IDENTIFYING THE ROOT CAUSES OF STUDENTS' COMPREHENSION PROBLEMSN IN NARRATIVE READING IN EFL EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the difficulties encountered by Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan in understanding narrative texts in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through classroom observations, student and teacher interviews, and document analysis. The findings reveal that students face various challenges, including limited vocabulary, lack of understanding of narrative text structure, difficulty in making inferences, and low motivation toward reading. These difficulties are influenced by both linguistic and non-linguistic factors, such as students' limited exposure to English reading materials and the lack of effective reading strategies. The study highlights the need for more interactive and strategy-based teaching practices to improve students' reading comprehension skills. It also recommends increased support from schools and teachers in promoting reading habits and providing engaging narrative texts suited to students' language proficiency levels.

Keywords: *Students' difficulties, narrative texts, reading comprehension, EFL classroom, qualitative study, Grade 7, SMP Panca Budi Medan*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the fundamental skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. It plays a crucial role in helping students access information, build vocabulary, understand grammatical structures, and develop critical thinking skills. In the Indonesian junior high school English curriculum, one of the key genres taught is narrative texts, which aim to develop students' ability to understand stories, recognize characters and settings, and interpret moral messages.

However, in the context of Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan, many learners still face significant difficulties in understanding narrative texts. These difficulties are evident in students' inability to comprehend the plot, identify the structure of the story, interpret the meaning of new vocabulary, and infer implied messages from the text. Despite being exposed to narrative texts in the classroom, students often struggle to engage deeply with the content and demonstrate low reading comprehension outcomes.

Grabe (2009) explains that reading is a complex cognitive process involving word recognition, syntactic parsing, semantic processing, and discourse integration. In the case of narrative texts, students are expected to comprehend elements such as orientation, complication, and resolution, while also connecting the story to their own background knowledge. Koda (2007) emphasizes that reading comprehension is strongly influenced by vocabulary knowledge, familiarity with text structures, and the reader's cognitive abilities.

Furthermore, studies such as Andriani (2020) have found that reading instruction in many EFL classrooms in Indonesia tends to be teacher-centered, offering limited opportunities for students to actively engage in meaning-making. This lack of interaction and strategy-based teaching contributes to students' persistent reading difficulties. In addition, Zheng (2008) point out that factors such as reading anxiety, low motivation, and a lack of reading habits negatively impact students' comprehension.

Given this context, it is essential to explore what specific challenges students face when reading narrative texts and to understand the underlying causes of these difficulties. This research aims to analyze the types of reading comprehension problems experienced by Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan. By identifying these issues, the study can provide valuable insights for English teachers to design more effective and student-centered reading strategies that address learners' needs and improve their engagement with narrative texts.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading plays a vital role in students' language development. It is not merely a skill to decode words and sentences, but a complex cognitive process that involves constructing meaning from written texts. According to Grabe and Stoller (2013), reading comprehension requires the integration of multiple components such as word recognition, syntactic processing, semantic understanding, and discourse-level integration. For junior high school students, particularly in an EFL setting like Indonesia, reading comprehension is a challenging task that demands more than just basic language knowledge. It also requires background understanding, motivation, and appropriate reading strategies.

Narrative texts, which are widely taught in Indonesian junior high school English classes, are among the most significant genres students encounter. These texts are structured to tell a story with a sequence of events that include an orientation, a complication, and a resolution (Anderson & Anderson, 2003). They are designed not only to entertain but also to teach moral values, expand imagination, and enhance students' language proficiency. However, the narrative genre often presents a variety of difficulties for EFL learners. As Pardiyono (2018) emphasizes, understanding narrative texts demands a combination of vocabulary knowledge, awareness of narrative structure, and inferencing skills—elements that are still developing in many junior high school students.

At the Grade 7 level, such as in SMP Panca Budi Medan, students

frequently encounter several problems when engaging with narrative texts. These difficulties include limited vocabulary, unfamiliar cultural references, inability to identify the plot structure, and challenges in drawing inferences or understanding implicit meanings. Nation (2022) highlights that vocabulary knowledge is foundational for reading comprehension. Without adequate vocabulary, students struggle to understand even the most basic content of a text. In addition, Koda (2007) argues that reading comprehension in a second or foreign language is greatly influenced by the reader's background knowledge and their familiarity with textual conventions.

