https://journal1.uinssc.ac.id/index.php/lens

Language Education, Network, and Studies
Vol. 2, No. 1, April 2026, pp. 55-65
e-ISSN: 3123-660X
English Language Teaching Department
UIN Siber Syekh Nurjati Cirebon, Indonesia

Graded reading and context clues in EFL reading comprehension: A descriptive study of Indonesian senior high school EFL students

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Article Information

Article History:
Received: 02 April 2026
Accepted: 15 April 2026
Available online: 30 April 2026

Keywords:
Graded Reading
Context Clues
Reading Comprehension
EFL High School Students

ABSTRACT

English reading comprehension remains a persistent challenge for Indonesian EFL high school students, who tend to rely heavily on automated translation tools rather than building genuine independent reading strategies. This study examines how graded reading and context clues strategies, when implemented together, can improve reading comprehension among Indonesian EFL high school students. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with questionnaire data from 22 high school students across Grades X, XI, and XII, the study generates two primary themes: (1) the effectiveness of graded reading in supporting comprehension and vocabulary development, and (2) the role of context clues in reducing students' over-reliance on word-by-word translation. Literature findings show that graded reading, grounded in Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis and Nation's (2009) 98% vocabulary rule, creates the controlled reading conditions needed for sustained fluency development, while explicit context clue instruction significantly enhances vocabulary inferencing. Questionnaire results show that half of the students (50%) immediately use Google Translate when encountering a hard word. Yet they achieved a 90.9% average score on a context clues mini-test, highlighting a significant gap between actual capability and daily habits. Merging these two reading strategies offers useful insights for EFL curricula development, teaching, and learning in Indonesian secondary education, especially for fostering long-term, independent readers.

How to cite (in APA style):
Qisthi, K. M., & Salwa, A. (2026). Graded reading and context clues in EFL reading comprehension: A descriptive study of Indonesian senior high school EFL students. *Language Education, Network, and Studies*, 2(1), 55-65. https://doi.org/ 10.24235/lens.v2i1.24995

1. INTRODUCTION

In EFL education, mastering reading comprehension is an absolute necessity for students. Yet, teachers and learners alike often find this area the most grueling to develop. Even though English has been part of the mandatory school curriculum across Indonesia for

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decades, independent reading of authentic texts remains a massive struggle for most senior high schoolers. This gap between what policymakers expect and what happens in classrooms is a well-documented issue in language research.

When we look closely, the core issue is rarely about their fundamental reading capability. Instead, it comes down to how students react when facing unfamiliar words. Their immediate reflex is to stop reading entirely, fire up Google Translate, and copy-paste the sentences. Some even go a step further by dropping whole text chunks into ChatGPT. This habit might feel convenient, but it breaks their concentration and prevents them from ever becoming self-reliant readers. Puspita and Purwati (2021) observed this exact trend in Indonesian SMA classrooms, pointing out that limited vocabulary and poorly matched reading materials are the main drivers behind it. To fix this, implementing two specific strategies can provide a practical way forward. First, graded reading introduces texts that sit right at or slightly above their current level, ensuring they can read smoothly without getting stuck every few seconds.

To address this issue, two specific strategies can offer practical paths forward. First, graded reading provides texts that match or sit just slightly above the students' current proficiency, allowing them to read smoothly without constantly halting. Nation (2009) argues that students need to recognize at least 98% of words in a text to read it fluently; Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis adds theoretical weight by positioning this 'i+1' zone as the ideal space for language acquisition. Second, training students to use context clues helps them guess unknown words using surrounding sentences, breaking their dependence on digital translation tools.

Sternberg (1987) maps this out as a three-stage cognitive process that involves selective encoding, selective combination, and selective comparison. Essentially, this model shows how fluent readers break down new words naturally. What makes these two methods fascinating is how deeply intertwined they are. Graded reading builds the low-anxiety, familiar ground needed for context clues to work. If the text lacks enough familiar words around the target vocabulary, guessing becomes a nearly impossible task. Conversely, without active guessing habits, graded reading cannot deliver its full educational impact. While past literature often evaluates these strategies in isolation, very few studies have explored what happens when they are combined within Indonesian high school EFL classrooms. This specific gap is what this study intends to address.

