

READING JOURNAL ARTICLES FOR THESIS PREPARATION: VOICES FROM EFL UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the undergraduates' experiences when reading journal articles as references for their thesis composition through a narrative inquiry. Four undergraduates of English Language Education program at UIN Mataram were interviewed to analyze what they encountered when reading such genre. The findings suggest that their experiences mostly circulated around their motivation and challenges, therefore the narratives were focused on these facets. In terms of motivation, these students seemed to be strongly driven by controlled motivation that entailed the need for a model, accessibility and currency, as well as demands from supervisors and institutions. Furthermore, these students also encountered challenges in terms of unfamiliar academic technical terms and vocabulary, boredom due to text complexities, and failed reading strategies. These findings imply the need of scaffolding the reading of journal articles for undergraduates in their final year of study.

Keywords: Academic reading, journal articles, EFL, narrative inquiry

INTRODUCTION

In the context of higher education, academic reading skills play fundamental roles particularly in connection with academic writing since it serves as input for the writing (Grabe & Zhang, 2016). There is also a mutual relationship between academic reading skills and academic success (Hermida, 2009) and between information sourced and extracted from texts and its expression in academic writing (Hamilton, 2018). Academic reading helps to improve comprehension necessary to frame arguments and helps to increase the amount of academic vocabulary acquired. Additionally, reading academic texts especially written by experts facilitates university students to engage in academic culture, discourse community and conventions.

In Indonesian universities, final year students of undergraduate program are required to compose a thesis as their final task. To undertake such task, they have to first critically read and review scientific references pertinent to their research topics particularly those from

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journal articles. However, reading such genre is painstaking as not only does it require understanding of the words but also takes into account lexical, syntactical, and discursive processes. Academic reading also necessitates psycholinguistic and metacognitive strategies (Pae et al., 2016). The former involves making predictions and inferences, while the latter entails planning, monitoring, and evaluating skills (Pranowo, 2018). Moreover, exposing this sort of literature to undergraduates is quite dilemmatic and may pose challenges since they are novice academic readers and writers. Problems in understanding academic texts are due to insufficient vocabulary inventory, short memory span, problems of figuring out the main points and lacking prior knowledge of the topic (Chen, 2017). In the context of EFL, academic reading becomes even more challenging as not only does it require high-level cognitive processes but the FL also escalates the complexity of the reading task (Pae et al., 2016). Hamilton (2018) reported that higher education students encountered obstacles and struggled to find related and appropriate sources.

Several factors play a pivotal role in determining one's comprehension of academic texts including reader characteristics, text properties and task demand which are sociocultural context-bound (Snow, 2010). Reader characteristics might entail inner cognitive properties such as motivation, learning style, strategies, vocabulary inventory, as well as one's prior knowledge of the topics of the texts. However, this factor should not be taken into account in isolation. Reader characteristics should also be regarded in interaction and interdependencies with other factors such as textual and contextual properties of the text (Kendeou & Van Den Broek, 2007).

Motivation, as one of the reader characteristics, can be categorized into autonomous and controlled motivation (De Naeghel et al., 2016), alternative terms to represent intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Autonomous motivation refers to self-determination which leads to reading engagement, satisfaction, and joy, whilst the latter, controlled motivation is twofold: external regulation and introjected regulation. External regulation is the demand that requires learners to read such as tasks, assignments, homework or classroom instruction. On the other hand, introjected motivation emerges as an internal pressure that appears from external factors such as shame and pride.

Another reader characteristic that is determinant in textual comprehension is vocabulary inventory. A considerable amount of vocabulary will help one comprehend text better. There is also a straight relationship between the size of vocabulary and the extent of reading comprehension (Schmitt et al., 2011). Nonetheless, as noted by Qian (2002), the depth of vocabulary is as imperative as vocabulary size in predicting academic reading performance. In other words, the mastery of academic vocabulary (technical terms, academic registers) is of paramount importance in addition to knowing common words.

