



## EFL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING WORD MEANING WHEN READING NARRATIVE TEXTS

Aliq Devan Arinal Haq<sup>1</sup>, Kushardiyanti Novinda<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Universitas Negeri Semarang

E-mail: [1aliqdevan20@students.unnes.ac.id](mailto:aliqdevan20@students.unnes.ac.id), [2kushardiyanti@mail.unnes.ac.id](mailto:kushardiyanti@mail.unnes.ac.id)

Accepted :

6 June 2026

Published :

12 June 2026

Corresponding Author:

Aliq Evan Arinal Haq

Email Corresponding :

aliqdevan20@students.unnes.  
ac.id

### ABSTRACT

Reading proficiency plays a crucial role in enabling English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to comprehend academic texts effectively. However, vocabulary comprehension remains a significant challenge for many learners. While numerous studies have examined vocabulary-related difficulties, limited research has focused on Indonesian twelfth-grade students. This study investigates the experiences and perceptions of twelfth-grade EFL learners at SMA N 12 Semarang regarding the challenges they encounter in understanding word meanings while reading narrative texts. A qualitative descriptive design was employed. Data were collected through questionnaires administered to 34 students from one intact class and were further supported by semi-structured interviews with one English teacher and six students. The findings revealed that learners experienced various lexical difficulties, including unfamiliar vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, polysemous words, grammatical variations, and lengthy complex sentences. These challenges were influenced by limited vocabulary exposure and affective factors such as frustration. To overcome these difficulties, students primarily relied on digital translation tools, particularly Google Translate, and collaborative discussions with peers. The study highlights the need for instructional strategies that enhance vocabulary development and reading comprehension skills among EFL learners.

**Keywords:** *EFL learners, vocabulary comprehension, reading difficulties, narrative texts, qualitative study.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is widely recognized as a fundamental competency that EFL learners must develop to achieve academic success and language proficiency (Cahyani, 2023; Maryamah et al., 2024; Mulatu & Regassa, 2022). Rather than functioning as a passive activity, reading involves a dynamic cognitive process in which learners actively construct

meaning by integrating linguistic knowledge, prior experiences, and contextual understanding (Aisyah & Rosyida, 2019; Nayeem et al., 2025; Azwar et al., 2024). Within EFL instruction, narrative texts constitute an essential pedagogical resource, providing students with opportunities to engage with authentic language use while developing comprehension skills through

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exposure to story structures, event sequences, and moral values embedded within the narratives (Setyawati & Mandarani, 2021; Hartmann, 2017; Sari, 2019).

The ultimate purpose of reading extends beyond the mere decoding of written symbols; it involves achieving a comprehensive understanding of the author's intended message and underlying meanings (Nation, 2019). Through effective reading, learners are expected to interpret textual information critically and comprehend the writer's communicative intentions. Nevertheless, many students continue to encounter difficulties in understanding narrative texts, particularly when attempting to follow complex plot developments and interconnected story elements (Anggadewa & Tarigan, 2022).

A variety of factors contribute to reading comprehension difficulties, among which vocabulary knowledge is one of the most influential. Research has consistently demonstrated a strong relationship between vocabulary size and learners' ability to recognize and interpret lexical items encountered in reading materials (Beceran, 2020). Limited vocabulary knowledge remains a persistent challenge for many EFL learners and often impedes their ability to identify key concepts and follow narrative progression effectively (Khoirunnisa, 2019). Furthermore, the presence of numerous unfamiliar words increases cognitive load during reading, requiring learners to allocate substantial mental resources to lexical processing. As noted by Dolgunsöz (2018), excessive cognitive demands may hinder comprehension, prolong reading time, and generate feelings of frustration among learners.

To overcome vocabulary-related difficulties, students frequently employ a range of learning strategies. Common approaches include consulting dictionaries, memorizing unfamiliar vocabulary items, and participating in collaborative learning activities with peers (Lutfiyah et al., 2022). In addition, some learners attempt to infer the meanings of unknown words through contextual analysis, drawing on surrounding textual information to facilitate comprehension (Siregar, 2019). Beyond conventional classroom practices,

exposure to English-language films has been identified as an engaging and effective means of expanding vocabulary knowledge and enhancing language acquisition (Maulida & Warni, 2024). Likewise, social media platforms have emerged as valuable supplementary tools that support vocabulary development while simultaneously increasing learner motivation and engagement (Pangaribuan et al., 2025).

