Investigating Students Difficulties in Comprehending English Reading Text at the Ninth Grade of SMP IT Qurrota A'yun Palu

Wildan Zahen Da'im[1], Darmawan[1], Andi Patmasari[1], Wahyudin[1]

[1]Universitas Tadulako, Indonesia
*Correspondence: wildancahaya264@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to identify the most challenging aspect of reading comprehension, particularly in narrative texts, as well as the factors contributing to these challenges. This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing tests and interviews as data collection instruments. The participants of this study were students at the junior high school level during the 2024/2025 academic year. A reading comprehension test was administered to 26 students, consisting of 15 questions categorized into five types: identifying the main idea, locating references, understanding vocabulary, making inferences, and finding detailed information. In addition, three students were interviewed using a set of 10 questions. The test findings indicate that the most challenging aspect for the students is identifying detailed information. Furthermore, interview results reveal two main factors contributing to students' difficulties in reading comprehension: internal and external factors. Internal factors include inadequate reading strategies, limited vocabulary knowledge, and low interest in reading. Meanwhile, the external factor is related to the students' surrounding environment.
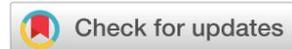
1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is a crucial skill for students to achieve their academic goals, particularly in understanding written texts in English. As defined by Meylana (2019), it involves the process of interpreting and constructing meaning from text, while Aprilia (2023) explains that it is achieved by connecting new information with prior knowledge. In the Indonesian educational context, reading comprehension is emphasized in the 2013 Curriculum, which requires students to master various types of texts, including narrative texts (Rahman, 2018; Prihandoko et al., 2021; Weda et al., 2022). Despite this, many students still struggle with comprehending English texts effectively (Rahman et al., 2019; Youngsun et al., 2024).

Previous studies have revealed that students often encounter challenges in aspects such as identifying main ideas, understanding vocabulary, making inferences, locating references, and finding detailed information (Lestari et al., 2017; Larasati, 2019; Aprilia, 2023). These difficulties hinder their ability to comprehend reading materials and respond accurately to comprehension questions. Moreover, factors such as lack of reading strategies, limited vocabulary, low interest in reading, and unsupportive learning environments have been identified as contributing to students' poor reading performance.

Among these studies, Aprilia (2023) provides a more structured classification of students' difficulties. However, her research—as well as others—tends to focus on general comprehension challenges without specifically analyzing each aspect in the context of narrative texts or linking them to internal and external contributing factors. Most prior studies have not deeply explored the specific difficulties encountered by students in each aspect of reading comprehension, particularly in narrative texts, nor have they examined the internal and external factors influencing these difficulties in the context of junior high school students in rural or semi-urban areas.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the most challenging aspects of reading comprehension faced by junior high school students, with a specific focus on narrative texts. In addition, it explores the underlying internal and external factors that contribute to these challenges. This study is expected to contribute valuable insights into students' reading comprehension difficulties and provide practical implications for English teachers in selecting appropriate strategies to support student learning.

The findings may also serve as a reference for future researchers to explore effective interventions or teaching techniques in improving students' reading comprehension, particularly in narrative texts. Moreover, by focusing on students in a semi-urban setting, this study offers a contextual contribution that highlights how local learning environments shape students' reading abilities—an area that remains underexplored in previous studies.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate students' difficulties in reading comprehension, particularly in narrative texts, and to identify the contributing internal and external factors. This method was selected because it allows for an in-depth exploration of students' experiences, perceptions, and understanding in a natural classroom setting (Creswell, 2012), thereby producing rich and contextualized data.

The participants of this study were 26 ninth-grade students from class IX D at SMP IT Qurrota A'yun Palu during the 2024/2025 academic year. Data were collected using two instruments: a reading comprehension test and semi-structured interviews. The reading test consisted of 15 multiple-choice questions based on narrative texts, targeting five key aspects of comprehension: identifying the main idea, locating references, understanding vocabulary, making inferences, and recognizing detailed information. The purpose of the test was to identify which aspects presented the greatest challenges to students.

Following the test, three students were purposefully selected for interviews—two students with high scores and one with a low score—to gain deeper insights into the cognitive and contextual factors affecting their reading comprehension. The interviews explored students' reading habits, home and school learning environments, vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies, and motivation for learning English.

The data were analyzed descriptively. The results of the reading test were quantified to calculate the percentage of errors for each comprehension aspect. Interview transcripts were coded and thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns and factors contributing to students' difficulties. To ensure the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing the results from both instruments. This process enhanced the overall reliability and validity of the study.

