

EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' PRACTICE ON ANNOTATION AS READING STRATEGY

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Abstract: Annotating is an active reading strategy for improving comprehension and retention of information. However, it is not always clear how the EFL learner understand and use it. The purpose of this paper is to explore students practice on annotation as their reading strategy. The participants are a class of EFL students enrolled in Reading and Writing for Academic Purposes in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The data were collected through the students' written reflection and classroom discussion. The qualitative analyses on the data revealed that the students have adequate understanding about annotation, and they use it to achieve their reading goals. However, some of them stated that they lack practice, and their annotating skills are insufficient. Therefore, ample time and effort for practicing the strategy are needed to help students in their learning.

Keywords: *annotation, EFL students, reading strategy*

Reading was far more than simply a receptive act (Stahl & Armstrong, 2022). Reading is important part of academic activity, and it requires strategies that can be repeatedly implemented in all settings of learning process (Lloyd et al., 2022). In addition, reading activity is the heart of a university education, and require students to work on critical and ethical reading in order to make them engage with the text (Seaboyer & Barnett, 2019). The reading text generally viewed as foundational material in education that demands uninterrupted, patient concentration on words on a page, virtual or actual, for extended periods of time is side-lined as students browse, scroll and link across multiple surfaces (Seaboyer & Barnett, 2019). Thus, by implementing certain strategies, fluent readers decode the text, predict the meaning, test their prediction, and confirm their prediction (Mikulecky, 2011).

There are several reading strategies discussed in reading books that are practiced in second language reading courses. According to Brown (2001) reading strategies include identifying reading purpose, skimming the text for main ideas, scanning the text for specific information, making inferences of literal and implied meanings, annotation (that also includes note-taking), identifying text pattern or semantic mapping, and others. They are all crucial to be mastered since they will enable students to achieve complete understanding toward reading text.

In this research, one reading strategy under investigation is annotating. Annotating is a close reading strategy for improving comprehension and retention of information. It is defined as any action that deliberately interacts readers with a text to enhance their understanding of, recall of, and reaction to the text (Lloyd et al., 2022). It is even included as one of useful study skills, and as is said previously, this can be used for all learning process. Annotation involves text marking (e.g. underlining, highlighting), and adding visual notes (e.g. drawing and writing that includes comment and summary of the key concept contained in the text). Active readers use this reading strategy to engage with the text they read. It could be done both in printed or in digital texts.

Annotation is a useful and important strategy for reading. According to Fisher & Frey (2014) study, annotation is an intervention of close reading that covers reading and re-reading, questioning, and discussions. They further note that students who received close reading intervention have successfully improved their academic achievement. Cole (2014) adds that annotation also can improve comprehension and motivated learning. This motivation is acquired through the process of active reading by unveiling the text (Taboada Barber et al., 2015)

Regarding the importance of the strategy, Azmuddin et al. (2020) suggested that training on annotation task should be mandatory, and Solmaz (2020) suggested research on the use of digital annotation tool in L2 teaching and learning settings.

As one of language skills, reading is learned by second language learners in order to gain competency to read materials in the target language. However, it is not always clear how the EFL learner understand and use annotation for their study. It is crucial, then, to figure out the way's students done when they annotate reading texts, especially when they read academic text where there are a lot of useful information needed to accomplish assignment or to fulfil course required readings.

The purpose of this study is to explore students understanding and experience on annotation. The participants are a class of EFL students enrolled in Reading and Writing for Academic Purposes in academic year 2022/2023 in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The questions to guide this paper are:

1. How do the students define annotating?
2. What annotating technique do the students use?
3. What problems of difficulties students think about their annotation practices?

Research on the area of annotation as reading strategy is still under investigation, particularly in Jambi Province. Especially in this digital area, it is quite hard to maintain students' concentration while they are doing their reading. Distraction from gadget like the sounds of notification frequently become burdens to keep concentrate on reading material Mardiah et al (2021). By conducting research on this area, students can be well informed about their own reading strategy, especially when practicing annotation, how they understand the concept of annotation, and how they put annotation into real implementation in their reading activities. For the lecturers also, figuring out students' reading behaviour not only based on personal experiences, but also based on the research-based analysis is crucial. It brings to the pedagogical knowledge of lecturers to make critical reflection upon their teaching in the classroom (Adams & Wilson, 2022).

