

# FACTORS CAUSING READING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES AMONG THE SEVENTH GRADERS

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the factors causing reading comprehension difficulties. This study used a qualitative method with a case study research design to describe the factors causing reading comprehension difficulties among the seventh grade students in Palembang. The data were collected through structured interviews with four students and analyzed thematically. The study found five factors contributing to students' difficulties in reading comprehension, including problems with understanding long sentences, the use of poor reading strategies, lack of concentration, house environment, and school environment. This study provided suggestions for teachers and students. Teachers should use creative teaching methods and emphasize the development of all four language skills to make learning more interesting. Students should improve their English by enriching their vocabulary, using effective reading comprehension strategies, and seeking support from parents.

**Keywords:** Reading Comprehension; Comprehension Difficulties; Effective Strategies

## INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English is considered a foreign language and is taught as a mandatory subject in schools. Based on competency standards issued by Kemdikbud (2022), students in Junior high school (Phase D) are expected to have a basic understanding of everyday English vocabulary and be able to comprehend new words with the help of visual aids such as pictures, illustrations, or multimedia. They should be able to read and comprehend simple written or digital text, including visual, multimodal, or interactive content. Additionally, they should have the ability to identify the topic of a text they read or observe and explain it by finding relevant information within the text. According to Sharma and Puri (2021), four language skills need to be mastered for language development: reading, speaking, writing, and listening, which are crucial in exchanging ideas and information. Idayanti (2021) argued that reading is a fundamental way to gain new knowledge and has a positive impact on students who have a more or less understanding of reading. The more they read, the better their understanding will be, she further emphasized that reading also helps students gain new vocabulary and improves reading comprehension. In a similar vein, Nuttall (1982) stated that vocabulary and writing skills improve through reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension is the ability not only to read a text but also to understand the contents of the reading text. Knowledge and skills influence someone to understand a text, including making conclusions (Prihatini, 2020). It is in line with Suherman and Mandarani (2021) who argued that reading will become useless if readers do not understand the content of the reading. In addition to reading, students also have to understand and implement the information gained from reading, as this is what makes reading truly valuable and beneficial. Furthermore, Husnayaini (2019) assumed that learning motivation influences the process of learning English. A lack of motivation could occur in countries such as Indonesia, where English is a foreign language. According to Laily (2018), reading comprehension requires an interest in the topic to

motivate students to read. Interesting topics make people interested in reading. They will read if the topic is useful and meets their needs.

Difficulty in comprehending English reading texts affects students' performance and achievement in reading because comprehending reading texts is an important skill. Teachers and students have to know the difficulties they are facing. Difficulties in comprehending English reading texts can significantly affect students' learning (Matondang, 2020). According to Prihatini (2020), the difficulties that students usually encounter are incorrect reading and limited understanding, which become an obstacle in learning reading comprehension. In addition, Erlidawati (2018) identified several obstacles faced by students, such as a lack of vocabulary, difficulty in understanding the main idea of reading texts, and poor pronunciation due to a lack of independent reading.

After reviewing the literature, the researchers found several studies that investigate the difficulties encountered by students in reading comprehension. One of the studies was done by Idayanti (2021). Her study aimed to determine the difficulties faced by ninth-grade students of SMP Muhammadiyah Al-Amin Sorong City in reading comprehension. The study revealed that the students struggled with four main difficulties: identifying the main idea in a reading text, comprehending vocabulary, understanding the content and meaning of the text, and recognizing important details, the second by Putri (2020). The study explored the difficulties in comprehending reading among grade nine students at MTs in Medan. The study found that the difficulties faced by the students included understanding vocabulary, making inferences, recognizing details, and limited grammar skills. The last study (Septia et al., 2022) investigated the difficulties in comprehending reading faced by students in a public high school in Banka. The results indicated that the students had difficulties in answering vocabulary questions and main idea questions and making inferences. Based on the previous studies, the researchers were interested in conducting a study entitled "Factors Causing Reading Comprehension Difficulties Among the Seventh Graders". The study aimed to explore the factors that caused difficulties in reading comprehension faced by the seventh grade students.

## **METHOD**

This study fell under the qualitative research design. Creswell (2014) described that qualitative research is a method of inquiry that focuses on collecting, interpreting, and analyzing data in the form of words, images, or sounds. The seventh-grade students in Palembang were chosen purposively as the participants of this study. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and were recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Before conducting the analysis, the interview recording was transcribed verbatim. After the transcription was completed, six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Creswell (2015) were followed, which included (1) preparing the collected data through interviews, (2) taking detailed notes, (3) identifying the main themes in the data, (4) categorizing the data into relevant themes (also known as coding), (5) explaining the data using these themes, and finally, (6) interpreting the findings to understand the difficulties that the students encountered in reading comprehension.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

The study identified two main factors that can affect students' reading comprehension, namely internal factors and external factors. Internal factors included problems with understanding long sentences, poor reading strategies, and lack of concentration. Meanwhile, external factors included home environment and school environment, which were identified based on a review

of existing literature. Table 1 below highlights the factors affecting students' difficulties in reading comprehension:

