

Reading comprehension difficulties among EFL university students: A case study at prof. Dr. Hazairin, SH university

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Article info

Keywords:

EFL learners; qualitative study; reading comprehension; reading difficulties; university students

Article History:

Received: December 13, 2025

Revised: March 16, 2026

Accepted: March 26, 2026

Published: March 30, 2026

How to cite in APA style:

Nasution, E. A., Kencana, N., & Utami, E. (2026). Reading comprehension difficulties among EFL university students: A case study at Prof. Dr. Hazairin, S.H. University. *JOEEL (Journal of English Education and Literature)*, 7(1), 27-40. <https://doi.org/10.38114/hv26mt53>

ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill for university students learning English as a foreign language; however, many learners continue to experience persistent difficulties in understanding academic texts. This study aims to explore the reading comprehension difficulties encountered by second semester students of the English Education Study Program at Prof. Dr. Hazairin University. The research addresses the gap in empirical evidence regarding specific comprehension problems faced by EFL learners in higher education contexts. Employing a descriptive qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations, reading comprehension tests, and semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis. The findings reveal that students face difficulties in several aspects of reading comprehension, including limited vocabulary knowledge, inability to identify main ideas, difficulty in making inferences, and limited background knowledge related to the texts. These difficulties hinder students' overall comprehension and engagement with academic reading materials. The study highlights the need for more explicit reading instruction and strategic support to enhance students' comprehension skills. The findings are expected to contribute to English language teaching practices by providing insights for lecturers to design more effective reading instruction tailored to learners' needs in EFL university settings

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in higher education, particularly for students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). At the university level, students are required to read a wide range of academic texts, including textbooks, journal articles, and research reports, which demand not only basic linguistic understanding but also higher-order cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, and critical evaluation. For EFL learners, reading comprehension serves as a primary means of accessing academic knowledge, as much of the instructional material and scholarly literature is presented in English. Consequently, difficulties

in reading comprehension may significantly hinder students' academic performance and overall success in higher education (Nurjanah, 2018).

Reading comprehension is widely acknowledged as a complex and interactive process involving multiple components, including vocabulary knowledge, grammatical competence, background knowledge, and the strategic use of reading skills. According to (Mustafa & Bakri, 2020), comprehension occurs when readers actively construct meaning by integrating textual information with their prior knowledge and cognitive processes. In EFL contexts, this process becomes more demanding because learners must simultaneously manage linguistic decoding and meaning construction. As a result, EFL learners often experience greater challenges in reading comprehension compared to native speakers, especially when dealing with academic texts that contain complex structures and specialized vocabulary (Utami et al., 2025).

Previous studies have consistently reported that EFL learners encounter various difficulties in reading comprehension. One of the most frequently identified problems is limited vocabulary knowledge, which restricts learners' ability to understand key concepts and ideas in a text (Ahmad et al., 2022). In addition, insufficient grammatical awareness may prevent learners from interpreting sentence structures accurately, leading to misunderstandings at the clause and sentence levels (Utami & Rakhmanina, 2021). Beyond linguistic factors, cognitive aspects such as the inability to identify main ideas, make inferences, and recognize text organization also contribute to poor reading comprehension (Ahmad et al., 2022). These challenges are further compounded by learners' limited exposure to English texts and inadequate practice in strategic reading.

Research on reading comprehension difficulties in EFL contexts has been conducted using various methodological approaches. Quantitative studies have often focused on examining the relationship between reading comprehension and specific variables, such as vocabulary size, reading strategies, or language proficiency levels (Kencana et al., 2023). These studies provide valuable statistical evidence regarding factors influencing reading comprehension but tend to offer limited insight into how and why learners experience particular difficulties. In contrast, qualitative and mixed-method studies have explored learners' perceptions, experiences, and behaviors during reading, thereby offering richer descriptions of reading comprehension challenges (Creswell, 2019).

Despite the growing body of research on EFL reading comprehension, much of the existing literature has concentrated on secondary school students or general EFL learner populations (Tsegaw et al., 2024). Studies focusing specifically on university-level EFL learners remain relatively limited, particularly in developing country contexts. Moreover, research conducted in higher education settings often emphasizes learning outcomes or strategy use rather than providing in-depth descriptions of the actual difficulties encountered by students during the reading process. As a result, there is a need for more qualitative, context-sensitive research that captures the complexity of reading comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL university students.

