

Exploring Academic Reading Skills Challenges and Strategies from the Perspective of Indonesian IELTS Test-Takers

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ABSTRACT

Academic reading is an essential competency for EFL learners, especially for those preparing for the IELTS examination, although it continues to create significant challenges. This study examines the issues encountered by Indonesian IELTS candidates in the reading section and analyzes the tactics they utilize to overcome these obstacles. A mixed-method approach was employed to collect data via questionnaires and open-ended responses from 24 participants in an IELTS preparation program in Ternate City. Quantitative data were evaluated using SPSS, and qualitative data were thematically interpreted to enhance the findings. Findings indicate that restricted vocabulary, time limitations, and comprehension challenges are the primary barriers faced by examinees. Participants indicated adopting multiple strategies to tackle these challenges, with skimming, scanning, highlighting important information, and employing contextual hints being the most commonly adopted techniques. The results highlight the significance of strategic instruction and vocabulary enhancement in preparing students for IELTS reading assessments. This study indicates that focused instruction and regular practice can improve learners' reading efficiency and performance in high-stakes language assessments.

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1. Introduction

Academic reading is an important skill and a big challenge for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Academic reading is essential for students who seek to pursue higher education and professional careers. It improves critical and analytical thinking to support educational success (Wahyono, 2019). Academic reading allows students to engage deeply with disciplinary content, grasp nuanced arguments, and synthesize information from different sources (Feng & Chen, 2016; Tammasse et al., 2025; Youngsun et al., 2024). Proficiency in reading is crucial for achieving high academic standards and for those who aim to succeed in educational settings and professional environments (Li, 2018; Schoepp & Garinger, 2016; Uysal, 2009).

Academic reading is a gateway to knowledge and intellectual growth, which is essential for students. Individuals can explore information in various fields, acquire knowledge, and build a foundation of understanding through academic reading (Habók & Magyar, 2018; Rahman & Amir, 2019; Sachiya et al., 2025). Through academic reading, one can develop critical thinking skills (Aloqaili, 2011) and practice their ability to analyze complex arguments, distinguish fact and opinion, and synthesize information from various sources. Many authors and researchers consider reading to be a non-linear process, allowing students to interact with the texts and work with skills such as hypothesizing, predicting, and using their prior knowledge to make meaning of a text (Carrell & Grabe, 2002; Grabe, 2009; Smith, 2012; Carrell & Grabe, 2013). Furthermore, academic reading plays a crucial role in shaping perspectives and building empathy by exposing readers to various perspectives and cultural contexts. Therefore, academic reading is a process of enlightenment that can guide individuals on a journey of discovery, self-reflection, and lifelong learning.

However, mastering academic reading poses challenges, particularly in assessments like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) Reading Task. To navigate academic texts successfully, students must develop various skills. Academic reading skills include vocabulary mastery, reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, recognizing text patterns, and using inferential to understand underlying meanings from text. Furthermore, readers must also employ an effective time management strategy to complete reading tasks within the given time limit. Several obstacles hinder

compelling academic reading. Students encountered several problems in academic reading due to linguistics barriers, such as complex grammar and vocabulary, passage structures, language formality, challenging reading topics, and focus problems (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022).

Additionally, Alghail & Mahfoodh (2016) reported that international students have reading problems related to language, including taking brief notes, using their own words in note-taking, working out the meaning of difficult words, identifying supporting details and examples, recalling prior knowledge while reading, and managing time for completion of reading academic materials. Most of these difficulties can be attributed to low proficiency in English, limited vocabulary mastery, and slow reading rate. Time constraints, complex vocabulary, and demands on working memory were reported to negatively influence reading comprehension among test takers (Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014; Prihandoko et al., 2022; Rahman & Widyastuti, 2023).

Many countries widely use the IELTS Test to screen an individual's proficiency in English. In many English-speaking countries, the IELTS test has generally become the prerequisite for language proficiency screening for higher education (Green, 2019; Pearson, 2019). The IELTS Reading Test assesses the ability to comprehend academic texts written in English. It consists of three sections, each containing a different type of text (e.g., descriptive, argumentative). The test aims to evaluate proficiency in reading and understanding passages that are usually encountered in University or professional contexts. The test tests readers the skills needed in academic reading, such as skimming and scanning, understanding detail, identifying main ideas, and inferencing. The Tests are divided into two types depending on their purpose, such as the Academic and General Training versions of the IELTS test. Both tests provide a valid assessment of the four language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) and are scored similarly. The first three parts of the tests (listening, reading, and writing) are taken simultaneously with no breaks in between, which challenges participants' focus and time management skills (Hashemi & Daneshfar, 2018).

