

## Reading Evolution in the Screen Era: Investigating the Complexity of Digital Novel Problems for EFL Students

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### ABSTRAK

Perkembangan teknologi digital telah mengubah praktik membaca dari teks cetak ke teks berbasis layar, termasuk dalam konteks pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL). Salah satu bentuk bacaan digital yang semakin populer adalah novel digital, yang menawarkan aksesibilitas dan keautentikan bahasa, namun juga menghadirkan tantangan tersendiri bagi pembelajar EFL. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji secara komprehensif kompleksitas permasalahan yang dihadapi mahasiswa EFL dalam memahami novel digital di era layar. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode literature review kualitatif dengan pendekatan naratif-tematik terhadap artikel jurnal relevan yang diterbitkan dalam sepuluh tahun terakhir. Analisis dilakukan melalui sintesis temuan penelitian terkait evolusi literasi dari cetak ke digital, karakteristik novel digital, serta pemahaman mahasiswa EFL terhadap teks naratif berbasis layar. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa permasalahan membaca novel digital pada mahasiswa EFL muncul akibat interaksi antara keterbatasan linguistik, tuntutan teks naratif panjang, dan karakteristik lingkungan membaca digital yang cenderung terfragmentasi. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kesulitan memahami novel digital bukan semata-mata disebabkan oleh kemampuan bahasa, melainkan merupakan fenomena multidimensional yang dipengaruhi oleh literasi digital, strategi membaca, dan konteks teknologi. Oleh karena itu, kajian ini menekankan pentingnya integrasi pengembangan strategi membaca dan literasi digital dalam pembelajaran membaca sastra bagi mahasiswa EFL.

### ABSTRACT

*The development of digital technology has shifted reading practices from print to screen-based texts, including in the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL). One increasingly popular form of digital reading is the digital novel, which offers accessibility and authenticity of language, but also presents unique challenges for EFL learners. This study aims to comprehensively examine the complex problems faced by EFL students in comprehending digital novels in the screen era. This study uses a qualitative literature review method with a narrative-thematic approach to relevant journal articles published in the last ten years. The analysis is conducted through a synthesis of research findings related to the evolution of literacy from print to digital, the characteristics of digital novels, and EFL students' understanding of screen-based narrative texts. The results of the study indicate that the problems of reading digital novels among EFL students arise from the interaction between linguistic limitations, the demands of long narrative texts, and the characteristics of the digital reading environment, which tends to be fragmented. These findings confirm that difficulties in comprehending digital novels are not solely caused by language ability but are a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by digital literacy, reading strategies, and the technological context. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of integrating reading strategy development and digital literacy in teaching literary reading for EFL students.*

### INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought significant changes in reading practices, particularly among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Reading activities, previously dominated by printed texts, are now increasingly shifting to screen-based texts, such as e-books, online articles, and digital novels. This change affects not only the reading medium but also how readers process information,

interact with texts, and construct understanding. In the context of language learning, reading remains a fundamental skill because it plays a crucial role in vocabulary development, discourse comprehension, and overall language competence (Mahmood, 2022). Therefore, the transformation of reading practices in the digital era is a crucial issue that requires critical examination.

Several recent studies have shown that reading in a digital context has different characteristics than reading printed text. Digital texts are generally non-linear, multimodal, and integrated with technological features such as hyperlinks, word searches, digital annotations, and built-in dictionaries. Studies in digital literacy have revealed that these conditions encourage readers to engage in more skimming and scanning, selective reading, and rapid attention shifts (Oh et al., 2022). While these features can increase efficiency, research has also found a decrease in text processing depth, concentration, and emotional engagement, particularly when reading long, screen-based texts (Chen & Lin, 2016).

In the EFL context, the complexity of digital reading is increasing. EFL learners are not only faced with the demands of understanding a foreign language despite limited vocabulary, grammatical structures, and cultural background, but also must adapt to a digital environment full of distractions. Previous research has shown that EFL learners' language limitations often interact with the characteristics of digital texts, slowing processing, increasing cognitive load, and hindering in-depth comprehension. On the other hand, popular literary texts such as digital novels or e-novels are increasingly used and read by EFL students due to their engaging, authentic, and accessible nature (Chou, 2015). However, digital novels are generally aimed at native speakers, and therefore contain complex vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and lengthy narrative structures that demand high reading stamina.

