

Strategies used by Indonesian high school English teachers to improve students' reading comprehension: A qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is essential in ESL/EFL teaching, yet many students in Indonesia face difficulties in comprehending English passages. This study aims to investigate the strategies used by English language teachers to address these challenges. The research problem focuses on identifying effective strategies to improve students' reading comprehension skills. A qualitative research method was used, involving semi-structured interviews with four high school English teachers in Indonesia who were purposively selected. Data were collected in January 2024 through interviews conducted at different times and locations. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring challenges and effective strategies. The findings revealed that teachers faced significant barriers, such as students' limited vocabulary and difficulties with long texts. To address these issues, teachers used strategies such as selecting passages based on students' interests, using skimming and scanning techniques to quickly identify key ideas and specific information, and using mind mapping to help students organize and understand complex information. In conclusion, the study highlighted the importance of adaptive teaching methods in overcoming reading comprehension challenges. The suggested strategies -

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interest-based texts, skimming, scanning and mind mapping - were found to be effective in improving students' reading skills. Further research is recommended to investigate the long-term effects of these strategies and to develop additional methods for improving reading comprehension.

Keywords: *English reading; English teaching; Reading difficulties*

1. Introduction

Reading is a fundamental skill in the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) or a foreign language (EFL). It serves as a cornerstone in language acquisition, enabling learners to comprehend, interpret, and analyze written texts effectively. In the diverse landscape of language learning, the importance of reading cannot be overstated. It not only facilitates language comprehension but also cultivates critical thinking, vocabulary expansion, and cultural awareness. Research has shown that EFL learners who adopt a positive attitude towards reading tend to exert greater mental effort, leading to improved comprehension and critical thinking skills (Mekuria et al., 2024; Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2017; Oxford, 2016).

Understanding English texts necessitates a broad vocabulary. Comprehending a text involves utilizing knowledge, abilities, and various reading strategies. Enhancing reading skills is essential for students to grasp educational materials. Reading comprehension pertains to the extent to which a reader comprehends the content. Abidin and Nurlisna (2018) define reading comprehension as extracting information, messages, and meanings from reading material. Experienced readers perceive words not merely as isolated letters but as components of a larger context (Zare & Othman, 2013).

Most students reported having difficulty with reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and understanding the information presented in learning reading. It causes the students to lack interest and motivation. Supported by the finding by Isma & Nur, (2023) that most students achieved a low score of reading comprehension. This was attributed to factors such as lack of interest in reading, inadequate understanding of the text, and spending excessive time searching for meanings in a dictionary. Ultimately, the majority of students struggled to grasp the content they were reading.

According to recent studies, teacher teaching strategies have a major impact on learning effectiveness and student academic accomplishment. Implementing appropriate teaching strategies can help students improve confidence and accuracy in reading. Various instructions adapted to individual needs of learners have been noticed to increase reading skills and establish a good learning environment (Imbaquingo & Cárdenas, 2023). Additionally, the use of evidence-based strategies, such as guided reading and formative assessment, can provide the necessary support and feedback for students to progress in their reading abilities (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Walker, 2023). According to Nordin et al. (2024) effective reading instruction from teachers helps each student become an effective reader in the classroom. Effective teachers utilize specific strategies and

techniques for this purpose. Nonetheless, to cater to the diverse needs and learning preferences of each student in the class, teachers can employ a range of strategies and abilities.

Many researchers have looked into the challenges that students experience when it comes to reading comprehension. Alshammari (2023) for example, found that Saudi EFL students had difficulty understanding what they read because they have a limited vocabulary and do not know how to read. Similarly, Jafary et al. (2024) discovered that understanding is hindered for Iranian EFL students by complicated texts and foreign terminology. Rahman and Mohamad (2023) emphasized that two major obstacles to reading comprehension in the Indonesian context are limited exposure to English texts and inadequate instructional support.

Despite the huge amount of study that has already been done, there is still not enough information on specific strategies that can be used to solve these problems in the Indonesian setting. This study intends to close this gap by investigating the methods senior high school English teachers in Indonesia use to help their students who struggle with reading comprehension.

