



Understanding the Causes of Reading Comprehension Deficits in Bruneian Primary Schools: Insights from Teacher Perspectives

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Abstract

Reading is very important for students' school study, especially their language learning. Some students, especially those in primary schools, have various reading problems all over the world and Brunei is not an exception. However, this problem has not caused enough attention in Brunei's academic research. This paper is such an effort to explore the causes contributing to reading comprehension deficits in primary school students in Brunei from teachers' perspectives. The research is based on survey responses from English language teachers in primary schools, who highlight several concerns: limited time for reading-focused lessons, a significant gap between reading and comprehension skills, insufficient reading resources, and a lack of parental support. The findings show that although reading programmes are implemented in schools, they may not be sufficient to bridge the reading and comprehension gap without proper support. This paper concludes with recommendations to improve reading comprehension in schools.

Keywords: Reading comprehension; Bruneian primary schools; Teacher perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

Learning language in primary schools requires children to master various language skills, including reading comprehension. These skills are important to help children understand what they are reading, not only for language subjects but also for other subjects. If the children are able to comprehend what they read, they are inclined to enjoy studying and become more interested in reading, which will positively impact their academic skills and lifelong learning skills – especially living in Brunei, where many people speak two or more languages.

In primary schools, particularly in Brunei, most children struggle with their reading comprehension skills, either having difficulty in reading the words or understanding the meaning of the word read. English language teachers often find their students unable to explain what they are reading – both orally or in writing – despite having fluency in their oral reading. This gap between decoding and comprehension skills needs to be addressed by teachers to reduce the deficits in children's reading comprehension abilities. Ministry of Education in Brunei has planned initiatives to encourage reading by introducing reading programmes and assessments in schools and embedding reading strategies within the English

curriculum through its National Education System for the 21st Century (SPN-21). However, there is still concern about whether these efforts are effective in improving children's comprehension.

This paper explores the perspectives of primary school teachers, specifically English language teachers, to investigate the causes of difficulties in primary school children's reading comprehension. Data were gathered from teachers' responses to their reading instructions, reading programmes, and their findings, through a survey questionnaire. The information from this survey is intended to find out more about effective teaching reading strategies, support programs for reading comprehension intervention, and reading resources to increase the impact of reading comprehension outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading is crucial for children because it is a basic skill that determines their success in their academics. Reading comprehension is necessary for students to do well in all subjects in school. According to Hjetland et al. (2019: 751), 'the goal of reading is to comprehend text', which stresses the need to be able to engage the text meaning from the reading text. Once they have acquired reading skills, learning becomes easier for them as they grow. Goodman (1964) observed that, at the elementary level, students spend more time reading compared to learning other subjects, which supports the view that reading comprehension is essential across the curriculum. However, a significant number of primary school children in Brunei struggle to comprehend what they read.

Reading involves many thinking skills at once, such as decoding, vocabulary knowledge, and other higher-order thinking skills (Cain et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2020; Peets et al., 2019; Perfetti et al., 2005). This process requires the brain to carry out multiple activities while reading, such as converting letters into words, understanding the text's meaning, and making sense of the overall text. In connection with that, Oakhill et al. (2003) explain that although decoding is necessary, it is still not enough to fully understand the text. This is a common issue in Bruneian primary schools, where many students are able to read fluently but struggle to comprehend the text. These students are often referred to as poor comprehenders, who according to Tong et al. (2011) are those students who gained skills in word reading but lack comprehension skills. Teachers in this study also reported that their students are able to read aloud fluently but are unable to answer comprehension questions, either orally or in written form.

Students' vocabulary gap and lack of background knowledge contribute to their difficulties in reading comprehension. Perfetti et al. (2005) suggest that comprehension cannot occur without a combination of effective decoding and understanding of vocabulary. Likewise, Flowerdew and Miller (1992) state that learners who attend lessons with sufficient background knowledge are able to understand texts better than those who do not.

