



Teaching And Learning Reading Comprehension through Close Reading: Insights from First-Semester EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill in English language learning; however, many non-English-major students encounter difficulties in understanding academic texts. This study investigated the implementation of the Close Reading strategy in teaching reading comprehension to first-semester non-English-major students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung and explored students' perceptions of the strategy. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings revealed that the implementation of Close Reading involved five stages: text selection, independent reading, lecturer modeling, collaborative discussion, and text-based questioning. The strategy helped students activate prior knowledge, apply strategic reading behaviors, engage in collaborative meaning-making, and support their answers with textual evidence. Students perceived the strategy positively because it enabled them to understand texts more systematically and critically. Nevertheless, challenges related to vocabulary limitations, inferential comprehension, translation dependence, and confidence were still observed. Overall, the study demonstrates that Close Reading provides an effective instructional framework for improving reading comprehension and fostering critical reading practices among EFL learners. These findings suggest that the strategy can be integrated into reading instruction for non-English-major students to support deeper engagement with academic texts.

Keywords: *Close Reading, Reading Comprehension, Efl, Qualitative Case Study, Higher Education*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received

January 2, 2026

Revised

March 03, 2026

Accepted

March 30, 2026

Journal Homepage

<https://ojs.staialfurqan.ac.id/IJoASER/>

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INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential language in higher education, serving as a medium for accessing academic resources, scientific publications, and global information. In the era of globalization, university students are increasingly required to engage with English texts to support their academic learning and professional development. Consequently, reading comprehension has become one of the most important skills that students need to master, as it enables them to obtain information, construct meaning, and develop critical thinking skills (Grabe & Stoller, 2020).

Reading comprehension involves more than simply recognizing words and sentences. It requires readers to understand explicit information, infer implicit meanings, identify main ideas, and connect textual information with prior knowledge (Snow, 2002). For students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading comprehension is often considered a challenging skill due to limited vocabulary knowledge, unfamiliar text structures, and insufficient reading strategies (Nation, 2019). These challenges are particularly evident among first-semester university students who are still adapting to the academic demands of higher education.

The challenges become more significant for students enrolled in non-English majors. Unlike students in English-related programs, non-English-major students generally have fewer

opportunities to practice English in academic settings. As a result, many of them experience difficulties when reading English texts, identifying key information, and answering comprehension questions accurately. They often rely on word-by-word translation, which may hinder their ability to understand the overall meaning of a text. Consequently, students may become less confident and less motivated to engage with English reading materials.

In the context of English Language Education at UIN Raden Intan Lampung, reading comprehension is one of the core competencies expected from first-semester students. As prospective English educators, students are required to understand various types of academic and non-academic texts. However, preliminary observations indicate that some students still face difficulties in comprehending English texts, particularly when dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary, identifying main ideas, and interpreting implicit information. These challenges suggest the need for effective instructional strategies that can facilitate deeper understanding and improve students' reading performance.

One instructional strategy that has gained considerable attention in reading instruction is Close Reading. Close Reading is a systematic approach that encourages readers to interact deeply with a text through repeated reading, careful analysis, and evidence-based interpretation (Fisher & Frey, 2012). Rather than focusing on surface-level understanding, Close Reading requires students to examine textual details, identify important information, and support their responses using evidence from the text. This approach helps students become more strategic readers and promotes active engagement during the reading process.

According to Fisher and Frey (2014), Close Reading enables students to develop deeper comprehension by encouraging them to reread texts with specific purposes and focus on textual evidence. Similarly, Shanahan (2015) argues that Close Reading can strengthen students' analytical skills and improve their ability to comprehend complex texts. Through repeated interaction with a text, students are guided to construct meaning independently and answer comprehension questions more accurately. Therefore, Close Reading has the potential to support first-semester students who require additional guidance and encouragement in understanding English texts.

Several previous studies have reported positive effects of Close Reading on students' reading comprehension. For example, Fisher and Frey (2012) found that Close Reading promotes deeper engagement with texts and enhances students' comprehension skills. Other studies have demonstrated that Close Reading can improve students' ability to identify textual evidence and understand complex reading materials. However, most existing studies have been conducted in primary schools, secondary schools, or English-major programs. Limited research has explored the implementation of Close Reading among first-semester students from non-English majors in Indonesian higher education contexts.