Another major issue that affects students' reading comprehension is the method of instruction. In many EFL classrooms, including those in Indonesian schools, reading is often taught through teacher-centered approaches, where the teacher dominates the class, explains vocabulary, and translates sentences (Andriani, 2021). While such methods may help students understand surface-level meanings, they rarely foster deeper comprehension or critical engagement with the text. Zheng (2008) also emphasize that affective factors such as reading anxiety, lack of motivation, and low self-confidence further hinder students' ability to comprehend what they read.

Various studies have explored these difficulties in greater depth. For instance, Rahmani and Sadeghi (2022) found that vocabulary limitations and grammar complexity were the most cited barriers in EFL reading. Similarly, Andriani (2020) observed that students in junior high schools struggled significantly with making inferences and understanding story structures in narrative texts. These findings suggest that reading difficulties are not merely linguistic but are also tied to cognitive, emotional, and instructional dimensions.

In order to help students overcome these challenges, researchers and educators have proposed a number of effective strategies. Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development supports the use of scaffolding—where teachers provide structured support before gradually reducing assistance as students become more competent (Hammond, 2001). Reciprocal teaching, as introduced by Brown (2001), encourages students to actively participate in the reading process through predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing. Other techniques, such as the use of graphic organizers and story maps, can also help students visualize and better understand the structure of narrative texts (Zulaikah& Andriani, 2002).

Taking these theoretical and empirical insights into account, it becomes clear that students' difficulties in understanding narrative texts are multidimensional. They stem from a combination of linguistic limitations, cognitive demands, instructional methods, and affective variables. Therefore, a focused study on the specific challenges faced by Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan is both relevant and necessary. Understanding these difficulties more deeply will not only enrich

existing literature on reading comprehension in the EFL context, but also provide practical insights for teachers to design more effective, student-centered reading instruction.

RESEARH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative case study design. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. A case study approach is appropriate for this research because it allows an in-depth and detailed investigation of students' difficulties in understanding narrative texts within a specific context—Grade 7 EFL classroom at SMP Panca Budi Medan. This method enables the researcher to gain insights from the natural setting and perspectives of the participants.

The participants in this study are Grade 7 students of SMP Panca Budi Medan in the academic year 2024/2025. One class will be selected purposively based on the recommendation of the English teacher, considering the students' general performance and participation in reading classes. The number of participants is estimated to be around 25–30 students. In addition, the English teacher of the selected class will also be involved as a supporting participant to provide contextual insights.

The research will be conducted at SMP Panca Budi Medan, a private junior high school located in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The data collection will take place during the second semester of the academic year 2024/2025, which is expected to be between March and May 2025, during regular English lessons.

To collect relevant and rich data, the following qualitative techniques will be used:

a. Observation
   Classroom observations was conducted to understand how students engage with narrative texts and to identify the difficulties they experience in real-time.
b. Field notes were taken, focusing on students' behaviors, interactions, participation, and the teacher's instructional strategies.
c. Interviews
   Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students (5–7 students, chosen purposively) and the English teacher. Student interviews will aim to explore their experiences, perceptions, and difficulties in reading narrative texts. The teacher interview will provide insights into students' common problems and the teaching strategies used.
a. Document Analysis
   Students' English reading worksheets, test results, and selected narrative reading materials will be analyzed to identify common

comprehension problems and patterns of error or misunderstanding.

The data collected from observations, interviews, and document analysis will be analyzed using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

FINDINGS

After analyzing the data, several prominent themes emerged related to students' difficulties in understanding narrative texts. These are:

1. Limited Vocabulary Knowledge

   Many students struggled to understand the meaning of words used in narrative texts. Words such as "enchanted," "mysterious," or "creature" were unfamiliar to them. This vocabulary gap made it difficult for students to grasp the overall meaning of the story.

   "I don't know the meaning of many words… it makes me confused to follow the story." (Student Interview 3) From document analysis, many students skipped unknown words or misinterpreted them, affecting their comprehension.

2. Difficulty Understanding Story Structure

   Students had difficulty identifying the generic structure of a narrative text—such as orientation, complication, and resolution. When asked to identify which part of the text represented the complication, most students were unsure. Observation showed that students often read the story linearly without understanding the function of each part.

3. Problems with Inference-Making

   Students struggled to make inferences—especially when the answers were not explicitly stated in the text. For example, in a story where a character was sad after losing something, students couldn't explain why the character was sad unless the emotion was directly mentioned. This finding is consistent with interview responses in which students admitted they prefer texts with clear and direct information.

4. Lack of Motivation and Reading Habits

   Some students revealed a lack of interest in reading English texts, particularly if they were long or had no illustrations. This low motivation was observed in the classroom, where some students were passive or distracted during reading activities.

