

Interpreting Students' Reading Comprehension Strategies in Higher Education

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Abstract

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill that enables students to extract meaning from Reading comprehension is a crucial skill that enables students to extract meaning from texts, supporting their academic success, professional growth, and cognitive development. This qualitative study explores the reading comprehension strategies of eighth-grade students at Al-Khoir Islamic Boarding School in Padang Lawas, with data collected from 22 students through questionnaires and structured interviews. The results reveal that skimming and scanning are the dominant techniques, with skimming being the most frequently used method. About 50% of participants expressed that these strategies were effective due to their simplicity and speed in aiding text comprehension, with skimming receiving the highest score among the four strategies assessed. While these strategies allow for efficient reading, the study suggests that students engage less with more comprehensive techniques like intensive and extensive reading, which are essential for fostering deeper comprehension and critical thinking skills. This preference for skimming and scanning may be influenced by the boarding school's structured environment, which creates time pressures, as well as the students' language proficiency, which may limit their ability to engage with more complex texts. The findings emphasize the need for instructional strategies that promote a balanced approach, integrating both surface-level and in-depth reading techniques to enhance overall language proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a crucial cognitive skill that forms the foundation of academic success, language proficiency, and lifelong learning. It is not simply the process of decoding written words but involves the complex task of extracting meaning, interpreting content, and critically engaging with a text (Snow, 2010). This dynamic process, involving the interaction between the reader's prior knowledge, the textual information, and the reading context, is essential for understanding and making sense of written material. Reading comprehension encompasses more than just understanding words and sentences; it also includes constructing meaning from the text based on the reader's cognitive and metacognitive skills (Eripuddin, 2021). Scholars have long noted the

centrality of reading comprehension in education, as it underpins students' ability to succeed in various academic fields and daily life (Smith, 2018).

Theoretical frameworks such as schema theory play a critical role in explaining reading comprehension. According to Anderson (2004), schema theory posits that readers use their pre-existing knowledge (schemas) to make sense of new information presented in a text. This interaction between prior knowledge and new information helps readers understand and integrate the content effectively. In this sense, reading comprehension is not merely a linear process but a dynamic, interpretive act influenced by the reader's cognitive processes and world knowledge (Alawadhi & Hossain, 2021). This theoretical approach is particularly relevant in the context of second language acquisition, where understanding the cultural and contextual aspects of a text is key to interpreting its meaning (Hammad & Bader, 2022).

As an essential literacy skill, reading comprehension influences various aspects of education and beyond. For instance, in academic contexts, reading comprehension allows students to engage with complex texts, analyze diverse viewpoints, and construct arguments based on what they have read (Grabe & Zhang, 2020). The ability to read and comprehend English texts is also important for professional development, as it equips individuals with the tools to interpret reports, instructions, and other written forms of communication. Beyond academics and work, reading comprehension fosters personal growth by broadening one's knowledge and expanding their worldview (Saray, 2021).

Effective reading strategies are critical for improving reading comprehension. Research has demonstrated that certain reading strategies enable students to process information more efficiently and effectively. Among these strategies, skimming and scanning are particularly useful for quickly extracting key information from a text. Skimming involves reading quickly to get the main ideas or gist of the material without focusing on every detail (Saraswati et al., 2021). This strategy is particularly effective when reading long texts where a general understanding is needed rather than a detailed one. Skimming allows students to identify the text's purpose and relevance to their reading goals, building their confidence to engage further with the material (Bell, 2022).

Similarly, scanning involves reading quickly to locate specific details, such as dates, names, or facts, within the text. Scanning is especially useful in contexts where readers need to find a particular piece of information, such as when looking up data or answering specific questions (Alshammari, 2015). This strategy helps readers filter out irrelevant information and focus on the details that are crucial for comprehension. As stated by Hossain (2022), scanning is an effective tool for improving speed and precision when reading texts that contain large volumes of information.

