



# EFL Teachers’ expectations and students’ reading-related difficulties at the university level

Muthita Chinpakdee<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> muthita.c@cmu.ac.th, English Department, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

\* Corresponding author, muthita.c@cmu.ac.th

<b>APA Citation:</b> Chinpakdee, M. (2023). EFL teachers’ expectations and students’ reading-related difficulties at the university level. <i>LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network</i> , 17(2), 48-68.	
Received 10/04/2023  Received in revised form 24/07/2023  Accepted 05/02/2024	<b>ABSTRACT</b>  The ability to read English is essential in academic settings, but it can pose challenges for EFL students, potentially impacting their academic performance. This study investigates the expectations that EFL university teachers have for their English major students’ reading and the challenges that the students encounter while reading English. Findings from interviews with teachers and students, as well as class observations indicate that teachers expect their students to read for different academic purposes beyond main idea comprehension. However, these expectations are not always clearly conveyed through classroom discourse and reading activities. While students have some awareness of what is expected of them, they still believed they lack necessary skills to read effectively. This research provides discipline-specific insights into the demands and difficulties English major students face when reading English for general and academic purposes. It highlights the need for more extensive language and reading support in the higher education settings.  <b>Keywords:</b> EAP reading, reading demands and difficulties, EFL reading instruction, English-major education

## Introduction

Although university students are required to read extensively in English, reading skills development is not always the primary focus of course design and classroom instruction (Afflerbach et al., 2013; Stoller & Nguyen, 2020). As a result, many students may struggle with understanding complex texts and retaining information. This is especially true for EFL students who may also face additional linguistic and cultural barriers.

At university, reading requirements can vary across academic disciplines. For instance, in the sciences, students must be able to comprehend and interpret experimental data, while in the humanities, they must be able to analyze and evaluate the meaning of text and ideas. In both cases, basic comprehension, critical thinking, and the ability to synthesize information across texts are essential. Therefore, it is important for teachers to prioritize reading skills development and provide students with opportunities to practice and improve their reading skills through various activities and assignments.

To this end, this study aims to uncover the reading expectations for English major students and the reading-related difficulties they encounter in their academic pursuits. This discipline-specific understanding can inform reading teachers on what to prioritize in their classes to help students become better prepared for reading demands at university.

## Literature Review

### English Reading at the University Level

Reading is an important skill that university students need to master. According to Grabe and Stoller (2018), students need to develop advanced reading skills to succeed academically and professionally. Reading is a complex process that involves a coordination of multiple cognitive abilities, linguistic resources, as well as metacognitive and affective factors. To understand a text, students first need to be able to decode the text at the word level. This requires their ability to recognize letter-sound correspondences and understand word meaning quickly and accurately. They also need to understand how words fit together to form idea units (sentences or phrases) and relate the information to their background knowledge to construct a meaningful mental representation of the text (Hedgcock & Ferris, 2018). In other words, knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and text structure is an essential building block of reading comprehension (Birch & Fulop, 2021; Nergis, 2013).

Apart from cognitive skills, reading comprehension is also influenced by metacognitive and affective factors. For instance, skilled readers metacognitively regulate their reading process by planning their reading with a clear purpose in mind. They also attend to problems in their reading and use strategies to repair their comprehension when needed (Grabe & Stoller, 2022). Skilled readers believe in their ability to read. They view reading and its associated challenges as an opportunity to learn (Afflerbach et al., 2020; Chinpakdee & Gu, 2021). Successful reading comprehension thus involves developing students' cognitive ability to process text in combination with their metacognition, strategies, motivation, and self-efficacy belief.

While reading comprehension is certainly an important skill, the ability to read and understand what one reads is not sufficient for academic demands at the university level (Anderson, 2015; Ohata & Fukao, 2014). For instance, Grabe and Zhang (2013) found that university students are commonly assigned tasks that require their abilities to read, take notes, summarize ideas, compare views, and synthesize information within and across texts. Similar demands were also identified in Anderson's (2015) survey in which main idea comprehension, critical reading, information synthesizing, and strategic reading are named as crucial reading skills for university-level reading.

However, skills required for academic reading seem to vary, depending on academic disciplines, reading purposes, text types, and amount of reading assigned. Sawaki's (2017) survey revealed that university mathematics and earth sciences lecturers considered academic reading as the most important skill for first-year students. They expected their students to read their course materials in order to understand key concepts and learn technical vocabulary. Students are typically assigned to read short sections of their course materials per week, and they are expected to use their general comprehension skills to understand course content. Ismayilli Karakoç et al. (2022) found that social sciences and arts and humanities courses seem to require students to engage critically with a wide range of printed and digital reading materials. On average, first-year students read two texts per week for each course and are expected to demonstrate their understanding in writing assignments. Therefore, in addition to general comprehension skills, students also need to develop higher-level reading skills, such as interpretive and critical reading, information reconstruction, and analytical thinking to meet academic demands. Together, these studies show that reading plays a central role in students' academic success and that reading for academic purposes involves a broad range of reading-related skills that extend beyond main idea comprehension. In addition, disciplinary variations in reading amount, purposes, and skills required also reflect the highly contextualized nature of EAP reading. This emphasizes the need for research that examines discipline-

---

specific reading demands and reading-related challenges among university students.