Candidates often face challenges such as time constraints, complex vocabulary, and the need to comprehend nuanced arguments across different disciplines (Ali et al., 2020). Additionally, the test's diversity of text types and writing styles necessitates adaptive reading strategies and comprehensive preparation. Another problem in the IELTS test is when participants are challenged with unfamiliar topics or when the reader and the writer are from different cultures (Chowdhury, 2009). Test takers spend quite some money to take the test, which is an economic burden since it is not very affordable (Pearson, 2019). This cost puts more pressure on test takers to pass the required score on their first test. Indonesian test takers especially need to book a test that is only available in some big cities. Test takers often travel to other cities and pay extra for transportation, accommodation, and meals to get the test.

To effectively tackle IELTS questions, it is essential to employ specific reading strategies. Efficient time management is crucial to ensure test takers can complete all sections within the allocated time. When encountering challenging questions, it is advisable not to spend too much time on a difficult question but instead to move on to the next one. Additionally, applying skimming and scanning techniques is essential to swiftly extract specific information from the texts without reading every word (Hughes, 2003). Locating keywords or highlighting essential parts of the reading also helps readers read more effectively (Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014).

This research explores the academic reading difficulties students encounter in the context of Indonesian IELTS Test takers, particularly in the reading section. The study would look into these challenges and propose practical strategies for reading improvement.

2. Methodology

The researcher collected quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions. This methodological framework would collect empirical data while presenting descriptive insight into the findings (Dörnyei, 2007). The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Part A has eight items adapted from Rugsakorn et al. (2013). In part A, test takers were asked to identify the difficulties they encountered during the IELTS Academic reading test. There were eight items in the first part of the questionnaire. In part B, there were 26 items about strategies taken by test takers during the reading test. Part B was adapted from the questionnaire by Phi and Vu (2021). The reliability of the questionnaire was appropriate, with Cronbach's Cronbach's Alpha of .805. The questionnaire was presented on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The researchers used a measurement tool, which is Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 26.0 software, to measure the descriptive data. Additionally, the instrument contained four open-ended questions to describe test takers' perspectives and opinions on their difficulties and strategies during the test. Their responses were then

transcribed and interpreted thematically to reconfirm, compare, and compare with the quantitative information obtained from the questionnaire.

The data were collected in a short IELTS academic training program held by a private institution in Ternate City. There were 24 participants taking part in the study. Participants came from various backgrounds; some had finished their bachelor's degrees, and some were still university students. During the program's registration process, participants mainly mentioned that they were interested in joining the IELTS training program because they plan to pursue a master's abroad.

3. Result and Discussion

This study examines the academic reading challenges experienced by Indonesian IELTS test takers, specifically within the reading section of the exam. It aims to identify the primary difficulties faced by candidates and to explore the strategies they employ while completing the test. By analyzing these aspects, the research seeks to provide practical insights and recommendations for enhancing reading proficiency and test performance. The results and discussion presented in the following section focus on interpreting the participants' responses and performance patterns, highlighting how their encountered challenges and selected strategies influence their overall outcomes in the IELTS reading component. Such findings are expected to contribute to a better understanding of the areas where Indonesian learners may require additional instructional support to achieve more effective reading comprehension.

3.1 Questionnaire Results

Table 1. IELTS Academic Reading Test Difficulties

Questionnaire Items	N	Mean	Std Deviation
I didn't understand the instructions.	24	1.7083	.85867
While reading, I had to translate into the Indonesian language	24	2.3750	1.24455
I had to skip some questions because I didn't understand the reading texts.	24	2.5417	1.14129
The time for reading texts was not long enough.	24	3.2917	1.26763
The lack of vocabulary was a problem in the test.	24	3.7083	1.33447
I didn't have enough time to check my answers	24	3.0833	1.21285
I didn't understand the questions.	24	1.9583	.7560
Having understood the questions, I was still unable to find the answers.	24	2.8333	1.16718

Table 1 presents the participants' responses to their IELTS Academic Reading Test difficulties. From the data above, it can be inferred that one of the most significant difficulties faced by participants ($M = 3.29$) was to read the reading passage in a short amount of time. Participants mostly agreed that there was not enough time to read more carefully. In addition, there was very limited time for participants to review their answers before submitting the test ($M = 3.08$). Vocabulary problems were also identified as a major obstacle ($M = 3.71$). A lack of vocabulary could affect participants' understanding of the information in the passage. Participants also reported issues related to questions and text comprehension. Participants reported skipping the questions because they did not understand the text ($M = 2.54$). The need to skip questions shows how participants felt the challenge of managing time while having to comprehend the text quickly. This emphasizes how difficulties dealing with more complex or unfamiliar passages can result in incomplete responses to certain questions.