METHOD

The present study was conducted as part of an undergraduate reading and writing course offered in the second semester of coursework at an English Education Study Program in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The instructors of the course were the authors who had several years of experience in teaching undergraduate ELT course. The course has four academic hours per week and was aimed to support intermediate English students' academic reading and writing skill by introducing them to a multitude of genres and various reading and writing strategies. Instructors introduce annotation techniques and assist the participant students to familiarize themselves with the strategy. A task on annotation was then uploaded by the students to the university learning management system. A classroom discussion was conducted based on the task and then the students were required to answer questions that reflected their experiences in written form. From 28 students in the class, there are 21 students who give responses to the lesson's reflection.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following are themes obtained from students' answers toward the lesson reflection about annotation. The answers are grouped into four themes, namely definition of annotation understood by students, students' annotation strategies, difficulties when practicing annotation, and advantages of doing annotation.

Table 1. Summary of students' responses of lesson reflection.

No.	Themes	Subthemes	%
1	Definition of annotation	a. Process of marking important information in the passages	10
		b. A process that requires deeper and critical reading	5
2.	Students' strategy of annotation	a. Underlining/highlighting key information	29
		b. Making notes in the text margin (putting some comments about the text)	29
		c. Making notes in terms of listing unfamiliar vocabulary	20
		d. Making summary	5
3.	Difficulties when doing annotation	a. Still not too proficient because lack of practice	29
		b. Text comprehension problem	5
		c. Changing words when making notes	10
		d. Distinguishing unimportant and important information	29
4.	Advantages of annotation	a. More focus on reading goals	5
		b. Save more time to learn more courses	14

Students' definition of annotation

Based on the data gained in the questionnaire, some students have successfully offered definition of annotation based on their understanding of what annotation is. A student says,

"Annotating is the process of marking important passages by highlighting special words and writing notes in the margins so that we can easily remember the contents of the book." (P15)

This definition is further emphasized by another definition addressed by student,

"annotating requires deeper and critical reading." (P20)

From these two examples of definition given, students agree that annotation as reading strategy is an integral part of their reading activity. They can give mark or highlight important information and add notes in the margin of the text in order to retain that information so they do not need to repeat reading the whole text again. It is an interesting fact that from their statements, students say they highlight or give mark to important information. It means that there is a practice of critical thinking when they read as they pile the information becoming important or not so important ones. Critical thinking in reading is an essential part of the information gathering process that is required to create an academically sound assignment. By practicing the skill frequently, the students critical thinking skills will be developed faster and more accurate (Cottrell, 2011).

Students' strategies of annotation

Students employ different strategies when doing annotation as suggested in the table above. Firstly, students highlight and/or underline information that they consider to be important ones. The following are students' answer regarding annotation strategy. It seems that this is the most strategy used by students.

"Annotate usually involves highlighting or underlining key pieces of text."

"In making an annotation, I find important sentences by colouring or underlining them." (P15)

Another strategy is to put some notes on the text margin. The notes contain students' comment about the text content or put more explanation. This strategy is one step ahead from the previous one. It means that after students highlight or underline information that they consider to be important, they take notes. The notes contain the main idea of the information and students are required to create the notes by using their own words, as it is the instruction from the lecturer. However, this annotation strategy becomes the issue from students where they have to change the original words from the text. It is elaborated more on the next theme of this finding. Here are what students say about taking notes.

"It can be a note that includes a comment or explanation." (P1)

"... consider adding brief notes in the margins." (P3)

"I can add comments in my own words." (P13)

Since the students are doing L2 reading, they usually find unfamiliar words they do not know the meaning. Thus, the strategy of taking notes is also employed to list the words and figure out the words' reference later.

"I highlight words that I don't know and searching for its meaning." (P13)

"In annotating, I also write small notes on every unfamiliar word that I don't understand." (P15)

It is found from the data that a student annotates by summarizing key ideas from the text. It becomes the fourth strategy of annotation identified from students' response.

"I often wrote notes or summaries of learning material." (P2)

The different strategies the students employ in annotating show a tangible reflection of the engagement with the text the students' read and the wide range of reasons they have in reading. It could be for improving comprehension, marking passages to quote in the readers' own texts or for later review, interpreting and commenting upon the text, facilitating critical thinking, and recording readers' reaction to the text (Azmuiddin et al., 2020).

