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The Ability of Third Semester Students in Multiple Choice Questions to Assess Literal, Evaluative and Critical Understanding

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kemampuan mahasiswa semester tiga dalam menjawab soal pilihan ganda yang dirancang untuk menilai tingkat pemahaman membaca literal, evaluatif, dan kritis. Metode deskriptif kuantitatif digunakan dengan instrumen berupa tes pilihan ganda sebanyak 30 butir. Partisipan penelitian terdiri dari 35 mahasiswa semester tiga dari mata kuliah Bahasa Inggris di STIKOM Tunas Bangsa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemahaman literal mahasiswa berada pada kategori "baik" (mean = 78), pemahaman evaluatif berada pada kategori "cukup" (mean = 65), dan pemahaman kritis berada pada kategori "kurang" (mean = 58). Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa masih perlu mengembangkan strategi membaca tingkat tinggi, terutama dalam kemampuan analisis kritis.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the ability of third-semester students in answering multiple-choice questions designed to assess literal, evaluative, and critical levels of reading comprehension. A quantitative descriptive method was employed using a 30-item multiple-choice test. The participants consisted of 35 third-semester students from an English Course at STIKOM Tunas Bangsa. The results show that the students' literal comprehension is categorized as "good" (mean = 78), evaluative comprehension as "fair" (mean = 65), and critical comprehension as "poor" (mean = 58). These findings indicate that students still need to develop higher-order reading strategies, especially in the area of critical analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is one of the most essential skills in academic learning, especially for university students who constantly interact with various types of texts. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, reading becomes even more crucial because students must process information written in a language that is not their native tongue. Reading comprehension is not limited to recognizing words and sentences; rather, it involves complex cognitive processes such as identifying ideas, evaluating arguments, and forming critical judgment (Grabe, W., & Stoller, 2013). As (C. E. Snow, 2010) notes, effective reading requires the integration of linguistic knowledge, prior knowledge, and strategic thinking to construct meaning from a text.

At the most basic level, literal understanding refers to the ability to identify explicitly stated information such as facts, supporting details, and main ideas. This level is generally easier for learners because it does not require deep interpretation (Day, R.R.,& Park, 2005). A higher level of comprehension, evaluative

understanding, involves making judgments about the content, quality, or credibility of the information presented in the text. It requires readers to assess the author's arguments, evaluate the use of evidence, and determine the relevance of ideas (Anderson, 2003). The highest cognitive level in reading comprehension is critical understanding, which focuses on analyzing arguments, identifying bias and assumptions, evaluating logical structures, and drawing well-reasoned conclusions (Kendeou, P.,McMaster, K., & Christ, 2014). Mastery of critical comprehension is important in academic settings, where students are expected not only to understand information but also to question and critique it.

Despite its importance, many EFL learners struggle to achieve satisfactory performance in evaluative and critical comprehension. Research has shown that students tend to perform better in literal comprehension but face significant challenges when tasks require deeper analysis or critical reasoning (Yunus, M., & Abdullah, 2011). One contributing factor is that classroom reading instruction often focuses heavily on surface-level understanding, providing fewer opportunities for students to engage with analytical or argumentative texts. Additionally, limited exposure to academic reading strategies may hinder students' ability to evaluate and critique information effectively (Grabe, W., & Stoller, 2013).

Given these challenges, it is necessary to assess students' abilities at different levels of comprehension to understand their strengths and weaknesses. Multiple-choice questions are widely used as assessment tools in reading comprehension because they can be constructed to measure various cognitive levels, including literal, evaluative, and critical skills (Burton, S., Sudweeks, R., Merrill, P., & Wood, 1991). When well-designed, multiple-choice items can reveal how effectively students interpret explicit information, infer meaning, and analyze arguments.

