

Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension Among EFL Students; Students' Perceptions at Kabul Education University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v7i3.1325>

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate the factors that contribute to low reading comprehension among Afghan EFL learners and to identify the ways to improve their reading comprehension skills. A survey research design was used to carry out this research, and data were collected using a Likert scale questionnaire from 40 participants, including English language learners and teachers. Descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data by computing the mean score for each item in the data set. The results revealed that limited vocabulary knowledge, word recognition problems, lack of background knowledge, and word-for-word translation are some of the main factors that contribute to low reading comprehension among Afghan EFL learners. On the other hand, it was also found that vocabulary development, background knowledge, and teaching specific reading strategies are some of the ways to improve reading comprehension among Afghan EFL learners. This research also found that both teachers and learners should be involved in improving their reading comprehension skills.

KEYWORDS

Reading comprehension; affecting factors; strategies and EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Learning the English language requires mastering four basic skills, which are listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Ganie, Deliana, & Rangkuti, 2019). Reading is considered an important skill among these four skills since people read for different reasons, such as acquiring information and recreational reading. For EFL learners, the process of reading can be an opportunity to learn academic content related to their fields of study while also enhancing their language knowledge (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Reading can be viewed as an active process in which readers interact with written texts to understand and construct the meaning conveyed by them (Sweet and Snow, as cited in Kasim & Raisha, 2017). Similarly, Grabe and Stoller (as cited in Kasim & Raisha, 2017) described reading as interpreting and making sense of information presented in written form.

Reading comprehension is associated with the process of making meaning through the information found in the written texts. Comprehension depends on the development of various connected skills like accurate word identification, fluent reading, vocabulary knowledge usage, and making connections between the text and knowledge of the reader

(Pressley & Birsch, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Grabe and Stoller also stressed that comprehension was a critical factor in helping the reader read effectively, gain knowledge, and create meaning out of texts (as cited in Roehl & Shiue, 2014). These skills are thus crucial for the process of developing into a competent reader (Grabe & Stoller, as cited in Abu Abeeleh, Al-Ghazo, & Al-Sobh, 2021). When the readers lack some basic skills like accurate word identification and reading fluency, a lot of attention will be used for decoding the words, leaving little cognitive energy for comprehending the text itself (Grabe & Stoller, as cited in Roehl & Shiue, 2014).

Reading is one of the ways of gaining knowledge and exploring new possibilities. It is particularly important for learners who can read in another language, such as English, because reading enables them to access a wide range of information, knowledge, fun, and activities from around the world. Moreover, improving reading skills can greatly contribute to learners' academic performance (Iftanti, as cited in Ganie et al., 2019).

Difficulties in comprehending written English still pose a continuing issue in EFL classes. It has been seen through research that a number of EFL students find it hard to interpret and comprehend English texts (Kasim & Raisha, 2017). However, efficient readers are capable of dealing with such difficulties through using proper reading strategies which allow them to overcome such obstacles in comprehending the texts (Tobing, as cited in Abu Abeeleh et al., 2021). Comprehension is the process through which one is able to understand language either in speech or writing. With regards to reading, comprehension entails creating meaning from the text by linking the new information gained from reading to what one already knows (Adib & Hakimi, 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

To read something does not mean simply moving one's eyes over the written words; instead, it means interpreting and making sense of the information conveyed by the text. In this respect, reading comprehension is one of the key aspects of language acquisition and is perceived as one of the crucial skills that learners must acquire while learning the language. Since comprehension is based on the active construction of meaning from the information provided in a text, achieving successful reading comprehension is often difficult for students who are learning English as a foreign language (Bani Issa, as cited in Abu Abeeleh, 2021). Accordingly, this chapter provides a literature review pertinent to the topic of the current research.

Theoretical Literature

The process of reading is considered to be a complicated one and plays a significant role in English language courses. To achieve proper understanding, learners need to use their existing knowledge together with the information obtained through a reading task (Al-Ahdal, as cited in Hezam, Ali, Imtiaz, Saifi, & Islam, 2022). Nevertheless, problems may arise due to several factors including lack of necessary background knowledge, culture-related knowledge and awareness of various text genres (Chawwang, 2008).

Definition of Reading Comprehension

Duke (2003) explains comprehension as an interaction between the reader and the text in which meaning develops through the combination of prior knowledge, previous experience, textual information, and the reader's perspective. In a similar vein, Pressley and Birsch describe reading comprehension in terms of obtaining meaning from written material (as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Bormuth (1969), meanwhile, relates comprehension to the information gained as a result of reading.

