

Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Reading to Students with Low English Proficiency at Telkom Schools Medan

¹⁾Ika Marlina Gultom, ²⁾Sri Ninta Tarigan, ³⁾Elvira Rosyida M.R

^{1),2)}Universitas Prima Indonesia, ³⁾Universitas Negeri Malang

Email: srinintatarigan@unprimdn.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study examines the difficulties faced by English teachers at Telkom Schools Medan in teaching reading to students with low English proficiency. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. Participants included junior and senior high school English teachers selected through purposive sampling based on their teaching experience and involvement in reading instruction. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and categories related to teaching challenges and strategies. The findings reveal five major challenges: limited student vocabulary, poor understanding of text structure, difficulties in making inferences, low motivation, and lack of instructional resources. Teachers responded with strategies such as scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and the use of multimodal materials. However, institutional limitations often hindered their efforts. These results underscore the need for enhanced teacher training, increased access to teaching resources, and stronger institutional support. The study's implications extend to curriculum planners and educational policymakers, highlighting the importance of systemic support for teachers working with low-proficiency learners in EFL contexts.

Keywords: *reading instruction, low English proficiency, EFL classroom, difficulties faced by teachers, reading techniques, Telkom Schools Medan*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a key component of learning English since it opens the door to vocabulary acquisition, language comprehension, and improved academic performance in general. Grabe and Stoller (2013) assert that reading is a cognitive process that includes decoding, comprehension, and critical interpretation in addition to being a receptive skill. Reading instruction is even more important in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), as it frequently serves as the main way that students are exposed to the language.

Reading plays a pivotal role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms by fostering vocabulary acquisition, textual understanding, and cognitive development (Grabe & Stoller, 2013; Nation, 2022). However, students with low English proficiency often face challenges in decoding vocabulary, understanding sentence structures, and making inferences, which significantly hinder their reading comprehension (Kispal, 2008; Brown, 2001). These linguistic limitations are further compounded by affective factors such as low motivation and anxiety, as explained by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982), and by contextual barriers including insufficient teaching time and resources (Garton & Copland, 2019).

In Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language with limited real-life exposure, these challenges are particularly pronounced. Students entering secondary education frequently lack the foundational skills necessary to meet the increasing academic demands of English literacy (Widiati & Cahyono, 2006). The situation is even more complex in institutions like Telkom Schools Medan, which aim to integrate educational innovation and the national Kurikulum Merdeka curriculum. The curriculum emphasizes student-centered learning and higher-order thinking, which are difficult to achieve when learners are still struggling with basic comprehension (Kemendikbudristek, 2022).

Teachers are thus at the forefront of navigating this instructional gap. They must tailor pedagogical strategies to accommodate diverse proficiency levels, often without sufficient support or training. While some research has explored learners' reading difficulties or general teaching challenges in EFL contexts, limited attention has been given to the specific experiences of teachers instructing low-proficiency readers in tech-oriented private schools like Telkom Schools Medan.

Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the multifaceted challenges faced by English teachers in teaching reading to students with low English proficiency at Telkom Schools Medan. It aims to (1) identify the primary obstacles teachers encounter, (2) explore the linguistic, affective, and institutional factors that contribute to these challenges, and (3) examine the strategies employed by teachers to address them in practice. By gaining a deeper understanding of these issues, the study seeks to inform the development of more effective teacher preparation programs, support systems, and pedagogical frameworks for EFL reading

instruction in similar contexts.

This research focuses on the experiences and perceptions of English teachers at Telkom Schools Medan in teaching reading to junior and/or senior high school students with low English proficiency. The study is limited to the challenges they encounter during reading instruction, the factors that contribute to these challenges, and the pedagogical strategies used to address them. This research adopts a qualitative approach, emphasizing in-depth understanding rather than generalization, and data will be collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis involving selected teachers at the school.

Reading is a key component of learning English since it opens the door to vocabulary acquisition, language comprehension, and improved academic performance in general. Grabe and Stoller (2013) assert that reading is a cognitive process that includes decoding, comprehension, and critical interpretation in addition to being a receptive skill. Reading instruction is even more important in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), as it frequently serves as the main way that students are exposed to the language.

However, there are particular difficulties when teaching reading in EFL classes, particularly to students who don't speak English well. Even simple texts are difficult for students with poor grammar comprehension, a small vocabulary, and low motivation (Nation, 2022). Due to their incapacity to decipher intricate structures, identify key ideas, or draw conclusions, these students frequently struggle to understand texts (Kispaal, 2008). In secondary education settings, like Telkom Schools Medan, where English language proficiency requirements rise while students' foundational skills may not improve, this problem becomes even more pressing.