2. Literature review

2.1. Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is a complex process that necessitates active engagement with the text. This complexity arises from the need to dynamically interact with the information presented and integrate it with prior knowledge to form coherent understanding and connections within the material (Nguyễn & Nguyễn, 2017). This dynamic interaction is crucial for deep comprehension, allowing readers to effectively grasp, analyze, and apply the information from the text.

The process of reading comprehension involves multiple cognitive and metacognitive strategies. Cognitive strategies help readers create a coherent mental model of the text, while metacognitive strategies involve monitoring and regulating one's comprehension process (Haider & Shakir, 2023). Effective readers utilize these strategies to overcome comprehension challenges and achieve a deeper understanding of the material.

Recent studies emphasize the importance of teaching these strategies to enhance reading comprehension. For instance, (Rusgandi, 2023) found that extensive reading and strategic instruction significantly improve postgraduate students' reading comprehension abilities. Similarly, research by Khellab et al. (2022) and Latifah et al. (2017) demonstrated that the implementation of metacognitive strategies, such as self-assessment and comprehension monitoring, positively affects students' reading comprehension achievement.

Therefore, understanding and teaching the mechanisms underlying comprehension are essential for effective reading instruction. By equipping learners with the necessary cognitive and metacognitive tools, educators can help students develop the

skills needed to navigate and understand complex texts (Khellab et al., 2022; Sari et al., 2023).

2.2. Students' challenges in reading comprehension

2.2.1. Lack of vocabulary

Understanding and mastering vocabulary is crucial for achieving proficiency in learning a second or foreign language. Recent studies emphasize the importance of vocabulary knowledge as a foundation for advanced language acquisition and effective communication in real-life situations. Proficiency in vocabulary significantly aids learners in excelling across listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. According to Haider and Shakir (2023), the broader a student's vocabulary, the more adeptly they can articulate their thoughts. Language experts also recognize a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading skills (Nasution, 2022; Velayati et al., 2017). In both foreign and second language learning contexts, insufficient vocabulary knowledge has been found to significantly contribute to learners' reluctance to engage with reading and listening tasks (Purnami, 2022; Velayati et al., 2017).

2.2.2. Students' boredom

Boredom is a significant factor that can negatively impact the learning experience, particularly in the context of second language (L2) reading classes. Boredom in L2 reading can arise from various sources, including unengaging reading materials, repetitive tasks, and a lack of perceived relevance to students' interests and goals. When students encounter texts that they find dull or irrelevant, their motivation to engage with the material decreases, leading to reduced comprehension and retention (Barber & Klauda, 2020). Additionally, the monotonous nature of some L2 reading activities can exacerbate feelings of boredom, causing students to disengage and perform poorly in reading tasks (Shehzad et al., 2020).

Research indicates that boredom in L2 reading classes can significantly hinder students' language acquisition and overall academic performance. A study by Shehzad et al. (2020) found that boredom in L2 reading activities is associated with lower levels of reading comprehension and decreased interest in language learning. When students are bored, they are less likely to invest cognitive effort in understanding the text, which impedes their ability to process and recall information. Furthermore, boredom can lead to a negative attitude towards reading in the second language, making it more challenging for teachers to foster a positive and motivating learning environment (Nasution, 2022; Rahman & Mohamad, 2023).

2.2.3. Lack of interest in reading

Interest is necessary for engaging activities related to reading. Khairuddin (2013) states that individuals who have an interest in reading will be encouraged to pay attention to these activities. Interest is a feeling of love and eagerness in a thing or activity without

the force of anyone. Someone who has an interest in certain activities tends to give great attention to these activities, including analyzing a discourse (Purwaningsih & Mabur, 2023). It is an active soul's desire to acquire language patterns in order to obtain knowledge that is closely related to the will, activity, and enjoyment experiences, which may allow individuals to choose, pay attention to, and accept anything outside of themselves (Zubaidah et al., 2018). This reading interest is the basis of one's motivation for reading activities (Imbaquingo & Cárdenas, 2023).

