

# Reading Test: How Students Face It in EPT

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## ABSTRACT

Many perceptions have been expressed regarding reading comprehension related to the TOEFL test. Most students in higher education in non-English speaking countries such as Indonesia still have difficulty mastering English texts. The implication is that the TOEFL test results have also decreased. The reading test section is a part that must also be mastered well by students to increase their scores. This qualitative-descriptive study involved six participants with specific criteria. One of them was that they had already taken one form of the English Proficiency Test (EPT) with reading as one of the sections. The results obtained included five challenges and three strategies regarding reading skills in ETP. The five challenges were looking for the main idea, determining the meaning of a complex word, identifying pronoun reference, specifying implied detail, and determining the passage's tone while the three strategies were reading the first sentence of each paragraph, guessing and using context clues, and skimming. In conclusion, all test-taker candidates of EPT must prepare themselves with adequate vocabulary to understand the meaning of the text given because the more vocabulary mastered, the greater the understanding of the text read. Therefore, one conclusion that can be drawn is that vocabulary plays a critical role in understanding the text given in the test.

**Keywords:** reading comprehension, EPT, challenge, strategy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is an essential academic skill to support knowledge achievement across all courses. Difficulty in understanding what students read can result in difficulty in mastering the lesson. In general, students with learning disabilities experience poor comprehension due to their failure to read strategically and spontaneously [1]. In reading, two aspects are crucial in influencing a person's fluency: speed and accuracy. Readers with maximum fluency will show a smooth process in getting information in their minds [2].

Problems will arise more when the reader reads a foreign language text, for example, English [3]. Students who read their mother tongue will understand the content of the text faster than those who read texts, not from their mother tongue [4]. Therefore, reading, in this case by students whose English is not their first language, faces many problems, mainly because of the limited vocabulary [5].

Especially for reading comprehension on the English Proficiency Test (ETP), such as TOEFL requires an extensive vocabulary to support understanding [6]. In the reading section, the emphasis is on the ability to understand a given passage. In this case, what a test-taker need is more than the ability to read and understand the material presented. To understand the material, one inevitably has to have an adequate vocabulary. If one does not have enough vocabulary, they may not understand the material presented.

In reading comprehension, test-takers will encounter questions about the meaning of certain words related to the existing context. Vocabulary is also essential knowledge because without having a complete vocabulary, one will not understand the reading quickly. The words that one encounters may not even be words that one commonly encounters in English lessons. Therefore, one must enrich their vocabulary.

The reading comprehension test is one part of EPT in which some challenges occur when non-English speaking students take it. Aside from vocabulary, another difficulty in doing the reading comprehension test is in identifying implied detailed questions. Making inferences about implied details in a passage or the author's viewpoint is considered difficult [7]. Mahmud [8] stated that one of the difficulties in identifying implied details is when students are doing an EPT in the reading section. The next challenge non-English speaking students face is determining the meanings of a particular word [7]. When a text consists of many difficult words, the understanding is also difficult to gain. This condition ultimately will lead to difficulty in identifying the main idea [9].

Some strategies should be formulated after the challenges are determined. There are many kinds of strategies that can be used by students when doing the reading comprehension test. Reading strategies are crucial to comprehend the text successfully and to overcome any reading problems [7]. Test-taking strategies are cognitive abilities to know what to do

during tests and deal with the challenges of any testing situation [10].

During completing the reading comprehension test, students use various strategies. Reading strategy is how readers interact with the text and how reading affects their understanding [11]. Knowing appropriate general reading strategies could help students complete the reading comprehension section [7]. Reading strategy improves students' reading comprehension and constructing their interpretations by interacting with texts to help overcome comprehension errors.

