

An Investigation of Reading Comprehension Difficulties amongst EFL Students at Qassim University

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Abstract

This study aims to measure the perceptions of Saudi EFL students (N= 30) at a university on the impact of teachers' competence to teach linguistic laws to manage students' reading comprehension problems. In addition, the study measures the importance of some psychological and procedural techniques which have a role in developing students' reading comprehension. This descriptive-analytical research was conducted at Qassim University using a questionnaire. Results showed that students moderately believed that owning limited knowledge of linguistic laws leads to weakness in reading comprehension (M=3). Results also indicate that teachers' lack of experience leads to poverty of student comprehension (M=2.9). Finally, students moderately agree to the efficacy of input of psychological and procedural techniques in developing their reading comprehension (M=3.2). This study is significant because it proposes practical pedagogical approaches for enhancing students' reading proficiency.

Keywords: *EFL, pedagogy, reading, linguistic laws, comprehension.*

Introduction

When a person sits down to read, he must focus on his attention towards an activity, recognize when his attention wanders, and expect to comprehend and act when he does not distinguish between significant and less important information, while also evaluating what he reads. Text comprehension is the term for these talents. Attention, Motivation, and Metacognitive skills have a significant impact on our ability to comprehend what we read. It takes a lot more work to keep our focus on something we don't care about than it does to read something we appreciate.

EFL university students' reading comprehension issues are attributable to a variety of circumstances, according to one hypothesis. Teachers may assist students in overcoming reading comprehension issues by improving their knowledge of the importance of reading skills for learning in general and giving them with reading comprehension tools to use (Ali & Razali, 2019). This study is significant for a variety of reasons, one of which is that it contributes to the body of knowledge in reading comprehension.

If teachers have a greater grasp of their students' reading comprehension problems, they may be able to assess their own teaching methods and resources (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007). EFL students are aware of their problems and the factors that contribute to their difficulties. Teachers and syllabus designers working in the subject of reading skills support the usefulness of the current study. Readers acquire knowledge, experience, become aware of other works, communicate effectively, and attain academic performance

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through the process of comprehension, which involves integrating, critiquing, inferring, analyzing, linking, and evaluating concepts in texts (Aziz, 2018). Furthermore, reading comprehension requires analyzing the meaning of the words on the page as well as determining the meaning of each phrase and paragraph. When a person reads, he is effectively decoding the markings on the page in some way and identifying what they represent and how they connect to one another, in addition to looking at the text (Budiharso, 2014). The reader is likely 'thinking' about what he's reading in texts like these, what it means to him, how it connects to other things he has read, what he already knows, and what he anticipates to happen next. He's presumably analyzing the material's utility, fascination, dullness, and strangeness. He may be thinking about the difficulties or ease with which he is reading, as well as possible methods to overcome the problems or keep the delight going (Pressley et al., 1992).

In general, dictionaries are an essential tool for learning a foreign language. Students benefit from dictionaries since they give important information on all elements of language (O'Neill, 2019). In addition to etymological and use information, they offer phonological, morphological, syntactical, and semantic information. As English is widely recognized as a communication tool, it is taught in EFL schools, colleges, and universities. In order to acquire in life skills, female Arab learners must study English as a foreign language. For many Arabs, pronunciation or reading aloud with comprehension is one of the most challenging components of learning a new language for EFL students. As a result, training in pronunciation is extremely important (Berry, 2021). Unfortunately, there is currently a scarcity of study on EFL learners' use of dictionaries, and little is known about dictionary users' behavior and preferences, as well as the intricate operation of a dictionary consultation (Hamouda, 2013). The main goal of this research is to figure out what kinds of dictionaries Saudi students use, how often they use them, and what lexical material they study while doing so.

