

BEYOND LIBRARY FACILITIES: HOW THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT SHAPES STUDENTS' READING INTEREST AND LITERACY ENGAGEMENT

Rana Raihanah¹, Nadrun², Dewi Rara Amiati¹
ranarayhanah@gmail.com

¹*English Education Study Program, Teacher Training and Education Faculty,
Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu*

²*English Education Study Program, Tadulako University*

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of the school learning environment on the reading interest of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Tolitoli. Employing a descriptive qualitative design, data were triangulated through student questionnaires, direct classroom and library observations, and in-depth teacher interviews. The findings reveal that a supportive learning environment, characterized by comfortable physical spaces, visually engaging materials, active teacher involvement, and positive peer influence, significantly enhances students' reading engagement. However, the study also identifies critical challenges, notably a lack of diverse non-textbook reading materials and a heavy reliance on teacher-assigned tasks rather than intrinsic motivation. The research concludes that while institutional and social support effectively facilitates structured reading habits, targeted infrastructural improvements and motivational strategies are required to foster independent, lifelong literacy.

Keywords: Learning environment, reading interest, junior high school, literacy engagement, qualitative study.

BACKGROUND

Reading interest is a fundamental catalyst for students' academic development and cognitive growth. Students with high reading engagement tend to comprehend subject matters more effectively and achieve superior academic performance (Umamy, 2024). However, cultivating a robust reading habit is a complex process influenced by various external factors, predominantly the learning environment. A conducive learning environment, encompassing physical aspects like library facilities and non-physical aspects such as teacher support, provides vital stimuli that can significantly elevate students' literacy engagement.

Recent studies have underscored the critical role of environmental facilitation in literacy. For instance, Lestari (2024) demonstrated that comprehensive library services and facilities directly correlate with increased reading interest among high

school students. Similarly, Alfiah et al. (2025) highlighted those physical interventions, such as establishing literacy corners, effectively strengthen the school's reading culture. While these studies provide valuable insights, a critical research gap remains in the current literature. The majority of existing studies tend to evaluate institutional facilities quantitatively or focus primarily on high school and urban settings. There is a paucity of in-depth qualitative research exploring how the interplay between physical environments (e.g., library conditions) and instructional environments (e.g., teacher strategies and peer influence) specifically shapes the reading interest of junior high school students in developing areas.

These environmental dynamics are particularly evident at SMP Negeri 3 Tolitoli. Preliminary observations indicate

that while the school possesses basic facilities, students' reading interest fluctuates significantly depending on the classroom atmosphere, the availability of engaging books, and the teacher's instructional approach. Therefore, this study aims to fill the empirical gap by qualitatively investigating the multifaceted role of the learning environment in influencing eighth-grade students' reading interest at SMP Negeri 3 Tolitoli.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing Reading Interest and Cognitive Literacy

Reading is not merely a passive process of word recognition, but rather a complex cognitive interaction between the reader and the text (Smith, 2015). In the context of learning, reading comprehension requires students to actively connect their prior knowledge with new information derived from the text (Anderson, 2017; Cain, 2016). This cognitive engagement is significantly influenced by students' reading fluency and speed (Hudson, 2018). Therefore, a love of reading serves as the primary driving force; students with a strong love of reading will more readily and voluntarily process these cognitive complexities, which ultimately underpin their literacy success in school.

Reading is not merely a passive process of recognizing words; it is a complex cognitive interaction in which students actively connect prior knowledge with new information, interpret meaning, and evaluate ideas presented in the text (Smith, 2015). In learning contexts, successful comprehension therefore depends not only on access to texts but also on the reader's fluency, accuracy, automaticity, and appropriate reading pace (Anderson, 2017; Cain, 2016), which reduce the cognitive effort required for word recognition and allow greater attention to meaning (Juanda et al., 2024, p. 416). Reading interest is consequently a crucial

motivational foundation for literacy development. Students who are genuinely interested in reading are more likely to read voluntarily, persist when texts become challenging, and engage deeply with their content. Through this sustained cognitive and motivational engagement, they can develop stronger comprehension, vocabulary, and subject-specific knowledge (Hudson, 2018), thereby establishing a foundation for continued academic and literacy success.

The Learning Environment's Ecology in Fostering a Reading Culture

Students' interest in reading does not develop naturally in a vacuum but is heavily dependent on the ecology of their surrounding learning environment. The physical school environment, such as the availability of adequate library facilities and comfortable reading corners, has been shown to correlate directly with increased student literacy participation (Smith et al., 2017). Lestari (2024) emphasizes that the quality of library services and facilities serves as a primary draw capable of significantly stimulating students' interest in reading. Furthermore, specific physical space interventions, such as creating literacy corners within classrooms, can strengthen the school's reading culture by bringing books closer to students in their daily activities (Alfiah et al., 2025).

