Literal Reading Comprehension Improvement through Texts Containing Idiomatic Expressions among Senior High School Students

Satriani[1], Herman Resyadi[2] Arni Arsyad Sultan[3]

[123]*Institut Agama Islam Negeri Bone*
Corresponding author's email: hermanresyadi24@gmail.com

Abstract

This study investigates the improvement of senior high school students' literal reading comprehension through the use of texts containing idiomatic expressions. The objective of this research is to determine the extent to which idiomatic expression texts can enhance students' literal comprehension of written materials. A quantitative approach was employed using a pre-experimental design with a one-group pre-test and post-test model. The participants were 20 Grade X students at MA Tinco during the 2023/2024 academic year. The results show that the average pre-test score for literal reading comprehension was 46.70, with a standard deviation of 5.440, a minimum score of 35, and a maximum score of 56. After the intervention, the average post-test score increased to 86.65, with a standard deviation of 7.506, a minimum score of 74, and a maximum score of 98. These findings indicate a significant improvement in students' literal reading comprehension after being taught using idiomatic expression texts. Hypothesis testing with a paired sample t-test produced a t-value of 17.533, exceeding the critical t-table value of 1.725, with a p-value of 0.000. Since the p-value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis (H_a) was accepted. The N-Gain analysis yielded an average score of 74.38, categorizing the intervention as "moderately effective." Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of texts containing idiomatic expressions is moderately effective in improving the literal reading comprehension of Grade X students at MA Tinco.
Keywords: *literal reading comprehension; idiomatic expressions; senior high school students*

INTRODUCTION

English plays a vital role in the globalized world as a means of communication, education, and access to knowledge. It is essential for reading books, gathering information, and acquiring understanding across various disciplines. Since English is often used as a medium of instruction, strong reading skills are indispensable for both academic achievement and personal development. Reading comprehension is widely recognized as the foundation of all learning, as it allows learners to construct meaning from written texts and relate information to their prior knowledge. As Grabe and Stoller (2011) state, reading comprehension involves the simultaneous process of extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and engagement with written language. Therefore, developing effective reading strategies from early stages of education is crucial to ensure learners' ability to succeed both in school and in their future professional lives.

Among the levels of reading comprehension, literal reading comprehension is the most basic yet essential one. It refers to the reader's ability to understand and recall explicitly stated information in a text, including main ideas, supporting details, and factual data (Nurjannah & Putri, 2022). According to Smith (2004), literal comprehension is the process of understanding the explicit or surface meaning of a text before engaging in higher-order interpretation such as inferential or critical comprehension. Without a solid foundation in literal comprehension, students may struggle to understand longer, more complex passages, which may ultimately impede their overall academic performance (Jumiati, 2014). In EFL contexts such as Indonesia, literal comprehension often becomes a major challenge for learners, as they are not only dealing with new vocabulary but also with unfamiliar cultural and linguistic contexts embedded in English texts.

This issue is evident at one of the Islamic senior high schools located in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, namely MA Tinco, where many students struggle to understand texts at the literal level. Teachers have reported that students often find it difficult to identify main ideas, locate supporting details, or extract factual information from reading passages. This difficulty limits their engagement with texts and hinders their progress in achieving higher levels of comprehension. The challenges suggest that traditional reading instruction focusing solely on vocabulary and grammar explanation may not be sufficient. Therefore, innovative and contextually meaningful strategies are needed to improve students' literal reading comprehension and make reading activities more engaging.

One potential strategy is the integration of idiomatic expressions into reading materials. Idioms are language units whose meanings differ from the literal meanings of their constituent words (Libben & Titone, 2008). For instance, the idiom *kick the bucket* does not refer to the physical act of kicking a bucket but means "to die." Similarly, *spill the beans* means "to reveal a secret," and *be on cloud nine* means "to feel extremely happy." These expressions represent a rich intersection between language, culture, and cognition. Cooper (1998) argues that idiomatic understanding requires learners to go beyond literal interpretation and engage in figurative and contextual reasoning, which ultimately strengthens comprehension skills. Although idioms are figurative in nature, learning to recognize and interpret them may help learners pay closer attention to contextual clues, thus enhancing their ability to understand both literal and non-literal meanings in a text.

