Unveiling students' learning strategies and barriers to extensive reading: a case study in an Indonesian university

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate students' learning strategies and barriers encountered in extensive reading activities. This research was designed with a qualitative case study method. The study recruited six Indonesian university EFL students majoring in English language education to participate and a lecturer in the study program. Data were garnered through semi-structured interviews as a data collection method. The data were analyzed thematically to find emerging themes. The research findings demonstrate that the EFL students employed three extensive reading comprehension strategies. The three strategies included predicting by inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words by making guesses based on the context, guessing from context by utilizing previous knowledge about the topics in the text, and paraphrasing by creating sentences from the obtained information. Another finding also uncovers the university students' barriers in extensive reading, including the students' language background and lack of interest in reading. This study concludes with practical implications for how EFL students engage in extensive reading with various learning strategies and how university teachers boost their students' interests in more diverse extensive reading activities.

Introduction

Reading is undoubtedly one of the critical skills that must be acquired by second or foreign-language learners (Huang, 2015). Recognizing words, how they are spelled, and their relationships with different words in a phrase can all be referred to as reading. Reading involves the act of constructing meaning from the textual material that is provided (Aukerman, 2013). One of the language skills that need strengthening is reading. Students who can read more clearly understand all of the stuff being taught.

Reading plays a significant part in teaching languages as one of the four language skills. It is claimed that understanding what people read is crucial since it is a very effective technique for learning new vocabulary and grammar (Harini, 2021). Therefore, reading is essential for EFL (English Foreign Language) students. Reading is very influential on student performance; it can be proven that the higher students' reading comprehension, the higher their knowledge. Wijaya (2022) argues that it is essential for all modern Indonesian academics to have more advanced reading skills and sustainable reading habits to enable them to become more proficient readers.

EFL (English as a foreign language) students must master the ability to read English well. English is a global language used in various fields such as science, technology, business, and culture. Many knowledge resources, including books, journals, scientific articles, and digital materials, are available in English. By mastering English reading skills, EFL students can access a wider range of information and knowledge that may not be available in their native language (Grabe & Stoller, 2013). In reality, students feel they need to improve their reading skills in English. At this time, many types of reading can be used to develop proficiency in English. EFL students are directed to make reading books in English a daily activity for EFL students (Iftanti, 2015).

There are several techniques in reading. Extensive reading is one of the reading strategies. Extensive reading aims to boost learners' desire to read more books because the principle behind extensive reading is that learners can select the books they want to read. The characteristics of extensive reading are that there is much reading, accessible reading material, faster reading speed, and reading with an element of pleasure (Yamashita, 2015). Extensive reading is an activity that is beneficial for students and teachers to improve students' ability to read (Salameh, 2017).

A reading instruction strategy called extensive reading encourages students to read a lot of engaging, enjoyable reading material both within and outside the classroom (Stoller, 2015). Extensive reading should be included in any curriculum to encourage L2 reading to produce the desired learning outcomes. Extensive reading has been implemented in various language-learning contexts (Yulia, 2018). Extensive reading programs involve students reading books at a level appropriate for them and reading large volumes of these books or other graded material. Day and Bamford (1998) emphasized that extensive reading can significantly improve EFL learners' reading fluency and overall language competence. Nation and Waring (2019) highlighted that extensive reading enhances vocabulary acquisition and promotes a positive attitude toward reading in a second language. These studies collectively underscore the importance of incorporating extensive reading into language learning curricula.

Few previous studies have also demonstrated the effectiveness of extensive reading in language learning. For instance, Alfian et al. (2022) conducted a study which uncovered that several students encountered unfavorable effects as a result of extensive reading learning activities, such as falling in love with a character in a book or comic they have been reading. Another research overtaken by Wutthisingchai (2022) reported that developing learning strategies for extensive reading was effective for university EFL students. Ro (2016) also revealed that the critical role of the reading strategy in improving students' extensive reading in EAP reading classes.

Further, the two criteria for material at the right level and a large amount of reading are the most critical criteria in an extensive reading program (Nation & Waring, 2019). This study was conducted based on the need to understand more deeply about the learning strategies used by students in extensive reading activities. Extensive reading has been proven effective in improving students' language skills and reading comprehension. However, the success of this activity is highly dependent on the learning strategies applied by students. The use of appropriate learning strategies can improve students' motivation, efficiency, and learning outcomes in extensive reading (Day & Bamford, 1998; Renandya & Jacobs, 2002).

