

Examining English Reading Comprehension Skills Among Junior High School Students: The Influence of School Values And Gender

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is a crucial skill that supports the academic success of junior high school students, particularly in an increasingly globalized world. Understanding students' proficiency in this area is essential for developing effective teaching strategies. This quantitative descriptive study evaluated the English reading comprehension abilities of 80 ninth-grade students at MTs Muqimus Sunnah. The assessment was based on an 18-question reading comprehension test covering four key aspects: contraction, sequence, vocabulary, and inference. The study also analyzed performance differences by gender and grade level. The results revealed that female students scored higher on average (4.43) than male students (3.66), though the difference was not statistically significant. Students demonstrated the strongest performance in contraction (8.68) and sequence (7.73) items. However, they struggled with context understanding and inference, indicating a need for improvement in higher-order reading skills. The findings suggest that while students show proficiency in recognizing structural and sequential elements, they face challenges in deeper analytical reading. This highlights the importance of targeted instructional strategies that emphasize vocabulary development and critical reading skills. This study provides valuable insights for educators and policymakers in enhancing English literacy instruction. Structured interventions focusing on analytical comprehension and vocabulary acquisition are recommended to address observed weaknesses and support overall reading development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Access to diverse sources of information and knowledge is vital for students' academic development. Literacy, particularly reading comprehension, plays a fundamental role in fostering academic success across disciplines, including science and mathematics, which demand critical and analytical thinking (Afflerbach, 2018). In addition to supporting subject mastery, strong literacy skills

also enable students to engage actively in project-based learning and real-world problem solving—skills essential for thriving in the 21st century.

Efforts to improve literacy have become a global educational priority. Initiatives such as Indonesia's National Literacy Movement (Gerakan Literasi Nasional, GLN) aim to build a culture of reading through school and community programs, including classroom reading corners and the distribution of free reading materials (Rahmawati & Mustofa, 2022). At the international level, organizations like UNESCO continue to promote literacy through campaigns targeting equitable access to quality education worldwide (UNESCO, 2023).

Among the many factors that influence literacy development, family support and socio-economic background are particularly significant. Access to educational resources—books, internet, and digital tools—is largely dependent on family income levels. Students from more affluent families are more likely to receive quality support, such as private tutoring and access to diverse reading materials (Klinger et al., 2015). Conversely, students from lower-income households often face a lack of resources, resulting in lower literacy performance and widening academic disparities (OECD, 2019). These challenges were further amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted learning, especially for students in remote areas without reliable access to technology (BPS, 2021).

Parental engagement in children's literacy development—through reading together, providing reading materials, and offering emotional and academic encouragement—has also been shown to significantly enhance students' reading skills and motivation (Widodo & Kurniawan, 2020). Without such support, students may struggle with literacy, affecting their broader academic performance, particularly in subjects requiring deeper comprehension and reasoning (Zulfa & Azis, 2023).

English reading comprehension is especially critical at the junior high school level. It encompasses more than fluency; it includes understanding, analyzing, and interpreting texts (Guthrie et al., 2023). These skills are essential for academic success in other content areas like science and social studies (Chen & Zhang, 2022). However, many Indonesian students face challenges in mastering English reading comprehension. Issues such as limited vocabulary, differences in grammatical structure from native languages, and insufficient practice in analytical reading all contribute to poor performance (Pérez & García, 2021; Lin, 2021; Liu & Wang, 2022).

According to Snow (2002), reading comprehension requires the ability to construct meaning from text by integrating new information with prior knowledge. Yet, many Indonesian students struggle to achieve even basic comprehension levels. The 2018 PISA results revealed that Indonesian 15-year-olds ranked 72nd out of 77 countries in reading proficiency (OECD, 2019). Inadequate teaching methods that emphasize rote memorization over critical thinking, along with socioeconomic inequalities, further inhibit students' literacy development (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2020).

Despite various efforts to address literacy problems, existing studies have not sufficiently explored how multiple variables—particularly socio-economic conditions, parental involvement, and pandemic-related challenges—interact to affect English reading comprehension at the junior high school level in Indonesia. Research has generally focused on literacy as a broad concept, without a specific emphasis on English reading skills or a regional perspective that accounts for the urban–rural divide.

