



# EMPOWERING READING COMPREHENCY UNLEASHING HIGH-ORDER THINKING SKILL (HOTS) STRATEGIES IN KURIKULUM MERDEKA FOR ELEVENTH GRADERS AT SMA SWASTA PEMBDA 1 GUNUNGSITOLI

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores (1) the implementation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) strategies in teaching reading comprehension under the Kurikulum Merdeka and (2) students' responses to these strategies in the eleventh grade of SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli. It employs a descriptive qualitative approach with 76 eleventh-grade students and two EFL teachers as subjects. Data collection methods included observations, interviews with teachers, and questionnaires for students. Data analysis revealed that while improvements are needed, both teachers created positive learning environments. The questionnaire showed 68% of students had positive responses to HOTS strategies, appreciating varied problem-solving approaches and alignment with their interests and motivations. Students preferred group projects and reading analysis but pointed out issues with motivation, learning facilities, and reading materials. The implementation of HOTS involved activities such as selecting suitable texts, questioning students, examining the author's viewpoint, gathering information, mind mapping, group discussions, and inferring meanings. Teacher 1 effectively integrated HOTS comprehensively, while Teacher 2 demonstrated content mastery but faced management challenges. Collaboration between teachers and students is crucial for optimizing HOTS and improving student outcomes. However, challenges remain in enhancing student motivation for reading, better utilizing school facilities, and providing appropriate reading materials to fully engage students in reading comprehension activities under the HOTS framework.

**Keywords:** HOTS, Teaching Reading Comprehension, Implementation of HOTS on Kurikulum Merdeka

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## INTRODUCTION

The curriculum in Indonesia has been evolving several times since Indonesia's independence in 1945. It includes curriculum 1947, 1952, 1964, 1968, 1975, 1984, 1994, 2004, 2006, 2013, and *Kurikulum Merdeka* as the newest curriculum (Batubara & Davala, 2023). The curriculum changes are to adjust to the needs and social shifts that take place

and to meet the purpose of education, improving the educational system and enhancing the lives of children in the community (Oktavia at. al., 2023).

These curriculum adjustments are intended to provide meaningful learning while also adjusting to contemporary advances and students' requirements. During COVID-19, the Minister of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia introduced *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which is centered on teachers and students (Hulu at. al., 2023). (Latifah at. al., 2023) also state the framework of Indonesia's current national curriculum for English subjects. One of the learning objectives is to empower students and enable them to access knowledge through literacy.

The numerous literacy issues confronting Indonesia were demonstrated by the 2018 PISA results, which show that Indonesian students' reading ability remains in a low category at approximately 386. In contrast, the average test score in OECD nations is over 500 (Amir at al., 2023). There is a sense of urgency that having reading skills is totally essential in the educational system and the students themselves. Since, reading skill is highlighted as one of the four essential skills in English Language Teaching (EFL), which are writing, speaking, and listening (Oo & Habók, 2022).

Reading skill relies on textual information to answer questions and comprehend the meaning of the text, which is one of the most common reading tasks in school. Laddo in (Nurdianingsih, 2021) states that reading improves one's intelligence and creativity. It enables students to make an attempt to process information from written sources in order to discover the exact information. Furthermore, According to Bojovic in (Rahmiani, 2023), deriving information from a text in a comprehensive way to understand the text itself is the process of reading comprehension. Having appropriate skills to comprehend written texts also helps students enhance their language acquisition process, gain suitable models for writing, and create discussions to promote their learning. Therefore, reading comprehension skill is required in school and posited crucial in the curriculum (Nafisah & Sumarsono, 2021).

Objectiveness for English topics has been determined by the government for the eleventh grade of senior high school in phase *F* in the learning module of *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which is students are expected to interact in English using oral, written, and visual texts (Mubarok at. al., 2023). The curriculum should prioritize English language lessons as the primary structure of the curriculum (Hulu at. al., 2023). Furthermore, this curriculum also emphasizes character development, *Pancasila* student profile, and Project-Based Learning in order to provide students with relevant learning that crucial needs High Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (Nurlaelah at. al., 2021). HOTS has been speculated for many years but has just recently been defined. Bloom (1956) developed the first iterations of HOTS in Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives.

In the revised Bloom's Taxonomy, human thinking skills are classified into two categories: low-order thinking skills (LOTS) include remembering, understanding, and applying, and Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) that include analysing, evaluating, and creating. It means that High high-order thinking Skills (HOTS) is the degree of thinking at which students think creatively, critically, and solve issues, and which is projected to be necessary now and in the future (Shanti at. al., 2022). Furthermore, (Laila & Fitriyah, 2022) emphasizes that HOTS in reading activities is essential since it can boost students' reading comprehension effectively (Dima at. al., 2021). During the analysis stage, students will be able to describe the concepts of the reading material and connect the relationship between each part and the overall structure. Then, during the evaluating stage, students will make

decisions based on the outcomes of the analysis, and ultimately, during the creating stage, students will design, plan, and produce something from the information obtained/read.

