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Novice Teachers' Challenges in Implementing Hots-Oriented English Reading Instruction in a Boarding School Context

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on examining the challenges encountered by novice teachers in implementing Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-oriented English reading instruction in an Islamic boarding school context. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis involving two novice English teachers. The findings indicate that the challenges experienced by novice teachers are multidimensional and interconnected. Pedagogical challenges include difficulties in designing HOTS-based reading questions, extending student responses through probing, managing discussion-based activities, sequencing reading tasks, and making flexible instructional decisions under time constraints. In addition, student-related challenges such as limited English proficiency and low readiness for analytical and evaluative thinking restrict students' engagement in higher-order reading tasks. These challenges are further intensified by contextual factors within the boarding school environment, including authority-oriented classroom norms and limited instructional resources, which shape classroom interaction and encourage teacher-centered practices. Collectively, these challenges constrain the consistent implementation of HOTS-oriented English reading instruction and contribute to the dominance of lower-order cognitive practices. This study provides empirical insights into the nature of challenges faced by novice teachers, emphasizing the contextual complexity of implementing HOTS in English reading classrooms within a boarding school setting.

1. Introduction

The integration of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) has been widely emphasized in recent educational discourse as a key competency required to meet the cognitive demands of the 21st century. HOTS, which involve analytical, evaluative, and problem-solving abilities, are considered essential for fostering

meaningful learning and preparing students for complex academic and real-life challenges (Ragab et al., 2024; Rusmin et al., 2024). In English language education, reading instruction is recognized as a critical avenue for promoting HOTS, as it requires learners to interpret texts, evaluate information, and construct meaning beyond surface-level comprehension (Fitriani et al., 2021; Mardhiah et al., 2025). Despite this emphasis, implementing HOTS-oriented English reading instruction remains a challenge. Recent studies indicate that reading classrooms are still largely dominated by Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS), focusing on vocabulary recognition and literal comprehension rather than higher-order cognitive engagement (Fitriani et al., 2021; Yulia & Budiharti, 2019). This condition reflects a persistent gap between theoretical expectations of HOTS-oriented instruction and actual classroom practices.

These challenges are particularly evident among novice teachers. Novice teachers often experience difficulties in lesson planning, instructional decision-making, and classroom management, which limit the ability to design and sustain HOTS-oriented activities (Chandran et al., 2022; Karas & Faez, 2020; Putri, 2020). As a result, novice teachers tend to rely on simplified instructional practices that prioritize LOTS, especially in reading instruction, where students' language proficiency varies significantly. The challenges of implementing HOTS-oriented instruction are further intensified in Islamic boarding school contexts. Boarding schools integrate academic learning with religious and cultural values, shaping classroom norms and instructional expectations (Fitri et al., 2024; Marinda, 2021). In such settings, teachers are required to balance student-centred learning approaches with institutional discipline and moral considerations. For novice teachers, navigating these contextual demands while promoting higher-order thinking in English reading instruction poses substantial pedagogical challenges.

Previous research has extensively examined strategies for integrating HOTS into English reading instruction. Studies by (Indriyana & Kuswandono, 2019) and (Fitriani et al., 2021; Sofiah et al., 2025) identified questioning strategies, group discussions, feedback, and clear learning objectives as effective approaches for promoting HOTS in reading classrooms. Despite these pedagogical strategies, numerous studies reveal persistent challenges in HOTS implementation. Teachers frequently experience difficulties in designing HOTS-based questions, managing time, and addressing students' limited language proficiency (Kusumastuti et al., 2019; Tyas et al., 2019). These challenges often lead teachers to simplify tasks, resulting in instruction that remains focused on LOTS rather than HOTS.

