

Measuring Reading Comprehension Difficulties among Thai International English Students Studying in Indonesian Universities

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ABSTRACT

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Mastering reading comprehension is quite challenging for EFL learners, thus the purpose of this study is to measure reading comprehension difficulties among the English Department students of Thailand Pattani currently studying in Indonesia. Descriptive quantitative research was used as the research design within this study. 25 English Department students of Thailand Pattani studying across Indonesian universities had been selected purposively to be the participants. Data were obtained through a 20-item reading comprehension test, which assessed students' understanding of main ideas, stated and unstated details, and vocabulary. The test was administered online using Google Forms. The data collected were analysed quantitatively by using some formulas. The findings reveal that the overall reading proficiency among English Department students at Pattani, Thailand, is weak, with an average mastery score of 51.52%. The most challenging component was identifying main ideas or topic sentences, with a mastery level of 43% (poor category), followed by vocabulary meaning questions at 48% (poor category). In contrast, questions related to stated and unstated details had a slightly higher mastery score of 57% (weak category). These results highlight the need for targeted instructional strategies in EFL reading comprehension development.

Keywords: EFL Learners, descriptive quantitative, reading comprehension, reading difficulties, Thai Pattani students

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INTRODUCTION

Reading serves as a foundational literacy skill that supports academic achievement and lifelong learning, involving intricate cognitive processes and influenced by sociocultural contexts (Mihret & Joshi, 2025). It is not merely a mechanical act of decoding words, but a complex activity that requires comprehension, interpretation, and critical thinking. Through reading, learners gain access to knowledge across disciplines, which is essential for their academic growth. Moreover, reading practices are shaped by the social and cultural environments in which learners live, affecting their motivation, strategies, and understanding. Therefore, fostering effective reading skills is crucial in educational settings, particularly for second language learners who may face additional linguistic and cultural challenges (Yoğurtçu, 2013).

In the EFL context, reading comprehension contributes strongly to academic achievement, as it enables learners to access and understand texts that are central to their educational success. Mastery of reading comprehension skills allows students to grasp complex concepts, follow instructions, and engage critically with academic materials written in English (Cheng et al., 2024). For many EFL learners, limited vocabulary, unfamiliar grammar structures, and lack of background knowledge can hinder their ability to fully comprehend texts. Therefore, teachers must employ appropriate strategies and

scaffolding techniques to support students in developing effective reading comprehension. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that students are not only able to decode text but also to derive meaning, interpret information, and apply knowledge in various academic contexts.

Sasabone et al., (2023) mentions that there are four aspects of reading comprehension that students, readers or test-takers should understand well based on Nuttal's theory. First, the main idea is defined as a statement that tells the author's point about a topic in a text. Finding main idea in the text is a key to understand a paragraph or a passage. Commonly, the main idea is located in the first sentence, but it can be in the middle or in the last sentence.

Second, stated-detail question which is asked about a specific piece of information that is explicitly and clearly mentioned in a passage. The answers to these questions are generally given in the order in the passage. In addition, these kinds of questions are designed to test the test-takers' ability to locate and recognize explicit details of information in a text.

Third, unstated-detail questions, also known as negative factual question, are required test-takers to locate implicit information in a passage. These types of questions are challenging since it requires readers to identify information which is not mentioned directly in a passage.

Lastly, vocabulary, at any stake, plays a crucial role in understanding any

language skills. Finding vocabulary meaning in a reading test could be done by, for example, speculating about their meaning based on context which can assist students in forming broad assumptions about the meaning based on the surrounding text. This means that they will be able to comprehend a word or phrase asked in a passage by forming predictions based on the context.

To enhance reading comprehension among EFL learners, lecturers can implement a variety of instructional strategies tailored to students' needs and proficiency levels. These may include pre-reading activities to activate background knowledge, vocabulary instruction to support lexical understanding, and post-reading discussions to promote critical thinking (Burger et al., 2025). However, Suryanto & Sari (2021) and Yanagi & Baker (2016) mention that most of EFL students frequently encounter problems when learning foreign languages since the term 'foreign' itself is effortlessly stigmatized as something unfamiliar, strange, and unusual. Another problem is that the different language structures between their first language (L1) and the second or foreign language (L2) that could lead them to the incomprehension. Consequently, it takes time for them to learn and adapt to the L2 grammatical accuracy.

