INSIGHTS INTO EFL STUDENTS' READING OBSTACLES: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

RESEARCH ARTICLE

MUHAMAD HOLANDYAH
Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah, Palembang, Indonesia

LENNY MARZULINA
Corresponding Author: **lennymarzulina_uin@radenfatah.ac.id**

DIAN ERLINA
Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah, Palembang, Indonesia

HERIZAL
Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah, Palembang, Indonesia

HIKMAH ZALIFAH PUTRI
Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah, Palembang, Indonesia

HANIF ALFARIDZI
Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah, Palembang, Indonesia

Abstract

This study utilized qualitative research with a case study design to investigate the difficulties encountered by EFL students in reading comprehension. Nine students from *Madrasah Aliyah Negeri* 1 (State Islamic Senior High School) *Muara Enim* in South Sumatra who met the research sampling criteria were selected using the purposeful sampling technique. Data were collected through interviews, and the results were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the majority of students experienced obstacles in reading comprehension, including a lack of vocabulary, a limited grasp of grammar, unfamiliarity with the topic content, an inability to employ reading strategies effectively, and unappealing reading materials. This exploration of specific obstacles that EFL students encounter in reading comprehension could serve as the foundation for the development of targeted strategies and interventions aimed at supporting the students in improving their reading skills.

Keywords: EFL students, reading comprehension, reading obstacles

Introduction

English is a language that provides learners with access to the outside world. There are some skills that have to be mastered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, which include listening, reading, speaking, and writing. According to Snow (2002), the most important skill to be mastered in English is reading. Students must read various materials printed in English and develop other skills, not only by reading the textbook but also by reading extensively (Maxom, 2009). Therefore, having sufficient reading skills is necessary to master other skills. Reading activities can help students gather information and knowledge from around the world, as they can read from various sources such as magazines, newspapers, books, and other reading materials. Reading is an activity that involves interpreting the written words (Pang, 2003). During reading activities, students are expected to understand what the author is trying to convey in their writing. Furthermore, Parthiban (2018) mentions in his study that reading skills need to be enhanced in order to meet the requirements for higher education. Reading is crucial because the ability to read at an advanced level equips students with a fundamental tool for education. The more information students acquire from written materials, the more knowledge they gain. Consequently, being able to comprehend the content of what they read is one way for students to become successful learners.

Reading comprehension is not only about understanding the literal meaning of the words on a page, but also about making inferences, synthesizing information, and critically analyzing the text. For many EFL students, mastering reading comprehension can be a significant challenge. Therefore, the focus on reading comprehension among EFL students has gained significant attention. In order to comprehend the text, there are several reading skills that need to be mastered. Phillip (2001) identifies reading skills such as finding the main idea, answering stated detail questions, finding pronoun referents, determining the meaning of difficult words, locating specific information, and making inferences. Comprehending the content of English reading material would be very difficult without mastering these skills. One of the main reasons for the low reading skills among Indonesian students is that, as a foreign language, English is rarely used in social life in Indonesia. In other words, students will not use English outside of school unless they have the awareness to learn English by themselves or are taking special courses outside of school.

An interview with an English teacher was conducted as part of the preliminary study at *Madrasah Aliyah Negeri* 1 (MAN 1) Muara Enim, South Sumatera. Based on the interview that we conducted with one of the teachers, it was revealed that tenth-grade students face some difficulties due to a lack of vocabulary mastery, which hinders their ability to comprehend the contents of the text, as well as inadequate background knowledge, making it difficult for students to relate to new information. These difficulties hinder students' development in reading comprehension. This problem is in line with the study conducted by Putri (2020), which found that one of the difficulties students faced in understanding the content of a text was in finding the meaning of vocabulary. The results of the data showed that students often looked up the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary in the dictionary, asked their classmates, or guessed the meaning.

The facts and preliminary studies at *MAN 1 Muara Enim*, regarding the problems encountered by students in reading comprehension have prompted researchers to delve into the difficulties experienced by some EFL students in reading comprehension. The significance of this inquiry lies in its potential to shed light on the nuanced obstacles that EFL students face when

engaging with English texts. Identifying and understanding these difficulties is the first step towards devising effective strategies and interventions to support these students in improving their reading comprehension skills.