Definition of Reading Strategies

Reading strategies may also be defined as the specific thought processes utilized by readers to interpret, track, and maintain meaning during reading (Baker & Brown, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). According to Pressley, the concept of reading strategies refers to conscious actions taken at various phases of the reading process such as prior to, during, and after reading to grasp meaning from written text. Reading strategies include specific skills that motivate readers to engage with reading materials in an active, effective, and purposeful manner (Pressley, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

According to Block and Pressley and Keene and Zimmerman, comprehension strategies are considered as valuable tools for facilitating understanding in learners. Such strategies consist of planned activities that allow readers to control and monitor their comprehension (as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). As Alder explains, comprehension strategies are also regarded as deliberate techniques used by effective readers in order to comprehend the text. In this way, the use of strategies can motivate learners to become more engaged in monitoring their comprehension (as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension Skills

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted process which goes beyond the mere recognition of written symbols, as readers must also interpret the information represented by those symbols and construct meaning from a text. Several factors can influence learners' reading comprehension abilities, including the difficulty of the reading material, the environment in which reading takes place, anxiety associated with reading activities, learners' interest and motivation, the speed of decoding and recognizing words, and certain medical difficulties. These factors can affect the extent to which learners are able to understand and respond effectively to written texts and are elaborated on in the subsequent section (Dennis, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

The difficulty of the text is one of the variables that may impact the learners' comprehension. The ability of the students to comprehend complicated texts is highly dependent on their linguistic proficiency, fluency and understanding of the various uses of language. Language skills are also involved in the reading process since the learners develop their vocabulary through oral skills among others. A wide range of vocabulary enables the learners to tackle difficult texts by allowing them to use the context in which the words occur to understand them. Therefore, learners with more vocabulary have more means to comprehend difficult texts (Dennis, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

The conditions in which readers read may also influence how they comprehend the text. For instance, an uncomfortable, disruptive, or disorganized learning environment may make it difficult for learners to focus on what they are reading. However, a conducive learning environment that is relatively quiet, safe, and under control may create better conditions in which the learners may be able to focus. When learners feel uncomfortable or insecure about where they are reading, it may become harder for them to focus and understand what they are reading. Similarly, any form of disruption in the background, such as the sounds emanating from the TV, radio, or elsewhere, may disrupt the reading process (Dennis, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Another element that can be linked with reading comprehension includes the anxiety that learners may experience when engaged in reading activities. The learners might feel more stressed when they have to read in order to take examinations, classroom tasks, or homework than when they are reading for themselves and for their own pleasure. Nevertheless, the reactions of the learners to those situations would differ. While some of the learners could handle the stress involved in reading for academic purposes, the rest

might find themselves under a lot of stress and anxiety that would prevent them from carrying out their work successfully (Dennis, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Interest and motivation can also be considered as another influential factor on comprehension skills. It is quite natural that when students feel that the content they are supposed to read is boring, monotonous, and irrelevant to their interests, they can hardly keep their mind focused during reading. Consequently, lack of focus can negatively influence their understanding and memorization of the material they read. On the contrary, those reading materials which are interesting and relevant to learners can promote engagement and help comprehension more easily. In this way, EFL teachers can help develop the skill of reading comprehension by offering learners interesting reading materials (Dennis, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Additionally, the rate of recognizing or decoding the words by the readers is linked to reading comprehension. Students who have problems recognizing or decoding the words will likely read slower and thus will focus more on each word rather than on comprehending the whole passage. This will create further complications while comprehending the passage as a whole. Vocabulary awareness plays an important part in the process since students need to establish connections between the unknown words and their meaning or pronunciations. Those students who have enough vocabulary knowledge may figure out the meanings of the unknown words quicker; however, those who do not have enough vocabulary knowledge will have to depend more on context clues (Dennis, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Finally, there may be some medical conditions related to poor reading comprehension of learners. Hollowell (as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016) notes that there are cases where these conditions may only become known as a learner grows older such as attention deficit disorders, speech and hearing problems among others. These problems may affect the involvement of the learners in classroom activities which help in building reading comprehension skills. Specifically, learners who have speech and hearing problems may not involve themselves in oral reading and classroom discussions. Since these activities offer learners the chance to interact with language and develop comprehension skills, their inability to involve themselves may impact their progress in reading comprehension (Dennis, as cited in Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Effective Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension Skills

A variety of strategies is available that could be used in order to help learners comprehend texts better, and their application might depend on the type of reading and its aims. Efficient readers often apply such techniques as prediction, anticipation of information, deduction, summarization of information, analysis of textual information, and evaluation of information read (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). There are also other techniques that could be applied in order to develop comprehension skills of learners. Some of them include reciprocal teaching, instructional conversations, visualization, paired reading, multiple reading strategies, assessment, and running records. These approaches can offer learners assistance in various ways during the process of reading. In the subsequent part, these strategies are explained in detail.