Idiomatic expression is significant in learning English, as Edwards (1975) states idioms are expressions that must be learned as a whole, as their meanings cannot always be inferred from individual words. For example, the idiom *kill two birds with one stone* has nothing to do with birds or stones; rather, it refers to achieving two goals with a single effort. Similarly, Rakhmyta and Rusmianti (2020) emphasize that idiomatic expressions require students to process language as an integrated unit rather than word by word, thereby promoting deeper language processing. Uswatunnisa, Mursyid, & Rahmat (2025) further defines language attitude with idioms as sentences or phrases that have meanings beyond the literal interpretation of the words that compose them and are deeply rooted in cultural and philosophical settings. These expressions are common in everyday English and are considered part of native speakers' communicative repertoire.

Understanding them enables EFL learners to engage more naturally with authentic English texts and to interpret both explicit and implicit meanings effectively.

Several studies have examined the relationship between idiomatic expressions and reading comprehension. For example, Velásquez (2018) found a significant correlation between students' mastery of idiomatic expressions and their achievement in literal reading comprehension, indicating that idioms contribute meaningfully to students' understanding of written texts. Similarly, Ramadhani and Isyam (2013) investigated the teaching of idioms to senior high school students and concluded that idiom instruction helps students comprehend functional texts such as news items, advertisements, and instructions. Liberti (2023) also explored the relationship between modern language aptitude and reading comprehension among eleventh-grade students, finding a positive association between language awareness and reading skills. Meanwhile, Kamaria (2021) applied the PARS strategy (Preview, Ask, Read, and Summarize) to enhance reading skills and reported improved student achievement through active reading engagement. Despite these studies, few have focused specifically on how idiomatic expression texts can be employed to enhance literal reading comprehension at the secondary school level, especially within Indonesian EFL contexts.

Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating the use of idiomatic expression texts as a medium to improve students' literal reading comprehension at MA Tinco. The underlying assumption is that by engaging with idiomatic texts, students are encouraged to pay attention to linguistic nuances, contextual clues, and explicit textual information—all essential for literal understanding. Moreover, the integration of idiomatic expressions into reading lessons is expected to make the learning process more culturally enriching and communicatively meaningful. By bridging literal and figurative understanding, this approach may provide a more holistic framework for developing reading competence among EFL learners.

In conclusion, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on reading comprehension and idiomatic learning by offering insights into how idiomatic expression texts can be effectively used to strengthen students' literal reading comprehension. It is hoped that the findings will not only support teachers in designing more engaging reading activities but also help students develop better comprehension skills that are essential for academic success and real-life communication.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design to examine the effect of idiomatic expression texts on students' literal reading comprehension. According to Creswell (2014), quantitative research is systematic and based on positivist philosophy, focusing on numerical data collection and hypothesis testing. In this design, one group of students received a pretest, treatment, and posttest to measure improvement. The independent variable was the use of idiomatic expression texts—texts containing at least ten common English idioms adapted to high school reading levels—while the dependent variable was literal

reading comprehension, defined as students' ability to identify explicit information, details, and meanings within the text.

The study involved 20 Grade X students of MA Tinco in the 2023/2024 academic year, selected through saturation sampling since the entire population participated. Data were gathered using performance tests consisting of 20 items (10 multiple-choice and 10 matching). The instrument's validity was verified through the product-moment correlation (r-count > 0.468), while reliability was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha (0.81), indicating high consistency. The research procedure included a pretest to measure baseline comprehension, a treatment phase involving idiom-based reading activities, and a posttest to assess improvement. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, median, mode, standard deviation) and a paired sample t-test, which revealed a significant difference between pretest and posttest results, confirming that idiomatic expression texts effectively improved students' literal reading comprehension.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

This study was conducted at MA Tinco from November 1 to December 1, 2024, involving Grade X students. It employed a quantitative pre-experimental design using texts containing idiomatic expressions. The implementation of the learning process followed the agreed-upon teaching schedule established collaboratively between the class teacher and the researcher.

The study was carried out over five sessions. The first session was dedicated to administering a pretest aimed at assessing students' initial literal reading comprehension skills. In the second, third, and fourth sessions, students received treatment through learning activities that incorporated idiomatic expression texts as supplementary materials to classroom instruction. The final session focused on recognizing and appreciating students who demonstrated outstanding performance during the learning process and achieved high scores. In addition, the posttest was administered during this session to measure students' improvement in literal reading comprehension after the use of idiomatic expression texts.

