

Assessing the Level of the Students' Reading Comprehension Abilities and Their Difficulties at SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan

Gloria Febriyanti Hutagaol
hutagaolgloria21@gmail.com
Universitas Prima Indonesia

Yenita Br Sembiring
yenitasembiring@unprimdn.ac.id
Universitas Prima Indonesia

Ira Maria Fran Lumbanbatu
ira.lumbanbatu.fs@um.ac.id
Universitas Negeri Malang

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess the level of students' reading ability in understanding recount text and their difficulties. This study used a qualitative descriptive method. This research was conducted at SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan. The sample of this study was 29 students in grade IX-3. This study used test and interview instruments. The researcher gave a test with 10 multiple-choice questions covered by several indicators, namely identifying the main idea, the purpose of the text, the language feature, the generic structure, and identifying specific information. After obtaining data from the reading test, the researcher analyzed the data by calculating the students' scores on the test that had been given to each class. Then the researcher categorized the students' scores on the test based on their ability level. The results of this study showed that students' ability to read texts was categorized as good with a mean score of 67.9%. A total of 15 students scored in the good level category, 7 students obtained scores in the fair category, and 7 students achieved the lowest score categorized in the poor level. The low score of students was caused by the lack of understanding in reading recount texts and the limited vocabulary of students.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension; Recount Text; Students' Difficulties

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill in learning English, alongside listening, speaking, and writing. Among these, reading plays a crucial role in knowledge acquisition, comprehension, and overall language development. Strong reading skills enable students to access information, improve their vocabulary, and enhance their critical thinking abilities. However, reading comprehension remains a significant challenge for many students, particularly when engaging with specific text types such as recount texts. These texts require students to recognize main ideas, understand text structures, and extract specific details, which can be difficult without the necessary skills and strategies.

Comprehending a text involves not only recognizing words but also constructing meaning from them. Moreillon (2018) emphasizes that reading is an active process where the brain interprets the meaning of words, phrases, and sentences. However, students often struggle with reading comprehension due to limited vocabulary, poor analytical skills, and insufficient reading strategies. In many cases, they rely on word-for-word translation rather than understanding the overall context of the text. This results in confusion, difficulty answering comprehension questions, and a lack of confidence in reading English materials.

At SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan, students in grade IX-3 have shown varying levels of reading comprehension ability. Based on their daily test scores, which range from 40 to 70, it is evident that many students face difficulties in understanding English texts. Some struggle to identify main ideas, while others have trouble recognizing specific details and the structure of a text. Moreover, students often encounter unfamiliar words, making it difficult for them to grasp the meaning of a passage. These challenges hinder their performance in reading comprehension tests and affect their overall learning experience.

One of the primary reasons for students' struggles in reading comprehension is their limited vocabulary. Many students do not possess a strong foundation in English vocabulary, which makes it difficult for them to understand the meaning of texts. When encountering unfamiliar words, they often rely on translation rather than inferring meaning from context. This habit slows down their reading process and makes it harder for them to answer comprehension questions accurately. Additionally, pronunciation difficulties further contribute to their struggles, as they find it challenging to recognize words they may have encountered before.

Another significant factor affecting students' reading comprehension is their lack of interest and motivation. Some students find reading long passages tedious and disengaging, leading to a lack of focus and effort in understanding the text. When students do not find reading enjoyable, they are less likely to develop strong reading habits, which further affects their comprehension skills. Time constraints during tests also add to their difficulties, as students often feel pressured to read quickly without fully understanding the text.

Previous research has identified similar challenges among students in reading comprehension. Satriani (2018) found that students struggle with comprehension due to a lack of motivation, inadequate reading strategies, and insufficient background knowledge. Similarly, Hutagalung et al. (2019) revealed that students have difficulties with recount texts due to their limited vocabulary and poor reading techniques. These studies emphasize the need for effective teaching strategies to help students overcome these obstacles and improve their reading skills.

