

Identifying Students' Difficulties in Reading Comprehension Tests

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Abstract

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Reading comprehension is a vital skill that students need to develop. However, the reality reveals that students still face difficulties in Reading Comprehension Tests. This study aims to identify the difficulties students encounter in Reading Comprehension tests and the underlying factors contributing to these difficulties. It adopts a qualitative approach and focuses on the 26 tenth graders of MA Ma'arif Miftahul Ulum Melirang as the subjects. To accomplish this, ten types of reading comprehension tests were administered to identify the students' difficulties in reading comprehension tests. Then, students were provided with questionnaires to elicit their opinions on factors influencing their difficulties in reading comprehension tests. The results revealed that students struggle the most with the Free-Recall test. The Summary test came next as the second most challenging, followed by the gap-filling test, Ordering Tasks, and Editing Test. Additionally, the main scores achieved by students in these five tests fell below the 60-point mark with many students obtaining the lowest scores in them. Therefore, English teachers need to provide effective reading comprehension techniques, focusing on strategies to help students overcome challenges in understanding English texts.

Kata Kunci:

*Pemahaman membaca,
tes pemahaman
membaca, kesulitan
siswa*

Abstrak

Kemampuan pemahaman membaca (reading comprehension) adalah keterampilan penting yang perlu dikembangkan oleh siswa. Namun, kenyataannya menunjukkan bahwa siswa masih mengalami kesulitan dalam Tes Pemahaman Membaca. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kesulitan siswa dalam tes pemahaman membaca serta faktor-faktor yang mendasari kesulitan tersebut. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan berfokus pada 26 siswa kelas sepuluh di MA Ma'arif Miftahul Ulum Melirang sebagai subjek penelitian. Untuk mencapai

tujuan tersebut, sepuluh jenis tes pemahaman membaca diberikan kepada siswa untuk mengidentifikasi kesulitan yang mereka alami dalam tes pemahaman membaca. Selanjutnya siswa diberi kuesioner untuk mengetahui opini mereka tentang faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kesulitan mereka dalam tes pemahaman membaca. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan siswa mengalami kesulitan dalam tes *Free-recall* (mengingat isi teks bacaan). Tes Summary (menulis ringkasan) merupakan yang paling sulit kedua, diikuti oleh tes *Gap Filling* (mengisi titik-titik), *Ordering Tasks* (Tugas Pengurutan) dan Tes Editing (pengeditan). Selain itu, skor rata-rata yang dicapai oleh siswa pada kelima tes mencapai nilai di bawah 60 poin, dengan sebagian besar siswa mendapat skor terendah dalam tes-tes tersebut. Oleh karena itu, guru-guru Bahasa Inggris perlu mempersiapkan teknik-teknik pemahaman bacaan yang efektif, dengan fokus pada strategi untuk membantu siswa mengatasi kesulitan dalam memahami teks Bahasa Inggris.

INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that reading is necessary for students to serve a wide range of purposes and fulfill various needs. Reading is defined as an active process in which readers switch between information sources, develop meaning and strategies, monitor understanding, and reflect on responses using the social context. In essence, reading is a cognitive activity in which the reader engages actively to gain understanding and reflect on their responses (Walker, 2000). Moreover, reading is a skill that harmoniously combines and coordinates various abilities, which may appear effortless and enjoyable to proficient readers (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Therefore, reading should be an inspiring and transformative experience for the students. It should involve enjoyable activities for the readers. As a result, whenever the writer's messages are successfully understood, it indirectly leads to a transformative experience.

Furthermore, reading is not just about identifying letters, words, and sentences to comprehend the text. Reading is a unified process where readers combine the information they read in the text with their background knowledge to

create meaning (Nunan, 2003). It means that readers use their prior knowledge to predict what comes next and how new information connects to what they already know. If students can improve these aspects, it will help them understand English better (Muflihah & Sukino, 2021).

However, things do not always go smoothly because, despite its crucial nature, reading is also considered a complex skill. Reading is a challenging process to learn and equally challenging to teach (Janette, 2007). In addition, reading is an activity undertaken by someone to gather information about something which involves three essential elements: the reader, the text, and the process of comprehending the text (Siregar, 2018).

