

## Academic Reading Challenges and Coping Strategies: A Mixed-Methods Study of Indonesian EFL Undergraduate Students

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates academic reading difficulties and coping strategies among undergraduate English as Foreign Language (EFL) students in the English Education Study Program at Pattimura University, Indonesia. Using a mixed-methods case study design, data were collected from 40 undergraduate students through questionnaires and group interviews. Quantitative analysis revealed three primary challenges: understanding specialist vocabulary ( $M=3.8$ ), taking brief and relevant notes ( $M=3.8$ ), and working out meanings of difficult words ( $M=4.0$ ). Qualitative findings identified four main coping strategies: technology utilization, systematic note-taking, text rereading, and mind mapping techniques. The results indicate that while students face significant vocabulary-related challenges in academic reading, they have developed sophisticated strategies to overcome these difficulties. This study contributes to understanding EFL students' academic reading experiences in Indonesian higher education contexts and provides insights for developing targeted pedagogical interventions.

**Keywords:** *Academic Reading, EFL Students, Reading Difficulties, Coping Strategies, Higher Education*

### INTRODUCTION

Reading proficiency is a fundamental linguistic skill essential for academic success in higher education. It enables students to effectively engage with scientific literature, technological documentation, cultural texts, and various academic materials across disciplines. Research has established that formal education heavily relies on reading comprehension skills (Hulme & Snowling, 2011), making it a critical component of university-level learning.

Anderson (2003) categorizes reading into three distinct purposes: reading for enjoyment, reading for information, and reading to learn new concepts. Within the university context, academic reading specifically requires students to engage with texts at a deeper level, analyzing viewpoints, synthesizing information, and collaborating with authors to construct meaning. This advanced form of reading poses particular challenges for students studying in a foreign language context.

At the English Department of Pattimura University, students progress through a structured sequence of reading courses that culminates in the Academic Reading Class. This advanced course

exposes students to sophisticated reading materials spanning diverse fields including health sciences, technology, and education. The curriculum emphasizes critical reading skills through various activities. According to Nainggolan (2018), these activities include identifying main ideas and supporting details, comprehending implicit meanings, summarizing academic articles, drawing evidence-based conclusions, and developing critical perspectives on authors' arguments.

Academic reading in a foreign language environment presents significant challenges for students. Previous research has identified several common difficulties. Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016) and Shen (2013) note that students often struggle with limited vocabulary knowledge, technical terminology, comprehensive text understanding, identifying supporting ideas, and effective note-taking. Furthermore, studies by Sari (2013) and Jayanti (2016) have highlighted additional barriers such as struggles with complex sentence structures, limited background knowledge in specialized topics, and insufficient extensive reading practice.

While existing research on reading difficulties is substantial, most studies have focused on general reading comprehension and have been conducted in countries like Malaysia and Turkey. There is limited research examining specific academic reading challenges faced by English as Foreign Language (EFL) students in Indonesian universities. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the particular academic reading difficulties encountered by EFL undergraduate students in Pattimura University's English Education Study Program.

The present study addresses two primary research questions. First, what academic reading difficulties do EFL undergraduate students in the English Education Study Program at Pattimura University encounter? Second, what strategies do these students employ to overcome their academic reading difficulties? The study focuses specifically on understanding how EFL undergraduate students in the English department navigate and overcome academic reading challenges, examining both the specific difficulties they face and the strategies they develop to address these challenges.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Reading constitutes an active cognitive process that extends beyond basic word and sentence decoding. According to Cziko et al. (2000), readers engage in complex interactions with text, drawing upon their thoughts, memories, and prior knowledge to construct meaningful interpretations. This process becomes particularly sophisticated in academic contexts, where reading serves specific pedagogical and scholarly purposes.

Academic reading represents a distinct category of reading practice characterized by its specialized nature and purpose. Khan (2018) defines academic reading as an activity conducted

with explicit academic and pedagogical objectives, encompassing diverse materials such as scholarly texts, reference works, and research articles. Sengupta (2002) further elaborates this definition by emphasizing that academic reading involves purposeful and critical engagement with extensive texts on specialized subjects. This conceptualization highlights that academic reading transcends mere information retrieval, requiring deliberate analytical approaches to comprehend and examine specific subject matter.

The University of Southampton (2009) identifies three fundamental reading approaches essential for academic success. These comprise scanning for specific information, skimming for general comprehension, and detailed reading for thorough understanding. Each approach serves distinct purposes within the academic reading process, facilitating different levels of engagement with scholarly texts.

Research consistently indicates that non-native English speakers face heightened challenges in academic reading compared to native speakers. Studies by Durkin (2004), Goodman (1976), and Reid et al. (1998) demonstrate that non-native readers typically require significantly more time to develop critical reading skills for academic purposes. This finding is particularly relevant for international students who, according to Phakiti and Li (2011) and Young and Schartner (2014), often experience initial difficulties adapting to university academic practices due to unfamiliarity with institutional conventions.