In implementing HOTS in *Kurikulum Merdeka*, teachers hold an important role in conducting HOTS in the teaching-learning process, especially in teaching reading comprehension. HOTS can always be found in the realm of English language instruction.

Reading also depends upon the difficulty level of the text, the unknown words in the text, and background knowledge of the readers. They contribute to the reading activity which is to get the message of the writer. The difficulty level in a reading text should be adjusted to the level of the reader (Dinda, n.d.). Additionally, different curricula, teachers, and students' backgrounds will affect to the success of reading comprehension as well. A study by Htun accentuates that teachers, in fact, play a crucial role in ensuring students fully comprehend the reading content (Htun et al., 2023). These strategies emphasize how crucial a teacher's role is in achieving the goals of the teaching and learning process (Nurdianingsih, 2021).

To ensure the success of teaching the reading comprehension process, it is urgent to implement HOTS as a strategy to assist students in literacy and to meet reading comprehension skills since many students struggle to complete the reading assignment satisfactorily, especially when the information is not explicitly stated in the textbook. Which is using texts to answer comprehension questions effectively necessitates the application of strategies and abilities that go beyond creating a representation of the text (Serrano-Mendizábal et al., 2023).

However, contrary to the expectation of teacher's strategies of implementing HOTS in teaching reading comprehension outcome within two years on going *Kurikulum Merdeka* in SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli, pre-observation held on October 2023 at the eleventh grade showed that students' scores in reading comprehension test were still low. The students faced some difficulties in understanding the reading text.

Learning module that points out the learning achievements must include the understanding, dispositions, and abilities that students ought to gain at every phase. *Phase F* refers to students in eleventh grade and twelfth grade, which groups students in the differentiation of the learning level in class. Learning achievements in the learning module expect students to think critically and globally. The preliminary observation was conducted once in each class (XI MIPA 2 & XI MIPA 3) in October 2023. The observation was made during the teachers' teaching process to see how the teaching and learning process was carried out and how the students responded. They tended to be less enthusiastic when learning reading comprehension in class. Meanwhile, students are undeniably closely intertwined daily with reading activities in English subjects at schools as well as in their English tests, especially in the current applied national-wide curriculum, *Kurikulum Merdeka*, where reading literacy skill is a significant area to be strengthened. Clearly, it shows that those phenomena slightly deviate from the purpose of teachers' strategies of implementing HOTS in teaching reading comprehension.

Furthermore, a study by (Valdev Singh & Shaari, 2019) aimed to determine the utilization of HOTS items in selected English reading comprehension tests for Malaysian Standard 6 students. The findings show that most reading comprehension questions in English test papers require further changes to meet the HOTS standards. A study by (Sitorus et al., 2021) aimed to find out whether HOTS assisted Junior High school students increase their reading comprehension or not. The study's findings revealed that HOTS helped students to grasp the book's substance through extensive reading, and the researcher also asked

students questions to test their understanding of the reading material. Lastly, a study by (Mada Ali at. al., 2022) applied HOTS in teaching reading skills to students. It was discovered that the t-test value exceeded the t-table value ( $16.883 > 2.056$ ).

Various results among the studies indicate how pivotal to do research associated with investigating teachers' strategies in implementing HOTS in teaching reading comprehension. Previous studies showed gap research and gap theory where the results of studies appear differently. The researcher assumes that there are ineffective strategies for implementing HOTS in teaching reading comprehension. In addition, it is urgent too to investigate how teachers' strategies in implementing HOTS, particularly in *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the eleventh grade as well as students' problems in reading comprehension. Therefore, the researcher was inspired to explore both implementation and students' responses sides. This research aimed to investigate the implementation of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension, especially in the current applied *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the eleventh grade of SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli based on phenomena during observation.

The result of the research contributed to the EFL teachers as an evaluation in implementing HOTS in their teaching reading comprehension strategies according to *Kurikulum Merdeka*; as references to teach reading comprehension more effectively; and as references for students in achieving reading comprehension skill (HOTS) by referring to the recent applied curriculum, *Kurikulum Merdeka*.

This research employed qualitative methods; the researcher interviewed two EFL teachers and gave the questionnaires to students in two classes (eleventh grade) where the teachers taught. The data was obtained from interview sheets and questionnaires, and then data analysis, descriptive data interpretation, and data reports were conducted subsequently. Concerning the background of the study, the problems of the study were formulated to find out the implementation of HOTS strategies in teaching reading comprehension on *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the eleventh grade of SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli and what the students' responses toward the implementation of HOTS by the teachers in teaching reading comprehension on *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the eleventh grade of SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher raised the research titled "Empowering Reading comprehension Unleashing High-Order Thinking Skill (Hots) Strategies in *Kurikulum Merdeka* for Eleventh Graders at SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli."

