

# NAVIGATING READING CHALLENGES: ANALYZING THE FACTORS BEHIND STUDENTS' STRUGGLES WITH COMPREHENSION

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## ABSTRACT

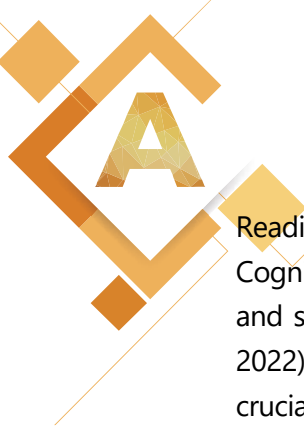
This study investigates the multifaceted challenges students face in reading comprehension, with a focus on identifying key areas of difficulty through a quantitative method in which questionnaires distributed to 32 students of English Education Department students in UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Indonesia. The results showed that the respondents struggled with general comprehension, underlining the prevalence of cognitive and educational hurdles. The acquisition of vocabulary also appeared as a significant obstacle, with many experiencing troubles understanding word meanings, limiting greater connection with texts. Additionally, most failed to identify key information, which is a fundamental skill for extracting meaning and building knowledge from textual content. Difficulties with reading speed and efficiency also contributed to decreased understanding and retention. Furthermore, they also struggled to synthesize information, demonstrating limits in integrating ideas across texts. These findings highlight the complexities of reading comprehension and the importance of thorough, focused educational strategies. To help students succeed in academic reading tasks, interventions should focus on building vocabulary, reading fluency, and higher-order comprehension skills.

KEYWORDS: *Reading Challenges, Reading Comprehension, Students' Struggles*

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is not only as a fundamental skill that plays a crucial role in academic success but also as vital academic skill that directly influences students' learning experiences and overall academic achievement (Rusmiati et al., 2022; Wani & Hanim Ismail, 2024). However, despite its importance, a significant number of students encounter persistent challenges in mastering this ability then continue to struggle with understanding and retaining what they read, affecting their overall academic performance (Villanueva, 2025). These challenges are not just due to insufficient effort or skill but are frequently shaped by a complex combination of cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences. The difficulties arise not solely from poor reading skills but from various interrelated factors that work together in intricate ways.



Reading comprehension difficulties stem from both cognitive and external factors. Cognitive elements like working memory, attention, and language proficiency (vocabulary and syntax) influence how well students process and understand text (Rakhshanfadaee, 2022). Additionally, prior knowledge, reading strategies, and metacognitive awareness are crucial for effective reading (Çigdemir, 2022). External factors, such as socio-economic background, access to resources, and psychological barriers like anxiety or lack of motivation, can further complicate comprehension (Ibáñez-Alfonso et al., 2021). These factors make it challenging to identify and address reading difficulties.

This article examines the multifaceted nature of reading comprehension struggles by reviewing existing literature and drawing from recent research in educational psychology, cognitive science, and linguistics. Understanding the factors that contribute to reading difficulties is the first step toward creating more inclusive, effective educational environments where all students have the opportunity to succeed. By identifying these barriers and uncovering evidence-based strategies, this article seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on how best to support students in navigating the complex world of reading comprehension. The aim is to analyze the key factors behind students' struggles with reading comprehension, focusing on the underlying causes that hinder their ability to fully engage with and understand texts. Additionally, the multiple factors that contribute to students' struggles with reading comprehension were also analyzed with the ultimate goal of identifying effective strategies to mitigate these challenges and enhance student success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *FIVE DIMENSIONS OF READING COMPREHENSION*

Reading comprehension is a multidimensional process with five important elements that assist a reader's capacity to extract meaning from text. Firstly, phonemic awareness helps readers to distinguish and manipulate individual sounds in words, a skill needed for early reading success (Ehri et al., 2001; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). This lays the groundwork for the second element, phonics, which relates those sounds to letters and decodes words effectively (NICHD, 2000). Research on struggling readers found that phonemic awareness training and phonics instruction helped greatly improve decoding and reading comprehension (Anku, 2024).