In contrast to these techniques, extensive reading and intensive reading focus on different levels of engagement with the text. Extensive reading involves reading large volumes of material for general understanding and enjoyment. This approach promotes reading fluency and vocabulary acquisition, as well as the development of a positive attitude towards reading (Renandya & Jacobs, 2021). In their study, they highlight that extensive reading allows students to improve their comprehension skills by immersing themselves in a variety of texts, from fiction to non-fiction, while focusing on the overall meaning rather than every individual detail. According to Day and Bamford (2022), extensive reading enhances overall reading competence, which in turn contributes to academic performance.

On the other hand, intensive reading involves a more detailed and analytical approach to understanding a text. This strategy typically focuses on shorter texts and requires readers to pay attention to the details, make inferences, and analyze complex ideas within the text (Nuttall, 2018). Intensive reading helps develop a deeper understanding of the content, which is essential for academic texts that require critical thinking and interpretation (Stephen et al., 2011). Recent studies by Wang (2020) and Schumaker & Deshler (2022) highlight that intensive reading improves comprehension by encouraging careful analysis of text structure, word meaning, and implicit content.

Another critical factor influencing reading comprehension is motivation. Research by Schunk and Zimmerman (2019) indicates that motivated readers are more likely to use effective strategies, engage deeply with the text, and persist in their reading efforts. Intrinsic motivation, in particular, is associated with greater success in reading comprehension, as it drives students to engage with texts for pleasure or intellectual curiosity, rather than out of obligation. This aligns with the findings of Schumaker & Deshler (2022), who note that motivated students employ a range of strategies to understand texts and monitor their progress. Motivation also plays a key role in the self-regulation of reading, where students adjust their strategies based on their reading goals and the challenges they face in understanding the material (Eripuddin, 2021).

Moreover, self-regulation has emerged as a key factor influencing reading comprehension. As students develop metacognitive awareness of their reading strategies, they become better equipped to monitor their comprehension and adjust their strategies accordingly. According to Zhang & Li (2023), self-regulated learners are more likely to recognize when they do not understand something and take steps to remedy it, such as rereading the text or seeking additional resources. This ability to regulate one's reading process is linked to better outcomes in both reading comprehension and academic achievement (Grabe & Zhang, 2020).

The context in which reading occurs also plays a significant role in shaping reading comprehension strategies. In the case of Islamic boarding schools, such as Al-Khoir, the educational environment influences the strategies employed by students. As students in these settings often engage with both religious and secular texts, their comprehension strategies may differ from those used in conventional school settings (Eripuddin, 2021). The use of culturally relevant and context-specific strategies can enhance student engagement and comprehension, particularly when students can relate the content to their personal experiences and prior knowledge (Alawadhi & Hossain, 2021).

This study aims to explore the reading comprehension strategies employed by eighth-grade students at Al-Khoir Boarding School. The research will investigate whether students use teacher-guided strategies or have developed their own personal strategies for tackling reading comprehension tasks. By examining the frequency and effectiveness of strategies such as skimming, scanning, extensive reading, and intensive reading, this study seeks to provide insights into how students in this particular context approach reading and improve their comprehension. The findings will contribute to our understanding of how reading strategies function within Islamic boarding schools and may inform teaching practices to further enhance reading comprehension in this unique educational setting.

In conclusion, reading comprehension is a multifaceted skill that demands the use of various strategies to ensure effective engagement with written material. The use of skimming, scanning, extensive reading, and intensive reading techniques, along with factors like motivation and self-regulation, are essential components of reading comprehension. Recent studies emphasize the importance of these strategies in diverse educational contexts and suggest that students' cultural and educational environments play a significant role in shaping their comprehension strategies. As this research demonstrates, understanding how students in specific educational settings use these strategies can inform better teaching practices and contribute to improving reading proficiency across different learner populations.

