

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Textbooks play a central role in formal education systems, particularly in English language teaching, as they serve as the primary instructional resources that shape classroom practices, learning objectives, and assessment activities (Prodanović & Gavranović, 2022). Tomlinson (2011) emphasizes that textbooks function as the pedagogical backbone of classroom instruction because they determine not only what is taught but also how learning is structured. Similarly, Richards (2014) argues that in many EFL contexts, textbooks strongly influence teachers' instructional decisions, especially when teachers rely on them as the main teaching guide. Therefore, the quality of textbooks directly affects the quality of learning experiences provided to students.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, textbooks are tools to help students improve both linguistically and cognitively (Xie, 2024). According to Grabe and Stoller (2019), effective language learning materials should engage learners in meaning-making processes that go beyond grammar and vocabulary practice. In support of this viewpoint, Tomlinson (2011) argues that to support meaningful learning, language textbooks should encourage students to think, reflect, and process information deeply in order to promote meaningful learning. This viewpoint highlights the crucial cognitive engagement in EFL textbook design.

To support students' linguistic and understanding development, English textbooks provide various language skills activities, one of which is reading. Reading plays a vital role in language development since it provides students with a rich vocabulary, grammatical awareness, and discourse skills (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). In addition, Snow (2002) explains that reading comprehension involves constructing meaning through interaction between the reader and the text, which requires both linguistic knowledge and cognitive processing. Similarly, Grabe (2009) emphasizes that reading is not a passive activity but an active process that involves interpreting, analyzing, and synthesizing information. Consequently, reading instruction aims to foster deeper understanding rather than surface-level understanding.

Within reading instruction, reading questions play a crucial role in shaping students' cognitive engagement with texts (Maplethorpe et al., 2022). According to Afflerbach et al. (2020), questions guide students' attention and influence how they process textual information. Supporting this argument, Kintsch (2004) explains that comprehension questions can either promote shallow processing, such as locating explicit information, or deeper processing, such as integrating ideas and making inferences. Thus, the quality of reading questions determines whether students engage in surface learning or develop a deeper understanding (Barikmo, 2021).

At the global level, contemporary education emphasizes the development of deep learning and higher-order thinking skills as essential competencies for the twenty-first century (Miterianifa et al., 2021). As Fullan and Langworthy

(2014) define deep learning as a process in which learners actively construct knowledge, connect ideas, and apply understanding in meaningful contexts. Similarly, the OECD (2019) highlights that modern education systems should prioritize critical thinking, problem-solving, and analytical skills to prepare learners for complex real-world challenges. These global expectations place significant demands on the cognitive quality of textbook materials.

In Indonesia, these global educational priorities are represented in the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum. Kemdikbudristek (2022) states that the curriculum places a strong emphasis on developing learning, student autonomy, and the development of higher-order thinking skills. Supporting this policy direction, Suryadi (2021) argues that the Merdeka Curriculum seeks to shift classroom practices from content transmission toward deep conceptual understanding. As a result, textbooks that are aligned with this curriculum are expected to facilitate learning tasks that encourage critical and reflective thinking (Huda et al., 2024).

Despite these curricular expectations, several studies indicate that English textbooks used in Indonesian schools still predominantly emphasize lower-order cognitive skills (Ariawan & Kholidi, 2022). As Silalahi (2022) found, reading questions in senior high school English textbooks mainly focus on factual recall and explicit information. Similarly, Purba (2024) reports that many reading tasks fail to challenge students to analyze or evaluate texts, suggesting that the cognitive demands remain limited. These findings reveal a gap between curriculum objectives and the practices implemented in textbooks. Further

evidence of this issue is provided by Febria (2024), who found that reading questions in Indonesian EFL textbooks rarely encourage students to connect ideas or construct interpretations. Elmiana (2018) also argues that textbook activities often prioritize linguistic accuracy over cognitive depth. Concurrently, these studies show that reading comprehension questions often fail to support deep understanding, even though textbooks are supposed to align with higher-order learning objectives.

To evaluate the depth of students' understanding, an appropriate analytical framework is required. Biggs and Collis (1982) introduced the Structure of the Observed Learning Outcome (SOLO) Taxonomy, which categorizes learning outcomes based on the structural complexity of understanding. According to Biggs and Tang (2011), SOLO Taxonomy provides a clear hierarchy of understanding, ranging from separated to integrated and generalized comprehension. This framework allows researcher to examine how learning tasks reflect different levels of understanding.

SOLO Taxonomy emphasizes the quality and depth of understanding demonstrated in learning tasks, especially how ideas and information are structured within questions. Biggs and Tang (2011) argue that SOLO emphasizes how well learners integrate ideas and construct meaning. Supporting this view, Hattie and Brown (2004) state that SOLO is particularly useful for analyzing learning tasks that aim to promote conceptual understanding. Therefore, SOLO Taxonomy is considered suitable for analyzing reading questions in textbooks.

However, despite its relevance, the use of SOLO Taxonomy in Indonesian textbook analysis remains limited. Most previous studies have relied on Bloom's Taxonomy to examine cognitive levels in reading questions. As noted by Purba (2024) and Febria (2024), few studies have analyzed textbooks using SOLO Taxonomy, particularly at the junior secondary level. This indicates a clear research gap in the literature.

This gap becomes more significant when considering government-issued textbooks such as *English for Nusantara*. As an official textbook published by Kemdikbudristek, *English for Nusantara* is expected to align closely with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum. Richards (2014) argues that government textbooks play a crucial role in standardizing educational quality, while Tomlinson (2011) emphasizes that such textbooks should model best pedagogical practices. Therefore, examining the cognitive quality of reading questions in this textbook is essential.