In addition, this study is also based on the fact that many students still face difficulties in optimizing the benefits of extensive reading. These obstacles may be related to a lack of knowledge about effective learning strategies or a lack of support in developing these strategies. Thus, this study is important to identify the learning strategies the students use and explore how these strategies can be optimized to improve learning outcomes.

There are differences for each student in terms of used learning strategies in extensive reading. Applying learning strategies is closely related to differences in student personality (Yang, 2016). Likewise, with reading through extensive reading, students can choose their reading material to have their learning strategy in extensive reading. Therefore, this research focused on students' learning strategies in extensive reading. This research aimed to enrich knowledge and also add empirical data. More specifically, this study investigates the following questions:

1. What learning strategies do university EFL students employ in their extensive reading?
2. What barriers do the students face in the extensive reading?

Method

Research design

This study adopted a qualitative approach with a case study as the research design to explore students' learning strategies in extensive reading activities. A case study is an in-depth research method that allows researchers to gain a detailed understanding of a particular phenomenon in its original context (Yin, 2018). Case studies were chosen because this method allows researchers to explore phenomena holistically and in real-life contexts. With case studies, the researcher can identify and students' various learning strategies in extensive reading activities.

Setting and participants

This research was overtaken at the English language education study program in a university in Pekalongan, Central Java, Indonesia. Extensive Reading was one of crucial courses offered by the study program to the second semester students. The university also provided them with an English language reading corner and library in the faculty building to encourage their extensive reading.

The participants of this research involved six students from three different classes and recruited one lecturer who taught the extensive reading course. The selection of the second-semester participants was based on several considerations. The second-semester students

had initial experiences in extensive reading activities, so that they could provide relevant insights into their learning strategies. They also regulated themselves to have extensive reading in their daily lives. An interview with the lecturer was conducted to verify the responses provided by the students. Prior to the interview, the participants filled out an informed consent form to become respondents to this study. Personal information regarding participants is kept confidential.

Data collection

In this study, the collection of data was accomplished through semi-structured interviews to obtain precise and clear information. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews as a process to collect data. This type of interview is included in the in-depth interview category, which is carried out more freely than structured interviews. In semi-structural interviews conducted more openly, participants were asked for their opinions and ideas (Yin, 2018).

The researcher focused on students' experiences in creating learning strategies in Extensive Reading classes. Interviews were conducted using Indonesian language to avoid misunderstandings in the questions. The qualitative research involved a two-week interview phase, each session lasting approximately 30 minutes to gather in-depth insights. To support the richness of our data, we used an audio recording device such as a cellphone during interviews. All interviews were conducted at the university setting and a comfortable space was chosen for participants to share their experiences freely. This approach aimed to ensure the reliability and depth of the qualitative data collected.

Data analysis

The researcher analyzed the data using thematic analysis. All interview data analysis using this method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis involves a five-step process, i.e. listening to recordings repeatedly, transcribing data, interpreting data by focusing on the words and sentences of each participant, verifying whether the data aligns with participants' intentions, and seeking feedback from participants to enhance the credibility of data interpretation (Widodo, 2014).

In repeated listening to recordings, it involves repeatedly listening to the recording to thoroughly understand every aspect of the interview or audio data source. The goal of this step is for the researcher to capture nuances and details that may be missed on the first listen. In transcribing interview data, it involved converting the data from audio form to written text. Transcription allowed the researcher to work with data more efficiently and facilitated analysis. In interpreting data, it involved in-depth text analysis by paying attention to the words and sentences used by each participant. The researcher looked for patterns, meaning, and other important aspects that emerge from interviews. In verification, the researcher ensured that the findings match the participants' intentions or expectations. This step created harmony between the research findings and participants' responses. Finally, when seeking feedback from participants, it aimed to increase the credibility of the analysis results. This also allowed the researcher to refine or clarify their interpretations based on participants' perspectives, which can increase the validity of the findings.

Findings and discussion

Students' learning strategies employed in extensive reading

The first strategy is predicting. Two out of six participants used this strategy for learning strategies in extensive reading activities. This strategy is to predict the contents of the text that might be discussed. This kind of strategy can be seen from the following data:

> I usually predict words that I do not know through prediction. Usually, I predict what the information in the story I read is about, so by predicting through information, I understand a little more about what the word means (EC, Interview, February 23rd, 2024, Researcher's translation).

