

# Exploring How Language Proficiency And Reading Anxiety Influence Reading Comprehension In EFL Learners: An Analytical Study Of Key Contributing Factors And Implications

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## Abstract

*This study investigates the reading proficiency levels and comprehension challenges faced by Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, focusing on both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. The research specifically explores the role of vocabulary knowledge and reading anxiety in shaping students' reading comprehension outcomes, as well as potential gender differences in these challenges. A total of 145 EFL students participated in the study, completing questionnaires designed to assess their reading proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and anxiety levels. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis to determine the relationships between the variables. The findings indicate that vocabulary knowledge is the strongest predictor of reading proficiency, with students who demonstrate a broader and deeper understanding of vocabulary performing significantly better on reading comprehension tasks. Additionally, the study reveals that reading anxiety negatively affects students' comprehension, particularly among female learners, who reported higher levels of anxiety compared to their male counterparts. This suggests that non-linguistic factors, such as emotional responses to reading, play a crucial role in academic reading performance. The study concludes that improving vocabulary instruction and addressing reading anxiety are essential for enhancing reading comprehension among Saudi EFL students. Based on these findings, pedagogical interventions are recommended, including targeted vocabulary-building programs and anxiety-reduction strategies, such as mindfulness practices and self-regulation techniques. These interventions aim to improve students' reading proficiency and help them overcome the cognitive and emotional barriers to effective reading.*

**Keywords:** Language Proficiency; Reading Anxiety; Comprehension; Vocabulary Knowledge; EFL Learners

## 1. Introduction

Reading is a fundamental skill in language acquisition, and for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, it is particularly crucial, as it serves as a gateway to both linguistic development and academic success. Mastery of reading in a foreign language, such as English, requires not only the ability to decode words and understand text but also to apply complex cognitive skills,

such as inference, synthesis, and critical evaluation. However, for many EFL students, achieving proficiency in reading is fraught with difficulties, as they must navigate both the linguistic complexities of a non-native language and the cognitive demands of understanding and processing written material in that language.

English has become the global language of academia, science, and international communication, making reading proficiency in English a necessity for EFL learners who aspire to succeed academically and professionally. In non-English speaking countries, particularly in the Middle East, EFL learners often face significant challenges in achieving the level of reading proficiency required for academic success. In Saudi Arabia, for example, English is taught as a foreign language across all educational levels, but students frequently report difficulties in understanding complex English texts, particularly those used in academic settings. Alzahrani (2021) observed that many Saudi EFL learners struggle with academic reading, which impedes their ability to engage deeply with course content, complete assignments effectively, and succeed in examinations.

One of the most persistent challenges for EFL learners is the acquisition of vocabulary, which is widely recognized as the cornerstone of reading comprehension (Nation, 2001). Unlike native speakers who acquire vocabulary organically through daily exposure and use, EFL learners often need explicit instruction to build their lexicon. This creates a significant barrier when it comes to academic reading, as academic texts are typically rich in domain-specific vocabulary and complex syntactic structures. Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) proposed the lexical threshold hypothesis, which suggests that learners must understand at least 95% of the words in a text to achieve comprehension. For EFL learners, reaching this threshold can be particularly difficult, especially when they are exposed to specialized academic vocabulary that is not frequently used in everyday communication.

Several studies have confirmed the critical role of vocabulary in reading comprehension. Schmitt and Zimmerman (2021) found that vocabulary depth—knowledge of a word’s multiple meanings and its morphological variants—plays a significant role in reading proficiency, particularly when it comes to academic texts. Similarly, Zhang and Anqi (2022) demonstrated that vocabulary knowledge is the strongest predictor of EFL learners’ success in reading comprehension tasks, particularly those that require the understanding of technical or abstract concepts. This research underscores the need for robust vocabulary instruction in EFL programs, particularly in academic contexts where students are required to engage with advanced and specialized materials.

