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## Perceived Challenges and Ways to Improve Reading Proficiency for EFL Teachers: Narratives from EFL Teachers

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### ABSTRACT

*The need of using English in global context has led schools in Indonesia to prepare and make their students proficient in English. However, the majority of English teachers may not have attained a level of proficiency deemed necessary for effective teaching. This study aimed to reveal the level of teachers' reading proficiency and to figure out how they perceived challenges and ways to improve their proficiency. Qualitative data was used as a method of inquiry. The study employed a narrative inquiry to dig deeper into teachers' perspective. A proficiency test, self-reflection (logbook), and interview were used as the instrument to measure 15 EFL teachers' proficiency and figure out their challenges and ways to improve their proficiency. The data was analyzed using inductive reflective thematic analysis and the findings showed that teachers proficiency varied, but most of them have a good reading proficiency equal to B2-CEFR level; It is referred to as upper intermediate and independent user by CEFR. In addition, five themes expressing the teachers' perceived challenges were revealed: 1) They experienced self-errors; 2) The answer is implied; 3) The text is difficult; 4) The question type is unfamiliar; 5) They encountered unfamiliar vocabulary. Moreover, the ways the teachers used to improve their proficiency were: 1) understand the question and passage carefully; 2) find main idea and supporting details; 3) familiarize with the topic; 4) Enrich vocabulary; 5) scan and take notes; 6) predict the question and keep focus. In conclusion, the findings provide the important insights into EFL teachers. Their collective experiences can be used to overcome the challenges faced by EFL teachers.*

**Keywords:** Reading Proficiency; EFL Teachers; Narrative Inquiry

### INTRODUCTION

Considered an international language, English is important to learn. The aim of the English learning is to make learners familiar and be able to master all fundamentals English skills such are reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Sadiku, 2015). By mastering all these skills, learners are expected to be able to communicate effectively in a global context (Hazar, 2021). Regarding this circumstances, English teachers play the most important role as they are responsible to teach and prepare the future students. They have to attain the required English proficiency level because their competence affects the quality of teaching and determines the success of students' learning (Jalal et al., 2009). In many nations including Indonesia, the teaching profession is still regarded as necessary to raise the quality of education. To help students communicate and compete globally, therefore, English teachers

are compelled to enhance their English proficiency and advance their professional development (Lie et al., 2019).

In 2018, the Ministry of Education and Culture in coordination with the Ministry of Research and Higher Education established an in-service professional education program. This program was a response to the necessity of teachers' competence and was a route to teacher certification (Kurniawan & Zarnita, 2020). Unfortunately, however, English teachers' proficiency and levels of competence are still characterized low quality. The Ministry of Education has some fascinating information regarding the English proficiency of teachers who previously taught at the International Standard Schools (also locally known as RSBI schools). Coleman (2009) as stated in (Renandya et al., 2018), reported that of 27.000 RSBI teachers who took the TOEIC test, only a minuscule portion (less than 1%) demonstrated a high level of English proficiency. Half of them had an elementary and intermediate level, while the rest had a very low level. In addition to this, Renandya et al. (2018) revealed that English teachers' proficiency in Indonesia varied hugely. However, the majority likely fall between B1 and B2 on the CEFR scale, which is the lower intermediate range.

Regarding the importance of English proficiency for EFL teachers, many studies have been conducted focusing on English teachers' proficiency. Soepriyatna (2012) conducted a research investigating and assessing competence of high school teachers of English in Indonesia. The result has shown that high school English teachers in Indonesia had a good content knowledge and good English. On the contrary, Lie et al. (2019) conducted a research focusing on English proficiency of secondary school teachers in Indonesia. The findings revealed that English teachers' proficiency demonstrated various level from novice low to advanced high. However, many teachers have not attained the threshold level. In addition, a research conducted by Butler (2004) stated that teachers perceived large gaps between their English proficiency level and the bare minimum level required to teach.

