

# INDONESIAN GRADUATE STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH JOURNAL ARTICLES

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## Abstract

For academic purposes, higher education students need to analyze the information in English journal articles to write academic articles and graduate students are no exception. Furthermore, this study was conducted to investigate and explore the challenges in comprehending English journal articles faced by graduate students, and their strategies to overcome the difficulties. The respondents of the study were first and second-semester graduate students of English Education in two private universities in Surakarta and Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The qualitative research design used open-ended questionnaires and forum group discussions to collect the data. The results of this study indicated that the difficulties students face when understanding journal articles were lack of vocabulary, unfamiliar academic vocabulary, boredom with reading long texts, difficulties in finding the details, and unfamiliar sentence structure and different culture with the author. To overcome this problem, there were five categories of ways for students: getting used to reading, creating a comfortable atmosphere when reading, using a dictionary to translate the text, enriching new vocabulary, looking for simpler articles, and using appropriate reading strategies. Therefore, this research can provide reflection and evaluation of lecturers and students in the teaching and learning process in enhancing students' reading skills.

**Keywords:** English Journal Article; Graduate Students; Reading Challenges

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, globalization has had a very significant impact on the development of science. In the era of the industrial revolution 4.0, people are required to continue to develop their knowledge (Brown et al., 2008). One of the fundamental 21st-century learning abilities is reading, which calls for students to deeply analyze and evaluate the texts by using analytical thinking to go forward with a wealth of knowledge (Putu Ratama et al., 2021). Reading skill is a cumulative skill that students must master in order to continue to upgrade their understanding regarding the field of knowledge they are involved in. It needs the harmony of a lot of related sources of information (Wijaya, 2022a). The primary objective of reading is to extract the message that the author intended for the reader to take away from a book. Academic reading is mandatory reading for intellectuals and crucial for success in higher education. This fact cannot be ignored especially for college students, especially graduate students. They are required to deepen their knowledge and conduct in-depth research in the field of science they are involved in. This required them to master English which can help them access scientific articles in various reputable journals easily. Mastery of English reading strategies and skills for graduate students is an important concern because graduate students rely heavily on reading and writing skills to succeed in their higher studies (Abdullah et al., n.d.). There is a mutual relationship between academic reading skills and academic success and between information sourced and extracted from texts and its expression in academics (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016)

In Indonesia, graduate students have more demands to be able to produce academic writing which is a graduation requirement, both in the courses taken and university graduation (Bram & Angelina, 2022). In compiling good writing, students must have quality references. Quality academic reading can be found on various reputable journal platforms such as Scopus, Springer, etc. (Wang et al., 2002). Effective readers must have strong reading comprehension abilities. These abilities enable students to read well and understand the text efficiently. Students can learn more about their chosen courses and develop their language skills by engaging in academic reading. Reading academically aids in developing the comprehension needed to frame arguments as well as expanding one's knowledge of the academic realm. Additionally, reading academic texts especially written by experts facilitates students to engage in academic culture, discourse community, and conventions.

However, several students experience reading challenges due to environmental, educational, and biological factors. Students who struggle with reading comprehension do so for a variety of reasons. For some students, comprehension issues may result from faulty or inadequate word recognition and decoding techniques. The learners' ability to comprehend what they read is influenced by their environment. In an unorganized setting, they can encounter several challenges interpreting the reading materials (Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018). However, people who are in a calm, orderly setting might read more effectively. Insecure housing makes it harder for students to focus on their reading. However, their reading comprehension effectiveness generally increases when students are in secure situations. It has been demonstrated that students lose concentration while reading comprehension in noisy environments, such as those with a lot of televisions or radios playing (Wijaya, 2022b).