Comprehending the text can be challenging for Indonesian students, primarily because English is not their first language. The challenges can be attributed to several factors, such as the students' limited vocabulary, which makes it harder for them to grasp the text. Moreover, understanding longer texts can be tough because the process of making sense of the content is disrupted by the challenge and slow pace of recognizing words (Snow, 2013). Based on the aforementioned statement, this implies that comprehending the text is the most crucial aspect of reading because going through the words without grasping their meaning is a meaningless activity.

In addition, Harmer (2002) classifies student reading difficulties into four main categories: language-related issues, challenges with topics and genres, problems with comprehension tasks, and negative expectations. The first category describes how students struggle more with understanding longer sentences compared to shorter ones. The second category points out that students often find it hard to grasp unfamiliar genres or topics. The third category relates to how students frequently perceive reading tasks as overly complex. Lastly, the negative expectation delves into the concept that students sometimes have low expectations due to considering the reading activities as too difficult.

To find out the students' difficulties in reading, some tests need to be administered. Alderson (2000) suggests several test types: (1) Discrete-point versus integrative techniques; (2) cloze and gap filling tests; (3) multiple choice

questions; (4) matching techniques; (5) ordering tasks; (6) dichotomous items; (7) editing tests; (8) C-test; (9) cloze elide test; (10) short answer tests; (11) free recall test; and (12) summary test. Nevertheless, he underscores that there is no “best method” as one test approach cannot fulfill all testing objectives. He states further that the first approach is not recommended to test reading since there is not enough time to test one thing at a time. Moreover, the objectives do not demand a detailed evaluation of students' understanding. Therefore, the present study did not use Discrete point versus integrative techniques to find out student's difficulties in reading comprehension.

The second approach is the cloze test and gap-filling tests. Cloze tests involve removing every n-th word (typically between the fifth and twelfth word) from a text. On the other hand, gap-filling tests remove specific words to evaluate particular aspects, like grammar sensitivity or vocabulary. However, it's more advisable to use gap-filling tests, as they offer greater simplicity and control (Alderson, 2000). Consequently, this study employed gap-filling tests due to their ease of administration.

The other types of tests that are recommended for students include multiple choice questions (a common method to assess reading comprehension); matching techniques (similar to multiple-choice but with one option acting as a distractor for each "item"); ordering tasks (scrambled sentences have to be rearranged into the correct sequence to form a coherent text); Dichotomous items (some statements related to a text have to be identified whether they are true or false); Editing tests (a passage containing errors that must be corrected); C-test (the deletion of the second half of every second word, and requiring the reader to restore the missing parts); cloze elide test (incorrect words are inserted into a text and must be identified by the students). However, the cloze elide test appears to pose a significant challenge for the students as they need to have strong reading proficiency to find out the incorrect words within the text. Previous research showed that the test takers often carelessly and cautiously identified correct sentences as containing redundant words (Holster, 2017). This test seems to be too difficult for Indonesian students as they are still struggling to comprehend the

texts. Moreover, they still lack awareness of the new words due to their limited vocabulary.

Another recommended test format for students is a short answer test which contains questions that demand brief responses. Another option is the free recall test in which students read a text and write down what they can recall from the text. Additionally, the summary test requires students to read a passage and then summarize the main idea—either of the entire text or a section—particularly those relevant to a designated subject within the text. Nevertheless, from all test above types, teachers must carefully deliberate on the most suitable tests for their students. Ideally, classroom assessments should be alignment with the curriculum objectives and offer formative advantages (Brown, 2004).

Some researchers have investigated students' challenges in comprehending reading text through various theories and perspectives. Zuhra (2015) discovered that the majority of twelfth graders at SMA Negeri 2 Lhokseumawe struggled with answering inference questions due to an incomplete understanding of the questions and weaknesses in comprehending reading comprehension questions. Meanwhile, Rais et al. (2021) found that students of MTs 1 Muhammadiyah Ciputat struggle with comprehension of main ideas, finding references, making inferences, vocabulary, and detailed information in English text. In a separate study, Nur et al. (2022) reported that the exam results for the eighth graders of MTs Madani Alauddin Paopao revealed that 63% of students found it challenging to locate references and make inferences.