## METHOD

In this research, the researcher applied a descriptive qualitative method for data analysis, which means that the information gathered through observation that is summarized and combined with the data obtained from interviews adopted by Harris & Brown (2010) in (Rachman, 2023). A qualitative methodology was used in the case study to address the research topics. Interviews and questionnaires were the methods used to collect the data. In this study, two teachers were interviewed, and students in two classes each received a questionnaire. The collected data was processed and analysed to provide answers to the research questions. Following that, a descriptive data interpretation is given.

Based on the explanation above, the study utilized a sequential strategy by following the technique of exploratory strategies. So, the first stage was to interview the two English teachers. After that, the researcher distributed the questionnaire to the students to obtain

their responses toward strategies used by the teachers in teaching reading comprehension. The researcher subsequently analysed the qualitative data from both sources.

The subjects of the research were two English teachers and the eleventh-grade students (XI MIPA 2 & XI MIPA 3) of SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli in the 2023/2024 academic year. There were two EFL teachers involved in the research and the total students of both classes were 76 students. The researcher collected the qualitative data later on from the subjects of the research.

The collected data was processed and analysed to provide answers to the research questions. Following that, a descriptive data interpretation is given. The researcher collected the qualitative data later on from the subjects of the research. Data analysis organizes records of observations, interviews, and questions to improve understanding of the subject and disseminate findings to others. The observation and interview results with the EFL teachers will be analysed and interpreted by the researcher. Furthermore, to analyse the questionnaire, the researcher used the Likert Scale created by the sociologist Rensis Likert who proposed a scale for measuring attitudes in 1932 (Mumu at. al., 2022).

The Likert scale is one of the key rating scales used as a measurement instrument in social sciences research, notably in the qualitative method.

**Table 3.1 Likert Scale Classification**

No.	Category	Score
1.	Strongly Agree	5
2.	Agree	4
3.	Neutral	3
4.	Disagree	2
5.	Strongly Disagree	1

After collecting student replies, the data was evaluated using the formula proposed by Nazir in (Solehudin at. al., 2021) which is shown below.

**Formula:**  $T \times P_n$  Note: T : Total Respondent

$P_n$  = The chosen Likert score

Y = The highest score of Likert x total respondent x total response

X = The lowest score of Likert x total respondent x total response

Interval formula =  $100 / \text{total score}$

Percentage formula % =  $\text{Total Score} / Y \times 100$

The following criteria of score interpretation based on interval, as follows:

**Table 3.2 Rating Percentage**

No.	Percentage	Category
1.	80%-100%	Positive
2.	60%-79,99%	

3.	40%-59,99%	Neutral
4.	20%-39,99%	Negative
5.	0%-19,99%	

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Implementation of HOTS Strategy in Teaching Reading Comprehension on *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the eleventh grade of SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli

#### a. Teacher Observation in Implementing HOTS

The researcher conducted an observation of two EFL teachers on Friday, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2024 at their classes respectively to see the implementation of Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) while teaching reading comprehension. The results of the observations are presented in the following table.

**Table 1.1 Observation Sheet of Teacher 1**

Observed Aspects		Yes	No	Notes
<b>Preliminary Activities</b>				
1	Motivate participants to start learning	√		
2	Create a comfortable learning atmosphere (seating arrangements, media, readiness of learning aids)	√		
3	Convey objectives, competencies, indicators, time allocation, and learning activity scenarios	√		
<b>Core Activities</b>				
<b>Mastery of material and learning management</b>				
<b>Ability to facilitate Learning</b>				
1	Master the learning material	√		
2	Present material systematically	√		
3	Master the class	√		
4	Do the learning according to the planned time allocation		√	Students were slow to do the assignment
<b>Involvement of participants in learning</b>				
1	Foster active participation of participants in learning activities	√		
2	Respond positively to participant participation	√		
3	Develop participants' joy or enthusiasm in learning	√		Only when using Kahoot game

<b>Scientific Integration, HOTS Aspects, 21st Century Skills and dimensions of knowledge in learning</b>			
1	Scientific Process (5M)	√	
2	HOTS learning activities		
	A <i>Transfer Knowledge</i>	√	
	B <i>Critical Creativity</i>	√	
	C <i>Problem-Solving</i>	√	Need more practice for students to do problem solving