The next element, fluency, allows readers to digest these words smoothly and with accurate expression, freeing up cognitive resources to focus on comprehension (NICHD, 2000; Juhkam et al., 2023). Vocabulary gives readers knowledge of word meanings, which helps them understand the explicit and implicit messages in the text

(NICHHD, 2000). Research has showed that vocabulary depth, particularly in making inferences, is a strong predictor of reading success in EFL learners (Artuso & Palladino, 2022; Dong et al., 2020). Lastly, comprehension incorporates all of these skills and is strengthened by the use of metacognitive strategies, e.g., predicting, querying, summarizing, and assessing one's own understanding, so that readers are able to actively build meaning (Allen & McNamara, 2017; Boulware-Gooden et al., 2007; Gil et al., 2022; NICHHD, 2000). These elements then connect with one another to guide readers through texts that may get more complicated and encourage a deeper understanding of whatever ideas they come across.


#### *EFL LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION CHALLENGES*

EFL learners often face significant challenges in reading comprehension due to a variety of linguistic, cognitive, and psychological factors. Linguistically, limited vocabulary can hinder learner's understanding texts (Brooks et al., 2025; Hezam et al., 2022). Cognitive factors are central to comprehension. Struggles with decoding or limited working memory capacity, which affects the integration of new information, can impede comprehension (Fälth & Brkovic, 2021). Metacognitive factors, such as monitoring comprehension and adjusting reading strategies, are also crucial. Learners who actively regulate their reading tend to be more successful, whereas those lacking these skills may miss critical details, resulting in poor information integration (Adunyarittigun, 2021; Graham & Harris, 2000). Additionally, for EFL learners, psychological obstacles including anxiety, low motivation, and low self-confidence greatly impede their reading progress (Limeranto & Subekti, 2021; Zaccoletti et al., 2020).

#### *RELATED STUDIES ON EFL LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION CHALLENGES*

Hezam et al. (2022) explored the reading comprehension challenges experienced by EFL learners, focusing on vocabulary and word recognition as primary barriers to understanding text meaning. The study, which was conducted with Saudi EFL students, discovered that male and female students had similar challenges, confirming that these reading difficulties are not gender-specific. The authors underline the necessity for interventions to improve EFL students' reading comprehension and overall English competence.

Fälth and Brkovic (2021) undertook a study that found that combined training in reading and working memory greatly enhanced reading comprehension, word decoding, and nonsense-word reading among struggling primary school readers. Their findings pointed out the critical relationship between working memory capacity and reading development, implying that interventions targeting both cognitive areas could successfully boost reading abilities in children experiencing reading challenges.



Adunyarittigun (2021) explored the reading difficulties encountered by college students who struggle to read. The study focused on the extent of metacognitive awareness regarding reading and the types of reading strategies they used. Nonproficient readers were often shown to have lower levels of metacognitive awareness, which means they are less aware of their own comprehension processes and less likely to successfully assess their development. As a result, they tended to use fewer types of reading strategies, frequently resorting to less successful approaches or failing to adapt techniques to varied text types and reading objectives. This lack of metacognitive skill and strategic flexibility has had a substantial impact on their reading comprehension difficulties.

Zaccoletti et al.'s (2020) study found that reading anxiety is an important predictor of reading comprehension challenges. Their findings suggest that high levels of anxiety during reading activities correlate to challenges with reading, often resulting in lower comprehension outcomes. This anxiety is impacted by the reader's perceived lack of control over the reading activity and the value they place on it. As a result, the paper proposes that addressing reading issues necessitates not only cognitive approaches, but also techniques for reducing reading-related anxiety by instilling a sense of control and emphasizing the value of reading.

#### RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this study was to explore the common reading challenges faced by students in academic settings. To address this, a quantitative research approach was used, specifically focusing on gathering data through students' questionnaires. A reading test was given to know the students' reading ability, and then scored by using reading rubric adapted from J. B. Heaton (1975), which is typically used to assess the reading comprehension and skills of second language learners. The questionnaire was designed with closed-ended questions, which was distributed to a group of English Education Department students at UIN Ar-Raniry Banda Aceh, Indonesia. The closed questions asked participants to rate the frequency and severity of various writing challenges they faced. The responses were examined based on Heaton's (1975) reading aspects to gain a deeper understanding of the factors influencing students' reading challenges.

## J.B. HEATON READING SCORE RUBRIC (1975)

ASPECT		CRITERIA
1. Comprehension	5	Demonstrates full understanding of the text; all key points are grasped, and answers to questions are complete and accurate.
	4	Understands most of the text with only minor lapses in comprehension; answers questions with good accuracy but may miss some details.
	3	Partial understanding of the text; some questions may be answered incorrectly or incompletely.
	2	Limited understanding; key points are missed, and responses are generally inaccurate.
	1	Fails to comprehend the text; answers are incorrect or irrelevant.
2. Vocabulary Understanding	5	Demonstrates a high level of vocabulary comprehension; able to understand both common and academic words in context.
	4	Good understanding of vocabulary; occasional difficulty with complex or less common words.
	3	Limited understanding of vocabulary; struggles with unfamiliar or more complex words.
	2	Poor understanding of vocabulary; frequent misunderstanding of key words.
	1	Unable to understand basic vocabulary, making comprehension difficult.
3. Accuracy in Identifying Key Information	5	Accurately identifies and interprets all key information in the text.
	4	Mostly accurate in identifying key information; minor omissions or misinterpretations.
	3	Sometimes misses key information; misinterprets some important details.
	2	Frequently misses key information; significant misunderstanding of important details.
	1	Fails to identify or interpret key information; misunderstanding or omission of major points.
4. Speed and Efficiency	5	Reads quickly and efficiently, with minimal need for rereading; processes information effortlessly.
	4	Reads at a good pace with occasional rereading or slight pauses to understand content.
	3	Reads slowly, needing to reread or pause frequently to understand the text.
	2	Very slow reading pace; struggles with processing information.
	1	Extremely slow reading pace; difficulty in processing the text or understanding its meaning.
5. Ability to Synthesize Information	5	Demonstrates strong ability to synthesize information from the text, making connections and drawing conclusions
	4	Can synthesize most information and make reasonable connections between ideas.
	3	Some ability to synthesize information, but connections between ideas may be unclear or incomplete.
	2	Struggles to synthesize information; makes few or no connections between ideas.
	1	Fails to synthesize information; responses are disconnected or illogical.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RESULTS

In this part, the results would be discussed in terms of each reading component based on Heaton's rubric. The discussion would be elaborated from the questionnaires.

#### 1. Comprehension

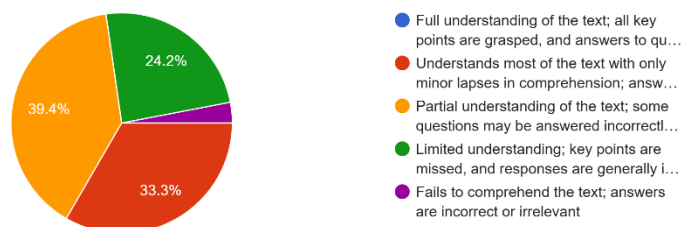


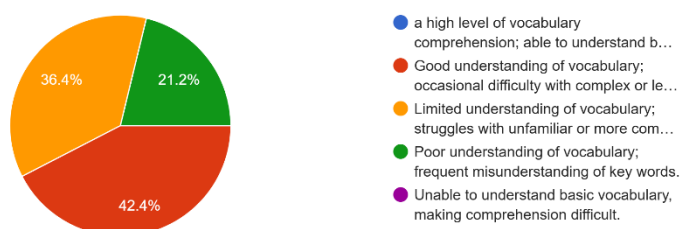
FIGURE 1. Students' reading comprehension level

