

Reading Comprehension and Expository Writing Skills of Elementary School Students: A Barrett Taxonomy Analysis

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Abstract

Reading comprehension and expository writing are the twin pillars of literacy that determine how far elementary students can learn from text, yet national and international assessments consistently place Indonesian learners well below expected levels. This study aimed to describe and analyze the initial profile of fifth-grade students' reading comprehension based on Barrett's taxonomy and their expository writing skills based on six assessment aspects, as an empirical foundation for designing literacy instruction that moves beyond literal reading. A quantitative descriptive approach was employed with 224 fifth-grade students from eight elementary schools in Purwakarta Regency, West Java, Indonesia, comprising public, private, and Islamic schools that had implemented the School Literacy Movement. Reading comprehension was measured using an eight-item essay test representing four levels of Barrett's taxonomy, while expository writing was assessed using a six-aspect analytic rubric. The data were analyzed descriptively through means, percentages, and category distributions. The findings show that reading comprehension reached a mean score of 47.8 on a 0 to 100 scale, classified in the poor category, with a declining pattern from literal comprehension (72.5%) to reorganization (56.3%), inferential (33.8%), and evaluative comprehension (28.8%). Expository writing reached a mean of 49.2, also in the poor category, with text structure (40.0%) and argumentation (37.5%) as the weakest aspects. A total of 78.1% of students were in the poor category for reading comprehension and 81.3% for expository writing, with no student reaching the very good category in either competency. These findings imply that literacy instruction in Indonesian elementary schools must shift from reading habits toward comprehension instruction that explicitly targets higher order thinking and provides modeling and guided practice of text structure and argumentation in expository writing.

Keywords: Barrett's Taxonomy; Reading Comprehension; Expository Writing; Elementary School; Literacy Movement

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension and expository writing are two interrelated literacy competencies that form the foundation of students' success throughout elementary education. Reading is not merely the activity of decoding words; it is a process of constructing meaning in which readers connect information in the text with their prior knowledge to build a coherent mental representation (Kintsch, 1998; Snow, 2002). In the context of the elementary school curriculum, this competency becomes the gateway to mastering all other subjects because almost every learning activity relies on text comprehension (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). In the same vein, writing expository texts trains students to convey ideas systematically through the structure of thesis, arguments, and restatement (Keraf, 2004). Reading and writing are mutually reinforcing: readers who understand how texts are organized tend to produce better structured writing, while composing strengthens the comprehension of content and organization of what is read (Graham

dkk., 2012; Hebert dkk., 2018). Contemporary models of reading comprehension emphasize that proficient reading depends on the coordination of word recognition, language comprehension, and the active use of comprehension strategies (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). From this perspective, comprehension is a developmental achievement that must be deliberately taught, not an automatic byproduct of having learned to decode.

The centrality of these competencies is even clearer when the school curriculum is viewed longitudinally. In the early grades of Indonesian elementary school, students learn to read, but beginning around fourth grade the curriculum increasingly expects them to read to learn from informational texts across subjects (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Expository texts, which explain, describe, and argue about the world, become the dominant text type that students must handle in science, social studies, and other content areas. Yet the transition from narrative reading to informational reading is rarely supported by explicit instruction in how expository texts are organized and how their arguments are constructed (Roehling dkk., 2017). International assessment frameworks make a similar demand: PISA defines reading literacy as the capacity to understand, use, evaluate, reflect on, and engage with texts in order to achieve personal goals and participate in society (OECD, 2023). The abilities measured by such frameworks go far beyond literal comprehension and include the location of information, the understanding of meaning, and the evaluation and reflection on text content (Koyuncu & Fırat, 2020). Schooling that confines reading to literal questions therefore prepares students poorly for the reading demands of assessment and of life beyond school.

The factual condition of literacy in Indonesia remains far from these expectations. The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment 2022 show that Indonesia's reading score reached only 359, far below the OECD average of 476, and only about a quarter of Indonesian participants achieved reading proficiency level two or above (OECD, 2023). National assessments likewise indicate that the literacy competence of elementary school students has not been evenly distributed and remains concentrated in basic reading skills rather than in the higher order comprehension expected at each phase of the national curriculum (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). A growing body of recent Indonesian research confirms that the reading comprehension of elementary school students generally falls into the low to moderate category (Alpian & Yatri, 2022; Ambarita dkk., 2021; Nurmalia dkk., 2023; Setiyadi dkk., 2025). This condition is exacerbated by learning and assessment practices that measure literal comprehension more often than inferential, evaluative, or appreciative comprehension (Koyuncu & Fırat, 2020; Nehari dkk., 2024). Studies that analyze the reading questions used in Indonesian classrooms and textbooks repeatedly find a heavy concentration of literal questions, with inferential and evaluative questions appearing far less frequently, a pattern that has also been documented in textbook analyses in other national contexts (Nehari dkk., 2024).

