

CHALLENGES FACED BY 11 TH-GRADE STUDENTS AT SMAN 1 INDRALAYA UTARA IN READING ENGLISH TEXTS

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Abstract :

This study investigates the reading difficulties faced by eleventh-grade students at SMA N 1 Indralaya Utara and explores the strategies they use to overcome them. A Mixed-Method approach with a Sequential Explanatory Design was employed. In the first phase, quantitative data were gathered through a reading comprehension test and a Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 71 students. The results revealed that the most common challenges were analyzing sentence structure (28%) and understanding vocabulary (26%), followed by interpreting discourse and comprehending texts (23% each). In the second phase, semi-structured interviews with selected students of different reading proficiency levels were conducted to explore these challenges more deeply. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes such as vocabulary difficulties, syntactic confusion, discourse interpretation, and strategic or external support efforts. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative findings provides a comprehensive understanding of students' reading comprehension problems and highlights the need for more targeted instructional support in grammar awareness, vocabulary enrichment, and reading strategy training.

Keywords : *Reading Comprehension; Reading Difficulties; EFL Students; Reading Strategies; Indonesian High School; Mixed-Method*

Abstrak :

Penelitian ini menyelidiki kesulitan membaca yang dihadapi oleh siswa kelas sebelas di SMA N 1 Indralaya Utara serta strategi yang mereka gunakan untuk mengatasinya. Pendekatan Mixed-Method dengan desain Sequential Explanatory digunakan dalam penelitian ini. Pada tahap pertama, data kuantitatif dikumpulkan melalui tes pemahaman bacaan dan kuesioner skala Likert yang diberikan kepada 71 siswa. Hasilnya menunjukkan bahwa tantangan paling umum adalah menganalisis struktur kalimat (28%) dan memahami kosakata (26%), diikuti oleh menafsirkan wacana dan memahami teks (masing-masing 23%). Pada tahap kedua, wawancara semi-terstruktur dilakukan dengan siswa terpilih dari berbagai tingkat kemampuan membaca untuk menggali lebih dalam tantangan tersebut. Analisis tematik digunakan untuk mengidentifikasi tema-tema utama seperti kesulitan kosakata, kebingungan sintaksis, penafsiran wacana, serta upaya strategis atau dukungan eksternal. Integrasi temuan kuantitatif dan kualitatif memberikan pemahaman menyeluruh tentang masalah pemahaman membaca siswa dan menyoroti perlunya dukungan pengajaran yang lebih terarah dalam kesadaran tata bahasa, pengayaan kosakata, dan pelatihan strategi membaca.

Kata Kunci: *Pemahaman Membaca; Kesulitan Membaca; Strategi Membaca; Sekolah Menengah Atas (SMA); Metode Campuran*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill that plays a key role in students' academic

success. It allows learners to access knowledge, build critical thinking, and perform effectively across subjects (OECD, 2008; Moreillon, 2007). However, for many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, reading in English is a demanding process that requires more than just decoding words. It involves vocabulary mastery, syntactic analysis, discourse understanding, and text comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Anderson, 2008).

In the Indonesian context, reading difficulties among senior high school students remain a persistent issue. The 2018 PISA results revealed that Indonesian students ranked among the lowest in reading literacy, with more than 70% failing to reach minimum proficiency levels (OECD, 2019). This finding is alarming, considering that reading is essential not only for language development but also for overall academic achievement.

Students in grade 11 are expected to handle various English text types, such as narrative, exposition, and argumentative texts, which require higher-level reading strategies. However, many struggle due to limited vocabulary, unfamiliar grammar structures, and difficulty in understanding the writer's ideas and purpose (Bharuthram & Clarence, 2015; Wingate, 2015). These challenges can result in low motivation, poor academic performance, and increased anxiety during English learning (Torgesen, 2000; Tomas et al., 2021).

