

صعوبات القراءة الأكاديمية التي تواجه طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية في جامعة الزاوية
د. نعيمة عليّ العربي الخبولي - قسم اللغة الإنجليزية - كلية الآداب - جامعة الزاوية
E-mail:n.alkhbolli@zu.edu.ly

Challenges of Academic Reading Facing EFL Students in Azawiya
University

Dr. Naema Alkhbolli

English Department/Faculty of Arts/ Azawiya University

الملخص باللغة العربية :

تعد القراءة في التعليم العالي من أكثر الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب الجامعة في مجال اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، ويهدف هذا البحث إلى تحديد صعوبات القراءة الاستيعابية على المستوى الجامعي بالتركيز على طلاب جامعة الزاوية ، واستخدمت هذه الدراسة المنهج المختلط ، وتم جمع البيانات الكمية من استبيانات مغلقة بينما تم جمع البيانات النوعية من سؤال واحد مفتوح ، تتضمن هذه الدراسة 40 طالبًا يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، وطلب منهم تقييم جوانب القراءة الاستيعابية كما هي مدرجة في الاستبيانات اعتمادًا على مستوى الصعوبة لديهم وتقديم التعليقات والجوانب الإضافية المحتملة ، وأظهرت النتائج الكمية أن معظم الطلاب يعتبرون القراءة الأكاديمية سهلة (المتوسط : 2.445 والانحراف المعياري: 0.584) ، وتم تحديد القراءة بعناية لفهم النص على أنها الجانب الأقل صعوبة (المتوسط: 2.18 ، والانحراف المعياري: 0.974)، بينما معرفة معاني الكلمات الصعبة كانت هي الأصعب (المتوسط: 2.74 والانحراف المعياري: 1.252) ، وتدعم النتائج النوعية هذه الإحصائيات؛ إذ يعاني 0.30 % من طلاب السنة الأولى في جامعة الزاوية من صعوبات في فهم وترجمة الكلمات الصعبة والرسمية

Abstract

Reading in higher education is one of the most difficulties encountered university EFL students. This paper aims to determine reading comprehension difficulties at the university level focusing on Azawiya

university students. This study used mixed method. Quantitative data will be collected from close-ended questionnaires while qualitative data from one open-ended question. This study includes 40 EFL students who were asked to rate the reading sides as listed in the questionnaires depending on their level of difficulty and provide comments and probable additional aspect. The quantitative results revealed that most students considered academic reading easy ($M=2.445$, $SD=0.584$). Reading carefully to understand the text was identified as the aspect with the least difficulty ($M=2.18$, $SD= 0.974$) while knowing the meaning of difficult words was found as the most difficult one ($M=2.74$, $SD=1.252$). The qualitative results supports these statistics while 30% of first year Azawiya University students have difficulties understanding and translating difficult and formal words.

.Introduction

Learning success in higher education depends only on the skills of reading and writing.

Without researching through several reading materials, no one will be able to produce a good piece of writing. Academic reading forms a great difficulty to students since they read for academic purposes. Students often view the activity of academic reading as time-consuming and a stressful task. Reading an academic text is very dissimilar from reading for pleasure in that people can spend long time reading without getting bored. It needs a complicated skill that includes sharing contextual knowledge of the reader and the printed language. Students must be capable to use different reading strategies to efficiently transfer the meaning from a text. Academic reading requires deeper analytical and critical skills to deal with different types of text (Sohail, 2015). Reading comprehension is a main tool in learning process, as it requires active participation so that students can get the benefits of reading (Martiarini, 2018). Reading at the university is more challenging because it requires students to perform many skills such as synthesizing, interpreting, asking questions, and reflecting from the text (Sengupta, 2002).

Academic reading texts are considering difficult because paragraphs are denser, they are longer than general reading, and they contain difficult vocabulary and complex sentences. In order to read efficiently, students must bring their previous knowledge and sufficient vocabularies into the

reading process (Westwood, 2008). The nature of academic reading is very different from reading in high school. Hirano (2015) pointed out that students felt more challenging when reading academic text in English. English reading assignments are common at university. Students are frequently assigned to read different English reading sources such as articles and textbooks. Low motivation and interest when reading English text affect students' success in learning English (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006). Students typically refuse to participate in further reading comprehension assignments unless teachers assign them. Furthermore, students who failed to provide their previous knowledge related to the assigned text are more likely to disengage from the reading task (Zuhra, 2015).