However, those previous studies concentrated solely on Multiple Choice Questions. The researchers aim to expand this analysis by exploring the challenges in reading comprehension, particularly within recount text, using the ten types of reading tests mentioned previously. Hence, the objective of this study is to identify the specific difficulties encountered by tenth-grade students at MA Ma'arif Miftahul Ulum Melirang in reading recount texts and the factors causing the difficulties.

METHOD

The present research employed a descriptive qualitative design. It involves the exploration and interpretation of the significance attributed to social or human issues by individuals or groups (Creswell, 2009). The study involved 26 tenth-grade students from MA Ma'arif Miftahul Ulum Melirang Bungah Gresik. These students underwent reading tests focused on recount text to assess their progress in comprehending recount texts. Furthermore, an array of reading tests, as proposed by Alderson (2020), were administered to identify the challenges the students faced in reading comprehension tests. These tests encompass multiple-choice questions, short answer tests, gap-filling tests, dichotomous items tests, matching tests, ordering tasks, C-tests, editing tests, summary tests, and free-recall tests. Test results were meticulously analyzed item-by-item. The frequency of incorrect responses in each section was recorded, thereby determining the sections with the highest and lowest occurrences of errors. Subsequently, students were provided with questionnaires aimed at eliciting their perspectives on reading comprehension and uncovering factors influencing their difficulties in reading comprehension tests.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Students' Test Results

Table 1 presented below provides descriptions related to the result of the first test. A recount text, along with a set of ten Multiple Choice Questions, was provided to the students. The first question focused on determining the main topic of the text, while the second question delved into understanding the purpose of the text. The next four questions aimed to identify specific details, followed by two questions tasked with finding references, and the last two questions centered on discovering synonyms. The results revealed that students faced difficulties in both determining suitable references and identifying synonyms. The students' struggle to recognize synonyms within the text highlights their vocabulary limitations.

Table 1: Students' Results in Multiple-Choice Questions

No	Section	Correct answers		Wrong answers	
		Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	Finding the topic of the text	24	92%	2	8%
2	Purpose of the text	17	65%	9	35%
3	Finding detailed information	20	77%	6	23%
		19	73%	7	27%
		22	85%	4	15%
		24	92%	2	8%
		10	38%	16	62%
4	Finding references	11	42%	15	58%
		12	46%	14	54%
5	Finding synonyms	14	54%	12	46%

The test was completed by 26 students, with 92% of them correctly finding the topic of the text. The purpose of the recount text was also discussed, with 65% of students answering correctly. Next, finding detailed information was discussed, with the majority of students correctly answering the questions. The text also covered finding references and synonyms, with more than 50% of students incorrectly answering questions. The results indicate that students encountered challenges in identifying appropriate references and recognizing synonyms.

This finding supports a prior study by Wahyudin (2020) who highlighted that students' inability to choose the correct answer in multiple-choice questions is due to their difficulties in grasping vocabulary and identifying references within texts. It also indicates that the primary challenge students face in reading comprehension tests, particularly in multiple-choice questions is related to the aspect of determining references (Isnawati, 2019; Maizarah, 2019).

Table 2 provides descriptions related to the result of the second test. Another recount text was presented to the students, accompanied by a set of five short answer questions related to the topic of the text, the detailed information, and the writer's feeling

Table 2: Students' Results in Short Answer Test

No	Section	Correct answers		Wrong answers	
		Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	Topic of the text	25	96%	1	4%
		13	50%	13	50%
2	Detailed information	23	88%	3	12%
		25	96%	1	4%
3	Writer's feeling	1	4%	25	96%

It revealed that majority students correctly answered questions related to the topic of the text and detailed information about the accident happened in the story. However, only 4% of students correctly answered questions about the writer's feelings at the time. The results showed noticeable difficulties for students in accurately deducing the writer's sentiment from the text.

Table 3 provides information related to the result of the gap-filling test. It consisted of a recount text followed by 5 questions related to the vocabulary of the text. The results showed that only a few students were able to fill the gaps within the text with appropriate vocabulary

Table 3: Students' Result in Gap filling Test

No	Correct answers		Wrong answers	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	8	31%	18	69%
2	5	19%	21	81%
3	6	23%	20	77%
4	3	12%	23	88%
5	4	15%	22	85%

From the table above, it can be seen that the majority of students answered all the test items incorrectly. It indicates that the majority of students indeed struggled with vocabulary. This discovery aligns with a prior study by Lestari et al. (2020) who also identified vocabulary deficiencies as a significant challenge faced by students in reading comprehension.

