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## Literal Reading in Academic English Texts among EFL Undergraduate Thesis Writers: A Mixed-Method Exploration

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### Abstract

This research investigated how EFL undergraduate thesis writers engage in and perceive literal reading when working with academic English texts. An explanatory sequential mixed-method design was employed, involving questionnaire data from 38 undergraduate thesis writers and follow-up interviews with seven purposively selected participants. Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively, while qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that students actively engage in literal reading strategies such as scanning, highlighting, and translation, and report strong confidence in locating explicit information, identifying main ideas, and recognizing cohesive ties in academic texts. However, interview data revealed that their reading performance is frequently constrained by limited vocabulary and the structural complexity of academic texts, leading students to rely on compensatory rather than fluent reading practices. Overall, the findings suggest that literal reading remains a foundational yet insufficiently developed component of academic literacy among EFL undergraduate thesis writers. This research contributes to the literature by highlighting the gap between students' perceived literal reading competence and the actual lexical and structural demands of academic English, underscoring the need for explicit instructional support in vocabulary development and literal reading strategies in higher education contexts.

**Keywords:** *Academic text; EFL undergraduate students; Literal reading; Mixed method.*



## 1. Introduction

Reading comprehension lies as a fundamental component of language learning, especially in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Grabe and Stoller (2019) propose that reading comprehension can enable learners to construct knowledge and engage critically with the text across other disciplines. In the context of higher education, reading is considered not only as a skill for understanding the literal information in the text but also becomes a gateway to support students' ability in synthesizing arguments, evaluating sources, and producing academic writing (Hyland, 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, the literal reading represents the most basic level of reading comprehension, which involves the direct retrieval of explicitly stated information from a text (Day & Park, 2005). It consists of identifying definitions, facts, ideas, and relationships clearly presented in the text. Although the literal reading may appear as a low-level skill, some findings suggest that weakness at the literal reading level can undermine students' ability to perform higher-order tasks such as inferential or critical reading (Alderson, 2000; Grabe, 2009). When students misread or overlook explicit information, their overall understanding of academic material becomes fragile (Nation, 2022). This can be interpreted that literal reading forms the cognitive framework upon which deeper interpretation is built.

In academic reading contexts, literal reading presents persistent challenges, particularly in environments where instructional emphasis is placed on critical and inferential comprehension (Snow, 2010). Previous research has reported that EFL undergraduate thesis writers frequently face difficulties in identifying explicit ideas in complex academic texts due to the density of information, vocabulary issues, and unfamiliar specific terminology (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; Eriksson, 2023; Syamsu & Hadijah, 2023). The issue then becomes more pronounced in the context of academic English texts, for instance, where syntactic and lexical complexity of journal articles and research papers can obscure surface-level meaning (Sahiruddin, 2019; Martin, Suraiya, & Chan, 2023). Students may misinterpret data, fail to recognize key ideas, or overlook the structural cues essential to text comprehension. As a result, students' difficulties in literal comprehension stem not merely from limited reading awareness, but from the interaction between linguistic complexity and readers' constrained lexical and syntactic resources.

These challenges become particularly visible in the Indonesian EFL higher education context. Despite years of English instruction, many undergraduate students continue to experience reading comprehension difficulties when engaging with academic texts (Hamra & Syatriana, 2010; Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018). The transition process from general English to academic English often exposes a gap between surface reading and deeper comprehension required for thesis writing. Based on the researchers' preliminary observation of undergraduate thesis writers, several students appeared to

rely heavily on translation tools and struggled to identify explicit information in journal articles or research papers. When asked to summarize a paragraph or locate stated definitions, many tended to translate word by word rather than extract the main idea, which often led to misinterpretation of key terms or research concepts. Some students also expressed difficulty distinguishing between examples and main points, indicating a limited ability to retrieve literal information from dense academic texts. This aligns with previous findings showing that EFL undergraduates often depend on translation due to difficulties in recognizing literal meaning in academic texts (Edelia & Maharsi, 2022; Fahmi & Arjulayana, 2023; Jupri, Rahman, Hassan, & Manu, 2024). This situation underscores the importance of examining EFL undergraduate thesis writers' literal reading practices and perceptions when engaging with academic English texts.