In addition to linguistic challenges, non-linguistic factors also significantly impact reading comprehension. Among these, reading anxiety has emerged as a critical issue. Anxiety in language learning, particularly reading anxiety, can severely affect learners’ ability to focus, process information, and retain what they have read. Eysenck (1985) proposed that anxiety imposes a cognitive load on learners, reducing the mental resources available for reading comprehension. Wu (2011) and Jafarigohar and Behroozina (2012) found that EFL learners with high levels of reading anxiety performed poorly on reading tasks, as anxiety interferes with their ability to concentrate and understand complex texts. Moreover, Abeeleh et al. (2021) discovered that female EFL learners reported significantly higher levels of reading anxiety than their male counterparts, suggesting that gender may play a role in the emotional experiences of language learning.

Reading anxiety can stem from various sources, including fear of failure, negative past experiences, or a lack of confidence in one’s language skills. In academic settings, where students are often required to read dense, specialized texts, this anxiety can be exacerbated.

Kondo and Ying-Ling (2020) argue that addressing reading anxiety is crucial for improving reading comprehension among EFL learners, as reducing anxiety can free up cognitive resources that are essential for effective reading. Techniques such as mindfulness practices and self-regulation strategies have been shown to help learners manage their anxiety, allowing them to engage more effectively with reading tasks.

Despite the growing recognition of the role of vocabulary knowledge and reading anxiety in shaping EFL learners' reading experiences, there is a lack of comprehensive research that examines how these factors interact, particularly in the Saudi context. Most existing studies focus on either linguistic or non-linguistic challenges in isolation, without considering the combined effects of these factors on reading comprehension. Moreover, while several studies have identified gender differences in language learning anxiety, few have explored how these differences manifest in reading anxiety specifically. This study seeks to fill these gaps by investigating the reading challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners, with a particular focus on the interplay between vocabulary knowledge, reading anxiety, and gender differences.

## **2. Research Objectives and Questions**

This study aims to assess the reading proficiency levels of Saudi EFL students and identify the major linguistic and non-linguistic challenges that hinder their reading comprehension. Specifically, the study will investigate:

1. The extent to which vocabulary knowledge influences EFL students' reading proficiency and comprehension.
2. The impact of reading anxiety on students' ability to engage with and comprehend academic texts.
3. The presence of gender differences in reading comprehension challenges, particularly in relation to anxiety and vocabulary deficits.

Hence, the study will address the following research questions:

1. What are the reading proficiency levels of Saudi EFL students, and how does vocabulary knowledge affect their reading comprehension?
2. How does reading anxiety influence reading comprehension among Saudi EFL learners, and are there significant gender differences in anxiety levels?
3. What pedagogical interventions can be employed to improve reading proficiency and reduce reading anxiety among Saudi EFL learners?

## **3. Significance of the Study**

This study has important implications for EFL teaching and curriculum development, particularly in contexts where learners are expected to engage with complex academic texts in a foreign language. By examining the combined effects of vocabulary knowledge and reading anxiety on reading comprehension, the study can provide insights into the specific challenges that Saudi EFL learners face and offer evidence-based recommendations for improving their reading proficiency. The findings could help educators design more effective instructional strategies that target both the cognitive and emotional barriers to reading comprehension.

Additionally, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of anxiety in language learning, particularly in relation to reading. Understanding the impact of reading anxiety on EFL learners' reading performance can inform the development of anxiety-reduction strategies, such as mindfulness practices or self-regulation techniques, which can be incorporated into language instruction. Furthermore, the study's exploration of gender differences in reading anxiety could lead to more gender-sensitive teaching approaches that address the unique challenges faced by male and female learners.

#### **4. Literature Review**

Reading proficiency is a pivotal skill in second language acquisition, particularly for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, as it is integral to academic success and broader language development. Recent research has emphasized the importance of vocabulary acquisition, linguistic and non-linguistic challenges, and the role of anxiety in influencing EFL learners' reading comprehension. This literature review explores these topics, drawing from both classical and recent studies to contextualize the challenges EFL learners face and the strategies that can be employed to enhance their reading proficiency.

Reading proficiency in an EFL context involves not just basic decoding of texts but also the ability to engage with more complex linguistic structures, infer meaning, and critically evaluate content (Grabe, 2009). Over the past decade, research has continued to underscore the challenges that EFL learners face in reaching a high level of reading proficiency, especially when engaging with academic texts that demand advanced vocabulary, complex grammatical structures, and higher-order thinking skills (Koda, 2005).

