

Exploring Students' Perceptions of Intensive Reading Activities in an EFL Classroom: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Understanding students' perceptions of intensive reading activities is important for improving reading instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. While previous studies have primarily focused on the effectiveness of intensive reading in improving reading outcomes, limited research has explored how students perceive and experience intensive reading activities in university-level EFL contexts. This study aimed to explore students' perceptions of intensive reading activities in an EFL classroom. Employing a qualitative design, data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire administered via Google Forms to 43 undergraduate students enrolled in an Intensive Reading course at Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya. The responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework. The findings revealed three major themes: (1) intensive reading as a tool for comprehension and reading development, (2) vocabulary limitations and challenges in processing academic texts, and (3) self-regulated strategies for managing reading difficulties. Students generally perceived intensive reading positively because it helped them improve comprehension, develop reading strategies, and engage more actively with academic texts. However, they also reported challenges related to unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and lengthy texts. To address these difficulties, students employed various strategies, including rereading, contextual guessing, dictionary use, and skimming techniques. The study highlights the importance of instructional scaffolding, vocabulary support, and strategy instruction in helping students engage more effectively with intensive reading activities in EFL classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill in learning a foreign language, particularly in EFL contexts where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited. Among various reading approaches, intensive reading focuses on careful and detailed analysis of relatively short texts to enhance learners' comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and grammatical awareness. In EFL classrooms, intensive reading is often used to train students to understand meaning deeply rather than read for general ideas.

Intensive reading has been widely recognized as a crucial component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, particularly in academic contexts where learners are required to

comprehend texts accurately and critically. According to Brown (2007), intensive reading involves careful, detailed reading of relatively short texts under close teacher guidance, aiming to develop learners' understanding of language forms, meaning, and discourse features. Similarly, Nation (2009) emphasizes that intensive reading enables learners to notice vocabulary, grammar, and textual organization, which are essential for improving reading proficiency and overall language competence. From a theoretical perspective, intensive reading is designed to support cognitive engagement with texts and to enhance learners' analytical reading skills.

In line with these views, intensive reading activities typically include tasks such as identifying main ideas, analyzing vocabulary in context, answering comprehension questions, and interpreting textual meaning. Grabe and Stoller (2011) argue that such activities are effective when they encourage active interaction between the reader and the text, supported by appropriate scaffolding from the teacher. However, they also highlight that the success of reading instruction is not solely determined by instructional design, but also by learners' engagement, motivation, and perceptions of the learning process.

Intensive and Extensive reading are very different. Richards and Schmidt (2010) note that in many EFL classrooms, intensive reading activities tend to be teacher-centered and exam-oriented, focusing primarily on translation and discrete comprehension questions. As a result, students may participate passively and perceive intensive reading as demanding or monotonous. This condition suggests a gap between theoretical expectations, which emphasize meaningful engagement and interaction with texts, and actual classroom practices, which may not fully consider students' experiences. Despite the central role of intensive reading in EFL classrooms, recent research has mainly focused on general reading strategies or extensive reading rather than students' perceptions of intensive reading activities specifically. Most contemporary studies address students' views on extensive reading (e.g., Lindawati, 2021; although not intensive reading directly) or compare extensive and intensive reading in terms of engagement and outcomes rather than students' lived experiences with intensive reading perceptions. Only a few recent works integrate intensive reading with other reading approaches or examine its outcomes (e.g., Chachar et al., 2024 found that Pakistani EFL learners perceived combined intensive and extensive reading as beneficial for grammar but did not isolate intensive reading perceptions). Moreover, studies that do focus on intensive reading tend to use quantitative designs or examine specific sub-skills such as vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Alfansury & Imaniar, recent high-school context) rather than holistic student perceptions of classroom activities and their affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses in university-level EFL contexts. This gap highlights the need for rich, qualitative insight into how EFL learners interpret and emotionally respond to intensive reading tasks, particularly at the tertiary level where learner autonomy and academic reading expectations are higher.

