



Analysis of Indonesian Language Learning Difficulties in Upper Grade Elementary School Students: A Case Study at Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire

Jasmari^{1*}, Rivaldo Paul Telussa², Refly J. Umpel³

^{1,2}Study Program of Primary Teacher Education, Satya Wiyata Mandala University, Nabire, Indonesia

³ Study Program of Mathematics Education, Satya Wiyata Mandala University, Nabire, Indonesia

*Correspondence e-mail: jasmarisabelau2018@gmail.com

Abstract

This study aims to analyze the forms of Indonesian language learning difficulties experienced by 4th and 6th grade students in elementary school. The method used is qualitative research with a case study approach. The research subjects were 12 students from grades 4 and 6 at Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire, selected through purposive sampling. Data collection techniques were carried out through observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Data analysis used the interactive model of Miles and Huberman consisting of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The results showed that Indonesian language learning difficulties experienced by students include: (1) difficulty in reading comprehension of complex texts, (2) difficulty in writing essays with coherent and cohesive structures, (3) low mastery of standard vocabulary, and (4) difficulty in understanding effective sentence structures. Contributing factors come from internal factors (low reading interest, habit of using regional languages at home) and external factors (less varied teaching methods and limited learning media). The implications of this research are expected to serve as a reference for teachers in designing more effective and innovative Indonesian language learning strategies in upper grade elementary schools.

Keywords: learning difficulties, indonesian language, upper grades, elementary school, qualitative research.



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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian plays a central role in the national education system of Indonesia. As the primary medium of instruction in the learning process at elementary schools, proficiency in the Indonesian language serves as a fundamental basis for students' academic success across all subjects. Law Number 24 of 2009 concerning the Flag, Language, State Symbol, and National Anthem affirms that Indonesian functions as the official state language, the language of instruction in education, and a means of national unity.

However, the reality in the field shows a concerning condition. Many elementary school students, particularly those in the upper grades (Grades 4 and 6), still experience various difficulties in learning Indonesian. Various recent studies indicate that elementary students' reading literacy skills still require strengthening, both in terms of reading comprehension and readiness to face reading literacy assessments based on the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM) (Iskandar et al., 2024; Naimah et al., 2024).

Learning difficulties in the Indonesian language can be understood as obstacles experienced by students in the process of understanding, using, and expressing language skills, including reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In the context of elementary schools, these obstacles are often reflected in low early reading ability and literacy skills, limited vocabulary, as well as difficulties in writing in a coherent and effective manner (Putri et al., 2024). The condition in Papua, particularly in Nabire City, presents its own unique challenges. The diversity of students' first-language backgrounds, most of whom are speakers of local languages in their home environments, often becomes one of the factors that complicates the academic mastery of Indonesian. The phenomenon of local language interference in the use of Indonesian within formal school contexts is also still frequently found among upper-grade elementary school students (Rahman et al., 2022; Suherpan et al., 2025; Sulfasyah & Ernawati, 2024).

This problem is consistent with the results of the researcher's preliminary observations conducted at Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire. Fifth- and sixth-grade teachers reported that students often experience difficulties in understanding long reading passages, composing essays with correct structure, applying spelling rules in accordance with the General Guidelines for Indonesian Spelling (PUEBI), and using standard vocabulary in writing and formal conversations. These problems have contributed to students' low achievement scores in Indonesian, with some classes even failing to meet the established Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKM).

Several previous researchers have conducted studies on learning difficulties in the Indonesian language at the elementary school level. (Puspawati et al., 2025) showed that difficulties in reading comprehension remain a dominant problem among elementary school students. Meanwhile, (Nurahayu & Samsudin, 2022), howed that the strong use of local languages in students' daily lives can contribute to weak formal Indonesian language proficiency. However, studies that specifically examine these two aspects within the context of Papua remain very limited.

Based on the background above, this study was conducted to analyze in depth the forms of learning difficulties in the Indonesian language experienced by upper-grade students at Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire, as well as to identify the underlying factors. The results of this study are expected to provide a meaningful contribution to the development of Indonesian language teaching practices that are more responsive to the needs and characteristics of students in the Papua region.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The qualitative approach was chosen because the study aimed to understand and describe in depth the phenomenon of learning difficulties in the Indonesian language as experienced and perceived by students within the real context of classroom learning at school. Qualitative research enables researchers to interpret the meanings given by participants to social and educational issues in a contextual and in-depth manner (Wahyudin, 2017).

