IJEAL (*International Journal of English and Applied Linguistics*)
Volume : 5 | Number 3 | December 2025 | E-ISSN: 2787-9482 | DOI: doi.org/ijeal.v5i3.7164

READING COMPREHENSION AS CRITICAL PRACTICE: EMPOWERING STUDENTS THROUGH CDA BASED LEARNING

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Received: 29/10/2025
Accepted: 15/11/2025
Publication: 01/12/2025

Abstract
This study aimed to enhance students' reading comprehension at MTs MIM Langsa through the use of CDA-based learning. Reading instruction, according to this approach, should not only emphasize grammar and vocabulary memorization but also motivate students to engage with the meaning of the text. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in reading activities encourages learners to develop deeper comprehension skills. The research employed quantitative methods, using questionnaires and interviews as data collection tools. Twenty eighth-grade students participated as the main data source. The researcher examined the students' reading difficulties and the underlying causes of their comprehension challenges. The findings revealed that 12 students (60%) faced problems with overall comprehension, 7 students (35%) struggled to identify main ideas, 14 students (70%) had trouble making inferences, 8 students (40%) found it difficult to locate supporting details, and 9 students experienced challenges with vocabulary understanding. The study concluded that CDA-based learning effectively enhances students' reading comprehension by guiding them to interpret texts through social, discursive, and textual dimensions, thereby fostering greater reading interest and cultivating consistent reading habits.

Keywords— CDA, Critical, Empowerment, Learning

Introduction

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in junior high school that extends beyond merely grasping the literal meaning of a text. It requires students to engage actively with language to explore underlying meanings and the broader social context of the discourse (Pratama et al., 2024). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as an effective approach that enables learners to examine texts critically, uncover implicit ideologies and assumptions, and develop a deeper awareness of how language constructs meaning (Mullet, 2018)

Viewing reading comprehension as a critical practice means treating reading as an active, reflective, and analytical process (Arifin, 2020). It goes beyond simply understanding the literal meaning of words to exploring the underlying messages, beliefs, and social influences within a text (Gibbs, 2002). This approach encourages readers to think critically about what they read, uncover hidden assumptions, assess the credibility of information, and reflect on the wider cultural and social contexts that shape the text (Timor-Shlevin et al., 2022). In doing so, reading becomes a means of fostering critical thinking and social awareness transforming it from a passive activity into an active dialogue between the reader, the text, and the surrounding world (Niculescu & Dragomir, 2023)

Reading is a fundamental skill that students must acquire when learning English. It involves the process of looking at and interpreting written text (Imbaquingo & Cárdenas, 2023).

This skill encompasses the ability to recognize letters and words, associate letters with their corresponding sounds, and blend those sounds to form complete words (Kya Dewi Davina

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& Wahyunengsih, 2023) Moreover, effective reading also relies on the reader's capacity to anticipate words within a text by applying their linguistic knowledge—such as understanding sentence structure, vocabulary meanings, and the overall context of the passage.

Reading comprehension also plays a vital role in enhancing students' vocabulary and writing abilities (Fadillah & Amin, 2022). However, according (Fuqaha' & Wartim, 2023) there are five essential components that students must master to read effectively: identifying the main idea, locating specific information, making inferences, recognizing references, and understanding word meanings or textual details. These elements often represent the key challenges students encounter when trying to achieve full comprehension of a text.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an instructional approach that enables students to move beyond the surface meaning of texts and uncover the deeper social and political messages embedded in language use (Nasution et al., 2020). It fosters critical thinking by revealing how language can reflect, reinforce, or challenge power relations, ideologies, and social inequalities that may not be immediately visible (Pnevmatikos et al., 2023). Through CDA, learners develop the ability to analyze how texts sustain or transform these power dynamics by identifying hidden meanings, underlying assumptions, and persuasive linguistic strategies. This process encourages students to become more reflective and discerning readers, rather than accepting texts at face value (Lestari et al., 2024). In classroom practice, CDA-based learning shifts the focus from merely understanding content to questioning whose interests are represented in the text and how language shapes perceptions of society (Winiharti & Suprato, 2020)

Research on the use of CDA in reading comprehension emphasizes the importance of engaging critically with texts to reveal hidden ideologies, power relations, and deeper meanings beyond the literal words (Hazaea, 2020). Meanwhile, (Mohammed Abd El Fatah Mohammed, 2021) argues that incorporating CDA into reading instruction not only enhances students' comprehension but also strengthens their critical thinking and analytical skills.

