

Exploring Reading Comprehension Difficulties among First-Semester Students in Statistics and Computer Systems Engineering at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia

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Article Info

Article history:

Accepted: 05 January 2026

Publish: 14 January 2026

Keywords:

reading comprehension

EFL learners

reading difficulties

vocabulary

reading sub-skill

Abstract

This study explores the reading comprehension difficulty encountered by first-semester students in the Statistics Department and Computer Systems Engineering Department at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia. A descriptive quantitative design was employed, involving 25 students. Data were obtained using a 50-item reading comprehension test and a structured questionnaire. The reading comprehension test covers six reading subskills: identification of the main idea, recognition of references, inferencing, vocabulary knowledge, locating specific information, and understanding detailed information. The findings show that students from both departments still face significant difficulty in comprehending reading texts, as reflected in their low-test performance. Understanding vocabulary was the most difficult aspect (71.08%), followed by determining the main idea (62.67%), making inferences (52.8%), finding detailed information (44%), finding specific information (35.5%), and identifying references (23.33%). The study also revealed that students' reading comprehension difficulties were influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors included limited vocabulary, weak grammatical competence, low reading strategies, and poor concentration. External factors included limited family support and insufficient English learning resources. The study recommends that instructional efforts should focus on systematic vocabulary development, explicit grammar instruction, effective reading strategies, and increased access to English reading materials to improve students' reading comprehension.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English has become the dominant language of academic and scientific communication. For EFL students in higher education, the ability to comprehend English texts is a fundamental requirement, as a substantial proportion of academic resources, including journals, textbooks, and research articles, are written in English (Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Snow & Matthews, 2021). Therefore, reading comprehension is a vital requirement for successfully learning across disciplines (Wu et al., 2017). Previous studies have consistently shown that reading competence is closely associated with learning outcomes and overall academic performance (Dardjito et al., 2023; González-Betancor et al., 2023).

Despite its importance, many EFL students—including those in the Statistics and Computer Systems Engineering programs at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia—experience considerable difficulties in understanding English academic texts. Bottom of Form Reading is not merely a process of word recognition; rather, it is a complex cognitive activity resulting from the interaction between

the reader, the text, and the reader's prior knowledge (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Reading comprehension, therefore, refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and construct meaning from written texts. According to Grabe and Stoller (2019), effective reading requires the integration of linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, and the strategic use of reading skills. Thus, reading comprehension is an active cognitive process in which readers combine linguistic knowledge, prior knowledge, and strategic reading skills to derive meaning from written texts.

Reading comprehension is a complex cognitive process; students need to master several essential reading skills. According to Nuttall (2005), there are several key aspects of reading comprehension, including identifying main ideas, locating specific information, making inferences, understanding vocabulary in context, and recognizing text organization. Students need to grasp these aspects of reading comprehension. Inadequate mastery of these skills frequently leads to reading difficulties, particularly when students process academic and technical texts.

Students' difficulties in comprehending texts are influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include learners' attitudes toward reading, such as interest and motivation, as well as their prior knowledge, which plays a crucial role in facilitating text comprehension (Casicas & Quirap, 2023). External factors involve instructional practices, teaching techniques, and learning environments, including family support, school context, and the availability of learning facilities and resources, which significantly affect students' reading development in EFL higher education contexts (Aini, 2024; Kadusale & Tepacia, 2025).

Considering the important role of reading comprehension in academic success and the challenges often faced by EFL students, it is essential to investigate students' reading comprehension problems and the factors contributing to them. This study aims to examine the reading comprehension difficulties experienced by first-semester students of the Statistics and Computer Science Engineering Departments and identify the internal and external factors influencing their comprehension of English texts. Based on observations conducted by the researchers, these students are required to read many English academic texts, but they still face many challenges in comprehending English texts.

Previous studies related to students' reading difficulties have been conducted by many researchers. Dardjito et al. (2023) reported that non-English major students frequently experience difficulties in comprehending English academic texts due to limited vocabulary, insufficient grammatical knowledge, and ineffective reading strategies. Other studies also revealed that Indonesian EFL students experienced multiple reading comprehension difficulties, such as challenges in understanding vocabulary, finding main ideas, and applying reading strategies in academic texts (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023; Baiti & Sofa, 2023). However, these previous studies focused on general EFL learners. This study, then, aims to examine reading comprehension difficulties experienced by first-semester students in the Statistics and Computer Systems Engineering Departments at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia and identify the internal and external factors affecting first-semester students' understanding of English academic texts in technical disciplines. It is expected that the findings can contribute to the improvement of reading instruction and strategy-based learning in higher education contexts.

