

Factor Affecting Reading Comprehension of Malaysian Secondary School Students

¹Surindar Kaur., ¹Jane Irene*, ²Sri Rejeki Murtiningsih

¹Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Malaysia

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is the main method of integrating knowledge that promotes training methods and efficient coping in both academic and personal contexts. This research presents the factors affecting the reading comprehension of Malaysian secondary school students and how the affecting factors differ between the students' genders. According to the findings, the majority of the students chose that reading motivation affects the students' reading comprehension. Even though these students chose reading motivation as the factor that affects their reading comprehension, when it comes to the factor that affects them the most, the majority of the students chose vocabulary. Moreover, a strong correlation is found between reading motivation and vocabulary. Noting that the students chose these two factors, students' confidence in their capacity to read and comprehend texts may be impacted by their vocabulary. A strong vocabulary helps enhance reading motivation in students since it increases their sense of security when reading. From the findings obtained from the survey, it was revealed that the factors that affect reading comprehension differ between the genders of the students. Even though most students chose similar factors, it can be seen that male students chose reading materials as a factor, whereas none of the female students chose the factor. On the other hand, the female students, based on the findings obtained, revealed that reading without actually understanding it, the length of reading material provided was too long, and students lost interest in reading, and the background knowledge affected their reading comprehension.

Keywords: reading comprehension factors, Malaysian Secondary School Students, male and female students

INTRODUCTION

The English language is widely recognized as the "lingua franca" or a means of communication. Thompson (2024) has quoted the term 'lingua franca' whereby English is widely regarded as one of the world's most important languages for verbal communication and is seen as a valuable resource for growth and information. According to World Population Review (2022), more people speak English than any other language. After Spanish and Mandarin (Chinese), it is the third most often used native tongue. The United States and the British Empire played a significant role in English's global expansion during the 17th century, making it the dominant business and communication language worldwide. In addition, English is also spoken by 390 million aborigines, approximately 1.1 billion speakers of the second language, with a total of 1.5 billion speakers worldwide in 2025 (Visual Capitalist, 2025). Globalization amplifies the importance of English. In Malaysia, English is designated as the second language (L2) in the Malaysian educational system. According to the nation's educational policy, it has been made mandatory for all levels of education, implying that it coexists with strong autochthonous languages, and is heavily used as the language of politics, the media, judicial systems, higher education, and other related professions. It also fulfils excellent, occasionally official, intergovernmental duties likewise Bahasa Melayu is the national language and been made as the main medium of language coexisting with other secondary languages (Suhaimi, Lee & Hamidi, 2025).

English is taught formally in classroom settings within the Malaysian educational system. Children are first exposed to and taught the English language in preschool at year 5 or 6 and it is continued as a required subject throughout primary and secondary school. To meet the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the

growing needs in Science and Technology, the educational system has placed a strong focus on the value of learning English, which dictate that Malaysian students be fluent in the language to compete globally. Furthermore, Malaysia made it compulsory for all Malaysian undergraduates to fulfill the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) requirements before the completion of the study. Moreover, universities in Malaysia now include English language proficiency requirements for admission and placement in academic programs due to the significance of English language proficiency in educational contexts and a wide competition in job industry among the newbies according to Maksan & Sukri (2025). For instance, it has been claimed that the need that students have near-native reading ability in addition to other English language proficiency skills, such as writing, listening, and speaking, makes English language proficiency crucial for Malaysian tertiary institutions (Maksan & Sukri, 2025; Malaysian Journal of Learning Instruction, 2025).

Reading is one of four skills that are the pinnacles of language that will lift you to new heights. Reading is a skill that teaches students how to extract ideas from a text and apply that knowledge to deepen their comprehension (Qureshi & Al-Surmi, 2025; Zakaria & Khoirunnisa, 2024). Zhang et al., (2025) stated that reading could increase a person's overall language proficiency. This means that when students advance through the learning process, reading serves as a mechanism for them to pick up knowledge and information. To gain knowledge, the students must first master their reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is the main method of integrating knowledge that promotes training methods and efficient coping in both academic and personal contexts. Reading comprehension is also known as an active cognitive skill that demands the reader's association with the content of the book in terms of interpreting and integrating knowledge through critical thinking and strategic approaches and comprehending from the actual text (Busari, John, & Goodness, 2025). However, not every student has a strong grasp of reading comprehension. Thus, this study's goals to examine what affects Malaysian secondary school students' reading comprehension and how the factors differ between the genders.

