Challenges and Problems of Reading Comprehension Experienced by EFL Learners

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Abstract

The study aims to (a) explore reading comprehension problems that EFL learners encounter in an Intensive English Program and (b) ascertain any significant differences between male and female learners regarding these challenges at the University of Bisha, KSA. The study followed a quantitative paradigm in which the researchers distributed an online questionnaire pertinent to reading difficulties to 301 male and female Saudi EFL students. It consisted of two parts: the first was students' background information, and the second was on reading comprehension challenges (language, reading process, and psycholinguistic challenges). The results showed that most students have the same problems, i.e., lack of vocabulary and recognition of the words. Vocabulary is one of the biggest problems when trying to work out the meaning and general idea of the text. Findings also exhibited that male and female EFL learners experienced challenges in a similar way which shows that all students of both genders face identical problems when reading English. The study concluded that healthy intervention is needed to help students improve their reading comprehension in particular and English language in general.

Introduction

It is fair to state that reading is complex yet central to any English language program. It is a skill that involves learners entirely in the learning process as it depends on prior knowledge and connects it with the reading tasks at hand (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Alenezi, 2021; Al-Kadi & Hamdi, 2022; Suchona & Urmy, 2019; Van, 2021). Observably, in many contexts, including the present study, learners spend more than enough time when they sit for a reading exam and demand more time and clarification. They also stay in the exam hall until the end of the exam and request extra time to finish the reading section. This has inspired the researchers to study this phenomenon closely and determine the causes and suggest solutions. Although a considerable amount of literature has been published on this phenomenon in several contexts, it has led to a renewed interest in reading comprehension skills to shed more light on various challenges, their causes and recommendations to mitigate such challenges in the local situation.

Foundational to this is evidence of reading difficulties ensued from studies in East Asian contexts. As seen in the Vietnamese context, Thao and Tham (2018) surveyed eighty English major students' ESP reading difficulties using a questionnaire and interviews with three teachers. The findings showed that Vietnamese students faced problems because of a lack of vocabulary and the background of the subject matter and not because of grammar and structure. In another study in Vietnam, Van (2021) identified the challenges that 50 Vietnamese first-year EFL students encountered in reading comprehension. Using an open-ended and close-ended questionnaire to collect students' views about reading compression problems and an interview with three EFL teachers, the study reported that the students' major problems were a lack of vocabulary and background knowledge.

In another East Asian context, Kasim and Raisha (2017) explored the linguistic and non-linguistic problems Indonesian EFL students faced in reading comprehension, reporting that 80% of the students had problems because of insufficient vocabulary knowledge. In the Indonesian context, too, Satriani (2018) found that students face problems in reading comprehension because of many factors such as lack of motivation, long and unfamiliar texts, and complex Grammar and sentence structure. One more study on the Indonesian situation was by Febriani, Elfrida, and Jayanti (2019) to explore the reading difficulties. The study examined 70 English major students who had TOEFL as a required subject. The findings showed that students had problems with reading process, motivation, background, strategies and language knowledge.

Similarly, Suchona, and Urmy, (2019) investigated the difficulties that Bangladeshi EFL students face in reading comprehension. The research used qualitative and quantitative methods to find the results. They distributed a close-ended questionnaire to 60 EFL Bangladeshi students and an open-ended questionnaire to 25 Bangladeshi EFL teachers. They found that students have difficulty with vocabulary and comprehending the deeper meaning of the text which caused anxiety.

In Malaysia, Kyung-Rahn Kim (2021) investigated the difficulties Malaysian EFL students face in reading comprehension. The researcher conducted a qualitative study (in-depth and semi-structured interviews) with nine university students. The reading problems were attributed to the students' background and lack of vocabulary and motivation. Chandran and Shah (2019) investigated the learners' difficulties in ESL reading comprehension among 80 upper secondary students in Johor. In the study, there were five categories of reading comprehension difficulties; most participants agreed that the main difficulty was related to the reading process.

Some other researchers demonstrated the phenomenon in the Arab context. Eltayb (2021) studied reading comprehension difficulties faced by school students in Sudan, drawing data from 30 Sudanese EFL school teachers via a questionnaire. The study found that Sudanese EFL students have problems in reading because of a lack of motivation and vocabulary. Let alone the curriculum, the students endured a lack of teachers' training on teaching reading strategies. Additionally, Hassan and Dweik (2021) conducted a qualitative study based on interview with five Jordanian EFL teachers and two supervisors

and a quantitative questionnaire with 70 female EFL students in grade 9. The study found that students had problems with grammar and new vocabulary. This is supported by Abu Abeeleh, Al-Ghazo and Al-Sobh (2021) who attributed reading comprehension problems to the complexity of the texts, anxiety, and word recognition. This is not far from yet another relevant study that Orqez and Ab Rashid (2017) conducted at Yarmouk University in Jordan which revealed that ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited time to process the text cognitively were some of the problems encountered by the first-year students. In another relevant scenario, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) studied reading comprehension difficulties of 100 Arab EFL learners who study at two universities in Malaysia. The researchers found that Arab EFL students face problems in reading comprehension owing to a lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, attention, and inability to recognize the type of text structure.

