

EXPLORING READING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES AMONG SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: Reading comprehension is a fundamental component of English language learning as it enables learners to construct meaning, acquire knowledge, and develop critical thinking skills. Despite its importance, many learners continue to experience difficulties in understanding English texts. Previous studies have identified various challenges in reading comprehension; however, limited research has explored students' experiences and perceptions of reading comprehension difficulties in Indonesian senior high school contexts. Therefore, this study aims to explore the reading comprehension difficulties experienced by senior high school students and identify the factors contributing to these challenges. This study employed a qualitative case study design involving fifteen eleventh-grade students from a public senior high school in Indonesia. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of students' reading tasks. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis involving data familiarization, coding, categorization, theme development, and interpretation. The findings revealed that students encountered several difficulties in reading English texts, including limited vocabulary knowledge, difficulties identifying main ideas, inadequate grammatical understanding, challenges in making inferences, and low reading motivation. Furthermore, external factors such as limited reading practice, insufficient exposure to English texts, and ineffective reading strategies contributed significantly to students' comprehension difficulties. The findings suggest that reading comprehension difficulties result from the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors. This study concludes that English teachers should implement explicit reading strategy instruction, vocabulary development activities, and learner-centered reading practices to improve students' reading comprehension. The findings contribute to the understanding of reading difficulties in contexts and provide pedagogical implications for improving reading instruction in senior high schools.

Keywords: Learners, Qualitative Study, Reading Comprehension, Reading Difficulties, Senior High School Students

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is widely recognized as one of the most essential language skills in English as a Foreign Language. learning because it enables learners to access information, acquire knowledge, and develop academic literacy. Through reading, students are exposed to new vocabulary, grammatical structures, and cultural perspectives that contribute to overall language development. In educational contexts, reading comprehension plays a crucial role in helping learners understand written texts, interpret information, and construct meaning from various sources. Consequently, reading has become a fundamental component of English language instruction at all educational levels, including senior high schools.

Reading comprehension extends beyond the simple recognition of words and sentences. It involves complex cognitive processes that require readers to integrate prior knowledge, linguistic competence, and strategic thinking to derive meaning from texts. According to Snow (2002), reading comprehension is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. This definition highlights that comprehension is an active process requiring readers to connect textual information with their existing knowledge and experiences. Therefore, successful reading comprehension depends not only on language proficiency but also on cognitive and metacognitive abilities.

In contexts, reading comprehension is often considered one of the most challenging skills for learners to master. Unlike native speakers who are frequently exposed to English in their daily lives, learners generally encounter English only in classroom settings. As a result, they often possess limited vocabulary, insufficient grammatical knowledge, and inadequate reading experience, which can hinder their ability to comprehend texts effectively (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). These challenges become more evident when students are required to read academic texts, identify implicit information, make inferences, and interpret complex ideas.

The importance of reading comprehension has been emphasized in the Indonesian educational system, where English is taught as a compulsory subject in secondary schools. The national curriculum requires students to understand various genres of texts, including descriptive, narrative, recount, report, and analytical exposition texts. Students are expected to identify main ideas, locate specific information, infer meanings, and evaluate textual content. However, despite years of English instruction, many students continue to experience difficulties in achieving these objectives. Teachers frequently report that students struggle to understand texts independently and often rely heavily on dictionaries or teacher explanations during reading activities.

Several studies have demonstrated that reading comprehension difficulties remain a significant concern among learners. Research has consistently shown that many students encounter problems related to vocabulary knowledge, grammar, text structure, inference-making, and reading strategies (Koda, 2018; Grabe & Stoller, 2020). These difficulties can negatively affect academic achievement because reading serves as the foundation for learning across various subjects. Students who experience reading comprehension difficulties may struggle to complete assignments, participate in classroom discussions, and achieve expected learning outcomes.

One of the most frequently reported factors contributing to reading comprehension difficulties is limited vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary plays a central role in reading because readers must understand the meanings of words to construct textual meaning. Nation (2019) argues that vocabulary knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension success. Learners who possess limited vocabulary often encounter difficulties understanding key concepts, identifying relationships between ideas, and interpreting textual information. Consequently, vocabulary deficiencies may significantly impede reading comprehension.