Many studies have highlighted the difficulties of students in reading academic texts (Shen, 2013; Sultana, 2016). Students reported the difficulties in understanding vocabulary and indicated the need for lecturer's assistance with difficult vocabulary and terminology (Shen, 2013). In Sultana's study (2016) students reported the same frustration in terms of understanding vocabulary. Satriani (2018) in his study stated that 74% of students encounter difficulties to get the meaning when they read complicated or lengthy sentences in the text and also have challenges to get the actual information because the material is unfamiliar for them. Grammar complexity and vocabulary are also one of the difficulties for the students to get the meaning of text. A coherent text by a writer on a broad topic uses a very much smaller vocabulary than a series of unrelated texts. This kind of texts can increase a vocabulary load of the course extremely because the texts consist of many low frequency content words and technical words (Sutarsyah, 2008). Therefore, it seems that the texts cannot offer enough repetition for content words which are valuable for skill development

Another difficulty also exists when students have to read a long academic reading text. Phakiti and Li in their study (2011) they found that students had problems collecting information and producing academic essays. These difficulties are affected by factors such as motivation, language proficiency, academic background, self- efficacy and adjustment to students' academic life. Even though English is a main subject in the Libyan curriculum, students' exposure to reading comprehension materials in English is limited.

Teachers used only one textbook to teach the reading skills of English. This phenomenon indicates the need for more exposure to read texts for students in classrooms. Students gradually lose their stimulation during classroom reading activities.

Reading activities' purpose is to make sure understanding and interaction with the text. It is significant that students can retain their reading experience as productive information and knowledge for using in future. So, a lot of research indicated that using genuine materials to assist reading comprehension is more motivating and interesting (Martinez, 2002; Berardo, 2006; Gilmore, 2007). Though, materials only are insufficient; teachers' efforts are greatly needed to support the educational reading environment. Berardo (2006) proposed the importance of preparing students before engaging in basic reading activities by helping them through pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities. Teachers must design reading activities creatively to make sure students gain valuable experience and information after each stage.

Often, students who lack reading skills from high school will have more difficulties when entering college. These difficulties in reading comprehension can ultimately impact students' academic success. Therefore, this study will examine academic reading difficulties among undergraduate students. This study aims to contribute to the literature related to the field of EFL reading for lecturers and teachers to explore more strategies for effective reading in EFL classrooms.

Research Method

The main focus of this study is to identify language difficulties in reading academic texts. This study used a mixed method approach to obtain a rich analysis on the addressed issues. Data are analysed using quantitative and qualitative approaches to understand the difficulties that students face during academic reading tasks at the university. Qualitative data were gained from open-ended question which were described descriptively to support the quantitative data and create relevant arguments.

Forty students in their first year of study participated in the survey questionnaire. Participants were asked to answer one open-ended question and to complete close-ended questionnaire items about reading difficulties in higher education. This study used a survey questionnaire to collect data

Challenges of Academic Reading Facing EFL Students in Azawiya University

from English language study program students. The questionnaire included ten close ended questions and one open ended question. Questionnaire items were adjusted from Anwar and Sailuddin (2022) with some addition and revision in a five-point Likert scale ranging from very easy to very difficult. The open-ended question is used to investigate students' view on their experience with academic reading difficulties.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data responses were analysed using SPSS program to obtain the statistic scores. Participants' comments from open-ended questions were coded based on keywords to classify any issues arising from students' difficulties in academic reading. An inductive data analysis is applied to analyse qualitative data which involved coding raw materials and capturing relevant characteristic points from the content (Patton, 1990).

Research Findings and Discussion

Participants were asked to determine their own difficulties in academic reading by considering all ten questionnaire items. Questionnaire results are described as follows:

Table 1: Students' Academic Reading Difficulties Score

	Number	Mean	Standard D.
Score	40	24.52	5.842
Mean	40	2.445	0.584

Data in table 1 showed that almost all questionnaire items of students' academic reading difficulties are considered easy. Students in general find academic reading easy ($M=2.445$, $SD=0.584$).