Based on Heaton's rubric, the analysis of EFL university students' reading comprehension level revealed moderate proficiency with room for improvement. No students achieved the highest level of comprehension, as shown by the 0% in the category for full understanding and accuracy. The largest group (39.4%) demonstrated partial understanding, providing incomplete or incorrect responses. Another 33.3% showed better comprehension, with mostly accurate answers and minor lapses. A smaller group (24.2%) had limited understanding, often missing key points. Alarmingly, 3.1% failed to comprehend the text entirely, offering irrelevant or incorrect responses. These results highlight the need for targeted support to improve reading comprehension in EFL contexts.

The challenges arise from cognitive, emotional, and strategic factors, including limited vocabulary, poor fluency, lack of background knowledge, and ineffective reading strategies. Distractions, difficult texts, cognitive overload, and anxiety further hinder comprehension. Emotional stress, weak critical thinking, and low motivation also play significant roles, highlighting the need for academic and emotional support.

To improve comprehension, several interventions can be applied. Teaching active reading strategies like summarizing and questioning helps students engage with texts, while building background knowledge through pre-reading activities provides context. Graphic organizers, such as concept maps, aid in retaining information, and expanding vocabulary enhances understanding of complex language. Encouraging reflection through discussion and using multimodal tools, like videos and diagrams, can clarify difficult concepts. Chunking longer texts into smaller sections makes information more digestible.

## 2. Vocabulary Understanding



**FIGURE 2.** Students' vocabulary comprehension level

The assessment of EFL university students' vocabulary comprehension during reading, based on Heaton's rubric, revealed moderate proficiency with challenges in lexical depth. None of the students demonstrated high vocabulary understanding, as shown by the 0% in the top category, reflecting fluent comprehension of both common and academic words. The largest group (42.4%) showed good vocabulary comprehension,

though they struggled with less common terms. A significant portion (36.4%) had limited understanding, particularly with unfamiliar vocabulary, affecting overall comprehension. Additionally, 21.2% exhibited poor vocabulary comprehension, often misinterpreting key terms. While no students were in the lowest category, suggesting basic vocabulary comprehension is intact, advanced lexical items remain a challenge. These findings suggest the need for focused vocabulary instruction, especially in academic word acquisition, to improve reading comprehension in EFL learners.

Students often struggle with vocabulary comprehension due to limited vocabulary knowledge, lack of exposure to complex texts, and ineffective word-learning strategies. Difficulties with polysemy, complex sentence structures, and advanced vocabulary can overwhelm students, especially those with lower language proficiency. Cognitive overload, lack of motivation, and emotional barriers can also hinder progress.

To improve vocabulary comprehension, students should engage in regular reading, use strategies like flashcards and word maps, and infer meanings from context. Previewing unfamiliar words, predicting meanings, and scaffolded instruction in academic terms can also enhance vocabulary understanding.

### 3. Accuracy in Identifying Key Information

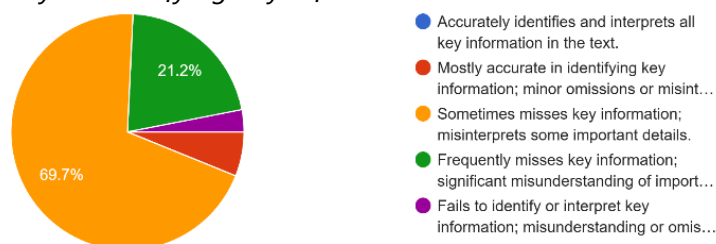


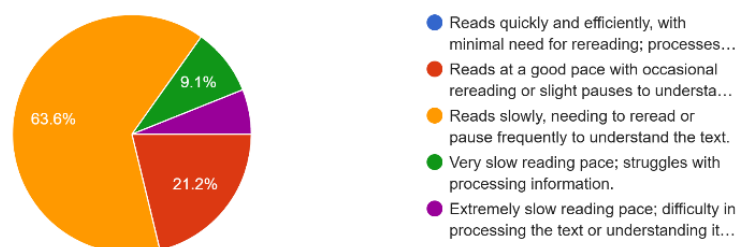
FIGURE 3. Students' accuracy in identifying key information level

