

STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN READING DESCRIPTIVE TEXT**Yusnita^{1*}, Nuzulul Isna²**¹yusnita2911@gmail.com, ²nuzulul.izna@stkipmuabdya.ac.id

STKIP MUHAMMADIYAH ACEH BARAT DAYA

Received: May 28, 2024; Accepted: January 3, 2025

ABSTRACT

Reading is one of the English skills that has a significant role in helping students acquire English better and succeed in the academic field. Unfortunately, most students still struggle with reading comprehension, especially descriptive text. To address this issue, this study investigates students' difficulties in reading descriptive text. A qualitative research method with a descriptive qualitative design was employed, involving 35 students as participants. The data were collected through interviews and observation. The result of this study showed that the difficulties in reading comprehension faced by students are due to five factors such as the length of the text, lack of vocabulary mastery, use of inappropriate reading strategies, lack of prior knowledge and limited reading practice. It is suggested the students should increase reading frequency to avoid the difficulties in reading comprehension.

Keywords: Descriptive text, Difficulties, Comprehension, Reading

A. INTRODUCTION

The English has the status of an international communication. It rules in all international sectors: economy, politics, trade, education, and so on (Goddard, 2021). It has become a compulsory subject in the Indonesian curriculum to develop students' ability in English. Its learning is divided into four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This study focuses on reading skills, the cognitive process of decoding symbols to extract meaning from written or printed text (Nunan, 1989). Reading involves recognizing and comprehending written language, encompassing sub-skills such as word recognition, fluency, comprehension, and critical analysis (Grellet, 1981). It is fundamental to literacy, enabling individuals to acquire knowledge, communicate ideas effectively, and participate in society. Reading comprehension, an interactive process, involves decoding symbols and understanding linguistic elements to construct meaning from text (Miller, 2023; Lemov et al., 2016). It emphasizes the reader's role in interpreting and integrating prior knowledge and contextual clues to comprehend written material (Alderson, 2022). Proficient reading facilitates understanding and promotes critical thinking, analysis, and synthesis of information from various texts (Taylor et al., 2000; Grabe, 2009; Collins & Glover, 2015).

Reading comprehension is a critical skill essential for accessing and understanding a variety of written content, as highlighted by Taylor et al. (2000). It goes beyond simply decoding words to encompass interpreting, analyzing, and synthesizing information (Grabe, 2009;

Collins & Glover, 2015). This proficiency not only supports academic achievement across disciplines but also fosters critical thinking and analytical abilities (Clarke et al., 2013), enabling individuals to evaluate and apply information effectively in both educational and everyday contexts (Rasinski et al., 2021; Johnson, 2008).

Based on initial observations and information from the English teacher at SMP Negeri 1 Blang Pidie, many students struggle with comprehending descriptive texts despite repeated exposure. Challenges stem from limited vocabulary, insufficient exposure to diverse descriptive texts, or difficulties in connecting textual details. The teacher noted that understanding descriptive texts requires critical thinking skills, including visualizing scenes and interpreting details. Students struggle with critical analysis without strong comprehension, affecting their ability to draw conclusions, make inferences, or analyze information effectively. This issue can hinder their academic performance, including completing assignments and participating in classroom activities, ultimately impacting their overall educational progress at SMP Negeri 1 Blang Pidie.

The difficulties in reading comprehension of descriptive texts become problematic for many students who learn English as a foreign language (Cornoldi & Oakhill, 2013). The difficulties in reading comprehension occur when students do not understand how to become readers (Prayudha, 2023). The process of combining all language elements to form a complete understanding can be challenging for some readers. The cognitive demand to construct a cohesive mental representation poses a challenge, particularly for students with underdeveloped critical thinking skills. Moreover, the difficulties come from a potential since the students do not have prior knowledge and the contextual information provided in the descriptive text (Vaughn et al., 2024). Insufficient background knowledge can hinder the reader's ability to contextualize and interpret the information accurately. Additionally, the intricacy of descriptive language, replete with metaphorical expressions and figurative language, can pose comprehension hurdles for readers less adept at decoding such linguistic intricacies.

