IJECA (International Journal of Education & Curriculum Application)
Journal homepage: http://journal.ummat.ac.id/index.php/IJECA
ISSN 2614-3380 | Vol. 9, No. 1, April 2026
https://doi.org/10.31764/ijeca.v9i1.38335

EFL Students' Motivational Regulation and Behavioral Engagement in Academic Reading Tasks: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Motivational regulation and behavioral engagement influence academic reading in EFL higher education, yet many students struggle to stay motivated and actively involved in demanding tasks. Prior research has often treated these constructs separately and relied on self-report data, so we still know little about how students regulate their motivation in practice or how this connects to their observable engagement. This study aims to examine how motivational regulation relates to behavioral engagement in EFL academic reading. It also aims to identify the strategies students use to regulate motivation and sustain engagement during cognitively demanding reading tasks through a mixed-methods approach. The participants were 114 third-semester EFL students from four universities in Bengkulu, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling based on their enrollment in academic reading courses. Quantitative data were collected through a motivational regulation and engagement questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to identify patterns and relationships between constructs. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to explain the quantitative results. The findings indicate that students demonstrated relatively high behavioral engagement in academic reading (M = 3.17). Students also reported strong goal-directed motivation (M = 3.33) and self-regulation (M = 3.10–3.25). Qualitative evidence suggests that students who actively regulate their motivation are more likely to continue reading difficult texts and complete their tasks. Interview results further revealed that goal setting, effort regulation, and perceived task value supported sustained engagement in reading activities. These findings highlight motivational regulation as a key mechanism supporting behavioral engagement in EFL academic reading. The study contributes empirical evidence showing how goal setting, time management, and comprehension monitoring support sustained engagement during demanding reading tasks. Pedagogically, the findings suggest that academic reading instruction should explicitly integrate motivational regulation strategies through structured pre-reading goals, guided monitoring activities, and reflective tasks to help students sustain effort and engagement in higher education EFL contexts.

Keywords: Academic Reading Tasks; Behavioral Engagement; EFL Higher Education; Motivational Regulation; Self-Regulated Learning.

Article History:
Received: 13-02-2026
Revised : 23-03-2026
Accepted: 26-03-2026
Online : 01-04-2026

How to Cite (APA style):
Kencana, N., & Jaya, S. (2026). EFL Students' Motivational Regulation and Behavioral Engagement in Academic Reading Tasks: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry. *IJECA (International Journal of Education and Curriculum Application)*, *9*(1), 36-49. https://doi.org/10.31764/ijeca.v9i1.38335

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to construct and evaluate arguments through critical reasoning is an essential competence in higher education. Academic reading requires students not only to understand texts but also to analyze claims, evaluate evidence, and form reasoned interpretations. These processes demand sustained cognitive effort and strategic control. The processes demand sustained cognitive effort and strategic regulation. Motivational regulation and behavioral engagement have been identified as key factors that shape how students initiate and sustain effort during academic reading (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2022; Singh et al, 2022; Talwar et al., 2023). Motivational regulation refers to learners' active management of goals, effort, and persistence, whereas behavioral engagement reflects observable participation including completing tasks, maintaining focus, and contributing to learning activities.

In practice, however, this expectation is not always achieved. Observations and institutional reports from participating universities indicate that many third-semester students struggle to complete extended reading assignments and participate consistently in text-based discussions. Prior studies conducted in comparable EFL contexts report similar patterns, including cognitive overload, limited academic vocabulary, and insufficient background knowledge that reduce students' willingness to persist effectively (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022b; Yapp, 2023). Limited exposure to academic texts and insufficient strategy instruction also limit students' ability to regulate their reading effectively (Hussin et al., 2022; Nadeak & Kuswandono, 2024). Consequently, students tend to adopt surface-level reading strategies and withdraw behaviorally from demanding tasks, which may restrict the development of long-term academic literacy development (Indriyani & Pertiwi, 2021; Laursen et al., 2022; Talwar et al., 2023). These conditions signal a clear gap between expected academic standards and classroom realities.