In an EFL institution, reading comprehension efficiency is becoming increasingly important; students must be able to grasp textbooks published in English in order to master their major. However, reading of complicated English texts, especially at the university level, can be difficult. The goal of this study is to investigate the concerns with reading comprehension among EFL Qassim University students. While EFL university students face such a dilemma, it is essential to assess the situation and propose potential remedies. The purpose of this study is to learn more about the causes of reading comprehension problems among EFL university students and to offer some possible strategies for dealing with these challenges. Therefore, this research aims to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does the lack of linguistics ability affect Saudi FEL students' reading comprehension?
2. To what extent does poor teaching experience of the teachers impact Saudi FEL students' reading comprehension?
3. To what level do psychological and methodological techniques contribute in boosting Saudi FEL students' reading comprehension?

Literature review

In recent years, there has been a tremendous rise in interest and attention to reading training. In the context of EFL, there have been several studies on this (Abdul-Abbas et al., 2021). Roach (2009) stated that reading aloud training has not always been favored or widely adopted among instructors and language teaching theories. Phonological perception and production are receiving more attention from the standpoints of linguistics, cognition, and social interaction, as well as a renewed focus on second

language pronunciation (Troike, 2006). Language is routinely articulated and conceptualized in multiple systems (Reed & Levis, 2019).

Comprehension necessitates going beyond mere words and extracting analogy, concept, and link between the textual ideas (Greene, 1978). Reading comprehension and skills include understanding and interpreting what is read. Students must be able to decode what they read; draw connections between what they read and what they already know; and think deeply about what they have read in order to effectively grasp written material as explained in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Reading comprehension and skills

Bygate (1987) mentioned that reading allows you to escape reality by immersing yourself in alternate, typically imaginary worlds, imagining events that are unlikely to occur in the reader's real environment. Despite the fact that English is taught in schools beginning at the basic and secondary levels, it was discovered that university students' capacity to understand English is quite limited. Students have a hard time understanding what they are reading in English (Macaro et al., 2018). Due to their incapacity to cope with language challenges, the majority of pupils are unable to read the books that are part of their curriculum. Students read in a foreign language, but the context appears to hold less meaning for them (Alhosni, 2014). For a long time, educators and parents have been concerned about this issue.

Reading is an activity that allows us to access the world of ideas and feelings, as well as knowledge of the past and future visions. It is the most widely investigated and enigmatic of the so-called language abilities (Carrell, 1984). Reading has been examined from a number of perspectives by linguists, psychologists, educators, and second language academics, and a vast amount of research is now available (Dörnyei, 2014). Reading is also crucial in applied linguistics research and the day-to-day professional life of language instructors. Assessing reading ability is very important in a range of educational and professional situations, and there is a great need for expertise in this field (Eskey, 2005). Reading is also important in applied linguistics research and the day-to-day professional lives of language educators. The capacity to assess reading ability is critical in a variety of educational and professional settings, and there is a great need for experts in this field (Hall, 2017).

Reading comprehension and cognition processes

There are various processes that are connected to reading comprehension and cognition. Reading comprehension is a critical tool for socio-economic and educational growth. It's a talent that involves a wide range of processes and cognitive functions centered on creating a mental image of a given text. They are depicted in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Reading comprehension and cognition as a resource for educational and social development

Background knowledge of EFL

A growing body of evidence suggests that readers' past knowledge of the content they are reading is one of the most crucial factors in predicting whether they will understand what they are reading (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). To put it another way, if they are unfamiliar with a topic, they will find it more difficult to comprehend what they are reading than if they are very familiar with it. Students' vocabulary knowledge is intimately linked to their ability to understand since the bulk of new vocabulary is acquired and mastered via reading (Kuo & Anderson, 2006). Understanding, on the other hand, needs lexical knowledge. According to most research, a child must understand around 90% of the words in a paragraph in order to deduce what the remaining 10% of the words mean. As a result, it is clear that vocabulary knowledge has a big influence on students' overall reading comprehension skills. Many students struggle with comprehension because they can't figure out what the text means (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). Some of them perceive book language as formal language, and as a result, they may have difficulties since they are unfamiliar with the entire sentence pattern that exists in written but not a spoken language (Schleppegrell, 2004). Students with poor memory may struggle to understand phrases because they can't retain the words in their minds long enough to grasp their meaning. Reading comprehension, thus, is a process that requires active participation of the learner and his/ her past knowledge (Oakhill et al., 2014).