2. METHOD

This study employs a descriptive research design using a mixed-instrument approach, combining quantitative and qualitative instruments. The research is categorized as descriptive because it aims to describe and analyze students' difficulties in reading comprehension. The use of both quantitative and qualitative instruments enables the researcher to obtain comprehensive and in-depth data on students' reading comprehension difficulties. The quantitative data were collected through a multiple-choice reading comprehension test, while the qualitative data were obtained through a questionnaire. The

combination of both instruments strengthens the research findings, as the questionnaire data are used to support and explain the results of the reading comprehension test.

The research procedures consisted of three main stages. First, testing was conducted by giving the students a reading comprehension test. Second, the test results were analyzed descriptively to identify students' difficulties in reading comprehension. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the results of the data analysis.

The participants of this study were 25 first-semester students from the Department of Statistics and Computer Systems Engineering at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia who took the English course in the academic year 2025/2026.

The research instruments used were a reading comprehension test and a questionnaire. A reading comprehension test was taken from the reading section of the TOEFL test, consisting of 50 multiple-choice questions and designed to measure the aspects of reading comprehension as proposed by Nuttall (2005): identifying the main idea, finding specific information, finding detailed information, making inferences, identifying references, and understanding vocabulary. A closed-ended questionnaire with alternative answers was distributed to the students to gather more concrete data on the factors influencing their difficulties with reading comprehension questions.

For data analysis, the results of the students' test are analyzed or calculated with the scale adopted from Arikunto (1989).

$$S = \frac{R}{N} \times 100\%$$

Where:

S = Correct Percentage

R = Correct answers

N = Total Questions

The classification of students' reading ability in this research was adapted and modified from Arikunto (2010).

Table 1. The Interval of Reading Ability

Score	Classification
85.00-100	very good
69.0-85.00	good
55.00-69.00	fair
00.00-55.00	low

The difficulty index classification follows the criteria proposed by Arikunto (2010).

Table 2. Classification of Value Difficulty

Interval	Classification
0– 30	Easy
30 – 70	Fair
71-100	Difficult

The students' responses in answering the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics by calculating the frequency and percentage of students' responses.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

A reading comprehension test was given to 25 students and consisted of 50 questions adapted from a TOEFL test. These items were designed to measure six aspects of reading comprehension adopted from Nuttal (2005), including identifying the main idea, recognizing references, making inferences, understanding vocabulary, locating specific information, and obtaining detailed information. The aspects of the reading comprehension test are presented as follows:

Table 3: The Aspects of Reading Comprehension Test

The Aspect of Reading	Number Item	Total
Determining the main idea	1,2,11, 21, 31, 41	6
Identifying reference	5, 15, 28, 37, 39, 48	6
Making inference	10, 12, 35, 40, 49	5
Understanding vocabulary	4,6,7,16,18,22,26,29,33,36,38,42,43	13
Finding Specific Information	3, 8, 13, 20, 24, 25, 44, 46	8
Finding Detailed Information	9,14,17,19,23,27,30,32,34,45,47, 50	12

Based on a score classification system, the students' reading proficiency levels are presented in the following table:

Table 4: The Frequency of Students' Reading Test

Classification	Score	Frequency	Percentage
Very good	85.00-100	-	
Good	69.0-85.00	5	20
Fair	55.00-69.00	6	24
Poor/low	00.00-55.00	14	56

The findings indicate that most of first semester students in the Statistical and Computer Science Engineering department at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia achieved low scores on the reading comprehension test. As shown in Table 4, none of the students fell into the very good category, while only five students (20%) achieved good scores. Six students (24%) were classified as fair. In contrast, more than half of the students (56%) were categorized as poor. This distribution of scores indicates that the first-semester students of the Statistical and Computer Science Engineering department of Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia still face significant difficulty in comprehending reading texts, as reflected in their low-test performance.

In the reading comprehension test, six items focus on identifying the main idea, specifically questions 1, 2, 11, 21, 31, and 41. Based on the difficulty index analysis, four items were classified as fair, while two items were categorized as difficult. The percentage analysis shows that the overall level of difficulty for main idea questions reached 62.67%, as presented in Table 5.

