IJETL
International Journal of English Teaching and Linguistics
Vol. 1 No. 2 (2026): A collection of scholarly articles and research findings.
https://ejurnal.umri.ac.id/index.php/IJETL

English Teachers' Perceptions of the Challenges in Teaching Reading Comprehension at Muhammadiyah Vocational High School in Pekanbaru

Ismarani Fikri Arifah[1], Prih Febtiningsih[2], Siti Niah[3]
[1,2,3]Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau, Indonesia
*Email: ismarani1601@gmail.com[1], prihfebtiningsih@umri.ac.id[2] , sitiniah@umri.ac.id[3]

First Received: April, 2026 Final Proof Received: July, 2026

Abstract

This study aimed to explore English teachers' perceptions of the challenges in teaching reading comprehension at Muhammadiyah Vocational High School in Pekanbaru, involving 4 English teachers as the research participants. This research employed a qualitative research design with data collected through semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences and perspectives. The findings revealed that teachers are aware of various challenges in teaching reading comprehension, with students' limited vocabulary mastery identified as the most prominent factor affecting their understanding of texts. Other contributing factors include low motivation, lack of self-confidence, limited reading habits, and students' preference for short and visual content. External influences such as mobile phone distractions and limited parental support also affect students' engagement in reading activities. These challenges are interpreted as multidimensional issues involving linguistic, psychological, and contextual factors. In response, teachers apply various instructional strategies such as scaffolding, translation, differentiated instruction, and interactive learning activities. Teachers also demonstrate adaptability, patience, and professional commitment in addressing students' difficulties. Furthermore, these challenges are viewed as part of the teaching process that requires continuous reflection and adjustment. Therefore, effective teaching of reading comprehension depends on teachers' ability to adapt instructional practices to students' needs and classroom contexts

Keywords: teachers' perceptions; reading comprehension; teaching challenges; vocational high school

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is an essential skill for vocational high school students as it enables them to understand written texts related to their field of study, such as manuals, reports, and technical documents. It involves constructing meaning from texts by integrating linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, and cognitive strategies (Snow, 2002). Therefore, reading comprehension plays an important role in supporting students' academic development and future professional readiness. However, teaching reading comprehension in vocational high schools presents several challenges. Students often face difficulties related to limited vocabulary mastery, insufficient understanding of sentence structures, and low motivation in reading activities (Budianto et al., 2025; Sadikova, 2023). In addition, psychological factors such as low self-confidence and fear of making mistakes, along with external factors such as technological distractions and limited learning support, may further hinder students' reading performance (Dixon & Oakhill, 2024).

Reading comprehension is a complex process influenced by linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical factors (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Snow, 2002). Linguistic factors involve vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, cognitive factors relate to the ability to process and interpret information, while pedagogical factors are associated with instructional strategies and classroom practices (Lu, 2022). These complexities indicate that effective reading instruction requires adaptive and context-sensitive teaching practices. In this context, teachers play a central role in addressing these challenges. Their perceptions are shaped by prior knowledge, teaching experience, and contextual factors, which influence how they interpret classroom situations and make instructional decisions (Mao & Stocker, 2024; (Kirko & Woldearegawi, 2024). Therefore, understanding teachers' perceptions is important to gain deeper insights into the challenges of teaching reading comprehension.

Previous studies have investigated challenges in reading instruction; however, most of them were conducted in different educational contexts and did not specifically focus on vocational high schools from the perspective of teachers. This indicates a gap in understanding how English teachers perceive the challenges of teaching reading comprehension in vocational education settings. Based on preliminary observations conducted in January 2025 at SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru, students were found to struggle in understanding reading texts due to limited vocabulary and tended to focus more on pronunciation rather than comprehension. Low motivation and limited engagement in reading activities were also observed. Therefore, this study aims to explore English teachers' perceptions of the challenges in teaching reading comprehension at SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru. The study is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of instructional challenges and contextual factors influencing reading comprehension teaching in vocational high schools.