Table 2: Students' Difficulties in Academic Reading

No.	Question	Number	Mean	Standard D.
1.	Knowing the meaning of difficult words	40	2.74	1.252
2.	Reading quickly to get the overall clarification of the text	40	2.72	1.125

Challenges of Academic Reading Facing EFL Students in Azawiya University

3.	Understanding organisation of a text	40	2.67	1.102
4.	Maintaining focus while reading	40	2.65	1.134
5.	Identifying supporting ideas	40	2.40	1.123
6.	Taking a brief relevant note	40	2.39	1.075
7.	Drawing a conclusion from reading a text	40	2.34	1.125
8.	Using your own words to take notes	40	2.23	1.023
9.	Identifying main ideas	40	2.20	0.838
10.	Reading carefully to understand a text	40	2.18	0.974

In the item Q2 of the questionnaire results revealed that students find it difficult to some extent to read a text quickly to get the overall interpretation of the text ($M=2.72$, $SD=1.125$), while the highest mean score is displayed on item Q1; knowing the meaning of difficult words ($M=2.74$, $SD= 1.252$). In contrast questions with the lowest mean score are Q10; reading carefully to understand the text ($M=2.18$, $SD= 0.974$) and Q9;

identifying main ideas ($M=2.20$, $SD=0.838$) which indicated that students find the least challenges in these aspects of academic reading. See table 2 above.

Table 3: Aspects of Difficulties in Academic Reading

No.	Aspects of Difficulties	Frequency	Percentage
1	Difficult words, e.g. formality, novelty	12	0.30%
2	Lack of reading skill	8	0.20%
3	Language style, e.g. academic language, complexity of sentences	6	0.15%
4	Ideas, e.g. main ideas, supporting ideas, abstract	4	0.10%

Challenges of Academic Reading Facing EFL Students in Azawiya University

5	Length, i.e. too lengthy	5	0.125%
6	Difficult topics	3	0.075%
7	No difficulty	2	0.05%

Participants were asked to provide comments on the aspects of difficulties in academic reading. Understanding and translating difficult and formal words was stated by 0.30% of respondents as the most difficult aspect in academic reading. 0.20 % of students identified the lack of reading skills as one of the difficulties they encounter during reading comprehension texts. The next factor of problems in Academic reading as mentioned by 0.15% of participant was Language style. Sentences complexity and the use of academic language are recognized as the challenging language style in higher education reading texts. Followed by 0.10 % of participants who cited their inability to know the main idea and the supporting ideas as one of the problems they encounter during reading academic text. Students' comments are categorized above in table 3.

Discussion

Similar results were highlighted by Phakiti & Li (2011) when students were asked to identify their academic reading difficulty. Knowing the meaning of academic vocabulary was frequently mentioned as the most difficult aspect in reading. A similar result was identified in Hirano's study (2015) where participants mentioned difficult vocabulary as the key reason when they face complex reading texts. He explained that the lack of basic knowledge has also become another major problem in academic reading. It is unavoidable that control vocabulary contributes greatly to students' academic reading. Sutarsyah (2008) stated that most of reading comprehension texts included low frequency content words. Low reading habit students would have challenges reading these kinds of text. It is known for EFL students to face difficult vocabularies, particularly when they read texts which are unfamiliar to them. Lack of basic knowledge in the relevant field could cause students to lose engagement with the text while reading (Zuhra, 2015). Lack of sufficient prior knowledge of the given text among students results in an ability to draw inferences from the passage.

Reading quickly to get the overall clarification of the text is cited as the second most problematic reading skill ($M=2.72$). Reading quickly to get an overall idea of information from the text is also identified as skim reading. Skimming is a reading technique that aims to find the main idea by reading quickly before readers decide to read the text in a detailed way (Gulo, 2020). Skimming allows students to be able to anticipate the text's purpose, main idea, and message. Students do not have to read the whole text, they just have to skim the passage, leave unnecessary parts and get the general idea of the text. Though, students who do not have enough experience of reading may find this strategy challenge especially in higher education. Skimming techniques provides significant benefits for supporting reading comprehension. Hutabarat (2012) compared two groups of students who learned to read using a separate technique, and found that the group of students taught intensively using the skimming technique gained better reading comprehension and were able to get the main ideas from paragraphs more easily. Skimming is a great technique for higher education students who have a lot of reading materials in short time. In line with Satriani (2018) findings, students admitted that their lack of reading skill leads them to poor reading comprehension. Low skill of reading ability is related to several critical aspects of reading. Through the questionnaire, it is learnt that students encountered several sides of challenges in reading comprehension such as difficult topics, difficult vocabularies, grammar complexity, lengthy sentences, and academic terms. Hirano (2015) stated that academic reading is different from high school reading. Most high school reading activities take place in the classroom where students have a lot of opportunities to discuss with teachers and colleges. While in college, students must have high consciousness of individual reading practice at home and particularly before class. These challenges may obstruct students from extracting information from their reading texts. To achieve academic success, Phakiti & Li (2011) stated that students should be conscious of their individual aspects that influence reading comprehension. It is suggested that high level motivation combined with self-efficacy are factors that can lead students to success. Class size also contributes to students' stimulation. The academic reading activity should be treated as a teaching activity rather than lecture subject. A smaller class size can lead to increase interest and focus while a

larger class with more students may lead to a lack of interest (Miller & Merdian, 2020).