Table 5: The Calculation of the Percentage of Difficulty in Answering Main Idea Questions

No	Question items' number	The number of incorrect answers	Percentage of difficulty per question item (%)	The percentage of reading for making inference (%)
1	1	16	64	62,67
2	2	16	64	
3	11	14	56	
4	21	20	80	
5	31	18	72	
6	41	10	40	

Although some items were classified as fair, more than half of the main idea questions (62.67%) were categorized as difficult, indicating that identifying the main idea remains a difficult aspect of reading comprehension for the students.

There were six questions designed to measure students' ability to locate references. These items are questions 5, 15, 28, 37, 39, and 48. The findings revealed that students' ability to locate references was categorized as easy, with an average difficulty percentage of 23.33%. Although it was categorized as easy, some students still made mistakes in locating references. Table 6 presents the percentage of difficulty in answering locating a reference.

Table 6: The Calculation of the Percentage of Difficulty in Answering the Locating Reference

No	Question items' number	The number of incorrect answers	Percentage of difficulty per question item (%)	The percentage of reading for making inference (%)
1	5	7	28	23,33
2	15	7	28	
3	28	6	24	
4	37	3	12	
5	39	7	28	
6	48	5	20	

Students' inferencing ability was measured through five reading test items in the reading test, namely Questions 10, 12, 35, 40, and 49. The analysis of item difficulty shows different levels across these questions. Questions 10 and 12 were classified as easy, questions 35 and 40 as fair, and question 49 as difficult. The total difficulty percentage for inference questions was 52.8%, categorized as a fair level of difficulty. The findings showed that students can draw inferences from explicit textual information, but they may encounter problems when they are required to interpret implicit information within the passage.

Table 7: The Calculation of the Percentage of Difficulty in Answering Making Inferences

No	Question items' number	The number of incorrect answers	Percentage of difficulty per question item (%)	The percentage of reading for making inference (%)
1	10	13	52	52.8
2	12	8	32	
3	35	14	56	
4	40	14	56	
5	49	17	68	

A total of 8 items in the reading test (items 3, 8, 13, 20, 24, 25, 44, and 46) were intended to evaluate students' ability to find specific information. Based on the item difficulty index, one item (question 8) was classified as *easy*, while six items (questions 3, 13, 20, 24, 25, and 46) fell into the *fair* category. Overall, the majority of items assessing the ability to locate specific information demonstrated a *fair* level of difficulty, with an average difficulty percentage of 35.5%. These results indicate that most students were able to answer these items correctly, although their performance was still not optimal. Table 8 shows the percentage of difficulties in identifying specific information.

Table 8: The Calculation of the Percentage of Difficulties in Answering Specific Information

No	Question items' number	The number of incorrect answers	Percentage of difficulty per question item (%)	The percentage of reading for making inference (%)
1	3	10	40	35,5
2	8	6	24	
3	13	8	32	
4	20	9	36	
5	24	13	52	
6	25	9	36	
7	44	8	32	
8	46	8	32	

There are 13 reading test items developed to assess students' vocabulary. The results of the test showed that the level of difficulty in answering vocabulary questions ranged from 48% to 88%. 7 items (questions 4,6,7,16,29,33,42) were classified as difficult, while 6 items (questions 18,22,26,36,38, and 43) were categorized as fair. Overall, the findings revealed that students experienced a high vocabulary difficulty level of 71.08% in comprehending the reading texts. It suggests that most students struggled with understanding vocabulary in the reading texts. The following table shows the percentage of difficulty in understanding vocabulary:

Table 9: The Calculation of the Percentage of Difficulties in Answering Vocabulary

No	Question items' number	The number of incorrect answers	Percentage of difficulty per question item (%)	The percentage of reading for making inference (%)
1	4	18	72	71,08
2	6	22	88	
3	7	20	80	
4	16	20	80	
5	18	17	68	
6	22	16	64	
7	26	17	68	
8	29	18	72	
9	33	18	72	
10	36	17	68	
11	38	17	68	
12	42	19	76	
13	43	12	48	

Twelve items in the reading test were designed to assess students' ability to identify detailed information, namely questions 9, 14, 17, 19, 23, 27, 30, 32, 34, 45, 47, and 50. Based on the difficulty analysis, all of these items were classified as having a fair level of difficulty. The average difficulty for detailed information questions was 45%, indicating a moderate/fair level of difficulty in identifying detailed information in the text.