The issue also embraces Thailand Pattani learners as they are parts of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Thailand Pattani, also known as Thai Malay, is a Muslim community occupied in

the southern Thailand spreading in the provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun that are quite close to the northern Malaysia (Sisamouth & Lah, 2015). Furthermore, Sisamouth & Lah (2015) mention that they are descendants of the Malay ethnic group and speak Malay as their mother tongue and Standard Thai as the national language. English, on the other hand, is introduced as the foreign language, thus most of the citizens in these southernmost provinces learn the language at the formal institutions and do not master it well (Assalihee & Boonsuk, 2022).

Hayikaleng et al., (2016) point that most of Thai students in Pattani experience lack of motivation in learning English as Foreign Language (EFL) due to the reason that English teachers teach English classes using conventional teaching method, Chalk and Talk (CnT). This kind of teaching strategy is solely teacher-oriented strategy which emphasizes on writing and the teachers' voices. During the learning process itself, teachers mostly use Thai language rather than English as a medium of the instructional process. Consequently, the English learning process is not satisfactory which effects directly to the students' proficiency of language skills.

Reading skill is one of the biggest issues that Thai students find many difficulties in mastering it. It can be proved by the data released by PISA (Program for International Student Assessment in 2012 as cited in (Hayikaleng et al., 2016). The data reveals that Thailand was placed at 50 out of 65 countries in the English reading

comprehension of TOEFL test. The Ministry of Thai Education (2013) as cited in (Hayikaleng et al., 2016), moreover, mentions that the majority of Thai students are ranked at the second level out of five levels in reading skills.

Sawangsamutchai & Rattanavich (2016) claim that the veiled factor influencing the disappointed English competence among Thai students is that most of English teachers do not pay attention to critical thinking strategies that could help students to solve many English problems. In addition, some English elements such as grammar, vocabulary, and translation are the main focus of the teaching at high school level. As a result, most of them only understand contextual or implicit things towards the materials delivered in classroom settings. Additionally, the English teachers frequently apply Grammar Translation Method in teaching reading skills which neither covers up the in-depth meaning competency skill intended in the text, nor enhancing the reading text comprehension in general since the students learn words, phrases and grammar of the text separately.

According to Some previous research conducted by Kasemsap & Lee (2015) and Shin et al., (2014) also report that English reading comprehension among Pattani students are reported unsatisfied. They face some difficulties in reading comprehension because of several reasons. The main problem is the opportunity to learn a good of quality English which has being the biggest problem. Sawangsamutchai &

Rattanavich (2016) say that English teachers in Pattani posse insufficient proficiency in English competence which results in the reluctance to use the language in teaching and learning process of it. In addition, Nithideechaiwarachok et al., (2022) claims that English is not widely used in daily life contexts by Thai students - they speak Thai and Malay languages in many facets of their life. Those salient factors eventually impact to their level of proficiency towards the language skills, including reading skills.

There is little research which is devoted on reading comprehension among Pattani students as international students. The research, moreover, brings some novelties to fill in the gap of previous studies in forms of its location and sample of the study. First of all, the location of this study is quite various and has a wide range in which some different universities across Indonesian provinces and islands were selected; Sumatera, Java and Kalimantan. Secondly, the present study is devoted on International English Department students who learn in Indonesia, while previous research are devoted on the assessment of reading skills among Pattani students of junior high school Sawangsamutchai & Rattanavich (2016) and reading comprehension motivation among the first-year university students in Pattani Hayikaleng et al., (2016). In brief, those reasons prompt the researchers to conduct further study under the umbrella of reading comprehension skills.