Problem Statement

Since the early 1960s, there has been a focus on the difficulty of reading comprehension among ESL students in terms of limitations in lexicon, reading techniques, and inspirational issues on comprehending performance (Jabamani & Senthilnathan, 2023). In addition, the MOE indicated that 122,000 Malaysian children in junior one failed to master literacy skills especially reading during the academic year indicating weakness in the foundation skills (Ibrahim et al., 2024). This is due to the fact that comprehending language involves more than just a word-level grasp; it also requires the capacity to engage actively with the material and create an image in the mind (Idris et al., 2024).

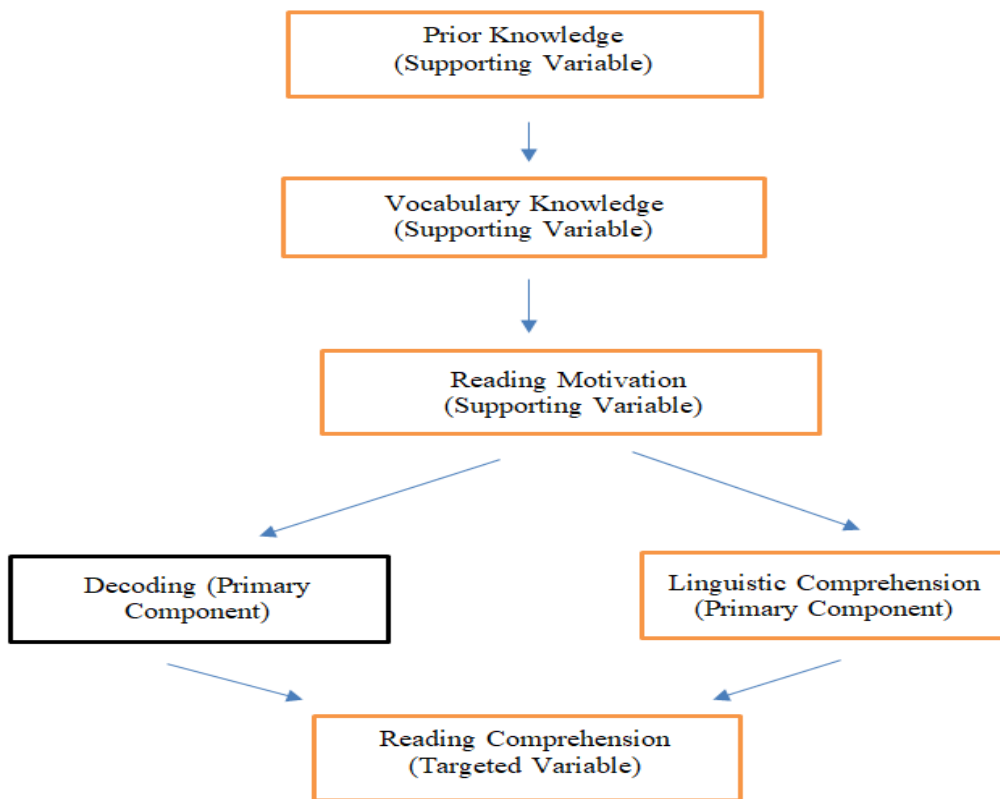
A study conducted by Bayuon & Hasyim (2023) on English curriculum in primary schools found that attempts by the government to lower the starting age for language instruction had been unsuccessful. Even though English has been a required subject since the first year, children still struggle to grasp reading abilities, which is a major worry for our educational system.

English was also found to be a foreign language in several Malaysian communities where the locals scarcely used it (Muhamad et al., 2024). When the locals hardly use the language, it would be difficult for them to comprehend it. This indirectly contributes to poor reading comprehension in Malaysia. Past research on this topic only touches on the variables influencing school students' reading comprehension. Hence, this research investigates what affects Malaysian secondary school students' reading comprehension and whether the factors that affect reading comprehension differ between the genders.

Theoretical Framework

The Simple View of Reading (SVR) model by Gough and Tunmer in 1986 will be used to identify the factors affecting reading comprehension. This model suggests that reading comprehension is determined by two primary factors: decoding and linguistic comprehension. Prior knowledge, reading material, reading motivation, and vocabulary all play a role in supporting both decoding and linguistic comprehension, and thus ultimately impact reading comprehension.

Figure 1: Simple View Reading Model



The SVR model suggests that readers with more prior knowledge about a topic are better able to understand and remember what they read because they have a larger store of background knowledge to draw upon when reading and are able to make connections between new information and what they already know. Besides that, reading material also plays a critical role in reading comprehension. The SVR model suggests that readers must be able to decode the words on the page in order to comprehend a text, but the complexity and difficulty of the material can also impact comprehension. Moreover, reading motivation is also an important factor in reading comprehension. The SVR model suggests that readers who are motivated to read are more likely to engage with the material and put forth effort to understand it. As per the vocabulary, the SVR model suggests that readers must be able to recognise and understand the meanings of words in order to comprehend a text.

