

Students' Perspectives on Learning Narrative Reading Texts in an Indonesian EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension, particularly in narrative texts, remains a significant challenge for EFL university students despite the widespread use of narrative materials in language classrooms. Previous studies have predominantly focused on students' reading achievement, while limited attention has been given to students' perspectives, motivation, and perceived difficulties in learning narrative texts. This study aimed to investigate students' perspectives on learning to read narrative texts at Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang (UNIMUS). This study employed a quantitative survey design using a 10-item Likert-scale questionnaire to investigate students' perspectives on learning to read narrative texts in an Indonesian EFL context. The questionnaire was distributed to 22 university students selected through purposive sampling. The instrument examined students' reading motivation, perceived text difficulty, relevance, and enjoyment, as well as perceived efficacy in understanding narrative texts. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and percentage analysis. The findings revealed that students generally demonstrated positive attitudes toward narrative reading and considered narrative texts beneficial and enjoyable for language learning. However, the results also indicated low intrinsic motivation for reading outside of classroom activities and considerable difficulty with higher-order reading skills, particularly distinguishing facts from opinions. In addition, students showed confidence in identifying basic narrative elements such as

plot, conflict, and characters. These findings suggest that current reading instruction successfully supports foundational comprehension skills but has not fully facilitated students' critical reading development and autonomous reading habits. This study contributes to EFL reading pedagogy by providing student-centered empirical data that may assist educators in designing more engaging, critical, and responsive narrative reading instruction in higher education contexts.

Keywords: EFL reading, narrative texts, reading comprehension, student perspectives, critical reading

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning because it enables students to understand, interpret, and evaluate written information effectively. In higher education contexts, reading ability is essential because university students must engage critically and independently with academic texts. Reading is not merely the process of recognizing words and sentences but also an interactive cognitive activity in which readers connect textual information with their prior knowledge and experiences (Grabe, 2009). Therefore, reading competence significantly contributes to students' academic success and language development.

Among the various text genres taught in EFL classrooms, narrative texts play an important role by exposing students to authentic language use, cultural values, and emotional experiences. Narrative texts such as short stories, folktales, and novels encourage students to engage with characters, settings, and plot developments while developing their imagination and interpretive thinking skills. According to Schema Theory, reading comprehension occurs when readers activate prior knowledge to interpret new information in a text (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Students with relevant background knowledge generally comprehend narrative texts more effectively because they can make inferences and connect ideas more readily. Recent studies also confirm that schema activation strategies and digital mind mapping positively improve EFL students' reading comprehension and engagement during reading activities (Yan, 2023). In addition, pre-reading activities that activate learners' background knowledge can significantly facilitate comprehension and interpretation of narrative texts in EFL classrooms (Khartite, 2021).

Despite the pedagogical benefits of narrative texts, many EFL learners continue to struggle with reading comprehension. Previous studies have shown that students often struggle to identify main ideas, interpret implied meanings, and evaluate textual information critically (Elsiyana et al., 2025; Ningsi et al., 2021; Siswanti et al., 2014). In many cases, students can understand literal information but struggle with higher-order reading tasks, such as distinguishing facts from opinions and analyzing authors' perspectives. This pattern indicates that reading instruction often emphasizes literal comprehension while providing limited opportunities for critical reading and analytical thinking. Woolley (2011) explained that effective reading comprehension requires not only literal understanding but also inferential and evaluative comprehension skills. Therefore, students who receive limited exposure to analytical reading activities may experience difficulties in higher-order comprehension tasks.

Another important factor in reading comprehension is motivation. According to Self-Determination Theory, students are more likely to engage actively in learning when they have intrinsic motivation and personal interest (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In reading contexts, intrinsically motivated students tend to read voluntarily, spend more time with texts, and demonstrate stronger comprehension. However, previous studies have found that many EFL students lack motivation to read independently outside classroom activities (Wijayatiningih et al., 2021). Similarly, Rahmadina et al. (2023) found that students' reading motivation in EFL classrooms is strongly influenced by personal interest, classroom environment, and reading materials used during instruction. Students with stronger reading interests tend to demonstrate better engagement and comprehension performance.

As a result, students may recognize the academic importance of reading without developing sustainable reading habits necessary for long-term language improvement. In addition, students' attitudes toward reading activities strongly influence their participation and learning outcomes. Positive attitudes encourage students to engage more actively in classroom activities and build confidence in their reading abilities. Conversely, negative attitudes may lead to boredom, anxiety, and disengagement. Understanding students' attitudes is therefore important because it helps educators identify learning barriers, instructional challenges, and areas needing pedagogical improvement.

Although numerous studies have examined reading comprehension and instructional strategies in EFL contexts, most

prior research has focused on students' achievement and instructional effectiveness. Little attention has been paid to students' perspectives on learning to read narrative texts, particularly in Indonesian higher education. Therefore, this study aims to investigate students' perspectives on learning to read narrative texts at Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang (UNIMUS). Specifically, the study explores students' motivation, perceived difficulties, enjoyment, and self-efficacy in understanding narrative texts. The findings are expected to provide student-centered empirical evidence that may inform more engaging, motivating, and critically oriented reading instruction in higher education.

