

## **START WITH SIMPLE STORIES: BOOSTING EIGHTH GRADERS READING COMPREHENSION AT SMPN 19 PALU**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The objective of this study is to determine whether using the Start with Simple Story (SSS) Method could improve the reading comprehension of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 19 Palu. A pre-experimental one-group pretest–posttest design was applied to 31 purposively selected students. Data collection was conducted using pretest and posttest assessments. The pretest was administered to measure the students' initial knowledge, while the posttest was given to measure the improvement in their reading comprehension after the treatment. The average pretest score was 32.77, while the average posttest score was 64.51. Using a significance level of 0.05, the researcher observed that the calculated *t*-value (7.82) was higher than the *t*-table value (2.042). The conclusion is that the Start with Simple Story (SSS) Method significantly improves the reading comprehension of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 19 Palu. These findings imply that the SSS method effectively reduces students' reading anxiety by providing accessible materials. Therefore, it is recommended that EFL teachers integrate simplified storytelling to foster early comprehension success.*

**Keywords:** *Improving, Reading Comprehension, Start with Simple Story (SSS) Method.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Reading continues to be a crucial skill in the development of assessments for overall language proficiency. Evaluating reading skills goes beyond merely measuring comprehension, it now encompasses the ability to navigate digital environments, evaluate source credibility, and apply information to new contexts (Grabe & Yamashita, 2024; PIRLS, 2026).

Reading is a fundamental language skill that junior high school students need to master. It holds great importance because the majority of formal assessments are presented in written form, and even oral interviews may require reading skills for specific tasks. Thus, reading can be considered the most crucial skill for achieving success in educational settings (Nufus & Ifadloh, 2021). At the junior high school level, most questions in the national English examination focus on reading comprehension. Therefore, having strong reading comprehension is key to achieving satisfactory exam results. In this regard, mastering reading comprehension is crucial for students in facing the national examination in English.

Referring to the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum, students are given the freedom to choose reading materials that align with their interests and needs. This approach aims to enhance their motivation to read while also allowing teachers the flexibility to select texts that are relevant to the local context and

students' preferences. In addition, teaching methods can be adapted to help students develop a deeper understanding of the texts and improve their analytical skills. The Merdeka Curriculum also emphasizes the use of innovative and interactive teaching strategies to holistically improve students' reading comprehension.

Students' reading comprehension remain one of the greatest challenges in the field of education. Based on data obtained from various surveys and research studies, many students in Indonesia still struggle to comprehend texts, both in Indonesian and English. This certainly poses a barrier to the learning process, as reading serves as the foundation for studying various other subjects. Low reading proficiency also impacts students' academic achievement and their ability to think critically.

Referring to the initial observations conducted by the researcher on eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 19 Palu, several issues were identified, particularly in reading comprehension. First, many students had difficulty identifying the main ideas and supporting sentences in a text. Second, their overall understanding of English texts was quite low, as they struggled to grasp the meaning due to a limited vocabulary. Referring to the paragraph above, it can be concluded that students need a conducive classroom environment to enhance their motivation to learn English. Moreover, the use of engaging, interactive, and effective learning media is essential to support students in improving their reading comprehension. Therefore, the development of appropriate media and teaching strategies for English, particularly in the area of reading, is something that must be given serious attention.

Based on the researcher's initial visit to the school observed that many students, particularly those in class VIII, did not meet the criteria for proficient English reading comprehension. Interviews with English teachers revealed that students struggled to identify specific information from reading, as evidenced by their performance on comprehension assessments. When questioned about passage details, students often exhibited confusion or provided incorrect answers.

Additionally, students showed a preference for non-academic activities over focusing on learning, with many displaying decreased attention to the teacher. Some students even left class when feeling bored. Given these observations, the researchers plan to implement innovative methods to improve students' reading comprehension enjoyably. This method is called the Start with Simple Story (SSS)

Method. Its aim is to determine its effectiveness in improving students' reading comprehension.

