

English Students' Difficulties and Strategies in Comprehending Journal Articles

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Abstract

This research explores the difficulties and the strategies faced by second-year students of the English Study Program at FKIP Universitas Riau in comprehending English journal articles. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed in this study, utilizing a sample of 77 fourth-semester students chosen through cluster random sampling. Data was collected through a questionnaire using a four-point Likert scale, designed to measure two variables: students' difficulties and strategies in comprehending journal articles. The results indicate that the main difficulties experienced by students include inability to use effective reading strategies, limited academic vocabulary, and lack of familiarity with the journal article format. Meanwhile, the strategy most used by students is Problem-Solving Strategies (PROB), followed by Global Reading Strategies (GLOB), and Support Strategies (SUP). These findings highlight that improving students' mastery of academic vocabulary, familiarity with journal structures, and strategic reading skills is essential to enhancing their comprehension of academic texts.

Keywords: Reading Difficulties; Reading Strategies; Journal Article Comprehension; EFL Students

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the four fundamental language skills in English learning, alongside speaking, listening, and writing. It is not merely the act of decoding words but a process of constructing and negotiating meaning (Brown, 2010). While some may consider reading textbooks or articles relatively simple, true comprehension requires deeper engagement and critical understanding of the text. This ability is particularly important for university students, who are expected to process large amounts of reading material as part of their academic development. Reading comprehension enables students to access information, broaden knowledge, and succeed in higher education (Duke & Pearson, 2009). Therefore, reading comprehension goes beyond recognizing words, it involves interpreting meaning, integrating information, and critically engaging with content (Klimova & Zamborova, 2020). In higher education, reading academic texts is a central component as it provides students with access to current knowledge and critical perspectives in their field. Among the various types of academic texts, journal articles are particularly important for students because they present current theoretical insights, contain scientific content and original research findings that cannot always be found in textbooks (Lee & Spratley, 2010; Round & Campbell, 2013). Subramanyam (2013) suggests general reasons for the importance of reading journal articles, including keeping informed about developments in a particular specialization or field study, understanding some basic concepts, getting inspiration to conduct research, finding evidence to support one's opinion, and impressing others. For English education students, the ability to comprehend journal articles is not only essential for coursework and assignments but also a key requirement in preparing theses and other academic projects. Despite their importance, journal articles pose considerable challenges

for students, especially for those studying English as a foreign language (EFL). Reading English journal articles can be challenging for students for a variety of reasons, including unclear language, new terminology, and a lack of time for cognitive processing (Qrquez & Rashid, 2017). Unlike general reading materials, journal articles employ technical vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, and highly formal styles of writing. Words in academic texts, including journal articles often have more specific meanings and use complex sentence structures and word choices that are difficult to understand. Finding meaning in academic texts requires not only understanding the text at the lexical and phrasal level, but also identifying the semantic patterns of discourse that embody the genre, field, tenor, and mode of the text (Martin & Rose, in Dardjito et al., 2023). These characteristics can make comprehension difficult even for advanced learners. Previous studies have highlighted that EFL students often face barriers such as limited academic vocabulary, difficulty understanding main ideas, and unfamiliarity with scientific writing conventions (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). EFL students often encounter difficulties in comprehending journal articles, due to inadequate preparation and limited vocabulary knowledge (Shen, 2013). According to De Soto and De Soto (1983), additional obstacles include a lack of vocabulary in English, a short attention span, difficulty comprehending important ideas and supporting details, and a lack of prior knowledge about the topic. These obstacles often hinder students' comprehension, resulting in ineffective reading and reduced academic performance. In the Indonesian context, similar issues have been observed. Studies reveal that many university students are not accustomed to reading academic texts, resulting in limited exposure to the language and structure of journal articles (Satriani, 2018). This lack of familiarity contributes to persistent problems in comprehending research-based texts. Additionally, Ahada et al., (2023) discovered that students struggle with three primary areas when reading journal articles, including limited semantic knowledge, difficulty understanding the main points, and short attention span. Insufficient training in academic reading strategies exacerbates the situation, leaving students without the necessary tools to navigate scholarly articles efficiently. These challenges underscore the importance of investigating how students approach journal article reading in local EFL settings, particularly at the undergraduate level.