Reader characteristic that also affects one's comprehension is familiarity with the topics in the reading. This refers to one's prior knowledge necessary to construct meaning and evaluate arguments presented by the authors of the articles. In a study addressing different factors associated with comprehension of academic texts, Kendeou & Van Den Broek (2007) revealed that prior knowledge affects readers' working memory.

Textual properties may correspondingly become an important factor in one's attempt of comprehending academic text. The structure of a text, for example, might help direct the readers to the points they are seeking as each sub generic structure consists of different functions. There is also evidence that text structure in interaction with one's prior knowledge shapes one's comprehension of a text (Kendeou & Van Den Broek, 2007). In addition, topics that interests the readers, physical layout of the text (fonts, indents, images) might also be influential in reading comprehension.

Another factor that defines successful academic reading comprehension is the task undertaken by the readers (Snow, 2010). The task demand for reading varies according to the educational and contextual situation. In a context, one might be required simply to read for information and simply remember new information to pass a test. On the other hand, in a different context, one might be required to construct meaning from text by evaluating the arguments of the authors and revisit his or her prior knowledge on the topic being read when necessary. This issue is perhaps relevant to the term surface and deep approach to reading (Hermida, 2009). Reading for information such as reading pamphlet, email, or chat does not require deep approach as it is intended to read for information which does not necessarily use a lot of cognitive resources and time. In the case of academic reading, the demand requires perhaps the top hierarchy of comprehension taxonomy.

In this paper, I aim to explore how EFL undergraduate experienced academic reading, particularly the reading of journal articles for thesis composition. It presents the experiences revealed by EFL undergraduates using narrative inquiry approach to research to depict how they came across reading such genre and what they encountered during the reading.

METHOD

Respondents

In this research, four students of English Language Education program at UIN Mataram, three males and one female, participated as subjects. The main consideration in selecting these participants was that they were final year students namely Ibra, Izal, Gee and Bee (pseudonyms) who were in the progress of composing their thesis proposals. Limited instruction of academic reading was obtained during their previous semester through a course

entitled critical reading which was equivalent to two credit hours. This course was the sole course that was mainly aimed to equip students with academic reading skills and strategies.

Instruments

To collect the data, semi-structured interviews were addressed to these participants in an individual fashion which took around twenty to thirty minutes per individual. During the interview, field notes were also created to capture the important traits these participants told. The interview covered a relatively adequate range of aspects such as how they came across academic reading requiring them to access scientific journal articles, the motivation behind reading the articles and how they experienced challenges during their reading.

Procedures

On different occasions, I interviewed each of the participants individually at around twenty to thirty minutes each. When the interview took place, I also asked for their consent to record their voice using a digital recorder. To ensure the data collected did not miss important events that could not be captured by the recorder, I also took field notes to supply the interview data. Along with these data collection techniques, I also engaged with these participants informally either through face-to-face interaction or through technology-mediated communication.

Data analysis

This research is based on narrative inquiry approach to research. Narrative inquiry elucidates stories about people's experiences and how they understand them (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). As a research methodology, narrative inquiry enables the researcher to carry out an in-depth study on one's experiences over time and in a milieu (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Since this research takes into account multiple participants with diverse individual stories, the narrative is based on thematic analysis. In the case of a small number of narratives, the analysis in narrative inquiry might be presented either by analyzing them per individual and treating them as diverse stories or by treating them collectively as a single case (Barkhuizen et al., 2013). Thus, the data of students' narratives were analyzed on the basis of themes that emerged from the comparison between narratives. The analysis also takes into account the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry which entails social, cultural, and institutional narratives. During analysis, I also did cross-check and confirmed the data with the participants to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis. Apart from these, this research was not intended for generalizability but offers rich data and in-depth analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

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This section presents and discusses the findings based on the storied experiences exposed by the participants which cover two main themes in their stories, namely motivation and challenges.