In the Bruneian context, most students are learning English not as a second language, but as a foreign language (Pieronek, 2001). Therefore, their limited exposure to English outside the school further contributes to their vocabulary gaps and poor comprehension. Nabiev (2024) also highlights that students' low English proficiency

and lack of interest are two main reasons why many of them struggle with reading. Consequently, external factors and linguistic disadvantages, such as low exposure to English, make it difficult for students to read and understand texts. This then leads to a lack of interest in reading, which reduces the amount of reading practice, making it impossible for them to improve.

Many Bruneian primary schools have implemented various reading programmes to support reading development, including interventions, enrichment activities, and structured reading lessons such as Guided reading, silent reading, reading aloud, and reading for enjoyment. Depending on students' reading abilities, reading-focused lessons are planned and conducted accordingly – from basic phonics lessons for weak readers to more challenging texts for good readers – supported by ongoing assessment. These approaches are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Sloat et al., 2007; Snowling & Hulme, 2012), who highlight that reading development happens in phases starting as early as at younger levels, with students progressing through steps that are supported by assessments.

Unfortunately, these programmes are not consistently well-implemented in schools. Without a national framework focusing on reading-focused instruction, the teaching of reading will not be prioritised as important as English language lessons (Pieronek, 2001). The absence of an appropriate framework makes it more challenging for teachers to address individual needs, particularly in reading comprehension. In addition, some teachers still have negative perceptions about the effectiveness of the reading programmes conducted in their schools, due to certain hindrances such as time constraints, insufficient resources, or lack of parental support.

Assessment of comprehension skills also requires attention. Farrall (2012), Bojovic (2010), and Fletcher (2006) criticise the reliance of comprehension assessment on pencil-and-paper formats, such as multiple-choice, cloze tests, short- and long-answer tests, or information transfer questions, which limit teachers' ability to determine their students' strengths and weaknesses in comprehension. These assessments do not focus solely on comprehension skills, but a mix of writing, vocabulary, and grammatical skills, which fails to capture the real reading difficulties faced by students. Five teachers in this study also voiced similar concerns, stating that the existing assessment tools are not reliable enough to measure students' actual comprehension skills. The targeted interventions are important given that 'most children who do not learn to read during the primary grades will probably never learn to read well' (Sloat et al., 2007:523).

Most literature indicates that there are many reasons that cause students to struggle with their reading comprehension. Some of these factors can be language exposure, thinking skills, pedagogical approaches, environmental factors, and can also be genetic factors (Nabiev, 2024).

In summary, the literature shows that reading comprehension is a complex skill that depends on multiple factors including external factors and linguistic proficiencies. In the Bruneian primary school context, the struggles faced by the students are made even harder by the limitations in curriculum and the implementation of reading programmes in schools. Despite numerous studies on reading development, there is still a need to understand why students in Brunei's primary schools struggle with their reading comprehension. It is important to

understand that perspectives from English teachers in Brunei's primary schools reveal significant insights into the big picture of what affects students' reading comprehension.

METHOD

This study used both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect information on the deficits of reading comprehension in Bruneian primary schools. The study followed a structured approach, by collecting numerical data and using the respondents' responses to elaborate for qualitative data purposes.

The qualitative research design employs thematic analysis to discover teacher perspectives on the causes of reading comprehension deficits among primary school students in Brunei, which allows for an in-depth view of classroom experiences and circumstantial factors that affect students' reading progress.

Thematic analysis is a convenient approach to explore teachers' experiences by identifying repeated information, echoing Lochmiller (2021), who explains that recurring patterns mean that there are common points in research, that tell a big picture on teachers' viewpoints on reading comprehension.

The objective of this study is to investigate primary school students' reading comprehension difficulties from the viewpoints of English teachers, either in their pedagogical instructions or with support from the relevant authorities.

To achieve this objective, a set of questionnaires was created using Google Forms, which was distributed to primary English teachers from different schools across Brunei, and teaching in different grade levels, intended to give a better overview of the challenges being studied and to make the participants more representative. Through this survey, teachers were required to share information about teaching reading in their classes.

Following the ethical research practices, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The survey was conducted during a one-week timeframe to allow ample time for a targeted number of thirty teachers to respond.

