

# Exploring Postgraduate Students' Lived Experiences in Extensive English Reading Courses: A Phenomenology Study at One Public University in Jambi

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## A B S T R A C T

While Extensive Reading (ER) has been widely studied in undergraduate EFL contexts, empirical evidence on postgraduate students' lived experiences with ER courses – particularly in Indonesian higher education – remains scarce, leaving a critical gap in understanding how graduate learners navigate its challenges and adapt their strategies. This study explores postgraduate students' lived experiences in the newly introduced Extensive English Reading course at a state university in Jambi as part of the English education curriculum revision. The objective is to understand students' challenges, strategies, and reflections using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The population comprised Master's in English Education students in 2024, with a purposive sample of three second-semester female students. Instruments included semi-structured interviews and reflective journals, analyzed via Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Findings revealed three themes: linguistic challenges, workload, and low motivation; cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies; and positive reflections with greater need for instructor support. The conclusion emphasizes the necessity of accessible texts and active teacher guidance to optimize Extensive Reading implementation.

**Keywords:** *Extensive Reading, Phenomenology, Postgraduate Students, Reading Strategies, Linguistic Challenges*

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill in language learning, particularly for English language acquisition at the academic level (Willis, 2008; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). The Extensive Reading (ER) approach is gaining popularity as an effective method that encourages learners to read large volumes of engaging texts appropriate to their ability level to gain general comprehension and naturally improve language skills (Day & Bamford, 2002; Krashen, 1982). ER emphasizes enjoyment in reading and quantity of reading material, thus supporting vocabulary development, reading fluency, and a positive attitude toward reading (Arai & Takizawa, 2025; Gopal et al., 2022). For graduate students, particularly, strong academic reading skills are key to understanding scientific literature and expressing ideas clearly (Basri, 2024; Huynh, 2022). In this context, a state university in Jambi introduced an Extensive English Reading course as an effort to improve the reading competence of postgraduate students in the 2024 academic year, in accordance with the revised English language education curriculum.

Despite the broad benefits of ER, many students experience various difficulties that hinder the optimal use of this learning (Fitriasti, Setyaningsih, & Sulistyawati, 2024; Afiani et al., 2024). One major problem is that reading materials are often too difficult, containing technical vocabulary and complex language structures, thus reducing motivation and enjoyment of reading (Hidayat & Rohati, 2020; Nation, 2009). Furthermore, the high academic load also makes it difficult for students to allocate time for reading effectively (Fitriasti et al., 2024; Afiani et al., 2024). Low autonomy in selecting reading materials and a lack of active support from lecturers also contribute to decreased interest and achievement in this course

(Gopal et al., 2022; Basri, 2024). Various studies confirm that the lack of freedom to choose reading materials and the lack of teacher guidance have a negative impact on the effectiveness of ER implementation, especially for learners with diverse language abilities (Huynh, 2022; Fitriasti et al., 2024).

To address these issues, several strategies have been proposed in recent literature, including selecting reading materials appropriate to the level of difficulty and interest, integrating reflective activities such as reading journals, and strengthening the teacher's role as a learning facilitator and reading role model (Basri, 2024; Gopal et al., 2022). The teacher's role in providing active guidance and creating a conducive reading environment is crucial for the success of ER, as found in research on higher-level English teaching (Fitriasti et al., 2024; Huynh, 2022). Furthermore, building intrinsic motivation through autonomy in selecting materials and appropriate reading techniques is also a key focus for increasing student engagement (Arai & Takizawa, 2025; Nation, 2009).

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of postgraduate students while taking an Extensive English Reading course at a state university in Jambi using a phenomenological approach, in order to deeply understand their expectations, challenges, and strategies used during the learning process. This study is important because ER is still a new course whose implementation has not been widely researched contextually at the postgraduate level, especially in Indonesia (Abrar, 2024; Creswell, 2013). By presenting students' direct perspectives as research subjects, this study offers a novel understanding of the effectiveness of ER learning and provides recommendations for pedagogical improvements based on real experiences, thereby helping to improve the quality of teaching and students' academic reading learning outcomes in the future (Basri, 2024; Gopal et al., 2022).

## METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach that aims to describe The research method used in this study is qualitative research with a phenomenological approach that aims to explore in depth the lived experiences of postgraduate students in taking the Extensive English Reading (EER) course at a state university in Jambi. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the meaning of experiences from the perspective of participants, as well as describe the essence of phenomena as experienced together by them in the context of extensive reading learning at the postgraduate level (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Huynh, 2022). This approach aligns with the characteristics of qualitative research that emphasizes depth, context, and meaning, where researchers engage reflectively with the data and phenomena studied, including when the researcher is part of the context being studied (Abrar, 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025). Phenomenological qualitative research such as this is also relevant in language education studies because it is able to reveal the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of extensive reading experiences that cannot be captured through a purely quantitative approach (Gopal et al., 2022; Fitriasti et al., 2024).