Motivations to Read Journal Articles

At first, I had no idea what this was for

When I interviewed Ibra, I found him to have no hesitation to tell his story and to have strong confidence. This is not surprising as in his campus, he led the English Students Association. Ibra's acquaintance with journal article began when he was in the early semesters of his education. During these semesters he was required to read journal articles as part of several course materials. He once questioned the significance of reading such academic texts as he believed that the best source or references would be a textbook, similar to what he experienced during his secondary school. He described his journey of reading journal articles as more intensive when he was in the final year of his study. At this stage, he started thinking and began to realize how important reading journal articles was particularly for his thesis preparation. According to Ibra, there was also an obligation either from the institutions or from the lecturers to read at least ten journal articles before he could come up with a research title. Nonetheless, the demand for journal articles might be partially due to its availability and currency (Hamilton, 2018). Ibra tends to believe that journal articles could help him better structure his thesis and assure him about the validity and accuracy of his research thesis. However, it should be noted that undergraduates are novice readers (Hamilton, 2018), therefore the students need not only supervision during thesis writing but also supervision when reading journal articles.

"We started reading journal articles from the early semesters, but we did not know what the significance of doing so. However, in the fifth semester we realized how important reading the articles is. Our lecturer also suggested to search for references in the form of journal articles. Reading articles are more intensive when we reached the last semesters, fifth or sixth semester of our education since we know that we were going to write a thesis proposal. Why do we read journal articles? Because we will know more vocabulary words, the way to write academically which will be our preliminaries in composing a thesis proposal. Besides, our thesis requires valid and accurate resources; therefore, journal articles meet the criteria. We have to read approximately more than ten articles."

I need it as a model

Izal was taking journal article seriously when he was aware that in the upcoming semester, he should have prepared a title for his thesis. He thought that a title would not come up unless he tried to read several relevant articles. He admitted that his knowledge to project his future research was inadequate, therefore he needed more sources to assure himself about his research topic. As perceived by Izal, the research article also functioned as a model or a template that can help him better structure his thesis. The term 'template' narrated by Izal

probably reflects what is-called intertextuality, the relationship between a text with other texts surrounding it. Bazerman and Prior (2003), for instance, expands the view of intertextuality not only which texts one is referring to, but also the way they are used, the purposes of using them, and most importantly how the writer positions himself with respect to the previous publications. What Izal was experiencing with the articles is intertextual analysis, allowing him to explore more and position himself among the sea of words in journal articles.

“I started to think about reading journal articles as soon as we were informed in the sixth semester that we were allowed to propose a title for the thesis. Ever since, I tried to search for articles and read. Therefore, before proposing the title I already read several articles. By reading the articles, I felt like I could come up with more specific title, it was not up in the air and I could have real title and references. In addition, it becomes a template for me to compose a thesis proposal; some parts share similarities with thesis like the abstract, introduction, and soon. If I do not read the articles, my knowledge is not enough for composing the thesis. It also helps me expand my insights on the structure of academic writings.”

It is easier to access and up-to-date

At the time of the interview with Gee, he had already proposed three research titles for his thesis and all of which were strongly related to technology-mediated instruction. As a relatively new area of research, these topics required updated references that were specific and relevant. After several attempts, Gee realized that he could find pertinent references mostly from journal articles and barely found few from books. It was interesting to hear that Gee signals the obligation of reading journal articles and makes them references for title proposal (i.e five references per title with most of them are articles) which seems to be an institutional policy. This phenomenon occurs since there is an assumption that textbooks are quickly dated, but journal articles provide recent knowledge (Hamilton, 2018). However, it seems to be difficult for Gee to find out matching references for his research topic. This is in line with Hamilton’s (2018) experience that his students struggled in terms of finding relevant sources and coherently as well as cohesively writing about research topics. Apparently, Gee’s decision on reading journal articles is an essential one as he found it helpful for more insights for thesis proposal although what drove him to do so tends to be external pressure from the study program.

“I started reading journal articles when I want to propose a title for my thesis, about a week before. The English department requires us to propose three titles ad each of which requires at least five references either from books or journal articles and mine is mostly based on journal articles. Journal articles are more up-to-date for scientific information which provides more information for my research topic, the Use of YouTube in speaking class. I can hardly find books that give information on this title. Creating the title is easy, but finding out the reference is hard. I read the articles to gain more academic insights and also to help me finish my course projects, and the most significant one is to help me compose my thesis proposal.”

