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# FROM PASSIVE DECODING TO ACTIVE MEANING-MAKING: HOBBY-BASED READING INSTRUCTION IN AN EFL CLASSROOM AT A MADRASAH ALIYAH IN PRAYA, A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

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**Abstrak**

Rendahnya minat dan motivasi membaca siswa sering dikaitkan dengan ketidaksesuaian antara materi buku teks dan minat pribadi siswa. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi bagaimana hobi membentuk keterlibatan dan proses pemaknaan siswa dalam kegiatan membaca, serta bagaimana pembelajaran membaca berbasis hobi diimplementasikan dan berkontribusi pada pemahaman membaca. Penelitian menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif pada siswa kelas X sebuah madrasah aliyah di Praya, Lombok Tengah, tahun ajaran 2026/2027, dengan teks recount yang disesuaikan dengan hobi siswa seperti olahraga, membaca dan qiro'ah, serta media digital. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas pada empat pertemuan, wawancara semiterstruktur dengan delapan siswa dan satu guru bahasa Inggris (25 Juli 2026), serta telaah dokumen, kemudian dianalisis secara tematik dan ditriangulasi antarsumber. Karena bersifat kualitatif, penelitian ini tidak menggunakan uji hipotesis statistik sehingga tidak melaporkan nilai rerata atau signifikansi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa siswa bergeser dari dekode pasif ke pemaknaan aktif dengan memanfaatkan skema, kecemasan membaca berkurang, dan "expert agency" muncul ketika siswa menjelaskan isi teks kepada teman sebaya. Hambatan yang tetap ada meliputi ketidaksesuaian ejaan dan pelafalan, keterbatasan waktu di lingkungan asrama, serta minat awal yang rendah pada sebagian kecil siswa. Pembelajaran membaca berbasis hobi layak dipertimbangkan sebagai strategi yang relevan secara kontekstual, tetapi bukti yang ada bersifat deskriptif dan tidak membuktikan peningkatan kemampuan membaca secara kausal.

**Kata Kunci:** pemahaman membaca; pembelajaran berbasis hobi; keterlibatan siswa; studi kasus kualitatif; expert agency

**Abstract**

Low reading interest and motivation among EFL learners are often attributed to a mismatch between textbook materials and students' personal interests. This study explored how hobbies shape students' engagement and meaning-making in reading, and how hobby-based reading instruction was implemented and contributed to reading comprehension. A qualitative case study was conducted with tenth-grade students at a madrasah aliyah in Praya, Central Lombok, during the 2026/2027 academic year, using recount texts tailored to

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students' hobbies such as sports, reading and Quranic recitation, and digital media. Data were gathered through classroom observation across four sessions, semi-structured interviews with eight students and one English teacher (25 July 2026), and document analysis, then analysed thematically and triangulated across sources. Because the design was qualitative, no statistical hypothesis tests were run, and no means or significance values are reported. The findings show that students moved from passive decoding to active meaning-making by drawing on background knowledge (schema), reported lower reading anxiety, and displayed "expert agency" when explaining text content to peers. Persistent constraints included mismatches between spelling and pronunciation, limited time to pursue hobbies in a boarding setting, and low initial interest among a small minority. Hobby-based reading instruction appears to be a contextually relevant strategy, although the evidence is descriptive and does not establish causal gains in reading ability.

**Keywords:** reading comprehension; hobby-based learning; student engagement; qualitative case study; expert agency

**Introductio**n

Reading is one of the most essential skills in learning English as a foreign language (EFL). It is not only a channel for acquiring information but also a demanding cognitive process of understanding, interpreting, analysing and evaluating written texts. In academic settings, reading comprehension is widely treated as a core indicator of overall language proficiency because it determines how far learners can engage with learning materials across subjects. At the senior secondary level, students are expected to handle narrative, descriptive and analytical texts, which require not only literal understanding but also inferential and critical reading. In practice, many students still read passively and without genuine understanding of what they read.

