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Beyond Relevance: How Perceived Difficulty Shapes Veterinary Students' ESP Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This study examines veterinary students' perceptions and reading comprehension of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) texts in veterinary science. The subjects were 60 undergraduate veterinary students who participated in the study by responding to a 20-item questionnaire that assessed four dimensions: relevance, perceived difficulty, reading strategies, and text format. The students also completed an eight-item reading comprehension test based on authentic veterinary texts. The findings showed that students generally held positive perceptions toward the ESP materials, particularly in terms of text format and support, while still acknowledging linguistic challenges related to vocabulary and sentence structure. The average reading comprehension score was 5.5 out of 8, indicating a moderate level of understanding. Correlation analysis revealed weak but statistically significant positive relationships between perceptions of relevance ($r = 0.26$, $p < .05$) and difficulty ($r = 0.28$, $p < .05$) with reading comprehension performance. These results highlight that while veterinary students recognize the importance of ESP reading materials, pedagogical interventions are necessary to enhance comprehension outcomes. The study underscores the importance of scaffolding techniques, vocabulary support, and structured pre-reading activities in ESP courses for veterinary students.ed pre-reading activities in ESP courses for veterinary students.

Keywords: Academic Vocabulary, ESP, Perceptions, Reading Comprehension, Veterinary Students

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INTRODUCTION

In veterinary medicine, where English dominates scientific publications, the ability to comprehend and accurately interpret English-language texts is essential for both academic success and professional competence. A misinterpretation of key

research findings or clinical guidelines could directly impact animal health outcomes, making reading comprehension in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) particularly critical for veterinary students. As they engage with authentic texts, including journal articles, research reports, and diagnostic manuals, students must master reading comprehension to access global knowledge and stay abreast of advancements in the field. This skill not only facilitates academic achievement but also supports lifelong professional development (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Within the context of ESP instruction, reading comprehension serves as a crucial indicator of the effectiveness of teaching methods, student engagement, and language proficiency (Redmond & Lock, 2019). Given that most veterinary research, diagnostic guidelines, and international animal health standards are published in English, understanding how veterinary students perceive ESP materials—and how these perceptions influence their comprehension—becomes vital for optimizing instructional strategies and enhancing academic success.

Despite its critical role, reading comprehension remains a significant challenge for veterinary students. These difficulties are largely attributed to the complexity of technical vocabulary, dense sentence structures, and limited exposure to authentic texts in their field (Bora et al., 2025). Additionally, when ESP materials are perceived as irrelevant, excessively difficult, or poorly formatted, students are likely to develop negative perceptions, further hindering their engagement (Carrell, 1989). Previous research has shown that students in various ESP contexts often resort to surface-level strategies, such as word-for-word translation, which impede deeper comprehension of key concepts and inferential meaning (Nation, 2013). However, despite the well-documented challenges in other disciplines, there is a notable absence of studies focusing specifically on veterinary students' perceptions of ESP reading materials and how these perceptions impact their comprehension performance. This gap in empirical research underscores the need for a targeted investigation into how perceptions of relevance, difficulty, strategies, and text format relate to reading comprehension outcomes in veterinary education (Wahidin, 2016).

While numerous studies have explored ESP reading in fields such as business, engineering, and medicine, research specifically focusing on veterinary students remains scarce. Previous research has primarily examined general ESP reading comprehension, often overlooking the discipline-specific texts encountered by veterinary students, which contain specialized vocabulary and concepts (Özer, 2024). Furthermore, although some studies have investigated students' perceptions of ESP courses, few have empirically tested the connection between these perceptions and measurable reading comprehension outcomes in veterinary education (CHEDIAK et al., 2018). This study aims to fill this gap by integrating survey data on students' perceptions with objective performance data from a reading comprehension test. The novelty of this approach lies in examining both the subjective (perceptions) and objective (test performance) dimensions of reading within the veterinary ESP context. Grounded in cognitive models of reading and Expectancy-Value Theory, this study seeks to better understand how perceptions of relevance, difficulty, and reading strategies influence comprehension outcomes. By addressing this, the study aims to provide actionable insights into how instructional practices can bridge the gap between veterinary students' perceptions and their actual reading performance

(Frenette et al., 2020). The study will address the following research questions: 1) To what extent do veterinary students' perceptions of text relevance correlate with their reading comprehension scores? 2) How do students' perceptions of text difficulty impact their comprehension performance? 3) In what ways do reading strategies and text format contribute to students' reading comprehension in veterinary ESP?