Given these concerns, this study aims to identify the challenges faced by 11th-grade students at SMAN 1 Indralaya Utara in reading English texts. By exploring the specific aspects that hinder their reading performance-namely vocabulary, sentence structure, discourse understanding, and text comprehension-this research seeks to inform better reading instruction and support strategies in EFL classrooms.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-method research design with a sequential explanatory model. The quantitative phase aimed to identify students' challenges in reading English texts through a reading comprehension test and a structured questionnaire. The test was designed to diagnose specific aspects of reading difficulties, while the questionnaire captured both the challenges and the strategies students used to overcome them. The qualitative phase followed, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gain deeper insight into the reading difficulties and coping strategies adopted by students. The combination of these methods allowed for a more holistic and in-depth analysis of the issue.

This research was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Indralaya Utara, South Sumatra, between April and May 2025. A total of 71 eleventh-grade students from Class XI.1 and XI.4 participated in the study. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their comparable English performance levels and the fact that both classes were taught by the same English teacher. Despite their shared learning conditions, both classes demonstrated low performance in reading comprehension, making them suitable subjects for this research.

Three primary instruments were employed in this study: a reading comprehension test, a questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview guideline. All instruments underwent expert validation by two professionals in English education (Wala, 2025). Based on their suggestions, revisions were made to ensure content and construct validity, after which the instruments were declared valid. A pilot test of the reading comprehension instrument was administered to 36 students in Class XI.2 at the same school. Initially consisting of 40 items, only 26 met the validity criteria ($r_{\text{observed}} > r_{\text{table}} = 0.329$) and were selected for the final test. The reliability of the test was confirmed through SPSS version 26.0, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha value of 0.882, indicating high internal consistency. The questionnaire and interview guideline were also validated through expert judgment and deemed suitable for data collection.

Data were collected through the reading comprehension test, questionnaire, and interviews. The test results were analyzed using a framework adapted from Larasati (2019), which categorized students' reading difficulties into four key aspects: vocabulary, sentence structure, discourse interpretation, and text comprehension. Each incorrect response was coded and entered into a matrix, and the total frequency of each difficulty was calculated per student and per aspect. These frequencies were then converted into percentages using Sudjono's (1987; 2005) formula to quantify the prevalence of each difficulty across the sample.

For the questionnaire, descriptive statistics were applied using SPSS to calculate the average percentage of student responses per indicator. The same statistical formula ($P = F/N \times 100$) was used to determine the students' perceived difficulties and the strategies they used. Additionally, the average for each category was derived to interpret overall trends in student responses. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using Thematic Analysis based on the six-phase process proposed by Clarke and Braun (2006), which includes

familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and producing the report. Thematic coding was used to identify recurring patterns in students' responses, particularly concerning their reading challenges and the strategies they implemented. This methodological approach ensured the integration of both objective data from tests and subjective perspectives from students. The mixed-method design enabled triangulation, enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings, and ultimately providing comprehensive insights into the reading comprehension difficulties encountered by EFL students and the strategies they use to overcome them.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and analyzes the findings from the qualitative data obtained through tests, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The reading comprehension test consisted of 26 multiple choice questions assessing four aspects: Vocabulary, Sentence Structure, Discourse, and Text Comprehension. The questionnaire included 27 Likert scale statements to explore the challenges students face in reading English texts and their coping strategies.

A total of 71 eleventh grade students from classes XI.1 and XI.4 at SMA Negeri 1 Indralaya Utara participated in both instruments. To gain deeper insight, interviews were conducted with three selected students one high level achiever, one average-level student, and one low-level student through open-ended questions focusing on their reading experiences and difficulties.

The reading comprehension test was administered to 71 eleventh-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Indralaya Utara. The test consisted of 26 validated multiple-choice questions derived from three English text types-narrative, exposition, and argumentative-designed to measure students' performance across four aspects: (1) understanding vocabulary, (2) analyzing sentence structure, (3) interpreting discourse, and (4) comprehending text.