Previous Research

Several previous studies have examined challenges in teaching reading comprehension from different perspectives and educational contexts. These studies can be grouped based on their focus on pedagogical practices, learner perspectives, and instructional challenges. First, studies focusing on pedagogical practices highlight the role of teachers in facilitating reading comprehension. (Kirko & Woldearegawi, 2024) investigated teachers' perceptions and practices in integrating critical thinking skills into reading instruction at the university level. The study found that although teachers demonstrated moderate awareness of critical thinking integration, its classroom implementation remained limited due to students' low engagement. This suggests that teachers play a central role in shaping reading instruction, yet they still face difficulties in applying higher-order instructional strategies.

Second, research focusing on student-centered perspectives has also been widely conducted. Rajik (2023) explored students' perceptions of teacher questioning strategies in reading comprehension. The findings revealed that higher-order questioning techniques contributed to deeper understanding, although classroom practices were still dominated by lower-order questions. However, this study emphasizes students' perspectives rather than teachers' experiences in addressing instructional challenges. Third, studies addressing instructional challenges across educational levels indicate that teachers encounter various difficulties in reading instruction. Lu (2022) found that elementary school teachers faced challenges such as students' low reading

ability, limited learning materials, and diverse learner needs. While this study provides valuable insights into instructional difficulties, it was conducted at the elementary level, which differs significantly from vocational high school contexts where reading materials are often more technical and discipline-specific.

Overall, previous studies indicate that research on reading comprehension has primarily focused on student perspectives or non-vocational contexts. There is still limited attention given to English teachers' perceptions of challenges in teaching reading comprehension in vocational high schools. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring teachers' perceptions at SMK Muhammadiyah Pekanbaru.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design with a case study approach to explore English teachers' perceptions of the challenges in teaching reading comprehension. The study was conducted at three SMK Muhammadiyah schools in Pekanbaru in February 2026. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences and perspectives.

Participants

The participants of this study were four English teachers from three SMK Muhammadiyah schools in Pekanbaru, namely SMK Muhammadiyah 1, SMK Muhammadiyah 2, and SMK Muhammadiyah 3. The total population of English teachers across these schools was four, consisting of one English teacher from each school. Therefore, total sampling was applied, as all members of the population were included in the study. All participants had direct experience in teaching reading comprehension and were actively involved in classroom instruction.

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives and theoretical framework to explore teachers' perceptions of the challenges in teaching reading comprehension. This type of instrument allowed flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions and obtain in-depth information from participants.

Data collection procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted in February 2026. Prior to the interviews, the researcher obtained permission from the schools and informed consent from all participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable setting to ensure participants could express their views freely. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun & Clarke (2006). The analysis process involved transcribing the interview data, reading and re-reading the transcripts, generating initial codes, and grouping the codes into themes based on

recurring patterns. The identified themes were then interpreted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges experienced by English teachers in teaching reading comprehension.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion section consist of description of the results of the data analysis to answer the research question(s) and their meanings seen from current theories and references of the area addressed. The proportion of this section is 40-60% of the total article length.

Teachers' Awareness

The findings indicate that all teachers demonstrate strong awareness of the challenges in teaching reading comprehension through continuous classroom observation and interaction. Teachers identify students' difficulties by examining their responses, participation, and behavior during reading activities. Limited vocabulary was identified as the most significant challenge affecting students' comprehension, as it prevents them from understanding texts effectively. In addition, teachers also recognized other challenges, including low reading motivation, lack of confidence, and limited classroom engagement. Contextual factors, such as students' reliance on gadgets and limited learning support, were also found to influence their reading performance.

However, teachers' perspectives on the use of mobile phones were not entirely negative. While mobile phones were seen as a source of distraction during reading activities, some teachers also acknowledged their potential to be integrated into learning. For instance, digital tools and online reading materials were considered useful in providing more interactive and engaging reading experiences. This suggests that rather than solely being viewed as a hindrance, technological devices can also be leveraged as supportive tools in reading instruction when properly guided by teachers.

These findings suggest that teachers' awareness of reading comprehension challenges encompasses linguistic, motivational, psychological, and contextual aspects, which are developed through direct classroom experience. This finding is consistent with the linguistic dimension of reading comprehension proposed by Grabe & Stoller (2011) and Snow (2002), which emphasizes that limited vocabulary knowledge can significantly hinder learners' ability to construct meaning from texts.