METHOD

This study used a quantitative survey design to examine students' perspectives on learning to read narrative texts in an Indonesian EFL context. The survey method was chosen because it enables researchers to systematically collect and analyze numerical data to describe participants' perceptions, attitudes, and learning experiences. The study was conducted at Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang (UNIMUS) from October 28 to November 3, 2025.

The participants in this study comprised 22 university students selected through purposive sampling. This sampling technique was used to select participants with prior experience learning to read narrative texts in EFL classrooms. The participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study and completed the questionnaire anonymously.

The primary instrument used in this research was a 10-item Likert-scale questionnaire designed to explore students' perspectives on narrative reading. The questionnaire examined four main aspects: reading motivation, perceived text difficulty, relevance and enjoyment, and perceived efficacy in understanding narrative texts. The instrument consisted of both positive and negative statements measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, as follows:

- 1 = Strongly Agree
- 2 = Agree
- 3 = Disagree
- 4 = Strongly Disagree

Before data collection, the questionnaire was reviewed and validated by English education experts to ensure content validity and item clarity. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and percentages to identify patterns in students' responses.

Mean scores and response percentages were used to interpret students' perspectives on narrative reading in the EFL classroom.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study were based on questionnaire responses from 22 university students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang (UNIMUS). The analysis focused on students' perspectives on learning to read narrative texts in an Indonesian EFL context. The questionnaire assessed students' reading motivation, perceived text difficulty, relevance, and enjoyment, as well as perceived efficacy in understanding narrative texts. Table 1 presents a summary of students' responses, based on mean scores and category interpretations.

Table 1. Students' Perspectives on Learning Narrative Reading Texts

Item	Indicator	Mean	Category
P1	Reading helps students understand stories	1.41	Strongly Agree
P2	Narrative texts support English learning	1.45	Strongly Agree
P3	Learning narrative texts is enjoyable	1.59	Strongly Agree
P4	Narrative texts are difficult to understand	2.36	Agree
P5	Assessments help overcome reading difficulties	1.82	Agree
P6	Difficulty distinguishing facts from opinions	2.64	Agree
P7	Ability to identify narrative elements	1.77	Agree
P8	Ability to identify story conflicts	1.68	Agree
P9	Teaching methods meet students' needs	1.86	Agree
P10	Motivation to read outside of classroom activities	2.55	Disagree

The findings showed that students generally held positive attitudes toward learning narrative texts. Most participants strongly agreed that narrative reading activities improved their understanding of English and supported their language learning (P1 and P2). Students also viewed narrative texts as enjoyable learning materials (P3). This finding indicates that narrative-based learning activities can create a more engaging reading environment for EFL learners. The result aligns with Elsiyana et al. (2025), who found that narrative-based instructional materials positively influenced students' reading engagement and comprehension performance.

From a theoretical perspective, this finding can be explained by Schema Theory, proposed by Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), which holds that students comprehend texts more effectively when they can connect textual information to prior knowledge and personal experiences. Narrative texts often feature familiar themes and relatable story structures that support students' understanding and engagement. Consequently, students tend to view narrative reading activities as meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences. This finding also supports Yan (2023), who demonstrated that schema-based instructional strategies increase students' engagement and comprehension during reading activities by enabling learners to connect textual information with their prior knowledge more effectively.

Beyond students' cognitive engagement, the findings also indicate that narrative texts may contribute to the development of affective dimensions of language learning. Positive emotional responses toward reading activities often reduce learners' anxiety and increase their willingness to participate in classroom discussions. Narrative texts expose learners to meaningful contexts, authentic characters, and culturally familiar situations that facilitate emotional involvement during reading. Such emotional engagement encourages students to sustain attention throughout the reading process and may strengthen comprehension by making textual information more memorable. Therefore, enjoyment should not merely be viewed as an outcome of successful reading instruction but also as a facilitating factor that supports language acquisition.

Despite these positive perceptions, the findings also showed that students lacked intrinsic motivation to read independently outside of classroom activities. Item P10 had the highest mean score (2.55), indicating that many students did not voluntarily read narrative texts for personal enjoyment. This finding aligns with Wijayatiningsih et al. (2021), who reported that EFL students frequently recognize the academic importance of reading but show low motivation for autonomous reading practices.

This phenomenon may occur because students' reading activities are still highly dependent on classroom instruction and academic demands. According to Self-Determination Theory, intrinsic motivation develops when students experience autonomy, competence, and personal relevance in learning activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In this study, students may perceive reading primarily as an academic obligation rather than a personally meaningful activity. As a result, they tend to read only when required by teachers or classroom assignments.

The low level of autonomous reading also suggests that classroom instruction may still rely heavily on teacher-directed learning. Although structured classroom activities are necessary for developing reading skills, excessive dependence on teacher guidance may limit opportunities for students to develop lifelong reading habits. Encouraging students to select reading materials based on their interests, participate in reading clubs, or engage in digital reading platforms may gradually increase their intrinsic motivation. Such learner-centered practices provide students with greater autonomy while fostering sustained engagement with English texts beyond formal classroom settings.

