ACADEMIC READING DIFFICULTIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Article Info	Abstract
	Academic reading is one of the challenges commonly faced by university students especially EFL learners. This study aims to identify academic reading difficulties in higher education focusing on Indonesian university students. It used mixed-method by collecting quantitative data from close-ended questionnaires and qualitative data from one open-ended question. In this study, 60 students were asked to rate the reading aspects listed in the questionnaires based on their level of difficulty and provide commentaries and possible additional aspect. The statistic results showed that overall students considered academic reading easy (M=2.445, SD=0.568). Reading carefully to understand the text was found as the aspect with the least difficulty (M=2.16, SD= 0.963) and working out the meaning of difficult words was identified as the most difficult one (M=2.75, SD=1.235). The qualitative finding supports these statistics whereas 43% students having problems translating and understanding difficult and formal words.

INTRODUCTION

The success of learning in higher education solely lies on the skill of reading and writing. One would not be able to produce a good quality piece of writing without researching through numerous of reading materials. University reading poses a greater challenge to students because they read for academic purposes. Students often perceived academic reading activity as a stressful and time-consuming task. Reading academic text is very different from reading for pleasure where people can spend long time on a book without feeling bored. It requires complex skill which involves engagement of reader's contextual knowledge and printed language. In order to efficiently convey the meaning from a text, students must be able to use various reading strategies. Unlike other types of reading, academic reading requires deeper and critical analytical skill to engage with various kinds of text (Sohail, 2015). Academic reading poses greater challenge as it requires learners to perform multiple skills such as questioning, interpreting, synthesizing, and reflecting from the text (Sengupta, 2002). Reading is an essential tool in learning process, it takes active engagement so learners are able to get the benefits from reading (Martiarini, 2018).

Academic reading texts are challenging as they are longer than general reading, the paragraph are more dense, and contain complex sentences and difficult vocabularies. In order to read effectively, students must bring their prior knowledge and adequate vocabularies in the process of reading (Westwood, 2008). The nature of university reading is very different compared to high school reading. Hirano (2015) reported that students felt greater challenge when reading academic text in English. English reading tasks are common in higher education. Students are often assigned to read various English reading sources such as textbooks and journal articles. Low motivation and interest when reading texts in English influence students'

success in English learning (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006). Students usually refuse to engage in further reading comprehension tasks unless teachers assign them. In addition, students who failed to bring their prior knowledge related to the given text are more likely to disengage with the reading task (Neuman, Kaefar, & Pinkam, 2014; Zuhra, 2015).

Several research have underlined difficulties of students in reading academic texts (Shen, 2013; Sultana, 2016). Students reported the difficulties in understanding vocabularies and mentioned the need of lecturer's assistance in vocabularies and difficult terminologies (Shen, 2013). In Sultana (2016), students mentioned the same frustration in terms of vocabularies comprehension. Another difficulty is also found when students have to read long academic reading text. Phakiti and Li (2011) found that students' encountered problems synthesizing information and producing academic pieces of writing. These difficulties are influenced by factors such as linguistics proficiency, motivation, self-regulation, academic background, self-efficacy and students' academic life adjustment. Although English is an obligatory subject in Indonesian curriculum, learners' have limited exposure to English reading materials (Napitupulu, 2018). Teachers only used a single exercise book and one supplementary textbook to teach all four skills of English. Clearly, this phenomenon pointed out the need for more reading texts exposure for students in classroom. Students gradually lose motivation during reading activities in classroom.

The purpose of reading activities is to ensure comprehension and engagement with the text. It is important that students can keep their reading experience as a fruitful information and knowledge for future use. Therefore, lots of research suggested that using authentic materials to support reading comprehension is more interesting and stimulating (Berardo, 2006; Gilmore, 2007; Martinez, 2002). However, materials only are not enough, teachers' efforts are greatly needed to support learning reading atmosphere. Berardo (2006) suggested the significance of preparing students before entering into the core reading activities by assisting them through pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activites. Teachers must creatively design reading activities to ensure students get valuable experience and information after each session.