Although research on digital reading, digital literacy, and EFL reading comprehension has grown rapidly, studies specifically examining the issue of reading digital novels in an EFL context are still limited. Most previous research has focused on comparing print and digital texts, the use of academic e-books, or the effectiveness of digital media in learning. Meanwhile, digital novels, as a long narrative genre read for academic or recreational purposes, have not received much in-depth study, particularly regarding the complexity of problems arising from the intersection of EFL language limitations and the characteristics of screen-based reading. Furthermore, existing research tends to discuss linguistic or technological factors separately, thus failing to provide a comprehensive picture of the problem

of reading digital novels as a multidimensional phenomenon.

Based on these gaps, this literature review aims to comprehensively examine the complexity of the problems faced by EFL learners in reading digital novels in the screen era, by examining the findings of recent research on the characteristics of digital reading, the linguistic limitations of EFL learners, and the influence of digital contexts on the reading comprehension process. Through the synthesis of relevant primary literature, this study is expected to provide a complete conceptual picture of the dynamics of reading digital novels in the EFL context and serve as a theoretical basis for research and practice of reading instruction in the digital environment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative literature review method by Creswell (2018) to examine previous research related to EFL students' problems and strategies in reading English digital texts, particularly digital novels. The literature review was conducted systematically to ensure the relevance, credibility, and academic quality of the selected sources.

The process of data collection began with a systematic search for scholarly articles using Google Scholar as the primary search engine. Google Scholar was chosen because it provides broad access to peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and academic publications in the fields of applied linguistics, English education, and digital learning. In addition to Google Scholar, several academic databases indexed within it were considered, including ERIC, Scopus-indexed journals, and DOAJ, to ensure the inclusion of reputable and widely cited studies.

The search was conducted using specific keywords and keyword combinations relevant to the focus of this review, such as EFL reading, digital reading, online reading comprehension, digital novels, e-books in EFL, reading problems, reading strategies, and digital literacy. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search results and narrow the scope of the literature to studies most relevant to EFL contexts.

The articles selected for review met several criteria. First, the studies had to focus on EFL or ESL learners and address issues related to reading comprehension, reading strategies, or digital reading environments. Second, only peer-

reviewed journal articles published within the last ten years were included to ensure the relevance and currency of the findings. Third, the studies had to be written in English and provide empirical data or theoretical discussions directly related to digital reading or technology-enhanced reading practices.

To organize and evaluate the selected studies, a literature review matrix was used as the main review instrument. The matrix included key components such as author and year of publication, research context and participants, research design, focus of the study, main findings, and relevance to EFL digital reading. This instrument enabled systematic comparison across studies and facilitated the identification of recurring themes, similarities, and differences among the reviewed articles.

The analysis of the literature was conducted using thematic analysis. After reading each article thoroughly, relevant findings were coded according to emerging themes, such as linguistic challenges, cognitive processing in digital reading, digital literacy, motivation, and reading strategies. These themes were then grouped and synthesized to identify dominant patterns and research trends in the field. Through this process, gaps in the existing literature regarding EFL students' engagement with English digital novels were identified and critically discussed.

Overall, this method allowed for a comprehensive and structured examination of previous studies, providing a solid theoretical foundation for understanding EFL learners' problems and strategies in digital reading contexts.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Literacy Evolution: From Print to Digital

Study shows a significant shift from print-based reading practices to digital reading practices as a consequence of technological developments and changes in learning habits. Various studies agree that digital media offers higher accessibility, flexibility in time and place, and the integration of technological features not available in printed texts, such as word searches, hyperlinks, and digital annotations (Hidayati, 2021; Nehe et al., 2023). This shift is also accompanied by changes in reading strategies, where readers tend to skim and scan, read selectively, and rely on digital features to find information quickly (Pardede et al., 2023). Furthermore, readers' digital literacy levels are reported to play a significant role in

determining the success of digital text comprehension, particularly in utilizing these features effectively (Sari et al., 2022).

However, these findings also reveal that digital reading does not always have a positive impact on comprehension. Several studies report that reading on a screen can potentially reduce emotional engagement, concentration, and reading retention for long texts, as well as increase eye fatigue compared to reading printed text (Hidayati, 2021). Thus, the study results indicate that the evolution of literacy from print to digital has dual consequences: ease of access and cognitive and affective challenges in the reading process.