The Start with Simple Story (SSS) method remains a highly effective alternative to traditional reading instruction in contemporary EFL classrooms. Recent research confirms that by introducing learners to simplified, illustrated stories and gradually increasing text complexity, the SSS method significantly reduces cognitive barriers and enhances learner engagement (Isral et al., 2024). Current studies emphasize that the method's focus on contextual guessing and extensive reading (ER) without heavy dictionary reliance promotes not only reading fluency but also substantial gains in vocabulary mastery and student confidence (Wiranegara, 2022; Zein et al., 2023).

The significance of this research lies in its strategic approach to bridging the literacy gap often found in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, particularly at the junior high school level. While conventional methods often overwhelm students with complex structures prematurely, this study underscores the psychological and cognitive benefits of the Start with Simple Story (SSS) method. As indicated by Fauzi (2023), this method provides a necessary pedagogical scaffold that allows students to achieve incremental success by lowering reading anxiety and easing cognitive processing, which is vital for long-term academic resilience in language learning. By validating the effectiveness of the SSS method specifically within the unique demographic of SMP Negeri 19 Palu, this research highlights how pedagogical simplicity can lead to significant statistical gains in comprehension.

Furthermore, this study offers a distinct novelty by examining the intersection of the SSS method with student engagement in a post-pandemic educational landscape, a period where student baseline literacy and classroom attention spans face unprecedented declines. Unlike broader studies, this research provides a granular look at how simplified narratives act as an immediate catalyst for intrinsic motivation; as suggested by Paratih (2026), improved comprehension and reading motivation exist in a deeply symbiotic relationship, where accessible texts empower learners to become more engaged. The primary contribution of this work is both practical and theoretical: it provides English educators with a proven, low-resource framework to revitalize reading instruction, while simultaneously

contributing to the contemporary body of literature that advocates for "Extensive Reading" principles over rote, word-for-word translation (Nur Fitria, 2023; Renandya & Jacobs, 2022). Ultimately, this study serves as a foundational reference for schools seeking to implement scalable, student-centered literacy interventions.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

### **Materials**

The study utilized two primary instruments to gather data: observation sheets and academic tests. First, structured observation sheets were designed based on the targeted teaching methodology to evaluate the instructional process, focusing on two distinct dimensions: teacher activities (assessing lesson delivery fidelity, time management, and scaffolding effectiveness) and student activities (tracking engagement, peer collaboration, and task responsiveness). Second, pretests and posttests were administered to measure academic growth. Each assessment consisted of five multiple-choice questions to evaluate literal comprehension such as identifying main ideas, character traits, and chronological plot points and five essay questions structured to assess higher-order thinking skills, including analyzing themes, inferring motivations, and evaluating moral lessons. Parallel to these instruments, the core intervention was guided by detailed lesson plans spanning six meetings, each utilizing distinct narrative texts such as the local legend "Tangkuban Perahu" and the classic fairy tale "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs". These specific stories were selected based on the students' reading proficiency and prior knowledge, as their familiar chronological structures and modified vocabulary minimized cognitive overload. Furthermore, balancing the local cultural familiarity of "Tangkuban Perahu" with the universal recognition of "Snow White" allowed students to focus on language acquisition rather than plot decoding. Finally, the instructional delivery was enhanced through supporting media, including laptops, whiteboards, markers, and illustrated narrative text handouts, which served to optimize student engagement and visual understanding throughout the treatment

### **Method**

This research employed a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design with no control group, involving a population of 111 eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 19 Palu and a purposive sample of 31 students from class VIII C. This specific design was selected due to administrative constraints within the school

setting that prevented the isolation of a comparable control group without disrupting the academic schedule. According to Purba (2023), conducting single-group pre-experiments is highly pragmatic and widely accepted in classroom-based research where maintaining school administrative stability overrides strict laboratory control. However, the absence of a control group presents limitations, as it cannot completely eliminate internal validity threats such as history, maturation, and testing effects (Suhadi & Hartono, 2024).

To select the sample, a purposive sampling technique was utilized based on recommendations from the school's English teacher and preliminary classroom observations. Class VIII C was chosen because the participants shared a homogenous academic background characterized by a low-to-intermediate English reading proficiency level, high reading anxiety, and consistent difficulties with literal comprehension and vocabulary decoding, making them the most suitable candidates for the intervention. As emphasized by Rosiana et al. (2022), purposive selection based on pre-defined diagnostic criteria ensures that pedagogical treatments target the exact sub-population facing severe instructional barriers, thereby maximizing the social and educational relevance of the study.