A growing body of research highlights the importance of both motivation and engagement in academic reading. Motivation has been linked to comprehension, strategy use, and academic achievement (Abdalla, 2023; Ghavamnia & Kashkouli, 2022), while engagement contributes to learning outcomes and task completion (Dierendonck, 2023; Han, 2023). Other studies emphasize the role of instructional support, feedback, and autonomy in shaping students' effort and participation (Froment et al., 2023; Quadir, 2021). Research on self-regulated learning further shows that goal setting, monitoring, and strategy use enable students to manage reading tasks more effectively (Lap et al, 2025; Qi, 2021). Although these studies provide valuable insights, they often treat motivation and engagement as related but separate constructs. As a result, motivational regulation as a process through which students actively manage their motivation to sustain behavioral engagement remains underexplored.

Despite these contributions, an important gap remains in understanding how motivation is translated into observable engagement in academic reading. While prior studies have examined motivation and engagement extensively, many have treated these constructs as separate dimensions or relied on cross-sectional designs (Rohmani, 2022; Yapp et al., 2024). The approaches provide limited insight into motivational regulation as a process through which learners actively manage goals, effort, and comprehension during reading tasks. In addition, relatively few studies have combined quantitative patterns of engagement with qualitative evidence of how students enact regulatory strategies in authentic EFL academic contexts. This limits a process-oriented understanding of how engagement is sustained in practice. The present study addresses this gap by examining both the relationship between motivational regulation and behavioral engagement and the strategies through which students regulate their motivation in Indonesian higher education, where academic reading demands remain substantial.

Grounded in Self-Regulated Learning Theory (Wolters, 1998; Zimmerman, 2013) and Engagement Theory (Fredricks et al., 2019), this study seeks to clarify the regulatory processes that sustain behavioral engagement in EFL academic reading tasks. Self-Regulated Learning Theory emphasizes goal setting, strategic planning, monitoring, and reflection as mechanisms for sustaining effort (Luo & Zhou, 2024; Zaha, 2022). Engagement Theory conceptualizes learning as active behavioral, cognitive, and emotional participation (Cobo-Rendón et al., 2022; Oga-Baldwin & Fryer, 2018). Integrating these frameworks enables a more coherent explanation of how motivational regulation supports observable engagement during demanding reading activities. The novelty of this study lies in empirically examining this integration through a mixed-methods design that captures both statistical patterns and students' lived regulatory experiences.

Based on this rationale, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) what are the levels of motivational regulation among EFL students in academic reading tasks?; (2) how is motivational regulation related to behavioral engagement in academic reading?; and (3) how do EFL students regulate their motivation during academic reading tasks?. By addressing these questions, the study aims to refine understanding of motivational regulation as a process that links motivation to observable behavioral engagement in academic reading. It also informs instructional practice by highlighting the value of goal-oriented reading tasks, explicit strategy instruction in planning and monitoring, and structured academic support to help students sustain engagement in EFL higher education.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a convergent explanatory mixed methods design to examine EFL students' motivational regulation and behavioral engagement in academic reading tasks. In this design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then integrated at the interpretation stage to address the same research questions. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of complex educational phenomena (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Quantitative data were used to identify patterns of motivational regulation and behavioral engagement, while qualitative data were used to explain how students regulated their motivation during academic reading activities (Ivankova et al., 2020). Both forms of data were collected during the same period, analyzed independently, and integrated during interpretation to produce a coherent explanation of the findings (Creswell & Clark, 2018).

The selection of a mixed methods approach reflects the multidimensional nature of motivational regulation and engagement. Motivation and engagement involve observable behavior as well as internal regulatory processes that cannot be captured through numerical data alone (Fredricks et al, 2016). Quantitative analysis identifies relationships among constructs, whereas qualitative inquiry reveals students' regulatory experiences when engaging with academic texts. The integration of both data strands enables triangulation, where qualitative findings are used to explain and contextualize statistical relationships.

This study follows a descriptive explanatory orientation that seeks to describe engagement patterns in authentic EFL academic reading classrooms and explain them through students' regulatory experiences (Cohen et al., 2018). The qualitative findings complement statistical patterns by providing contextual explanation, thereby strengthening interpretive validity (Ivankova et al., 2020). Integration was conducted through a side-by-side comparison of quantitative and qualitative results in the discussion, allowing convergence and divergence between findings to be identified.

