

## Reading Comprehension Challenge on English Language Faced by Students; A Systematic Review

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**Abstract.** This study aims to analyze and synthesize empirical research on students' reading comprehension challenges within English language teaching. A systematic review method selected 20 peer-reviewed articles published within the last five years. The selected studies were analyzed based on their research topics, designs, and theoretical frameworks. The findings reveal that most studies adopt a descriptive qualitative approach, with a strong focus on the Indonesian context. Four key challenges in reading comprehension were identified: (1) limitations of textbooks in supporting effective reading, (2) low student motivation and engagement, (3) inadequate vocabulary knowledge, and (4) slow reading pace. Based on these findings, it is recommended that future research explore the effectiveness of specific interventions and instructional strategies to address these challenges, ultimately improving students' reading comprehension skills. Such strategies could include the use of more engaging and relevant reading materials, vocabulary enhancement techniques, and methods to improve reading speed, with the goal of enhancing students' overall reading comprehension skills.

**Keyword:** Analysis; Reading comprehension problems; English language teaching

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### INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a crucial skill in English language learning, especially for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. According to Chandran and Shah (2019), reading is one of the key skills that students must master to achieve proficiency. However, field data and previous studies indicate that many students struggle with reading comprehension. For instance, Wahyuningsih and Muis (2020) found that 75% of students exhibit disinterest in reading, while Kannianen et al. (2022) report that 25.7% of students with reading difficulties and 16.2% of students with attention issues struggle to comprehend texts. These challenges hinder students

from fully understanding reading materials, affecting their academic performance and overall language development.

While reading is an essential skill, students frequently face comprehension difficulties due to various factors, such as limited vocabulary, difficulty understanding complex sentence structures, and struggles in identifying main ideas (Siahaan et al., 2022). Furthermore, learners who experience difficulty in reading often lack motivation and engagement, leading to ineffective learning outcomes (Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018). Despite the importance of reading skills, existing teaching methods may not adequately address students' diverse needs, making it imperative to explore more effective approaches to enhancing reading comprehension (Girsang et al., 2019; Lisiana et al., 2021).

A significant gap in current research is the predominant focus on traditional reading materials, such as textbooks, while studies on the effects of digital and multimedia resources remain limited (Abeeleh, 2021). Additionally, many studies (Sulistiyawati & Mbato, 2021; Yukselir, 2014; Gamboa, 2017; Erya & Pustika, 2021; Diana et al., 2020; Septia et al., 2022; Nuralasari & Haryudin, 2021; Laily, 2018; Frestisia & Ratmanida, 2021; Huynh Trang, 2021) generalize findings across different student populations without considering differences in developmental stages and educational contexts. Another major gap is the lack of longitudinal studies that track students' reading comprehension progress over time. Moreover, research on the effectiveness of reading comprehension strategies, particularly in technology-assisted learning environments, remains insufficient (Bagazi, 2022). Furthermore, much of the existing research is conducted in Western contexts, highlighting the need for studies in more diverse cultural and linguistic settings to determine whether reading challenges are universal or context-specific.

Given these research gaps, reading comprehension is an essential skill for ESL learners, yet many students struggle with it, which negatively impacts their academic performance and overall language development. It is essential to explore effective instructional strategies that can enhance reading comprehension, particularly for ESL learners. One potential approach is the implementation of pre-reading techniques, where teachers introduce reading content before students engage with the text (Nafsiah, 2019). This method helps students make inferences and better understand complex passages (Suryanto, 2017; Ganie et al., 2019). Additionally, Akyol and Kayabaşı (2018) suggest that increasing student engagement through interactive reading activities can mitigate comprehension difficulties. Sari et al. (2020) propose identifying students' specific challenges through direct feedback to develop tailored interventions. By synthesizing and analyzing research findings, this study aims to provide valuable insights into reading comprehension challenges and propose more effective instructional strategies.

This analytical review aims to examine recent research (2019–2023) on reading comprehension challenges in ESL learning. The study seeks to identify common themes, barriers, and solutions in reading comprehension instruction. By synthesizing existing research, this study intends to provide educators and researchers with a more comprehensive understanding of effective teaching methods, contributing to the advancement of English language instruction and improving students' reading comprehension outcomes.

## **METHOD**

This systematic review involved reviewing and analyzing a range of journal articles on reading comprehension issues in English language teaching to summarize and understand the challenges students face. The process included categorizing findings into subtopics and presenting the results.

Following Creswell et al. (2018) methodology for literature reviews, which involves synthesizing information from journal articles, books, and other sources, summarizing and critiquing past and current knowledge, and organizing findings into subtopics, this study adhered to specific selection criteria: (1) articles must be peer-reviewed, (2) studies must focus on reading

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comprehension challenges in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), and (3) the articles must be from the years 2019 to 2023.

