

INVESTIGATING EFL STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES OF READING ENGLISH RESEARCH ARTICLES: CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstract: Reading English research articles is an important part of academic learning for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. However, many students experience difficulties because academic texts contain complex language, unfamiliar research concepts, and emotional demands. This study aimed to explore EFL students' lived experiences of reading English research articles, focusing on the challenges they encountered and the strategies they used to overcome them. A qualitative study using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was conducted with four final-semester EFL students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) thematic analysis, while member checking was conducted to ensure trustworthiness. The findings revealed three categories of challenges: linguistic, cognitive, and affective. Participants experienced difficulties with unfamiliar academic vocabulary, understanding article structure, identifying main ideas, and managing anxiety and low confidence. To cope with these challenges, they employed cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and social strategies, including skimming, scanning, selective reading, note-taking, rereading, digital tools, self-management, peer discussion, and lecturer support. The findings indicate that reading English research articles is not only a linguistic and cognitive activity but also a self-regulated learning process. Therefore, lecturers should provide explicit instruction in effective reading strategies and promote the appropriate use of digital and collaborative learning resources. Students are encouraged to develop self-regulated reading habits, while future research should examine more diverse participants and learning contexts to provide broader insights into EFL students' academic reading experiences.

Keywords: EFL students, English research articles, academic reading, lived experiences, challenges, coping strategies, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

INTRODUCTION

Reading English research articles is an essential part of academic learning for university students, especially those studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Through academic articles, students are expected to understand research findings, evaluate arguments, and develop critical thinking skills. However, reading English research articles is often a challenging task because students need to deal with unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and discipline-specific terminology. Previous studies have also reported that many EFL students experience difficulties in identifying important information and understanding the overall meaning of academic texts. These challenges indicate that reading English research articles requires not only language proficiency but also strong cognitive skills.

The importance of academic reading is also reflected in international educational reports. The PISA 2022 results show that many students still have difficulty achieving the minimum level of reading proficiency, particularly in understanding and interpreting complex texts. In Indonesia, this issue becomes more significant because English research articles are widely used in university courses, assignments, and research projects. Previous studies have shown that Indonesian EFL students often struggle with unfamiliar academic structures, abstract ideas, and complex explanations. These difficulties are frequently accompanied by feelings of anxiety and low confidence, suggesting that reading English research articles involves not only linguistic and cognitive demands but also emotional challenges.

Despite these challenges, EFL students continue to develop different strategies to help them understand English research articles. They often use translation tools, online dictionaries, note-taking, summarizing, rereading, selective reading, and discussions with peers to improve comprehension. These strategies enable students to manage reading difficulties and stay engaged with academic texts. However, most

previous studies have mainly examined reading difficulties and strategies through quantitative approaches, focusing on the frequency or effectiveness of particular strategies. As a result, limited attention has been given to students' personal experiences, feelings, and reflections while reading English research articles.

To fill this gap, the present study explores the lived experiences of EFL students in reading English research articles. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, this study investigates the challenges students encounter and the coping strategies they use to overcome them. By focusing on students' personal reflections, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of academic reading as a cognitive, emotional, and reflective process. The findings are expected to contribute to more supportive teaching practices and help EFL students become more confident and effective readers of English research articles.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do EFL students experience the challenges of reading English research articles?
2. How do EFL students select the coping strategies regarding their challenges while reading English research articles?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading English research articles is an essential part of academic learning for EFL students because it helps them develop academic knowledge, critical thinking, and research skills. However, understanding academic texts requires more than language proficiency. Students also need to interpret ideas, evaluate evidence, and connect new information with their prior knowledge. Therefore, academic reading is considered an active and meaningful learning process rather than simply decoding written words.

This study reviews several related concepts to understand the process. It first discusses academic reading in the EFL context and English research articles as academic texts. It then explains the linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges experienced by EFL students, followed by learning and coping strategies that help students overcome these challenges. Finally, previous studies are reviewed to identify the research gap that forms the basis of the present study.

Academic Reading in the EFL Context

Academic reading refers to the process of understanding, interpreting, and critically engaging with academic texts. In this study, academic reading is explained through the Interactive Theory proposed by Rumelhart (1977) and Stanovich (1980). This theory argues that successful reading occurs when readers actively combine information from the text with their background knowledge to construct meaning. Unlike the bottom-up or top-down approach alone, the Interactive Theory views reading as a dynamic process in which linguistic knowledge and prior knowledge work together. Therefore, EFL students are expected not only to understand words and sentences but also to identify main ideas, analyze arguments, evaluate evidence, and relate new information to their previous knowledge.

