

STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN UNDERSTANDING NARRATIVE TEXTS: A NARRATIVE THEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mensintesis penelitian-penelitian terdahulu mengenai kesulitan siswa dalam memahami teks naratif dengan menggunakan pendekatan narrative thematic literature review. Pemahaman membaca merupakan keterampilan penting dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL), namun masih banyak siswa yang mengalami kesulitan ketika berhadapan dengan teks naratif. Penelitian ini mengkaji dan menganalisis sejumlah artikel jurnal yang relevan untuk mengidentifikasi pola-pola kesulitan yang muncul secara berulang dalam berbagai konteks pendidikan. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan siswa dalam memahami teks naratif bersifat multidimensional dan saling berkaitan, meliputi keterbatasan kosakata, lemahnya penguasaan tata bahasa—terutama penggunaan tense—kesulitan kognitif dan pemrosesan teks, rendahnya pemahaman terhadap struktur teks naratif, serta kesulitan dalam menjawab pertanyaan pemahaman bacaan. Keterbatasan kosakata dan tata bahasa menjadi faktor dasar yang memengaruhi pemahaman makna teks, sementara faktor kognitif dan struktural semakin memperparah kesulitan siswa. Melalui sintesis tematik, artikel ini memberikan pemahaman yang lebih terintegrasi mengenai kesulitan dominan yang dihadapi pembelajar EFL dalam memahami teks naratif. Temuan ini mengimplikasikan perlunya pendekatan pembelajaran yang holistik dalam pengajaran membaca teks naratif.

Kata kunci: teks naratif, pemahaman membaca, kesulitan siswa, kajian literatur tematik, EFL.

ABSTRACT

This article aims to synthesize previous studies on students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts by employing a narrative thematic literature review approach. Reading comprehension is a crucial skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning; however, many students continue to face challenges when engaging with narrative texts. This study reviews and analyzes selected relevant journal articles to identify recurring patterns of difficulties reported across different educational contexts. The findings reveal that students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts are multifaceted and interconnected, encompassing vocabulary limitations, insufficient grammar mastery—particularly tense usage—cognitive and text-processing challenges, limited understanding of narrative text structure, and difficulties in answering comprehension questions. Vocabulary and grammar problems emerge as foundational factors that influence students' ability to interpret narrative meaning accurately, while cognitive and structural difficulties further exacerbate comprehension problems. Through thematic synthesis, this study provides an integrated understanding of dominant difficulties faced by EFL learners in narrative text comprehension. The findings suggest that effective instruction should adopt a holistic approach by integrating vocabulary development, grammar reinforcement, explicit teaching of narrative text structure, and strategic reading skills. This article contributes to the literature by offering a thematic synthesis that may serve as a reference for English teachers, curriculum developers, and future researchers in improving narrative reading instruction.

Keywords: narrative text, reading comprehension, students' difficulties, thematic literature review, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension constitutes a central component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it enables learners to interpret written discourse, construct meaning, and engage critically

with textual information. In formal education contexts, reading comprehension is not merely the ability to decode words but involves complex cognitive processes, including understanding textual structure, recognizing implicit meaning, and

integrating prior knowledge with textual cues. Among the various genres introduced in Indonesian secondary education, narrative texts occupy a prominent position due to their close association with storytelling, moral values, and cultural representation. Narrative texts are commonly employed to enhance students' reading skills through stories that are structurally organized into orientation, complication, and resolution. Nevertheless, despite their pedagogical importance, many EFL learners continue to encounter substantial difficulties in comprehending narrative texts, which in turn negatively affects their overall reading achievement (Sari et al., 2020).

A growing body of research has documented that students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts stem from multiple linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Vocabulary limitation has consistently been identified as one of the most dominant obstacles hindering effective comprehension. Students who possess limited lexical knowledge often struggle to interpret sentence meaning accurately, particularly when encountering unfamiliar or low-frequency words. Consequently, they tend to rely heavily on word-by-word translation strategies, which disrupt reading fluency and prevent holistic understanding of narrative content (Anggadewa & Tarigan, 2022; Novianti & Kurniawati, 2021). This condition indicates that vocabulary mastery plays a foundational role in enabling learners to grasp narrative meaning.

Beyond vocabulary-related challenges, grammatical competence especially in relation to tense usage has been shown to significantly influence students' comprehension of narrative texts. Since narratives predominantly employ past tense forms to describe sequences of events, insufficient understanding of grammatical structures often leads students to misinterpret temporal relationships and event progression within the story (Ridwan, 2024; Ridwan, 2025). In addition, deficiencies in grammar mastery frequently result in confusion when students attempt to identify causal relationships between events, thereby weakening their overall comprehension of the narrative.

