

From Screens to Pages: Contextual Strategies to Boost Gen Z's English Reading Motivation in Rural Indonesian EFL Classrooms

Novri Susanti Suparman¹, Destri Wahyuningsih², Denny Wahyuni³, Roswati⁴, Ummi Rasyidah⁵

¹ Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Nurul Falah, Airmolek, Indonesia; novrisusantisuparman@gmail.com

² STKIP Insan Madani, Airmolek, Indonesia; destri070@gmail.com

³ Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Nurul Falah, Airmolek, Indonesia; dennywahyunismile@gmail.com

⁴ Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim, Pekanbaru, Indonesia; roswati@uin-suska.ac.id

⁵ Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim, Pekanbaru, Indonesia; ummirasyidah1987@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

reading motivation;
generation Z;
English as a foreign language;
digital distractions;
instructional strategies

Article history:

Received 2025-07-26

Revised 2025-11-04

Accepted 2025-12-31

ABSTRACT

Reading motivation among Generation Z students in rural Indonesian EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms remains critically low due to digital distractions, outdated materials, and limited home support. While prior studies highlight the benefits of digital engagement and gamification, little is known about how these strategies function in under-resourced, rural settings. This study employed a mixed-methods design using a convergent parallel approach. Quantitative data were collected from 150 senior high school students across SMA, SMK, and MA institutions in Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu, using a questionnaire adapted from the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ). Qualitative data were obtained through interviews and focus group discussions with 10 teachers and 10 students. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics were integrated to identify motivational barriers and context-appropriate strategies. Findings revealed that digital distractions, vocabulary difficulties, lack of family encouragement, and exam-oriented instruction were key factors undermining reading motivation. Only 27% of students reported experiencing interactive or digital reading activities in class. Students expressed preference for digital content but struggled with comprehension due to limited vocabulary and irrelevant materials. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory, the study suggests that increasing students' autonomy, competence, and task value—through gamified learning, contextualized materials, and family engagement—can significantly boost motivation. These insights offer actionable strategies for teachers and policymakers to revitalize reading culture in rural EFL settings.

This is an open access article under the [CC BY-NC-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) license.



Corresponding Author:

Novri Suanti Suparman

Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Nurul Falah, Airmolek Indonesia; novrisusantisuparman@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading motivation has long been acknowledged as a crucial determinant of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) achievement. Nevertheless, it continues to pose a serious challenge among Generation Z students, particularly in rural Indonesian contexts such as Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu. Senior high school students across SMA, SMK, and MA institutions in this region often display low enthusiasm for reading English texts. Such disengagement is reflected in weak comprehension, limited vocabulary development, and a heavy reliance on exam-oriented practices that fail to cultivate enduring reading habits. Preliminary interviews and classroom observations further reveal that students are easily distracted by digital entertainment, find English vocabulary overwhelming, and rarely receive consistent encouragement from teachers or parents. These conditions point to an urgent need to reconceptualize how reading motivation is fostered in rural EFL classrooms.

Existing research consistently emphasizes that reading motivation differs across generational and contextual lines. Generation Z, frequently described as digital natives, tend to prefer interactive, visual, and technology-driven resources rather than static, print-based materials (Johnson, N. F., & Broadley, T. 2011.; Liu, M., & Zhang, D. 2023; Farr & Leńko-Szymańska, 2024; Suparman, 2024). Studies have also demonstrated that the integration of gamification—that is, the application of game elements such as points, rewards, and competition—can enhance engagement and persistence in EFL learning (Deterding et al., 2011; Dao et al., 2022; Albaaly, 2025). In addition, situational interest, defined as short-term engagement triggered by the relevance or novelty of learning materials, has been shown to positively influence reading motivation when texts align with learners' personal experiences and aspirations (Cole et al., 2014; Cancino et al., 2025; Poorebrahim et al., 2019).

However, most of these studies have been conducted in urban or well-resourced environments. Empirical investigations into reading motivation among rural Indonesian students remain limited. Recent findings highlight significant disparities in literacy performance between rural and urban schools due to unequal access to resources, teacher quality, and parental support (Baharuddin et al., 2025). Furthermore, Dunifa, L. (2024) identifies sociocultural barriers in rural communities—such as ethnocentric perceptions of English as a foreign culture and limited exposure to digital literacy—as key demotivating factors in English learning. Similarly, Setiamunadi (2025) reports that rural students in West Sumba exhibit interest in reading yet lack sustained motivation due to minimal environmental and familial reinforcement. Although these studies offer valuable insights, none directly examine how digital habits, gamified learning, and sociocultural contexts interact to influence EFL reading motivation in rural Indonesian settings. This indicates a substantial research gap that warrants further exploration, especially in regions like Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu, where educational resources remain scarce, and digital engagement patterns among Generation Z students are evolving rapidly.