Teachers have also implemented various instructional approaches to address vocabulary and reading comprehension challenges. One notable example is the Listen–Read–Discuss (LRD) strategy, which encourages students to connect newly acquired information with their prior knowledge and experiences, thereby facilitating deeper comprehension and learning (Ningtyas et al., 2023). Ultimately, proficient readers tend to adopt flexible and adaptive reading strategies, modifying their approaches according to the specific challenges presented by a text and their individual learning needs (Sari, 2017).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that limited vocabulary knowledge constitutes a major barrier to reading comprehension among EFL learners. Nevertheless, much of the existing literature has concentrated on university students (Cahyani, 2023), while other investigations have primarily focused on learners at the junior secondary level (Setyawati & Mandarani, 2021). Consequently, there remains a noticeable gap in qualitative research exploring the experiences of Indonesian senior high school students, particularly regarding their vocabulary-related difficulties when engaging with narrative texts. Moreover, studies conducted at this educational level have predominantly employed quantitative approaches, emphasizing the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions rather than examining learners' personal experiences, perceptions, and challenges.

To address this gap, the present qualitative study seeks to investigate the

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perceptions of twelfth-grade students at SMA N 12 Semarang concerning the vocabulary difficulties they encounter while reading narrative texts and the strategies they employ to overcome these obstacles. Specifically, the study explores students' interpretations of their vocabulary-related challenges, the factors they perceive as contributing to these difficulties, and the coping mechanisms they utilize during the reading process. The findings are expected to provide valuable pedagogical insights for English teachers seeking to improve reading instruction and for curriculum developers aiming to design learning materials that better accommodate the needs of senior high school learners.

Understanding the conceptual complexity of narrative texts is particularly important when examining vocabulary-related reading difficulties. Narrative texts are generally designed to entertain readers or evoke emotional responses through the presentation of events organized within a structured sequence. Typically, narratives follow a conventional organizational pattern consisting of an orientation, the emergence and development of conflict, and a subsequent resolution (Ardiansyah & Jaya, 2020). Such genre-specific structures help guide readers' expectations and facilitate meaning-making throughout the reading process (Derewianka & Jones, 2016). In addition to their organizational framework, narrative texts frequently employ descriptive language, temporal conjunctions, and past-tense verb forms to create vivid settings, develop characters, and convey sequences of events.

However, the complexity of narrative texts extends beyond their structural organization. Readers must simultaneously process linguistic features and interpret emotional nuances, contextual details, and plot developments. When learners encounter an excessive number of unfamiliar lexical items, their attention often shifts away from constructing a coherent understanding of the narrative toward decoding individual words. This fragmented approach to reading can disrupt comprehension processes and reduce overall reading fluency (Pratiwi & Widiati, 2021).

For Indonesian EFL learners, reading narrative texts presents numerous linguistic and cognitive challenges that frequently hinder comprehension (Rizqon et al., 2021). At the secondary school level, students commonly experience difficulties related to limited vocabulary knowledge, insufficient understanding of textual structures, and low levels of learning motivation (Shafira & Widodo, 2024). These challenges are further compounded by the presence of lengthy and syntactically complex sentences, which often contain subordinate clauses and sophisticated grammatical constructions. Such linguistic features increase the cognitive demands placed on learners and make comprehension more difficult. According to Mustafa (2019), these problems are largely attributable to inadequate vocabulary breadth and depth among Indonesian secondary school students.

As a consequence of these linguistic and cognitive barriers, many Indonesian EFL learners perceive reading as a demanding and monotonous activity rather than as an engaging means of acquiring knowledge and developing language proficiency (Rizqon et al., 2021). This negative perception may further reduce students' motivation to engage in extensive reading practices, thereby limiting opportunities for vocabulary growth and reading development.

### 3. METHODS

This research utilized a qualitative descriptive methodology to examine the experiences and viewpoints of EFL learners in relation to the lexical challenges they face when reading narrative texts. This method is particularly well-suited for investigating intricate learning processes and human experiences within a natural educational context (Creswell & Creswell 2018). The participants in this research included senior high school students from the twelfth grade and an English instructor at SMA N 12 Semarang, Indonesia. A group of 34 students from a complete twelfth-grade class took part in the first phase by completing an online survey. For the interview stage, a purposive sampling method was utilized to choose

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participants capable of offering detailed and relevant perspectives on the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The sample for the interview included one English teacher and six students, who were chosen according to their academic achievements, representing the highest, average, and lowest levels of performance in the class. The teacher was part of the sample to confirm the validity of the experiences reported by students in the classroom. To adhere to strict research ethics, the identities of all respondents are kept confidential and represented by pseudonyms (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Two main tools were employed to collect data for this research: a survey and a semi-structured interview framework. The employment of various tools is a common approach in qualitative research to attain data triangulation and improve the trustworthiness of the study (Yin, 2018). The survey aimed to uncover the common lexical challenges encountered by students when reading narrative texts and was administered online through Google Forms. Meanwhile, semi-structured interview guides were created for both the students and the teacher to thoroughly investigate the insights gathered from the questionnaire (Cohen et al., 2018).

The systematic collection of data was conducted following the formal approval from the administration of SMA N 12 Semarang. The online survey was initially sent out to the 34 students enrolled in the chosen class. After gathering the questionnaire responses in Excel, the chosen participants were invited to interview sessions to reinforce and confirm the preliminary findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The English teacher participated in a direct, in-person interview that was recorded digitally. The interviews with the six chosen students were held separately using the Zoom video conferencing platform.

