
**TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR ENGLISH READING IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL
STUDENTS AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light numerous challenges in the field of English language learning, including the need for strict adherence to health protocols like school closures, mask mandates, and frequent handwashing. This period required a swift adaptation to blended learning, fostering critical and creative thinking to address COVID-19 issues. This study aims to investigate various strategies utilized by English teachers to enhance reading skills amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic. Transcription data were gathered through observational methods and interviews involving three participants – one teacher and two students. Grounded theory was employed for data analysis, revealing eight strategies for improving students' reading abilities. These strategies include utilizing E-learning (WhatsApp) as a platform for delivering reading materials, employing visual aids like PPT presentations and YouTube videos to illustrate texts, identifying and marking challenging vocabulary in PDF texts, translating sentences using online tools (Google Translate), facilitating oral reading through WhatsApp's voice-notes feature, assigning reading tasks on specific websites or PDFs, engaging in Q&A discussions on WhatsApp, and conducting project discussions via virtual platforms like WhatsApp and Google Meet. This study contributes to the understanding of reading teaching practices for junior high students during the COVID-19 pandemic, thus expanding the knowledge of strategies employed by teachers in the teaching of reading.

Keywords: reading skills; teaching strategies; teenage learners

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably limited the interaction between teachers and students in educational settings. According to Wajdi et al., (2020), government-mandated closures of educational institutions have been implemented to curb the spread of the virus. Abidah et al., (2020) introduced the concept of "Freedom of Learning" during the pandemic, emphasizing social, physical, independent, and digital-based learning. Consequently, effective management by the government is crucial, including efficient communication processes and respecting appropriate timing for all involved parties, including teachers, parents, and students themselves (Rulandari, 2020).

The demand for technology-based English learning has surged among educators during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mafruudloh et al., (2021) revealed that this research explores the shift in teachers' perceptions of language learning from offline to online modes. Tathahira & Sriayu (2020) conducted a study that noted many high school English teachers in South Aceh employed WhatsApp as a learning tool. Prasetya (2021) highlighted the use of Moodle and Google applications for English learning, emphasizing their role in facilitating the learning process.

Reading, one of the four receptive skills, imparts substantial knowledge to students. According to Peregoy & Boyle (2000), English learning in schools must encompass reading activities, primarily to foster literacy, closely linked to the academic domain. Frankel et al. (2016) assert that reading is an integral aspect of literacy and a receptive skill in language acquisition, distinct from listening. ESL/EFL students' comprehension in reading is often influenced by their reading practice duration and the texts provided by the teacher (Bojovic, 2010).

In these scenarios, English teachers need to employ suitable assessment methods aligned with students' abilities. Waliyadin's (2019) research reveals that some junior high school teachers encounter difficulties when designing reading tests, often due to grammatical errors and other factors. For instance, Utami et al.'s (2021) research highlights that certain junior high school teachers inadequately frame reading

comprehension questions by including numerous HOTS questions unrelated to school indicators. This has been observed to result in reading challenges for students, as evidenced by item test analysis of the 2018/2019 school final exam (Ariyani, 2020).

While previous researchers have addressed English language learning, specifically teaching reading strategies, there are several noteworthy gaps to consider. Firstly, these studies generally pertain to a broader educational context and lack a specific focus on junior high school students. Secondly, while they touch upon the teacher's perspective, the coverage is not comprehensive. Thirdly, prior research primarily discusses reading comprehension skills, leaving room for exploration of a broader range of teacher strategies beyond reading comprehension in this new study. Additionally, there are differences in data collection locations and subject demographics when comparing previous studies with the present research. Consequently, this study will address these concerns as teacher employs strategies to enhance students' reading skills during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Method

Participants

Shkedi (2019) revealed that qualitative research employs language as a research instrument, focusing on deeper meanings rather than literal interpretations. Palmer & Bolderston (2006) emphasized that qualitative research enables researchers to explore information within a specific cultural context, often presented in a narrative format, aimed at elucidating human experiences (Rosiek, 2007).

The current study was conducted at MTs Agung Alim Blado, a junior high school in Batang Regency, with a deliberate sampling approach based on specific criteria and research themes, as per Palys in (Given, 2008). The participants in this research include Mr. Candra, the male English teacher, and two students, Bintang (male) and Sinar (female). To protect their privacy, participant names have been pseudonymized. Furthermore, the study focused exclusively on the eighth-grade class, resulting in a total

of three participants: one English teacher and two students, one male and one female. These two students were selected due to their gender diversity, which brings different perspectives to their experiences, complementing the teacher's viewpoint.