Against this background, the present study investigates the underlying factors contributing to low motivation to read English texts among Generation Z high school students in Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu and proposes strategies that align with their digital habits and sociocultural realities. The study is anchored in three theoretical constructs: digital natives, gamification, and situational interest, which collectively inform how instructional design can better respond to learners' motivational needs. To deepen the theoretical analysis, the study also employs Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT). SDT posits that motivation thrives when learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled (Hills et al., 2013; Liu & Zhang, 2023). Within the context of reading instruction, integrating digital tools and gamified tasks can enhance autonomy by offering choice, build competence through manageable challenges, and foster relatedness through collaboration. Meanwhile, EVT emphasizes that learners' motivation is shaped by their expectations of success and the value they assign to a given activity (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Farr & Leńko-Szymańska, 2024). For rural EFL learners, providing relevant reading materials, strengthening vocabulary support, and promoting parental involvement can enhance both expectancy and task value. By combining SDT and EVT, this research establishes a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how targeted instructional strategies can transform disengagement into sustained reading motivation.

In summary, although motivation to read English texts has been widely explored in urban and tertiary EFL settings, empirical attention to rural Indonesian contexts remains minimal. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by examining the specific challenges faced by Generation Z students in Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu and by proposing contextually responsive strategies grounded in contemporary motivational theories. The findings are expected to contribute both theoretical insights and practical implications for revitalizing reading engagement in Indonesian EFL classrooms.

2. METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods design to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' motivation in reading English texts. The quantitative strand captured overall patterns in reading behavior, preferences, and self-reported motivation, while the qualitative strand explored students' and teachers' lived experiences and perceived challenges. A convergent parallel design was adopted, allowing both data types to be collected simultaneously and integrated during interpretation. This integration ensured that numerical trends were supported and explained by qualitative insights, producing a more holistic account of the phenomenon.

2.1 Participants and Sampling

Participants consisted of 150 students and 10 English teachers from senior high schools in Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu, Riau Province, representing general (SMA), vocational (SMK), and Islamic (MA) institutions. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure diverse representation across school types, locations (urban and rural), and proficiency levels. This non-random approach was chosen due to logistical constraints of fieldwork in a rural regency and the need to include information-rich cases relevant to the study's objectives. Data collection took place between February and March 2025.

2.2 Instruments and Data Collection

Two main instruments were used: a questionnaire and semi-structured interview/focus group discussion (FGD) guides. The questionnaire was adapted from the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) by Wigfield & Guthrie (1997), focusing on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, task value, reading frequency, and preferences for digital or printed formats. The instrument was translated into Bahasa Indonesia, reviewed by two EFL experts, and piloted with 20 students, producing a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.84, indicating strong internal consistency.

Semi-structured interviews and FGDs were conducted to obtain qualitative insights into students' reading attitudes, digital habits, perceived difficulties, and the influence of classroom practices and parental support. Interviews with 10 teachers and 10 students lasted approximately 30–40 minutes each, while three FGDs of six to eight students encouraged interactive discussion. All sessions were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized.

2.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 25, applying descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, percentages) to summarize trends in motivation and preferences. Inferential statistical tests were not employed because the study was exploratory and context-specific, focusing on one regency; therefore, generalization beyond the sample was not the intent. The aim was to describe and interpret the existing conditions rather than test causal relationships.

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically following Wigfield & Guthrie (1997) six-phase framework:

- (1) familiarization with data through repeated reading of transcripts,
- (2) generation of initial codes,
- (3) searching for themes by clustering related codes,
- (4) reviewing themes for coherence and relevance,
- (5) defining and naming themes, and
- (6) producing the final report integrating narrative evidence.

Themes such as digital distractions, vocabulary barriers, family support, and exam-oriented instruction emerged through this iterative process. To enhance reliability, two researchers independently coded 20% of the data and reached an inter-rater agreement of 0.82. Discrepancies were discussed until consensus was achieved. Member checking and data triangulation between questionnaires, interviews, and FGDs were used to ensure credibility.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The study followed strict ethical protocols approved by the institutional review board of STAI Nurul Falah. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all students, teachers, and guardians. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence. Data confidentiality was maintained through anonymization and secure storage of recordings.