Although literal reading comprehension has long been discussed in reading theory (Grabe & Stoller, 2019), much of the existing research has concentrated on general reading proficiency or secondary-level EFL learners. Studies addressing literal comprehension in academic English contexts remain limited, particularly among undergraduate students engaged in thesis writing. Within the Indonesian EFL setting, many studies focus instead on students' general reading problems or strategy use rather than on literal comprehension of academic texts (Isma & Nur, 2023; Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022; Dardjito, Rolls, Setiawan, & Sumekto, 2023). Thus, a critical gap exists in understanding how EFL undergraduate thesis writers engage with and perceive literal comprehension when reading scholarly materials such as journal articles, theses, or books.

In response to this gap, this research addresses two research questions: (1) How do EFL undergraduate thesis writers engage in literal reading when reading academic English texts? and (2) How do they perceive their literal reading practices in academic reading contexts? Using questionnaire data and semi-structured interviews, the research examines both students' reported practices and their perceptions of literal reading during thesis writing. By focusing on literal comprehension in academic English contexts, this research contributes empirical insight into an underexplored area of EFL reading research and offers pedagogical implications for integrating explicit literal reading and vocabulary instruction in higher education.

## **2. Methods**

This research employed an explanatory sequential mixed-method design (Creswell, 2014), involving both quantitative and qualitative phases. The quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire to identify students' general patterns of literal reading practices, followed by qualitative data from interviews to get deeper insights into their experiences (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

The participants in this research were EFL undergraduate students who were in the process of writing their theses in the English Education program at Institut Agama Islam Negeri Bone. Thirty-eight students completed the questionnaire, and seven of

them were purposively selected as the participants in the follow-up interviews (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). The selection of interview participants considered several criteria, including the variation of questionnaire scores (high, medium, and low), their willingness to participate, and their ability to communicate their literal reading experiences during thesis writing. These factors are intended to provide more information for the qualitative phase.

There are two instruments in this research: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire consisted of eight Likert-scale items, which is designed to discover students' literal reading practices. The instruments were adapted from the theoretical framework of literal reading comprehension proposed by Day and Park (2005) and Grabe and Stoller (2011). Sample questionnaire items included statements such as "I can easily locate explicitly stated information in academic texts" and "I understand the literal meaning of key terms when reading journal articles." Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The interview instrument consisted of semi-structured questions aimed at exploring students' perceptions and experiences of literal reading in academic contexts. The interview questions were aligned with the questionnaire constructs and allowed participants to elaborate on their reading strategies, difficulties, and coping mechanisms.

The instrument validity was established through expert review by two English education specialists, it is to ensure content clarity and alignment with the research objectives. A pilot test was also conducted with a small group of students to examine the internal consistency of the questionnaire. The results showed acceptable reliability for this research ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ), exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70 suggested by Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012).

Data collection was conducted in two sequential phases. In the first phase, the questionnaire was administered to the EFL undergraduate thesis writers during the academic semester through an online format. The respondents completed the questionnaire voluntarily within approximately 15–20 minutes. In the second phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven selected participants. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and informed consent was obtained. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were ensured throughout the research process.

The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to present percentages for each item. The data from the interview were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. The process included transcribing the recording, familiarizing data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, and refining them to get the key patterns to literal comprehension practices. In this research, the integration of the quantitative and qualitative data occurred at the interpretation stage,

where the emergent qualitative themes were used to explain, contextualize, and expand upon the questionnaire results. This process of integration allowed the qualitative findings to provide deeper insight into trends observed in the questionnaire, consistent with the design of this research.

### 3. Results and Discussions

#### 3.1 Understanding Explicit Information in Academic Texts

**Table 1.** *Students' Ability to Identify and Recall Explicit Information in Academic Texts*

Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1. I can find information (e.g., data, terms, or definitions) that is clearly stated in academic texts.	44.7	52.6	2.6	0.0	0.0
2. I can recall specific facts or information after reading academic English texts such as journal articles, theses, or books.	23.7	63.2	13.2	0.0	0.0

The findings indicate that EFL undergraduate thesis writers demonstrate a strong capacity for their literal reading practice, particularly in identifying explicitly stated information in academic texts. A majority of respondents reported confidence in locating factual details such as definitions, terminology, and data clearly presented in texts. Confidence levels were slightly lower when respondents were asked about recalling specific information after reading, suggesting a distinction between immediate information recognition and longer-term retention.