However, physical facilities alone are not sufficient to sustain reading interest. The non-physical environment, particularly emotional support from teachers and the creation of interactive learning spaces, serves as a crucial catalyst (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). Social interaction with teachers who provide book recommendations and motivate students transforms reading activities from a perceived burden into an enjoyable experience.

The Intersection of Learning Environments, Interest in Reading, and Academic Performance

Cumulatively, a conducive learning environment does more than stimulate students' intrinsic and extrinsic interest in reading; it also strengthens the academic competencies that develop through sustained engagement with texts (Juanda et al., 2024, p. 416). The learning environment functions as the foundation of this process by providing access to literacy resources, supportive instruction, and meaningful opportunities to read. In turn, reading interest serves as the mechanism that transforms these conditions into improved learning outcomes: as students read more frequently and with greater motivation, they are better positioned to expand their vocabulary, deepen comprehension, and strengthen subject-specific knowledge. This relationship is consistent with Umamy's (2024) finding that the school environment positively influences Indonesian-language achievement both directly and indirectly through students' reading interest (Umamy, 2024). Thus, a literacy-rich school environment can generate a reinforcing cycle in which supportive conditions cultivate reading interest, sustained reading develops students' competencies, and improved academic performance further encourages their engagement with learning.

METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the impact of the school environment on students' reading interest in English learning. According to Sugiyono (2016), qualitative research generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observable behaviors. The variables in this study consist of the learning environment as the independent variable and the students' reading interest as the dependent variable.

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 3 Tolitoli, located in Central Sulawesi. The participants included eighth-grade students and an English teacher, selected to provide comprehensive insights into the reading culture and environmental factors within the school.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through methodological triangulation involving questionnaires, interviews, and observations. A 10-item questionnaire was distributed to the students to assess their reading preferences and environmental motivators. Subsequently, in-depth interviews were conducted with the teacher to explore instructional strategies and institutional support. Direct classroom and library observations were also carried out to confirm the behavioral information obtained from the primary data sources.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model, which encompasses three stages:

- (1) Data Reduction: The raw data from questionnaires, interview transcripts, and observation notes were filtered and simplified to focus on information relevant to solving the research questions.
- (2) Data Display: The reduced data were systematically organized and presented in descriptive narrative text, allowing for a clearer understanding of the emerging patterns regarding students' reading habits.
- (3) Conclusion Drawing and Verification: The final step involved synthesizing the displayed data to draw credible conclusions regarding the impact of the learning environment on reading interest, supported by valid evidence gathered from the field.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Through the triangulation of questionnaires, interviews, and direct observations, this study identified several significant environmental and instructional factors that shape students' reading interest at SMP Negeri 3 Tolitoli.

Students' Perspectives on Reading and Environment

Data derived from the student questionnaires (n=20) revealed a generally positive attitude toward reading, driven by both internal motivations and external environmental factors. A significant majority of the respondents perceived reading as a valuable activity for expanding knowledge and insight. Students exhibited higher enthusiasm when the reading materials aligned with their personal interests, such as folklore, novels, comics, and texts discussing local culture, geology, or technology.

The physical learning environment notably influenced their engagement. Students frequently cited a clean, quiet, and comfortable library, alongside visually appealing books with clear illustrations, as key motivators. Furthermore, peer influence played a crucial role; many students reported feeling inspired to read when they observed their friends engaging in reading activities. However, extrinsic motivation, specifically teacher-assigned tasks, remained a primary driver for a large portion of the students. Conversely, a minority of students expressed disinterest, associating reading with boredom or sleepiness, particularly in noisy or non-conducive environments.

Teacher's Strategies and Instructional Environment

Corroborating the students' responses, the teacher interview highlighted that approximately 88% of the students exhibited high reading enthusiasm when provided with heavily illustrated books and clear instructional guidance. The teacher

strategically utilizes varied assignments, such as requiring students to find online references at home, match regular and irregular verbs in texts, and retell story contents, to stimulate active reading.