3. Result and Discussion

This study investigated the difficulties faced by ninth-grade students in reading comprehension, specifically in narrative texts, and identified the internal and external factors contributing to these difficulties. The findings were obtained through a reading comprehension test consisting of 15 questions and interviews with selected students. The results are explained in detail below.:

3.1 Students' Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

This study reveals that students faced difficulties across all five aspects of reading comprehension: identifying detailed information, understanding vocabulary, determining the main idea, making inferences, and locating references. Among these, the most difficult aspect was identifying detailed information, accounting for 40% of total incorrect answers. This indicates that students often fail to locate or recall explicit information stated in the text. For instance, when asked about the consequence of Malin Kundang's actions, some students incorrectly answered "he apologized" instead of the correct "he turned to stone." This suggests that students struggle to recognize key factual details embedded in narrative events.

These findings align with those of Lestari et al. (2017) and Irmayanti (2021), who reported that students tend to overlook explicit facts when processing longer texts. In contrast to Aprilia (2023), who categorized students' difficulties broadly, this study provides more nuanced insight into the specific challenges encountered in each reading aspect, especially in narrative contexts.

The second most difficult aspect was understanding vocabulary (20%). Many students could not derive the meanings of words like furious or acknowledge from context, especially when the words were idiomatic or figurative. One student expressed this by saying, "It's hard to understand the English words, especially when they are figurative or like idioms." Wahyuni (2019) emphasized that limited vocabulary hinders comprehension, a notion clearly reflected in this study. Moreover, this confirms Hidayat's (2018) assertion that vocabulary mastery plays a critical role in determining reading success.

The third challenge, determining the main idea (also 20%), further suggests a lack of higher-order thinking skills. Many students mistakenly chose supporting details as the main idea. This indicates weak summarization skills and a lack of training in identifying key messages—skills essential to narrative text comprehension. Compared to Fauzi (2019), who found that students could grasp the gist when guided, this study found that students struggled independently.

Making inferences and locating references each accounted for 10% of the total challenges. These are higher-level cognitive skills that require students to connect ideas across sentences and paragraphs. A student's misinterpretation of the rabbit's character as "afraid" instead of "brave" highlights this gap. Similarly, when students failed to identify pronouns like he or she correctly, it demonstrated poor tracking of textual cohesion. These findings reinforce Larasati's (2019) observation that students often find implicit information harder to grasp.

3.2 Factors Influencing Students' Difficulties

The interviews with three students—two with high test scores and one with a low score—revealed that the difficulties stemmed from both internal and external factors, which are explained below.

a. Internal Factors

Several internal factors were found to contribute to students' reading comprehension difficulties:

Lack of Reading Strategies: All students interviewed demonstrated limited awareness of strategies for understanding texts. One high-achieving student said, "First, I look at the characters and the plot. For example, what the lion and rabbit did," but she did not mention using specific strategies like skimming or scanning. Another student admitted, "I don't know how to answer. I just guess based on what I feel." These responses suggest a lack of structured approaches to comprehension.

Limited Vocabulary Knowledge: All three students acknowledged that unfamiliar words, particularly idioms or figurative language, hindered their ability to understand texts. As one student stated, "I don't understand the words; sometimes I don't even know how to read them." Another said, "It's difficult to translate them, especially idioms or figurative expressions." They expressed difficulty in translating complex vocabulary and felt uncertain about many word meanings.

Low Motivation and Interest in Reading English: One student expressed genuine interest in English, stating, "Yes, I really like reading English books because the stories are legit, wahh." Another said, "I like English because since second grade I've been good at it. English is like my main language now." However, the third student noted, "I prefer Arabic books. English books aren't that interesting to me." These differences in interest levels correlate with their performance in reading tasks.

These internal factors align with research by Hidayat (2018) and Fauzi (2019), who found that limited strategy use and vocabulary mastery are strongly linked to reading difficulties. Kholiq & Luthfiyati (2020) also emphasize that students with low interest in reading are less likely to develop comprehension skills.

b. External Factors

In addition to internal factors, the study identified several external influences:

Unfavorable Learning Environment: Students reported that noisy classroom conditions often made it hard to concentrate during reading sessions. One student mentioned that her class environment was too loud, which disrupted her focus while trying to understand the texts.