Research focusing on novice teachers highlights even greater constraints. Saraswati & Wicaksono (2023) found that novice English teachers struggle more than experienced teachers in designing HOTS-oriented reading tasks due to limited pedagogical training and insufficient classroom experience. Similarly, beginning teachers frequently face emotional stress, low self-efficacy, and difficulties in classroom management, which hinder the consistent implementation of higher-order instructional practices (Bi Hady, 2018; Nelci & Lomi, 2020). In addition, contextual challenges play a significant role. Studies conducted in religious-based educational settings suggest that institutional norms and cultural expectations

influence teaching practices. Habibi et al., (2018) noted that teachers in Islamic educational institutions often face tension between encouraging critical thinking and maintaining traditional values. However, most existing studies examine these challenges in general terms and do not focus specifically on novice teachers' experiences in English reading classrooms within a boarding school context.

Although prior studies have provided valuable insights into HOTS implementation and novice teacher development, several gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on instructional strategies or student outcomes rather than on the challenges teachers encounter during classroom implementation. Second, studies that explicitly examine novice teachers' challenges in implementing HOTS-oriented English reading instruction are still limited. Moreover, research conducted in Islamic boarding schools has largely focused on character education and institutional culture with minimal attention to English reading instruction and the integration of HOTS. As a result, there is limited empirical evidence explaining how novice teachers experience and respond to pedagogical, student-related, and contextual challenges when implementing HOTS-oriented reading instruction in a boarding school environment.

In addition to the pedagogical and contextual gaps identified above, this study is situated within a distinct institutional case. The Islamic boarding school examined in this research implements a policy in which newly graduated teachers are directly assigned to teach English reading classes without prior formal teaching experience. This policy creates a unique instructional context where novice teachers are expected to implement HOTS-oriented instruction while simultaneously adapting to professional teaching responsibilities and institutional norms. Such a condition differs from typical school settings, where novice teachers often receive structured induction or mentoring programs. Therefore, this boarding school provides a meaningful case for examining how novice teachers navigate instructional demands, particularly in implementing HOTS-oriented English reading instruction.

To address gaps identified in previous studies, this research aims to investigate the challenges novice teachers face in implementing HOTS-oriented English reading instruction in an Islamic boarding school context. This study is guided by two research questions: (1) What pedagogical challenges do novice teachers encounter when implementing HOTS-oriented English reading instruction? and (2) What student-related and contextual challenges within the boarding school environment influence novice teachers' efforts to promote HOTS in English reading classrooms? Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to explore and describe the pedagogical, student-related, and contextual challenges novice teachers encounter during the implementation of HOTS-oriented English reading instruction. By focusing on novice teachers' classroom experiences in a religious-based boarding school, this study seeks to provide empirical insights that extend current understandings of HOTS implementation and novice teacher development in Islamic boarding setting.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to investigate how novice teachers experience challenges in implementing HOTS-oriented English reading instruction within a bounded context, an Islamic boarding school. A case study was selected because the phenomenon under investigation was inseparable from its real-life setting, where institutional regulations, religious values, and classroom culture shaped instructional practices. In this study, the boarding school constituted a single case, while novice English teachers served as embedded units of analysis. This design enabled an in-depth and holistic examination of pedagogical, student-related, and contextual challenges as they occurred in English reading classrooms.

The participants of this study were two novice English teachers who taught reading at the eighth and ninth grades of a junior high school within the boarding school. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, with novice teachers defined as those having less than five years of teaching experience (Karas & Faez, 2020; Septiani et al., 2025). The criteria for participant selection were: (1) having less than five years of teaching experience, and (2) beginning their teaching careers immediately after graduation without prior classroom teaching experience. This sampling technique was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to obtain information-rich data relevant to the research focus rather than to achieve statistical generalization.

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Classroom observations focused on instructional activities, questioning strategies, and classroom interaction patterns related to HOTS-oriented reading instruction. An observation checklist was developed based on indicators of HOTS-oriented reading instruction, including the types of questions teachers pose, the reading activities designed to promote higher-order thinking, and patterns of classroom interaction. Field notes were taken systematically during each observation to capture instructional events and contextual details. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perceptions of pedagogical, student-related, and contextual challenges. An interview guide was developed in alignment with the research questions and covered pedagogical aspects, students' responses, and contextual influences within the boarding school environment. This interview format ensured consistency across participants while allowing in-depth exploration of emerging issues. Document analysis of lesson plans and reading materials was used to support and triangulate the observational and interview data. The use of multiple data sources enhanced the credibility of the findings.