Literature Review

Reading comprehension

Reading is more than just recognizing symbols that create words or sentences printed on a medium like paper. Nuttal (2000) defines reading as the skill used to efficiently understand written text and extract the necessary information. Therefore, reading activities involve the interaction between the reader and the text, encompassing the entire thinking process to evaluate information. Brown (2001) explains that reading is a process that requires a relationship between the information in a passage and previous knowledge to construct meaning. This means that during reading activities, students will attempt to relate their experiences to the text they are reading in order to understand the author's intention. Readers who successfully comprehend the message in the texts will gain new knowledge or update their previous knowledge. According to Pang (2003), reading comprehension is the process of making sense of words, sentences, and connected text.

The process of reading comprehension is complex and influenced by various factors such as the reader and the text. The interaction between the reader and the text is crucial in forming meaning and developing a deeper understanding of the information provided. Therefore, preparation is essential before engaging in reading comprehension. This preparation can take the form of employing various strategies. The reader's ability to comprehend the text is significantly impacted by the strategies they utilize to explore and understand the ideas presented by the writer. Experts have identified a number of effective reading strategies, including previewing, drawing on prior knowledge, scanning, skimming, identifying the main idea, and making inferences (Carrel, 1998; Harmer, 2007; Langan, 2002; Kopitski, 2007).

Reading comprehension difficulties

Reading difficulties encompass a range of challenges that can hinder students' ability to meet the reading requirements in class. Davoudi and Yousefi (2015) identify various types of reading difficulties encountered by EFL learners, including:
- Lack of background knowledge: Pang (2003) asserts that possessing ample background knowledge enhances readers' understanding of the text.
- Lack of grammar mastery: Proficiency in grammar facilitates the learning of foreign languages. Andini's research (2022) demonstrates that students' grasp of grammar significantly impacts their reading comprehension.
- Lack of vocabulary knowledge: One significant hurdle for EFL students is the presence of unfamiliar vocabulary in texts. This issue can lead to misinterpretation and hinder their ability to comprehend the material. which impedes students' understanding and interpretation of reading texts.
- Lack of cultural knowledge: Comprehending a reading content involves connecting the new

knowledge in the text with the prior knowledge that you already have (Pang, 2003). Readers with sufficient cultural background knowledge will have better text comprehension.

- Lack of reading strategies: Students who lack reading strategies frequently struggle to comprehend what they read. Interpreting text efficiently requires a combination of word recognition skills, linking new information with prior knowledge, and applying appropriate strategies.
- Text length: One of the difficulties experienced by students in understanding foreign reading is the length of the text. Usually, students assume that the text is difficult to understand when they find a long text, and their motivation to read decreases as a result. Understanding longer texts is very difficult because the process of creating meaning in reading is delayed by the complexity of a sentence, which causes the difficulty and slowness of word recognition.

Methodology

Research design and approach of the study

This research employed a qualitative method with a case study. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research seeks to elucidate the phenomena of the participants' experiences, including behaviors, motivations, opinions, reactions, and others. In qualitative analysis, data are collected and interpreted using words or images rather than numerical values. Additionally, Creswell (2012) notes that a case study delves into a program, an event, an activity, a process, or one or more individuals in greater depth. Therefore, we utilized qualitative research with a case study to investigate the reading comprehension difficulties of EFL students.

Research site and participants

The research took place at MAN 1 Muara Enim, in South Sumatera, where nine participants were chosen using purposeful sampling. With the selection of participants through purposeful sampling, the study aimed to capture a diverse range of reading comprehension difficulties. The participants were the tenth-grade students who had prior exposure to descriptive, narrative, and recount texts underscores the significance of foundational knowledge in reading comprehension. To ensure a range of reading comprehension difficulties, three students with high scores, three with moderate scores, and three with low scores were selected.

Data collection and analysis

In this study, an interview was used as the data collection method. In conducting this study, we used a semi-structured interview. We asked the listed questions and explored the questions to gather more information about EFL students' difficulties in reading comprehension. The interview was conducted via telephone. During the interview, we recorded the interview activities and then took notes on the answers. In analyzing the obtained data, we used thematic analysis, the steps of which are: compiling and preparing data, reading the data as a whole, analyzing in detail with the coding process, making a data description, explaining the analyzed information, and interpreting the data.

Establishment of trustworthiness

This research employed member checking to ensure the trustworthiness and validity of the findings. As Creswell (2012) aptly puts it, member checking involves the process of seeking feedback from participants to ascertain the accuracy and credibility of the collected data. Member checking was utilized in this research to enhance the reliability, accuracy, and validity of the data obtained from the interview activities by involving the practice of asking several research findings, such as whether the description is realistic or not, to one or more students. There are several steps in the member checking process. First, interviews were conducted to collect data. Second, member checking was employed, where the participants reviewed the final report from the earlier conducted interviews to provide feedback on the accuracy of the findings. Third, any inaccuracies were corrected, or additional data was gathered from the participants to enhance the validity of this study. The incorporation of member checking in this research not only contributed to the overall robustness and trustworthiness of the findings but also exemplified a commitment to ethical and rigorous research practices.