Furthermore, previous studies have predominantly focused on measuring students' reading achievement and comprehension scores. Comparatively little attention has been given to understanding how non-English-major students experience Close Reading, how the strategy supports their comprehension process, and how it encourages them to locate information from texts when answering questions. Exploring these aspects is important because students' experiences can provide valuable insights into the practical implementation of Close Reading in university classrooms.

Considering the importance of reading comprehension and the potential benefits of Close Reading, it is necessary to investigate how this strategy is implemented in university-level EFL classrooms. Exploring students' experiences and perspectives can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of Close Reading in supporting reading comprehension development among first-semester students.

Therefore, this study entitled "Teaching and Learning Reading Comprehension through Close Reading: Insights from First-Semester EFL Students" aims to explore the implementation of Close Reading in reading instruction and examine the experiences of first-semester students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung. The findings are expected to contribute to the improvement of reading pedagogy in EFL higher education contexts and provide practical recommendations for lecturers seeking to enhance students' reading comprehension skills.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate the implementation of the Close Reading strategy in teaching reading comprehension to first-semester non-English-major students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to explore and describe the teaching and learning process, particularly how Close Reading was implemented in classroom activities and how students engaged with the strategy during reading comprehension instruction.

The study was conducted at UIN Raden Intan Lampung during the 2026/2027 academic year. The participants consisted of one English lecturer and first-semester students enrolled in a compulsory English course from non-English-major departments. The participants were selected through purposive sampling because they were directly involved in the implementation of the Close Reading strategy. The lecturer was chosen based on his/her experience in applying Close Reading during reading instruction, while the students were selected because they actively participated in the learning activities.

Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Classroom observations were conducted during reading comprehension sessions in which the Close Reading strategy was implemented. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer and used an observation checklist and field notes to record classroom activities. The observations focused on the stages of Close Reading implementation, lecturer-student interactions, students' engagement in reading activities, and students' ability to identify information from texts and answer comprehension questions.

To obtain deeper insights into the implementation process, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the lecturer and selected students after the observation sessions. The interview with the lecturer explored the procedures of implementing Close Reading, perceived benefits of the strategy, and challenges encountered during instruction. Meanwhile, the student interviews focused on their experiences using Close Reading, difficulties in understanding English texts, and perceptions of how the strategy helped them locate information and answer reading comprehension questions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The data collection process was carried out in several stages. First, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the lecturer and the institution. Second, classroom observations were conducted during reading comprehension lessons employing the Close Reading strategy. Third, field notes were compiled and organized following each observation session. Finally, interviews were conducted with the lecturer and selected students to clarify and enrich the observational data.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data condensation stage, observation notes and interview transcripts were selected, coded, and categorized according to themes related to the implementation of Close Reading. The data were then displayed in the form of narrative descriptions and thematic categories to facilitate interpretation. In the final stage, conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring patterns and themes across the data. To enhance the credibility of the findings, data triangulation was employed by comparing information obtained from classroom observations and interviews.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

The findings revealed that the implementation of the Close Reading strategy in teaching reading comprehension to first-semester non-English-major students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung was conducted through five main stages: text selection, independent reading, lecturer modeling, collaborative discussion, and text-based questioning. These stages guided students to engage with texts more actively and systematically.

1. Text Selection

The first stage involved selecting reading materials appropriate to students' proficiency levels and learning needs. The lecturer used short informational texts related to topics familiar to first-semester Islamic university students, such as *Muslim Clothing and Islamic Modesty*, *Halal Food and Its Importance in Daily Life*, and *Maintaining Cleanliness in Islam*.

Classroom observations showed that students demonstrated greater interest when the topics were related to their experiences and prior knowledge. The lecturer explained that the selection of appropriate texts was important because many students had limited experience reading English texts at the university level.

