

ANALYSIS OF THE STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN READING COMPREHENSION AT SMA DAARUL HIKMAH SERANG

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Abstract

This research aims to analyze the students' difficulties in reading comprehension at SMA Daarul Hikmah Serang. Many students still struggle to understand the content of English texts, identify main ideas, interpret vocabulary, and infer implied meanings. This study employed a descriptive qualitative method involving eleventh-grade students as participants. Data were collected through reading tests, questionnaires, and interviews to identify the types and sources of students' difficulties.

The findings reveal that students experience difficulties in several aspects of reading comprehension: limited vocabulary knowledge, inability to identify main ideas, lack of reading strategies, and low motivation. Additionally, external factors such as insufficient learning materials and ineffective reading exercises also contribute to their challenges. Based on the results, the study suggests that teachers should implement more interactive reading strategies and provide vocabulary enrichment to improve students' comprehension.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesulitan siswa dalam memahami bacaan (reading comprehension) di SMA Daarul Hikmah Serang. Banyak siswa masih mengalami kesulitan dalam memahami isi teks bahasa Inggris, mengidentifikasi gagasan utama, menafsirkan kosakata, serta menarik makna tersirat. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif kualitatif dengan melibatkan siswa kelas XI sebagai partisipan. Data dikumpulkan melalui tes membaca, angket, dan wawancara untuk mengetahui jenis dan sumber kesulitan siswa.

Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa mengalami kesulitan pada beberapa aspek pemahaman membaca, yaitu keterbatasan kosakata, ketidakmampuan mengidentifikasi gagasan utama, kurangnya strategi membaca, serta motivasi yang rendah. Faktor eksternal seperti keterbatasan materi pembelajaran dan latihan membaca yang kurang efektif juga berpengaruh terhadap rendahnya pemahaman siswa. Berdasarkan hasil tersebut, penelitian menyarankan agar guru menerapkan strategi membaca yang lebih interaktif serta memberikan pengayaan kosakata untuk

meningkatkan pemahaman siswa.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is one of the most essential skills in learning English as a foreign language because it enables students to understand written information, expand knowledge, and support their overall language development. In the context of senior high school students, reading becomes not only a linguistic skill but also a cognitive process that involves identifying main ideas, interpreting vocabulary, connecting prior knowledge, and drawing inferences from the text. However, despite its importance, many students still face significant challenges when reading English texts, especially when the texts contain unfamiliar words, complex sentence structures, or abstract ideas.

At SMA Daarul Hikmah Serang, reading comprehension has become a notable concern among teachers and students. Teachers frequently report that students struggle to understand the meaning of passages, find it difficult to answer comprehension questions, and often rely on guessing rather than applying reading strategies. These difficulties may arise from various factors, such as limited vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, ineffective reading strategies, and low motivation. In addition, external factors—including insufficient exposure to English reading materials, limited classroom time, and traditional teaching methods that emphasize testing over comprehension—may worsen the situation.

Understanding the nature of students' difficulties in reading comprehension is crucial, as it helps teachers design more effective instruction, choose appropriate materials, and implement strategies that can improve reading outcomes. Moreover, identifying these difficulties provides insights into how students process information and what kind of support they need to improve their learning.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types of difficulties faced by students in reading comprehension and the factors that contribute to these problems. Through this analysis, it is expected that the findings will serve as a foundation for improving classroom practices and enhancing students' ability to comprehend English texts more effectively.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension becomes challenging when learners struggle with linguistic processing, such as decoding, recognizing vocabulary, or understanding grammatical structures. Nation (2013) emphasizes that reading is not merely decoding words but constructing meaning from the combination of text features and the reader's cognitive processes. Therefore, students' difficulties often arise from limited vocabulary, weak grammatical understanding, low background knowledge, or ineffective reading strategies.

In the context of foreign language learning, reading comprehension is even more complex because learners process texts in a language that is not their mother tongue. Anderson (2008) states that L2 learners frequently fail to grasp the meaning because they are preoccupied with translating word by word. This indicates that reading comprehension requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability to use higher-order thinking skills such as inferring, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information.