The quantitative data were analyzed by calculating the frequency and percentage of incorrect responses in each aspect. These results reflect students' difficulties and help determine the most prominent challenges in reading English texts. The total number of recorded difficulties was 541. The distribution of student errors per aspect is shown in the table below:

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Students' Reading Difficulties

No	Types of Difficultues	Frequency	Percentage
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1.	Understanding Vocabulary	142	26%
2.	Analyzing Sentence Structure	150	28%
3.	Interpreting Discourse	127	23%
4.	Comprehending Text	122	23%

As indicated, the most frequently occurring challenge was analyzing sentence structure (28%), followed by understanding vocabulary (26%), and both interpreting discourse and comprehending text at 23%.

These findings suggest that linguistic complexity-especially syntax and vocabulary-significantly hampers students' ability to comprehend English texts. Below is a detailed analysis of each aspect.

A total of 142 errors (26%) were recorded in the vocabulary aspect. Many students struggled to identify the meanings of unfamiliar words or determine word class. For instance: (1) In a question about the word "mischievous", 31 students chose the incorrect answer "thoughtful" instead of the correct option "playful." (2) A contextual vocabulary question asking for the function of the word "jam" in "traffic jams" was incorrectly answered by 25 students, who chose "a place to relax" instead of the correct meaning, "a traffic problem."

These errors reveal that students lacked both lexical knowledge and contextual inference skills. This confirms findings by Nation (2001), who emphasized the critical role of vocabulary in reading fluency and comprehension.

This aspect had the highest error rate, with 150 incorrect responses (28%). Sentence structure questions tested students' understanding of grammar, text organization, and function of paragraphs. Common challenges included: (1) Misidentifying paragraph roles: For example, in a narrative text, 21 students incorrectly thought the opening paragraph was meant to describe conflict instead of introducing the main character and setting. (2) Difficulty recognizing exposition structures: 23 students incorrectly identified "arguments" instead of "thesis" as the first part of an exposition.

Students showed poor awareness of text structure conventions and weak syntactic processing. This supports Alderson's (2000) view that syntactic knowledge is essential to interpret meaning at sentence level.

Discourse interpretation accounted for 127 errors (23%). This aspect involves identifying coherence, referents, and author's intent.

Examples include: (1) 21 students misunderstood the referent of "he" in a

narrative, mistaking “the cheesemaker” for “the farmer.” (2) In identifying text purpose, 22 students selected “to persuade readers to support skateboarding” instead of “to inform parents about skateboarding safety.”

These findings indicate students’ limited discourse-level processing, especially in tracking ideas across paragraphs and recognizing argumentation structure (Grabe & Stoller, 2011).

The lowest percentage of errors (122 or 23%) occurred in text comprehension, but the difficulty level remained high. Students frequently misinterpreted the main idea, cause-effect, and author’s suggestion. (1) In a question about saving money, many students answered “It’s fun to travel” rather than “To help in emergencies or tuition needs.” (2) When asked how the writer suggests increasing public transport use, many chose “Fines for car drivers” instead of the correct option “Include transit passes in property taxes.”

These patterns reflect surface-level reading, with minimal engagement in building a mental model of the text (Kintsch, 1998). Students often relied on guessing rather than deep comprehension.

The data indicate that students’ greatest reading difficulty lies in analyzing sentence structure, followed closely by vocabulary. These challenges stem from limited linguistic competence, especially grammar and word knowledge. Errors in discourse interpretation and text comprehension further suggest a lack of strategic reading skills, such as identifying main ideas, recognizing reference, and inferring meaning from context.

These findings support previous research highlighting syntactic complexity and lexical unfamiliarity as primary barriers in EFL reading (Bharuthram & Clarence, 2015; Wingate, 2015). Moreover, the need for explicit instruction in reading strategies is evident.

The questionnaire was administered to gather insights into the specific difficulties experienced by eleventh-grade students when reading English texts. The statements in the questionnaire were categorized into four core aspects of reading difficulty—vocabulary knowledge, sentence structure, discourse interpretation, and text comprehension—and two additional aspects that address students’ coping strategies: individual efforts and external support.