Overall, the Simple View of Reading model suggests that reading comprehension is determined by both decoding and linguistic comprehension, which are impacted by a variety of factors including prior knowledge, reading material, reading motivation, and vocabulary. The prime SVR components are the decoding and linguistic components which are clearly defined. The dependent variable is reading comprehension. Questionnaire items are aligned directly to the SVR components. Therefore, the theoretical framework will become a measurable figure, well-organised and testable based on empirical studies. These factors can work together to support or hinder a reader's ability to understand and remember what they read.

Significance of research

Recent results highlighted that students from primary school have yet to reach the primary benchmark emphasizing an urgency in reading literacy to increase the proficiency of the present students (SEA-PLM 2024). As mentioned earlier, empirical studies reveal that approximately 42% student of 15 years obtained a mediocre level in reading literacy as found by Programme for International Student Assessment 2022 (PISA 2022) forecasting on reading challenges by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023). The researcher was driven to conduct this study to what affects Malaysian secondary school students' reading comprehension most and, simultaneously, to identify whether the factors that affects reading comprehension differ between the genders of the students.

The results of this study are expected to provide insight into how to deal with the affecting factors, mainly when it differs between males and females—knowing that female students perform better than male students when it comes to reading comprehension in English (Kerneža, 2025).

Lastly, insights and recommendations from this study may be helpful to the Education Ministry and the Education Sector in stressing the importance of reading skills and reading comprehension. The teachers can also note the affecting factors of Malaysian secondary school students' reading comprehension and make improvements accordingly.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is the key aspect of reading because it enables a person to achieve effective meaning-making in a written text (Arguedo et al., 2023). Difficulties with reading comprehension and weak reading skills can significantly hinder performance and frequently result in academic failure (Madrid et al., 2025). Supporting this argument, the results of research conducted on the impacts of reading comprehension on success in Science & Mathematics performance, Karacaoğlu & Kasap (2023) demonstrate that students' reading comprehension affects their success in these sciences.

In addition, having problems understanding the context and directions in the reading materials might be caused by a lack of English reading comprehension skills. However, students with stronger reading skills and positive engagement with reading activities demonstrate better overall academic performance, as more effective comprehension contributes to successful understanding of instructional content and assessment requirements (Buraga, 2025). Accordingly, reading comprehension is essential in ensuring the development of knowledge while improving students' performances, as students with stronger comprehension skills tend to achieve better results in academics (Abid et al., 2023). Moreover, reading is crucial to students' academic progress and will greatly impact their future jobs.

A positive attitude toward reading can influence academic success. However, students only read because they are required to for their exams or because they have to. To do well in examinations, students must read well so that they can comprehend the subjects' content. This is reflected in a study conducted by Dela Safitri & Suryadi (2024), which proves that students with open personalities tend to display improvement in reading skills. Having said that, reading comprehension requires active engagement and self-regulated reading behavior to improve understanding and academic success (Ferdiyanto, 2024).

Gender difference in reading

A study by Lepper et al. (2022) on 514 elementary students revealed that boys' reading interest was significantly higher when texts featured male protagonist topics. However, the girls' interest was not influenced by the topic or the protagonist's gender but rather only by the difficulty of the text.

Another study carried out among 6,017 second-grade students in Hungary displayed that boys had significantly fewer positive attitudes toward both school reading and leisure reading. On the other hand, girls showed stronger preferences for reading books and school texts, with medium effect sizes observed in these motivational differences (Hódi et al., 2025).

Furthermore, large-scale research by Hu et al. (2024) was conducted on 439,847 students, and it showed that female students significantly preferred reading in print format and were more involved with fiction and magazines. In contrast, the male students were found to be much more likely to disengage from reading entirely, with 32.9% reporting that they "never or rarely" read books, compared to only 18.6% of girls. Furthermore, while reading for more than two hours a day yielded the highest performance benefits for girls, the boys were found to benefit most from a more moderate duration of one to two hours daily.