This pattern indicates that while locating explicit information is a relatively accessible literal reading process, recalling detailed content requires greater cognitive effort. In academic texts, which are often dense and information-heavy, retention may be affected by factors such as lexical load, technical content, and the presence of numerical data. As a result, literal comprehension in academic reading extends beyond surface recognition and involves memory-related processing demands.

The qualitative findings further illuminate this distinction. Several participants described relying on structural cues within academic texts such as abstracts or results sections to efficiently locate explicit information. As participant 1 explained, *“When I read journal articles, I usually focus on data and definitions because they help me understand the context quickly.”* This suggests that students’ ability to locate information

is often supported by familiarity with academic text organization rather than by comprehensive processing of the entire text.

However, other participants reported difficulty retaining specific details after reading, particularly when texts were lengthy or contained complex numerical information. Participant 3 noted, “*Sometimes I remember the general idea but not the exact data, especially when the text is very long or full of numbers.*” This indicates that although literal recognition is generally strong, information recall remains variable and susceptible to cognitive overload in academic reading contexts.

Taken together, these findings suggest that EFL undergraduate thesis writers possess a solid foundation in literal reading, especially in identifying explicit information, yet experience challenges when sustained retention is required. This variability highlights the complexity of literal comprehension in academic English texts and underscores the need to examine not only what students can identify during reading, but also how effectively they process and retain information critical for academic writing tasks.

### 3.2 Recognizing Structure and Organization in Academic Reading

**Table 2.** *Students’ Ability to Identify Main Ideas and Information Sequence in Academic Texts*

Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
3. I can identify the main idea or central theme in paragraphs of academic English texts.	28.9	55.3	15.8	0.0	0.0
4. I can recognize the order of information or steps described in academic English texts.	26.3	55.3	15.8	2.6	0.0

Table 2 indicates that most respondents demonstrate a solid understanding of academic text structure and organization, particularly in identifying main ideas and following the logical sequence of information. In general, students reported stronger confidence in recognizing paragraph focus than in maintaining coherence across longer or more complex texts. This pattern suggests that while students possess foundational literal reading skills related to text organization, their performance varies depending on textual demands.

The findings further reveal that students are generally able to determine the whole meaning of academic texts and follow the flow of ideas across sentences and paragraphs. However, a small but meaningful proportion of respondents expressed uncertainty,

indicating that difficulties tend to emerge when academic texts contain implicit topic sentences, dense information, or complex rhetorical structures commonly found in research writing. This variation highlights that literal comprehension of text organization is not consistently stable across all readers.

The qualitative data support these patterns. Several participants described actively using structural cues to understand academic texts. For example, Participant 2 explained, *“When I read an article, I usually find the first or second sentence to get the main idea; it helps me understand the paragraph easily.”* Similarly, Participant 6 noted, *“I follow the explanation step by step, especially in the methods or results section, to know the order of the process.”* These responses indicate that students consciously rely on topic sentences and transitional signals to construct meaning at the literal level.

Nevertheless, some participants reported persistent challenges when dealing with lengthy or densely written academic texts. As Participant 4 admitted, *“Sometimes the paragraph is too long, and I get confused about which part is the main idea.”* Participant 8 similarly stated, *“If the author uses too many technical terms or complex sentences, I lose track of the sequence.”* These accounts suggest that although students can generally identify text structure, cognitive overload caused by lexical density and syntactic complexity can disrupt their ability to maintain coherence during reading.

Taken as a whole, the findings indicate that EFL undergraduate thesis writers demonstrate a generally strong ability to identify main ideas and follow textual organization as part of their literal reading competence. However, complex academic texts continue to pose challenges for a minority of students, suggesting that literal comprehension of text structure is influenced not only by reading awareness but also by linguistic and cognitive demands.