Instruments

In this qualitative research, in-depth interviews were employed. According to Seidman (2006), open-ended research questions served the purpose of acquiring specific facts. The researcher conducted interviews in the Indonesian language to prevent misunderstandings and misinterpretations between the researcher and the participants, conducting these interviews in a face-to-face manner. During the data collection phase, the researcher assessed data validity to ensure its quality, as per Norris (1997). Data validity aims to guarantee that the research is appropriate, factual, definite, substantial, real, and represents the truth's nature. The researcher enlisted the English teacher and two students (one male and one female) as the first participants, who confirmed that English learning, particularly in developing reading skills, had taken place.

Data Analysis Procedure

This research was descriptive, interpretive, and critical, incorporating multiple supporting theories and moving from inductive to deductive reasoning, following Thomson's (2011) framework. Subsequent to the data collection, the research advanced to the data analysis phase. Adopting a grounded theory approach, the framework applied an inductive technique, moving from specific to general. This method delved into information, comparing one theory with another to unearth the most prominent theme or theory, which represents the teacher's strategies in teaching reading. Following the analysis, data transcription was carried out to facilitate data examination, following Gin's guidance (Given, 2008).

Findings and Discussions

Strategies for Teaching Reading Skills to Junior High School Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic

When faced with challenges impacting the teaching of reading skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers played a pivotal role in devising specific strategies. Teachers assumed a crucial responsibility in providing solutions when problems arose. These techniques were either innovated or purposefully selected to align with the instructional requirements. The teacher's assessment of these strategies revolved around their effectiveness with the specific age group of students, namely, teenagers. The emphasis shifted from whether a strategy was simply utilized to whether it was aptly chosen. The following delineates several of the strategies that were selected and employed as tools to address the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Teaching and Learning before and during COVID-19

No.	General Teacher Reading Strategies	The Emergence of COVID-19	Specific Teacher Reading Strategies amid COVID-19 Pandemic
1.	implementing E-learning as learning media	the following of health protocol as well as maintaining distance in the teaching and learning processes (Kusuma, 2022; Lase et al., 2021; Zierer, 2021; Setyoningrum et al., 2022).	utilizing E-learning (WhatsApp) as the learning media to convey reading materials (Nakhriyah & Muzakky, 2021; Malilla & Irwandi, 2022; Walidaini, 2021)
2.	using images or visual aids,	the implementation of blended learning to maintain learning interaction (Lestari 2022; Hafeez, 2021; Kanik & Hadizadeh, 2022; Altun & Ahmad, 2021).	utilizing visual aids for illustrating text via PPT and YouTube video playback (Parwati & Pramerta, 2021); Wiralaksana, 2021; Mohibu & Ismail, 2021).
3.	identifying vocabulary as an important part of a sentence,	the requirement of thinking critically from massive information (Annenkova & Domyshva, 2020; Ariawan & Malang, 2020; Kummala et al., (2022).	identifying certain vocabulary in the text by marking difficult words in the PDF text (Setiawati & Budiasih, 2021).
4.	translating sentences	the teacher's awareness of student's learning styles (Kummala et al., 2022; Francisco, 2021; Valencia-Robles & Garcia-Labord, 2022).	translating sentences over passages using an online translator (Google Translate) (Nurdin, 2021; Dwiningtyas et al., 2020)

5.	assisting students to read orally	the lack of infrastructure facilities and material resources (Utomo et al., 2020; Malaikosa & Taopan, 2020; El Rizaq & Sarmini, 2021; Engzell et al., 2021; Surahman & Rahmad, 2021).	supporting students to read orally (read a-loud) through the voice-notes feature on WhatsApp (Rahmawati & Yunus, 2020; Anjelita, 2022; Dalimunthe et al., 2022).
6.	asking students to read silently	the emergence of physical illness (Aperribai et al., 2020; Ganne et al., 2021; McCallum & Price, 2010).	instructing students to read test questions and long texts—on certain websites or PDF files (Giawa, 2022; Bari et al., 2021; Natalia et al., 2021).
7.	questioning and answering for the specific point	the high level of managing emotions (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Santamaría et al., 2021; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Richards, 2020).	engaging question-and-answer for specific information in the books by typing messages on WhatsApp (Nurdin, 2021; Arwila, 2022; Karomah, 2022).
8.	discussing and cooperating with certain text	the risk of undisciplined and passive students (Serra et al., 2021; Muksin & Makhsin, 2021; AGU et al., 2022).	engaging in project discussions through virtual (WhatsApp & Google Meet) small-grouping (Anjelita, 2022; Hikmah et al., 2021).