This study therefore addresses three research questions: (1) How does graded reading improve English reading comprehension among Indonesian EFL high school students? (2) How does the use of context clues reduce over-reliance on word-by-word translation? (3) How can the combined implementation of both strategies support sustainable reading comprehension development? The goal is to offer a literature-grounded, empirically supported framework that is practically useful for teachers, students, and curriculum designers working in the Indonesian EFL context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. EFL Reading Comprehension in Indonesian High School Contexts

Grabe and Stoller (2011) place heavy emphasis on the idea that reading comprehension is far from a passive word-decoding task. Rather, it functions as a highly active process where readers blend new details from a text with their personal background knowledge. For high school EFL learners, this process demands heavy cognitive effort because they must extract meaning from a foreign language while simultaneously juggling new vocabulary, tricky grammar, and alien cultural references. Widodo and Ferdiansyah (2022) also noted that simple access to digital reading materials does not automatically

translate into better reading skills. The real hurdle is that students do not utilize proper reading strategies, not that they are completely unable to recognize words. When a student pauses to translate every single difficult word, the reading experience shatters into fragments, making it incredibly hard to grasp the main idea. Puspita and Purwati (2021) witnessed this exact routine in Indonesian classrooms, showing how word-for-word translation turns into an ingrained habit that completely kills student confidence. Over time, this triggers a continuous cycle of frustration, causing students to avoid reading entirely unless teachers intervene with better strategies.

2.2. Graded Reading Strategy

Day and Bamford (1998) describe extensive reading as an activity where students consume a large volume of texts that match their linguistic competence. The main objective here is not analyzing grammar rules or memorizing lists but rather gaining a general understanding and finding genuine joy in reading. Graded reading serves as the perfect practical tool for this concept by offering books with strictly controlled vocabulary, meaning students can read fluently without constantly stumbling. This framework is completely different from intensive reading. While intensive reading forces a deep, analytical breakdown of short and difficult texts, graded reading encourages students to read larger amounts, build up their speed, and choose texts where they feel comfortable with the language.

According to Nation (2009), readers need to know around 98% of the words in a text to achieve good fluency. The moment unknown words cross that 2% threshold, comprehension drops sharply. This happens not because the students are weak, but because their brainpower gets used up entirely on decoding individual words instead of processing the message. This concept aligns perfectly with Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, which states that language acquisition is most effective when input is just one step beyond a student's current level, known as the "i+1" zone. If a text is too simple, students do not learn anything new, but if it is too advanced, anxiety spikes and blocks the learning process entirely. Puspita and Purwati (2021) observed this in Indonesian classrooms, confirming that well-structured graded materials boost comprehension while driving confidence and motivation. Renandya, Krashen, and Jacobs (2021) add that book series featuring consistent characters and settings work wonders for graded reading because they lower the cognitive load, allowing the brain to focus on processing language. Furthermore, Yamashita (2020) highlights that structured reading programs can reshape student attitudes, turning reading from a boring classroom chore into a voluntary hobby.

2.3. Context Clues Strategy

Sternberg (1987) argues that most vocabulary is picked up through regular exposure in meaningful contexts rather than direct memorization. He outlines three core cognitive steps in this process: selective encoding to isolate useful cues, selective combination to piece those clues together, and selective comparison to check that guess against existing knowledge. Practicing these three steps regularly helps students build a habit that completely changes how they face unfamiliar words. Grabe and Stoller (2011) mention that fluent readers use context clues automatically, relying on definitions, synonyms, or examples inside the text to keep reading without stopping. In contrast, weaker readers focus strictly on isolated words and check dictionaries immediately when seeing a hard word, which ruins their comprehension. Because of this, they recommend that EFL students receive direct training on context clues rather than being left to figure things out alone.