**Table 1.2 Observation Sheet of Teacher 2**

<b>Observed Aspects</b>		<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Notes</b>
<b>Preliminary Activities</b>				
1	Motivate participants to start learning	√		
2	Create a comfortable learning atmosphere (seating arrangements, media, readiness of learning aids)	√		
3	Convey objectives, competencies, indicators, time allocation, and learning activity scenarios	√		
<b>Core Activities</b>				
<b>Mastery of material and learning management</b>				
<b>Ability to facilitate Learning</b>				
1	Master the learning material	√		
2	Present material systematically	√		
3	Master the class	√		
4	Do the learning according to the planned time allocation		√	It took time for students to finish the task
<b>Involvement of participants in learning</b>				
1	Foster active participation of participants in learning activities	√		
2	Respond positively to participant participation	√		
3	Develop participants' joy or enthusiasm in learning		√	The students still showed lack of

enthusiasm

**Scientific Integration, HOTS Aspects, 21st Century Skills and dimensions of knowledge in learning**

1	Scientific Process (5M)	√	
2	HOTS learning activities		
	a <i>Transfer Knowledge</i>	√	
	b <i>Critical</i>	√	
	c <i>Problem Solving</i>	√	Still need to train problem solving to students

**b. Teachers' Interview in Implementing HOTS**

To provide the results of interviews, the researcher interviewed two EFL teachers who served as informants at SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli. The Teacher 1 interview was done on 24 February 2024 at the teacher's office, and Teacher 2 was interviewed on 26 February 2024 at the class. The responses of the informants were presented in the following table.

**Table 1.3 The Data of EFL Teachers' Interviews**

INTERVIEWS' SHEET	
<b>Question:</b>	
Have you ever heard the term HOTS or LOTS?	
<i>First Informant's Responses</i>	<i>Second Informant's Responses</i>
Yes, I have. I have known that since <i>Kurikulum 13</i> .	Yes, I have heard the term of HOTS and LOTS.
<b>Question:</b>	
What do you know about HOTS strategy in the teaching learning process?	
<i>First Informant's Responses</i>	<i>Second Informant's Responses</i>
Well, in my mind, HOTS is an important method in the teaching and learning process. It promotes the development of critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and creativity in students.	In education, the HOTS strategy is a teaching that focus on the development of high cognitive skills just like in Bloon Taxonomy which are analysing, evaluating, and creating.
<b>Question:</b>	
Does SMA Swasta Pemda 1 implement HOTS in teaching learning process particularly in teaching reading comprehension since <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> is implemented?	
<i>First Informant's Responses</i>	<i>Second Informant's Responses</i>
Well, actually Yes. I think our school has been implementing HOTS in teaching.	Yes, it was running before and after the <i>Kurikulum Merdeka</i> is used.
<b>Question:</b>	
How was the implementation of HOTS in the classroom previously?	



<i>First Informant's Responses</i>	<i>Second Informant's Responses</i>
Well, using HOTS (Higher Order Thinking Skills) in the classroom has been good in developing students' critical thinking and deeper knowledge. I, one of the English teachers used exercises that encouraged analysis and problem-solving. For example, I don't only ask the students to retell the content in a reading comprehension assignment, I ask students to think the author's point of view, find out the facts, and create their understanding from the texts.	So, using HOTS in the classroom was challenging but I think it must be effective. Some teachers feel it difficult to use higher order thinking activities, but others are successful in doing it. I sometimes use conventional strategies in teaching because sometimes they feel discouraged when only asking them to think deep about the text. I know we as teachers must be patient because using HOTS takes more time for students to think and process the information and their ideas.

**Question:**

How does the EFL teacher implement HOTS in teaching reading comprehension?

<i>First Informant's Responses</i>	<i>Second Informant's Responses</i>
The teacher uses HOTS to teach reading comprehension by giving exercises to train their comprehension. I am one of EFL teachers who use HOTS to teach reading comprehension by first choosing suitable texts and then guide them to do exercises like author viewpoint analysis, looking for evidence, and gather information. I think the activities will improve critical thinking abilities.	I encourage students to observe text, find meaning, and do some discussion for comprehension. I also encourage them to enjoy reading the text as well.

**c. Students' Questionnaire Items through Likert Scale**

The result of the questionnaire showed that the students who chose “Strongly Disagree” were 46 items, the students who chose “Disagree” were 814, the students who chose “Neutral” were 411, the students who chose “Agree” were 3.112, and the students who chose “Strongly Agree” were 760 items. All those results are counted, and the total score is 5.143. The counted score interpretation is as follows:

**Formula:**  $T \times P_n$  Note: T : Total Respondent

$P_n$  = The chosen Likert score

Y = The highest score of Likert x total respondent x total response

X = The lowest score of Likert x total respondent x total response

Interval formula =  $100 / \text{total score}$

Percentage formula % =  $\text{Total Score} / Y \times 100 = 5.143 / 7.600 \times 100 = 68\%$

**Table 4.7 Rating Percentage**

No.	Percentage	Category
1.	80%-100%	Positive
2.	60%-79,99%	

3.	40%-59,99%	Neutral
4.	20%-39,99%	Negative
5.	0%-19,99%	

The above data showed that the students' responses toward the implementation of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension especially in *Kurikulum Merdeka* categorized in the "positive category" which is 68%. It means that most of the students have positive opinions with statements related to the HOTS implementation.