A frequently cited source of this problem is low reading interest. Saepurokhman et al. (2023) argue that reading interest shapes knowledge, critical thinking and intellectual development, so weak interest limits exposure to information and reduces cognitive engagement. The wider literacy landscape points the same way: reading enjoyment among children and young people has been reported at a critical low, with direct consequences for academic performance and personal development (Clark, 2014). One proposed explanation is a "mismatch" between the materials schools provide and the interests learners actually hold (Webber et al., 2024). When reading feels disconnected from daily life, the motivation to work through complex texts weakens. Traditional classroom routines, in which reading is reduced to answering comprehension questions, deepen this disconnection, and Widiana et al. (2023) note that such methods often fail to stimulate interest and creative thinking.

Personal interest is therefore a promising entry point. A hobby is an activity pursued voluntarily in leisure time for enjoyment and intrinsic satisfaction, and recent work shows that hobbies can become part of a person's identity and lifestyle rather than a passing pastime (Janeczko et al., 2021). Meaningful activities, hobbies included, also strengthen a sense of purpose and persistence (Ronkainen et al., 2022), and creative hobbies are associated with positive affect and cognitive

well-being (Smith et al., 2022). These claims align with two established motivational perspectives. Self-determination theory holds that people engage more deeply and persistently when an activity satisfies needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Interest theory adds that situational interest, once triggered and sustained, can develop into a durable, well-developed individual interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006). Applied to reading, both suggest that texts rooted in a learner's own passions can raise willingness to read and make comprehension less effortful.

Previous studies have approached this idea mainly through media and strategy. Visual platforms such as Webtoon have been linked to better reading comprehension because they match students' visual preferences (Erya & Pustika, 2021), and social media such as Instagram can be used to steer students towards structured reading activities (Putri et al., 2021). Langstedt and Hunt (2022) describe social networking sites as spaces where adolescents discover and adopt hobbies, and Khadijah et al. (2022) show that playful, engaging tools can support the move from word recognition to deeper understanding. Other lines of work stress strategy and collaboration, such as Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), which improves comprehension and motivation through peer interaction and strategies like "Click and Clunk" and "Get the Gist" (Bermillo & Merto, 2022). Extensive reading programmes likewise raise motivation when learners have agency and choice over materials (Abdul Rahman & Mohamad, 2023; Meinawati et al., 2022), and library collections matched to student interests help sustain reading habits (Mokodenseho et al., 2023). Hietanen and Ruismäki (2021) add that building an identity around a personal interest develops agency and confidence that can transfer to academic tasks.

Despite this support, three gaps remain. First, most of the evidence concentrates on specific platforms or instructional techniques, and treats digital tools as the unit of analysis rather than the learner's hobby-based identity as a whole. Second, the existing studies rarely examine how non-digital hobbies such as sports, reading and Quranic recitation can be used as the primary context of an English reading lesson. Third, little qualitative work has examined this approach in the Madrasah Aliyah context, where many students live in boarding arrangements and their exposure to English and to personal hobbies may differ from that of students in regular public schools. These gaps limit our understanding of how interest-based reading unfolds in real classrooms in a specific regional setting.

The problem is concrete at the research site. During a teaching internship in Sembalun, the researcher observed that both students and teachers regarded standard textbook materials as monotonous and detached from students' lives. Many materials, such as model conversations between two students, offered practice but no meaningful context. At MA Ishlahul Ikhwan NW Mispalah Praya, tenth-grade students likewise tend to treat reading as a burden, often relying on word-for-word translation without deep contextual understanding. Anchoring reading tasks in students' hobbies, for example football news for students who follow football, offers the context that textbooks lack and may reduce reading anxiety by making content familiar.