This study focuses on third-semester students, who are in a transitional stage between foundational reading skills and more advanced academic literacy. At this stage, students are expected to develop higher-order comprehension skills that will support their performance in upper-level courses. Evaluating their ability to answer multiple-choice questions at different levels of comprehension will provide useful insights into their reading proficiency and instructional needs.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the ability of third-semester students in responding to multiple-choice questions that assess literal, evaluative, and critical understanding. The results of this research are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of students' reading comprehension performance and to support educators in designing more effective reading instruction for EFL learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to interpret, understand, and construct meaning from written text. It is a complex cognitive process that involves interaction between the reader and the text (Grabe, W., & Stoller, 2011). According to (C. Snow, 2002), comprehension occurs when readers are able to extract and integrate information from the text with their prior knowledge. Reading comprehension is influenced by several factors such as vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, reading strategies, and text complexity (Alderson, 2000).

In academic contexts, reading comprehension is essential for learners because it supports their ability to acquire knowledge, think critically, and succeed in academic tasks (Grabe, 2009). Therefore, assessing students' reading comprehension is crucial to determine whether they are able to understand texts at different cognitive levels.

B. Levels of Reading Comprehension

Researchers classify reading comprehension into various levels to evaluate students' cognitive abilities during reading. This study focuses on three major levels: literal, evaluative, and critical comprehension.

1. Literal Comprehension
   Literal comprehension involves understanding information that is explicitly stated in the text. It includes identifying main ideas, supporting details, reference words, and stated facts (Day, R.R.,& Park, 2005). This level is considered the foundation of reading comprehension since readers must first comprehend surface meaning before progressing to deeper interpretation (Grabe, W., & Stoller, 2011).
2. Evaluative Comprehension
   Evaluative comprehension refers to the reader's ability to make judgments about the text based on textual information and personal knowledge. According to Bloom's taxonomy, evaluation requires higher-order cognitive processing, such as interpreting tone, assessing the author's purpose, and

distinguishing fact from opinion (Anderson, L. W.,& Krathwohl, 2001). Readers must apply reasoning to determine the credibility and relevance of textual information (Dorn, L., & Soffos, 2005).

3. Critical Comprehension
   Critical comprehension represents the highest level of understanding. It involves analyzing the text critically, identifying assumptions, making logical inferences, and evaluating arguments (Ennis, 2011). Critical readers must question the author's ideas and compare information with other sources (Wallace, M.,& Wray, 2016). This advanced level is essential for academic success and the development of critical thinking skills.

C. Multiple-Choice Questions in Reading Assessment

Multiple-choice questions (MCQs) are widely used in language assessment because they allow for objective scoring, high reliability, and efficient administration (Hughes, 2013). MCQs enable the assessment of various comprehension skills in a single test, including literal, inferential, and critical understanding (Alderson, 2000).

Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) state that well-constructed MCQs must include plausible distractors, clear stems, and a single correct answer. MCQs are also effective for evaluating large groups of students in a limited time. However, test developers must ensure that questions are based on authentic reading materials and require more than simple recall to avoid limiting assessment to lower-order thinking skills (Popham, 2008).

D. Reading Comprehension in Higher Education

University-level students, especially those majoring in English Education, are expected to master different comprehension levels, including critical reading. Critical reading is essential for engaging in academic discourse and developing independent thinking (Wallace, M.,& Wray, 2016). However, several studies show that many EFL university students still struggle with evaluative and critical comprehension due to limited strategy use, insufficient vocabulary, and lack of exposure to complex texts (Fitriani, 2018)(Sari, 2020).

Therefore, examining students' reading comprehension performance helps educators identify learning gaps and plan effective instructional strategies to support their academic literacy development.

E. Relevant Previous Studies

Several studies have investigated students' comprehension levels using multiple-choice tests.

a. (Sari, 2020)found that students performed well in literal comprehension but encountered difficulties in evaluative and critical comprehension.
b. (Fitriani, 2018) reported similar findings, highlighting the need for teaching strategies focused on higher-order reading skills.
c. (Hanafiah, 2021) emphasized that critical comprehension remains the most challenging aspect for EFL learners.