1. Learning Outcomes of Literal Reading Comprehension

Based on the research findings, the recapitulation of students' literal reading comprehension scores before the use of idiomatic expression texts shows that out of 20 students, the highest recapitulated score was 56, while the lowest was 35. The following table presents the descriptive statistical values of the pretest scores for students:

Table 1. Description of Pretest Scores of Students' Reading Comprehension

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.Deviation
Pretest	20	35	56	46.70	5.440

Table 1 shows that from 20 respondents, the average pretest score for Grade X students' reading comprehension is 46.70, with a standard deviation of 5.440, a minimum score of 35, and a maximum score of 56. To further analyze the pretest criteria, the data will be presented as follows:

Table 2. Criteria for Pre-test

Score	Frequency	Criteria
76 – 100	0	good
51 – 75	4	sufficient
26 – 50	16	poor
0 – 25	0	very poor

The table 2 reports from 20 students, the following criteria were obtained: 0 students for "very poor," 16 students for "poor," 4 students for "fair," and 0 students for "good.". Hence, the recapitulation of students' reading comprehension scores after using idiomatic expression texts from 20 students shows that the highest score is 98 and the lowest score is 74. The following table presents the descriptive statistics of the students' posttest scores:

Table 3. Description of Posttest Reading Comprehension Scores

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Post-test	20	74	98	86.65	7.506

The table 3 shows that from 20 respondents, the average posttest reading comprehension score for grade X students is 86.65, with a standard deviation of 7.506, a minimum score of 74, and a

maximum score of 98. The details of the posttest criteria are presented as follows:

Table 4. Post-test Reading Comprehension Criteria

Score	Frequency	Criteria
76 – 100	18	good
51 – 75	2	sufficient
26 – 50	0	poor
0 – 25	0	very poor

Based on the data from table 4, out of 20 students who participated in the posttest reading comprehension, no students were in the very poor or poor category. Two students were in the sufficient category, while 18 students were in the good category.

The normality test is also conducted to determine whether the pre-test and post-test are normally distributed or not. The normality test was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 22.0. In this study, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used. Data is considered normally distributed if the probability value in the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test output is greater than the predetermined alpha level, which is 5% (0.05). A summary of the normality test results for pre-test and post-test can be seen in the following table:

Table 5. Results of Normality Test

Group	Statistic Value Description	Sample	Probability	
Pretest	0.144	20	0.200*	Normal
Posttest	0.151	20	0.200*	Normal

The table 5 reports that the results of the normality test show that the pretest data has a significance probability value of 0.200, which is greater than 0.05 (0.200 > 0.05), and the posttest data also has a significance probability value of 0.200, which is greater than 0.05 (0.200 > 0.05). Therefore, it can be concluded that the research data is normally distributed.

This analysis aims to determine the difference in students' reading comprehension before and after treatment using idiomatic expression texts. The analysis was conducted by comparing the results of pre-tests and post-tests. This analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Version 22.0. The condition for data to be considered

different is if the probability value is less than 0.05. The following are the results of the paired sample t-test analysis of pre-test and post-test reading comprehension scores.

Table 6. Paired Sample t-test for Students' Reading Comprehension

Variable	Mean	Std Deviation	*t*	*p-value*
Pretest – Posttest Reading Comprehension	39.950	10.190	17.533	0,000

Table 6 known that from 20 respondents, the average reading comprehension score of class X students is 39.950, with a standard deviation of 10.190. Based on the t-value of 17.533 > t-table 1.725 with a p-value of 0.000. If p-value 0.000 < 0.05, it can be concluded that there is a significant difference in students' reading comprehension before and after the use of idiomatic expression texts, meaning that H0 is rejected and Ha is accepted. It can be understood that the use of idiomatic expression texts can improve the reading comprehension of Class X students at MA Tinco. From the categorization of N-gain scores, it can be determined based on the N-Gain value as well as the percentage (%) of N-Gain value. The categorization of N-Gain scores in the following table:

Table 7. N-Gain Test Results

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation	Category
N_Gain_Score	20	0.50	0.96	0.7439	0.15296	Effective Enough
N_Gain_Percent	20	50.00	96.15	74.3884	15.29582	

The table 7 shows the average N-Gain value is 74.38, and based on the interpretation category, the N-Gain score falls into the "fairly effective" category. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of idiomatic expression texts is fairly effective in improving the reading comprehension of Grade X students at senior high school.