Critically, these findings demonstrate that the shift in reading media is not simply a change in format, but rather a fundamental shift in how readers interact with text. Comparatively, Hidayati (2021) emphasizes the affective aspects and deeper reading experiences of print texts, while Pardede et al. (2023) highlight efficiency and speed as the dominant characteristics of digital reading. This difference in focus suggests that digital reading tends to encourage a functional orientation toward text, while print reading is still associated with deeper processing and stronger emotional engagement.

Furthermore, the role of digital literacy is a key differentiating factor in bridging the gap between the advantages and limitations of digital reading. Sari et al. (2022) showed that readers with high digital literacy are able to utilize digital features to enhance comprehension, while readers with low digital literacy experience additional barriers. This finding strengthens the argument that literacy evolution is neither linear nor universal, but rather depends heavily on readers' cognitive and technological readiness.

In the context of this study, the shift from print to digital reading provides an important foundation for understanding the complexities of digital novel reading. The fast, fragmented, and screen-based nature of digital reading potentially conflicts with the demands of long narrative texts like novels, which require sustained concentration and in-depth comprehension. Therefore, recent literature emphasizes that the evolution of digital literacy needs to be critically understood, not only as a technological advancement but also as a source of new challenges in reading comprehension, especially for EFL learners.

### Complexity of Digital Novel Characteristics

The studies indicate that digital novels have unique characteristics that distinguish them from both academic and printed digital texts, and these characteristics often create reading challenges. One of the main characteristics of digital novels is their long, screen-based format, which demands sustained reading over long periods. Several studies have reported that readers experience decreased focus and visual fatigue when reading long narrative texts digitally, which results in decreased comprehension and emotional engagement (Hidayati, 2021; Pardede et al., 2023). Unlike short or informative texts, digital novels demand greater attentional consistency, while digital media tends to encourage intermittent reading.

Furthermore, digital novels are often equipped with interactive features, such as hyperlinks, comments from other readers, illustrations, or quick access to dictionaries and translations. While these features are designed to assist readers, literature suggests that their presence can be a source of cognitive distraction if not used selectively. Studies on digital learning have found that excessive interactivity can distract readers from the main narrative flow and lead to fragmented comprehension (Susanti et al., 2023). This suggests that interactive features in digital novels are ambivalent: they have the potential to support comprehension, but also risk disrupting the in-depth reading process.

Another aspect that emerged in the literature is technical and environmental distractions, such as app notifications, limited screen size, and text navigation issues (Jaelani, A., Dewanti, R., & Iskandar, I., 2025). These distractions cause readers to frequently shift focus and lose continuity in reading. Pardede et al. (2023) noted that the digital context encourages readers to frequently switch between tasks, making it difficult to maintain a flow of comprehension in complex narrative texts. Thus, the study's findings indicate that the complexity of digital novels lies not only in the language, but also in the medium and reading environment itself.

These findings demonstrate that digital novels occupy a problematic position within the digital literacy ecosystem. On the one hand, the digital format offers easy access and flexibility, but on the other hand, the novel's nature as a long narrative text conflicts with the rapid and fragmented nature of digital reading. Comparatively, Hidayati (2021) emphasizes the

negative impact of screens on readers' emotional engagement, while Susanti et al. (2023) highlight the potential of interactive features to increase motivation. This difference suggests that the effectiveness of digital novels depends heavily on how these digital features are used and controlled by readers.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that the main problem lies not in digital novels themselves, but rather in the mismatch between the demands of narrative texts and the characteristics of the digital environment. Novels demand linear reading, prolonged concentration, and emotional engagement (deep reading), while digital environments tend to facilitate fast, non-linear reading and multitasking. This tension explains why readers, especially EFL learners, often struggle to fully comprehend digital novels.

Thus, the complex characteristics of digital novels need to be understood as a result of the interaction between long-form text formats, interactive features, and technical glitches in the digital environment. This understanding provides an important foundation for analyzing how EFL learners process digital novels and why they face greater challenges than when reading non-narrative digital texts. This subtheme also serves as a conceptual bridge to the subsequent discussion on EFL learners' understanding of digital novels.

### EFL Students' Understanding of Digital Novels

The studies indicate that EFL students' comprehension of digital novels is influenced by a complex interaction between linguistic limitations, narrative text characteristics, and screen-based reading contexts. Studies consistently report that limited vocabulary, understanding of complex sentence structures, and low sensitivity to implicit meanings are the main obstacles to comprehending the content of English novels (Akbari, 2016; Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023). These linguistic barriers become even more pronounced when students read digital novels that are long and rich in idiomatic expressions and stylistic variations.

