

## EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LITERAL READING PRACTICES IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS A CASE STUDY AT A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** Reading comprehension plays a crucial role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, particularly in higher education where students are required to engage with various academic texts. Although literal reading is essential for developing broader comprehension skills, limited studies have explored university students' perceptions of literal reading practices in EFL classrooms. Therefore, this study explores EFL students' perceptions of literal reading practices in English classrooms at a Nigerian private university and examines their perceived benefits, challenges, and contributions to reading development. This study used a qualitative case study design involving 25 students from the English Education Department of a private university in Nigeria. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their experience in reading comprehension courses. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals. The findings revealed five major themes. First, students perceived literal reading as the foundation of reading comprehension because it helped them identify key information and understand texts more effectively. Second, literal reading supported vocabulary development by exposing learners to new words in meaningful contexts. Third, participants expressed generally positive attitudes toward literal reading activities due to their role in increasing confidence and facilitating comprehension. Fourth, students encountered challenges related to unfamiliar vocabulary, lengthy texts, and limited background knowledge. Finally, participants viewed literal reading as a bridge to inferential and critical reading skills. The study concludes that literal reading remains an essential component of EFL reading instruction and should be integrated with higher-order reading activities to support comprehensive reading development.

**Keywords:** EFL students, literal reading, reading comprehension, student perceptions, English classroom, qualitative case study, private university

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the most essential skills in English language learning because it provides learners with access to knowledge, information, and language input. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, reading serves as a primary source of exposure to English, especially in environments where opportunities for authentic language use are limited. Through reading activities, learners encounter new vocabulary, grammatical structures, discourse patterns, and cultural information that contribute to their overall language development. Consequently, reading comprehension has become a central component of English language education and is widely regarded as a critical factor influencing students' academic success.

In higher education, reading plays an even more significant role because university students are expected to engage with a variety of academic texts, including textbooks, journal articles, research reports, and other scholarly materials. These texts often contain complex language, specialized vocabulary, and sophisticated organizational structures that require advanced comprehension skills. As a result, students must develop the ability not only to decode written language but also to construct meaning, evaluate information, and integrate textual knowledge into their learning processes. According to Grabe and Stoller (2020), reading is a strategic and interactive process that requires readers to coordinate multiple cognitive and linguistic resources simultaneously. Therefore, effective reading instruction remains a major concern in EFL classrooms.

Reading comprehension is commonly described as the process through which readers construct meaning from written texts by combining textual information with prior knowledge and cognitive strategies. Successful comprehension involves identifying explicitly stated information, recognizing relationships among ideas, making inferences, evaluating arguments, and responding critically to textual content. Because reading comprehension encompasses different levels of understanding, researchers have proposed various frameworks to categorize comprehension processes and outcomes.

One of the most influential frameworks in reading education is Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension. Barrett classified reading comprehension into several levels, including literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, critical comprehension, and appreciative comprehension. Among these levels, literal comprehension is generally considered the foundation upon which more advanced forms of reading are built. Literal reading refers to the ability to recognize and understand information that is explicitly stated in a text, including facts, details,

sequences, and directly expressed ideas. Readers operating at the literal level focus on what the text says rather than what it implies or suggests (Rahma, 2020).

Although literal reading is often viewed as the most basic level of comprehension, its importance should not be underestimated. Students who fail to understand explicitly stated information are unlikely to perform successfully on inferential, evaluative, or critical reading tasks. In other words, higher-order comprehension depends largely on readers' ability to extract and process literal information accurately. Research examining reading comprehension through Barrett's Taxonomy has demonstrated that weaknesses in literal comprehension frequently influence students' performance at higher levels of reading (Rahma, 2020). Consequently, strengthening literal reading skills may contribute significantly to overall reading development.

Within EFL classrooms, literal reading activities are commonly employed to support students' comprehension of English texts. Such activities often involve identifying main ideas, locating specific information, answering factual questions, completing summaries, and recognizing supporting details. These tasks are particularly important for learners who are still developing linguistic competence because they encourage close engagement with textual content and help students establish foundational comprehension skills. Through repeated practice, learners gradually become more capable of understanding texts and engaging in more sophisticated reading processes.