Specifically, Gunning (2002) grouped the reading issues into five categories: (1) language knowledge issues, students may struggle with comprehension because of linguistic or cognitive shortcomings. Additionally, effort and focus are elements that may affect comprehension because some readers may have trouble understanding larger phrases despite being able to understand simple words or ideas (Phakiti & Li, 2011). Lerner (2000) asserts that students with strong reading backgrounds tend to read more and advance more quickly than students with weak reading backgrounds (Erya & Pustika, 2021). Phonological knowledge issues or conditions where the reader lacks proficiency in one or more of the five language knowledge domains phonology, semantics, syntax, morphology, and pragmatics; (2) background knowledge issues, the situation when readers discover discrepancies between their own prior knowledge and what the author intended in the text, are the second (Yi, 2006). Even when readers are familiar with every word in the text, background information can make it difficult to understand some cultures' laden terms and phrases. The research found that readers' working memory is impacted by prior knowledge in a study examining various elements related to the understanding of academic writings. In an attempt to understand academic material, textual characteristics may thereafter become crucial (De Naeghel et al., 2016); (3) motivation issues, less reading motivation is another reason why students struggle and fall short of their reading comprehension goals (Wigfield et al., 2016). Students may struggle with reading comprehension and fail if they are not engaged in the subject matter. On the other hand, if the students are truly interested in the subject, it could become a significant element because positive motivation is vital for the development of reading comprehension and can encourage students to read about other subjects. (4) reading strategy issues, issues with reading comprehension, or the circumstance where students utilized the wrong method. The readers can effectively comprehend the content if they have a sound approach to reading comprehension. On the other hand, readers who use a poor method will have trouble understanding what they read. The reading strategy demonstrates how readers grasp texts, how they read texts, and what they do when they have trouble understanding what they are reading (Deliany & Cahyono, 2020), and (5) reading knowledge issues that students may encounter. Condition when students

are unable to focus through a whole section. The readers sometimes appear to forget what they have already read, forcing them to go back and reread it.

Concerning the facts above, Indonesian graduate students who are non-native English speakers are required to make more efforts to understand professional academic articles that are generally in English. In practice, they have to face problems in understanding English journal articles, not only the content but also the language. Reading English journal articles requires the reader to give attention to the lexical, syntactic, and discursive processes in addition to word interpretation. Additionally, metacognitive and psycholinguistic skills are necessary for academic reading (Florenso Wijaya, 2021; Pae et al., 2016; Sulistyawati & Mbato, 2021, 2022). However, the majority of students may experience difficulties with comprehension while reading material, but excellent readers would avoid these issues by using efficient reading techniques to overcome the difficulties (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022). Exposure to text arrangement and focus is one of the factors that affect reading comprehension abilities (Salehudin et al., 2021). One's ability to comprehend academic literature is greatly influenced by several variables, such as the reader's traits, the text's attributes, and the task's sociocultural context. Reader characteristics may include inner cognitive traits including drive, learning preferences, methods, vocabulary stock, and background knowledge of the texts' subjects. This aspect shouldn't, however, be considered in isolation. Along with other aspects like the text's textual and contextual features, reader traits should be taken into consideration in interactions and interdependencies (Rahman, 2020).

Previous research that specifically addresses the challenges of reading English journal articles is still limited. Some of these studies include the following. Chen (2017) specifically investigated 456 graduate students undertaking various majors in Taiwan. In this research, the researcher identified non-native English speaker graduate students' comprehension difficulties and reading strategies when reading English journal articles. From this quantitative study, the researcher explained that NNES graduate students have a medium-to-high level of EJA reading comprehension difficulty. These difficulties consist of limited vocabulary, low reading speed, limited semantic knowledge, lack of reading efficiency, lack of syntactic knowledge, and short attention span (Tzu & Chen, 2017). In another study, Chen (2019) again investigated EFL graduate students. In this study, she identified EFL graduate students' use of EEJA searching strategies and reading strategies and explored the relationship between these two variables. Taking data from 383 graduate students from 15 different universities in Taiwan, the results of his research show that students use e-journal search strategies and e-journal reading strategies at moderate to high levels. The results also show that students' use of ESS is related to the use of ERS. Students with higher ESS levels tend to use more ERS than those with lower ESS levels. One of the aims of this study was to determine whether students with different background characteristics use ESS and ERS. The results showed that students between the ages of 31 and 40, with excellent self-report reading skills, and spend 3 to 4 hours daily on online academic reading use ESS and ERS more frequently (Chen, 2020). Other research related to reading challenges in comprehending English journal articles specifically for NNES graduate students was also conducted in Jordan. This research using qualitative methods shows that graduate students in Jordan also experience difficulties in reading and understanding EJA. The students faced difficulties in reading quickly to grasp the overall meaning, using their own words in taking notes, quick reading seeking information, understanding the organization of the text, and taking notes and pointing out key ideas (Banat, 2019).