Broadly speaking, language proficiency is defined as the one's ability to utilize English for a variety of communicative purposes. It is commonly assessed by five indicators such as accuracy, fluency, complexity, appropriateness, and capacity (Richards et al., 2013). In the context of the classroom, capacity refers to the degree to which a teacher is able to utilize their target language ability to explain, give examples, choose pertinent teaching materials, model appropriate language use, and give useful feedback on student performance (Renandya et al., 2018). To measure language proficiency, a well-known and internationally standardized framework as known as CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) is utilized (Council of Europe, 2001). It has been used as a guideline to describe English ability and has been adopted to measure English teachers and students' proficiency.

In 2018 and 2020, the Council of Europe updated the CEFR with the modifications on several areas. According of CEFR, the reference framework categorizes communicative language activities into 3 domains, namely reception activities, production activities, and interactive activities. Reception activities were previously known as listening and reading skill, while production activities were known as speaking and writing skills. Of all CEFR frameworks and English skills, reading skill deserves more attention. According to Bamford & Day (1998), in foreign language teaching, oral comprehension of a foreign language seems to be of less importance than a reading knowledge of that language. In addition to this, Sandri & Fithriani (2019) added that reading allows students to obtain information decoded through the given sample of reading text, which could improve comprehension, interpretation, synthesizing, and understanding between lines that assist learners in acquiring information and English proficiency.

Reading proficiency, therefore, should be paid more attention because it is a complicated skill as it requires the coordination and interpretation of a number of interrelated sources of information (Anderson et al., 1985). According to Wixson et al. (1987) reading is a

process of decoding meaning through a complex interaction and process among: 1) the reader's existing comprehension and knowledge; 2) the new information delivered by the text being read; 3) the context of reading situation (Wixson et al., 1987). In addition, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) defines reading as a dynamic and intricate process that involves: 1) comprehending the written material; 2) creating and interpreting meaning; 3) and applying meaning in accordance with the context, purpose, and kind of text (National Assessment Governing Board, 2013) Because of this complexity, reading strategy is the needed to suggest reader using a variety of strategies to guide them with the acquisition, storage, and retrieval of information (Rigney, 1978). Oxford, R., & Crookall (1989) defined strategies as techniques, learning behaviors, study skills, or problem solving that help learning to be more effective and efficient.

The importance of reading proficiency in teaching foreign language has prompted several studies to be conducted. Kanmaz (2022) conducted a research focus on teachers' reading comprehension and reading strategy. The findings revealed that teachers' reading comprehension differed by the branch variable. The study suggested that effective instruction of reading strategy will enable teachers to yield better performance. Furthermore, another study conducted a survey of pre-service English teachers' reading habits and it reported that English teachers' reading habits of English texts are not in the good category (Jaelani & Holisah, 2015). In addition to this, Nugroho (2017) investigated pre-service FL teachers' English proficiency and their preparedness for teaching practicum program. The study shown that more than 40% of pre-service EFL' teachers proficiency was in low level category.

Off al studies mentioned, they revealed that teachers' English proficiency were still considered low. Low proficiency of reading, in particular, may be affected by the challenges encountered during reading. According to Jaelani & Holisah (2015) one of challenges frequently faced by pre-service English teachers was lack of vocabulary. This is in line with Singh (2014) who reported that understanding specialist vocabulary is ranked as one of the top three challenges encountered in academic reading practice. So that, this is in line with the result of reading strategies where using dictionary was the most vital strategies employed by the respondents to overcome the challenges.