The government has responded through the School Literacy Movement (GLS), which is implemented in three stages, namely habituation, development, and learning (Kemendikbud, 2016). However, studies of GLS implementation consistently show that the program predominantly stops at the habituation stage, such as arranging reading corners and conducting fifteen-minute reading activities, while the learning stage that integrates literacy with subject content has not run optimally (Dafit & Ramadan, 2020; Imelda & Dafit, 2024; Kartikasari & Nuryasana, 2022). As a result, reading activities in schools have not yet been connected systematically to the development of students' thinking and writing competencies. The habituation stage, although valuable for cultivating reading interest, does not by itself teach students how to comprehend more complex texts or how to produce well structured writing. In fact, deep text comprehension requires students to move from literal comprehension toward reorganization, inferential, and evaluative comprehension as formulated in Barrett's taxonomy (Barrett, 1968; Yuliawati dkk., 2026).

Barrett's taxonomy provides an analytical framework for capturing students' reading ability in levels, from literal comprehension, reorganization, and inferential comprehension to evaluative and appreciative comprehension (Barrett, 1968). The framework has proven useful not only for profiling students but also for auditing the quality of reading questions and classroom activities (Nehari dkk., 2024; Yuliawati dkk., 2026). Contemporary models of reading comprehension similarly emphasize that proficient reading depends on word recognition, language comprehension, and the active construction of meaning through strategies that go well beyond retrieving explicit information (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Reading comprehension instruction that follows such a view is therefore characterized by explicit teaching of text structure, inference generation, and

critical evaluation rather than by repetitive literal questioning (Duke dkk., 2011; Roehling dkk., 2017). The practical value of such taxonomies lies in their diagnostic power: when a teacher knows the distribution of students across comprehension levels, instruction can target the level at which students actually struggle rather than the level at which the textbook happens to ask questions (Yuliawati dkk., 2026).

On the other hand, expository writing skills can be analyzed through six aspects, namely content, text structure, argumentation, language, vocabulary and spelling, and cohesion and coherence (Dalman, 2020; Keraf, 2004). Expository text structure, in particular, requires writers to organize ideas into recognizable patterns, such as thesis, arguments, and restatement, so that readers can follow the logical development of the text (Fels & Meyer, 2023; Roehling dkk., 2017). Intervention studies demonstrate that explicit text structure instruction improves both expository reading comprehension and expository writing quality of upper elementary students (Hebert dkk., 2018; Tesfa dkk., 2026). These findings underscore that text structure and argumentation are teachable, and that their absence in students' writing signals a gap in instruction rather than a fixed limitation of the students. Writing research has further shown that when students are taught strategies for planning, drafting, and revising informational texts, their writing quality improves and their confidence as writers grows (Graham dkk., 2012).

Despite the urgency of this issue, empirical studies that simultaneously describe the profile of both competencies among Indonesian elementary school students remain limited. Most existing studies test the effect of certain learning models on one of the two skills (Fadil & Ramadhan, 2023; D. D. S. Fatimah, 2018; S. Fatimah et al., 2024), while only a few describe initial ability profiles in sufficient detail to serve as a basis for designing instruction (Anggraeni dkk., 2024; Yuliawati dkk., 2026). Such mapping is essential so that literacy interventions can be directed at the weakest levels and aspects rather than applied uniformly (Roehling dkk., 2017; Tesfa dkk., 2026). Recent development studies of learning designs for elementary literacy have likewise emphasized that the analysis of learner characteristics and initial competencies is the first and most decisive step of systematic instructional design (Hidayat dkk., 2023; Kamal dkk., 2023; Sopandi dkk., 2021). The absence of a clear empirical profile also hampers teachers who must decide where to begin their literacy instruction, because grade-level expectations alone cannot tell them how far below those expectations their students actually are (Nuramalia dkk., 2023).

Based on this gap, this study aims to describe and analyze the reading comprehension ability of fifth-grade students based on Barrett's taxonomy and their expository writing skills based on six assessment aspects in elementary schools implementing the School Literacy Movement. Two research questions guided the study: how is the profile of students' reading comprehension distributed across the levels of Barrett's taxonomy, and how is the profile of students' expository writing distributed across the six assessment aspects? The results of the analysis are expected to become an empirical basis for designing more systematic literacy instruction, particularly instruction that emphasizes higher order comprehension and the strengthening of text structure and argumentation in expository writing (Hidayat dkk., 2023; Yuliawati dkk., 2026).