Table 9: The Calculation of the Percentage of Difficulties in Answering Detailed Information

No	Question items' number	The number of incorrect answers	Percentage of difficulty per question item (%)	The percentage of reading for making inference (%)
1	4	18	72	71,08
2	6	22	88	
3	7	20	80	
4	16	20	80	
5	18	17	68	
6	22	16	64	
7	26	17	68	
8	29	18	72	
9	33	18	72	
10	36	17	68	
11	38	17	68	
12	42	19	76	
13	43	12	48	

Based on the results of the reading comprehension test, it can be concluded that students experienced different levels of difficulty in each reading aspect. Understanding vocabulary was identified as the most difficult aspect (71.08%), followed by determining the main idea (62.67%), making inferences (52.8%), finding detailed information (45%), and finding specific information (35.5%). In contrast, identifying references appears to be the least difficult aspect, with a percentage of 23.33%. Table 10 shows the percentage distribution of difficulty levels across various reading comprehension aspects

Table 10: The Percentage of Difficulty Items in Reading Comprehension Questions

Reading Aspect	The Percentage of Reading Difficulty
Understanding vocabulary	71.08 %
Determining the main idea	62.67%
Making inference	52.8%
Finding detailed information	45%
Finding specific information	35.5 %
Identifying reference	23,33%

The findings indicate that most first-semester students in the Statistics and Computer Systems Engineering Department at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia experienced difficulties in answering reading comprehension questions, reflecting students' low level of reading performance.

The Result of Questionnaire Analysis

Data concerning students' difficulties in answering reading comprehension tests were also collected through a closed-ended questionnaire distributed to the students. The questionnaire consisted of ten items addressing difficulties related to vocabulary, understanding the purpose of the text, concentration during reading, knowledge of reading strategies, family support for reading English texts, perceptions of the availability of learning resources in the library, identifying the main idea, making inferences, and understanding grammatical structures.

In terms of difficulties in understanding vocabulary, the majority of students (40%) reported that they always experienced problems in understanding vocabulary in reading texts. 15 students

(60%) often find difficulty. It indicated that vocabulary presents a significant challenge for students in reading comprehension tests, since all the students (100%) always and often found difficulty in answering the vocabulary questions in the reading comprehension test.

In understanding the intent of the text, 9 students (36%) stated that they always found this aspect difficult, while 18 students (64 %) reported that they often face difficulty. No students selected the options “seldom” or “never,” suggesting that interpreting the meaning or purpose of a text was perceived as difficult by all students.

Regarding concentration during reading comprehension tests, most students reported experiencing difficulties. Specifically, 7 out of 25 students (28 %) selected “always,” and 18 students (68%) chose “often.” None of the students reported seldom or never having difficulty concentrating. This indicates that concentration problems are a common issue among students that may affect their reading comprehension performance during tests.

In terms of applying reading strategies, the findings showed that the majority of students did not apply reading strategies during reading comprehension tests. About 72% of students reported they seldom or never used such strategies. This result suggests that students’ awareness and application of effective reading strategies remain limited.

With respect to family motivation, only a limited number of students reported receiving consistent support. 5 students (20%) indicated that they always received support, while 9 students (36 %) selected often. Meanwhile, 11 students (44%) reported seldom and never receiving family support. These findings suggest that students’ reading difficulties may be influenced by insufficient family encouragement in learning English.

Regarding the availability of learning resources, almost all the students (88%) stated that only limited English learning materials are available in the library, while only 12% students believed that sufficient English books were available. This lack of resources may hinder students’ opportunities to practice and improve their English reading skills.

In identifying the main idea of a text, 48% of the students reported that they often had difficulty in identifying the main idea, while 44% stated that they always faced difficulty. This suggests that identifying the main idea is difficult for the majority of students. This result is in line with the result of the reading comprehension test, which showed that 62.67% of the students made mistakes when answering questions related to the main idea of the text.

Almost all the students (92%) reported experiencing difficulties in understanding grammar and sentence structure when reading texts. These findings suggest that grammatical and structural problems significantly affect students’ overall reading comprehension. Limited grammatical and structural competence can make it difficult for students to understand complex sentences pattern, which in turn affects their ability to grasp the overall meaning of the text.

Similarly, all students experienced difficulties in making inferences, with 96% reporting that they often or always struggled to understand implicit meaning. This difficulty is closely related to students’ problems in identifying the main idea, as drawing inferences requires an understanding of the overall message of the text.

4. DISCUSSION

This study investigated students’ reading comprehension difficulties by integrating data from a reading comprehension test and a questionnaire. The integrated findings reveal that first-semester students of the Statistics and Computer Systems Engineering Department at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia have poor ability in comprehending English academic texts. Both test results and questionnaire data show strong evidence that their reading comprehension ability is generally low and influenced by some interrelated factors.

