

Factors Affecting Reading Narrative Ability in SMPN 7 Medan

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ABSTRACT

Reading narrative texts is a vital component of English learning at the junior high school level, as it helps students understand story structures, characters, and moral lessons. However, many students still face difficulties in comprehending these texts effectively. This study aims to identify and analyze the internal and external factors that influence the narrative reading abilities of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Medan. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, the research involved 24 students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews focused on students' reading motivation, interest, vocabulary mastery, teaching strategies, parental support, and the classroom environment. The findings indicate that internal factors, particularly motivation to read and the use of effective learning strategies, significantly influence reading performance. Approximately 70% of students with high reading motivation and strategic reading habits showed better comprehension of narrative elements. External factors such as parental support and a supportive learning environment also played a key role, benefiting around 60% of the participants. Students with access to reading materials at home and school, along with encouragement from parents and teachers, demonstrated stronger reading abilities. These results suggest that improving

narrative reading skills requires a combined focus on nurturing students' internal motivation and strengthening external support systems. The implication of this study is that educators should integrate motivational reading strategies and create literacy-rich environments, while parents are encouraged to actively support reading habits at home to enhance students' overall literacy development.

Keywords: Reading Ability; Narrative Text; Influencing Factors

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension particularly in narrative texts is a foundational skill in English language education, especially at the junior high school level. Narrative texts not only serve to develop students' linguistic abilities but also enrich their cognitive and affective understanding through characters, plot development, setting, conflict, and moral values. However, a significant problem has been identified at SMP Negeri 7 Medan, where many students experience ongoing difficulties in comprehending narrative texts. These challenges are not merely academic shortcomings but reflect deeper issues rooted in both internal and external factors that influence students' reading performance. The urgency of this issue lies in the fact that reading is not only central to language learning but also to students' academic success across all subjects. Despite its importance, there remains a lack of focused research on how these combined factors affect narrative reading ability in the specific context of Indonesian public junior high schools.

Internally, factors such as reading interest, vocabulary mastery, motivation, cognitive engagement, and confidence significantly contribute to students' success in reading comprehension. Studies have shown that students with a high level of motivation and interest in specific reading genres are more likely to engage actively in reading tasks and demonstrate better comprehension (Ihsan, 2019). Additionally, consistent use of effective strategies, such as the Story Mapping Technique, has been associated with improved understanding of narrative structure (Annisa, 2020; Pratiwi, 2021). However, these strategies are often underutilized due to limitations in teaching methods or student engagement.

External factors such as teaching strategies, classroom environment, access to diverse reading materials, and parental support also play a pivotal role in shaping reading comprehension outcomes. Teachers are central to creating a learning environment that encourages critical thinking and active engagement with texts. Research by Wulan Ari and Wijayatiningsih (2021) emphasizes that a supportive environment combined with interactive instructional techniques, including group discussions and open-ended questions, can significantly enhance students' narrative understanding. Aceira (2023) further supports this by highlighting how consistent reading habits are key to strengthening comprehension skills over time.

Preliminary observations at SMP Negeri 7 Medan revealed clear disparities in students' abilities to interpret and analyze narrative texts. While some students were able to identify core elements such as plot and characters, others struggled with more abstract components like theme, moral message, and narrative resolution. This variation indicates a visible gap in reading proficiency that demands systematic exploration and intervention.

The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive approach to analyzing both internal and external factors simultaneously, rather than isolating them. Moreover, this study is among the few that provide focused attention on narrative reading ability within a public school context in Indonesia offering visibility to a problem that is often generalized or underexplored in existing literature. By investigating these factors in a real-world classroom environment, this study aims to provide practical implications for improving reading instruction, guiding teachers, and informing educational policy.

