

READING COMPREHENSION CHALLENGES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTING FACTORS AMONG EFL STUDENTS AT SMPN 2 KOTA TERNATE

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Abstract: Reading comprehension remains one of the most challenging skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly at the junior high school level. This study aimed to identify the reading comprehension challenges faced by ninth-grade students at SMPN 2 Kota Ternate and to investigate the factors contributing to those challenges. The study employed a descriptive research design involving 34 students of class IX-1. Data were collected through a reading comprehension test consisting of five reading aspects, namely identifying main ideas, identifying references, making inferences, finding detailed information, and interpreting vocabulary. A questionnaire was also administered to identify linguistic and non-linguistic factors affecting students' reading comprehension. The findings revealed that the students experienced substantial difficulties in reading comprehension, with an average score of 39.85, categorized as very poor. Among the five aspects assessed, vocabulary was identified as the most difficult aspect, followed by references and main ideas. The questionnaire results indicated that limited vocabulary mastery, insufficient grammar knowledge, lack of effective reading strategies, low motivation, limited background knowledge, and poor reading habits contributed to students' difficulties. These findings suggest that reading instruction should focus not only on improving linguistic competence but also on developing reading strategies and motivation. More contextualized and interactive reading activities are recommended to support students' reading comprehension development.

Keywords: *reading comprehension, EFL learners, reading difficulties, vocabulary, reading strategie.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the fundamental language skills that plays a crucial role in English language learning. Through reading, students gain information, expand vocabulary knowledge, strengthen grammatical understanding, and develop critical thinking skills. Reading is not merely a process of recognizing written symbols but also a process of constructing meaning from texts. Octasary (2023) states that reading involves interaction between the author's ideas and the reader's prior knowledge. Similarly, Anwar and Sailuddin (2022) emphasize that reading is an essential academic skill that supports learning across disciplines.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading comprehension often becomes a significant challenge. Students are required to understand vocabulary, sentence structures, textual organization, and cultural references simultaneously. According to Grabe and Stoller (2011), reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process involving linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, and strategic processing. Likewise, Nation (2001) argues that vocabulary knowledge plays a central role in successful reading comprehension because students cannot fully understand texts when they encounter too many unfamiliar words.

Previous studies have consistently reported that vocabulary limitations are among the major barriers to reading comprehension. Davoudi and Yousefi (2015) found that EFL learners often struggle with vocabulary, background knowledge, and text organization. Similarly, Sari et al. (2020) reported that students frequently perceive reading texts as difficult because of unfamiliar vocabulary and complex text structures. Nanda and Azmy (2020) further revealed that students with limited reading habits tend to demonstrate lower levels of reading comprehension than students who read regularly.

Besides linguistic factors, non-linguistic factors also influence reading performance. Motivation, reading habits, prior knowledge, and cultural familiarity contribute significantly to students' ability to understand texts (Brown, 2001; Robertson, 2009). Students who lack motivation often demonstrate less engagement with reading activities, while students with insufficient background knowledge may experience difficulty connecting new information with existing knowledge.

Based on preliminary observations during school field practice (PLP) at SMPN 2 Kota Ternate, many students appeared to struggle with reading comprehension tasks. They encountered difficulties in understanding vocabulary, identifying main ideas, interpreting references, and comprehending the overall meaning of texts. In addition, low motivation and limited reading habits were frequently observed among students.

Although numerous studies have examined reading comprehension difficulties, studies focusing on junior high school EFL learners in the context of Ternate remain limited. Therefore, this study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

1. What reading comprehension challenges are faced by ninth-grade students at SMPN 2 Kota Ternate?
2. What factors contribute to these reading comprehension challenges?

The findings are expected to provide practical insights for teachers and contribute to improving reading instruction in EFL classrooms.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive research design. The study was conducted at SMPN 2 Kota Ternate during the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants consisted of 34 ninth-grade students from class IX-1.

Two instruments were used to collect data. The first instrument was a reading comprehension test consisting of twenty multiple-choice items. The test was designed to identify students' difficulties in five aspects of reading comprehension: identifying main ideas, identifying references, making inferences, finding detailed information, and interpreting vocabulary. The second instrument was a questionnaire consisting of twenty statements that explored factors contributing to reading difficulties.

The questionnaire covered five dimensions: language knowledge problems, reading strategy problems, motivational problems, background knowledge problems, and reading process problems. Students responded using a Likert-scale format.

Data collection was conducted in several stages. First, students completed the reading comprehension test. Afterward, they completed the questionnaire. The collected data were analyzed descriptively using percentages and score classifications adapted from Arikunto (2002). Questionnaire responses were tabulated and analyzed using Microsoft Excel to identify dominant factors affecting students' reading comprehension.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

For ease of reading and comprehension, findings are presented first followed by discussion. The Findings sub-title and Discussion sub-title are presented separately. This section should occupy the most part, minimum of 60%, of the whole body of the article.

Findings

Students' Reading Comprehension Challenges

The reading comprehension test revealed that the students experienced considerable difficulties in understanding English texts. The mean score obtained by the participants was

39.85, which was categorized as "Very Poor."

The analysis of the test results showed that students encountered difficulties in all five reading aspects assessed in this study, namely identifying main ideas, identifying references, making inferences, finding detailed information, and interpreting vocabulary.

Among these aspects, vocabulary was identified as the most difficult area. Only 24.77% of the students answered the vocabulary-related questions correctly. Difficulties were also found in identifying references and determining main ideas. In addition, students demonstrated weaknesses in making inferences and locating detailed information within the texts.

Overall, the findings indicate that the students faced multiple challenges in reading comprehension, with vocabulary emerging as the most problematic aspect.