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles et al., (2014) which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were systematically coded to identify recurring patterns of challenges. These patterns were then organised into themes aligned with the research questions. To ensure trustworthiness, data triangulation across data sources was applied, and the analysis process was conducted iteratively to confirm the consistency of emerging interpretations.

3. Results and Discussion

Results

Overview of Research Participants and Data Collection

Before presenting the findings, it is important to describe the general characteristics of the research participants and the process through which the data were collected. This study involved two novice English teachers teaching reading in a boarding school environment. Both participants had less than five years of teaching experience and were responsible for conducting English reading instruction for secondary-level students. As novice teachers, they were in the early stages of developing pedagogical competence in designing and implementing Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-oriented learning activities.

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical challenges encountered during the implementation of HOTS-oriented English reading instruction. Classroom observations were conducted during several reading lessons to examine instructional practices, questioning strategies, and classroom interaction patterns. To complement the observation data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating teachers after the classroom sessions. The interviews aimed to explore teachers' perspectives, experiences, and reflections regarding the implementation of HOTS-oriented reading instruction. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow predetermined guiding questions while also providing flexibility to probe deeper into issues that emerged during the conversation. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The guiding questions used during the interview process are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Guiding Questions for Semi-Structured Teacher Interviews

No	Interview Questions
1	How do you understand the concept of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in English reading instruction?
2	How do you usually design reading questions that encourage students to think critically or analytically?
3	What difficulties do you experience when asking HOTS-based questions in the classroom?
4	How do students usually respond to analytical or evaluative reading questions?
5	What challenges do you face when managing classroom discussions during reading lessons?
6	How do time constraints influence the implementation of HOTS-oriented activities?
7	What contextual factors in the boarding school environment affect reading instruction?
8	What strategies do you use to encourage students to express opinions or explanations during reading discussions?

This study identified a range of pedagogical challenges novice teachers encounter when implementing HOTS-oriented English reading instruction in the classroom. These challenges emerged consistently across data obtained from classroom

observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Rather than appearing as isolated issues, the challenges were interconnected and influenced teachers' instructional planning, classroom interaction, and decision-making during reading lessons. To provide a clear overview of the pedagogical difficulties identified, Table 2 summarizes the main categories of challenges, key characteristics, and the data sources supporting each finding.

Table 2. Pedagogical Challenges Faced by Novice Teachers in HOTS-Oriented Reading Instruction

Category of Challenges	Description of Findings	Data Sources
Designing HOTS-based questions	Teachers struggled to formulate analytical and evaluative reading questions aligned with students' proficiency	Interview, Observation
Extending student responses	Teachers rarely used follow-up or probing questions to deepen students' thinking	Observation
Instructional decision-making	Teachers hesitated to adapt lessons spontaneously during classroom interaction	Interview
Time management	HOTS activities were shortened or simplified due to limited instructional time	Interview, Observation
Classroom management during discussion	Teachers faced difficulties managing noise and unequal participation in group discussions	Observation
Sequencing reading activities	HOTS tasks were not consistently scaffolded across reading stages	Observation

In line with the qualitative case study design, the pedagogical challenges presented in this section are not intended to represent generalizable patterns but rather to reflect the complexity of the instructional realities novice teachers face within a specific educational context. The identification of these challenges was based on recurring patterns observed across multiple lessons and corroborated through teachers' reflections during interviews. By organizing the findings into thematic categories, this section aims to present a coherent account of how pedagogical limitations shaped the enactment of HOTS-oriented reading instruction in practice.

