



Analysis of Challenges Faced by English Teachers in Teaching Reading Comprehension: A Case Study at SMP Advent Tomohon

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 08 May 2026	Reading comprehension is essential in English language learning because it facilitates access to information, vocabulary development, and communicative competence. However, teaching reading in EFL contexts can be challenging due to limited resources, diverse student proficiency, administrative demands, limited collaboration, and difficulties in selecting appropriate comprehension strategies. This study aims to identify and analyze the challenges experienced by an English teacher in teaching reading comprehension at SMP Advent Tomohon, a rural, faith-based, single-teacher junior secondary school implementing the Kurikulum Merdeka. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving the sole English teacher responsible for Grades 7–9 during the 2025/2026 academic year. Data were collected through structured classroom observations across the three grades and a semi-structured interview conducted after the observations. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, with five overarching themes adapted from Moswane's framework: teacher unpreparedness, lack of reading resources, absence of teamwork, communication difficulties, and teacher proficiency in teaching reading. Findings revealed five interconnected challenges. Administrative demands reduced preparation time, while limited textbooks, malfunctioning technology, and shared smartboard access constrained resources. The absence of meaningful teamwork contributed to professional isolation. Differences in students' English proficiency required frequent code-switching. Despite strong English proficiency, the teacher mainly used read-aloud activities and dictionary use rather than structured reading strategies. The study highlights the need for institutional support, adequate resources, professional collaboration, and reading-pedagogy training.
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1. Introduction

English language learning (ELL) aims to help students use English confidently and effectively as a second or foreign language. To achieve this, learners must develop four core skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These skills are interrelated and contribute collectively to communicative competence, although the relative emphasis placed on each skill may vary according to learners' educational contexts and needs (Alhaider, 2023). Among all skills, reading is particularly important because it not only helps students understand information in texts but also supports their speaking and writing development. Reading provides learners with linguistic input, vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and ideas that can subsequently contribute to productive language use (Alhaider, 2023; Brooks et al., 2021).

Reading comprehension is the process of extracting and constructing meaning from written language (Lawrence et al., 2022). It requires students to go beyond word recognition and understand main ideas, details, and inferences, connecting content to background knowledge. Recent research confirms that reading comprehension is a multidimensional process involving linguistic, cognitive, and metacognitive resources rather than vocabulary recognition alone (Mulder et al., 2024). In particular, vocabulary knowledge, morphological awareness, working memory, inferencing, and metacognitive knowledge have been identified as important factors associated with L2 reading comprehension among secondary-school EFL learners (Nation, 2001; Vettori et al., 2024). The importance of vocabulary is also supported by empirical research showing that lexical and sublexical knowledge significantly predict second-language reading comprehension (Koda, 2008; Alshehri & Zhang, 2022; Röthlisberger et al., 2023). Similarly, background knowledge influences the processing and comprehension of second-language texts, indicating that learners' familiarity with the topic can affect how effectively they construct meaning while reading (An et al., 2024). Thus, reading comprehension should be understood as an active meaning-making process in which readers integrate textual information with linguistic knowledge, prior knowledge, and higher-level cognitive processes.

As a receptive skill, reading comprehension is critical for academic success. However, reading in an EFL context can be particularly demanding because learners often encounter linguistic and cognitive barriers simultaneously. Vocabulary limitations, unfamiliar textual structures, insufficient background knowledge, difficulties making inferences, and limited familiarity with reading strategies may prevent learners from constructing coherent meaning from texts (Brooks et al., 2021; Vettori et al., 2024). Research on EFL learners has demonstrated that vocabulary knowledge is strongly related to reading comprehension, while lexical processing efficiency can influence learners' ability to access and integrate information from texts (Alshehri & Zhang, 2022). In addition, lexical coverage affects the processing demands placed on L2 readers, making the selection of appropriately challenging texts an important consideration in reading instruction (Song & Reynolds, 2022). These findings indicate that difficulties in reading comprehension cannot be attributed simply to students' lack of motivation but should also be considered in relation to linguistic resources, text characteristics, prior knowledge, and instructional practices.

The challenges of reading instruction, however, are not limited to students. Teachers must manage large class sizes, address diverse reading capabilities, and work with scarce materials. Research on EFL reading classrooms indicates that teachers frequently need to accommodate differences in students' proficiency levels while simultaneously managing instructional time, vocabulary difficulties, motivation, and the availability of appropriate learning resources. In large classes, for example, teachers may experience difficulties

providing individualized support and implementing varied reading strategies effectively (Istiqomah et al., 2023). Similarly, research on EFL teachers has identified challenges related to instructional resources, student differences, and the complexity of teaching reading comprehension effectively (Meihami & Abdoli, 2024). Teachers therefore play an important role in mediating the relationship between students, texts, and reading strategies. Evidence suggests that explicit reading-strategy instruction, scaffolding, collaborative learning, questioning, and other learner-centered approaches can support students' comprehension and engagement (Yapp et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Samiei & Ebadi, 2021).

