



Analyzing the Students' Obstacles in English Reading Comprehension at Senior High School

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the obstacles faced by grade 11 students at MAN Sorong SP 4 in comprehending English reading texts. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through a 4-point Likert scale questionnaire completed by 20 students and semi-structured interviews with 5 students and 1 English teacher. The instrument covered four key areas: vocabulary mastery, motivation, media preferences, and teacher support. Results revealed that 76% of students struggled with vocabulary, 71% lacked effective reading strategies such as skimming and inference, and 64% had difficulties understanding text structures. Additionally, 60% of students demonstrated low motivation toward academic reading, although they showed interest in English content through social media. Interview findings supported the quantitative data, indicating students' reliance on dictionaries, absence of explicit reading strategy instruction, and low confidence in dealing with complex texts. The study recommends an instructional approach that integrates reading strategies, vocabulary development, and educational digital media to enhance students' holistic reading comprehension skills.

Keywords: *obstacles, reading comprehension, English learning*

Introduction

Reading comprehension is a fundamental basic skill in mastering English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in today's competitive global era (Mujayanah et al., 2023). Understanding and interpreting English texts for high school students in Indonesia is needed for learning success and professional and personal growth in the global era. In reality, however, many high school students still have difficulty with reading comprehension, especially in areas that use English as the main means of communication.

According to Hasbullah (2023); Mahu (2024), and Kaunain (2025) Most students at the junior and senior high school levels in Sorong, Southwest Papua, still have low ability and understanding of English, in the areas of vocabulary mastery and comprehension of reading skills, as well as speaking, listening, and writing. This issue is why researchers conducted research focused on identifying and analyzing specific obstacles that hinder students' reading comprehension at MAN Sorong SP 4, a State Islamic High School in Southwest Papua.

Mujayanah et al. (2023) explained that reading comprehension involves more than just decoding words; reading comprehension requires the skill to comprehend vocabulary. It also emphasizes making inferences, identifying main ideas, and integrating new information with prior knowledge (Daud et al., 2023). When students struggle in any of these areas, their inclusive comprehension of the text suffers. Factors such as limited vocabulary, lack of reading strategies, low motivation, and minimal exposure to authentic English texts are common barriers reported by students in the Indonesian educational context (Said & Sidin, 2014; Pongsapan & Patak, 2021; Hasbullah et al., 2018; and Nurdin et al., 2023).

Moreover, in the digital age, students are increasingly influenced by social media and multimedia content, which shapes their reading habits and preferences. While traditional methods emphasize textbook-based learning, today's students are more responsive to interactive, visual, and short-form content made known on platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Those platforms, when properly integrated into education, can help bridge the gap between student interests and academic needs.

Furthermore, Zimmerman & Moylan (2009), Cahyono & Rahayu (2020), and Huang & Mizumoto (2024) revealed that having good English learning motivation increases when students have autonomy and find personal relevance in their learning experiences. In this context, digital tools explore a potential role in supporting reading comprehension if they align with pedagogical goals. In MAN Sorong SP 4, English is taught as a core subject, but many students still show limited comprehension when reading texts in English. Initial observations indicate that although students can recognize basic vocabulary, they often fail to understand the meaning of complex texts or apply critical thinking skills during reading activities.

The gap between surface-level knowledge and deeper understanding prompted the need. This study aimed to explore the students' various challenges in comprehending English texts and to investigate how factors such as vocabulary, learning motivation, media preferences, and teacher support affect their reading comprehension. This study aims to explore practical recommendations for teachers, policy makers, and education stakeholders to improve the teaching of English reading in similar learning environments.

Method

This study investigated the students' obstacles in English reading comprehension at MAN Sorong SP 4, Southwest Papua province, Indonesia.

Design of the Study

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell & Clark, 2011) and (Sarwono, 2011) to comprehensively analyze the obstacles faced by grade 11 students in English reading comprehension at MAN Sorong SP 4, Southwest Papua Province, Indonesia. The mixed-method approach enables the researchers to obtain broad numerical data from questionnaires and detailed insights through interviews, allowing a deeper understanding of the students' learning challenges.