In order to adapt reading instruction to the various needs of students, teachers are essential. However, many EFL teachers say they have trouble modifying materials, choosing suitable reading techniques, running mixed-ability classrooms, and overcoming students' emotional obstacles, like anxiety or lack of confidence (Rahmani & Sadeghi, 2022). Furthermore, teachers' capacity to carry out successful reading instruction is frequently hampered by a lack of adequate time, instructional materials, and professional development (Garton & Copland, 2019).

Disparities in language exposure and proficiency levels are typical in Indonesia, where English is taught as a foreign language from early childhood through senior high school. As a private school that prioritises innovation and technology, Telkom Schools Medan must simultaneously support English literacy while serving students from a variety of linguistic backgrounds. Teachers might not have the resources or know-how to adequately address the needs of students with low English proficiency, who need more support and differentiated instruction (Zhao & Wang, 2021).

Additionally, a more student-centered approach and the incorporation of higher-order thinking skills are required by the transition to the Kurikulum Merdeka (Indonesian Freedom Curriculum) (Kemendikbudristek, 2022). This makes teaching low-proficiency readers even more difficult because they may have trouble with critical thinking and text interpretation in addition to basic comprehension.

Examining the practical difficulties faced by English teachers when instructing students with low English proficiency in reading is crucial in light of these facts. In schools like Telkom Medan, which are dedicated to educational innovation but must operate within the limitations of student readiness and classroom dynamics, an understanding of these challenges can help with curriculum development, teacher training, and policy-making.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the unique pedagogical, linguistic, and affective difficulties faced by English teachers at Telkom Schools Medan and to pinpoint potential solutions that could improve the efficiency of teaching reading to students with low proficiency.

Teachers often face various challenges in teaching reading, particularly when working with students who have low English proficiency. One of the main obstacles is students' limited vocabulary. Nation (2022) asserts that a minimum of 3,000 to 5,000 word families is required for basic comprehension of English texts. Students with low vocabulary mastery are unable to decode words or infer meaning, leading to frustration and disengagement.

Another challenge lies in students' limited knowledge of grammar and sentence structure. According to Brown (2001), syntactic understanding is crucial for recognizing

sentence relationships, identifying main ideas, and understanding paragraph flow. Students with poor grammar competence struggle to make sense of complex or compound sentences, which impairs their comprehension.

In addition, low-proficiency learners often lack reading strategies. As Kispal (2008) notes, students who are not taught to make predictions, summarize, or make inferences are less likely to comprehend texts deeply. Teachers must therefore explicitly teach and model these strategies, which can be time-consuming and difficult in large or mixed-ability classes.

Affective factors also pose significant challenges. Learners with low proficiency may experience anxiety, low motivation, or lack of confidence when asked to read in English. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) suggests that emotional barriers such as fear and frustration block language input from becoming intake. Teachers must therefore manage classroom dynamics sensitively to reduce anxiety and create a supportive environment.

Low English proficiency refers to learners who have limited control over English language skills, particularly in vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. According to CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), students at A1 or A2 levels typically understand only basic phrases, cannot follow longer written texts, and struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary (Council of Europe, 2020). These learners require more instructional support and differentiated teaching to meet their reading needs.

In the Indonesian context, English is taught as a foreign language, and exposure outside the classroom is minimal. This creates a gap between curriculum expectations and student abilities. As observed by Widiati and Cahyono (2006), many Indonesian students reach junior or senior high school with poor reading habits and a limited vocabulary base, making academic reading in English especially difficult.

Effective teachers develop strategies to accommodate students' low proficiency. One common approach is scaffolding, in which teachers provide temporary support to help students complete reading tasks they cannot yet perform independently (Vygotsky, 1978). This includes using pre-reading activities such as vocabulary pre-teaching, guided reading, and graphic organizers to enhance comprehension.

Differentiated instruction is another essential strategy. Tomlinson (2014) explains that teachers can differentiate by content, process, or product, allowing students to access the same learning goals through varying levels of support. For instance, providing simplified texts or using bilingual glossaries can make reading more accessible to low-level learners.

Incorporating multimodal texts—such as visuals, videos, or audio readings—has also been shown to support reading comprehension. Mayer (2009) proposes that dual coding (verbal + visual input) enhances understanding, particularly for struggling learners. Digital storytelling or interactive reading platforms can engage students and support meaning-making in ways that traditional texts cannot.

Moreover, teacher collaboration and continuous professional development play a role in overcoming instructional challenges. Garton and Copland (2019) highlight the importance of teacher training in addressing diverse classroom needs, especially in multilingual and low-resource contexts. Sharing best practices and reflecting on teaching experiences help educators refine their approaches to reading instruction.