Teachers' Interpretations

The findings reveal that teachers interpret students' reading comprehension difficulties as the result of multiple interconnected factors. Vocabulary limitation was consistently identified as the primary cause, as it affects students' ability to understand texts and participate actively in classroom activities. Teachers also emphasized that students with limited vocabulary tend to show lower confidence and engagement during learning.

In addition to linguistic factors, teachers highlighted psychological and behavioral aspects such as low motivation, lack of confidence, and students' preference for short and visual content over longer texts. These conditions often make students feel overwhelmed when dealing with complex reading materials. Furthermore, environmental factors, including the frequent use of mobile phones and limited learning support, were also considered to influence students' reading

performance. The findings also indicate that teachers interpret these challenges as manageable through instructional adaptation. Teachers reported modifying teaching strategies, such as using interactive activities, games, and contextual materials, to maintain students' engagement. Therefore, teachers view reading comprehension difficulties not only as linguistic problems but also as complex issues that require flexible, creative, and context-sensitive instructional approaches.

Teachers' Beliefs

The findings indicate that teachers hold strong beliefs regarding the factors influencing students' reading comprehension difficulties. All teachers consistently viewed vocabulary mastery as the most fundamental element, as it affects students' ability to understand texts, participate in classroom activities, and build confidence in using English. In addition, teachers believe that students' motivation, interest, and concentration play a crucial role in reading comprehension. The relevance of reading materials to students' daily lives and vocational contexts was also considered important in increasing engagement. Teachers emphasized that when materials are meaningful and relatable, students are more likely to participate actively in reading activities.

Furthermore, teachers believe that their role is not only to deliver content but also to act as facilitators and motivators who guide students in constructing meaning from texts. They highlighted the importance of using interactive and adaptive strategies to support students' learning. These findings indicate that teachers' beliefs about reading comprehension are shaped by both linguistic and contextual considerations, as well as their responsibility to support students' engagement and understanding.

Teachers'Emotional & Cognitive Response

The findings reveal that teachers demonstrate strong emotional commitment and adaptive cognitive responses in addressing students' reading comprehension difficulties. Their responses reflect a combination of instructional responsibility, empathy, and strategic problem-solving to support students' understanding. Teachers showed a high level of responsiveness by providing immediate assistance, guiding students through difficult texts, and simplifying complex content through structured scaffolding. They also emphasized the importance of building students' confidence by creating a supportive learning environment where mistakes are accepted as part of the learning process. This emotional support encourages students to participate more actively in reading activities without fear of failure.

In addition, teachers applied various adaptive strategies such as differentiated instruction, interactive activities, and contextualized materials to accommodate students' diverse proficiency levels. They also demonstrated persistence and flexibility in modifying instructional approaches when initial strategies were not effective. These efforts indicate that teachers actively regulate their teaching practices to respond to classroom challenges. Overall, the findings suggest that teachers' emotional and cognitive responses are characterized by empathy, resilience, and strategic adaptability, which play a crucial role in supporting students' engagement and improving reading comprehension outcomes.

IJETL
International Journal of English Teaching and Linguistics
Vol. 1 No. 1 (2026): This issue consists of articles from authors of 3 countries including: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand
https://ejurnal.umri.ac.id/index.php/IJETL

Teachers' Experience-Based Reflection

Teacher 1 reflected that challenges in teaching reading comprehension were highly situational and depended on how teachers implemented appropriate techniques. She emphasized that effective strategies and classroom management played a crucial role in helping students understand the material. In addition, she highlighted that learning conditions, such as class schedules and physical environment, significantly influenced students' engagement. Morning classes tended to be more effective as students were still fresh and motivated, whereas afternoon sessions often reduced students' focus due to fatigue and discomfort.