Types of reading comprehension

The reading process includes word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation. By integrating these characteristics, one may learn how readers interpret print. In Figure 3, the many forms of reading are depicted.

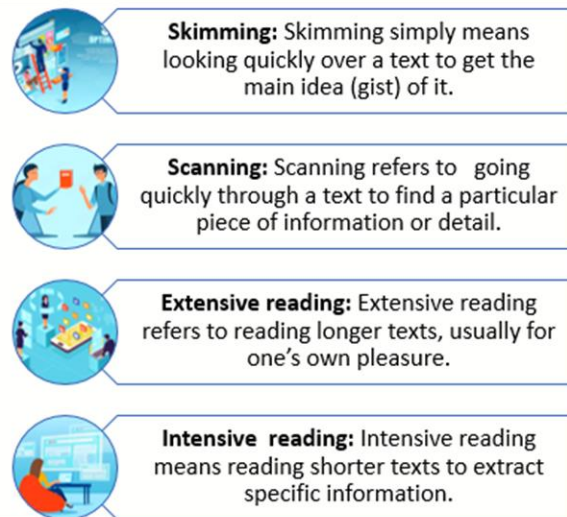


Figure 3. Reading and its types

Smith (1971) mentioned that reading comprehension is a multi-faceted, complex process that necessitates multiple interactions between the reader and what they bring to the text (prior knowledge, technique, etc.), as well as factors woven throughout the text that are inextricably linked to it and necessary for greater comprehension (interest in the text, understanding of the types of texts). While many students in middle school, high school, college, and even adulthood have learned to read, others will find it difficult to comprehend what they are reading (Mol & Bus, 2011). If these children have a good comprehension of explicit reading techniques, they should be able to read successfully. Techniques are required for getting and remembering information from books. Good readers can figure out which strategies work best for them and how to apply them to different types of texts (Alqahtani, 2015). Those who are still having difficulty reading might enhance their reading comprehension abilities by learning reading comprehension methods and when and how to apply them to various sorts of texts (Oakhill et al., 2014). Some examples of practices that might help people to improve their reading comprehension skills include finding the essential concept, determining specifics, ordering events, working with situations, collecting information, drawing inferences/forecasting outcomes, knowing the difference between facts and views, understanding the relationship between cause and effect, knowing how to recognize metaphorical language, recognizing prejudice and bias, comparing and comparing concepts, using past knowledge, answering and generating inquiries, determining inferences, concept summarization, visualizing concepts, understanding vocabulary and determining the author's goal. The stages of teaching reading comprehension are depicted in Figure 4.

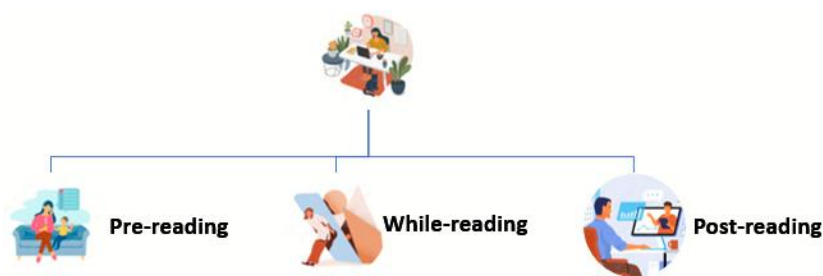


Figure 4. Stages of reading comprehension

The pre-reading stage is crucial because it stimulates our desire to read. The instructor should carefully plan exercises in the pre-reading stage that psychologically prepare the students to absorb what he will teach in the following level (Ghasemi, 2011). Pre-reading tasks include thinking about the small things, rapidly reading appendices, quickly scanning indices, and carefully reading the abstract (Fisher, 2016). Students should be engaged in activities that allow them to respond intellectually throughout this time. In this phase, the teacher should assign help assignments to the students in order for them to achieve greater outcomes in the next level. At this point, the activities should be adjusted to the students' skills and needs (Schunk, 2013). While -reading tasks are outlined in Figure 5.