In the Indonesian EFL context, reading comprehension has been recognized as a persistent challenge for university students. Several studies have reported that Indonesian EFL learners struggle with understanding academic texts due to limited

vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, and insufficient reading strategies (Utami, 2018). However, many of these studies adopt quantitative designs or focus on instructional interventions, leaving a gap in descriptive qualitative evidence that documents students' reading comprehension difficulties in natural classroom settings. Furthermore, few studies have examined reading comprehension difficulties among early-semester university students, who are at a critical stage of transitioning from secondary to tertiary education and are expected to adapt to more demanding academic reading tasks (Pahamzah, 2020).

Another important issue highlighted in previous research is the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension. Schema theory suggests that readers comprehend texts more effectively when they can activate relevant prior knowledge to interpret new information. In EFL contexts, students may lack familiarity with the cultural, social, or academic topics presented in English texts, which can hinder comprehension even when linguistic knowledge is sufficient (Hussein et al., 2024). While some studies have acknowledged the importance of background knowledge, limited attention has been given to how this factor interacts with other difficulties, such as vocabulary limitations and strategy use, particularly in higher education contexts.

In addition to linguistic and cognitive factors, instructional practices play a crucial role in shaping students' reading comprehension development. Research has shown that explicit instruction in reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning, summarizing, and inferencing, can significantly improve learners' comprehension (Adeyiga & Mpungose, 2025). However, in many EFL classrooms, reading instruction tends to focus on answering comprehension questions rather than teaching students how to approach and process texts strategically. As a result, students may develop ineffective reading habits, such as word-by-word translation, which impede comprehension and reduce reading efficiency. This instructional gap highlights the need for research that examines reading comprehension difficulties within specific teaching and learning contexts.

Although a few researchers have focused on reading comprehension difficulties among EFL learners in higher education, there have been limited descriptive qualitative case studies that explore these difficulties in depth, particularly among early-semester students in Indonesian universities. Most existing studies do not sufficiently address how multiple factors linguistic, cognitive, instructional, and affective interact to influence students' reading comprehension. Consequently, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of the nature of reading comprehension difficulties faced by EFL university students at the beginning of their academic journey.

Therefore, this research intends to address these gaps by conducting a descriptive qualitative case study on second semester students of the English Education Study Program at Prof. Dr. Hazairin University. This study seeks to explore the reading comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL university students and to examine the factors contributing to those difficulties within a specific institutional context. By focusing on early-semester students, this research aims to capture reading comprehension challenges at a critical stage of academic development.

The objectives of this research are: (1) to identify the types of reading comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL university students, and (2) to examine the factors contributing to these difficulties. Through an in-depth qualitative analysis of data collected from reading comprehension tests, classroom observations, and interviews, this study aims to provide a detailed description of students' reading experiences and challenges.

The contribution of this study lies in its potential to enrich the existing literature on EFL reading comprehension by offering context-specific, qualitative evidence from a higher education setting. The findings are expected to advance the current state of knowledge by highlighting the complex and interconnected nature of reading comprehension difficulties among early-semester EFL university students. In addition, the study is expected to provide practical insights for lecturers and curriculum developers in designing more effective reading instruction that addresses students' actual needs. By bridging the gap between theory, research, and classroom practice, this study contributes to the improvement of EFL reading pedagogy in higher education.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research methodology to explore reading comprehension difficulties among EFL university students. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the research aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of students' difficulties as experienced in a natural learning context rather than to measure variables statistically (Creswell, 2009). This method allowed the researcher to capture rich, detailed data related to students' reading comprehension problems and the factors contributing to those difficulties.

