

## **Reading the World of Children: An In-Depth Analysis of the Literacy Skills of Fifth Grade Elementary Students**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to analyze the reading literacy skills of fifth-grade elementary school students and to identify the urgency, proficiency level, and influencing factors. The research employed a qualitative descriptive method conducted at Kebayoran Lama Utara 09 Public Elementary School. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, with the research subjects being fifth-grade students. The results indicate that students' reading literacy skills are generally low, particularly in understanding texts that require higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). Although teachers are aware of the importance of literacy, most students experience difficulties in comprehending reading materials. The factors affecting literacy skills are divided into two categories: internal and external. Internal factors include low reading interest and motivation, as students tend to prefer non-academic reading materials such as comics. External factors involve limited supporting facilities, such as underutilized reading corners and libraries. These findings highlight the need for efforts to improve literacy through contextual and varied learning approaches, as well as the provision of engaging reading facilities and materials. This study provides significant implications for developing strategies and programs to enhance reading literacy in elementary schools.

Kata kunci: Elementary Education, Learning Motivation, Reading Literacy, Reading Skills.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Reading literacy has increasingly been recognized as a foundational competence that determines not only academic achievement but also lifelong learning capacity and civic participation. Literacy extends beyond the mechanical ability to decode written symbols; it encompasses the capacity to construct meaning, evaluate information critically, and apply textual knowledge across contexts (UNESCO, 2022). Contemporary scholarship defines reading literacy as a multidimensional construct integrating cognitive, linguistic, motivational, and sociocultural dimensions (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Within this broader framework, literacy is not simply a school-based skill but a fundamental human capability shaping intellectual growth and social mobility.

Globally, the urgency of strengthening literacy skills has intensified in the wake of declining performance trends in large-scale international assessments. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 results indicate that reading literacy levels have declined in many participating countries, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted formal schooling and reading engagement (OECD, 2023). Indonesia continues to face persistent challenges in this domain, as reflected in the decline of its PISA reading scores. Such data underscore systemic issues in reading comprehension, inferential reasoning, and critical literacy development at the elementary level.

Reading literacy is particularly crucial in upper elementary grades, where students transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." According to Snow and Matthews

(2018), this developmental shift requires students to engage with increasingly complex texts, extract implicit meanings, synthesize information, and critically evaluate arguments. Duke and Cartwright (2021) further argue that comprehension in later elementary years depends on a combination of vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, inferential reasoning, and metacognitive regulation. When any of these components are underdeveloped, students struggle to progress beyond literal text interpretation.

Evidence from SDN Kebayoran Lama Utara 09 reveals that although students are generally able to decode texts fluently, they encounter difficulties in summarizing, reflecting on, and analyzing reading materials. This finding aligns with global patterns showing that many elementary students demonstrate surface-level comprehension but struggle with higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) tasks (Uli et al., 2021). The distinction between literal comprehension and inferential reasoning is critical because advanced literacy competence involves constructing meaning beyond explicitly stated information (Wulandari & Ansori, 2022).

The theoretical foundation of reading literacy has evolved significantly over the past decade. Earlier models focused primarily on decoding and phonics; however, contemporary frameworks emphasize integrated comprehension processes involving strategic thinking and metacognition (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Reading is now understood as an active, constructive process in which readers continuously monitor understanding, generate inferences, and evaluate coherence. Students who lack metacognitive awareness often fail to detect misunderstandings and therefore struggle to repair comprehension breakdowns (Afflerbach et al., 2020).

Motivation has also emerged as a critical determinant of literacy development. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) posits that intrinsic motivation flourishes when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the observed context, students demonstrate enthusiasm for reading comics and entertainment-based materials, suggesting that motivation is not absent but rather selectively directed. Research by Sari and Putri (2023) confirms that allowing students to choose reading materials increases engagement and sustained reading habits. Thus, the issue may lie less in reading interest per se and more in the mismatch between assigned academic texts and students' preferences.

Sociocultural perspectives further illuminate literacy development as a contextual phenomenon shaped by environmental support. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (2019) conceptualizes learning as influenced by nested systems including family, school, and broader societal structures. In this study, limited reading facilities and underutilized libraries represent environmental barriers to literacy growth. Krashen (2020) emphasizes that access to abundant, appealing reading materials is one of the strongest predictors of voluntary reading and literacy development. When school environments fail to provide engaging literacy spaces, reading becomes an obligation rather than a culture.