Learning through CDA enhances students' reading abilities by encouraging them to move beyond simply understanding words and sentences toward a deeper engagement with texts (KURT TAŞPINAR & CUBUKCU, 2020). It raises students' awareness of how language choices shape meaning, reflect social contexts, and expose underlying ideologies or beliefs (Micalay-Hurtado & Poole, 2022). This approach involves questioning the author's intentions, assessing arguments, and examining the social and power structures influencing the text. Consequently, students develop stronger comprehension, sharper critical thinking skills, and a greater motivation to interact meaningfully with various types of texts instead of reading passively (Tilahun et al., 2022)

This study was conducted at MTs MIM Langsa, where the researcher discovered through discussions with students that they experience significant difficulties in reading comprehension. Many students struggled to identify the main ideas in texts and to make inferences about information that was not explicitly stated. Therefore, the researcher aimed to explore in greater depth the challenges students encounter when trying to understand English reading materials.

Reading comprehension difficulties present a significant challenge that must be addressed, as reading is considered an essential skill in all areas of life, especially in learning English (Hezam et al., 2022). These challenges require further investigation because many students still struggle to understand the meaning of texts. Several factors contribute to these difficulties: limited vocabulary prevents students from reading effectively and forming meaningful sentences; secondly, many students find it hard to express their ideas clearly; and thirdly, teachers rarely use engaging teaching methods due to difficulties in designing interesting learning activities and limited access to multimedia resources (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023)

Based on observations, the teaching method used was predominantly teacher-centered, involving lecturing, writing on the board, listening once, completing assigned tasks, and remaining seated. As a result, students appeared disengaged and lacked understanding of how to read narrative texts effectively. Additionally, the researcher found that ten students struggled to repeat after the teacher due to limited vocabulary, had difficulty identifying the main ideas, and

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Volume : 5 | Number 3 | December 2025 | E-ISSN: 2787-9482 | DOI: doi.org/ijeal.v5i3.7164

were unable to recognize the generic structure of narrative texts. Overall, these students might have understood the material better if the teacher had applied a more effective instructional strategy. However, they continued to face challenges in grasping the basic structure of narrative texts.

Previous studies have primarily examined the common challenges faced by junior high school students in reading comprehension. Their findings revealed that students often struggled to identify main ideas, make inferences, and understand unfamiliar vocabulary. Other studies explored these difficulties from different angles, emphasizing the influence of background knowledge and reading strategies. It was found that students with limited prior knowledge about a topic tended to have more trouble understanding related texts. Building on these insights, the present study aimed to identify the specific reading comprehension challenges encountered by eighth-grade students at MTs MIM Langsa and the factors influencing them through CDA-based learning. The central research question was: How can CDA-based learning be implemented to effectively enhance students' reading comprehension? This study adopted a quantitative approach, applying CDA-based learning and using questionnaires to collect data that describe participants' attitudes, opinions, behaviors, and characteristics within the population.

Literature Review

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process that plays a vital role in achieving success across various fields of study (Oo & Habók, 2020). A review of previous research consolidates recent insights into how individuals comprehend texts, emphasizing effective instructional methods, the relationship between reading and other skills, and the importance of foundational literacy abilities (Kazemi et al., 2020). It also highlights existing research gaps and proposes directions for future investigations. Reading comprehension is essential for both academic success and personal development, yet many students encounter significant challenges that hinder their understanding of texts (Pokharel, 2018). This body of research identifies key factors contributing to these difficulties, including cognitive, environmental, and pedagogical influences (Tarigan et al., 2022). Among the main obstacles faced by students when reading in English are limited vocabulary which restricts their ability to grasp key terms and concepts (Brooks et al., 2021). and decoding difficulties, referring to the process of recognizing and pronouncing words, a foundational reading skill that is often underdeveloped or insufficiently reinforced after early education (Indrayadi, 2021).

In addition, insufficient background knowledge makes it more difficult for students to connect with and comprehend the content of the texts they read (Tuhumury & Nikijuluw, 2020). A study investigating common challenges faced by junior high school students in reading comprehension revealed that learners often struggled to identify main ideas, draw logical inferences, and understand unfamiliar vocabulary. Many students also found it hard to grasp the overall meaning of a passage due to limited vocabulary and difficulty linking ideas within the text. The research further emphasized that reading comprehension can be significantly improved through the application of CDA-based learning (Oroujlou & Sadeghi, 2022).

(Franchi et al., 2023) examined reading comprehension from a different perspective, focusing on the influence of background knowledge and the application of reading strategies. Their findings indicated that students with limited prior knowledge about a topic often struggled to comprehend related texts. CDA-based learning helps address these difficulties by encouraging students to engage more critically with what they read, analyze how messages are shaped, and identify the social and power relations embedded in the content. This approach enables learners to move beyond surface-level understanding and develop stronger critical thinking and analytical abilities. Furthermore, it empowers them to question assumptions and interpret texts within broader social and political contexts—an aspect that traditional reading instruction methods often fail to emphasize (Bahrami, 2018).