Students often face obstacles in reading comprehension, especially in decoding words to difficulties in understanding the deeper meaning of descriptive text (Kilpatrick et al., 2019). Some struggle with decoding individual words, hindering their ability to read and comprehend the material fluently. Additionally, limited vocabulary and unfamiliarity with certain concepts can influence comprehension. The lack of critical thinking skills may prevent students from making connections between different parts of the text or drawing inferences. Furthermore, the students are poor in mastering vocabulary and cognitive processing capacities, which contributes to the overall complexity of reading comprehension challenges (Kliegman et. al., 2007). Students encountering these difficulties may experience frustration, potentially erasing motivation and interest in engaging with descriptive texts, thereby exacerbating the comprehension gap.

Previous studies support the observation, as Prayudha (2023) identified several key difficulties students face in reading descriptive texts, including recalling information, understanding complex text structures, unfamiliarity with the subject matter, lack of fluency, and insufficient use of reading strategies during the learning process. In addition, Hasibuan et al. (2021) further identified issues in grasping main ideas, making inferences, understanding word meanings, and extracting specific information from descriptive texts.

These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of reading comprehension difficulties and highlight the need for targeted strategies to address these challenges effectively.

Since descriptive texts are commonly found in students' difficulties, they can affect their performance in various academic areas. Hence, the writer is interested in searching for further explanations about students' problems in reading descriptive texts. The research question for this study is: What are students' difficulties in reading descriptive texts?

B. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach, focusing on a descriptive qualitative design to explore students' difficulties in reading comprehension. It aims to explore and understand the complexities of understanding a phenomenon in depth (Mason, 2017). The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Blangpidie, located in Geulompong Payong, Blangpidie, Aceh Barat Daya, involving 35 eighth-grade students from class VIII.1. This class was chosen based on the results of an English test, where most students scored below the minimum competency criterion (KKM) of 75. From these students, 10 were selected for interviews to gain deeper insights into their reading comprehension challenges.

The data for this study were collected through structured interviews and observations. The structured interviews consisted of three main questions designed to address the research objectives (Campion et al., 2017). The process began with designing questions relevant to the study, which were primarily closed-ended to facilitate categorization and analysis. The interviews were conducted after obtaining approval from the head of the school. Following this, appointments were arranged with students, and interviews were conducted outside the classroom and lesson hours, lasting approximately two hours. A script was followed during the interviews to ensure consistency in the questions posed to all participants. While, observation involves systematically watching and recording behaviors, events, or phenomena naturally occurring in a particular setting or context (Cohen et al., 2017). During the observation of students' interviews, several steps are involved to capture verbal and nonverbal expressions effectively. Firstly, attentive listening is crucial to comprehend students' verbal expressions, including their responses, explanations, and concerns regarding reading difficulties. Secondly, observing students' gestures, body language, and facial expressions provides valuable insights into their emotions, engagement levels, and comfort during the interview process.

For data analysis, this study employed thematic analysis. In thematic analysis, researchers systematically analyze qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, focus group discussions, or open-ended survey responses, by identifying recurring ideas, concepts, or patterns of significance (Creswell, 2019). This process involves coding the data, categorizing codes into broader themes, and interpreting the underlying meanings or narratives embedded within these themes. Through a rigorous and iterative process of data immersion, coding, and theme development, thematic analysis enables researchers to gain deep insights into participants' experiences, perspectives, and behaviors, ultimately facilitating the generation of rich and nuanced interpretations of the research phenomenon under investigation.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion based on the investigation into students' difficulties in reading descriptive texts. Through interviews and observations, several factors contributing to these challenges were identified. These include the length of texts, lack of vocabulary mastery, a lack of prior knowledge, reading without strategies and limited reading practice.