Results

In this study, the data were analyzed by using thematic analysis. The descriptions of the research results were described as follows:

Table 1. EFL Students' Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Themes	Codes
Lack of vocabulary	Encountered unfamiliar vocabulary Skipped the unfamiliar vocabulary Guessed the unfamiliar vocabulary
Low grammar mastery	Difficulties with pronouns and tenses Difficulty with word arrangement
Unfamiliar with the topic content	Low background knowledge
Inability to use reading strategies for effective reading	Difficulty understanding certain places Difficulty understanding cultural context Difficulty using skimming and scanning Difficulty determining the main idea Difficulty making an inferences
Unappealing and lengthy reading material	Difficulty understanding long and boring texts Decreased reading motivation after encountering lengthy texts Loss of concentration due to lengthy texts

During the research, several challenges in reading comprehension were identified, including a lack of vocabulary, limited grammar proficiency, unfamiliarity with the text, insufficient use of reading strategies, and excessively long texts. Additional details regarding these difficulties are provided below.

Lack of vocabulary

Firstly, in relation to the lack of vocabulary, the interview data revealed that students often encountered unfamiliar words in the text. However, they employed various strategies to address this issue, such as using a dictionary, seeking assistance from teachers or friends, and utilizing online resources such as Google Translate. For example, a student with the initials KN stated, "*I frequently encounter this problem, particularly when dealing with descriptive texts during the weekly tests. Typically, when I come across challenging vocabulary, I seek help from my friends as I do not bring a dictionary to school.*" Similarly, MIB added, "*This used to happen frequently, but not as much now. I usually rely on Google Translate at home, but I refrain from bringing my cellphone to class due to school regulations. Therefore, I sometimes seek help from my peers when encountering unfamiliar words.*"

We also found that some students often skipped vocabulary words whose meanings they did not know, which prevents them from fully understanding the reading material. One student expressed, "*Sometimes it does, but I just skip the words that I don't know. It's a bit difficult, sir, because you can't interpret the text completely if you do not know what all of the words mean.*" Additionally, ANA added, "*Sometimes it's difficult, sir, because if I don't know too many vocabulary words in a sentence, it's challenging for me to understand the meaning of the text. But if there are just a few words that I don't know, I can guess the meanings by connecting the words before or after them so that the sentence makes sense.*"

Furthermore, after interviewing some students, we found that one of the students often guessed the vocabulary they did not understand in the text. This was due to their relatively limited vocabulary mastery. The student with the initials AZC stated, "*It happens all the time, sir, that I just guess the word meaning.*" MIB added, "*Usually I guess the word's meaning according to the sentence where the word is located and by looking at the other words beside it. But it does not always work, sir.*"

Low grammar mastery

Some of the students said that they had trouble determining the subject or object to which the pronoun in the text was referring, in order to answer questions about referencing. Student with the initial J stated, "*Yes, there are. For example, the use of pronouns. Usually, questions are asked about what "it" refers to, or "they" or something similar, because there are many pronouns that are still difficult for me to understand. It is very challenging to answer those kinds of questions because there can be more than one object in one sentence.*" The student with initial VZ also mentioned, "*Yes, it does. Sometimes I am really confused, especially when I encounter pronouns in a text. Because of that, I often struggle to determine which object the pronoun refers to. For example, there are: they, their, those. It makes me misinterpret a sentence and choose the wrong answer.*"

We also found that one of the students explained that he often had difficulty understanding the text because he did not know how to arrange words in English correctly since it differs from the arrangement of words in Indonesian. The student, MR stated, "*It's still not enough because when I*

translate English text word by word into Indonesian, sometimes the translation doesn't make sense." Additionally, another student added, "*That's even more difficult, sir, because if I want to make an inference, I have to comprehend the entire text while I still don't understand the arrangement of words in English, which hinders my ability to fully grasp what I read. This factor makes me inaccurate in making inferences from a text.*"

Unfamiliar with the topic content

Some students were unfamiliar with the text they read. This could be attributed to their lack of prior exposure to similar topics or insufficient background knowledge to comprehend the content. Student AZC stated, "*Yes, I do, because if you are not familiar with the topic being read, you will definitely encounter unfamiliar vocabulary later. Furthermore, without a basic understanding of the text, it is challenging to comprehend the topic for discussion.*" Additionally, student VZ mentioned, "*Sometimes it happens; I forget the details and can't recall the topic, but the cultural content included in the reading posed a challenge for me. Perhaps my limited knowledge on the subject made it difficult for me to comprehend.*"