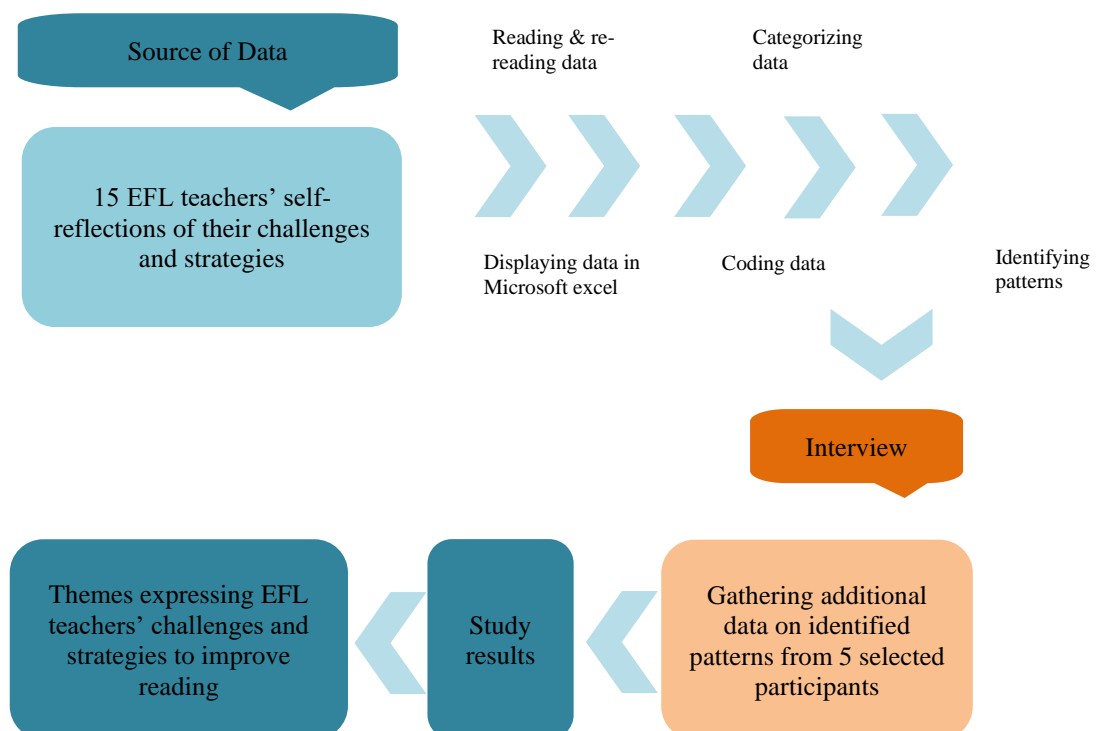
According to this circumstance, studies on language and reading proficiency have been done. However, study focuses on teachers' perception was limited and rarely found. This gap has brought the researcher to fill in a research focusing on EFL teachers' perception toward challenges and strategies to improve reading proficiency. This present study is significant since it offers in-depth perception of EFL teachers who experienced reading challenges and established their strategy to overcome. To determine research objectives, two research questions were formulated: 1) how is reading proficiency level of EFL teachers; 2) how EFL teachers perceived their challenges and ways to improve reading proficiency. At the end, the findings and their collective experiences are expected to give insightful information for EFL teachers toward challenges that is commonly encountered during the EFL proficiency test. In addition, the findings are expected to provide useful strategies to overcome those challenges. On the other hand, this current study is also expected helpful for the advanced researcher because it provides findings that can be used for their preliminary data to fulfil the gap that has not been conducted in this study.

## **METHOD**

This current study used quantitative and qualitative research methodology. The quantitative data was used to measure EFL teachers' reading proficiency level meanwhile the qualitative data was used to dig deeper into their perceptions. For the research method, this study employed narrative inquiry method to tell how EFL teachers perceived their challenges and ways to improve their reading proficiency. The narrative inquiry seemed the most

appropriate method since it allows research in which stories are used as data (Polkinghorne, 1995). A total of 15 EFL teachers were involved as the participant in this study. The sampling technique of the study was purposive sampling in which the participants were all master program students who took English Proficiency for Teachers course. In addition, this study utilized the test, self-reflection (logbook) and interview as the research instrument. This combination of the instruments, which consists of test, self-reflection, and interview, was referred to as trustworthiness to ensure rigor of the method employed (Kuper et al., 2008).