One of the most frequently identified causes of reading comprehension difficulties is limited vocabulary knowledge. Nation (2019) argues that vocabulary is a fundamental component of comprehension because readers must understand a substantial proportion of words within a text to construct meaning successfully. Learners with limited vocabulary often experience difficulties identifying key ideas, understanding details, and interpreting contextual meanings. Similarly, Koda (2018) found that

vocabulary deficiencies significantly reduced learners' ability to comprehend academic texts. These findings suggest that vocabulary knowledge serves as a strong predictor of reading comprehension achievement among learners.

In addition to vocabulary limitations, grammatical knowledge has also been recognized as an important factor influencing comprehension. Alderson (2020) emphasizes that understanding grammatical structures enables readers to identify relationships between ideas and interpret textual meaning accurately. Students with inadequate grammatical competence often struggle with complex sentence constructions, resulting in misunderstandings and incomplete comprehension. Research conducted by Zhang (2021) revealed that learners who demonstrated stronger grammatical awareness generally achieved higher reading comprehension scores than those with weaker grammatical skills.

Another factor frequently discussed in the literature is difficulty identifying main ideas and supporting details. Reading comprehension requires readers to distinguish essential information from less important content. However, many learners experience challenges recognizing textual organization and determining which information is central to the author's message. Grabe and Stoller (2020) reported that students often focus excessively on individual words rather than understanding overall textual meaning. As a result, they may fail to identify main ideas and establish connections between different parts of a text.

Inference-making difficulties have also been widely documented in previous studies. Inferencing refers to the ability to derive meanings that are not explicitly stated in a text. Successful readers use contextual clues, prior knowledge, and logical reasoning to make inferences and understand implicit information. However, learners frequently struggle with this process because it requires higher-order cognitive skills and adequate linguistic competence. According to Cain and Oakhill (2018), difficulties in inferencing significantly limit reading comprehension because readers are unable to integrate information effectively and construct coherent interpretations.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of reading strategies in facilitating comprehension. Reading strategies refer to conscious actions employed by readers to enhance understanding, including predicting, skimming, scanning, note-taking, summarizing, and monitoring comprehension. Research by Mokhtari and Sheorey (2019) demonstrated that successful readers employ a wider range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies than less successful readers. Similarly, Oxford (2020) found that strategic readers were better able to overcome comprehension difficulties and maintain engagement with challenging texts. These findings indicate that ineffective strategy use may contribute to reading comprehension difficulties among learners.

Motivation has also emerged as a significant factor influencing reading comprehension. Guthrie and Wigfield (2020) argue that motivated readers are more likely to engage actively with texts, persist when encountering difficulties, and employ effective reading strategies. In contrast, students with low reading motivation often avoid reading activities and invest minimal effort in comprehension tasks. Research conducted by Wigfield et al. (2021) found a positive relationship between reading motivation and comprehension achievement, suggesting that motivational factors play a crucial role in reading development.

In the Indonesian context, several studies have investigated reading comprehension difficulties among secondary school students. For example, Pratama and Mulyadi (2022) found that vocabulary limitations, lack of background knowledge, and insufficient reading practice were major obstacles to comprehension among senior high school students. Similarly, Sari and Rahman (2023) reported that students experienced difficulties identifying main ideas, understanding implicit meanings, and interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary. These findings indicate that reading comprehension challenges remain prevalent among Indonesian learners despite years of English instruction.

Although previous studies have contributed valuable insights into reading comprehension difficulties, several gaps remain evident. First, many studies have focused primarily on quantitative assessments of reading performance while providing limited exploration of students' personal experiences and perceptions. Second, previous research often examines individual factors separately

rather than investigating the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and affective influences. Third, relatively few qualitative studies have explored reading comprehension difficulties among Indonesian senior high school students in depth. Consequently, there is a need for qualitative investigations that provide detailed insights into learners' experiences, challenges, and perspectives regarding reading comprehension.

Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by exploring reading comprehension difficulties among senior high school students through a qualitative case study approach. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on statistical relationships, the present research aims to provide a deeper understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges when reading English texts.

Furthermore, affective factors such as motivation, interest, and attitudes toward reading can influence comprehension outcomes. Students who demonstrate low motivation often engage less actively in reading activities and invest minimal effort in understanding texts. Guthrie and Wigfield (2020) argue that motivated readers are more likely to employ effective reading strategies, persist when encountering difficulties, and achieve higher levels of comprehension. Consequently, motivation constitutes an important factor that should be considered when investigating reading difficulties among learners.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore reading comprehension difficulties among senior high school students. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges when reading English texts. According to Yin (2018), a case study is appropriate when researchers seek to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. In the present study, reading comprehension difficulties were examined within the natural context of English language learning in a senior high school setting.