This study was conducted with the primary aim of addressing two key research questions: (1) To what extent do Thai international English students studying in Indonesian universities experience reading comprehension difficulties? and (2) What types of reading comprehension difficulties are most commonly faced by these students? By focusing on these questions, the research seeks to reveal both the proficiency level of the students and the specific reading sub-skills they struggle with most. The results are intended to inform EFL educators and curriculum developers in designing targeted interventions to support Thai learners in overcoming their reading challenges.

METHOD

Research Design

The descriptive quantitative research method was employed in this study which means that it is a method with a purpose to make a picture or descriptive about a situation objectively that uses numbers, starting from data collection, interpretation of the data as well as the appearance and results (Arikunto, 2013).

Participants

The participants of the research are Malay Pattani students currently studying in Indonesian, spreading in the island of Sumatera, Java, and Kalimantan. There are 25 participants selected using purposive sampling to meet the need of the research's requirements; they are studying at the

English Language Department in Indonesian universities and they must be at least in the second year in the department. The description of the participants is as follows.

Table 1. Total Participant of the Pattani students studying in Indonesia

No	University	Total Sample
1.	Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara	2
2.	UIN Haji Muhammad Idris Samarinda	3
3.	Universitas Jambi	2
4.	Universitas Syiah Kuala	2
5.	Universitas Bina Bangsa Getsempena	1
6.	Universitas Walisongo	4
7.	Universitas Nahdatul Ulama Lampung	2
8.	Universitas Jember	3
9.	Universitas Bandung	1
10.	Universitas Jakarta	1
11.	Universitas Jenderal Soedirman	3
12.	Universitas Nahdatul Ulama Purwokerto	1
Total		25

Instrument

The instrument of the study is a set of reading comprehension questions consisting of some reading aspects, such as finding main idea or topic sentences, stated and unstated detail information as well as looking for vocabulary meaning. Each aspect possesses 5 questions, thus there are 20 questions altogether.

Since the majority of the participants are live and study across different islands in Indonesia, the researchers, then, magnified Google Form to collect data from the samples since it is more efficient and saving time.

The data collected were analyzed using a descriptive quantitative method, in which statistical formulas were applied to obtain valid research results. The data

gathered, later, were analyzed by using descriptive quantitative method in which some statistical formulas were employed to reach a valid research result. The data analysis procedure of the reading test which were collected through Google Form were analyzed using some statistical formulas as suggested by (Arikunto, 2013), presented by the following elaboration.

The researchers calculated the result of true answers by using the formula;

$$Sc = \frac{\text{true answer}}{n} \times 100$$

Where:

Sc = score

n = number of questions

Furthermore, the researchers calculated the mean score or the average score of the total result of the reading test by using the formula as showed below:

$$M = \frac{fX}{N}$$

Where:

M = mean.

fX = total number of the score.

N = total number of the students

The next step is that finding out of the percentage of reading difficulty in the reading test. It is done to figure out the level of reading mastery of each category in the test by using the following formula;

$$S = \frac{R}{N} \times 100$$

Where:

S = incorrect percentage.

R = incorrect answer.

N = total sample

Finally, the students' scores were categorized into five levels of mastery, as presented in the following table.

Table 2. Classification of Reading Mastery Level

No	Score/Range	Interpretation
1.	80-100	Excellent
2.	70-79	Good
3.	60-69	Fairly Good
4.	50-59	Weak
5.	0-49	Poor

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Result of Reading Comprehension Difficulties among Thai International English Students Studying in Indonesian Universities

This study employs a quantitative method with a descriptive approach to examine the reading comprehension difficulties faced by Thai international English students enrolled in Indonesian universities.

The first result focused on the overall reading comprehension scores of the Thai international English students. The data revealed that a majority of students achieved scores within the moderate to low categories, indicating that their reading comprehension proficiency was still developing. This outcome suggests that many students faced challenges in fully understanding English academic texts, which could be attributed to limited vocabulary range, unfamiliar grammatical structures, or lack of exposure to various

text types. These findings highlight the need for targeted reading interventions and support programs to enhance students' reading proficiency in academic settings.

The following bar chart is the score obtained by each sample in the reading

comprehension test. The highest score is 100 and the lowest score is 0 which is based on the formula for calculating true answers. In addition, the total sample is 25 English Department students of Malay Pattani studying in Indonesia.