Reading comprehension develops through various strategic approaches. Grabe (2009) identifies several crucial strategies that support effective academic reading: activation of prior knowledge, question formation and response, mental imagery creation, association development, comprehension monitoring, text preview, summary creation, structural analysis, graphic organizer utilization, selective rereading, speed adjustment, focused attention, and discriminative reading. These strategies collectively form a comprehensive framework for approaching academic texts effectively.

Several empirical studies have investigated academic reading challenges in diverse contexts. Sari (2013) examined students' perceptions of reading difficulties across different genres among English Department students at the State University of Padang. This study revealed patterns in how students approach various text types and the specific challenges each genre presents. Jayanti (2016) conducted research analyzing both student and teacher perspectives on reading difficulties at the University of Bengkulu, providing valuable insights into the alignment between learner experiences and instructor observations. Akarsu and Harputlu (2014) investigated effective reading strategies among Turkish graduate-level EFL learners, documenting both individual and collective strategic approaches. Additionally, Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016) explored academic reading

challenges encountered by international graduate students at a Malaysian university, highlighting significant areas of difficulty including note-taking efficiency, vocabulary comprehension, and time management.

## **METHOD**

### ***Research Design***

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design as outlined by Creswell (2018), integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to develop a comprehensive understanding of academic reading difficulties. The design choice was motivated by the need to gather both broad numerical data about students' reading challenges and deep insights into their coping strategies. The instrumental case study approach was particularly suitable as it allowed for detailed examination of a specific phenomenon within its natural context while contributing to broader theoretical understanding.

### ***Research Site and Participants***

The study was conducted at the English Department of Pattimura University, Indonesia. The research site was selected based on its established English Education Study Program and its systematic approach to reading instruction through various course levels. The participant sample comprised 60 undergraduate students who had completed the Academic Reading Class in the English Department Study Program. To ensure representative data collection, participants were selected from the 2017 and 2018 academic cohorts.

From the initial pool of 60 students invited to participate, 40 students provided complete responses, representing a response rate of 66.7%. The final sample consisted of 12 male and 28 female students, all of whom had progressed through the department's sequential reading courses. This gender distribution reflects the typical enrollment pattern in the English Education Study Program. All participants had completed the required sequence of reading courses, including Extensive Reading, Intensive Reading, Professional Reading, and Academic Reading, ensuring they had sufficient experience with academic reading tasks to provide informed perspectives on the challenges and strategies involved.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The study utilized multiple data collection instruments to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research questions. The primary data collection tools consisted of an online questionnaire and group interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from established instruments developed by

Hyland (1997) and Evans and Green (2007), comprising two sections: demographic information and academic reading difficulties assessment. The second section contained ten items evaluating students' perceptions of various academic reading tasks, measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'very easy' to 'very difficult'.

Given the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, data collection employed both online and offline methods. The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms for remote participants, while paper versions were distributed to students who could attend in person. To ensure data quality, follow-up group interviews were conducted with selected participants to validate questionnaire responses and gather detailed information about their reading strategies.

For data analysis, the study employed a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using Anas Sudijono's percentage formula, as cited in Indarto (2012), to determine the frequency and distribution of reading difficulties. This analysis provided numerical insights into the prevalence of various reading challenges. Qualitative data from the group interviews were processed using Sugiyono's (2008) thematic analysis framework, allowing for the identification of common patterns and themes in students' coping strategies. This dual analytical approach enabled triangulation of findings and provided a comprehensive understanding of both the challenges students face and their strategic responses.

## **FINDINGS**

### ***Academic Reading Difficulties Encountered by EFL Undergraduate Students***

The analysis of questionnaire responses from 40 undergraduate students revealed significant patterns in academic reading difficulties. The comprehensive data collection process achieved a response rate of 66.7% from the initial pool of 60 students, representing a robust sample for analysis. The gender distribution of respondents comprised 12 males and 28 females, reflecting typical enrollment patterns in the English Education Study Program.

Table 1 presents the distribution of responses across ten aspects of academic reading activities, measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Very Easy (VE) to Very Difficult (VD). The data demonstrates varying levels of difficulty across different reading tasks, with mean scores ranging from 2.0 to 4.0.