Problem Statement

Putting it in the Saudi context, reading comprehension is never flawless and it has been the theme of some prior inquiries. To elaborate, the studies of Al-Qahtani (2016) and Khan, Shahbaz, Kumar, and Khan (2020) can be a good illustration. Al-Qahtani (2016) examined reading comprehension problems faced by ninety Saudi EFL school students. The results showed that students face difficulties in reading comprehension due to various factors from the teachers' side such as focusing on reading aloud and neglecting reading comprehension, from the curricula's side such as insufficient emphasis on reading comprehension, and on the students' side such as lack of motivation and finally from parents' side such as lack of supporting. These factors showed that the problem has roots at the school level. Also, Khan, Shahbaz, Kumar, and Khan (2020) explored the reading comprehension problems encountered by 290 Saudi EFL elementary level students, 9 English teachers and 3 English supervisors. The study reported that insufficient vocabulary and lack of grammar knowledge, in addition to issues related to spelling, pronunciation and slow reading are the main factors for students' weakness in reading comprehension. According to another study conducted by Orqez and Ab Rashid (2019) some of the other factors affecting reading comprehension of Saudi students at Umm Al-Qura University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were lack of support from the parents, teachers and society, the students found reading textbooks uninteresting, the classroom environment, and most Saudi university students have little interest in reading in English.

Taken together, reading difficulties in the above-mentioned contexts are identical. To approach the phenomenon thematically, various studies considered the impact of psychology on positive reading comprehension. Numerous studies found that motivation positively impacts reading comprehension (Ahmadi, 2017; Chen, 2019; Miyamoto, Pfost, & Artelt, 2019). Anxiety was also a negative impact on students reading comprehension (Jafarigohar & Behrooznia, 2012; Wu, 2011), but Javanbakht and Hadian (2014) pointed out that there are no correlations between test anxiety and the students' performance on reading comprehension during the test.

Objectives

Drawing on the previous studies, the objectives of the research are to:

1. Examine the problems in reading comprehension among the non-English major learners in the Intensive English Program.
2. Explore the gender differences between and among EFL learners.

The following are the research questions which have been addressed in the study;

1. What are the problems in reading comprehension faced by EFL learners in their Intensive English Program?
2. Are there any significant differences between the male and female learners?

Method

The present study set out to illuminate reading comprehension difficulties that EFL learners at the university of Bisha largely encounter. It mainly focuses on the Intensive English Program, a compulsory course for all first-year students.

Participants

A sample of 301 first-year students enrolled in the Intensive reading course at the University of Bisha conveniently took part in this study. Regarding gender, 183 (61%) participants were females and 118 (39%) were males. They were non-English significant students. They were from different colleges/disciplines on the main campus at the university. The criteria for their selection included their level of study. Eligibility criteria inquired all the participants to be in the first semester, and their ages varied between nineteen and twenty-two. All the participants had studied English for at least six years in school before joining the university and studied the Headway series at the university for three months before responding to the questionnaire.

Instrument

A close-ended questionnaire was developed and administered to the study sample during the academic year 2021-2022. It took its leitmotif based on the authors' experiences with students' reading comprehension difficulties and problems raised in the literature review. The main purpose of using such a tool is to collect data on the difficulties Saudi EFL learners face in reading comprehension. The questionnaire design was informed by several studies in the literature and refereed by colleagues from English departments in both Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The questionnaire consisted of 12 items divided into three sections: problems related to language issues (vocabulary, grammar, syntax), problems related to reading comprehension process, and problems related to psycholinguistic issues (lack of motivation or interest, anxiety/attitude towards long). The authors utilized three-point Likert scale with the following breakup: Yes, I do not know, and No. The original version was in English and then translated into Arabic so that the respondents could understand the statements clearly before responding to it. Each statement was given in English first and then Arabic translation was given underneath, followed by the Likert scale. The Likert scale was also translated into Arabic. It was distributed online via the teachers who teach the Intensive English course to non-English major students. A Google form was used for this purpose.