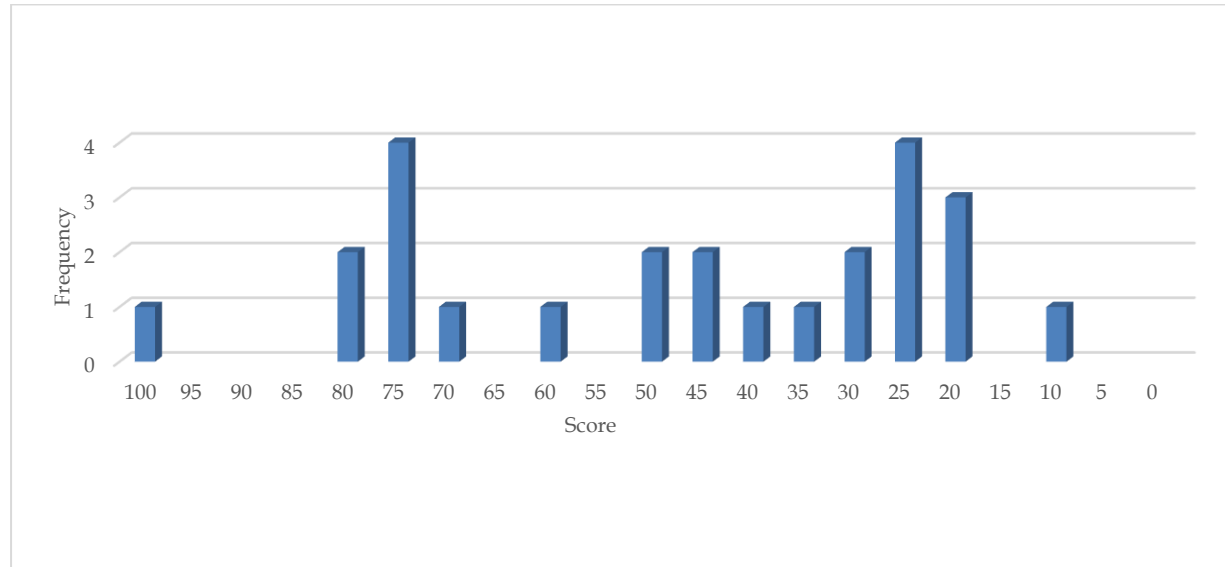


Figure 1. The Result of Reading Comprehension

From the chart above, it is evident that the highest score achieved by the 25 samples is 100, while the lowest score is 10. The distribution of the scores is as follows: 1 student scored 100, 2 students scored 80, 4 students scored 75, 1 student scored 70, 1 student scored 60, 2 students scored 50, 2 students scored 40, 2 students scored 30, 4 students scored 25, 3 students scored 20 and 1 student scored 10.

Furthermore, the reading comprehension test consists of 4 types of reading comprehension, main idea or topic sentences (5 questions), stated detail (5 questions), unstated detail (5 questions), and vocabulary (5 questions), thus there are 20 questions altogether. The following table

represents the distribution results of each type of question.

Table 3. The Mean Score of Each Aspect of Reading Comprehension

No	Types of Reading Comprehension Questions	Questions	Sample	Total Score of True Answers	Mean Score
1.	Main Idea Questions	5	25	70	2.8
2.	Stated Detail Questions	5		53	2.12
3.	Unstated Detail Questions	5		53	2.12
4.	Vocabulary Questions	5		60	2.4
Total		20		236	9.44

Based on the results, the total questions of the reading comprehension are 20 questions and the total sample is 25 students. In the section of main idea questions, the total score of true answer

achieved by the samples is 70 and it is the highest score compared to the stated and unstated detail questions with the total score achieved 53 respectively, while in the vocabulary question section, the sample obtained 60 which means the score is higher than stated and unstated detail questions' score, but it is lower than the main idea questions' total point. Finally, the total score of the true answers for the 4 types of reading comprehension is 236 and the total mean score is 9.44.