Locating answers, despite understanding the questions ($M = 2.83$), was also found quite challenging. While these difficulties were less mentioned compared to time or vocabulary problems, they still underline a gap in comprehension. These findings showed a lack of ability to pinpoint specific information in the text and skills to interpret question prompts correctly. Several participants also reported some issues, such as having to translate texts into Indonesian while reading ($M = 2.38$). This indicates that participants struggled to think in English directly while reading. This challenge is frequently encountered by non-native speakers of English, which hinders the reading process and decreases efficiency in responding

to questions. The difficulty associated with understanding the instructions was the least reported ($M = 1.71$). This finding implies that the majority of participants did not encounter significant challenges in understanding the instructions. Participants may already had previous experience with the IELTS test format. They may also possess higher proficiency in English already, which helped them to process and follow the test instructions efficiently. Additionally, it may indicate that the instructions were clearly articulated, reducing any potential ambiguities.

Table 2. Strategies in Answering IELTS Academic Reading Test

Questionnaire Item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I had a purpose of reading to answer the question only	24	3.5417	1.14129
2. I managed my time well	24	3.4167	.88055
3. I made predictions about what I was going to read by looking at any pictures with the text and bold word in title.	24	3.5833	.92861
4. I underlined keywords in the questions.	24	4.2917	.90790
5. I highlighted important information as I read the text.	24	4.3750	.76967
6. I looked for keywords in the questions and words or phrases with similar and related meanings in the texts; I looked for a paraphrase of each statement.	24	4.2500	.67566
7. I scanned quickly for numbers, names, dates, and words around them to get the answers.	24	4.2083	.77903
8. I remembered that the questions followed the order of the passage.	24	3.7917	1.02062
9. I didn't try to read every word.	24	3.6250	1.09594
10. I tried to summarize after I read.	24	3.0417	1.19707
11. I read the first sentence of each paragraph for the main idea.	24	4.0000	.72232
12. I looked for how the text was organized and ignored details.	24	3.1667	1.00722
13. I tried to predict where the author's points were leading.	24	3.7917	.77903
14. I got the gist of each paragraph.	24	3.7500	.67566
15. I paid special attention to the first part of the passage.	24	3.9167	.88055
16. I found short sentences within paragraphs.	24	3.3750	.82423
17. I formed ideas about the text while reading.	24	3.6250	.87539
18. I related what I read to what I already knew.	24	3.7083	.90790
19. I looked for context clues for the meaning of unfamiliar or difficult words.	24	4.0833	.82970
20. I answered the questions I knew first.	24	4.4167	.82970
21. I avoided answers that were too specific or too broad.	24	3.7917	.83297
22. I always looked for answers that sounded consistent with the idea in the text.	24	3.7500	.67566
23. I guessed the meaning of any word in the stem I did not know.	24	3.6667	.96309
24. I used prior knowledge to answer questions.	24	3.5833	.97431
25. I guessed if I could not find the answer.	24	3.8333	1.37261

26.	I made sure I found evidence in the text to answer the question; I tried not to use what I thought was true.	24	3.7917	1.10253
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The second table in the questionnaire explored the strategies used by participants in answering the IELTS Academic Reading Test. The results indicated that participants employed a wide variety of strategies to answer the test. Skimming, scanning, and highlighting key information in the test were reported as the highest methods used by participants. In order to help their focus while reading, participants would highlight important information (4.37) and keywords so that they can read more effectively (M= 4.29). These strategies help participants to quickly locate relevant information and increase their chances of answering correctly. Furthermore, participants mostly used scanning techniques to quickly look for details like numbers, names, and related words in the text (M= 4.21).

Effective time management was found to be a crucial strategy applied by participants to navigate time pressure. The average score of 3.42 for the statement "I managed my time well" suggests that participants realized the importance of managing their time effectively when answering questions. However, it also reveals that they encountered difficulties in doing so, as evidenced by their reported challenges with time constraints. Additionally, the approach of focusing on the simpler questions (M = 4.42) was often utilized, allowing participants to gain points quickly and better manage their time for the duration of the task.the assessment.

Participants often reported using prediction techniques, including looking at titles and images (M= 3.58), predicting the author's point (M=3.79), and reading the first and last sentence of the paragraph to grasp the main idea (M= 4.00). These strategies help participants predict where the passage is heading and prepare them mentally to create a framework for understanding the passage effectively. Another strategy employed is using context clues to understand unfamiliar words (M= 4.08). This strategy is also highly rated by participants because reading texts in IELTS are often filled with many academic words and unfamiliar vocabulary. Participants would use this strategy by looking at the surrounding words and context to infer meaning. Participants also rely on their prior knowledge while reading (M= 3.58) to answer questions. This strategy enables participants to connect the reading passages to what they already know. Skimming passages to get the gist of each paragraph (M= 3.75) was also employed by participants to help them focus on the general flow of the passage and not too drowned in the details. This strategy helped them extract the main points of the texts quickly.