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative descriptive approach to analyze the results of an initial test administered at the analysis stage of a broader development project of a RADEC-GLS instructional design (Creswell, 2002; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The research was conducted in Purwakarta Regency, West Java, Indonesia. The subjects were 224 fifth-grade students from eight elementary schools selected to represent the diversity of school types in the regency: two public elementary schools, two private elementary schools, two public Islamic elementary schools, and two private Islamic elementary schools. All participating schools had officially implemented the School Literacy Movement in accordance with the national guideline (Kemendikbud, 2016), and permission was obtained from the school principals before data collection. Fifth grade was chosen because students at this level are expected to have moved from learning to read toward reading to learn, making the profile of their higher order comprehension particularly informative for instructional planning (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). Two instruments were used in this study. The first was an eight-item essay test of reading comprehension representing four levels of Barrett's taxonomy, namely literal, reorganization, inferential, and evaluative comprehension, with two items at each level (Barrett, 1968). The test was developed from a reading passage appropriate to the students' grade level and scored against a scoring key with a maximum raw score of 32. The

second instrument was an expository writing task in which students were asked to compose an expository text of three paragraphs on a familiar topic, assessed using a six-aspect analytic rubric covering content, text structure, argumentation, language, vocabulary and spelling, and cohesion and coherence (Dalman, 2020; Keraf, 2004). The maximum raw score of the writing task was 24. Both instruments were validated by experts using Aiken's index, and the content validity coefficients met the accepted threshold before the instruments were administered (Aiken, 1985). The instruments were administered in one session of ninety minutes in each school under the supervision of the researchers and the classroom teachers. Raw scores were converted to a scale of 0 to 100 to facilitate interpretation and comparison between the two competencies. The converted scores were then categorized into very good (85 to 100), good (70 to 84), sufficient (55 to 69), and poor (0 to 54), following the categorization commonly used in Indonesian educational assessment. The data were analyzed descriptively through means, percentages, and category distributions (Gall dkk., 2007). The results are presented in the form of frequency tables and narrative descriptions organized by the levels of Barrett's taxonomy for reading comprehension and by the six aspects of the writing rubric for expository writing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The initial test results of reading comprehension show a profile that declines gradually from the literal level to the higher levels of Barrett's taxonomy. Literal comprehension obtained a mean score of 5.80 out of a maximum score of 8, equivalent to 72.5 percent and classified in the sufficient category. Reorganization comprehension reached 4.50 or 56.3 percent, also in the sufficient category but with a visible drop of more than sixteen percentage points. Inferential comprehension decreased to 2.70 or 33.8 percent, falling into the poor category, while evaluative comprehension was the lowest with 2.30 or 28.8 percent, also in the poor category. Overall, the mean reading comprehension score of the students reached only 15.30 out of 32 or 47.8 on the 0 to 100 scale, placing the group in the poor category. The complete distribution is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Initial Test Results of Reading Comprehension Ability by Level

No.	Comprehension Level	Items	Max Score	Mean Score	Percentage	Category
1	Literal	2	8	5.80	72.5	Sufficient
2	Reorganization	2	8	4.50	56.3	Sufficient
3	Inferential	2	8	2.70	33.8	Poor
4	Evaluative	2	8	2.30	28.8	Poor
	Overall	8	32	15.30	47.8	Poor

A similar profile appears in expository writing skills when the scores are disaggregated by assessment aspect. The content aspect obtained the highest percentage of 62.5 percent in the sufficient category, followed by spelling and punctuation at 55.0 percent and language at 52.5 percent. Cohesion and coherence reached 47.5 percent, entering the poor category. The two weakest aspects were the expository text structure with 40.0 percent and argumentation with 37.5 percent, both in the poor category. The mean score of the overall writing task was only 11.80 out of 24 or 49.2 on the 0 to 100 scale, in the poor category. The details of the writing profile are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Initial Task Results of Expository Writing by Aspect

No.	Assessment Aspect	Max Score	Mean Score	Percentage	Category
1	Content	4	2.50	62.5	Sufficient
2	Text structure	4	1.60	40.0	Poor
3	Argumentation	4	1.50	37.5	Poor
4	Language	4	2.10	52.5	Sufficient
5	Vocabulary and spelling	4	2.20	55.0	Sufficient
6	Cohesion and coherence	4	1.90	47.5	Poor
	Overall	24	11.80	49.2	Poor