The data on EFL university students' accuracy in identifying key information in reading texts showed significant difficulty in this critical aspect of comprehension. No students achieved full accuracy, indicating a complete absence of top-level performance. The majority (69.7%) fell into the mid-range category, often missing or misinterpreting key details, suggesting inconsistent ability to extract essential information. A further 21.2% performed at a lower level, frequently overlooking key points and demonstrating major misunderstandings. Only a small percentage (5.8%) were mostly accurate, with minor lapses, and 3.3% completely failed to identify or interpret key information. These highlight a widespread challenge in distinguishing and processing core content, likely stemming from limited vocabulary, underdeveloped inference skills, and unfamiliarity with academic text structures, underscoring the need for instruction focused on information prioritization and reading strategies.



Students often struggle to identify key information while reading due to cognitive, emotional, and strategic factors. Poor reading comprehension, lack of prior knowledge, and difficulty recognizing text structure can hinder their ability to focus on essential points. Ineffective note-taking, rushed or slow reading, and cognitive overload further complicate matters. Emotional factors like anxiety and low confidence, along with limited critical thinking skills, can also prevent students from identifying relevant details. Distractions, poor vocabulary, and language barriers contribute to misunderstandings, while stress and lack of practice impact focus. Targeted interventions to improve reading strategies, vocabulary, and critical thinking can help students overcome these challenges and boost comprehension.

#### 4. *Speed and Efficiency*



**FIGURE 4.** Students' reading speed and efficiency level

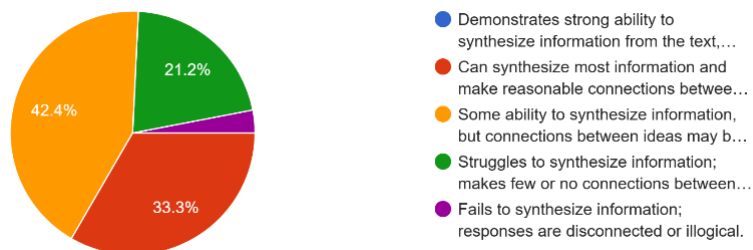
The analysis of EFL university students' reading speed and efficiency revealed significant challenges in fluent text processing. None of the students reached the highest level of performance, with 0% reading quickly and efficiently without rereading. The majority (63.6%) fell into the mid-level category, reading slowly with frequent pauses or rereading to grasp the content, indicating difficulty in maintaining continuous comprehension, likely due to limited vocabulary or unfamiliar text structures. A smaller group (21.2%) demonstrated better fluency, requiring only occasional rereading. However, 9.1% read very slowly, and 6.1% struggled significantly with processing and understanding the text, placing them at the lowest level. These findings underscore the need for support in developing reading automaticity and efficiency, essential for handling academic texts in a second language.

Students often struggle with reading speed and efficiency, impacting comprehension. Key causes include low reading fluency, slow word recognition, limited sight vocabulary, and ineffective strategies like subvocalization. Distractions, poor vocabulary, and difficulty identifying main ideas also slow progress, along with low motivation, cognitive overload, and lack of strategies for specific texts. Emotional factors like anxiety and poor time management further exacerbate these issues. Improving reading speed and efficiency involves consistent practice, vocabulary



building, better reading strategies, and addressing underlying issues such as anxiety or learning difficulties.