Reading incompetence

Reading and writing are among the most important skills a child may learn. The foundation of most academic instruction is reading. While the impact is moderate, reading comprehension has a significant influence on students' overall academic performance (Orellana et al., 2024). However, the issue of challenges in reading among students still daunts Malaysia's educational system. A majority of Malaysian students still have weak vocabulary, low comprehension, and a lack of reading habits (Singh et al., 2023). Recent study on Malaysian ESL learners highlights that many students face persistent reading comprehension challenges, including limited vocabulary knowledge and difficulties in understanding English texts, which impede their overall reading proficiency and learning outcomes (Hussain & Mohamad, 2024).

Gap in Literature

Plenty of research has been conducted on reading habits among students both locally and internationally. However, most studies only emphasized the reading types of material that could affect reading comprehension. Other factors like prior knowledge, vocabulary, and motivation are often identified on the surface level. Furthermore, there is very little research on the reading comprehension of Malaysian secondary students and the factors affecting reading comprehension between genders. Often, the affecting factor of reading comprehension and the connection between the genders are analyzed separately, even though there is a correlation between them. Therefore, a locally conducted study could help teachers better understand the hindering factors that limit their students' reading comprehension.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research design to explore the factors that influence reading comprehension among Malaysian secondary school students, with particular attention to possible differences between male and female learners. A quantitative approach was selected because it allows for systematic measurement of variables and statistical comparison between groups.

The study involved 100 upper secondary school students aged 16 to 17. The sample was evenly divided between 50 male and 50 female students to ensure balanced representation. A stratified sampling technique based on gender was used so that meaningful comparisons could be made between the two groups.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire adapted from Kiew and Shah (2020). The instrument comprised two sections: demographic information and items measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4) to assess four key factors related to reading comprehension: vocabulary knowledge, reading motivation, prior knowledge, and reading materials. The items were designed in alignment with the Simple View of Reading framework, which highlights the importance of both decoding skills and linguistic comprehension involved in the reading process.

The collected data were analysed using SPSS. The mean and standard deviation were computed to summarise students' responses using the descriptive statistics, while independent-samples t-tests were conducted to determine whether significant gender differences existed. Pearson's correlation analysis was also performed to examine the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading motivation. Statistical significance was determined at the .05 level.

FINDINGS

Descriptive Results

The results indicate that vocabulary emerged as the most influential factor affecting students' reading comprehension. The highest mean score for vocabulary is ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.51$). Reading motivation followed closely behind ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 0.55$). Prior knowledge ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.60$) and reading materials ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.63$) received comparatively lower mean scores. Overall, students appeared to perceive vocabulary and motivation as paramount to their reading comprehension success.

Gender Differences

The independent samples t-test analysis revealed that there was no significant difference between male and female students in terms of vocabulary knowledge. Although female students reported slightly higher scores, the difference was not large enough to be considered statistically meaningful.

However, a significant gender difference was found in reading motivation, whereby female students demonstrated significantly higher reading motivation compared to male students, suggesting that female students may be more motivated to engage in reading activities.

No significant gender difference was observed for prior knowledge. Interestingly, reading materials also showed a significant difference between genders. Male students were reportedly more influenced by the type of reading materials than female students. This finding suggests that the genre and selection of texts may play a particularly important role in shaping male students' reading engagement.

Relationship Between Vocabulary and Motivation

The Pearson correlation test analysis revealed a moderate positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading motivation ($r = .58, p < .001$). In practical terms, this means that students who possess stronger vocabulary skills also tend to feel more motivated to read. The relationship indicates that cognitive and affective aspects of reading are closely connected.

Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension

Item	Options	Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Item 1: What do you think affects your reading comprehension?	Vocabulary	17	21	38
	Prior knowledge	12	14	16
	Reading motivation	17	25	42
	Reading materials	4	0	4

Table 1.0

Table 1 shows that more females than males cited that vocabulary and reading motivation significantly affect their reading comprehension. On the other hand, prior knowledge and reading materials affect the male respondents more than it does the females.

Item	Options	Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Item 2: From the given factors, which factor affects you the most?	Vocabulary	21	25	46
	Prior knowledge	0	0	0
	Reading motivation	17	17	34
	Reading materials	12	8	20

Table 2.0

Table 2 indicates that the vocabulary affects the students the most (21 males and 25 females). Both males and females equally indicated that reading motivation affects them, while for the reading materials, 12 males and 8 females found that the type of materials they read affects them. Interestingly, none of the respondents reported that prior knowledge affected them.