### 3.3 Understanding Lexical Meaning and Cohesion in Academic Texts

**Table 3.** *Students’ Understanding of Word Meaning and Textual Relationships*

Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
5. I understand the literal meaning of words or phrases in English texts without over interpreting them.	21.1	52.6	21.1	5.3	0.0
6. I can recognize relationships between parts of the text, including which words or phrases are referred to by pronouns such as <i>it, this, or they</i> .	39.5	55.3	2.6	2.6	0.0

Table 3 shows that respondents generally demonstrate adequate awareness of textual cohesion and a moderate level of lexical understanding when reading academic texts. The students reported stronger confidence in recognizing relationships between parts of a text, such as identifying pronoun references and linking expressions, than in interpreting the literal meaning of words or phrases. This pattern suggests that while students are relatively proficient in tracking how ideas are connected across sentences, precise lexical interpretation remains more demanding.

The findings further indicate an imbalance between cohesion awareness and vocabulary mastery. Students appear more comfortable following referential ties and logical connections that support textual flow, yet they experience greater uncertainty when encountering unfamiliar or specialized academic vocabulary. This suggests that literal comprehension at the discourse level is more stable than comprehension at the lexical level, particularly when texts contain discipline-specific terms or abstract expressions.

Qualitative data from interviews reinforce this pattern by highlighting vocabulary as a primary obstacle to literal comprehension. Several participants reported that limited lexical knowledge slowed their reading process and affected accuracy. As Participant 2 explained, *“The main difficulty is that my English vocabulary is still limited, so I always translate new words first before understanding the sentence.”* Similarly, Participant 5 noted, *“Unfamiliar vocabulary makes it harder for me to understand the text.”* These responses illustrate a strong reliance on translation as a compensatory strategy, which may support basic understanding but can hinder fluency and automatic word recognition.

In contrast, participants generally expressed confidence in following textual cohesion, particularly through pronouns and conjunctions. Participant 1 stated, *“Sometimes the text uses many pronouns like ‘it’ or ‘this,’ but I can usually find what they refer to by rereading the previous sentence.”* Likewise, Participant 7 mentioned, *“I try to follow how ideas are linked in the text to understand the author’s explanation.”* These findings suggest that students have developed sensitivity to referential devices that maintain coherence, enabling them to navigate academic texts even when lexical challenges arise.

The findings indicate that EFL undergraduate thesis writers possess a strong grasp of textual cohesion as part of their literal reading competence. However, persistent difficulties in academic vocabulary comprehension continue to limit the precision and efficiency of their literal understanding. This imbalance highlights lexical mastery as a critical area requiring instructional attention to support more accurate and fluent academic reading.

### **3.4 Strategic Reading and the Perceived Importance of Literal Comprehension**

**Table 4.** *Students’ Use of Reading Strategies and Perceived Importance of Literal Reading*

Questionnaire Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Uncertain (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
7. I often use reading strategies such as scanning or highlighting to find explicit information in academic English texts.	36.8	55.3	5.2	2.6	0.0
8. I consider the ability to understand literal information very important when reading academic English texts for thesis writing.	57.9	36.8	5.3	0.0	0.0

Table 4 indicates that most respondents demonstrate strong awareness and use of reading strategies that support literal comprehension in academic texts. Overall, students reported actively employing strategies such as scanning, highlighting, rereading, and note-taking to locate and retain explicitly stated information. This pattern suggests that their engagement with academic reading is largely purposeful and goal-oriented rather than passive.

The findings also show that respondents clearly recognize the importance of literal comprehension in academic reading contexts. Students perceived understanding explicitly stated information as a foundational skill that supports more advanced academic tasks, such as evaluating methods, interpreting results, and comparing studies. This awareness reflects a level of metacognitive understanding, as students not only apply strategies but also understand why such strategies are necessary for effective thesis-related reading.