### 5. Ability to Synthesize Information




**FIGURE 5.** Students' ability to synthesize information level

The data on EFL university students' ability to synthesize information in reading highlighted a general struggle with higher-order thinking skills essential for academic literacy. None of the students demonstrated strong synthesis skills, such as making clear connections and drawing well-supported conclusions from the text. While a third (33.3%) were able to synthesize most information and establish reasonable connections, a larger group (42.4%) showed only partial synthesis, with unclear or incomplete links. Additionally, 21.2% struggled significantly, making few or no meaningful connections, and 3.1% failed to synthesize information altogether, producing disjointed or illogical responses. These results suggest that while students can extract individual points, they struggle to integrate them into coherent interpretations or arguments. This highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that explicitly teach synthesis skills, such as summarizing, inference-making, and drawing connections between concepts, particularly in academic English reading tasks.

Students often struggle to synthesize information due to challenges such as limited prior knowledge, weak reading comprehension, and a lack of critical thinking skills. Difficulty identifying key points, poor note-taking, and managing complex texts also hinder synthesis. A narrow vocabulary, insufficient practice, and emotional factors like poor time management or stress further complicate the process. Additionally, a lack of metacognitive awareness, confusion between summarization and synthesis, distractions, and personal issues can all contribute. Improving synthesis skills requires targeted instruction in reading comprehension, critical thinking, note-taking, and active engagement with the text.

### DISCUSSION

This study highlights significant challenges in reading comprehension among students. Students reported difficulty understanding texts, indicating cognitive and educational



barriers. Vocabulary comprehension was also a problem, which hindered the students' deeper understanding. Additionally, many students had trouble identifying key information, impacting their ability to grasp central arguments. Speed and efficiency also posed a challenge for the students, affecting retention and understanding of complex passages. Further, most of them still struggled with synthesizing information, a vital skill for higher-level comprehension. These findings correspond those in previous studies regarding reading challenges (e. g., Adunyarittigun, 2021; Fälth and Brkovic, 2021; Hezam et al., 2022; Zaccoletti et al., 2020).

Overall, the analysis of EFL university students' reading performance showed moderate achievement but highlights significant difficulties in higher-level skills. Many students lack proficiency across key areas: 69.7% struggle with identifying key information, 63.6% read slowly, and 42.4% have basic synthesis abilities. These issues suggest that students engage with texts at a surface level, limiting deeper understanding. To improve academic success, reading instruction in EFL contexts must focus on critical reading skills, vocabulary development, and analytical tasks to bridge the gap between basic comprehension and advanced literacy (Fayrouz, 2025; Grabe & Stoller, 2013; Pang et al., 2003).

These findings underscore the complexity of reading comprehension challenges, which stem from cognitive, linguistic, and educational factors. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions in vocabulary, fluency, and strategies for identifying key information and synthesizing material. By understanding students' specific struggles, educators can design more effective, personalized approaches to enhance reading comprehension.

To address students' reading comprehension challenges, teachers should focus on key strategies. First, explicit vocabulary instruction is essential, using context clues and strategic reading practices to help students master academic words (Fayrouz, 2025; Hermida, 2023; Nisa et al., 2020). Improving reading fluency through timed exercises, reading aloud, and guided silent reading, with comprehension checks, will help students read faster without losing understanding (Herdiana & Munir, 2024). Teachers should also foster critical thinking and synthesis by encouraging summarizing, comparing, and drawing conclusions (Al Roomy, 2022). To help students identify key information, exercises like highlighting, outlining, and guided questions should be included (Sua, 2021). These approaches can enhance students' reading comprehension and academic performance.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that English Education students face a number of challenges in reading comprehension, which underline the need for targeted instruction. The challenges include difficulties in acquiring new vocabulary, in identifying key ideas, in reading speed and fluency, and in synthesizing information. Based on the study, educational strategies aimed at improving reading comprehension in EFL students should prioritize vocabulary, fluency, and higher-order comprehension skills.

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