Discussion

This study aims to determine whether the application of idiomatic expression strategies can improve students' literal reading comprehension at MA Tinco, as implemented by teachers in the learning process. The research method involved administering a

pretest, using idiomatic expression texts, and ending with a posttest to measure changes in students' literal reading comprehension after participating in learning with the use of idiomatic expression texts.

The research findings indicated that the average literal reading comprehension score of Grade X students was relatively low before the intervention. The pretest results showed that students' ability to comprehend literal information in a text was still limited, as they previously struggled to identify main ideas and specific details. On the other hand, the posttest results demonstrated that providing treatment to students and reviewing the material repeatedly helped them recall and understand the content better. The average posttest score showed a significant improvement, with a wider distribution of scores. This is evident from the comparison of pretest and posttest results obtained by students during the learning process.

This finding aligns with Ramadhani & Isyam (2023) and Nuralima, Afdaliah & Uswatunnisa (2025), which indicates that teaching idioms helps high school students understand functional texts in English and highlights why understanding idioms is important for comprehending English texts, especially functional texts such as news, advertisements, or instructions. Similarly, Velásquez (2018) and Naniwarsih & Andriani (2018) supports this by showing that idioms contribute to reading comprehension, with a significant correlation between students' mastery of idiomatic expressions and their achievement in literal reading comprehension. Based on the research review, most studies confirm that idiomatic expression learning can enhance the depth and accuracy of students' understanding of texts.

From the research findings, the researcher assumes that the use of idiomatic expression texts can be an effective strategy to improve literal reading comprehension. Moreover, the use of idiomatic texts is not only relevant but also has the potential to significantly enhance students' reading skills, especially in understanding the relationship between literal and non-literal meanings in English texts. The integration of idioms provides contextual and cultural insights that make the reading process more meaningful and cognitively stimulating. This indicates that exposure to idiomatic expressions not only fosters awareness of figurative meaning but also reinforces literal comprehension, as students learn to differentiate surface meanings from intended interpretations.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusion

In relation to the research objective, it can be concluded that students' literal reading comprehension scores improved significantly after the use of idiomatic expression texts. The average pretest score was relatively low, with a narrow range of scores, while the posttest scores showed a notable increase and a wider distribution.

Hypothesis testing using a paired sample t-test confirmed a significant difference in literal reading comprehension before and after the intervention, as the t-value exceeded the critical threshold and the p-value was below the significance level. Moreover, the N-Gain analysis categorized the improvement as "moderately effective." Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of idiomatic expression texts serves as an effective strategy for enhancing the literal reading comprehension of Grade X senior high school students.

While the results confirm the effectiveness of idiomatic expression texts in improving literal reading comprehension, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the research design used was pre-experimental with a one-group pre-test and post-test, so there was no control group for comparison. This limits the researcher's ability to draw strong conclusions about cause and effect. Second, the sample size was limited to a single class in one school, so the results cannot be generalized to a broader population. Third, the duration of the intervention was relatively short lasting only one month which may not be sufficient to demonstrate the long-term effects of idiomatic expression learning on students' literal reading comprehension.

Due to these limitations, future researchers are encouraged to explore other teaching strategies that incorporate idiomatic expressions to enhance students' language comprehension. Investigating the long-term effects of idiom-based learning on students' reading proficiency could provide valuable insights. Additionally, studies comparing the effectiveness of different instructional methods for teaching idioms may contribute to further improvements in English language education. Expanding research to different educational levels or diverse student backgrounds could also offer a broader perspective on the impact of idiomatic expression learning on literal reading comprehension.

Suggestions

This research also giving suggestions for teachers to use idiomatic expression as supplementary materials for teaching reading especially in the level of literal reading. Using idiomatic expressions will be valuable for the improvement of students' literal reading comprehension. It is also suggested for students to have more idiomatic expression in order to support literal reading development.

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