

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Reading comprehension is one of the most essential language skills for students to develop, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Song et al., 2024). In today's globalized world, English serves as the primary medium for accessing information, as most available information is written in English, creating significant challenges for students from non-English-speaking countries who must first master English to understand the information (Andoko et al., 2020). Reading skills are critical because they serve as a gateway to acquiring knowledge and improving academic competence, while also forming the basis for assessing students' language proficiency at all levels of education (Song et al., 2024).

Although it has an important role, the process of reading comprehension is not a simple thing. Reading comprehension involves complex cognitive processes that go beyond just word recognition. It is defined as "the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction between the reader's existing knowledge, the information presented by the written language, and the context of the reading situation" (Lotfi Sin & Siahpoosh, 2020). The process requires coordination and interpretation of various interrelated sources of information, including the reader's previous understanding and knowledge, new information conveyed by the text, and the context of the reading situation (Hakiki & Mardiana, 2024). Thus, reading comprehension determines how readers interact with the text by utilizing prior knowledge to add meaning, evaluate information, connect new content with existing knowledge, and make informed decisions (Al-Badareen et al., 2020).

In the context of EFL, the complexity of reading comprehension is further reinforced by the interconnected nature of language skills. Vocabulary knowledge, for example, has a strong correlation with reading comprehension ability because vocabulary limitations significantly affect students' ability to communicate and understand English texts (Setyowati et al., 2020). In countries like Jordan and Indonesia, reading in a foreign language proves to be more difficult than reading in the mother tongue because students have fewer opportunities to practice and communicate using the target language (Al-Badareen et al., 2020). This challenge is evident in EFL classrooms, where teachers face students with varying levels of reading proficiency, requiring a strategic approach to accommodate different learning needs (Al-Badareen et al., 2020).

The complexity of reading comprehension challenges is also illustrated through student performance data. Research shows that almost all students fail the diagnostic pre-test for TOEFL reading comprehension, with mastery rates ranging from 0% to 39% (Mertosono et al., 2020). The low performance is attributed to several factors, including limited vocabulary mastery and a lack of background knowledge on reading topics (Mertosono et al., 2020). Many students can recognize individual words but fail to relate them to a coherent meaning in the context of a sentence or text (Song et al., 2024). This difficulty is often exacerbated by the student's focus on the process of solving the meaning of the word rather than understanding the content of the reading as a whole (Song et al., 2024).

This challenge is not only experienced by students but also by teachers. Teachers often struggle to guide students in understanding the information in the text, particularly due to students' low interest in reading (Song et al., 2024). Many students feel bored, less motivated, and struggle to come up with ideas or identify the main points of a paragraph, especially when encountering much unfamiliar vocabulary in the text (Rahayu et al., 2024; Assiddiq & Sasmayunita, 2022). In the context of UPT SMP Negeri 15 Gresik, many students also show similar conditions, as they often feel bored during reading lessons and tend to be less engaged in classroom activities. These challenges are exacerbated by the cognitive demands of reading comprehension in the context of EFL. EFL learners often exhibit limitations in basic linguistic skills, including vocabulary mastery, syntactic comprehension, and inferential reasoning (Tassawa et al., 2025). This deficiency leads to a fragmented interpretation of the text and hurts reading interest (Tassawa et al., 2025). Additionally, a lack of exposure to reading practices and an excessive focus on high-stakes standardized testing often encourage superficial reading habits (Tassawa et al., 2025).

One of the leading causes of low reading comprehension skills is the use of less effective learning strategies and methods. Traditional instructional approaches, such as paper-based lecture and exercise methods, tend to make students more passive and less involved in the learning process (Song et al., 2024). In addition, at UPT SMP Negeri 15 Gresik, teachers still rely on traditional media in the learning process, such as worksheets and printed textbooks, which makes students easily bored and less motivated to improve their reading skills. Conventional teaching methodologies often prioritize grammar and memorization approaches over communicative skills, thus failing to develop essential reading skills (Tassawa et al., 2025). The limited use of interactive learning media exacerbates this situation, as students lose motivation and struggle to comprehend the reading content (Rahayu et al., 2024). The absence of explicit instruction on reading strategies also causes students to lack a clear framework when navigating the text (Tassawa et al., 2025). As a result, monotonous teaching methods trigger anxiety, decreased motivation, and avoidance of reading (Song et al., 2024; Tassawa et al., 2025).

Alternatively, Problem-Based Learning (PBL) has emerged as a transformative instructional approach that is fundamentally different from conventional methods. PBL emphasizes students' active participation, problem-solving, and critical thinking, making it relevant to be applied in teaching English reading (ZHAO, 2023). Unlike traditional methods that make students passive, PBL puts students in real problem-solving situations through questions that stimulate critical thinking and active engagement in reading comprehension (ZHAO, 2023). This approach engages students in collaborative and discussion-based learning, encouraging the development of analytical skills and an in-depth understanding of the text (Song et al., 2024).

Research indicates that PBL can significantly enhance EFL learners' critical thinking skills compared to traditional teaching methods, while also positively influencing language skills, including vocabulary acquisition, speaking, writing, and reading comprehension, through an emphasis on authentic tasks and practical application (Song et al., 2024). This approach integrates explicit reading instruction, engagement with authentic materials, and collaborative discussions, thereby improving students' reading comprehension (Song et al., 2025). The main strength of PBL lies in its structured question strategies that help students understand key ideas and important details in the reading, form their own perspectives, and encourage critical thinking (ZHAO, 2023).