This study therefore addresses the following gap: there is limited qualitative research on how diverse, non-digital hobbies can serve as the main pedagogical resource for tenth-grade reading instruction in a regional Indonesian madrasah. The study aims to (1) examine how students' hobbies shape their engagement and meaning-making processes in reading activities, and (2) investigate how hobby-based reading instruction is implemented and how it contributes to the development of students' reading comprehension, including the learning processes, classroom interactions and practices involved.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### Research design and setting

This study used a qualitative case-study design to examine how hobby-based learning operates in a reading classroom. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research questions concern students' experiences, perceptions and interpretations, which require in-depth, descriptive data rather than numerical measurement. The case was bounded by a specific phenomenon, the use of hobby-based reading instruction, within a specific context: the tenth grade of MA Ishlahul Ikhwan NW Mispalah Praya in the 2026/2027 academic year. The reading materials were limited to recount texts to keep the instructional process consistent and the analysis focused on a single text type.

### Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling according to their relevance to the research focus. The planned criteria were students who participated actively in reading activities, students with identifiable hobbies, and students willing to be interviewed. Eight tenth-grade students with varied hobbies, including football, reading, cooking and Quranic recitation, and one English teacher were interviewed. Many students lived in the school's boarding facilities, which shaped how much time they had for their hobbies. To protect confidentiality, participants are identified here by codes (S1–S8 for students and T for the teacher), not by name.

### Data collection and instruments

Three techniques were combined to allow triangulation, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Data sources and instruments

| Technique | Instrument | Scope | Focus |
|---|---|---|---|
| Classroom observation | Observation checklist and field notes | Four sessions | Engagement, responses to hobby-based texts, teacher–student and peer interaction, indicators of expert agency |
| Semi-structured interview | Interview guide with three focus areas | Eight students and one teacher, 25 July 2026 | Reading habits and motivation; connection between hobbies and comprehension; implementation of hobby-based learning |
| Document analysis | Documentation sheet and classroom photographs | Reading materials, lesson plans, worksheets, reflection logs | Corroboration of interview and observation data |

The interview guide contained nine open questions in three groups. The first group explored feelings during textbook reading, the biggest difficulty in understanding English texts, and how often students read English texts related to their hobbies. The second addressed students' current hobbies, how they handle difficult hobby-related words, and whether hobby texts are easier to understand than regular school texts. The third asked about students' opinions of hobby-matched materials, their confidence in explaining a text to friends, and their future interest in learning English. The observation checklist included indicators of "expert agency": how often students

corrected or clarified technical terms from their hobby knowledge, how often they explained text context to peers without teacher intervention, and the shift from "passive decoding" to "active meaning-making". A hobby interest inventory adapted from the lifestyle-involvement perspective of Janeczko et al. (2021) was used to profile the level of student passion, and CSR strategies (Bermillo & Merto, 2022) structured the group work.

**Instrument quality and trustworthiness**

Because the study was qualitative and used no tests or questionnaires with scored items, statistical validity and reliability coefficients were not computed. Instrument quality was instead addressed through standard trustworthiness criteria: credibility (prolonged engagement and triangulation of interviews, observations and documents), dependability (a documented research process that can be audited), confirmability (interpretations grounded in the data), and member checking with participants. Consistency in the interviews was supported by the semi-structured guide, which fixed the order of the questions while allowing follow-up probes.

**Data analysis**

The data were analysed thematically in five steps: (1) familiarisation with all transcripts, field notes and documents; (2) coding of significant data segments; (3) grouping codes with similar meaning into categories; (4) developing categories into broader themes that represent the findings; and (5) interpreting the themes against the research questions and the relevant theory. No statistical tests, prerequisite tests or hypothesis tests were used, so the findings are presented as themes supported by illustrative interview excerpts and observational descriptions, without frequencies or significance values.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Results**

The findings are organised around the two research questions and draw on four observation sessions, interviews with eight students (S1–S8) and one teacher (T) conducted on 25 July 2026, and document analysis. Table 2 summarises the themes and the evidence supporting each. All themes are qualitative and are not accompanied by frequencies, means or significance values, because the study did not use scored instruments or statistical tests.

