

THE IMPACT OF READING HABITS AND PREFERENCES ON CHOOSING ENGLISH LITERATURE AND PERSONAL GROWTH

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Abstract

Reading is a fundamental activity in academic and personal development, especially for students in English Literature programs. However, reading habits and preferences vary widely and may influence students' educational decisions in different ways. This study aimed to explore how reading habits and preferences influenced first-year English Literature students at Brawijaya University in choosing their academic major and shaping their personal growth. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through close-ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and reading logbooks from four purposively selected students. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. The findings revealed three major themes: (1) the development of reading habits over time, (2) the influence of reading preferences on the choice of major, and (3) the perceived role of reading in personal and academic growth. Students with consistent reading habits were often guided by intrinsic motivation and clear academic goals, while others developed habits later or experienced a decline due to external demands. Reading preferences such as fiction or cultural texts were found to influence academic interest, though not exclusively. All participants acknowledged reading as beneficial to language proficiency, academic achievement, and self-development. The study highlights the need for educational institutions to foster sustainable reading environments and support students' individual reading journeys.

Keywords: reading habits, reading preferences, English Literature students, personal growth

INTRODUCTION

Reading serves as a foundational skill in academic development, particularly for students in English Literature programs. It not only facilitates access to knowledge but also cultivates critical thinking, language proficiency, and cultural understanding (Sangia, 2018). As a core academic activity, reading plays a pivotal role in shaping students' intellectual and personal growth (Aloqaili, 2012; Mustika & Lestari, 2016). However, reading habits and preferences are highly individualistic and can vary significantly even among students within the same academic discipline (Becnel & Moeller, 2015; Tarihoran & Dewi, 2020).

In the Indonesian higher education context, English Literature students are expected to engage extensively with literary texts in English. This expectation requires not only proficiency but

also motivation and consistent reading practices. Yet, little is known about how students' prior reading behaviors influence their decision to pursue English Literature as their academic major. Understanding this connection is crucial, as reading is not merely an academic requirement but often a factor in students' academic identity and motivation (Akbari et al., 2019; Pereszlényi, 2023)

Several studies have examined the role of reading in cognitive development Sukmawati et al., (2023) and Anggraini et al., (2020) emphasized that reading habits sharpen critical thinking and enhance personal character development. Wardani (2019) found that strong reading habits among university students correlate positively with academic performance and engagement with campus resources. Similarly, Hicks, (2023) and Shanti, (2018) noted that frequent readers tend to perform better academically due to improved vocabulary, comprehension, and analytical skills.

Several previous studies have addressed reading behaviors in various educational contexts. Hidayati, (2021) found that Indonesian high school students generally demonstrated low reading frequencies, especially for English texts. Pereszlényi, (2023) explored first-year English majors in Hungary from the perspective of their tutors, revealing a diversity of reading skills and motivations. In a cross-cultural study, Shatunova et al., (2021) highlighted a shift in youth reading preferences toward digital formats and fantasy genres. However, these studies did not specifically examine how such habits influence academic decisions such as choosing a major, particularly in the Indonesian context. This study intends to fill that gap.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how first-year English Literature students at Brawijaya University developed their reading habits and preferences, and whether these factors influenced their decision to pursue English Literature. It also investigates the perceived impact of reading on their academic growth and personal development. Brawijaya University, as one of Indonesia's top institutions with internationally accredited English Literature programs (AQAS, 2023), provides an ideal context to explore these issues.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature by offering insights into how early reading experiences shape students' academic choices and identities. It further provides practical implications for educators and curriculum designers in fostering supportive environments that nurture sustainable reading practices among university students.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the reading habits and preferences of first-year English Literature students at Brawijaya University. The qualitative method was chosen to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences regarding reading and its influence on their academic decisions and personal growth. According to Braun & Clarke, (2006) qualitative research allows researchers to identify patterns in participants' perspectives through thematic analysis.

Participants

The participants consisted of four first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the English Literature program at Brawijaya University. They were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria: (1) currently in their first year of study, (2) actively engaged in reading either for academic or personal purposes, (3) had indicated that reading influenced their decision to major in

English Literature, and (4) were willing to participate in both questionnaire and interview sessions. Two male and two female participants were chosen to reflect varying levels of reading frequency and habits, as identified from preliminary questionnaire scores.

Data Collection

Three data collection techniques were utilized in this study: close-ended questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and documentation through reading logbooks. This triangulation ensured validity and richness of the data.