Based on previous explanations and research that has been conducted regarding the challenges and strategies used by graduate students, especially in Taiwan and Jordan, researchers are motivated to examine the challenges faced by Indonesian graduate students in understanding EJA. Due to the limited research related to the understanding of EJA in the Indonesian context, this research is expected to be able to fill this gap. In particular, this research examines the

problems faced by graduate students of English education courses who are required to read a large number of English journal articles. This needs to be studied more deeply and from a broader perspective for students who are required to include sources or reading references in the form of reputable national or international references in the journal articles they write. In conducting this research, the researcher made a research gap by focusing on two questions, namely what kind of difficulties that students face in comprehending English journal articles, and how do students overcome the difficulties they face?

## METHOD

This research was descriptive qualitative research. The main benefit of applying qualitative content analysis is to enable researchers to attain more trustworthy data from the life-specific events shared by research participants (Mayring, 2014). The subjects of this study were 18 students of the Graduate of English Education Department. The students were from three universities in Central Java, Indonesia, especially Yogyakarta and Solo. To collect data, the researcher distributed open-ended questionnaires through Google Forms adapted from Hezam and team research to the respondents (Hezam et al., 2022). The questionnaire is divided into two main sections. The first section was used to collect participants' personal information, including age, gender, and educational background. The second section contained four items to gather data on students' perceptions of their reading comprehension challenges when reading articles from English publications. Then, three participants were randomly selected as representatives of the dominant answers interviewed by the researcher to obtain specific details from the data in the focus group interview. This is a component of gathering genuine and additional data to enhance the study. Focus group interviews are thus more flexible than observation or questionnaire surveys and are also a great way to learn respondents' opinions and perceptions of certain subjects. In this study, the focus group methodology is employed to determine the students' reading challenges when reading English journal articles.

To analyze data, some of the steps, adopted by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) were employed, namely: (1) data collection, (2) data condensation, (3) data display, and (4) conclusion drawing and verification. After getting the data from the Google form, the data were then described descriptively. The data were described and analyzed qualitatively concerning the graduate students' challenges in comprehending English journal articles. The researchers then displayed the data and verified the research by making conclusions from the data findings.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

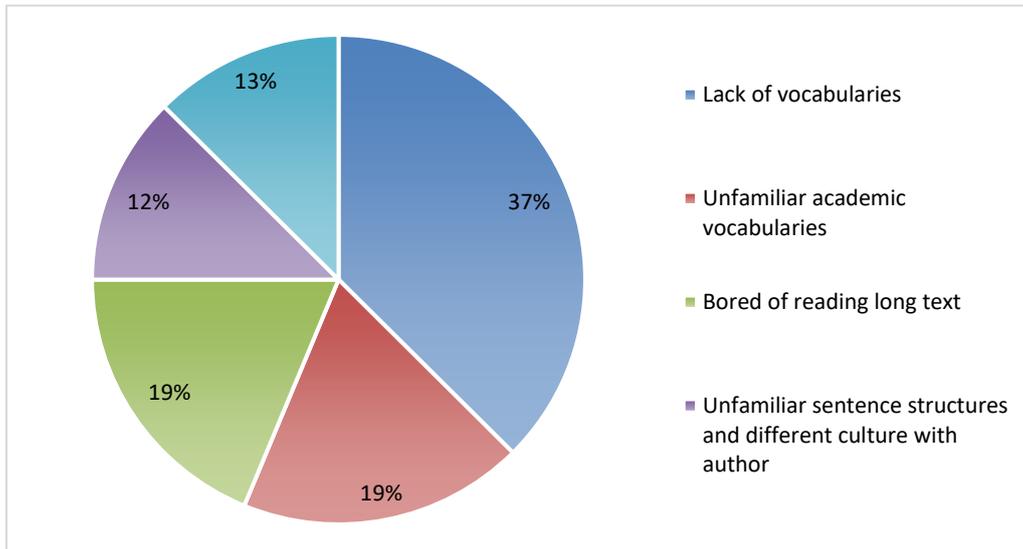
In this section, the results of the questionnaire collected via Google Forms are presented based on the questions given. From the answers, the researchers group the answers from 18 graduate students into several categories that have the same answers and are presented using a pie chart. The translated answers from participants in the focus discussions are also attached here. Therefore, these results are presented descriptively as follows:

#### 1. Students' difficulties in comprehending journal articles

From the results of the open-ended questionnaire collected by the researcher, the researcher grouped the answers and then presented each category. From the questions given in Google Forms, *based on your personal experience, what difficulties do you often face when reading journal articles in English?* Then, the researcher was interested in further examining the difficulties faced by graduate students in understanding the text. The researcher conducted

additional interviews specifically for this one question via group WhatsApp chat with three participants who were randomly selected by the researcher. They come from different universities. To the 3 participants, the researcher gave additional questions. The data can be seen as the following:

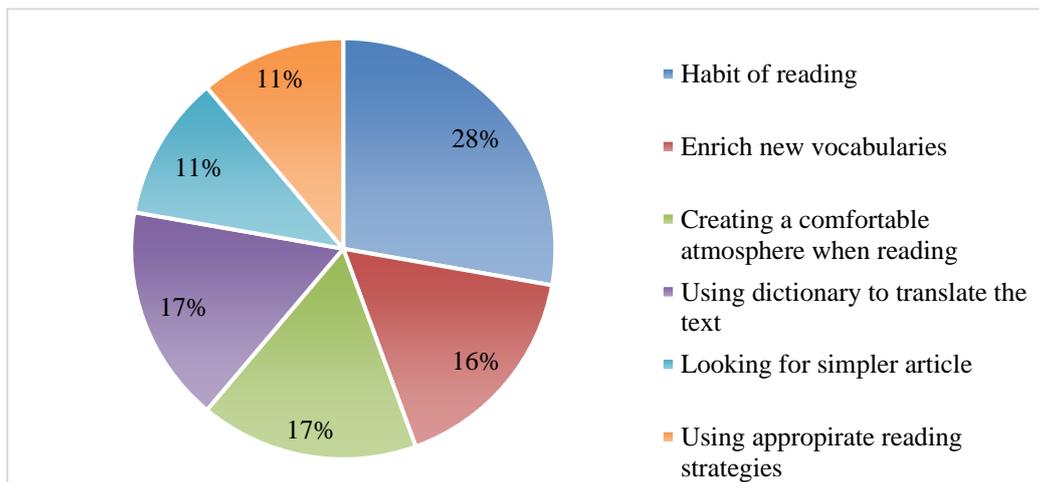
**Figure 1.** Graduate students' difficulties in comprehending journal articles



## 2. Students' strategies to overcome the difficulties in comprehending journal article

In the second question that the researcher included in Google Forms, the researcher asked how the graduate students overcame the problems they faced when reading and understanding journal articles. The result can be seen in the following diagram:

**Figure 2.** Students strategies to overcome the difficulties in comprehending journal article



## Discussion

### 1. Students' difficulties in comprehending journal articles

Participants responded to the questions given in the Google form with various answers. As many as 37% of students stated that they had difficulty understanding journal articles because they had limited English vocabulary. Reputable English journal articles generally use academic

language diction which is rarely used in daily conversation. Students who are rarely exposed to academic dictions like this allow their confusion and lack of understanding in understanding the text. The lack of vocabulary makes it difficult for students to identify the meaning contained in academic vocabulary found in English academic journals (Sulistyawati & Mbato, 2022). The researcher then investigated the participants more deeply through a group discussion forum.