This study offers a novel contribution by examining the complex interplay of these factors, using English reading comprehension as a focal point. Unlike previous research, it integrates the impact of family background, resource availability, and educational disruptions from the pandemic to provide a nuanced understanding of reading difficulties faced by Indonesian junior high school students.

The primary aim of this research is to investigate the factors influencing English reading comprehension among Indonesian junior high school students. It seeks to explore the role of socio-economic status, family support, and post-pandemic learning recovery in shaping students' reading outcomes. The study also aims to identify practical strategies that schools, families, and policymakers can adopt to improve literacy levels across different socio-demographic contexts.

This research is significant because it addresses a pressing national education challenge: improving students' literacy competencies in an increasingly globalized world. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for curriculum planners, educators, and policymakers, enabling them to design more inclusive and targeted interventions. Strengthening English reading comprehension at the junior high school level not only enhances students' overall academic performance but also prepares them for future academic and professional demands. By offering a holistic perspective grounded in empirical data, this study aims to support ongoing literacy reforms and promote equitable access to quality education in Indonesia.

2. METHODS

This study aimed to measure and analyze students' reading comprehension skills using an informal comprehension assessment at Muqimus Sunnah Junior High School. Informal comprehension assessment serves as a tool to evaluate students' understanding of English reading materials through structured test items.

A purposive sampling technique was employed, allowing the selection of participants based on predefined criteria aligned with the research objectives. This method ensured that the sample reflected the relevant characteristics necessary for meaningful analysis. Specifically, the research focused on grade IX students, considering both gender and academic performance as key variables. The rationale for this sampling strategy included the following:

- Alignment with research goals, which required participants with sufficient reading proficiency and diversity in gender and academic standing.
- Efficiency in data collection, as targeting a relevant group, which allowed the researcher to concentrate resources effectively.
- High subject relevance, as ninth-grade students are presumed to possess foundational reading skills suitable for comprehension testing.
- This deliberate approach helped ensure the sample provided reliable data for analyzing the relationship between gender, school grades, and reading comprehension.

2.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The study applied a descriptive quantitative method to present an objective analysis of students' reading comprehension skills across the selected variables. Data were gathered through an 18-item test designed to assess multiple dimensions of reading, including contractions, sequencing, vocabulary knowledge, inferencing, and identification of main ideas. The test's item variety aimed to ensure comprehensive measurement of reading skills.

Descriptive statistical analysis and regression modeling were employed to identify performance patterns and relationships between gender, school grades, and comprehension levels. Metrics such as mean scores, standard deviation, and variable correlations were calculated. This approach enabled the researcher to determine both group-level trends and individual differences in comprehension ability, offering insights into specific weaknesses such as contextual understanding and inferencing.

2.2 Instrument Validity and Reliability

The test instrument demonstrated strong content validity, as it was meticulously developed to address core aspects of reading comprehension: vocabulary acquisition, contextual interpretation, reasoning, and main idea identification. With items categorized into areas such as compound words and inferencing, the test effectively represented the construct of reading comprehension, ensuring construct validity as well.

In terms of reliability, analysis of data from 80 students revealed consistent scoring patterns,

indicating the instrument's ability to distinguish varying levels of reading ability. The use of clearly defined item categories supported consistent measurement. However, for enhanced academic rigor, the study acknowledges the potential benefit of formal reliability testing—such as calculating Cronbach's Alpha—to strengthen the internal consistency of the instrument. Despite this limitation, the test is deemed a reliable and valid tool for evaluating students' comprehension skills.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the 18-question English test given to the Muqimius Sunnah junior high school students, it is found that the average scores between males and females are similar in their mastery of comprehending the questions, and weaknesses are presented below.

3.1. English Reading Comprehension Ability of MTs Muqimius Sunnah Students

In this study, male students had a mean reading comprehension score of 3.66 with a standard deviation of 2.01. Their scores ranged from a minimum of 0.11 to a maximum of 8.00. Female students, on the other hand, achieved a higher mean score of 4.43 and a standard deviation of 2.88, indicating both a higher average and greater variability in performance compared to males. These results suggest that, on average, female students performed slightly better in reading comprehension than their male counterparts. However, the difference in score distributions between the two groups was not statistically significant.