Questionnaire

A close-ended questionnaire was administered to gain an initial overview of the students' reading frequency, preferences, and motivations. The instrument consisted of 22 Likert-scale items (Always–Never) adapted from Gaona (n.d.), covering dimensions such as reading habits, genres, formats, and reading purposes. The questionnaire was distributed online to first-year English Literature students between April 2 and April 9, 2025.

In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four selected participants from the questionnaire phase. The interviews aimed to explore students' reading experiences in greater detail, including the development of habits, reading motivations, and how reading affected their academic decisions and personal growth. Interviews were conducted both online and offline between April 15 and April 21, 2025. Each interview was recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed for analysis.

Documentation

Reading logbooks were collected from each participant as supporting data. The logbooks, maintained by participants prior to the study, included information such as reading dates, book titles, number of pages read, and reading duration. These documents provided longitudinal insight into the participants' reading consistency and preferences.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, following the six-phase model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. NVivo software was used to assist with coding and organizing qualitative data from interview transcripts. Themes were derived inductively based on recurring patterns and meanings related to students' reading behavior, preferences, and motivations.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, this study employed both data triangulation and methodological triangulation. Data triangulation involved comparing questionnaire results, interview transcripts, and reading logbooks, while methodological triangulation combined qualitative and quantitative elements in the research design. As noted by Kyngäs et al., (2020), triangulation strengthens the trustworthiness of qualitative research by validating findings across multiple data sources.

FINDINGS

This study explored the reading habits and preferences of first-year English Literature students at Brawijaya University and how these factors influenced their academic choices and personal development. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the interview data, supported by reading logbooks and questionnaires, revealed three major themes: (1) the development of reading habits over time, (2) the influence of reading preferences on choosing English Literature, and (3) the perceived role of reading in personal and academic growth.

To maintain confidentiality and ensure clarity in the presentation of qualitative findings, the four participants were assigned pseudonymous codes based on their gender and reading habit scores (as identified in the preliminary questionnaire). Male participants are coded as **M1** and **M2**, and female participants as **F1** and **F2**. The number "1" refers to the participant with the **higher** reading habit score within their gender group, while "2" refers to the one with the **lower** score. This system allows for comparative analysis of students with varying levels of reading consistency and motivation.

Development of Reading Habits Over Time

The findings revealed diverse trajectories in students' reading habit formation. Two participants, M1 and F1, exhibited structured and sustained reading routines that developed over several years. M1 reported that his reading habit began in senior high school, initially driven by a growing interest in learning English. His routine became more stable over time, with reading sessions typically occurring in the morning, afternoon, and evening, each lasting around 45 minutes. He read twice a week consistently and preferred to read before or after campus hours.

"The habit started from senior high school, because that's when I began to focus on learning English, and it continues until now." (M1)

His logbook supported this narrative, indicating scheduled sessions with clear records of time, duration, and materials read. His habit reflected strong time management and goal orientation.

F1, on the other hand, showed a more intensive pattern. She reported reading three to four times a week, usually before bed, with each session lasting between two to two and a half hours. Her reading began early in high school and intensified after joining the English Literature program. She described her reading as both a source of enjoyment and a strategic way to improve her English for future academic goals.

"If I have free time, I can read two to four times a day. But if I'm busy, I try to read at least once. Reading is already part of my routine." (F1)

F1's logbook confirmed this habit, showing detailed records of novel titles, long reading durations, and consistent frequency. Her habit was both intrinsic and structured, reinforced by a personal ambition to study abroad.

In contrast, M2 and F2 exhibited less consistent and more fluctuating patterns. M2 stated that he only started reading English materials after entering university, often due to academic pressure and peer expectations. His reading sessions occurred randomly, mostly during holidays or exam preparation weeks. He read one to two times a week with durations varying between five minutes to 45 minutes.

"I just started after entering university. Before that, I only read Indonesian news or articles, not English books." (M2)

His logbook revealed sporadic entries, although he admitted to sometimes skipping documentation of short reading sessions. His reading habit was reactive rather than proactive, motivated by external demands.

F2 described herself as a passionate reader during junior high school, calling herself a "bookworm." She frequently borrowed books from the library and read out of pure enjoyment. However, her habit declined during high school due to involvement in student organizations and other academic commitments.