Therefore, this study sets out with several specific research objectives. First, it aims to identify and analyze the various factors that affect the ability of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 7 Medan to read and comprehend narrative texts. Second, the study seeks to examine the dominant internal factors influencing reading comprehension, particularly students' interest in reading and their vocabulary mastery. Third, it explores key external factors, such as the teacher's instructional methods and the overall learning environment, which impact students' ability to understand narrative texts. Through these objectives, the research intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted influences on students' narrative reading abilities and offer valuable insights to support more effective literacy instruction in junior high schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading comprehension, particularly in the context of narrative texts, is a foundational skill in English language learning. It enables students to not only decode written words but also understand story structure, interpret characters' actions, and extract moral values embedded in the text. Numerous studies have examined the various factors that influence students' ability to comprehend narrative texts, which can be broadly categorized into internal factors and external factors.

Internal Factors Influencing Reading Narrative Ability

Internal factors refer to the cognitive and affective components within the learner that impact their reading comprehension. Among the most significant of these is vocabulary knowledge. Ihsan (2019) found that students with a richer vocabulary bank tend to perform better in reading comprehension tasks, as they are more capable of understanding unfamiliar words and interpreting context.

Another important internal factor is reading interest. Students who are genuinely interested in reading, especially those who prefer specific genres such as fiction or folktales, tend to engage more frequently with texts and show greater enthusiasm during reading activities (Pratiwi, 2021). This aligns with the idea that intrinsic motivation can drive students to improve their literacy skills.

Reading habits also play a critical role. According to Aceira (2023), students who read regularly whether in school or at home are more likely to develop fluency and better comprehension of narrative structures such as plot, theme, and conflict. In addition, confidence and motivation are linked to performance. Students who feel confident in their ability to read and retell stories are more likely to engage actively in reading tasks and overcome comprehension difficulties.

Another dimension of internal factors is students' ability to write and retell stories. Those who practice retelling narratives demonstrate a better grasp of story elements and sequencing, which reinforces their comprehension. Imana Annisa (2020) noted that teaching techniques which combine reading and writing tasks help reinforce narrative understanding and build student confidence.

External Factors Influencing Reading Narrative Ability

External factors encompass elements related to the learning environment, instructional approaches, and access to educational resources. Among the most influential is the teacher's role in delivering instruction and providing access to reading materials. Wulan Ari and Wijayatiningsih (2021) emphasized that the teacher's ability to facilitate meaningful reading activities and implement interactive strategies, such as story mapping and group discussions, significantly improves students' engagement and comprehension.

Another external factor is the availability of learning resources and media. Students who have access to a rich variety of reading materials—both printed and digital—are more likely to develop consistent reading habits (Juaeriah, 2021). Furthermore, schools that provide functional libraries and reading corners foster a reading culture that positively influences student motivation and literacy skills.

The classroom learning environment also impacts reading comprehension. A supportive, stimulating, and literacy-rich environment encourages students to explore texts independently and collaboratively. Teaching strategies that involve open-ended questioning, peer interaction, and scaffolded guidance have been found to deepen understanding of narrative texts and promote critical thinking (Aceira, 2023).

Lastly, instructional techniques such as the use of visual aids, graphic organizers, and story maps can enhance the teaching of narrative texts. These techniques support students in identifying main ideas, understanding sequencing, and

analyzing character development, thereby strengthening their overall comprehension (Annisa, 2020; Pratiwi, 2021).

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. The qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing students' ability to read narrative texts at SMPN 7 Medan. Meanwhile, the descriptive design aims to portray the existing phenomena as they are, without manipulating any variables (Creswell, 2014). The research was conducted at SMPN 7 Medan over two days, specifically on April 21 and April 24, 2025. This location was selected based on preliminary observations indicating that many students struggled with comprehending English narrative texts. The subjects of this study were eighth-grade students at SMPN 7 Medan. A purposive sampling technique was used to select students who were considered capable of providing relevant insights into their reading comprehension of narrative texts (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Instrument and Procedure