A case study design was selected because this research focused on a specific unit, namely upper-grade students at Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire, by exploring various aspects and information comprehensively and in depth. Through the case study approach, the researcher was able to capture the complexity of learning difficulties within a specific, natural, and context-rich setting (Fadli, 2021).

Research Subjects

The research subjects were determined through a purposive sampling technique, namely the selection of participants based on specific considerations relevant to the objectives of the study. The criteria for selecting the subjects included: (1) fourth- or sixth-grade students of Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire in the 2025/2026 academic year, (2) students identified as experiencing difficulties in learning the Indonesian language based on classroom teachers' recommendations and previous semester report card scores, and (3) students who were willing to participate in the study with the consent of their parents or guardians.

Based on these criteria, 12 students were selected as research subjects, consisting of 7 fourth-grade students and 5 sixth-grade students. In addition to the students, the researcher also interviewed 3 classroom teachers and 1 school principal as supporting informants to enrich the research data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

1. Forms of Indonesian Language Learning Difficulties among Upper-Grade Students

Based on the results of observations conducted over eight meetings, in-depth interviews with 12 students and 3 teachers, as well as an analysis of learning documents, four dominant forms of learning difficulties in the Indonesian language were found to be experienced by fourth- and sixth-grade students at Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire. These four forms of difficulties are described in detail as follows.

a. Difficulties in Reading Comprehension of Complex Texts

The first and most dominant finding in this study was students' difficulty in reading comprehension, particularly when dealing with informative, expository, or argumentative nonfiction texts consisting of more than three paragraphs. Of the 12

research subjects, 10 students (83.3%) were found to have difficulty answering inferential and evaluative questions that required Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS).

Direct observation in Grade 4 on February 12, 2026, revealed a highly representative situation. When the teacher asked students to read a one-page text entitled *The Importance of Preserving Forest Sustainability*, most students were seen repeatedly turning pages back and forth. When asked about the content of the text, they struggled to summarize it in their own words. Of the eight comprehension questions provided, students were able to answer only an average of 2–3 inferential questions correctly, while for explicit (literal) questions they answered an average of 5–6 questions correctly.

The same pattern was consistently found in Grade 6. Analysis of students' worksheets showed that nearly all answers to inferential questions consisted merely of copying sentences directly from the text without any process of interpretation, synthesis, or evaluation. Not a single student was found to be able to provide a complete and accurate inferential response using their own words.

Interviews with one of the research subjects, identified by the initials AR, a sixth-grade student, revealed the difficulties he experienced: *"I read it, but I do not understand the meaning, so I just write what is in the book. If the question is difficult, I look for a similar sentence in the passage and copy it."* A similar statement was expressed by RN, a fifth-grade student: *"If the passage is long, I do not feel like reading it until the end. Usually, I look at the questions first and then search for the answers in the text."*

The "answer hunting" strategy described by RN indicates that students have not yet read texts thoroughly and meaningfully; instead, they read only partially in order to locate keywords that match the questions.

In an interview, the sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Eunike Aba, S.Pd., expressed her concern: *"When I ask these children, 'What message can we learn from this passage?' they all remain silent. They can read, but they cannot understand the content deeply. What they are able*

to do is only answer questions such as 'what,' 'who,' and 'when,' where the answers are directly stated in the text."

The level of students' reading comprehension difficulties could also be observed from the formative assessment results documented by the teacher. Data from the daily test scores on reading comprehension material in the odd semester of the 2025/2026 academic year showed that out of the 12 subjects, 9 students (75%) scored below the school's Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKM), which was 70. The average score for reading comprehension was recorded at only 56.4, far below the average score for the Indonesian language subject overall.

b. Difficulties in Writing Cohesive and Coherent Compositions

The second form of difficulty identified in this study was students' difficulty in producing written compositions that were structured, cohesive, and coherent. An in-depth analysis of 12 student compositions collected during the observation process showed that all students, without exception, experienced serious problems in two main aspects: coherence (the unity of meaning and logical connection between paragraphs) and cohesion (the grammatical linkage between sentences through the use of cohesive devices such as conjunctions, pronominalization, and substitution).

Document analysis of a composition written by a student with the initials FM (Grade 4) on the topic *My Holiday Experience* found that the composition consisted of seven sentences, each standing independently without a clear logical relationship. The first sentence discussed departing for the village, the second suddenly described the food eaten, and the third returned to the travel process. There was no clear thread connecting ideas from one sentence to the next. No appropriate and consistent use of temporal conjunctions (*then, after that, later*), causal conjunctions (*because, therefore, as a result*), or adversative conjunctions (*however, but, although*) was found.