Students' difficulties when doing annotation

It is revealed in the last part of lesson reflection that students also find difficulties or experiencing problem when they do annotation.

"My knowledge in annotating ... are still insufficient because lack of practice." (P13)

Another difficulty that students admit is that they still have reading comprehension problems that barriers them to do more about the text itself. It is not only related to vocabulary problems, because apparently the strategy of annotation helps them to mark difficult words, make list of them, and search for the meaning. It is more on seeing the text as a bigger picture, such as understanding cause and effect, comparing and contrasting, and so on. The following statement gives clue that it is hard for the student to understand in detail.

"it takes more time for me to understanding the statement significantly so that I can add more information about it." (P17)

The next problem is students find it difficult to use their own words when making notes in the margin of the text. Students try to rewrite their understanding toward the text by not copying the words from the text. Instead, they make effort to use their own even if it becomes more challenging.

"I'm still confused about changing words based on understanding and using own words." (P2)

"I think in annotating I didn't do it too detailed. I just mark important things that I find and don't always make small notes in the margins of the page, I only make small notes when I think it's necessary." (P28)

The fourth issue in terms of students' annotation difficulty is that it is quite hard for students to distinguish which information are important and which ones are not. They just think that all information in reading material are all important.

"It is difficult for me to distinguish between important and unimportant information." (P7)

"This ability is also not easy for me because I have to find the important point of the paragraph." (P19)

Apparently, the difficulties mentioned by students can be related to each other. Their difficulty of annotation regarding text comprehension problem might be reduced if they have more time to practice. When they have more time to practice, it will increase their reading ability and comprehension. These findings so far really give information to lecturers or English teachers that reading ability is not only about answering questions after reading text like the one that is always practiced in the classroom, but also more on students significant understanding so they are able to understand the text as a complete whole. In turn, they can recognize which one is the main idea or key information, and which ones are supporting details (where they can be in the form of detailed explanation, examples, or facts).

Advantages of applying annotation

Interestingly, students can recognize that annotation can bring benefits to their study and this become the last theme of students' response. They admit that by doing annotation, they can focus on reading goals and save time to study other courses.

"By annotation we can focus on the (reading) goals and save the time to learn more courses." (P1)

Thus, having reading purpose and maintaining it are important for students when reading texts. By having a purpose when reading means that students have something to achieve. As suggested by literature above, annotation can help students to have more concentration and it further means that students can obtain information they need for their study. This concentration is crucially needed to enable students to plunge and engage with the text, or to discover pleasure in it. Otherwise, students will think that reading activity is too difficult, too confronting, or just too long (Seaboyer & Barnett, 2019)

Other answers are found to give elaboration to the above excerpt. A student states that by annotation he can relocate main idea of the text without spending much time as he has put marks on it. Another student also delivers that by annotating, it is easier for him to remember the content of the book.

"I know how to make annotation with use highlighting a file, colouring both files and books and underlining an idea so that when I reread, I immediately know what the main idea of the paragraph." (P23)

"Annotating is the process of marking important passages by highlighting special words and writing notes in the margins so that we can easily remember the contents of the book." (P15)

Remembering information from text being read is crucial for students' academic success. Salame & Thompson (2020) found that annotation/note-taking improves students' recall of material, increases their understanding of content, helps them prepare for examinations, and improves their overall grades. Considering that this benefit is acknowledged by students, hopefully they can regularly apply this strategy for their future reading activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the analysis, students are obviously aware of the annotation's definition and importance. Their answers indicate that annotation is one of close reading activity that can improve their understanding toward the texts. They also know how to do annotation and this is reflected through real implementation. Then, the difficulties students face when annotating are problems related to text comprehension, using their own words when they create notes in the text, as well as to distinguish important and unimportant information. As one purpose of annotation is to improve students' critical thinking, these difficulties need to be addressed carefully in teaching and learning process in the classroom. The last point discovered in this research is the benefits of using annotation. It is a good thing that they admit by themselves that this strategy is useful for their study, such as making them more focus on their reading goals and remembering the important information gained from the texts. Reckoning students already have their awareness of the advantages of annotation for their study, then, regular, structured practices become mandatory to be prepared by teacher/lecturer to train them to improve ability in annotation tasks.

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