Conclusion

This study highlighted many challenges of reading in higher education by Azawiya University students. Although the questionnaire results revealed that students to some extent consider academic reading is easy, students stated many aspects of academic reading difficulties such as difficult topics, complex grammar and vocabularies, passage structures, formality, and concentration problems. However, it is not possible to make any generalization due to the small scope of the study. More detailed analysis and a broader scope of research need to be done in the future. Implications of the current study lie in higher education practitioners' efforts to support students' needs in easing their understanding during academic reading activities. Higher education institutions when coming to college from diverse educational backgrounds, should give students the opportunities to join a special class to prepare students for the academic atmosphere at the university level. Academic reading and writing strategies and standards should be introduced at the beginning of their study. It is also necessary to conduct educational classes for smaller groups on a separate schedule between reading classes. Modules should be introduced in a structured form that can gradually build students' confidence and motivation in academic reading from simple to more complex reading material. Although these stages are applied in primary and high school level, they appear to be absent in higher education (Miller & Merdian, 2020). Higher education colleges need to make sure staged development of students' reading skill by planning reading modules carefully. Finally, lecturers need to inspire higher reading habits of their students.

References

- Anwar, I. W., & Sailuddin, S. P. (2022). Academic reading difficulties in higher education. *Journal of Languages and Language Teaching*, 10(2), 309-314.
- Berardo, S. A. (2006) The use of authentic materials in the teaching of reading. *The reading Matrix*, 6 (2): 60-69.

Challenges of Academic Reading Facing EFL Students in Azawiya University

- Cahyono, B. Y., & Widiati, U. (2006). The teaching of EFL reading in the Indonesian context: The state of the art. *Teflin Journal*, 17(1): 36-58.
- Gilmore, A. (2007) Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning. *Language teaching*, 40(2): 97-118.
- Gulo, S. N. (2020). The Benefits of Skimming Technique in Reading Comprehension for The Second Semester Students of Sanata Dharma University. *UC Journal: ELT, Linguistics and Literature Journal*, 1(1), 1-13.
- Hirano, E. (2015). 'I read, I don't understand': Refugees coping with academic reading. *ELT Journal*, 69(2): 178-187.
- Hutabarat, B. J. W. (2012). *The Effect of Applying Skimming Technique on Grade XI Students Reading Comprehension* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Martinez, A.G. (2002). Authentic Materials: An Overview. Free Resources for Teachers and Students of English, *Karen's Linguistics Issues*, 1-7.
- Martiarini, E. (2018). Reading for Academic Purposes: Problems Faced by Undergraduate Students of Visual Communication Design, University of Indraprasta PGRI. *Channing: Journal of English Language Education and Literature*, 3(1): 16-26.
- Miller, K., & Merdian, H. (2020). It's not a waste of time!" Academics' views on the role and function of academic reading: A thematic analysis. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 17(2): 3.
- .Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Phakiti, A., & Li, L. (2011) General Academic Difficulties and Reading and Writing Difficulties Among Asian ESL Postgraduate Students in TESOL at an Australian University. *RELC Journal*, 42(3): 227–264.
- Satriani, E. (2018). Reading Comprehension Difficulties Encountered by English Students of Islamic University of Riau. *J-SHMIC : Journal of English for Academic*, 5(2): 15-26.
- Sengupta, S. (2002). Developing academic reading at tertiary level: A longitudinal study tracing conceptual change. *The reading matrix*, 2(1).
- Shen, M. Y. (2013) Toward an Understanding of Technical University EFL Learners' Academic Reading Difficulties, Strategies, and Needs. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 10(1): 70-79
- Sohail, S. (2015) Academic reading strategies used by Leeds Metropolitan University Graduates: A case study. *Journal of Education and Educational Development*, 2(2).
- Sultana, N. (2016) Assessing Reading Difficulties and Reading Strategies in the Context of Bangladesh: Tertiary Level. *Unpublished Master's Thesis*. Department of English and Humanities: BRAC University
- Sutarsyah, C. (2008). Vocabulary Constraint on Reading Texts. *TEFLIN Journal*, 19(2), 127-140.
- Westwood, P. (2008). *What Teachers Need to Know About Reading and Writing Difficulties?* Australia: Ligare
- Zuhra, Z. (2015) Senior high school students' difficulties in reading comprehension. *English Education Journal*, 6(3): 430-441.