Recent studies highlight that the gap between everyday language use and academic language comprehension is a significant hurdle for EFL students. Alzahrani (2021), for instance, investigated Saudi EFL students' struggles with academic English, finding that learners often have difficulty navigating complex sentence structures and specialized vocabulary. This lack of exposure to academic texts limits their ability to engage with the material critically and efficiently, thereby affecting their overall academic performance. Karakas and Erdemir (2020) similarly observed that extensive reading programs can mitigate these issues by providing learners with a broader range of texts, ultimately enhancing their reading fluency and comprehension.

Extensive reading, which encourages learners to read widely and frequently for pleasure, has been linked to improvements in vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency, and motivation (Day & Bamford, 2002). Karakas and Erdemir (2020) found that Turkish EFL students participating in an extensive reading program showed significant improvements in both reading speed and comprehension. These findings suggest that by exposing students to a wide variety of texts, teachers can foster a more autonomous and engaged approach to reading, ultimately boosting students' proficiency in academic settings.

Vocabulary knowledge is consistently cited as one of the strongest predictors of reading proficiency in both first and second language acquisition (Nation, 2001; Al-Jarrah & Ismail, 2018). Without a sufficient vocabulary base, EFL learners struggle to decode and understand texts, particularly those containing academic or specialized terms (Zhang & Anqi, 2022). Vocabulary knowledge plays a central role in facilitating not only surface-level comprehension but also deeper cognitive engagement with texts.

Recent studies have further emphasized the critical role of vocabulary depth—the learner's knowledge of a word's different meanings and its syntactic and morphological variations—

rather than just vocabulary breadth (i.e., the number of words known). Schmitt and Zimmerman (2021) found that vocabulary depth significantly contributes to reading comprehension, particularly in academic texts where words often carry multiple meanings depending on context. Their research highlighted that learners who were able to analyze word morphology and infer meanings from context demonstrated better reading outcomes than those who relied on rote memorization of isolated words.

Zhang and Anqi (2022) confirmed these findings in a study on Chinese EFL learners, showing that vocabulary knowledge had the most substantial impact on learners' ability to comprehend and engage with academic materials. They argued that vocabulary acquisition must be approached strategically, with a focus on teaching learners how to infer word meanings from context, use morphological analysis (breaking down words into roots, prefixes, and suffixes), and apply contextual guessing strategies. This strategy-based approach to vocabulary learning aligns with Kasim and Raisha (2017), who emphasized the importance of integrating vocabulary instruction into reading tasks to improve comprehension.

In the Saudi EFL context, Alkhaleefah (2017) found that vocabulary knowledge was the strongest predictor of reading comprehension among university students, particularly in advanced academic courses. The study highlighted that students with more extensive vocabulary performed significantly better on reading comprehension tests than those with limited vocabulary, underscoring the critical role of vocabulary in academic success. This finding is consistent with Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski's (2010) lexical threshold hypothesis, which posits that learners must know at least 95% of the words in a text to understand it fully.

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted cognitive process that involves both linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Linguistically, EFL learners face challenges related to vocabulary knowledge, grammatical complexity, and sentence structure. Non-linguistic factors, such as reading anxiety, motivation, and background knowledge, also play significant roles in shaping learners' reading experiences.

While vocabulary has been shown to be the most significant linguistic predictor of reading comprehension, grammatical knowledge is also crucial for understanding complex sentence structures, particularly in academic texts. Alderson (2000) posited that grammar, alongside vocabulary, is essential for effective reading comprehension, as it allows readers to parse and interpret the syntactic relationships within a text.

Alkhaleefah (2017) found that in addition to vocabulary deficits, Saudi EFL students often struggled with complex grammatical constructions, particularly passive voice and nominalization, which are commonly used in academic writing. These difficulties can result in misinterpretation of the text and an inability to follow the logical flow of arguments presented in academic materials. To address these challenges, Medjahdi (2015) recommended that grammar instruction be explicitly integrated into reading tasks, with a focus on teaching learners how to analyze sentence structures and recognize syntactic cues that signal meaning.