Furthermore, previous studies on intensive reading have largely concentrated on measurable learning outcomes, such as reading comprehension scores or vocabulary gains, using quantitative approaches. While these studies provide valuable evidence of effectiveness, they often overlook learners' subjective experiences. Day and Bamford (1998) assert that learners' attitudes and perceptions toward reading activities play a significant role in determining their motivation and long-term reading development. However, empirical research that explores students' perceptions of intensive reading activities, particularly through qualitative methods and it remains limited in EFL contexts.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Reading Instruction in EFL Contexts

Reading is one of the important skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it enables learners to access academic knowledge and develop language competence. In EFL contexts, reading instruction is not only aimed at understanding written texts but also at supporting vocabulary development, grammatical awareness, and critical thinking. Grabe (2009) emphasizes

that effective reading instruction should integrate cognitive processes, linguistic knowledge, and strategic competence to help learners comprehend texts meaningfully. Reading instruction in EFL classrooms is commonly categorized into two major approaches: intensive reading and extensive reading. These approaches serve different pedagogical purposes and are often implemented in complementary ways.

Intensive and Extensive Reading: Conceptual Differences

Extensive reading focuses on reading large quantities of texts for general understanding, fluency development, and enjoyment. According to Day and Bamford (1998), extensive reading encourages learners to read independently with minimal teacher intervention, allowing them to choose materials that match their proficiency levels and interests. The primary goal of extensive reading is to develop reading fluency and positive attitudes toward reading through exposure to comprehensible input. In contrast, intensive reading involves close and careful reading of relatively short texts under teacher guidance. Brown (2007) explains that intensive reading requires learners to pay attention to linguistic details, such as vocabulary, grammar, and discourse features, in order to achieve accurate comprehension. Similarly, Nation (2009) argues that intensive reading plays a critical role in helping learners notice language forms and develop academic reading skills. While extensive reading prioritizes fluency and quantity, intensive reading emphasizes accuracy, depth of comprehension, and analytical reading skills, making it particularly relevant to classroom-based instruction.

Intensive Reading Theory and Classroom Practices

From a theoretical perspective, intensive reading is closely associated with cognitive and interactionist theories of language learning, which highlight the importance of conscious attention and guided practice. Grabe and Stoller (2011) state that intensive reading activities should engage learners in both bottom-up processes, such as word recognition and syntactic analysis, and top-down processes, such as predicting meaning and interpreting textual organization. When appropriately designed, intensive reading activities can support learners in developing strategic reading skills. In practice, intensive reading activities commonly include identifying main ideas, analyzing vocabulary in context, answering comprehension questions, and interpreting textual meaning. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), these activities are intended to facilitate deeper interaction with texts and promote language accuracy. However, Richards and Schmidt (2010) observe that in many EFL classrooms, intensive reading instruction tends to be teacher-centered, with a strong emphasis on translation and controlled exercises. This approach may limit students' opportunities for active engagement and critical thinking.

Students' Perceptions of Intensive Reading Activities

Students' perceptions are an essential factor in determining the effectiveness of reading instruction. Day and Bamford (1998) argue that students' attitudes toward reading activities influence their motivation and willingness to engage with texts. In EFL settings, students' perceptions of intensive reading activities can shape how they respond to classroom tasks and cope with reading challenges. Grabe and Stoller (2011) highlight that students' engagement and emotional responses play a significant role in reading comprehension. When students perceive intensive reading activities as meaningful and supportive, they are more likely to participate actively and benefit from instruction. Conversely, when activities are perceived as overly difficult, monotonous, or stressful, students may become disengaged. Despite the importance of these affective factors, previous research on intensive reading has largely focused on learning outcomes rather than students' experiences, leaving students' voices underrepresented.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore students' perceptions of intensive reading activities in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, opinions, and interpretations regarding intensive reading rather than to measure the effectiveness of the instructional approach quantitatively. The study focused on examining how students perceived the benefits, challenges, and strategies associated with intensive reading activities in their learning context.