Information regarding the outcome of The Dichotomous Item test is given in Table 4. It involved having the students read a historical recount text and determine the accuracy of five statements by marking them as true or false.

Table 4: Students' Results in Dichotomous Items Test

No	Correct answers		Wrong answers	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	13	50%	13	50%
2	22	85%	4	15%
3	17	65%	9	35%
4	19	73%	7	27%
5	19	73%	7	27%

The results of the Dichotomous Item test revealed that most students managed to correctly identify the appropriate option for each statement. The outcomes indicated that students didn't face challenges with this particular test.

The majority of students selected the correct option, suggesting ease and accuracy in answering this test format.

Information about the results of Matching Tests is presented in Table 5. The Matching Test encompassed five distinct texts, with each text divided into two separate paragraphs. Students were asked to pair the paragraphs.

Table 5: Students' Results in Matching Test

No	Correct answers		Wrong answers	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	26	100%	0	100%
2	22	85%	4	15%
3	23	88%	3	12%
4	24	92%	2	8%
5	21	81%	5	19%

Based on the table, the majority of students effectively matched the paragraphs correctly. The results revealed that students didn't encounter difficulties, particularly in matching paragraph number one. Most students successfully matched paragraphs two through five. Additionally, all students accurately matched paragraph number one. This suggests a strong understanding and proficiency in matching these paragraphs, especially the first one.

Details on the results of Ordering Tasks are shown in Table 6. The Ordering Tasks comprised another recount text, succeeded by 5 statements. Students were directed to rearrange the sentences into the correct sequence

Table 6: Students' Result of Ordering Tasks

No	Correct answers		Wrong answers	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	26	100%	0	0%
2	3	12%	23	88%
3	2	8%	24	92%
4	2	8%	24	92%
5	24	92%	2	8%

The study reveals that out of 26 students, only a small percentage (12%) wrote the correct option, while the majority wrote the incorrect option. Most students only managed to choose the correct options for the first and last sentences. It identified that students faced difficulties in completing this task.

The results of the C-Test are presented in the following table. The C-Test involved a recount text containing 10 words with certain missing letters that needed to be filled in by the students.

Table 7: Students' C-Test Results

No	Correct answers		Wrong answers	
	Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	3	12%	23	88%
2	9	35%	17	65%
3	3	12%	23	88%
4	3	12%	23	88%
5	0	0%	26	100%
6	4	15%	22	85%
7	5	19%	21	81%
8	4	15%	22	85%
9	0	0%	26	100%
10	3	12%	23	88%

After analyzing the outcomes of the C-test, it revealed that only a minority of students managed to accurately complete the words with the missing letters. On the other hand, the majority of students encountered difficulties when completing the missing letters of the vocabulary or words in the recount text. The result confirmed that students are indeed facing serious problems related to vocabulary context.

Regarding the outcome of the Editing Test, Table 8 offers details. The Editing test comprised a recount text containing 10 errors that required correction. Given the test's emphasis on Recount text, grammar errors were presented, specifically involving verbs. The students were asked to convert 10 words from their infinitive form to their past form

Table 8: Students' Result of Editing Test

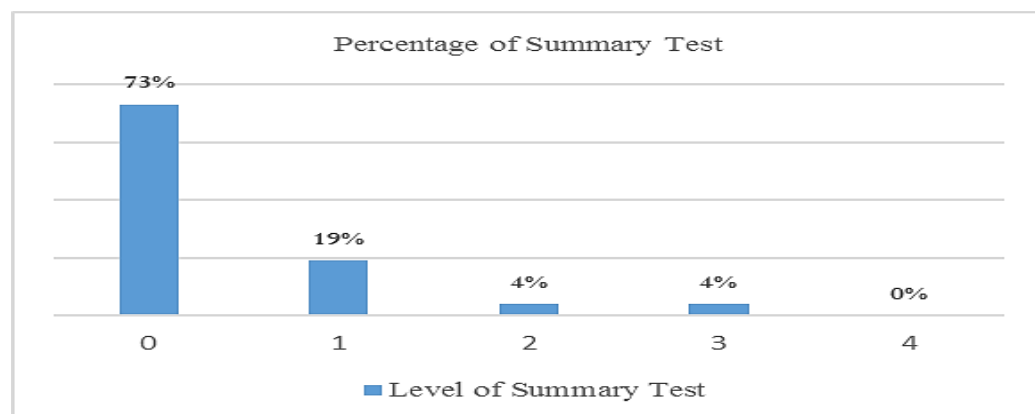
No	Verbs	Correct answers		Wrong answers	
		Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	Regular	23	88%	3	12%
		23	88%	3	12%
		20	77%	6	23%
		22	85%	4	15%
		23	88%	3	12%
		25	96%	1	4%
2	Irregular	1	4%	25	96%
		16	62%	10	38%
		2	8%	24	92%
		16	62%	10	38%