Research Design

The research adopted a qualitative case study design focusing on a specific group of learners within a particular institutional context. Case study research enables an in-depth exploration of a bounded system and is suitable for investigating complex educational phenomena in real-life settings (Kurniati & Fithriani, 2022). This design was chosen to provide a detailed description of students' experiences, behaviors, and challenges in reading comprehension, thereby allowing a contextualized understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Participants

The participants of this study were second semester students of the English Education Study Program at Prof. Dr. Hazairin University. They were selected using purposive sampling, as this technique allows researchers to choose participants who are most relevant to the research objectives (Azizah, 2019). The participants had completed basic reading courses and were actively engaged in academic reading activities in English. This group was considered suitable because early-stage EFL university students often encounter significant challenges in reading academic texts (Kharisma et al., 2023). Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity, were strictly observed throughout the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple techniques to ensure triangulation and enhance the credibility of the findings (Bahari et al., 2024). The data collection

methods included classroom observations, reading comprehension tests, and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observations were conducted to examine students' reading behaviors and engagement during instructional activities. Reading comprehension tests were used to identify specific areas of difficulty, such as understanding main ideas, vocabulary, and inferential meaning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain deeper insights into students' perceptions of their reading difficulties and the factors influencing their comprehension. These instruments were commonly used in qualitative studies of reading comprehension and EFL learning contexts (Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive analysis. The analysis process followed systematic procedures, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Samsudin et al., 2023). Data from observations, tests, and interviews were first transcribed and organized. Relevant data were then coded and categorized based on emerging themes related to reading comprehension difficulties. Finally, patterns and relationships among categories were interpreted to generate meaningful conclusions. To enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, data triangulation across multiple sources was applied (Firman et al., 2019).

This section presents the findings of the study derived from the analysis of data collected through reading comprehension tests, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. The findings are organized into several subsections based on the research objectives, which aim to identify the types of reading comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL university students and the factors contributing to those difficulties. The results presented in this section summarize the main patterns that emerged from the data and provide evidence to answer the research questions.

RESULT

Reading Comprehension Difficulties Experienced by EFL University Students

The analysis of the reading comprehension tests revealed that most students experienced difficulties in understanding English texts at various levels. These difficulties were not limited to lexical comprehension but also extended to sentence-level and discourse-level understanding. Classroom observations further confirmed that students often struggled to engage meaningfully with the texts and required frequent assistance during reading activities.

Vocabulary-Related Difficulties

Vocabulary-related difficulty emerged as the most dominant problem among the participants. The results of the reading comprehension tests showed that many students failed to understand key vocabulary items essential for grasping the meaning of the texts. When encountering unfamiliar words, students tended to stop reading and focus on translating individual words rather than continuing to construct overall meaning. This behavior was consistently observed during

classroom activities, where students frequently asked about word meanings or relied heavily on dictionaries.

In addition, interview data revealed that students perceived vocabulary as the main barrier to reading comprehension. Several participants stated that they could not understand the text because too many words were unfamiliar. This difficulty caused students to lose confidence and motivation during reading tasks. As a result, vocabulary limitations not only affected comprehension accuracy but also reduced students' reading fluency and engagement with the text.

Difficulty in Identifying Main Ideas

Another major difficulty identified in this study was students' inability to identify the main ideas of paragraphs or texts. The reading comprehension tests indicated that many students incorrectly answered questions related to main ideas, often selecting supporting details or minor information instead. This finding suggests that students struggled to distinguish between essential and non-essential information in a text.

Classroom observations supported this result, showing that students often read texts sentence by sentence without attempting to grasp the overall message. Instead of summarizing or paraphrasing the main idea, they focused on isolated sentences. Interviews further revealed that students were unfamiliar with techniques for identifying main ideas, such as recognizing topic sentences or paying attention to repeated ideas. This difficulty demonstrates that students' comprehension problems extended beyond vocabulary to higher-level reading skills.

Difficulty in Making Inferences

The findings also indicated that students experienced difficulties in making inferences from the text. Inferential questions in the reading comprehension tests were among the most challenging for participants. Many students relied solely on explicitly stated information and were unable to draw conclusions based on contextual clues.

During interviews, students reported that they found inferential questions confusing because the answers were not directly stated in the text. This suggests that students were more accustomed to literal comprehension rather than interpretative reading. Classroom observations showed that students rarely discussed implied meanings or author intentions, indicating limited practice in inferential reading. This result highlights a gap in students' ability to engage in deeper text interpretation.