Participants

The participants of this study were 43 undergraduate students enrolled in an Intensive Reading course at D4 English for Communication and Business Professional Study Program in Politeknik Negeri Sriwijaya. Participants were selected purposively because they had direct experience with intensive reading activities and were therefore able to provide relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation. All students enrolled in the course were invited to participate in the study. Since the research focused on a single classroom context, the findings are intended to provide context-specific insights rather than statistically generalizable conclusions about EFL learners as a whole.

Data Collection

Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire consisted of eleven open-ended questions designed to explore students' perceptions of intensive reading activities, including perceived benefits, challenges encountered during reading tasks, and strategies used to overcome reading difficulties. The use of open-ended questions allowed participants to express their experiences and viewpoints in their own words while providing sufficient flexibility for generating rich qualitative data.

The questionnaire was distributed to participants during the academic semester in which they were enrolled in the Intensive Reading course. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed about the purpose of the study prior to completing the questionnaire. To ensure confidentiality, participants were not required to provide identifying information, and all responses were anonymized during the analysis process.

Data Analysis

The collected responses were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-step framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the researcher familiarized themselves with the data by reading and rereading all responses to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives. Second, initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful units of information related to students' perceptions of intensive reading activities. Third, similar codes were grouped into potential themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and coherence across the dataset. Fifth, each theme was defined and named according to its central meaning. Finally, the themes were organized and reported to address the research objectives.

Through this process, three major themes emerged: (1) intensive reading as a tool for comprehension and reading development, (2) vocabulary limitations and challenges in processing academic texts, and (3) self-regulated strategies for managing reading difficulties.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

a. Intensive Reading as a Tool for Comprehension and Reading Development

Most participants expressed positive perceptions of intensive reading activities. They reported

that intensive reading helped them improve their comprehension of English texts, identify important information, and develop their reading skills. Students particularly appreciated the use of reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, which facilitated their understanding of academic texts.

1. “Yes, because there are learning activities such as skimming and scanning that help me understand the content of the text faster and find important information easily.” (Student 2)
2. “Yes, because intensive reading improves my ability to read texts in English.” (Student 4)
3. “Yes, because intensive reading helps me read carefully and focus only on important details.” (Student 9)

The interview data suggest that students viewed intensive reading as a structured learning process rather than merely a classroom activity. Participants frequently associated intensive reading with the ability to approach texts more systematically and efficiently. Their responses indicate that reading strategies such as skimming and scanning played an important role in helping them navigate academic texts and locate relevant information.

Another pattern emerging from the data is students’ emphasis on attention to detail. Several participants perceived intensive reading as an activity that required careful examination of texts, enabling them to focus on important information and understand content more deeply. Students also reported increased confidence when dealing with English reading materials, suggesting that repeated engagement with intensive reading activities may contribute to the development of more effective reading habits.

Overall, the findings indicate that students generally perceived intensive reading as beneficial for enhancing comprehension, improving reading skills, and supporting more strategic engagement with English texts.

Beyond language improvement, the responses indicate that students associated intensive reading with a greater sense of control over the reading process. Rather than approaching texts passively, students described using strategies that enabled them to identify relevant information and navigate academic texts more efficiently. This suggests that intensive reading may contribute not only to comprehension development but also to the formation of strategic reading awareness.

b. Vocabulary Limitations and Challenges in Processing Academic Texts

Although students acknowledged the benefits of intensive reading, many also reported experiencing difficulties during reading activities. The most frequently mentioned challenges were unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and the length of academic texts.

1. “Difficult vocabulary and long sentences that are hard to understand.” (Student 5)
2. “When reading long texts and being instructed to find the main idea, I still have difficulties.” (Student 8)
3. “English texts are quite long and contain some vocabulary that I do not understand well.” (Student 9)

The data reveal that vocabulary knowledge was a major factor influencing students’ reading experiences. Many participants indicated that unfamiliar words interrupted their reading process and made it difficult to understand the overall meaning of a text. Rather than focusing on the content, students often had to spend additional time interpreting individual words and expressions.