Namaziandost et al. (2020) test this empirically, finding that students who received explicit context clue instruction significantly outperformed a control group on both reading comprehension and vocabulary assessments. The mechanism makes sense: when students stop translating word-by-word, they are actually able to process the meaning of the whole sentence, paragraph, and text. Elgort et al. (2020) give this a psycholinguistic explanation: context-based word learning involves deeper cognitive processing than rote memorization, which produces stronger and more durable long-term memory. Utami and Prestwich (2022) confirm these gains in an Indonesian high school context specifically, showing that structured context clue practice leads to measurable improvements in reading independence. Meniado (2020) further finds that among various vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL high school students, those that prioritized contextual understanding consistently produce better reading outcomes than translation-reliant approaches.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach that combined an in-depth review of relevant literature with direct field data collection. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is an inquiry process aimed at understanding social or human problems by building a complex, holistic picture formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting. This design was chosen because the central questions of this study, how specific reading strategies affect student behavior and comprehension development, required interpretive, contextual answers rather than numerical measurement alone. The combined approach allowed literature-derived theory to be cross-referenced against real student data, producing a more grounded and practically applicable discussion.

3.2.Participants

The study involved 22 senior high school (SMA) students from Grades X, XI, and XII, selected through incidental sampling via teacher networks. This technique was chosen due to limited direct institutional access, with questionnaire distribution facilitated by English teachers at multiple schools. Participants reported English scores ranging from 75 to 96, reflecting a range of intermediate to high proficiency levels. All participant identities were kept strictly confidential, participation was entirely voluntary, and students were assured that their responses would have no bearing on their academic grades.

3.3.Data Collection

Literature data was gathered through keyword searches across Google Scholar, ERIC, and Scopus, using terms such as 'graded reading EFL high school,' 'context clues reading comprehension Indonesia,' and 'extensive reading secondary school.' Sources were selected based on five criteria: published between 2019 and 2024 (with classic foundational works included where relevant), focused on graded reading, context clues, or EFL reading comprehension, published in peer-reviewed journals or by recognized academic publishers, involving secondary school populations or EFL classroom contexts, and providing pedagogical implications. Thirteen sources met these criteria, ten journal articles and three academic books.

Field data was collected via a structured questionnaire administered in a single session covering seven sections: (A) respondent background, (B) reading habits

before/during/after reading, (C) reading challenges, (D) familiarity with and attitudes toward graded reading, (E) experience with context clues, (F) a mini reading comprehension test assessing context clue ability in practice, and (G) opinions on English reading instruction.

3.4.Data Analysis

Data from the selected literature was analyzed using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), a systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis followed a three-stage coding process: open coding (labeling key ideas from each source), axial coding (grouping related codes into categories), and selective coding (refining categories into final themes). Two primary themes emerged: (1) graded reading and reading comprehension development, and (2) context clues and reading fluency. Simple quantitative data from the questionnaire, average scores and response percentages, were used as supporting evidence to contextualize and validate the thematic findings.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings from two sources: thematic analysis of selected literature and questionnaire responses from 22 high school EFL students. The questionnaire data reveals a strong reliance on digital translation tools: Google Translate usage averages 1.55 on a reverse scale (1=always, 5=never), indicating near-constant use. When encountering unfamiliar words, 50% of respondents (11 of 22) report immediately opening Google Translate, while only 31.8% (7 of 22) attempt to infer meaning from context. Regarding graded reading, 50% of respondents (11 of 22) have no prior knowledge of the strategy, yet 77.3% (17 of 22) believe it would significantly help their reading development, and 72.7% (16 of 22) report that reading level-appropriate texts feel considerably easier and more enjoyable. Across context clue usage, 100% of respondents have attempted the strategy at least once, with a usage frequency average of 3.64 out of 5. These patterns align directly with the two themes identified in the literature review.