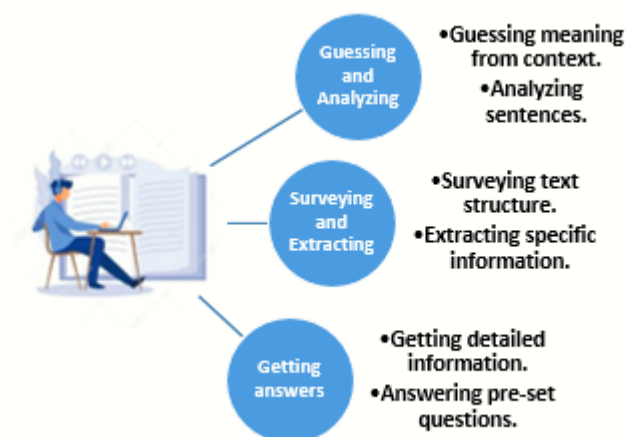


Figure 5. While-reading activities

This stage is used to assess the instructor's teaching during the while-reading stage. The instructor may question the students' reactions to the book at the post-reading stage. This stage is equally critical since it is responsible for evaluating and examining the students' work and feedback (Yazar, 2013). The Reading comprehension process necessitates the use of the abilities depicted in Figure 5.

EFL learners' reading comprehension difficulties

Reading difficulties are perceived as certain internal traits that can hinder the understanding of written text and the ability to process information in real-life situations. These concerns are directly related to the different stages of reading comprehension (Goh, 2002). Reading is a crucial language skill to have while studying a foreign language (Rost, 1994). Reading comprehension is important in language classrooms because it provides linguistic input to students. There can be no learning without the capacity to understand stimuli at the proper level. Reading comprehension is underestimated in many school and university curricula, according to (Morley, 2001), since professors and students are more concerned with speaking skills and grammar, they do not consider reading comprehension to be a key element of their courses. Teachers do not employ learning resources appropriate for the students' levels and requirements while teaching reading comprehension, and they test students' reading abilities rather than teaching them reading methods and approaches. Porter and Roberts (1981) mentioned that it is unrealistic to expect students to become proficient in multiple languages that they have never or rarely been exposed to. However, when we provide them with authentic reading materials, we can set different goals to cater to their individual skills and interests.

Another element that may impede EFL learners' reading comprehension is a lack of or limited vocabulary knowledge. According to Gunning (2002), because students with poor vocabulary knowledge have difficulty understanding technical words such as synonyms, antonyms, and words with different connotations, vocabulary knowledge is critical for understanding complex reading materials such as textbooks, especially those containing

technical expressions. Field (1997) affirmed that reading comprehension problems can also be caused by a lack of background, sociocultural, and contextual information, as all these factors play a part in understanding the text and their absence can have a detrimental impact on EFL students' reading comprehension. Swanson et al. (2009) pointed out that learners who struggle to read and are unable to recall ordered material have substantial reading comprehension challenges as a result of their weak memory skills. Because desire is so important in the learning process, it might have a role in EFL reading comprehension difficulties. Hassan (2000) claimed that students are unable to concentrate when they are distracted, and they are also unable to concentrate when they are uninterested in the reading passage's content. According to several studies, syntactic, phonemic, and grammatical knowledge play important roles in reading comprehension through influencing students' comprehension of the text. Koda (2005) affirmed that EFL students need grammar expertise to understand the meaning of terms in passages. Cain (2007) stated that in reading the relationship between phonemic, syntactic, and comprehension awareness was established.