(Mujani et al., 2022) mentions a study examined the relationship between reading interest and reading comprehension skills among junior high school students. The results revealed that students with low interest in reading and poor reading habits generally performed

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worse on comprehension tests. Factors such as limited access to engaging reading materials and distractions from digital devices were found to reduce students' motivation to read. In the context of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)-based learning, reading interest plays a key role by motivating students to think critically about texts and connect them to personal and social issues (Scholes et al., 2021). CDA encourages curiosity and engagement by allowing learners to question dominant ideas and uncover power relations within texts, which sustains motivation and promotes critical reading (Koyama, 2016). This form of active reading—where students analyze and question rather than passively consume texts—can enhance both their reading interest and comprehension skills (Javadi & Mohammadi, 2019)

(Bermillo & Merto, 2022) examined the impact of teacher instruction on students' reading comprehension abilities. Their research emphasized the importance of explicitly teaching reading strategies, where teachers guide students in applying techniques such as summarizing, questioning, and predicting through content and language integrated learning (Hamdi, 2022). The study also found that when teachers fail to provide sufficient support in using these strategies, students struggle to fully understand the meaning of the texts they read (Habók et al., 2024)

Research Method

This study employed a quantitative research approach, which is commonly used for data analysis and research design. According to (Mohajan, 2020) this method relies on numerical data and statistical procedures to analyze and interpret findings. Quantitative research encompasses several types of designs, generally categorized into descriptive, correlational, causal-comparative (or quasi-experimental), and experimental approaches (PANYA & NYARWATH (PhD), 2022)

The population of this study comprised eighth-grade students at MTs MIM Langsa during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, with 20 students selected as the main data source. The researcher observed the challenges these students encountered in reading comprehension and identified the contributing factors. Additionally, interviews were conducted with the students to obtain more in-depth information.

The researcher employed two types of instruments for data collection: questionnaires and interviews, aimed at obtaining information from participants. Questionnaires were used to identify students who faced difficulties in reading comprehension (Shirzad & Ebadi, 2020). According to (Nisak, 2023) a questionnaire serves as a data-gathering tool in which students evaluate their own views and respond to statements reflecting their attitudes, emotions, and opinions. Additionally, a semi-structured interview was conducted to create a more open and comfortable atmosphere, allowing for the collection of deeper insights into the factors contributing to students' reading comprehension challenges (Mohammadi et al., 2023). For data analysis, the researcher used quantitative methods to describe and interpret the observed phenomena, transforming raw data into meaningful conclusions. As explained by (Sulistiyarini et al., 2022) interactive data analysis involves data reduction, systematic presentation, and the formulation of insightful conclusions.

Result and Discussion

Result

This study examines the difficulties students face in reading comprehension and the factors contributing to those challenges. The data analysis follows the framework proposed by Miles and Huberman, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Asipi et al., 2022)

Students' Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

The questionnaire results revealed that students faced several difficulties in comprehending the texts they read. These challenges were categorized into four main areas: identifying the main idea, recognizing supporting details, making inferences from the text, and understanding unfamiliar vocabulary.

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Volume : 5 | Number 3 | December 2025 | E-ISSN: 2787-9482 | DOI: doi.org/ijeal.v5i3.7164

Difficulty in Identifying the Main Idea

One of the biggest challenges students faced was figuring out the main idea of a passage. Among the eight students who were surveyed, seven of them, which is 35%, said they often had trouble identifying the central theme or message of a text. A lot of the students mentioned that they found it hard to tell what information was important and what wasn't, which made it difficult for them to summarize the passage effectively.

Difficulty in Identifying Supporting Details

One of the most significant difficulties students encountered was identifying the main idea of a passage. Of the eight students surveyed, seven (35%) reported that they frequently struggled to determine the central theme or message of a text. Many students explained that they found it challenging to distinguish between essential and non-essential information, which made summarizing the passage effectively quite difficult

Difficulty in Making Inferences

Making inferences is a higher-level reading skill that requires readers to grasp the implied meaning of a text and draw conclusions from information that is not explicitly stated. Among the 14 students surveyed, 70% reported finding this skill difficult, particularly when dealing with complex or abstract texts.

Difficulty in Understanding Correct Vocabulary

Vocabulary understanding emerged as the most significant challenge for students. Nine students (45%) reported frequently encountering unfamiliar words while reading, which hindered their ability to comprehend the main ideas of the texts.