There are some reading strategies used by students, such as skimming and scanning [7]. Those strategies are employed mainly to determine the main idea and specific information [12]. Guessing is also considered a strategy to know the meaning of a text that contains difficult words. Another strategy in doing a reading comprehension test is by using language skills. Topic sentences are most probably found at the beginning of each paragraph. This situation will make it the students easy to determine the main idea [7]. Based on the explanation above, this research aims to determine the challenges and strategies in reading comprehension, especially in EPT taken by non-English speaking students.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Research Design

This research focused on the challenges faced and the strategies applied by the students of ELED at one private university in Yogyakarta while doing a reading comprehension test of EPT. A qualitative approach was used to explore deeper problems and develop a detailed understanding of the central phenomenon. Descriptive qualitative was determined as the design of this research to depict a comprehensive summarization, in everyday form, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals [13].

### 2.2. Research Setting

This research was conducted at the English Language Education Department (ELED) at one private university in Yogyakarta. This institution was chosen for this research because it holds an International Language Testing (ILT) course requiring students to do the EPT at the end of the semester. This institution also requires a minimum EPT score as a requirement to graduate. Another reason was based on a preliminary survey conducted by the researchers in this department. Some obstacles were recorded experienced by the students who took an EPT, especially on the reading comprehension test.

### 2.3. Participants

The participants were the students at the department in the chosen university based on friends' recommendations. There

were some criteria to select the participants. First, the participants had taken the EPT. It ensured that these participants were familiar enough with EPT, especially in the reading comprehension test. Second, the participants were the students, batch 2017. Third, they joined EPT training in their first year and took and passed the International Language Testing (ILT) course. In the ILT course, the students learn about EPT consisting of a reading comprehension section. These ensure that the participants already had enough experience and knowledge about EPT, especially on reading comprehension tests. Fourth, the participants were chosen by their latest score EPT that they got.

Based on their EPT score, the participants were divided into four groups, i.e., A2 (basic user-way stage), B1 (independent user-threshold), B2 (independent user-vantage), and C1 (proficient user). Based on the ETS (2021), the following is the classification of the total score of TOEFL: 337-459 is an A2 level, 460-542 is a B1 level, 543-626 is a B2 level, and 627-677 is a C1 level. In this research, there were four participants from the A2 level, one participant from the B1 level, and one participant from the B2 level.

Pseudonyms were used to keep the participants' identities. The pseudonyms of the participants were Rima, Sasha, Aline, Refa, Jeje, and Anes. Rima was the first participant, a female student with a B2 level. Sasha was the second female participant with an A2 level. Aline, the third female participant, belonged to the A2 level. Refa, the fourth female participant, belonged to the A2 level. The fifth female participant, Jeje, belonged to A2, and the last, the sixth female participant with B1 level, was given a pseudo-name Anes.

### 2.4. Data Collection Method

The researcher used the interview as the data collection technique.

### 2.5. Research Instrument

The researchers used interview protocol as an instrument. The guideline was used as a reminder of what point the researchers would ask when doing the interview. Therefore, the researchers could collect data. The researchers prepared four questions and a probe for each question to attain the data. The questions consisted of asking about ILT course that the participants had joined in the sixth semester, ensuring that the participants had already taken the EPT and the reason why the participants took the EPT, the challenges faced by the participants when doing the reading comprehension test of EPT, and the strategies they used. An audio recorder installed on a smartphone was used to record the interview process.

### 2.6. Data Collecting Procedure

There were some steps that the researchers did in this study. First, the researchers developed an interview protocol related to the research subject. Second, the researcher made the criteria for getting the participants in this study. Third, the

researcher contacted the participants through WhatsApp chat based on the criteria. The next step was when the researchers asked the participants whether they were willing to participate in this study. After all, participants agreed to be interviewed. The researchers asked for their time availability to interview voice calls.

The Indonesian language was used because it is the first language of all participants and the researcher. In addition, the Indonesian language prevented misperception between the participants and the researchers. The researchers recorded the voice calls using a voice recorder to make sure that nothing was left behind. The interviews were conducted in 30- 45 minutes for each participant to get in-depth data.

## 2.7.Data Analysis

After doing the interview, the researchers analyzed the data through some steps. The first step in the data analysis was transcribing. In this step, the researchers transcribed the audio recording into written text. The second step was member checking. The purpose of the member checking was to confirm the data after transcribing, whether it still had the same meaning as the participants' statements or not. Member checking was also used to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data. As member checking was done by returning the interview transcripts to the participants to check whether the transcript was following what the participant meant or not, the participants would know that the data were not manipulated or changed.