In addition to classroom-level challenges, English teachers in Indonesia are also expected to implement Kurikulum Merdeka, which emphasizes student-centered learning, learner autonomy, flexibility, contextualized learning, and the development of critical and creative thinking. The curriculum consequently requires teachers to move beyond conventional teacher-centered practices and design learning experiences that respond to students' individual characteristics and learning needs. This shift may create additional pedagogical demands for teachers, particularly when they have limited time, resources, facilities, or professional support. Studies of Merdeka Curriculum implementation have reported that teachers may experience difficulties in designing differentiated instruction, preparing teaching modules, selecting appropriate learning resources, and adapting instructional practices to students' diverse needs. Such challenges are especially relevant in schools with limited facilities and resources.

The need to understand these challenges is further supported by research showing that reading instruction is influenced not only by students' language proficiency but also by teachers' instructional decisions and the learning environment. Teachers need to select texts at appropriate levels, develop students' vocabulary and background knowledge, activate effective reading strategies, and provide opportunities for learners to engage with texts at different cognitive levels. Studies have demonstrated that questioning, scaffolding, collaborative learning, and active learning can contribute to improved reading comprehension and learner engagement (Liu, 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Majdi et al., 2025). At the same time, insufficient resources and infrastructural limitations can constrain teachers' ability to implement such approaches consistently, particularly in contexts where instructional support is limited.

Considering these circumstances, exploring the specific challenges faced by the English teacher at SMP Advent Tomohon is both timely and important. This study contributes to the ELT literature by providing context-specific insights from a rural, faith-based, single-teacher school, a setting notably underrepresented in Indonesian research. While previous studies have examined EFL reading difficulties, teacher challenges, reading strategies, and curriculum implementation in various educational settings, fewer studies have focused specifically on how these challenges intersect within a rural, faith-based junior secondary school with a single English teacher. Understanding this context is important because the challenges of teaching reading may emerge from the interaction between student-related factors, teacher-related factors, instructional resources, school conditions, and curriculum demands. The central research question guiding this study is: What challenges do English teachers at SMP Advent Tomohon face in teaching reading comprehension?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teaching Challenges in Reading Comprehension

Teaching challenges refer to the multifaceted difficulties educators face when delivering

instruction effectively, particularly in diverse and multilingual classrooms. These challenges came from limited resources, varying student abilities, curriculum demands, and teacher preparedness (Richards & Farrell, 2011). In language education, these are amplified by linguistic and cultural factors, as teachers must mediate language barriers and cultural differences that affect comprehension and participation (Borg, 2015). Kumayas et al. (2025) document how curriculum initiatives promising autonomy often multiply documentation requirements and adaptation burdens.

This study draws on five core challenges adapted from Moswane's (2019) comprehensive study of reading instruction difficulties: (1) teacher unpreparedness, (2) lack of reading resources, (3) absence of teamwork, (4) communication difficulties, and (5) teacher proficiency in teaching reading. Moswane's framework provides a well-established and contextually relevant basis for examining challenges in EFL reading instruction across varied educational settings.

2.2 Reading Comprehension and Kurikulum Merdeka

Reading comprehension refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and critically engage with written texts. Kintsch's (1998) construction-integration model describes comprehension as a process where readers build a coherent mental representation by integrating new information with prior knowledge. In second language contexts, comprehension is influenced by vocabulary knowledge, grammatical understanding, and cognitive skills (Urquhart & Weir, 1998; Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; 2022). Vocabulary size is one of the strongest predictors of comprehension success, as unfamiliar words impede fluency and understanding (Perfetti et al., 2005).

Kurikulum Merdeka focuses on learner autonomy, competency-based learning, and contextualized instruction, encouraging the use of authentic texts connected to students' lives. Phase D of the curriculum specifically targets literacy and reading comprehension by fostering critical thinking and self-directed learning. Teachers are expected to adapt materials and activities to diverse student needs an approach particularly demanding in under-resourced settings (Nurhusliya & Saputra, 2024).

Several studies have explored teacher challenges in reading comprehension instruction. Wau et al. (2023) found that teachers at SMP Negeri 10 Medan struggled with limited student motivation, insufficient materials, and difficulties adapting methods to diverse learners. Hidayat et al. (2024) identified inadequate resources, large class sizes, and lack of professional development as key obstacles at an Islamic Junior High School. Similar to Nazri (2025) who reported that limited vocabulary, low student motivation, and inadequate instructional resources as ongoing barriers in Indonesian EFL secondary classrooms.