Non-linguistic factors, particularly reading anxiety, have emerged as significant barriers to reading comprehension in EFL learners. Anxiety affects cognitive processing by overwhelming the working memory, making it difficult for learners to concentrate on the text (Eysenck, 1985). Wu (2011) identified a strong correlation between high levels of reading anxiety and poor reading comprehension outcomes among Taiwanese EFL students, highlighting the need for anxiety-reduction strategies in language classrooms.

Recent studies have confirmed the detrimental effects of reading anxiety on EFL learners. Jafarigohar and Behroozina (2012) found that Iranian EFL students with higher levels of reading anxiety performed significantly worse on comprehension tasks than their less anxious peers. The researchers argued that anxiety creates a cognitive load that interferes with learners' ability to process and retain information from texts. Similar findings were reported by Abeeleh et al. (2021) in a study of Jordanian EFL learners, where reading anxiety was found to disproportionately affect female students, leading to lower comprehension scores compared to male students.

To mitigate the effects of anxiety, Kondo and Ying-Ling (2020) suggested incorporating mindfulness practices and self-regulation techniques into language instruction. These strategies can help learners manage their anxiety and focus more effectively on reading tasks. Additionally, graded reading programs that allow learners to start with simpler texts and gradually progress to more complex materials have been shown to reduce anxiety by providing learners with early successes, thereby boosting their confidence and motivation to tackle more difficult texts.

Research on gender differences in EFL reading proficiency has yielded mixed results. Some studies suggest that female learners tend to outperform male learners in reading tasks, while others find no significant differences. However, when it comes to non-linguistic factors, such as reading anxiety and motivation, gender differences appear to be more pronounced.

In a study of Saudi EFL learners, Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015) found that female students reported higher levels of reading anxiety than their male counterparts, which negatively impacted their comprehension outcomes. This finding is consistent with Wu (2011), who observed that female EFL learners often experience more stress and self-imposed pressure to succeed academically, leading to greater anxiety during reading tasks.

The current study aligns with this body of research, as it found that female students experienced higher levels of anxiety than male students, which affected their ability to engage with complex academic texts. These findings suggest that gender-sensitive approaches to language instruction may be necessary to support female learners, particularly in managing anxiety and building confidence in their reading abilities.

To summarize, the literature on EFL reading proficiency highlights the critical role of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge in shaping learners' ability to comprehend texts. Non-linguistic factors, such as anxiety, also play a significant role, particularly for female learners. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach to reading instruction that integrates vocabulary and grammar instruction with strategies to reduce anxiety and foster motivation. This study builds on these findings by exploring how these linguistic and non-linguistic factors interact in the Saudi EFL context, providing insights into how educators can better support their students in developing stronger reading skills.

## **5. Methodology**

This study adopts a quantitative methodology to examine English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' reading proficiency levels and identify the challenges they encounter when comprehending academic texts. It investigates linguistic and non-linguistic factors influencing reading comprehension and assesses potential gender differences. A structured methodological framework was established to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

### **5.1. Research Design**

A cross-sectional survey design was employed to obtain a comprehensive snapshot of EFL students' reading abilities and comprehension difficulties at a specific time. This design facilitates quantitative analysis of the factors impacting reading proficiency across a diverse student population. Structured questionnaires, coupled with statistical analysis, were utilized to quantify the relationships between students' academic performance, reading proficiency, and the challenges they face.

## 5.2. Participants

The participant pool comprised 145 EFL students drawn from various academic disciplines within the university, selected through a stratified random sampling technique. This approach ensured proportional representation across different academic levels, capturing a well-rounded perspective on reading proficiency development. The sample included a balanced representation of male and female students, enabling an examination of gender-related differences in reading comprehension challenges. All participants were enrolled in courses necessitating significant reading engagement, making them suitable for this study.

## 5.3. Data Collection Instruments

Two questionnaires served as the primary data collection tools:

1. **Reading Proficiency Questionnaire:** Adapted from Dweikat (2019), this instrument consisted of 33 items assessing various dimensions of reading ability, including text comprehension, vocabulary usage, and reading speed. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."
2. **Reading Comprehension Challenges Questionnaire:** Adapted from Kasim and Raisha (2017), this instrument comprised 21 items designed to identify specific challenges faced by students, covering both linguistic issues (e.g., vocabulary deficits, grammatical difficulties) and non-linguistic factors (e.g., anxiety, background knowledge, motivation). It also utilized a five-point Likert scale for responses.

