

ACADEMIC READING CHALLENGES FACED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Academic reading is one of the most essential skills for university students because it supports reading comprehension, critical thinking, and academic achievement in higher education; however, many students still experience difficulties in understanding academic texts due to limited academic vocabulary, complex sentence structures, lack of effective reading strategies, low reading motivation, and distractions in digital learning environments. This study aims to identify and analyse the academic reading challenges faced by university students through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) by reviewing studies published between 2020 and 2025 from databases such as Google Scholar, ERIC, ScienceDirect, and ResearchGate. The findings reveal that students often struggle to comprehend scientific texts, maintain concentration while reading digital materials, and engage in deep-reading practices because of screen fatigue, multitasking habits, and social media distractions. These challenges significantly influence students' reading comprehension, critical thinking skills, and academic performance. The review also highlights that strategies such as vocabulary development, effective reading strategy instruction, critical reading practices, and academic support from lecturers and educational institutions are important in improving students' academic reading abilities and helping them achieve better learning outcomes in higher education.

Keywords: *Academic reading; university students; reading comprehension; digital learning; systematic literature review; academic literacy*

INTRODUCTION

Academic reading is one of the most essential skills for university students because it supports the learning process, critical thinking, and academic achievement. In higher education, students are required to read various academic texts, such as journals, textbooks, research articles, and scientific reports. Through academic reading, students are expected not only to understand information but also to analyze, evaluate, and critically connect ideas presented in a text, reading comprehension in higher education has a significant relationship with students' academic success. Therefore, reading ability serves as an important foundation for successful learning activities at the university level (Luque-Rojas & de-la-Peña, 2022).

However, many university students still experience difficulties in academic reading. These challenges include limited vocabulary knowledge, difficulties in understanding complex sentence structures, lack of reading strategies, low reading motivation, and problems identifying the main ideas of a text. A study conducted by (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022) revealed that students frequently encounter difficulties in understanding formal

words and academic vocabulary when reading scientific texts. Consequently, many students struggle to comprehend academic materials effectively, which negatively affects their academic performance and self-confidence in learning.

Recent studies have indicated that academic reading challenges remain a significant issue in higher education. Research conducted by Radiatan Mardiah et al. (2021) explained that students face various obstacles in digital reading, including difficulties in identifying main ideas, understanding detailed information, and maintaining focus while reading online academic materials. In addition, (Utimadini, 2021) found that students also experience eye strain, distractions, and difficulties maintaining concentration when reading online texts. These findings demonstrate that digital learning environments create additional challenges for students' academic reading practices (Arafat & Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, 2022).

Furthermore, the rapid development of digital technology and online learning has significantly changed students' reading habits. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, students have increasingly relied on digital learning resources. Although digital learning provides flexibility and accessibility, it also introduces new challenges such as screen fatigue, social media distractions, and reduced deep-reading practices. A study by (Khatri, 2021) showed that students in the digital era tend to spend more time using social media and online resources for academic purposes rather than engaging in in-depth reading of printed materials. This condition may influence students' reading patterns and comprehension of academic texts.

Based on these issues, it is important to examine and synthesize previous studies regarding the academic reading challenges faced by university students. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) can provide a comprehensive understanding of the most common difficulties experienced by students, the factors contributing to these challenges, and the possible solutions proposed by researchers. This review is expected to assist educators, researchers, and educational institutions in developing effective strategies to improve students' academic reading skills and support better learning outcomes in higher education.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic literature Review (SRL) design to identify, evaluate, and synthesize previous studies related to academic reading challenges among university students. The SLR method was chosen because it provides a systematic, comprehensive, and structured approach to reviewing existing research findings. According to (Kitchenham et al., 2007), a Systematic literature review is conducted through planned procedures to minimize bias in the processes of searching, selecting, and analyzing relevant studies. In this study, the SLR was used to examine the various difficulties experience by university students in academic reading, both in conventional and digital learning contexts. The study also aimed to identify the factors contributing to academic reading difficulties and the strategies that can improve students' reading abilities. Previous research has shown that academic reading skills are closely related to students' academic achievement and learning skills are closely related to students' academic achievement and learning success (Luque-Rojas & de-la-Peña, 2022). Therefore, the SLR approach was considered appropriate for collecting and synthesizing findings from previous studies regarding academic reading challenges among university students.