From a cognitive perspective, reading comprehension difficulties are also associated with students' limited text-processing and higher-order thinking skills. Several studies report that students who

struggle with reading comprehension experience difficulties in identifying main ideas, making inferences, and integrating information across sentences and paragraphs (Denton et al., 2015; Weaver & Bryant, 1995). These challenges become more pronounced when students are exposed to longer or linguistically demanding narrative texts, as they require sustained attention and strategic processing to construct meaning effectively.

Furthermore, inadequate understanding of narrative text structure constitutes another recurring issue identified in previous research. Students often demonstrate limited awareness of key narrative elements, such as orientation, complication, and resolution, which results in fragmented comprehension of the storyline (Lumbantungkup et al., 2022; Zebua et al., 2022). Without sufficient structural awareness, learners tend to focus on isolated textual details rather than perceiving the narrative as a coherent and meaningful whole.

Although numerous studies have explored students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts, the majority of these studies primarily report empirical findings within specific educational contexts and levels. There remains a noticeable lack of research that systematically synthesizes these findings through a narrative thematic literature review approach, particularly in categorizing students' difficulties into recurring thematic patterns across multiple studies. As a result, comprehensive insights into the dominant and interrelated factors influencing students' comprehension of narrative texts remain limited.

Therefore, this article aims to synthesize and review previous studies on students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts by employing a narrative thematic literature review approach. Through thematic mapping of recurring findings, this study seeks to provide a more integrated understanding of the key challenges faced by EFL learners in narrative text comprehension and to offer pedagogical insights for English teachers, curriculum developers, and future researchers.

METHOD

This study used a narrative thematic literature review approach to synthesize previous research on students' difficulties in

comprehending narrative texts. The data sources consisted of selected journal articles published in the past five years that focused on reading comprehension, narrative texts, and students' learning difficulties in EFL contexts. The articles were obtained from reputable databases and academic journals and selected based on their relevance to the research focus, clarity of findings, and contribution to discussions on narrative text comprehension.

The selected studies were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of difficulties reported across research contexts. The analysis involved reading and comparing the findings from each study, coding similar issues, and grouping them into broader thematic categories, such as vocabulary limitations, grammatical mastery issues, cognitive and text processing difficulties, understanding narrative elements, and challenges in answering comprehension questions. Through this process, the findings were synthesized to provide an integrated understanding of the dominant factors influencing students' comprehension of narrative texts.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the thematic synthesis of the selected studies, students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts can be systematically categorized into several dominant themes, including vocabulary limitations, grammar mastery problems, cognitive and text-processing challenges, insufficient understanding of narrative elements, and difficulties in responding to comprehension questions. These themes consistently emerge across various educational contexts and learner levels, indicating that students' reading comprehension difficulties in narrative texts are multifaceted and interrelated rather than isolated issues.

Vocabulary-Related Difficulties

Vocabulary limitation emerges as one of the most prominent factors affecting students' comprehension of narrative texts. Lexical knowledge plays a fundamental role in enabling readers to decode meaning, interpret textual information, and construct coherent understanding of a narrative. The reviewed studies consistently indicate that students with limited vocabulary knowledge encounter difficulties in understanding key words and expressions, which disrupts their reading flow and comprehension process

(Sari et al., 2020; Anggadewa & Tarigan, 2022). As a consequence, students tend to rely excessively on word-by-word translation strategies, which inhibit their ability to grasp the overall meaning of the text.

This finding aligns with Ridwan (2024), who emphasizes that insufficient vocabulary mastery significantly reduces students' ability to comprehend narrative texts effectively. Without adequate lexical resources, students struggle to identify main events, character motivations, and conflicts within the story. Thus, vocabulary limitation functions as a foundational difficulty that influences other aspects of reading comprehension, including inference-making and understanding narrative structure.

Grammar Mastery and Tense-Related Challenges

In addition to vocabulary-related issues, grammar mastery particularly in relation to tense usage constitutes a major source of difficulty in narrative text comprehension. Narrative texts predominantly employ past tense forms to describe sequences of events and actions. Several studies reveal that students often experience confusion when interpreting grammatical structures related to past tense, past continuous, and temporal expressions, which leads to misinterpretation of event chronology and causal relationships within the narrative (Pasaribu & Hutahaean, 2020; Ridwan, 2025).

Ridwan (2025) further explains that students with limited grammatical competence tend to misunderstand time references in narrative texts, resulting in fragmented comprehension of the storyline. This issue is reinforced by Hasim and Sherlina (2024), who report that grammatical misunderstanding frequently contributes to students' incorrect responses to narrative comprehension questions. These findings suggest that grammar mastery plays a crucial role in enabling students to accurately interpret narrative meaning.