The findings revealed that a large proportion of students reported difficulties with vocabulary. As shown in Table 4.2, 76.62% of students agreed that they often find it difficult to understand unfamiliar words, while 75.49%

reported struggling to guess meanings from context. These findings indicate that limited vocabulary knowledge remains a prominent challenge in reading English texts. Additionally, 73.80% stated they had difficulty mastering vocabulary due to lack of usage in daily communication, and 69.86% noted they easily forget new vocabulary, which negatively affects reading retention.

Regarding sentence structure, 73.80% of students agreed that long and complex sentences made it difficult to follow the main idea of a text. A similar challenge was reported by 72.11% who struggled to understand sentence structure when faced with lengthy constructions. Furthermore, 67.04% found it difficult to identify basic sentence elements such as subject, verb, and object. These findings support previous research (Alderson, 2000; Grabe & Stoller, 2011), which emphasizes the crucial role of grammatical knowledge in successful reading comprehension.

Table 2. Percentage of Students' Agreement on Each Statement

No.	Statement	%
1	I often find it difficult to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words in English texts.	76.62%
2	I struggle to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context.	75.49%
3	I have difficulty mastering vocabulary because I rarely practice it in daily conversations or writing.	73.80%
4	I forget new vocabulary easily, making it hard to improve my reading skills.	69.86%
5	Long and complex sentences make it hard for me to follow the main idea of the text.	73.80%
6	I struggle to identify the subject, verb, and object in a sentence.	67.04%
7	I have difficulty understanding sentence structure when encountering long sentences	72.11%
8	I cannot easily identify the main idea or topic of a paragraph	65.35%
9	I have trouble understanding cultural references or idioms in English texts	71.83%
10	I find it challenging to identify the purpose behind reading comprehension tasks	63.10%
11	I feel anxious when I see a long English text	61.69%
12	I feel anxious when I read about unfamiliar topics.	62.82%
13	I lose confidence when I encounter many unknown words or complex sentences	63.38%
14	I feel frustrated when I do not understand a text even after reading it multiple times	63.38%
15	I cannot find the main idea of an article because of difficult vocabulary	67.04%
16	I find it challenging to connect ideas between paragraphs	71.83%
17	I struggle to determine the purpose of a text	60.85%
18	I find it difficult to understand my teacher's explanations about how to connect ideas in a text.	58.03%
19	Even after my teacher provides explicit instructions on	58.59%

	understanding a text, I still struggle to comprehend it as a whole.	
20	I feel confused when my teacher asks me to identify how different parts of a text are related to each other.	67.61%
21	I use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words while reading	85.92%
22	I try to guess the meaning of unknown words using context clues	82.25%
23	I underline or highlight important sentences to help me understand the text better.	81.41%
24	I summarize each paragraph in my own words to understand the overall meaning of the text	75.21%
25	I feel confused when my teacher asks me to identify how different parts of a text are related to each other.	70.14%
26	I understand the text better when we discuss it in a group	76.34%
27	My teacher provides useful feedback to help me improve my reading skills	81.41%

Difficulties in discourse interpretation were also reported by a notable number of students. For example, 71.83% agreed that they had trouble understanding cultural references or idiomatic expressions, while 71.83% also mentioned difficulty in connecting ideas between paragraphs. These responses suggest a lack of exposure to authentic reading materials and insufficient practice in analyzing text coherence and cohesion.

As for text comprehension, responses indicate that students experience psychological and motivational barriers. Approximately 61.69% felt anxious when confronted with long texts, and around 63.38% stated that unknown vocabulary or complex grammar often lowered their confidence. Additionally, 63.10% found it difficult to identify the intended purpose of a reading passage, and 64% reported needing to reread texts multiple times without fully understanding them.

To provide a clearer picture of the intensity of these challenges, Table 4.3 presents the average percentage of students who acknowledged each difficulty domain.

Table 3. Average Percentage of Reading Challenges

No	Types of Difficultues	Average
1.	Understanding Vocabulary	73.94%
2.	Analyzing Sentence Structure	70.99%
3.	Interpreting Discourse	67%
4.	Comprehending Text	64%

The results highlight that vocabulary is the most frequently reported

challenge among students, followed by sentence structure, both of which are foundational linguistic skills necessary for effective reading. Discourse and comprehension difficulties, although slightly less frequent, still pose substantial barriers to overall reading performance.