Recount texts, in particular, present unique challenges for students. A recount text is a type of writing that narrates past experiences, typically structured with an

orientation, a sequence of events, and a conclusion. To comprehend these texts effectively, students must recognize key details, understand the sequence of events, and identify the writer's purpose. However, many students struggle with these aspects, leading to poor performance in reading comprehension assessments. Without proper guidance, students may find it difficult to differentiate recount texts from other text types, further complicating their understanding.

Given these challenges, it is essential to assess students' reading comprehension abilities and identify the specific difficulties they face. By understanding the factors that hinder their comprehension, educators can develop effective teaching strategies to enhance students' reading skills. Providing targeted vocabulary instruction, promoting active reading strategies, and incorporating engaging reading materials can help students build confidence in their reading abilities. Additionally, using differentiated instruction approaches can address the diverse proficiency levels among students and provide them with personalized support.

This study aims to evaluate the reading comprehension abilities of grade IX-3 students at SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan. It seeks to determine the level of students' comprehension and identify the specific difficulties they face when understanding recount texts. The findings of this research will provide valuable insights into students' reading challenges and suggest strategies to improve their reading skills.

The significance of this study extends to multiple stakeholders. For students, the findings will highlight areas of improvement and provide strategies to enhance their reading comprehension. By improving their ability to understand texts, students can develop greater confidence in reading and communication. For teachers, this research will offer insights into the common difficulties students face, allowing them to implement more effective teaching methods. Additionally, the study will serve as a valuable reference for future researchers interested in exploring reading comprehension challenges and potential solutions.

Improving students' reading comprehension is crucial for their overall academic success. Reading skills are not only essential for learning English but also for understanding other subjects that require critical reading and analysis. Strengthening students' reading abilities will help them perform better in exams, engage more actively in classroom discussions, and develop a lifelong habit of reading. Educators must focus on providing meaningful learning experiences that foster students' interest in reading and equip them with the necessary skills to comprehend different types of texts.

In conclusion, reading comprehension is a vital skill that significantly impacts students' academic performance and language development. However, many students face challenges in understanding English texts, particularly recount texts, due to limited vocabulary, lack of motivation, and poor reading strategies. This study aims to assess students' reading comprehension levels and identify their difficulties, with the goal of developing effective strategies to enhance their reading

skills. The findings will contribute to improving English education at SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan and provide valuable recommendations for teachers and future researchers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Related Study

Several studies have explored students' difficulties in reading comprehension and the factors affecting their performance. Satriani (2018) conducted research on reading comprehension challenges among university students, identifying lack of motivation, insufficient reading strategies, and limited prior knowledge as major obstacles. Similarly, Hutagalung et al. (2019) analyzed students' difficulties in comprehending recount texts and found that vocabulary mastery, text structure recognition, and engagement in reading activities significantly influenced reading proficiency.

Furthermore, a study by Malinda et al. (2022) examined reading comprehension issues among junior high school students, emphasizing the need for improved instructional methods to support struggling readers. Their findings highlight the importance of interactive reading activities, differentiated instruction, and vocabulary-building exercises to enhance comprehension skills.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a crucial skill in English learning that involves understanding, analyzing, and interpreting written texts. Moreillon (2018) states that reading is not just about recognizing words but actively constructing meaning from texts. It requires cognitive processing, where the reader's brain deciphers words, connects them to prior knowledge, and derives meaning from sentences and paragraphs. Harmer (2018) further explains that reading is an interaction between the reader and the text, where comprehension occurs through the integration of linguistic knowledge and contextual understanding.

In the context of English learning, reading comprehension is essential for academic success. Walker (2000) highlights that effective reading comprehension allows students to extract information, develop critical thinking skills, and enhance their overall language proficiency. However, many students face difficulties in reading comprehension due to several factors, including a lack of vocabulary knowledge, difficulty understanding text structures, and poor reading strategies. These challenges are particularly evident when students engage with specific text types such as recount texts.

Recount Texts in English Learning

Recount texts are a specific genre of English writing that narrates past events in chronological order. Anderson (1997) defines recount texts as texts that retell experiences, events, or activities that have happened in the past, typically structured into three main parts: orientation, sequence of events, and reorientation or conclusion. The purpose of recount texts is to inform or entertain the reader by providing a detailed account of past occurrences. Unlike narrative texts, which often include conflicts and resolutions, recount texts focus solely on reporting events as they occurred.