### **Reading-related Challenges at University**

Previous research identified lack of motivation to read completely, low level of comprehension, slow reading speed, and inability to read strategically as main reading challenges facing university students. First, while teachers usually expect students to learn course content through reading, research shows that only a small number of students finished assigned reading materials for their courses (Grabe & Stoller, 2022; Ismayilli Karakoç et al., 2022; Kerr & Frese, 2017). How much and how thoroughly students are willing to read appear to depend on their own motivation and how teachers make use of the assigned texts. If students perceive the text as too challenging or uninteresting, they may not read it. Moreover, they tend to underestimate the importance of reading and choose not to read when they know that teachers will summarize the text for them in class or that their understanding of the text will not be evaluated (Brost & Bradley, 2006; St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018). In addition, factors such as reading anxiety, a lack of clear reading purposes, pressure from other competing commitments, and insufficient background knowledge can weaken students' motivation and cause them to completely avoid reading (Huang, 2006; Torudom & Taylor, 2017).

Low level of comprehension can also make academic reading challenging. University students often struggle to understand assigned reading materials, particularly when the texts contain unfamiliar concepts (Kerr & Frese, 2017). Moreover, when reading for academic purposes, students experience difficulties understanding discipline-specific content, academic vocabulary, and complex sentence structures (Anderson, 2015; Hartshorn et al., 2017). Likewise, Liu and Read (2020) observed that university students often encountered challenges in comprehending implied meanings, identifying main concepts, and locating specific information in academic journals, as well as in synthesizing information from different sources.

In addition, slow reading speed and ineffective use of reading strategies were also found to have hindered university students' reading efficacy (Anderson, 2015; Hartshorn et al., 2017; Liu & Read, 2020). Students placed great importance on expeditious reading, yet they often feel that they cannot read fast enough and attributed their slow reading to their inability to skim and scan texts for key information (Liu & Read, 2020). Many students do not know when and how to modify their reading strategies for different reading objectives (Brost & Bradley, 2006). In other words, students do not know how to read strategically, and their comprehension suffers as a result.

Overall, these studies suggest that reading skills development is a process that involves interactions between students, teachers, and texts. To facilitate reading development, Grabe and Stoller (2022) proposed a framework that structures a reading lesson into pre-, during-, and post-reading stages. The pre-reading stage aims to prepare students for purposeful reading by setting reading goals, connecting the text to students' background knowledge, and practicing pre-reading strategies. During reading, teachers can demonstrate how to use comprehension strategies such as taking notes, summarizing, and inferencing to construct meaning from the text. Finally, the post-reading stage encourages students to evaluate their comprehension through rereading, critically evaluating the text, and integrating textual information into other tasks. When applied together, these activities can help students develop necessary reading skills to understand, retain, and make use of information from reading.

Despite research insights into the nature and challenges of academic reading and efforts made to develop students' reading skills, there is a clear need to further explore reading skills development, particularly in EFL contexts where students' limited exposure to authentic English texts and linguistic resources are likely to affect their reading practice (Grabe & Stoller, 2018; Nation & Macalister, 2020). Moreover, studies that investigate EAP reading through the perspectives of English major students and teachers remain scant, even though English is considered one of the academic fields that require high levels of reading skills. Considering disciplinary differences in reading purposes and skill requirements, it is important to understand what is expected of English major students and what support they need in reading skills development. Such understandings have direct and practical implications for language teaching and learning given that they can inform teachers what to focus on in their reading lessons and how they can support their students' academic literacy development in general.

Building upon Grabe and Stoller's (2022) framework, the present study explores how teachers incorporate their expectations for students' reading skills development into their teaching of reading. Additionally, it also investigates how students perceive and tackle reading difficulties that arise in their academic courses. Two research questions addressed in this study are:

- 1) What are English major students expected to read and what reading skills are they expected to develop?
- 2) What difficulties do students encounter in reading and how are these difficulties resolved?

## Methodology

### Participants and Context

Following approval from the Chiang Mai University Ethics Committee, data were collected from 5 Thai university teachers who teach English major courses and 21 English major students studying in a 4-year Bachelor of English program at a Thai university. These participants were selected based on purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All teachers had taught the Reading Skills course for at least 1 semester in the past 3 years and all student participants had taken or were taking the same course by the time of data collection. Table 1 provides an overview of participants and data collection process.