Table 1. English Reading Comprehension Skills

No	Problem Category	Male Mean Score	Female Mean Score	Mean
1	Compound Words	2.59	3.70	3.15
2	Contractions	8.00	9.35	8.68
3	Base Word-Inflations	6.54	9.10	7.82
4	Affixes	3.95	5.70	4.83
5	Synonyms	3.84	4.45	4.14
6	Antonyms	3.78	3.50	3.64
7	Multiple Meanings & Context	2.22	1.45	1.83
8	Details	4.32	6.90	5.61
9	Sequence	6.68	8.60	7.73
10	Cause and Effect	3.51	5.00	4.26
11	Main Idea	5.51	6.65	6.08
12	Following Directions	1.24	5.05	3.15
13	Inferred Details	2.16	2.40	2.28
14	Inferred Sequence	0.11	0.25	0.18
15	Inferred Cause and Effect	3.30	3.45	3.38
16	Inferred Main Idea	2.43	0.75	1.59
17	Facts and Opinions	2.92	2.95	2.94
18	Verifying Accuracy	2.59	0.45	1.52
	Total	3.76	4.59	2.18

The following table shows descriptive statistics related to the variables used:

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Students	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	0.11	8.00	3.6594	2.00945
Female	0.25	9.35	4.4278	2.88160

Table 2 shows that male students had an average reading comprehension score of 3.66 with a standard deviation of 2.01. Their scores ranged from a minimum of 0.11 to a maximum of 8.00. In comparison, female students had a higher mean score of 4.43 and a standard deviation of 2.88, reflecting greater variability in their results. While female students, on average, performed slightly better than male students, the difference in score distribution between the two groups was not statistically significant.

3.2. The Relationship Between Gender and Students' English Reading Comprehension Skills

A statistical analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between gender and students' English reading comprehension skills. The correlation matrix below presents the strength and direction of associations between the variables under study: the overall question score, male students, and female students.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix of Gender and English Reading Comprehension Skills

Variables	Question	Male	Female
Question	1.000	-0.511	-0.605
Male	-0.511	1.000	0.871
Female	-0.605	0.871	1.000

The figure below presents the correlations between gender and students' reading ability, referred to as the "Problem" variable. There is a significant negative correlation between the Problem variable and male students' scores, with a correlation coefficient of -0.511 and a significance level of 0.015. This indicates that as male scores increase, their performance on the Problem variable tends to decrease, and vice versa.

Similarly, the correlation between the Problem variable and female students' scores is also negative and statistically significant, with a stronger correlation of -0.605 and a p-value of 0.004. This suggests that higher female scores are associated with lower scores on the Problem variable.

In contrast, there is a strong positive correlation between male and female students' English reading comprehension scores, with a correlation coefficient of 0.871 and a significance level of $p < 0.001$. This means that as one group's scores increase, the other group's scores tend to increase as well.

Table 4. Gender Variable Regression Model

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.606	0.367	0.283	4.52174

Based on the results from the Regression Model (Table 3), it can be seen that the R Square of 0.367 indicates that this model is able to explain about 36.7% of the variability in students' reading comprehension ability scores, based on gender variables.

Table 5. ANOVA of the Relationship Between Gender and Students' Reading Comprehension Ability

Model	Sum of Squares	Off Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	177.808	2	88.904	0.032
Residuals	306.692	15	20.446	
Total	484.500	17		

The ANOVA test results show an F value of 4.348 with a significance of 0.032, indicating that this model is significant. This means that there is a significant relationship between gender and school grades and reading comprehension scores in English.

Table 6. Regression Coefficient of English Reading Comprehension Ability

Model	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	14.229	2.267		6.306	0.000
Male	0.176	1.111	0.066	0.158	0.876
Female	-1.228	0.775	-0.1584	-1.584	0.134

The Regression coefficient table shows that the Intercept Coefficient (Constant) of 14,292 is the initial value when the predictor variable (gender) is zero.

1. Male: The coefficient of 0.176 indicates that a one-unit increase in the male group score has only a small and insignificant impact ($p = 0.876$).
2. Female: The coefficient of -1.228 indicates that increasing scores in the female group has a negative effect on reading comprehension ability, but it is not statistically significant ($p = 0.134$).