The findings indicate that pedagogical challenges constituted the most significant obstacles faced by novice teachers in implementing HOTS-oriented English reading instruction. Although the teachers demonstrated awareness of the importance of promoting higher-order thinking, novice teachers encountered persistent difficulties in translating this understanding into consistent classroom practices. These challenges were evident in lesson planning, questioning strategies, classroom interaction, and the sequencing of reading activities. One major pedagogical challenge was the difficulty in designing HOTS-based reading questions. These activities supported a basic understanding, offering limited opportunities for

analytical or evaluative thinking. One novice teacher acknowledged this limitation during the interview, stating:

“I understand that HOTS questions are important, but I often feel confused about how to make questions that are not too difficult for the students. If the question is too hard, they just stay silent.”

(Teacher A, Interview)

The interview excerpt above illustrates that the challenge novice teachers face lies not in their lack of awareness of HOTS principles, but in the difficulty of translating these principles into pedagogically appropriate questions. The teacher’s confusion reflects an ongoing struggle to balance cognitive demand with students’ language proficiency. In attempting to avoid student silence or disengagement, the teacher becomes cautious in formulating questions, particularly those that require analysis or evaluation. As a result, HOTS-oriented questioning is perceived as potentially problematic rather than as an integral component of reading instruction. Another pedagogical challenge involved the limited use of probing and follow-up questions during classroom interaction. When students provided short or partial answers, teachers often accepted the responses without encouraging elaboration. Field notes from classroom observations illustrate this pattern:

The teacher asked why the main character decided to leave home. One student answered briefly, “Because he was sad.” The teacher nodded and moved on to the next question without asking for further explanation or justification.

(Field Notes, Classroom Observation)

This pattern indicates that novice teachers may recognize the importance of asking analytical questions but experience difficulty sustaining cognitively demanding interaction. The absence of follow-up questions suggests limited use of scaffolding strategies to guide students toward elaboration, justification, or textual evidence. In HOTS-oriented reading instruction, such probing is essential to encourage students to explain reasoning, evaluate character decisions, and connect ideas within the text. Without this instructional support, students’ responses remain brief and descriptive, and opportunities for developing analytical and evaluative thinking are reduced. The findings also revealed that instructional uncertainty affected teachers’ classroom decision-making. Novice teachers tended to follow lesson plans rigidly and expressed hesitation to adapt instructional activities spontaneously. One teacher explained this concern during the interview:

“Sometimes students ask questions that are outside my plan. I am afraid if I follow that, the lesson will not finish, so I prefer to go back to what I prepared.”

(Teacher B, Interview)

This finding suggests that limited teaching experience influences how novice teachers perceive classroom flexibility. Instead of viewing spontaneous student questions as a resource for extending higher-order thinking, the teacher prioritizes adherence to the lesson plan to maintain instructional control and time efficiency. Consequently, opportunities to deepen students’ reasoning through discussion,

clarification, or evaluation are often constrained. This pattern indicates that instructional rigidity functions as a coping mechanism for novice teachers, but at the same time limits the dynamic and dialogic processes essential for the development of Higher Order Thinking Skills in reading instruction.

Time management emerged as another prominent pedagogical challenge. HOTS-oriented reading activities, such as discussion and reflection, require extended instructional time. However, observations showed that discussions were often shortened due to time pressure. Teachers prioritised completing lesson objectives over sustaining cognitive depth, resulting in HOTS activities being confined to brief segments of the lesson rather than being integrated throughout. Classroom management during discussion-based activities further complicated implementation. Group discussions often resulted in uneven participation, with a small number of students dominating interaction while others remained passive. Managing noise levels and maintaining focus proved challenging for novice teachers, who sometimes reverted to individual written tasks to regain control. This shift reduced opportunities for collaborative higher-order thinking.

In addition, challenges related to sequencing reading activities were observed. Although pre-reading activities were commonly used to activate background knowledge, transitions to higher-order tasks in the while-reading and post-reading stages were not always clearly scaffolded. In several lessons, HOTS-oriented tasks were introduced abruptly, causing students to hesitate or disengage. Without gradual cognitive development, students struggled to progress from basic comprehension to deeper analysis. Overall, these pedagogical challenges indicate that novice teachers' difficulties stemmed not from a lack of awareness of HOTS principles, but from limited instructional experience in operationalising HOTS within real classroom contexts. The findings highlight the complexity of implementing HOTS-oriented English reading instruction and underscore the need for pedagogical support that strengthens questioning skills, instructional flexibility, and classroom interaction management.