2.2 Participants

The participants were 114 third semester EFL students enrolled in academic reading or English for Academic Purposes courses at four universities in Bengkulu, Indonesia. These students regularly engaged in offline academic reading activities involving textbooks, journal articles, and instructor provided reading materials. At this stage of study, students typically possess foundational reading strategies but continue to experience difficulty sustaining motivation during extended academic reading tasks (Grabe, 2021). Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had direct experience with academic reading in English (Cohen et al., 2018). From the survey participants, 24 students were selected for interviews using stratified purposive sampling to represent high, moderate, and low levels of motivational regulation and behavioral engagement (Palinkas et al., 2015). This variation allowed the study to capture diverse regulatory experiences across engagement levels. Demographic information, including age, gender, university affiliation, and English learning experience, was collected to contextualize the findings (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Le, 2023). Ethical procedures were followed throughout the study. Participants received clear information about the research purpose and procedures, provided informed consent, and were assured of confidentiality (Cohen et al., 2018).

2.3 Instruments

a. Quantitative Instrument

The questionnaire measured two main constructs: motivational regulation and engagement, with engagement operationalized into behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions to capture the multidimensional nature of student involvement in academic reading (Pintrich & Garcia, 1994). Motivational regulation was operationalized through goal-directedness and self-regulation components, reflecting students' ability to manage goals, effort, and comprehension processes. The instrument consisted of 40 items, distributed across the constructs as follows: behavioral engagement (8 items), cognitive engagement (8 items), emotional engagement (8 items), goal-directed motivation (8 items), and self-regulation (8 items). Items were adapted from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) (Pintrich & Garcia, 1994) and contextualized to fit EFL academic reading tasks by modifying item wording to reflect reading-specific behaviors and strategies. The adaptation process involved rephrasing general learning items into academic reading-specific contexts, such as focusing on reading comprehension, strategy use, and participation in reading-related classroom activities. This ensured alignment between the instrument and the targeted academic reading tasks.

Responses were recorded using a four point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The instrument was pilot tested with 20 students prior to the main study. Reliability analysis showed acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values above 0.70. Content validity was confirmed through expert review to ensure alignment with EFL academic reading contexts. This study employed two primary instruments: a structured survey questionnaire for quantitative data collection and a semi-structured interview for qualitative inquiry. The use of these complementary instruments aligns with the mixed-methods design and allows for a comprehensive examination of students' motivation and engagement in academic reading.

b. Qualitative Instrument
Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students' motivational regulation processes during academic reading. The interview protocol consisted of 10 open-ended questions addressing reading goals, persistence during difficulty, emotional responses to challenging texts, and strategies used to maintain engagement. The interview guide was informed by motivational regulation within Self-Regulated Learning theory and constructs related to sustained motivation in academic tasks. A pilot interview was conducted with five students to refine the clarity and sequencing of the questions. A total of 24 students participated in the interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 20–25 minutes, depending on the depth of responses. Interviews were conducted in English or Indonesian based on participant preference to ensure clarity and richness of data.

2.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection took place during the academic semester in offline classroom settings. Students first completed the questionnaire during scheduled academic reading classes under researcher supervision. The questionnaire required approximately 20 to 25 minutes to complete. Following preliminary quantitative analysis, interview participants were selected based on motivation and engagement levels. Interviews were conducted face to face in a quiet setting. Each session was audio recorded with participant consent and later transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were anonymized to maintain confidentiality. Field notes were recorded during interviews to capture contextual details and non-verbal responses that supported interpretation.