Utilizing E-learning (WhatsApp) as the medium for delivering reading materials

The results of the interview showed that the teacher also used E-learning as WhatsApp. The following is an excerpt revealed by Mr. Candra:

"When it comes to reading, the materials are readily available in textbooks and online sources. To facilitate comprehensive learning, I opted for WhatsApp due to its fast communication capabilities." (Interview, October 12, 2022)

Based on the interview results with Mr. Candra, it was explicitly mentioned by Bintang that the use of WhatsApp as a medium for learning English was essential during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sinar also confirmed that WhatsApp was the primary application for learning English at that time. Additionally, observations revealed that schools provided online learning resources, specifically through the WhatsApp platform.

For the initial reading strategy implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, the English teacher chose WhatsApp as the instructional medium. According to Nakhriyah & Muzakky (2021), junior high school teachers employed various media, including WhatsApp, to enhance their creativity when teaching English skills. Malilla & Irwandi

(2022) also affirmed that the use of WhatsApp for English learning had a positive and effective impact, particularly in the realm of receptive skills. Walidaini (2021) added that the utilization of the WhatsApp application significantly contributed to students' reading skills. Some of the benefits included: 1) Harnessing mobile devices for pedagogical purposes in teaching scenario designs. 2) Enhancing the quality of mobile intervention trial designs, empowering educators through the integration of mobile devices, software, and pedagogical design (Sung et al., 2016).

Utilizing visual aids to illustrate text through PPT presentations and YouTube video playback

The second interview also showed how to use visual aids or visualization strategies by integrating PPT and YouTube videos. The following is a presentation from Mr. Candra:

"Yes, during that period, I integrated visual aids into the learning process. For instance, I incorporated images into PowerPoint presentations. Additionally, certain modules included pictures. I also shared video links from YouTube, allowing students to read subtitles while watching videos. This approach proved highly effective in enhancing their engagement in reading." (Interview, October 12, 2022)

Based on Mr. Candra's feedback, Bintang emphasized that the use of visual media by the teacher facilitated his comprehension and expression of the text. Similarly, Sinar explained that the teacher incorporated picture-based media by embedding it into PowerPoint presentations, which she and her peers found helpful. Observations also revealed that the teacher frequently employed visual aids, including pictures and videos, in the learning process.

The adoption of technology during the COVID-19 pandemic saw English teachers increasingly utilizing PPT and YouTube videos to convey reading materials. As mentioned by Parwati & Pramerta (2021), the incorporation of pictures in KWL-based teaching reading comprehension had a proven positive impact on student focus. Wiralaksana (2021) noted that English teachers tended to use creative media, such as instructional

videos for procedure texts, designed using applications like Powtoon. Mohibu & Ismail (2021) further emphasized that the use of 'picture and picture' techniques could enhance students' logical thinking. Brown (2007) highlighted the significance of accommodating various learning styles, including visual media like drawings and illustrations. Teachers have responded by devising reading strategies that involve picture-cued tasks (Brown, 2004). For instance, the use of visual aids, such as wall charts, slides, and films, has assisted teachers in delivering content effectively to the class (Corder, 1963).

Identifying specific vocabulary in the text by annotating challenging words within the PDF document

The results of the interview show that the third strategy is to identify vocabulary as synonyms, antonyms, or difficult words meaning in PDF text. The following is a presentation from Mr. Candra:

"To ensure students' mastery of vocabulary, I stressed the importance of identifying challenging or unfamiliar words in PDF texts." (Interview, October 12, 2022)

Bintang also mentioned that while learning English, the teacher instructed him to locate specific vocabulary in the text, underline it, and then search for either synonyms or antonyms. Sinar explained that, at times, she was tasked with identifying challenging words and determining their meanings. Observations likewise indicated that students frequently encountered difficult vocabulary while comprehending texts.

The reading strategy implemented by the teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic was the identification of specific vocabulary. As reported by Pitriana & Hadi (2021), teachers utilized the vocabulary list technique in online learning to enhance students' vocabulary proficiency. Setiawati & Budiasih (2021) highlighted that junior high school teachers during online learning employed a vocabulary identification strategy to enhance reading skills, involving the identification of unfamiliar vocabulary and its meanings. Misda (2021) revealed that in interactive-based reading instruction, teachers utilized the bottom-up technique, prompting students to recognize particular vocabulary words. Another

example included the application of the word wall method, wherein students encountered specific vocabulary in the text (Nasution, 2021). Thornbury (2002) underscored the significance of vocabulary in language learning, and the word-collection strategy played a pivotal role in reading activities, enabling students to actively engage in word learning to succeed in mastering numerous words (Grabe & Stoller, 2018).