Table 2. Themes, evidence and sources

| Research question | Theme | Principal evidence | Data source |
|---|---|---|---|
| RQ1: Hobbies, engagement and meaning-making | Shift from passive decoding to active meaning-making | Students used background knowledge to infer the meaning of recount texts and no longer relied on verbatim translation | Observation, interview, documents |
| RQ1 | Emotional connection and reduced | Students described feeling at ease, more active in asking questions and quicker to grasp material | Interview (S1, S2), observation |

| Research question | Theme | Principal evidence | Data source |
|---|---|---|---|
| | reading anxiety | | |
| RQ1 | Varied engagement and constraints | Spelling–pronunciation mismatch (S3, S6), limited time to pursue hobbies in boarding life (S4), lower initial interest (S5) | Interview |
| RQ2: Implementation and contribution | Hobby-tailored recount texts | Reading tasks built on sports, reading and recitation, and digital media replaced context-free textbook passages | Observation, documents |
| RQ2 | Emergence of expert agency | Students explained text points to peers and consulted knowledgeable classmates for vocabulary (S7, S8) | Interview, observation |
| RQ2 | Ease of concept comprehension | The teacher reported that familiar concepts, background and terms made reading feel less like hard work | Interview (T) |

***Theme 1: Hobbies shape engagement and meaning-making***

The first theme concerns the shift from passive decoding to active meaning-making. Before the intervention, students tended to read words verbatim without grasping contextual meaning and showed high anxiety and low intrinsic motivation when faced with context-bare textbook passages. The observations show a gradual change over the four sessions. In the first session, students appeared confused and hesitant about the unfamiliar method. By the third and fourth sessions, they had adapted to the strategy and felt comfortable asking questions and clarifying difficulties without feeling nervous, shy or intimidated. Once recount texts were linked to their hobbies, students used their background knowledge to infer meaning rather than stalling on unfamiliar vocabulary.

S8, who engaged with football-related content, explained the change in confidence: “It makes it way easier to explain the points to my friends because I’m not just repeating memorized English words but actually sharing something I genuinely know about.” The teacher confirmed the same mechanism from the instructional side: hobby-based texts were much easier for students than regular textbook passages because the concepts, background and specific terms were already familiar to them in real life, so the learners only had to map known ideas onto English words.

The second part of this theme is emotional. Hobbies acted as an emotional anchor that relieved academic stress. S1 reported: “I’m happy because it aligns with my interests, and because the content provided matches my own hobbies; as a result, I’ve become more active in asking questions and am able to grasp the material quickly.” S2, whose hobbies are reading and reciting the Quran, described them as a source of calm: “whenever I do them, they always make me feel at ease and help relieve my worries, stress, sadness, and so on.” These accounts suggest that the emotional security attached to a hobby transferred to the related reading tasks.

The data also captured constraints. Two students identified phonological barriers: S3 said, “written and spoken English aren’t the same—it’s like they have different accents,” and S6 reported, “I often get confused because the text doesn’t match with how I pronounce it.” S4 observed that boarding-school life limited exposure to hobby-related reading: “Yes, once in a while, but only for a short time.” S5 expressed lower general interest (“Not really interest”). Despite these

constraints, the overall pattern across the sources was that personal hobbies increased students' willingness to engage with English reading.

***Theme 2: Implementation and contribution to reading comprehension***

The second theme addresses implementation. Hobby-based reading was carried out through recount texts tailored to students' hobbies, covering sports, literacy habits such as reading and Quranic recitation, and digital media. The texts replaced the context-free passages and conversation drills of the textbook, and the group work followed Collaborative Strategic Reading principles: students used "Click and Clunk" to monitor comprehension and "Get the Gist" to summarise the main ideas of the hobby-based texts. Documents such as recount worksheets and self-reflection logs, together with classroom photographs, corroborated the interview and observation accounts of this process.