Tools to Collect Data

Data were gathered through a set of questionnaires which was designed to collect the combination of measurable information on the reading instructions and resources, individual perceptions on the progress of the students' reading comprehension skills and the intervention programs conducted in schools. The questionnaire included two types of items:

- a. Closed-ended questions included multiple choice and Likert scales to measure the frequency of specific reading instructions and the teachers' professional opinions on the effectiveness of the school intervention programs. Responses to these questions were analysed using illustrative statistics to observe the trends and patterns across the responses.
- b. Open-ended questions required teachers to elaborate on their teaching experiences, challenges, and suggestions related to teaching reading in classrooms. This question type is very helpful to get better understanding on the challenges being studied and to identify perspectives overlooked by the fixed-questions.

Google Forms was used as a research instrument as it is commonly used and easily accessed by teachers in Brunei at their own pace. Through this platform, the teachers' responses were analysed and the closed-ended questions were converted into illustrative statistics, which were grouped by frequency, percentage, and average ratings. These data were then exported to Microsoft Excel for more descriptive analysis, especially the responses to the open-ended questions.

Participants

The study targeted at least thirty English teachers in Bruneian primary schools. They come from different schools across Brunei, teaching at different grade levels, and have a variety of teaching experiences. The purpose of this diversity was to study their individual teaching reading strategies, their viewpoints on challenges in teaching reading, their teaching resources, and their observations on their students' comprehension skills.

The teachers were categorised into groups of four:

- a. Pre-school teachers played an important role in early literacy foundations, such as decoding skills.
- b. Lower primary teachers, who teach Years 1 and 2 students. These teachers introduce formal reading instruction while continuing the phonics lessons from the pre-school level.
- c. Mid-primary teachers, who teach in Years 3 and 4, are responsible for strengthening the students' fluency and comprehension skills.
- d. Upper primary teachers are those who prepare the Years 5 and 6 students for national assessments and foster their higher-level comprehension skills.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed individually to provide an in-depth understanding of reading comprehension. The quantitative data were derived from the closed-ended questions. Those responses were exported automatically by Google Forms to Microsoft Excel. These data were then analysed to identify key patterns and trends in challenges and perceptions of student comprehension levels. To make comparisons easier, the data were illustrated as bar graphs and pie charts, which are discussed in the Findings section. Open-ended questions collected the qualitative data, which were analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

In contrast to the quantitative analysis, the researchers carried out the thematic analysis manually to better connect with and understand the teachers' responses. Pairing both types of analysis allowed for the triangulation of data, as patterns found on the statistics were presented in the teachers' qualitative responses. These provide a more inclusive understanding of the struggles in teaching reading and comprehension in Bruneian primary schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the survey responses of thirty primary English teachers in Brunei, useful information was discovered about how teachers view the difficulties they encounter when teaching reading and comprehension. Their responses gave a clearer picture of the challenges in the classroom, such as a lack of resources, lack of flexibility

in the timetable for reading instruction, differences in students' reading levels, and the struggle to help all students follow and understand what they read.

Impact of Reading Programmes in Schools

All respondents stated that their schools conducted reading programmes, which are implemented to help their students overcome weaknesses in reading. These programmes, with their own names, such as GoLITTS, Renaissance, and School Improvement Plan, are intended to help weak readers or enrich their reading experiences. Through these programmes, various reading instructions are conducted, including guided reading, phonics, and reading recovery, which aim to support those who need to improve or enrich their reading and comprehension skills. About 83.3% of the respondents believed that these initiatives had a positive impact on their students' reading progress (see Figure 1).

In your professional opinion, has the program had an impact on your students' reading AND comprehension skills?

30 responses

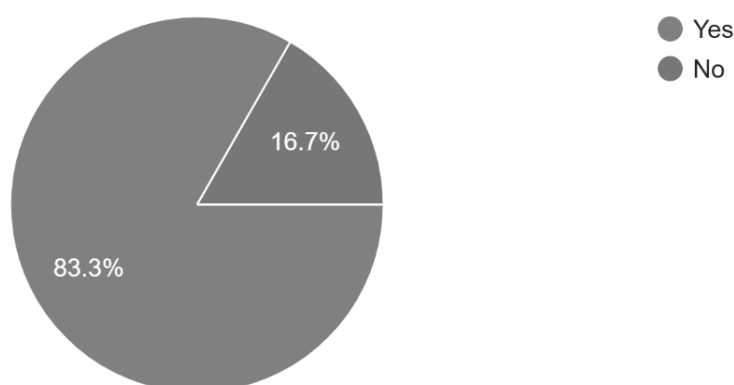


Figure 1. Respondents' view on the impact of reading programmes.