Factors Contributing to Reading Comprehension Difficulties

In addition to identifying the types of reading comprehension difficulties, this study also explored factors contributing to these difficulties. The contributing factors were mainly derived from interview data and supported by classroom observations.

Limited Background Knowledge

One significant factor contributing to students' reading comprehension difficulties was limited background knowledge. Interview data revealed that students struggled to understand texts discussing unfamiliar topics, particularly those related to academic, social, or cultural issues. Students reported that they found it difficult to follow the text when they lacked prior knowledge about the topic.

One participant stated:

Excerpt 1:

"I find it difficult to understand the text when the topic is unfamiliar because I do not know what the text is talking about."

This finding indicates that insufficient background knowledge hindered students' ability to make connections between new information and their existing knowledge. As a result, students tended to focus on surface-level understanding and failed to grasp the deeper meaning of the text.

Ineffective Reading Strategies

Another factor identified in this study was the use of ineffective reading strategies. Classroom observations revealed that most students relied on word-by-word translation as their primary reading strategy. They rarely applied strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting content, or summarizing information. This limited strategic repertoire negatively affected their reading efficiency and comprehension.

Interview data further showed that students were not explicitly taught how to use effective reading strategies. Several participants mentioned that reading activities in class mainly involved answering questions without prior instruction on how to approach the text. Consequently, students lacked awareness of strategic reading processes, which contributed to their comprehension difficulties.

Low Reading Motivation and Confidence

The findings also revealed that low reading motivation and confidence contributed to students' reading comprehension difficulties. Interviews indicated that repeated failure to understand texts made students feel discouraged and anxious during reading activities. Some students expressed fear of making mistakes when answering comprehension questions, which reduced their willingness to participate actively in class.

Classroom observations confirmed that less confident students tended to remain passive during reading discussions. This lack of engagement limited their opportunities to improve reading skills through interaction and feedback. Although motivation was not the main focus of the study, the findings suggest that affective factors played a supporting role in students' reading difficulties.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that EFL university students experienced multiple reading comprehension difficulties, including limited vocabulary knowledge, difficulty in identifying main ideas, and challenges in making inferences. These difficulties were influenced by several contributing factors, such as limited background knowledge, ineffective reading strategies, and low reading motivation. Compared to previous studies that often emphasized quantitative outcomes or focused on secondary school learners, this study provides qualitative,

context-specific evidence of reading comprehension difficulties among early-semester EFL university students in a higher education setting.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the significance of the research findings by interpreting them in relation to the research objectives, existing theories of reading comprehension, and previous empirical studies in EFL contexts. Rather than restating the results, this discussion seeks to explain why the identified reading comprehension difficulties occurred, how they relate to broader theoretical perspectives, and how the findings compare with those reported by other researchers. The discussion begins with an overview of the major findings and proceeds to a detailed interpretation of each key issue.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that EFL university students experienced complex and interrelated reading comprehension difficulties encompassing linguistic, cognitive, and instructional dimensions. The major difficulties identified include limited vocabulary knowledge, problems in identifying main ideas, and challenges in making inferences. These difficulties were further influenced by limited background knowledge, ineffective use of reading strategies, and affective factors such as low confidence and motivation. These findings directly address the research objectives outlined in the Introduction, which aimed to explore the types of reading comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL university students and the factors contributing to those difficulties.

Reading Comprehension Difficulties Experienced by EFL University Students

Vocabulary Knowledge as a Foundational Barrier to Comprehension

One of the most salient findings of this study is the central role of limited vocabulary knowledge in students' reading comprehension difficulties. From a theoretical perspective, vocabulary knowledge is a core component of reading comprehension, particularly in foreign language contexts where learners do not have automatic access to word meanings (Simatupang & Heryono, 2022). When students encounter frequent unfamiliar vocabulary, they are forced to allocate a substantial amount of cognitive effort to decoding lexical items, leaving limited resources for higher-level comprehension processes such as inference making and integration of ideas.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research demonstrating that insufficient vocabulary knowledge negatively affects reading fluency and comprehension accuracy among EFL learners (Tsegaw et al., 2024). However, this study provides additional qualitative insight into how vocabulary limitations manifest in classroom practices. The students' tendency to rely heavily on word-by-word translation suggests that vocabulary learning has not yet become integrated into a broader reading strategy repertoire. This reliance may explain why students struggle to comprehend texts holistically, even when they recognize some individual words (Ahmad et al., 2022).