“I have difficulty understanding English journal articles because of my limited vocabulary. When I find articles that use simple language, I usually understand them more quickly, but when I find articles with more advanced diction, it takes me longer to understand them.” (STU 1)

The interviewee's statement above then supports the answers of 19% of students who stated that they had difficulties in understanding EJA because they found some vocabulary that they rarely found or even never found before. In general, when facing these difficulties, students will use a dictionary or a translation tool to find the meaning of difficult words or unfamiliar words.

“My biggest difficulty in understanding EJA is when I find vocabulary that I have never read before. When that happens, I usually use Google Translate to find out the meaning quickly.” (STU 3)

“When I read English academic journals, I always find difficult vocabulary. If I am in a good state, I will usually look up the meaning of the vocabulary, but if I am in a bad state for reading, I usually ignore it and try to understand sentences that are easier for me to understand.” (STU 1)

Further, 13% of students stated that they had difficulty understanding the details of the specific findings and of the EJA. Several students require more time. As is known, in general, the findings and discussion section are the longest part of a scientific article. Although the results of the research can be seen instantly in the abstract section, a detailed and thorough discussion is still available in the findings and discussion section.

“I usually find it difficult to understand the findings and discussion section because I have to understand the research flow first to capture the researcher's intent in presenting the results listed in the findings and discussion section.” (STU 2)

In addition, the last 12% of students agreed that unfamiliar sentence structures and different backgrounds with the authors of the articles sometimes made them misinterpret the meaning contained in the articles. This background difference can occur when students read articles written by authors from abroad whose social and cultural context is different from Indonesia. This causes students to need more time to understand the article in depth.

“Several times I faced difficulty understanding the context of the articles I read. Sometimes I realize after reading the article several times and only then do I understand the meaning of the article in the many times I have read it.” (STU 1)

From the answers to the interview results above it was found that the difficulties experienced by students as shown in Figure 1 were located in certain parts of the journal articles. Each student has different reasons based on their different background knowledge and reading.

## 2. Students' strategies to overcome the difficulties in comprehending journal article

The results were grouped by researchers and showed that 28% answered that they could overcome this problem by getting used to reading the journal article so that they were familiar with the pattern of the article. Furthermore, 17% of participants responded that they could overcome these difficulties by using reading aids such as a dictionary so they could understand the journal article in their native language. In addition, 16% of participants overcame the problems they faced when understanding journal articles by trying to enrich their understanding of the vocabulary they had so that when reading they were not hampered by limited vocabulary anymore. From these data, it showed that they realized that to be able to read and understand well the English journal articles they read, they need consistent and continuous reading habits. With this reading habit, they will be exposed to various vocabulary which can enrich their language knowledge. Simply put, students can read easily and understand text quickly because they already know the pattern and structure of their reading and the language. Through the group discussion forum, one of the students stated something similar which could reinforce this finding.

“I realize that I still don't read enough, especially academic journals in English. Even though I'm busy, I should be able to find time to build good habits. I believe if I often read it will make me familiar with the text and can easily understand it.” (STU 2)

“I need quite a long time to understand an article, especially if the article is an article published by a reputable Scopus journal, etc. The diction used is very unfamiliar so it takes time to translate and then you can understand it. I even sometimes look for other references to help me understand the article.” (STU 3)

Then, as many as 17% answered that the difficulty in understanding the journal article can be overcome by creating a comfortable atmosphere so that they can read with full concentration and become focused on understanding the journal article they are reading. The atmosphere and situation when reading can affect the comfort of students. Some students feel more comfortable reading in a quiet, undisturbed room. Some feel more comfortable reading in a library or a quiet room without a sound, but some also like to read accompanied by music or other instruments. This shows that the definition of one's comfort cannot be generalized. Each student has their own learning style which can help them to read and understand more easily, especially English journal articles.