In addition to vocabulary-related difficulties, students frequently referred to the complexity of academic texts. Long passages and complicated sentence structures appeared to increase the effort required to comprehend information. Several participants reported difficulty identifying main ideas when texts contained dense information or unfamiliar language.

Another finding is that students experienced challenges in balancing detailed reading with time management. Intensive reading requires close attention to textual details, yet some students felt overwhelmed by the amount of information they needed to process. This suggests that

students' difficulties were not limited to language knowledge alone but also involved managing the cognitive demands of intensive reading tasks. Overall, the findings demonstrate that students' challenges stemmed from a combination of linguistic and processing difficulties, particularly when dealing with lengthy and complex English texts.

Interestingly, the challenges reported by students appear to be closely connected to the very nature of intensive reading itself. Because intensive reading requires learners to focus carefully on vocabulary, sentence structure, and textual meaning, students become more aware of gaps in their linguistic knowledge and comprehension processes. In this sense, the difficulties experienced by participants may not simply indicate weaknesses in reading ability; rather, they reflect the cognitive demands involved in engaging deeply with academic texts. The findings suggest that intensive reading encourages students to confront language problems directly, making both their strengths and limitations more visible during the reading process.

c. Self-Regulated Strategies for Managing Reading Difficulties

To overcome the challenges encountered during intensive reading activities, students reported using a variety of strategies. These strategies included consulting dictionaries, using contextual clues, skimming texts, rereading passages, and discussing content with peers.

1. "Looking up the meanings of vocabulary that I do not understand and trying to understand the sentence context." (Student 1)
2. "Using skimming techniques." (Student 5)
3. "Rereading the text." (Student 11)

The findings indicate that students did not passively accept reading difficulties but actively sought ways to improve their understanding. One of the most commonly reported strategies was consulting dictionaries to identify the meanings of unfamiliar words. However, students also emphasized the importance of understanding vocabulary within its context, suggesting that they attempted to construct meaning beyond simple word translation.

Another recurring strategy was rereading. Participants explained that rereading enabled them to clarify information that was initially unclear and confirm their understanding of key ideas. This suggests that students monitored their comprehension and adjusted their reading behavior when they encountered difficulties.

The data also show that students used skimming strategically to identify important information before engaging in more detailed reading. Some participants reported combining multiple strategies, such as skimming first and then rereading sections that required closer attention. In addition, several students mentioned discussing texts with classmates, indicating that reading comprehension was sometimes supported through collaborative learning.

Therefore, these findings suggest that students employed a range of self-directed strategies to manage the demands of intensive reading. Their responses demonstrate an awareness of the challenges they faced and a willingness to adapt their reading approaches in order to achieve better comprehension.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insights into how students perceive intensive reading activities in an EFL classroom. Three major themes emerged from the data: intensive reading as a tool for comprehension and reading development, vocabulary limitations and challenges in processing academic texts, and self-regulated strategies for managing reading difficulties.

First, students generally perceived intensive reading as beneficial for improving their reading comprehension and overall reading ability. Participants reported that activities such as skimming, scanning, and careful reading enabled them to identify important information and understand academic texts more effectively. This finding supports the view that intensive reading promotes close engagement with texts and facilitates the development of reading comprehension skills. According to Nuttall (2005), intensive reading encourages learners to focus on detailed

understanding of a text, including vocabulary, grammar, and textual meaning. The students' positive perceptions suggest that intensive reading provides opportunities for learners to develop greater awareness of how texts are organized and how meaning is constructed.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that intensive reading contributed to the development of strategic reading behaviors. Students frequently referred to the use of reading techniques such as skimming and scanning, which suggests an increasing awareness of how to approach texts effectively. This finding aligns with Grabe and Stoller's (2011) argument that successful readers employ a range of cognitive and metacognitive strategies to facilitate comprehension. Through repeated exposure to intensive reading tasks, students may become more strategic readers who are able to monitor their understanding and adjust their reading processes according to task demands.