83.3% teachers who believed that the reading programmes conducted in their schools were a success did so by observing improvements in their students' reading through oral reading test results, Running Records, and their performances in comprehension assessments during written tests. These assessments are tools used to monitor students' progress in reading and comprehension skills, as well as to identify their weaknesses. 16.7% of teachers did not observe improvements in their students' reading progress, this suggests that the success of reading programmes differs according to how these programmes are implemented.

Students Can Read, But Cannot Comprehend

In response to questions about their challenges in teaching reading, many teachers expressed that their students can read but cannot understand what they are reading, regardless of their class levels. This means that these students are focusing more on decoding words rather than thinking of the context meaning, or they might not have background knowledge in regard to their reading texts.

Figure 2 shows that more than 90% of the teachers agreed that their students have no problem with oral reading. One teacher even said that none of their students

have a problem with reading, but they clarified that although the students can read aloud, they often lack understanding. On the other hand, two of the respondents stated that all of their students find oral reading difficult, suggesting that for some students, achieving reading fluency is still a challenge, especially for those who struggle with confidence and pronunciation.

Do your students find oral reading difficult?

30 responses



Figure 2. Teachers' responses on students' oral reading difficulty

Lack of Home Reading

Teachers also believed that a lack of home reading support contributes to reading difficulties, as many students do not have the opportunity to read at home. This may be due to limited access to reading materials, language issues within the family, or simply because reading is not part of the routine at home. As a result, students develop limited background knowledge, making it harder for them to engage with and understand unfamiliar texts.

Without regular practice, students tend to forget vocabulary and may lose interest in reading as they struggle to become independent readers, often needing assistance from teachers. This prevents them from developing the necessary skills to comprehend texts, due to a lack of background knowledge.

Comprehension Difficulties

Based on the responses of these teachers (see Figure 3), 100% of them believed that their students struggle with comprehension.

Do your students find reading for comprehension (either orally or written) difficult?

30 responses

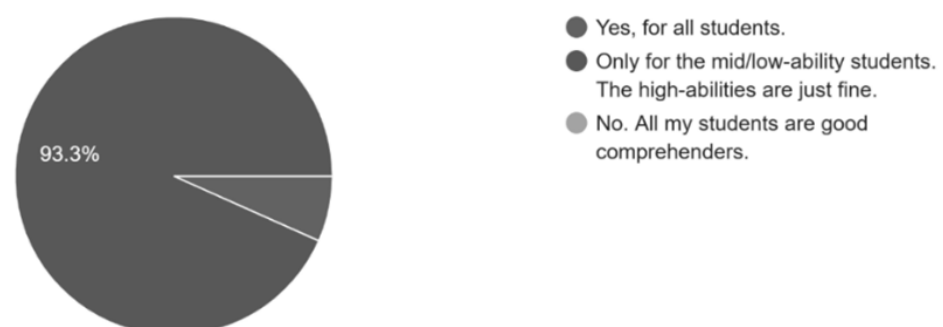


Figure 3. Teachers' responses to students' comprehension difficulty

These results are based on the teachers' findings from reading comprehension assessments, such as Running Records, written assessments, and oral discussions. According to the teachers, some students can understand the story but struggle to write their answers due to weaknesses in spelling or grammar. Orally, students often struggle to answer questions or give opinions that require them to guess, predict, or explain the story based on clues in the text.

Lack of Time for Teaching Reading in Class

Despite careful planning, it is not always possible to provide the best support to every student in every lesson. One teacher commented that they 'had very little time allocated to reading', which made it difficult to teach reading to the whole class. Teachers are required to complete the syllabus, which leaves little time for guided reading or other focused reading lessons.

They also stated that scheduled teaching periods, to fulfill the syllabus and prepare students for exams, often reduce opportunities for guided reading sessions. As a result, students tend to miss out on valuable opportunities to improve their reading and comprehension skills.