The main instrument in this study was the researcher themselves (human instrument) (Sugiyono, 2013), who collected, interpreted, and analyzed the data. The researcher was supported by observation sheets and interview guidelines to aid the data collection process. The instruments were applied through three data collection methods: (1) a reading test in which students were given a narrative text followed by comprehension questions; (2) a questionnaire designed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5), containing 20 items categorized into five aspects: motivation, reading interest, vocabulary mastery, reading strategies, and learning environment; and (3) semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring both internal and external factors affecting students' reading abilities. These techniques were selected to obtain rich and detailed data about the context of narrative reading instruction (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the interactive model developed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes three stages: (1) data reduction, involving selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting the raw data; (2) data display, presenting the data in the form of tables, narratives, or graphs to facilitate interpretation; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, in which final conclusions are drawn based on identified patterns or relationships. To ensure the validity of the data, three strategies were applied: technique triangulation (combining data from tests, interviews, and observations), source triangulation

(comparing information from students and teachers), and member checking (confirming the findings with participants to ensure accuracy). Ethical considerations were also maintained throughout the study, including obtaining consent from participants and the school, ensuring the confidentiality of participants' identities, and using the data solely for academic purposes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study reveal the factors influencing Grade VIII students' ability to read narrative texts at SMP Negeri 7 Medan. Data were collected from 24 students using a questionnaire consisting of 15 statements grouped into five key factors: reading motivation, reading interest, vocabulary mastery, reading strategies, and learning environment. In addition, interviews were conducted with five students and one English teacher, and classroom observations were carried out to strengthen the findings.

Factors Affecting the Ability to Read Narrative Texts

Based on the questionnaire results, two broad categories of factors influencing students' ability to read narrative texts were identified: internal and external. Overall, student motivation to read was relatively high. None of the students disagreed or strongly disagreed with statements such as "I read English texts to improve my grades" and "I feel challenged to understand English reading." About 65.43% of students agreed, and 55% strongly agreed. This suggests that student motivation is mostly driven by external factors like assignments and grades, rather than intrinsic motivation.

However, the results for reading interest were different. A majority of students (78.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with reading stories in their free time without teacher instruction. Only 21.4% of students showed a high interest in reading independently, indicating that reading activities are primarily driven by obligation rather than enjoyment.

In terms of vocabulary mastery, more than half of the students (53.6%) agreed that they understood most of the vocabulary in narrative texts, and 3.6% strongly agreed. However, 32.2% admitted they still had difficulties when encountering unfamiliar words. This indicates that while vocabulary mastery is generally adequate, it is not evenly distributed among students.

Reading strategy was one area showing positive development. Around 50% of students agreed that they used skimming techniques to identify the main idea, and 46.4% agreed they summarized texts after reading. Additionally, 46.4% strongly agreed with the habit of summarizing. However, about 25% of students had not yet applied these strategies effectively, showing a need for further instruction in advanced techniques such as scanning and making inferences.

Finally, regarding learning environment factors, most students (86%) felt their teachers frequently assigned narrative reading tasks. However, only 28.6% believed their school had good reading facilities, and 21.5% expressed dissatisfaction with literacy support. This suggests that while teacher support is relatively strong, literacy infrastructure still needs improvement.

Internal Factors: Reading Interest and Vocabulary

Interview findings supported the questionnaire data. Many students reported challenges in understanding vocabulary and sentence structures in narrative texts. Students 1 and 4, for example, admitted being confused by unfamiliar words and long sentences. Student 19 stated he did not understand much of the vocabulary, while Student 16 had difficulty understanding the content, characters, and structure of the stories. However, Student 7 claimed to understand narrative texts well due to their unique structure and language style.

In terms of reading interest, several students expressed enthusiasm for English stories, especially fictional and entertaining ones. Student 6 preferred family and action stories, while Students 18 and 20 said they read because the stories were fun and helped relieve boredom. On the other hand, some students displayed low interest—Student 3, for example, read only when instructed by the teacher, and Student 24 openly stated he was not interested in narrative texts. This shows that many students' motivation remains external and lacks internal awareness.