Based on the result, it is evident that students didn't encounter challenges when converting regular verbs from infinitive to past form. The majority of students succeeded in this task. However, when dealing with irregular verbs, the

majority of students still struggled with the task of transitioning from infinitive to past form.

Moving to the result of the Summary Test, Graph 1 provides details. The Summary Test centered on a biographical recount. Students were instructed to summarize the text. Then, their summaries were evaluated and categorized into 5 distinct score levels, adapted from Brown (2004:215). These levels were defined as follows: **Level 0** (Students demonstrating no comprehension of both main and supporting ideas – Score:20); **Level 1** (Students showing only partial comprehension of the main idea and supporting ideas – Score:40); **Level 2** (Students indicating comprehension of the main idea but lacking full understanding of some supporting ideas – Score:60); **Level 3** (Students accurately expressing both main and supporting ideas – Score:80); **Level 4** (Students conveying the main and supporting ideas using their own words – Score:100)

Graph 1: The Students' Result of the Summary Test

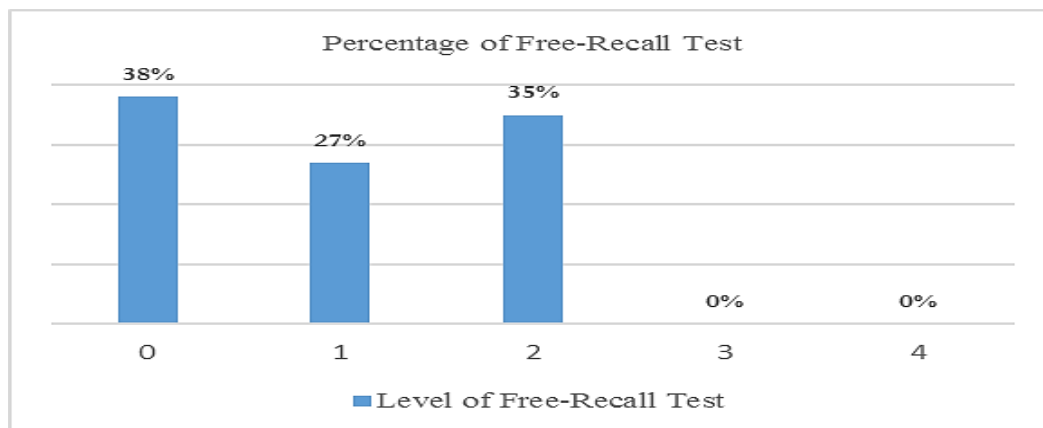


The data presented in Graph 1 illustrates that the largest portion of students (73%) fell into Level 0. Additionally, 19% of students were categorized in Level 1, while 4% were in Level 2 and another 4% in Level 3. Interestingly, no students were classified in Level 5. These findings strongly suggest that students encountered significant challenges, particularly in expressing the main idea and supporting ideas using their own words, as reflected in the summary test results.

Switching to the last type of test, the Free Recall Test, Graph 2 presents information about the outcomes. This test comprised another biographical recount text. In this test, students were instructed to read the text and rewrite anything they

remembered about the text they had previously read. Similar to the summary test, the students' outcomes in the free-recall test were categorized into 5 score levels, adapted from Brown (2004:215).

Graph 2: The Students' Result of Free-Recall Test



From the data depicted in Graph 2, it's evident that 38% of students were categorized in Level 0, followed by 27% in Level 1, and 35% in Level 2. Notably, no students were classified in Levels 3 and 4. These findings from the free-recall test strongly indicate that most students encountered challenges in accurately expressing both the main idea and supporting ideas from the text. Additionally, they struggled to convey these concepts in their own words. The results underscored the difficulties in accurately expressing the main idea and supporting ideas while also facing challenges in summarizing them in their own words.