Compared to studies involving more advanced EFL learners, where readers are often able to infer word meanings from context, the participants in this study

demonstrated limited use of contextual guessing. This contrast suggests that vocabulary-related difficulties may be particularly acute among early-semester university students, highlighting the need for systematic vocabulary development alongside reading instruction at the tertiary level (Shamida et al., 2023).

Main Idea Identification and Text Structure Awareness

Another important finding of this study concerns students' difficulty in identifying main ideas, which reflects challenges at the discourse level of comprehension. Reading comprehension theories emphasize that successful readers actively construct meaning by identifying key ideas and organizing information into a coherent mental representation (Al-maashani, 2023). The inability to identify main ideas indicates that students may lack awareness of text structure and organizational patterns commonly found in academic texts.

The findings align with earlier studies reporting that EFL learners often focus excessively on sentence-level comprehension rather than global meaning (Tsegaw et al., 2024). However, this study extends previous research by showing that students' difficulty in identifying main ideas is closely related to instructional factors. Interviews revealed that students were rarely taught how to locate topic sentences or summarize paragraphs, suggesting a gap between instructional practices and the cognitive demands of academic reading.

In contrast to studies conducted in contexts where explicit instruction in text structure is emphasized, the findings of this study suggest that limited instructional support may hinder students' development of discourse-level comprehension skills. This highlights the importance of incorporating explicit instruction on text organization and main idea identification into early university reading courses.

Inferential Reading and Higher-Order Cognitive Processing

The difficulty students experienced in making inferences represents another critical aspect of the discussion. Inferential comprehension is widely recognized as a higher-order reading skill that requires readers to integrate textual information with background knowledge and logical reasoning (Kintsch, 1998). The findings indicate that many students relied primarily on literal comprehension and struggled when information was implied rather than explicitly stated.

This result is consistent with previous research indicating that inferential comprehension poses significant challenges for EFL learners (Derin et al., 2020). However, the present study differs from some earlier research conducted in secondary school contexts by showing that inferential difficulties persist at the university level, particularly among early-semester students. This finding suggests that higher education does not automatically guarantee the development of advanced reading skills and that targeted instructional support remains necessary.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings imply that inferential reading skills may not develop spontaneously through exposure to texts alone. Instead, students may require guided practice and explicit modeling of inferential thinking processes to move beyond surface-level comprehension.

The Factors Contributing the Difficulties

Background Knowledge and Schema Activation

The findings regarding limited background knowledge further illuminate the complexity of reading comprehension difficulties among EFL learners. Schema theory posits that comprehension is facilitated when readers can activate relevant prior knowledge to interpret new information (Ali et al., 2022). When students lack familiarity with the topic of a text, they may struggle to construct meaning, even if their linguistic knowledge is adequate.

The results of this study support previous research highlighting the role of background knowledge in EFL reading comprehension (Adeyiga & Mpungose, 2025). However, this study contributes new insight by demonstrating that students in this specific institutional context encountered academic texts with limited preparatory support. This suggests that pre-reading activities designed to activate background knowledge may not be sufficiently emphasized in classroom instruction. Compared to studies conducted in settings where pre-reading activities are systematically implemented, the findings of this study indicate a gap in instructional practice. This difference underscores the importance of contextual factors in shaping students' reading experiences and outcomes.

Reading Strategies and Instructional Practices

Another key contribution of this study lies in its analysis of reading strategies. The findings reveal that students primarily relied on word-by-word translation and demonstrated limited awareness of effective reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and summarizing. This result supports previous research suggesting that many EFL learners lack strategic reading competence due to insufficient explicit instruction (Hussein et al., 2024).