Parental involvement also significantly influences literacy outcomes. Hidayati et al. (2024) demonstrate that home literacy environments, including shared reading practices and parental encouragement, correlate positively with reading comprehension achievement. In the present context, minimal parental engagement in literacy activities weakens reinforcement outside the classroom. This highlights the necessity of collaborative school-family partnerships in fostering consistent reading habits.

Another critical dimension involves vocabulary knowledge. Research indicates that vocabulary breadth and depth are strong predictors of reading comprehension (Nation, 2019; Perfetti & Stafura, 2018). Students who struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary often experience cognitive overload, hindering comprehension of complex texts. Observations in this study reveal that students frequently rely on teachers or online searches to clarify vocabulary, indicating gaps in lexical knowledge that may impede inferential reasoning.

The integration of literacy within Indonesia's Merdeka Curriculum reflects recognition of these challenges. The curriculum emphasizes critical reasoning, communication, and cross-disciplinary literacy integration. However, translating policy intentions into classroom

practice remains challenging. Uli et al. (2021) note that teacher professional development is crucial in equipping educators with strategies to cultivate higher-order literacy skills.

Moreover, digital transformation introduces both opportunities and challenges. While students increasingly use digital platforms to seek information, digital literacy requires critical evaluation skills to distinguish credible sources (OECD, 2023). Without guided instruction, digital access alone may not enhance comprehension depth.

Taken together, contemporary research underscores that reading literacy is shaped by cognitive processes (vocabulary, inference, metacognition), motivational dynamics (interest, autonomy), and environmental support systems (school facilities, family involvement). The present study contributes to this body of knowledge by providing an in-depth qualitative analysis of literacy skills within a specific elementary school context, highlighting the interplay between internal and external determinants.

Therefore, this research aims to analyze the literacy proficiency of fifth-grade students, identify factors influencing their reading development, and examine the implications for instructional reform. By situating local findings within global theoretical frameworks, this study seeks to provide actionable insights for strengthening literacy culture in Indonesian elementary education.

## **2 RESEARCH METHODS**

This research employed a qualitative descriptive design with an ethnographic approach, aiming to describe and interpret the reading literacy abilities of fifth-grade elementary school students in a natural and contextual setting. The qualitative descriptive method was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore phenomena in depth and to provide rich, detailed explanations based on participants' experiences and perspectives. The ethnographic approach was particularly relevant because it focuses on understanding cultural and social behaviors within a particular educational environment—in this case, the classroom culture of reading literacy among students at SDN Kebayoran Lama Utara 09, Jakarta. The study was conducted during the 2024/2025 academic year, covering the period from November 2024 to March 2025.

## **3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **3.1.1 Urgency of Reading Literacy**

Teachers emphasized that reading literacy holds a vital role as the foundation of all academic learning and intellectual development. They explained that the ability to read and comprehend is not only essential for understanding textbooks or completing assignments but also for building lifelong learning habits. Reading literacy empowers students to access knowledge independently, think critically, and connect ideas across different disciplines. Without strong reading literacy skills, students often struggle to interpret questions, understand written instructions, or express their thoughts effectively, which ultimately hinders their overall academic achievement. Furthermore, teachers noted that reading literacy supports the development of other key competencies, such as writing, speaking, and problem-solving. Students who read regularly tend to have richer vocabularies, more advanced reasoning skills, and a broader perspective on social and cultural issues. The teachers agreed that literacy is not limited to language lessons alone but must be integrated across all subjects, allowing students to apply their reading comprehension in science, social studies, and mathematics. According to the teachers interviewed, the cultivation of reading literacy must begin as early as possible, particularly in the lower grades of elementary school. Establishing daily reading habits through programs such as "15 Minutes of Reading Before Class" or storytelling sessions can instill a positive reading culture among students. Early exposure to diverse and engaging reading materials also helps students develop curiosity and motivation to read voluntarily. Therefore, improving reading literacy from a young age is considered an urgent and strategic step toward enhancing educational quality and lifelong learning skills.

### 3.1.2 Factors Influencing Reading Literacy

The findings of this study revealed that students' reading literacy is influenced by two major categories of factors: internal and external. The internal factors primarily relate to students' personal attitudes and psychological aspects. Many students display low interest in reading academic materials, preferring instead to engage with visual or entertainment-based content such as comics, short social media posts, or picture books. This limited reading interest often stems from a lack of intrinsic motivation, where students view reading as an obligation rather than an enjoyable activity. Teachers also observed that some students experience difficulty concentrating while reading longer passages, which further reduces their enthusiasm to read. In addition, students who lack confidence in their reading ability are less likely to participate actively in literacy programs or classroom discussions about texts.