These studies support the rationale for investigating comprehension levels among third-semester students to provide insights into their reading development. Based on the theories and previous studies, it is evident that reading comprehension involves various cognitive levels requiring different strategies and skills. Multiple-choice tests are appropriate tools to assess students' comprehension performance at literal, evaluative, and critical levels. This review establishes the importance of evaluating students' reading comprehension in higher education to identify strengths and challenges in their academic literacy.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to investigate the ability of third-semester students in answering multiple-choice questions aimed at assessing literal, evaluative, and critical levels of reading comprehension. A descriptive design was selected because the main objective of the study was not to examine cause-and-effect relationships, but to describe, measure, and interpret the existing performance of students in their natural academic environment. According to (Creswell, 2014), descriptive quantitative research is appropriate when the researcher intends to systematically present factual and accurate information about a particular phenomenon.

In this context, the phenomenon under investigation is students' reading comprehension ability across three distinct cognitive levels. Quantitative descriptive design allows the researcher to convert students' test performance into numerical data that can be analyzed statistically, thereby providing an objective overview of patterns and tendencies in their comprehension skills (Fraenkel, J.R., Wallen,N.E.,& Hyun, 2012). This

approach also enables comparisons between the three comprehension levels—literal, evaluative, and critical—to determine which areas demonstrate strengths and which indicate weaknesses.

Furthermore, a quantitative descriptive design was considered appropriate because the study focused on a specific group of learners**,** namely third-semester students in an English Education program. The design allows for the collection of data at a single point in time, creating a clear snapshot of students' comprehension abilities at their current stage of academic development. This aligns with the purpose of educational research that seeks to monitor and understand learners' progress and instructional needs (Ary, D., Jacobs, L.C., Sorensen, C., & Walker, 2014).

The design also provides a framework for describing central tendencies such as mean scores, percentage distributions, and categorical interpretation, which are essential for evaluating students' proficiency in reading comprehension. Additionally, by using a standardized test format (multiple-choice), the design ensures that the measurement is consistent, objective, and easily interpretable across participants.

In summary, the quantitative descriptive design was chosen because it:

1. Provides an accurate representation of students' reading comprehension performance.
2. Allows systematic measurement of literal, evaluative, and critical comprehension.
3. Supports statistical analysis to describe trends and performance classifications.
4. Is appropriate for educational assessment**,** where the goal is to evaluate rather than manipulate learning conditions.
5. Ensures objectivity and reliability through the use of structured multiple-choice tests.

Thus, this design enables the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions regarding students' comprehension strengths and weaknesses, thereby offering valuable insights for curriculum development and instructional improvement.

B. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 35 third-semester students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at University X during the 2024/2025 academic year. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, based on the assumption that third-semester students have already taken basic reading courses and are developing higher-order comprehension skills (Fraenkel, J.R., Wallen,N.E.,& Hyun, 2012). All students voluntarily participated in the study.

C. Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a 30-item multiple-choice reading comprehension test, specifically designed to assess students' literal, evaluative, and critical understanding. In educational research, multiple-choice tests are widely recognized as effective tools for measuring reading comprehension because they allow for objective scoring, high reliability, and the assessment of various cognitive levels within a single test format (Brown, H.D., 2010)(Hughes, 2013).

1. Test Structure and Components
   The instrument consisted of three sections, each targeting a different comprehension level:
   a. Literal Comprehension (10 items)
      These items required students to identify explicit information directly stated in the text, such as main ideas, supporting details, references, and factual information. Literal comprehension is considered the foundational level of reading, as students must first understand the surface meaning before progressing to higher-level interpretation (Grabe, W., & Stoller, 2011).
   b. Evaluative Comprehension (10 items)
      This section assessed students' ability to make judgments, evaluate information, distinguish fact from opinion, and assess the writer's purpose or tone. Evaluative questions require students to apply more advanced cognitive skills by interpreting the text beyond the literal level (Day, R.R.,& Park, 2005).
   c. Critical Comprehension (10 items)
      These items measured students' ability to critically analyze the text, identify assumptions, infer deeper meanings, and draw logical conclusions. Critical comprehension involves the highest level of reading skills, as it requires interpretation, justification, and critical reasoning (C. Snow, 2002).