The data was firstly collected through the test of proficiency level that is gradually given during the course. After doing the test, they wrote their self-reflection toward challenges encountered during the test and their ways to improve the reading proficiency. Following the analysis of the self-reflection, the interviews were also conducted. The interview was carried out with 5 teachers of those who considered to have wrote the most insightful, descriptive, and well-written self-reflection. It lasted within 15-20 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed upon the approval of the participants. The data analysis technique that utilized in this study was thematic narrative analysis. The thematic analysis is intended to examine multiple examples and to categorize the similarities and differences among the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Meanwhile narrative analysis is aimed to analyse the particularity and situate it in more general context (Squire, 2008). To analyse the collected data, 15 self-reflections were input into a single Microsoft excel document. The data was read and stories which met the specific criteria were selected (Riessman, 2003). In addition, the data was given an identifying code regarding to the challenges and ways to improve reading. So that, the researcher grouped the same themes that met the code and reoccurred in each self-reflection. The illustration will be shown in the following figure:

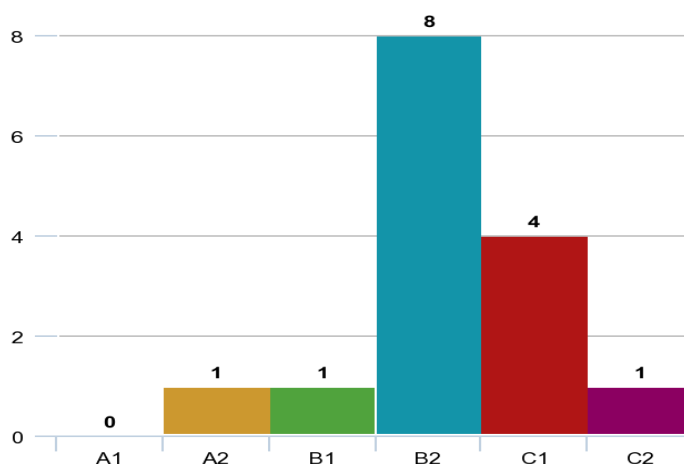


**Figure 1.** Research Procedures

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

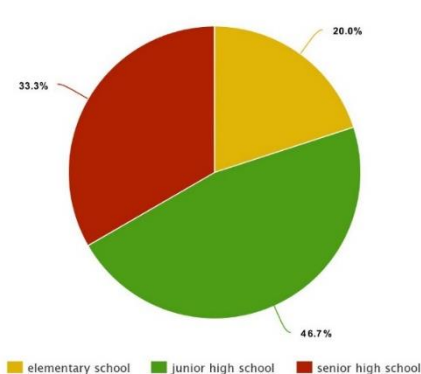
### Results

According to the findings, the level of teachers' proficiency varied. Out of all proficiency levels, teachers passed all levels but A1. As it is shown in the chart below, the highest level achieved by the teachers was B2 with the total 8 teachers (53.3%). Then, the second highest was C1 with the total 4 teachers (26.7%) and it is followed by A2, B1, and C2 respectively with the total 1 teacher (6.7 %).