**Table. 1. Area of Academic Reading Difficulty**

| No                          | The Aspect of Academic Reading Activities | VE<br>(1)    | E<br>(2)      | N<br>(3)      | D<br>(4)      | VD<br>(5)     | Mean       |
|-----------------------------|---|--------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| 1.                          | Identifying supporting details            | 5<br>(12.5%) | 20<br>(47.5%) | 12<br>(32.5%) | 3<br>(7.5%)   | 0<br>(0.0%)   | 2.3        |
| 2.                          | Reading to understand whole text          | 8<br>(20%)   | 19<br>(47.5%) | 10<br>(25%)   | 3<br>(7.5%)   | 0<br>(0.0%)   | 2.2        |
| 3.                          | Identifying keywords                      | 5<br>(12.5%) | 21<br>(52.5%) | 6<br>(15%)    | 8<br>(20%)    | 0<br>(0.0%)   | 2.4        |
| 4.                          | Understanding the Organization of text    | 4<br>(10%)   | 16<br>(40%)   | 17<br>(42.5%) | 3<br>(7.5%)   | 0<br>(0.0%)   | 2.0        |
| 5.                          | Scanning Significant Details              | 2<br>(5%)    | 14<br>(35%)   | 11<br>(27.5%) | 13<br>(32.5%) | 0<br>(0%)     | 2.8        |
| 6.                          | Skimming to get main Ideas                | 3<br>(7.5%)  | 16<br>(40%)   | 13<br>(32.5%) | 5<br>(12.5%)  | 3<br>(7.5%)   | 2.7        |
| 7.                          | Understanding Specialist Vocabulary       | 0<br>(0%)    | 8<br>(20%)    | 6<br>(15%)    | 11<br>(27.5%) | 15<br>(37.5%) | 3.8        |
| 8.                          | Taking Brief, Relevant Notes              | 0<br>(0%)    | 9<br>(22.5%)  | 4<br>(10%)    | 12<br>(30%)   | 15<br>(37.5%) | 3.8        |
| 9.                          | Working Out Meaning of Difficult Words    | 0<br>(0%)    | 5<br>(12.5%)  | 7<br>(17.5%)  | 8<br>(20%)    | 20<br>(50%)   | 4.0        |
| 10.                         | Using Own Words in Note Taking            | 8<br>(20%)   | 17<br>(42.5%) | 11<br>(27.5%) | 3<br>(7.5%)   | 1<br>(2.5%)   | 2.3        |
| <b>Average Responds (M)</b> |   |              |               |               |               |               | <b>2.8</b> |

The quantitative data reveals that understanding specialist vocabulary presents significant challenges, with 37.5% of participants rating it as very difficult and 27.5% as difficult. The mean score of 3.8 for this aspect indicates a substantial barrier to effective academic reading. Similarly, taking brief and relevant notes emerged as a significant challenge, with 37.5% of students finding it very difficult and 30% rating it as difficult, resulting in a mean score of 3.8.

Working out the meaning of difficult words proved to be the most challenging aspect, with a mean score of 4.0. Half of the participants (50%) rated this as very difficult, while an additional 20% considered it difficult. This finding suggests a critical need for vocabulary development support in academic reading contexts.

The overall mean score of 2.8 across all activities indicates a moderate level of difficulty in academic reading tasks generally. However, the data shows that students find certain aspects more manageable, such as understanding text organization (M=2.0) and reading to understand whole text (M=2.2), suggesting varying levels of competency across different reading skills.

### ***Students' Strategies to Cope with Academic Reading Difficulties***

The analysis of interview data revealed distinctive patterns in how students approach academic reading challenges. Group interview participants, comprising five students who reported significant difficulties (Group A) and five who demonstrated stronger reading capabilities (Group B), provided detailed insights into their coping strategies.

Students consistently reported relying on technological tools for vocabulary comprehension. Student C's experience exemplifies this approach: "When reading journals or literature, I frequently encounter challenging vocabulary. To comprehend the meanings, I utilize Google Translate, which is faster and simpler than a dictionary." Similarly, Student A explained: "Making summaries can be difficult due to the complicated terminology in the text. I use Google Translate to learn the meanings of new words and phrases."

The interviews revealed sophisticated note-taking strategies developed by successful readers. Student F elaborated on their approach: "I underline the topic sentence, circle keywords, and write the writer's main idea to aid in understanding." This method was echoed by Student I, who stated: "When taking important notes, I understand the meaning, write translations of complex words, and highlight crucial information." These systematic approaches demonstrate students' active engagement with text comprehension.

Multiple readings emerged as a crucial strategy across both groups. Student G emphasized this necessity: "Reading once is insufficient for academic purposes. I need three or more times to understand the meaning and specialist vocabularies in context." Student A supported this approach, noting: "I read multiple times to understand difficult words and underline important information." The consistency of this strategy across different proficiency levels suggests its fundamental importance in academic reading.