   Each item consisted of four answer choices (A–D) with only one correct option, following the standard format recommended for language assessment (Alderson, 2000).
2. Source of Test Items
   The items were adapted from internationally recognized reading comprehension sources to ensure authenticity and difficulty level. These sources included:
   a. TOEFL iBT Reading Practice Materials (ETS, 2020)

b. IELTS Academic Reading Practice Tests (Cambridge University Press, 2019)
c. Supplemental reading passages from (Grabe, W., & Stoller, 2011) *Teaching and Researching Reading*

Adaptation was carried out to align the test items with the cognitive levels described by (Day, R.R.,& Park, 2005). Each item was revised to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriate difficulty for third-semester university students.

3. Instrument Development Process

The development of the instrument followed several key steps:

a. Selection of reading passages from academic topics suitable for university-level learners.
b. Design of multiple-choice items according to the target comprehension level.
c. Expert review for content validity (two lecturers specializing in reading comprehension).
d. Revision of test items based on expert feedback for clarity, appropriateness, and cognitive alignment.
e. Pilot testing on a different group of students to evaluate the reliability and difficulty level.

This process aligns with the recommended stages in test development as outlined by (Hughes, 2013) and (Brown, H.D., & Abeywickrama, 2010).

4. Validity and Reliability
   a. Content Validity
   b. The test's content validity was assured through expert evaluation. The experts assessed whether each item accurately reflected the intended comprehension category and whether the test content aligned with established theoretical frameworks (Day, R.R.,& Park, 2005); (Grabe, W., & Stoller, 2011).
   c. Reliability
   d. A pilot test was administered to 15 students. Using Cronbach's Alpha, the reliability score reached 0.82, indicating that the instrument had high internal consistency (Pallant, 2016). According to (Fraenkel, J.R., Wallen,N.E.,& Hyun, 2012), any reliability coefficient above 0.70 is acceptable for educational research.
5. Scoring System

Each correct answer received 1 point, while incorrect answers were scored 0. Scores for each comprehension level were analyzed separately to determine students' strengths and weaknesses. This scoring approach follows standard procedures in reading comprehension assessment (Alderson, 2000).

D. Validity and Reliability

1. Validity

Validity refers to the extent to which an instrument measures what it is intended to measure. In the context of this research, the reading comprehension test must accurately assess literal, evaluative, and critical understanding. To ensure this, the study established content validity, construct validity, and face validity, following the principles recommended by (Brown, H.D., 2010), (Hughes, 2013), and (Creswell, 2014).

a. Content Validity

Content validity was addressed by ensuring that each test item represented the specific skills associated with the three comprehension levels. The researcher developed items based on established reading comprehension frameworks (Day, R.R.,& Park, 2005); (Grabe, W., & Stoller, 2011), which classify reading comprehension into various cognitive processes.

To verify alignment with these frameworks, the instrument underwent expert judgment. Two lecturers specializing in Reading and Language Assessment reviewed the test according to the following criteria:

1) clarity and readability of items
2) appropriateness of reading passages
3) suitability of questions to the targeted comprehension level
4) linguistic level appropriate for third-semester students

This expert validation process follows the recommendation of (Ary, D., Jacobs, L.C., Sorensen, C., & Walker, 2014), who state that expert review is essential to ensure that the test fully represents the domain of knowledge it intends to measure.

b. Construct Validity

Construct validity concerns whether the test accurately measures the theoretical construct of reading comprehension. Since reading comprehension involves multiple cognitive domains, dividing the instrument into literal, evaluative, and critical sections reflects commonly accepted reading taxonomies (C. Snow, 2002).