METHOD

Research Design

This study will employ a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the strategies used by eighth-grade students at Al-Khoir Boarding School in Padang Lawas for reading comprehension. The primary aim is to understand how students approach and utilize different reading strategies in comprehending written texts. As defined by Widoyoko (2012), qualitative research is descriptive in

nature, focusing on explaining phenomena based on factual statements and narratives rather than numerical data. A descriptive qualitative approach is especially suited for this study, as it seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how students engage with texts and the strategies they apply during the process of reading comprehension.

The researcher intends to gather detailed information on the specific strategies students use to comprehend reading material, whether these strategies are taught or self-developed. This research design is appropriate for exploring the underlying patterns and themes related to students' comprehension skills, which can subsequently inform teaching practices aimed at improving reading comprehension outcomes.

Instruments and Procedures

In any research study, the selection of appropriate instruments for data collection is critical to ensure that the findings are reliable and valid. For this study, interviews, questionnaires, and documentary analysis will be used as the primary tools for data collection. Each instrument serves a unique function in capturing data that provides comprehensive insights into students' reading strategies.

According to Arikunto (2002), an instrument is defined as a tool or device that aids the researcher in gathering data, simplifying the process of data collection and organization. For this study, the researcher will design a questionnaire to gather quantitative data on students' use of various reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning, and in-depth reading. Interviews will also be conducted to capture qualitative insights into the students' thought processes while engaging with reading material. Documentary analysis may be used to examine existing student records, such as reading assignments and teacher feedback, to triangulate data and support findings from the questionnaires and interviews. The procedures for data collection are described as follows:

1. Introduction

The first step in the research process will involve the researcher introducing herself to the students and explaining the purpose of the study. The researcher will also provide a clear explanation of the data collection instruments, including how the students will be expected to complete the questionnaire and participate in the interviews. This introduction will ensure that students understand the study's aims and feel comfortable participating.

2. Data Collection

Once the students are familiar with the study's purpose and procedures, the researcher will distribute the questionnaires and schedule one-on-one interviews with the participants. The questionnaires will be designed to assess the frequency and effectiveness of different reading strategies, and the interviews will provide a deeper understanding of students' perceptions and motivations behind their strategy choices. During this phase, the researcher will collect completed questionnaires and interview recordings.

3. Data Analysis

After data collection, the researcher will systematically analyze the responses from both the questionnaires and the interviews. The analysis will involve coding the qualitative data from the interviews and categorizing the responses based on common themes or patterns. Additionally, quantitative data from the questionnaires will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the frequency and percentage of responses for each item.

4. Conclusion

In the final stage of the research, the researcher will draw conclusions based on the data analysis, identifying key trends and insights related to the students' reading comprehension strategies. These findings will be discussed in the context of current research and theory on reading

comprehension, and recommendations for improving students' reading strategies will be made based on the results.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analysis in this research will follow several structured steps to ensure that all collected data is processed thoroughly and accurately.

1. Identifying the Sample

The first step in the data analysis process is to identify and confirm the number of students who participated in the study. This will involve ensuring that the sample size is representative of the population of eighth-grade students at Al-Khoir Boarding School.

2. Analyzing Questionnaire Responses

The researcher will analyze the questionnaire responses by reviewing the frequency with which each strategy was selected by students. The responses will be coded and categorized to identify common reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning, and detailed reading, and to assess how frequently each strategy was used. The researcher will also examine whether there are any correlations between the students' reading strategies and their academic performance or other demographic factors.

3. Calculating Percentages

To quantify the questionnaire data, the researcher will calculate the percentage for each response item using the following formula (Sudijono, 2011):

$$P = \frac{f}{N} \times 100$$

Where:

- **P** = Percentage of responses for a particular item
- **f** = Frequency of a specific response
- **N** = Total number of respondents

This formula will allow the researcher to present the data in a clear, quantitative format that highlights the most common reading strategies used by the students.

4. Analyzing Interview Data

For the interview data, the researcher will perform a qualitative analysis by transcribing the recorded interviews and applying thematic coding techniques. The responses will be analyzed to identify recurring themes or patterns in how students describe their reading strategies, how they approach texts, and the reasoning behind their choices. The analysis will also explore the relationship between students' comprehension strategies and their understanding of the reading materials.