Often, students lack in reading skills from high scholl will find even more difficulties when entering college. These difficulties in reading comprehension eventually can influence students' academic success. Therefore, this study will investigate students' academic reading difficulties in university level. This research aims to contribute to the literature on the field of EFL reading for teachers and lecturers to explore more effective reading strategies in their EFL classrooms.

RESEARCH METHOD
Research Design
The core focus on this research is to identify language difficulties in reading academic texts. This research used mixed method to gain a rich analysis on the addressed issues. Data are analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approach for understanding on students' difficulties during academic reading tasks in higher education. The acquired qualitative information of qualitative from open-ended question was described descriptively support the quantitative data and find relevant argumentation.

Participating in the survey questionnaire were sixty-three students consisting of 80,3% female and 19,7% male, varied from year 1 to year 4 of study. Participants were asked to complete close-ended questionnaire items and answer one open-ended question about difficulties in academic reading. This research used survey questionnaire to gather data from students of English study program. The questionnaire consists of ten close-ended questions and one open-ended question. Questionnaire items were adapted from Alghail and Mahfoodh (2016) with little addition and revision in a five-point Likert scale ranging from very easy to

very difficult. Open-ended questions are used to investigate students' opinion on their experience of academic reading difficulties.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires' responses were analyzed by using SPSS to obtain the statistic scores. Students' commentaries from open-ended questions were coded based on keywords to categorize any emerging issues from students' difficulties in academic reading. An inductive data analysis is applied to analyze qualitative data which involved coding raw materials and capturing relevant points of characteristics from the content (Patton, 1990).

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Research Findings

Students were asked to identify their personal difficulties in academic reading by looking into all ten questionnaire's items. Questionnaire results are described as follows;

Table 1
Students' Academic Reading Difficulties Score

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Score	67	12	40	24.45	5.628
Mean	67	1.2	4.0	2.445	.568

Table 2
Students' Difficulties in Academic Reading

Question	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Identifying main ideas	67	1	5	2.18	.833
Identifying supporting ideas/examples	66	1	5	2.39	1.135
Reading quickly to get the overall interpretation of the text	67	1	5	2.70	1.128
Reading carefully to understand a text	67	1	5	2.16	.963
Understanding organisation of a text	67	1	5	2.69	1.144
Taking a brief relevant note	66	1	4	2.41	1.052
Using own words in note taking	66	1	5	2.26	1.057
Working out the meaning of difficult words	67	1	5	2.75	1.235
Drawing a conclusion from reading a text	67	1	5	2.39	1.072
Maintaining focus and concentration while reading	67	1	5	2.66	1.149

Data analysis revealed that all questionnaire's items of students' academic reading difficulties are considered easy. Students in overall find academic reading easy (M=2.445, SD=0.568). Questions with the lowest mean score are Q1; identifying main ideas (M=2.18, SD=0.833) and Q4; reading carefully to understand the text (M=2.16, SD= 0.963) which indicated that students find the least difficulties in those aspects of academic reading. In contrast to reading carefully to understand the text, item Q3 of the questionnaire results showed that students find it fairly difficult to read a text quickly to get the overall interpretation of the text (M=2.70, SD=1.128). The highest mean score is shown on item Q8; working out the meaning of difficult words (M=2.75, SD=1.235).

In the questionnaire, students were asked to provide comments on the aspects of difficulties in academic reading. The most problematic aspect in academic reading from students' commentaries are in line with the questionnaire result. 43% students mentioned having problems translating and understanding difficult and formal words. 17% students mentioned the lack of reading skills as one of the problems they face during reading academic text. Language style was identified as the next factor of difficulties in reading by 13% of students. The use of academic language and complexity of sentences are identified as the challenging language style in university reading texts. Students' comments are categorized as follows;

Table 3
Aspects of Difficulties in Academic Reading

No.	Aspects of Difficulties	Frequency	Percentage
1	Difficult words, e.g. novelty, formality	26	43%
2	Language style, e.g. academic language, complexity of sentences	8	13%
3	Ideas, e.g. main ideas, supporting ideas, abstract	8	13%
4	Length, i.e. too lengthy	4	7%
5	Lack of reading skill	10	17%
6	Difficult topics	2	3%
7	No difficulty	2	3%