1) Literal items measured recognition of explicit information.
2) Evaluative items assessed judgment and interpretation.

3) Critical items required deeper reasoning and inference.

This structure ensures that each construct is represented systematically and reflects theoretical expectations in reading assessment (Alderson, 2000).

c. Face Validity

Although the simplest form of validity, face validity ensures that the test appears appropriate and understandable to the participants. Pilot test students reported that the instructions were clear and the questions matched typical academic reading tasks. According to (Brown, H.D., & Abeywickrama, 2010), face validity contributes to test-taker confidence and engagement, which can affect performance.

2. Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of an instrument in measuring what it intends to measure. A reliable test yields stable results across time, test forms, and groups of participants (Hughes, 2013); (Cohen, L., Manion, L.,& Marrison, 2018). To assess reliability, a pilot test was conducted involving 15 students who did not participate in the actual study. The responses were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha, a commonly used statistical procedure for determining internal consistency.

a. Internal Consistency Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha for the 30-item instrument was **0.82**, indicating strong internal consistency. According to (Pallant, 2016), values above:

1) **0.70** = acceptable
2) **0.80** = good
3) **0.90** = excellent

Thus, the reliability coefficient of 0.82 confirms that the test items function cohesively in measuring reading comprehension skills.

The internal consistency also suggests that the instrument items are homogenous and measure the same construct, which is essential for reading comprehension tests (Alderson, 2000).

b. Item Analysis

Item analysis was conducted to assess:

1) item difficulty (p-value)
2) item discrimination (D-index)

Items with extremely high or low difficulty ($p > 0.90$ or $p < 0.20$) or low discrimination ($D < 0.20$) were revised or removed. This procedure aligns with Hughes' (2013) recommendation that high-quality test items must discriminate between high-achieving and low-achieving students.

c. Reliability Improvement Measures

Based on pilot test findings, minor revisions were made:

1) Ambiguous wording was simplified.
2) Answer options were balanced to avoid guessing bias.
3) Distractors were improved to increase discrimination.

Brown (2010) notes that revisions following pilot testing significantly enhance test reliability and provide more valid measurement outcomes.

E. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure followed several steps:

1. Requesting permission from the head of the study program and informing students about the research.
2. Administering the 30-item reading comprehension test in a classroom setting.
3. Providing students with 45 minutes to complete the test.
4. Collecting answer sheets and scoring them based on correct responses.
   Each correct answer received 1 point, while incorrect answers were scored 0.

F. Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores, percentages, and categorical interpretation. The scoring formula was:

$$\text{Score} = \frac{\text{Number of Correct Answers}}{30} \times 100$$

To interpret students' performance, the study adopted (Arikunto, 2010) classification:

1. **80–100** = Very Good
2. **70–79** = Good
3. **60–69** = Fair
4. **Below 60** = Poor

The results were then analyzed separately for literal, evaluative, and critical comprehension to identify which level students performed best and which required improvement.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

The objective of this study was to determine the ability of third-semester students in answering multiple-choice reading comprehension questions measuring literal, evaluative, and critical understanding. The results of the test are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Students' Reading Comprehension Performance

Comprehension Level	Mean Score	Category
Literal	78	Good
Evaluative	65	Fair
Critical	58	Poor

The data indicate that students achieved the highest performance in literal comprehension with a mean score of 78, classified as "Good" based on (Arikunto, 2010) criteria. This result shows that most students were able to identify explicitly stated information such as facts, main ideas, and specific details from the text. Meanwhile, the evaluative comprehension level reached a mean score of 65, categorized as "Fair". Although students can understand general meaning, they still struggle with distinguishing facts from opinions and interpreting the author's intentions or viewpoints.

Finally, the critical comprehension level recorded the lowest mean score, 58, categorized as "Poor". This indicates that students had difficulty making inferences, evaluating arguments, and interpreting implied meanings within the text. Overall, these findings suggest that as comprehension questions become cognitively more demanding, students' performance decreases.