Student-Related and Contextual Challenges in the Boarding School Environment

This section presents the student-related and contextual challenges that influence novice teachers' efforts to implement HOTS-oriented English reading instruction within the boarding school environment. The findings indicate that challenges related to students' language proficiency, learning readiness, and participation patterns are closely intertwined with institutional norms, time constraints, and limited instructional resources. Rather than operating independently, these factors collectively shape teachers' instructional decisions and classroom practices. To provide a clearer overview of the student-related and contextual challenges identified, the data display below highlights how students' characteristics and the boarding school context jointly shape the implementation of HOTS-oriented English reading instruction. As illustrated in Table 3, student-related factors and contextual constraints are closely interconnected and collectively shape

instructional decision-making. These challenges often result in efficiency-oriented practices that limit opportunities for sustained higher-order thinking engagement.

Table 3. Student-Related and Contextual Challenges and The Instructional Impact on HOTS-Oriented Reading Instruction

Challenges	Impact on HOTS Implementation
Limited English proficiency	Teachers prioritize vocabulary explanation over analytical questioning
Authority-oriented culture	Discussion-based HOTS activities become teacher-centered
Limited resources	Lack of comparative and evaluative reading tasks

The findings indicate that novice teachers’ efforts to promote Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in English reading classrooms are strongly influenced by a combination of student-related and contextual challenges within the boarding school environment. One of the most prominent challenges emerges from students’ limited English proficiency, which restricts engagement with cognitively demanding reading tasks. Interview data reveal that many students struggle to understand basic vocabulary and sentence structure, leading reading lessons to focus heavily on literal comprehension. One novice teacher stated,

“Students still have difficulty understanding the meaning of the text. Before asking analytical questions, vocabulary explanation must be done first, otherwise students become silent.” (Teacher B, Interview)

This condition suggests that instructional time is largely devoted to foundational language support, leaving little room for analysis or evaluation. The analytical hypothesis derived from this finding proposes that limited English proficiency reduces students’ cognitive capacity to engage in HOTS-based reading tasks, encouraging novice teachers to rely on LOTS-oriented instruction as a compensatory strategy to maintain classroom participation and comprehension. In addition to linguistic limitations, students’ low readiness for higher-order thinking processes further constrains HOTS implementation. Interview data indicate that students are unfamiliar with expressing opinions, providing reasoning, or responding to open-ended questions. One teacher explained,

“When asked ‘why’ or ‘what do you think’, students tend to wait for the answer instead of responding.” (Teacher A, Interview)

This pattern reflects a learning habit shaped by prior instructional experiences that emphasize correct answers rather than reasoning processes. The analytical hypothesis associated with this finding suggests that limited exposure to HOTS-oriented learning reduces students’ cognitive confidence, resulting in hesitation during analytical reading tasks and discouraging active participation. Consequently, novice teachers often simplify questions or provide guiding explanations, which unintentionally reduces opportunities for independent higher-order thinking. Contextual challenges rooted in the boarding school culture also significantly influence classroom interaction. The findings show that authority-oriented learning

norms shape students' classroom behavior, particularly during discussion-based activities. One teacher described the classroom atmosphere by stating,

"Students are very polite and quiet. When discussion is given, only a few students talk."