The Most Common Types of Reading Comprehension Difficulties Faced by Thai International English Students Studying in Indonesian Universities

Moreover, the researchers calculated the percentage for each indicator of the reading comprehension test in order to find out the most difficult aspect of reading comprehension test experienced by those students.

There are four aspects of reading comprehension tested in this research. The following table will present the analysis result of the first aspect; the main idea or topic sentence questions in the reading comprehension test answered by the samples. Firstly, finding main idea is the most common questions tested in reading comprehension test. In this study, there are five questions altogether asked about them. Below is the distribution of the result of the main idea questions.

Table 4. The Percentage of Difficulty Level of Main Idea Questions

No	Formulation	Percentage	Mastery Level
1.	2÷25×100	8%	
2.	14÷25×100	56%	
3.	11÷25×100	40%	
4.	14÷25×100	56%	
5.	14÷25×100	56%	
8+56+40+56+56÷5		43%	Poor

It is notable from the above table that the students' result test for main idea questions is 43%, indicating that their level of proficiency was poor. It is in line with the research undergone by (Fauziah & Dania, 2024) claiming that finding main idea questions is the most difficult aspect in reading test for students.

In this category, the students are required to identify the primary point or main purpose of a passage. According to (Fuqaha' & Wartim, 2023) there are some factors that cause difficulty in finding main idea, such as having lack of vocabulary, inappropriate reading style and uninteresting reading material. In addition, the poor performance in main idea section can be caused of misidentifying supporting details, specific examples or minor details as main idea, selecting answers that are too broad or too narrow, and struggling with implied main idea.

The second category in the reading comprehension test is finding stated-detail questions. The following table presents the detail distribution of the difficulty level in answering the questions.

Table 5. The Percentage Result of Stated Detail Questions

No	Formulation	Percentage	Mastery Level
1.	13÷25×100	52%	
2.	15÷25×100	60%	
3.	13÷25×100	52%	
4.	16÷25×100	64%	
5.	14÷25×100	56%	
52+60+52+64+56÷5		57%	Weak

The students' level proficiency in answering the stated-detail questions is weak. It is in line with studies from (Samad et al., 2017) which claims that locating and understanding specific information which are stated or mentioned explicitly in the passage is struggling for the students. It means that rereading carefully and pinpointing specific details within the text can be time-consuming and lead to confusion when students attempt to locate the correct answers.

The third aspect of reading comprehension examined in this study is the ability to identify unstated-detail questions. These types of questions require students to understand implied or indirectly stated information that is not explicitly mentioned in the text or passage. Such questions assess higher-order thinking skills, as they demand readers to make inferences based on context clues and overall comprehension. The results for this aspect are presented in the following table, which shows the percentage of correct responses given by the participants. The data provides insight into how well the students could interpret and deduce information beyond what is directly stated,

indicating their depth of comprehension and inferential reasoning ability.

Table 6. The Percentage Result of Unstated Detail Questions

No	Formulation	Percentage	Mastery Level
1.	13÷25×100	52%	
2.	15÷25×100	60%	
3.	13÷25×100	52%	
4.	16÷25×100	64%	
5.	14÷25×100	56%	
52+60+52+64+56÷5		57%	Weak

Based on the result, it reveals that students' mastery in examining unstated detail questions in reading comprehension test is also weak. It is in accordance with the result of research done by (Fajri, 2019) which also reveals that the unstated-detail questions become one of the most difficult or challenging aspects in reading test. Students could struggle with the questions since they have to be able to infer information that is not explicitly stated in the text. The unstated-detail questions, in other words, are quite tricky since it is required the readers to recall or locate multiple details from the passage and test-takers have to identify the one option that is missing or incorrect.

The last aspect is the questions of finding vocabulary meaning which also have five questions altogether. The following table presents the result of the mastery level on the aspect.