The significance of literal reading is further supported by studies examining reading comprehension among EFL learners. Research has shown that many students encounter difficulties understanding texts due to limited vocabulary knowledge, unfamiliar grammatical structures, and insufficient background knowledge (Yusuf et al., 2017). These difficulties often affect students' ability to identify explicitly stated information, which subsequently influences their performance on more complex comprehension tasks. Similarly, studies investigating reading difficulties among Indonesian EFL learners have reported that vocabulary limitations and inadequate reading strategies frequently hinder students' comprehension of academic texts (Suhendar & Wahyuni, 2023).

Recent developments in reading research have also emphasized the importance of students' perceptions and experiences in shaping learning outcomes. Students' perceptions influence how they approach reading tasks, how motivated they are to engage with texts, and how effectively they apply reading strategies. Positive perceptions may encourage active participation and persistence, whereas negative perceptions may reduce engagement and limit opportunities for learning. Consequently, understanding students' perceptions of reading activities is essential for designing instructional practices that support both cognitive and affective aspects of reading development.

Several studies have investigated EFL students' perceptions of reading-related practices. For example, research conducted by Pratama and colleagues (2024) found that university students generally viewed reading comprehension activities as beneficial for improving language proficiency and academic performance. Similarly, studies exploring students' perceptions of extensive reading reported that learners often associated reading activities with vocabulary growth, increased reading fluency, and improved comprehension skills. However, students also identified various challenges, including unfamiliar vocabulary, lengthy texts, and difficulties maintaining concentration during reading activities.

Despite the growing body of literature on reading comprehension, relatively little attention has been given to students' perceptions of literal reading practices specifically. Existing studies have predominantly focused on reading achievement, strategy use, metacognitive awareness, or the effectiveness of instructional interventions. While these studies provide valuable insights into reading development, they offer limited understanding of how students experience literal reading activities in actual classroom settings. Since literal reading serves as the foundation for higher-level comprehension, exploring students' perceptions of these practices may provide important information regarding their role in language learning.

Furthermore, most previous studies have concentrated on secondary school students or general reading comprehension contexts. Comparatively fewer investigations have examined university students' perceptions of literal reading, particularly within private university settings. This gap is important because private universities often operate under different institutional conditions, including class sizes, curriculum implementation, learning resources, and student demographics. Such contextual differences may influence how students experience and perceive reading instruction.

Another limitation in the existing literature concerns the lack of qualitative investigations exploring students' lived experiences with literal reading activities. Quantitative studies have contributed significantly to understanding reading performance and achievement; however, they may not fully capture the meanings, interpretations, and experiences associated with reading practices. Qualitative approaches can provide richer insights into how students understand the value of literal reading, what challenges they encounter, and how these activities influence their learning experiences.

Understanding students' perceptions is particularly important because perceptions often shape learning behaviors. Students who perceive literal reading activities as meaningful and useful are more likely to participate actively and engage deeply with texts. Conversely, students who view such activities as repetitive or unhelpful may demonstrate lower levels of engagement. Therefore,

exploring students' perspectives can help educators design instructional approaches that are both pedagogically effective and responsive to learners' needs.

Based on the gaps identified in previous research, this study aims to explore EFL students' perceptions of literal reading practices in English classrooms at a private university. Specifically, the study seeks to understand how students perceive the role of literal reading in supporting comprehension, identify the benefits they associate with literal reading activities, examine the challenges they encounter during classroom implementation, and explore how literal reading contributes to their broader reading development. By focusing on students' experiences and perspectives, the study is expected to contribute to the growing literature on EFL reading comprehension and provide practical implications for English language teaching in higher education contexts.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore EFL students' perceptions of literal reading practices in English classrooms at a private university. A qualitative approach was selected because the study aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, opinions, and interpretations regarding literal reading activities rather than measuring relationships between variables statistically. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative research is appropriate when researchers seek to understand how individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences within specific contexts.