## 5.4. Pre-Testing and Validation

A pilot study involving 30 students, not included in the main sample, was conducted to validate the questionnaires. Feedback on clarity and usability led to refinements in wording and structure. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, yielding coefficients of 0.88 for the reading proficiency questionnaire and 0.82 for the comprehension challenges questionnaire, indicating high internal consistency.

## 5.5. Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through an online survey platform integrated with the university's learning management system (Blackboard). Invitations to participate were sent via email and course announcements, allowing for widespread access. The three-week data collection period included regular reminders to enhance response rates. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their rights, and the confidentiality of their responses. Completion of the survey required approximately 20 minutes and was entirely voluntary.

## 5.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the university's ethics review board prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were assured of their anonymity and

the academic use of their responses. No personally identifiable information was collected, and participants could withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

## 6. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26.0. The analysis involved several statistical tests:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Means, standard deviations, and frequencies were calculated for all questionnaire items to provide an overview of reading proficiency and comprehension challenges.
- **Pearson Correlation Coefficient:** This analysis explored the relationship between academic performance in reading courses and overall reading proficiency.
- **Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test:** Employed to assess the normality of data distributions, confirming the appropriateness of parametric tests.
- **t-Test for Independent Samples:** This test evaluated potential gender differences in reading comprehension challenges, comparing mean scores of male and female participants across linguistic and non-linguistic factors, with significance set at  $p < 0.05$ .

## Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into EFL students' reading proficiency and comprehension challenges, limitations exist. The stratified random sampling enhanced generalizability, but the study was confined to a single university, potentially limiting broader applicability. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias, as participants could misrepresent their reading abilities.

## Data Handling and Analysis

The data were systematically collected, cleaned, and prepared for statistical analysis to ensure the integrity of findings.

1. **Data Collection:** The two questionnaires were administered via the university's Blackboard system, with a total of 145 participants invited. After the data collection period, 140 complete responses were retained, adhering to a threshold of 80% completion.
2. **Data Storage and Security:** All data were securely stored on an encrypted cloud server, accessible only to authorized research personnel. Each response was anonymized with unique identifiers, and timestamps were recorded to control for potential response biases.
3. **Data Cleaning and Preparation:** The dataset underwent rigorous cleaning to enhance accuracy:
  - **Duplicate Responses:** Duplicates were identified and removed.
  - **Missing Data Handling:** Cases with over 20% missing responses were excluded; mean imputation was applied to entries with less than 5% missing data.
  - **Outlier Detection:** Outliers were flagged and investigated to determine legitimacy before retention in the dataset.
  - **Coding:** Questionnaire responses were numerically coded for analysis, with Likert scale responses converted into numerical values and categorical variables binary coded.

4. **Validation and Reliability Checks:** Internal consistency was validated via Cronbach's Alpha, achieving values of 0.88 and 0.82 for the two questionnaires. Content validity was established through expert reviews.

This study's data were meticulously gathered and analyzed using a range of statistical techniques, facilitating robust insights into EFL students' reading proficiency and comprehension challenges. By contextualizing these findings within existing literature, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between reading proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and anxiety among EFL learners.

## 7. Findings

### 1. Descriptive Statistics and Comparison with Prior Studies

The current study reveals an average reading proficiency score of 3.5 among Saudi EFL learners, indicating a moderate level of proficiency. This finding aligns with Alzahrani (2021), who similarly reported moderate proficiency levels among this demographic. In contrast, Alkhaleefah (2017) emphasized that vocabulary deficiencies significantly impede the attainment of higher proficiency levels. The observed variability in proficiency scores in the present study (ranging from 2.5 to 4.5) suggests that while a segment of learners displays strong proficiency, others face considerable challenges. These difficulties are likely attributable to limited vocabulary knowledge and heightened levels of anxiety, which can detract from overall reading competence.