In summary, the methodological choices—mixed-methods design, purposive sampling, validated instruments, thematic analysis, and ethical rigor—ensured both breadth and depth in understanding the complex issue of reading motivation among Generation Z students in Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu. The integration of descriptive quantitative results and thematically analyzed qualitative findings provided a balanced, context-sensitive understanding of the factors shaping students' engagement with English reading.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Quantitative Results

The questionnaire results indicated several patterns of students' English reading motivation in Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu. Table 1 summarizes the main quantitative findings.

Table 1. Summary of Students' Reading Motivation and Barriers (N = 150)

Aspect	Percentage (%)
Preference for digital media over printed books	65
Preference for printed textbooks	22
Main difficulty in reading	72
Difficulty understanding grammar/sentence structure	48
Uninteresting or outdated school materials	54
Lack of family encouragement to read	61
Lessons too exam-oriented	58
Teachers using digital/interactive materials	27

Overall, the data show that students are more engaged with digital platforms than with school textbooks, but their reading motivation is hindered by linguistic, familial, and pedagogical factors.

Vocabulary deficiency and limited parental encouragement were the most frequently cited barriers, while exam-oriented instruction reduced intrinsic motivation for reading.

3.2 Qualitative Results

Thematic analysis of interviews and focus groups identified four main themes: digital distractions, vocabulary and comprehension challenges, limited family and school support, and exam-oriented teaching.

Students described how digital media competed with reading time. One student explained that social media is “more interesting and easier to enjoy” than reading English texts (S3, FGD 1). This reflects the dominance of short, visual content among Generation Z learners.

Vocabulary problems were another recurrent theme. As one student noted, “I often stop reading when I encounter too many unfamiliar words” (S7, FGD 2). Teachers confirmed this challenge, observing that “the textbooks used in class contain vocabulary beyond students’ level, which discourages them from continuing” (T5, Interview).

A lack of family encouragement was also emphasized. One participant stated that “parents rarely encourage reading; they usually ask us to help with chores instead” (S2, FGD 3). Teachers similarly mentioned that “many parents believe reading English is solely the school’s responsibility” (T8, Interview).

Finally, several teachers admitted that classroom reading activities were “mostly focused on exam preparation rather than building reading enjoyment” (T3, Interview).

These accounts reinforce the quantitative data, revealing that motivation is shaped by both internal factors (low confidence and limited vocabulary) and external factors (home environment and instructional approach).

3.3 Linking Findings to Theoretical Frameworks

The results align closely with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT). From an SDT perspective (Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M., 2000; Hills et al., 2013), students’ motivation was undermined by unmet psychological needs.

- a. Autonomy was constrained because reading materials were outdated and lacked relevance to students’ interests.
- b. Competence was weakened by vocabulary difficulties that made reading tasks feel overwhelming.
- c. Relatedness was limited, as both teachers and parents offered minimal encouragement.

Together, these factors suppressed intrinsic motivation, leading students to view reading as an obligation rather than an enjoyable or self-driven activity.

From the EVT perspective (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), students’ expectancy for success was low due to repeated comprehension failures, and their task value was weak because reading materials seemed irrelevant to daily life. Without a sense of usefulness or personal connection, students lacked motivation to invest effort.

3.4 Comparison with Previous Research

The findings confirm prior research indicating that Generation Z students are easily distracted by digital entertainment (Johnson & Broadley, 2011; Nash, 2023). The persistent vocabulary gap supports (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020) claim that lexical knowledge strongly predicts reading engagement. The low level of parental involvement echoes findings by (Putra, 2023), who emphasized that family encouragement is crucial for sustaining reading habits in rural contexts. Moreover, the dominance of exam-oriented teaching reflects concerns raised by (Ngoc & Iwashita, 2012) and (Suparman & Irsandi, 2022), who observed that rigid curricula often limit creativity and reduce intrinsic motivation.

3.5 Implications

Interpreted through SDT and EVT, these findings suggest that motivation can be enhanced by addressing autonomy, competence, and task value simultaneously. Teachers should provide students with choices of reading materials that align with their interests, simplify vocabulary loads to increase perceived competence, and build a sense of community through collaborative reading tasks.

Practically, gamified platforms such as *Kahoot*, *Quizizz*, or *Duolingo Stories* can appeal to students' digital habits while maintaining pedagogical focus. Family-based programs—for example, “Family Reading Time” or parent workshops—could also strengthen home support. Teachers are encouraged to shift from test-driven practices toward meaning-oriented and interactive reading strategies such as role-playing, storytelling, and small-group discussions.