3.3 Weaknesses and Strengths of English Reading Comprehension Skills

The findings of this study highlight notable weaknesses in students' English reading comprehension, particularly in the contrast between male and female students' performance. Although statistical analysis revealed no significant differences in comprehension levels between genders, indicating that both male and female students perform similarly overall, deeper analysis uncovered several specific areas where students demonstrated limited mastery.

One key area of weakness is vocabulary knowledge, especially the understanding of multiple meanings, contextual vocabulary, and word forms. Many students struggled with questions involving compound words and base word-inflections. Errors in forming compound words and identifying base forms suggest a lack of foundational knowledge in word structure—an essential skill for reading comprehension.

Another area of difficulty lies in interpreting context and contextual meanings. Test items that required students to deduce the meaning of words based on their use in a sentence revealed that many had trouble distinguishing meaning in different contexts. This indicates limited proficiency in using context as a guide to word meaning, which negatively affects their overall understanding of the text.

Inference ability also emerged as a weak point. Items assessing students' capacity to draw conclusions from implied information—such as inferred details and sequence—showed that many were unable to make logical inferences or correctly determine the sequence of events without explicit clues. These results point to a need for further development in implicit comprehension skills, which are crucial for interpreting more complex or nuanced texts.

In addition, students demonstrated challenges in identifying main ideas and key supporting details. Several students struggled to pinpoint the main idea of a paragraph or to recognize details that supported it. This suggests the need for enhanced instruction in recognizing text structure and distinguishing central ideas from less relevant information, particularly in longer passages.

Despite these weaknesses, the study also identified areas of strength. The highest average scores were observed in questions related to contractions. Male students scored an average of 8.00, while female students achieved a higher average of 9.35, resulting in a combined average of 8.68. This suggests a strong understanding of contractions among students, likely due to their frequent exposure to such forms in everyday English usage.

Sequence-based questions also received relatively high scores. Male students averaged 6.68, while female students scored 8.60, with a combined average of 7.73. These results indicate that students possess a solid understanding of chronological or step-by-step progression in texts.

Furthermore, base word-inflection questions yielded an overall average score of 7.82, with males averaging 6.54 and females 9.10. These findings reflect a relatively good grasp of word structure and

morphological forms, which could serve as a strong foundation for improving comprehension of more advanced texts.

In summary, while students exhibit promising skills in certain areas—such as contractions, sequencing, and word inflections—they continue to face challenges in deeper vocabulary knowledge, contextual understanding, inference, and identifying key textual elements. Addressing these weaknesses through targeted instruction and practice will be essential for fostering more advanced reading comprehension skills.

3.4 Gender and learning preferences as literacy strengthening variables

There are close relationships between national literacy initiatives, school grades, gender, and junior secondary school students' reading comprehension skills in English. The National Literacy Movement (Gerakan Literasi Nasional, GLN) aims to improve the reading culture and literacy skills of students in Indonesia, which is becoming increasingly important given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in remote areas with limited access to learning. In terms of gender, female students performed better on average in reading comprehension than male students, especially on sequence and contractions type questions, although this difference was not statistically significant. School grades play an important role in supporting structured instruction, particularly in improving deep analytical skills, context understanding and vocabulary acquisition. Globally, high literacy skills give students greater access to information and knowledge, supporting achievement in other subjects such as science and math. Therefore, literacy reinforcement needs to be designed with gender, school values and synergies with national and global literacy initiatives in mind to create more effective and inclusive learning strategies.

Teaching methods play a crucial role in students' reading comprehension ability, as it directly affects how they process, understand and apply information from texts. An overly dominant memorization-based approach is often a hindrance in the development of critical thinking skills, text analysis and inference, all of which are crucial for understanding complex texts. While memorization has its own role in learning, its overuse tends to make students focus only on the repetition of information without understanding the relationship between important elements in the text. As a result, students have difficulty connecting new information with the knowledge they already have, which ultimately hinders their understanding of the text as a whole.