The structure of a recount text plays a significant role in comprehension. Students must be able to identify the main idea, recognize specific details, and understand the chronological sequence of events. Additionally, recount texts use specific language features such as past tense verbs, time connectors (e.g., then, after that, finally), and descriptive details. Many students struggle with these aspects, making it difficult for them to fully grasp the meaning of the text.

Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

Students encounter several challenges when reading and understanding texts, particularly recount texts. One of the biggest barriers to reading comprehension is limited vocabulary knowledge. Many students struggle to understand key words and phrases, which leads to confusion and difficulty in answering comprehension questions. Without a strong vocabulary foundation, students find it challenging to grasp the meaning of a text, making reading a frustrating experience. Hutagalung et al. (2019) found that students with poor vocabulary knowledge tend to perform poorly in reading assessments, as they are unable to connect unfamiliar words to prior knowledge or deduce their meanings from context. Another major challenge is understanding text structure. Recognizing the structure of a recount text is essential for comprehension, yet many students struggle to distinguish between the orientation, sequence of events, and conclusion. This affects their ability to identify main ideas and follow the logical flow of the text. When students are unable to break down the structure, they may miss key details, leading to misinterpretation and incorrect responses in reading assessments.

Lack of interest and motivation is another significant factor that hinders reading comprehension. Some students are not motivated to read, especially when faced with long texts that require focused attention. As a result, they do not engage actively with the material, leading to poor comprehension and low test scores. Satriani (2018) suggests that motivation plays a key role in successful reading comprehension, and students who lack interest often struggle with reading tasks. When students find reading to be boring or difficult, they are less likely to practice and improve their skills, further exacerbating their difficulties. In addition, many students adopt translation-based reading habits, where they rely on word-for-word translation instead of understanding the overall meaning of a text. This habit slows

down their reading process and prevents them from grasping the message conveyed in the text. Instead of focusing on context and inference, they get stuck on individual words, leading to fragmented comprehension. Walker (2000) explains that reading comprehension should focus on meaning-making rather than direct translation, as excessive reliance on translation hinders fluency and understanding.

Finally, time management issues further complicate students' reading comprehension abilities. Many students struggle to complete reading tasks within a limited time frame, particularly during tests. When under time pressure, students tend to rush through the text without fully understanding it, leading to incorrect answers and lower performance. Without proper reading strategies, they are unable to manage their time effectively, resulting in incomplete or inaccurate responses. Developing efficient reading techniques, such as skimming and scanning, can help students improve their reading speed and comprehension under timed conditions.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method to assess students' reading comprehension abilities and their difficulties in understanding recount texts. Descriptive research is designed to collect detailed information about existing conditions and provide an in-depth analysis of the issues being studied. Surakhmad (1994) explains that descriptive research systematically involves data collection, classification, analysis, and interpretation to describe the characteristics of a particular phenomenon. In this study, the goal is to evaluate the extent of students' reading comprehension skills and identify the challenges they face when engaging with recount texts. The research was conducted at SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan, with the target population being students of class IX-3 during the academic year 2024-2025. A total of 29 students participated in this study. The sample was selected based on the students' varying levels of English proficiency, ensuring that the research captured a diverse range of reading comprehension abilities.

Instrument and Procedures

To collect data, this study utilized two main instruments: a reading comprehension test and an interview. These instruments were designed to assess students' reading comprehension abilities and identify the specific difficulties they encountered when understanding recount texts. The reading comprehension test was developed to evaluate students' ability to analyze and interpret recount texts. The test consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions, covering key reading indicators such as identifying the main idea (1 question), determining the purpose of the text (2 questions), recognizing language features (1 question), understanding the generic structure of the text (2 questions), and extracting specific information from the text (4 questions). The test was administered in an offline format, where students answered comprehension questions based on a given recount text. To maintain academic

integrity and prevent cheating, the test was conducted using Google Forms and Exampro, a secure exam browser that restricts external access during the test. The total duration of the assessment was 40 minutes.