2.5 Data Analysis

a. Quantitative Analysis
Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were calculated to summarize motivational regulation and engagement levels. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine relationships between motivational regulation and behavioral engagement. Multiple regression analysis was used to determine the predictive contribution of motivational regulation components to engagement outcomes. These analyses provided an overview of engagement patterns in academic reading tasks and identified relationships among key constructs.

b. Qualitative Analysis
Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2021) six phase procedure: familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Deductive coding was guided by Self-Regulated Learning and Engagement Theory constructs Zimmerman (2013), while inductive coding captured participants' experiences. Credibility was strengthened through member checking and peer debriefing. Participants reviewed summaries of their responses to confirm accuracy.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Levels of Motivational Regulation in Academic Reading

Motivational regulation in this study refers to students' ability to manage goals, effort, and comprehension processes during academic reading. It was operationalized through goal-directedness and self-regulation, which together capture how students initiate, sustain, and regulate their engagement with academic texts. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of students' motivational regulation in academic reading tasks.

Table 1. Students' Levels of Motivational Regulation in Academic Reading

Aspect	SD	D	A	SA	Mean
I read academic texts to achieve my academic goals	1	4	26	29	3.38
I set clear goals before reading academic texts	2	6	25	27	3.28
Academic reading helps me succeed in my studies	1	5	24	30	3.38
I am motivated to read for long-term academic benefits	2	5	26	27	3.30
I feel reading is essential for my future career	1	6	25	28	3.33
I can manage my time effectively for reading tasks	3	9	26	22	3.12
I monitor my understanding while reading	2	7	28	23	3.20
I adjust strategies when texts are difficult	2	6	27	25	3.25
I stay disciplined in completing reading assignments	3	8	25	24	3.17
I continue reading despite distractions	4	9	24	23	3.10

Table 1 shows that students demonstrated relatively high levels of motivational regulation, with mean scores ranging from 3.10 to 3.38. Goal-directedness emerged as the strongest component, particularly in reading to achieve academic goals (M = 3.38) and perceiving reading as supporting academic success (M = 3.38). These findings indicate that students approach academic reading with clear academic purposes and a strong orientation toward achievement and future outcomes. Self-regulation indicators also showed consistent levels. Strategy adjustment when texts were difficult (M = 3.25) and monitoring comprehension (M = 3.20) were among the most prominent behaviors, suggesting that students actively regulate their understanding during reading. However, time management (M = 3.12) and sustaining attention despite distractions (M = 3.10) showed comparatively lower scores, indicating that maintaining consistent reading routines remains a challenge for some students.

Interview data from 24 students across four universities support these quantitative findings. Several participants emphasized the role of academic goals in sustaining reading effort. Student 1 from University a Stated, "*I read academic articles because they help me understand course materials*," while Student 18 from University D explained, "*I believe academic reading will help me in my future career*." These responses indicate that goal-directedness functions as a central motivational driver in academic reading. Students also described regulating their reading processes through monitoring and strategy adjustment. Student 13 from University D noted, "*I check whether I understand each section before continuing*," and Student 10 from University B explained, "*If the article is difficult, I change my strategy by reading more slowly*." These accounts suggest that students actively manage comprehension and effort in response to task demands. These findings align with previous research showing that goal orientation and self-regulation support sustained effort in EFL learning contexts (Khonamri et al, 2024; Reyes et al, 2024). The results extend this evidence by showing that motivational regulation in academic reading involves not only goal formation but also the active control of strategies and effort. This regulatory process provides a foundation for sustained behavioral engagement during demanding reading tasks.

The pattern also reflects the role of instructional context. Engagement appears to develop through classroom expectations and structured learning routines rather than fully autonomous reading behavior (Archila et al, 2025; Ghavamnia & Kashkouli, 2022). The present findings support evidence that behavioral engagement is closely connected to motivational support and learning structure. Teacher guidance and peer interaction strengthen engagement by shaping self-efficacy and motivational beliefs (Honicke et al., 2023; Quadir, 2021). Although motivation is positively associated with reading activity, it does not by itself ensure sustained engagement in complex tasks (Han, 2021; Mahdahera & Ridwan, 2023). In this study, students maintained behavioral participation even when emotional responses fluctuated, indicating the influence of academic requirements and structured task demands.