Furthermore, Table 9 presents the results for each test, revealing the highest, lowest, and main scores for every individual test.

Table 9. The Highest Score, Lowest Score, and Main Scores for Each Test

No	Test	Highest Score			Lowest Score			Main Score
		Score	Total	%	Score	Total	%	
1	Multiple Choice Questions	100	1	4%	10	1	4%	67
2	Short answer	80	6	23%	60	20	77%	65
3	Gap filling	100	2	8%	20	14	54%	42
4	Dichotomous Item	80	13	50%	20	4	15%	64
5	Matching Test	100	21	81%	20	1	4%	89
6	Ordering Tasks	100	1	4%	40	23	88%	44
7	C-Test	90	3	12%	30	11	42%	66
8	Editing Test	80	7	21%	10	14	54%	48
9	Summary Test	60	9	35%	20	14	54%	34
10	Free-recall Test	80	1	4%	20	19	73%	28

From the table 9 above, it can be seen that the highest average score from the ten kinds of tests was 89 for the matching test. Meanwhile, the lowest average score from the ten kinds of tests was 28 for the free-recall test. Therefore, the Reading Comprehension tests that are considered to be the most difficult are the free-recall test, followed by the summary test in second place, gap filling test in third place, Ordering Tasks in fourth place, and the Editing Test in fifth place.

The Factors Causing The Students' Difficulties

Furthermore, the questionnaire explored the factors that contribute to students' difficulties in the Reading test distributed to the students after completing all types of tests. It consisted of six questions, divided into two categories: internal and external factors that influence their reading difficulties. The internal factors were addressed by questions 1 to 4, while questions 5 and 6 related to external factors. The analysis of the questionnaire responses concerning factors influencing reading difficulties is presented in the table below:

Table 10: Students' responses in Questionnaire

No	Students' Difficulties	Factors	Yes		No	
			Total	Percentage	Total	Percentage
1	Difficulties in comprehending long sentences and texts	Internal	3	12%	23	88%
2	Lack of vocabulary		9	35%	17	65%
3	Difficulties in implementing reading strategies		3	12%	23	88%
4	Difficulties in Concentrating while reading		3	12%	23	88%
5	House environment	External	0	0%	26	100%
6	School environment		4	15%	22	85%

Several internal factors contributed to students' struggles in reading comprehension, namely; difficulty in understanding long sentences and texts, difficulty caused by limited vocabulary knowledge, difficulty in using reading strategies and difficulty in concentration (Fajar, 2009). Based on the presented table, a conclusive observation can be made that students encountered challenges in all the internal factors. The primary problem leading to students' reading difficulties was attributed to "difficulty in understanding long sentences and texts." Additionally, maintaining concentration poses another significant challenge. Furthermore, students also grappled with "limited vocabulary

knowledge" and encountered issues with effectively utilizing reading strategies. This finding supports some previous research that reported that some internal factors influence students' difficulties in reading especially the lack of vocabulary (Nurjannah, 2018; Prihatini, 2020) and in understanding long sentences (Siahaan et al., 2022)

Meanwhile, two external factors impact students' reading comprehension, namely: the home environment and the school environment (Westwood, 2008). Based on the provided table, a conclusion can be drawn that the two aforementioned external factors did not contribute to students' reading challenges. The students reported that their environment was beneficial and encouraging in facilitating their learning of reading.

CONCLUSION

Based on the result of the research, it can be concluded that the majority of students have big problems with Reading Comprehension Tests. The test result revealed that in five out of ten tests, the students' main score was below 60. These tests include the free-recall test, summary test, gap-filling test, Ordering Tasks, and Editing Test. Furthermore, the majority of students obtained the lowest scores in these specific five tests.

Hence, it becomes a big task for teachers to teach students effective techniques to enhance their reading comprehension abilities, particularly focusing on skills and strategies for comprehending texts. By imparting and encouraging the use of appropriate reading strategies, teachers can play a pivotal role in assisting students to overcome their challenges in understanding English texts and addressing their difficulties in doing Reading Comprehension Tests.

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