From the teachers' observation and interviews as well as the students' questionnaires, it was found that the HOTS strategy in teaching reading comprehension on *Kurikulum Merdeka* has been implemented at the eleventh-grade students of SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli.

The observation sheets of two teachers during the implementation of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension highlight effective strategies and approaches in the classroom. The following is the result observation from Teacher 1:

1. Integration of HOTS in English class XI MIPA 2.
2. Emphasis on critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication.
3. Focus on 21st-century skills, scientific integration, core activities, learning assessment, and participant involvement.
4. Demonstrated motivational strategies to encourage student engagement and interest in learning.
5. Created a comfortable learning atmosphere.
6. Communicated objectives, providing students with direction and purpose.
7. Facilitated learning by providing necessary support and resources, encouraging critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
8. Integrated scientific processes, HOTS aspects, 21st-century skills, and media well.
9. Areas for improvement: more practice in problem-solving and addressing time constraints.

Meanwhile, Teacher 2 also did the same when implementing HOTS in teaching reading comprehension to the students as the following result:

1. Mastery of learning material and effective class management observed.
2. Integration of scientific processes and HOTS learning activities.
3. Challenges in time management and student engagement noted.
4. Incorporated HOTS into the lesson, fostering critical thinking and analytical skills.
5. Engaged students in the learning process.
6. Integrated scientific principles into the lesson, connecting it to real-world applications to train students' critical thinking skills.
7. Areas for improvement: training students in problem-solving skills, enhancing 21st-century skills, addressing time constraints, and providing clear guidance to students.

Overall, both teachers demonstrated good implementation of HOTS and other essential aspects, creating positive learning environments that promote critical thinking, active participation, interdisciplinary connections, and overall student engagement. These

approaches set students up for success in their academic pursuits. However, the students' participation did not meet the expectations that can be caused by their limited prior knowledge. Moreover, both teachers demonstrate strengths in their teaching methodologies, including effective communication, mastery of learning material, and efforts to engage students.

Furthermore, the interview results revealed the teachers' knowledge of HOTS that was introduced before the launch of *Kurikulum Merdeka*. Both teachers agreed that HOTS is a valuable learning that aids in the development of students' critical thinking abilities and advanced cognitive capabilities. It promotes more complex reasoning abilities and requires active teacher-student engagement. Both teachers were already familiar with the role of HOTS in education.

From the interviews, the EFL teachers have implemented HOTS in the classroom, particularly in reading comprehension by (1) choosing suitable texts, (2) questioning the students, (3) asking the author's point of view from the texts, (4) gathering information, (5) mind mapping, (6) group discussion, and (7) guessing inferring meaning as can be evidenced by the checklist of students on the questionnaires as served above on data analysis.

The implementation of HOTS in the classroom was believed by the teachers to help students to get a deeper understanding and promote analysis and problem-solving. However, implementing HOTS in teaching reading comprehension can be challenging, as it requires more time for students to assimilate the material and develop their thoughts. The EFL teachers implement HOTS in teaching reading comprehension, aiming for deeper knowledge, and promoting critical thinking, analysis, and evaluation skills. The teachers also believed the strengths of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension include promoting deep comprehension and critical thinking. However, the result of students' scores was still dissatisfied as to the pre-observation by the researcher.

The responses of the teachers from the interviews were in line with the students' questionnaire. Statements 1 to 13 in the questionnaire were designed to confirm the implementation of HOTS by the teachers in teaching reading comprehension. It resulted that most of the students agreed the material conveyed for reading comprehension is suitable for their need to identify problems (43 students). The teachers often give assignments to analyse a recent problem through reading a text in the class and outside the class such as from the internet or social media (59 students), to criticize a problem from a text (59 students), to do group assignments and discussions (69 students). The teachers often give motivation to students to read texts (59 students). The teachers also ask difficult questions, and they encourage the students to ask questions as well (63 students).