Figure 1. *Questionnaire Data Collection*

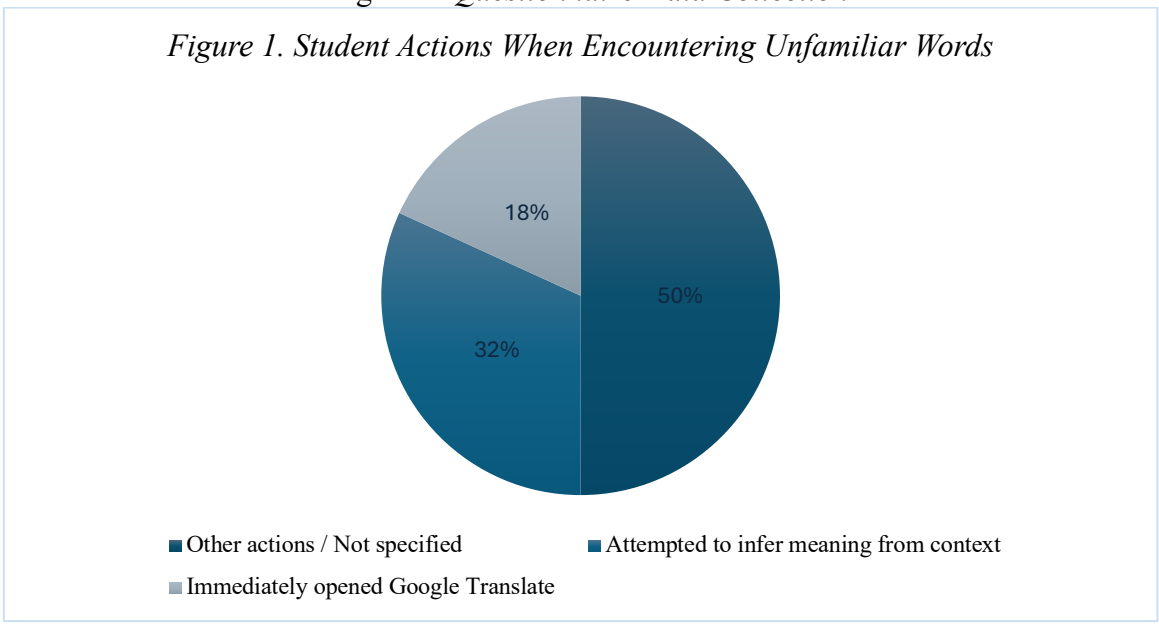


Figure 2. Student Perceptions and Beliefs Regarding Graded Reading

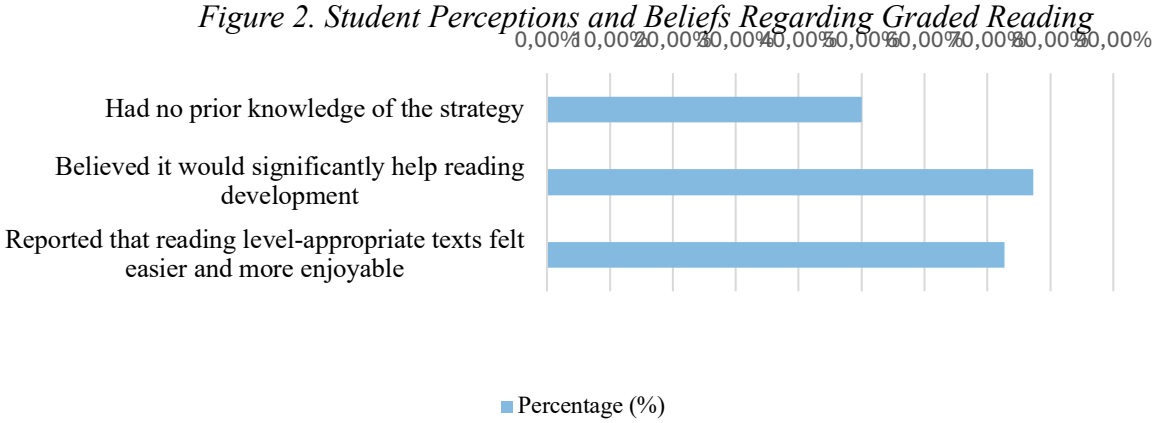


Figure 3. Mean Frequency Scores of Digital Translation and Context Strategy Usage