The present study builds on these investigations by adopting Moswane's (2019) specific thematic framework to examine challenges within a smaller, rural, faith-based single-teacher context. This focus distinguishes the study from broader qualitative investigations and offers a fresh perspective on systemic barriers unique to under-resourced rural schools.

3. Method

This research employed a qualitative case study design to gain a deep, contextual understanding of the challenges faced by one English teacher at SMP Advent Tomohon. As Yin (2017) explains, case studies are particularly suitable for answering "how" and "why" questions when context is integral to the research problem. Qualitative research enables the collection and analysis of rich, descriptive data that captures processes and perspectives

within real-life contexts (Miles et al., 2014).

The sample was purposively selected as the sole English teacher at SMP Advent Tomohon, responsible for English instruction across grades 7-9 in the 2025/2026 academic year. She is a 47-year-old female teacher holding a Bachelor of Education qualification with 11 years of teaching experience.

Data were collected using two instruments: (1) structured classroom observations across grades 7-9 using an observation sheet adapted from Moswane (2019), covering 13 indicators across five thematic areas; and (2) a semi-structured interview conducted one week after all observations, ensuring responses reflected the teacher's own perspectives. A member-checking process was carried out by sharing preliminary findings with the participant to verify theme interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (See Table 1 in appendix:). Both descriptive and in vivo coding were employed. The five overarching themes were derived from Moswane's (2019) framework and refined through systematic coding.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Teacher Unpreparedness

Observations across grades 7-9 revealed that the teacher consistently arrived with lesson plans aligned to curriculum objectives. Minor delays were recorded: a 5-minute interval in grade 7 due to students not setting up the classroom, and a 10-minute overrun in grade 8 caused by the previous subject teacher running over time. Grade 9 started on time despite similar setup issues. Materials remained ready throughout, with plans clearly aligned to syllabus goals in every class.

The teacher attributed her preparation confidence to years of repetition: *"I at least learn, read and master the material... because I have been teaching the lessons over and over again that I am fine with the preparations."* However, she acknowledged the disruption of administrative demands: *"Sometimes when the principal asked me to do something outside of the schoolwork... I sometimes don't have time to read or study the material deeply."*

These findings align with Moswane (2019), who links preparation quality to professional competence, yet reveal a more nuanced picture: unpreparedness here is not a product of insufficient content knowledge but of time-management fragility caused by external administrative demands. As Murtiningsih (2014) noted, structured approaches can alleviate preparation struggles, however at SMP Advent Tomohon, the core challenge is not "how to prepare" but "how to secure institutional space for preparation." The teacher's reliance on experience-based confidence functions as a tactical response to an environment that offers limited room for proactive lesson development.

4.2 Lack of Reading Resources

Observations showed that reading materials were limited to six textbooks shared among all students across all three grade levels, requiring pair-sharing during reading activities. No supplementary materials, graded readers, or digital media were consistently applied. The teacher confirmed this constraint: *"Right now, there are a lot of resources... but since my laptop is broken, I use my handphone for now. And also, the government provided a smartboard... but all teachers also use the smartboard so we need to take turns."*

It correlates with Liando and Zein (2025) who emphasize that reading success depends on access to varied materials. More critically, this study reveals that scarcity does not merely inconvenience teachers it fundamentally restructures instruction. The textbook ceases to be a pedagogical tool and become a “lifeline,” binding students to a rigid, text-bound experience that precludes higher-order engagement. Digital tools intended to compensate for textbook shortages become bottlenecks themselves due to hardware failure and shared access, echoing Moswane’s (2019) findings from South African schools.

4.3 Absence of Teamwork

Observations confirmed a complete absence of cross-subject coordination or team teaching in English lessons across all three grades. The teacher noted: *“Sometimes we handle a school program together like P5. But, specifically, in English class what hinders me to teach English as a team is usually the other teachers, some already know English but there are some that don’t know and still need to learn more, so at least I have to inform them in advance on to what the lesson will be.”*

This confirms that isolation is the default state for English teachers in rural small-scale schools (Richards & Farrell, 2011; Akbar & Wijaya, 2024). While Huda and Rahadiano (2021) noted that departmental meetings facilitate peer support in urban settings; however, this study demonstrates that such structures are incompatible with the staffing realities of SMP Advent Tomohon (see also Prayitno et al., 2022). The “one-way briefing” model where the teacher merely informs colleagues of lesson plans represents administrative obligation rather than genuine collaboration. The study argues that meaningful teamwork in under-resourced schools requires institutional restructuring of schedules, not just goodwill from individual teachers.