However, the HOTS strategy implemented by the teachers did not meet the expectations due to some issues such as students' limited background knowledge and vocabulary. They used to get conventional teaching in elementary and junior high school, were less motivated, and did not make reading a habit which caused them lazy to read outside the classroom as admitted by the EFL teachers in the interviews. One of the EFL teachers replied that he still applied conventional teaching as the students realized HOTS learning particularly in reading comprehension was difficult. Both teachers believed that implementing HOTS could positively influence students' reading comprehension, contingent on their effort and commitment.

Meanwhile, from the students' side, as can be seen from the questionnaire result, the students mostly disagree with a statement that says the teachers often deliver reading

comprehension material by using games as well as the utilization of school libraries as a learning medium (58 students disagreed, 18 strongly disagreed). They disagreed that school facilities helped them in reading comprehension. Statements 13 to 20 which were designed to see the skill of the students to analyse, evaluate, and create, also showed that most students still do not meet teachers' expectations. The students mostly do not always check and analyse new information, question the truth of arguments, nor diligently read the text in English and learn the text independently. The above-mentioned can be said as an explanation as to why the implementation of HOTS did not reach satisfaction.

HOTS in the classroom can improve students' reading comprehension for few students. While some students welcomed the HOTS strategy in reading comprehension teaching, most appear lethargic, especially when pushed to read outside of class hours. To increase student participation, a collaborative effort between teachers and students is needed, with teachers providing encouragement and students contributing their efforts. Additionally, students may struggle with motivation or teachers need to change the teaching method, indicating the need for assessing student assignments to ensure relevance, enjoyment, and participation in the HOTS activities. The teachers recommended the students to fight laziness and make reading a habit.

In terms of students' enthusiasm, both informants noted challenges in generating excitement among students for HOTS activities. The need for collaborative efforts between teachers and students to promote engagement was emphasized, along with the importance of assessing the design of student assignments to ensure relevance and enjoyment.

### **The Students' Responses Toward the Implementation of HOTS Strategies in Teaching Reading Comprehension on *Kurikulum Merdeka*.**

From the data analysis, it was found that 68% of the range percentage of students' responses toward HOTS strategies in teaching reading comprehension by the teachers. The category can be seen in the following table:

**Table 1. Rating Percentage**

No.	Percentage	Category
1.	80%-100%	Positive
2.	<b>60%-79,99%</b>	
3.	40%-59,99%	Neutral
4.	20%-39,99%	Negative
5.	0%-19,99%	

Based on the table, the researcher found the overall score from the students' responses to the questionnaire. It demonstrated that the students' responses to the implementation of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension, particularly in *Kurikulum Merdeka* were classified as "positive" with 68%.

However, there are some points to be considered according to the questionnaire results:

#### **1) Students' Assignments from the Teachers**

Most students believe that the assignments by the teacher are relevant to the real world and everyday problems. However, in this case, students prefer other approaches to problem-solving. For example, teachers may assign students to do reading tasks on the internet. In this case, teachers may need to consider students' limited knowledge or a lack of student engagement with the texts. These will also be important for students when they follow the teacher's instructions. Besides, students may be uninterested or disengaged from researching problems found on social media or the internet.

## **2) The Teachers' Strategy in Implementing HOTS**

It was discovered that one of the teachers' strategies in using HOTS to teach reading comprehension was games but rarely used by them. The teachers must consider their students' interests and expectations when developing games for teaching.

It was also found that most students agree that group projects and reading material analysis are effective learning techniques that are appropriate for their learning style. Group activities provide a platform for conversation and sharing understanding, thereby boosting students' comprehension of the reading materials. Moreover, the use of dictionaries also is a common way or recommended by teachers as a tool to help students understand and answer problems related to reading.

The teachers allow students to ask questions, which is an efficient way to assist them in understanding the subject and boost students' comprehension of the topic. On the contrary, when the teacher poses difficult questions, some students may react without careful or logical thought. It can be caused by lacking understanding or attention to the subject matter. This is a concern for the teacher, who will post the questions and ask the students to concentrate more.

Most students agreed that reading comprehension materials were suitable for their needs but still, the success of the HOTS implementation be attributed to four factors: language competence, prior knowledge, metacognitive understanding, and reading practices. Reading materials should be appropriate for the range of students' abilities which can enhance their High Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in analysing, evaluating, and creating.

## **3) Teaching and Learning Facilities**

The questionnaire showed that teachers do not use the school library as a learning resource and that it is valued for its contribution to the learning process. The supply of proper reading materials is a significant challenge for the teachers and school since the learning environment or learning facilities at their school provide significant benefits in helping them improve their reading skills.

## **4) Students' Motivation for Reading**

Although most students agree that the EFL teachers motivate them to read in English, they showed less enthusiasm to read. The students do not feel capable of reading and comprehending English reading material independently.