When studying discourse, students had to read it completely. Of course, the students' deep interest in reading was essential for the activity of analyzing discourses to progress smoothly and successfully. In addition, Romainah (2018), Fitria (2019) and Alkan (2020) claimed that less interest in reading causes students' low students' reading ability in reading comprehension. It is a person's enthusiasm for reading and acquiring new information. Therefore, in further discussion Barber and Klauda (2020) claimed that motivation and a good environment are two of the factors that influence the students' interest in reading. Motivation serves as an internal drive that propels students to engage with reading materials actively and a positive reading environment involves creating opportunities for students to discuss and share their reading experiences, which can further stimulate their interest. He emphasized that when both motivation and a supportive environment are present, they collectively contribute to a richer and more engaging reading experience for students, ultimately nurturing their long-term interest in reading.

2.3. Strategies in teaching reading comprehension

Reading is very important because it broadens learning and promotes academic performance in the context of reading comprehension (Fahas, 2021). Reading comprehension strategies as the tactics or behaviors utilized by skilled readers to comprehend texts (Nordin et al., 2024). It was suggested that teachers have a range of strategies to construct reading comprehension, which include mind mapping, skimming and scanning, scaffolding, and think aloud.

2.3.1. Mind mapping

Perfetti and Stafura (2014) claim that to promote a comprehensive understanding of various subjects, students may employ mind mapping techniques to simplify and comprehend intricate information. The utilization of mind mapping influences students' ability to comprehend what they read. Furthermore, mind mapping aims to replicate the cognitive processes of learners by prompting them to transition between different concepts. The method of encoding knowledge through symbols, images, or colors mirrors the way learners' brains naturally process information. Mind mapping strategies are also proved by the current studies by Setianingsih et al. (2019) and Malekzadeh and Bayat (2015) who found that mind mapping successfully improved students' reading abilities and coding the knowledge from the passages.

2.3.2. Skimming and scanning

Skimming, which involves quickly moving through a text to grasp its main ideas and overall structure, and scanning, which involves searching for specific information, are essential reading strategies that enhance comprehension and efficiency (Pido & Mubarakah, 2021; Yung et al., 2024). Pido and Mubarakah (2021) found skimming aids in understanding detailed information later. Meanwhile, Yung et al. (2024) noted skimming's utility in processing large volumes of academic information quickly. Meanwhile, Nordin et al. (2024) and Mekuria et al. (2024) reported skimming improves the synthesis of information from multiple sources. Additionally, Mekuria et al. (2024) noted that scanning helps quickly locate specific information, saving time and improving efficiency and found scanning enhances recall of specific details. These studies collectively highlight the importance of incorporating both skimming and scanning strategies into reading instruction to help students become more effective and efficient readers.

2.3.3. Scaffolding

Scaffolding in teaching reading comprehension is a very effective instructional strategy, with recent studies highlighting its significant benefits. Research by Pijeira-Díaz et al. (2023) shows that scaffolding helps students bridge the gap between their current abilities and learning goals by providing temporary support. This support is gradually removed as students become more proficient, helping them build confidence and independence in reading comprehension. Adaptive scaffolding is key, as it allows teachers to assess students' needs continuously and provide the right level of support, creating a personalized learning experience. The use of scaffolding techniques in digital learning environments has also been explored. Spjeldnæs and Karlsen (2024) found that digital tools like interactive e-books and online platforms can enhance reading comprehension by providing immediate feedback and guided questions. These tools help students navigate complex texts and develop critical thinking skills. Additionally, Cai et al. (2022) found that students who received digital scaffolding showed better comprehension and retention than those who did not, underscoring the importance of using scaffolding in both traditional and digital methods to improve reading comprehension outcomes.

2.3.4. Think aloud

The think-aloud method has been widely recognized as an effective strategy for enhancing reading comprehension, particularly in L2 contexts. By verbalizing their thought processes while reading, students can better monitor their understanding and develop metacognitive skills that are crucial for comprehension (Zhang, 2024). Recent studies have shown that think-aloud protocols can help identify students' reading strategies and difficulties, allowing for more targeted instructional interventions (Alkhaleefah, 2017; Wang, 2016). Moreover, think-aloud has been found to promote

active engagement with the text, as students become more aware of their cognitive processes and are able to adjust their reading strategies accordingly (Wang, 2016). In a study by Sari et al. (2023) the use of think-aloud in L2 reading classes led to significant improvements in students' reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. Another study by Shih and Reynolds (2018) highlighted that think-aloud practices can foster a deeper understanding of the text, as students learn to make inferences and connect ideas more effectively. Therefore, incorporating think-aloud techniques into L2 reading instruction can be a valuable approach to mitigating boredom and enhancing students' reading comprehension skills.