However, the success of PBL can be increased through technology support, one of which is the use of Wordwall. The Wordwall platform provides a range of interactive games that support reading, learning, and vocabulary mastery, thereby making the learning process more engaging and meaningful (Perdana et al., 2023). Research indicates that Wordwall can enhance students' motivation to learn and improve their test results, as evidenced by a significant increase in pre-test and post-test scores (Perdana et al., 2023). PBL's integration with Wordwall is expected to create an interactive learning experience, increase student engagement, and facilitate better reading comprehension (Song et al., 2024).

Although research on PBL and Wordwall has been conducted, significant gaps in research remain. Few studies in Indonesia have specifically explored the effectiveness of PBL integration with Wordwall in improving EFL students' reading comprehension (Song et al., 2024). Most previous research has still focused on conventional strategies, such as the Intisari and Hamburger strategies, without utilizing technology-based media (Marlinton et al., 2023). In addition, most studies focus on higher education and rarely explore the implementation of interactive digital platforms in secondary schools (Putra et al., 2023; Meka et al., 2024). Existing research also faces methodological limitations, such as small sample sizes and a lack of random sampling, making the findings difficult to generalize (Nasim et al., 2024). Therefore, experimental research with a stronger design and a wider sample is needed to provide more accurate empirical evidence.

The urgency of the research is further reinforced by the limited empirical evidence available on the integration of Problem-Based Learning with technology-enhanced platforms in secondary education settings. While existing research has primarily focused on the quantitative evidence of PBL's effectiveness, there remains a limited understanding of the mechanisms underlying PBL's ability to foster critical thinking and reading comprehension skills (Song et al., 2025). The scarcity of studies that specifically explore the effectiveness of PBL integration with Wordwall in improving EFL students' reading comprehension abilities represents a significant gap that requires immediate investigation (Song et al., 2024).

Therefore, to address this research gap, combining Problem-Based Learning (PBL) with Wordwall presents a promising approach for overcoming students' difficulties in reading comprehension at UPT SMP Negeri 15 Gresik. Many students still face challenges in understanding English texts, primarily due to limited vocabulary mastery, a lack of background knowledge, and a reliance on traditional teaching methods. Integrating PBL, which emphasizes active learning, critical thinking, and problem-solving, with Wordwall, which provides interactive and engaging reading activities, is expected to help students build essential skills, increase motivation, and make reading tasks more meaningful. This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of using Problem-Based Learning combined with Wordwall in improving students' reading comprehension skills in the EFL context. Through this integration, the research seeks to provide empirical evidence and practical insights into the use of technology-based PBL to enhance students' reading comprehension in junior high school settings.

1.2 Scope and Limitation

This research focuses on grade VIII students at UPT SMP Negeri 15 Gresik who participate in English reading activities using Wordwall media. The research was limited to efforts to determine the effectiveness of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) strategies combined with Wordwall in improving students' reading comprehension skills. This study does not discuss learning strategies or other digital media. Additionally, the study's participant pool was limited due to its specific focus on grade VIII students, so the findings may not be generalizable to students at different grade levels or schools.

1.3 Research Question

Based on the background and limitations of the problem, this research is focused on answering the following questions:

1. Is the application of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) strategy integrated with Wordwall effective in improving the reading comprehension of 8th-grade students at UPT SMP Negeri 15 Gresik?
2. What is the students' perception of the use of Wordwall in the implementation of PBL strategies in learning to read English?

1.4 Hypothesis of the Study

H₀: The application of the Problem-Based Learning strategy integrated with Wordwall is not effective in improving students' reading comprehension.

H_a: The application of the Problem-Based Learning strategy integrated with Wordwall is effective in improving students' reading comprehension.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To measure the effectiveness of the Problem-Based Learning strategy integrated with Wordwall in improving the reading comprehension of 8th-grade students of UPT SMP Negeri 15 Gresik.
2. To investigate students' perceptions of using Wordwall as part of the PBL strategy in English reading activities.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This research is expected to provide the following benefits:

1. For teachers, the results of this research can serve as a reference for developing more engaging and effective reading teaching methods that utilize technology.
2. For the development of educational science, this study makes an empirical contribution to the effectiveness of integrating PBL and Wordwall interactive media in EFL learning at the junior high school level.

1.7 Definition of Key Terms

1. Problem-Based Learning (PBL): Problem-Based Learning (PBL) is a teaching method that puts students to learn through real problems that are complex and open, which serves as a means to encourage understanding of principles and concepts (Ali, 2019). This pedagogical approach is innovative because it supports and facilitates student learning independence (Guo et al., 2024)
2. Wordwall: Wordwall is an effective technology medium in transforming traditional vocabulary learning into an interactive and game-based learning experience. As an educational platform, Wordwall offers a range of learning games that enhance student motivation in a fun and engaging manner, making it particularly useful for language learning that emphasizes the importance of student involvement (Santi et al., 2023).
3. Reading Comprehension: Reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning through interaction between the reader and the written text. It involves understanding words, sentences, and ideas by using background knowledge, vocabulary, and reading strategies (Lotfi Sin & Siahpoosh, 2020). In this study, reading comprehension specifically refers to students' ability to understand the content, structure, and language features of narrative texts after participating in Problem-Based Learning (PBL) activities supported by Wordwall media.