The case study design was adopted because it enables researchers to investigate a phenomenon within its real-life setting and provide detailed descriptions of participants' experiences (Yin, 2018). In the present study, the phenomenon under investigation was students' perceptions of literal reading practices in English classrooms. The case study approach allowed the researcher to examine how students experienced literal reading activities, the benefits they perceived, and the challenges they encountered in a particular educational context.

### **Research Setting**

The study was conducted at a private university in Indonesia offering an English Education Study Program. English is used as the primary medium of instruction in several language courses, including reading comprehension courses. Students are required to engage with various academic texts such as journal articles, textbooks, essays, and reading passages throughout their studies.

The selected university was considered an appropriate setting because reading courses constitute a significant component of the curriculum, and literal reading activities are frequently

implemented as part of classroom instruction. These activities include identifying main ideas, locating specific information, answering factual questions, and summarizing explicitly stated information in texts.

### **Participants of the Study**

The participants of this study consisted of 25 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Education Department at a private university. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they met the criteria relevant to the objectives of the study.

The participants were drawn from the third and fifth semesters because students at these levels had sufficient experience with academic reading activities and could provide meaningful reflections regarding their learning experiences. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 22 years old and represented diverse academic backgrounds and levels of English proficiency.

### **Research Instruments**

To obtain comprehensive data, three instruments were employed: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and reflective journals.

#### **a. Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument. This type of interview was selected because it allows participants to express their experiences freely while enabling researchers to explore specific topics relevant to the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions focusing on students' experiences with literal reading activities, perceived benefits, challenges, and overall opinions regarding their usefulness in English learning. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was conducted individually. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

#### **b. Classroom Observations**

Classroom observations were conducted to examine how literal reading activities were implemented during English lessons and how students responded to these activities. Observation enabled the researcher to compare students' reported perceptions with their actual classroom behavior. Field notes were recorded after each observation session and were used as supplementary data during analysis.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection was conducted over six weeks and involved three main stages.

The first stage involved classroom observations. The researcher observed several reading classes to gain an understanding of the instructional context and identify how literal reading activities were implemented. Observation notes were recorded systematically after each session.

The second stage involved collecting reflective journals. Students were instructed to submit weekly reflections describing their experiences with literal reading activities. These journals provided ongoing documentation of students' perceptions throughout the study period.

The third stage involved conducting semi-structured interviews. Interviews were scheduled after observations and journal collection so that the researcher could explore issues emerging from earlier data sources. The interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences and clarify observations made during classroom sessions.

Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and signed informed consent forms. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process.

## **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic procedure for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data.

## **Trustworthiness of the Study**

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. First, data triangulation was achieved through the use of multiple sources, including interviews, observations, and reflective journals. Second, member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review interview summaries and confirm the accuracy of interpretations. Third, peer debriefing was used to discuss coding procedures and thematic development with colleagues familiar with qualitative research. Finally, an audit trail was maintained throughout the study to document analytical decisions and enhance transparency. These procedures helped ensure the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the research findings.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

Analysis of the interview transcripts, classroom observation notes, and students' reflective journals revealed five major themes regarding EFL students' perceptions of literal reading practices

in English classrooms. These themes include: (1) literal reading as the foundation of reading comprehension, (2) literal reading as a means of vocabulary development, (3) positive perceptions of literal reading activities, (4) challenges encountered during literal reading tasks, and (5) literal reading as a bridge to inferential and critical reading. Collectively, these themes illustrate how students interpret the role of literal reading in their language learning experiences and how such practices contribute to their overall reading development.

### **Literal Reading as the Foundation of Reading Comprehension**

The first theme that emerged from the data was students' perception that literal reading serves as the foundation of reading comprehension. Most participants believed that understanding explicitly stated information was necessary before engaging in more complex reading processes. Students frequently described literal reading as the "first step" in understanding English texts.

One participant stated:

"When I read English texts, I need to understand the facts first. If I cannot understand the information directly written in the text, I cannot answer deeper questions."

Another participant explained:

"Literal reading helps me know what the text is talking about before I try to analyze it."

These perceptions suggest that students recognize the hierarchical nature of reading comprehension. They understand that comprehension begins with identifying explicit information before progressing toward interpretation and evaluation. Classroom observations further supported this finding. During reading activities, students often referred back to specific sentences and paragraphs when answering questions, indicating their reliance on literal understanding as a basis for comprehension.