Additionally, we have identified that students encountered difficulties when trying to comprehend readings describing unfamiliar places, particularly places abroad. Chelsea articulated, "*Yes, sir, I have experienced this. It's challenging to grasp the concept of foreign locations, sir. If I have prior knowledge of the place, I may be able to understand it, but often the place being referenced is unfamiliar to me. Consequently, it becomes challenging to visualize the scenario in that location, making it difficult to comprehend the content of the reading.*" Furthermore, ANA also remarked, "*Topics related to places in countries other than Indonesia, sir, present challenges. For instance, when I read a descriptive passage about Paris, it contained numerous foreign terms that I couldn't comprehend. Consequently, understanding the text and locating answers of reading comprehension questions within it became quite difficult.*"

The students claimed to have difficulty comprehending the text due to cultural context. One student with the initials AZC mentioned, " *The topic is unfamiliar. It contains western culture.*" Another student, ANA, added, "*I think because the text discusses the habits and daily life of other people's cultures, which are very different from my own, sir. Because I have never done or have never known the culture in the text, I can't relate and imagine what the text is talking about.*"

Inability to use reading strategies for effective reading

We have also discovered that students still struggled with applying the skimming and scanning strategy effectively in reading comprehension. They become confused and lose understanding of what they have read because they haven't fully mastered the reading strategy. Some students faced difficulties when using reading strategies like scanning and skimming because the information they were seeking was often implied. Initial VZ shared that this could be attributed to the possibility that the information was not directly stated in the text, resulting in confusion and a failure to comprehend.

They also still struggled with determining the main idea in their reading. Initial J stated, "*Yes, I have, sir. In order to determine the main idea, I have to be careful while reading a paragraph to distinguish the main sentence from the supporting sentences. However, I still encounter sentences that I can't understand, which makes it difficult for me to distinguish the main idea.*" The student with the initials VZ added, "*I often find it confusing*

to determine the main idea in a paragraph, sir. Sometimes the main idea appears at the beginning of the paragraph, while other times it can be found in the middle or end of the paragraph."

The students were still experiencing confusion in making inferences from the reading. As one student, J, expressed, "*That's even more difficult, sir, because if I want to make an inference, I have to comprehend the entire text while I'm struggling to understand every sentence. This factor makes me inaccurate in making inferences from a text.*" Additionally, DWH pointed out, "*Yes, I have experienced this, sir, because I don't know how to make an inference from what I've read. Comprehending the text is already difficult after all. I think making inferences from it is far more difficult.*"

Unappealing reading materials

The students frequently struggled to understand the content of the reading, which they perceived as uninteresting and overly long. Student ANA stated, "*I don't think it's a problem for either of them, long or short text. Even though the story is long, as long as the story is exciting, interesting, and easy to understand, it doesn't matter. I will still find it easier to understand the contents of the reading if it's not boring.*" On the other hand, VY expressed a different view, saying, "*I think it does. Because if it's too long, I easily forget the previous paragraph when trying to understand the next paragraph. It really annoys me so much when that happens because I need to repeat it all over again. It really affects my understanding of the reading.*"

The students stated that they often lost concentration because the text was too long. Most of them were bored with reading because of topics they did not understand or they were just simply unfamiliar with them. Just like initial ANA said "*Long texts are sometimes boring and there are too many words that are difficult to understand. In the end, I don't really comprehend the text because there are a lot of things that I skip*". Initial AZC added that "*The thing that disturbs my concentration the most is my unfamiliarity with what is explained in the text.*"

Discussion

After analyzing the results of the study by using thematic analysis, we found some EFL students' difficulties in reading comprehension. All of the students argued that they often encounter unfamiliar or difficult vocabulary in the texts they read, which affects their reading comprehension. Previous researches identified that this the lack of vocabulary has been a common factor in reading difficulties among Indonesian students (Sutarsyah, 2008; Floris & Divina, 2009; Garcia-Castro, 2020) When they encounter unknown words, they struggle to understand the full meaning of the sentences. As a result, they tend to skip over unfamiliar words or guess their meanings, leading to misinterpretations of the reading. This significantly impacts their overall reading comprehension. This finding aligns with Putri (2020), who noted that students frequently encounter unfamiliar vocabulary in texts, causing confusion in understanding the content. This confusion stems from their lack of mastery of the vocabulary. The students face difficulties in understanding the text due to challenges in determining the meanings of unfamiliar words. Students also stated in the interview that they rely on online dictionary or their friends to understand the meaning of new unfamiliar words. This will lead them to only understanding the text based one word for word translation than based on the whole context of the reading material which in turn will make it difficult for them to understand the reading text as a whole (Jayanti,

2016).