In addition to the test, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into students' reading comprehension difficulties. These interviews focused on students who scored below 70 on the test, as they were considered to have significant challenges in understanding the text. The interview questions explored various aspects of reading difficulties, including the challenges students faced while reading the recount text, the reasons behind their struggles in answering comprehension questions, and their perceptions of reading in English and their motivation levels. The interviews provided valuable qualitative data that complemented the test results, offering a more comprehensive understanding of students' reading struggles. By combining quantitative test scores with qualitative interview insights, this study aimed to identify the key factors affecting students' reading comprehension and suggest strategies for improvement.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' reading comprehension abilities and challenges. In the quantitative analysis, students' test scores were calculated and categorized into four proficiency levels: Excellent (100%), Good (80-90%), Fair (60-70%), and Poor (<60%). The mean score was determined by summing all students' scores and dividing by the total number of participants. Additionally, the percentage of students in each category was calculated to evaluate the overall reading comprehension performance. This numerical data provided a clear representation of students' reading proficiency and highlighted the distribution of abilities within the class.

For the qualitative analysis, the interview responses were examined using thematic analysis, where recurring patterns and key themes related to students' reading difficulties were identified. The analysis focused on common issues such as vocabulary limitations, lack of reading strategies, and motivation levels, which significantly impacted students' ability to comprehend recount texts. By analyzing these themes, the study aimed to gain deeper insights into the underlying factors affecting students' reading comprehension and provide recommendations for improving their reading skills.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to assess students' reading comprehension abilities and identify the difficulties they faced in understanding recount texts. The findings were gathered from a reading comprehension test and semi-structured interviews conducted with students of SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan, class IX-3. The results

provide an overview of students' performance and highlight the key challenges they encountered during the assessment.

Students' Reading Comprehension Performance

The results of the reading comprehension test revealed varying levels of proficiency among students. The average test score was 67.9%, which falls under the good category. However, performance varied across different levels, with some students excelling while others struggled. The highest score recorded was 90, while the lowest was 30. The distribution of students based on their scores is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Distribution of Students' Reading Comprehension Scores

Score Range	Proficiency Level	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
80 – 90	Good	15	51.7%
60 – 70	Fair	7	24.1%
Below 60	Poor	7	24.1%

The results indicate that while more than half of the students performed well, a significant portion still struggled with reading comprehension, particularly in understanding recount texts.

Challenges in Reading Comprehension

To gain deeper insights into the difficulties students faced, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 students who scored below 70. The interviews revealed several recurring issues that impacted students' reading comprehension. One of the primary challenges was limited vocabulary knowledge, as many students struggled to understand unfamiliar words, making it difficult for them to grasp the overall meaning of the text. This lack of vocabulary knowledge resulted in confusion and incorrect answers. Additionally, students had difficulty identifying key information, particularly in recognizing the main idea and extracting specific details from the text. Many were unable to distinguish between general and essential information needed to answer comprehension questions accurately.

Another common issue was translation-based reading, where students relied on word-for-word translation instead of understanding the overall meaning of the text. This habit slowed down their reading process and led to fragmented comprehension. Some students also reported a lack of interest and motivation, especially when reading long texts, which resulted in disengagement and difficulty in focusing. Furthermore, time constraints were a significant factor, with students struggling to complete the test within the allotted time. Many expressed that they

ran out of time while answering, affecting their ability to read quickly and comprehend efficiently.

Performance Based on Reading Indicators

The test questions were designed to assess students' reading comprehension abilities based on key indicators of understanding recount texts. The results for each indicator are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2. Students' Reading Comprehension Performance Based on Key Indicator

Reading Indicator	Number of Questions	Average Score (%)	Performance Level
Identifying the main idea	1	65.5%	Moderate
Determining the purpose	2	79.3%	Good
Recognizing language features	1	72.4%	Good
Understanding the structure	2	74.1%	Good
Extracting specific details	4	58.6%	Needs Improvement

Based on these results, students performed best in understanding the purpose of the text (79.3%), indicating that they could generally recognize why the recount text was written. They also demonstrated good comprehension of text structure (74.1%) and language features (72.4%), suggesting that they were able to identify past tense verbs and transition words. However, they struggled the most with extracting specific details (58.6%), highlighting a need for further instruction in skimming and scanning techniques to improve their ability to locate important information in texts.