This finding aligns with Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension, which positions literal comprehension as the foundational level of understanding. Previous studies investigating reading comprehension among EFL learners have similarly emphasized the importance of literal comprehension in supporting higher-order reading skills. Research on reading comprehension levels has shown that students who demonstrate strong literal comprehension tend to perform better on inferential and evaluative reading tasks because they possess a more accurate understanding of textual content.

The finding also supports Grabe and Stoller's perspective that reading comprehension develops progressively through multiple levels of processing. Before readers can make inferences or critically evaluate texts, they must first construct accurate representations of explicitly stated

information. Therefore, students' positive perceptions of literal reading reflect an awareness of its importance in the broader reading process.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that literal reading activities should not be viewed merely as basic exercises but as essential components of reading instruction. Teachers who provide opportunities for students to identify key information, recognize main ideas, and understand factual content may help establish stronger foundations for advanced comprehension skills.

### **Literal Reading Supports Vocabulary Development**

The second theme concerned the role of literal reading in vocabulary learning. Participants frequently reported that literal reading activities exposed them to new words and expressions, thereby contributing to vocabulary development.

One participant commented:

“When I answer literal questions, I often need to find the meaning of unfamiliar words. It helps me learn new vocabulary.”

Another participant noted:

“Reading passages in class gives me many new words that I can use in other courses.”

Reflective journals revealed similar perceptions. Many students described literal reading activities as opportunities to encounter and practice unfamiliar vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Students reported that repeated exposure to words across different reading passages improved their understanding and retention of vocabulary.

Vocabulary development emerged as an important benefit because lexical knowledge plays a central role in reading comprehension. Students who possess larger vocabularies are generally better able to understand texts, identify main ideas, and interpret meanings. Conversely, limited vocabulary often creates barriers to comprehension and reduces reading confidence.

The findings are consistent with previous research indicating that reading serves as a major source of vocabulary acquisition. Studies on EFL reading have demonstrated that learners acquire vocabulary more effectively when words are encountered repeatedly in authentic contexts rather than through isolated memorization. Through literal reading activities, students engage directly with textual content and develop vocabulary knowledge while focusing on comprehension.

Interestingly, participants emphasized that vocabulary learning occurred naturally during reading activities. Rather than perceiving vocabulary study as a separate task, students viewed it as an integral component of understanding texts. This perception highlights the potential value of

integrating vocabulary development into reading instruction rather than treating it as an isolated aspect of language learning.

### **Positive Perceptions of Literal Reading Activities**

The third theme reflected students' generally positive attitudes toward literal reading practices. Most participants described literal reading activities as useful, manageable, and supportive of their learning. Students appreciated the clarity of literal reading tasks because such activities focused on information explicitly available within texts.

One participant explained:

“Literal reading questions are easier than other reading questions because the answers are in the text. They help me feel more confident.”

Another participant stated:

“I like literal reading because it helps me understand the text step by step.”

These perceptions indicate that literal reading activities may contribute to learners' confidence and motivation. Students often experience anxiety when confronted with complex reading tasks requiring interpretation or critical evaluation. Literal reading activities, however, provide opportunities for successful comprehension experiences because students can locate information directly within texts.

Classroom observations further demonstrated that students participated actively during literal reading tasks. Many students engaged enthusiastically in identifying information, discussing answers, and collaborating with classmates. Such engagement suggests that literal reading activities may foster positive classroom experiences and encourage participation among learners with varying proficiency levels.

The findings support previous studies reporting positive student perceptions of reading comprehension activities. Research has shown that students often appreciate reading tasks that provide clear objectives and achievable outcomes. Because literal reading tasks focus on explicit information, learners may perceive them as less intimidating than inferential or critical reading activities.

However, the findings also suggest that students do not view literal reading as sufficient on its own. While participants appreciated the accessibility of literal reading tasks, they also recognized the importance of progressing toward more advanced comprehension levels. This observation indicates that students perceive literal reading as one component of a broader reading development process rather than as an end in itself.