“I feel more comfortable and can concentrate more fully when I read in a bright and quiet place without any distractions. I usually don't really like being in a place where there are lots of people passing by and hearing loud people or music.” (STU 1)

“When reading I don't mind being in a public place, because I usually turn on my favorite music playlist that I listen to through my headset or earphones. In this way, I feel comfortable and can concentrate on reading.” (STU 2)

Furthermore, 11% of participants faced this problem by looking for other articles on the same topic but with simpler diction so they could easily understand. As explained above, some students find it difficult to understand the English journal articles they read because they are constrained by their limited vocabulary. This leaves them looking for other ways they can go

about it and still get the information they need. Looking for other articles whose diction is easier to understand is an option for students.

“Usually when I have free time, I will look for various similar articles which I think I understand more easily. I usually find articles in reputable international journals with dictions that are unfamiliar to me. Other options, if they can still be found, I will try to find articles in national journals with similar topics.” (STU 3)

Moreover, another 11% said they overcame difficulties when understanding the English journal article by using the right reading strategy so they could find the information they wanted with the right understanding. Understanding strategies for reading English journal articles is an essential concern as they depend upon their reading and writing skills to succeed in their graduate studies. Students need to understand strategies for reading scientific journal articles in order to help them be more structured, effective, and efficient in reading and understanding the English journal articles they read.

“I think I have difficulty understanding the English journal articles that I read due to the inappropriate reading strategy that I apply. My lecturer once taught me to read the abstract of an article first so that I can get the subject matter of the article effectively.” (STU 1)

This study examined the reading comprehension challenges among graduate students in English education programs. Based on the results of the research, it is related to the findings of reading comprehension difficulties research by It is also related to this research found five students’ difficulties in comprehending the article journal: lack of vocabulary, unfamiliar academic vocabulary, bored of reading long text, unfamiliar sentences, and difficulties in finding details of the reading. The difficulties are also similarly based on the Gunning theory of reading difficulties. Besides that, researchers pointed out that the response of students to the difficulties they face was habiting reading, enriching new vocabularies, creating a comfortable atmosphere when reading, using a dictionary to translate the text, looking for simpler articles and using appropriate strategies (Rahman, 2020). Furthermore, using a structured reading strategy in comprehending journal articles, using skimming and scanning reading strategy (Tzu & Chen, 2017). Moreover, students’ motivation was also impactful to the success of students’ comprehension in reading journal articles. It found that the biggest motivation of students to comprehend the article journal was to fulfill the research references and get ideas for their research, curiosity, and to complete the task from lecturers. It was related to the research of (Nurmalasari & Haryudin, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to reveal the difficulties and challenges faced by English education graduate students. Through the qualitative approach used, the research results show that some aspects of reading caused students to experience difficulties in understanding the journal article. This indicates that students should pay more attention to these things in order to overcome them. Some of these problems are lack of vocabulary, unfamiliar academic vocabulary, boredom of reading long texts, unfamiliar sentences, and difficulties in finding the details of the reading. From the results of the questionnaire, students also found independent ways to overcome problems in understanding their journal articles independently. These methods include habiting reading, enriching new vocabulary, creating a comfortable atmosphere when reading, using a dictionary to translate the text, looking for simpler articles, and using appropriate strategies. It

is hoped that the findings of this study can provide an empirical contribution for other researchers to conduct research on similar topics with different research designs and a more in-depth study of solutions to overcome students' difficulties in understanding article journals. Practically, these findings are expected to be useful for helping lecturers or students to better understand the problems they face, so they can decide how to solve these problems to develop students' reading skills. Therefore, this research can provide reflection and evaluation of lecturers and students in the teaching and learning process.

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