

Literal Reading Difficulties among freshmen Indonesian EFL Students: A Survey-Based Investigation

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Abstract

Literal reading, which involves understanding information explicitly stated in a text, is a foundational component of reading comprehension and is essential for higher-level reading skills. Despite its importance, limited research has examined students' challenges at this basic level of comprehension in the Indonesian EFL context. This research employed quantitative descriptive. The participants were 68 first-year university students enrolled in an English course at a university in Indonesia. Data were collected using a self-developed questionnaire consisting of eight Likert-scale. The findings reveal that many students experience persistent difficulties in literal reading comprehension. High proportions of neutral responses across items indicate uncertainty and inconsistent confidence in processing explicitly stated information in English texts. Difficulties were particularly evident in sentence-level comprehension, identifying textual relationships, and verifying information based on clear textual evidence. Although understanding basic WH-information appeared less problematic, students' overall literal reading skills remained unstable. The conclusion is that literal reading skills cannot be assumed to be fully developed among university-level EFL learners. Explicit instruction, targeted vocabulary support, and structured reading activities are recommended to strengthen students' foundational reading comprehension.

Keywords: *EFL students, Indonesian students, literal reading, survey*

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is a central skill in language learning, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In higher education, students are frequently required to engage with English texts to acquire content knowledge and support independent learning. Effective reading comprehension enables learners to extract meaning from texts, connect ideas, and integrate new information with existing knowledge. Without such competence, students may struggle academically; this challenge is especially salient in EFL contexts where learners have limited opportunities for meaningful exposure to English outside the classroom. Some research in Indonesian EFL settings has reported that learners often face considerable difficulties in reading comprehension, such as understanding vocabulary, interpreting sentence structures, and organizing ideas from texts (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023).

Among the multiple dimensions of reading comprehension, literal

reading comprehension often represents the most fundamental level or reading practice. Literal reading comprehension simply can be defined as to the reader's ability to understand information that is explicitly stated in a text. All the information mentioned including main ideas, supporting details, sequences of events, and clearly stated facts (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). In the theoretical frameworks from as Barrett's Taxonomy, the concept of literal comprehension is positioned as the foundational tier upon which interpretative, critical, and evaluative reading skills are built. Here, students must first locate and understand explicit information before they can effectively engage in higher-order comprehension processes such as making inferences or evaluating text merit. Evidence from EFL reading research suggests that learners typically perform better on literal comprehension tasks than on inferential ones, but literal comprehension remains a significant area of difficulty for many (Amiri et al., 2012).

Despite its foundational standing, the literal reading continues to have challenges for EFL learners. Several sources are mentioned, for instance limited vocabulary knowledge, less grammatical structures mastery, and unfamiliarity with text organization patterns in English. Take an example, the EFL students frequently struggle to identify explicitly stated details and referential links within passages, which impedes their ability to respond correctly to surface-level comprehension questions (Qarqez & Rashid, 2017). Furthermore, Indonesian EFL students often report difficulties in extracting literal information due to limited exposure to extended English texts and a reliance on translation strategies rather than direct comprehension. Based on the researchers' observation, the research conducted in Indonesian university contexts has identified similar patterns of comprehension challenges, linking lower reading scores to weaknesses in understanding basic textual information (Nurhayati, Julyan, & Williyani, 2023).

It is reported that the Indonesian EFL context presents particular conditions that may exacerbate literal reading difficulties. Many students enter university with a range of proficiency levels, shaped by their prior educational experiences. Although English is taught throughout primary and secondary schooling, the focus often remains on discrete language knowledge for example vocabulary lists and grammar rules rather than on sustained engagement with authentic English texts. Consequently, many of them encounter a sudden increase in reading demands when they begin university, where course materials, academic articles, and text-based assignments require learners to process extended information in English independently. As a result, students may find it difficult to keep pace with academic reading tasks despite having spent years studying English as a subject.