Table 1. Students' Reading Comprehension Difficulties by Reading Aspect

Reading Aspect	Correct Answers (%)	Incorrect Answers (%)
Vocabulary	24.77	75.23
Reference	35.29	64.84
Main Idea	48.53	51.47
Inference	46.19	53.81
Detailed Information	50.65	49.35

Table 2. Students' Overall Reading Performance

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Excellent	1	2.94
Good	2	5.88
Fair	5	14.71
Poor	6	17.65
Very Poor	20	58.82
Mean Score	39.85	Very Poor

The findings indicate that students experienced difficulties across all assessed aspects of reading comprehension. Vocabulary emerged as the most challenging aspect, with only 24.77% of correct responses, followed by reference (35.29%) and inference (46.19%). Although detailed information was identified as the least difficult aspect, the percentage of correct responses remained relatively low (50.65%). These results suggest that the students' reading comprehension ability was generally weak, particularly in aspects requiring vocabulary knowledge and the ability to establish connections between ideas within a text.

Factors Contributing to Students' Reading Difficulties

The questionnaire results revealed several factors contributing to students' reading comprehension difficulties. The first factor was vocabulary knowledge. Many students reported that unfamiliar words often prevented them from understanding reading texts. The second factor was grammar knowledge. Students indicated that they frequently encountered difficulties in understanding sentence structures and grammatical patterns in English texts. The third factor involved reading strategies. Several students reported relying heavily on dictionaries and reading texts word by word. The fourth factor was motivation. Some students admitted that they lacked interest in reading English texts, particularly when the texts were considered difficult. The fifth factor was background knowledge. Students reported experiencing difficulties when reading texts related to unfamiliar topics. Finally, reading process problems

were also identified. Several students stated that they often lost concentration while reading and needed to reread passages multiple times before understanding them.

These findings suggest that both linguistic and non-linguistic factors contributed to students' reading comprehension difficulties. The questionnaire results reveal that students' reading comprehension difficulties were influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Reading strategies (90.42%) and language knowledge (87.75%) were identified as the most influential factors, indicating that many students lacked effective reading techniques and sufficient language proficiency to comprehend English texts. Furthermore, background knowledge (84.33%), reading process difficulties (80.40%), and motivation (80.10%) also contributed substantially to students' reading challenges. Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' reading difficulties stem from multiple interconnected factors rather than a single source of difficulty.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that students at SMPN 2 Kota Ternate experienced substantial difficulties in reading comprehension. The average score of 39.85 demonstrates that many students struggled to understand English texts effectively. This finding is consistent with previous studies reporting that reading comprehension remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022; Davoudi & Yousefi, 2015).

One of the most significant findings of this study is that vocabulary emerged as the greatest challenge faced by the students. Only 24.77% of students correctly answered vocabulary-related questions, indicating that lexical knowledge remains limited among the participants. This result supports Nation's (2001) argument that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental prerequisite for reading comprehension. Readers cannot construct meaning from texts effectively when they encounter a large number of unfamiliar words. Similarly, Melandita (2019) found that limited vocabulary knowledge significantly hinders students' ability to comprehend written texts.

The findings also revealed that students experienced difficulties in identifying references and determining main ideas. These difficulties suggest that students were not only struggling with word meanings but also with understanding relationships among ideas within a text. According to Grabe and Stoller (2011), successful reading comprehension requires readers to integrate information across sentences and paragraphs. Weaknesses in reference identification may therefore negatively affect students' ability to construct overall textual meaning.

Another important finding concerns students' difficulties in making inferences. Many students were unable to derive implied meanings from the texts. This finding may indicate limited higher-order comprehension skills. Reading comprehension involves not only understanding explicit information but also making logical connections between ideas and drawing conclusions from textual evidence (Snow, 2002).

The questionnaire results further demonstrated that students' reading difficulties were influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Linguistically, vocabulary and grammar deficiencies were found to hinder comprehension. These findings are consistent with Brown (2001), who argues that language proficiency plays a critical role in reading success. Students with limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge often struggle to process textual information accurately.

Non-linguistic factors were also found to contribute to students' difficulties. Students reported low motivation, limited background knowledge, ineffective reading strategies, and problems maintaining concentration during reading activities. These findings support Robertson (2009), who emphasizes the importance of prior knowledge in facilitating reading comprehension. Likewise, Hidayatillah and Zainil (2020) found that motivation significantly influences students' engagement with reading tasks and their overall reading achievement.

Taken together, the findings suggest that reading comprehension difficulties among the

participants cannot be attributed to a single factor. Rather, they result from the interaction between linguistic competence and non-linguistic variables. Students with limited vocabulary and grammar knowledge are likely to encounter greater difficulties when reading, particularly when they also lack effective reading strategies, sufficient background knowledge, and motivation.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the reading comprehension challenges faced by ninth-grade EFL students at SMPN 2 Kota Ternate and the factors contributing to those challenges. The findings revealed that the students experienced difficulties in all assessed aspects of reading comprehension, namely identifying main ideas, references, inferences, detailed information, and vocabulary. Among these aspects, vocabulary was identified as the most challenging, with only 24.77% of correct responses. Furthermore, the students' overall mean score of 39.85 indicated a very poor level of reading comprehension.

The study also found that students' reading difficulties were influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Reading strategies and language knowledge emerged as the most influential factors, followed by background knowledge, reading process difficulties, and motivation. These findings suggest that improving students' reading comprehension requires not only strengthening vocabulary and grammar knowledge but also developing effective reading strategies, increasing reading motivation, and providing opportunities to engage with a wider range of reading materials. Future studies may involve larger samples and additional data collection methods, such as interviews and classroom observations, to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of students' reading difficulties.

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