The primary instrument in this study was the researcher herself, managing the entire data collection and analysis process, supported by a semi-structured interview guide and student reflective journals as supporting instruments. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provided a balance between systematic question guidance and the flexibility to explore participants' experiences in greater depth, allowing for richer insights into key topics such as reading challenges, strategies, and reflection (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2025). Reflective journals, written periodically throughout the course, served as qualitative documents that captured the students' reading processes, emotional dynamics, and changes in strategies over time, thus enhancing data depth and enabling source triangulation (Gopal et al., 2022; Huynh, 2022). Data reliability and validity were maintained through the use of a loosely structured interview guide, reflective field notes, and systematic documentation of all collected data, as recommended in qualitative educational research methodology.

The population of this study was all postgraduate students enrolled in the Master of English Education Program at a state university in Jambi who were taking the Extensive

English Reading course in the 2024 academic year. The sample was determined purposively because this study requires participants who have actually experienced the phenomenon being studied and are able to articulate their experiences in depth both orally and in writing (Abrar, 2024; Huynh, 2022). Three students were selected as participants with the following characteristics: officially enrolled in the EER course, willing to participate voluntarily, and able to express their experiences reflectively; all three were female in the second semester of the Master of English Education program with an age range of 23–24 years. The purposive sampling approach with a relatively small number of participants aligns with phenomenological research practices that focus on data depth, rather than statistical generalizations, thus allowing for a more comprehensive exploration of the essence of experience (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2025).

The data collection techniques in this study consisted of semi-structured interviews and reflective journal entries, which together formed a triangulation of sources to enhance the credibility of the findings. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online for approximately 20–30 minutes per participant, recorded with their consent, and then fully transcribed for analysis. Reflective journal entries were collected weekly throughout the semester and included student accounts of reading experiences, linguistic difficulties, assignment load, strategies used, and emotional responses related to the material and reading activities (Gopal et al., 2022; Basri, 2024). The combination of these two techniques allowed the researcher to obtain a multi-layered picture of students' experiences in the EER course, while also facilitating cross-checking between data sources, as recommended in contemporary qualitative research practices.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: data introduction, initial coding, theme discovery, theme review, theme definition and naming, and final report preparation. First, the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts and reflective journal entries to gain a thorough understanding and record initial impressions. Then, the researcher developed initial codes relevant to the research focus, such as linguistic challenges, cognitive strategies, social strategies, and reflections on strategy effectiveness (Ahmed et al., 2025; Morriss, 2024). These codes were then grouped into potential themes, reviewed across the entire data set, and refined into three coherent main themes: challenges in extensive reading, strategies for overcoming challenges, and reflections on strategy effectiveness. These themes are then explained narratively in the findings report. This thematic analysis approach was chosen because it provides a flexible yet systematic framework for identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data and has been widely used in language education and ER research.

The research procedure was carried out through several systematic stages, starting from planning and data collection, to analysis and validation of findings. In the initial stage, the researcher developed a research proposal, obtained ethical approval, and contacted potential participants to explain the study's objectives, procedures, and their rights and obligations, before obtaining written informed consent that guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. The next stage was data collection, which took place over one semester. During this semester, the researcher organized interview schedules, collected weekly journal entries, and conducted reflective notes on the learning context and interactions with participants (Abrar, 2024; Huynh, 2022). After all data was collected, the researcher conducted transcription, thematic analysis, and member checking by sharing a summary of the findings with participants for confirmation. This effort increased the validity and credibility of the research results, in line with current validation practices in qualitative research (Kullman & Chudyk, 2025; Lloyd et al., 2024).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences of graduate students in an Extensive English Reading course at a state university in Jambi. The analysis reveals a dual

nature of the students' experiences: the course supports the development of reading competencies, but at the same time, several challenges limit its effectiveness.

### **Theme 1: Challenges in Extensive Reading**

One of the most prominent challenges is linguistic difficulty. Students often report difficulty understanding academic journal articles due to sophisticated vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, and unfamiliar cultural references. For example, one student stated in her reflective journal:

*"Yes, especially academic journal articles. The vocabulary is sophisticated and the structure is complex. Without proper explanation, I have difficulty identifying the main argument and supporting evidence." (P1)*

This statement suggests that some of the reading material presented was too difficult for students. This finding contradicts the main principle of Extensive Reading (ER), which recommends that students read easy texts to build fluency and enjoyment (Gopal et al., 2022).

Similarly, Hidayat and Rohati (2020) found that limited vocabulary often leads to poor comprehension, which makes it difficult for students to understand and remember the material.

Other participants shared similar experiences:

*"Some journal articles are difficult to understand because they use technical terms and complex grammar. Some texts also contain cultural references I don't understand, which makes them even harder to follow." (P3)*

Such experiences indicate that some assigned readings are beyond students' ability levels. This contradicts the core principle of Extensive Reading (ER), which is that learners should engage with accessible texts to facilitate fluency and enjoyment. (Gopal et al., 2022) This highlights the challenge of having reading materials that are not appropriate to students' language proficiency levels. Day and Bamford (2002) emphasize that ER (Educational Reading) works best when the reading materials are appropriate to students' ability levels and enjoyable, which was not always the case here. In addition to linguistic issues, students also cited time management and heavy workloads as significant barriers. One student said:

*"My reading ability is affected when I have a lot of assignments from other courses. I don't have enough time to read thoroughly, so sometimes I just skim the text quickly without really understanding it." (P2)*

This aligns with Nation's (2009) argument that ER requires sustained time and attention, which is difficult to achieve when students have a heavy workload. Afiani et al. (2024) also highlight time constraints as a major barrier to successful ER, particularly in higher education.