Several studies have addressed the topic of reading instruction for low-proficiency learners. Rahmani and Sadeghi (2022) conducted a study on Iranian EFL learners and found that the major obstacles to reading were related to vocabulary, motivation, and unfamiliar text structures. In the Indonesian context, research by Isnaini (2021) revealed that many junior high school students struggled with reading comprehension due to a lack of vocabulary and the absence of reading strategies taught in class.

Furthermore, Nugroho and Mutiaraningrum (2020) examined EFL teachers' perceptions of reading instruction and found that time constraints, curriculum demands, and large class sizes were key barriers to effective reading instruction. These findings suggest that the issue is both learner-based and system-based, requiring multifaceted solutions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive method using a case study approach. The goal was to gain an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced by English teachers in teaching reading to students with low English proficiency at Telkom Schools Medan. This approach allowed the researcher to explore real-life teaching contexts and gather rich,

contextualized data.

Participants were English teachers from both junior and senior high school levels at Telkom Schools Medan. They were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (1) a minimum of two years of experience teaching English, (2) active involvement in teaching reading, and (3) willingness to participate in interviews and classroom observations. This selection ensured that participants had sufficient pedagogical experience and insight into the study's focus.

The study was conducted at Telkom Schools Medan, a private educational institution known for its integration of technology and innovation within the Indonesian national curriculum. The research was carried out during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year, specifically from February to April 2025. This timeline coincided with a full instructional cycle of English reading classes, providing a comprehensive view of teachers' practices and challenges.

To ensure data richness and credibility, three instruments were employed:

- a. Interviews – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six teachers to explore their perceptions, experiences, and coping strategies related to teaching reading to low-proficiency students
- b. Classroom Observations – Observations focused on teachers' instructional methods, student engagement, and classroom interactions during reading lessons.
- c. Document Analysis – Teachers' lesson plans, reading worksheets, and assessment records were reviewed to provide contextual support and validate observed practices.

The study followed ethical guidelines to protect participants' rights. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their identities were anonymized using pseudonyms. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could withdraw at any time. All collected data were stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved transcribing interviews, coding data, and identifying recurring themes related to instructional challenges and coping strategies. Triangulation was applied by cross-verifying data from interviews, observations, and document analysis to ensure trustworthiness.

Researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing were also employed to reduce potential bias and enhance the reliability of findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the challenges faced by English teachers at Telkom Schools Medan in teaching reading to students with low English proficiency. Data gathered through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis revealed a range of pedagogical, linguistic, and contextual issues. Thematic analysis identified five main challenges, each intertwined with teachers' instructional efforts and their broader educational environment. The discussion below presents these findings narratively and connects them to relevant theories and previous research.

One of the most prominent difficulties identified by teachers was students' limited vocabulary. This linguistic gap significantly hindered reading comprehension. Teachers frequently expressed concern that many students were unfamiliar even with basic English words, making it difficult for them to make sense of texts independently. During observations, students were seen relying heavily on the teacher's translations or dictionary assistance, which interrupted the flow of reading and reduced overall comprehension. This finding supports Nation's (2022) claim that a core vocabulary of 3,000 to 5,000 word families is essential for basic understanding of texts. In this case, students' restricted lexical knowledge became a foundational barrier that not only impeded decoding but also discouraged autonomous reading behaviors.

Another challenge stemmed from students' weak understanding of text structure, particularly when working with narrative texts. Teachers reported that students were unable to identify elements such as orientation, complication, and resolution—key components necessary to understand the flow and logic of a story. The document analysis of students' reading tasks and worksheets showed that many students responded with fragmented or incomplete ideas, revealing confusion about narrative sequencing. This difficulty aligns with Brown's (2001) emphasis on syntactic and discourse-level competence, both of which are vital for reading extended texts. The lack of structured reading strategies in classroom practices further compounded the issue.

Beyond structural comprehension, many students demonstrated difficulty in making inferences and interpreting implied meanings within texts. According to several teachers, learners could answer factual or literal questions but struggled with questions requiring deeper interpretation or synthesis. This observation reflects Kispal's (2008) argument that inferencing is a crucial but often underdeveloped skill in EFL contexts. In one observed lesson, students hesitated when asked to predict outcomes or explain characters' motivations, relying instead on copying phrases directly from the text. Teachers noted that explicit instruction in reading strategies—such as prediction, summarization, and visualization—was limited by class time and curriculum demands.