Students Who Need Support

Since English is considered a foreign language, some children may find it difficult to understand, especially those who are in lower primary. Teachers who work with them said that their students still rely a lot on the teacher to help them read and understand texts, indicating a gap in student readiness. Some teachers also mentioned that giving comprehension questions at this early stage might be too early for them. To address this gap, teachers must tailor their instruction and provide targeted support for struggling readers.

Alternatively, students in mid-primary levels are expected to read more complex English texts, but some find the language barrier an obstacle. These students may find decoding challenging and affecting their ability to read fluently. Although they may be able to read the words aloud, their pronunciation is often inaccurate, which impacts both fluency and reading confidence.

Eight teachers also pointed out their struggle to teach large classes with mixed reading abilities. It is not uncommon to have a variety of learning abilities in a single classroom, where some require extra attention because their reading skills are far below the benchmark, while others are more advanced. Teachers find it hard to manage these mixed abilities while still meeting the curriculum requirements. Although they try to give different texts tailored to individual learning needs, teachers often struggle due to time constraints.

Lack of Reading Resources

The lack of appropriate reading resources also plays a significant role, as some respondents stated that reading is not a skill that can be taught similarly to every student. As mentioned above, teaching reading has to be tailored based on individual needs.

One teacher explained that 'reading needs to be differentiated' because students come from different language backgrounds and have different learning abilities and styles. This means teachers are responsible for preparing a variety of reading texts and activities to meet the individual learning needs of their students.

DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the findings of the study, which aims to explore primary English teachers' perspectives on teaching reading and comprehension skills in Brunei's primary schools and investigate the challenges they face in this area. It discusses several factors that affect local primary students' reading comprehension development, grouped under relevant subheadings. These offer insights into what is currently happening in classrooms and identify areas that need support and improvement.

Opinions about Reading Programmes

Various reading programmes are introduced in primary schools intended to support and enrich student's reading development. Conversely, the success of these programmes varies according to the implementation in each school. These programmes, either interventions or enrichments, often require regular monitoring and follow-up to ensure success by tracking students' reading progress. A variety of reading instruction strategies are used in these programmes, such as guided reading, phonics instruction, reading recovery, and reading for enjoyment, depending on individual students' needs.

According to the PISA 2021 report, students who regularly read for enjoyment have more opportunities to improve their reading skills and see themselves as competent readers, while less competent readers often view reading as a burden and are therefore less motivated to read for enjoyment (OECD, 2021).

As shown in Figure 1 above, 83.3% of teachers opted for positive outcomes in their students' reading and comprehension skills as a result of the reading programmes conducted in their schools. This suggests that reading programmes play an important role in the progress of students' reading and comprehension skills.

However, 16.7% of teachers commented that reading programmes conducted in their schools did not improve their students' reading, possibly due to poor implementation and lack of resources, but most commonly because of time constraints and lack of support. These issues will be further explained in the Conclusion section.

From the comments in the survey, teachers were concerned about the scheduling of reading programmes, which are usually conducted during normal lesson time. This makes it difficult for teachers to give full attention, especially to students who struggle with reading and need additional support. Squeezing the time for reading interventions in normal lessons also means that teachers have to rush through the curriculum, leaving less time to focus on supporting students who need help with reading.

Therefore, teachers proposed that reading programmes should have a dedicated time slot, separate from the regular lesson period. This would allow teachers to better monitor students' reading progress while providing students sufficient time to focus on their reading.

In addition to proposing allocated reading time, teachers also reported visible progress in their students' reading assessments through the reading programmes. This progress was evident in the students' increasing Lexile levels from Running Records, their improvement in answering comprehension questions both orally and in writing, and their oral reading has become more confident.

Reading without Comprehension

A number of teachers expressed that while most of their students can read, they struggle to understand what they are reading. This was from their comments saying that understanding the text is a challenge faced by their students – not only for students who struggle in reading but also for those who are known to be fluent readers. This suggests that there is a visible gap between the ability to read text and the ability to comprehend it, as Dymock (1993) points out decoding and comprehension skills work together, and an imbalance between the two skills can lead to comprehension difficulties.