Table 7. The Percentage Result of Vocabulary Meaning Questions

No	Formulation	Percentage	Mastery Level
1.	16÷25×100	64%	
2.	12÷25×100	48%	
3.	13÷25×100	52%	
4.	8÷25×100	32%	
5.	11÷25×100	44%	
64+48+52+32+44÷5		48%	Poor

In the aspect of vocabulary meaning questions, the students performed poorly with the obtained percentage as many as 48%. It is consistent with previous studies by (Wahyuningsih et al., 2024) and (Hafid et al., 2021) who have pointed out that vocabulary meaning questions tend to be the most difficult aspect in reading comprehension test. One of the reasons influencing the issue, besides suffering from insufficient vocabulary knowledge, is that the students are struggling in understanding the context understanding of the vocabulary questioned. It means that vocabulary-in-context questions are challenging because words frequently have multiple meanings and the meaning relies on the surrounding text.

This summary provides a more comprehensive understanding of which specific areas students performed well in and which aspects posed significant challenges, thereby offering valuable insights for targeted instructional improvements.

Table 8. The percentage result of the reading comprehension test

No	Category	Percentage Result	Level Mastery
1.	Main Idea Questions	43%	Poor
2.	Stated-Detail Questions	57%	Weak
3.	Unstated-Detail Questions	57%	Weak
4.	Vocabulary Meaning Questions	48%	Poor

Moreover, the following bar chart will portray the brief summary of the four aspects of reading comprehension; main ideas, stated details, unstated details and vocabulary meanings which can be used to visualize the results.

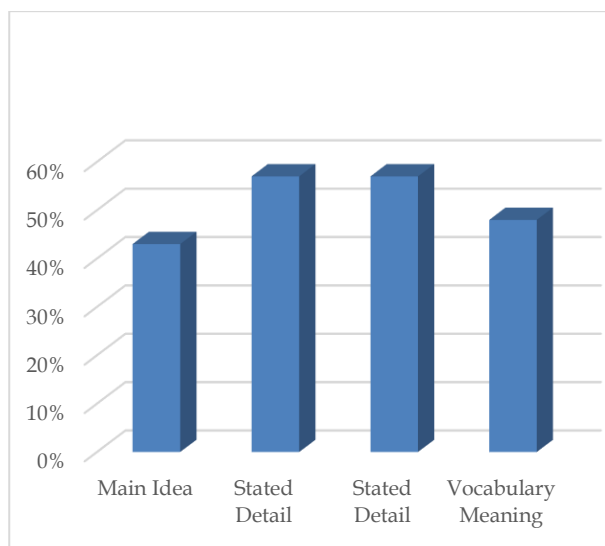


Figure 2. The Results of the Four Aspects in Reading Comprehension Test

From the above table, it can be calculated that the final mean score for reading comprehension test among International English Department students of Thailand Pattani is weak with the total mean score 51.25. It is in accordance with the report of Ministry of Thai Education (2013) as stated in Hayikaleng et al., (2016)

claiming that based on the result of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2012 Thailand was placed at 50 out of 65 countries in the English reading comprehension of TOEFL test, thus Thai students are ranked at the second level out of five levels in reading skills. Accordingly, Sawangsamutchai & Rattanavich (2016) mention that reading skills among Thai people in several foreign language tests, such as TOEFL (Test of English as Foreign language) and O-NET (Ordinary National Educational Test) in English is under the global average standard.

The bad reading comprehension performance among the Thailand Pattani students could be caused by several factors, embracing internal and external factors. The first internal factor influencing the bad English reading performance skill among the students is derived from the reading passage itself. Longer sentence structures in a reading passage are the pinpoint that makes reading comprehension becomes more challenging. Due to the reason, students or test-takers have limited time to finish the reading and they can not score well in the test (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022).

Furthermore, having poor reading strategies prolong the poor achievement. Indeed, reading strategies are a set of ability to assist readers to understand, analyze, and retain pieces of information efficiently. Readers will be able to strengthen retention and recall as well as improving comprehension and critical thinking. Most importantly, by applying appropriate

reading strategies, they will save time and enhance efficiency. Additionally, (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022), readers or test-takers who do not possess some kinds of appropriate reading strategies will encounter more difficulties in answering the questions.