3. Method

This research employed a case study design to deeply explore the strategies utilized by English teachers in addressing students' difficulties in reading comprehension. It allows for an in-depth investigation of contemporary phenomena within their real-life context (Griffie, 2012). This aligns with Lapan et al. (2011) assertion that qualitative research aims to understand phenomena related to the lived experiences of participants, encompassing behaviors, perceptions, actions, and motivations.

To collect rich and detailed data, the researcher conducted interviews with four certified English teachers from four different high schools in Indonesia. These teachers were selected through purposive sampling, a method suitable for qualitative research when specific criteria are needed to address the research questions effectively. The criteria for selection included certification as English teachers and a minimum of five years of teaching experience. This criterion ensured that the participants had substantial experience and insights into the challenges and strategies related to reading comprehension.

The interviews took place in various locations and times during January 2024, allowing for flexibility and convenience for the participants. This approach helped in obtaining candid and reflective responses from the teachers. The semi-structured interview format was used to facilitate an open-ended conversation, enabling the researcher to delve deeper into specific issues as they emerged during the discussions. The questions focused on identifying the specific challenges students face in reading comprehension and the strategies employed by teachers to mitigate these difficulties.

4. Findings

The interview results showed that the students faced various difficulties and used different strategies to solve the difficulties. The details of the difficulties faced by the students and the strategies used by the teachers are elaborated as follows.

4.1. Selecting passages based on students' interests

Teacher A said that feeling bored was the main problem faced by students in learning reading comprehension. She admitted that students did not like to read long texts

which had no relation with their lives or their passion because there were so many terminologies which were not familiar to the students. As a result, reading long texts which contain unfamiliar vocabulary becomes a boring activity because they need to translate a lot of terminologies. Therefore, the teacher tried to find the texts based on the topic chosen by the students. The aim is to build the students' reading interest. In doing so, the teacher made an agreement with the students about the topic of the text before starting to learn reading comprehension. She said:

I gave clues for students to choose the topic of reading. Then, I search the text by the topic from many sources. Therefore, the students will not feel bored because the topic of the text is based on their preferences.

4.2. Using skimming and scanning techniques

Meanwhile, teacher B claimed that students did not like to read long texts and understand the meaning of the sentences in the text one by one. Thus, she acknowledged scanning and skimming techniques to the students. She claimed that skimming and scanning techniques helped students to find the ideas discussed in a text and to predict about the aim of a text. However, she admitted that the technique did not always run well because the students still need to master vocabularies presented in a text to comprehend the text, especially in dealing with Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) reading questions. The teacher B said:

I train students to read the text by using some tricks such as skimming and scanning because some students feel bored when it comes to the reading session. Thus, I help them to find key terms in the text to generate the idea presented in the text.

4.3. Implementing mind mapping

Teacher C explained that the mind mapping technique became one of the most frequent techniques she used in teaching reading. She said that identifying the students' ability is not easy nowadays because students can easily find the samples of reading text along with the reading comprehension test on the internet. Students also can easily translate the English texts by using various applications by using smartphones and the internet. Therefore, the students' real ability in comprehending the ideas in the text is biased and needs to be identified. In this case, mind mapping can help with reading comprehension. Students can absorb and comprehend information from the books they've read by participating in engaging reading activities such as mind mapping. Teacher C believed that mind mapping techniques helped students to identify the ideas in a text from the beginning to the end of the paragraphs. After giving English reading text to the students, the teacher instructed the student to make a map of ideas of the text. Hence, the students can easily understand the ideas or the message presented in the text.

I like to ask students to make mind-mapping of a text to identify how far the students understand the concept presented in the text. In addition, nowadays

the students tend to use Google to translate a text without understanding the ideas contained in a text.

Meanwhile, the teacher D admitted that she did not decide any specific technique in teaching reading before coming to the class. She claimed that most of the time she could not apply the technique she prepared in the lesson plans due to the atmosphere of the class and the students' condition. Thus, the techniques were various based on the students' condition and mood.

I did not design any specific strategies in teaching reading because we cannot predict the students' mood and condition in the class. Most of the time I failed to implement the teaching strategies due to the students' condition which is not ready to be involved while implementing the teaching reading strategies. Therefore, I decided the teaching reading strategy after coming to the class.