This study makes a distinct contribution by being one of the first to quantitatively link veterinary students' cognitive perceptions such as perceived difficulty and relevance with their objective reading comprehension performance. By providing empirical data on how these perceptions directly influence comprehension outcomes, this research offers an evidence-based foundation for pedagogical innovation in veterinary ESP education. Furthermore, the study's findings have practical implications for enhancing instructional strategies tailored to the unique needs of veterinary students. This study bridges the gap between theory and practice by aligning student perceptions with measurable performance, thereby advancing our understanding of how to optimize ESP teaching in the veterinary field. The following sections of the manuscript are structured as follows: a review of the relevant literature, an outline of the methodology, the presentation of results, and a discussion of the findings and their pedagogical implications.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive design with data collected through classroom observation, interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis as the following (Cresswell, 2014):

Participants

The participants in this study were 60 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in a veterinary education study program. These students were taking an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course during the semester. The participants were purposively selected based on their enrollment in the course, as they represented the target population of veterinary students who regularly engage with English texts related to their discipline. All participants were first-year veterinary students, aged 18 to 19 years. It is important to note that the participants were selected through convenience sampling, which limits the external validity of the results. While the sample reflects a typical cohort of first-year veterinary students in an ESP course, the use of convenience sampling may introduce selection biases, as the participants were chosen from a single class based on their enrollment status rather than randomly. These limitations will be further discussed in the limitations section of the manuscript.

Instruments

Two main instruments were employed in this study: a Perception Questionnaire and a Reading Comprehension Test.

Perception Questionnaire

The Perception Questionnaire consisted of 20 items designed to assess students' perceptions of ESP reading materials across four key dimensions: (a) relevance (5 items), (b) perceived difficulty (6 items), (c) reading strategies (5 items), and (d) format

of the materials (4 items). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The questionnaire was adapted from well-established ESP and reading comprehension studies (Grabe, 2009; Nation, 2013), ensuring alignment with previous research in ESP. The items were carefully modified to reflect the veterinary context, incorporating terms and situations relevant to veterinary students' experiences with English texts. This adaptation process was guided by a panel of three experts: two ESP instructors and one veterinary subject-matter expert, who reviewed the items for content validity, ensuring that the questions were both relevant and representative of the dimensions under investigation.

Reading Comprehension Test

The Reading Comprehension Test consisted of 8 items derived from authentic veterinary texts, such as excerpts from textbooks, research abstracts, and clinical reports. The test aimed to assess four critical aspects of reading comprehension: (a) identifying main ideas, (b) recognizing supporting details, (c) making inferences, and (d) interpreting contextual vocabulary.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out over two consecutive class sessions. In the first session, students were informed about the study's purpose, and written informed consent was obtained. The researcher provided a clear explanation of the study's goals and ensured that participation was voluntary and confidential. After consent was obtained, students completed the Perception Questionnaire, which took approximately 20 minutes.

In the second session, the Reading Comprehension Test was administered under supervised classroom conditions, with a strict time limit of 40 minutes. To mitigate potential test anxiety and ensure that the students' responses reflected their true abilities, it was made clear that the results would not count toward their course grades. The researcher emphasized the importance of confidentiality and anonymity to encourage honest and thoughtful responses from the students.