1. Length of Text

Lengthy texts pose a major challenge in reading comprehension. About 75% of respondents find long texts hard to understand. They say these texts overwhelm them and make staying focused and grasping everything tough. They also find longer texts, especially those with lots of complex details. Additionally, longer texts often have more difficult words and sentences, which makes understanding even harder for them. The interview with students expressed that:

When I read the length of descriptive text, I found it difficult to understand the information in the text and lost focus when confronted with lengthy passages. (S2)
(Interview, translated version)

According to students interviewed, it's clear they struggle with reading comprehension due to text length. Longer passages, especially those with compound-complex sentences in descriptive texts, make it harder for them to grasp information. Bell and MacCallun (2015) confirm that text length affects comprehension because longer texts demand more time and sustained focus, which is particularly challenging for students with weaker reading skills. Additionally, lengthy texts often include complex sentence structures, vocabulary, and ideas that can overwhelm students, especially those still developing their language skills.

I get frustrated when I see the length of the text. It is not interesting to me. I like the short passage and find it easy to comprehend the text. (S4)
(Interview, translated version)

The students at SMP Negeri 1 Blang Pidie indicated that they struggle to process and retain the information presented in lengthy descriptive passages, resulting in incomplete comprehension or misunderstanding of critical concepts. Kolbi (2021) stated that longer texts can be challenging for students, especially when reading descriptive texts. As a result, the size of descriptive texts can significantly impact students' reading comprehension, hindering their ability to engage with and understand the content effectively. Therefore, it is essential for educators to consider the length of texts when selecting reading materials and to provide appropriate support and scaffolding to help students navigate longer passages successfully.

2. Lack of Vocabulary Mastery

Lack of vocabulary contributes to students' challenges in reading comprehension. The study found that a substantial 63% of students encountered unfamiliar vocabulary while reading descriptive texts. This high percentage underscores the frequent difficulty students face with unknown words, which impedes their overall understanding of the text. Insufficient

vocabulary hinders their ability to decode and interpret individual words and phrases, creating gaps in comprehension. As a result, students may struggle to follow the narrative or argument presented in the text, slowing down their reading comprehension and disrupting their engagement with the content.

Due to limited vocabulary, students frequently do not understand the meanings of many words encountered in descriptive texts, making it challenging to comprehend the information being conveyed. As a result, students faced significant difficulties in extracting relevant information and fully understanding the content of the explanatory text. These struggles highlighted the crucial role that vocabulary knowledge plays in reading comprehension and the need for targeted interventions to help students build a stronger vocabulary foundation, enabling them to engage more effectively with complex texts.

*I don't know the meaning of any of the word in Indonesia. (S3)
I feel tired because it's difficult to understand unfamiliar words (S10)
frequently getting stuck on words they don't recognize, which impedes their overall
comprehension (S4)*

(Interview, translated version)

Based on interviews with students, it is clear that they express frustration when they encounter unfamiliar words while reading, which significantly affects their ability to understand entire sentences. Chan (2020) reinforces this notion by suggesting a strong link between reading comprehension and vocabulary mastery. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that vocabulary proficiency plays a crucial role in comprehending texts. Students who face challenges in mastering vocabulary often struggle to grasp the meanings of unfamiliar words encountered in descriptive texts, thereby hindering their comprehension.

I come across words I don't understand, and it makes it hard to understand the whole sentence. it's frustrating because I feel like I'm constantly stopping to look up words in the dictionary. It breaks my concentration, and I lose track of what I'm reading. (S1)

(Interview, translated version)

Moreover, the observation indicated that students' limited vocabulary affected their capacity to grasp meaning in descriptive texts. Descriptive passages often rely on rich and precise language to evoke vivid imagery and paint detailed scenes or settings. However, students with inadequate vocabulary skills struggle to visualize and interpret the descriptive elements effectively, leading to shallow comprehension and incomplete understanding of the text's content and message. It is in line with the study by Rahmah et al. (2023), which showed that the primary factor of students' difficulties in reading was that they had limited vocabulary.

Furthermore, comprehending descriptive texts necessitates students to discern relationships between descriptive terms, infer implicit meanings, and interpret the author's tone or perspective. However, students lacking vocabulary mastery find it difficult to establish these connections and to extract deeper insights from the text. In short, vocabulary mastery influences reading descriptive text; meanwhile, the hindrance is caused by a lack of vocabulary.