Translating sentences across passages using an online translator, such as Google Translate

Then, the results of the fourth interview showed that the development of reading skills was through a translation strategy such as the use of Google Translate and Kamusku. The following is a presentation from Mr. Candra:

"I employed the translation strategy. I translated an entire text during that period. Google Translate, in my opinion, was quite advanced, and I encouraged students to use it. Even when the translation was inaccurate (inconsistent, to be precise), I demonstrated how to refine it." (Interview, October 12, 2022)

According to Bintang, the use of a translation strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic aimed to enhance students' comprehension of each sentence in the text. Additionally, Sinar mentioned that, in the context of online learning, the teacher instructed her to utilize Google Translate. Observations indicated that teachers commonly employed online tools like Google Translate and Kamusku when teaching English reading skills.

The adoption of a translation process in teaching reading led the English teacher to replace printed dictionaries with Google Translate and Kamusku during the pandemic. This strategy was deemed effective in helping students improve their comprehension and vocabulary expansion (Nurdin, 2021). This approach aligns with the application of the Grammar Translation Method for teaching English sentence structure, a method frequently employed by English teachers (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Priatin & Nurfauziah (2021) discovered that humorous translation could significantly enhance students' vocabulary mastery. The success criteria were met as students achieved an

average score of 80, and they responded positively to this strategy. Furthermore, in translation activities, teachers encouraged students to use dictionaries (Dwiningtyas et al., 2020). The Grammar-Translation method proved valuable in foreign language learning, particularly at the junior high school level, as it facilitated the recognition of similarities and differences between the students' native language (L1) and the target language (L2) (Elmayantie, 2015).

Supporting students in oral reading by utilizing the voice-notes feature on WhatsApp

The results of the fifth interview show that in developing reading skills the teacher used a reading-a-loud strategy through voice notes on WhatsApp feature. Below is the description of Mr. Candra:

"Yes, I employed the strategy of having students read aloud during that period. The primary objective was to ensure they could pronounce sentences correctly. Many of the students lacked confidence. For specifics, I requested students to read the text using voice notes." (Interview, October 12, 2022)

Bintang mentioned that, during reading activities, the teacher instructed him to read the text in the module and record it using the voice notes feature in the WhatsApp application. On the other hand, Sinar expressed feeling nervous and lacking confidence when using voice notes. Observations indicated that the teacher's use of the read-aloud technique through voice notes in WhatsApp had a positive impact on improving students' reading skills, particularly in pronunciation.

Furthermore, the reading strategy employed by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic was the read-aloud strategy through the voice-notes feature on WhatsApp. This strategy required students to practice pronunciation skills, such as by using specific songs (Rahmawati & Yunus, 2020). Anjelita (2022) disclosed that when teaching reading skills, students were encouraged to read aloud to enhance their fluency in pronouncing

words and sentences. Dalimunthe et al. (2022) also noted that using the teacher's voice-note feature on WhatsApp while reading specific texts had a positive impact on students' pronunciation, irrespective of any mistakes made. According to Jeon (2018), teaching oral reading to adolescents can involve reading song lyrics, and in this study, the researcher used the song "River" by Ibeyi as data for the analysis process. Another teacher strategy involved reading stories to students, taking into account both verbal and non-verbal components (Fisher et al., 2004). Furthermore, the read-aloud strategy was well-suited for students at both the elementary and junior high school levels (Fuchs et al., 2001).

Instructing students to read test questions and lengthy texts on specific websites or PDF files

The results of the interview showed that the teacher also used the silent reading strategy in certain texts or passages. The following is a report from Mr. Candra:

"Yes, I employed this strategy, focusing on questions. It involved scanning with the questions I provided, such as daily tests, for instance. For specific texts, I selected only a few sections to help them concentrate." (Interview, October 12, 2022)

Bintang noted that the teacher introduced a silent reading strategy, and he found that it enhanced his focus during reading. Sinar also shared that the silent reading technique enabled her to concentrate more quickly. Observations confirmed that the teacher employed a silent reading strategy when students worked on specific questions, encouraging them to summarize their findings.

During online reading activities, the teacher provided students with modules or e-books and instructed them to read silently to extract essential information from the text. Giawa (2022) also emphasized that implementing the silent reading strategy enhanced students' concentration and facilitated a rapid understanding of the text. According to Bari et al. (2021), consistent silent reading in descriptive texts could aid students in comprehension. Natalia et al. (2021) reported that school teachers used the Silent

Reading (SSR) strategy to boost students' concentration when engaging with particular texts.