According to Figure 2, more than 90% of teachers reported that their students find oral reading difficult. Additionally, Figure 3 shows that all respondents stated that their students struggle with comprehension. Findings from these data suggest that students who have mastered decoding skills might lack the thinking skills required for comprehension. Goodman (1993, as cited in Dymock, 1993) and Smith (1978, as cited in Dymock, 1993) argued that delays in comprehension happen because readers give more attention to decoding word by word accurately and forget to read for meaning.

Bojovic (2010) supports this view on the importance of the interaction between decoding and complex thinking processes to help readers understand what they read. As mentioned above, comprehension is limited if students focus only on decoding. This view echoes the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), which emphasises that both decoding and comprehension are essential.

Difficulty in comprehending texts may be due to limited vocabulary, which limits the student's ability to grasp the meaning of the words. According to Snowling and Hulme (2012), students who are already weak in language skills from an early stage often experience difficulties in complex cognitive processes which hinders their ability to understand the reading texts. Yahya Othman and Noradinah Jaidi (2012) also observed that students who struggle with comprehension are often those who can read but do not fully understand, which highlights the need for teachers to develop students' higher-order thinking skills to encourage progress in their comprehension skills. This will be discussed further in the next subheading.

Problems related to students' comprehension deficits suggest that reading instruction must include the teaching of comprehension strategies to enhance understanding (Lika, 2017), rather than focusing solely on decoding skills such as phonics and fluency. This method can help students develop their high-order thinking skills, which are essential for comprehending texts, such as inferring, predicting, and making connections. Readers who do not focus on their thinking while reading are not fully engaged with the text (Lika, 2017).

Effects of Home Reading

Another factor contributing to poor reading and comprehension skills is limited language exposure. It is commonly known that when students receive less exposure to English outside the classroom, it limits their ability to understand English reading texts. The PISA 2021 report highlights the differences between the language of instruction and spoken language adding another challenge for students to attain good reading proficiency (OECD, 2021).

In addition to this, students who do not have active reading habits at home, and those who come from families with limited educational backgrounds, tend to struggle with reading. A lack of reading materials, language issues within the family, and insufficient support for reading at home may contribute to the lack of reading practice outside the classroom. This causes students to struggle with vocabulary acquisition, as they may forget new words when reading only happens in class, with no opportunity to expand their vocabulary at home.

Overall, limited language exposure both within and outside the classroom affects students' reading and comprehension skills. When students are not exposed to regular reading habits at home, it reduces their opportunities to develop their vocabulary and background knowledge. This eventually restricts their ability to become independent and proficient readers. To promote home reading, teachers can adopt a collaborative approach with parents by providing reading materials and activities to encourage reading habits outside the classroom.

Struggles with Comprehension

Among all the challenges mentioned earlier, student readiness and attitudes toward reading also play a crucial role in their comprehension skills. Students with high readiness may have shown good vocabulary skills, are motivated to read, and have a better understanding of texts. Meanwhile, students with positive reading attitudes tend to display high interest in reading and are usually confident when reading aloud. These two factors influenced students' capabilities to understand the reading texts. Students with strong vocabulary can decode words fast and be able to make connections with the text, which enables them to comprehend what they read. In addition to that, students' positive reading attitudes inspire them to read independently, which contributes to better development of comprehension skills.

As shown in Figure 3, all teachers believed that their students find comprehension challenging. This was observed in their responses to comprehension questions, both oral and written. However, some teachers shared that while their students could discuss comprehension questions orally, they struggled to explain them in writing – probably due to poor grammar or spelling. This suggests that students may require more opportunities to develop their linguistic skills in order to improve their comprehension.

The difficulty in expressing their understanding in writing leads to a discussion on assessment, which poses its own challenges. Five teachers noted that the struggle which their students faced was not merely because they could not understand the reading texts, but sometimes it was because they could not describe their answers correctly in writing. These students may find grammar or spelling difficult, especially those who are in earlier levels, such as the lower and mid-primary students. The gap between understanding and writing may give a misleading opinion of their reading proficiency.