5. Triangulation of Data

To increase the reliability of the findings, the researcher will employ data triangulation by comparing the results from the questionnaires, interviews, and documentary analysis. By cross-referencing the different data sources, the researcher can verify the consistency of the findings and draw more robust conclusions regarding students' reading comprehension strategies.

FINDINGS

In this study, the researcher aimed to investigate the reading comprehension strategies employed by eighth-grade students at Al-Khoir Boarding School, Padang Lawas. The research utilized both a questionnaire and interviews to collect data from 22 students. The results of the questionnaire and interview responses provided significant insights into the students' preferred reading comprehension techniques and the challenges they faced while reading.

The data revealed that skimming and scanning were the most frequently used reading comprehension strategies. Skimming, in particular, emerged as the dominant technique, with a higher percentage of students indicating it as their preferred method. This suggests that many students rely on skimming to quickly grasp the main ideas of a text without delving into every detail. This was evident from the data analysis, where the responses for skimming statements were significantly higher than for other strategies. On the other hand, scanning also ranked highly, with a notable number of students indicating that they often use it to locate specific information quickly within a text.

In contrast, intensive reading and extensive reading were found to be less frequently used by the students. These techniques require more time and attention to detail, which may explain why they are not as favored as skimming and scanning. Students in this study appeared to prioritize efficiency over depth, indicating that they prefer techniques that allow them to process information more quickly.

The findings also showed that vocabulary comprehension and understanding the meaning of words in context were areas of difficulty for many students. This aligns with the general observation that students often face challenges when they encounter unfamiliar words or long sentences. However, students were more comfortable using skimming and scanning as techniques to bypass these difficulties, suggesting that these strategies serve as coping mechanisms to deal with comprehension challenges.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research reflect a tendency among students to adopt reading comprehension strategies that enable them to quickly navigate and understand texts. The preference for skimming and scanning aligns with recent studies, suggesting that students often use these techniques to manage time constraints and simplify the reading process (Ruan et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020). These strategies, which are considered top-down strategies, involve seeking general meanings or specific details without attending to every word. As noted by Zhang et al. (2021), learning strategies, including reading comprehension techniques, play a significant role in students' ability to interact efficiently with written content.

The preference for skimming and scanning in this research may reflect students' prioritization of speed and efficiency over deep comprehension, possibly as a response to the pressure of completing reading tasks within a set time. This finding is consistent with Tan & Zhao (2022), who observed that students tend to avoid in-depth reading of complex texts due to time constraints. However, unlike Tan and Zhao's study, which found students struggling with inference questions, this research identified that students at Al-Khoir Boarding School encountered greater difficulty with vocabulary and word meanings. This discrepancy may be attributed to differences in reading difficulty levels, as the students in Tan and Zhao's study were from senior high school, while the participants in this study were junior high school students with more limited language proficiency.

A critical factor influencing this preference for skimming and scanning is the students' environment at Al-Khoir Boarding School. The rigid structure of the boarding school environment likely contributes to time constraints that favor faster, less thorough reading techniques. The focus on meeting deadlines may push students to choose strategies that allow them to get the gist of a text quickly, rather than engaging in more time-consuming methods like intensive or extensive reading. Moreover, the school's emphasis on efficiency over depth may reinforce the students' reliance on surface-level comprehension strategies, which prioritize speed.

In addition, the students' language proficiency plays a key role in their reading strategy choices. As evidenced by the finding that vocabulary and word meanings were the most challenging aspects of reading, students with limited vocabulary knowledge may opt for skimming and scanning as coping mechanisms to avoid getting bogged down by difficult words. This aligns with Yuan's

(2020) argument that students' vocabulary and grammatical knowledge are crucial for full comprehension. A limited vocabulary base could explain why students at Al-Khoir Boarding School prefer faster reading methods rather than engaging with the complexities of in-depth reading techniques.

