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English Teachers' Strategies in Addressing Students' Low Reading Ability: A Case Study in Indonesian Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

Reading ability plays a pivotal role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. However, many junior high school students in Indonesia continue to struggle with reading comprehension, vocabulary recognition, and pronunciation. This study explores the strategies employed by English teachers to support students with low reading ability. Conducted at a public junior high school in Majalengka, West Java, this qualitative case study involved two English teachers and used interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis to gather data. The findings revealed that teachers employed a range of strategies, including read-aloud and guided reading, vocabulary repetition, peer pairing, visual aids and the use of dictionaries. These strategies were primarily intuitive and adapted to classroom conditions rather than being formally differentiated. While the techniques proved helpful in scaffolding struggling students, the study also highlights the lack of challenge for higher-level learners. This paper recommends more systematic application of differentiated instruction to address the varied needs of learners and improve reading instruction in heterogeneous classrooms.

1. Introduction

Beyond being a critical skill for students in EFL contexts, reading represents a fundamental language ability that, as noted by Amrullah et al. (2024), functions as a primary means of communication. Reading is defined as a complex cognitive process involving active interaction between the reader and the text (Rahma et al., 2025); consequently, as a receptive skill, it provides learners with the necessary exposure to discourse patterns and vocabulary required to advance their general language proficiency (Astuti et al., 2026). Reading depends not only on linguistic ability but also on background knowledge and the application of cognitive strategies (Grabe, 2009). Recent studies in EFL contexts further emphasize that students' comprehension is strongly influenced by instructional approaches implemented by teachers in the classroom (Ocktavia et al., 2025). This process enables readers to

process information effectively, allowing them to understand and interpret the content of the text within its context.

Reading supports learning in other subjects because when students can read well, they are more likely to understand the material in different classes. Grabe & Stoller (2013) emphasize that low reading ability is caused by weak decoding, vocabulary acquisition, and reading strategies. Supporting this, recent findings indicate that students' difficulties in English learning are often linked to insufficient vocabulary mastery and lack of strategic guidance from teachers (Saqinah et al., 2025). For EFL learners, this process is further complicated by unfamiliar vocabulary and different phonetic systems. Reading widely recognized as a foundation skill that support students' learning across subject. Unfortunately, many students in Indonesia still lack sufficient reading skills, even at the junior high school level.

This fact shows that Indonesia still faces a literacy emergency, particularly in reading English texts. Based on data from several studies, there are cases of junior high school students who continue to struggle with reading fluently in various regions. According to Aida et al. (2022), students in grade VIII at SMPN 22 Jambi City faced various difficulties in understanding English texts. These difficulties include a limited understanding of sentence structure, a restricted vocabulary, difficulty mastering speed reading techniques, and a lack of concentration during learning. Similarly, Ranico et al. (2023) identified students' limited vocabulary and low motivation as the main barriers to reading comprehension.

Based on Hidayat et al. (2024), teachers face various obstacles, including difficulties in choosing effective teaching methods, low student understanding, limitations in assessing student abilities, and interference from the mother tongue. Ranico et al. (2023) noted that teachers also face challenges, including a lack of student motivation, time constraints, unfavorable student backgrounds, and inadequate lesson planning. In addition, Maulida et al. (2025) noted that variations in student abilities, limited resources, and the integration of technology also make it challenging for teachers to design effective reading instruction. Therefore, these challenges indicate that teachers face not only technical barriers but also pedagogical and psychosocial issues that require flexible and adaptive teaching strategies.

Teachers play a crucial role in creating learning environments that motivate students and foster positive attitudes toward reading (Ismail, 2010). Recent studies also demonstrate that the strategies employed by teachers, such as interactive instruction and contextualized learning, significantly influence students' engagement and comprehension in EFL classrooms (Trastiawan et al., 2025). This aligns with the concept of differentiated instruction, which emphasizes the importance of tailoring learning to students' readiness and learning styles (Tomlinson, 2001). Similarly, recent classroom-based studies highlight that adapting instructional strategies to students' needs can improve learning outcomes and address individual learning difficulties (Saqinah et al., 2025).