3.6 Limitations and Future Directions

This study's limitations include its restricted geographic focus (one regency) and the use of descriptive statistics, which precludes causal inference. Infrastructural limitations in rural areas also challenge the implementation of digital approaches. Future studies should compare rural and urban contexts, apply longitudinal designs to observe motivational changes, and test the impact of digital or parental involvement interventions experimentally.

The study concludes that Generation Z students' low motivation to read English in Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu stems from intertwined linguistic, social, and pedagogical barriers. Framed within SDT and EVT, the findings emphasize that students' autonomy, competence, and perceived value of reading must be strengthened simultaneously. Enhancing relevance, interactivity, and family engagement can foster sustainable reading motivation, particularly in under-resourced rural EFL settings.

The findings of this study reveal that students' disengagement from English reading is influenced by digital distractions, limited vocabulary, exam-oriented materials, and insufficient support from both teachers and parents. These observations are consistent with Kaban, 2021, who found that digital gamification can re-engage learners by aligning reading tasks with their digital lifestyles. Similarly, (Namaziandost et al., 2020) highlighted that situational interest generated through multimedia and interactive reading platforms can strengthen intrinsic motivation, especially among younger learners.

Furthermore, this study supports (Dao et al., 2022) conclusion that mobile-assisted reading can promote motivation in resource-limited settings. When reading activities are supported by relevant technology and personalized content, students' sense of competence and autonomy increases, leading to stronger persistence in reading English texts.

Interpreted through SDT and EVT, these findings underscore that motivation is sustainable when reading materials are meaningful, culturally relevant, and reinforced by social support systems from families and teachers.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined the underlying causes of low English reading motivation among Generation Z students in Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu and identified strategies that are both effective and contextually relevant to rural educational settings. The findings revealed four interrelated barriers: digital distractions that compete with reading time, limited vocabulary and comprehension skills that undermine students' confidence, a lack of family and school support that weakens social encouragement, and exam-oriented teaching that reduces intrinsic engagement. Among these, insufficient autonomy and digital distractions emerged as the most critical challenges shaping students' reading behavior.

Interpreted through the frameworks of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), the study shows that reading motivation improves when learners experience greater autonomy through choice and relevance of materials, enhanced competence through accessible

vocabulary and supportive instruction, and stronger relatedness through teacher and family involvement. These findings suggest that motivation can be nurtured not merely through additional resources but through pedagogical redesign that aligns with rural learners' digital habits, linguistic needs, and community realities.

Rather than merely extending existing theories, this study provides an actionable framework for localizing motivation-based interventions in resource-limited schools. The integration of gamified and technology-enhanced reading activities, contextually relevant materials, and family-school collaboration represents a feasible model that can be adapted to similar rural EFL settings across Indonesia.

Looking ahead, sustainability can be achieved through teacher professional development, digital literacy initiatives, and community-supported reading programs that ensure continuity beyond classroom interventions. Future studies may replicate or adapt these strategies across different rural provinces, enabling cross-regional comparison and refinement. Through such ongoing efforts, rural schools can progressively transform English reading from an exam-focused task into a meaningful and motivating part of students' daily learning lives.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the students and teachers in Kabupaten Indragiri Hulu who participated in this study and generously shared their time and insights. Special thanks are also extended to STAI Nurul Falah for its support throughout the research process. Appreciation is further given to the reviewers and editors of *Jurnal Al-Ishlah: Jurnal Pendidikan* for their valuable feedback and contributions to the improvement of this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. Authors have no personal or financial relationships that could inappropriately influence the conduct or reporting of this research.