In addition to linguistic factors, the digital context also influences how EFL students process story content. Several studies have found that reading novels on a screen encourages students to engage in more superficial reading, such as skimming and selecting information, resulting in a less complete understanding of the plot, character development, and interconnected

events (Pardede et al., 2023). Under these conditions, students tend to grasp individual pieces of information but struggle to develop a global understanding of the narrative. While digital features like built-in dictionaries can aid vocabulary comprehension, overuse of them can actually slow down the reading flow and disrupt engagement with the story.

The literature also shows variations in comprehension levels among EFL students, influenced by affective and strategic factors. Students with high motivation and better digital literacy are reported to be able to adjust their reading strategies, for example by regulating their reading speed, selecting important passages for in-depth reading, and selectively utilizing digital features (Par, 2020; Sari et al., 2022). Conversely, students with low digital literacy tend to experience navigational confusion, cognitive fatigue, and loss of interest in reading before finishing the novel.

Critically, the findings suggest that EFL students' comprehension of digital novels is not solely determined by their language skills, but also by their adaptation to the digital reading environment. Comparatively, Akbari (2016) and Ramadhianti & Somba (2023) emphasize the dominant role of linguistic limitations in hindering text comprehension, while Pardede et al. (2023) highlight the impact of the digital context that encourages fragmented reading. This comparison indicates that the problem of digital novel comprehension is cumulative, where language barriers are amplified by the characteristics of the digital medium.

Furthermore, differences in comprehension levels among students reveal the importance of reading strategies as a mediating factor. Par (2020) showed that the use of problem-solving and global strategies can help readers maintain comprehension even when faced with difficult texts. However, in the context of digital novels, these strategies are not always sufficient if students lack adequate digital literacy. Sari et al. (2022) corroborate these findings by demonstrating that digital literacy plays a role in determining whether digital features serve as aids or distractions.

Thus, EFL students' comprehension of digital novels is the result of a dynamic interaction between linguistic limitations, the demands of long narrative texts, and screen-based reading conditions. Digital novels require not only English reading skills but also the ability to manage attention, strategies, and digital

features simultaneously. These findings confirm that difficulties in comprehending digital novels are not individual student failures, but rather a consequence of the complexity of reading in the screen era. Therefore, this study emphasizes the need for a pedagogical approach that explicitly integrates reading strategy development and digital literacy into literary reading instruction for EFL students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of the literature synthesis and discussion, it can be concluded that the complexity of the problem of reading digital novels among EFL students is a consequence of the shift in literacy practices in the screen era. The evolution from reading printed texts to digital texts has changed the way readers interact with texts, from linear and in-depth reading to faster, more selective, and fragmented reading. This change brings ease of access and flexibility, but also raises cognitive and affective challenges, especially when readers are faced with long narrative texts such as digital novels. This study also shows that the characteristics of digital novels—including their long, screen-based text format, the presence of interactive features, and technical distractions and the digital environment—contribute significantly to reading difficulties. The mismatch between the demands of novels requiring sustained concentration and the tendency for disjointed digital reading is a major factor hindering in-depth comprehension. In the EFL context, this complexity is further exacerbated by students' linguistic limitations, such as limited vocabulary, difficulty understanding complex sentence structures, and low ability to grasp implicit meanings in literary texts.

Furthermore, this literature review confirms that EFL students' comprehension of digital novels is not solely determined by language proficiency, but also by digital literacy, motivation, and the ability to manage reading strategies in a digital environment. Difficulty comprehending digital novels cannot be viewed as an individual student's failure, but rather as a result of the multidimensional interaction between language, text, and the digital medium. Thus, the aim of this study, which was to comprehensively examine the complexity of digital novel reading problems among EFL students, has been achieved through a synthesis of previous research findings.

### Suggestion

Based on the findings and limitations of the existing study, further research is recommended to more empirically explore how EFL students construct understanding of digital novels through qualitative approaches, such as think-aloud protocols, in-depth interviews, or reading process analysis. These approaches can provide a more detailed picture of the cognitive processes and strategies students use when interacting with digital novels. Furthermore, future research needs to specifically examine the role of pedagogy in facilitating digital novel reading, for example, through the integration of digital literacy training and literary reading strategies into EFL learning.

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