The qualitative case study design enabled the researcher to explore multiple dimensions of students' reading experiences and identify factors contributing to comprehension difficulties. Rather than measuring reading performance through numerical scores alone, the study focused on understanding how students perceive reading challenges and how these challenges influence their learning processes. This approach was considered suitable because reading comprehension difficulties are complex phenomena involving linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions.

Participants of the Study

The subjects of consisted of fifteen eleventh-grade students enrolled in a public senior high school in Indonesia. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they were considered capable of providing rich and relevant information regarding reading comprehension difficulties

Research Setting

The study was conducted in senior high school located in Indonesia during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. English is taught as a compulsory subject, with approximately four instructional hours allocated each week. Reading activities form an important component of English instruction because students are expected to comprehend various genres of texts, including narrative, descriptive, recount, report, and exposition texts.

The selected school was considered suitable for the study because teachers frequently reported that students experienced difficulties understanding English reading materials. Furthermore, classroom observations indicated that many students relied heavily on dictionaries, translation applications, and teacher explanations when completing reading tasks. These conditions provided a relevant context for exploring reading comprehension difficulties in depth.

Research Instrument

The primary instruments used in this study were semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews served as the main data collection instrument because they enabled participants to describe their experiences and perceptions in their own words. An interview guide consisting of open-ended questions was developed based on the research objectives and relevant literature.

Classroom observations were conducted to obtain contextual information regarding students' reading behaviors and classroom interactions. The researcher observed reading lessons over a period of four weeks. Document analysis involved examining students' reading assignments, worksheets, and classroom assessment results. These documents provided additional evidence regarding students' comprehension difficulties and reading performance.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a six-week period. Prior to the study, permission was obtained from the school administration, English teacher, and participants. Students were informed about the purpose of the research and assured that their participation was voluntary.

The data collection process involved three stages. The first stage consisted of classroom observations. The researcher attended reading lessons and recorded observations regarding students' engagement, reading behaviors, and challenges encountered during classroom activities. The second stage involved conducting semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. The third stage involved collecting and reviewing students' reading assignments and related classroom documents. These documents were analyzed to identify recurring patterns of reading comprehension difficulties.

The use of multiple data sources facilitated data triangulation, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2021). Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic approach for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The purpose of this study was to explore reading comprehension difficulties among senior high school students and identify the factors contributing to these difficulties. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The thematic analysis revealed five major themes: (1) limited vocabulary knowledge, (2) difficulties understanding grammatical structures, (3) challenges in identifying main ideas and making inferences, (4) low reading motivation, and (5) limited reading practice and exposure to English texts.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes of Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Theme	Subtheme
Linguistic Difficulties	Limited vocabulary knowledge
	Grammatical difficulties
Cognitive Difficulties	Identifying main ideas
	Making inferences
Affective Difficulties	Low reading motivation
Environmental Factors	Limited reading practice
	Limited exposure to English texts

Theme 1: Limited Vocabulary Knowledge

The findings revealed that limited vocabulary knowledge was the most frequently reported difficulty experienced by participants. Nearly all students stated that unfamiliar vocabulary prevented them from understanding texts effectively. Students often encountered numerous unknown words, which interrupted the reading process and reduced overall comprehension.

One participant stated:

“When I read English texts, I often find many words that I do not know. I have to open a dictionary repeatedly, and sometimes I still cannot understand the meaning of the sentence.” (Participant 3)

Similarly, another student explained:

“Even if I understand some words, there are usually many difficult words that make me confused about the whole paragraph.” (Participant 8)

Classroom observations confirmed these findings. During reading activities, many students spent considerable time searching for word meanings rather than focusing on understanding the text. Several students relied heavily on dictionaries and translation applications to complete reading tasks.

Document analysis also showed that students frequently failed to answer comprehension questions correctly when key vocabulary items appeared in the text. This finding suggests that vocabulary limitations significantly hindered students’ ability to construct meaning from written materials.

Theme 2: Difficulties Understanding Grammatical Structures

Another major challenge identified in the study was difficulty understanding grammatical structures. Participants reported that long and complex sentences often caused confusion, particularly when texts contained unfamiliar grammatical patterns.