3. Lack of Prior Knowledge

The study highlighted a significant obstacle to students' comprehension of descriptive texts: a lack of prior knowledge. Specifically, 92% of students reported difficulties from having

never encountered similar descriptive texts. This absence of familiarity prevents students from establishing meaningful connections with the content, hindering their ability to understand and engage with the text fully. Descriptive texts frequently employ intricate imagery and context-specific vocabulary, posing challenges for students without the foundational knowledge necessary to grasp subtleties and implicit meanings embedded in the passages.

Furthermore, this lack of prior knowledge affects students' confidence and motivation in reading activities. Students encountering unfamiliar topics are less likely to feel competent and motivated to tackle the reading material. This can create a cycle of avoidance and limited exposure, further perpetuating their struggles with comprehension. To address this issue, educators must provide pre-reading activities that build background knowledge and context for the students. This can include discussions, multimedia resources, and connecting new information to students' existing knowledge base. By enhancing students' prior knowledge, educators can improve their ability to understand and appreciate descriptive texts, enhancing their reading comprehension skills. As stated by the student:

In reading comprehension is because they are unfamiliar with the topic of text read. Similarly. Lack of understanding about the information within its context and difficulty in drawing important conclusions from the text. (S6)

(interview, translated version)

The interview results with students can be figured out if they seldom read descriptive texts, and several common themes and challenges contribute to their infrequent engagement with this type of material. One prominent finding indicated a lack of interest or motivation in reading descriptive texts. This lack of interest could stem from various factors, such as the perceived difficulty of descriptive texts, a disconnect between the topics covered and their personal interests, or a preference for more visually stimulating forms of media. Moreover, most students agreed that the absence of prior knowledge affects students' understanding of descriptive texts and influences their overall reading experience. Students felt disconnected from the text when they encountered an unfamiliar object described. This lack of engagement can further exacerbate comprehension difficulties, as students are inclined to actively process and analyze the descriptive information presented in the text (Abdelaal & Sase, 2014).

Furthermore, the interview indicated that these students encountered specific obstacles or difficulties when reading descriptive texts, further discouraging their engagement with this genre. Common challenges mentioned by students might include struggles with vocabulary comprehension, difficulty visualizing or understanding the descriptive imagery presented in the text, or feeling overwhelmed by the level of detail or complexity in descriptive passages. According to Smith et al. (2021), background knowledge differentially impacts stronger and weaker readers. Students with lower background knowledge appear to benefit more from highly cohesive text. In contrast, weaker students could compensate somewhat for their relatively weak reading skills in the context of a high degree of background knowledge. Similarly, Ekasary et al. (2022) stated that a lack of prior knowledge is a significant hindrance to reading comprehension, particularly in comprehending descriptive texts. Students who lack background knowledge relevant to a text's subject matter or context face difficulty making meaningful connections and understanding the content presented. This deficiency limits their ability to draw upon existing schema or prior experiences, which is

crucial for interpreting descriptive details and forming a coherent understanding of the text. Consequently, the absence of previous knowledge impedes students' engagement with the text. It diminishes their comprehension as they struggle to grasp the significance of key concepts, themes, or references embedded within the descriptive passages.

Reading without Strategies

A substantial 52% of students reported struggling with understanding such texts, attributing their difficulties to the absence of structured methods for dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentence structures. Students said the difficulty of grasping the text's overall meaning was due to a lack of structured approaches to tackle unfamiliar words or complex sentence structures.

I feel lost when encountering descriptive passages, indicating a need for strategies to navigate the text efficiently. (S3) (interview, translated version).

The interview revealed students' attempts to compensate for the absence of reading strategies by employing ineffective or inefficient methods, such as guessing word meanings solely based on context or resorting to time-consuming tactics like constant dictionary referencing. Such behaviors reflect students' struggles and emphasize the necessity for explicit instruction and guidance in developing effective reading strategies (Rusgandi, 2023). Without a well-developed toolkit of reading strategies, students may be disadvantaged when confronted with descriptive texts, hindering their ability to extract meaning, make connections, and engage deeply with the content (Bucay et al., 2022).