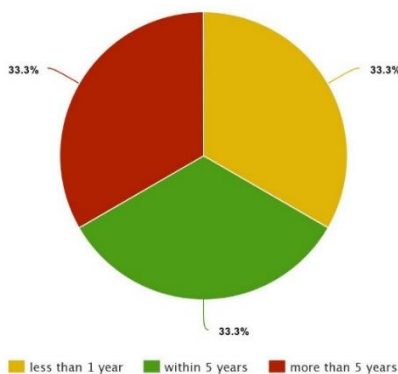


**Chart 1.** Teachers' proficiency level

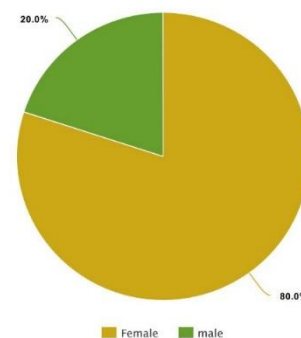
The data of the proficiency level was gathered from 15 EFL teachers that participated in this study. The participants were 3 male teachers (20%) and 12 female teachers (80%). Of all 15 teachers, the data showed the variety of teachers' level of education background. 3 teachers were elementary school teacher (20%), 7 teachers were junior high school teacher (46.7%) and 5 teachers were senior high school teacher (33.3%). In addition to this, the background of teachers' period of teaching varied as well. 5 teachers have been teaching less than a year (33.3%), 5 teachers have been teaching within 5 years (33.3%), and 5 teachers have been teaching more than 5 years (33.3%). The data of participants' background will be illustrated in diagram below:



**Chart 2.** Teachers' level of education



**Chart 3.** Teachers' period of teaching



**Chart 4.** Teachers' gender

The next findings were aimed to answer research questions 2. From the thematic analysis, codes and categories were grouped to establish themes expressing EFL teachers' challenges and ways to improve their reading proficiency. Additionally, the narrative analysis was also utilized. At the end of the analysis, therefor, 5 themes expressing EFL teachers' challenges in reading emerged as follows.

**Table 1. Challenges' Codes and Categories**

Self-Challenges	Stated & Implied Answers	Text is Difficult
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I was reckless</li> <li>2. I didn't notice the question</li> <li>3. I was not paying attention</li> <li>4. I read the word mistakenly</li> <li>5. I am not careful in reading</li> <li>6. Lack of concentration</li> <li>7. I hardly maintain focus</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The answer is sometime implied</li> <li>2. "What is not TRUE" question</li> <li>3. Implicit meaning</li> <li>4. To differ which statements are false</li> <li>5. Text has implied message</li> <li>6. I have to understand the implied meaning</li> <li>7. I should distinguish between literal and implied meaning</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The topic is difficult</li> <li>2. The passage I have to read is so long</li> <li>3. Question consumed so much time</li> <li>4. I failed to understand the passage</li> <li>5. Some numbers were hard to follow</li> <li>6. I found a lot of misunderstanding</li> </ol>

Unfamiliar Question Type	Unfamiliar Vocabulary/Structure
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I cannot choose the best word representing the correct answer.</li> <li>2. My challenge was paraphrasing the sentence.</li> <li>3. Sometimes I was confused choosing the right answer.</li> <li>4. I was not familiar when it comes to the question containing pictures.</li> <li>5. the answers 'not in a text' are sometimes confusing.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Difficult to guess meaning from the context.</li> <li>2. Hard to choose the answer from the synonym.</li> <li>3. I felt difficult to recognize words and particular meaning.</li> <li>4. It is hard when I found unfamiliar vocabulary.</li> </ol>

Following the challenges, the next findings revealed the ways that the EFL teachers do in order to improve their reading proficiency. As the analysis has been done, 6 themes expressing teachers' ways to improve their reading proficiency emerged as follows.

**Table 2. Ways to Improve Codes and Categories**

Understand the Question & Passage	Find Main Idea and Supporting Details	Familiarize With the Topic
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understand the context and all sentences</li> <li>2. I read the text more than once</li> <li>3. I read the passage including the picture</li> <li>4. I read the question carefully to make the answer right</li> <li>5. Understand the sign</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I tried to find the main idea and supporting details</li> <li>2. The supporting details were very important</li> <li>3. I have to follow the whole conversation to get the idea</li> <li>4. The strategy was reading in details about things mentioned</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Familiarize myself with terms in certain topic</li> <li>2. Activate your knowledge about climate (topic)</li> </ol>
Enrich Vocabulary and Grammar	Scanning, Skimming, and Take Notes	Predicting the Question and Keep Focus
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I have to be familiar with structure and grammar</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. If it is possible to take notes, it will be better</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I read the problem first, and then associate it with the text above</li> </ol>