**Table 1.** Factors affecting students' difficulties in reading comprehension

| No | Internal factor   | External factor   |
|----|---|---|
| 1  | Problems with understanding long sentences<br>- Limited vocabulary<br>- Dictionary reliance | House environment<br>- Limited parental assistance<br>- Parental limitation<br>- Limited parental involvement               |
| 2  | Poor reading strategies<br>- Main idea identification<br>- Word-by-word translation         | School environment<br>- Language barrier<br>- Availability of dictionaries<br>- Visual materials<br>- Appropriate materials |
| 3  | Lack of concentration<br>- Friends' distraction<br>- Fatigue<br>- Complex terms             |   |

The findings show that students' difficulties in reading comprehension were caused by several factors

**Discussion**

The first factor that participants encountered in reading comprehension was related to the problems with understanding long sentences. The finding indicated that they were confused and tired of understanding long sentences in the text because there were so many words that they did not know what they meant, so they had to spend more time looking up the definitions of the words in the dictionary. This trouble appears to be caused by a lack of vocabulary comprehension and the ability to read long texts, which affects the student's comprehension of the text material. This resonated with Putri's (2020) study, in which it was found that students have difficulty reading text or long sentences because of a lot of words that they do not understand. In the study (Putri, 2020), the participants also had difficulty linking the sentences in the text to understand the information as a whole due to their limited knowledge of words. This was also in line with Prihatini's (2020) findings, which showed that the difficulty in understanding words was due to students' lack of vocabulary.

The second factor that caused students' difficulty in reading comprehension was related to the use of poor reading strategies. The findings revealed that some participants had problems understanding the text, locating the main ideas, and frequently got confused when encountering unfamiliar words. These participants employed ineffective strategies as looking up the definition of each word in a dictionary and reading the text over and over until they understood it. The same issue was also found in Septia et al.'s (2022) study; in their study, students who did not use effective reading comprehension strategies did the following strategies when reading. First, the students read the text word-for-word while placing too much emphasis on visual clues, which slowed down their reading and made it harder for them to understand what they were reading. Second, because the students focused too much attention on the details, they frequently missed the main idea of the text. Third, they gave too much attention to the meaning

conveyed by the text. The data obtained also supported the theory by Duarte (as cited in Hidayati, 2018), which argued that students who lacked reading strategies often had trouble comprehending the text.

The third factor that affected students' difficulty in reading comprehension was the lack of concentration. The findings revealed that noise from classmates and fatigue interfered with their concentration making it difficult to pay attention to lessons. Their lack of focus on reading was also triggered by the complexity of the terms in their readings. Qurniawan's (2020) study has suggested several factors contributing to the poor comprehension. These included, among others, the uncomfortable environment for learning such as noise and distraction from classmates. In addition, Putri (2020) stated that students were not able to learn naturally if there was such an impediment as disruption from friends in the classroom. Furthermore, students who frequently felt tired, sleepy, and dizzy, especially those with unstable health, had difficulty concentrating and were less motivated to learn (Erlidawati, 2018). When students experienced these difficulties they were not able to interact with the class successfully because their brains were not working at their best, making it harder for them to understand and respond to the lesson content, Erlidawati (2018) further argued.

The fourth factor that influenced students' difficulty in reading comprehension was related to the home environment. The findings showed that their parents had encouraged them to learn English but had not helped them with their assignments. Another barrier was the parents' limited understanding of English. Although parents had emphasized the need to study consistently, some students had only studied English when given assignments. Septia et al. (2022) corroborated these findings, stating that every student needs parental involvement to achieve their academic goals. Children need parental or family attention to understand English because learning English is different from learning the Indonesian language (Septia et al., 2022). In the same vein, Idayanti (2021) emphasized that parents had different attitudes toward their children's education. She argued that some parents consistently provided encouragement and attention to their children, while others did not due to various factors, including being busy working and unable to dedicate enough attention to their children (Idayanti, 2021).

The last factor that caused students' difficulty in reading comprehension was related to the school environment. The findings revealed that the students had difficulty understanding English content due to constraints in the availability of suitable books and dictionaries, as well as the lack of variety in the presentation of the material, such as pictures which could make learning more interesting. Also, the participants exchanged that books available in schools tend to be outdated and difficult to understand, so they preferred to look for learning resources online. The student's lack of access to relevant and interesting reading materials seemed to affect the level of students' concentration and understanding of English content. Several studies (Idayanti, 2021; Qurniawan, 2020) have suggested that poor environmental factors, including those relating to proper book facilities and information in schools, had a profound impact on students' ability to learn reading comprehension. In particular, school learning facilities such as dictionaries were very important aids for teaching and learning activities of reading comprehension to help students look up new or difficult vocabulary (Qurniawan, 2020). Because the home and school environments could influence students' reading achievement and interest, schools therefore should provide learning resources like dictionaries and engaging storybooks to encourage students to read diligently and visit the library to learn English (Westwood, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers could conclude that there were five factors contributing to reading comprehension difficulties among the seventh-grade students in Palembang. The first three were categorized as internal factors, and the last two were categorized as external factors. First, students had problems with understanding long sentences because of their limited vocabulary and reliance on dictionaries. Second, they applied ineffective reading strategies, especially in identifying main ideas and relying on word-by-word translation. Third, their concentration was affected by distractions from friends, fatigue, and the complexity of certain terms. Fourth, they faced problems concerning their home environment, including limited parental help, parental limitations, and minimal parental involvement. Finally, they encountered issues with the school environment, including language barriers, limited access to dictionaries, the absence of visual materials, and the lack of appropriate learning materials.

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