From the 12 compositions analyzed, recurring patterns of writing difficulties were identified and categorized into five groups. First, the absence of topic sentences in paragraphs: 11 out of 12 compositions lacked a clear main sentence in each paragraph, making it difficult for readers to grasp the central idea intended by the writer. Second, the lack of supporting sentences: ideas were not sufficiently developed, and the compositions seemed to “jump” from one event to another without elaboration. Third, the absence of concluding sentences: paragraphs ended abruptly without any summary or transition to the next paragraph. Fourth, unproductive repetition of ideas: some students repeated the same information in nearly identical sentences, indicating an inability to develop ideas. Fifth, inconsistency of point of view: within the same composition, students shifted between first-person and third-person perspectives without any clear reason.

A fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Ikke Nurtiana, S.Pd., clearly described this condition in an interview: *“When I ask the children to write compositions, the results are always very short. Usually only one paragraph with three or four short sentences. If I ask them to add more, they become confused about what else to write. They do not know how to develop ideas. It seems they have thoughts in their minds, but they cannot express them well in writing.”*

c. Low Mastery of Standard Vocabulary and Application of Spelling Rules

The third finding was related to students’ low mastery of standard Indonesian vocabulary and weak application of spelling rules in accordance with the General Guidelines for Indonesian Spelling (PUEBI). Observations during the learning process found that 9 out of 12 students (75%) consistently used nonstandard words in their formal writing.

The results of document analysis of 12 student compositions identified 87 instances of nonstandard vocabulary usage, which could be categorized into three major groups. The first group consisted of lexical interference from Papuan local languages and Papuan

Malay, including the use of the words “*su*” (*already*), “*dong*” (*they/you all*), “*tra/trada*” (*none/not available*), “*kase*” (*give*), “*pi*” (*go*), “*ko*” (*you*), “*pu*” (*have/belong to*), and “*mo*” (*want*). The second group involved the use of informal Indonesian or slang expressions, such as “*bilang*” (*say/tell*), “*kasih tahu*” (*inform*), “*nggak*” (*no/not*), “*gimana*” (*how*), and “*terus*” (*then/after that*), which were used excessively.

The third group consisted of diction errors, namely the selection of words that were inappropriate to the context, such as using “*buat*” instead of “*untuk*” (*for*) in formal sentences, and “*bikin*” instead of “*membuat*” (*make/create*). In addition to nonstandard vocabulary, spelling errors were also found extensively in students’ compositions. The most frequently occurring patterns of spelling errors included: (1) incorrect use of capital letters, especially for the names of days, months, and places that should begin with capital letters; (2) omission of periods and commas where they should have been used; (3) incorrect writing of affixed words, such as “*di tulis*” (should be “*ditulis*” / *written*), “*mem baca*” (should be “*membaca*” / *to read*), and “*ber main*” (should be “*bermain*” / *to play*); (4) incorrect use of the preposition “*di*”, where students often failed to distinguish its function as an affix from its function as a preposition; and (5) incorrect use of hyphens in reduplicated words.

d. Difficulties in Understanding and Using Effective Sentences

The fourth form of difficulty was students’ difficulty in understanding the concept of and applying effective sentences in writing. An effective sentence is defined as a sentence that has the ability to recreate ideas in the minds of listeners or readers in the same way as they exist in the mind of the speaker or writer (Sukmandari, 2024). The requirements of an effective sentence include clarity of subject–predicate elements, accuracy of diction, conciseness, logic, parallelism, and emphasis.

The results of the analysis of students' worksheets showed that 11 out of 12 students (91.7%) produced sentences that did not meet the principles of effective sentences. The three most dominant error patterns found were as follows.

The first pattern was sentences lacking a subject or predicate. Many sentences were found to consist only of adverbial phrases without a clear subject and predicate. An example from a student's composition was: "*When going to the beach yesterday.*" (There is no clear subject or predicate.) The sentence should have been written as: "*We went to the beach yesterday.*"

The second pattern was illogical or ambiguous sentences. Many sentences contained internal logical contradictions or multiple meanings that confused readers. For example: "*Because it rained heavily so I brought an umbrella to go.*" The simultaneous use of *because* and *so* in one sentence creates a grammatically illogical structure.