MF added the example of the used of predictive strategies:

> For example, in the novel I read, there was a picture of a child smiling broadly and there were lots of toys around him, in the narration I found the word "beaming" and I didn't know what it meant so I predicted from seeing the illustration of a happy child, "beaming" might mean very happy or pleased (MF, Interview, February 23rd, 2024, Researcher's translation).

Based on the results, EC and MF use a "predicting" strategy. According to Keatley and Kennedy (1998), students can predict the content of texts that might be discussed and students can predict certain vocabulary based on the information that has been presented. In this strategy, the university students used a predicting strategy to derive meaning from a text. They utilize divination to transform their knowledge into new information from the text so they can understand its meaning better (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

In this context, EC and MF used this strategy in carrying out extensive reading activities. From this assumption, they used this strategy by relying on information from the reading material they were reading. According to data, EC likes novels with romantic themes. She predicted vocabulary words that she did not know the meaning of by relying on previous information. As same as EC, MF also used this strategy when she carried out extensive reading activities. MF said she did not choose a specific topic when reading but prefers fiction books. MF guesses or predicts something based on existing information when she encounters vocabulary words, she does not know the meaning of. This prediction strategy can encourage readers to think and carry out investigations so that they believe forward (Bailey, 2015).

The second strategy is guessing from context. Four participants used this strategy, and this could be seen from AA and EJ's statements:

> If I find difficult words like that, I usually use the strategy of guessing from context; for example, I read a book titled Anne of Green Gables in full English. I am challenging myself to read that book, in that book. I found many of sentences that I did not understand, so I used a guessing from context strategy (AA, Interview, February 23rd, 2024, Researcher's translation).

> I have experienced this. To overcome this, I used the strategy of guessing from the context by looking at the word before or after so that I could understand a little about the meaning or purpose of the vocabulary (EJ, Interview, February 28th, 2024, Researcher's translation).

AA added the example of the used of guessing from context strategies:

> I applied the strategy of guessing from context for example in the sentence "Anne's eyes shone like evening stars, it seemed there was no limit to the joy in her heart." There is the word "shone" and I don't know what it means, so the strategy is using the sentence's context, which is that Anne's eyes shone like evening stars. So, I interpret "shone" as possibly meaning shining or glowing (AA, Interview, February 23rd, 2024, Researcher's translation).

Keatley and Kennedy (1998) explain that guessing from context is a reading strategy where you try to guess the meaning of an unknown word or phrase based on the context of the sentence or paragraph in which the word appears. Based on data AA, AD, EJ, and MF used this strategy. AA used this strategy when reading a novel, one of the titles of which was Anne of Green Gables. AA said she found a lot of vocabulary that he did not know the meaning of and she tried to understand the vocabulary through the context of the sentence. AD, EJ, and MF also have the same opinion; they used this strategy by guessing vocabulary they do not know in the context of sentences or paragraphs in the reading.

The guessing from context strategy is an important skill in reading because often readers will not know every word in the text they read (Çetinavcı, 2014). By guessing from context, readers can continue to flow in reading without stopping to look for every unknown word. The strategy of guessing from context helps them stay engaged in reading and increases their confidence as readers (Siregar, 2019).

The third strategy is paraphrasing. BM and MF said they chose the paraphrasing strategy in the extensive reading activity because it allowed her to understand words that they did not know by creating new sentences from the information obtained.

> Usually, I solve these words using a paraphrasing strategy, namely by compiling or creating new sentences based on the information in the story, so I can understand the words without looking at the dictionary (BM, Interview, February 23rd, 2024, Researcher's translation).

> ... I usually also use paraphrasing when reading a novel, even if I like it, for example, I find a word that I do not know the meaning of, and then I try to express it using other words (MF, Interview, February 28th, 2024, Researcher's translation).

BM added the example of the used of paraphrasing strategies:

> For example, if I don't understand the meaning of a word, I will try to replace the word with other words that have similar meanings or explain its meaning in the context of the sentence. I'm looking for synonyms for that word. For example, from the sentence "Freedom is slavery" I don't know the meaning of the word "slavery" Then I look for synonyms and interpret it using my sentences like putting together my sentences that fit the context (BM, Interview, February 23rd, 2024, Researcher's translation).

According to Keatley and Kennedy (1998) in the paraphrasing strategy, students assess their understanding by rephrasing information and ideas found in the text. This strategy helps readers deepen their understanding of the texts they read by reformulating critical ideas in their own words. This not only helps enrich the reader's vocabulary but also helps internalize and process the information in more depth.