The study by Septyawati et al. (2025) shows that the use of structured reading strategies can significantly enhance students' comprehension, engagement, and ability to process texts more effectively. A study by Apriliyani et al. (2023) found that the strategies used by teachers, which include providing additional lessons, arranging seating so that students with difficulties sit close to more advanced students, and providing consistent motivation, are effective. In addition, a study by Juhaeni et al. (2022) found that teachers utilize reading corners in the classroom, accustom students to reading together (both reading aloud and silently), and provide continuous direction and motivation to students and parents. This study highlights the importance of collaboration between teachers and parents in fostering students' reading development. Taken together, these three studies demonstrate that while teaching students with low reading abilities poses challenges, appropriate and contextualized teacher strategies can enhance student learning outcomes. These results also suggest that teachers' flexibility, creativity, and collaboration with the surrounding environment are crucial factors in successful reading instruction.

This condition highlights that low reading skills, particularly in the English context, pose a significant challenge in education. Good reading skills in a foreign language are not only important for academic success but also for developing critical thinking and independent learning. In this context, teachers play a central role in guiding students and helping them apply effective reading strategies. Recent research highlights that self-regulated learning strategies can support students in managing their reading process, improving motivation, and achieving better learning outcomes in EFL contexts (Vici et al., 2025). Faced with this problem, English teachers are required to have and implement appropriate teaching strategies so that students with low reading skills can still follow the learning process.

While numerous studies have addressed students' reading difficulties, there have been limited studies focusing on teachers' strategies for teaching English to students with low reading abilities. This study fills that gap by examining the practical strategies employed by junior high school English teachers to support students who struggle with reading. By understanding how teachers adjust teaching approaches, modify teaching materials, and provide appropriate guidance, this study is expected to make a real contribution to improving English learning practices in schools. The guiding research question is: What strategies do teachers use to address students with low reading ability in English classrooms?

2. Methodology

Following Creswell's (2014) qualitative framework for exploring social and humanitarian problems, this study investigates the meaning behind teachers' strategies for supporting students with low reading abilities. A case study design is implemented to facilitate this exploration, providing what Yin (2017) describes as an empirical investigation into a real-life phenomenon. By focusing on this specific classroom context, the study addresses a scenario where the boundaries between the teaching strategies and the educational environment are deeply intertwined. Data analysis in this study used thematic analysis techniques.

This study was conducted in one of the junior high schools in Majalengka, West Java, which had eighth-grade students with low English reading skills. This school, in general, still faces various literacy challenges, one of which is the low reading skills of students in several grades, including English. In this school context, English lessons have been offered since grade seven, but teachers still encounter students who struggle to understand reading texts effectively. The participants in this study are two English teachers who teach eighth-grade students and have experience working with students who have low reading skills. Data in this study were collected through three main techniques: semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation.

The instruments in this study consisted of interview guidelines, an observation sheet, and supporting documents. The interview guide and observation sheet were developed based on the theories of teaching strategies by Brown (2007), differentiated learning by Tomlinson (2001), and reading strategies by Grabe & Stoller (2013). The interview guideline includes several main focuses, such as the types of strategies used, the reasons for choosing the strategies, the implementation in the classroom, and the impact on students. The observation notes include teaching techniques, teacher-student interaction, and the use of strategies that are appropriate for students with low reading ability. Researchers also used documents such as lesson plans, assignment sheets, teacher reflections, or student work to strengthen data.