Qualitative evidence further shows that motivational regulation operates through cognitive processes during reading. Students reported rereading difficult sections, identifying key ideas, and inferring meaning from context. As noted by Student 7, "*If I do not understand a paragraph, I read it again slowly*," while Student 15 explained, "*I try to find the main idea first before understanding the details*." These responses indicate active meaning construction and strategic effort. This finding is consistent with research showing that self-regulated learning strategies support sustained attention and task engagement (Qi et al, 2025). The results highlight that cognitive effort and motivational regulation operate in coordination during academic reading.

Emotional engagement, however, remains less stable. Students reported both satisfaction and difficulty when engaging with academic texts. Positive emotions emerged when comprehension was achieved, while frustration and fatigue appeared when texts were linguistically demanding. This variation reflects the context-dependent nature of affective responses (Afdal et al., 2023; Cobo-Rendón et al., 2022). Emotional engagement is influenced by task difficulty, prior knowledge, and perceived competence (Yung, 2023). The findings suggest that emotional responses can either support or constrain sustained engagement, depending on how students regulate their effort.

3.2 Relationship Between Motivational Regulation and Behavioral Engagement in Academic Reading

Behavioral engagement reflects students' observable participation in academic reading tasks, including completing assignments, maintaining focus, contributing to class activities, and allocating time for reading. In this study, behavioral engagement functions as the outcome variable through which the role of motivational regulation is examined. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of students' behavioral engagement.

Table 2. Students' Behavioral Engagement in Academic Reading

Aspect	SD	D	A	SA	Mean
I regularly complete assigned academic reading tasks	2	6	28	24	3.23
I stay focused when reading academic texts	3	7	30	20	3.12
I actively participate in reading-related class activities	2	8	27	23	3.18
I allocate specific time for academic reading	4	9	25	22	3.08
I persist in reading even when texts are difficult	3	6	26	25	3.22

Table 2 shows that students demonstrated relatively high behavioral engagement, with an overall mean score of 3.17. The highest mean scores were found in completing assigned reading tasks (M = 3.23) and persisting when texts were difficult (M = 3.22), indicating that students

generally maintain effort and task completion in demanding reading conditions. Maintaining focus (M = 3.12) and participating in reading-related activities (M = 3.18) also reflect consistent engagement. However, allocating specific time for reading (M = 3.08) shows comparatively lower consistency, suggesting that time management remains less stable. To examine how motivational regulation relates to behavioral engagement, multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Behavioral Engagement

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p
Constant	1.12	0.31	—	3.61	.000
Goal-Directedness	0.34	0.08	.41	4.25	.000
Self-Regulation	0.29	0.07	.36	3.98	.000

Note: $R = .62$, $R^2 = .38$, Adjusted $R^2 = .37$, $F(2, 111) = 33.94$, $p < .001$

The regression results indicate that motivational regulation significantly predicts behavioral engagement, $F(2, 111) = 33.94$, $p < .001$, explaining 38% of the variance. Both goal-directedness ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) and self-regulation ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$) emerged as significant predictors, indicating that students with stronger goal orientation and regulatory strategies demonstrate higher levels of participation and persistence in academic reading tasks. Interview excerpts further support these quantitative findings. Students who reported clear goals and active regulation strategies also described consistent engagement in reading activities. Student 4 from University A explained, "*I always try to finish the reading before class because we will discuss it*," while Student 11 from University B stated, "*Even when the text is difficult, I continue reading because it is part of the assignment*." These responses suggest that behavioral engagement is closely supported by goal-directed effort and regulatory control.

At the same time, the relatively lower mean score for time allocation indicates that engagement may still be partly influenced by external academic demands. Students tend to complete tasks and persist when required, but independent regulation of reading time appears less stable. This pattern suggests that while motivational regulation supports engagement, it may not be fully internalized across all aspects of reading behavior. These findings are consistent with previous research showing a positive relationship between motivation and engagement in EFL contexts (Han, 2021; Mahdahera & Ridwan, 2023). However, the present study moves beyond this general association by showing that motivational regulation, rather than motivation alone, is more closely linked to observable behavioral engagement. The results suggest that engagement in academic reading is not simply driven by students' motivational level but by their ability to regulate goals, effort, and strategies during task execution. In this sense, motivational regulation can be understood as a process mechanism that supports continued participation in demanding reading tasks.