The literature and existing studies on reading comprehension in EFL settings often examine general comprehension difficulties or focus on higher-order processes such as inference, evaluation, and strategic reading behavior. From the researcher' investigation, research has explored broad comprehension issues among Indonesian EFL learners, identifying vocabulary limitations and text complexity as major barriers to understanding English texts (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023;). Similarly, studies conducted in other EFL contexts have investigated overall comprehension problems without isolating the literal level as a distinct focus. While these

studies provide valuable insights into reading challenges, there remains a gap in empirical research that specifically documents the types of literal reading difficulties experienced by learners from the learners' own perspectives, particularly using survey methods. Research that foregrounds students' self-reported experiences with literal comprehension can illuminate specific patterns of difficulty that may not be captured through performance tests alone.

The researchers believe that addressing this gap is important because literal comprehension not only supports more complex reading tasks but also reflects learners' basic processing of text information. Hence, the present study investigates the types of literal reading difficulties experienced by Indonesian EFL freshmen university students when engaging with English texts through a survey-based approach. By analyzing students' self-reported challenges, the study seeks to provide empirical evidence that can support both pedagogical practice and future research in EFL reading instruction.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative survey research design to investigate the types of literal reading difficulties experienced by Indonesian EFL students. A survey-based approach was considered suitable for this study because it enables the researcher to identify patterns of students' perceived difficulties in understanding information that is explicitly stated in English texts, which aligns with the focus on literal reading comprehension (Dörnyei, 2007).

The participants of this study were 68 Indonesian first-year (freshmen) university students enrolled in an English course at a university in Indonesia. The participants were selected using convenience sampling, where participants are chosen based on accessibility and willingness to participate (Creswell, 2014).

The instrument used in this study was a self-developed questionnaire designed to examine students' difficulties in literal reading of English texts. The questionnaire consisted of eight items representing key aspects of literal reading comprehension. The aspects are commonly associated with literal comprehension in reading theory (Barrett, 1976; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). All questionnaire items were measured using a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932; Dörnyei, 2007). All the instrument items was reviewed by two experts in the field of English language teaching and reading comprehension (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

The questionnaire was administered in online format. Prior to data collection, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain confidential. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics are appropriate for summarizing and interpreting survey data related to learners' perceptions and experiences (Dörnyei, 2007). Items with higher mean scores were interpreted as indicating greater levels of difficulty in literal reading comprehension.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

The findings here are presented by describing the results of each questionnaire item to highlight the types of literal reading difficulties commonly experienced by the participants.

Table 1. Students' difficulty in understanding the literal meaning of simple sentences in English texts

Percentage	
3.1%	Strongly Agree
20.3%	Agree
54.7%	Neutral
23.4%	Disagree

As shown by the data on item 1, there are 3.1% of the participants strongly agreed and 20.3% agreed that they experienced difficulty in understanding simple, explicitly stated sentences. In contrast, 23.4% of the students disagreed with the statement, suggesting that they did not perceive this aspect as particularly problematic. Notably, the majority of participants (54.7%) selected the neutral option.

This finding suggests that while a proportion of Indonesian EFL freshmen students experience difficulty in understanding the literal meaning of simple sentences in English texts, many students are uncertain about their level of difficulty or experience inconsistent comprehension. The high percentage of neutral responses may indicate varying levels of confidence or fluctuating comprehension when processing simple, explicitly stated information in English texts.

Table 2. Students' ability to answer literal questions

Percentage	
1.6%	Strongly Agree
24.6%	Agree
45.9%	Neutral
29.5%	Disagree

The data on item 2 show that 1.6% of the participants strongly agreed and 24.6% agreed that they experienced difficulty in answering such questions. Meanwhile, 29.5% of the students disagreed with the statement, indicating that they were able to locate and use explicitly stated information in a single sentence without major difficulty. Similar to the previous item, a substantial proportion of respondents (45.9%) selected the neutral option.