The application of effective strategies in reading is necessary to support students' success in understanding English journal articles. According to Mokhtari and Reichard (2002), there are three categories of reading strategies, namely global reading strategies (GLOB), problem-solving strategies (PROB), and support strategies (SUP). These reading strategies can be used for students to improve their comprehension of academic reading, such as journal articles. Several researchers have examined how students attempt to cope with these difficulties. Chen (2017), for example, found that non-native English-speaking graduate students often relied on problem-solving strategies, such as rereading and guessing meaning from context, but their reliance on these strategies was not always sufficient to ensure comprehension. Similarly, Akmal and Mulia (2020) reported that Indonesian students frequently resorted to external aids such as dictionaries, online resources, or discussions with peers, but these approaches did not fully resolve the deeper issues of vocabulary mastery and structural understanding. These findings indicate that while students are aware of their difficulties, they may lack systematic and effective strategies to overcome them.

Many previous studies have examined students' difficulties in academic reading, such as those conducted by (Qrquez & Rashid, 2017), (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016) and (Eriksson, 2023). However, most of them focused on general English texts or academic reading in broader contexts rather than specifically addressing journal articles. Previous research also tended to examine either difficulties or strategies separately, with limited attention to both aspects together. Although reading journal articles is crucial for academic assignments and thesis writing, students are still unfamiliar with effective reading formats, language, and strategies,

resulting in a gap between academic needs and actual abilities. In light of these issues, this study aims to investigate the specific difficulties experienced by English Study Program students at FKIP Universitas Riau in comprehending English journal articles and to examine the strategies they employ to address these difficulties. By identifying the most prominent obstacles and the strategies most frequently used, this study seeks to contribute practical insights into how EFL students can be better supported in developing academic reading skills.

METHOD

This research employed a descriptive quantitative research design to examine students' difficulties and strategies in comprehending English journal articles. According to Tavakoli (2012), descriptive quantitative research investigates people, groups, institutions, methods, and materials describe and analyze different things and events. The population of this research consisted of 115 second-year students of the English Study Program at FKIP Universitas Riau. The sample were 77 drawn from two classes (4B and 4C) through cluster random sampling. The research instrument was a structured questionnaire adapted from Chen (2017), which was designed to capture two main aspects, including students' difficulties in comprehending journal articles and students' strategies in comprehending journal articles. The questionnaire consisted of 30 items developed on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Validity and reliability tests were conducted before distribution to confirm that the instrument was appropriate for the study context. Responses were exported into Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS version 30. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were applied to identify the most prominent difficulties and strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section reports the findings on the difficulties and strategies of second-year English Study Program students at FKIP Universitas Riau in comprehending journal articles.

The Difficulties of English Study Program Students in Comprehending Journal Article

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviations of students' Difficulties in Comprehending Journal Articles

Difficulties	M	SD
Limited vocabulary	2.7763	0.66531
Syntactic, semantic and language proficiency	2.4035	0.43992
Recalling information	1.6974	0.73066
Short attention	2.0921	0.73353
Inability to use effective reading strategies	2.8158	0.72499
Lack of prior knowledge	2.0789	0.68825
Difficulty understanding the main points	2.6184	0.67265
Struggling with the tables, charts or statistics	2.4342	0.64495
Journal article format is unfamiliar	2.7763	0.64495

Ambiguous words	1.6842	0.63688
Average	2.3377	0.66170

Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for each indicator of difficulty. The overall mean score was 2.34, which falls into the high category. These results indicate that students generally experienced notable challenges in comprehending journal articles. Among the indicators, the most significant difficulties were the inability to use effective reading strategies (M = 2.82), limited vocabulary (M = 2.78), and unfamiliarity with the format of journal articles (M = 2.78).