One student explained:

"I liked the topic because it was related to things that we already know in our daily life, such as halal food and Islamic values. It made the text easier to understand even though there were some difficult words." (Student A)

Similarly, another student stated:

"Usually, I feel nervous when reading English texts, but this text was interesting because the topic was familiar to me. I could guess the meaning of some parts from my background knowledge." (Student B)

These findings suggest that familiar and relevant topics increased students' motivation and reduced anxiety during reading activities. Students appeared more willing to engage with texts when they could connect the content to their existing knowledge and experiences.

2. Independent Reading

After receiving the text, students were asked to read independently to gain a general understanding of the content. During this stage, students attempted to identify the main idea and key information before receiving further guidance from the lecturer.

The observations revealed that some students initially encountered difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary. However, most students continued reading and attempted to infer meanings from the context. Several students were observed rereading certain sections of the text to ensure comprehension. Interview data showed that students perceived the first reading as useful for understanding the general topic before engaging in more detailed analysis.

As one student reported:

"In the first reading, I did not understand everything, but I could understand the general topic. After that, it became easier to focus on the details." (Student D)

Another student explained:

"Sometimes I found unfamiliar vocabulary, but I tried not to stop reading. I continued reading the next sentences to understand the meaning from the context." (Student C)

These findings indicate that independent reading encouraged students to develop initial comprehension before moving toward deeper textual analysis.

3. Lecturer Modeling

The lecturer then modeled the Close Reading process by demonstrating how to identify important information, analyze textual evidence, and answer comprehension questions.

During this stage, the lecturer used guiding questions and highlighted specific parts of the text. Students were encouraged to pay attention to keywords, supporting details, and textual clues that could help them understand the author's message. Observation data indicated that students became more engaged when the lecturer explicitly demonstrated how to approach the text. Students frequently followed the lecturer's guidance by underlining important information and revisiting specific paragraphs.

One participant stated:

"When the lecturer showed us how to find keywords and important sentences, I realized that I did not need to translate every word. I only needed to focus on the important information." (Student A)

Another student noted:

"The lecturer's explanation helped me understand where I should look for the answer. Before, I often guessed the answer without checking the text carefully." (Student E)

The observations further revealed that lecturer modeling provided students with practical strategies for interacting with the text and encouraged them to rely more on textual evidence than on assumptions.

4. Collaborative Discussion

Following the modeling stage, students worked collaboratively in pairs or small groups to discuss the text. They shared interpretations, compared answers, and clarified information that they found difficult to understand.

The observations showed that collaborative discussion encouraged students to participate more actively in the reading process. Students often returned to the text to verify information and support their arguments during discussions. Interview results revealed that students felt more confident discussing the text with peers because they could exchange ideas and resolve misunderstandings together.

One student explained:

"Discussing with friends helped me understand the text better because sometimes they understood parts that I did not understand." (Student B)

Another student added:

"When we worked in groups, we could compare our answers and check which information was supported by the text. It made me more confident." (Student F)

These findings indicate that collaborative discussion played an important role in strengthening comprehension and promoting active engagement with the text.

5. Text-Based Questioning

The final stage involved answering comprehension questions based on information found in the text. Students were instructed to support their answers with textual evidence rather than relying solely on personal opinions.

Observation data indicated that students frequently reread relevant sections of the text before answering questions. Many students highlighted key sentences and searched for supporting information to justify their responses. The interview findings suggested that this stage helped students develop a habit of locating information systematically and encouraged them to pay closer attention to textual details.

One participant stated:

"Before using this strategy, I usually answered based on what I thought was correct. Now I try to find the exact sentence in the text before answering." (Student C)

Another student remarked:

"The questions made me go back to the text many times. At first it was tiring, but later I realized it helped me find the correct answer." (Student B)

These findings suggest that text-based questioning encouraged students to become more evidence-oriented readers and improved their ability to locate relevant information within a text.

Challenges Encountered During the Implementation

Although the implementation of Close Reading generally proceeded well, several challenges were identified. The most common difficulties experienced by students included limited vocabulary knowledge, difficulty understanding unfamiliar expressions, difficulty making inferences from the text, dependence on word-by-word translation, and lack of confidence when answering comprehension questions.

Regarding vocabulary, one student stated:

"The biggest problem for me was vocabulary. Sometimes I knew the topic, but I could not understand some important words." (Student G)

Similarly, another student explained:

"There were some expressions that I had never seen before, so I needed extra time to understand them." (Student J)

Some students also experienced difficulty making inferences from the text.