Previous empirical studies

There are a few notable studies that are related to the current study (Algazoly, 2008; Izzah & Keeya, 2019; Raihan & Nezami, 2012). Algazoly (2008) aimed to improve instructors' teaching techniques in order to better teach EFL reading. It also attempted to learn more about the pupils' difficulties with reading comprehension. A questionnaire was used to collect data for this investigation. The key conclusion of the study is that youngsters have difficulty understanding what they are reading. When teaching reading comprehension, English instructors pay less attention to the procedures and tactics of reading competency. A majority of instructors believed that in order to use reading comprehension strategies, teachers needed to be well-trained. Likewise, Raihan and Nezami (2012) aimed to figure out what was causing university students to have poor reading comprehension ratings. Students were watched over many reading sessions, and a survey was conducted using the instructors' questionnaire. The survey's findings revealed that many youngsters struggled with spelling and grammar. Izzah and Keeya (2019) aimed to determine the most frequent reading comprehension issues that Indonesian EFL students confront. Quantitative descriptive research approaches were used in this study. The researchers employed a self-structured questionnaire to collect data using the Likert scale. The study's findings revealed that distortions, lexis recognition, phonological awareness, and passage complexity are the most common issues encountered by study participants. According to the study, a lack of word recognition, a desire to grasp every single word or detail, a student's degree of skill, new vocabulary and grammatical structures, and a student's poor concentration on the work, all contribute to reading comprehension issues.

Methods

Research design

A quantitative design was used in this study which was conducted at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia during the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022.

Participants

In this study, 30 EFL students at Qassim University responded to the questionnaire. The sample were recruited from students at first (n=10), second (n=8) and third (12) levels of English. All participants were females in the age range of 19-20 years. All ethical issues were attended to in data collection including secrecy of personal data as well as freedom to not respond to the questionnaire

Instrument

A closed-ended questionnaire was prepared by the researcher. It consisted of 18 items divided into three dimensions of lack of linguistic knowledge, teacher's lack of teaching experience and requirement for teaching reading. The responses could be on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire validity and reliability were checked to ensure the originality of the results. Four EFL university professors checked the validity of the items. The final questionnaire comprised of 18 items that loaded onto three dimensions. After that, the data were statistically analyzed using (SPSS Version 25).

Results

RQ1: To what extent does the lack of linguistics ability affect Saudi FEL students' reading comprehension?

This question was answered using 6 items. Table 1 shows that students reported moderately favorable perception on the impact of lack of linguistic knowledge in their reading comprehension. They scored, $M=3.0$, $Std=1.35$ on the impact of lack of linguistic knowledge on students' comprehension abilities.

Table 1. Lack of linguistic ability in affecting Saudi EFL students' reading comprehension

	Statements	M	Std
i	Limited, unfamiliar vocabulary can cause great reading comprehension difficulties.	3.6	0.8
ii	Lack of knowledge in syntactic, phonemic, grammar and background knowledge are important factors in lowering students' reading comprehension.	2.4	0.5
iii	Lack of socio- cultural, factual, and contextual knowledge of the target language cause some difficulties in reading comprehension.	3.3	0.7
iv	Low working memory abilities of the students can influence reading comprehension.	2.9	4.8
v	Psychological and physical features can pose some reading comprehension difficulties	2.6	0.5
vi	Text complexity and complex sentences influence students' understanding of the reading passage.	3.6	0.8
	Total	3.0	1.35

RQ2: To what extent does the poor teaching experience of the teachers impact Saudi FEL students' reading comprehension?

Four items were used to collect data on this question. Table 2 shows that students believed that teachers' poor knowledge in teaching reading also negatively impacted the students' in reading comprehension. The total mean score for this item was 2.9, and $Std=2.17$.

Table 2. Impact of deficiencies of teaching procedures on students' reading comprehension

	Statements	M	Std
i	Most of the time teachers test reading rather than teach it and neglect reading strategies.	2.5	3.8
ii	Teachers do not usually train students to read aloud in the class.	3.4	2.5
iii	Teachers do not use suitable reading materials and tasks as per the level and the needs of the students.	2.8	1.7
iv	Universities do not pay much attention to teaching reading comprehension techniques and strategies.	2.9	0.7
	Total	2.9	2.17

RQ3: To what level do psychological and methodological techniques contribute in boosting Saudi FEL students' reading comprehension?

Table 3 indicates that students held a moderate opinion (M=3.15, Std =0.65) in favor of psychological and teaching techniques in developing Saudi EFL students' reading comprehension.