Interview data further support these findings by illustrating how students consciously regulate their reading processes. For example, Participant 1 explained, *“I usually read the methodology section slowly because it shows the research steps in order, and I note each phase like planning, acting, observing, and reflecting.”* This response indicates deliberate pacing and information management to ensure accurate comprehension of procedural details. Similarly, Participant 7 stated, *“I look for sequence markers, highlight important sentences, and make short notes about cause and effect relationships,”* demonstrating strategic attention to textual signals that convey explicit meaning.

At the same time, several respondents revealed that strategy use often serves as a compensatory mechanism for linguistic limitations. Participant 2 noted, *“I usually translate the text first to make sure I understand it correctly,”* indicating reliance on

translation when encountering lexical difficulties. This suggests that while students possess strategic awareness, some strategies are employed to cope with gaps in vocabulary knowledge rather than to enhance reading efficiency. In addition, Participant 8 shared, “*Before reading, I check other research methods to ensure the procedures are correct,*” showing that literal reading is integrated with monitoring and verification processes that support academic accuracy.

Hence, these findings indicate that EFL undergraduate thesis writers view literal reading as a critical academic competence and actively employ strategies to support it. However, the continued dependence on translation and slower reading among some students suggests an intermediate stage of strategic literacy, where metacognitive awareness is present but has not yet become fully automatic. This highlights the need for instructional support that fosters more efficient and independent strategy use in academic reading.

#### **4. Discussion**

When examining the first two themes, understanding explicit information and awareness of text structure, the findings indicate that EFL undergraduate thesis writers generally perceive themselves as capable of locating explicitly stated information and identifying main ideas in academic texts. Interview data also further suggest that students rely heavily on recognizable textual features, such as abstracts, topic sentences, and structural cues, to support their literal comprehension during reading. This pattern reflects the relative accessibility of literal-level processing, where meaning can be derived directly from surface textual elements without extensive inferential demands.

This finding is in line with Saadatnia, Ketabi, and Tavakoli (2017), who reported that literal comprehension tends to be more developed than inferential comprehension among EFL learners. Based on a cognitive perspective, this can be attributed to the lower processing load required for identifying explicitly stated information compared to constructing implied meanings. Similarly, research in Indonesian EFL contexts has shown that students with stronger literal comprehension tend to demonstrate better overall reading performance, as literal understanding provides the necessary foundation for engaging with more complex interpretive tasks (Nurjanah & Putri, 2022).

To further explain this difference, recognizing explicitly stated information primarily involves surface-level text-based construction, in which readers identify propositional units that are directly available in the text. In contrast, recalling specific details requires the consolidation of those propositional units into more stable memory representations within working memory. This process demands integration, rehearsal, and resistance to interference from competing information, making it cognitively more taxing. Therefore, the discrepancy observed between locating information and recalling it may reflect differences in processing depth rather than differences in basic comprehension ability.

However, despite this apparent strength, students’ reliance on surface-level textual cues also suggests a potential limitation in their reading development. The ability to

identify main ideas or follow text organization does not always guarantee deeper comprehension, particularly when academic texts present dense information, implicit argumentation, or complex rhetorical structures. This means that while literal reading competence supports initial access to academic texts, it may remain fragile unless systematically reinforced through explicit instructional guidance that helps students move beyond surface recognition toward more integrated comprehension.

Nevertheless, these high self-ratings should not be interpreted as evidence of full mastery of literal reading. Interview responses from Participant 4 such as “*sometimes I get confused about which part is the main idea*” indicate that comprehension difficulties emerge when academic texts are lengthy or contain implicit topic sentences. This finding suggests that although literal reading functions as a necessary foundation for academic reading, it is not sufficient across all academic contexts. Academic texts often rely on implicit organizational patterns, dense informational content, and specialized terminology, which place additional cognitive demands on readers. In this regard, Setiani, Kamaruddin, Hastini, and Marhum (2025) have reported similar findings that increased reading frequency contributed to better literal comprehension but did not adequately address persistent vocabulary and syntactic difficulties. Hence, these findings position literal reading as an essential scaffold for academic engagement; however, its effectiveness becomes constrained when linguistic complexity and implicit textual structures exceed students’ current linguistic resources. Importantly, this research demonstrates that even at the thesis-writing stage, the literal reading competence cannot be assumed to be fully consolidated, particularly when academic text involve high lexical density and implicit structural organization.

