



## Students' Perceptions of Difficulties in Reading English Texts among Fourth Semester Students of English Education at Islamic University of Riau

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**Abstract.** Reading is an important part of language learning, but many students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) still experience difficulties in understanding reading English texts. This study aims to explore the perceptions of fourth-semester students of the English Education Department at Islamic University of Riau regarding their reading difficulties. This research used a qualitative phenomenological approach. Data were collected from 20 participants through a structured questionnaire. The findings show that students face several challenges in reading comprehension, including limited vocabulary, difficulties in understanding grammar, ineffective use of reading strategies, low motivation, and problems identifying main ideas in long sentences. These findings suggest the importance of implementing appropriate teaching strategies to improve students' reading comprehension and support their academic achievement.

**Keywords:** Reading Comprehension, EFL Learners, Students' Perceptions, Reading Difficulties, Qualitative Study

**Abstrak.** Membaca merupakan bagian penting dari pembelajaran bahasa, namun banyak siswa yang belajar Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL) masih mengalami kesulitan dalam memahami teks bacaan berbahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi mahasiswa semester empat Jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Islam Riau mengenai kesulitan membaca mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologi kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan dari 20 partisipan melalui kuesioner terstruktur. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa menghadapi beberapa tantangan dalam pemahaman bacaan, termasuk kosakata yang terbatas, kesulitan memahami tata bahasa, penggunaan strategi membaca yang tidak efektif, motivasi rendah, dan masalah dalam mengidentifikasi ide utama dalam kalimat panjang. Temuan ini menunjukkan pentingnya menerapkan strategi pengajaran yang tepat untuk meningkatkan pemahaman bacaan mahasiswa dan mendukung prestasi akademik mereka.

**Kata kunci:** Pemahaman Bacaan, Pembelajar EFL, Persepsi Mahasiswa, Kesulitan Membaca, Studi Kualitatif

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is considered one of the most important language skills in English learning because it allows students to access information, understand ideas, and develop knowledge through written texts. In higher education, reading becomes increasingly important since students are required to engage with academic materials and comprehend complex information independently. According to Khafidhoh & Abdullah (2022), reading is a process of obtaining and constructing meaning from written texts. Similarly, Aida (2021) explains that reading involves not only recognizing words but also

understanding and interpreting ideas presented in the text. Reading comprehension therefore becomes an essential ability that supports academic achievement and language development.

Despite its importance, many students still face difficulties in comprehending English texts. Reading English as a foreign language requires students to process vocabulary, grammar, sentence structures, and contextual meaning simultaneously. As a result, students often encounter barriers that reduce reading effectiveness.

Previous studies indicate that vocabulary limitations remain one of the most common problems among EFL learners. Students frequently encounter unfamiliar vocabulary and struggle to infer meaning through context. In addition, grammatical complexity and long sentence structures often create confusion and reduce comprehension.

Besides linguistic factors, difficulties in reading are also associated with ineffective reading strategies and affective factors. Many students are unfamiliar with strategies such as skimming and scanning and tend to read texts word by word. Motivation, concentration, and environmental conditions further influence reading performance.

This issue becomes particularly important among fourth-semester students because they are entering a more advanced stage of academic reading. At this level, students are expected to analyze longer and more complex English texts. Therefore, understanding students' perceptions regarding reading difficulties may provide useful insights for improving teaching practices and supporting students' reading development.

This study addresses the following research question:

How do students perceive the difficulties they face in reading English texts?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Reading comprehension is generally understood as the ability to understand, interpret, analyze, and construct meaning from written texts. This process does not only involve recognizing words but also understanding relationships among ideas and interpreting information presented in a text. According to Aida (2021), reading comprehension is an important cognitive skill that allows readers to understand, analyze, and respond effectively to written information. Similarly, Khafidhoh & Abdullah (2022)

explain that reading is an active process in which readers interact with texts to obtain meaning. Therefore, reading comprehension requires both linguistic knowledge and cognitive processing to achieve successful understanding.

For students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, reading comprehension often becomes more challenging because English is not used as the primary language in daily communication. Students are expected to understand not only vocabulary and sentence structures but also implied meaning and contextual information within texts. However, many students still experience difficulties during reading activities, which may reduce comprehension and academic performance. These difficulties often occur because students need to process multiple aspects of language simultaneously while constructing meaning from texts.

One of the major factors influencing reading comprehension is vocabulary mastery. Vocabulary knowledge supports students in understanding words, sentences, and the overall message contained in reading passages. According to Aida (2021), unfamiliar vocabulary frequently becomes a barrier that interrupts students' understanding of English texts. Likewise, Khafidhoh & Abdullah (2022) found that limited vocabulary mastery often causes confusion and reduces students' ability to comprehend reading materials effectively. Students who encounter unfamiliar vocabulary may focus excessively on individual words and lose understanding of broader textual meaning. Consequently, vocabulary becomes an essential component in supporting successful reading comprehension.