The independent variable was the Start with Simple Story (SSS) method, while th

The dependent variable was reading comprehension. The research process included administering a pretest to assess baseline reading skills, conducting a treatment over six meetings using the SSS method where students read narrative texts in groups without dictionaries, inferred meanings, participated in discussions, shared findings, and completed follow-up tasks, and giving a posttest to measure improvement. Finally, the collected data were analyzed by calculating mean scores and deviation scores, followed by a *t*-test to assess if the reading comprehension improvement was statistically meaningful at a significance level of 0.05.

## **RESULTS**

The result of the study are presented to directly answer the central research question of this study: "Can the use of the Start with Simple Story (SSS) method improve the comprehension of VIII students at SMP Negeri 19 Palu?" To provide a statistically rigorous and empirical answer, the data obtained from the pretest and posttest were computed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

## Descriptive Statistical Analysis

To evaluate whether the SSS method systematically enhances students' reading comprehension, a comparative analysis between the baseline skills (pretest) and post-intervention skills (posttest) was performed. Data from the pretest revealed that the eighth-grade students of Class VIII C at SMP Negeri 19 Palu initially demonstrated a deficient level of reading proficiency when encountering English narrative texts. This baseline deficiency aligns with the findings of Ahmadi (2023), who noted that junior high school EFL learners frequently demonstrate low performance due to high reading anxiety and cognitive resistance when encountering unadapted target-language texts.

As summarized in Table 1, the mean score obtained by the 31 participants during the pretest was only 32.77. According to the school's minimum mastery criterion (KKM=60), this baseline average falls firmly into the (Very Poor) category. A closer inspection of the individual scores showed that the highest score achieved in the pretest was 50, while the lowest score was 20. Out of the entire class, only 2 students (6.45%) managed to achieve a passing grade, confirming that the vast majority faced severe difficulties with narrative text comprehension prior to the treatment. The fact that almost the entire class failed to reach the KKM threshold highlights a common issue in EFL contexts, where students struggle to comprehend texts because they lack the threshold of vocabulary knowledge required for autonomous reading (Nation, 2021). Consequently, instead of grasping the global meaning of the narrative, students often get trapped in mechanical, word-for-word decoding, which severely disrupts their comprehension flow (Renandya & Jacobs, 2022).

**Table 1.** Pretest and Posttest Mean Scores

Test Type	Mean Score	Highest	Lowest	Students Passing	Passing %
Pretest	32,77	50	20	2	6,45%
Posttest	64,51	85	45	15	48,38%

Following the six-session intervention utilizing the SSS method, a substantial upward shift in reading scores was observed. The posttest results showed that the classroom mean score rose to 64.51, indicating an absolute gain of 31.74 points compared to the pretest baseline. Furthermore, student achievement relative to the school standard improved markedly; the number of students

successfully reaching or exceeding the KKM threshold increased to 15 students (48.38%). The highest score recorded in the posttest reached 85, while the lowest score advanced to 45. This descriptive progression indicates that the SSS method helped a significant portion of low-achieving students pass the academic threshold.

Hypothesis Testing (Inferential Statistical Analysis)

While the descriptive gains demonstrate a positive trend, inferential statistical analysis was required to determine whether this 31.74-point increase directly answers the research question or if it was merely an accidental byproduct of chance. Since this study monitored a single group over time, a paired-sample  $t$ -test was administered with a standard significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ .

The statistical computation yielded a  $t$ -value of 7.82 ( $t = 7.82, p < 0.05$ ). Because the calculated probability ( $p$ -value) is significantly lower than the established significance threshold, the null hypothesis, which states that the SSS method has no effect on reading skills, is rejected. Consequently, the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This inferential outcome provides a definitive, statistically backed answer to the research question: the use of the Start with Simple Story (SSS) method significantly improves the reading comprehension of the eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 19 Palu.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that students' reading comprehension improved significantly after the implementation of the Start with Simple Story (SSS) method. Prior to the treatment, many students struggled to comprehend narrative texts due to limited vocabulary and an over-reliance on dictionaries, which often disrupted their reading flow. The SSS method effectively mitigated these barriers by introducing short, illustrated, and highly engaging stories. This graded approach allowed students to gradually build reading confidence and stamina without being overwhelmed by dense or complex lexical items. This outcome reinforces the empirical evidence by Fauzi (2023), who confirmed that utilizing the SSS method systematically yields a significant positive shift in secondary school students' reading comprehension performance.