External Factors: Teaching Method and Learning Environment

Regarding access and reading facilities, several students acknowledged the existence of a school library, such as Student 9, but said that most available books were textbooks and not English storybooks. Students 8 and 10 reported rarely or never finding English storybooks in the library, which limited their exposure to relevant narrative texts. This indicates that available reading materials do not fully support the development of English literacy skills.

In terms of social interaction and reading strategies, only a few students were used to discussing what they read with peers. Student 11 noted that discussing stories with friends helped strengthen his understanding, while Student 12 said he rarely discussed texts due to differences in reading interests. The English teacher interviewed also noted that students' reading strategies were still limited and needed improvement, especially in skimming and scanning techniques, which are essential for efficiently understanding reading content.

Some students demonstrated a good understanding of the concept of narrative texts. Students 14 and 15 gave accurate definitions, explaining that a narrative text is a series of interconnected events arranged chronologically, either fictional or nonfictional, with the primary purpose of entertaining the reader.

Classroom observations further supported these findings. During English lessons focused on narrative reading activities, students showed varying levels of comprehension. Some actively participated in discussions, while others struggled to follow the storyline or identify key elements of the text. The teacher used several strategies to support student understanding, including questioning, summarizing, and vocabulary support. These observations highlight the crucial role of the teacher in facilitating narrative reading instruction.

The findings of this study reveal that students' ability to read narrative texts in Grade VIII at SMPN 7 Medan is influenced by five primary factors: reading motivation, reading interest, vocabulary mastery, reading strategies, and the learning environment. These factors interact dynamically, shaping how effectively students engage with and comprehend narrative texts in English. This multidimensional perspective aligns with a growing body of research emphasizing that reading comprehension is not determined by a single factor but by a complex interplay of cognitive, affective, and environmental elements. Understanding this interplay is crucial for designing effective instructional interventions that holistically address students' needs.

Consistent with recent studies (e.g., Almasri & Ariffin, 2019; Chen et al., 2021), reading motivation in this study is largely driven by external factors such as academic demands, assignments, quizzes, and explicit teacher instructions, whereas intrinsic motivation—where students read for personal satisfaction, curiosity, or enjoyment—remains comparatively underdeveloped. This finding resonates with the work of Ng (2020) and Putra & Rahayu (2022), who emphasize that cultivating intrinsic motivation is essential for fostering long-term engagement and a sustainable reading habit. To address this motivational gap, schools could consider implementing a variety of programs designed to foster intrinsic interest in reading, such as interactive storytelling sessions, creative writing contests, or themed reading festivals. These activities can create a more engaging and emotionally rewarding reading experience, which encourages students to read beyond academic requirements and to appreciate the joy and value of literature.

The study also revealed that students' interest in independent reading is generally low, as most tend to read English texts only when mandated by the curriculum or teachers, rarely engaging voluntarily with reading materials outside the classroom. This observation parallels findings by Wulandari et al. (2018) and Hasanah & Susanti (2023), who argue that lack of personal engagement with reading often stems from limited access to diverse, appealing, and age-appropriate reading resources. To stimulate voluntary reading and enhance student engagement, educational stakeholders could offer a broader selection of storybooks tailored to students' interests and reading levels. Furthermore, integrating interactive and collaborative reading activities, such as role-plays, dramatizations, peer book reviews, or reading circles, may enrich the reading experience and promote a positive reading culture. Such approaches not only increase motivation but also

facilitate deeper comprehension and critical thinking, as advocated by Sari & Rahmawati (2021).

Vocabulary mastery emerged as a crucial but uneven factor influencing students' reading comprehension. While some students demonstrated sufficient vocabulary knowledge to understand the narrative texts, others faced considerable difficulties in decoding unfamiliar words, idiomatic expressions, and complex sentence structures, which are characteristic of narrative writing. This vocabulary gap directly impedes comprehension and overall reading performance, as reported in studies by Liu & Chen (2020) and Dewi & Oktaviani (2024). To address this challenge, it is imperative that educators systematically integrate vocabulary enrichment strategies into daily instruction. These may include word mapping techniques, vocabulary journals, contextualized dictionary use, and targeted pre-reading vocabulary instruction, all of which have been shown to facilitate word retention and comprehension (Santoso & Malik, 2019). Additionally, repeated exposure to new words within meaningful contexts is essential to reinforce vocabulary acquisition and support fluent reading.