Paraphrasing involves students putting someone else's thoughts into their own words, all while ensuring they capture the core message of the source (Escudero et al., 2018). The strategy of requiring students to paraphrase what they read is suggested as a powerful way to strengthen the complex thinking skills involved in reading. This is because paraphrasing helps students develop a deeper understanding of the text (İlter, 2017). In this context, BM and MF used this strategy in extensive reading activities. BM applied this strategy by arranging or creating new sentences based on the information in the story, likewise, MF applied this strategy if she found a word that she did not know the meaning of and then tried to express it using other words.

Barriers in extensive reading faced by the university EFL students

The first obstacle is the language background of students. All participants experienced language barriers in extensive reading activities. This could be seen from AA's statement:

> The problem I faced is that if the text is in English, for example, there are sentences that I do not know the meaning of, so when I encounter difficult vocabulary, it sometimes hinders me from reading (AA, Interview, February 23rd, 2024 Researcher's translation).

Based on the interviews conducted by the researcher, BM, EC, AD, EJ, and MF had difficulties with language; they encountered vocabulary that they did not know the meaning of. According to Archer (2012), students' language background can cause difficulties in the context of extensive reading. In the process of learning to read, it is important to pay attention to several key components, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and background knowledge. A strong vocabulary serves as the cornerstone for mastering language abilities such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

With a solid grasp of vocabulary, achieving proficiency in any language becomes easier. Vocabulary forms the foundation for learning a second language (Afzal, 2019). One of the obstacles that students often face is limited vocabulary. Each student has a different level of vocabulary mastery. For students who study English as a foreign language, the amount of vocabulary they master may still be limited. This limitation often becomes an obstacle in the reading process.

Based on the data, all participants experienced this challenge. AA said that difficulty in reading is a lack of vocabulary knowledge, which can hinder reading. The other five participants, BM, EC, AD, MF, and EJ, shared the same as AA. This finding is also supported by the university teacher, stating that when the students encountered unfamiliar words, they tended to experience difficulties and lose interest in continuing reading. This can disturb their concentration and reduce their understanding of the text they read (Yu et al., 2023). When students have difficulty understanding vocabulary, they tend to stop reading or even feel frustrated.

The second obstacle is a lack of interest in reading. According to Robbani and Khoirotunnisa (2021), students are not familiar with reading activities because they do not know what material they have to read. This causes a lack of student interest in reading. Students' lack of confidence in their ability to read in English causes them to be reluctant. Reading in English for them is a passive and scary activity (Mu & Green, 2012).

> The problem is usually my English vocabulary is lacking, I don't know the meaning, and it sounds new to me. Besides that, I also lack of interest in reading (EC, Interview, February 23rd, 2024, Researcher's translation).

> The obstacle is because I lack interest in reading … (EJ, Interview, February 28th, 2024, Researcher's translation).

Based on the interview data, EC and EJ experienced this problem. They said they felt a lack of interest in reading. This finding is also supported by the statement made by the EFL lecturer in an interview conducted by the researcher. The lecturer said that the general and most difficult challenge in extensive reading activities by students is growing interest in reading itself. When interest in reading is low, this creates problems in the student's education system. Ideally, reading should be an enjoyable activity for them. However, when students lose interest in reading, they experience significant difficulties. Individuals who lack

interest in learning something typically struggle to comprehend the knowledge they are studying because they lack the motivation or enthusiasm necessary to effectively master the material (Dewi et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Based on the findings and discussion, it was found that students used several strategies in extensive reading activities, namely prediction, guessing from context, and paraphrasing. The first strategy is prediction. Students can predict the content of the text that might be discussed and students can predict certain vocabulary based on the information that has been presented. The second strategy is guessing from context, where students try to guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases based on the context of the sentence or paragraph in which the word appears. The final strategy is paraphrasing, and students rearrange the information and ideas in the text. However, there are still many obstacles faced by readers in extensive reading activities, namely the language background of the students and lack of interest in reading. The first obstacle that students face is language background, namely the lack of vocabulary knowledge they have. This causes them to need help understanding the content of the literature they read. The second obstacle is a lack of interest in reading. Students lose interest in reading, and they experience significant difficulties.

The researcher provides several recommendations for further research to explore the strategies applied in extensive reading activities. Although this study only used six participants, it would be better if future research used more than five participants so that the research could be strengthened. Future researchers can also continue this research by conducting a more in-depth investigation regarding learning strategies in extensive reading activities and the obstacles that students experience in extensive reading.

Acknowledgements

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