As one participant noted:

"Finding information that was written directly in the text was easier. The difficult part was when I had to understand information that was not stated clearly." (Student H)

Dependence on translation was also evident.

One student admitted:

"I still often translate words into Indonesian because I am afraid of misunderstanding the text." (Student I)

In addition, several students reported a lack of confidence when answering questions.

As one participant stated:

"Sometimes I knew the answer, but I was not confident because I was worried that my interpretation might be wrong." (Student C)

Despite these challenges, observations showed that repeated reading, lecturer guidance, and collaborative discussion helped students gradually overcome these difficulties.

Overall, the implementation of the Close Reading strategy enabled students to engage more deeply with reading texts through repeated reading, guided analysis, peer discussion, and evidence-based questioning. The findings suggest that Close Reading provided a structured framework that supported students in identifying information, understanding textual meaning, and answering comprehension questions more effectively.

A student summarized this experience by stating:

"Close Reading helped me read more carefully. Before, I only focused on finishing the text, but now I pay more attention to finding information and understanding the author's message." (Student D)

Likewise, another participant reflected:

"The strategy taught me how to read step by step. It was not only about answering questions, but also about understanding how the information in the text is connected." (Student C)

These reflections indicate that Close Reading contributed not only to students' reading comprehension but also to the development of more strategic and critical reading practices.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the Close Reading strategy was implemented through a structured process that encouraged students to engage with texts multiple times and examine textual information carefully. This finding is consistent with Fisher and Frey (2012), who argue that Close Reading helps students develop deeper comprehension through repeated interaction with texts and evidence-based analysis.

The text selection stage played an important role in supporting students' comprehension. Because the participants were non-English-major students, selecting texts that matched their proficiency levels enabled them to participate more confidently in reading activities. This supports Nation's (2019) view that appropriate text difficulty is essential for effective reading instruction.

The lecturer's modeling also contributed significantly to students' understanding of the reading process. By demonstrating how to identify key ideas and textual evidence, the lecturer provided scaffolding that helped students approach texts more strategically. This finding aligns with Vygotsky's concept of guided learning, in which learners benefit from support before becoming independent readers.

Furthermore, collaborative discussion allowed students to negotiate meaning and share interpretations with their peers. Through interaction, students were able to clarify misunderstandings and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the text. This finding supports previous research suggesting that discussion-based reading activities enhance comprehension and student engagement (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

The findings also revealed several challenges during implementation. Some students struggled with limited vocabulary, difficulty making inferences, and dependence on word-by-word translation. These challenges are commonly reported among EFL learners and may hinder reading comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). Nevertheless, the repeated reading process encouraged by Close Reading helped students revisit the text and locate relevant information more effectively.

Overall, the implementation of Close Reading provided opportunities for students to become active readers, engage critically with texts, and support their answers using textual

evidence. These findings suggest that Close Reading can be a useful instructional strategy for improving reading comprehension among first-semester non-English-major students in higher education contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the implementation of the Close Reading strategy in teaching reading comprehension to first-semester non-English-major students at UIN Raden Intan Lampung. The findings showed that the strategy was implemented through five interconnected stages: text selection, independent reading, lecturer modeling, collaborative discussion, and text-based questioning. These stages provided a structured learning process that encouraged students to engage actively with texts and develop their reading comprehension skills. The findings further revealed that Close Reading helped students improve their ability to identify main ideas, locate supporting information, interpret textual meaning, and answer comprehension questions using textual evidence. The strategy also promoted strategic reading behaviors, such as rereading, using contextual clues, and verifying information through the text. Although students experienced challenges related to vocabulary, inferential comprehension, translation dependence, and confidence, these difficulties were gradually reduced through lecturer guidance and collaborative learning activities. Overall, the study suggests that Close Reading is an effective strategy for supporting reading comprehension among EFL learners, particularly non-English-major students. By encouraging active and evidence-based engagement with texts, the strategy contributes to the development of both comprehension and critical reading skills. Future research may examine the implementation of Close Reading in different educational contexts, with larger participant groups and diverse text types, to further explore its impact on students' reading development.

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