Secondly, having insufficient amount of vocabulary is another internal factor derived from the students themselves (Wahyuningsih et al., 2024). Vocabulary is the most essential element in learning a language; it will shape the ability to understand the four language skills. Since language is formed of vocabulary, thus possessing sufficient vocabulary in learning second language, especially in reading skill strongly matters in understanding complex texts rapidly and being able to guess unfamiliar words from their contexts (Nyudak et al., 2024).

The third internal factor is the low interest in reading comprehension. (Assalihee & Boonsuk, 2022) opine that the lower recognition among the learners towards the importance of English learning, leading to the unsatisfied achievement in the field. Additionally, (Widyawati & Fitriah, 2023) proclaim that what students perceive will influence how they learn. It means that, if they realize and understand the benefits of English language for their future career and life, they will have strong motivation and self-efficacy to learn it actively, confidently and eagerly.

(Hayikaleng et al., 2016), similarly, mentions that Thailand Pattani students possess lack of motivation in learning

English based on four variables examined and related to the motivation issue; attention, relevance, confidence and satisfaction. The result reveals that the mean scores for all of those variables are below the average. It means that the students are unmotivated to learn English due to the unattractive teaching method applied by their teachers, uninteresting reading material provided, and insufficient exposure towards the importance of English for their future career and life.

Further, the external factors influenced the bad achievement are as opined by (Sawangsamutchai & Rattanavich, 2016). They explain that inappropriate teaching method employed by teachers makes the condition even worse. They tend to teach English, especially reading skills by utilizing Grammar-Translation Method (GTM). The method merely assists the students to understand the surface or basic understanding of a passage as words, phrases and sentences are taught separately. In fact, a reading text is more than what it is written or coding on a media. Students must learn how to translate and interpret the explicit and implicit written language as a unity to build their critical thinking, hence teachers must figure out the genuine and appropriate method in teaching reading to promote and encourage students' cognitive and higher order thinking level skill (Hermida, 2019).

Additionally, another external factor contributing to the worse issue is that coming from the nation itself. (Assalihee &

Boonsuk, 2022) say that conducting English Language Teaching in Southern Thailand has been facing many struggles as well as obstacles since this region has gone through political instability, causing wave of violence, dread, and unstable life for decades. Therefore, the quality of teaching and learning process the conflict area has significantly disrupts education, such as school closures, unsafe commutes, and psychological trauma. Due to the ongoing conflicts, teachers can not teach and transfer knowledge well since they feel unsafe to go to school. Students, on the other hands, are not permitted to go to school by their parents due to the instability situation, fear, and anxiety. Consequently, those factors influence to the all aspects of teaching and learning process, including English reading skill.

CONCLUSION

Finding main idea questions become the most difficult aspect in the reading comprehension test among English Department students of Thailand Pattani. It can be leaked out by the percentage result with the achievement score 42% that obviously belongs to the poor category. The second one goes to vocabulary meaning questions with the percentage score 46%, categorizing in the level of poor mastery as well. Stated and unstated-detail questions achieve the same percentage score; 57% which means that the mastery level of this aspect among the students are weak. In addition, the level of reading

comprehension among them, based on the final analysis result is weak which scored 51.25%.

There are two factors contributing to the weak performance among Thailand Pattani students in the reading comprehension test. Firstly, the internal factors, such as longer passages, having lack of vocabulary as well as feeling unmotivated to learn English give contribution to the unsatisfied achievement in reading test among the students. Secondly, the external factors, involving inappropriate and uninteresting teaching method used by teachers in classroom setting and the political unrest over two decades result in the instability life and the decline of education quality across the area.

This research has some limitation which can be drawn as follows. The small number of samples taking part in this becomes the first limitation. The second one is the instrument used in this research is only reading comprehension test. Therefore, it is suggested for further researchers to take larger amount of sample in order to get more data. In addition, it is also suggested for further research to use another kind of instrument, such as the interview as an attempt to get more valid research data. By interviewing, the researchers will obtain more detailed and specific information about the issue being investigated or analyzed.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

The first author, ID, worked on Introduction, Result, and Discussion. The second author, HJ, compiled the section of Method and the last author, BR, wrote down Abstract and Conclusion.

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