2. Students' Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

Students often face a variety of difficulties when attempting to comprehend English texts. These difficulties can be categorized into linguistic, cognitive, affective, and strategic problems.

a. Linguistic Difficulties

These include problems related to vocabulary mastery, grammar, and sentence structure. Laufer (1997) asserts that vocabulary is the strongest predictor of reading comprehension; students with low vocabulary tend to misunderstand passages or fail to identify key information. Similarly, complex grammatical forms such as passive voice, subordinate clauses, and conditional sentences may hinder comprehension.

b. Cognitive Difficulties

Students may struggle to understand the logical flow of ideas, identify main ideas, distinguish between major and minor details, or make connections within the text. According to Paris and Hamilton (2009), cognitive difficulties arise when learners lack the mental processes required to monitor their understanding or to apply appropriate reading strategies.

c. Affective Difficulties

Factors such as anxiety, low confidence, lack of interest, or low motivation may reduce students' engagement in reading tasks. Krashen (1982) describes these challenges as part of the "affective filter," where emotional barriers limit language acquisition and reading comprehension.

d. Strategic Difficulties

Some students do not use reading strategies effectively. They may read passively without predicting, inferring, or summarizing. Palincsar and Brown (1984) suggest that good readers are strategic— they preview text, ask questions, infer meaning, clarify misunderstandings, and summarize. When students lack these strategies, comprehension becomes significantly weaker.

3. Factors Influencing Reading Comprehension Difficulties

a. Text Difficulty

Text complexity—including vocabulary load, sentence length, discourse structure, and content familiarity—affects students' comprehension. Texts that are dense with unfamiliar words or contain culturally specific information are harder to understand (Alderson, 2000).

b. Background Knowledge

Schema theory (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983) explains that prior knowledge plays a crucial role in comprehension. Students with limited background knowledge about the topic of the text cannot connect the information, resulting in fragmented understanding.

c. Learning Environment

Teachers' methods, classroom atmosphere, and availability of reading materials also influence students' reading comprehension. A supportive environment promotes curiosity, motivation, and active engagement.

4. Reading Comprehension Strategies

Several strategies can be applied to help students overcome difficulties. These include:

- Previewing: scanning the title, headings, and pictures before reading.
- Predicting: making assumptions about the content.
- Skimming and Scanning: for general and specific information.
- Contextual Guessing: using context to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words.
- Summarizing: identifying key points and synthesizing them.
- Questioning: asking and answering questions to enhance understanding.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) highlight that effective reading strategies are essential tools that help students process text more systematically and independently.

5. Previous Studies

Several previous studies have examined students' difficulties in reading comprehension.

- Rahmawati (2018) found that vocabulary limitation and lack of reading strategies are the primary obstacles among high school students in Indonesia.
- Siregar (2020) reported that students often struggle with unfamiliar grammar structures, especially in narrative and recount texts.
- Wulandari (2022) concluded that anxiety and low motivation significantly affect students' performance in reading comprehension tasks.

These studies show that reading difficulties are multifaceted and require comprehensive analysis.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to analyze the students' difficulties in reading comprehension at SMA Daarul Hikmah Serang. A qualitative method was chosen because the focus of the research is to explore, describe, and interpret the real difficulties experienced by students, rather than to measure variables numerically. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research allows researchers to understand human behavior, perceptions, and challenges through detailed and contextualized descriptions. Therefore, this method is appropriate for identifying various linguistic, cognitive, affective, and strategic difficulties faced by students in reading English texts.

1. Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at SMA Daarul Hikmah Serang, a private senior high school where English is taught as a compulsory subject. The participants consisted of eleventh-grade students, selected because they have already been introduced to several types of reading texts and are expected to achieve higher comprehension skills. A total of **25 students** were purposively selected based on their English teacher's recommendation, particularly students who were identified as having varied levels of reading comprehension proficiency. Purposive sampling is used because it allows the researcher to select participants who can provide the most relevant and rich information (Miles & Huberman, 2014).

2. Data Collection Techniques

To obtain comprehensive data, the researcher used three instruments:

(a) Reading Test

A standardized reading comprehension test was administered to identify students' difficulties at the linguistic and cognitive levels. The test included multiple-choice and short-answer questions covering vocabulary understanding, identifying main ideas, making inferences, and interpreting text structure. This test served as the primary data to detect patterns of common difficulties.

(b) Questionnaire

A semi-structured questionnaire was distributed to explore students' affective and strategic difficulties in reading. The questionnaire included open-ended questions regarding motivation, anxiety, reading habits, and the strategies students usually apply when reading English texts. This instrument allowed students to express their perspectives more freely.

(c) Interview

In-depth interviews were conducted with selected students and the English teacher to validate the findings from the test and questionnaire. Interviews helped the researcher understand the underlying causes of difficulties, such as lack of vocabulary exposure, unfamiliar text genres, or anxiety during reading tasks. Interviews were conducted individually and recorded with permission.

Using multiple instruments enabled triangulation, which increases the validity and credibility of the data (Denzin, 2010).