**Table 1**

#### *Participants*

Teacher	Gender	Qualification	Data provided
DV	Female	M.Ed. in TEFL	5 sessions of class observation and 1 individual interview
NL	Female	M.Ed. in TEFL	5 sessions of class observation and 1 individual interview
SP	Male	Ph.D. in Linguistics	1 individual interview
TM	Female	Ph.D. in English Language and Applied Linguistics	1 individual interview
TD	Female	Ph.D. in Translation Studies	1 individual interview

  

Student group	Gender	Number of students	Data provided
First year	4 females and 1 male	5 (S1-S5)	1 group interview
Second year	4 females and 2 males	6 (S6-S11)	1 group interview
Third year	4 females and 1 male	5 (S12-S16)	1 group interview
Fourth year	4 females and 1 male	5 (S17-S21)	1 group interview

In total, the students are required to take 47 courses (141 credits) covering a wide range of topics in English communication, linguistics, literature, and translation. The content of these courses generally become increasingly complex and discipline-specific as the students advance through

the higher years of study. In their first year, students must take fundamental skills courses (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) which mainly require their ability to understand, memorize, and apply basic linguistics concepts for communicative purposes. These first-year courses serve as prerequisites for other English major courses, such as academic writing, fiction, drama, phonology, syntax, sociolinguistics, and translation. These subsequent courses demand the students' interpretive and critical reading abilities, as well as analytical thinking skills. Finally, every course taken by the students leads up to a senior project in which students conduct in-depth research on topics related to English communication, linguistics, literature, or translation. The students are expected to present their research orally, in writing, or in other creative formats. The language of instruction for all courses is English and all assigned reading materials are in English. The students are expected to read extensively, yet there is only one first-year course (Reading Skills) that directly target students' reading.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected over a 15-week semester from 10 class observations, 5 individual interviews with teachers, and 4 group interviews with students. First, 10 sessions of the Reading Skills course were observed from two classes over the period of two months. This course is compulsory for first-year English major students. Each class meets for 75 minutes twice a week. The main purpose of class observation was to obtain a general understanding of how reading is taught and what teachers do to develop students' English reading skills. Throughout the observation process, fieldnotes were taken with a focus on the structure and organization of the reading activities, along with the incorporation of strategic reading practice in relation to specific reading objectives.

In addition, audio-recorded semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to gain insights into their expectations and pedagogical plans for developing students' reading skills. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and was conducted in Thai, the interviewees' first language. The interviews were guided by a set of questions which direct the teachers' attention to reading skills development and problems that hinder such development in their students (see Appendix A).

Finally, audio-recorded interviews were conducted with 4 groups of students. Similar to teacher interviews, student interviews were conducted in Thai and followed a set of questions aimed at uncovering their perspectives on university-level academic reading and the difficulties they face in developing their reading skills. (see Appendix B). Student group interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Fieldnotes and interview transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo. The first round of coding involved iterative reading of the data and assigning portions of data to a set of pre-established codes based on the research questions and related research literature. The code list was then expanded in the second round of coding when the data were recoded to allow unexpected findings to emerge. This iterative coding process ensures that the generated code list adequately captured the essence of the data (Saldaña, 2015). A second independent coder (a university lecturer with Applied Linguistics background) was then asked to code 2 teacher interview transcripts and 2 student interview transcripts to improve systematicity and trustworthiness of data analysis. Finally, disagreements in coding between the two coders were resolved through detailed discussion of the data.

## Findings

### Reading Expectations for University Students

Throughout their four years at the university, the English major students are expected to read a wide range of expository and narrative texts (e.g., research reports, news articles, contemporary and classic fiction, and Shakespearean poems) both in printed and in digital formats. Findings show that the teachers place great importance on reading comprehension and expect their students to read broadly and regularly. They want their students to develop comprehension skills, engage critically with reading materials, improve academic literacy, and use text-based information to complete other academic tasks (see Table 2). In this sense, reading comprehension is regarded as a goal and a means to achieve other academic goals.

The teachers mentioned that they assign several reading materials in their classes to engage students in EAP reading. According to the teachers, the primary purpose of the assigned reading materials is twofold: reading to learn course content and reading to develop comprehension skills which range from literal to interpretive and critical comprehension. At the surface level, the teachers expect their students to read and understand stated and implied main ideas and to identify supporting details from reading. At a more advanced level, they expect their students to interpret authors' attitudes and purposes, make logical inferences, and evaluate information from reading. TM explained:

**TM:** The ability to read and understand subject matter at the surface and deeper levels is crucial to their study. They must be able to understand content, interpret and infer meanings, and critically evaluate what they read. I expect my students to read a lot to master comprehension skills at all levels.