2. I improve my vocabulary	2.I used scanning as the strategy 3.Scanning might help 4.Readers are allowed to do skimming	2. I read and analyse the question according to the passage 3. Reader must read the first and last paragraph 4. Keep in mind what I have read during answering the question
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## Discussion

The EFL teachers' reading proficiency that was mentioned in the findings has shown the variety. According to Kanmaz (2022), the variety of EFL teachers' proficiency is affected by some variables. Particularly, it lies on the level of use reading strategy and level of reading comprehension (Kanmaz, 2022). Consequently, the finding of the current study has shown that the most achieved level of proficiency by the EFL teachers is B2 level. According to Nugroho (2017), B2 level to EFL teachers is sometimes referred as medium-to-high self-efficacy toward their teaching of EFL classroom (Nugroho, 2017).

Following the EFL teachers' proficiency level, the next findings answered the research question 2 regarding EFL teachers' challenges and ways to improve reading proficiency. According to the findings, there were 5 themes expressing teachers' perceived challenges. Of all challenges, unfamiliar vocabulary seemed to be more likely the most challenges encountered by the teachers. The lack of vocabulary may affect readers' comprehension. In contrast, understanding the vocabulary makes reading faster and easier while convey the meaning of the text (Cooper, 1999). Moreover, many teachers experienced self-errors. It means that they were reckless and didn't pay attention to the question carefully. On the contrary, however, it is crucial to pay attention to the question because it simply identifies the important point (RC Anderson, 1975). Furthermore, another challenge found by the EFL teachers was the difficult topic. When someone tried to read the passages of unfamiliar topic, he or she may experience difficulties. Thus, according to Cambridge assessment (Council of Europe, 2001), doing a plenty practice of reading was highly recommended because of the different genres or text types.

Opposite with the challenges, the findings revealed much more strategies used by the EFL teachers in order to improve their reading proficiency. After being grouped following the codes and categories, 6 themes describing teachers' ways to improve reading proficiency emerged. According to the finding, they usually look for the main idea and supporting details to get the answer correct. Finding the main idea is the most important in reading passage because it tells what the texts are mainly about (Segretto, 2002). In addition to this, another strategy was applied by the EFL teachers such as scanning and taking notes (Setiawan & Ena, 2019; Vaida & Brinzei, 2021). While scanning and taking notes, the teachers can easily find what they are looking for without any distraction because they have already written it. Moreover, many more strategies have been used in order to help EFL teachers achieve the high score in reading. Their strategies were helpful because appropriate strategies help to overcome the challenges (Giawa & Panjaitan, 2021; Marpaun & Sinaga, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

In order to answer the research question, 15 EFL teachers participated in this study. The findings revealed that EFL teachers' reading proficiency varied from A2 to C2. According to the findings, the EFL teachers have passed all level except A1. The highest level achieved by the teachers was C2 level and the lowest was A1 level. Meanwhile, the most achieved level of proficiency by the EFL teachers is B2 level that is considered medium to high.

Following the level of proficiency, the 5 themes of strategies and 6 themes of ways to improve were revealed to answer research questions 2. The challenges encountered by the teachers were: 1) They experienced self-errors; 2) The answer is implied; 3) The text is difficult; 4) The question type is unfamiliar; 5) They encountered unfamiliar vocabulary. Meanwhile, the ways the teachers used to improve their proficiency were: 1) understand the question and passage carefully; 2) find main idea and supporting details; 3) familiarize with the topic; 4) Enrich vocabulary; 5) scan and take notes; 6) predict the question and keep focus.

Some implications about improving reading proficiency for EFL teachers were proposed. Firstly, this study's theme should become a steppingstone for EFL teachers who still encounter reading challenges and have no idea to implement the strategy to improve their reading proficiency. Secondly, this narrative inquiry has provided an overview of challenges encountered and some solutions to overcome. To sum up, this study suggests best practices and some feature of EFL teachers to succeed in reading for their teaching purposes later.

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