Moreover, the teacher dynamically adapts the learning environment to combat student fatigue. Recognizing that students' enthusiasm wanes during the final periods of the school day, the teacher allows flexible and less monotonous learning arrangements, such as permitting students to study on the floor while maintaining instructional focus.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the learning environment at SMP Negeri 3 Tolitoli plays a multifaceted and consequential role in shaping eighth-grade students' interest in reading. The physical environment constitutes a foundational factor: comfortable library spaces and visually engaging books appear to reduce barriers to participation and encourage students to spend more time engaging with texts. This relationship suggests that the availability and quality of learning facilities are not merely supplementary features but essential conditions for sustaining students' reading engagement. These findings align with the assertion by Smith et al. (2017) that appropriate classroom and library conditions are critical to literacy development.

However, physical facilities alone are insufficient to cultivate a sustained reading interest. The study indicates that the instructional environment created by the teacher determines how effectively available resources are transformed into meaningful reading experiences. The teacher's proactive strategies, including the assignment of interactive reading tasks, the provision of guidance, and the adaptation of the physical learning space to reduce student fatigue, function as important external stimuli that encourage participation. By making reading more interactive and responsive to students' needs, these strategies can strengthen

students' positive attitudes toward reading. This finding supports the conclusions of Johnson and Johnson (2018), who emphasized that emotional support and interactive learning spaces make reading more enjoyable and can significantly improve students' reading interest.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal limitations that prevent the current learning environment from fully developing students' independent reading habits. Although the library provides a comfortable setting, its limited collection of materials beyond standard textbooks restricts students' opportunities to explore diverse topics and genres. Consequently, the teacher must rely on electronic sources when preparing homework assignments, indicating that the physical reading infrastructure does not yet adequately support sustained and varied reading. Moreover, the fact that some students read primarily because of teacher assignments suggests that their engagement remains largely extrinsically motivated. This dependence may encourage compliance with immediate academic requirements but is unlikely, by itself, to produce lifelong reading habits.

Overall, the learning environment at SMP Negeri 3 Tolitoli facilitates reading interest most effectively when physical resources, teacher support, and motivational practices operate together. Comfortable facilities create the necessary conditions for engagement, while teacher-led activities provide direction and encouragement (Alfiah et al., 2025; Lestari, 2024; Umamy, 2024). To convert this structured participation into intrinsic and lifelong interest, the school should expand its collection of age-appropriate and diverse reading materials, maintain engaging reading spaces, and implement strategies that give students greater choice and personal relevance in their reading. Without these complementary improvements, the existing environment may continue to support assigned reading but remain less

effective in fostering independent, sustained reading among students.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

Based on the qualitative findings and discussion, this study concludes that the learning environment at SMP Negeri 3 Tolitoli plays a pivotal and multifaceted role in shaping students' reading interest. The integration of comfortable physical facilities, such as the library, with interactive and visually appealing reading materials provides a strong foundation for literacy engagement. Crucially, the non-physical environment, specifically the teacher's proactive instructional strategies, adaptive classroom management, and positive peer influence, acts as the primary catalyst that transforms passive facilities into active reading habits.

However, the study also concludes a critical pedagogical caveat: the current environmental support is predominantly effective in driving extrinsic, structured reading (e.g., fulfilling teacher assignments) rather than fostering independent, intrinsic motivation. The limited diversity of non-textbook materials in the library remains a significant barrier. Therefore, to maximize students' reading interest, schools must move beyond merely providing basic physical facilities; they must continuously curate diverse reading resources and cultivate a holistic instructional environment that bridges the gap between assigned reading and independent, lifelong literacy.

Suggestion

Based on the empirical findings and the drawn conclusions, the following recommendations are proposed to further optimize the learning environment and foster students' reading interest:

- (1) For School Administrators: It is highly recommended to diversify the library's collection by acquiring a wider range of non-textbook reading materials, such as

contemporary fiction, local folklore, and interactive digital texts. Furthermore, the institution should establish structured literacy programs, such as book clubs or reading competitions, to transform the library into a dynamic hub for independent reading rather than merely a quiet study space.

- (2) For English Teachers: Teachers are encouraged to continue employing adaptive instructional strategies while actively seeking to transition students from extrinsic compliance (reading solely for assignments) to intrinsic motivation. Integrating digital reading platforms and granting students the autonomy to select reading materials aligned with their personal interests can significantly boost voluntary reading habits.
- (3) For Future Researchers: Future studies are encouraged to conduct longitudinal research to observe the long-term impact of enhanced learning environments on students' literacy development. Additionally, conducting comparative studies across schools with differing environmental conditions (e.g., urban versus rural settings), as well as investigating the role of parental and community involvement, would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the external factors shaping students' reading habits.

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