English Research Article as Academic Text

English research articles are one of the most important academic texts used in higher education because they communicate original research findings and current scholarly knowledge. This study adopts English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Theory (Hyland, 2006), which explains that students need to understand not only academic language but also how knowledge is presented in academic contexts. In addition, Genre Theory proposed by Swales (1990) explains that research articles have a specific organizational structure, including the introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and discussion, where each section serves a particular purpose. Understanding

these characteristics helps EFL students follow the development of research, interpret arguments, and understand how conclusions are constructed.

Challenges Faced by EFL Students in Reading English Research Articles

Reading English research articles is often challenging for EFL students because these texts contain formal academic language, unfamiliar concepts, and complex arguments that require readers to process linguistic, cognitive, and emotional demands at the same time. Unlike general reading materials, research articles require students to understand discipline-specific vocabulary, evaluate evidence, and connect ideas across different sections of the text. As a result, many students experience difficulties that influence both their comprehension and confidence. Based on the literature, these challenges can be categorized into three main areas: linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges, which provide the theoretical foundation for understanding students' experiences in this study.

Linguistic Challenges

Linguistic challenges refer to difficulties in understanding the language used in English research articles, including unfamiliar academic vocabulary, technical terms, complex grammatical structures, and formal academic expressions. This study is grounded in Schema Theory (Rumelhart, 1980), which explains that reading comprehension occurs when readers connect new information with their existing knowledge. When students cannot activate relevant language schemas because of unfamiliar vocabulary or academic language, they tend to focus on decoding individual words rather than understanding the overall meaning of the text. Consequently, they may struggle to follow arguments, interpret research findings, and understand the author's intended message.

Cognitive Challenges

Cognitive challenges occur because reading English research articles requires students to process large amounts of information, identify main ideas, analyze arguments, connect information across sections, and monitor their own understanding. These challenges are explained by Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which states that learning becomes difficult when the demands of a task exceed the capacity of working memory. When EFL students simultaneously process academic language and complex research concepts, they may experience cognitive overload, making it difficult to understand the overall content and construct meaningful interpretations of the text.

Affective Challenges

Besides linguistic and cognitive demands, EFL students also experience affective challenges, such as anxiety, frustration, low confidence, and reduced motivation when reading English research articles. These emotional experiences are explained through Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985), which suggests that negative emotions can reduce learners' ability to process language input effectively. When students perceive academic texts as too difficult, their affective filter becomes higher, limiting comprehension and decreasing their willingness to engage with the text. Therefore, positive emotions, confidence, and motivation are important factors that support successful academic reading alongside linguistic and cognitive abilities.

Learning Strategies in the EFL Context

Learning strategies are the techniques that students use to improve their language learning and overcome learning difficulties. This study adopts Oxford's Language Learning Strategy Theory (1990), which explains that learners use memory, cognitive, metacognitive, affective, compensation, and social strategies to support learning. When reading English research articles, these strategies help EFL students

understand the text, monitor their comprehension, and become more independent readers.

Coping Strategies in Reading English Research Articles

Coping strategies are the ways students deal with challenges while reading English research articles. This study is based on Metacognitive Theory (Flavell, 1979), which explains that effective readers plan, monitor, and evaluate their reading process. By using appropriate coping strategies, EFL students can better manage linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges during academic reading.

Coping Strategies for Linguistic Challenges

To deal with language difficulties, this study uses Good Language Learner Theory (Rubin, 1975). Students may guess word meanings from context, use dictionaries or translation tools, reread difficult parts, and focus on important sections of the article. These strategies help them understand unfamiliar vocabulary and academic language more effectively.

Coping Strategies for Cognitive Challenges

This study adopts Self-Regulated Learning Theory (Zimmerman, 2000) to explain how students manage cognitive challenges. Students can improve their understanding by setting reading goals, taking notes, summarizing key information, and checking their comprehension while reading. These strategies help them organize information and understand research articles more effectively.

Coping Strategies for Affective Challenges

To explain emotional challenges, this study uses Emotion Regulation Theory (Gross, 1998). Students can reduce anxiety and increase confidence by staying motivated, thinking positively, and seeking support from friends or lecturers. These

strategies help students remain engaged when reading challenging English research articles.

Previous Studies

Several previous studies have examined EFL students' experiences in reading English research articles and consistently reported that they face linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges. Academic texts often contain unfamiliar vocabulary, technical terms, and complex sentence structures, making it difficult for students to identify main ideas and understand the overall meaning of the text. Indriyani and Pertiwi (2021) found that EFL students often struggle to identify the main arguments and connect ideas across different sections of research articles, while Ni'mah and Sholihah (2022) emphasized that students' comprehension is influenced by the suitability of reading materials to their language proficiency and learning needs.