In this research, to ensure validity and trustworthiness, the researchers conducted member checking. In conducting the member checking, the researchers returned the transcript to be checked by the participants. The result of the member checking was that all the participants agreed with the transcript. What was written was what they stated and meant. There was no data manipulation, and the researchers did not find confusion in interpreting the participants' answers. Since all participants agreed to the transcripts presented by the researcher, the next step was conducted without adding or deleting transcripts. The researchers did not conduct additional interviews.

The third step was coding as segmenting and labeling text form descriptions and broad topics in data. The coding process consists of several actions based on the types of coding: open coding, analytical coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The first step was open coding. The researcher classified the participants' statements who answered the questions based on differences and similarities in the research topics. The second step was to pass the findings of the open coding to analytical coding. The third step was to do the axial coding. The researcher classified the results of the open and analytical coding and then found the relationships between them. In axial coding, the researcher found a relationship between classifications. The final coding was selective. The researcher created categories of textual data to form a theory. The next step was a classification of the

data as more general than previous coding methods. Finally, the researchers reported the results and drew conclusions that were relevant to the study.

## 3. RESULTS

The reports concerning the challenges faced by ELED students when doing a reading test of EPT are displayed first, followed by the strategies used regarding the topic discussed. As informed previously, the names of the participants were pseudonymized into Rima, Sasha, Aline, Refa, Jeje, and Anes.

### 3.1.The Challenges Faced by ELED Students in Doing Reading Test of EPT

The researchers have gathered the data from the participants by conducting the interview. The six participants reported that they faced challenges in doing the reading test of EPT. Five challenges were then determined.

#### 3.1.1. Looking for the Main Idea

Looking for the main idea was the number one challenge faced by the participants. Four of six participants had difficulty looking for the main idea while doing the reading test of EPT. When asked about the challenges, one of the participants, Sasha, answered that "There were challenges faced when I did the reading comprehension test of EPT, for example, when there were questions asking to find the main ideas". Three other participants, Aline, Jeje and Anes, also had difficulty determining the text's main idea. Jeje mentioned that she got difficulty in looking for the main idea or the main topic. She stated that "Usually, the question in the EPT is like.. the main topic of the text, and it's very difficult". Jeje added that she had to read the text to know the main idea. She stated that "To know the main topic, we have to read and understand it". Anes stated that "Sometimes, I was already confused about the meaning of the text in English, then we were asked by the question to read and understand the content to find main idea... and at that point, I found it difficult to find the main idea."

This finding was in line with Samad et al. [7], who said that one of the difficulties in reading tests was identifying main idea questions correctly. Asrida and Fitrawati [9] stated that determining the main idea was the most challenging reading comprehension test question. This challenge might be caused by the students' limited knowledge and skills. This idea was also pointed out by Nezami [14].

#### 3.1.2. Determining the Meaning of Difficult Vocabulary

The next challenge was determining the meaning of complex vocabulary. Five of six participants argued that they had a challenge in determining the meaning of complex vocabulary based on the interview. Determining the meaning of complex vocabulary here was related to the questions

asking the meaning of specific complex vocabulary in the text. Participant one and participant two, Rima and Sasha, stated that they had challenges answering the question asked to determine the meaning of difficult words. Therefore, they ended up having a hard time answering such a question. Sasha, participant two, mentioned that “questions that ask the equation of a difficult word is hard to be done”. She added, “like, the similar meaning of the underlined word is?... for example..., like finding the similar meaning of underlined word in row nine, but we don’t know the meaning of that vocabulary”. Refa, Jeje, and Anes also mentioned that they had difficulty answering the kind of question asking the similar meaning of difficult words. They stated that it was so hard because they did not know what the vocabulary meant. Refa stated that “if it’s a word we rarely hear and we don’t understand, it is difficult in my opinion to find its similarity”.