## **Discussion**

In the research, the researcher focused on analyzing how the implementation of HOTS strategies in teaching reading comprehension on *Kurikulum Merdeka* at the eleventh grade of SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli is and knowing the students' responses toward the implementation of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension on *Kurikulum Merdeka*. The result showed that the EFL teachers in SMAS Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli have implemented HOTS in the classroom both through observation and interviews with the EFL teacher.

During the implementation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in teaching reading comprehension, the comparison between Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 reveals notable strengths and areas for improvement in their teaching.

Teacher 1 demonstrated the integration of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in their English class, emphasizing critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication. Their strong focus on 21st-century skills, scientific integration, core activities, learning assessment, and participant involvement reflects a comprehensive approach to education. However, Teacher 1 could enhance their teaching by providing more opportunities for students to practice problem-solving and addressing time constraints.

On the other hand, Teacher 2 exhibited mastery of the learning material and effective class management. They effectively integrate scientific processes and HOTS learning activities but face challenges in time management and student engagement. Teacher 2 could improve by providing more training in problem-solving skills, enhancing 21st-century skills integration, addressing time constraints, and offering clearer guidance to students.

In conclusion, both teachers demonstrate strengths in communication, mastery of material, and efforts to engage students. Teacher 1 emphasized comprehensive integration of HOTS, while Teacher 2 excelled in mastery of material and class management. However, both have areas for improvement, including addressing time constraints, enhancing problem-solving skills, and further integrating 21st-century skills into their teaching practices.

Moreover, interview results affirmed the teachers' prior knowledge of HOTS highlighting its value in enhancing students' cognitive abilities and promoting active engagement in learning particularly in reading comprehension and they believe that HOTS can help the students to get a deeper understanding and promote analysis and problem-solving.

Moreover, the teacher used strategies in developing HOTS for the students as follows (1) choosing suitable texts, (2) questioning the students, (3) asking the author's point of view from the texts, (4) gathering information, (5) mind mapping, (6) group discussion, and (7) guessing inferring meaning. All teachers almost use strategies HOTS in teaching reading comprehension in their class.

Furthermore, the researcher found that the student's responses to the implementation of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension on the applied *Kurikulum Merdeka* were categorized as "positive," with 68% which means that the students have a positive opinion about the implementation of the HOTS strategy in the classroom and they mostly agreed that the HOTS strategy in teaching reading comprehension has been implemented by the teachers.

However, there are still many challenges as found that caused the result of the implementation of the HOTS in teaching reading comprehension itself did not meet the expectations. Based on the teachers' interviews and the students' questionnaires, it was found challenges came from the students, the teachers, and learning facilities factors such as limited background knowledge of the students, less motivation of students to take initiative to make reading a habit, limited teacher's teaching strategies, and limited

learning facilities at school that supposed to enhance the ability of students to think creatively and critically as expected. To solve the challenges in developing HOTS in teaching reading comprehension, the teacher can use the strategies by (1) choosing suitable texts for the students' need, reading materials should be appropriate for the range of students' abilities which can enhance their HOTS in analysing, evaluating, and creating, (2) questioning the students related to the topic which is efficient way to assist them in understanding the subject and boost the students' comprehension of the topic, (3) mind mapping, (4) group discussion or group project and reading materials analysis are effective learning techniques that are appropriate for their learning style, and (5) guessing inferring meaning.

The previous research by (Nurmaharaeni at. al., 2022) indicates that HOTS has a good effect on the learning reading comprehension process because students can get used to questions related to making inference and their ability to answer reading comprehension questions improves. Students be able to predict questions and provide logical reasons related to texts and learning materials. This finding of previous study can be said contrast to with this research finding of this study, since the result of students' reading comprehension scores were not significantly raised after the implementation of HOTS by the teachers. When the teacher poses difficult questions, some students can react without careful or logical thought. It happens because the students lacking understanding or attention to the subject matter. This is a teacher's concern that will post the questions and asks the students to concentrate more.

Other previous research is (Amali at. al., 2022). The finding shows that although students achieved the required score in reading comprehension using the HOTS assessment, the previous research also found that teachers had challenges owing to the students' requirements and motivation. It can be said it supported the findings of this research. In this research, the students do not feel capable of reading and comprehending English reading materials independently. Next, the teacher must give students motivation for reading.

Third previous research by (Indriyana & Kuswandono, 2019) showed that the strategies by the teachers to develop HOTS were as follows: (1) asking divergent questions to the students, (2) using group discussions, (3) informing learning objectives to the students, (3) giving feedback to invite the students to review, refine, and improve understanding about learning materials, and (5) giving motivation to the students to think critically. This previous study, It has a similar and contrary result with the research findings of the study where the teachers implemented HOTS by (1) choosing suitable texts, (2) questioning the students, (3) asking the author's point of view from the texts, (4) gathering information, (5) mind mapping, (6) group discussion, and (7) guessing inferring meaning.