Data were collected thought digital platform and then being analyzed digitally as wells. The researcher ensured that all collected data were stored securely, with access restricted to the research team only, to maintain privacy and integrity throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics (Ingleby, 2012). Descriptive statistics included the calculation of means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions for the perception dimensions and reading comprehension scores. For inferential analysis, Pearson's product–moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between students' perceptions of ESP materials and their reading comprehension performance. The assumptions of normality and linearity were checked using skewness, kurtosis, and scatterplots. The significance level was set at $p < .05$. Data analysis was performed using Python for visualization and descriptive tables, and SPSS version 26 for correlation tests. The

analysis aimed to answer the central research question: To what extent do veterinary students' perceptions of ESP reading materials relate to their reading comprehension performance?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The present study investigated how veterinary students perceive English for Specific Purposes (ESP) texts and how these perceptions relate to their actual reading comprehension performance. The findings are presented in several stages: descriptive analysis of questionnaire data, visualization of perception scores, correlation results, and interpretive discussion.

Descriptive statistics were computed for the students' perceptions of the ESP texts across four dimensions: relevance, difficulty, strategies, and format, as well as for their reading comprehension scores. As shown in Table 2, the overall mean score for perceptions of ESP texts was 3.97 (SD = 0.41). The dimension with the highest mean score was Text Format (M = 4.07, SD = 0.47), followed by Perceived Difficulty (M = 3.99, SD = 0.45), Reading Strategies (M = 3.91, SD = 0.39), and Relevance (M = 3.88, SD = 0.42). The mean reading comprehension score was 5.5 (SD = 1.21), indicating moderate comprehension.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Perceptions and Reading Scores (N = 60)

Dimension	Mean	SD	Scale Range
Relevance	3.88	0.42	1–5
Difficulty	3.99	0.45	1–5
Strategies	3.91	0.39	1–5
Format	4.07	0.47	1–5
Total Perceptions	3.97	0.41	1–5
Reading Comprehension	5.50	1.21	0–8

Assumptions for Statistical Tests

Before performing the Pearson correlation analysis, the assumptions of normality and linearity were tested. The Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted for each key variable. The results indicated that both the perception dimensions and reading comprehension scores were normally distributed ($p > 0.05$ for all variables), supporting the validity of the subsequent correlation analysis.

3.3 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between students' perceptions of ESP reading materials and their reading comprehension performance. The results, shown in Table 3, revealed statistically significant weak positive correlations between perceived relevance ($r(58) = 0.26$, $p = 0.04$) and perceived difficulty ($r(58) = 0.28$, $p = 0.03$) with reading comprehension scores. However, reading strategies ($r(58) = 0.08$, $p = 0.42$) and text format ($r(58) = -0.05$, $p = 0.61$) did not show statistically significant correlations with reading comprehension performance.

Table 2. Correlations Between Perceptions and Reading Comprehension (N = 60)

Dimension	r	p-value
Relevance	0.26	0.04*
Difficulty	0.28	0.03*
Strategies	0.08	0.42
Format	-0.05	0.61

*Note: p < .05, significant at the 5% level.

Discussion

These findings suggest that when students see ESP texts as relevant and challenging, they may engage more actively, which in turn improves comprehension. The positive role of difficulty may reflect students' metacognitive awareness, as those who recognize challenges are more likely to put in additional effort. However, strategies reported by students did not translate into better performance, possibly because the strategies were surface-level and not always effective for academic texts. The lack of influence from text format indicates that content and pedagogy matter more than presentation style.

The results align with Carrell (1989) and Grabe & Stoller (2011), who emphasize the role of metacognition and strategy use in reading. They also highlight the need for scaffolding in ESP instruction for veterinary students, especially in dealing with domain-specific vocabulary and inference-making.

The findings from both the descriptive and correlational analyses provide important insights into how veterinary students experience ESP reading tasks. Several key themes emerge from the data:

Positive but Uneven Perceptions of ESP Texts

Students rated ESP texts positively overall, with an average perception score close to 4.0. However, their strongest appreciation was for format, whereas relevance was relatively weaker. This imbalance suggests that while students liked how the materials were structured, they may not have always seen a direct connection to their veterinary studies. Previous research in ESP has emphasized the importance of disciplinary relevance (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hyland, 2006). When students perceive texts as closely aligned with their field, they are more motivated to engage in deep processing. Thus, materials developers and instructors in veterinary contexts need to ensure stronger alignment between reading tasks and authentic professional content.