The result observations indicated that the students do not understand reading strategies, contributing to difficulties in managing comprehension challenges encountered during reading. When confronted with unfamiliar vocabulary or ambiguous passages, students may demonstrate a lack of adaptive strategies for overcoming these obstacles, resulting in difficulties in comprehending the text. Lapp & Moss (2017) firmly stated that students must employ appropriate reading strategies to enhance reading comprehension. Effective strategies include activating prior knowledge to create connections with new information, employing metacognitive skills such as monitoring comprehension and adjusting strategies when encountering difficulties, utilizing context clues and text structures to infer meanings, and engaging in active reading techniques like summarizing and asking questions. By systematically implementing these strategies, students can develop a deeper understanding of texts, improve critical thinking skills, and enhance reading proficiency.

In conclusion, the slack of strategies hindering difficulties in reading underscores the importance of explicitly teaching and reinforcing effective reading strategies to support students' comprehension and literacy development. By providing opportunities for students to practice and apply diverse reading strategies, educators can empower them to become more proficient and strategic readers, capable of overcoming comprehension challenges and effectively engaging with various texts.

Limited Reading Practice

The difficulties in reading comprehension are also caused by limited reading practices. Most students, or 82%, agreed that they only read texts during English class. Once class is over, they rarely read English outside of the classroom. The result of the interview with students

highlights that reading practice is a significant factor contributing to difficulties in reading descriptive texts.

I felt lazy reading English text; I only read it when I had a task from my teacher in English classes. (S8) (interview, translated version).

Based on students' statements, reading English text is not interesting for them. Perhaps, reading practice contributed significantly to reading ability. This means the frequency of reading has benefits in achieving better in reading comprehension. The lack of regular reading practice deprives students of opportunities to develop and reinforce their reading skills, including vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and comprehension strategies, which are essential for effectively navigating descriptive texts. This indicates that students who engage in rare reading practice may encounter difficulties in reading comprehension. Regular reading practice is crucial for developing and maintaining essential reading skills such as vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and comprehension strategies. When students do not engage in frequent reading activities, their proficiency in these areas may suffer, impacting their ability to understand and interpret written texts effectively.

Students at SMP Negeri 1 Blangpidie with limited reading practice struggle to build the concentration needed to sustain attention during reading sessions, particularly when faced with descriptive texts requiring sustained mental effort to visualize and interpret detailed descriptions. Edge (2021) firmly stated that students who spend much time in reading activities can easily achieve reading comprehension. By reading, students can improve their reading skills. On the contrary, students with low reading ability will find reading comprehension difficult. Furthermore, limited exposure to diverse reading materials may result in a narrow range of vocabulary and background knowledge, making it difficult for students to comprehend the varied language and content presented in descriptive texts. As a result, the lack of regular reading practice undermines students' reading proficiency and impedes their ability to effectively comprehend and analyze descriptive texts, ultimately hindering their overall literacy development.

D. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that there are several difficulties in reading descriptive texts. Those included the length of the text, which can be frustrating for students in grasping information, especially passages with compound-complex sentences. Then, Poor vocabulary also hinders reading comprehension, mainly when descriptive text uses unfamiliar words. Poor vocabulary comprehension can further exacerbate students' challenges in deciphering the overall message conveyed by the text, leading to frustration and discouragement in their reading endeavors. The students do not know about the descriptive text they read, making it harder to scan information. Most students obtained rare reading practice; therefore, they lost motivation and interest in reading. Another difficulty factor is that most students have no reading strategy. Students read without a repertoire of reading strategies, and students struggle to approach descriptive texts systematically and efficiently. Hence, vocabulary mastery holds a significant role in helping students understand descriptive texts.