The findings on theme 3 reveal an important contrast between students’ ability to track textual cohesion and their mastery of lexical meaning. While most students reported confidence in identifying cohesive ties such as pronoun references and transitions, fewer expressed confidence in understanding the literal meaning of words or phrases. This discrepancy highlights a gap between recognizing how ideas are connected across sentences and fully comprehending the lexical content that carries those ideas. According to Grabe (2009) and Day and Park (2005), literal reading encompasses both word-level meaning and referential connections; therefore, weaknesses in vocabulary knowledge can undermine otherwise effective cohesion tracking. The interview data further reinforce this interpretation. Students’ reliance on translation, as reflected in the statement from Participant 2 “*I always have to translate new words first before understanding the sentence*”, this suggests that lexical processing remains effortful and non-automatic. Such reliance may slow reading fluency and limit readers’ ability to process information efficiently at the literal level, particularly in academic texts where unfamiliar terminology frequently appears.

This pattern is consistent with previous studies that emphasize the central role of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension, particularly at the literal level. Limited

lexical knowledge can obstruct readers' access to explicitly stated information, which constitutes the core of literal reading (Grabe, 2009; Day & Park, 2005). Moreover, vocabulary size and mastery have been identified as strong predictors of overall reading success (Safitri, Ramadhani, Rahmadaniati, & Syahid, 2025). Essentially, El Garras, Ghaicha, and Oufela (2025) also demonstrated that explicit instruction in formulaic language significantly enhanced students' comprehension, indicating that lexical instruction can directly support literal reading development.

Based on a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that strengthening students' lexical resources should be treated as a strategic instructional priority rather than a supplementary activity. Explicit vocabulary instruction, particularly focusing on academic and formulaic language, may serve as a key leverage point for improving students' literal comprehension and reducing their reliance on translation. In turn, this may facilitate more fluent engagement with academic texts and better support students' thesis writing processes.

Overall, the findings indicate that although EFL undergraduate thesis writers demonstrate relatively strong ability in recognizing cohesive relationships within academic texts, limitations in lexical knowledge continue to constrain the precision of their literal comprehension. Simply, students may be able to trace how ideas are connected across sentences, yet their understanding of the exact meaning conveyed by key lexical items often remains incomplete. This imbalance suggests that cohesion awareness alone is insufficient to guarantee accurate literal comprehension when readers lack adequate vocabulary resources. In this context, strengthening vocabulary knowledge should be not only in terms of size but also depth and contextual awareness that emerges as a critical condition for developing efficient literal reading practice. Targeted vocabulary instruction, combined with guided reading practices on lexical interpretation within authentic academic texts such as article journal or thesis may help students move beyond partial comprehension toward more precise meaning construction. This support is particularly significant in thesis reading, where misinterpretation of key terms or concepts can directly affect the quality of academic writing and argumentation.

Theme 4 demonstrates that EFL undergraduate thesis writers display a relatively high level of strategic awareness when engaging in literal reading tasks. Both questionnaire and interview data indicate that students actively employ strategies such as scanning, highlighting, note-taking, and translation to support their comprehension of explicitly stated information in academic texts. These strategies reflect students' conscious efforts to manage cognitive demands during reading, particularly when dealing with dense academic content. This strategic behavior aligns with Day and Park (2005), who position literal comprehension as the foundational stage of reading in which readers focus on extracting explicit facts, details, and relationships before engaging in higher-level interpretation. In this research, students' reliance on surface-level strategies suggests that their primary goal is to secure basic textual understanding prior to deeper analytical

processing. However, the findings also indicate that frequent strategy use does not necessarily translate into fluent or efficient literal reading.

Previous research has similarly reported that metacognitive strategy use can support comprehension monitoring without guaranteeing reading fluency or accuracy, particularly when linguistic resources remain limited (Pahrizal, Vintoni, Sotlikova, & Ya'akub, 2025; Febriani, 2022). Diana and Sepyanda (2022) further argue that the effectiveness of reading strategies among EFL learners is highly mediated by vocabulary mastery and structural awareness. Consistent with these studies, the findings suggest that students' strategy use often functions as a compensatory mechanism rather than as an indicator of fully developed literal reading competence.