3. Results and Discussion

The data collection instruments used in this study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview and Observations Focus

No	Instrument	Focus Area	Sample Questions / Indicators
1	Interview	Teaching strategies	What strategies do you use to teach students with low reading ability?
		Reason for strategy	Why do you choose these strategies?
		Implementation	How do you apply the strategy in class?
		Challenges	What difficulties do you face?
2	Observation	Classroom interaction	Teacher-student interaction during reading activities
		Strategy use	Use of read-aloud, peer pairing, vocabulary drills
		Student response	Student participation and engagement

This study aimed to explore the strategies used by English teachers in addressing low reading ability among eighth-grade students in an Indonesian junior high school. Based on classroom observations and interviews with two English teachers, several strategies were identified as central in supporting students with reading difficulties. These strategies include read-aloud and guided reading, personalized motivation, peer pairing, simplified materials, dictionary and peer support, and daily vocabulary reinforcement. The discussion below presents these strategies thematically and in connection with relevant theories and prior research.

A. Read-Aloud and Guided Reading

Both teachers in this study implemented read-aloud techniques as a core strategy. Teacher 1 initiated reading sessions by asking students to read a story—such as *Malin Kundang*—individually and then in turns, correcting mispronunciations and encouraging reluctant readers to participate.

“I force them to read even if they get it wrong, then we correct it together.” (Teacher 1)

Teacher 2 employed a more structured “word-by-word” guided reading approach, particularly during the lesson using *The Lion and the Rabbit*. He also used drill-based repetition to reinforce pronunciation and fluency. These practices align with Brown’s (2007) principle of learning by doing, where students improve language performance through active engagement and guided practice. According to Grabe and Stoller (2013), guided reading helps students build automaticity in decoding, which is crucial for developing fluency and comprehension.



Figure 1. Teacher 1 demonstrating the guided reading to engage students in literacy

Read-aloud activities not only model correct pronunciation but also help scaffold comprehension, especially for students with limited exposure to English texts. When guided properly, this strategy helps reduce the fear of failure and increases student confidence, thereby creating a supportive learning environment.

B. Personalized Motivation and Teacher Support

Teacher motivation was another significant strategy observed in the study. Teacher 1 frequently provided personal encouragement during lessons and reassured students that mistakes were acceptable and part of the learning process.

“If you do not try, you do not know where the mistakes are.” (Teacher 1)

This approach reflects Tomlinson's (2001) theory of differentiated instruction, which emphasizes the importance of addressing students' emotional needs in addition to their academic readiness. Motivation plays a crucial role in overcoming affective barriers to reading, such as anxiety and low self-confidence (Saliza, 2021).

Teacher 2 complemented this by setting clear learning goals at the beginning of the lesson and highlighting the relevance of the lesson for students' futures, which he believed helped sustain attention and interest throughout the session. In addition, Teacher 2 utilized visual aids, such as images related to the texts, to provide context and help students understand vocabulary in a more meaningful way. These practices align with previous findings indicating that the use of contextual and visual support can enhance students' comprehension by making abstract language more accessible (Trastiawan et al., 2025). These motivational techniques—although not formally structured—proved crucial in keeping students engaged, especially those who tend to withdraw from reading tasks.

C. Peer Pairing (Collaborative Learning)

Another key strategy employed was peer pairing, particularly by Teacher 2. He intentionally grouped students with differing reading abilities so that stronger readers could assist their peers during reading and comprehension tasks.



Figure 1 Teacher 2 is implementing peer pairing

“I usually pair students who are good with those who are not.” (Teacher 2)

This strategy aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learning is most effective with the assistance of a more capable peer or adult. Collaborative learning not only fosters a sense of teamwork but also provides struggling readers with support in a less intimidating context.

Observations revealed that this method enabled students to complete tasks that might have been too challenging independently, such as answering comprehension questions and identifying missing words in a text. However, the pairing was not rotated often, which may limit its long-term effectiveness and exclude some students from diverse interactions.