These results suggest that although a notable number of Indonesian EFL freshmen students encounter challenges in answering literal questions

even when the information is clearly stated in one sentence, many students remain uncertain about their comprehension ability. The large neutral response may reflect inconsistent reading strategies or limited confidence when dealing with literal comprehension tasks in English texts.

Table 3. Students experienced difficulties in identifying information clearly stated sequences of events in English texts

Percentage	
6.6%	Strongly Agree
34.4%	Agree
49.9%	Neutral
14.8%	Disagree

It is reported from item 3 that 6.6% of the respondents strongly agreed and 34.4% agreed that they faced such difficulties. In contrast, only 14.8% of the students disagreed with the statement, suggesting that a relatively small number of participants were confident in their ability to recognize explicitly presented event sequences.

Notably, 45.9% of the respondents selected the neutral option, indicating uncertainty or inconsistency in their ability to process sequential information in English reading texts. This pattern suggests that even when the sequence of events is explicitly stated, many Indonesian EFL freshmen students still struggle to organize information chronologically, which is a key component of literal reading comprehension.

Table 4. Students' ability to understand explicitly stated cause–effect relationships

Percentage	
1.6%	Strongly Agree
24.6%	Agree
57.4%	Neutral
18.0%	Disagree

The data show from item 4 that only 1.6% of the participants strongly agreed and 24.6% agreed that they could understand such relationships with ease. In contrast, 18.0% of the respondents disagreed, suggesting that a noticeable proportion of students experienced difficulty even when causal relationships were directly presented.

A substantial majority of the participants (57.4%) selected the neutral response. This high percentage of neutral responses suggests uncertainty or partial understanding, indicating that many students were not fully confident in identifying explicit cause–effect relationships in English reading texts. Overall, these results imply that recognizing literal cause–effect information remains a challenge for many Indonesian EFL freshmen, despite the information being clearly stated in the text.

Table 5. Students experienced difficulties in identifying explicit definitions or explanations in English texts

Percentage	
1.6%	Strongly Agree
39.3%	Agree
39.3%	Neutral
16.4%	Disagree

The results from item 5 indicate that 1.6% of the students strongly agreed and 39.3% agreed that they faced such difficulties. In contrast, 16.4% of the respondents disagreed with the statement, suggesting that only a small proportion of students did not experience this type of difficulty.

Interestingly, 39.3% of the participants selected the neutral option, reflecting uncertainty or inconsistent comprehension when locating clearly stated definitions or explanations. This distribution suggests that even at the literal level of reading, many Indonesian EFL freshmen struggle to extract explicit explanatory information from English texts. These findings highlight that difficulties in recognizing written definitions or explanations may hinder students' overall comprehension, despite the information being directly available in the text.

Table 6. Students experienced difficulties in determining the truth value of statements

Percentage	
4.9%	Strongly Agree
29.5%	Agree
57.4%	Neutral
11.5%	Disagree

Item 6 indicate that many students' experienced difficulties in determining the truth value of statements based on explicitly stated information in English texts. Specifically, 4.9% of the respondents strongly agreed and 29.5% agreed that they found this task difficult. In contrast, 11.5% of the students disagreed, suggesting that only a small proportion were confident in evaluating statements using clearly stated textual information.

A notably high percentage of participants (57.4%) selected the neutral option. This pattern suggests uncertainty or hesitation in judging whether statements are true or false, even when the relevant information is explicitly provided in the text. These findings imply that Indonesian EFL freshmen may struggle with basic verification skills at the literal reading level, which may affect their overall reading comprehension and accuracy when responding to factual questions.

Table 7. Students experienced fewer difficulties in understanding explicit WH-information

Percentage	
1.6%	Strongly Agree
11.5%	Agree
49.2%	Neutral
34.4%	Disagree

Item 7 suggest that students generally experienced fewer difficulties in understanding explicit WH-information compared to other aspects of literal reading. There is 1.6% of the participants strongly agreed and 11.5% agreed that they found this type of information difficult to understand. In contrast, a relatively large proportion of the respondents (34.4%) disagreed with the statement, indicating that many students were able to comprehend basic factual information explicitly stated in English texts.