The role of instructional context is also evident. Engagement appears to be supported by structured classroom expectations rather than fully autonomous reading behavior (Archila et al, 2025; Ghavamnia & Kashkouli, 2022). This suggests that students' engagement is partly sustained by external academic demands. Teacher guidance and peer interaction further reinforce this pattern by shaping self-efficacy and motivational beliefs (Honicke et al., 2023; Quadir, 2021). While motivation is positively associated with reading activity, it does not ensure stable engagement when tasks become cognitively demanding (Han, 2021). The present findings

indicate that students may maintain behavioral participation even when emotional engagement fluctuates, reflecting a combination of regulatory effort and instructional structure.

Cognitive engagement provides further insight into how motivational regulation operates in practice. Students reported frequent use of strategies such as rereading, identifying key ideas, summarizing, and evaluating arguments. These behaviors indicate active processing, where learners construct meaning rather than passively receive information. Interview evidence supports this pattern. As noted by Student 7, "*If the text is difficult, I read it again slowly*," while Student 15 explained, "*I try to find the main idea first before understanding the details*." These responses show that students monitor and adjust their comprehension in response to difficulty.

This pattern aligns with research linking cognitive engagement to metacognitive awareness and self-regulated learning strategies (Antia & Vogt, 2022; Singh et al, 2022). Students who actively monitor comprehension and evaluate arguments tend to demonstrate deeper processing and stronger academic outcomes (Mahdahera & Ridwan, 2023; Mason & Warmington, 2024). Compared with earlier studies that emphasized reading frequency or surface-level strategies, the present findings indicate that students engage in higher-order processes such as evaluation and integration of ideas. In this study, cognitive engagement represents the depth of processing, while motivational regulation reflects the control of effort and direction that sustains the processing.

Emotional engagement, however, appears less stable. Students reported both satisfaction and difficulty during reading. Positive emotions were associated with successful comprehension, while frustration and fatigue emerged when texts were linguistically demanding. This variability reflects the context-dependent nature of affective responses (Afdal et al., 2023; Cobo-Rendón et al., 2022), and the influence of perceived competence and task difficulty (Yung, 2023). Importantly, this fluctuation helps explain why motivational regulation is necessary. When emotional responses become negative, students rely on regulatory strategies to maintain effort. Without such regulation, engagement may decline despite initial motivation.

The findings suggest that behavioral engagement in academic reading is shaped by the interaction of three elements: goal-directed orientation, regulatory control, and instructional context. Goal-directedness provides direction, cognitive engagement reflects processing depth, and self-regulation supports sustained effort under difficulty. Motivational regulation connects these elements by enabling students to maintain participation when tasks are complex or emotionally challenging. This study contributes to the literature by clarifying the role of motivational regulation as a linking process between intention and observable engagement. Unlike prior research that treats motivation and engagement as separate constructs, the present findings show how these constructs interact in practice within academic reading tasks. The integration of quantitative patterns and qualitative evidence strengthens this explanation by capturing both the structure and the process of engagement.

3.3 Motivational Regulation Processes in Academic Reading

To explain how students regulate their motivation during academic reading, qualitative data from interviews were analyzed. The findings reveal that motivational regulation operates through three interconnected processes: goal setting, strategy regulation, and effort regulation. These processes reflect how students manage their motivation in response to task demands.

a. Goal Setting and Academic Orientation

   Students reported setting goals before engaging in academic reading. These goals were primarily academic and task-oriented, including understanding course materials, preparing for discussions, and completing assignments. Student 6 from University A

explained, "*I set a target to finish several pages each day*," while Student 9 from University C noted, "*Reading academic texts helps me prepare for my thesis*." These responses indicate that goal setting provides direction and structure for reading activities.