In addition to identifying challenges, the questionnaire also explored strategies used by students to cope with reading difficulties. The results show that students actively engage in both individual and external support strategies to improve their comprehension skills.

The most frequently used strategies fall into the individual category, with 85.92% of students stating that they used dictionaries to look up unfamiliar words. Similarly, 82.25% reported attempting to guess word meanings using context clues, 81.41% highlighted or underlined important sentences, and 75.21% summarized paragraphs to grasp overall meaning. These findings suggest that students are developing autonomous reading habits that support vocabulary acquisition and meaning-making.

External support strategies also played a role in students' reading improvement. For instance, 76.34% reported understanding texts better through group discussions, and 81.41% appreciated the usefulness of teacher feedback in helping them overcome reading problems. These results emphasize the importance of collaborative learning environments and responsive instructional support in promoting reading proficiency. The overall distribution of strategies used by students is summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Average Percentage of Reading Strategies

No	Strategies to Overcome Reading Challenges	Average
1	Individual Strategies	81%
2	External Factors	76%

To gain deeper insights into students' reading challenges and strategies, interviews were conducted with three participants of varying English reading proficiency: F (high), A (medium), and Y (low). Thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2006) revealed six main themes aligned with the four core challenges and two strategic responses.

All three participants reported challenges with unfamiliar words. Participant Y said, "I'm usually confused, but I immediately check the dictionary." A stated, "Sometimes the meaning doesn't quite match the text." F explained, "I read the sentence and try to guess first, then check the dictionary if

I need to."

Each participant struggled with complex sentence structures. Y explained, "If it's already long, it's hard. I just read the whole thing and guess." A said, "I underline the words I already know and then try to understand the rest." F described a similar method: "I try to find known words first, then use them to understand the sentence."

Participants faced difficulty understanding paragraph coherence and idiomatic expressions. Y shared, "I saw 'piece of cake' and didn't know it meant easy until I saw it on Instagram." A found idioms confusing. F noted, "I still find it hard to understand idioms, even the common ones."

Y admitted to feeling anxious and demotivated when encountering long texts: "I feel I won't understand it and lose motivation." A noted greater motivation when familiar with the topic: "If I'm familiar with the content, I feel more motivated to read." F preferred reading paragraph by paragraph to manage the content.

Participants described personal strategies for overcoming reading difficulties. Y and A mentioned using dictionaries and underlining familiar words. A also said, "I like reading English song lyrics – that helps me know more words." Y reported breaking down texts into smaller parts. F highlighted, "I annotate, guess word meaning from context, and read English materials outside school like lyrics."

All participants valued external support from teachers and peers. Y appreciated, "Ma'am Retno often explains meanings word by word – that helps a lot." A mentioned, "Discussion with friends is helpful if they understand the text." F added, "If the teacher corrects my mistakes, I understand faster."

These interview findings not only validate the quantitative results but also offer nuanced insights into how students experience and address specific reading difficulties in real contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the reading challenges experienced by 11th-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Indralaya Utara and the strategies they used to overcome them. The findings revealed that students faced significant difficulties in four key aspects of reading: vocabulary mastery, sentence structure analysis, discourse interpretation, and overall text comprehension. These difficulties were closely linked to limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of syntactic awareness, and

insufficient reading habits. The challenges not only affected students' understanding of English texts but also contributed to anxiety and low motivation in reading activities.

Despite these challenges, students demonstrated a range of coping strategies, including the use of dictionaries, translation, rereading, identifying keywords, and seeking assistance from peers and teachers. These strategies, while helpful, indicate the need for more structured instruction in reading techniques and greater exposure to diverse English texts.

Overall, this study highlights the importance of addressing linguistic limitations and promoting strategic reading practices in EFL classrooms. Future research could explore the effectiveness of targeted interventions, such as vocabulary-building programs or grammar-based reading instruction, to further support students in developing stronger reading comprehension skills.

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