## **Challenges Encountered During Literal Reading Tasks**

Despite generally positive perceptions, participants identified several challenges associated with literal reading activities. The most frequently reported difficulties involved unfamiliar vocabulary, lengthy texts, complex sentence structures, and limited background knowledge.

One participant explained:

“Sometimes I understand the questions, but I do not understand the words in the text.”

Another participant stated:

“Long passages make it difficult to find important information because there is too much content.”

Reflective journals revealed that vocabulary difficulties were particularly common. Students often reported spending considerable time looking up unfamiliar words before they could answer literal comprehension questions. This finding suggests that even basic comprehension tasks may become challenging when learners encounter substantial linguistic barriers.

The challenges identified by participants are consistent with previous research on EFL reading comprehension. Studies investigating reading difficulties among university students have frequently highlighted vocabulary limitations as a major obstacle to understanding texts. Similarly, research has shown that unfamiliar content and complex language structures may interfere with students’ ability to identify explicitly stated information.

Another interesting finding concerns students’ dependence on dictionaries and translation tools. Several participants reported translating large portions of texts into their first language before attempting comprehension tasks. While translation may support understanding in some situations, excessive reliance on translation can slow reading processes and reduce opportunities for direct engagement with English texts.

These findings suggest that instructors should provide appropriate support when implementing literal reading activities. Pre-reading vocabulary instruction, background knowledge activation, and scaffolded reading tasks may help reduce comprehension difficulties and improve students’ reading experiences.

## **Literal Reading as a Bridge to Inferential and Critical Reading**

The final theme highlighted students’ perceptions of literal reading as a stepping stone toward more advanced reading skills. Participants generally believed that understanding explicit information enabled them to make inferences, evaluate ideas, and interpret meanings more effectively.

One participant stated:

“If I do not understand the facts first, I cannot answer inferential questions.”

Another participant explained:

“Literal reading gives me the information I need before I can think critically about the text.”

These perceptions suggest that students view reading comprehension as a developmental process involving multiple levels of understanding. Rather than seeing literal and inferential reading as separate skills, participants perceived them as interconnected components of comprehension.

Classroom observations provided additional evidence supporting this theme. Students who demonstrated stronger literal comprehension often participated more confidently in discussions involving interpretation and evaluation. Conversely, students who struggled with basic comprehension frequently experienced difficulties during higher-order reading activities.

The findings align with theoretical perspectives suggesting that comprehension develops progressively from lower-order to higher-order processes. Literal comprehension provides the informational foundation necessary for inferential and critical thinking. Without accurate understanding of explicit content, readers may struggle to construct valid interpretations or evaluate arguments effectively.

The findings also support educational frameworks emphasizing the importance of balanced reading instruction. While higher-order thinking skills are essential educational goals, students must first develop strong foundational comprehension skills. Therefore, literal reading should be viewed not as a simplistic form of reading but as an essential stage in comprehensive reading development.

Overall, the findings indicate that students perceive literal reading as an important, beneficial, and necessary component of English language learning. Although challenges remain, participants generally recognized the value of literal reading in supporting comprehension, vocabulary development, and broader reading skills. These perceptions highlight the continued relevance of literal reading practices within EFL classrooms and suggest that such activities play a significant role in students’ academic reading development.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study provide important insights into how EFL students perceive literal reading practices in English classrooms at a private university. Overall, participants viewed literal reading as an essential component of reading instruction that supports comprehension, vocabulary development, and academic reading performance. Although students acknowledged several challenges associated with literal reading tasks, they generally perceived these activities as beneficial and necessary for their language learning development. The discussion below interprets these

findings in relation to existing theories and previous research on reading comprehension and EFL learning.

One of the most significant findings of this study is students' perception that literal reading serves as the foundation of reading comprehension. Participants consistently emphasized that understanding explicitly stated information is necessary before engaging in more advanced forms of comprehension such as inference, interpretation, and critical evaluation. This finding supports Barrett's Taxonomy, which positions literal comprehension as the first and most fundamental level of reading understanding. According to Barrett's framework, readers must first identify factual information and explicit meanings before progressing to higher-order comprehension processes.