The third pattern was wordy or redundant sentences (pleonasm). Students often used excessive words that added no meaning. For example: "*I climbed up to the top of the mango tree.*" (The phrase *to the top* is unnecessary because *climbed* already implies upward movement.) Another example was: "*We together went together to school.*" (Redundant repetition of the meaning *together*.)

These difficulties in the aspect of effective sentences were directly related to students' low mastery of Indonesian grammar. In interviews, the fifth-grade teacher explained that grammar instruction in class was still conducted conventionally through memorizing definitions and completing multiple-choice exercises, without being connected to authentic writing practices that were meaningful for students. As a result, the grammatical knowledge possessed by students was inert (inactive) and could not be transferred into actual writing practice.

2. Factors Causing Difficulties in Learning the Indonesian Language

Based on the results of in-depth interviews with students, teachers, and the school principal, as well as observations and documentation analysis, the factors causing difficulties in learning the Indonesian language can be categorized into two main groups, namely internal factors (originating from within the students themselves) and external factors (originating from the students' external environment).

a. Internal Student Factors

First, low interest in reading and weak reading habits. This was the internal factor most consistently mentioned by teachers and acknowledged by the students themselves. Interview data showed that 10 out of 12 students (83.3%) admitted that they never or only very rarely read books voluntarily outside school assignments. Most of their free time at home was spent using mobile devices, watching videos on digital platforms, and playing with friends. None of the research subjects had a regular habit of reading storybooks, children's magazines, or other reading materials at home.

An interview with a subject identified by the initials DP honestly revealed this condition: *"At home I keep using Papuan language with my mother and father. Only at school do I use Indonesian. Sometimes I get confused about what to say in Indonesian, so I just use Papuan words instead."*

Third, low intrinsic motivation to learn the Indonesian language. Interview data showed that 8 out of 12 students (66.7%) stated that Indonesian was one of the subjects they most avoided or disliked, particularly in writing tasks and reading long texts. Several students expressed that they felt anxious when asked to write compositions in front of the class or read aloud.

This low motivation was closely related to repeated failure experiences faced by the students. Each time they completed Indonesian language tasks and received poor scores or many red corrections from the teacher, their self-confidence became increasingly

eroded and their motivation to learn declined further. This condition formed a *failure cycle* that was difficult to break without appropriate intervention.

Fourth, limited background knowledge. Many reading texts in Indonesian language textbooks present themes that are far removed from the students' life experiences and contexts in Papua. Texts about Javanese culture, traditional foods from Sumatra, or traditions from other regions of Indonesia often could not be connected by students to the knowledge and experiences they already possessed. This limited schema became a serious barrier in the reading comprehension process because understanding a text depends greatly on the reader's ability to activate and connect prior knowledge with new information in the text.

b. External Factors

First, teaching methods and approaches that were insufficiently varied and innovative. Classroom observations over eight meetings showed that Indonesian language instruction was still heavily dominated by the following pattern: the teacher explained the material through lectures, students completed exercises from the textbook, and the teacher corrected the answers. This pattern occurred monotonously and repeatedly in almost every meeting, without any variation in methods that could stimulate students' curiosity and enthusiasm.

No implementation was found of active learning strategies such as *Think-Pair-Share*, *Jigsaw*, *Reciprocal Teaching*, or *Literature Circles*, which have been proven effective in improving students' reading comprehension and writing skills. In terms of writing instruction, teachers did not use a *process writing* approach involving the stages of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. As a result, students never learned that writing is an iterative process that can be improved, rather than merely a one-time task to be completed.

The principal of Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire acknowledged this limitation in an interview: *“Our teachers have tried their best, but training on innovative teaching methods is still lacking. The professional development programs we attend are not always focused on Indonesian language teaching, and the training materials are not always directly applicable in the classroom.”*

Second, limitations in learning media and school literacy facilities. The library of Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire had a very limited book collection, both in quantity and quality.

Observations of the library showed that most of the available books were old textbooks that were outdated and no longer relevant to the current curriculum. Children’s storybooks, informative nonfiction books, children’s magazines, and engaging fiction materials were almost unavailable. The library’s opening hours were also very limited, and there was no active book-lending program to encourage students to read.