The external factors, on the other hand, involve environmental and social influences that affect literacy development. The school's reading facilities were found to be inadequate; reading corners were poorly maintained and lacked a variety of engaging and age-appropriate books. The library resources were limited, and access to them was irregular due to schedule constraints. Furthermore, parental involvement in literacy activities at home was minimal. Many parents did not allocate time for reading with their children or provide access to reading materials, which weakened the continuity of literacy learning outside of school. Consequently, both internal disinterest and external limitations contribute to the low reading literacy levels among fifth-grade students. Addressing these factors requires collaborative efforts between schools, families, and the community.

The findings of this study confirm that the reading literacy abilities of fifth-grade students at SDN Kebayoran Lama Utara 09 are highly varied. While a majority (6 out of 10) of the observed students demonstrated "very good" skills in basic comprehension tasks, a significant gap remains in higher-order thinking. The observation data showed that indicators like "explaining the content back in their own language" were difficult for many students, indicating that while they can decode texts, they struggle with synthesis and personal interpretation. The teachers' definitions of literacy—emphasizing understanding and critical thinking—align perfectly with modern literacy concepts described by experts like Baynham (literacy as an integration of skills including critical thinking) and James Gee (literacy as a complex skill involving thinking, speaking, reading, and writing). However, this advanced understanding from the teachers has not fully translated into student outcomes. The findings reveal a clear gap between the *awareness* of literacy's importance and the *practice* of it. Students know reading is important for learning but are hindered by practical barriers like difficult vocabulary.

This disconnect is most evident in the students' literacy levels. The varied abilities reflect the different stages of literacy development outlined by Kemendikbudristek. Many students appear to be at the "reading surface" level (*memahami informasi yang tersurat*), able to answer explicit questions. However, very few demonstrated the ability to reach the "inferential reading" level (*menarik kesimpulan dari informasi tersirat*).

This is strongly supported by the teacher interviews, which stated that students struggle significantly with HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) questions. This confirms that most students have not yet reached the "advanced level" of literacy (*literasi tingkat lanjut*), which involves analyzing, evaluating, and critically reflecting on information.

The factors influencing this gap are clear. Internally, the study challenges the simple narrative that students have "low interest" in reading. Students *do* have high interest and motivation, but it is directed at materials they choose themselves, such as comics and story books. The problem, therefore, is not the *act* of reading, which they enjoy, but the *type* of reading being assigned. Externally, the school's facilities present the most significant barrier. The purpose of the Gerakan Literasi Sekolah (GLS) is to create comfortable, attractive spaces that build a culture of reading. The findings show the school's facilities are achieving the opposite. Reading corners that are messy and filled with damaged books, and a library that is noisy, uncomfortable, and used for storage, actively discourage students from engaging in reading. While the school's weekly reading program

is a positive step , its impact is undermined by the poor quality of the physical literacy environment.

| No | Indicator                             | Description                                                      | Achievement Level |
|----|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1  | Understanding the main idea of a text | Students can identify the topic but often miss implicit meaning  | Moderate          |
| 2  | Summarizing reading materials         | Students can retell basic ideas but struggle with abstract texts | Low               |
| 3  | Using vocabulary contextually         | Students often depend on teacher's explanation                   | Low               |
| 4  | Reflecting on the reading             | Students rarely express critical opinions about the text         | Very Low          |

1. Menurut Saya literasi membaca adalah kemampuan seseorang dalam memahami isi bacaan berbeda dengan seseorang yang hanya bisa membaca artinya hanya mampu membacakan suatu bacaan tanpa memahami isi bacaan tersebut.

Figure 4.2. Interview with Ibu Irly Widiyanti, S.Pd.

Caption: Teacher VB defining literacy as "the ability of a person to understand the content of a reading" versus "only being able to read a text aloud without understanding its content."