E. REFERENCES

- Abdelaal, N. M., & Sase, A. S. (2014). Relationship between Prior Knowledge and Reading Comprehension. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 5(6), 125-131.
- Alderson, J. C. (2022). *Assessing Reading*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bell, S. M., & McCallum, R. S. (2015). *Handbook of reading assessment: A one-stop resource for prospective and practicing educators*. Routledge.
- Bucay, M. A., Abrina, T. A., Gan, J., & Cosico, M. F. (2022). A Technical Analysis on the Manila Bay Dolomite Beach Reclamation Project. *Philippine Journal of Public Policy: Interdisciplinary Development Perspectives 2021*.
- Campion, M. A., Palmer, D. K., & Campion, J. E. (1997). A review of structure in the selection interview. *Personnel psychology*, 50(3), 655-702.
- Clarke, P. J., Truelove, E., Hulme, C., & Snowling, M. J. (2013). *Developing reading comprehension*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2017). Observation. In *Research methods in education* (pp. 542-562). Routledge.
- Collins, K., & Glover, M. (2015). *I am reading: Nurturing young children's meaning making and joyful engagement with any book*. Heinemann.
- Cornoldi, C., & Oakhill, J. V. (Eds.). (2013). *Reading comprehension difficulties: Processes and intervention*. Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (2019). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Ekasary, M., Mahmud, M., & Salija, K. (2022). The use of learners' background knowledge to connect to text on reading comprehension. *Pinisi Journal of Art, Humanity, and Social Studies*, 2(1), 48-53.
- Goddard, C. (2021). *Minimal English for a Global World: Improved Communication Using Fewer Words*. Springer International Publishing.
- Grabe, W. (2009). *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice*. Cambridge University Press.
- Grellet, F. (1981). *Developing Reading Skills*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hasibuan, A., Irmayana, A., & Siregar, O. (2021). An Analysis of Students' Difficulties in Reading Comprehension of Descriptive Text At The Eighth Grade of SMP Negeri 2 Barumun Tengah In 2020/2021 Academic Year. *Journal Education and Development*, 9(3), 605-608.
- Johnson, A. P. (2008). *Teaching reading and writing: A guidebook for tutoring and remediating students*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kilpatrick, D. A., Joshi, R. M., & Wagner, R. K. (2019). *Reading Development and Difficulties: Bridging the Gap Between Research and Practice*. Springer International Publishing.
- Kliegman, R. M., Behrman, R. E., Jenson, H. B., & Stanton, B. M. (2007). *Nelson textbook of pediatrics e-book*. Elsevier Health Sciences.
- Lapp, D., Moss, B., Grant, M., Johnson, K. (2017). *Dive Into Close Reading: Strategies for Your K-2 Classroom*. Amerika Serikat: Shell Education.
- Lemov, D., Driggs, C., & Woolway, E. (2016). *Reading reconsidered: A practical guide to rigorous literacy instruction*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mason, J. (2017). *Qualitative Researching*. SAGE Publications.
- Miller, D. (2023). *Reading with meaning: Teaching comprehension in the primary grades*. Routledge.
- Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Cambridge University Press.

- Prayudha S., J. (2023). Analysis of Students' Difficulty in Understanding English Proverbs. *Teaching English as Foreign Language, Literature and Linguistics*, 3(1), 31–39. <https://doi.org/10.33752/teflics.v3i1.4097>
- Rahmah, N., Tahir, M., & Talib, A. (2023). The Effect of Vocabulary Mastery on Students' Reading Comprehension. *International Journal of Business, English, and Communication (IJoBEC)*, 1(1), 36–44.
- Rasinski, T., Rupley, W., Paige, D., & Young, C. (2021). *Reading Fluency*. MDPI AG.
- Rusgandi, M. A. (2023). Reading Strategies in Enhancing Students' Reading Comprehension: Are They Still Relevant?. *IJET (Indonesian Journal of English Teaching)*, 12(1), 57-72.
- Smith, R., Snow, P., Serry, T., & Hammond, L. (2021). The role of background knowledge in reading comprehension: A critical review. *Reading Psychology*, 42(3), 214-240.
- Taylor, B. M., Graves, M. F., & van den Broek, P. W. (2000). *Reading for Meaning: Fostering Comprehension in the Middle Grades*. Teachers College Press.
- Vaughn, S., Boardman, A., & Klingner, J. K. (2024). *Teaching reading comprehension to students with learning difficulties*. Guilford Publications.