4.4 Communication Difficulties

Consistent bilingual pattern was documented across all three grades. In grade 7, the teacher delivered instructions in English followed by Indonesian clarification and repetition. In grade 8, English was used more confidently, with Indonesian introduced when necessary. In grade 9, English was used regularly, with clear pacing and repetition to support comprehension. The teacher described her strategy: *“Sometimes I mixed English and Indonesian to give explanation or instructions.”*

While Hafid and Margana (2022) figured out that code-switching as a deliberate pedagogical choice; however, this study suggests that at SMP Advent Tomohon it functions as a “default survival mechanism” rather than a principled strategy. The teacher’s bilingual flexibility, while necessary given students’ limited English baseline, risks creating “linguistic dependency” that limits the development of autonomous comprehension skills. A critical gap exists in the need for scaffolding interventions that progressively reduce teacher-led language mediation and build student readiness to engage with English texts independently an explicit priority under Kurikulum Merdeka Phase D.

4.5 Teacher Proficiency in Teaching Reading

Observations confirmed that the teacher demonstrated strong English fluency and curriculum alignment across all grade levels. Lessons were clearly paced, and the teacher responded promptly to student questions. However, instructional strategies were limited to read-alouds and dictionary lookups. The teacher reflected: *“Teaching reading is easy for me, my*

experience in teaching help me to teach reading well."

These findings point to a gap between general English proficiency and procedural pedagogical knowledge the ability to scaffold complex comprehension tasks such as previewing, summarizing, and questioning (Grabe, 2009). As Emilia et al. (2022) stated that a lack of specialized training in reading pedagogy leads teachers to default to low-risk, surface-level strategies. This study adds that such choices are "defensive teaching" behaviors: rational responses to high-pressure environments with minimal structured guidance. Professional development must be classroom-embedded, demonstrating how to analyze a text within a 45-minute lesson rather than conveying reading theory in abstract terms (Mandasari et al., 2025).

5. Conclusion

This study revealed five interconnected challenges that impede effective reading comprehension instruction at SMP Advent Tomohon: scheduling disruptions undermining teacher preparation, severe textbook shortages limiting text access, complete isolation from cross-curricular collaboration, student proficiency gaps requiring constant language switching, and over-reliance on surface-level strategies over proven comprehension methods. Together, these challenges form a self-reinforcing cycle: limited resources constrain preparation, isolation cuts off professional support, communication gaps slow instructional momentum, and basic strategies cannot compensate for cumulative systemic deficiencies.

The study's primary contribution lies in its focus on the "single-teacher" isolation model in a rural, faith-based school a context underrepresented in Indonesian ELT research. Unlike studies in larger urban or public school's settings with more varied support systems, this research illuminates how individual teacher dedication becomes the sole buffer against potential instructional failure when institutional support is absent.

For schools, principals should establish weekly 15-minute coordination meetings, launch daily 10-minute "English zones" during breaks, and create resource-sharing networks with neighboring schools to alleviate textbook shortages. For teachers, keeping 30-minute emergency reading kits ensures productive lesson starts on disrupted days, while picture-based vocabulary activities at the outset of reading lessons can reduce code-switching. Participation in PLPG/MGMP workshops on structured methods such as Preview-Question-Read-Reflect (PQ4R) would shift instruction from word-level translation to higher-order comprehension engagement. Future research should extend this inquiry across comparable Adventist junior high schools in Sulawesi to determine whether the single-teacher isolation pattern represents a systemic challenge or broader regional trend.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest

Authors' contribution

Marnix Johannes Pongoh: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Noldy Pelenkahu:** Formal

analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Tirza Annette Kumayas:** Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

Statement of the use of AI

This study utilized artificial intelligence (AI) in the writing process, particularly to review the clarity of sentences, structure, and grammar. However, all final outputs were thoroughly reviewed, verified, and validated by the authors prior to publication.

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Appendix

Table 1. Interview data coding (selected examples)

Theme	Sub-theme	Interview Excerpt	Initial Code	Final Theme Label
Teacher Unpreparedness	Administrative Burdens	"Sometimes when the principal asked me to do something outside of the schoolwork... I sometimes don't have time to read or study the material deeply."	Admin Interruption	External Time Pressures
Teacher Unpreparedness	Experience Compensation	"I at least learn, read and master the material... because I have been teaching the lessons over and over again that I am fine with the preparations."	Repetitive Confidence	Experience-Based Readiness
Lack of Resources	Technology Failure	"Right now, there are a lot of resources... but since my laptop is broken, I use my handphone for now."	Tech Scarcity	Equipment Breakdown
Absence of Teamwork	Proficiency Gap	"...some already know English but there are some that don't know and still need to learn more."	Proficiency Barrier	Colleague Skill Gap
Communication Difficulties	Bilingual Strategy	Teacher used English for instructions, followed by Indonesian clarification and repetition. (Observation-derived)	Code Switching	Strategic Language Mixing
Teacher Proficiency	Basic Methods Reliance	Teacher demonstrates content mastery but uses read-alouds and dictionary lookups rather than structured strategies. (Observation-derived)	Surface Strategies	Limited Pedagogical Repertoire