Goal-directedness also reflects students' broader academic and future orientation. As noted in Section 3.1, students perceive academic reading as essential for academic success and professional development. This orientation sustains their willingness to engage with demanding texts despite cognitive challenges. This pattern aligns with previous research indicating that goal orientation supports sustained effort and engagement in EFL learning contexts (Khonamri et al, 2024). Students who establish clear academic goals are more likely to remain engaged because they can link reading tasks to immediate academic requirements and long-term outcomes. In the present study, goal-directedness is not limited to task completion but reflects a broader academic orientation in which students perceive reading as essential for academic success and professional development. This perception reinforces their willingness to engage with demanding texts, even when cognitive load is high.

b. Strategy regulation and cognitive engagement

Students described actively regulating their comprehension through a range of strategies. These included rereading difficult sections, identifying key ideas, summarizing content, and evaluating arguments. Student 7 from University C stated, "*If I do not understand a paragraph, I read it again slowly*," while Student 15 from University A explained, "*I try to find the main idea first before understanding the details*." Other participants reported summarizing texts and questioning the author's ideas to deepen understanding. These behaviors reflect cognitive engagement and indicate that students actively construct meaning rather than reading passively. The use of comprehension monitoring and strategy adjustment demonstrates that motivational regulation is closely linked to cognitive processes during reading. This finding is consistent with previous research showing that metacognitive strategies support sustained attention and effort in language learning tasks (Alfahid & Zai, 2024; Luo & Zhou, 2024; Qi et al, 2025).

c. Effort regulation and emotional variation

Students also reported regulating their effort when encountering difficulty. Many participants described continuing to read despite challenges such as unfamiliar vocabulary and complex arguments. Student 11 from University B stated, "*Even when the text is difficult, I continue reading because it is part of the assignment*." This indicates that effort regulation enables students to sustain engagement under demanding conditions. At the same time, emotional responses to academic reading were found to be variable. Some students expressed satisfaction when they successfully understood the text. Student 2 from University D stated, "*I feel satisfied when I finally understand the article*." In contrast, others reported fatigue or anxiety, particularly when dealing with dense vocabulary or complex content. Student 18 from University B noted, "*Sometimes I feel tired when the vocabulary is too difficult*," while Student 9 from University C described academic reading as "*interesting but challenging*." These findings indicate that emotional engagement is dynamic and context-dependent. Positive emotions may reinforce effort, while negative emotions may challenge sustained engagement. This pattern is consistent with research showing that affective responses influence reading engagement and comprehension outcomes (Afdal et al., 2023; Cobo-Rendón et al., 2022; Yung, 2023).

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined EFL students' motivational regulation and behavioral engagement in academic reading within Indonesian higher education. It addressed the need to explain not only the levels of engagement but also how motivational regulation supports observable participation in academic reading tasks. The findings show that students demonstrate relatively high behavioral engagement, alongside strong motivational regulation, particularly in goal-directed processes. This indicates that students are able to complete reading tasks, maintain focus, and persist when texts are demanding. However, aspects of self-regulation such as time management and emotional control remain less stable, suggesting that engagement is not fully self-sustained across all conditions. The study also confirms a significant relationship between motivational regulation and behavioral engagement. Goal-directedness and self-regulation contribute meaningfully to students' observable participation in academic reading. These results suggest that engagement is not driven by motivation alone, but by students' ability to regulate goals, effort, and strategies during task completion.

The findings further clarify how motivational regulation operates in practice. Students regulate their motivation through three interrelated processes: setting academic goals, applying comprehension strategies, and maintaining effort when facing difficulty. Emotional responses remain variable, indicating that affective factors continue to influence the stability of engagement. These findings demonstrate that motivational regulation functions as a process mechanism that translates intention into sustained behavioral engagement. The study contributes to theory by providing empirical evidence that integrates motivational regulation and behavioral engagement within a single explanatory framework grounded in self-regulated learning. It extends existing research by showing that engagement in EFL academic reading is shaped by goal-directed processes and regulatory strategies rather than by motivation as a general construct. From a pedagogical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of integrating motivational regulation into academic reading instruction. Effective instruction should include structured goal setting, explicit strategy training, and support for effort and emotional regulation. The practices may strengthen students' capacity to sustain engagement during demanding reading tasks. Future research may adopt longitudinal designs to examine how motivation, engagement, and self-regulation develop over time in academic reading courses. Intervention-based studies that implement motivational regulation and self-regulated reading training would provide stronger causal evidence regarding their impact on sustained engagement and academic performance.

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