I need it before my consultation with thesis supervisors

When I had her interviewed, Bee seemed to be a bit hesitant to talk. She did not tell me a lot of things, so I elicited some information from her. Bee started reading journal articles seriously two weeks prior to her first consultation with her supervisors. She admitted that she needed to equip herself with ‘academic ammunition’ when she came to her supervisors. Bee’s story on his journey in the writing of thesis proposal signals the social practice between she and her supervisor. Reading these articles helps her to project her thesis. Bees’s motivation seems to be an anticipating step prior to her thesis consultation with her supervisor. In other words, her motivation is driven by the demand which signals controlled motivation. This type of motivation might be in the form of both external regulations (task given by the supervisors or the institution) or by introjected regulation (pressure not to let her supervisors down, pride to show her progress in reading journal articles). However, controlled motivation is not always beneficial. As pointed by De Naeghel, Van Keer, Vansteenkiste, & Rosseel (2016), dedicated reading engagement will likely be hindered by tension and pressure of controlled motivation. Therefore, simply relying on controlled motivation does not seem to be the only factor in reading engagement and joy. Teachers or supervisors should, therefore, scaffold and arrange the reading for the students to foster the internal impetus or inner drive to upscale the quality of the reading process.

“I started reading articles before I consult to my supervisor which is about two weeks before my title is accepted. My aim of reading these articles is to get direction in writing my thesis proposal so that there would a description of how my thesis is going to be. Thus, they can be my references in the thesis.”

Challenges in Reading Journal Articles

I could only digest half of the ideas in the articles

When narrating his experience about reading journal articles, I noticed that Ibra encountered complexities and a tough challenge in terms of text accessibility and text comprehension. At first, he narrated that after a few trials it was quite hard for him to get access to reputable journals as many are paid journals and he also encountered difficulties in locating the best matching references. Fortunately, he found out that certain websites such as Springer and Science direct provided search options for subject-related references, yet most of the articles provided by these services are paid. To overcome the challenge, he used third party apps to retrieve the articles. This strategy was once modeled by his lecturer and then he was able to do so by himself. In terms of text comprehension, he revealed that he could not understand a lot of difficult vocabulary and technical terms. As a result, he never really grasped the whole ideas in the text. Interestingly, he admitted that he also had no idea how these technical terms and unfamiliar vocabulary are pronounced as he needed the

pronunciation for further steps such as oral thesis examination. As Ibra demonstrates, his problem with reading was difficult vocabulary. This was probably due to insufficient vocabulary inventory (Chen, 2017). However, as indicated by Ibra, complicated technical terms represent the breadth of vocabulary he has. In other words, the mastery of vocabulary for academic reading does not solely depend on the size of the inventory but also the depth of vocabulary (Qian, 2002). This highlights the necessity of preparing students with academic vocabulary instruction before they proceed to read peer-reviewed journals.

“Since we came across difficult vocabulary, it takes much time to digest the ideas and we could not understand all the ideas in the articles. Thus, we could only understand half of the articles, since there are some familiar words. We have limited vocabulary, we do not use complicated technical terms, we do not know some words’ pronunciation too.”

I’m getting bored

Izal did not encounter difficulties when accessing journal articles relevant to his topic. He usually typed the topic on Google search then several articles links popped out and he chose the most relevant ones. At first, Izal was highly motivated to read journal articles as he felt challenged to do so. Izal himself was a curious student and had strong motivation to graduate very soon. However, as time passed, he began to feel the boredom of reading such texts. Along with this boredom, he narrated that his ability to grasp ideas from journal articles was poor; he managed to catch the ideas in about a quarter of the text without dictionary help. Similar to his peers, the breadth of vocabulary was also the main concern in dealing with academic reading. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Izal, the most daunting task was to understand the ideas in the articles, especially those published in peer-reviewed international journals. As warned by Hamilton (2018), texts in peer-reviewed journals are intended for expert readers. Therefore, understanding texts intended for experts would be incredibly painful for Izal who was a novice academic reader. Hamilton (2018) also argued that lecturers who have pursued postgraduate study tend to unconsciously adapt the standards they had used during their study into their instruction or supervision. In the case of Izal, his boredom in the middle of the reading process reflects the reader’s characteristics which result in less reading engagement. Along with text properties and contexts, reader characteristics plays a considerable role in text comprehension (Kendeou & Van Den Broek, 2007).