In addition to vocabulary difficulties, grammar and grammatical complexity also influence students' reading experiences. Reading comprehension requires students to understand how sentence elements work together to convey meaning. According to Yulianto & Marhamah (2022), many EFL students continue to experience difficulties understanding sentence structures, clauses, and complex grammatical forms. Long sentences containing multiple clauses often increase cognitive demands and require students to spend more time processing information. Differences between English and Indonesian grammatical systems may also create confusion and affect interpretation. As a result, grammatical complexity frequently becomes one of the obstacles to effective reading comprehension.

Reading comprehension is also influenced by students' ability to apply appropriate reading strategies. Reading strategies refer to techniques that readers use to improve understanding and reading efficiency. According to Aida (2021), strategies such as skimming and scanning help students identify main ideas and locate important information more effectively. However, many students still struggle to apply these strategies appropriately while reading English texts. Hidayati (2018) explains that students who lack strategic awareness often depend on reading word by word, which makes reading slower and less efficient. Therefore, developing effective reading strategies is important to support better comprehension outcomes.

Besides linguistic and strategic factors, affective aspects such as concentration and motivation also contribute to students' reading performance. Concentration allows students to maintain attention while processing information from texts, whereas motivation encourages students to continue reading despite difficulties. According to Sari et al. (2020) students with lower motivation tend to lose concentration more easily and become less engaged in reading activities. Environmental conditions, including noise and distractions, may further interrupt comprehension processes. Students who feel bored or uninterested may stop reading before completing the text. Therefore, maintaining motivation and concentration becomes an important element in achieving successful reading comprehension.

Another difficulty experienced by students involves identifying main ideas and understanding long sentences in reading texts. Students are expected to distinguish between central ideas and supporting details while interpreting information across paragraphs. According to Kubela et al. (2022), many students still experience difficulties identifying topic sentences and understanding texts containing multiple clauses. Long and complex sentences frequently require students to reread passages several times before understanding the intended meaning. Furthermore, Ramadhianti & Somba (2023) explain that limited background knowledge may increase students' difficulties, especially when reading unfamiliar topics or texts related to different cultural contexts. Consequently, students may struggle to interpret both explicit and implied information.

Perception also becomes an important aspect in understanding students' reading difficulties because individuals may experience and interpret challenges differently.

According to Devito (2011), perception is the process through which individuals interpret and assign meaning to experiences and information they receive. Through perception, students express their thoughts, experiences, and responses regarding the difficulties they encounter during reading activities. Exploring students' perceptions therefore provides deeper insight into how reading difficulties are experienced and how these experiences influence learning processes.

Based on previous theories and related studies, students' difficulties in reading English texts are influenced by interconnected factors, including vocabulary mastery, grammatical complexity, reading strategy use, concentration and motivation, background knowledge, and the ability to identify main ideas and understand long sentences. These theoretical perspectives become the foundation of this study in exploring students' perceptions regarding the difficulties they face in reading English texts among fourth-semester students of English Education at Islamic University of Riau.

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research method using a phenomenological approach to explore students' perceptions regarding the difficulties they experience in reading English texts. A phenomenological approach was selected because it focuses on understanding participants' experiences and perceptions related to a particular phenomenon. According to Creswell (2018) phenomenology aims to describe and interpret participants' lived experiences in depth.

This study was conducted at the English Education Study Program of Islamic University of Riau during the academic year 2025/2026. The participants consisted of 20 fourth-semester students who had experience in reading English texts through academic activities. These participants were selected because they were expected to provide relevant information regarding their reading experiences and difficulties.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of 25 statements adapted from previous studies and covered indicators including vocabulary difficulties, grammar and grammatical complexity, reading strategy difficulties, concentration and motivation difficulties, and difficulties in identifying main ideas and understanding long sentences. Participants

responded using a four-point Likert scale consisting of Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Agree (A), and Strongly Agree (SA).

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher reviewed participants' responses, identified recurring patterns, grouped similar responses into themes, and interpreted the findings based on relevant theories. The analysis was conducted to answer the research question and gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions regarding reading difficulties.

## **4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Vocabulary Difficulties**

The findings indicate that vocabulary remains one of the most dominant difficulties experienced by students when reading English texts. Most participants reported that they frequently encounter unfamiliar vocabulary during reading activities and that limited vocabulary knowledge prevents them from understanding the overall meaning of texts. Students also expressed difficulty interpreting word meanings through contextual clues and often relied on dictionaries to support comprehension.

Another important finding shows that unfamiliar vocabulary interrupts students' understanding beyond individual words. Many participants stated that when they encountered unknown vocabulary, they often lost track of the meaning of entire paragraphs. This suggests that vocabulary mastery plays an important role in helping students construct meaning and maintain reading flow.