Sasha, participant two, mentioned that she did not know the similar meaning or synonym of the vocabulary, and even she did not know its meaning. Refa stated she did not know the meaning of the vocabulary because the vocabulary used was a word rarely heard.

In their study, Samad et al. [7] found that the challenge of students in determining the meanings of difficult words became the third most difficult one. Related to the difficulty in understanding the text in general, some participants explained that they had difficulty because the context used was unfamiliar so that the language and vocabulary used were unfamiliar too. Rima mentioned that she had difficulty determining the meaning of the hard words when reading the whole text because of the unfamiliar context, so that the language and vocabulary used were also unfamiliar to her. Rima stated that “.....in the text, the language used, is unfamiliar in colloquial”. She added that “The discussion of TOEFL is more like whether it is the scientific or the topic that does not exist in Indonesia. The discussion was indeed unfamiliar. With that unfamiliarity, the language used became unfamiliar as well”. Refa mentioned that she also got confused because of the unfamiliar context and the vocabulary. Refa stated, “My challenge is more to vocabulary. Actually, it makes me confused because I do not understand what the context is like, I don’t understand, it’s just like that”. Refa explained that “There are a lot of stories like stories from abroad; those are not familiar in Indonesia”.

The finding above was in line with some references stating that some students do not have enough vocabulary in English, so when the students are doing the English proficiency test, especially in the reading comprehension section, they do not know the meaning of the text or the questions [15]. Girsang et al. [16] mentioned that the meaning of the text was difficult to understand. Furthermore, test takers’ limitation of vocabulary and some phrases could hinder them from understanding the meaning of English texts.

### 3.1.3. Identifying Pronoun Reference

Identifying pronoun references became a challenge for the students. One of the participants had a challenge in identifying pronoun references. Aline mentioned that “I’m not careful with pronouns, for example, a question like it refers to”. Aline also explained that sometimes she got confused to identify the pronoun, whereas it is quite simple but tricky if she is not thorough. Aline stated that “Yeah, usually I’m not very thorough there like I have really read it, but it turned out to be wrong. She added that “It turns out that what the sentence meant was not what I caught in mind. Sometimes, it seems like I am not that thorough”.

Maizarah [17] revealed that finding pronoun reference was the second most challenging skill for the students in reading comprehension tests. Finding the correct pronoun will be more complicated when many subjects and objects are written in one paragraph before the pronoun is asked.

### 3.1.4. Specifying Implied Detail

Based on the interview, determining implied detail was one of the challenges faced by students. Participant one, Rima, mentioned that she got an obstacle in specifying implied detailed questions. Rima stated that “The implied detail question is quite complicated in my opinion”. Rima also added that “If you were in middle school or elementary school, there were many examples of questions asking something and the answer was in the text, now for the TOEFL questions, it’s not like that; you have to think first and really read it”. She also mentioned that “it’s not that easy. Just got it right away? No!..”

Sesriyani [15] mentioned that students had difficulty finding information conveyed in reading texts. Mahmud [8] also stated that one of the difficulties was identifying implied details when students answered the English proficiency test in the reading section.

### 3.1.5. Determining the Tone of the Passage

Determining the tone of the passage was one of the challenges for students in doing the reading test of EPT. Determining the tone of the passage was hard for Rima, participant one. She felt hard to answer the question about the tone of the text. Rima stated that “There are questions that asking the tone, what is the tone of the text in, persuasive or... what is that I forget, I forget because it’s rare, the point is that’s a bit challenging to me”. She added that “because we don’t know what the purpose of this text is: is it inviting, is it giving information, is it persuasive?”.

Questions on the tone of the text can be a challenge for the test-taker. The tone of the text can be humorous, sarcastic, passionate, or even factual or informational. Hilke and Wadden [18] explained that the tone-type questions that appear on the TOEFL test were 3% of the total questions. They added that this type of question asked test-takers to check the passage’s tone or the point of view from which the

author had written the passage. Another expert stated that determining the tone, purpose, or course was the second problematic skill, which only 37% of all students answered correctly [19].