She also pointed out that classroom facilities, such as ventilation and temperature, affected students' concentration. To address students' limited vocabulary, she applied scaffolding strategies, including reading aloud, translation, and summarizing texts. Furthermore, she emphasized the importance of active monitoring by moving around the classroom to ensure students stayed on task. Interestingly, she also applied controlled motivational strategies to encourage task completion. Finally, she acknowledged the gap between theoretical knowledge and real classroom practice, emphasizing that teaching required flexibility and adaptation beyond what was learned in academic settings.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore English teachers' perceptions of the challenges in teaching reading comprehension. A qualitative research design was employed to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences and perspectives regarding the difficulties encountered in reading instruction. The data were collected through interviews with English teachers, providing detailed insights into classroom challenges.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the teachers demonstrate clear awareness of the challenges in teaching reading comprehension. Their perceptions are shaped through continuous classroom interaction and direct teaching experience, enabling them to identify recurring difficulties during reading activities.

The findings reveal that the challenges in teaching reading comprehension are multifaceted. Linguistic factors, particularly students' limited vocabulary mastery, were identified as the most dominant challenge affecting students' ability to understand texts and respond to comprehension questions. In addition, pronunciation difficulties were observed during reading activities, especially when students were required to read aloud, which further influenced their reading fluency. Moreover, motivational and psychological factors were also found to significantly affect students' reading performance. Low reading interest and lack of self-confidence were commonly observed, leading to limited student participation in classroom activities. Some students were also hesitant to engage due to fear of making mistakes. In addition to internal factors, external influences were identified as contributing to students' reading difficulties. The use of technology for non-academic purposes was found to reduce students' focus during learning activities. Furthermore, limited parental support also played a role in shaping students' motivation in learning English.

Overall, this study concludes that the challenges in teaching reading comprehension are not solely related to linguistic limitations but also involve motivational, psychological, and contextual factors. These findings highlight the importance of teachers' awareness and adaptability in

addressing students' needs to support more effective reading comprehension learning in the classroom.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that English teachers in vocational high schools participate in continuous professional development programs focusing on effective strategies for teaching reading comprehension, particularly in handling students' limited vocabulary and low motivation. In addition, the use of simplified and context-based reading materials related to vocational fields is suggested to increase students' engagement and comprehension. Schools are also encouraged to support the integration of technology in a more controlled and instructional manner to minimize distractions while maximizing its educational potential.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the number of participants was limited to four English teachers from three SMK Muhammadiyah schools in Pekanbaru, which may not fully represent all English teachers in vocational high schools. Second, the study focused only on teachers' perceptions without involving classroom observation or students' perspectives, which could provide a more comprehensive understanding of reading comprehension challenges.

REFERENCES

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101.

Budianto, L., Yuniar, R. F., & Rohmana, W. I. M. (2025). Addressing diverse challenges in teaching reading comprehension: Voices among Indonesian university teachers. *Journal on English as a Foreign Language*, *15*(1), 54–80. https://doi.org/10.23971/jefl.v15i1.9191

Dixon, M., & Oakhill, J. (2024). Exploring teachers teaching reading comprehension: knowledge, behaviours and attitudes. *Education 3-13*, *52*(7), 963–978. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2357884

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2011). Teaching and Reaseaching Reading. In *Routledge* (2nd ed.). Taylor & Francis. The.

Kirko, M. A., & Woldearegawi, A. G. (2024). Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Integrating Critical Thinking Skills when Teaching Reading. *Educational Challenges*, *29*(2), 151–165. https://doi.org/10.34142/2709-7986.2024.29.2.10

Lu, H. (2022). Challenges teachers face in teaching reading among elementary pupils. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, *11*(16), 45–50. https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrse.2022.354

Mao, J., & Stocker, A. A. (2024). Sensory Perception Is a Holistic Inference Process. *Psychological Review*, *131*(4), 858–890. https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000457

Rajik, J. (2023). Students' Perceptions of the Influence of Teacher's Questions on Their Reading Comprehension. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, *5*(4), 101–112. https://doi.org/10.32996/jeltal.2023.5.4.11

Sadikova, G. (2023). Psycholinguistic Factors of Reading Comprehension in Teaching a Second Language. *Uzbekistan:Language and Culture*, *5*(2), 77–82. https://doi.org/10.52773/tsuull.uzlc.aphil.2023.2.5/wufl1732

Snow, C. (2002). Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension. In C. Snow (Ed.), *Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension* (1st ed.). RAND. https://doi.org/10.7249/mr1465.0