The low mastery of grammar made it difficult for students to comprehend their reading texts. The findings showed that students' grammar mastery was still low, which affected their understanding of their reading. The difficulties manifested as students misinterpreting English by translating it word for word into Indonesian, rendering the translated sentences meaningless. It was also found that students still had difficulty when answering questions that required them to find a subject or object referred to by a pronoun in a reading. This finding was consistent with Satriani (2018) and Putri (2020), who noted that students with low grammar proficiency had difficulty identifying information in the text they read because they did not understand sentence structure and tended to interpret English word by word, ignoring the meaning of the sentence as a whole, leading to misinterpretation. Therefore, students' grammar knowledge significantly impacted their reading comprehension.

Most of the students argued that they found it difficult to understand the content of the text, which contained information about foreign cultures or something they had never known or done before. This difficulty arose from their lack of background knowledge, which hindered their ability to comprehend the meaning of the text. This finding is consistent with previous research by Zuhra (2015), Satriani (2018), Melandita (2019) and Nanda (2020), who identified insufficient background knowledge as a key challenge for students in understanding reading material. This lack of familiarity could stem from either the lesson not being previously studied or the students never having encountered a similar text before. Students who have previously engaged with similar texts are better equipped to comprehend the content, while those faced with complex sentences struggle due to their insufficient background knowledge.

The data also indicated that students still had difficulty in using strategies effectively, making it difficult for them to find specific information, determine the main idea, and make inferences from a text. The students were still unable to understand reading strategies in reading comprehension, which made it difficult for them to comprehend the reading. Students will achieve low grades in reading lessons if they do not have good reading strategies, as those who do not understand the use of correct reading strategies tend to spend a lot of time finding the right answers during exams. On the other hand, Yusuf & Fauzan (2016) found that students claimed their teacher did not explain strategies to obtain answers from reading, which caused them not to understand how to use good reading strategies, making it difficult for them to analyze the text to find main ideas, supporting ideas, or draw conclusions.

Finally, unappealing reading materials can impede students' comprehension of their texts. According to the research findings, students frequently struggle when confronted with texts that are excessively dull or lengthy, leading to a decline in their enthusiasm for reading. Consequently, students may struggle to concentrate and comprehend the content of monotonous or lengthy reading materials. This result is in line with previous research that showed that Indonesian students ranked low in the PISA test because of two things, unfamiliarity with the topic of the reading materials and the length of the text that tends to be a lot longer than what they usually used to (Patria, 2021). This conclusion is also supported by Putri (2020), whose interview data revealed that students encounter greater difficulty when reading longer texts due to the abundance of challenging vocabulary and complex phrases, making it challenging for them to interpret sentences word by word. These challenges can lead to feelings of panic or boredom among students, as they find

themselves frequently reaching for the dictionary despite having limited time. This resulted in students becoming too lazy to start reading long texts. Yusuf and Fauzan (2016) found that students required more time to identify information in long texts, which contrasted with the time allotted for them to answer all questions. These conditions led to a loss of concentration among students, forcing them to hastily read the text and answer questions without fully understanding the content.

Conclusion

The difficulties that EFL students faced in reading comprehension at *MAN 1 Muara Enim* could be attributed to several aspects. Firstly, they often encountered unfamiliar vocabulary in texts, which led to misinterpretation of the meaning of the text. Secondly, their low mastery of grammar affected their comprehension as they struggle with understanding the structure and arrangement of sentences. Thirdly, their lack of familiarity with the material being discussed, combined with insufficient background knowledge, hindered their ability to comprehend the text. Additionally, they had difficulty in using reading strategies effectively to determine main ideas and make inferences. Lastly, unappealing and lengthy reading texts demotivated the students to read and concentrate as the text contained more vocabulary and made them open the dictionary too often due to their lack of vocabulary.

In light of these findings, it is evident that addressing the challenges faced by EFL students in reading comprehension is crucial for their academic development. By implementing targeted strategies, such as vocabulary building, grammar instruction, contextualization of content, explicit teaching of reading strategies, and managing the length of reading materials, English educators at *MAN 1 Muara Enim* can empower their students to become more proficient readers. Recognizing and addressing these obstacles is crucial in facilitating effective learning and enhancing students' reading comprehension skills.

Competing interest

The authors have declared that there is no competing interest.

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