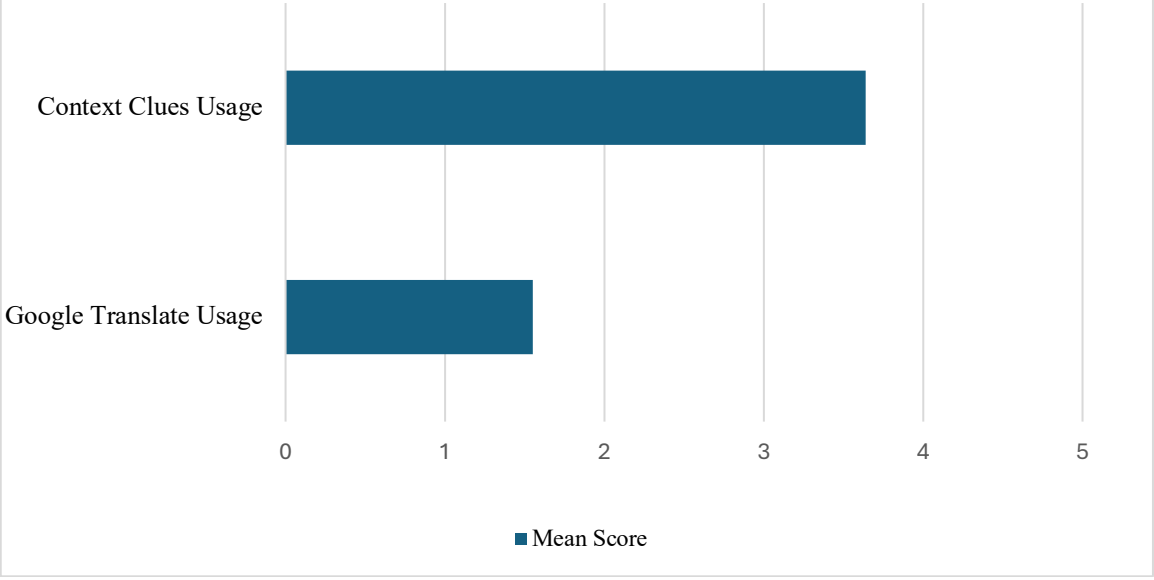


Table 1. *Theme 1: Graded Reading and Reading Comprehension*

No.	Code	Theme	Interpretation
1	Level-appropriate input	Graded Reading Strategy	Learners comprehend texts better when reading materials match their proficiency level (Krashen, 1982; Nation, 2009).
2	Vocabulary coverage	Graded Reading Strategy	A minimum of 98% vocabulary familiarity is required for fluent reading comprehension (Hu & Nation, 2000).
3	Progressive difficulty	Graded Reading Strategy	Moving gradually from simpler to more complex texts builds reading confidence and fluency (Renandya et al., 2021).
4	Indonesian classroom	Graded Reading Strategy	Graded reading shows consistent comprehension improvement in SMA EFL

No.	Code	Theme	Interpretation
	implementation		settings despite practical challenges (Puspita & Purwati, 2021).
5	Reading motivation	Graded Reading Strategy	Extensive reading at appropriate levels increases enjoyment and positive long-term reading attitudes (Yamashita, 2020).

Table 2. *Theme 2: Context Clues and Reading Fluency*

No.	Code	Theme	Interpretation
6	Contextual inferencing	Context Clues Strategy	Skilled readers use surrounding text to deduce unknown word meanings without disrupting reading flow (Sternberg, 1987).
7	Reduced translation dependency	Context Clues Strategy	Learners trained in context clues show significantly lower reliance on dictionaries and translation tools (Namaziandost et al., 2020).
8	Vocabulary acquisition	Context Clues Strategy	Context-based word learning produces stronger long-term retention than isolated vocabulary memorization (Elgort et al., 2020).
9	SMA classroom application	Context Clues Strategy	Explicit context clue instruction in high school EFL settings produces significant reading comprehension gains (Utami & Prestwich, 2022).
10	Reading fluency development	Context Clues Strategy	Students using context clues demonstrate better overall reading fluency compared to those relying on translation (Meniado, 2020).