Item	Options	Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Item 3: Apart from the factors mentioned, are there other factors that could affect your reading comprehension? If yes, state it.	Reading Environment	25	0	25
	Application of reading contents in real life	25	0	25
	Reading without actually understanding it	0	17	17
	The length of reading material provided was too long, and students lost interest in reading	0	17	17
	Background knowledge	0	16	16
	Total	50	50	100

Table 3.0

Table 3 projects that, other than those mentioned factors, respondents believed that reading without actually understanding it, the reading environment, the length of reading text, background knowledge, and real-life materials affect their reading comprehension. However, 50 male respondents stated that reading environment and reading content of real life affects their reading ability while another 50 female respondents claim reading without understanding, lengthy reading materials created boredom and background knowledge is the great influence in reading.

Item	Options	Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Item 4: How does the chosen factor affect you as a secondary school student? (Explain)	Hard to comprehend the reading texts	13	13	26
	The feeling of embarrassment	0	4	4
	It is very distractive	4	4	8
	I failed my English reading comprehension paper	0	4	4
	Because I am lazy to read	0	4	4
	It helps me to better understand the language, and converse in English	8	8	16
	No explanation	25	13	38
Total		50	50	100

Table 4.0

Table 4 shows how the chosen factor affects the respondents as secondary school students. 26 respondents (13

male and 13 female) stated that the chosen factor makes it hard for them to comprehend the reading texts. 4 female respondents stated that feeling of embarrassment affected her. 8 respondents (4 male and 4 female) stated that their chosen factor makes them feel distracted. 4 female respondents stated that she failed her English reading comprehension paper. 4 female respondents stated the chosen factor cause her laziness to read. On the other hand, there is a positive effect as well. 16 respondents (8 male and 8 female) stated that it helps them to better understand the language, and converse in English. A total number of 38 respondents (25 male and 13 female) did not provide an explanation.

Item 5: Why do you think the ability to master reading comprehension skills is critical for a secondary school student? (Explain)	Number of Times Mentioned		Total
	Male Respondents	Female Respondents	
1. It can help enable us to answer questions and increase our knowledge	4	17	21
2. To get good results	4	4	8
3. It helps to improve the ability to write clearly and effectively as well as the ability to analyze, understand, and respond to written communication	17	17	34
4. It will help me to understand the material better, thus improving my skills.	4	0	4
5. It will provide the next generation with a better understanding of any complex concept they stumble upon and solve them with their own solution; therefore, the civilization can continue to grow and be better every day	13	8	21
6. Can read in a short time, so will have time to read more	4	4	8
7. No response	4	0	4
Total	50	50	100

Table 5.0

Table 5 shows the opinions on why the ability to master reading comprehension skills is critical for a secondary school student. The majority of the respondents, 34 respondents (17 male and 17 female), stated that it helps to improve the ability to write clearly and effectively as well as the ability to analyse, understand, and respond to written communication. It is then followed by 21 respondents (4 male and 17 female) stating that it can help us to able to answer questions and increase our knowledge. Another 21 respondents (13 male and 8 female) stated that it will provide the next generation with a better understanding of any complex concept they stumble upon and solve them with their own solution, therefore the civilization can continue to grow and be better every day. 8 respondents (4 male and 4 female) stated that mastering reading comprehension helps to get good results. Another 8 respondents (4 male and 4 female) stated they can read in a short time, so they will have time to read more.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest vocabulary as the key contributor to reading comprehension among Malaysian secondary school students. This supports the principles of the Simple View of Reading, which emphasise the critical role of linguistic comprehension in understanding texts. When students have a strong vocabulary foundation, they are better equipped to interpret and make sense of any given written material.

While vocabulary levels did not differ significantly across gender, reading motivation did. Female students reported higher motivation levels, suggesting that emotional and attitudinal factors may influence reading engagement differently across genders.

The significant effect of reading materials on male students underscores the importance of selecting texts that resonate with students' interests and experiences. Engaging and relevant materials may enhance reading involvement, particularly among male learners.

The moderate positive correlation between vocabulary and reading motivation further demonstrates that knowledge and attitude are interconnected. Students who have a broader vocabulary and understand more words are likely to feel more confident when reading, and this confidence will increase their willingness to engage with texts.

Implications

Several practical implications arise from this study. Strengthening vocabulary instruction should be a priority in secondary education, given its strong association with reading comprehension. Explicit vocabulary teaching and exposure to rich language experiences may be beneficial. To enhance reading, more authentic materials could be included in students' reading to help increase engagement, particularly among male students. Furthermore, fostering reading motivation should be an integral component of ESL instruction. Educators and curriculum planners may also consider aligning literacy interventions with international standards such as the Programme for International Student Assessment conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to enhance students' global competitiveness.

Ethical Consideration

A letter of consent was issued to the school principal and the parents for their children's participation, clearly stating the aims of the research and the benefits to the school, relevant parties and stakeholders.

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