"I used to finish one book and immediately find another. But in high school, I got too busy and rarely read unless I had free time." (F2)

Despite the decline, F2 retained her interest and occasionally engaged in long reading sessions during holidays. Her logbook showed multiple instances of reading for more than two hours, though less frequently than M1 or F1. She expressed a desire to revive her previous habit, indicating that the passion for reading still existed but was buried under academic workload and time constraints.

These findings suggest that reading habits are dynamic and influenced by multiple factors such as early reading experiences, academic transitions, personal interests, and time availability. Students with strong intrinsic motivation and clear goals (M1 and F1) maintained their habits consistently, while those with competing priorities or late exposure to reading (M2 and F2) showed inconsistent patterns.

Influence of Reading Preferences on Choosing English Literature

Students' preferences for certain types of reading materials appeared to shape their academic interests to varying degrees. Participants M1 and F1 both acknowledged that their preferences played a significant role in motivating them to choose English Literature as their major.

M1 expressed a deep interest in reading cultural articles, social commentaries, and educational texts. He found enjoyment in reading about real-life topics and believed that English Literature would offer him a space to engage with such content critically and analytically.

"I like reading cultural texts, not just novels. That's why I felt English Literature would give me room to explore that." (M1)

F1 had a strong inclination toward fiction, especially novels in English. She explained that reading fiction helped her escape, learn about different cultures, and improve her English naturally. Her fascination with character-driven stories and literary expression was a key reason she pursued this academic path.

"Novels are my favorite. I enjoy getting into the story and learning from the characters. It really made me want to explore English Literature." (F1)

In contrast, M2 admitted that reading was not a key influence in his decision to choose English Literature. He chose the program due to external recommendations and later developed reading habits out of necessity.

"I didn't really choose this major because of reading. I got recommended and entered. Then I realized I had to read more." (M2)

F2's case was more nuanced. While she once enjoyed reading greatly, her decision to study English Literature was driven by a mix of her past interest and a desire to improve her language skills. Her reading preferences, such as fantasy and poetry, aligned with literary studies, though she did not explicitly cite them as her primary motivation.

Overall, the findings suggest that reading preferences can shape academic identity and influence educational decisions, but their impact varies depending on individual circumstances and motivation levels.

Perceived Role of Reading in Personal and Academic Growth

All four participants emphasized the importance of reading in their academic journey and personal development. Reading was associated with improvements in vocabulary, writing, comprehension, and critical thinking. Participants noted that regular reading helped them become more articulate in class discussions and more confident in expressing their ideas.

M2 highlighted how reading improved his independence in understanding academic texts without relying on external help:

"Now I can read journal articles without using a translator. It makes me feel proud and more confident." (M2)

F1 described reading as part of her long-term academic preparation and cultural learning. She linked her habit directly to future aspirations.

"Reading helps with language, but also opens your mind. It makes me more prepared for studying abroad." (F1)

F2 reflected on how reading provided emotional comfort and a sense of identity during her earlier years. Despite her reduced reading activity, she viewed it as a meaningful part of her personal history.

"Reading shaped who I was. Even now, when I read something meaningful, I feel like I'm reconnecting with myself." (F2)

Reading also played a social and motivational role. Some participants mentioned that peer influence and academic expectations encouraged them to maintain or improve their reading habits. The act of completing a book or understanding a complex text was described as rewarding and motivating.

These responses show that reading contributes to both cognitive and affective development. It enhances academic performance, fosters self-awareness, and cultivates perseverance in a demanding academic environment.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated how reading habits and preferences influence first-year English Literature students at Brawijaya University in terms of academic decision-making and personal development. The findings of this study resonate with and extend the literature on reading behavior among university students, especially in EFL and literary contexts. Three major aspects—habit formation, reading preferences, and personal-academic impact—are discussed in light of relevant previous research.

Reading Habit Development and Its Variability

The data indicated significant variability in the development of reading habits among students. Some participants (M1 and F1) established structured and consistent routines early in their academic lives, while others (M2 and F2) either began reading later or experienced a decline due to external factors such as organizational commitments or lack of motivation. This supports Iftanti, (2015) assertion that reading habits are shaped not only by academic expectations but also by environmental and personal conditions.

Moreover, participants who maintained strong habits demonstrated deliberate time allocation, intrinsic motivation, and goal-driven reading behaviors, consistent with findings by Sukmawati et al., (2023), who reported that reading habits are often tied to critical thinking and character formation. The case of F1 who maintained a nightly reading routine aligned with her aspirations to study abroad illustrates how personal goals can sustain long-term habits even under academic pressure.