“The content of the article is the most difficult part especially those from international journals which use English. The vocabulary used is quite different from our daily vocabulary. The words used are advanced technical terms. Without the help of dictionary, I can only figure out the contents at about 25 %, while if assisted with dictionary I could understand around 60 % of the articles’ contents. I was usually highly motivated in the beginning of reading the articles, but in the middle of which I usually get bored.”

There are many unfamiliar words

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Gee told me that during his journey to research proposal, he encountered complex vocabulary when extracting information from journal articles. He tried to read around twenty five journal articles. According to Gee, his lack of vocabulary caused him to be unable to grasp the meaning of the texts he read. When I asked him to describe those journals, he seemed to be hesitant and admitted that he did not really take into account the information on the article authors as well as the titles. He just focused on the key words or research variables in the articles. It took around ten minutes for him to extract information from each article. He said that such fast reading was due to the fact that he just read the abstracts as preliminaries. When he thought the articles were getting interesting and he felt he needed more information, he would go to the other sections, particularly the findings and conclusion. Although Gee simply mentioned lacking vocabulary and understanding unfamiliar words as the challenges, understanding text is more than just understanding words as part of text properties. In this sense, what was said by Gee represents a lack of understanding of contextual clues that help figure out the meaning of the unfamiliar words. Therefore, it is inevitable to say that understanding context plays a pivotal role apart from literal understanding of the words. Although journal articles are indeed good models for undergraduate students, reading journal articles is not simply about the amount of information processed by the readers but also about how the readers can employ higher-order cognitive skills to evaluate arguments the authors of the articles presented in their articles.

“I could figure out some parts of the article, maybe around 60% is understandable for me. I think I am also lack of vocabulary, there were also unfamiliar scientific words that I heard for the first time which make it hard to understand.”

Translation does not even help

An attempt to figure out the ideas in the text requires complex cognitive processes. This is what Bee experienced during her reading; understanding difficult and unfamiliar words takes time for her because of longer cognitive processing. The ability to derive meaning from context is reflected by the knowledge of vocabulary (McGinnis & Zelinski, 2000). With strong vocabulary competence, one would be able to derive meaning with the concepts of well-developed and accurate familiar words. The failure in understanding unfamiliar words experienced by Bee, even after translated, reflects a lack of discourse competence. From what she narrated, the characteristics of challenges she came across are quite similar to his peers with an exception of confusing translated text and differences in textual organizations among different articles. The confusing translation in this respect perhaps partially shows that understanding words meaning is not sufficient in decoding the text meaning. Although relatively insignificant, the role of mistranslation might be a partial

factor, yet more importantly, as highlighted by Kendeu & Van Den-Broek (2007), readers' quantity and quality of prior knowledge with regard to the text topics are imperative. Furthermore, as a part of text properties, the structure of a text also helps the reader's understanding of the ideas which codetermines the likelihood of acquisition of textual ideas (Kendeou & Van Den Broek, 2007).

“Reading the articles is time consuming. It is also hard to understand the difficult words, even after I translated them. Some articles have no abstract so I have to read the whole articles, so that it is hard to make conclusions.”

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it becomes evident, though not generalizable, that students' motivation to read journal articles was due to external pressure and tension as a result of institutional policy from the English language study program. Some of the participants also mentioned about the availability and currency, models for structuring thesis, as well as preparation prior to consulting thesis to supervisors. Nonetheless, their motivation intertwines with challenges in the comprehension of the articles such as challenging academic vocabulary, boredom and failed reading strategies. Therefore, as suggested by Hamilton (2018), there should be assistance from the teachers or supervisors for good journal articles selection in terms of structure, complexity, and readability that provides models. The journal articles selected should reflect simple and explicit structure and are written in a way that addresses a wide range of audiences including novice academic readers as well as uses a variety of lexicogrammatical features that are not too complex.

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