Within these tasks, expert agency emerged. Students positioned themselves as knowers of the topic, explaining the text to peers and clarifying domain-specific terms without waiting for the teacher. S8 felt more confident explaining the content precisely because it concerned something he knew well. S7 described a complementary strategy: "If I have trouble, I keep studying, and I'll also ask my friends who know more about it." Table 3 links the observed behaviours to the indicators used on the observation checklist.

Table 3. Observed shift in reading behaviour across the intervention

| Indicator | Early sessions (1–2) | Later sessions (3–4) |
|---|---|---|
| Response to the method | Confusion and hesitation | Clear grasp of the strategy and smooth adaptation |
| Reading mode | Passive decoding, word-for-word reading | Active meaning-making through hobby-related schema |
| Handling of unfamiliar terms | Reliance on the teacher or literal translation | Clarification through hobby knowledge and peer discussion |
| Classroom atmosphere | Hesitant, reluctant to ask questions | Comfortable and supportive, with students asking questions freely |

The description of this shift is based on the researcher's observation notes and is therefore interpretive. No pre-test or post-test scores were collected, so the findings cannot be used to quantify the improvement in comprehension.

**Discussion**

***Why hobbies reshape engagement and meaning-making***

The most consistent result is that students stopped treating reading as decoding and began treating it as meaning construction. The likeliest explanation is schema activation. Comprehending a foreign-language text depends heavily on the background knowledge a reader brings, and a hobby is precisely the domain in which a learner holds the richest, most organised knowledge. When a recount text describes a football match or a recitation routine, students already know the participants, sequence of events and specialised terms, so the cognitive burden shifts from working out what the text is about to mapping known ideas onto English words. This is what T described,

and it explains why S8 could explain the text to peers instead of repeating memorised vocabulary. The finding refines the "mismatch" argument of Webber et al. (2024): the problem with standard materials is not merely that they are dull but that they deny learners the schema that makes inference possible. Context-free textbook dialogues, as observed at the research site, leave decoding as the only available strategy.

The emotional dimension has a second explanation, rooted in motivation theory. Self-determination theory proposes that activities satisfying autonomy, competence and relatedness are pursued with greater persistence (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Hobby-based texts plausibly supported competence, because students were experts on the content, and autonomy, because the topics came from their own choices and identities. Hidi and Renninger (2006) similarly describe how an existing individual interest makes a topic easier to attend to and sustains effort even when the language is difficult. The reported ease and calm of S1 and S2 are consistent with this account, and with Smith et al. (2022), who link creative hobbies to positive affect, and Ronkainen et al. (2022), who link personally meaningful activities to persistence. This pattern also supports the view of Janeczko et al. (2021) that a hobby is closer to a lifestyle identity than to leisure. Students who think of themselves as footballers or reciters carry a stronger self-concept into related texts, and that self-concept appears to reduce the threat of reading in a foreign language. In terms of the affective filter, familiar content lowered anxiety and allowed deeper processing, a mechanism that this study infers from participants' accounts and did not measure.

The constraints deserve equal attention because they qualify the enthusiasm. The spelling–pronunciation mismatch reported by S3 and S6 is a linguistic barrier that no amount of interest can remove, which shows that motivation does not replace explicit instruction in phonics and decoding. The limited time reported by S4 is a structural constraint of boarding life and points to a contextual boundary on interest-based approaches: a hobby can only be a resource if students have the opportunity to engage with it. The low initial interest of S5 is a reminder that hobby-based instruction is not equally effective for every learner, and that students need a variety of hobby options rather than a fixed menu. These constraints also echo Widiana et al. (2023), who argue that conventional approaches alone cannot stimulate creative thinking, but who equally imply that task design matters as much as topic choice.