Hence, teachers believed that the assessment formats used to determine students' comprehension abilities do not necessarily represent a complete picture of their reading comprehension levels. This is because formal assessments for reading comprehension are often in writing format or an oral report (Bojovic, 2010).

Currently, teachers use assessment tools such as Running Records, written assessments, and oral discussions to evaluate students' reading and comprehension

progress. These tools are intended to help teachers track, monitor, and identify students' strengths and weaknesses in reading, which allows them to tailor their reading instruction to meet individual learning needs.

Time Constraints in Teaching Reading

A shortage of time to teach reading is another restriction faced by teachers. They claimed that their normal teaching periods are already packed, leaving less time to conduct lessons focused specifically on reading. Despite its integration into the English syllabus, many teachers expressed that they prefer a dedicated time allocated to reading instruction – where teachers can focus on enriching students' reading skills and intervening when necessary through various reading activities, and providing students with a wide range of reading materials.

This allocated reading period is especially important to teach reading in large classes with students of varying reading abilities. It is nearly impossible to focus on individual student's reading comprehension skills when reading is taught during regular lessons. Teachers are often pressured to complete the syllabus while addressing their students' reading needs, which makes it difficult for them to meaningfully support their students who require special attention. Ultimately, reading approaches such as reading aloud, guided reading, shared reading, and silent reading – which demand sufficient time and focused attention from teachers – are often sacrificed. This, negatively, reduces opportunities for struggling readers to improve their reading skills as a result of lack of support.

Time constraints in reading instruction not only limit the support students receive but also restrict teachers from regularly tracking students' reading progress. It is essential for schools to acknowledge the need to allocate specific time for reading-focused lessons within the schedule. This would allow teachers to apply tailored instruction for all students, providing opportunities for them to grow into proficient readers.

However, Lika (2017) also points out that in reading instruction, teachers spend less time on teaching comprehension, which adds to the struggles faced by poor comprehenders. Time allocated for teaching reading comprehension is often insufficient because teachers need to prepare a lot of reading materials and prompt good questions for effective understanding (Pieronek, 2001).

Supporting Struggling Readers

Student readiness is one of the issues discussed in earlier parts of this section. In a single classroom, not all students have the same level of reading attainment. It is challenging for a teacher to manage a class with mixed reading abilities, especially when trying to provide targeted support for struggling readers. Without sufficient time, addressing each student's individual needs becomes even more challenging.

Moreover, younger children – especially lower primary students – are still developing their language skills, which makes them rely heavily on their teachers' assistance to comprehend texts. As children grow, they are given more complex texts, which creates additional challenges for those who have already struggled with reading in their early years. This forces teachers to bridge the gap between proficient and struggling readers within mixed-ability classrooms. However, as mentioned earlier, time constraints remain a major issue to effectively address these challenges.

The need for differentiated instruction in mixed-ability classrooms is important to ensure that all students are supported. Teachers can plan individual reading activities, provide appropriate reading materials, and support students based on their reading interests and learning profiles. Differentiated instruction according to students' learning abilities creates a diverse learning setting that increases students' curiosity and leads to better reading outcomes (Cui, 2024; Nabiev, 2024).

However, differentiated reading instruction requires time for planning, implementation, monitoring, assessment, and intervention. When time is limited, some students may not receive the necessary support to scaffold their progress. In conclusion, schools should provide the necessary support, such as dedicated time for reading, sufficient resources, and proper training for teachers to implement effective differentiated reading instruction.

Inadequate Reading Resources

The lack of appropriate reading resources is another significant issue affecting the development of students' reading comprehension skills. Ten teachers stated that reusing existing reading materials does not meet the individual student's needs. When reading resources do not match students' interests and reading proficiencies, it becomes difficult for teachers to keep them motivated. This also makes it harder for students to understand what they are reading and to achieve the targeted learning outcomes.

One way to fulfill students' differentiated needs is for teachers to create their own resources, which adds to their already heavy workload from regular lessons. The time spent searching for suitable reading materials and creating their own resources reduces the time available for teachers to focus on providing tailored reading instruction for interventions.