One participant commented:

“I can understand short sentences, but when the sentence is very long, I do not know which part is the subject or the main idea.” (Participant 11)

Another student explained:

“Sometimes I know the meaning of the words, but I still do not understand the sentence because the grammar is difficult.” (Participant 6)

Observation data indicated that students frequently asked teachers for explanations regarding sentence structure and grammatical relationships. Complex sentences containing relative clauses, passive constructions, and advanced verb forms were particularly problematic.

Document analysis further revealed that students often misinterpreted textual information when they failed to understand grammatical relationships between ideas. These findings suggest that grammatical competence plays a crucial role in reading comprehension and that inadequate grammatical knowledge may contribute significantly to comprehension difficulties.

Theme 3: Difficulties Identifying Main Ideas and Making Inferences

The third theme concerned students’ difficulties identifying main ideas and making inferences. Many participants reported that they could understand individual sentences but struggled to determine the overall meaning of a text.

One participant stated:

“I can understand some parts of the text, but I do not always know what the writer wants to say.” (Participant 2)

Another student noted:

“When the answer is not directly written in the text, I often cannot find it.” (Participant 14)

These statements indicate that students experienced difficulties processing information beyond the literal level. Observation data showed that learners often focused on translating sentences word by word rather than constructing broader textual meaning.

Students also encountered challenges answering inferential questions that required interpretation and critical thinking. Such difficulties suggest limitations in higher-order reading skills, including synthesizing information and drawing conclusions from textual evidence.

Theme 4: Low Reading Motivation

The findings revealed that motivation significantly influenced students’ reading experiences. Several participants expressed limited interest in reading English texts because they perceived reading activities as difficult, time-consuming, and frustrating.

One participant explained:

“I rarely read English texts because they are difficult and make me tired.” (Participant 5)

Another student stated:

“I only read English when the teacher gives assignments. I do not read English texts in my free time.” (Participant 10)

Observation data supported these findings. Many students appeared reluctant to engage in reading activities and often lost concentration during longer reading tasks. Some students preferred waiting for teacher explanations rather than attempting to understand texts independently.

The findings indicate that low motivation may reduce students’ willingness to engage with reading materials and limit opportunities for reading development.

Theme 5: Limited Reading Practice and Exposure to English Texts

The final theme concerned limited reading practice and insufficient exposure to English materials. Participants frequently reported that they rarely encountered English texts outside classroom settings.

One student stated:

“I only read English texts at school. At home, I usually read Indonesian books or social media.” (Participant 7)

Similarly, another participant explained:

“I do not have many English books, so I rarely practice reading.” (Participant 12)

Classroom observations indicated that English reading activities were generally limited to textbook exercises and examination preparation. Consequently, students had few opportunities to develop reading fluency and comprehension strategies through extensive reading experiences.

The findings suggest that limited exposure to English texts may contribute to vocabulary deficiencies, weak reading habits, and reduced reading confidence.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that reading comprehension difficulties among senior high school students arise from the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, affective, and environmental factors. These findings support previous research emphasizing the multidimensional nature of reading comprehension and highlight the complexity of challenges faced by learners.

Vocabulary Knowledge as a Major Determinant of Reading Comprehension

The findings revealed that vocabulary limitations represented the most significant obstacle to reading comprehension. Students frequently reported difficulties understanding texts because of unfamiliar vocabulary. This finding supports Nation (2019), who argues that vocabulary knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension success.

Vocabulary functions as the foundation of comprehension because readers must recognize and understand words before they can interpret sentences and paragraphs. When students encounter numerous unfamiliar words, cognitive resources are diverted toward decoding vocabulary rather than constructing meaning. Consequently, comprehension becomes fragmented and inefficient.

The findings also align with Koda (2018), who found that learners with limited vocabulary knowledge experience substantial difficulties understanding academic texts. Therefore, vocabulary development should be considered a priority in reading instruction.

The Role of Grammatical Knowledge in Reading Comprehension

The study further revealed that grammatical difficulties significantly affected students' comprehension. Many participants reported confusion when reading complex sentence structures despite understanding individual vocabulary items.

This finding is consistent with Alderson (2020), who emphasizes that grammatical knowledge supports readers' ability to interpret relationships between ideas within texts. Without adequate grammatical competence, learners may struggle to identify subjects, verbs, modifiers, and logical connections between sentences.

The findings suggest that reading instruction should integrate grammar awareness activities to help students understand how grammatical structures contribute to textual meaning.

Cognitive Challenges in Constructing Meaning

Students' difficulties identifying main ideas and making inferences indicate that reading comprehension extends beyond vocabulary and grammar knowledge. These findings support Schema Theory (Rumelhart, 1980), which proposes that comprehension requires readers to integrate textual information with prior knowledge.