(Teacher A, Interview)

Silence in this context reflects respect and obedience rather than disengagement. However, this cultural expectation limits dialogic interaction and restricts opportunities for critical exchange of ideas. The analytical hypothesis emerging from this finding posits that hierarchical classroom norms within the boarding school environment reduce student-initiated interaction, thereby constraining discussion-based HOTS activities in English reading lessons. As a result, novice teachers tend to maintain stronger instructional control to align with institutional values, which further limits exploratory and evaluative reading practices. Limited access to learning resources further compounds these challenges. Interview data reveal that reading instruction frequently relies on a single text due to resource constraints. A teacher stated,

"Learning resources are limited. Usually, only one text is used, so comparing ideas is difficult." (Teacher B, Interview)

This limitation restricts opportunities for comparative analysis, evaluation of multiple perspectives, and synthesis of information. The analytical hypothesis derived from this finding indicates that insufficient instructional resources reduce pedagogical flexibility, limiting the range of HOTS-oriented reading activities that novice teachers can design and implement. Overall, these findings demonstrate that student-related and contextual challenges are interconnected and collectively influence novice teachers' efforts to promote HOTS in English reading classrooms. Limited English proficiency, low readiness for higher-order thinking, authority-oriented classroom culture, and restricted learning resources create conditions that favor LOTS-oriented instruction. Although novice teachers demonstrate awareness of HOTS principles, classroom implementation remains gradual and constrained by contextual realities within the boarding school environment.

Discussion

This study investigated the pedagogical, student-related, and contextual challenges encountered by novice teachers in implementing Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-oriented English reading instruction in a boarding school environment. The discussion is guided by two research questions and grounded in the previous theoretical and empirical literature. The analysis emphasizes how pedagogical competence, student readiness, and institutional context interact to shape novice teachers' instructional practices.

Pedagogical Challenges in Implementing HOTS-Oriented English Reading Instruction

The findings of this study reveal that pedagogical challenges constitute a central barrier in the implementation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-oriented English reading instruction by novice teachers. Although awareness of HOTS principles was evident, classroom practices consistently reflected difficulty in translating conceptual understanding into effective instructional actions. This finding aligns with prior research indicating that pedagogical knowledge alone does not automatically result in successful HOTS implementation, particularly among novice teachers who are still developing instructional confidence and classroom expertise (Karas & Faez, 2020; Saraswati & Wicaksono, 2023).

One of the most prominent pedagogical challenges identified in this study relates to the design of HOTS-based reading questions. Classroom observations and interview data show that novice teachers tended to rely on questions that targeted literal comprehension rather than analytical or evaluative thinking. This tendency reflects what Fitriani et al., (2021) describe as a common instructional pattern in reading classrooms, where teachers prioritize comprehension accuracy over cognitive depth. The difficulty experienced by novice teachers in formulating HOTS-oriented questions suggests that question construction requires not only theoretical knowledge of Bloom's taxonomy but also practical experience in aligning cognitive demand with student readiness. Without sufficient pedagogical experience, novice teachers appear to perceive HOTS questions as cognitively risky, potentially leading to student silence and disengagement.

This concern is closely linked to another pedagogical challenge identified in the findings, namely the limited use of probing and follow-up questions during classroom interaction. Even when analytical questions were introduced, interaction often ended after short student responses. The absence of follow-up questioning indicates a lack of scaffolding strategies to extend students' reasoning processes. According to Indriyana & Kuswandono (2019), probing questions play a critical role in HOTS-oriented instruction because such questions encourage justification, clarification, and reflection. In the absence of these strategies, reading activities remain surface-level, and opportunities for developing higher-order thinking are reduced. The findings of this study suggest that novice teachers may struggle to sustain cognitively demanding interaction due to uncertainty about how to guide student responses without losing classroom control.