Three strategies were employed for the literature search: First, an electronic search was conducted using databases such as Google Scholar and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), journal publisher websites (e.g., link.springer.com and Scopus), and reputable Indonesian journals (e.g., SIELE and TEFLIN). Second, articles were reviewed from journals including the Journal of English Education and Applied Linguistics, International Journal of Language Education, International Journal of Education, Learning, and Development, ENGLISIA: Journal of Language, Education, and Humanities, Ladu: Journal of Languages and Education, Register Journal, English Education Journal, Journal of Language, Literature and Arts, Review of Multidisciplinary Education, Culture and Pedagogy, Educational Psychology, Reading in a Foreign Language, and World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews. Third, the data was identified and analyzed to classify findings, focusing on emerging topics and patterns.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RESULTS

This systematic review analyzed 20 research articles published between 2019 and 2023, which address the challenges students encounter in reading comprehension within English Language Teaching. The details and classification of these articles are provided in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1** Summary of Research Studies on Reading Comprehension Challenges (N=20)

Characteristic	N	%
Publication Year		
2019	1	5
2020	3	15
2021	5	25
2022	6	30
2023	5	25
Research Design		
Descriptive Qualitative	7	35
Descriptive Quantitative	4	20
Mixed Methods	4	20
Experimental Research	2	10
Survey Research	2	10
CAR	1	5
Area Context		
Indonesia	14	70
Arab Saudi	2	10
Vietnam	1	5
Finland	1	5
Malaysia	1	5
Turkey	1	5

Most of the empirical studies were descriptive qualitative (35%), with descriptive quantitative and mixed methods each at 20%. Experimental research and survey research both accounted for 10%, while classroom action research constituted 5%.

In the past five years, a substantial amount of research on students' reading comprehension problems has been conducted in Indonesia (70%), followed by Saudi Arabia (10%), Vietnam (5%), Finland (5%), Malaysia (5%), and Turkey (5%).

This distribution underscores Indonesia's leading role in addressing reading comprehension issues, though other countries have also contributed significantly to the field.

## DISCUSSION

This section discusses and categorizes the primary research topics identified in 20 studies on students' reading comprehension challenges. The most frequent findings are presented first, followed by an analysis of emerging topics and patterns.

### **Theme 1: Challenges in Textbook Limitations for Supporting Effective Reading**

Textbooks play a crucial role in shaping students' reading comprehension, yet several studies reveal that these educational resources often fall short in supporting effective learning. Mardhiyatuzakiyah et al. (2023) analyzed English reading materials using the Cambridge Life Competencies Framework and found that many textbooks fail to adequately integrate critical thinking components such as problem-solving and decision-making. This lack of emphasis on critical thinking skills limits students' ability to engage deeply with texts, thereby constraining their overall comprehension and cognitive development. The absence of these skills in reading materials suggests that students are not adequately prepared to analyze and evaluate complex texts, which is essential for higher-level reading comprehension.

Further compounding the issue, Anwas et al. (2022) examined the relationship between textbook quality and students' basic literacy skills in Indonesian elementary schools. Their findings indicate that while some textbooks positively impact students' reading, writing, and arithmetic skills, many are deficient in several key areas. These deficiencies include the lack of engaging content and insufficient depth, which can hinder students' ability to understand and apply what they have learned. This gap in textbook quality highlights the need for improved resources that are not only informative but also engaging and comprehensive, to better support students' literacy development.

Moreover, the studies by (Misdi et al., 2023; Rahmah & Mistar, 2023; Zahroh et al., 2022) reinforce the challenges posed by inadequate textbooks. Rahmah and Mistar (2023) highlighted that many students struggle with comprehension due to insufficiently supportive reading materials. Their survey revealed that a significant percentage of students face difficulties in understanding texts, which may be attributed to the limitations of the textbooks they use. Similarly, Zahroh et al. (2022) found that while Insert Learning media improved comprehension in specific contexts, traditional textbooks often lack the interactive elements necessary for enhancing students' reading skills.

The challenges identified in these studies indicate that textbook limitations extend beyond critical thinking and content quality. They also encompass the need for textbooks to support diverse reading strategies and address various comprehension challenges. For instance, Sultan et al. (2023) emphasized that textbooks should include diverse cognitive processes and text types to better prepare students for complex reading tasks. This comprehensive approach is essential for developing well-rounded reading abilities and addressing the gaps in students' comprehension skills.

In summary, this theme incorporates findings from five studies that collectively reveal the significant limitations of textbooks in supporting effective reading comprehension. These limitations include inadequate integration of critical thinking skills, insufficient quality and diversity of content, and a lack of alignment with international standards. Addressing these issues through improved textbook development can help enhance students' reading comprehension and better prepare them for complex literacy tasks. The studies underscore the importance of creating textbooks that not only meet educational standards but also support diverse and engaging learning experiences.

### **Theme 2: Challenges in Student Motivation and Engagement in Reading**

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The challenges related to student motivation and engagement in reading are complex and impact both comprehension and overall academic performance. A notable concern is the struggle students face in sustaining motivation for academic reading. Mahardika and Kuswando (2022) investigated different strategies used by graduate students to manage their motivation in academic reading. This issue reflects a broader problem where, despite recognizing effective motivational strategies, students frequently find it difficult to apply them consistently, resulting in variable engagement and comprehension levels.