### ***3.2. The Strategies Used by ELED Students While Doing Reading Test of EPT***

Based on the six different participants, there were at least three findings of the strategies used by ELED students while doing a reading test of EPT. Those were reading the first sentence of each paragraph, guessing and using context clues, and skimming.

#### ***3.2.1. Reading the First Sentence of Each Paragraph***

Four participants mentioned that one of the strategies here was reading the first sentence of each paragraph. This strategy could be used to find the main idea of the text. Jeje (participant five) and Sasha (participant two) mentioned that they usually read the first sentence in a paragraph to find the text's main idea. Jeje, participant five, stated that "If there is a question asked to main..., main topic or idea, we just need to read the part, the first line of each paragraph". She added, "For example, there are three paragraphs here, we read from the first paragraph in the first sentence, continued to the first sentence in paragraph two, and continued to reading the first sentence in paragraph three". She added that this strategy was time-saving. She mentioned that "Because if we read all text, then it wasted the time". Rima, participant one, mentioned that "If determining the main idea, as far as I know, just try to check the beginning one." She continued explaining that "for example, the beginning paragraph discusses good farming methods, do the other sentences discuss good farming methods too? If so, it means that the main idea is indeed the main idea". another participant, Aline, stated that "Usually, to determine the main idea, we are given tips in the ILT class to determine the main idea, read carefully in the main sentence. Usually, it's there. Tips from learning, if the main ideas are at the beginning of a paragraph, that's why I'll just look at that".

The main sentence is usually put in the first sentence of a paragraph. Test-takers can look for the idea of the passage by studying the topic sentences [20], which are most probably found at the beginning of each paragraph. Therefore, test-takers can read the first sentence of each paragraph or another alternative, which is the passage's last sentence.

#### ***3.2.2. Guessing and Using Context Clues***

One of the strategies used by ELED students while doing a reading test of EPT was guessing and using context clues. This strategy was used to determine the meaning of complex vocabulary. Four of six participants mentioned that they used this strategy when doing the reading test. Rima stated that "To outsmart is by reading the previous sentence or the sentence

after it. So, it seems like guessing what this means". Jeje mentioned that "The solution is if we do not know the meaning of difficult word..., we'll look at the word or sentence after or before it". She added that "The question asked, for example, what is the meaning of that Handphone? Meaning that? We just see the words afterwards or the words before this Handphone word, and then just connect it".

The four participants' responses were related to Samad et al. [7] about the strategy in doing reading tests, who stated that students often use context clues to understand the meanings of difficult vocabulary. Students were more disposed to use clues to choose an option of the question. In addition, test-takers can look for context clues to help them understand the meaning of difficult vocabulary.

#### ***3.2.3. Skimming***

One of the strategies used by ELED students while doing the reading test of EPT was skimming. Skimming can be used for answering the main idea question. Participant two mentioned that she used skimming while doing the reading test of EPT, especially in determining the main idea. Sasha, participant two, mentioned that "If looking for the main idea, usually look at the title and look at the beginning of the sentence." She added that "I briefly read it, read it at a glance, skimming, didn't read it for long".

Skimming is the rapid coverage of reading matter to determine its gist or main idea [20]. Samad et al. [7] stated that some students often skim or scan the text in answering the reading comprehension section of EPT. They also mentioned that the questionnaire result in their study showed that 40% of the students often skim or scan the text to search for the idea. Skimming is used to quickly identify a passage's main ideas and is done at speed three to four times faster than average reading [14].

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The reading ability tested in the English Proficiency Test (EPT) presents challenges for non-English speaking students. It causes not optimal test results. Vocabulary, for example, contributes a great deal to the error of answering the correct answer. Ignorance of vocabulary has an impact on not knowing the meaning of the text that is read. Therefore, before measuring the reading ability, vocabulary mastery is better measured first. However, there are several strategies in understanding the text and answering the questions given. One of them is 'guessing' about the meaning of a word. It is based on the sentences before and after the presumed word. In general, reading can be the most challenging part of the EPT if the test-takers do not prepare themselves with adequate vocabulary.

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