The category distribution confirms the low mastery of both competencies across the sample. In reading comprehension, no student reached the very good category, only 8 students or 3.6 percent were in the good category, 41 students or 18.3 percent were in the sufficient category, and 175 students or 78.1 percent were in the poor category. In expository writing, a similar condition occurred: 3 students or 1.3 percent were in the good category, 39 students or 17.4 percent were in

the sufficient category, and 182 students or 81.3 percent were in the poor category, again with no student in the very good category. The distribution is displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Category Distribution of Students' Reading and Writing Ability

Category	Score Range	Reading (n)	Reading (%)	Writing (n)	Writing (%)
Very good	85-100	0	0.0	0	0.0
Good	70-84	8	3.6	3	1.3
Sufficient	55-69	41	18.3	39	17.4
Poor	0-54	175	78.1	182	81.3
Total		224	100.0	224	100.0

DISCUSSION

Several features distinguish this study from earlier work on literacy in Indonesian elementary schools. Most prior studies either tested the effect of a particular learning model on a single skill or examined reading and writing separately, so the relationship between the two profiles remained implicit (Fadil & Ramadhan, 2023; Fatimah dkk., 2024; Idris dkk., 2024). The present study measured reading comprehension and expository writing within the same sample and the same instructional setting, and it placed the two profiles side by side through Barrett's taxonomy and a six aspect writing rubric. This juxtaposition exposes a pattern that single skill studies cannot detect, namely that the weakest points in both competencies concern the organization of ideas rather than the retrieval of information. The study is therefore not another description of low literacy achievement, but a diagnostic account of where comprehension and composition break down in schools that have nominally implemented the School Literacy Movement (Kemendikbudristek, 2023; Setiyadi dkk., 2025).

The core findings can be summarized as follows. The mean reading comprehension score of 47.8 placed the group in the poor category, and the scores descended from literal comprehension at 72.5 percent to reorganization at 56.3 percent, inferential comprehension at 33.8 percent, and evaluative comprehension at 28.8 percent. Expository writing produced a comparable mean of 49.2, with text structure at 40.0 percent and argumentation at 37.5 percent as the weakest aspects. These results are meaningful because they describe the actual starting point of literacy instruction in schools that have been running a national literacy program. The majority of fifth graders have not reached the inferential and evaluative levels of comprehension, and most cannot yet organize and justify an expository text, even though the curriculum expects them to learn from informational texts across subjects at this stage (Kemendikbudristek, 2023).

The declining reading profile is consistent with previous studies that used the same analytical lens. Yuliawati et al. (2026) reported a similar descending pattern from literal to evaluative comprehension among elementary school students, and textbook analysis in another national context found that reading questions concentrate heavily on literal retrieval, with higher order questions appearing far less frequently (Nehari dkk., 2024). International evidence likewise shows that students are stronger at locating and retrieving information than at interpreting, evaluating, and reflecting on texts (Koyuncu & Firat, 2020; OECD, 2023). Within Indonesia, low to moderate reading comprehension among elementary students has been reported repeatedly across regions and school types (Alpian & Yatri, 2022; Ambarita dkk., 2021; Nurmawati, 2019; Setiyadi dkk., 2025). The convergence across instruments, languages, and samples suggests that the emphasis on literal comprehension is a systemic feature of reading instruction rather than a peculiarity of the eight schools examined here.

The writing profile also resonates with earlier findings, although the comparison needs to account for differences in design. Studies of writing in Indonesian elementary schools identify text structure and idea development as major difficulties (Anggraeni dkk., 2024; Setiyadi dkk., 2025), which matches the low scores on structure and argumentation in the present sample. Intervention research in other contexts demonstrates that explicit instruction on text structures can improve the quality of expository writing among upper elementary students and among older learners of English as a foreign language (Hebert dkk., 2018; Roehling dkk., 2017). The apparent contrast between the weak baseline documented here and the positive results of those interventions is not a contradiction. Experimental studies report what students can achieve after structured teaching, whereas the present study reports what students can currently do without such teaching. A low baseline is exactly the condition that makes intervention studies necessary and plausible (Graham dkk., 2012; Hebert dkk., 2018).

Several explanations account for the consistencies observed across studies. In Indonesia, the School Literacy Movement has been widely implemented at the habituation stage, such as reading corners and scheduled reading sessions, while the learning stage that connects reading activities with content comprehension and writing tasks has not run optimally (Dafit & Ramadan, 2020; Imelda & Dafit, 2024; Kartikasari & Nuryasana, 2022). When daily practice does not require students to reorganize information, draw inferences, evaluate content, or produce structured texts, it is unsurprising that these abilities are the weakest in any assessment that measures them (Duke dkk., 2011; Duke & Cartwright, 2021). Differences with studies reporting higher achievement can be traced to contextual and methodological factors, including grade level, the composition of public and private schools, the number of taxonomy levels measured, and the categorization scheme used to interpret percentage scores (Alpian & Yatri, 2022; Setiyadi dkk., 2025). The similar weakness in the organization of ideas across reading and writing within the same sample, meanwhile, supports the reciprocal view of the two competencies, in which comprehension and composition draw on shared knowledge of text structure and discourse patterns (Fels & Meyer, 2023; Graham & Hebert, 2011).