The above interview result indicates that the teachers used various strategies in teaching reading comprehension. The teachers gave the texts which were related to the students' interest, used skimming and scanning techniques and implemented the mind mapping technique. The further explanations about the finding are discussed in the next section.

5. Discussion

The study reveals a range of strategies employed by teachers to address the challenges students face in reading comprehension. These strategies include tailoring texts to students' interests, utilizing skimming and scanning techniques, and employing mind mapping. These methods are supported by various theories and research findings.

The practice of selecting reading materials aligned with students' interests is supported by research that highlights the importance of engaging students with content that resonates with them. Teacher A's approach—choosing texts based on student preferences—aims to combat student boredom, which can arise from disinterest in irrelevant or challenging materials. This aligns with Akmal et al. (2020) who argue that students' engagement with text is influenced significantly by its relevance and writing style. When students find the text interesting, they are more likely to maintain focus and perform better academically (Davies, 2011). Sulaiman et al. (2023) further emphasize that fostering a strong desire to read is crucial for academic success. These findings underscore the role of interest in enhancing reading comprehension and student motivation.

Teachers B's use of skimming and scanning techniques addresses the challenge of processing lengthy texts and unfamiliar vocabulary. Skimming helps students grasp the main ideas quickly, while scanning enables them to locate specific information efficiently. This method is supported by Azmi et al. (2020) who note that these techniques can make reading more manageable and less tedious. Skimming and scanning reduce cognitive load and time spent on reading, mitigating boredom and improving

comprehension (Azmi et al., 2020; Deveci, 2018). By helping students identify key information rapidly, these strategies facilitate more effective reading and comprehension.

Teacher C's use of mind mapping as a strategy for teaching reading comprehension aligns with cognitive theories about information processing. Mind mapping helps students organize and visualize information, enhancing their ability to understand and remember text content (Ramadhani et al., 2023). This technique mirrors how the brain naturally processes and organizes information, making it easier for students to connect ideas and grasp overall concepts (Setianingsih et al., 2019). The use of colors and symbols in mind mapping also engages students in a more interactive and enjoyable learning experience, which can increase motivation and comprehension (Thamrin et al., 2019). This approach supports the idea that cognitive tools like mind mapping can significantly boost students' reading comprehension and interest in texts.

Teacher D's flexible approach, which adapts strategies based on the class atmosphere and students' mood, highlights the importance of responsiveness in teaching. This adaptability ensures that the chosen methods align with the students' current needs and conditions, allowing for a more effective reading instruction process.

In summary, the strategies employed by teachers in this study—interest-based text selection, skimming and scanning, and mind mapping—are supported by theoretical and empirical research. These methods address common challenges in reading comprehension, such as student boredom and unfamiliar vocabulary, and enhance engagement and understanding. The use of these strategies aligns with best practices in reading instruction and reflects a comprehensive approach to improving students' reading abilities.

6. Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it was concluded that English teachers in Indonesia faced some problems in teaching reading comprehension and therefore they used some strategies to deal with students' reading comprehension difficulties. They suggested to give passages with the topic according to the students' interest, to use skimming and scanning strategies, and to use mind mapping strategy. In this study, these strategies were frequently used to deal with students' boredom when reading long passages and to understand the idea presented in the passages.

Although this study provides valuable insights into the strategies used by senior high school English teachers in Indonesia to address students' reading comprehension difficulties, it has several limitations that need to be considered. The qualitative nature of the research, with a small sample size of four teachers, limits the generalizability of the findings, as the experiences and strategies of these teachers may not fully represent those of other teachers in different regions or educational contexts. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data from interviews introduces potential biases and inaccuracies. To address these limitations, future research should use a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data, and include larger and more diverse samples

of teachers from different regions of Indonesia to increase generalizability. Experimental or quasi-experimental designs could provide a clearer assessment of the immediate impact of specific teaching strategies on students' reading comprehension outcomes, while longitudinal studies would provide insights into the long-term effectiveness of these strategies. Furthermore, exploring the integration of technology-based interventions, such as digital reading tools and online platforms, could provide additional support for students' reading comprehension development in ESL/EFL contexts.

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