The participants' views also align with cognitive models of reading comprehension. Reading is not a single process but rather a hierarchy of interconnected cognitive activities. Readers initially process words, phrases, and sentences to construct literal meaning before integrating information across the text and making inferences. Grabe and Stoller (2020) argue that successful reading depends on readers' ability to build accurate representations of textual information. Therefore, difficulties at the literal level may create obstacles for more complex comprehension processes.

The findings further suggest that students possess an awareness of the relationship between literal comprehension and academic success. Many participants believed that literal reading helped them understand course materials more effectively and enabled them to participate in classroom discussions with greater confidence. This perception is particularly important in EFL contexts where reading often serves as the primary source of language input. Students who can identify key information efficiently are likely to engage more successfully with academic texts and learning tasks.

Another important finding concerns the role of literal reading in vocabulary development. Participants consistently reported that literal reading activities exposed them to new vocabulary and improved their lexical knowledge. This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the close relationship between reading and vocabulary acquisition. Extensive exposure to written texts provides opportunities for learners to encounter words repeatedly in meaningful contexts, facilitating vocabulary growth and retention.

The participants' experiences suggest that vocabulary learning occurs naturally during reading activities. Rather than memorizing isolated word lists, students acquired vocabulary while attempting to understand texts and answer comprehension questions. This observation supports theories of incidental vocabulary learning, which propose that learners can acquire new lexical items through repeated exposure during meaningful language use. Reading therefore serves both as a comprehension activity and as a source of language development.

The findings also indicate that vocabulary knowledge influences students' perceptions of reading difficulty. Participants frequently reported that unfamiliar vocabulary represented the most significant challenge during literal reading tasks. This observation is consistent with research demonstrating that vocabulary knowledge is one of the strongest predictors of reading comprehension performance. Students who possess larger vocabularies are generally better equipped to process texts efficiently and construct accurate meanings. Conversely, limited vocabulary may hinder comprehension even when information is explicitly stated.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings emphasize the importance of integrating vocabulary instruction into reading classrooms. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to encounter vocabulary in authentic contexts while also supporting comprehension through pre-reading activities and lexical scaffolding. Such approaches may help students overcome vocabulary-related barriers and enhance both reading comprehension and language development.

A further significant finding concerns students' generally positive perceptions of literal reading activities. Most participants viewed these activities as useful, manageable, and beneficial for learning. Students appreciated the clarity of literal reading tasks because answers could typically be found directly within the text. This characteristic appeared to reduce anxiety and increase learners' confidence when engaging with English reading materials.

The positive perceptions reported by participants may be explained through theories of self-efficacy and motivation. Learners are more likely to engage actively in tasks when they believe they can perform successfully. Literal reading activities often provide achievable challenges because students can locate information directly within texts. Successful completion of these tasks may strengthen students' confidence and encourage continued engagement with reading activities.

The findings also highlight the importance of instructional design in shaping students' learning experiences. When reading tasks are perceived as accessible and meaningful, students may develop more positive attitudes toward reading. Such attitudes are particularly valuable in EFL contexts where reading can sometimes be viewed as difficult or intimidating. By creating opportunities for successful comprehension experiences, literal reading activities may contribute to the development of positive reading habits and increased motivation.

Despite these benefits, the study also identified several challenges associated with literal reading practices. Participants reported difficulties related to unfamiliar vocabulary, lengthy texts, complex sentence structures, and limited background knowledge. These findings suggest that literal reading is not necessarily a simple process, particularly for learners operating in a foreign language environment.

The challenges identified by students can be understood through Schema Theory, which emphasizes the role of prior knowledge in comprehension. According to schema-based perspectives, readers construct meaning by integrating textual information with existing knowledge structures. When students encounter unfamiliar topics or concepts, comprehension may become more difficult even if information is explicitly stated. Thus, literal comprehension depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on readers' familiarity with textual content.

The findings further indicate that linguistic complexity can interfere with comprehension processes. Long sentences, unfamiliar grammatical structures, and dense vocabulary often made it difficult for students to identify key information. These observations support previous studies reporting that linguistic barriers significantly influence reading performance among EFL learners. Consequently, teachers should consider text difficulty carefully when designing reading activities and provide appropriate support to facilitate comprehension.