Affective barriers also surfaced as a major concern. Teachers consistently described students as unmotivated, anxious, and disengaged during reading lessons. Many learners perceived English texts as too difficult or irrelevant to their daily lives. Observations showed students remaining passive, avoiding participation, and sometimes expressing frustration. These behaviors are consistent with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that negative emotions like anxiety can block language acquisition by reducing the intake of comprehensible input. Teachers attempted to build motivation through storytelling, visual aids, and simplified texts, but the impact was limited without consistent institutional support.

Finally, the study revealed contextual challenges related to the availability of instructional time and resources. Teachers cited insufficient reading materials, a lack of level-appropriate texts, and minimal access to technology. Large class sizes and limited periods for English lessons further constrained their ability to provide individualized support. One teacher explained that while differentiated instruction and multimodal resources would be ideal, the school lacked sufficient funding and infrastructure to implement these strategies. This finding echoes Garton and Copland's (2019) conclusion that structural limitations often restrict teachers' capacity to meet diverse learners' needs in EFL settings.

Despite these difficulties, the data also revealed that teachers employed several strategies in response. Scaffolding techniques, such as vocabulary pre-teaching and guided reading, were commonly used to bridge students' understanding. Some teachers also experimented with multimodal texts—videos, images, and audio recordings—to engage learners and reinforce meaning. These strategies reflect theoretical principles such as

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, in which learners perform better with appropriate support. However, the implementation of these techniques varied depending on teacher experience, access to resources, and administrative support.

In conclusion, the challenges faced by English teachers in this study were multi-dimensional—ranging from students' linguistic deficits and emotional resistance to systemic barriers within the school environment. While teachers demonstrated awareness of effective pedagogical strategies, their capacity to apply them consistently was shaped by broader institutional conditions. These findings highlight the importance of aligning curriculum design, teacher training, and school resources to better support reading development among low-proficiency EFL learners.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that English teachers at Telkom Schools Medan face multifaceted challenges in teaching reading to students with low English proficiency. These challenges emerged from both internal learner factors and external institutional constraints. Linguistically, students struggled with limited vocabulary, poor text structure recognition, and difficulty in making inferences—core components necessary for effective reading comprehension. Affective issues, such as low motivation and anxiety, further obstructed their learning progress. These problems were compounded by contextual limitations, including restricted instructional time, large class sizes, and inadequate teaching resources.

Despite these obstacles, teachers demonstrated resilience and a proactive mindset. They adopted scaffolding techniques, integrated multimodal materials, and employed various classroom management strategies to maintain engagement and facilitate understanding. However, their efforts were often constrained by systemic factors beyond their control. The findings underscore that the success of reading instruction for low-proficiency learners depends not only on teacher expertise but also on institutional commitment to providing adequate resources, professional development, and curricular flexibility.

Thus, the conclusion drawn from this study is that while pedagogical innovation and teacher dedication are crucial, meaningful improvements in reading instruction for low-proficiency learners require a comprehensive and collaborative approach. Only through

coordinated efforts between teachers, school administrators, and policymakers can lasting and equitable changes be achieved in the EFL classroom.

SUGGESTION

Based on the insights gathered from this study, several recommendations are proposed for various stakeholders involved in English language education.

For teachers, it is essential to continue incorporating scaffolding techniques, visual supports, and interactive approaches tailored to students' proficiency levels. Teachers should consider using bilingual glossaries, simplified texts, and task-based learning to help students engage more meaningfully with reading materials. Moreover, fostering a low-anxiety classroom environment where students feel safe to make mistakes can increase their confidence and willingness to participate.

For school administrators and curriculum planners, the findings highlight the urgent need to allocate more instructional time for reading and provide access to a diverse range of level-appropriate reading materials. Schools should also invest in teacher training programs that focus on differentiated instruction, classroom-based assessment, and the integration of digital tools for language learning. Facilitating collaboration among teachers through peer mentoring and reflective teaching circles can also enhance instructional effectiveness.

For students, the development of positive reading habits must be encouraged both in and out of the classroom. Students should be motivated to explore graded readers, use bilingual dictionaries, and participate in interactive reading activities that align with their interests. Parental involvement and access to reading materials at home can further support independent learning.

Finally, for future researchers, it is recommended to expand this line of inquiry by conducting longitudinal or mixed-method studies across different school settings. Comparative studies between public and private institutions, or urban and rural schools, may yield broader insights into how reading instruction challenges and strategies vary contextually. Exploring student perspectives more deeply could also enrich our understanding of the emotional and cognitive dimensions of reading struggles.

These suggestions aim to support a more holistic and sustainable approach to improving reading instruction for low-proficiency learners in EFL contexts.

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