While some studies have reported frequent strategy use among university-level EFL learners, the findings of this study present a contrasting picture. The participants' limited strategy use suggests that early-semester students may not yet have been exposed to strategy-based reading instruction. This contrast highlights the role of instructional context and curriculum design in influencing students' reading development.

The findings also suggest that ineffective strategy use may exacerbate other reading difficulties, such as vocabulary limitations and problems with main idea identification. This interrelationship indicates that reading strategies function as a mediating factor in reading comprehension and should be a central focus of instructional intervention.

Affective Factors and Reading Engagement

Although not the primary focus of the study, affective factors such as low motivation and confidence emerged as supporting contributors to reading comprehension difficulties. The findings indicate that repeated comprehension failure may lead to anxiety and reduced engagement during reading activities. This observation aligns with affective theories of language learning, which emphasize the role of emotional factors in learning outcomes (Pahamzah, 2020).

Previous studies have similarly reported that low confidence and anxiety can negatively affect EFL learners' reading performance. However, this study adds

qualitative depth by illustrating how affective factors interact with linguistic and cognitive difficulties, creating a cycle that further impedes reading development.

Integration of Findings and Contribution to the Field

Taken together, the findings of this study demonstrate that reading comprehension difficulties among EFL university students are multifaceted and context-dependent. The results are largely consistent with existing theories and empirical research, yet they also reveal important contextual differences, particularly regarding early-semester students in higher education. By adopting a descriptive qualitative case study approach, this research provides in-depth, context-specific evidence that complements the predominantly quantitative literature on EFL reading comprehension (Utami & Yunita, 2024).

In conclusion, the discussion of the findings highlights that reading comprehension difficulties among EFL university students stem from a complex interaction of linguistic limitations, cognitive challenges, instructional practices, and affective factors. The results of this study not only support established theories of reading comprehension but also reveal the need for more explicit, strategy-based, and context-sensitive reading instruction in higher education. By offering a detailed qualitative interpretation of students' reading difficulties, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of EFL reading comprehension and provides a foundation for pedagogical improvement and future research in similar educational contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated reading comprehension difficulties experienced by EFL university students through a case study conducted at Prof. Dr. Hazairin University. The findings indicate that students' reading comprehension difficulties are multifaceted, encompassing linguistic, cognitive, instructional, and affective dimensions. The most prominent difficulties include limited vocabulary knowledge, inability to identify main ideas, and challenges in making inferences. These difficulties are further influenced by limited background knowledge, ineffective use of reading strategies, and low reading confidence.

The study demonstrates that reading comprehension difficulties among early-semester EFL university students cannot be attributed to a single factor but rather result from the interaction of multiple elements. From a theoretical perspective, the findings support established models of reading comprehension that emphasize the interdependence of vocabulary knowledge, strategic competence, and background knowledge in constructing meaning from texts. At the same time, this research advances the field by providing context-specific qualitative evidence from a higher education setting, an area that has received relatively limited attention in previous studies, particularly in the Indonesian EFL context.

In terms of practical implications, the findings suggest that reading instruction at the university level should move beyond comprehension testing toward more explicit and systematic teaching of reading strategies. Lecturers are encouraged to integrate vocabulary development, main idea identification, and inferential reading practice into classroom instruction. In addition, the use of pre-reading activities to activate students' background knowledge and scaffold comprehension may help reduce students' reading difficulties and increase

engagement with academic texts. Addressing affective factors by creating a supportive learning environment may also enhance students' confidence and motivation in reading.

This study offers several possible directions for future research. Further studies could employ mixed-method or longitudinal designs to examine the development of reading comprehension skills over time and to investigate the effectiveness of strategy-based reading instruction. Future research may also explore reading comprehension difficulties among students at different academic levels or across diverse institutional contexts to provide broader generalizability. By addressing these areas, subsequent research can build upon the present findings and contribute to more effective EFL reading pedagogy in higher education.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the lecturers of the English Education Study Program at Prof. Dr. Hazairin University for their academic guidance and support throughout the research process. Appreciation is also extended to the students who willingly participated in this study and contributed valuable data. In addition, the authors acknowledge the assistance of all individuals who provided support in data collection, proofreading, and technical preparation of the manuscript.

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