Many participants focused primarily on translating words and sentences rather than constructing broader textual understanding. As a result, they struggled to identify central ideas and interpret implicit information.

The findings also support Snow's (2002) conception of reading comprehension as an active meaning-making process. Successful comprehension requires readers to synthesize information, evaluate textual content, and make connections between ideas. Therefore, reading instruction should encourage students to engage actively with texts rather than relying solely on translation strategies.

Motivation and Reading Engagement

The findings indicate that motivation plays an important role in reading comprehension development. Students with low motivation reported limited engagement in reading activities and minimal independent reading practice.

These findings support Guthrie and Wigfield (2020), who argue that motivation influences the amount of effort readers invest in comprehension activities. Motivated readers are more likely to persist when encountering difficulties and utilize effective reading strategies.

Consequently, teachers should design reading activities that are relevant, meaningful, and engaging to increase students' motivation and participation.

Environmental Factors and Reading Opportunities

The study also highlights the importance of reading practice and exposure to English texts. Students who rarely engaged with English reading materials reported greater comprehension difficulties than those with more extensive reading experience.

This finding is consistent with Grabe and Stoller (2020), who emphasize that extensive reading contributes significantly to vocabulary growth, reading fluency, and comprehension development. Regular exposure to authentic texts enables learners to develop familiarity with language patterns and reading strategies. Therefore, schools should provide greater access to English reading materials and encourage extensive reading programs that promote regular reading habits among students.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several important implications for English language teaching. First, teachers should prioritize vocabulary development through explicit instruction and extensive reading activities. Second, reading lessons should incorporate grammar awareness activities to help students understand sentence structures and textual relationships. Third, instruction should emphasize higher-order reading skills such as identifying main ideas, making inferences, and evaluating information. Finally, teachers should foster reading motivation by selecting engaging materials and creating supportive learning environments that encourage active participation in reading activities.

CONCLUSION

This study explored reading comprehension difficulties among senior high school students through a qualitative case study approach. The findings revealed that students encountered a variety of challenges when reading English texts, including limited vocabulary knowledge, difficulties understanding grammatical structures, problems identifying main ideas and making inferences, low reading motivation, and limited exposure to English reading materials. These difficulties were not isolated factors but rather interconnected challenges that collectively influenced students' ability to comprehend written texts effectively.

Among the identified difficulties, vocabulary limitation emerged as the most dominant obstacle. Students frequently reported that unfamiliar words disrupted their reading process and prevented them from understanding textual meaning. In addition, inadequate grammatical knowledge hindered students' ability to interpret complex sentence structures, while cognitive challenges affected their capacity to identify main ideas and infer implicit information. Furthermore, low reading motivation and insufficient reading practice reduced students' opportunities to develop reading skills and comprehension strategies.

The findings support Schema Theory, Interactive Reading Theory, and Reading Comprehension Theory, which emphasize that successful comprehension requires the interaction of linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing, prior knowledge, and strategic reading behavior. The results also confirm that reading comprehension difficulties among learners are multidimensional and influenced by linguistic, cognitive, affective, and environmental factors.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that English teachers should implement explicit vocabulary instruction, grammar-focused reading activities, and strategy-based reading instruction to support students' comprehension development. Teachers are also encouraged to provide

opportunities for extensive reading and create motivating classroom environments that promote positive reading habits. Such instructional practices may help students overcome reading difficulties and improve overall reading proficiency.

Although this study contributes valuable insights into students' reading comprehension difficulties, it has several limitations. The study was conducted in a single school and involved a relatively small number of participants. Consequently, the findings may not be generalizable to all contexts. Future research is recommended to involve larger participant groups from different educational settings and examine the effectiveness of intervention programs designed to improve reading comprehension. Further studies may also investigate the role of digital reading platforms, extensive reading programs, and metacognitive strategy training in supporting learners' reading development.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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Conceptualization: Muhammad Nawawi and Nur Shofia; **methodology:** Muhammad Nawawi and Nur Shofia; **investigation:** Muhammad Nawawi; **data collection:** Muhammad Nawawi; **writing—original draft preparation:** Muhammad Nawawi; **writing—review and editing:** Nur Shofia and Yos Widiarto; **visualization and data presentation:** Yos Widiarto. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and participant confidentiality. However, the data may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with appropriate permission.

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