Discussion

In the interviews, students admitted that they often approached reading passively, without making an effort to identify the main idea. One student expressed this by saying:

> "*Sometimes, when I read a passage, I feel confused. I don't really grasp what the text is about, so I just pick a random sentence when answering the questions."*

This response suggests that students may lack the skills needed to read critically and accurately identify the main idea of a text. Some students also admitted to memorizing sentences without truly understanding their meaning. This finding aligns with previous research by(Al-Shaye, 2021) which indicates that many junior high school students have difficulty determining the main idea independently.

When students read a short paragraph that indirectly described a character's emotions—such as "Sarah looked out the window and sighed, watching the rain pour down"—most failed to recognize that Sarah was feeling sad or disappointed. Instead, they focused only on the literal words without interpreting the underlying emotion. One student remarked:

> "*If the answer isn't clearly written in the text, I don't know what to say. I get really confused when the teacher asks me to figure out what the author means."*

This finding aligns with the conclusion of (van Zeijts et al., 2024) which indicates that students who lack exposure to different types of texts often struggle with making inferences. During the interviews, several students mentioned that they tended to stop reading whenever they encountered unfamiliar words and would immediately look them up in a dictionary. However, this approach was time-consuming and disrupted their focus. One student explained:

> "*I stop reading whenever I find a word I don't understand. It makes me feel stuck because I can't continue without knowing what it means."*

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This indicates that a limited vocabulary greatly impacts students' confidence and motivation to read. When learners struggle with unfamiliar words, they often feel anxious and lose interest in reading, which in turn hinders the development of their reading skills.

Factors Contributing to Students' Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Based on the interviews, five major factors were identified as contributing to students' reading comprehension difficulties. First, many students had a limited vocabulary, which made it challenging for them to interpret words within the context of a passage. Second, they lacked effective reading strategies, such as skimming and scanning, and often read without a specific goal. Third, their low motivation and interest in reading were evident, as most students found reading uninteresting and rarely practiced it outside the classroom. Fourth, insufficient background knowledge made it difficult for them to comprehend texts on unfamiliar topics. Lastly, some students felt that classroom instruction was not engaging since reading lessons mainly emphasized answering comprehension questions rather than incorporating interactive learning activities.

Correlation Between Reading Comprehension and CDA Based Learning

Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) proves to be an effective approach for enhancing students' critical reading abilities. CDA serves as a framework for examining how social inequality is represented, constructed, and maintained through language use (Azi et al., 2024). Research indicates that students' text comprehension improves significantly after applying CDA-based methods, as reflected in better test outcomes (Abbasian & Malaee, 2016). This approach allows learners to analyze texts both holistically and in detail. By understanding the broader context and linguistic features, students can more easily grasp new vocabulary and interpret complex academic texts, leading to improved comprehension (Wahyuni & Syamsi, 2021). Furthermore, studies suggest that CDA transforms conventional teaching into a more analytical and reflective process. Encouraging students to explore language use, power relations, and social contexts within texts fosters critical thinking, which naturally enhances their reading comprehension (Sajjad et al., 2017)

How do Impelement CDA Based Learning and Reading Empowerment

Reading empowerment has become a key objective in literacy education, serving an essential role not only in academic achievement across various disciplines but also in professional development and lifelong learning (Zhang in Yao, 2012: 50). In many schools, reading instruction tends to emphasize linguistic mastery, with teachers primarily focusing on helping students understand grammatical structures, vocabulary, and sentence patterns. At the initial stages, educators often simplify reading materials by dividing them into smaller sections so that learners can identify the structure of each part of the text. Students are then guided to learn the target or second language through word-by-word translation and verb tense matching (Chen et al., 2020).

This method often restricts students' linguistic development and confines their understanding to the sentence level. Therefore, teachers need to build a supportive and engaging reading environment by introducing students to a range of reading strategies or approaches, such as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Through this approach, students can move beyond focusing solely on structure and vocabulary and begin to appreciate the process of interpreting and uncovering meaning within reading texts (Akramovna, 2022)

Conclusion

This study contributes to the implementation of critical reading practices through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)–based learning at MTs MIM Langsa. The findings reveal that students experience difficulties in identifying main ideas, understanding supporting details, making inferences, and comprehending vocabulary. These challenges suggest that many students struggle with English texts primarily due to limited vocabulary, which prevents them from fully grasping the overall meaning. Additionally, students often find it difficult to interpret complex sentences, particularly those containing multiple clauses. Future research should aim to

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enhance vocabulary instruction by incorporating engaging activities such as word games, flashcards, and contextualized word learning. Providing background information prior to reading can also assist students in connecting new concepts with their existing knowledge.T

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