The literature search was conducted systematically using several academic databases, including Google Scholar, ERIC, ScienceDirect, and ResearchGate. These databases were selected because they provide access to scholarly journals and research articles relevant to academic reading in higher education. During the searching process, the researcher used several keywords such as academic reading challenges, reading comprehension in higher education, academic literacy, and digital reading difficulties. Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT were also used to obtain more specific and relevant search results. For example, the researcher applied combinations such as “academic reading” AND “university students” to locate studies discussing academic reading difficulties among university students. The search was limited to articles published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure that the data reflected recent developments in education, especially after the increased implementation of digital learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies conducted by (R. Mardiah et al., 2021) and (Utmadini, 2021) became important references in understanding the digital reading challenges experienced by students in online learning environments.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to ensure the quality, relevance, and credibility of the selected studies. The inclusion criteria consisted of several aspects. First, the study only included articles published between 2020 and 2025, while articles published before 2020 were excluded. Second, only articles written in English were considered, whereas articles written in languages other than English were excluded. Third, the selected studies focused on academic reading or reading comprehension among university students, while studies focusing on elementary or secondary school students were excluded. Fourth, the review included empirical studies published in reputable academic journals or scholarly publications, whereas non-empirical studies such as opinion papers, editorials, or unpublished works were excluded. Fifth, only articles providing full-text access for comprehensive analysis were included, while those without full-text access were excluded. Sixth, the study selected research specifically addressing academic reading difficulties, comprehension, vocabulary, or scientific texts in higher education contexts, while studies discussing general literacy without a specific focus on academic reading were excluded. Finally, only studies containing clear research findings and sufficient empirical data were included, whereas studies lacking clear empirical data or sufficient methodological explanation were excluded. The establishment of these criteria is essential in a systematic literature review to minimize bias and ensure transparency and rigor in study selection, as recommended by (Budgen et al., 2007) as well as the PRISMA Statement framework.

The study selection procedure was carried out through several systematic stages. First, the researcher identified relevant articles through database searches using predetermined keywords. Afterward, duplicate articles were removed to avoid repeated data. The next stage involved screening the titles and abstracts of the articles to evaluate their relevance to the research focus. Articles considered relevant were then reviewed in full text to ensure that they fulfilled all inclusion criteria. This selection process was conducted carefully so that only high-quality and relevant studies were included in the final analysis. The study also adapted the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to improve transparency and consistency in article selection. Through this systematic procedure, the researcher identified various academic reading challenges experienced by university students, including concentration problems and distractions while reading digital texts, as explained by (Darma Sabri et al., 2024).

Data extraction was conducted after the relevant articles had been selected. At this stage, the researcher systematically collected important information from each article using a data extraction table. The extracted information included the authors' names, publication year, research objectives, research methodology, number of participants, research findings, and factors influencing students' academic reading abilities. In addition, the researcher recorded the solutions or strategies proposed in previous studies to overcome academic reading difficulties. The data extraction process helped the researcher compare findings across studies and identify recurring themes. For example, the study by (Khatri, 2021) revealed that excessive use of social media and digital learning resources may reduce students' deep reading practices. Such findings became important components in the synthesis of the research data.