The findings from this study revealed the challenges and strategies faced by participants in the IELTS Academic Reading Test. The results of the questionnaire responses reported several key issues related to participants' efforts in reading comprehension and the effective use of time management. One of the most notable difficulties felt by participants was the time pressure during the test. The finding aligns with several previous studies that talked about the importance of managing time during the test (Vandewalle et al., 2019; Lu et al., 2021). A time management problem was also faced near the end of the test. A high number of participants agreed that they did not have enough time to review their answers before submitting (M= 3.08). This further highlights the importance of having a strategic planning of time. High number of participants agreed that time management was one of the most difficult thing to manage during reading test. This challenge marks the time pressure experienced by participants, highlighting a common challenge in timed English proficiency tests like IELTS (Chalmers & Walkinshaw, 2014). Test takers felt that the time allocated for reading was inadequate, affecting their ability to comprehend the material fully, answer all questions correctly and to review or verify their answers.

Rahimi & Jafari (2017) stated that time pressure is a common obstacle non-native English users face in an English proficiency test. IELTS is an academic English test that requires high focus and advanced comprehension of English. In order to successfully finish the test, participants need a lot of preparation and practice. Yang and Zhang (2020) suggested practicing by allocating a specific amount of duration for each reading section to avoid wasting time.

Another notable problem for participants was vocabulary; a mean score of 3.71 indicated that this was a moderate challenge. This result is in line with several studies that show vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension are related, especially when it comes to standardized English proficiency tests (Zhang & Lu, 2021; Xu & Xie, 2018). This happened because the reading passages on the IELTS Academic Reading Test sometimes use complicated phrases and technical terms, which can be a major obstacle for non-native speakers. According to this research, a lack of vocabulary proficiency can make it more difficult to understand academic publications, especially those with specialized or technical vocabularies (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022). The intricate lexical elements frequently found in IELTS reading passages, which test non-native speakers' ability to understand and use language, further exacerbated vocabulary problems.

Lack of comprehension of important language can make it difficult to understand a passage's overall meaning, which can lead to inaccurate or insufficient responses. According to Guo et al. (2020), language learners frequently turn

to translation techniques when faced with new words. Participants in this study ($M = 2.38$) acknowledged translating materials into Indonesian to facilitate comprehension, further demonstrating non-native speakers' dependence on translation (Yule, 2018). Participants are advised to practice vocabulary exercises and do comprehensive reading regularly to improve their performance on the tests.

The results reported that participants implemented a range of techniques to cope with the challenges they faced during the test. The most frequently reported strategies were using skimming, scanning, and highlighting information ($M = 4.37$, $M = 4.29$). These strategies were consistently found in previous research, which suggested that skimming and scanning are some important strategies for managing time and efficiently locating information (Davies & Green, 2016; Rashtchi et al., 2020).

The participants also underlined the importance of effective time management. Although the mean score for time management was somewhat moderate ($M = 3.42$), it reflects the participants' awareness of the significance of allocating sufficient time to each task. Similar findings were also found in Liu et al. (2019), who found that effective time management directly correlates with higher test performance.

Participants frequently employed prediction strategies to help them predict the answer faster ($M = 3.79$) by reading titles, using context clues ($M = 4.08$), and guessing the author's message. This prediction strategy has been shown to improve reading comprehension by helping readers anticipate content and create mental frameworks for understanding the passage (Nassaji, 2017; Zare & Othman, 2019). By using these predictive skills, participants were better able to engage with the text and identify relevant information that was directly linked to the questions. Moreover, participants utilized strategies such as skimming for main ideas ($M = 3.75$) and ignoring unnecessary details ($M = 3.17$). These strategies reflect the need for participants to balance focus on the main ideas of the text while minimizing distractions by eliminating less important details (Cheng & Chen, 2020).

3.2 Limitations of the Study and Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study can contribute significantly to understanding IELTS Academic Reading Test difficulties and strategies. However, it is important to recognize that there were some limitations from this research. The sample size of 24 participants is relatively small, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. It is suggested that future studies can employ a larger and more diverse samples to provide deeper insights into the strategies used by the IELTS test-takers.

Future research could also delve into the impact of test preparation on strategy use. Several studies have shown that intensive preparation and practice can enhance test-takers' ability to manage time effectively and improve vocabulary knowledge (Alderson, 2017; Lee, 2020). Investigating how test-preparation courses or self-study impact the use of strategies in the reading section could provide valuable information for educators and other test-takers.

4. Conclusion

This study outlines the primary challenges that test takers encounter on the IELTS Academic Reading Test, such as limited time, limited vocabulary, and reading comprehension issues. Methods used by participants which include skimming, scanning, and using context cues, are in line with successful test-taking techniques found in earlier studies. Knowing these challenges and solutions can help guide test-taking procedures and identify areas in which students can benefit from further assistance. The long-term impacts of strategy use on reading performance and the contribution of test preparation to improving reading abilities require more investigation.

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