In addition to these linguistic and cognitive difficulties, affective factors such as anxiety, low confidence, frustration, and lack of motivation also influence students' engagement with academic reading. This finding is supported by Dang (2024), who reported that students often experience emotional pressure when moving from general reading to more analytical academic reading. To overcome these challenges, students tend to use flexible reading strategies, including focusing on key ideas, using translation tools, rereading difficult sections, and organizing information visually. Ferdinandus and Simantuak (2023) found that students adapted their reading strategies according to the level of text difficulty, while Mudra (2024) highlighted that self-confidence, positive attitudes, and previous academic reading experiences encouraged students to apply different coping strategies more effectively. Although these studies have provided important insights into the challenges and strategies of reading English research articles, most have employed descriptive qualitative approaches. Therefore, limited research has used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to explore EFL students' lived experiences in depth. This study addresses this gap by

investigating how EFL students experience the challenges of reading English research articles and how they interpret the coping strategies they use to overcome those challenges.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) developed by Smith (1996) to explore EFL students' lived experiences of reading English research articles, particularly the challenges they encountered and the coping strategies they used. Four final-semester EFL students, identified by the pseudonyms Lila, Dita, Binta, and Alifa, were selected through purposive sampling because they had completed a Critical Reading course, had experience reading English research articles, and had participated in academic writing and publication activities. Data were collected through face-to-face, in-depth interviews conducted over one month, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian to allow participants to express their experiences more clearly, using a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 15 questions adapted from previous studies and focusing on the challenges and coping strategies related to reading English research articles.

The interview data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) thematic analysis, which involved familiarizing with the data, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, organizing themes, developing detailed descriptions, identifying the essence of participants' experiences, and validating the findings through member checking. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, member checking was conducted by asking participants to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations. Ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were also maintained throughout the research process.

FINDINGS

This study identified six main themes related to EFL students' experiences of reading English research articles. The findings include three types of challenges experienced by the participants and three coping strategies they used to overcome these challenges.

Linguistic Challenges

All participants reported that unfamiliar academic vocabulary, technical terms, and complex sentence structures were the main language-related difficulties when reading English research articles. These linguistic features often made it difficult for them to understand the overall meaning of the text, especially when they encountered many unfamiliar words in one section. As Dita explained, *"Many journals use formal and complicated language, so it takes me more time to understand the meaning."* Similarly, Binta mentioned that *"The difficulties I face most often are difficult academic vocabulary and unfamiliar technical terms."* These findings indicate that academic language remains one of the greatest barriers to reading English research articles.

Cognitive Challenges

Besides language difficulties, the participants also experienced cognitive challenges when trying to understand research articles. They found it difficult to identify the main ideas, understand the organization of the article, and connect information across different sections. Alifa shared, *"Sometimes I understand each paragraph, but I still find it difficult to connect all the ideas into one complete understanding."* Likewise, Lila explained that understanding research methods and interpreting the results section often required additional time and repeated reading. These findings suggest that processing academic information is another major challenge for EFL students.

Affective Challenges

The participants also described various emotional challenges while reading English research articles. Feelings of anxiety, frustration, and low confidence frequently appeared when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary or difficult research concepts. Lila stated, *"I often feel less confident and anxious because I am afraid of misunderstanding the article."* Similarly, Alifa admitted, *"I sometimes feel less confident about whether I fully understand the content correctly."* These findings show that emotional factors also influence students' reading experiences and may reduce their motivation to engage with academic texts.

Coping Strategies for Linguistic Challenges

The participants applied several practical strategies to overcome language-related difficulties. They frequently used online dictionaries, Google Translate, and AI tools such as ChatGPT to understand unfamiliar vocabulary and difficult sentences. They also reread difficult sections and focused on important parts of the article before reading it in detail. These strategies helped the participants understand academic language more efficiently and reduced the difficulties caused by unfamiliar vocabulary.

Coping Strategies for Cognitive Challenges

The participants organized their reading by taking notes to manage cognitive challenges, highlighting important information, rereading difficult sections, and reading the abstract or conclusion before reading the entire article. Alifa explained, *"I also take notes about important points so I can organize the information more clearly."* These strategies helped them connect ideas across different sections and improve their overall understanding of the article.

Coping Strategies for Affective Challenges

The participants also used several strategies to manage their emotions while reading English research articles. They tried to remain patient, read gradually, discuss difficult articles with friends, and seek clarification from lecturers when necessary. Binta explained that discussing research articles with classmates helped her understand the content and feel more confident. Overall, social support and positive learning attitudes helped the participants reduce anxiety and remain motivated to complete academic reading tasks.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings show that EFL students experienced several challenges when reading English research articles, with linguistic and cognitive difficulties being the most common. Most participants found it difficult to understand unfamiliar academic vocabulary, technical terms, and complex sentence structures. These language barriers also affected their ability to identify main ideas, connect information across different sections, and understand research methods and findings. This suggests that reading research articles requires not only English proficiency but also the ability to process and organize complex academic information. This finding is in line with Schema Theory, which explains that comprehension depends on readers' prior knowledge, as well as Cognitive Load Theory, which emphasizes that learners may struggle when the demands of a task exceed their cognitive capacity. Similar findings have also been reported in previous studies, showing that academic language and complex text organization remain major obstacles for EFL students reading research articles.