Motivation is another key issue. Students report losing interest in reading when the text is too difficult or doesn't directly relate to their academic goals. For example, one student wrote in her reflective journal:

*"Sometimes I feel unmotivated to continue reading when I encounter too many unfamiliar words. Furthermore, I have difficulty understanding certain topics I'm unfamiliar with. It's boring." (P2)*

This inactivity is related to the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1985), which states that motivation and emotional state significantly influence learning outcomes. If students feel frustrated or disinterested, their learning process will be hampered. Consistent with this, Gopal et al. (2022) found that a lack of interest in reading material negatively impacts students' motivation to continue reading.

### **Theme 2: Strategies to Overcome Challenges**

Despite these challenges, students demonstrated resilience by using a variety of cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies. At the cognitive level, many relied on translation tools and dictionary use:

*"I usually try to translate text using Google Translate. Sometimes, I ask a classmate for help if I really don't understand." (P1)*

*"First, I try to find the main idea of the text. Additionally, if there's a word I don't know, I try to look at the surrounding words. It takes more time, but it's effective in finding the word's meaning." (P2)*

This strategy helps students overcome the language difficulties they face, even though it focuses on word-for-word translation. Gopal et al. (2022) note that tools such as dictionaries and translators are common strategies for beginners facing difficult texts.

At the metacognitive level, students apply skimming and scanning techniques, highlighting, and note-taking:

*"I use skimming techniques to get the main idea, scanning to find specific information, and I often take notes or summaries to remember important points."*

These strategies demonstrate how students evolve from a focus on word-for-word translation to more sophisticated reading techniques. This development aligns with the findings of Grabe and Stoller (2011), who stated that reading skills improve as students develop more complex strategies for comprehending academic texts.

Social strategies also play an important role. Students often emphasize the importance of peer discussions:

*"Discussing with friends helps me understand the text more clearly because they provide me with different perspectives and strategies for understanding the text." (Page 2)*

*"Yes, I often discuss the readings with my classmates. It helps me understand the texts better because we share ideas and explain things to each other."*

These findings support Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Peer discussions can help students overcome reading difficulties and improve their comprehension.

### **Theme 3: Reflections on Strategy Effectiveness**

Overall, students acknowledged that the course helped them develop more effective reading strategies. One participant highlighted:

*"Taking notes, summarizing, and discussing with friends are the most helpful strategies for me. These strategies help me understand and remember the material better than just reading it silently." (P1)*

Others emphasized improvements in their reading approaches:

*"At first, I just read everything word for word. Then, I learned to skim the text first to get the main idea, then refocus on the difficult parts."*

These reflections indicate that the course encouraged a gradual shift from literal translation to higher-level academic reading practices. This is consistent with Krashen's claim that repeated exposure to comprehensible input supports a natural progression in reading fluency.

However, students repeatedly expressed the need for greater lecturer involvement in guiding the reading process:

*"I still really hope for more input from the lecturers."*

This highlights the importance of the teacher's role as a reading guide and role model, as underlined by As.(Basri, 2024) Even if students demonstrate independence, stronger pedagogical support can reduce unnecessary difficulties and further enhance their progress.

## **CONCLUSION**

This phenomenological study reveals that postgraduate students' experiences in an Extensive English Reading course at a Jambi state university are shaped by both meaningful growth and persistent challenges. Three coherent themes emerged from the data: linguistic challenges including sophisticated vocabulary and complex text structures, time-limiting academic workloads, and fluctuating motivation; adaptation strategies encompassing cognitive approaches such as translation and contextual guessing, metacognitive approaches

such as skimming and scanning, and social approaches through peer discussions; and positive reflections on a gradual shift toward more efficient academic reading practices, alongside an expressed need for more intensive lecturer support. Overall, the course contributed to vocabulary enrichment, improved comprehension, and broader reading strategy use, yet its effectiveness was constrained by inappropriate text difficulty levels and insufficient pedagogical guidance – both of which contradict core Extensive Reading principles regarding material accessibility and the teacher's role as a facilitator. This study is limited by its small sample of three female participants from the same semester, which may not fully represent the broader diversity of graduate student experiences. Practical implications point to the importance of selecting texts appropriate to students' proficiency levels, providing greater autonomy in material selection, and strengthening the lecturer's role as a reading guide and model, as consistently highlighted by participants throughout this study. Future research is recommended to adopt longitudinal designs with larger and more diverse samples, or mixed-methods approaches, to more comprehensively assess the impact of Extensive Reading on graduate-level academic reading performance.

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