The 40 items of the Likert Scale questionnaire are divided into parts of vocabulary mastery (10 items), motivation (10 items), media preferences (10 items), and teachers' support (10 items). The questionnaires were distributed to 20 students sitting in grade eleven before being interviewed by the four selected students and an English teacher.

Population and Sample

The population of this study was 120 students. They were spread sitting in grade ten (40 students), grade eleven (40 students), and grade twelve (40 students). Since this study focused on analyzing the students' obstacles in English reading comprehension, it used a partitioning method to select a sample because it is faster, cheaper, and easier to implement than others. Therefore, 20 students of grade eleven were chosen as a sample.

Data Analysis

Validity of Questionnaire

The validity test of 40 multiple-choice instrument questions in this study was the Students' Obstacles in English Reading Comprehension test, with the Pearson Product-Moment correlation validity test, which correlates the score of each question item with the total score. This test was carried out using SPSS statistical software. If the number of respondents is 30 students, then the r-table value at a significance level of 5% ($\alpha = 0.05$) is 0.361.

The questionnaire was distributed to 30 students in the 11th grade of the State Islamic Senior High School of Kota Sorong. This school was chosen to validate it because it has the same level and character of the English learning process. The validation results are as follows.

Table 1. Validity of Questionnaire

No.	r-Value	Notes	No.	r-value	Notes
1.	0.478	Valid	21.	0.521	Valid
2.	0.301	invalid	22.	0.396	Valid
3.	0.453	Valid	23.	0.281	invalid
4.	0.389	Valid	24.	0.508	Valid
5.	0.410	Valid	25.	0.399	Valid

6.	0.275	invalid	26.	0.442	Valid
7.	0.500	Valid	27.	0.470	Valid
8.	0.310	invalid	28.	0.489	Valid
9.	0.412	Valid	29.	0.330	invalid
10.	0.370	Valid	30.	0.481	Valid
11.	0.528	Valid	31.	0.351	invalid
12.	0.409	Valid	32.	0.510	Valid
13.	0.280	invalid	33.	0.392	Valid
14.	0.399	Valid	34.	0.273	invalid
15.	0.361	Valid	35.	0.465	Valid
16.	0.472	Valid	36.	0.503	Valid
17.	0.488	Valid	37.	0.520	Valid
18.	0.340	invalid	38.	0.375	Valid
19.	0.470	Valid	39.	0.390	Valid
20.	0.320	invalid	40.	0.471	Valid

10 items in the questionnaire were invalid because they were below the score of the r-table value at a significance level of 5% ($\alpha = 0.05$) is 0.361. which came from vocabulary mastery (3 items; numbers 2, 6, and 8), motivation (3 items; numbers 13, 18, and 20), media preferences (2 items; numbers 23 and 29), and teachers' support (2 items; numbers 31 and 34). Therefore, only 30 items of valid questions were used in this study.

Reliability

To determine the reliability of the 40-item questionnaire above, a reliability test was used, measured by Cronbach's Alpha (α). This statistic assesses the internal consistency of the items—how closely related the set of items is as a group. The instrument has a high level of internal consistency or reliability measured by Cronbach's Alpha (α) = 0.872, which means the 40 questionnaire items measured a consistent underlying construct.

Based on the reliability analysis of the 40 questionnaire items, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was found to be 0.872, indicating a good level of internal consistency. This suggests that the instrument is reliable and appropriate for use in this study.

Questionnaire and Interview

This research employed and analyzed the results using data analysis of mean score and percentage to see the students' average on their English obstacles in reading comprehension. The questionnaire consists of 30 items reflecting different reading comprehension skills outlined in the CEFR, such as understanding simple phrases, inferring meaning from context, and analyzing complex texts. Respondents rated each item on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Not Yet Able, 4 = Confidently Able). The questionnaire also included reflective open-ended questions about preferred reading materials, main difficulties, and reading

frequency outside school (Creswell & Clark, 2011); and (Yuliani et al., 2023). The data were analyzed descriptively using frequency counts and percentages to identify the most common obstacles reported by students. Scores were also interpreted based on CEFR proficiency bands.