Besides linguistic and cognitive demands, the participants also described various emotional challenges during the reading process. They often felt anxious, frustrated, and less confident, especially when they encountered unfamiliar concepts or were unsure whether they had understood the article correctly. These emotional

responses sometimes reduced their motivation to continue reading and made the task feel more demanding. This finding supports Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that anxiety and low confidence can limit language learning and comprehension. It also confirms previous studies that highlight the important role of affective factors in shaping students' academic reading experiences. Therefore, supporting students emotionally is as important as developing their language and reading skills.

To deal with these challenges, the participants adopted different coping strategies depending on the difficulties they encountered. For language-related problems, they commonly used online dictionaries, translation tools, AI-assisted applications, and repeated reading to understand unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentences. When facing cognitive challenges, they organized their reading by taking notes, highlighting key information, rereading important sections, and reading the abstract before the full article. These findings reflect the principles of Good Language Learner Theory, Metacognitive Theory, and Self-Regulated Learning Theory, which emphasize that successful learners actively choose, monitor, and evaluate strategies to improve their learning. Rather than relying on a single approach, the participants combined several strategies to better understand academic texts.

The findings also show that students used emotional coping strategies to maintain their engagement with English research articles. They tried to stay patient, read gradually, discuss difficult articles with friends, and seek support from lecturers whenever necessary. These strategies helped reduce anxiety and increased their confidence when dealing with challenging texts. This finding is consistent with Emotion Regulation Theory, which explains that managing emotions is an important part of successful learning. Overall, the findings suggest that reading English research articles is a multidimensional process involving linguistic, cognitive, and affective aspects. Students who are able to combine different coping strategies are more likely

to overcome reading difficulties and become more confident and independent academic readers.

CONCLUSION

This study explored EFL students' experiences of reading English research articles by examining the challenges they faced and the strategies they used to overcome them. The findings show that students experienced three main challenges: linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges. Unfamiliar academic vocabulary, technical terms, and complex sentence structures often made it difficult for them to understand the content of research articles. At the same time, they also struggled to identify main ideas, connect information across different sections, and interpret research findings. These difficulties were often accompanied by feelings of anxiety and low confidence, which affected their motivation and overall reading experience.

Although the participants faced various challenges, they did not simply give up. Instead, they used different strategies to support their understanding, such as using online dictionaries, translation tools, AI-assisted applications like ChatGPT, rereading difficult sections, taking notes, highlighting important information, and discussing the articles with friends or lecturers. These strategies helped them understand academic texts more effectively while also increasing their confidence and motivation. This suggests that successful reading of English research articles depends not only on language ability but also on students' use of appropriate learning strategies and their ability to manage cognitive and emotional challenges.

Based on these findings, this study highlights the importance of supporting EFL students in developing academic reading skills. Lecturers can help by introducing effective reading strategies, providing guidance on how to approach research articles, and creating a supportive learning environment where students feel confident to ask questions and discuss difficult texts. Future studies may include participants from

different universities or academic disciplines to gain a broader understanding of EFL students' experiences and explore other factors that may influence their academic reading.

SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions are proposed to help improve EFL students' experiences in reading English research articles. These suggestions are addressed to EFL students, lecturers, and future researchers to support the development of more effective academic reading practices and provide directions for future research.

1. For EFL Students

The findings of this study suggest that EFL students should develop regular reading habits and apply appropriate strategies when reading English research articles. Students are encouraged to use different resources, such as dictionaries, AI-assisted tools, note-taking, and discussions with peers, to help them understand unfamiliar vocabulary and complex research concepts. At the same time, they should gradually build confidence by reading more academic texts and reflecting on their own learning process. Consistent practice and the use of appropriate strategies can help students overcome linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges more effectively.

2. For English Language Lecturers

Lecturers are encouraged to provide more explicit guidance on how to read English research articles effectively. Besides introducing the structure and language features of research articles, lecturers can model practical reading strategies, such as identifying main ideas, analyzing research sections, and monitoring comprehension. Creating opportunities for classroom discussions and providing constructive feedback

may also help students reduce anxiety and become more confident when engaging with academic texts. Such support can encourage students to develop stronger academic reading skills.

3. For Future Researchers

This study involved a small number of final-semester EFL students from one university, so the findings reflect the experiences of a specific group of participants. Future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies with participants from different universities, academic disciplines, or educational levels to gain a broader understanding of students' experiences in reading English research articles. They may also explore the effectiveness of specific instructional approaches or digital learning technologies in helping EFL students overcome academic reading challenges and improve their reading performance.

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