Data collection and Analysis

Data was collected through a questionnaire. The respondents were non-English major students. The dataset was relevant to the intensive reading course which they had studied during the time of the present inquiry. According to the course description, it improved the learners' knowledge of English language. New textbooks, that replaced the previous 'Touchstone' series, were introduced in the academic year 2017-2018. They were the 'New Headway Plus Special Edition' series. There are five books in the series i.e., Beginner, Elementary, Pre-Intermediate, Intermediate, and Upper-Intermediate. The latter half of the 'Beginner', Full 'Elementary', 'Pre-Intermediate' and First half of the 'Intermediate' are taught to the students of Science and Engineering stream (101&102) during two semesters. The 'Elementary', 'Pre-Intermediate', 'Intermediate', and 'Upper-Intermediate' are taught to the students of medical stream (103 &104) during two semesters. The 'Beginner', 'Elementary', and 'Pre-Intermediate' are taught to the students of Humanities stream (105&106) during two semesters. After the data was collected, they were exported into

excel file for analysis. They were analyzed to find frequencies and percentages of Saudi EFL learners' problems while reading English texts.

Results and Discussions

The study specifically explored the reading difficulties in the context of the University of Bisha, and to address this objective, a 12-item questionnaire was used to describe the different types of problems. This section shows and interprets the results of the various issues. The participants' responses were converted into numeric data in frequencies and percentages and arranged in tables. There were three major problems: linguistic competence, reading process, motivational and anxiety-related problems. Most learners reported linguistic competence as the most problematic (56% of the responses), followed by motivation and anxiety-related problems (55% of the responses) and reading process-related problems 48% of the responses.

Table 1. *Frequencies and Percentages for the linguistic competence items*

Questionnaire items	Frequencies			Percent		
	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	I do not know	No
I face problems in comprehending texts because I do not have sufficient English vocabulary.	186	32	83	61.8%	10.6	27.6
I face problems in comprehending texts because of my weakness in grammar.	161	34	106	53.5%	11.3	35.2
I face problems in comprehending texts because I do not know sentence structures.	153	55	93	50.8%	18.3	30.9
I face problems in comprehending texts if I cannot translate every single word.	171	36	94	56.8%	12.0	31.2

It is apparent from Table 1 that the linguistic competence-related problems relate to vocabulary, meaning, grammar, and sentence structure. Learners report these areas of language as the most difficult in comparison to other factors. Concerning vocabulary, 186 responses 61.8% agreed that they had difficulty in comprehension due to insufficient vocabulary. This was followed by the meaning related problems, where 171 56.8 responses of the learners referred to as problematic. The sentence structure related problems as reported by 153 respondents (50.8%) learners were the least. The grammar related problems scored 161 (53.5%) and the responses agreed to the importance of grammar knowledge for reading comprehension. This response, however, contradicts with Thao and Tham (2018) which shows that students do not face difficulty because of grammar.

The third category of problems shown in Table 2 emerged from the reading process. The results showed that 202 students (67.1%) asserted that when the reading text was long it hindered comprehension. The second highest problem reported was referred to the type of questions, following the reading text that could not be answered though 49.8% of the respondents thought they had understood the content of the texts. While getting the main idea of the text was reported problematic to the students (121, 40.2%), the least problematic ones (99, 32.9%) were in relation to understanding the words of the

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texts. This is in line with Chandran and Shah (2019) in that students face problems because of reading process.

Table 2. *Frequencies and Percentages for the reading process items*

Questionnaire items	Frequencies			Percent		
	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	I do not know	No
I face problems in comprehending a text because I cannot get its main idea.	121	49	131	40.2%	16.3	43.5
I face problems in comprehending texts even if I know the meaning of all words.	99	43	159	32.9%	14.3	52.8
I cannot answer reading questions though I feel that I understand the whole text.	150	53	98	49.8%	17.6	32.6
I face problems in comprehending texts if the text is long.	202	37	62	67.1%	12.3	20.6

Table 3 *Frequencies and Percentages for the psycholinguistic items*

Questionnaire items	Frequencies			Percent		
	Yes	I do not know	No	Yes	I do not know	No
I face problems in comprehending texts if I have no interest in the topic.	118	68	115	39.2%	22.6	38.2
I feel nervous while reading new English texts.	186	33	82	61.8%	11.0	27.2
I feel nervous if do not understand English texts.	217	21	63	72.1%	7.0	20.9
I face difficulty in comprehending texts which are not related to my field of study.	137	75	89	45.5%	24.9	29.6

The second major category of problems is shown in Table 3. They encompass issues related to motivation and anxiety. It covered four types of problems, interest in the reading topic, field of study, new reading text, and the inability to understand the text. These psychic types of problems revealed that 217 (72.1%) of the respondents agreed that not understanding the reading text led the learners to feel anxious. In comparison, 186 (61.8%) of responses agreed that the novelty of the reading text led to anxiety, which prevented them from comprehending the text. Concerning motivation to read and understand texts, 137 (45.5%) of the respondents reported that reading texts unrelated to the study's field caused comprehension difficulties. The learners' interest in the topic of the reading text was reported by 118 (39.2) respondents as a problematic cause of reading comprehension. The highest percentage was anxiety due to the inability to understand the reading text, while the interest in the reading topic was the least.