**Table 2***Expectations for Reading*

<b>Expectations for reading</b>	<b>Number of references and examples in teacher interview responses</b>	<b>Number of references and examples in student interview responses</b>
1. To develop comprehension skills	13 SP: The most important goal is to read and develop comprehension skills.	18 S7: We need to understand what the text wants to tell us directly and indirectly.
2. To engage critically with reading materials	14 DV: They need to read and question what is presented to them.	31 S15: Understanding is not enough because we need to argue against the points mentioned.
3. To improve academic literacy	13 NL: I assigned them to read research articles to see how information is presented in this kind of text.	3 S17: When we read, we learn patterns of academic writing.
4. To use text-based information in other academic tasks	7 SP: They have to be able to integrate the information from reading in their argumentative essays.	17 S12: We need to read for our writing assignments.

In addition, the teachers further expect their students to develop the ability to read and engage critically with assigned texts. This means that students should be able to examine and critique arguments, challenge assumptions, and respond to information with their own ideas.

**TD:** They choose to study English, and we hope that by the time they graduate, their English reading should be excellent, or at least better than that of other majors. When I ask my students to read research papers, I expect them to read critically to evaluate whether the presented ideas or arguments have any flaws or whether any important information is missing. I also expect them to come up with their own ideas and questions when we discuss the texts in class.

The third expectation frequently mentioned in teacher interviews is reading to develop academic literacy. NL, DV, and SP explained that all English major subjects require students to be proficient at academic reading and writing. Thus, it is necessary to engage students in a variety of reading materials to familiarize them with vocabulary, structures, and general characteristics of academic writing.

**SP:** I assigned additional reading materials in my translation class and my academic writing class. These are academic or semi-academic texts with proper APA references. I want them to see good examples of academic articles and understand linguistics research. Reading a lot gives them the opportunity to see different registers and styles. They also need to learn and use summarizing and paraphrasing techniques and academic vocabulary in their own writing. I hope they get used to reading research and academic language in general because they will need to conduct their own study later.

Finally, the teachers expect their students to read and develop the ability to select and synthesize information within a given text and across multiple texts, as well as to use text-based information in other academic tasks.

**DV:** Expectations? My expectation is that they should be able to read and think about how they can apply what they learn in reading in other assignments. If they are asked to give a presentation or write an essay discussing certain ideas, they need to read multiple texts to extract key ideas from each text, assess how relevant or suitable these ideas are to the tasks, and then use the ideas as the foundation for their essays or presentations.

Findings from student interviews also provide equally interesting details on the students' awareness of what is expected of them in terms of reading. All students are aware that they are expected from their first year to "have good reading comprehension skills" (S3) and to "read a lot to understand course content" (S8). The students also mentioned that their English major courses require them to read for multiple purposes beyond basic comprehension and to make use of reading texts in writing. This perception is clearly articulated in a fourth-year student's interview response.

**S17:** At the beginning we only read to understand and answer exam questions. But now there are many more purposes. When we write essays discussing a novel, we need to use our interpretations and draw out important ideas from the novel and then analyze the characters, the plot, word choices, and how different settings could send different messages. Sometimes we need to identify similarities and differences between stories with similar themes. Information from all sources needs to be tied together in a logical way to support our interpretations and arguments.

Interestingly, some third- and fourth-year students noted that they did not fully perceive the connection between EAP reading and other academic

tasks in their first two years because reading materials were often assigned without clearly stated purposes, as S12 remarked, “The teacher could have explained more clearly why we had to read”. The students mentioned that they would have felt more engaged with reading had the teacher “pointed out what the purposes were” (S17) and “told us how we could make use of the information from reading” (S14). These comments were later confirmed by class observation data. Reading objectives and general lesson plans were only clarified in 3 of the 10 observed sessions and reading strategies were briefly mentioned in 2 sessions of the Reading Skills course. Most observed sessions began with the teacher assigning students to read articles in the pre-reading stage and answer comprehension questions either verbally or in writing after reading. In sum, the findings indicate that the teachers seem to have high expectations for students’ EAP reading, yet these expectations may not have been clearly communicated to their students.

### Reading-related Challenges

Several reading-related issues were raised in teacher and student interviews and were later classified into 3 broad themes: comprehension problems, not reading completely, and not reading at all (see Table 3). While the students are somewhat aware of the high expectations their teachers have and the importance of reading to their academic success, they still perceive EAP reading as a challenging task. Some students believe they lack necessary reading comprehension skills to overcome academic challenges in their English major courses. Likewise, the teachers also identified comprehension as the main problem in students’ reading skills development.