In other words, while students demonstrate awareness of how to approach academic texts strategically, their dependence on highlighting, scanning, and translation reflects an intermediate stage of literal reading development. At this stage, those strategies are employed to cope with lexical and syntactic difficulty rather than to enhance reading automaticity or depth of comprehension. This directly explains why students may appear strategically active yet continue to experience difficulty processing academic texts efficiently. In terms of teaching practice, these findings indicate that reading strategy instruction in higher education should move beyond surface-level techniques. Explicit instruction should integrate strategy training with systematic vocabulary development, structural awareness, and guided practice in paraphrasing and summarizing academic texts. Reading courses and thesis writing supervision should be aligned to reinforce literal reading as a foundational academic literacy skill rather than assuming it has already been mastered.

Taken together, the four themes reveal that literal reading among EFL undergraduate thesis writers is developmentally uneven rather than uniformly established. While students demonstrate competence in identifying explicit information and tracking cohesion, their lexical limitations and reliance on compensatory strategies indicate that literal comprehension remains structurally fragile. This internal imbalance suggests that literal reading should be conceptualized not as a fully mastered foundational skill at the university level, but as an evolving academic literacy component that requires continued instructional support. In this regard, the research contributes to EFL academic literacy research by providing empirical evidence that literal reading competence at the thesis-writing stage cannot be assumed to be fully consolidated, particularly in linguistically dense academic environments.

For the EFL researchers, the findings reaffirm the continued relevance of frameworks proposed by Day and Park (2005) and Grabe and Stoller (2011) in explaining how learners process explicit information in academic reading. Beyond reaffirming these frameworks, the present research extends them by demonstrating that literal reading competence among thesis writers is multidimensional and highly mediated by lexical depth and processing constraints in authentic academic contexts. At the same time, the

results also suggest the need to revisit these frameworks in light of contemporary academic demands, where students must navigate complex texts with increasing lexical density. Integrating literal reading theory with research on academic literacy and reading practices may offer a more comprehensive understanding of EFL students' reading development in higher education contexts.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research examined how EFL undergraduate thesis writers engage in literal reading and how they perceive their literal reading practices when working with academic English texts. The findings indicate that students actively employ literal reading strategies such as scanning, highlighting, and translating, and generally report confidence in identifying explicit information, main ideas, and cohesive ties. These patterns confirm that literal reading remains a fundamental component of academic reading and thesis writing.

However, the findings also reveal that students' literal comprehension is frequently constrained by limited vocabulary knowledge and the complexity of academic textual structures. As a result, reading academic texts often becomes effortful and less precise, despite students' strategic awareness and engagement. More importantly, the findings suggest that literal reading competence among EFL undergraduate thesis writers is not uniformly established. While students demonstrate relative strength in recognizing explicit information and textual cohesion, limitations in lexical processing and vocabulary depth continue to restrict the accuracy and efficiency of their comprehension. In this sense, the research contributes to EFL academic literacy research by providing empirical evidence that literal reading competence at the thesis-writing stage cannot simply be assumed to be fully consolidated.

Overall, this research highlights the importance of strengthening literal reading instruction at the university level rather than assuming that it has already been mastered by students. Integrating focused vocabulary instruction and explicit training in literal reading strategies into academic reading courses and thesis supervision practices may enhance students' reading efficiency, accuracy, and confidence when engaging with scholarly texts.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the qualitative emphasis and relatively small sample size limit the generalizability of the findings to broader EFL populations. Second, the research relied primarily on students' self-reported perceptions of their reading practices, which may not fully capture their actual reading performance when engaging with academic texts. Third, the focus on EFL undergraduate thesis writers means that the findings may not represent the experiences of general EFL learners or readers in non-academic contexts. Future research could adopt mixed-method designs with larger and more diverse samples, as well as incorporate direct observation of reading performance, to further examine the relationship between literal reading, vocabulary development, and higher-level comprehension processes in academic reading contexts.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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