B. Discussion

The results reveal a hierarchical pattern of reading comprehension ability among students: literal, evaluative and critical. This aligns with the theoretical foundation that literal comprehension is the most basic level of reading, while critical comprehension represents higher-order cognitive processing (Day, R.R.,& Park, 2005); (Anderson, L. W.,& Krathwohl, 2001).

1. Literal Comprehension Performance
   The strong literal performance suggests that students possess adequate skills in retrieving information directly stated in the text. These findings are consistent with (Grabe, W., & Stoller, 2011), who argue that literal comprehension develops earlier and is typically stronger in EFL university students. Similar results were also found in studies by (Fitriani, 2018) and (Sari, 2020), which reported that literal comprehension is generally the most mastered level among Indonesian EFL learners.
2. Evaluative Comprehension Challenges
   Students' moderate performance in evaluative comprehension indicates challenges in evaluating content and understanding the author's perspective. Brown (2010) notes that evaluation requires readers to integrate reasoning with reading strategies, which many EFL learners are still developing. Limited exposure to argumentative and analytical reading materials may contribute to these challenges (Dorn, L., & Soffos, 2005). This result correlates with previous findings that evaluative skills are less developed than literal comprehension among university students (Hanafiah, 2021).
3. Critical Comprehension as the Most Problematic Area
   Critical comprehension recorded the lowest performance. This aligns with observations by (Wallace, M.,& Wray, 2016) that critical reading is demanding because it involves questioning assumptions, interpreting implied meaning, and engaging in logical reasoning. According to (Ennis, 2011), critical thinking skills require explicit instruction and frequent practice, which may not be sufficiently integrated in current reading instruction.

The weak results in this domain suggest that students have difficulty going beyond the text to construct deeper interpretation and critical judgment—challenges that are commonly found in EFL contexts (Sari, 2020).

C. Pedagogical Implications

These results highlight the urgent need for educational interventions to improve higher-order comprehension :

1. Teachers should incorporate critical reading strategies, such as inference-making, text analysis, and argument evaluation.
2. Students should be exposed to a wider variety of academic texts requiring deeper comprehension.
3. Classroom activities must encourage reasoning and discussion instead of memorization-focused learning.

The findings support (Alderson, 2000) argument that reading comprehension instruction must target different cognitive levels to develop well-rounded academic literacy skills. The decline in students' scores from literal to critical comprehension demonstrates that while basic comprehension skills are developing adequately, higher-order reading skills remain insufficient. Therefore, teaching approaches must shift to foster analytical and critical reading abilities aligned with academic expectations at the university level.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the ability of third-semester students in answering multiple-choice reading comprehension questions that measure literal, evaluative, and critical understanding. Based on the statistical results, students demonstrated a strong performance on literal comprehension, as they were able to recognize explicit information and factual details presented in the text. This indicates that students have adequately developed basic reading skills that involve identifying what is directly stated.

However, the findings also revealed that students' evaluative comprehension remained at a moderate level, suggesting that they face challenges when required to interpret the author's purpose, make judgments, or assess the quality of information. More importantly, students performed weakest in critical comprehension, which involves deeper cognitive processing such as drawing inferences, analyzing textual arguments, and connecting the text with broader knowledge.

These results highlight that although students can understand the surface meaning of texts, they still require improvement in higher-order reading skills, particularly those related to critical thinking in reading. This situation implies that additional instructional strategies are needed to enhance students' analytical and evaluative abilities. Teachers should incorporate more activities that promote questioning, reasoning, and interpretation to strengthen critical reading competence.

In conclusion, while students' literal comprehension ability is classified as good, their evaluative and critical comprehension skills must be further developed. Strengthening these higher-level reading skills is essential to prepare students for more advanced academic challenges and to support their overall success in reading comprehension.

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