An especially important finding emerging from the study is students' perception of literal reading as a bridge to inferential and critical reading. Participants consistently emphasized that understanding explicit information enabled them to interpret meanings, make inferences, and evaluate ideas more effectively. This finding reinforces the hierarchical nature of reading comprehension proposed by Barrett and other reading scholars.

The relationship between literal and higher-order comprehension has important implications for reading instruction. Contemporary educational discourse often emphasizes critical thinking and higher-order cognitive skills. While these goals are undoubtedly important, the findings of this study suggest that such skills cannot develop effectively without strong foundational comprehension abilities. Students who struggle to identify factual information may find it difficult to engage in interpretation or evaluation.

The findings therefore support balanced approaches to reading instruction that address multiple levels of comprehension. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to develop literal comprehension while gradually introducing inferential and critical reading tasks. Such progression may help learners build confidence and develop increasingly sophisticated reading abilities.

Another notable contribution of the study concerns the context in which the research was conducted. Most previous studies examining reading comprehension have focused on secondary school students or general educational settings. By exploring students' perceptions within a private university context, the present study contributes to a growing body of literature addressing higher education EFL environments. The findings suggest that university students continue to value

foundational reading skills despite increasing academic demands and expectations for critical thinking.

The results also highlight the importance of considering students' perspectives when evaluating instructional practices. Educational research often focuses on achievement outcomes, test scores, or intervention effectiveness. While such measures are valuable, they may not fully capture learners' experiences and perceptions. Understanding how students interpret reading activities provides additional insights that can inform teaching practices and curriculum design.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest several implications for EFL instruction. Teachers should continue incorporating literal reading activities as part of comprehensive reading programs while ensuring that tasks remain engaging and appropriately challenging. Vocabulary support, background knowledge activation, and scaffolded instruction may help reduce comprehension difficulties and improve students' experiences. Furthermore, reading instruction should emphasize the connections between literal, inferential, and critical comprehension to help students understand the broader purposes of reading activities.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that EFL students perceive literal reading as an essential and beneficial component of English language learning. Although challenges remain, students generally recognize the value of literal reading in supporting comprehension, vocabulary growth, and academic success. The results therefore reaffirm the importance of literal reading practices within EFL classrooms and suggest that such activities continue to play a vital role in the development of effective reading skills.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored EFL students' perceptions of literal reading practices in English classrooms at a private university. The findings revealed that students generally perceived literal reading as an essential foundation for reading comprehension. Participants believed that understanding explicitly stated information helped them comprehend texts more effectively and prepared them for higher-level reading processes such as inference, interpretation, and critical evaluation. In addition, students reported that literal reading activities supported vocabulary development and increased their confidence when engaging with English texts. These findings indicate that literal reading continues to play a significant role in EFL learning despite the growing emphasis on higher-order thinking skills in contemporary education.

The study also identified several challenges experienced by students during literal reading activities. Unfamiliar vocabulary, lengthy texts, complex sentence structures, and limited background knowledge were frequently reported as obstacles to comprehension. These challenges

suggest that successful literal reading requires not only the ability to identify explicit information but also adequate linguistic knowledge and cognitive support. Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that students perceived literal reading as closely connected to inferential and critical reading. Rather than viewing these comprehension levels as separate skills, participants regarded literal reading as a necessary stepping stone toward deeper understanding and more sophisticated forms of text engagement.

Overall, the findings highlight the continuing relevance of literal reading practices in EFL classrooms. The study suggests that teachers should maintain a balanced approach to reading instruction by strengthening students' literal comprehension while gradually developing inferential and critical reading abilities. Providing vocabulary support, activating background knowledge, and using scaffolded reading activities may further enhance students' reading experiences and comprehension outcomes. Although the study was limited to a single private university and a relatively small number of participants, it contributes to the growing body of literature on EFL reading by providing insights into students' experiences and perceptions of literal reading practices.

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## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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## Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and participant confidentiality. However, the data may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with appropriate permission.

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