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic analysis. In this process, the researcher grouped the findings from previous studies into several major themes related to academic reading challenges. These themes included academic vocabulary difficulties, low reading comprehension, digital reading challenges, lack of reading motivation, and concentration problems in online learning environments. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to understand the relationships among the findings and identify the most common difficulties experienced by university students. The study conducted by (M. R. Mardiah & Safitri, 2023) found that students experienced difficulties identifying main ideas and understanding detailed information while reading academic texts digitally. Meanwhile, the study by (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022) showed that limited mastery of academic vocabulary was one of the major factors hindering students' reading comprehension. Through thematic analysis, the researcher was able to develop a comprehensive understanding of academic reading challenges in higher education.

Quality appraisal was conducted to ensure that the studies included in this review possessed adequate credibility and validity. Each article was evaluated based on several aspects, including the clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of methodology, validity of data, relevance to the research topic, and clarity of findings and conclusions. Studies with clear methodologies and reliable findings were prioritized in the analysis process. Quality appraisal is an important step in a systematic literature review because it helps researchers avoid using unreliable or irrelevant sources. Furthermore, this process ensured that the synthesized findings were based on studies with strong academic quality. Therefore, the results of this review are expected to provide a more accurate understanding of academic reading challenges among university students.

To maintain rigor and trustworthiness, this study applied systematic and transparent procedures throughout all stages of the review process. The researcher established clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to reduce selection bias. Furthermore, the use of multiple academic databases increased the comprehensiveness and diversity of the research sources. Consistency was also maintained during the processes of data extraction and thematic analysis to ensure the reliability of the findings. All articles included in this review were obtained from reputable academic publications and properly cited according to their original sources. By applying these procedures, the study aimed to produce valid and credible findings regarding academic reading challenges experienced by university students in the digital learning era. The findings from studies conducted by (Luque-Rojas & de-la-Peña, 2022), (R. Mardiah et al., 2021), and (Khatri, 2021) also strengthened the trustworthiness of this review.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The findings of this systematic literature review indicate that academic reading remains one of the major challenges faced by university students in higher education. Based on the reviewed studies, students experience difficulties in understanding academic texts because of several main factors, including limited academic vocabulary, complex sentence structures, lack of reading strategies, low reading motivation, and distractions in digital learning environments.

One of the major findings is students' limited mastery of academic vocabulary. Many university students have difficulty understanding scientific terms, formal expressions, and discipline-specific vocabulary commonly used in journals, textbooks, and research articles. This limitation affects students' ability to comprehend academic texts effectively. (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022) explained that insufficient academic vocabulary significantly influences students' reading comprehension and academic performance.

Another important finding is students' difficulty in understanding complex sentence structures. Academic texts usually contain long sentences, formal language, and dense information that require higher-order reading skills. Many students struggle to connect ideas between paragraphs and interpret the writer's meaning deeply. As a result, students need more time to process information, and their comprehension of academic materials becomes less effective.

The reviewed studies also reveal that many students lack effective reading strategies. Students often read academic materials passively without applying strategies such as skimming, scanning, note-taking, summarizing, and critical questioning. Consequently, students fail to identify main ideas, supporting details, and important information from the text. The absence of critical reading practices also limits students' ability to analyze and evaluate academic information.

Low reading motivation is another major challenge found in this review. Some students consider academic reading difficult, stressful, and time-consuming. Because of this negative perception, students become less interested in reading academic texts deeply and prefer short summaries or simplified materials instead of full scientific articles. Low reading motivation negatively affects students' engagement in learning activities and influences their academic achievement.

In the digital era, academic reading challenges have become more complicated due to the increasing use of technology and online learning. Many students experience distractions while reading digital texts because of social media, notifications, and multitasking habits. Studies conducted by (R. Mardiah et al., 2021) and (Utimadini, 2021) found that students also experience screen fatigue, eye strain, and difficulties maintaining concentration while reading online academic materials. As a result, students tend to practice surface reading rather than deep reading.