The thematic analysis of qualitative data from both sources was conducted utilizing the interactive model (Miles et al., 2019). This procedure entails the condensation of data, during which researchers identify and isolate important statements concerning students' challenges with vocabulary. They organize this information into themes for clarity and ultimately present their findings in a narrative

format. Methodological and source triangulation was applied by cross-verifying the students' survey and interview data with the teacher's interview insights to ensure validity.

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

##### Results

The findings are based on the thematic analysis of questionnaires completed by 34 twelfth-grade students, alongside insights gathered from in-depth interviews with six chosen students (identified as Student 1 through Student 6) and the English teacher at SMA N 12 Semarang. The information is organized into three primary themes: the various types of lexical challenges faced, their root causes, and the strategies employed to cope with them.

##### *4.1 Type of Lexical Difficulties Encountered by Students*

The data from the questionnaire indicated that a considerable majority of the 34 students encounter significant lexical obstacles. These challenges present themselves in various forms, extending beyond merely unfamiliar vocabulary. The survey indicated that students expressed a strong consensus regarding their difficulties with polysemy (words possessing several meanings) and idiomatic expressions. This conclusion was strongly reinforced by the Zoom interviews. Student 2 (Rafida) indicated that coming across a word that has several meanings confuses her, hindering her capacity to understand the context of the following storyline. Student 3 (Arya) and Student 4 (Irfan) noted that the use of figurative language, including idioms and archaic English found in classical literature, poses a significant obstacle.

Moreover, Additionally, the incorporation of grammar within narrative texts has been identified as a considerable lexical challenge. Student 6 (Novan) pointed out his struggle with recognizing and correctly spelling the various forms of past tense verbs (Verb 1, Verb 2, and Verb 3) commonly found in stories. Sentence length plays a significant role; Student 5 (Afiefa) mentioned that lengthy and intricate sentences exceed her cognitive

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capacity, compelling her to engage in a laborious word-for-word translation method.

**4.2 Underlying Causes of Lexical Obstacles**

Through the synthesis of students' survey data, interview feedback, and the teacher's perspectives, it became clear that these challenges arise from restricted language exposure and emotional influences. The in-person discussion with the English teacher affirmed that numerous students have limited interaction with English beyond the classroom and exhibit a generally low interest in reading. The teacher noted that students tend to favor exploring social media over engaging with lengthy educational materials. Conversely, Student 1 (Bertha) noted that she engages with short English narrative texts on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, suggesting that the reading format plays a crucial role in fostering student engagement.

The questionnaire results indicated a significant agreement among students that they experience frustration and a decline in motivation when faced with numerous challenging words. Student 1 (Bertha) acknowledged that her mood noticeably declines when she encounters unfamiliar vocabulary. However, for certain individuals, this serves as an incentive, Student 2 (Rafida) mentioned that becoming aware of her vocabulary constraints inspired her to expand her knowledge, particularly after observing her mother communicate effortlessly with foreigners.

**4.3 Students' Coping Strategies**

Despite these obstacles, students consistently utilize targeted strategies. The data collected from the questionnaire revealed that the main coping strategy employed by the 34 students is the use of digital translation resources, including tools like Google Translate and online dictionaries. During the interviews, nearly all students acknowledged their dependence on smartphones for the immediate translation of challenging words or even complete sentences. Student 5 (Afiefa) mentioned that she directly translates texts on her phone due to the complexity of the vocabulary.

The next most prevalent approach involves seeking advice from peers. Both Student 6 (Novan) and Student 4 (Irfan) often consult their friends or the teacher for assistance. Contextual guessing is employed, yet it frequently proves inadequate. Although Irfan tries to associate words to infer meanings, the English teacher observed that students typically struggle to comprehend context correctly because of their insufficient vocabulary base.

**5. CONCLUSION**

The students in the twelfth grade at SMA N 12 Semarang face intricate challenges related to vocabulary while engaging with English narrative texts. These challenges extend beyond merely encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, prominently encompassing issues with polysemy, idiomatic expressions, variations in past tense verb forms, and mental strain due to overly lengthy sentences. These challenges primarily stem from insufficient daily engagement with English literature and a limited foundational vocabulary, leading to adverse emotional reactions like frustration and decreased motivation to read. To overcome these obstacles, the students predominantly depend on instant, technology-based tools mainly Google Translate and online dictionaries while also seeking assistance from their peers. While these approaches provide immediate solutions, they frequently do not enhance students' capacity to independently extract meaning from context. It is strongly advised to adopt interactive and collaborative reading techniques that specifically focus on teaching vocabulary skills related to context clues.

**6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The researchers wish to convey their heartfelt appreciation to the principal, the English instructor, and the twelfth-grade students of SMA N 12 Semarang for their enthusiastic involvement and ongoing assistance throughout the data collection phase of this study.

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