Empirical observations conducted during PLP II (*Pengenalan Lingkungan Persekolahan II*) at SMPN 23 Medan show that teachers used *English for Nusantara* textbook for Grade 9. Preliminary data from the textbook revealed that some reading questions focused on the Uni-structural and Multi-structural Levels of understanding. During reading activities using the *English for Nusantara* textbook for Grade 9, students are generally directed to find explicit answers literally from the text without connecting or interpreting the information more deeply. As a result, reading activities in the classroom seem to focus more on finding answers than developing deeper understanding, as students are rarely

encouraged to interpret information, connect ideas, or build broader meanings from the text. According to Biggs and Collis (1982), these levels involve identifying isolated pieces of information rather than integrating ideas. Supporting this interpretation, Hattie and Brown (2004) argue that tasks at these levels rarely promote deep understanding. The limited presence of Relational and Extended-Abstract Level questions raises concerns about the textbook's ability to foster deep learning.

b. Read the text and answer the questions that follow.

Orangutan

Orangutans are great apes from Indonesia. Orangutan means man of the forest. They live in Sumatra and Borneo. The scientific name of Orangutan from Northern Sumatra is *Pongo Abellii* and the scientific name of Orangutan from Borneo is *Pongo Pygmaeus*.

Orangutans have big bodies. A male orangutan can be more than 100 kilograms and can be quite tall. His height can be up to 150 centimeters tall. Female orangutans are smaller and shorter than the males. A mature female orangutan's weight is about 40 kilograms. Her height is about 120 centimeters tall.

Orangutans have reddish brown hair. Unlike monkeys, they do not have tails. They have strong arms. They use their arms to swing between branches.

Orangutans live with their small family groups. They usually live in the tree branches where they build their nests. Orangutans' favorite food is fruits. They also eat insects, honey, bird eggs, bark, and plants. They sometimes eat meat too. When they are thirsty, they sometimes drink the water from holes in the tree branches.

Orangutans are an endangered species because their habitat is threatened by people doing deforestation. The number of Bornean orangutans around 2017 was estimated at about 104,000 and the Sumatran orangutans about 7,500.

(Adapted from: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/species/orangutan>)

Questions:

- Orangutans are ...
 - Monkeys
 - Apes
 - Birds
 - Reptiles
- A male orangutan can be ... meters tall.
 - 150
 - 1.5
 - 120
 - 1.2
- Orangutans have strong ...
 - Arms
 - Hair
 - Fur
 - Tails
- Orangutans can be categorized as ...
 - Herbivores
 - Carnivores
 - Insectivore
 - Omnivores
- There are about ... orangutans in Sumatra and Borneo.
 - 104,000
 - 7,500
 - 111,500
 - 200

Worksheet 1.7

Figure 1.1 Reading Questions Adapted from English for Nusantara Textbook

This condition highlights a gap between the curriculum expectations of the Merdeka Curriculum and the actual cognitive demands of reading questions in the *English for Nusantara* textbook. Fullan and Langworthy (2014) emphasize that deep learning requires tasks that promote integration and transfer of knowledge, while Kemdikbudristek (2022) underscores the importance of

higher-order thinking in curriculum implementation. However, the reading questions analyzed do not consistently reflect these principles.

For these reasons, the researcher focuses on analyzing the levels of understanding reflected in the reading questions of the English textbook entitled *English for Nusantara* for Grade 9 based on SOLO Taxonomy. This textbook was chosen because it is officially published and distributed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology. Additionally, previous studies in Indonesia have seldom analyzed English textbooks through the SOLO Taxonomy framework. Thus, the researcher seeks to fulfill this gap by examining the levels of understanding based on SOLO Taxonomy that are contained in the reading questions of the English textbook. Through this analysis, the researcher aims to ensure that the reading questions provided in the textbook truly support students' cognitive growth and foster deep learning in line with current educational objectives.

1.2 The Problem of the Study

Based on the background of the study above, the researcher would like to formulate this study as: How are the levels of understanding represented in the reading questions of the *English for Nusantara* textbook for Grade 9 based on SOLO Taxonomy?

1.3 The Objective of the Study

In accordance with the formulation of the problem above, the objective of this study is to identify how levels of understanding are represented in the reading questions of the *English for Nusantara* textbook for Grade 9 based on SOLO Taxonomy.

1.4 The Scope of the Study

This study investigates the reading questions in the Reading Sections of the *English for Nusantara* Textbook for Grade 9 used at SMP Negeri 23 Medan. This analysis is limited to reading questions because they provide deeper insight into students' thinking, allowing students to improve the high-level thinking skills promoted by textbooks. In this study, the researcher will focus on examining these reading questions using the level of understanding in the SOLO Taxonomy, which includes Pre-structural, Uni-structural, Multi-structural, Relational, and Extended-Abstract Levels.

1.5 The Significances of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to provide meaningful theoretical and practical contributions, as presented below.

1. Theoretically

The results of this study are expected to enrich the understanding of how reading questions in an English textbook, with the levels of

understanding in SOLO Taxonomy, that able to support teaching and learning process in mastering language skills, especially reading skills.

2. Practically

a. For the Teachers

This study can help teachers select or design reading questions that support deep learning and promote a higher level of understanding that is appropriate with the SOLO Taxonomy.

b. For the Students

This study provides students with knowledge of the value of the levels of understanding and the need to improve these skills in reading activities. Thus, this study gives motivation to improve their own practice.

c. For Future Researchers

This study will provide benefits for future researchers who conduct similar analyses on textbook questions using SOLO Taxonomy.