A shortage of reading materials, both in and out of school, impacts the effectiveness of reading instruction. Some students lack opportunities to read at home due to limited access to reading materials, whether in hard copy or via digital technology. With unsuitable or limited reading materials available both in schools and at home, students have fewer opportunities to develop sustained reading routines, increase their vocabulary, or build the necessary background knowledge for effective reading comprehension.

To address the problem of inadequate reading resources, schools should prioritise providing a variety of reading materials – both printed and digital formats – to enhance students' interest in reading and help them develop their reading proficiency. By ensuring that classrooms and libraries are well-equipped with differentiated reading resources, and by encouraging the use of digital reading platforms, students will have greater opportunities to select reading materials that match their individual needs and interests, which can boost their overall comprehension skills. Schools can also make use of free online applications – which are constantly getting more advanced – to foster students' reading skills, especially when getting printed materials is limited (Wu & Miller, 2021).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

Several suggestions to improve students' reading comprehension in primary schools can be made, following the valuable insights from teachers in this study and

the reviewed literature. It would also be useful for future research to study the impact of these suggestions on the effectiveness of reading comprehension development.

Most importantly, sufficient time should be designated specifically for reading comprehension, which is separated from regular English language lesson. During this allocated time, teachers can closely monitor and track students' progress in reading comprehension and spend ample time working closely with struggling readers, especially those in the lower primary levels.

Secondly, parents can be involved in supporting reading habits at home. Home-link reading programmes can be implemented for this purpose, so children can expand their vocabulary and become more motivated to read. Students' weakness in vocabulary is also a cause of their difficulties in reading comprehension. Future research can explore the success of such programmes and the impact of parental involvement on students' comprehension skills.

Another area for improvement is the opportunities for teachers to be professionally trained on strategies on reading instruction, including differentiation, comprehension strategies, use of assessment tools, and applying technology in reading. Lika (2017) and He and Miller (2011) have described that teachers who are better equipped with proper training can offer high-quality teaching to their students, which is essential for effective reading comprehension. Future research could identify various types of professional development that are impactful on reading comprehension instruction and student learning.

The fourth suggestion is to recommend a wider range of assessment methods for reading comprehension. Instead of consistently narrowing comprehension assessment to written formats, teachers should consider applying different kinds of assessments, such as oral story retelling and interactive question-and-answer sessions. Upcoming studies could examine which types of assessments most effectively illustrate students' comprehension skills across different proficiency levels.

Finally, to support effective guided reading, it is important to have a smaller ratio of teachers and students or for schools to provide additional teaching assistants during reading sessions. This allows teachers to focus on weak readers who need more support, while also providing enrichment for proficient readers. The relationship between smaller group sizes and comprehension progress, especially in mixed-ability classrooms, could be explored in future studies.

Overall, these recommendations show how important it is to have a structured framework and a research-based approach to teaching reading comprehension, to reinforce the requirement of professional training for teachers, and to provide students with ample resources and support to help them become proficient readers.

Reading comprehension remains a big challenge in Bruneian primary schools, mainly due to the previously mentioned issues related to students, pedagogical approaches, and the education system. From the teachers' viewpoints, complications within the system make it challenging to focus on teaching reading and providing opportunities for students to practice regularly.

Despite the presence of various reading programmes and structured reading instruction, these efforts may still not fully work to address the struggles faced by students, particularly poor comprehenders. Through this study, the real situation in classrooms and the challenges faced by teachers are highlighted, which provides

valuable insight for the education system to improve and develop a more structured framework to teach reading comprehension to make it more effective and inclusive.

Teachers' perspectives are essential to understanding what is missing in the system that causes our students to struggle to become proficient readers. Their responses are also important to continue improving our outdated curriculum so that students can make better progress. Bruneian children need to do more than just reading to pass tests – they need to truly understand what they read. This is crucial to equip them with the literacy skills needed for lifelong learning.

The results of this study give clear proof that reading comprehension challenges among primary school students in Brunei are not solely student-related, but also from the weaknesses in the system that often limit students' opportunities to develop their reading comprehension. Teachers are aware of these shortcomings and are willing to improve, but the system often limits their ability to do so effectively.

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WA Conceptualization, methodology, DYH; validation, formal analysis, WA; investigation, writing—original draft preparation, All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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