Instructional decision-making emerged as another significant pedagogical challenge. The findings demonstrate that novice teachers tended to adhere rigidly to lesson plans and showed hesitation in responding to unplanned student questions or discussion trajectories. This behavior reflects what Bi Hady (2018) describes as survival-oriented teaching, where instructional decisions are driven by concerns about time management, lesson completion, and perceived instructional competence. In this study, spontaneous student questions were often viewed as potential disruptions rather than as opportunities to deepen higher-order thinking. As a result, novice teachers frequently redirected discussion back to pre-planned activities, limiting the dynamic and dialogic nature of HOTS-oriented reading instruction. Time management further intensified these pedagogical constraints. HOTS-oriented activities, particularly discussion and reflection, require extended

instructional time. However, the findings indicate that novice teachers often shortened or simplified these activities due to concerns about syllabus coverage and lesson pacing. This finding is consistent with Tyas et al., (2019), who reported that time pressure frequently leads teachers to prioritize task completion over cognitive depth. For novice teachers, limited experience in pacing lessons may exacerbate this challenge, resulting in instructional choices that favor LOTS-oriented tasks as a more manageable alternative.

Classroom management during discussion-based activities also posed a considerable pedagogical challenge (Habibi et al., 2018; Amara et al., 2025). This is in line with observational data that revealed uneven participation patterns, with a small number of students dominating discussions while others remained passive. Managing noise levels and maintaining focus during group activities proved difficult, prompting novice teachers to revert to teacher-centered instruction. This shift reflects a tension between pedagogical ideals and classroom realities. While discussion-based learning is central to HOTS development, effective facilitation requires experience in managing interaction, setting clear expectations, and fostering equitable participation. Without these skills, novice teachers may perceive discussion as disorderly or inefficient, leading to reduced implementation of HOTS-oriented practices.

Another pedagogical issue concerns the sequencing of reading activities. Although pre-reading activities were commonly used to activate background knowledge, transitions to higher-order tasks in the while-reading and post-reading stages were often insufficiently scaffolded. This finding suggests a fragmented approach to HOTS integration, where higher-order tasks are treated as isolated components rather than as an integral part of the reading process. According to Kusumastuti et al., (2019), effective HOTS-oriented reading instruction requires a gradual progression from comprehension to analysis and evaluation. In the absence of coherent scaffolding, students may struggle to engage meaningfully with cognitively demanding tasks.

Taken together, these pedagogical challenges indicate that novice teachers' difficulties stem not from resistance to HOTS principles, but from limited instructional experience in operationalizing such principles in authentic classroom contexts. The findings reinforce the argument that HOTS-oriented instruction is a complex pedagogical practice that requires sustained professional support. Without structured mentoring, targeted training in questioning strategies, and opportunities for reflective practice, novice teachers may continue to rely on instructional approaches that prioritize control and efficiency over cognitive engagement. Therefore, pedagogical challenges should be understood as developmental rather than deficit-oriented, highlighting the need for systematic support mechanisms to strengthen novice teachers' capacity to implement HOTS-oriented English reading instruction effectively.

Student-Related and Contextual Challenges in the Boarding School Environment

In addition to pedagogical constraints, this study demonstrates that student-related and contextual challenges within the boarding school environment play a crucial role in shaping novice teachers' efforts to implement HOTS-oriented English reading instruction. The findings indicate that student characteristics, institutional culture, and resource availability interact in complex ways, influencing instructional decisions and limiting opportunities for higher-order cognitive engagement. These challenges are not isolated factors but interconnected conditions that collectively shape classroom practice.

One of the most influential student-related challenges identified in this study concerns limited English language proficiency. Interview and observation data reveal that many students experience difficulty understanding basic vocabulary and sentence structures in English texts. As a result, instructional time is largely devoted to vocabulary explanation and literal comprehension. This finding aligns with Yulia & Budiharti (2019), who reported that limited linguistic competence often constrains the implementation of HOTS-oriented reading instruction. When foundational comprehension remains fragile, novice teachers may perceive analytical or evaluative questions as unrealistic or inappropriate. Consequently, LOTS-oriented instruction becomes a pragmatic response to ensure basic understanding and classroom participation.

Beyond linguistic limitations, the findings highlight low readiness for higher-order thinking as a significant student-related challenge. Students were often unfamiliar with expressing opinions, providing reasons, or responding to open-ended questions. This condition reflects prior learning experiences that emphasize correct answers and teacher authority rather than reasoning processes. According to Fitriani et al., (2021), sustained exposure to HOTS-oriented learning is necessary to build cognitive confidence and analytical habits. In the absence of such exposure, students may respond to analytical questions with silence or hesitation. This reaction, in turn, reinforces novice teachers' tendency to simplify questions and provide direct explanations, inadvertently limiting opportunities for independent higher-order thinking.