REFERENCES

- Albaaly, E. (2025). Effectiveness of Mobile-Assisted Instruction in Enhancing the EAP Reading Performance of Faculty of Education EFL Freshers. *Port Said Journal of Educational Research*, 4(1), 28–76. <https://doi.org/10.21608/psjer.2024.296755.1037>
- Baharuddin, and Burhan. *Urban and rural teacher perspectives on Indonesian educational reform challenges and policy implications*. *Cogent Education* 12.1 (2025) 2497142. (n.d.).
- Cancino, Marco, and Alexandra Fonseca. *EFL Learners' Perceptions of Topic Interest Before and After Reading Individual and Situational Factors*. *Reading Psychology* (2025). (n.d.).
- Cole, J. S., Bergin, D. A., & Whittaker, T. A. (2014). *Predicting student interest in science from attitudes, social experiences, and achievement*. *Journal of Educational Research*. (n.d.).
- Cole, M. T., Shelley, D. J., & Swartz, L. B. (2014). Online instruction, e-learning, and student satisfaction: A three year study. ... in *Open and Distributed Learning*. <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1748>
- Dao, P., Nguyen, M. X. N. C., Iwashita, N., & Spinelli, F. (2022). A Dialogic Approach to Fostering TESOL Teacher-learners' Research Engagement: Insights from a 'Learning-to-Research' Procedure. *TESOL Quarterly*, 56(2), 775–787. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3127>
- Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2000). (n.d.).
- Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L. (2011a). From game design elements to gamefulness: defining "gamification". *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*, 9–15.

- Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L. (2011b). From game design elements to gamefulness: defining "gamification". *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*, 9–15.
- Dunifa, L. (2024). *Sociocultural barriers to English learning motivation in rural Indonesian communities A case study of Southeast Sulawesi*. (n.d.).
- Effects of gamified reading activities on motivation and engagement in EFL contexts A study of digital-age learners*. (n.d.).
- Farr, F., & Leńko-Szymańska, A. (2024). Corpora in English Language Teacher Education: Research, Integration, and Resources. *TESOL Quarterly*, 58(3), 1181–1192. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.3281>
- Hills, C., Ryan, S., Warren-Forward, H., & ... (2013). Managing 'Generation Y' occupational therapists: Optimising their potential. *Australian ...* <https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12043>
- Johnson, G., & Broadley, T. (2011). Learning style and digital activity: An ecological study. *ASCILITE 2011 Changing Demands ...* <https://espace.curtin.edu.au/handle/20.500.11937/26620>
- Johnson, N. F., & Broadley, T. 2011. *Digital natives and digital immigrants Teaching with technology*. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*. (n.d.).
- Liu, M., & Zhang, D. 2023. *Exploring digital reading motivation among EFL learners The role of technology integration and self-efficacy*. *ELT Journal*,. (n.d.).
- Namaziandost, E., Shafiee, S., & Esfahani, F. (2020). *Impact of Teaching Cultural Materials on Reading Motivation and Reading Attitude of Iranian Upper-intermediate EFL Learners*. <https://doi.org/10.22051/LGHOR.2020.31488.1310>
- Nash, J. (2023). *Nash, J. (2023). Social media, brain rot and the slow death of reading*. *Financial Times*.
- Ngoc, K. M., & Iwashita, N. (2012). A comparison of learners' and teachers' attitudes toward communicative language teaching at two universities in Vietnam. In *University of Sydney Papers in tesol*. academia.edu. https://www.academia.edu/download/34351742/A_comparison_of_learners_and_teachers_attitudes_toward_communicative_language_teaching_at_two_universities_in_Vietnam.pdf
- Poorebrahim, F., Sattarpour, S., & Ajabshir, Z. F. (2019). Written text quality and socio-affective strategy use: Monolinguals versus bilinguals across different proficiency levels. *Journal of Asia TEFL*, 16(4), 1119–1134. <https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2019.16.4.4.1119>
- Putra, A. (2023). Parental Education Conditions in Rural Areas of Bengkulu: Case Study on Responsive Gender, Parenting Styles, Equality Behavior, and Learning Needs. *Muwazah: Jurnal Kajian Gender*, 15(2), 95–118.
- Schmitt, N., & Schmitt, D. (2020). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge university press.
- Setiamunadi, Antonina Angraini. *West Sumba Students' Reading Interest, Motivation, Obstacles, and Strategies*. *Journal of Extensive Reading* 6.1. (n.d.).
- Suparman. (2024). *Reading Comprehension in the Digital Age Strategies for STAI Nurul Falah Students*.
- Suparman, & Irsandi. (2022). *ADAPTING LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS TO GENERATION Y'S LEARNING STYLES A STUDY IN THE CONTEXT OF MODERN EDUCATION*.
- Wigfield, A., & Eccles, J. S. (2000). Expectancy-value theory of achievement motivation. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 68–81. <https://doi.org/10.1006/ceps.1999.1015>
- Wigfield, A., & Guthrie, J. T. (1997). Relations of Children's Motivation for Reading to the Amount and Breadth of Their Reading. In *Journal of Educational Psychology Copyright* (Vol. 89, Issue 3). American Psychological Association, Inc.