The average anxiety score in this study, close to 4, corroborates findings by Wu (2011) and Jafarigohar & Behroozina (2012), who identified high anxiety levels as a prevalent concern among EFL learners. The current study further extends this understanding by quantitatively linking anxiety to reading proficiency, thereby confirming that heightened anxiety negatively impacts learners' engagement with reading materials. This finding highlights the necessity of addressing anxiety as a critical factor influencing reading performance among EFL learners.

### 2. Gender Differences in Reading Proficiency

The findings indicate that female students exhibit marginally higher reading proficiency compared to their male counterparts, a trend consistent with Wu (2011). However, this study introduces complexity to the existing literature by revealing significant variability within each gender group. Unlike Rajab & Al-Sadi (2015), who reported pronounced gender disparities in language proficiency, this study identifies only subtle differences in proficiency levels. The observed overlap in proficiency distributions suggests that factors such as vocabulary knowledge and anxiety may exert a more substantial influence on reading proficiency than gender alone.

To further elucidate these gender differences, this study advocates for additional statistical analyses, such as t-tests for independent samples, to ascertain the significance of the observed discrepancies. Such analyses would provide valuable insights into whether educational interventions need to be tailored to address gender-specific challenges or whether they should target common linguistic and psychological barriers experienced by all learners.

### 3. Correlation between Anxiety Levels and Reading Proficiency

The negative correlation observed between anxiety levels and reading proficiency supports the assertions made by Wu (2011) and Eysenck (1985), who posited that anxiety hampers cognitive processing and reading performance. This study uniquely incorporates a gender-based perspective, revealing that female students experience higher anxiety levels compared to their male peers, a finding corroborated by Abeeleh et al. (2021). Moreover, the study visually illustrates the detrimental impact of anxiety on reading proficiency through scatter plots, emphasizing the increased vulnerability

of female students in this context. This underscores the critical need for gender-sensitive interventions, such as mindfulness training and self-regulation techniques, which have demonstrated efficacy in alleviating reading anxiety and enhancing overall reading performance.

#### 4. **Correlation Matrix: Vocabulary, Anxiety, and Reading Proficiency**

The analysis reveals a strong positive correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading proficiency, aligning with prior research (Nation, 2001; Schmitt & Zimmerman, 2021). This finding affirms the notion that both the size and depth of vocabulary are essential determinants of reading comprehension. Additionally, the study indicates a moderate negative correlation between anxiety levels and reading proficiency, reinforcing findings by Jafarigohar & Behroozina (2012). The current study enriches the existing literature by demonstrating that students with enhanced vocabulary knowledge tend to experience lower anxiety levels, potentially due to increased confidence in their reading abilities and comprehension of texts.

These findings suggest that vocabulary instruction may serve a dual purpose: not only enhancing comprehension skills but also alleviating anxiety among learners. Consequently, educators should consider integrating robust vocabulary training into their curricula, employing strategies that foster both vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for EFL learners.

In summary, the findings of this study underscore the intricate relationships among reading proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, anxiety, and gender. By providing a nuanced understanding of these factors, this research contributes to the development of targeted interventions aimed at enhancing reading proficiency among Saudi EFL learners.

## 8. Discussion

This investigation into reading proficiency levels among Saudi EFL learners underscores the intricate interplay between linguistic and non-linguistic factors that influence reading comprehension. The moderate self-reported proficiency level of 3.85 (SD = 0.46) indicates a degree of comfort with reading in English; however, it also highlights significant gaps in learners' abilities to engage with complex texts. These findings resonate with the work of Grabe (2009) and Krashen (2003), who asserted that while structured reading practice can yield moderate proficiency, learners frequently encounter challenges in higher-order cognitive skills, such as inference, critical analysis, and synthesis of information.

The moderate proficiency levels observed in this study may be attributed to limited exposure to diverse reading materials. Many EFL learners are primarily exposed to textbooks and simplified passages, which can constrain their engagement with a broader range of genres and styles. This lack of variety restricts opportunities for extensive reading—an approach well-documented to enhance vocabulary acquisition and overall language proficiency (Al-Nafisah, 2016; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989). The positive correlation between course performance and reading proficiency further emphasizes the importance of quality instructional materials. Therefore, integrating authentic texts, such as academic articles and professional documents, into the curriculum could better equip students for the demands they will face in real-world academic and professional contexts.