The results of this study indicate that students' reading comprehension abilities at SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan vary significantly. While the mean test score of 67.9% falls within the good category, a considerable number of students still struggle with understanding recount texts. The distribution of scores shows that 51.7% of students performed well, but 24.1% fell into the fair category, and another 24.1% were classified as poor. This suggests that while some students have developed sufficient reading skills, others face difficulties that hinder their comprehension.

One of the major findings from the test results is that students performed well in understanding the purpose of the text (79.3%), the generic structure (74.1%), and

language features (72.4%). This suggests that students have a general understanding of the function of recount texts and the way they are structured. However, their ability to identify the main idea (65.5%) and extract specific information (58.6%) was notably weaker. These findings align with previous studies, such as those by Hutagalung et al. (2019) and Satriani (2018), which identified difficulty in locating key details as a common challenge among students learning to read in English. The difficulty in finding specific information suggests that students lack effective skimming and scanning strategies, which are essential for reading comprehension.

The semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights into the factors affecting students' reading comprehension. The most frequently mentioned difficulty was limited vocabulary, which made it hard for students to understand unfamiliar words and grasp the meaning of the text. This finding supports Walker's (2000) argument that a strong vocabulary foundation is crucial for reading comprehension, as students who struggle with vocabulary tend to have difficulty interpreting the main ideas of a text. Additionally, some students admitted that they translated texts word-for-word, which slowed down their reading process and often led to misunderstandings. This reflects Moreillon's (2018) observation that effective reading requires constructing meaning rather than relying on direct translation.

Another significant issue was lack of motivation and interest in reading. Some students expressed that they found long texts boring, which caused them to lose focus during the test. This aligns with Satriani's (2018) findings that motivation plays a key role in reading comprehension, as disengaged students are less likely to retain information. Furthermore, time constraints were another common issue reported by students. Several students mentioned that they ran out of time while answering questions, indicating that they struggled with reading speed and comprehension efficiency. This suggests that students need more practice in timed reading exercises to develop better reading fluency and test-taking strategies.

The findings of this study highlight the need for targeted interventions to improve students' reading comprehension. First, teachers should focus on vocabulary-building activities, such as contextual word learning and interactive reading exercises, to help students expand their word knowledge. Second, students should be trained in skimming and scanning techniques to improve their ability to locate specific information efficiently. Third, to increase motivation, teachers can incorporate more engaging reading materials, such as stories, digital texts, and interactive discussions, to make reading more enjoyable. Lastly, time management strategies, such as guided timed reading exercises, should be introduced to help students improve their reading speed and comprehension within limited time frames.

In conclusion, this study confirms that while many students at SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan demonstrate a good level of reading comprehension, a significant portion still faces challenges, particularly in understanding key details and managing reading time effectively. These difficulties are largely due to limited vocabulary,

reliance on translation, lack of motivation, and inefficient reading strategies. Addressing these issues through structured reading instruction, engaging materials, and effective time management training can help students develop stronger reading skills and improve their overall English proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed students' reading comprehension abilities at SMP Budi Murni 1 Medan and identified key challenges in understanding recount texts. While the overall performance was categorized as good, with a mean score of 67.9%, a significant number of students struggled, particularly with identifying main ideas (65.5%) and extracting specific information (58.6%). The main difficulties reported were limited vocabulary, reliance on translation, lack of motivation, and time management issues. To address these challenges, teachers should implement vocabulary-building exercises, skimming and scanning techniques, engaging reading materials, and timed reading practice. These strategies can enhance students' reading skills and comprehension efficiency. In conclusion, while students demonstrated moderate to good proficiency, targeted instructional methods are needed to further improve their reading comprehension and overall English proficiency.

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