Bisa membaca, kalo ~~ada~~ untuk memahami kadang paham kadang enggak karena kesulitan buat caritau tentang isi, pesan, dan tujuan. biasanya kalo dirumah bertanya ke orang tua dan google, kalo di sekolah bertanya ke guru

Figure 4.3. Interview with student

Caption: A student explaining: "I can read, but for understanding, sometimes I get it, sometimes I don't, because it's hard to find the content, message, and purpose. At home, I usually ask my parents and Google; at school, I ask the teacher." SDN Kebayoran Lama Utara 09 is located at Jalan Delman Asri IX No. 15, Kebayoran Lama Utara, South Jakarta, with a land area of 2,158 m<sup>2</sup> and a building area of 685 m<sup>2</sup>. The school has six classrooms, ten learning groups, 276 students, and a total of 15 teachers and four administrative staff. The principal, Mrs. Hasti Asih, S.Pd., manages the education from grade I to VI, implementing the Merdeka Curriculum. The school's vision is to develop students who are accomplished, have strong character, and are environmentally conscious based on faith and knowledge. Its mission includes promoting active and creative learning, fostering the character of Pancasila students, cultivating habits of cleanliness and discipline, implementing green school programs, practicing religious teachings, and advancing science and technology. The school also provides extracurricular activities such as scouts, Red Cross Youth (PMR), painting, dance, pencak silat, marawis, and BTQ, which are conducted regularly each week according to the schedule.

The research findings indicate that there are differences in teachers' perspectives regarding the importance of reading literacy. Mrs. Nur Fajrihyanti, S.Pd., stated that reading literacy is the ability to comprehend texts and use information in daily life, while Mrs. Irly Widiyanti, S.Pd., emphasized understanding the content of the reading rather than simply being able to read aloud. Students admitted that they could read fluently, but they often faced difficulties in understanding vocabulary and the meaning of unfamiliar sentences. To overcome this, students asked teachers or parents, reread the texts, or

searched for information online. The level of students' reading literacy also varies significantly. Six students were classified as excellent because they could answer questions, summarize, and explain the content in their own words. One student was categorized as good, one as sufficient, and two as poor due to difficulties in maintaining focus and summarizing the content independently. The grade 5A teacher assessed that students' literacy was generally still lacking, especially when faced with higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) tasks, whereas the grade 5B teacher considered it fairly good despite some students still facing challenges.

## Discussion

The data confirm that literacy proficiency remains uneven. While decoding skills are generally adequate, higher-order literacy remains weak. This reflects global findings that surface comprehension does not guarantee inferential reasoning (OECD, 2023).

Students predominantly operate at the literal comprehension level. According to Snow & Matthews (2018), inferential comprehension requires integrating prior knowledge with textual evidence, a skill that must be explicitly taught.

Difficulty in summarizing and reflecting on texts indicates limited metacognitive regulation. Duke & Cartwright (2021) argue that comprehension improves when students monitor understanding actively.

The struggle with HOTS questions demonstrates insufficient exposure to analytical reading tasks. Higher-order questioning strengthens critical literacy (Uli et al., 2021).

Internal motivation significantly shapes literacy engagement. Although students read comics enthusiastically, academic reading lacks intrinsic appeal. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2020) suggests autonomy enhances engagement.

Reading preference patterns challenge assumptions of "low interest." Students read willingly when materials align with interests. Sari & Putri (2023) show book choice autonomy increases reading motivation.

External environmental barriers are significant. Poorly maintained reading spaces undermine the goals of the Gerakan Literasi Sekolah (GLS). Physical literacy environments shape reading culture (Krashen, 2020).

Limited parental involvement weakens home literacy reinforcement. Home reading habits predict comprehension outcomes (Hidayati et al., 2024).

The literacy equation presented in the study conceptually integrates internal and external factors. Ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2019) supports this multi-layered influence. Teachers' awareness of literacy importance is not yet fully translated into instructional innovation. Professional development is crucial (Wulandari & Ansori, 2022). Literacy integration across subjects remains limited. Cross-disciplinary literacy strengthens transfer skills (Vioreza et al., 2022). Students' reliance on teachers or Google reflects emerging digital literacy patterns. Critical evaluation skills must accompany digital access (OECD, 2023).

The gap between decoding and critical analysis mirrors global literacy transitions. Duke & Cartwright (2021) emphasize comprehension strategy instruction. The Merdeka Curriculum prioritizes literacy, yet implementation requires consistent reading culture. Ultimately, literacy development must move beyond individual skill-building toward systemic transformation integrating motivation, environment, and pedagogy.

## 3 CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the reading literacy ability of fifth-grade students at SDN Kebayoran Lama Utara 09 remains below the expected level. Students encounter difficulties in understanding and analyzing texts due to low motivation and insufficient reading facilities. Teachers play a crucial role in stimulating literacy through engaging and contextual strategies. The school must enhance its reading infrastructure, while families should encourage reading habits at home. Strengthening collaboration between these elements can significantly improve students' reading literacy and overall academic performance.

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