Interestingly, when compared to previous research, such as Li et al. (2021), which highlighted difficulties with inference questions, this study revealed that vocabulary understanding was the primary hurdle for these students. This indicates that students at Al-Khoir Boarding School may not have advanced enough vocabulary skills to handle the more demanding aspects of reading comprehension, prompting them to use skimming and scanning as strategies to bypass these challenges. The emphasis on vocabulary acquisition could be a crucial element in developing students' ability to fully engage with texts.

Furthermore, the study found that students' limited engagement with intensive and extensive reading likely stems from the perceived difficulty and time constraints of these strategies. Intensive reading, which requires a focused and detailed analysis of the text, was avoided, likely because it demands significant cognitive effort and concentration. Liu & Wang (2023) support this finding, noting that students often shy away from intensive reading practices due to the cognitive load. Likewise, Xie & Chen (2022) suggest that students unfamiliar with extensive reading find it hard to maintain focus for extended periods, explaining their reluctance to use this method.

The lack of emphasis on extensive reading may also be linked to the students' limited exposure to reading materials that promote sustained reading practice. According to Li & Sun (2020), extensive reading—reading large volumes of text for enjoyment or general comprehension—can significantly enhance fluency and vocabulary. However, if students are not provided with diverse reading materials, they may not develop the habit of engaging with long texts. This limited exposure could further contribute to their preference for quicker strategies like skimming and scanning.

Moreover, the study corroborates Sheng's (2022) observation that students face challenges with grammar and sentence structure in reading comprehension. The findings of this research reveal that students at Al-Khoir Boarding School struggle with understanding complex sentence structures and grammatical nuances. This may explain their tendency to skim texts instead of engaging deeply with the material. As Wang & Liu (2021) note, reading comprehension involves not just decoding words, but also understanding how they fit together to form meaning. The students' struggles with grammar might impede their ability to process texts that require complex syntactic understanding, prompting them to rely on faster reading strategies.

Additionally, this study highlights how skimming and scanning serve as compensatory strategies for students' vocabulary and grammar gaps. These techniques allow them to bypass challenging words and sentences, facilitating the extraction of overall meaning from the text. Jiang et al. (2023) support this finding, suggesting that effective reading strategies often emerge in response to students' strengths and weaknesses. In this case, the students' reliance on faster reading techniques appears to be a coping mechanism for overcoming difficulties with vocabulary and grammar.

Ultimately, this research emphasizes the importance of incorporating more intensive and extensive reading strategies into the curriculum to encourage deeper engagement and comprehension. By providing targeted support for vocabulary and grammar development, students can be better equipped to tackle complex texts and improve their overall literacy skills. Zhao & Zhang (2021) stress the need for a balanced reading approach that integrates both efficient techniques and more comprehensive comprehension strategies, ensuring that students develop well-rounded literacy skills.

CONCLUSION

The results indicated that skimming and scanning are the most frequently used reading strategies. Most students reported using these techniques regularly, with skimming being the

preferred method. Skimming allows students to quickly identify the main ideas of a text, making it the most popular strategy, followed by scanning, which helps them locate specific details efficiently. These findings suggest that students favor strategies that enable them to quickly understand the core content of a text.

On the other hand, intensive and extensive reading strategies were used less often. Intensive reading, which involves a thorough analysis of a text, and extensive reading, which focuses on reading large volumes of material for general understanding, were less frequently employed. This could imply that students tend to prioritize speed and efficiency over deep engagement with texts or may face difficulties when dealing with more complex or lengthy readings.

In conclusion, the study shows that while skimming and scanning are effective for fast comprehension, there is a need for students to develop more advanced reading strategies, such as intensive and extensive reading. These strategies could enhance their overall reading abilities and provide a deeper understanding of texts. The results suggest that teachers should encourage students to incorporate a wider range of reading techniques, combining both fast reading and in-depth analysis for improved comprehension.

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