Another important finding is that academic reading challenges directly influence students' critical thinking abilities. Students who struggle to understand academic texts also experience difficulties analyzing information, evaluating arguments, and connecting theories with learning contexts. These problems affect the quality of assignments, classroom discussions, research activities, and students' overall academic performance.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, it can be understood that academic reading is not simply a reading activity but also a cognitive process involving comprehension, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of information critically. Therefore, students need strong language proficiency, effective reading strategies, and high learning motivation to understand academic texts successfully.

Difficulties in understanding academic vocabulary indicate that vocabulary mastery has a strong relationship with students' reading comprehension. Students with limited vocabulary knowledge often struggle to understand scientific concepts and academic texts. Therefore, academic vocabulary development becomes one of the most important aspects of improving students' academic reading skills.

Besides linguistic factors, changes in digital learning environments also significantly influence students' reading habits. Online learning provides flexibility and accessibility, but it also creates many distractions that reduce students' focus and concentration. The habit of reading short digital content decreases students' deep-reading practices and weakens their ability to engage critically with academic texts.

The lack of effective reading strategies is another issue that needs attention. Many students do not fully understand how to apply academic reading strategies effectively. In fact, strategies such as skimming, scanning, note-taking, summarizing, and critical reading are highly beneficial in improving comprehension and helping students become active readers. With proper reading strategies, students can process academic information more efficiently and critically.

Reading motivation also plays an important role in academic reading success. Students with high reading motivation are usually more active in searching for information, reading deeply, and developing critical thinking skills. In contrast, students with low motivation often avoid academic texts and only read materials when necessary to complete assignments.

To overcome these challenges, support from lecturers and educational institutions is necessary. Lecturers should provide training in academic reading strategies, vocabulary development, and critical reading practices. Educational institutions should also create supportive learning environments that promote academic literacy and digital literacy so that students can use technology effectively for learning purposes.

Overall, the reviewed studies demonstrate that improving students' academic reading skills requires systematic support from educators and institutions. Academic reading should not be considered only as students' individual responsibility but also as an important component of higher education that needs continuous guidance and development.

CONCLUSION

Based on this systematic literature review, it can be concluded that university students still face various challenges in academic reading. These challenges include limited academic vocabulary, difficulties understanding complex sentence structures, lack of effective reading strategies, low reading motivation, and distractions in digital learning environments. These challenges directly affect students' reading comprehension, critical thinking abilities, and academic performance.

The development of technology and digital learning environments has also significantly influenced students' reading habits. Although online learning provides

flexibility and easier access to information, digital environments may reduce concentration, increase distractions, and weaken students' deep-reading practices. Therefore, students need strong digital literacy skills to use technology effectively in academic learning.

To improve students' academic reading skills, several strategies are necessary, including academic vocabulary development, effective reading strategy instruction, critical reading practices, and academic support from lecturers and educational institutions. With proper support, students are expected to improve their reading comprehension, develop critical thinking skills, and achieve better academic outcomes.

In conclusion, academic reading is an essential skill that strongly determines students' success in higher education. Therefore, continuous efforts are needed to improve students' academic reading abilities and critical literacy skills in both traditional and digital learning environments.

Furthermore, the findings of this review indicate that academic reading challenges should not be viewed solely as individual student problems but as educational issues that require systematic support from higher education institutions. Universities should provide academic literacy programs, reading workshops, and learning resources that help students strengthen their reading comprehension and critical thinking abilities. Likewise, lecturers play an important role in guiding students to apply effective reading strategies and engage actively with academic texts. Such support can enhance students' confidence, motivation, and overall academic achievement (Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000); OECD, 2021).

Finally, this review highlights the need for further research on academic reading challenges in diverse educational contexts and disciplines. Future studies are recommended to investigate the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as digital reading platforms, academic vocabulary instruction, and critical reading training programs, in improving students' academic reading performance. In addition, research involving larger and more diverse participant groups may provide a broader understanding of how technological developments continue to influence students' reading habits and comprehension in higher education settings (Baron, 2021); Khasawneh et al., 2023).

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