DISCUSSION

Phakiti & Li (2011) found similar result when students are asked to identify academic reading difficulty. Recognizing the meaning of academic vocabularies was often mentioned as the most problematic aspect in reading. Similar finding was identified in Hirano (2015) where students pointed out difficult vocabularies as the main culprit whenever they are faced with complex reading texts. She further elaborated from her findings that the lack of background knowledge also became another main issue in academic reading. It is inevitable that vocabulary mastery contributes largely to students' reading comprehension. Sutarsyah (2008) mentioned that the majority of academic reading texts contained low frequency content words. Students who have low reading habit would find problems reading these types of text. It is common for EFL learners to encounter difficult vocabularies especially when the reading texts are in topics they are unfamiliar with. Lack of background knowledge in the related field or topic could cause students losing engagement with the text during reading (Zuhra, 2015). Students' insufficient prior knowledge of the given text among students causes the inability to draw inferences from the passage.

Reading quickly to get text's overall interpretation is the second most problematic reading skill (M=2.70). Reading quickly to get the gist of information from the text is also known as skim reading. Skimming is a reading technique that aims to get a glimpse of what the text is

about or to find the main idea by reading quickly before readers decide to read the text in a more detailed way (Brown, 2003). Skimming allows readers to be able to predict the purpose of the text, the main idea, and the message. Readers do not have to read everything but only go through the text quickly, skipping over unnecessary parts and getting the passage's general idea. However, readers who have not enough experience of reading practice might find this strategy difficult especially in college. Skimming techniques offers great benefits to support reading comprehension. Hutabarat (2012) compared two groups of students learning reading with separate technique found that the group of students who are taught intensively with skimming technique acquire better reading comprehension and able to get the main ideas from paragraphs easily. Skimming is a great technique for college students who have plenty of reading materials in short time.

In line with the result from Satriani (2018), students admitted that their lack of reading skill resulting in poor reading comprehension. Low skill of reading ability is associated with many crucial aspects in reading. Through the questionnaire, it is discovered that students faced many aspects of difficulties in reading comprehension such as grammar complexity, academic terms, difficult vocabularies, lengthy sentences, and difficult topics. As mentioned in Hirano (2015), academic reading burden is different from high school reading. Most high school reading activities are carried out in classroom where students have plenty of opportunities to discuss with peers and teachers. Meanwhile in college, students must have high awareness of individual reading practice at home and before class especially. These difficulties could hinder students to derive information from their reading texts. In order to achieve academic success, Phakiti & Li (2011) mentioned that students must be aware of their own individual aspects that affect reading comprehension. High level of motivation combined with self-efficacy are suggested as factors which can lead students to success. Class size also contributes to students' motivation. Academic reading activity must be treated more as a tutorial activity rather than lecturing subject. Smaller size of class can result in higher attention and focus while bigger class with larger number of students might result in lacking of attention (Miller & Merdian, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This research underlined several difficulties of academic reading by Indonesian college students. Although students mentioned many aspects of academic reading difficulties such as complex grammar and vocabularies, passage structures, formality, difficult topics, and concentration problems, the questionnaire results showed that students consider academic reading fairly easy. Therefore, it is impossible to establish any generalization considering the small scope of the research. More detailed analysis and broader scope of research is needed to carry out in the future. Implications of the present research lies in the effort of higher education practitioners to support students' needs in facilitating students' comprehension during academic reading activities. Coming to college from different educational background, higher education institutions must consider giving students the opportunities to join in a matriculation class to prepare students for the academic atmosphere at the university level. Academic reading and writing norms and strategies must be introduced at the beginning of their study. Smaller groups tutorial classes are also necessary to be done after class or in a separate schedule between reading classes. Modules must be presented in a structured form which can gradually build students motivation and confidence in academic reading starting from simple to more complex reading material. Though these stages are implemented in primary and high school level, it seems to be absent in higher education (Miller & Merdian, 2020). Higher education institution needs to ensure staged development of students' reading skill by carefully planning reading modules. Lastly, lecturers need to encourage higher reading habits to their students.

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