***Why implementation fostered expert agency***

Expert agency emerged because the instructional design inverted the usual authority relationship. In a standard reading lesson, the teacher and textbook hold knowledge and students try to receive it. In the hobby-based lessons, the students held the domain knowledge and the English text supplied the labels. This repositioning explains why students explained the content to peers and clarified technical terms on their own. It resonates with Hietanen and Ruismäki (2021), who show that building identity around a personal interest develops agency and confidence that learners transfer to academic tasks, and with Abdul Rahman and Mohamad (2023), who found that giving learners choice over materials increases motivation to engage with English text.

The collaborative structure supported this process. Bermillo and Merto (2022) show that CSR improves comprehension and motivation because peers monitor and repair understanding together. In the hobby-themed lessons, "Click and Clunk" and "Get the Gist" were easier to use because students were discussing something they understood, so the group could focus its effort on the English rather than on the content. S7's practice of asking more knowledgeable friends is a clear example. In Vygotskian terms, peers with greater hobby knowledge acted as more knowledgeable others who scaffolded learning within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The classroom thus became student-centred in a literal sense, with expertise distributed across learners

rather than concentrated in the teacher. This is consistent with the argument of Meinawati et al. (2022) that engaging, interest-aligned reading programmes are needed to recover students' reading skills, and with the claim of Mokodenseho et al. (2023) that materials matched to student interests sustain reading habits. Unlike earlier studies of Webtoon or Instagram (Erya & Pustika, 2021; Putri et al., 2021), the present case shows that non-digital hobbies such as sports and Quranic recitation can also serve as the primary context for reading, which extends interest-based reading to a Madrasah Aliyah setting.

***Pedagogical implications and limitations***

The findings carry three implications for EFL reading pedagogy. First, an interest inventory at the start of the term would give teachers the information needed to select or adapt texts. Second, hobby-based texts work best when combined with explicit strategy instruction, such as CSR, and with attention to decoding, because interest cannot compensate for the pronunciation and vocabulary barriers that students reported. Third, teachers should offer a range of hobby topics to avoid excluding students such as S5 whose interests are not represented.

Several limitations frame the transferability of these findings. The study was restricted to recount texts, to one madrasah and to a small purposive sample of eight students and one teacher, so the results are not generalisable to other text types, grades or schools. The evidence consists of observations, interviews and documents, with no pre-test and post-test scores, and the improvement in comprehension is therefore reported as perceived and observed, not as measured. Because the researcher was the main instrument of data collection and interpretation, researcher bias is possible, which triangulation and member checking only partly reduce. These limitations indicate that the study explains how and why hobby-based reading can work in this case, not how large its effect is.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to understand how students' hobbies shape engagement and meaning-making in reading, and how hobby-based reading instruction is implemented and contributes to reading comprehension. On the first question, hobbies changed both the emotional and the cognitive way students approached English texts. Reading about topics they cared about reduced anxiety and encouraged participation, and by drawing on background knowledge students moved from passive decoding to active meaning-making instead of depending on word-for-word translation. On the second question, hobby-based reading was implemented through recount texts tailored to students' interests and supported by collaborative strategies. This arrangement fostered expert agency, in which students confidently explained content, clarified specialised terms and helped one another, and it addressed the mismatch between generic textbook materials and students' lived experience. Reading comprehension was reported and observed to be easier and more productive, although this was not measured by test scores. Constraints remained in the form of pronunciation barriers, limited time for hobbies in boarding life, and low initial interest among some students.

The practical implications are as follows. English teachers should use interest inventories at the beginning of the term and design flexible recount texts around a range of hobbies, while pairing them with explicit strategy and decoding instruction. Students should be encouraged to connect their daily passions with English practice and to use their hobby knowledge to overcome vocabulary barriers through peer-assisted learning. School administrators should support contextually relevant teaching methods and diversify school library collections so that they reflect contemporary

adolescent interests. Future researchers should test hobby-integrated instruction on other text genres and language skills, and use mixed-methods or longitudinal designs in urban, rural and non-boarding schools to measure the long-term effect on standardised reading achievement.

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