D. Simplified Texts and Uniform Materials

Both teachers chose simpler vocabulary and familiar narrative texts, such as "Malin Kundang" and "The Lion and the Rabbit," for all students. These texts were selected due to their basic sentence structures, clear plotlines, and culturally familiar content. While no specific differentiation of reading materials was made for lower-ability students, the selection of simplified texts helped ensure that most students could engage with the material. However, according to Teacher 2, some students who considered themselves proficient in reading began to show signs of boredom.

“Usually, students who think they are already good at reading act indifferent— like, ‘Why is there a drill again?’” (Teacher 2)

This indicates a need for more flexible material design that can accommodate mixed-ability classes. As Tomlinson (2001) argues, differentiation should not only support weaker students but also offer sufficient challenge for more advanced learners. Thus, while simplified materials served as a bridge for struggling readers, they also risked demotivating higher-level students if not complemented with extension activities or optional challenges.

E. Dictionary Use and Peer Support

Teacher 1 implemented the use of dictionaries as a classroom routine. Students were required to bring dictionaries to class and encouraged to look up unfamiliar words independently. If they still did not understand, they were advised to ask their peers, and finally, the teacher.



Figure 2 Students bring their dictionaries to class

“If you do not understand, open the dictionary. If you are still confused, ask a friend. Then ask me.” (Teacher 1)

This strategy promotes learner autonomy, one of the key principles in developing long-term reading ability. It also fosters a culture of peer scaffolding, which is consistent with the collaborative strategies mentioned above. This finding is

consistent with previous studies highlighting the importance of vocabulary support and learner autonomy in reading development. Research published in *Journal of Educational Sciences* indicates that students' difficulties in English learning are often related to limited vocabulary mastery, and strategies that encourage active vocabulary exploration can significantly enhance comprehension (Ocktavia et al., 2025). In line with this, another study found that students who are actively engaged in identifying and understanding unfamiliar words demonstrate better reading performance compared to those who rely solely on teacher explanation (Trastiawan et al., 2025). Although, dictionary use may seem traditional, in this context it serves as an effective tool for vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. It also helps students develop habits of independent learning, which are crucial for progressing in EFL environments with limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

F. Daily Vocabulary Reinforcement

Teacher 2 integrated regular vocabulary exercises into his teaching routine. Each lesson introduced five new English words, which were then reviewed in the following session through informal quizzes or oral repetition.



Figure 4 Teacher 2 implementing a drill exercise

This practice not only reinforces lexical knowledge but also provides a form of informal formative assessment, allowing the teacher to monitor students' retention and understanding. Grabe and Stoller (2013) emphasize that vocabulary development is a cornerstone of successful reading. Without adequate vocabulary, students cannot decode or comprehend texts effectively. While the vocabulary drills observed were relatively simple, their consistent implementation helped address the lexical gaps experienced by many students with low reading proficiency.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that junior high school English teachers use practical and intuitive strategies to support students with low reading ability. These strategies included the use of read-aloud and guided reading practices, personalized

motivation and encouragement, peer pairing, simplified reading materials, dictionary-based vocabulary learning, visual aids, and routine vocabulary drills. While these approaches effectively helped students with low reading proficiency engage with texts and improve pronunciation and comprehension, they were general and not differentiated across ability levels. All students received the same materials regardless of their reading capacity, which sometimes led to disengagement among more advanced learners. Although peer collaboration and teacher support were beneficial, the lack of tiered materials and individual assessments limited the potential for maximizing each student's growth.

Thus, although the strategies were largely effective for foundational reading development, they would be more impactful if complemented by structured differentiation and systematic evaluation practices. For teachers, it is recommended to develop tiered reading materials and group tasks based on students' ability levels to ensure that both struggling and advanced readers remain engaged and challenged. For schools, organizing professional development workshops focused on differentiated instruction and formative assessment strategies would help equip teachers with the necessary tools to address mixed reading abilities more effectively. For future researchers, it is recommended to investigate the long-term effectiveness of peer scaffolding and motivation strategies in enhancing students' reading abilities in EFL classrooms, particularly in terms of their impact on learner independence and sustained engagement over time.

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