**Table 3**

#### *Students’ Reading Challenges*

Students’ reading challenges	Number of references and examples in teacher interview responses	Number of references and examples in student interview responses
1. Comprehension	12 TD: The problem comes from not understanding what they read.	39 S10: I have problems interpreting abstract ideas.
2. Not reading completely	9 SP: They aren’t motivated enough to read the whole thing.	11 S13: I usually feel burned out before finishing a lengthy text.
3. Not reading at all	6 TM: I don’t think they read anything we give them.	2 S9: I don’t read.

Comprehension problems occur when students fail to identify or misunderstand key ideas and supporting details from what they read. According to the teachers, comprehension problems come from unfamiliar text structures, students' insufficient vocabulary, and limited reading experiences. One teacher (DV) further noted that without comprehension, students will have difficulty completing other academic tasks.

**DV:** Most students are used to reading simplified texts in high school. But here, we use unedited authentic texts. They can't seem to capture main ideas, especially when they have to read multi-paragraph texts. Their weakness really shows when I ask them to summarize main ideas in writing. How can they go on with higher level courses that involve synthesizing information and argumentative writing?

Similarly, the students attributed their comprehension problems to their perceived insufficient linguistic knowledge (vocabulary and grammar) and a lack of topical or background knowledge. S18, for instance, mentioned that her limited vocabulary and lack of background knowledge "make it difficult to contextualize and understand the text". Despite using several reading strategies to resolve their comprehension problems (e.g., skipping unknown words, asking teachers for clarification, and guessing from context), the students admitted that they did not yet feel confident in their ability to read EAP materials effectively.

**S18:** I have difficulties learning psycholinguistics concepts in research articles because those are scientific studies written with complex sentences and academic terms. I can't understand everything right away even though I looked at prefixes and suffixes. Sometimes I need to rely on my teacher for information. I don't have enough vocabulary and I struggle a lot when the topic is new to me.

While it is difficult to gauge students' comprehension in class, class observations reveal students' difficulties with information reconstruction, which in turn, could be a result of their incomplete comprehension. For instance, students appeared hesitant when answering comprehension questions. They provided only a partial summary of the assigned readings despite the teachers' constant use of prompts, such as "how can we interpret this text in your own words? (NL, observation 4) and "what does this text tell us?" (DV, observation 2). As a result, both teachers often had to resolve this problem by summarizing main ideas and interpreting meanings of the reading materials for their students.

Another frequently mentioned issue is students' inability to read completely. The teachers noted that their students are not used to reading long texts and thus tend to "give up halfway and lose motivation after a few paragraphs" (NL). Similarly, the students also mentioned losing motivation to complete a text when the assigned text "gets too complicated and too long" (S8). Interestingly, findings from third- and fourth-year students show that students' motivation to read appears to be primarily instrumental and that their willingness to read closely and completely decreases significantly when the purposes and benefits of reading are not made clear. This point is illustrated in S15's comment:

**S15:** I know that it's important to read a lot, but many of my friends and I read only for the exams. I guess it depends on whether the reading is worth doing or not. I don't mind finishing a whole book or reading all those articles, but the teachers should explain why reading about certain issues can benefit us in the long run.

The third reading-related difficulty mentioned is reading non-compliance or students not reading the assigned materials at all. Although the teachers were not able to pinpoint the causes of this problem, they theorized that some students may not like to read. Moreover, the difficult content and the heavy reading load from each course may be discouraging for them.

**NL:** Our courses require a lot of reading. Students need to learn about different aspects of the English language through reading English and many concepts are difficult to understand. Some students just don't like to read even though they choose English as their major. For these students, the difficult content and the amount of reading they need to do can be off-putting. Because we have a schedule to follow and content to cover each week, we may keep asking them to read more and more without realizing that it may be too much already.

Findings from student interviews partly confirm the teachers' assumption. Some students admitted that they do not read at all unless "the reading will be in the exams" (S7) or "the content will be needed for some sort of group work or class discussion" (S8). While the teachers attributed reading non-compliance to heavy reading load, the students seemed to put more emphasis on their general dislike for reading, lack of time, and short attention span.

**S11:** I know we have to read a lot, but I don't read because I don't have time for it. I don't like reading even if it's in Thai and I have never finished a book in my entire life. I know this

is bad, but I don't read the course book and the extra reading materials for my Phonetics class. Whenever I read a long text, I often lose focus midway and then I have to reread the same parts many times until I get frustrated. My solution for this is to buy a cheat sheet online and study it for the exam.

To summarize, both teachers and students are aware of the problems the students experience in their reading. They all agreed that poor comprehension can diminish motivation and engagement in reading, leading to students not reading a text completely or not reading at all. While the teachers worried that their students' reading problems will intensify as they progress through higher years of study with increasingly complex academic demands, the students did not seem to realize the potential connection between EAP reading and their academic success until their third and fourth years of study.