Understanding vocabulary was identified as the most serious difficulty. The result of the reading test showed that vocabulary items had the greatest difficulty index (71.08%), indicating that most students failed to understand word meanings accurately. This result is strongly supported by questionnaire data, in which all students reported frequent difficulty in understanding vocabulary. Nation (2013) emphasizes that vocabulary mastery is a fundamental skill for successful reading in a foreign language. A limited vocabulary restricts students' ability to process sentence meaning and interpret main ideas, which in turn affects their reading comprehension skills.

Another major problem was students' inability to determine the main idea of a text. The reading test results showed that more than half of the students (62.67%) answered main-idea questions incorrectly. It was consistent with questionnaire responses that showed almost all the students often or always struggled with this skill. According to Nuttall (2005), identifying the main idea requires integrating information across sentences and distinguishing important points from supporting details. The limited use of reading strategies may negatively affect their ability to identify the main idea.

Questionnaire results showed that 92% of students encountered problems in understanding grammar and sentence structure. Weakness in grammatical competence makes it difficult for the students to process complex sentences and recognize relationships between ideas, which negatively affects reading performance. This condition is reflected in the reading test results, especially in main-idea and inference questions. Strong support for this finding is provided by Zheng et al. (2024) and Mahanani et al. (2017), who reported a significant relationship between grammatical knowledge and reading comprehension. Grammar plays a foundational role in both sentence-level processing and higher-order comprehension, such as inference making and text integration. Insufficient grammatical competence tends to show lower reading achievement.

The finding in the reading test also revealed a moderate difficulty level (52.8%) for inference questions, which was supported by questionnaire data that showed almost all students struggled to understand students' implicit meaning. Making inferences requires readers to integrate explicit information with background knowledge (Nuttall, 2005). The findings suggest that weak grammar, limited vocabulary, and poor understanding of the main idea contribute to students' inferential difficulties, consistent with previous EFL studies.

Other findings suggest that students demonstrated a moderate ability in locating specific information in reading texts, as indicated by the fair difficulty level (35.5%). Locating specific information is generally considered a lower-level reading skill that relies on scanning and identifying explicitly stated details (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). Since this skill is surface-level processing, learners tend to perform better on literal comprehension tasks than on inferential or interpretive reading tasks, which require greater cognitive effort and deeper processing (Zheng et al., 2024; González-Betancor et al., 2023).

The questionnaire data also revealed non-linguistic factors that affect students' reading difficulties. Most students encountered problems with concentration during reading tests and had limited reading strategies, which may contribute to their reading performance. According to Grabe (2009), successful reading requires the integration of multiple strategies. Many students also reported limited family support for learning English and inadequate English reading materials in the university library. Limited exposure to English texts reduces students' opportunities to practice reading and develop proficiency, which may negatively affect students' motivation and contribute to their low reading achievement.

In summary, the integrated findings indicated that students' reading comprehension difficulties are multidimensional. Linguistic factors, particularly limited vocabulary and weak grammatical knowledge, hinder higher-level skills such as identifying main ideas and making inferences. Cognitive and strategic factors, including low concentration and limited use of reading strategies, also hinder comprehension. Environmental factors, such as inadequate learning resources

and family support, also contribute to the problem. Therefore, instructional efforts should focus on systematic vocabulary development, explicit grammar instruction, effective reading strategies, family supports, and increased access to English reading materials to improve students' reading comprehension.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the first-semester students of the Department of Statistics and Computer Systems Engineering at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia experienced considerable difficulties in reading comprehension. The main difficulties were found in understanding vocabulary, identifying the main idea, understanding grammar and sentence structure, and making inferences. The study also reveals that students' reading comprehension difficulties were influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors included limited vocabulary knowledge, weak grammatical competence, low use of reading strategies, and poor concentration during reading. External factors included limited family support and insufficient English learning resources. These interrelated factors contribute to students' low reading comprehension performance.

Based on the findings, English lecturers are encouraged to strengthen students' vocabulary and grammar while explicitly teaching reading strategies such as identifying main ideas, making inferences, and understanding text organization. Students should practice reading English texts regularly, and institutions are expected to provide adequate learning resources to support reading comprehension development.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our grateful appreciation to all individuals who contributed to completing this paper. Gratitude to the lecturers of the Statistics and Computer Systems Engineering Department at Universitas AKPRIND Indonesia for their valuable guidance, academic support, and feedback. Special thanks are also extended to the students who willingly participated in this study for their cooperation and provide the required data. Deeply grateful to family and friends for motivation and encouragement.

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