Table 3. Requirements for improving students' reading comprehension

	Statements	M	Std
i	In teaching reading comprehension, it is essential for the teacher to be well-prepared (to be aware of what can cause difficulties for the students and what might be the ways to overcome them).	2.7	0.5
ii	Teachers should pre teach new vocabulary, grammar items and provide students with background knowledge, socio-cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge before reading a passage	3.4	0.5
iii	Students' motivation and concentration are key factors of reading comprehension success.	3.6	0.8
iv	Teachers should motivate students and help them to interact with the reading task and provide feedback immediately.	2.4	0.5
v	Teachers should design reading tasks that arouse the students' interest to help them learn reading skills and strategies	3.3	0.7
vi	Teachers should train the students to read and try to grasp the main idea depending on the background knowledge rather than understanding every single word or phrase	2.9	.70
vii	Teaching reading comprehension in small classes can be rewarding for both teachers and students.	3.3	.70
viii	Teachers should raise students' attention to the importance of reading in language development and that it is a complex task that requires many micro-skills such as attention, perception, recognition, and memory.	3.6	.80
	Total	3.15	0.65

Discussion

The study found that students moderately (M=3) believed that the lack of linguistics abilities weakens their comprehension ability. This finding implies that when students do not have sufficient knowledge in vocabulary, grammar, and meaning, they could not understand the text and failed to respond to the questions. This finding is supported by many previous studies (Cain, 2007; Field, 1997; Gunning, 2002; Hassan, 2000; Koda, 2005). Gunning (2002), stated that understanding words such as synonyms, antonyms, and words with different connotations, and vocabulary knowledge are critical for understanding complex reading materials. Field (1997) affirmed that lack of background, sociocultural, and contextual information can have a detrimental impact on EFL students' reading comprehension. Furthermore, Swanson et al. (2009) pointed out that learners who struggled to read and are unable to recall ordered material have substantial reading comprehension challenges as a result of their weak memory skills. Hassan (2000) claimed that students are unable to concentrate when they are distracted, and they are unable to concentrate when they are uninterested in the passage's content. Likewise, Koda (2005) affirmed that EFL students need grammar expertise to understand the meaning of terms in reading passages.

Results also indicated that students moderately (M=2.9) believed that teachers' with lack teaching experience led to students' poor reading comprehension. This perception goes along the current ideas of teaching methods in reading comprehension. For instance, Harvey and Goudvis (2007) affirmed that teachers should greatly grasp their students' reading comprehension problems, allowing them to assess their own teaching methods and resources.

Finally, the study also pinpointed that there are some psychological needs such as motivating students as well as teaching procedures that the teachers should focus on before teaching their students reading comprehension. This finding agrees with Aziz (2018) who pointed out that readers acquire knowledge, experience, become aware of other works, communicate effectively, and attain academic performance through the process of comprehension, which involves integrating, critiquing, inferring, analyzing, linking, and evaluating concepts in texts.

Conclusion

According to theories, reading comprehension deficits among EFL university students can be attributed to a range of factors. Teachers may help students overcome reading comprehension challenges by increasing their understanding of the significance of reading abilities in general and providing them with reading comprehension aids. EFL university students have considerable reading comprehension challenges, according to the results of the questionnaire, attributable to the following:

- Limited knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and grammar.
- Low- working memory abilities of the students.
- A lack of awareness of the target language's sociocultural, factual, and contextual aspects.
- Most teachers test rather than teach reading, and they ignore reading skills.
- Most teachers do not teach students to read aloud in class.
- Psychological and physical characteristics cause certain issues with reading comprehension.
- Reading comprehension techniques and strategies are not well-taught in universities.
- Teachers do not emphasize the importance of reading comprehension in students' language development.

Recommendations

According to the study conclusions, university textbooks should incorporate reading comprehension tasks that meet the demands of students. Teachers should emphasize to students the importance of reading in language development, as well as the fact that it is a difficult endeavor that necessitates a variety of abilities, such as attention, perception, recognition, and memory. Instead of striving to grasp every single word or sentence, teachers should encourage students to read and try to absorb the major notion based on prior knowledge. Reading comprehension should be taught in small groups, with each student having the opportunity to read aloud to the rest of the class. Before presenting and reading a book, teachers should pre-teach new vocabulary, phonological rules, and grammatical elements, as well as offer students with background information, socio-cultural awareness, and linguistic competence.

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