Moderate Reading Comprehension Performance

The mean comprehension score of 5.5 (out of 8) indicates that students demonstrated moderate proficiency. They were able to capture main ideas but may have struggled with inferential or critical reading. This is consistent with studies such as Carrell (1989), who noted that second-language readers often experience difficulty in processing implied meanings and specialized vocabulary. For veterinary students, domain-specific terminology presents an additional challenge. Without targeted scaffolding, even students who recognize text relevance may not perform well in tasks requiring deeper levels of comprehension.

Motivational Role of Relevance and Difficulty

The positive correlation between relevance and comprehension suggests that students who see a text as useful for their academic goals are more willing to invest effort in understanding it. Similarly, the positive link between difficulty and comprehension may reflect a metacognitive process: when students acknowledge that a text is challenging, they may adopt a more effortful stance, leading to better comprehension outcomes. This aligns with Grabe and Stoller (2011), who emphasized the value of task difficulty in promoting engagement and active strategy use.

Limited Impact of Strategies and Format

Interestingly, reported strategies did not correlate with comprehension performance. This could be explained by the nature of strategies employed by students. Surface-level strategies, such as using a dictionary for every unknown word, often hinder comprehension rather than facilitate it. Effective comprehension requires higher-order strategies, including inferencing, summarizing, and integrating prior knowledge (Anderson, 2003). The absence of strong correlations here suggests that students may benefit from explicit instruction in effective reading strategies tailored to veterinary texts.

The format dimension also showed no significant relationship with comprehension. Although students appreciated well-structured materials, presentation alone did not determine how well they understood the texts. This finding emphasizes that content relevance and pedagogy matter more than aesthetics in ESP learning.

Pedagogical Implications

Enhancing relevance in ESP reading requires teachers to integrate authentic veterinary cases, research abstracts, and professional documents so that reading tasks are directly connected to students' future careers. At the same time, managing difficulty is important; texts should be challenging enough to stimulate engagement but not so difficult that they discourage learners, which can be achieved through scaffolding techniques such as pre-teaching key vocabulary and using guiding questions (Bora et al., 2025). In addition, strategy training is essential, as instructors need to move beyond encouraging dictionary use and instead train students in higher-level reading strategies, including making inferences, recognizing discourse structures, and identifying patterns of argumentation. Furthermore, the focus should be placed on content rather than format; while well-designed materials are useful, presentation style alone does not significantly improve comprehension unless the content and tasks are aligned with students' disciplinary knowledge. In conclusion, ESP reading instruction in veterinary contexts should emphasize authentic, appropriately challenging, and strategically supported materials that prioritize content relevance to enhance both comprehension and professional preparation.

CONCLUSION

This study found that veterinary students generally perceive ESP reading materials positively, though they still face linguistic difficulties. Their comprehension scores suggest moderate ability, with strengths in identifying main ideas and weaknesses in inferential understanding. Perceptions of relevance and difficulty showed positive links with comprehension, whereas strategies and format did not.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that ESP instructors in veterinary programs integrate authentic, discipline-specific reading materials that closely align with students' professional needs to enhance engagement and comprehension. Texts should be

sufficiently challenging to stimulate metacognitive processing, yet supported with scaffolding strategies such as pre-teaching key vocabulary, guided questions, and explicit instruction in higher-order reading strategies like inference-making and summarization. Additionally, while text format and presentation are important, priority should be given to content relevance and pedagogical support to ensure that students can effectively comprehend and apply veterinary knowledge. Future research may also explore longitudinal interventions to evaluate the impact of sustained ESP reading instruction on comprehension outcomes and professional readiness.

Author Contributions

Amiruddin Hadi Wibowo, Romlah Ulfaika, Bekti Wirawati, Wahyun Bardianing Panggalih, and Diah Yovita Suryarini contributed collaboratively to this study. Amiruddin Hadi Wibowo and Romlah Ulfaika were responsible for the conceptualization and methodology of the research. Bekti Wirawati and Wahyun Bardianing Panggalih handled the data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Diah Yovita Suryarini supervised the project, provided critical revisions, and ensured the quality of the manuscript. All authors contributed to drafting the manuscript, reviewed the final version, and approved it for submission.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest

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