### **Discussion and Implications**

This study investigates EAP reading through the perspectives of English major teachers and students to understand the expectations and challenges facing the students in reading. Through interviews and class observations, the study confirms previous studies that university students are required to read extensively for different academic purposes beyond main idea comprehension, and that they are expected to develop several reading-related skills to engage critically with academic and discipline-specific texts (Anderson, 2015; Ismayilli Karakoç et al., 2022). Additionally, findings indicate that the English major students are likely to find their reading materials more challenging and their teachers' expectations more demanding as they progress through the course of their academic study. These findings highlight the importance of reading in EFL students' academic performance and further raise an important pedagogical question, namely how teachers can help their students develop proficient reading skills. Drawing on Grabe and Stoller's (2022) proposed framework for reading skills development, this section examines the gap between teachers' expectations and students' willingness and ability to read. Additionally, it discusses the importance of teaching students how to read, before concluding with pedagogical implications for reading skills development.

#### **The Gap between Teachers' Expectations and Students' Willingness and Ability to Read**

Findings from research question 1 show that the teachers and the students regard reading as a primary means for students to learn course

content. This confirms the importance of text-based comprehension as one of the university reading skills requirements (Anderson, 2015; Ismayilli Karakoç et al., 2022; Liu & Brown, 2019; Liu & Read, 2020). The teachers expect their students to read regularly, both in class and outside of class, and the students are also aware of this expectation.

In addition to reading to learn course content, the teachers further expect their students to practice comprehension skills, engage critically with texts, develop academic literacy through reading, and integrate reading with other academic tasks. The teachers acknowledged their high expectations and were aware of their students' reading-related challenges. Consequently, they typically assigned reading materials with the hope that regular exposure to English texts would help students acquire essential skills to solve problems in their EAP reading. The teachers, in other words, expect their students to view reading assignments not merely as a way to practice comprehension skills but also as an opportunity to cultivate crucial skills for their academic success.

These expectations, however, are not made shared knowledge between the teachers and their students. Class observations confirm the students' remarks that the teachers' expectations and the purposes of reading assignments were rarely explicitly clarified in class. In other words, students are usually told what to read but not *why*. When teachers' expectations and the purpose of reading activities are not clearly defined in class, students may not recognize reading as a learning opportunity. This could explain why most students reported not reading as much as their teachers had expected. Findings from student interviews, particularly with the third- and fourth-year students, confirm previous research that students will not read if they cannot immediately see the necessity and benefits of reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2022; St Clair-Thompson et al., 2018). Not reading enough also means fewer opportunities to practice and refine comprehension skills. As a result, it is not surprising why, even in their final year of study, some English major students still struggled to understand English texts. In short, the findings indicate a gap between the teachers' high expectations on students' reading development and what the students are willing and able to do.

To bridge this gap, teachers need to help students identify and take up the learning opportunity provided (Crabbe, 2007). They need to make the purposes of reading assignments clear to their students. This can be done through pointing out before reading what students can potentially gain from reading a text. For example, after assigning an expository text, teachers can explain that apart from practicing comprehension skills, students can also learn useful English expressions and new vocabulary. Through reading and re-reading a text, students can also learn how texts are structured and how ideas are related to form a coherent paragraph.

Clarifying reading objectives turns teachers' expectations, which are usually implicit in a task, into shared knowledge in class (Crabbe, 2003, 2007; Macalister, 2011). It further adds value to a reading activity because it makes students understand that from reading one text, they can learn a wide range of reading-related skills which can facilitate their comprehension of other English texts. Having well-defined purposes for reading can also influence how students read, the amount of time they are willing to spend on reading, and their level of comprehension. For example, once students understand that they are expected to read to evaluate arguments in a text, they are more likely to read the text completely and spend more time to critically examine ideas presented in the text (Grabe & Stoller, 2022; Liu & Brown, 2019). Findings from student interviews indicate that some students did not read because they did not fully realize the purpose and value of their reading assignments until their third or fourth year of study. Thus, if teachers expect their students to read to learn, they need to clearly communicate their expectations and explain early on how reading regularly and extensively can help students cultivate valuable learning skills.

## **Teaching Students How to Read**

Findings on students' reading challenges show that students will have difficulty understanding course materials if they do not know how to effectively identify main ideas, synthesize information across texts, and critically evaluate texts. While there is a clear need for these strategies, class observations and student interviews show very limited evidence of strategy instruction in the pre-, during-, and post-reading stages of the lessons. In addition, the fact that there was only one reading course for these students further suggests that these English major students are expected to develop their reading skills through incidental learning in class as well as independent exposure to texts outside of class. The findings represent a typical reading lesson in which comprehension testing takes precedence over comprehension teaching (Macalister, 2011). This further indicates the need for language teachers to teach students how to read.