An important finding emerged from the first part of the investigation. Both the male

and female students attributed the reading difficulties on account of insufficient vocabulary knowledge. The finding shows that EFL students face problems because of vocabulary (first group), when the text is long (second group) and nervousness when they do not understand the text (third group). The highest of the items is feeling anxious when not understanding the text.

Putting it in the literature, numerous other EFL contexts are not flawless. Research shows similar trends in the following studies: Thao and Tham (2018) and Van (2021) in Vietnam, Kasim and Raisha (2017), Satriani (2018), Febriani, Elfrida, and Jayanti (2019) in Indonesia, Kyung-Rahn Kim (2021) and Chandran and Shah (2019) in Malaysia, Eltayb (2021), Hassan and Dweik (2021), Abu Abeeleh, Al-Ghazo and Al-Sobh (2021) in Jordan, and Al-Qahtani (2016) and Khan, Shahbaz, Kumar, and Khan (2020) in the Saudi context. Reading problems in such contexts and the context under scrutiny are more or less identical.

Table 4. *Chi-square test the relation among, existence of problems, the categories and gender*

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	18.000a	16	0.324
Likelihood Ratio	24.953	16	0.071
Linear-by-Linear Association	3.041	1	0.081
N of Valid Cases	18		

a. 34 cells (100.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .50.

The second part of the investigation measured the effect of gender on the reading related problems. For this purpose, the Chi-square test was applied to view the significant correlation among the existence of the difficulty, the major type of the problem, and gender as shown in Table 4. It was not a surprise that gender had some effect on the existence of difficulties in reading. It can be noted (see Table 4) that males and females suffered more from reading problems when they worked on language (68% and 48%) than when they processed the text (64% & 42%) or related to motivation or anxiety (58% and 37%).

Table 5. *Frequencies and Percentages for male and female responses*

Major problems	Male				Female			
	Yes	I do not Know	No	Total %	Yes	I do not Know	No	Total%
Related to language	68%	10%	23%	100%	48%	15%	37%	100%
Reading process	64%	11%	26%	100%	42%	17%	41%	100%
Motivation and anxiety	58%	13%	29%	100%	37%	17%	46%	100%

In light of the results outlined above, the researchers recommend that reading text should be short for non-major English students, particularly first-year students. They also

recommended that teachers should teach new vocabulary before starting the text. This will lead to students reading comprehension and therefore, may reduce students' anxiety which is caused by new vocabulary and long texts. The choice of the text should be based on the familiarity of the content for the learners. Unfamiliar content leads to more incredible difficulty in comprehension. Relevant tasks for different stages should be devised for the learners while keeping their backgrounds in view. The use of certain cognitive and metacognitive strategies could be useful for the learners. The researchers acknowledge Alenezi's (2021) suggestion that teachers should focus on improving the knowledge of EFL students on extensive reading strategies and other strategies such as reading between the lines. Teachers should also follow the learner-centered method to help students improve their English reading strategies.

Conclusion

The current study examined Saudi EFL male and female learners' challenges while reading English texts. It confirmed previous findings and highlighted the problems in comprehensive reading skills. It showed that males and females faced similar difficulties in reading comprehension. The study, however, found certain apparent differences between Saudi EFL male and female students regarding reading comprehension. The male learners showed a higher percentage of reading comprehension than female students. This could be due to higher exposure to learning the target language for males than females. Despite significant findings, the study was subject to some limitations which could be drawn on to advance research on the same area of investigation. As in many survey studies, relying on a questionnaire as a solo data collection tool with a close-ended prompted response pattern is limited compared to open-ended questions or interviews. Furthermore, the investigation was limited to first-year students at the University of Bisha, making it hard to generalize the findings to all the other levels or universities across the kingdom. Despite these limitations, the results seek to impact educators, curriculum and syllabus designers and reading material suppliers. It views the learners' problems in reading comprehension. This should be considered in designing EFL reading materials. It familiarizes stakeholders with common reading difficulties while teaching and preparing relevant and need-based reading programs and materials for learners.

Disclosure Statement:

We (the authors of this paper) hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. We take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

Conflict of interest:

We have no conflict of interest to declare.

Funding: None

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