Furthermore, the integration of group-based activities facilitated peer learning, creating a collaborative environment where students pooled their knowledge to infer meanings from context, negotiate interpretations, and discuss

story content. According to Penalba (2026), structured peer collaborations in EFL settings serve as crucial mechanisms for emotional and cognitive regulation, allowing learners to share academic demands and actively construct textual meanings. This collaborative framework significantly reduced reading anxiety, fostered active participation, and shifted the students' focus from tedious, word-for-word translation toward global text comprehension. This shift is vital because extensive, scaffolded interaction with accessible texts trains students to look past individual word boundaries to grasp wider narrative structures (Nur Fitria, 2023).

A critical element of the intervention was the restriction on dictionary use, which forced students to abandon mechanical look-ups and instead rely on cognitive reasoning and contextual clues. Over time, this practice cultivated stronger inferencing skills and strategic reading behaviors. As highlighted by Paratih (2026), minimizing dependency on external decoding aids encourages incidental vocabulary attention, prompting readers to form conceptual assumptions directly from the story's context. The substantial improvement in posttest scores, validated by statistical analysis showing a highly significant difference, empirically proves that the SSS method is highly effective in enhancing literal and interpretive reading comprehension. These outcomes align closely with previous literature, corroborating the findings of Zainuddin et al. (2022) and Wiranegara (2022), who reported that scaffolded, simplified reading programs markedly boost the literacy skills of low-achieving language learners. Furthermore, providing a high volume of comprehensible input through simplified narratives is widely recognized as a superior alternative to traditional vocabulary drills for long-term comprehension enhancement (Elvriza & Nurcholis, 2025).

Despite these positive outcomes, certain instructional challenges emerged during the early stages of the treatment. Initially, students experienced cognitive discomfort when adapting to a dictionary-free environment, and some exhibited a tendency to disengage when encountering unfamiliar lexical items. However, these obstacles were progressively overcome as students became more accustomed to peer scaffolding and contextual decoding. Ultimately, this study contributes a valuable pedagogical framework to EFL reading instruction, demonstrating that the SSS method functions as more than just an engaging classroom strategy; it serves as a transformative instructional tool that successfully shifts students from passive,

dictionary-dependent decoders into autonomous, strategic readers within junior high school contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that the Start with Simple Story (SSS) method significantly improves the reading comprehension of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 19 Palu. The main pedagogical contribution of this research lies in its empirical framework for transitioning low-achieving, dictionary-dependent learners into active, strategic readers. By utilizing simplified, graded narrative texts paired with visual aids and peer collaboration, the SSS method offers a systematic instructional pathway that lowers cognitive load and reading anxiety. This approach successfully enables EFL students to focus on holistic text processing and context-based decoding rather than becoming stagnant during word-for-word translation.

The inferential statistical analysis confirms a highly significant difference between pretest and posttest scores, proving that SSS is a powerful strategy for developing literal comprehension skills. In reading instruction, literal comprehension refers to the baseline ability of students to locate, extract, and recall information that is explicitly stated in the text, such as identifying main ideas, character actions, and chronological plot structures. Cultivating these literal skills is critical because they serve as the foundational cognitive building blocks required before students can successfully transition into higher-order reading tasks, such as interpretive inferencing, structural analysis, and critical evaluation of a text.

Based on these findings, the SSS method is recommended as a highly practical and adaptable approach for English reading instruction, particularly for junior high school classrooms dealing with low literacy engagement and high reading anxiety. While further research is required to evaluate its long-term effects across broader text genres, this study underscores the immense educational significance of scaffolded extensive reading. Ultimately, this intervention highlights that by starting with accessible, graded materials, language instructors can effectively foster learner autonomy, strengthen foundational literacy, and cultivate lifelong reading confidence among young language learners (Day, 2023; Renandya et al., 2024; Zainuddin et al., 2022).

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