"Reading English is boring because I don't understand much. I prefer watching videos." (Student Interview 6)

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that vocabulary limitation is one of the main barriers to reading comprehension in EFL contexts. According to Nation (2022), vocabulary size strongly predicts reading success. Without understanding key words, students fail to construct meaning from the text.

The second challenge relates to understanding the narrative structure, which is critical in narrative comprehension. Anderson & Anderson (2003) emphasize that knowledge of generic structure (orientation, complication, resolution) helps readers predict and connect ideas. The students' inability to identify these parts suggests a need for explicit instruction on text organization.

Students also found inferential questions challenging. This aligns with Kispal (2008), who notes that inference-making is a higher-order thinking skill that requires not only linguistic ability but also background knowledge and cognitive engagement. For young EFL learners, especially in Grade 7, this is often a difficult skill to master.

The issue of low motivation and reading habits also plays a role. Guthrie & Wigfield (2000) highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation in fostering reading engagement. When students lack interest or confidence, they are less likely to invest effort in understanding texts.

These findings are consistent with studies by Andriani (2020) and Rahmani & Sadeghi (2022), which also identified vocabulary limitations, lack of reading strategies, and low motivation as common difficulties among junior high school EFL learners.

The findings suggest several implications for teaching practices:

a. Teachers should integrate explicit vocabulary instruction and encourage the use of dictionaries and context clues.

b. Story mapping and graphic organizers can help students visualize and understand narrative structures.

c. Teachers can foster inferential thinking by modeling how to read between the lines and infer meaning.

d. Increasing student engagement through interactive and visual-based reading activities may improve motivation and comprehension.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSION

This research explored the difficulties faced by Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan in understanding narrative texts within an EFL classroom setting. Through a qualitative case study approach, the researcher was able to gain insights into the students' experiences and challenges by observing classroom activities, conducting interviews with both students and the English teacher, and analyzing relevant documents such as reading worksheets and test results.

The findings revealed that students encountered several significant obstacles in comprehending narrative texts. First and foremost, many students demonstrated limited vocabulary knowledge, which made it difficult for them to understand key words and phrases within the text. As a result, they were often unable to grasp the overall meaning or message of the story.

Another major challenge involved the students' lack of understanding of the structure of narrative texts. Most students were unfamiliar with the elements such as orientation, complication, and resolution, and thus struggled to follow the flow of the story. This issue was often evident in their inability to identify which parts of the story represented the main problem or how it was resolved.

Furthermore, the study found that students had difficulties making inferences from the texts. Many were unable to interpret information that was implied rather than explicitly stated, which hindered their deeper understanding of the narrative content. This suggests a gap in their higher-order thinking and reading comprehension strategies.

Lastly, the research revealed that low motivation and weak reading habits contributed significantly to the students' struggles. Several students expressed a lack of interest in reading English texts, which was reflected in their passive participation during reading activities. Their limited exposure to English reading outside the classroom further impacted their ability to develop strong reading skills.

Overall, the study concluded that students' difficulties in understanding narrative texts stemmed from both linguistic limitations and non-linguistic factors, including lack of reading strategies, inadequate vocabulary, limited exposure to English reading, and low motivation.

SUGGESTION

In light of the findings, several suggestions are proposed for improving students' reading comprehension in narrative texts. These suggestions are addressed to English teachers, students, school management, and future researchers.

For English teachers, it is recommended to integrate vocabulary-building activities into reading lessons. Teachers can pre-teach unfamiliar

words, use visual aids, and encourage the use of context clues. Moreover, explicit instruction on the structure of narrative texts—using tools like story maps or graphic organizers—can help students better understand how stories are organized. Teachers should also encourage active reading strategies, such as predicting, questioning, and summarizing, to help students engage more deeply with the texts. Creating a more interactive and student-centered reading environment may also increase motivation and participation.

Students themselves are encouraged to take a more active role in improving their reading skills. Reading more English texts outside the classroom, practicing how to identify story elements, and seeking help when encountering unfamiliar words can support their development. Building a habit of reading and engaging with English stories for enjoyment can also positively influence their comprehension.

School management is encouraged to support reading-focused programs and provide resources that promote reading culture. Providing access to English storybooks, visual reading materials, and multimedia tools in the school library or classroom can enrich students' reading experiences.

Finally, for future researchers, this study offers a foundation for exploring similar issues in different contexts. Future studies may involve a larger sample size, adopt a mixed-methods approach, or compare students' reading difficulties across different schools or grade levels to gain a broader understanding of the challenges faced by EFL learners in Indonesia.

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