This finding is also consistent with the concept of extensive reading, which emphasizes frequent and voluntary reading as an effective means of improving language proficiency. Previous research has shown that students who regularly engage in extensive reading demonstrate greater vocabulary growth, improved reading fluency, and stronger comprehension abilities over time. Therefore, integrating structured extensive reading programs alongside classroom instruction may provide an effective strategy for strengthening students' motivation and promoting independent reading habits.

The findings further revealed that students had considerable difficulty with higher-order reading skills, particularly distinguishing facts from opinions (P6). Although students generally agreed they could identify narrative elements such as plot, conflict, and characters (P7 and P8), many still struggled to analyze text critically. This finding aligns with Ningsi et al. (2021), who found that EFL students often perform well in literal comprehension but encounter difficulties in analytical and evaluative reading tasks.

Theoretically, this condition suggests that students' reading comprehension remains primarily at the literal level rather than the critical level. Higher-order reading skills require students to evaluate information, identify implicit meanings, and critically interpret authors' perspectives. However, many classroom reading activities still focus on factual understanding and vocabulary recognition. Consequently, students become accustomed to identifying explicit information while receiving limited practice in analytical reasoning and critical interpretation. Higher-order reading comprehension requires inferential and evaluative thinking skills that must be developed through continuous exposure to analytical reading tasks and critical discussion activities (Woolley, 2011).

Another possible explanation is that many reading activities in EFL classrooms continue to emphasize answering comprehension

questions with predetermined correct answers rather than encouraging students to justify their interpretations using textual evidence. As a result, students become proficient in locating explicit information but receive limited opportunities to construct arguments, evaluate evidence, and question the author's intentions. Developing these higher-order thinking skills requires classroom tasks that promote reflection, discussion, and multiple interpretations of narrative texts.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings imply that reading instruction should move beyond literal comprehension toward critical literacy. Teachers may incorporate activities such as debating characters' decisions, comparing multiple viewpoints, identifying bias, and evaluating the credibility of textual information. These instructional practices can strengthen students' analytical thinking while simultaneously improving their overall reading comprehension. Consequently, narrative texts can function not only as language learning resources but also as vehicles for developing critical thinking and reflective learning.

Another important finding was students' positive perception of classroom assessments. Most participants agreed that assignments and evaluations helped them understand narrative texts more effectively (P5). This result indicates that current instructional practices have successfully supported students' foundational reading skills. However, the findings also suggest that classroom assessments should be expanded to include more critical reading activities, such as inferential questioning, evidence-based interpretation, and fact-opinion analysis.

An interesting pattern emerging from the findings is the contrast between students' positive perceptions of narrative reading and their relatively low autonomous reading motivation. Although students enjoyed narrative texts and acknowledged their educational benefits, these positive attitudes did not automatically translate into voluntary reading behavior outside the classroom. This discrepancy suggests that favorable classroom experiences alone may be insufficient to establish sustainable reading habits. Additional instructional support, meaningful reading opportunities, and motivational strategies are therefore needed to bridge the gap between positive attitudes and actual reading practices.

Comprehensively, the findings indicate that students hold positive attitudes toward narrative reading but still struggle with motivation for independent reading and higher-order comprehension skills. These findings underscore the need to develop more engaging, critically oriented reading instruction in EFL classrooms. Teachers

should integrate motivational strategies and critical reading activities to help students build stronger autonomous reading habits and more advanced comprehension skills in higher-education contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined students' perspectives on learning to read narrative texts in an Indonesian EFL context at Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang (UNIMUS). The findings showed that students generally held positive attitudes toward narrative reading activities. Most participants strongly agreed that narrative texts supported their English learning and helped them understand stories more effectively. In addition, 95.5% of students found narrative reading activities enjoyable and interesting, suggesting that narrative texts can create engaging learning experiences in EFL classrooms.

However, the study also revealed several important challenges. Although students were confident in identifying narrative elements such as characters, settings, and conflicts, 72.7% of participants reported difficulty distinguishing facts from opinions in narrative texts. This finding indicates that students' comprehension abilities remain stronger at the literal level than at the critical or evaluative level. Furthermore, the results showed that students' intrinsic motivation to read independently outside classroom activities remained relatively low, as many participants admitted they rarely read narrative texts voluntarily for personal enjoyment.

The findings suggest that current classroom instruction has supported students' foundational comprehension skills but has not fully fostered autonomous and critical reading habits. This study contributes to EFL reading pedagogy by providing student-centered empirical evidence on students' motivation, perceived difficulties, enjoyment, and self-efficacy when learning narrative texts. The findings may help educators design more engaging and critically oriented reading instruction in higher education contexts.

Based on the findings, EFL teachers are encouraged to integrate critical reading activities, inferential questioning, and autonomous reading practices into classroom instruction to strengthen students' higher-order comprehension skills. Future studies are recommended to involve larger participant groups and employ mixed-methods or experimental research designs to gain deeper insights into students' reading experiences and the effectiveness of narrative-based instructional strategies in improving critical reading abilities.

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