Interview data analysis in this study involved several important steps to extract meaning from the information collected. This process involved interview transcription, data reduction, categorization, data presentation, and conclusion by using an inductive or deductive approach, with thematic content analysis and narrative analysis methods commonly used. In reducing interview data, researchers select, simplify, and focus on important information that is relevant to the research objectives. Also, it identifies the main themes that emerge from the interview transcripts, then eliminates irrelevant or redundant data (Said & Sidin, 2014); and (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Semi-structured interview guides were developed for both students and the teacher. Student interviews explored in depth their specific obstacles, study habits, motivational factors, and strategies for overcoming difficulties. The teacher interview focused on observed student challenges, instructional methods, and resource availability. The results of interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis following the Miles and Huberman model, involving four stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Initial codes were generated to categorize obstacles and coping strategies, followed by identifying key themes reflecting student experiences and teacher perspectives.

Results

This study reported the results of data analysis collected from questionnaires and interviews about students' obstacles in improving their English reading comprehension. This section presents quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interviews) data results to identify the primary obstacles students face in English reading comprehension at MAN Sorong SP 4. The results are structured according to the main thematic categories: vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies, text structure awareness, and motivation.

Findings through the Questionnaire

The table below describes the results of the data analysis using a set of questionnaires. The results measured the students' obstacles in English reading comprehension in vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies, text structure awareness, and motivation.

Table 2. Thematic category's results of Key Obstacles

Obstacle Category	Mean score	Std. Deviation	Percentage
Vocabulary Deficiency	3.80	0.65	76%
Poor Reading Strategies	3.55	0.72	71%
Text Structure Issues	3.20	0.69	64%
Motivation Gap (Academic)	3.20	0.78	60%

Based on the data in Table 2 above, it could be described as follows. Quantitative data revealed that the majority of students struggle significantly with vocabulary, particularly with unfamiliar academic words and idiomatic expressions. 76% of students agreed or strongly agreed that they had difficulty understanding unknown words, leading to comprehension breakdown. Students also had a lack of skimming, scanning, and inferencing techniques to analyze text structure issues, as shown in the data of the mean score (3.20), standard deviation (0.69), and 64% which means that they had serious problems, like their academic motivation gap. The results also described similar frequencies and percentages across all obstacle categories.

Findings through the Interview

Based on interviews, most students have a similar perception of obstacles in English reading comprehension, including vocabulary deficiency, poor reading strategies, text structure issues, and motivation. The specific explanation is as follows.

The first question of the interview relates to vocabulary deficiency in English reading comprehension, describing three (std.1, std.2, and std.4) of the five interviewees' similarity statements, they stated:

"I often stop reading because I do not understand many words. I often need to use a dictionary when reading English texts".

Two other students (std.3., and std.5) said that:

"I had problems understanding an English text because I do not have enough vocabulary".

Question about poor reading strategies' results, that all students (std.1, std.2, std.3, std.4, and std.5) did not have any particular strategy to comprehend any kind of English text.

"We never got special knowledge to master and understand the main idea of English texts. We just got an explanation from the teacher that we must read more sentences in newspapers and textbooks".

The findings in question about text structure issues showed that one student (std.5) said:

"I have a little knowledge about the technique to underline text strategies issues, that is, I focused on the main ideas, and the topic to be discussed. I know this because my teacher ever taught us in English class".

Response of the other students (std.1, std.2, std.3, and std.4 revealed that:

"We do not care about the text structure issues because we do not have enough vocabulary, and we are not motivated to study English."

The question about the motivation and gap showed that:

"All students have basic motivation to study English; however, they did not know how to improve their English reading comprehension."

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal multiple challenges faced by students at MAN Sorong SP 4 in comprehending English reading materials. These challenges are consistent with those identified in previous literature and can be analyzed through cognitive, linguistic, and motivational perspectives.

Vocabulary Deficiency as a Core Barrier

The dominant obstacle identified was students' limited vocabulary, which significantly hindered their ability to understand reading texts. This is in line with the emphasis that students ought to master a minimum vocabulary of 3,000 words to understand simplified texts (Hasbullah et al., 2018; Nurdin et al., 2023; and Apoko et al., 2023). It was also stated that the students' dependence on online translation tools was mentioned in interviews. It reflects their lexical limitations and lack of confidence in using context clues, an essential reading skill. This vocabulary deficiency aligns with the input, which stresses that learners must receive input slightly above their current level; if vocabulary gaps are too wide, comprehension breaks down.