The mini reading test (Section F) further substantiates these themes. Across four target vocabulary items drawn from a short passage, respondents achieve an average accuracy rate of 90.9%: 'avid' is correctly identified by 95.5% of students (21/22), 'tattered' by 90.9% (20/22), and both 'captivated' and 'tranquil' by 86.4% (19/22). This high accuracy is particularly striking given that the same students largely default to Google Translate in daily reading situations. Open-ended responses add texture to this finding: Giovita describes her context clue process as 're-reading the sentence repeatedly and examining each surrounding word carefully until the meaning becomes clear,' while Nafisa points out that the strategy breaks down 'when the words around the difficult word are also unfamiliar,' an observation that links directly back to the vocabulary density conditions that graded reading is designed to address.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1.Graded Reading as a Pathway to Comprehension Development

The literature consistently positions graded reading as one of the most accessible and sustainable approaches to building EFL reading competence. Its theoretical grounding is solid: Krashen's (1982) i+1 principle identifies the optimal zone for language acquisition as input that is slightly above current ability, and Nation's (2009) 98% vocabulary coverage rule translates this into a practical threshold that determines whether reading remains a meaning-making activity or collapses into word-level decoding. When students hit that 2%

unknown-word ceiling, comprehension suffers, not because they are not capable, but because their cognitive resources are being consumed by decoding rather than understanding.

In the Indonesian high school context, Puspita and Purwati (2021) find that providing appropriately leveled texts produces consistent comprehension gains alongside improved student motivation and academic confidence, a finding that extends beyond the cognitive into the affective. Renandya et al. (2021) add that series books are particularly effective because familiarity with characters and narrative style reduces cognitive load, giving students more mental bandwidth for actual language processing. The questionnaire data aligns with this: despite 50% of respondents having never heard of graded reading before the survey, 72.7% immediately recognize the experience of reading level-appropriate texts as easier and more enjoyable, and 77.3% believe it would help their development. One student (Ziyad) notes that reading English novels feels enjoyable 'when you don't need to keep opening a dictionary,' a description that captures the core benefit of graded reading in student terms.

Yamashita (2020) frames this affective dimension as equally important to the cognitive one: structured extensive reading programs shift students' orientation toward reading from obligation to voluntary engagement, which in turn sustains long-term development through incidental language acquisition outside the classroom. This pattern is visible in questionnaire responses from Endah and Wempy, who both express a desire to reach a point where they could 'read fluently without opening a translator.' The aspiration is there; graded reading provides the pathway.

5.2.Context Clues as a Bridge Away from Translation Dependency

The most striking finding from the questionnaire is the gap between student habits and student ability. Half of respondents (50%) say their first response to an unknown word is to open Google Translate. Yet those same students achieve a 90.9% average accuracy rate on a context clue mini-test embedded in the questionnaire, without any access to translation tools. This is not a small discrepancy. It suggests that Indonesian EFL students are not using context clues because they do not believe they can, not because they actually cannot.

Namaziandost et al. (2020) document exactly this dynamic in their experimental research, showing that students trained in context clue strategies significantly outperformed control groups on both vocabulary and comprehension assessments. The mechanism, as Elgort et al. (2020) explain from a psycholinguistic perspective, lies in the depth of processing: inferring meaning from context engages more cognitive resources than looking up a translation, which produces stronger, more durable long-term memory for the word. Utami and Prestwich (2022) confirm these gains in an Indonesian SMA context specifically, finding that structured context clue practice, where teachers explicitly model the process of identifying definition, synonym, antonym, and example clues, leads to measurable improvements in reading independence. Meniado (2020) adds that students who prioritize contextual strategies consistently outperform those who rely on translation in long-term reading fluency.