Engaging in question-and-answer exchanges regarding specific information in books through WhatsApp messaging

The results of the next interviews showed that in developing reading skills students were asked to ask questions through direct message in online mode and the teacher by walking around when offline mode (blended learning context). The following is what Mr. Candra reported:

*"Yes, I certainly employed a questioning strategy. In offline mode, I walked around the class, attempting to engage with students, and one of them would ask questions. In online mode, I directly asked students by typing a message on WhatsApp."
(Interview, October 12, 2022)*

Bintang explained that with this strategy, the teacher presented several questions that required immediate answers, promoting faster thinking and text analysis. Sinar added that through this technique, she was tasked with responding to various key points in the text. Observations indicated that teachers embraced this approach because it encouraged students to think critically and independently.

Moreover, the reading strategy developed during COVID-19 pandemic learning involved question-and-answer sessions, focusing on locating specific information in the text and engaging students through text messaging. Nurdin (2021) reported that when developing reading skills, teachers used the QARs technique to activate prior knowledge. Arwila (2022) emphasized that the question-and-answer strategy aided both teachers and students in enhancing and diversifying their interaction styles. Karomah (2022) added that the QAR strategy ensured that students not only read the text but comprehended it thoroughly. Like any scanning technique, it served several functions: a) scanning enabled students to identify specific details, b) it assisted students in following the passage's

predictability, and c) it helped students make more efficient use of their time (Aritonang et al., 2019).

Engaging in project discussions through virtual small-group sessions on platforms like WhatsApp and Google Meet

The results of the interview showed that the English teacher also uses a discussion strategy. Below is the description of Mr. Candra:

"For the reading activity, I prioritized how they acquired information. However, I also integrated other skills like speaking. I aimed for students to become more critical in this activity. It involved group work where they had to create presentations."
(Interview, October 12, 2022)

Bintang reported that the teacher instructed him to engage in discussions on specific topics within the text. Sinar explained that these discussion activities were conducted in groups and took place at home. According to observations, the teacher emphasized that students should collaborate in pairs or small groups of 3-5 students.

As the final component of the reading strategy employed when teaching English during the COVID-19 pandemic, the teacher implemented a discussion approach. Students were tasked with working together to discuss a text with their group members at home. Anjelita (2022) also highlighted that the discussion strategy encouraged students to function as a team rather than individually. Further empirical evidence indicated that utilizing small group discussion strategies enhanced the skills of students at SMPN 7 Tanjungpinang, resulting in improved understanding of the main topics and supporting ideas in the text (Hikmah et al., 2021). Grabe (2009) describes this approach as "Experienced-Text-Relate (ETR)," where discussion activates students' foundational comprehension, fosters assumptions about the text, assists students in monitoring their text comprehension, generates questions about the text, evaluates the text, and encourages reflection on the relationship between the text's information and personal

experiences. Consequently, teachers employed various appropriate teaching methods, including the creation of structured discussion groups (Gillies, 2004).

Conclusion

This study investigated strategies for enhancing reading skills among junior high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was primarily focused on addressing two key aspects: 1) the challenges encountered by junior high school teachers when teaching reading skills during the COVID-19 pandemic, and 2) the strategies employed by junior high school teachers to teach reading skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the analysis, the research objectives can be summarized as follows:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, English learning faced several challenges, including the need to adhere to health protocols such as school closures, mask-wearing, and frequent handwashing, adapting to the novel method of blended learning, fostering critical and creative responses to COVID-19-related issues to counteract misinformation, accommodating varying student learning styles within the student-centered teaching approach, coping with a lack of access to essential learning facilities like language labs and digital libraries, and addressing physical discomfort such as eye strain, headaches, and shoulder pain resulting from prolonged gadget and laptop use. Additionally, teachers and students had to manage psychological well-being due to decreased motivation and discipline issues, including tardiness and passivity during synchronous learning sessions. To navigate these challenges, English teachers implemented several strategies to enhance junior high school students' reading skills during the pandemic. These strategies encompassed the use of the WhatsApp application for both synchronous and asynchronous learning, the integration of visual aids and images to facilitate text comprehension, encouraging students to identify and underline challenging vocabulary in PDFs, utilizing Google Translate for sentence translation, employing a reading-aloud strategy through voice notes to boost self-confidence and pronunciation, implementing silent reading for tests and e-books to enhance focus, engaging students in question-and-

answer sessions to promote active online learning, and utilizing discussion strategies involving project-based group discussions to foster cooperation and comprehension. These strategies aimed to address the challenges and provide effective learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research offers several recommendations, including the incorporation of references from Scopus-indexed and international journals. Future studies should consider expanding the number of participants to overcome the limitations of this research. While this study adopted a qualitative design, it is advisable for future researchers to explore quantitative or mixed-methods designs for a more comprehensive analysis.

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