The previous research by (B & Lestari, 2023) in its findings shows that there are several challenges the teachers face due to their misconceptions of HOTS, limited capacity in designing HOTS-based materials and activities, and students' dependent learning styles. It also supports the findings of this research which showed the implementation of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension has not reached satisfaction due to limited students' initiative in learning, the teacher's strategies, and learning facilities factors. In this study, it has the similarity with the previous study. It shows that the implementation of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension on the applied *Kurikulum Merdeka* were categorized as "positive," with 68% which means that the students have a positive opinion about the

implementation of the HOTS strategy in the classroom and they mostly agreed that the HOTS strategy in teaching reading comprehension has been implemented by the teachers.

In summary, from the research findings of the research, there are indeed some findings of previous research that are in contrast and some previous research also supports the findings in this research as well.

Hence, the researcher would like to give the solution regarding the teachers' obstacles toward the implementation of HOTS on *Kurikulum Merdeka*, as follows:

### **1. Teacher Training and Professional Development**

Provide training sessions and workshops for teachers to enhance their understanding and implementation of HOTS in the teaching and learning process.

### **2. Resource Development**

Develop and provide teachers with appropriate learning materials that cater to various students' abilities. This could include differentiated reading materials and activities that accommodate different levels of language competence, prior knowledge, and metacognitive understanding.

### **3. Communication and Collaboration**

Establish open communication channels between teachers and students to address the perception of a lack of encouragement or unique instructions. Encourage teachers to provide clear instructions and support to motivate students.

### **4. Alignment with Theoretical Expectations**

Bridge the gap between theoretical expectations and practical implementation by providing additional resources and guidance to teachers on how to effectively deliver high-level questions during reading lessons.

### **5. Addressing Teacher Obstacles**

Provide ongoing support for teachers in overcoming obstacles related to understanding and implementing HOTS. This could involve mentorship programs, peer collaboration, or access to additional professional development resources.

### **6. Student Engagement**

Explore ways to make HOTS activities more engaging for students. Consider incorporating interactive and collaborative learning approaches to enhance motivation and interest in the material.

### **7. Assessment and Feedback**

Evaluate the design of student assignments to ensure relevance and enjoyment. Encourage teachers to provide constructive feedback that helps students understand and improve their performance.



Additionally, *Kurikulum Merdeka* has differentiated learning benefits for both teachers and students. Teachers may properly analyze and evaluate learning since students are addressed based on their requirements. Differentiated learning is a cyclical process that involves students' learning based on their differences. The varied characteristics and conditions of students in a learning community allow for distinct learning processes that are tailored to each student's needs. The students' potential and abilities will be investigated, and they will be allowed to grow and develop by their nature, or the potential and surroundings of the students.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the result of the research on the implementation of HOTS in teaching reading comprehension on *Kurikulum Merdeka* for eleventh grade at SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli, the conclusions are as follows the implementation of the Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) strategy in teaching reading comprehension on *Kurikulum Merdeka* for the eleventh grade at SMA Swasta Pembda 1 Gunungsitoli, as assessed through observation, interviews, and questionnaires, reflects efforts by both teachers to integrate HOTS principles into their teaching practices by (1) choosing suitable texts; (2) questioning the students; (3) asking the author's point of view from the texts; (4) gathering information; (5) mind mapping; (6) group discussion, and (7) guessing inferring meaning. While Teacher 1 demonstrated comprehensive integration of HOTS with a focus on critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, and communication skills, Teacher 2 exhibited mastery of the learning material and class management, albeit facing challenges in time management and student engagement. Despite areas for improvement, such as addressing time constraints and enhancing problem-solving skills, both teachers created positive learning environments conducive to promoting critical thinking. Collaborative efforts between teachers and students are essential to further optimize HOTS implementation and enhance student outcomes in reading comprehension.

Based on the questionnaire analysis from 76 students, generally responded "positively" about 68% to the implementation of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) strategies in teaching reading comprehension within the *Kurikulum Merdeka* framework. However, several key points emerged from the responses that consideration. Firstly, while students appreciated assignments relevant to real-world problems, alternative strategies to problem-solving skills, addressing time constraints, and offering clearer guidance to students were preferred.

Additionally, teachers' strategies, such as the use of games, need to align with student interests and expectations. Additionally, group projects, reading material analysis, and the use of dictionaries are favoured by students. However, challenges related to students' motivation for reading, the utilization of school facilities, the need for appropriate reading materials, and limited teacher's teaching strategies that supposed to enhance the ability of students to think creatively and critically as expected remain areas for improvement in enhancing students' engagement and comprehension in reading comprehension activities under the HOTS framework.

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