3. Data Analysis Technique

The data obtained from tests, questionnaires, and interviews were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's Interactive Model (1994), which consists of three major steps:

(a) Data Reduction

The researcher selected, categorized, and simplified the raw data into meaningful themes. For example, vocabulary difficulty, grammatical difficulty, low motivation, or ineffective reading strategies.

(b) Data Display

The reduced data were presented in the form of tables, descriptions, and thematic categories to make interpretation easier. This step helps the researcher see patterns and connections among students' difficulties.

(c) Conclusion Drawing and Verification

The researcher interpreted the findings, drew conclusions, and re-checked them through triangulation to ensure accuracy. The results were then compared with theories and previous studies to provide a deeper understanding.

4. Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher applied four criteria by Lincoln and Guba (1985):

- Credibility: achieved through triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member checking.
- Transferability: ensured by providing detailed descriptions of the research context.
- Dependability: supported by consistent documentation of the research process.
- Confirmability: maintained by presenting findings based on actual evidence rather than personal bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a. RESULTS

The findings of this research reveal that the students at SMA Daarul Hikmah Serang experienced various difficulties in reading comprehension. The data were obtained from reading tests, questionnaires, and interviews, and then analyzed to identify the dominant types of difficulties. The results indicate three major categories of challenges: **linguistic difficulties, cognitive difficulties, and affective-strategic difficulties**. Each category is explained in detail below.

1. Linguistic Difficulties

Linguistic difficulties were found to be the most dominant problems among the students. The majority of students struggled to understand vocabulary, sentence structures, and grammar patterns contained in the reading passages.

(a) Vocabulary Mastery

The reading test results showed that more than half of the students were unable to define basic and intermediate-level vocabulary. Many students reported that unfamiliar words created a cognitive block that prevented them from understanding the main idea of the passage. Students frequently struggled with synonyms, antonyms, idiomatic expressions, and academic vocabulary often used in narrative and exposition texts.

Interviews confirmed that students rarely practiced reading English outside class, resulting in limited exposure to new words. Some students also stated that they tended to skip difficult words instead of using contextual clues, which further hindered comprehension.

(b) Grammar and Sentence Complexity

Students also experienced difficulties understanding complex sentence patterns, such as passive voice, subordinate clauses, and conditional sentences. Many of them could not identify the subject-verb relationship, which affected their ability to interpret the meaning of sentences.

The teacher remarked that students were still unfamiliar with academic texts that require higher-level syntactic processing. As a result, students often misinterpreted key information or failed to draw accurate conclusions from the passage.

2. Cognitive Difficulties

Beyond language-related barriers, students faced cognitive challenges related to processing and constructing meaning from the text. The findings reveal several sub-difficulties:

(a) Identifying Main Ideas

A significant number of students struggled to identify the main idea of a paragraph or entire text. They tended to focus on specific details rather than understanding the overall message. The test results demonstrated that questions related to main idea identification had the lowest accuracy rate.

(b) Making Inferences

Students also had difficulty making inferences, particularly when the information required logical reasoning or implied meaning. Many students stated in interviews that they preferred direct information and felt confused when the answer was not explicitly stated in the text.

(c) Understanding Text Structure

Another cognitive issue was an inability to recognize text organization such as orientation, complication, and resolution in narrative text, or thesis and arguments in analytical exposition. Students who lacked awareness of text structure were less able to predict the flow of ideas, causing them to lose coherence and connection between paragraphs.

3. Affective and Strategic Difficulties

The questionnaire and interviews revealed that emotional and behavioral factors significantly influenced students' reading performance.

(a) Low Confidence and Anxiety

Several students expressed low confidence when reading English texts. They reported feeling overwhelmed when faced with long passages, leading to anxiety that made comprehension even more difficult. Some students assumed they were "not good at English," which affected their motivation and effort.

(b) Poor Reading Strategies

The majority of students lacked effective reading strategies. They rarely applied techniques such as skimming, scanning, predicting, or summarizing. Instead, many attempted to translate every single word, causing them to spend excessive time on one passage without fully understanding it.

(c) Lack of Reading Habit

The findings also show that students had minimal exposure to English reading materials outside of school. They rarely read English stories, articles, or online content, which resulted in limited improvement over time. The teacher emphasized that students generally relied solely on classroom activities for developing reading skills.

4. Summary of Findings

The combined analysis of tests, questionnaires, and interviews indicates that students' difficulties in reading comprehension stem from a combination of linguistic limitations, cognitive processing challenges, and affective-strategic issues. Linguistic difficulties were the most dominant, especially related to vocabulary and grammatical structure. Cognitive difficulties, such as identifying main ideas and making inferences, also significantly impacted comprehension. Moreover, affective factors like anxiety and a lack of effective reading strategies made it harder for students to overcome these challenges.

b. Discussion

The findings of this research reveal several significant insights into the students' difficulties in reading comprehension at SMA Daarul Hikmah Serang. Overall, the results demonstrate that the challenges experienced by the students are not caused by a single factor, but rather by an interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and affective elements. Each difficulty influences the others, creating a learning environment in which reading comprehension becomes a demanding skill for many students.