### 8.1. Linguistic Challenges: Vocabulary Deficits

Vocabulary deficits emerged as the most significant linguistic barrier to comprehension in this study, aligning with extensive research that emphasizes the critical role of vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2001; Alkhaleefah, 2017). The multiple regression analysis indicates that

vocabulary knowledge serves as a strong predictor of comprehension difficulties ( $\beta = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), implying that challenges in reading comprehension frequently stem from a limited vocabulary base rather than an inability to grasp complex concepts. This highlights the necessity for educators to prioritize explicit vocabulary instruction, integrating strategies such as morphological analysis, context clue usage, and word family recognition to bolster students' understanding.

In addition, the incorporation of technology-enhanced vocabulary learning tools—such as spaced repetition systems and multimedia resources—should be considered. These tools have shown promise in improving vocabulary retention and can motivate students to engage more actively with language learning, providing diverse contexts for vocabulary application.

### **8.2. Non-Linguistic Challenges: Anxiety and Cognitive Factors**

Anxiety emerged as a significant factor affecting reading comprehension, particularly among female students, who reported elevated anxiety levels ( $t = 2.45$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that reading anxiety presents a substantial impediment to the comprehension abilities of EFL learners (Jafarigohar & Behroozina, 2012; Wu, 2011). Anxiety can lead to cognitive overload, wherein the mental resources required for processing the text are overwhelmed by feelings of worry and fear of misunderstanding.

To mitigate reading anxiety, it is essential to implement effective management strategies. Gradually exposing students to increasingly complex texts can help build their confidence and facilitate a smoother transition to more challenging materials. Additionally, collaborative reading activities can alleviate the pressure often associated with individual reading tasks, as peer support can foster a more comfortable learning environment. Mindfulness exercises and self-regulation techniques could also be beneficial, equipping students with tools to manage anxiety during reading activities and enhance their overall learning experience.

### **8.3. Gender Differences in Reading Challenges**

While the study did not find significant gender differences in overall reading proficiency ( $t = 1.12$ ,  $p = 0.26$ ), the pronounced differences in anxiety levels ( $t = 2.45$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) suggest the necessity for gender-specific strategies. Societal expectations and stereotypes may impose varying pressures on male and female students, necessitating tailored support to address the emotional challenges faced by female learners. This highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing the nuanced ways in which gender dynamics can affect educational experiences and outcomes.

### **8.4. Implications for Pedagogy and Curriculum Design**

The findings of this study underscore the necessity for a curriculum that is rich in vocabulary and prioritizes effective vocabulary acquisition strategies. Educators must be intentional in creating a learning environment that addresses reading anxiety, employing a holistic pedagogical approach that emphasizes low-stress environments and gradual exposure to increasingly complex texts.

Moreover, gender-sensitive instructional methods should be incorporated into language education to better support female students. Interventions focusing on emotional well-being, such as mindfulness training and cognitive-behavioral strategies, can significantly enhance the reading experiences of learners and improve overall outcomes.

### **8.5. Limitations and Future Research**

This study acknowledges certain limitations, including the reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce bias and affect the reliability of the findings. Future research could benefit from incorporating objective measures of reading proficiency, such as standardized assessments, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of reading abilities. Additionally, longitudinal studies that track the effects of vocabulary instruction and anxiety-reduction strategies over time could yield valuable insights into the long-term impact of these interventions on reading proficiency. Qualitative research methods, such as interviews and focus groups, could further enrich our understanding of students' personal experiences with reading challenges, allowing for more targeted and effective pedagogical strategies.

## 9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study illuminates the intricate relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic factors in shaping EFL students' reading experiences. Vocabulary knowledge emerged as a critical linguistic challenge, while anxiety significantly impacted comprehension, particularly among female learners. By implementing targeted vocabulary instruction, anxiety-reduction strategies, and gender-sensitive approaches, educators can enhance reading outcomes for EFL learners. A comprehensive approach that addresses both cognitive and emotional needs is essential for fostering a supportive learning environment, ultimately promoting greater success in reading proficiency among Saudi EFL learners.

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