What the questionnaire respondents' open-ended answers reveal is that the underlying cognitive process is already happening intuitively for many students; they just do not have a name for it or confidence in it. Giovita's description of re-reading a sentence until context makes the meaning clear is textbook selective encoding and combination (Sternberg, 1987). Yevano's approach of 'connecting possible meanings and matching them against the sentence' is exactly the selective comparison step. The capacity exists. What is missing is explicit instruction that legitimizes and reinforces these instincts. Nafisa's observation that

the strategy 'does not work when the surrounding words are also difficult' is the key connective insight: context clues need sufficient contextual support to function, which is precisely what graded reading provides.

5.3.The Combined Approach: Why One Without the Other Is Not Enough

The relationship between graded reading and context clues is fundamentally symbiotic rather than additive. Graded reading, through the 98% vocabulary rule (Nation, 2009) and the i+1 framework (Krashen, 1982), creates the controlled vocabulary environment that makes context clues workable in practice. Context clues, in turn, make graded reading cognitively active rather than passive; students are not just reading, they are building vocabulary through every encounter with a slightly unfamiliar word. Remove one strategy and the other loses much of its value: context clues without appropriate text difficulty fail because there are not enough familiar words to generate useful context; graded reading without context clue habits misses the vocabulary acquisition opportunity built into every slightly-above-level word.

The questionnaire data makes this interdependence concrete. The 90.9% mini-test accuracy shows that students can do contextual inferencing. The 72.7% who find level-appropriate texts 'much easier and more enjoyable' shows that graded reading conditions are positively received. The 50% who still default to Google Translate shows that neither capacity has yet been sufficiently activated in daily reading practice. The gap between all three numbers is the intervention space: with explicit instruction that links graded reading conditions to context clue practice, students have both the environment and the strategy they need to build genuine reading independence.

For EFL teachers in Indonesian high schools, the practical implication is a systematic instructional sequence: select level-appropriate texts first, explicitly teach context clue identification within those texts, then gradually increase text difficulty as student confidence grows. For students, the 90.9% accuracy finding is itself motivating; they are better at this than their habits suggest. For curriculum developers, the key insight is that effective reading instruction is not just about assigning texts; it is about building the reading conditions and cognitive strategies that let students engage with those texts on their own terms.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1.Summary of Findings

This study examines how graded reading and context clues strategies, individually and in combination, improve English reading comprehension among Indonesian EFL high school students through a descriptive qualitative approach supported by questionnaire data from 22 students. This study answers three main research questions. Regarding RQ1, the findings show that graded reading improves reading comprehension because it gives students texts that fit their actual level, which matches Krashen's (1982) i+1 concept and Nation's (2009) 98% rule. Both the existing literature (Puspita & Purwati, 2021; Yamashita, 2020) and the survey data support this conclusion, with 77.3% of respondents stating that they believe this method is effective. In regard to RQ2, context clues show a strong potential to reduce the heavy reliance on translation, even though students do not practice this behavior enough in their daily reading. The gap between their 90.9% mini-test accuracy and their 50% dependency on Google Translate shows that the underlying ability is there; they simply lack the structured training needed to turn it into a steady habit. Looking closely at RQ3, utilizing both strategies together yields far better results than using either one alone. Graded reading creates a safe space with highly accessible vocabulary so context clues can actually function,

while context clues keep the reading process active and productive. Together, they offer a clear, practical path for Indonesian high school EFL students to become independent readers.

6.2.Implications

For EFL teachers, these results offer a clear framework for the classroom: start with texts that match the students' level, directly teach them how to spot context clues in those pages, and slowly increase text difficulty as their vocabulary grows. For the students, knowing they achieved 90.9% accuracy in using context clues can give their confidence a major boost, proving they can safely reduce their reliance on translation software. For curriculum designers, the focus needs to shift toward providing more graded books in schools and officially embedding reading strategies into the high school English syllabus.

6.3.Limitations and Future Research

There are a few limitations in this study that need to be mentioned. First, the sample size only included 22 students through incidental sampling, meaning the questionnaire results cannot be broadly generalized to a larger population. Second, there was no follow-up phase after the intervention, which means changes in students' reading habits over time could not be tracked. Finally, like any questionnaire data, there is always a chance of response bias from the students.

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