



Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Reading English Text for EFL Learners in Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the reading difficulties faced by EFL students at the junior high school level. Using a qualitative descriptive method with content analysis, data were gathered through interviews and classroom observations involving 20 eighth-grade students and one English teacher at SMPN 3 Bantarujeg. The findings show that students experience difficulties in vocabulary mastery, sentence structure comprehension, identifying main ideas, making inferences, and applying reading strategies. In addition, teacher-centered approaches and lack of support from the learning environment contribute to these issues. The study recommends the implementation of strategy-based instruction and supportive classroom practices to improve students' reading comprehension.

Keywords: EFL students, reading difficulties, reading comprehension, qualitative research.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill in English language learning, particularly for students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). At the junior high school level, reading does not merely involve recognizing words, but understanding texts critically, identifying main ideas, interpreting vocabulary in context, and making inferences. However, many EFL students in Indonesia face persistent difficulties in reading English texts, which often result in low academic performance and lack of confidence.

These challenges stem from both internal and external factors. Internal factors include limited vocabulary mastery, low grammatical understanding, lack of reading strategies, and weak metacognitive awareness. External factors encompass teacher-centered learning, inappropriate reading materials, minimal parental support, and underutilized digital tools. These issues were identified during preliminary observations at SMPN 3 Bantarujeg, where students struggled with reading comprehension tasks.

Although several studies have examined EFL reading difficulties, most have focused on specific genres, higher education levels, or utilized quantitative designs. This study fills the gap by providing a qualitative, context-sensitive analysis of the real-life difficulties faced by junior high school students, offering deeper insights into both causes and potential solutions.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach with a content analysis technique. The research was conducted at SMPN 3 Bantarujeg, Majalengka, West Java, involving 20 eighth-grade students and one English teacher, selected through purposive sampling.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interview questions focused on students' challenges in reading, strategies they used or failed to use, and emotional responses during reading activities. Observations were conducted to record real-time behaviors and teaching practices during English reading lessons.

Data analysis was performed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The credibility of findings was ensured through triangulation of sources and techniques.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the main findings of the study regarding EFL students' difficulties in reading English texts. The results are based on interviews and classroom observations, and are analyzed thematically in relation to relevant theories and previous research.

RESULT

This study aimed to investigate the reading difficulties faced by junior high school EFL students. Through semi-structured interviews with 20 eighth-grade students and one English teacher, combined with classroom observations, the research revealed six major categories of difficulties:

1. Limited Vocabulary Mastery

Many students struggled to understand reading texts due to insufficient vocabulary knowledge. When encountering unfamiliar words, students tended

to stop reading or guess meanings inaccurately without using context clues. Several students admitted they were only familiar with basic words commonly used in exams but lacked exposure to academic or descriptive vocabulary found in texts.

2. Poor Grammatical Understanding

The students found it difficult to comprehend complex sentence structures, especially passive voice, compound sentences, and subordinating clauses. They often failed to identify sentence subjects and predicates, leading to a misunderstanding of the overall meaning. Observations showed that some students paused mid-sentence because they were confused by word order or grammatical constructs.

3. Inability to Identify Main Ideas

Most students were unable to distinguish the main idea from supporting details. They often assumed that the first or last sentence of a paragraph always contained the main idea without analyzing the paragraph's full content. As a result, they had trouble answering comprehension questions related to main ideas.

4. Weak Inferential Skills

Students tended to understand texts only at a literal level and found it challenging to draw conclusions or infer implicit meaning. When given inference-based questions, they often copied irrelevant sentences from the text or answered randomly.

5. Lack of Reading Strategies

It was evident that students lacked awareness and training in reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and questioning. Reading was approached in a passive, word-by-word manner without a clear purpose or plan. This led to ineffective and time-consuming reading processes with low comprehension outcomes.

6. External Factors: Teaching Methods and Environmental Support

Beyond internal cognitive factors, external influences such as teacher-centered instruction and limited access to English reading materials contributed

to students' difficulties. Lessons observed were primarily lecture-based with minimal interaction. Furthermore, students reported rarely reading at home due to a lack of parental support and interesting materials.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that the reading difficulties experienced by EFL students are multifaceted, involving cognitive, pedagogical, and environmental aspects.

First, limited vocabulary was a major barrier to reading comprehension. This aligns with Westwood (2008), who emphasized that vocabulary knowledge is critical to understanding text meaning. Without sufficient vocabulary, students become easily frustrated and lose motivation. Damanik et al. (2024) similarly found that limited vocabulary among EFL students severely hinders comprehension.

Second, the difficulty in understanding grammatical structures supports the findings of Sudirman and Said (2021), who argued that poor syntactic awareness can lead to misinterpretation of texts. Students in this study were unfamiliar with more advanced sentence types, which obstructed their ability to follow the logical flow of ideas in a passage.

Third, the inability to identify main ideas highlights the lack of students' ability to process discourse holistically. Instead of analyzing paragraph content, students rely on surface cues. This skill gap reflects a need for more training in discourse-level comprehension and text analysis.

Fourth, weak inferencing skills indicate that students are not yet trained in higher-order thinking strategies during reading. Paris and Jacobs (1984) state that inferencing is a vital metacognitive skill necessary for constructing meaning from texts. The lack of inference ability limits students to surface-level understanding.

Fifth, the absence of effective reading strategies shows that students are not reading strategically. As noted by Afflerbach et al. (2008), skilled readers use different strategies depending on the reading purpose. Without these strategies, students read inefficiently and struggle to retain or connect information.

Finally, external factors such as teacher-centered instruction exacerbate the situation. Harmer (2019) argues that effective reading instruction must be learner-centered, with active student participation and strategy training. The findings

revealed that most lessons did not involve group discussions, strategy modeling, or individualized reading support. Moreover, the lack of supportive reading environments at home discourages reading habits and language exposure beyond the classroom.

Overall, this study confirms that junior high school EFL students face a combination of linguistic, cognitive, and contextual challenges. To address these, English teachers should implement a more interactive and student-centered approach that emphasizes explicit strategy instruction, vocabulary development, and supportive classroom environments. Schools and families must also collaborate to foster students' motivation and access to reading materials.

CONCLUSION

His study revealed that junior high school EFL students encounter a range of significant difficulties in reading English texts. These include limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of fluency, lack of knowledge of the subject matter, lack of use of effective reading strategies, problems in information processing. Such linguistic and cognitive challenges hinder students' ability to comprehend texts holistically. Moreover, these difficulties not only impede reading comprehension but also negatively affect students' motivation and confidence in engaging with English reading materials.

The findings indicate that both internal and external factors contribute to students' reading difficulties. Internally, students struggle with cognitive limitations, low interest in reading, and insufficient metacognitive awareness, including the inability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their understanding while reading. Externally, the use of teacher-centered learning approaches, the presence of reading materials that are either too difficult or irrelevant, limited integration of technology, and inadequate support from the home environment exacerbate students' challenges. These interconnected factors create a learning context that is not conducive to the development of effective reading comprehension skills.

Addressing EFL students' reading difficulties requires a comprehensive and strategic approach. Students should be equipped with explicit instruction in reading strategies that promote active engagement with texts, such as making predictions,

inferring meaning, and questioning content. Teachers are encouraged to adopt more student-centered learning, select level-appropriate and engaging reading materials, and integrate multimedia resources to foster interest, comprehension and deducing meaning from context. Furthermore, creating a supportive learning environment both inside and outside the classroom through parental involvement and the use of digital tools can significantly enhance students' reading proficiency. These measures are essential for fostering independent, reflective, and competent readers in EFL contexts.

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