Lack of Resources: Students noted the limited availability of English reading materials and dictionaries at school. One student preferred using Webtoon translations as an alternative source to learn vocabulary. Another said she had to study independently at home with minimal guidance.

Family Support: While one student reported strong parental support, including encouragement and enrollment in English courses, the others admitted to receiving little or no motivation from family members. One student said she had to study English by herself since her parents did not prioritize language learning.

Health and Sleep Issues: One respondent attributed her lack of concentration in class to insomnia, while another said she felt sleepy during lessons due to late-night tutoring and assignments. These physical and psychological factors further affected their ability to comprehend texts effectively.

These environmental and psychological barriers are in line with findings from Larasati (2019) and Hidayati (2018), who showed that both home and school environments play a vital role in shaping students' reading abilities. Limited access to reading materials, insufficient support, and health-related issues such as sleep deprivation were identified as key external challenges. Taken together, these findings indicate that students' difficulties in reading comprehension are not only rooted in cognitive limitations, but also in socio-environmental conditions that are often overlooked in pedagogical planning. The combination of limited strategy use, vocabulary deficits, disinterest in English, inadequate home support, and classroom distractions creates a complex web of challenges that teachers must address with targeted and context-sensitive interventions.

Table 1. Students' Difficulties in Aspects of Reading Comprehension

No	Aspect	Frequency (Incorrect Answers)	Percentage
1	Detailed Information	33	40%
2	Understanding Vocabulary	17	20%
3	Main Idea	17	20%
4	Making Inference	8	10%
5	Locating Reference	8	10%

The table presents the results distribution of students' difficulties across five aspects of reading comprehension based on a test administered to 26 participants. The highest percentage of incorrect responses (40%) occurred in detailed information, indicating students' struggles in identifying explicit facts or narrative details. Both vocabulary understanding and main idea identification accounted for 20% each, suggesting challenges in recognizing word meanings—particularly idiomatic or figurative ones—and distinguishing key ideas from supporting details. The remaining difficulties were evenly split between making inferences and locating references (10% each), highlighting issues in interpreting implied meanings and identifying referents such as pronouns within the text.

3.3 Research Data

The data in this study were collected from two primary sources: a reading comprehension test and semi-structured interviews. The participants were 26 ninth-grade students from class IX D at SMP IT Qurrota A'yun Palu during the 2024/2025 academic year. The test comprised 15 multiple-choice questions based on narrative texts, each targeting one of five key aspects of reading comprehension: identifying the main idea, locating references, understanding vocabulary, making inferences, and finding detailed information.

The students' responses were analyzed to determine which aspects posed the greatest difficulty. The results are summarized in Table 1 (see Section 3.2). The highest percentage of incorrect answers was in the aspect of identifying detailed information (40%), followed by vocabulary understanding and main idea (20% each), while making inferences and locating references were less problematic (10% each).

Additionally, interviews were conducted with three students—two with high test scores and one with a low score—to gain qualitative insights into their reading comprehension challenges. The responses were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically. The interview data revealed two main contributing factors to students' difficulties: internal factors (such as limited vocabulary, lack of reading strategies, and low motivation), and external factors (including limited access to learning resources, lack of family support, and disruptive classroom environments).

By combining quantitative data from the test and qualitative data from the interviews, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of students' difficulties in reading comprehension and the underlying causes.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals that ninth-grade students at SMP IT Qurrota A'yun Palu face significant challenges in comprehending narrative texts. Among the five aspects examined—main idea, locating references, understanding vocabulary, making inferences, and detailed information—students showed the greatest difficulty in extracting detailed

information, followed by understanding vocabulary and identifying the main idea. Meanwhile, inference and reference-related tasks posed moderate levels of difficulty. The interviews further highlighted that these comprehension challenges are shaped by both internal and external factors. Internally, students struggle with limited vocabulary mastery, lack of reading strategies, and low motivation to engage with English texts. Externally, unsupportive learning environments—such as noisy classrooms, lack of English resources, and minimal parental support—exacerbate their difficulties. These findings underscore the importance of adopting more engaging and strategy-focused reading instruction in the classroom. Teachers are encouraged to provide varied and interactive reading experiences that enhance vocabulary and promote the use of effective comprehension strategies. In addition, creating a supportive and resourceful learning environment at both school and home can play a vital role in improving students' reading outcomes. It is hoped that this study contributes to ongoing efforts to address reading comprehension issues and offers useful insights for educators and future researchers.

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