The findings also suggest that students currently employ limited and relatively basic reading strategies, primarily skimming and note-taking. Although these strategies offer some benefit, they are insufficient for deep comprehension required by more complex narrative texts. This finding is consistent with the observations of Hakim & Aisyah (2021) and Fitriani (2022), who report that many students lack explicit instruction in advanced reading techniques such as scanning for details, making inferences, identifying main ideas, and summarizing. Effective development of these higher-order strategies requires deliberate and scaffolded teaching approaches that include guided practice, peer collaboration, and the use of diverse text types. Incorporating structured strategy instruction into the curriculum can empower students to become more autonomous and skilled readers, enhancing their ability to process and critically analyze narrative content independently.

Lastly, the learning environment plays a pivotal role in supporting or constraining students' reading development. The study found strong teacher encouragement and consistent reading assignments, which positively motivate students. However, the availability and diversity of English reading materials and literacy resources within the school remain limited. Students reported that the school library primarily contains textbooks, with few English storybooks or supplementary materials, limiting their exposure and opportunity to practice reading beyond class requirements. This issue has also been highlighted by Rizki & Pratama (2017) and Anggraini et al. (2023). To address this, schools could enhance literacy support by improving library collections, establishing dedicated reading corners in classrooms, and promoting family literacy initiatives that involve parents in supporting reading habits at home. Providing such rich literacy environments encourages continuous reading practice and strengthens literacy skills over time.

Despite the valuable insights gained from this study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 24 students from a single school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts or populations. Additionally, the reliance on qualitative data from interviews and questionnaires introduces potential subjectivity and response bias, which could affect the interpretation of students' motivation and strategy use. Future research could address these limitations by employing larger, more diverse samples and combining qualitative and quantitative methods to triangulate data and strengthen validity.

In conclusion, while Grade VIII students at SMPN 7 Medan demonstrate promising motivation levels and partial vocabulary mastery, significant gaps remain in intrinsic motivation, voluntary reading interest, advanced reading strategies, and literacy resources. Addressing these gaps requires a comprehensive approach involving teachers, school administrators, curriculum developers, and parents. Collaborative efforts to foster a positive reading culture, enrich vocabulary instruction, train students in effective reading strategies, and improve access to diverse reading materials are essential for enhancing students' ability to comprehend narrative texts. Such interventions will not only improve academic performance but also contribute to lifelong literacy and language learning success.

CONCLUSION

Reading narrative texts is a vital component of English language learning at the junior high school level, as it not only enhances students' linguistic competence but also fosters their understanding of literary elements and moral values. The ability of students at SMPN 7 Medan to comprehend narrative texts is influenced by a combination of internal and external factors. Internally, students' vocabulary mastery, interest in reading, motivation, and confidence play a central role in shaping their reading performance. Students with a strong vocabulary base and high motivation tend to engage more actively in reading and demonstrate a better understanding of narrative elements such as plot, characters, setting, and conflict.

Externally, the effectiveness of teaching strategies, the availability of learning resources, and the overall classroom environment significantly impact students' narrative reading abilities. Supportive teachers who use interactive methods and provide access to engaging reading materials can greatly enhance students' comprehension and foster regular reading habits. The interaction between these internal and external factors suggests that improving reading comprehension requires a comprehensive approach. Educators must not only address students' cognitive needs but also create an environment that encourages consistent reading practices and supports individual learning differences. Identifying and responding to these factors can help schools implement more effective interventions to improve literacy outcomes.

In light of these findings, future instructional practices should focus on integrating motivational strategies, developing student-centered teaching methods, and strengthening school-based reading environments. These efforts are essential to support students at SMPN 7 Medan and similar educational settings in enhancing their ability to read and understand narrative texts effectively.

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