Inside the classroom, teachers did not have adequate access to engaging Indonesian language learning media such as educational videos, illustrated word cards, word boards, or interactive digital media. Learning activities relied almost entirely on textbooks and the blackboard. These media limitations made learning feel less dynamic and less able to capture the attention of digital-generation students who are accustomed to rich visual stimulation.

Discussion

1. Discussion of Reading Comprehension Difficulties

The findings of this study, which showed that 83.3% of students experienced difficulties at the inferential reading level, are consistent with various previous studies. According to earlier research (Atun & Etika, 2023; Saputra, 2025; Tarbiyah, 2021) , elementary school students’ reading comprehension skills tend to be stronger at the literal level, while

inferential skills and deeper meaning-making remain weak. These findings indicate that the low level of reading comprehension among elementary school students is closely related to weak reading habits and limited vocabulary.

From the perspective of literacy learning, higher-level reading comprehension requires mastery of basic reading skills, vocabulary, and sufficient reading experience. Students who have limited linguistic experience because they rarely read and more frequently use local languages tend to face obstacles in understanding complex texts and interpreting information comprehensively (Puspitaningrum et al., 2025).

In line with this, studies on reading literacy assessment in elementary schools also show that students are relatively more capable of identifying explicit information than interpreting, evaluating, and reflecting on the content of a text. This pattern is evident in the results of the Minimum Competency Assessment (AKM) for reading literacy, which indicate weaknesses at higher cognitive levels (Puspitaningrum et al., 2025).

2. Discussion of Writing Difficulties

The difficulties in writing compositions found in this study are closely related to the complexity of writing skills in language learning. Writing requires the ability to organize ideas logically, choose appropriate vocabulary, build coherence between parts, and consistently apply spelling rules and effective sentence structures. When students experience limitations in these aspects simultaneously, writing becomes one of the most challenging skills for elementary school students (Rohim & Rahmawati, 2020).

Students' inability to build coherence and cohesion in their compositions can be explained by the importance of writing instruction that provides models, structured practice, and opportunities to revise written work. Research has shown that active, contextual, and problem-oriented learning models can improve elementary school

students' narrative writing skills more significantly than conventional instruction (Frans et al., 2023).

3. Discussion of Local Language Interference

The finding regarding the dominance of interference from local languages and Papuan Malay in students' writing is a distinctive and important phenomenon to understand within the Papuan context. Various recent studies have shown that the use of local languages in students' daily lives can support comprehension during the learning process; however, at the same time, it may also create interference in the use of standard Indonesian, particularly in formal language skills such as reading and writing (Biman, 2020).

What needs to be emphasized is that this condition should not merely be viewed as a "weakness" or "deficiency" of the students, but rather as a natural reflection of the sociolinguistic reality of a multilingual society. Therefore, an ideal instructional approach should position the mother tongue and the Indonesian language proportionally so that students' understanding can develop without hindering their mastery of academic Indonesian.

4. Discussion of Causal Factors and Pedagogical Implications

The factor of insufficiently varied teaching methods found in this study reinforces previous findings that the quality of instructional strategies and the management of literacy activities in the classroom greatly influence students' learning outcomes. Passive and teacher-centered learning tends to be insufficient in encouraging students to develop critical thinking skills, reading interest, and active-productive language abilities (Milawasri & Suryadi, 2021).

Structured support, or scaffolding, becomes essential in Indonesian language learning, especially when students are asked to read complex texts or write compositions. In the context of writing instruction, scaffolding may take the form of providing composition frameworks, model texts, writing planning sheets, and specific as well as gradual feedback so that students can more easily express their ideas in complete written form (Martaulina, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussion, the following conclusions can be drawn. First, there were four dominant forms of difficulties in learning the Indonesian language experienced by upper-grade students at Agape Christian Elementary School Nabire, namely: (1) difficulties in reading comprehension of complex texts at the inferential and critical levels; (2) difficulties in writing cohesive and coherent compositions; (3) low mastery of standard Indonesian vocabulary; and (4) difficulties in understanding and using effective sentences.

Second, the factors underlying these difficulties originated from internal student factors (low reading interest, dominance of local languages at home, and low learning motivation) as well as external factors (insufficiently varied teaching methods, limited learning media and resources, and a lack of habituation in using Indonesian within the school environment).

These findings emphasize that addressing difficulties in learning the Indonesian language requires a holistic and contextual approach that takes into account the sociolinguistic realities of students in Papua. Synergy among teachers, schools, and parents is needed to create a literacy ecosystem that supports the optimal development of students' Indonesian language abilities.

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