The contribution of this study to the field is threefold. Empirically, it offers a diagnostic map showing precisely where instruction should be strengthened, namely at the inferential and evaluative levels of reading and at the structural and argumentative aspects of writing. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of profiling two literacy competencies in one sample, because the parallel decline in the two profiles reveals a common difficulty in handling organized relationships between ideas that separate studies cannot expose (Graham & Hebert, 2011; Roehling dkk., 2017). Practically, the profile provides an evidence based starting point for models that sequence learning from reading toward answering, discussing, explaining, and creating, since each stage can be aligned with a specific weakness found in this study (Fadil & Ramadhan, 2023; Sopandi, 2017; Sopandi dkk., 2021). The Read stage can shift reading from habituation toward purposeful comprehension, the Answer stage can push students to the inferential and evaluative levels where the greatest weakness appeared, the Discuss and Explain stages can exercise the argumentation skill that was weakest in writing, and the Create stage can require students to apply the text structures they have learned (Fatimah dkk., 2024; Hidayat dkk., 2023; Idris dkk., 2024; Kamal dkk., 2023).

The findings also carry theoretical significance. Within the construction integration view of reading, the low inferential and evaluative scores indicate that most students have not yet built a coherent mental representation of the text, because such a representation depends on the ability to connect propositions, draw inferences, and evaluate content against prior knowledge (Kintsch, 1998). Contemporary accounts of reading likewise emphasize that proficient comprehension requires the active coordination of word recognition, language comprehension, and strategic processing, none of which develops automatically from decoding practice alone (Duke dkk., 2011; Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Snow, 2002). The weak performance on tasks requiring reorganization and evaluation is thus not merely a measurement artifact but evidence that the active dimension of comprehension has been underdeveloped in classroom instruction (Koyuncu & Fırat, 2020). In writing, the low scores on structure and argumentation indicate that students have not internalized the organizational patterns of expository discourse, which supports the view that text structure knowledge is a teachable component of both reading and writing competence (Fels & Meyer, 2023; Graham & Hebert, 2011; Hebert dkk., 2018).

The implications of these findings are practical, academic, and policy related. For teachers, the results emphasize the importance of initial assessment before designing literacy lessons, so that instruction starts from the actual level of students rather than from assumptions about grade readiness (Imelda & Dafit, 2024, 2024; Nurmalita, 2019). For schools and literacy program coordinators, the findings indicate that the School Literacy Movement must move beyond habituation into the learning stage, where literacy activities are deliberately connected to comprehension instruction and writing tasks (Dafit & Ramadan, 2020; Kartikasari & Nuryasana, 2022; Kemendikbud, 2016). For teacher educators and curriculum developers, the parallel weakness in higher order comprehension and text organization confirms the value of integrated approaches that treat reading and writing as one literacy process and that model text structure and argumentation explicitly (Graham dkk., 2012; Hebert dkk., 2018; Setiyadi dkk., 2025). Future studies should address the limitations of this descriptive design by investigating the causes of the documented weaknesses through longitudinal or qualitative inquiry, by including the appreciation

level of Barrett's taxonomy, by expanding data collection to other regions and school types, and by testing whether learning models that integrate reading and writing instruction can lift both competencies from the poor category (Fatimah dkk., 2024; Idris dkk., 2024; Tesfa dkk., 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study answers two questions about the literacy baseline of fifth-grade students in elementary schools implementing the School Literacy Movement. Reading comprehension in this population is in the poor category, with a mean of 47.8 and a profile that declines from literal comprehension (72.5 percent) to reorganization (56.3 percent), inferential (33.8 percent), and evaluative comprehension (28.8 percent). Expository writing is similarly poor, with a mean of 49.2, and its weakest aspects are text structure (40.0 percent) and argumentation (37.5 percent); 78.1 percent of students fall in the poor category for reading and 81.3 percent for writing, with no student reaching the very good category in either competency. The two profiles therefore share one critical weakness: students can retrieve information, but they have not learned to reorganize, infer, evaluate, or organize and justify ideas in their own writing. Literacy programs in elementary schools should accordingly move beyond reading habits toward explicit comprehension instruction and structured writing practice aimed at these higher levels and aspects, and future interventions should be measured against the baseline documented here.

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