The Strategies of English Study Program Students in Comprehending Journal Article

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviations of Students' Reading Strategies in Comprehending Journal Articles

Strategies	M	SD
GLOB	2.7368	0.43145
PROB	3.0022	0.41410
SUP	2.5842	0.45462
Average	2.7744	0.43339

Table 2 shows the use of various strategies when reading journal articles. The overall mean score of 2.77 places students' use of reading strategies within the high category, indicating that such strategies were employed frequently when engaging with journal articles. Among the three categories, Problem-Solving Strategies (PROB) emerged as the most commonly applied (M = 3.02), followed by Global Reading Strategies (GLOB) (M = 2.92) and Support Strategies (SUP) (M = 2.74). These findings indicate that students tend to rely more heavily on problem-solving strategies, such as rereading or guessing meaning from context, when facing comprehension difficulties. In contrast, their use of global strategies and support strategies appears less consistent.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that second-year students of English Study Program at FKIP Universitas Riau face significant challenges when reading English journal articles. The main difficulties identified were ineffective use of reading strategies, limited academic vocabulary, and lack of familiarity with the journal articles format. These findings suggest that comprehension problems are not only linguistic but also related to students' limited awareness of how academic texts are organized. Inability to use effective reading strategies shows that students have difficulty in applying appropriate reading techniques, such as identifying main ideas or understanding the structure of academic texts. This finding is in line with (Chen, 2017) research, which revealed that non-native speaker students experience academic reading difficulties due to weak use of strategies. The difficulty related to limited vocabulary also aligns with the observations of (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016), who emphasized that insufficient mastery of technical and academic terms is a primary obstacle for EFL learners. Similarly, the challenge of unfamiliar journal structures is consistent with Akmal and Mulia (2020) finding that students often lack exposure to academic genres, making it difficult to navigate sections such as methods, results, or discussion. Taken as a whole, these results highlight the importance of both language proficiency and genre knowledge in academic reading. In terms of strategy use,

students relied heavily on problem-solving strategies (PROB), such as rereading or inferring meaning from context. This finding is consistent with research by Chen (2017) and Alimimudin (2024), which reported that students often depend on problem-solving approaches when encountering difficulties in understanding academic texts. Although such strategies are effective for addressing immediate comprehension problems, the results indicate that students are less consistent in applying global strategies, such as setting clear reading goals and activating prior knowledge, as well as support strategies, such as note-taking and consulting reference materials. This tendency reflects a focus on short-term solutions rather than the adoption of broader and more systematic approaches to academic reading. The findings of this study also indicate a significant correlation between the difficulties students experience in comprehending journal articles and the strategies they employ to overcome them. Each difficulty triggered the use of specific strategies aimed at compensating for comprehension gaps, showing that strategies function as direct responses to obstacles in reading. In other words, the greater the challenges students encounter, the more actively they employ strategies to cope with them. This demonstrates that students' strategies are not used arbitrarily, but rather are shaped by the particular difficulties they face in comprehending English journal articles. Overall, this study contributes to a better understanding of the specific challenges EFL students face in academic reading and provides insights for designing more effective reading instruction in higher education.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study is to examine second-year English study program students' difficulties and strategies in comprehending English journal articles. Based on the findings, this study concludes that second-year English study program students face various difficulties in comprehending journal articles, particularly the inability to use effective reading strategies, limited vocabulary, and unfamiliar with the format of journal articles. Meanwhile, the strategy most used by second-year English study program students in comprehending journal articles is problem-solving strategies (PROB), followed by global reading strategies (GLOB) and support strategies (SUP).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The researcher extends sincere gratitude to all individuals who contributed to the completion of this study, particularly the academic supervisors for their invaluable guidance and constructive feedback. Special appreciation was also directed to the second-year students of the English Study Program at FKIP Universitas Riau for their active participation and thoughtful responses, without which this research would not have been possible. Their support, both academically and personally, has been truly valuable and meaningful.

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