Nevertheless, nearly half of the participants (49.2%) selected the neutral response, suggesting uncertainty or variability in their comprehension of WH-information. This result implies that while some Indonesian EFL freshmen are capable of identifying basic factual details, a substantial number remain unsure of their ability to consistently process explicit information such as who, what, when, where, why, and how in English reading texts.

Table 8. Students experience difficulties in understanding the meaning of simple sentences

Percentage	
4.9%	Strongly Agree
24.6%	Agree
54.1%	Neutral
19.7%	Disagree

The data from item 8 reveal that 4.9% of the respondents strongly agreed and 24.6% agreed that they faced such difficulties. In contrast, 19.7% of the students disagreed, suggesting that fewer than one-fifth of the participants felt confident in comprehending simple, directly stated sentences.

More than half of the respondents (54.1%) selected the neutral option, reflecting uncertainty or fluctuating comprehension. This high proportion of neutral responses suggests that although the sentences were simple and explicitly presented, many Indonesian EFL freshmen were not fully confident in their literal understanding. These findings reinforce the notion that difficulties at the most basic level of reading comprehension remain prevalent among EFL learners and may hinder their ability to progress to higher-level reading skills.

It is important to note that the responses categorized as “strongly disagree” were minimal across questionnaire items and were treated as missing data. Therefore, the quantitative analysis focused on four response categories (strongly agree, agree, neutral, and disagree), with percentages calculated based on valid responses.

Based on researchers' investigation, the findings demonstrate that Indonesian EFL freshmen experience widespread challenges in literal reading, particularly in processing explicit meanings, sentence-level information, and logical relationships in English texts. These difficulties at the foundational level of reading comprehension may hinder students' ability to progress to higher-level reading skills such as interpretive and critical reading

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that Indonesian EFL freshmen students experience a range of difficulties at the literal level of reading comprehension, even when information is explicitly stated in English texts.

First, the results showed that students reported difficulties in understanding simple sentences and answering literal questions based on single sentences, data reported from Items 1 and 2. Although the percentage of students who strongly agreed was relatively low, the combined agree responses and a high proportion of neutral responses reflect that many students are not fully confident in these basic skills. This pattern mirrors previous findings that Indonesian EFL learners struggle with sentence-level comprehension and explicit meaning extraction, often due to limitations in vocabulary and language exposure (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023). Studies in similar settings have noted that linguistic limitations such as insufficient vocabulary and unfamiliarity with English sentence structures contribute to difficulties in understanding explicit textual content (Kasim & Raisha, 2025).

Second, the data indicated that sequencing events and understanding explicit cause–effect relationships were also areas of difficulty (Items 3 and 4). These aspects of reading require readers to process structural and logical information, even when it is directly presented. Such challenges are consistent with EFL research that identifies weaknesses in students' ability to integrate textual information into coherent conceptual representations, particularly when processing logical relationships such as cause and effect. In Indonesian EFL contexts, these structural comprehension challenges are frequently linked to limited reading practice and insufficient strategic instruction in classroom settings (Ferdinandus, & Simantuak, 2024).

The results for Items 5 and 6 show that many students had trouble identifying explicit definitions and determining the truth value of statements based on clearly stated information. These findings suggest that even tasks requiring direct retrieval of information are not always straightforward for learners. The high levels of neutral responses again point to inconsistent comprehension processing, which may be influenced by limited vocabulary knowledge and weak metacognitive strategies. Systematic reviews of reading comprehension difficulties have repeatedly identified vocabulary limitations and lack of background knowledge as primary barriers for EFL learners, hindering their ability to locate and interpret explicit

textual information.