Limited Reading Strategy Awareness

The results also showed that many students lacked effective reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, inferring, and summarizing. Without these strategies, students tend to read passively and become overwhelmed by unfamiliar words or complex structures. This confirms findings by (Mujayanah et al., 2023), who emphasized that skilled readers are active readers who monitor their understanding and apply strategies as needed. The lack of strategy instruction may be attributed to traditional teaching methods that focus more on grammatical analysis rather than reading comprehension techniques.

Ms. Dini, the English teacher, highlighted the need for explicit instruction in reading strategies. According to Riswanto (2023) Metacognitive awareness—knowing how and when to apply reading strategies—is essential for developing independent readers. This lack among the students in MAN Sorong SP 4 likely contributes to their reading difficulties.

Difficulties with Text Structures and Inferencing

Another major issue was the students' struggle with identifying main ideas, text organization (e.g., cause-effect, compare-contrast), and making inferences. Students reported confusion when dealing with implicit meanings and author's purpose questions. These difficulties indicate a lack of discourse-level comprehension, which goes beyond sentence-level understanding.

As suggested by Al Aziz & Yusanti (2020) Poor performance in inferencing tasks is common among EFL learners, especially when they are not accustomed to reading academic texts. In the Indonesian context, where English is a foreign language, exposure to such texts is limited, leading to insufficient development of higher-order comprehension skills.

Motivation: A Mixed Landscape

While students exhibited strong interest in informal English reading through social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, their engagement with school reading materials was significantly lower. This duality reflects a gap between students' everyday digital practices and the academic expectations placed on them in school.

According to (Yaumi et al., 2018); and (Hanifah et al., 2024), Learners are more motivated when they experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Students showed high autonomy in choosing content on social media, which made them feel in control and thus more motivated (Tiara Vinnilarika Sari & Muamaroh, 2024). However, classroom reading was seen as rigid and disconnected from their interests. The teacher's view supported this, emphasizing the importance of integrating digital tools and relatable topics into reading instruction.

This is consistent with recent studies (Fahri Falah et al., 2024) highlighting that using digital platforms like YouTube and Instagram can enhance reading comprehension when content aligns with students' interests. Videos with English subtitles, song lyrics, and interactive content not only develop vocabulary but also expose learners to contextual and authentic English usage.

The Role of Technology and Media Literacy

The use of digital media can be an asset rather than a distraction if properly guided. As the teacher pointed out, many students benefit from visual and audio input, especially those who struggle with reading traditional texts. The integration of media such as YouTube supports multiple learning styles and offers multimodal input (images, sounds, text), which is effective for language acquisition (Geng et al., 2019).

However, the challenge lies in guiding students to engage critically with content. As Mali & Salsbury (2021) noted, students need media literacy skills to differentiate between educational and misleading content. Teachers play a crucial role in curating relevant materials and training students to evaluate online resources critically.

Conclusion

This study revealed several significant challenges that hinder students' reading performance. Firstly, limited vocabulary knowledge emerged as the most dominant barrier, preventing students from fully understanding reading passages. Many relied on translation tools, indicating a lack of confidence and insufficient mastery of word recognition skills. Secondly, ineffective reading strategies were

found to be another critical issue. Most students were unfamiliar with essential techniques such as skimming, scanning, and inference, which are crucial for efficient reading.

In addition, the study highlighted students' difficulty in processing complex text structures, including identifying main ideas, summarizing content, and understanding implicit meanings. The limited exposure to authentic English reading materials further exacerbated these difficulties. Motivational factors also played a crucial role. While students showed enthusiasm for informal English learning through digital media (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), their engagement with academic texts was significantly lower. This dichotomy reveals a misalignment between students' digital learning preferences and the traditional reading materials used in the classroom.

Lastly, while the availability of social media offers great learning potential, its effectiveness depends largely on the guidance and direction provided by teachers and schools. Without appropriate scaffolding and media literacy education, students' risk being distracted or misinformed rather than educated.

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