The implementation of mind mapping techniques represented an advanced strategic approach. Student J described their process: "We learned how to use mind maps in earlier reading classes. In academic reading, I employ mind maps to comprehend the writer's ideas and perspectives." This was further elaborated by Student H, who explained: "I create a mind map alongside the text, linking key points. It helps me express my arguments." These testimonies demonstrate the development of sophisticated reading comprehension strategies among successful readers.

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated academic reading difficulties encountered by EFL undergraduate students and their coping strategies at Pattimura University's English Department. The findings reveal three primary challenges in academic reading and four distinct strategies employed by students to overcome these difficulties. This discussion examines these results within the context of existing literature and theoretical frameworks.

The identification of specialist vocabulary comprehension as a significant challenge (M=3.8) aligns with previous research findings. This difficulty reflects the observations of Durkin (2004) and Reid et al. (1998), who noted that non-native English speakers require substantially more time to process academic texts compared to native speakers. The high difficulty rating for specialist vocabulary comprehension suggests that students struggle with the technical and discipline-specific terminology common in academic texts. This finding is particularly significant given that vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to academic reading comprehension, as emphasized in earlier studies by Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016).

The challenge of taking brief, relevant notes (M=3.8) emerges as equally significant, supporting Piolat et al.'s (2005) assertion that note-taking represents a complex cognitive activity requiring simultaneous comprehension, selection, and textual production processes. The students' difficulty with note-taking suggests that they struggle with the multifaceted nature of academic reading, which requires not only understanding the text but also synthesizing and recording key information effectively. This finding extends Zhang's (2012) work on note-taking challenges by highlighting specific difficulties in the EFL context.

The highest difficulty rating for working out word meanings (M=4.0) indicates a fundamental vocabulary processing challenge that affects overall reading comprehension. This finding supports Shen's (2013) research highlighting vocabulary limitations as a primary barrier to effective academic reading among EFL students. The fact that 70% of participants rated this aspect as difficult or very difficult suggests that vocabulary processing remains a critical challenge even at advanced academic levels. This persistent difficulty may be attributed to the specialized nature of academic vocabulary and the limited exposure to such terminology in regular language learning contexts.

The strategies employed by students to overcome these challenges demonstrate both adaptability and resourcefulness. The prevalent use of technology, particularly translation tools, represents a modern approach to traditional vocabulary challenges. However, this finding raises important questions about the effectiveness of such tools in academic contexts, particularly given Jayanti's (2016) concerns about the development of independent reading skills. The systematic



note-taking strategies reported by students align with Brown's (2016) recommendations for effective academic reading practices, suggesting that students are actively developing metacognitive approaches to reading comprehension.

The reported use of mind mapping and multiple reading strategies indicates that students are developing sophisticated approaches to text comprehension. These strategies align with Grabe's (2009) identified key components of effective reading comprehension, including activation of prior knowledge, monitoring comprehension, and utilizing graphic organizers. The emergence of these strategies suggests that students are moving beyond simple translation-based approaches to develop more comprehensive reading strategies. This development is particularly significant given Young and Schartner's (2014) findings regarding the importance of adapting to university academic practices.

The findings reveal a nuanced interaction between reading challenges and strategic responses. While students face significant difficulties with vocabulary and note-taking, they have developed multiple strategies to address these challenges. This adaptive response suggests a level of metacognitive awareness that supports academic reading development. However, the persistent nature of vocabulary-related difficulties indicates that current instructional approaches may need modification to better support vocabulary acquisition in academic contexts.

These findings contribute to the broader understanding of academic reading challenges in EFL contexts, particularly within Indonesian higher education. The identification of specific difficulties and corresponding strategies provides valuable insights for pedagogical practice and curriculum development. The results suggest a need for more targeted support in vocabulary development and note-taking skills, while acknowledging the value of student-developed strategies in overcoming academic reading challenges.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study underscores the multifaceted nature of children's second language acquisition (SLA), shaped by the dynamic interplay of internal and external factors. Internally, attributes such as motivation, cognitive abilities, personality traits, and emotional states significantly influence the learning process. Externally, factors including the quality of instruction, sociocultural context, and family involvement provide essential support systems for language development. The findings emphasize the critical interdependence of these factors, with successful SLA reliant on their alignment and reinforcement. Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of age-related advantages and the role of neuroplasticity in shaping effective learning strategies, along with the impact of emotional well-being on learner outcomes.

Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed to enhance language acquisition among children. Educators are encouraged to implement tailored instructional strategies that align with learners' developmental needs and cognitive profiles. Strengthening parental and community engagement can provide essential reinforcement and opportunities for immersive learning. Teacher training programs should emphasize evidence-based pedagogical methods to improve instructional quality. Integrating sociocultural elements into the curriculum and addressing emotional barriers such as language anxiety can foster motivation and active learner participation. Lastly, future research should focus on empirical validation of theoretical models and explore the integration of innovative tools and technologies to further support SLA processes.

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