Research in EFL contexts has shown that reading skills can be improved with experience and explicit strategy instruction (Aghaie & Zhang, 2012; Chinpakdee & Gu, 2021). Instead of letting students handle comprehension problems on their own, teachers can provide structured support through embedding explicit strategy instruction into reading lessons. This ensures that students are metacognitively aware of the reading process. Moreover, it can prepare students to effectively tackle reading difficulties through using text-appropriate strategies. During reading, teachers can verbalize their thinking process in order to demonstrate how certain strategies



can be used to obtain and repair comprehension. Additionally, opportunities for guided and independent strategy practice should be provided to allow students to apply their newly-acquired strategies in a supportive learning environment (Chamot & Harris, 2019). However, deliberate strategy instruction is only the starting point to developing EAP reading skills. As suggested by Grabe and Stoller (2022), it is also important for teachers to structure uninterrupted time for students to read a wide variety of texts without being tested for comprehension. This allows students to develop a refined understanding of the conventions of academic writing and to experience a range of reading difficulties they may encounter in their future academic courses. Furthermore, providing students with opportunities to engage with self-selected reading materials and self-reflection after reading can enhance the enjoyment of reading and increase their confidence and motivation to read (Grabe & Stoller, 2022; Nation & Macalister, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

This study explores English major teachers' and students' perspectives on EAP reading at the university level. It uncovers specific expectations for students' reading skills development and further reveals the gap between what teachers expect their students to achieve and students' ability and willingness to achieve such goals. Findings from interviews and class observations suggest the need for curriculum designers and reading teachers to make reading purposeful and its strategic process visible to students.

It is important to acknowledge that findings from this small-scale study may not be generalizable across all contexts. However, the study offers essential insights into the intricacies of developing English reading skills which may further prompt reading teachers to consider what to prioritize in their reading lessons.

In conclusion, the findings show that the ability to read strategically and critically is a crucial aspect of university education for English major students. For this reason, teachers should help these students develop necessary reading skills and strategies to effectively comprehend and make use of academic texts. EAP reading requires a combination of explicit instruction in which students learn to read with clear purposes, along with guided and independent strategy practice. Additionally, continuous exposure to a variety of texts is essential as it not only facilitates students' learning of course content but also helps students become skilled and confident readers. Because reading demands, expectations, and reading-related difficulties can vary across academic disciplines, understanding these aspects is thus a

---

necessary step to ensure that students are well-equipped for success in their academic careers.

### Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. I would like to further express my gratitude to all the participants who generously gave their time and effort to take part in my research project. I sincerely thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback, which have significantly enhanced the quality of this paper.

### About the Author

**Muthita Chinpakdee:** a lecturer at Chiang Mai University, Thailand. Her current research interests include autonomy in language learning and teaching, and strategic language learning.

### References

- Afflerbach, P., Cho, B.-Y., Kim, J.-Y., Crassas, M. E., & Doyle, B. (2013). Reading: What else matters besides strategies and skills? *The Reading Teacher*, 66(6), 440–448. <https://doi.org/10.1002/TRTR.1146>
- Afflerbach, P., Hurt, M., & Cho, B.-Y. (2020). Reading comprehension strategy instruction. In D. L. Dinsmore, L. K. Fryer, & M. M. Parkinson (Eds.), *Handbook of strategies and strategic processing* (pp. 99–118). Routledge.
- Aghaie, R., & Zhang, L. J. (2012). Effects of explicit instruction in cognitive and metacognitive reading strategies on Iranian EFL students' reading performance and strategy transfer. *Instructional Science*, 40(6), 1063–1081. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11251-011-9202-5>
- Anderson, N. J. (2015). Academic reading expectations and challenges. In N. W. Evans, N. J. Anderson, & W. G. Eggington (Eds.), *ESL readers and writers in higher education: Understanding challenges, providing support* (pp. 95–109). Routledge.
- Birch, B. M., & Fulop, S. (2021). *English L2 reading: Getting to the bottom*. Routledge.
- Brost, B. D., & Bradley, K. A. (2006). Student compliance with assigned reading: A case study. *Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 6(2), 101–111.