Interestingly, the item concerning the comprehension of explicit WH-information (Item 7) exhibited relatively fewer reported difficulties compared to other literal reading aspects. A larger proportion of students disagreed that this was problematic, although neutrality remained substantial. This suggests that basic factual information such as who, what, when, where, why, and how may be easier for some students to extract than relational or structural information. However, the large group of neutral responses continues to point to uneven confidence and performance, indicating that even relatively direct comprehension tasks are not fully assimilated across the cohort.

Across items, the pattern of high neutral responses may reflect learners' lack of reading strategies and confidence rather than strong comprehension competence. Prior research in Indonesian EFL contexts suggests that students often adopt surface-level reading approaches, such as word-by-word translation or relying on lexical recognition without deeper engagement with text structure and meaning, which can produce uncertainty when processing even literal information (Ferdinandus, & Simantuak, 2024). In addition, demographic and educational factors for example limited exposure to extensive reading materials, a focus on discrete grammar and vocabulary instruction that contribute to weak foundational reading skills that manifest as hesitancy and inconsistent responses in comprehension tasks.

The implications of these findings are theoretically and pedagogically significant. From a theoretical perspective, the results support models of reading comprehension that emphasize the interdependence of linguistic knowledge, text processing strategies, and comprehension performance. Even literal comprehension, which is traditionally considered the most basic level of reading, requires sufficient vocabulary, sentence processing ability, and strategic reading skills. When these resources are limited, learners may struggle to interpret explicit information consistently, as evidenced by the response patterns in this study.

Pedagogically, the results highlight the need for instructional interventions that strengthen literal reading processes. Teachers should integrate explicit strategy training that emphasizes scanning for specific information, identifying relationships within texts, and building confidence in handling explicit content. Additionally, targeted vocabulary instruction, repeated exposure to structured English texts, and guided practice on logical relationships and definition recognition may help reduce neutral uncertainty and improve comprehension accuracy over time. Such instructional adaptations are consistent with recommendations from prior research on improving reading outcomes for EFL learners in Indonesia.

In summary, the findings of this study demonstrate that Indonesian EFL freshmen students encounter widespread literal reading difficulties, particularly in processing explicit meanings, structural relationships, and verification tasks. These challenges underscore the importance of reinforcing foundational reading skills and implementing instructional practices that promote strategic engagement with English texts. Addressing these basic difficulties is a critical first step toward enabling learners to achieve higher-order comprehension and academic success.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSION

Based on the result of questionnaire items findings and the discussion, a short conclusion reported that students had difficulties in understanding simple sentences, identifying explicitly stated meanings, recognizing sequences of events, understanding cause–effect relationships, locating definitions, and verifying the truth value of statements based on clear textual information.

A notable pattern was the high proportion of neutral responses, which suggests uncertainty, lack of confidence, or inconsistent comprehension rather than complete mastery of literal reading skills. This pattern indicates that many students possess partial or unstable foundational reading abilities, despite having received prior formal English instruction. Although some aspects of literal reading such as understanding basic WH-information appeared less problematic, students' overall confidence and consistency in processing explicit information remained limited.

So, it is confirming that literal reading is not automatically acquired and cannot be assumed to be fully developed at the university level. Difficulties at this foundational stage may hinder students' ability to progress to higher-order reading skills, such as interpretive, evaluative, and critical reading. Therefore, strengthening literal reading comprehension should be viewed as an essential component of EFL instruction at the tertiary level.

SUGGESTIONS

Several suggestions are proposed by this research. Firstly, EFL instructors should explicitly teach literal reading skills, rather than assuming that students have already mastered them. Instruction should focus on teaching basic literal reading. Secondly, vocabulary development and sentence-level comprehension training should be integrated into reading instruction. Thirdly, for future research, it is recommended that researchers combine survey data with performance-based reading tests or qualitative methods, such as interviews or think-aloud protocols, to gain deeper insights into the causes of students' literal reading difficulties.

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