First, linguistic difficulties—including limited vocabulary mastery and difficulties in identifying grammatical structures—emerged as the most dominant problems faced by the students. This is consistent with Nunan's (2015) argument that vocabulary and grammar serve as the foundation for comprehending written texts. When students encounter unfamiliar words, their reading fluency is disrupted, causing inaccurate interpretation of sentence meaning and failure to grasp the main ideas. In the present study, many students reported struggling to infer meaning from context, which suggests insufficient exposure to reading materials and lack of training in contextual guessing strategies.

Second, the results indicate that students also struggle with cognitive aspects, such as identifying main ideas, locating supporting details, making inferences, and understanding text structure. These findings align with Grabe and Stoller (2013), who emphasize that comprehension is an active cognitive process that requires strategic reading behaviors. The difficulty in identifying main ideas suggests that the students tend to read word-by-word rather than engaging in top-down processing. Moreover, their inability to make inferences points to limited background knowledge and insufficient practice in higher-order thinking skills. This suggests that reading instruction in the classroom may be overly focused on literal comprehension rather than analytical or inferential tasks.

Third, the study finds that affective factors, particularly low motivation and lack of confidence, significantly affect the students' reading performance. According to

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), emotional states such as anxiety, boredom, and low self-esteem can inhibit students' ability to process language input effectively. Some students expressed feelings of anxiety when asked to read English texts, which may stem from their limited vocabulary and fear of misunderstanding. As a result, they approach reading tasks with hesitation, which further weakens their comprehension ability.

Another relevant finding relates to the reading habits and learning environment. Many students admitted that they rarely read English texts outside the classroom. This lack of reading exposure limits vocabulary growth, reduces familiarity with various text types, and weakens comprehension skills. Additionally, classroom conditions—such as insufficient use of interactive reading strategies, limited feedback opportunities, and teacher-centered instruction—contribute to the persistence of these difficulties. This reflects the need for more student-centered approaches, such as collaborative reading, guided questioning, and strategy-based instruction.

Furthermore, the combination of linguistic, cognitive, and affective barriers highlights the importance of adopting an integrated instructional approach. Teachers should not only focus on vocabulary teaching but also help students develop metacognitive strategies—such as predicting, summarizing, questioning, and monitoring their comprehension. Research by Anderson (2003) supports the idea that teaching students how to think about their reading processes enhances comprehension significantly.

Lastly, the findings underscore the necessity for teachers to design reading activities that are meaningful, relevant, and engaging. Incorporating texts that align with students' interests, integrating storytelling techniques, using visual supports, and connecting reading tasks to real-life experiences may help reduce anxiety and improve motivation. When students feel emotionally involved in reading, their comprehension becomes more natural and effective.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that improving students' reading comprehension requires a holistic instructional approach that considers language proficiency, cognitive processes, affective conditions, and classroom environment. Addressing these aspects will not only improve comprehension outcomes but also foster students' confidence and long-term engagement with reading.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicate that the students at SMA Daarul Hikmah Serang experience various difficulties in reading comprehension, which stem from linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors. Linguistic barriers—particularly limited vocabulary and challenges in understanding grammatical structures—are found to be the most dominant issues that hinder comprehension. These limitations disrupt students' ability to interpret text meaning accurately, resulting in difficulty identifying main ideas and supporting details. In addition to linguistic obstacles, cognitive challenges such as difficulty making inferences, analyzing text organization, and engaging in higher-order thinking skills also play a significant role. These findings

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suggest that the students require more structured training in reading strategies, including predicting, summarizing, questioning, and monitoring their own understanding. Furthermore, affective factors such as low motivation, anxiety, and lack of confidence contribute to increased difficulty, as emotional states strongly influence the way students process reading input.

The study also highlights the importance of reading habits and learning environment. Limited exposure to reading materials and teacher-centered instructional approaches reduce opportunities for students to practice and develop effective comprehension skills. Therefore, improving reading comprehension requires a holistic instructional approach that integrates vocabulary enrichment, cognitive strategy instruction, and affective support within an engaging and interactive learning environment.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that teachers provide more varied and meaningful reading activities, apply student-centered teaching strategies, and create supportive classroom environments to enhance students' confidence and motivation. Such comprehensive efforts are essential for fostering improved reading comprehension and supporting students' success in English language learning.

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