In contrast, direct and repetitive teaching methods are often effective in helping students master basic skills, such as understanding contractions or the order of events in a text. These skills are important, especially in the early stages of learning, as they provide the necessary foundation for reading. However, this method is inadequate when used to train students in understanding implied meanings, analyzing context, or making deeper inferences. Therefore, learning that relies solely on this method needs to be combined with other more challenging strategies to improve students' analytical skills.

To overcome these weaknesses, teachers are advised to adopt more innovative and interactive teaching methods. Project-based learning, for example, can provide students with opportunities to apply reading skills in real contexts relevant to everyday life. These projects can be in the form of analyzing complex texts linked to real-world problems or compiling reports based on the reading materials they have studied. Group discussions are also one of the effective methods to encourage students to share perspectives, improve mutual understanding, and practice critical thinking skills. In addition, the use of authentic texts, such as news articles, short stories, or other reading materials relevant to their lives, can make learning more interesting and meaningful.

Innovative methods such as these not only improve students' analytical skills, but also provide greater motivation to learn. When students feel that their learning is relevant to the real world, they are more motivated to learn and more eager to understand the material. With an approach that involves hands-on experience, students not only learn to understand the text, but are also able to develop critical

thinking that will be useful in various aspects of their lives. The combination of mastery of basic skills and deep analytical ability is the key to improving students' overall reading comprehension ability. This requires teachers' commitment to continuously evaluate and update teaching methods to align with the needs of students in the modern era.

Other factors that influence students' reading skills are school environment, gender and practice opportunities. A supportive school environment, especially with a strong reading culture, plays a big role in improving students' reading skills. A school with an active library with a varied collection of books, regular literacy programs such as scheduled reading time and project-based learning approaches can create a learning environment conducive to literacy development. A consistent reading culture in schools not only improves students' reading comprehension skills but also builds long-term reading interests and habits.

In terms of gender, female students generally showed higher average scores than male students, although the difference was not statistically significant. However, this finding remains interesting to explore further, especially in terms of differences in learning styles, interest in certain reading materials, as well as social expectations of how they learn. For example, female students tend to be more interested in narrative texts or reading materials that involve empathy and emotional connections, while male students may be more interested in informative or technical texts. These differences can provide insights for teachers to design teaching methods that better suit students' needs based on their learning preferences.

In addition, exposure to English texts outside the school environment is also an important factor in improving students' reading skills. Students who have access to storybooks, digital media or additional courses are more likely to have better literacy skills than those who rely solely on classroom learning materials. Consistent practice opportunities, such as reading texts in different contexts and language styles, help students understand the content better. Repeated practice also gives them the confidence to tackle more complex texts. By creating an environment rich in reading opportunities, both in school and outside, students can develop deeper and more sustainable literacy skills.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals several key insights into the English reading comprehension skills of students at SMP Muqimus Sunnah. While female students achieved a slightly higher average score (4.43) compared to male students (3.66), the difference was not statistically significant, suggesting that gender alone does not have a meaningful impact on comprehension outcomes. Students generally performed well on items involving familiar, everyday language—such as contractions and sequence recognition—yet struggled with more cognitively demanding tasks, particularly those requiring vocabulary mastery, contextual interpretation, and inference-making. The regression analysis showed that gender and school grade together accounted for 36.7% of the variance in reading comprehension scores ($R^2 = 0.367$), and while the model as a whole was statistically significant, neither gender showed a significant individual effect. This indicates that the observed performance patterns are better understood as collective trends rather than effects driven by a single variable.

Despite offering valuable insights, the study has limitations. It focused on a specific school with a limited sample size, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. Additionally, the study did not consider other influential factors such as students' socio-economic backgrounds, prior language exposure, or home literacy environments—all of which could play crucial roles in shaping reading comprehension skills.

Future research should explore a broader range of variables, including instructional quality, reading habits, access to educational resources, and parental involvement. Expanding the sample across multiple schools and regions would provide a more representative understanding of students' reading proficiency. Moreover, longitudinal studies could better capture developmental changes and

long-term learning outcomes. Ultimately, improving reading comprehension requires a multifaceted approach that goes beyond gender and emphasizes enriched vocabulary instruction, context-based learning, and inference training, supported by collaboration among educators, families, and the wider school community.

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