Conversely, the accounts of M2 and F2 reveal the fragility of reading routines in the face of changing priorities and time constraints. This echoes Pereszlényi's (2023) research which highlights the importance of institutional support and conducive environments in sustaining students' motivation to read.

Reading Preferences and Academic Choices

Another key insight from this study is the varying degree to which reading preferences influenced students' decisions to pursue English Literature. Participants like F1 and M1 displayed clear links between their preferred genres fiction and cultural texts and their academic orientation. This finding aligns with Becnel and Moeller (2015), who emphasized that preferences can guide students toward specific fields of study, particularly when those preferences are nurtured over time.

However, the cases of M2 and F2 demonstrate that preference alone may not be the primary determinant in academic choice. M2 entered the program with limited reading interest and gradually developed his reading habit through academic necessity. This highlights the role of extrinsic factors, such as peer influence and curriculum demands, in shaping reading behavior post-enrollment. Such findings reinforce Shatunova et al. (2021), who argued that in today's academic climate, students' reading preferences often shift based on media accessibility and peer environments rather than purely intrinsic interest.

These results suggest that while preferences may act as early indicators of academic interest, they function in tandem with broader social, motivational, and academic influences when students make decisions about their educational paths.

Reading as a Tool for Academic and Personal Growth

All participants, regardless of habit strength, acknowledged the positive impact of reading on their academic performance and personal development. Participants linked reading to increased vocabulary, comprehension skills, writing fluency, and critical thinking—elements supported by Anggraini et al. (2020) and Hicks (2023), who argue that consistent reading contributes to better academic outcomes in language-related disciplines.

Reading was also perceived as a form of self-expression and identity building. F2, for example, described reading as a nostalgic activity tied to her sense of self during adolescence, even though she no longer read as frequently. This reflects Urlaub, (2013) view that reading not only improves linguistic competence but also fosters cultural sensitivity and emotional growth.

Furthermore, reading emerged as a coping mechanism for managing stress and academic pressures. The emotional satisfaction and confidence participants gained from understanding complex texts or finishing novels reinforced the findings of Shanti (2018), who noted that habitual readers tend to have stronger resilience in academic contexts.

Interestingly, even the less consistent readers expressed a desire to improve or revive their reading habits. This aspiration suggests a strong perceived value of reading among students, even if they struggle to maintain it consistently. It also points to an opportunity for educators to support students through structured reading interventions, peer reading groups, or academic mentoring programs.

Implications for Teaching and Curriculum

The findings of this study highlight several practical implications. First, instructors in English Literature programs can benefit from assessing students' initial reading habits and preferences during the early stages of university. Doing so may inform more adaptive and motivating approaches to literature instruction, especially for students like M2 and F2 who require additional support to engage with reading tasks meaningfully.

Second, the university environment should foster a culture that values diverse reading experiences. Providing access to varied reading materials (fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and digital texts), as well as encouraging recreational reading through clubs or assignments, may help students sustain their interest.

Finally, the integration of personal reflection on reading such as reading journals or logbooks may enhance metacognitive awareness and help students recognize their growth over time, as supported by the documentation in this study.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the reading habits and preferences of first-year English Literature students at Brawijaya University and their influence on academic choices and personal development. The findings revealed that reading habits varied significantly among students, shaped by personal motivation, time availability, and external pressures. Students with strong and consistent habits developed their routines over time and often had clear academic or personal goals that sustained their engagement with reading. In contrast, students with less stable routines tended to be influenced by situational factors but still recognized the value of reading in their academic journey.

Reading preferences were found to contribute to the decision-making process in choosing English Literature as a major, particularly for those with a long-standing interest in fiction or cultural texts. However, preference alone was not a universal determinant, as some students made their academic choices based on external recommendations or aspirations unrelated to reading. Despite these differences, all participants agreed that reading played a meaningful role in their language development, critical thinking, and academic performance.

This study contributes to the broader understanding of how individual reading experiences shape students' academic identities, especially in literary and EFL contexts. It emphasizes the importance of supporting reading habit formation through institutional efforts such as curriculum design, reading communities, and personalized reading encouragement.

Future research is encouraged to explore larger and more diverse samples, including comparisons between students in literature and non-literature programs. Longitudinal studies could also offer deeper insights into how reading habits evolve throughout university life and into students' future careers.

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