Cognitive and Text-Processing Difficulties

Beyond linguistic factors, cognitive aspects and text-processing abilities significantly influence students' comprehension of narrative texts. The reviewed studies indicate that students with poor reading comprehension skills often struggle to identify main ideas, integrate information across sentences, and make inferences based

on textual cues (Denton et al., 2015; Weaver & Bryant, 1995). These cognitive challenges become more pronounced when students are exposed to longer or linguistically demanding narrative texts.

Denton et al. (2015) demonstrate that poor comprehenders exhibit weaker text-processing strategies compared to adequate comprehenders, particularly when dealing with complex narrative texts. Similarly, Weaver and Bryant (1995) argue that increased text difficulty negatively affects students' ability to monitor their comprehension, causing them to overlook misunderstandings during the reading process. As a result, students may focus on surface-level information rather than developing a deeper understanding of the narrative.

Difficulties in Understanding Narrative Elements

Another recurring theme identified in the literature is students' limited understanding of narrative text structure, specifically the elements of orientation, complication, and resolution. Several studies report that students often fail to recognize these structural components, which leads to fragmented comprehension of the storyline and narrative progression (Lumbantungkup et al., 2022; Zebua et al., 2022). Although students may understand individual sentences, they frequently struggle to connect events logically within the narrative framework.

Novianti and Kurniawati (2021) emphasize that insufficient awareness of narrative elements negatively affects students' ability to identify the purpose and message of the story. This finding is further supported by Aprilia et al. (2025), who argue that comprehension difficulties are closely related to students' limited understanding of text structure. Without explicit awareness of narrative organization, students encounter challenges in predicting events, interpreting conflicts, and drawing conclusions from the text.

Difficulties in Answering Comprehension Questions

The synthesis of previous studies also reveals that students experience significant difficulties when responding to comprehension questions related to narrative texts, particularly multiple-choice questions. These difficulties are often associated with

limited vocabulary knowledge, weak grammar mastery, and inadequate inference skills (Students' Difficulties in Answering Multiple-Choice Questions in Narrative Text, 2013; Hasim & Sherlina, 2024). Students frequently misinterpret question prompts or fail to identify relevant textual information, which leads to incorrect answers.

Anggadewa and Tarigan (2022) report that students tend to rely on superficial textual clues rather than deeper comprehension when selecting answers. This pattern indicates that students' difficulties in answering comprehension questions reflect broader weaknesses in narrative text comprehension rather than test-taking strategies alone.

Synthesis and Pedagogical Implications

Overall, the thematic synthesis indicates that students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts result from the interaction of linguistic, cognitive, and structural factors. Vocabulary limitation and grammar mastery problems constitute the foundational challenges, while cognitive processing difficulties and limited understanding of narrative elements further intensify students' comprehension problems. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing that effective narrative comprehension requires not only linguistic knowledge but also strategic reading skills and awareness of text structure (Denton et al., 2015; Septy & Utami, 2024).

From a pedagogical perspective, these results suggest that English language instruction should integrate explicit vocabulary development, grammar reinforcement—particularly related to tense usage—and explicit teaching of narrative text structure within reading activities. By addressing these interconnected difficulties holistically, educators may enhance students' narrative reading comprehension and foster more effective reading strategies.

CONCLUSION

This thematic literature review of narrative reveals that students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts are multidimensional and interrelated, encompassing linguistic, cognitive, and structural factors. A synthesis of previous studies suggests that limited vocabulary and inadequate mastery of grammar—especially regarding tense usage—are fundamental

barriers that hinder students' ability to accurately interpret narrative meaning. These linguistic challenges often trigger further comprehension problems, such as misinterpreting events and difficulty identifying key information in the text. Furthermore, cognitive and text-processing difficulties significantly contribute to students' limited comprehension of narrative texts, particularly in identifying main ideas, drawing inferences, and integrating information across sentences and paragraphs. Furthermore, a lack of understanding of narrative text structure, including orientation, complication, and resolution, leads to fragmented comprehension and prevents students from comprehending narrative texts as a coherent whole.

From a narrative thematic synthesis perspective, this study highlights that students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts should not be viewed as isolated issues, but as the result of interactions between various influencing factors. By categorizing these difficulties into recurring thematic patterns, this article provides a more integrated understanding of the dominant challenges faced by EFL learners across various educational contexts. In terms of implications, the findings suggest that English language teaching should adopt a holistic approach by systematically integrating vocabulary development, grammar reinforcement—particularly tense use—and explicit instruction on narrative text structure into reading activities. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to develop students' cognitive and strategic reading skills, such as inferencing and comprehension monitoring, to improve overall reading ability. For future research, further thematic reviews involving a wide range of recent and diverse studies are recommended to deepen understanding of students' difficulties in comprehending narrative texts and to support the development of more effective teaching practices.

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