- Chamot, A. U., & Harris, V. (Eds.). (2019). *Learning strategy instruction in the language classroom: Issues and implementation*. Multilingual Matters.
- Chinpakdee, M., & Gu, P. Y. (2021). The impact of explicit strategy instruction on EFL secondary school learners' reading. *Language Teaching Research*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168821994157>
- Crabbe, D. (2003). The quality of language learning opportunities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(1), 9–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3588464>
- Crabbe, D. (2007). Learning opportunities: Adding learning value to tasks. *ELT Journal*, 61(2), 117–125. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccm004>
- Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2018). How reading comprehension works. In Newton, Jonathan M., D. R. Ferris, C. C. M. Goh, W. Grabe, & L. Vandergrift (Eds.), *Teaching English to second language learners in academic contexts: Reading, writing, listening, and speaking* (pp. 9–27). Routledge.
- Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2022). Principles for reading instruction. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of practical second language teaching and learning* (pp. 357–369). Routledge.
- Grabe, W., & Zhang, C. (2013). Reading and writing together: A critical component of English for academic purposes teaching and learning. *TESOL Journal*, 4(1), 9–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.65>
- Hartshorn, K. J., Evans, N. W., Egbert, J., & Johnson, A. (2017). Discipline-specific reading expectation and challenges for ESL learners in US universities. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 29(1), 36–60. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1137899>
- Hedgcock, J. S., & Ferris, D. R. (2018). *Teaching readers of English: Students, texts, and contexts* (2nd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315465579>
- Huang, S. (2006). Reading English for academic purposes – What situational factors may motivate learners to read? *System*, 34, 371–383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2006.04.006>
- Ismayilli Karakoç, A., Ruegg, R., & Gu, P. (2022). Beyond comprehension: Reading requirements in first-year undergraduate courses. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 55, 101071. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2021.101071>
- Kerr, M. M., & Frese, K. M. (2017). Reading to learn or learning to read? Engaging college students in course readings. *College Teaching*, 65(1), 28–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2016.1222577>
- Liu, X., & Brown, G. T. L. (2019). Investigating students' perceived cognitive needs in university academic reading: A latent variable approach. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 42(2), 411–431. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9817.12275>
- Liu, X., & Read, J. (2020). General skill needs and challenges in university academic reading: Voices from undergraduates and language

- teachers. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 50(2), 70–93.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10790195.2020.1734885>
- Macalister, J. (2011). Today's teaching, tomorrow's text: Exploring the teaching of reading. *ELT Journal*, 65(2), 161–169.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccq023>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Nation, I. S. P., & Macalister, J. (2020). *Teaching ESL/EFL reading and writing*. Taylor & Francis Ltd.
- Nergis, A. (2013). Exploring the factors that affect reading comprehension of EAP learners. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 12(1), 1–9.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2012.09.001>
- Ohata, K., & Fukao, A. (2014). L2 learners' conceptions of academic reading and themselves as academic readers. *System*, 42, 81–92.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2013.11.003>
- Saldaña, J. (2015). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). Sage Publication.
- Sawaki, Y. (2017). University faculty members' perspectives on English language demands in content courses and a reform of university entrance examinations in Japan: A needs analysis. *Language Testing in Asia*, 7(1), 13. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-017-0043-2>
- St Clair-Thompson, H., Graham, A., & Marsham, S. (2018). Exploring the reading practices of undergraduate students. *Education Inquiry*, 9(3), 284–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2017.1380487>
- Stoller, F. L., & Nguyen, L. T. H. (2020). Reading habits of Vietnamese university English majors. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 48, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2020.100906>
- Torudom, K., & Taylor, P. (2017). An investigation of reading attitudes, motivation and reading anxiety of EFL undergraduate students. *LEARN Journal: Language Education and Acquisition Research Network*, 10(2), 47–70. <https://so04.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/LEARN/article/view/111714>

## Appendix A

### *Teacher Interview Questions*

1. What kind of texts do you generally assign to your students? Why?
2. What are your expectations for your students' reading skills development? Why?

3. What level do you think the English reading skills of the students are? What are the main problems in English reading for students, and what are the causes of these problems? Please give an example.
4. Which reading-related problem do you think should be urgently addressed? If you have experience in solving this problem, please give an example of the method you used to solve it and the results of the solution.
5. Do you think the Reading Skills course is beneficial for developing English reading skills of English major students? How? Please give an example of a topic or skill that you teach in the course and explain why it is most beneficial.
6. Based on your experience as a teacher, which teaching topic in the Reading Skills course do you believe should receive greater emphasis, and which topic can be taught with less emphasis or without being emphasized at all?
7. What suggestions do you have for developing English major students' reading skills?

## **Appendix B**

### *Student Interview Questions*

1. What type of English texts do you usually read?
2. What English reading skills do you think are necessary for university-level learning?
3. What level do you think your English reading skills are at and why?
4. What are your main problems when reading English texts? What causes the problems? Please give an example of the problem, the method you used to solve it, and the results of the solution.
5. Which reading-related problem do you think should be urgently addressed? Why?
6. Do you think the Reading Skills course is beneficial for developing your English reading skills? How? Please give an example of a topic or skill that you find useful.
7. What do you think the English Department should/ could do to improve your English reading skills?