CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Background of Study

Reading is one of the fundamental skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. It plays a crucial role in helping students access information, build vocabulary, understand grammatical structures, and develop critical thinking skills. In the Indonesian junior high school English curriculum, one of the key genres taught is narrative texts, which aim to develop students' ability to understand stories, recognize characters and settings, and interpret moral messages.

However, in the context of Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan, many learners still face significant difficulties in understanding narrative texts. These difficulties are evident in students' inability to comprehend the plot, identify the structure of the story, interpret the meaning of new vocabulary, and infer implied messages from the text. Despite being exposed to narrative texts in the classroom, students often struggle to engage deeply with the content and demonstrate low reading comprehension outcomes.

Grabe (2009) explains that reading is a complex cognitive process involving word recognition, syntactic parsing, semantic processing, and discourse integration. In the case of narrative texts, students are expected to comprehend elements such as orientation, complication, and resolution, while also connecting the story to their own background knowledge. Koda (2018) emphasizes that reading comprehension is strongly influenced by vocabulary knowledge, familiarity with text structures, and the reader's cognitive abilities.

Furthermore, studies such as Sari & Setiawan (2021) have found that reading instruction in many EFL classrooms in Indonesia tends to be teacher-centered, offering limited opportunities for students to actively engage in meaning-making. This lack of interaction and strategy-based teaching contributes to students' persistent reading difficulties. In addition, Zarei&Meibodi (2020) point out that factors such as reading anxiety, low motivation, and a lack of reading habits negatively impact students' comprehension.

Given this context, it is essential to explore what specific challenges students face when reading narrative texts and to understand the underlying causes of these difficulties. This research aims to analyze the types of reading comprehension problems experienced by Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan. By identifying these issues, the study can provide valuable insights for English teachers to design more effective and student-centered reading strategies that address learners' needs and improve their engagement with narrative texts.

1.2 The Problems of the Study

Based on the background above, here are the research question:

1. What difficulties do Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan face in understanding narrative texts in the EFL classroom?
2. What factors contribute to the students' difficulties in understanding narrative texts?
3. How do students respond to the challenges they encounter when reading narrative texts?

1.3 The Objectives of the Study

In line with the research questions, below are the research objectives:

1. To identify the specific difficulties faced by Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan in understanding narrative texts.
2. To explore the factors that contribute to these difficulties.
3. To analyze how students cope with or respond to the challenges in reading narrative texts.

1.4 The Scope of the Study

This research focuses on the analysis of students' difficulties in understanding narrative texts in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at Grade 7 of SMP Panca Budi Medan. The study is limited to:

1. One class of Grade 7 students during the academic year 2024/2025.
2. Narrative texts as part of the English subject based on the current curriculum.
3. Students' comprehension difficulties, contributing factors, and responses in reading classes.

The study does not cover other language skills (such as speaking, listening, or writing), other genres of texts (e.g., recount or descriptive), or other grade levels.

1.5 The Significance of the Study

1. Theoretical Significance:

This study is expected to contribute to the development of theories related to EFL reading comprehension, particularly in understanding the challenges students face with narrative texts in junior high school settings.

2. Practical Significance:

a. For teachers: The findings can help English teachers design more effective teaching strategies and reading materials tailored to students' needs.
b. For students: By identifying their specific challenges, students may become more aware of their learning difficulties and seek strategies to improve.

c. For future researchers: This study can serve as a reference for those conducting similar research in reading comprehension or EFL education.

1.6 Literature Review

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading plays a vital role in students' language development. It is not merely a skill to decode words and sentences, but a complex cognitive process that involves constructing meaning from written texts. According to Grabe and Stoller (2013), reading comprehension requires the integration of multiple components such as word recognition, syntactic processing, semantic understanding, and discourse-level integration. For junior high school students, particularly in an EFL setting like Indonesia, reading comprehension is a challenging task that demands more than just basic language knowledge. It also requires background understanding, motivation, and appropriate reading strategies.

Narrative texts, which are widely taught in Indonesian junior high school English classes, are among the most significant genres students encounter. These texts are structured to tell a story with a sequence of events that include an orientation, a complication, and a resolution (Anderson & Anderson, 2003). They are designed not only to entertain but also to teach moral values, expand imagination, and enhance students' language proficiency. However, the narrative genre often presents a variety of difficulties for EFL learners. As Pardiyono (2018) emphasizes, understanding narrative texts demands a combination of vocabulary knowledge, awareness of narrative structure, and inferencing skills—elements that are still developing in many junior high school students.

At the Grade 7 level, such as in SMP Panca Budi Medan, students frequently encounter several problems when engaging with narrative texts. These difficulties include limited vocabulary, unfamiliar cultural references, inability to identify the plot structure, and challenges in drawing inferences or understanding implicit meanings. Nation (2022) highlights that vocabulary knowledge is foundational for reading comprehension. Without adequate vocabulary, students struggle to understand even the most basic content of a text. In addition, Koda (2018) argues that reading comprehension in a second or foreign language is greatly influenced by the reader's background knowledge and their familiarity with textual conventions.

Another major issue that affects students' reading comprehension is the method of instruction. In many EFL classrooms, including those in Indonesian schools, reading is often taught through teacher-centered approaches, where the teacher dominates the class, explains vocabulary, and translates sentences (Sari & Setiawan, 2021). While such methods may help students understand surface-level meanings, they rarely foster deeper comprehension or critical engagement with the text. Zarei and Meibodi (2020) also emphasize that affective factors such as reading anxiety, lack of motivation, and low self-confidence further hinder students' ability to comprehend what they read.

Various studies have explored these difficulties in greater depth. For instance, Rahmani and Sadeghi (2022) found that vocabulary limitations and grammar complexity were the most cited barriers in EFL reading. Similarly, Andriani (2020) observed that students in junior high schools struggled significantly with making inferences and understanding story structures in narrative texts. These findings suggest that reading difficulties are not merely linguistic but are also tied to cognitive, emotional, and instructional dimensions.

In order to help students overcome these challenges, researchers and educators have proposed a number of effective strategies. Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development supports the use of scaffolding—where teachers provide structured support before gradually reducing assistance as students become more competent (Hammond, 2001). Reciprocal teaching, as introduced by Palincsar and Brown (1984), encourages students to actively participate in the reading process through predicting, questioning, clarifying, and summarizing. Other techniques, such as the use of graphic organizers and story maps, can also help students visualize and better understand the structure of narrative texts (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002).

Taking these theoretical and empirical insights into account, it becomes clear that students' difficulties in understanding narrative texts are multidimensional. They stem from a combination of linguistic limitations, cognitive demands, instructional methods, and affective variables. Therefore, a focused study on the specific challenges faced by Grade 7 students at SMP Panca Budi Medan is both relevant and necessary. Understanding these difficulties more deeply will not only enrich existing literature on reading comprehension in the EFL context, but also provide practical insights for teachers to design more effective, student-centered reading instruction.