Further insight into the motivational challenges faced by students is provided by Min et al. (2023), who explored the use of graphic organizers to foster critical thinking and engagement in English reading classes. Their study demonstrated that graphic organizers can significantly enhance students' critical thinking skills, which are crucial for reading comprehension. However, the effectiveness of these tools was found to be highly dependent on their integration into the reading process. The challenge here lies in not only introducing graphic organizers but also in ensuring they are used effectively and consistently. If not integrated effectively, even well-designed motivational tools such as graphic organizers may fail to maintain student interest and enhance engagement over time.

The collective findings from these studies underscore the critical role of motivation and engagement in reading comprehension. They reveal that while various strategies and tools are available to support motivation, students frequently face difficulties in applying them effectively. Issues such as inconsistent engagement, varying impacts of different strategies, and the challenges of integrating motivational tools into regular reading practices all contribute to the broader problem of maintaining student motivation.

In summary, this theme encompasses several studies that highlight the significant challenges related to student motivation and engagement in reading. These challenges include maintaining consistent motivation, effectively utilizing engagement strategies, and integrating motivational tools into reading practices. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and adaptable approach that recognizes individual differences among students and the varying effectiveness of different strategies. The studies collectively emphasize the need for targeted interventions and continuous support to foster sustained student involvement and enhance reading comprehension.

### **Theme 3: *Challenges in Student's Poor Vocabulary***

Limited vocabulary significantly hampers students' ability to comprehend text effectively (Abeer M. W. Alharbi, 2022; Huynh Trang, 2021; Nanda & Azmy, 2020; Saraswati et al., 2021; Septia et al., 2022). Research indicates that students with limited vocabulary skills often struggle with reading comprehension, as a strong vocabulary is crucial for accurately understanding and interpreting texts. For instance, a study by Huynh Trang (2021) examined the challenges first-year students encounter with reading comprehension. The findings indicated that the primary factor contributing to these difficulties is insufficient vocabulary. The study revealed that students often ignore difficult words or rely heavily on dictionaries instead of employing strategies to guess the meaning or grasp the text's general idea. Additionally, the research found that students lack consistent habits of learning and reviewing vocabulary.

Nanda & Azmy (2020) further examined the causes, impacts, and potential solutions for poor reading comprehension. Their study identified inadequate English vocabulary as a significant factor contributing to difficulties in reading comprehension. This issue has three primary negative effects: it reduces students' academic performance, hinders their problem-solving abilities, and limits their future educational and career prospects.

In conclusion, some studies have highlighted that limited vocabulary is a significant barrier to effective reading comprehension among students.

#### **Theme 4: Challenges with Students Being Slow Readers**

Being slow readers makes it difficult for students to keep up with their reading tasks and participate actively in class discussions (Huynh Trang, 2021; Khan et al., 2020; Torppa et al., 2020). A study by Huynh Trang (2021) resulted that inappropriate use of strategies is a noticeable factor causing reading comprehension difficulties. This issue can be attributed to the fact that these students are freshmen, just beginning their first year of a four-year learning program. Consequently, they may not yet use reading strategies effectively or have not fully understood the strategies introduced in their reading courses.

Moreover, a study by Khan et al., (2020) found that a significant number of learners struggled with reading words correctly due to their inability to spell them. Similarly, other research has highlighted pronunciation and fluency as crucial elements of reading proficiency (Bensalem, 2020; Septia et al., 2022; Torppa et al., 2020).

Additionally, research has demonstrated that students' slow reading pace is significantly affected by their difficulties in comprehending long sentences, identifying the main idea, and drawing inferences from texts (Bensalem, 2020; Rahmah & Mistar, 2023; Saraswati et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the challenges faced by students who are slow readers are multifaceted and significantly impact their academic performances. These findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to improve reading strategies, spelling, pronunciation, and fluency to enhance overall reading comprehension and academic success.

## **CONCLUSION**

This systematic review identifies significant challenges in students' reading comprehension within English language teaching, particularly in materials, motivation, vocabulary, and reading fluency. These issues require practical solutions to improve learning outcomes and support students in developing stronger reading skills.

To address these challenges, educators should implement more interactive and student-centered teaching strategies, such as integrating multimedia resources and fostering active reading engagement. Schools and educational institutions need to revise and enhance the quality of textbooks, ensuring they are aligned with students' reading needs and contain diverse, engaging materials. Additionally, explicit vocabulary instruction and structured intervention programs should be emphasized to support students with limited vocabulary and slow reading abilities.

However, this review has several limitations. It focuses on articles published between 2019 and 2023, potentially excluding relevant earlier research. The study also emphasizes research from Indonesia, which may limit the generalizability to other regions. Additionally, by relying only on peer-reviewed articles, the review may overlook studies with negative or inconclusive results, as well as valuable non-peer-reviewed sources. Future research should focus on the effectiveness of various instructional strategies, such as digital learning platforms and differentiated reading interventions. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how these interventions impact reading comprehension over time. Furthermore, exploring the role of cultural and linguistic contexts in shaping students' reading abilities would add valuable perspectives to the field.

By addressing these challenges and continuing to refine instructional approaches, this research contributes to the ongoing effort to improve English language reading comprehension in diverse educational settings.

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