Despite these benefits, students reported several challenges during intensive reading activities, particularly related to unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and lengthy texts. Vocabulary limitations emerged as one of the most significant barriers to comprehension. This finding is consistent with Nation (2001), who emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of reading comprehension. When learners encounter a large number of unfamiliar words, they may struggle to construct meaning from the text and identify key ideas. Therefore, students' difficulties appear to stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from the increased cognitive demands associated with processing complex academic texts.

The findings also suggest that the cognitive load imposed by intensive reading may influence students' reading experiences. Intensive reading requires learners to pay attention to details, analyze language forms, and comprehend content simultaneously. As a result, students may experience difficulties when texts are lengthy or contain complex sentence structures. This observation supports Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which proposes that learning becomes more challenging when the cognitive demands of a task exceed learners' available processing capacity. Consequently, appropriate instructional support may be necessary to help students manage the demands of intensive reading activities more effectively.

Another important finding concerns the strategies students employed to overcome reading difficulties. Participants reported using dictionaries, contextual guessing, rereading, skimming, and peer discussions to improve their understanding of texts. These strategies demonstrate students' active involvement in the reading process and reflect characteristics of self-regulated learning. According to Oxford (2017), successful language learners utilize a variety of strategies to compensate for linguistic gaps and enhance comprehension. The use of rereading and contextual guessing indicates that students actively monitored their understanding and attempted to resolve comprehension problems independently.

Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of metacognitive awareness in intensive reading. Students did not rely on a single strategy; instead, they combined multiple approaches depending on the challenges they encountered. This supports previous research suggesting that metacognitive strategy use plays a crucial role in reading success among EFL learners (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002). By selecting and adapting strategies according to reading demands, students demonstrate a growing ability to regulate their own learning processes.

Overall, the findings suggest that intensive reading is perceived positively by students because it supports comprehension development and promotes strategic reading behavior. However, challenges related to vocabulary knowledge and text complexity indicate the need for instructional scaffolding. Teachers may consider providing pre-reading vocabulary activities, strategy instruction, and guided reading tasks to help students engage more effectively with academic texts. Such support may not only reduce comprehension difficulties but also foster greater learner autonomy and confidence in reading English texts.

Therefore, the findings suggest that students' perceptions of intensive reading were shaped by a dynamic interaction between benefits, challenges, and coping strategies. Students did not perceive intensive reading as either entirely positive or entirely difficult. Instead, their responses indicate a process of negotiation in which reading challenges encouraged the use of strategic

behaviors that ultimately supported comprehension development. This interaction highlights the complex nature of intensive reading in EFL contexts and demonstrates that students' experiences cannot be understood solely in terms of learning outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored students' perceptions of intensive reading activities in a university-level EFL classroom. The findings revealed that students generally perceived intensive reading as a valuable learning activity that supported their understanding of academic texts, enhanced their awareness of reading strategies, and encouraged more active engagement with reading tasks. Students particularly associated intensive reading with improved comprehension, careful attention to textual details, and the use of strategies such as skimming and scanning.

At the same time, participants reported several challenges, including unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and lengthy texts. These difficulties often increased the cognitive demands of reading and affected students' ability to identify main ideas and comprehend texts efficiently. Nevertheless, students demonstrated active efforts to overcome these challenges through various self-regulated strategies, including rereading, dictionary use, contextual guessing, and peer discussion.

Therefore, the findings suggest that students' experiences of intensive reading were shaped by an interaction between perceived benefits, reading challenges, and the strategies they employed to manage those challenges. Rather than viewing intensive reading solely as an effective or difficult activity, students appeared to perceive it as a learning process that required both effort and strategic engagement.

Pedagogically, the study highlights the importance of providing vocabulary support, strategy instruction, and appropriate scaffolding to help students engage more effectively with intensive reading tasks. As the study was conducted within a single classroom context and relied on students' written self-reports, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable. Future research may involve multiple institutions, in-depth interviews, and classroom observations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of students' experiences with intensive reading in EFL settings.

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