Contextual factors within the boarding school environment further intensify these student-related challenges. The findings indicate that authority-oriented learning norms shape classroom interaction patterns. Respect, obedience, and quietness are highly valued, influencing how students participate in discussion-based activities. While such norms support discipline and moral development, this cultural orientation constrains dialogic interaction and critical exchange of ideas. Habibi et al., (2018) argue that educational settings grounded in strong hierarchical values may experience tension when implementing student-centered pedagogies. In this study, silence often reflected politeness rather than disengagement, yet this behavior limited opportunities for collaborative analysis and evaluation in reading instruction.

Institutional expectations also influence novice teachers' instructional choices. Maintaining classroom order and adhering to institutional norms were often prioritized over exploratory discussion. This emphasis encouraged teacher-centered

practices, particularly during reading lessons that involved complex texts. In such contexts, novice teachers may perceive strong instructional control as necessary for aligning with institutional values. As a result, HOTS-oriented practices that rely on open-ended discussion and student autonomy are implemented cautiously or selectively. Limited instructional resources constitute another contextual challenge affecting HOTS implementation. The findings indicate that reading instruction frequently relied on a single text due to resource constraints. This limitation restricts opportunities for comparative analysis, synthesis of ideas, and evaluation of multiple perspectives. According to Indriyana & Kuswando (2019), exposure to diverse texts is essential for developing higher-order reading skills. In the absence of varied materials, novice teachers face restricted pedagogical options, limiting the range of HOTS-oriented tasks that can be designed and implemented.

The interaction between student-related and contextual challenges creates a learning environment that favors efficiency-oriented instruction. Limited language proficiency, low cognitive readiness, authority-oriented norms, and resource constraints collectively encourage instructional practices that emphasize comprehension accuracy and classroom control. Although novice teachers demonstrate awareness of HOTS principles, implementation remains gradual and constrained by contextual realities. This finding supports Chandran et al., (2022), who emphasize that instructional innovation is deeply influenced by institutional and cultural contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that challenges in promoting HOTS-oriented English reading instruction cannot be attributed solely to teacher competence. Student readiness and institutional context play a decisive role in shaping instructional possibilities. In a boarding school environment, where academic learning is closely intertwined with cultural and moral values, HOTS implementation requires contextual sensitivity and adaptive pedagogical strategies. Addressing these challenges requires systemic support, including curriculum alignment, resource provision, and professional development that acknowledges the unique characteristics of boarding school contexts. Without such support, novice teachers may continue to face significant constraints in fostering higher-order thinking in English reading classrooms.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the challenges faced by novice teachers in implementing Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS)-oriented English reading instruction in an Islamic boarding school context. The findings reveal that the implementation of HOTS remains limited and gradual, not due to a lack of awareness, but because of interconnected pedagogical, student-related, and contextual constraints. Novice teachers experienced difficulties in designing HOTS-based questions, extending student responses, managing discussion-based activities, and making flexible instructional decisions. Consequently, reading instruction was often dominated by Lower Order Thinking Skills (LOTS), with higher-order tasks implemented inconsistently.

Student-related factors, particularly limited English proficiency and low readiness for analytical thinking, further restricted students' engagement with HOTS-oriented activities. In addition, contextual factors within the boarding school environment, such as authority-oriented classroom norms and limited instructional resources, shaped classroom interaction and encouraged more teacher-centered practices. This study highlights that the challenges of implementing HOTS-oriented reading instruction are both contextually situated and developmentally shaped for novice teachers. Future research should involve multiple educational settings and incorporate students' perspectives to gain broader insights. Practically, targeted professional development and greater instructional support are essential to help novice teachers effectively integrate HOTS into English reading instruction.

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