These findings support Khafidhoh & Abdullah (2022), who explain that vocabulary limitations frequently become one of the main causes of reading difficulties among EFL students. Students with insufficient vocabulary knowledge may experience challenges understanding textual information effectively.

### **4.2 Grammar and Grammatical Complexity**

The findings also reveal that grammar and sentence complexity significantly affect students' reading comprehension. Most participants agreed that understanding English texts becomes more difficult when sentences contain complex grammatical

structures and multiple clauses. Students often reported difficulties identifying the main verb and understanding relationships between sentence components.

Participants also perceived differences between English and Indonesian grammatical patterns as factors contributing to confusion during reading activities. Long and compound-complex sentences frequently required repeated reading before students understood the intended meaning. These findings are in line with Yulianto & Marhamah (2022), who found that grammatical complexity increases processing demands and may reduce reading efficiency among EFL learners.

#### **4.3 Reading Strategy Difficulties**

The findings demonstrate that students experience varied levels of difficulty in applying reading strategies while reading English texts. Responses regarding skimming showed balanced perceptions, indicating that some students still experience difficulties identifying main ideas quickly, while others are relatively able to apply this strategy effectively. This result suggests that students possess different levels of familiarity and confidence in using skimming during reading activities.

Interestingly, most participants reported fewer difficulties in applying scanning techniques to locate specific information in a text. This finding indicates that students are relatively more capable of searching for factual information compared to identifying broader ideas within a text. However, many participants still admitted reading texts word by word and spending more time understanding each sentence. Students also expressed uncertainty when deciding which reading strategy should be applied for different reading purposes.

These findings suggest that although students have begun to develop certain reading strategies, strategic reading skills still require improvement. Students who rely on inefficient reading habits may experience slower comprehension and reduced reading effectiveness. This finding supports Hidayati (2018), who explains that insufficient knowledge and application of reading strategies often limit students' comprehension and reduce reading performance.

#### **4.4 Concentration and Motivation Difficulties**

The findings reveal that concentration and motivation influence students' experiences when reading English texts. Most participants reported that they often lose focus while reading long English passages and find it difficult to maintain attention throughout the reading process. In addition, many students agreed that external factors such as noise and environmental distractions negatively affect their concentration during reading activities.

Responses regarding boredom showed relatively balanced results, indicating that students have different experiences and attitudes toward reading English texts. Some participants perceived reading activities as tiring and less engaging, while others remained interested and motivated. Furthermore, students showed varied levels of motivation toward reading English texts outside classroom assignments, suggesting differences in reading habits and personal preferences.

These findings indicate that reading comprehension is not influenced only by linguistic ability but also by affective factors. Students who experience low concentration and reduced motivation may encounter greater difficulties in maintaining reading engagement and understanding texts effectively. This finding supports Sari et al. (2020), who explain that concentration and motivation significantly influence students' participation and comprehension during reading activities.

#### **4.5 Difficulties in Identifying Main Ideas and Understanding Long Sentences**

The findings indicate that students continue to experience difficulties identifying main ideas and understanding complex information in English texts. Most participants reported difficulty distinguishing main ideas from supporting details and identifying topic sentences within paragraphs. These findings suggest that students may struggle to organize and interpret textual information effectively.

Students also agreed that long sentences containing multiple clauses were difficult to understand and frequently required repeated reading before meaning could be understood. Many participants reported rereading sentences several times to interpret information accurately. In addition, making inferences from implied

information remained challenging because students found it difficult to connect ideas and interpret meanings beyond explicit statements.

These findings demonstrate that reading comprehension involves more than recognizing words and understanding grammar. Students are also required to process relationships between ideas and interpret information critically. This finding supports Kubela et al. (2022), who explain that identifying main ideas and understanding long sentence structures remain common difficulties experienced by students in academic reading contexts.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to explore students' perceptions regarding the difficulties they experience in reading English texts among fourth-semester students of English Education at Islamic University of Riau. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that students experience various challenges during reading activities, and these difficulties are influenced by several interconnected factors. These findings indicate that reading comprehension difficulties involve more than language knowledge and may affect students' academic reading performance.

The findings show that vocabulary limitations, grammar and grammatical complexity, and difficulties in applying reading strategies remain the major challenges experienced by students. In addition, concentration and motivation were found to influence students' reading experiences and comprehension performance. Students also experienced difficulties identifying main ideas, understanding implied meaning, and comprehending long and complex sentences.

Overall, reading comprehension difficulties among EFL students involve linguistic, strategic, and affective dimensions that influence one another. Therefore, improving students' reading comprehension should focus not only on language development but also on strengthening reading strategies and creating supportive learning environments. Future research is recommended to involve larger participant groups or use additional instruments such as interviews to obtain a deeper understanding of students' reading experiences and provide broader insights into reading difficulties.

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