Reciprocal teaching is among the possible ways for developing learners' reading comprehension skills. This process includes teaching students how to employ various strategies, such as predicting content, summarizing the text, clarifying difficult parts, and asking questions about the text. These activities have proven to be useful in assisting learners to develop their comprehension skills. As teachers provide students with appropriate cognitive tools to understand and interpret the texts, learners will gradually

become able to use these strategies and take responsibility for their comprehension process (Pressley, 2002). Moreover, according to Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), some other approaches that could help readers in becoming successful in reading comprehension include activation of prior knowledge, posing questions, and inferring.

Empirical Studies

Several empirical studies have investigated reading comprehension in EFL contexts. According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), vocabulary knowledge and proper use of reading strategies are important determinants in the process of developing reading comprehension skills among EFL learners. Likewise, Medjahdi indicated that many learners face challenges such as pronunciation problems and ambiguity of words, which hinder their comprehension of the reading material. The type of text chosen for reading is another determinant of learners' success and comprehension (as cited in Abu Abeeleh et al., 2021). Additionally, Abu Abeeleh et al. (2021) found that a number of elements were considered by the learners to be major sources of problems when comprehending reading. Such elements included the complexity of reading material, anxiety arising from reading, and difficulties related to word decoding. There were also significant gender differences in terms of reading comprehension difficulties faced by the learners. Female students had different experiences from their male counterparts regarding reading comprehension problems (Abu Abeeleh et al., 2021). Recent evidence from the Afghan EFL context indicates that students increasingly use artificial intelligence to support language-learning tasks, including generating ideas, paraphrasing difficult sentences, improving language accuracy, and organizing written content (Hakimi & Ahmadzai, 2026).

Research Gap

A number of researches have been done concerning the reading comprehension of EFL learners, and the importance of vocabulary, reading, and teaching has been highlighted in the process of developing reading comprehension in EFL students. But little research has been done to investigate the factors that cause reading comprehension difficulties in EFL students in Afghanistan. For instance, there is a need to conduct empirical research to investigate the perceptions of Afghan students concerning the difficulties they face when they read English texts, and strategies that can be employed to help them overcome their difficulties in reading comprehension. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to examine the reasons for problems in reading comprehension of EFL learners in Afghanistan and strategies that can be employed to help them overcome their problems with reading comprehension.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

A quantitative survey design was adopted to obtain participants' perceptions of reading comprehension difficulties and instructional strategies that may support improvement among Afghan EFL learners.

Participants

The study involved 40 Afghan participants from the Department of English Language and Literature at Kabul Education University. Convenience sampling was used because the questionnaire was distributed to classmates and students who were easily accessible to the researcher. The participants were English language learners and/or English language

teachers. This sampling approach was selected because the available participants could be reached within the time and resources of the study.

Instrument

A five-point Likert-scale questionnaire was used as the method for collecting data from the participants. Overall, 40 questionnaires were distributed among the participants and subsequently collected. A total of 40 completed questionnaires were found to be valid and appropriate for analysis. Each question in the questionnaire was rated on a five-point scale from 1 to 5. The rating of 1 was considered Strongly Disagree, 2 was Disagree, 3 was Neutral, 4 was Agree, and 5 was Strongly Agree.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed using SPSS Version 25 software. The frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations of each question were calculated. Following the calculation of mean scores, the factors which were believed to be contributing to the poor reading comprehension level of Afghan students and the effective strategies perceived as useful for improving them were determined.

Validity and Reliability

To support content validity, the questionnaire items were designed with regard to the objectives and questions of the study on the problems of EFL reading comprehension faced by Afghan learners. Moreover, the questionnaire was reviewed by experienced English language teachers to ensure that the questions were appropriate for the participants. For consistency of data collection, every participant responded to the same set of Likert-scale items. The questionnaire used standardized response options and clearly worded statements, providing a consistent procedure for collecting the responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Findings

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the participants in terms of gender, age, and academic year.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	40	100%
Age	18–25 years	40	100%
Academic year	Freshman	10	25%
Academic year	Sophomore	10	25%
Academic year	Junior	10	25%
Academic year	Senior	10	25%

As shown in Table 1, the sample comprises 40 male students ranging from 18 to 25 years old. An equal number of each academic year is equally represented in the sample, where 10 students from each academic year of freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior are equally included in the sample.

Results Related to the First Research Question

Table 2. Factors Contributing to Low Reading Comprehension

No.	Statement	SD n (%)	D n (%)	N n (%)	A n (%)	SA n (%)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Limited vocabulary makes it difficult for me to understand English texts.	2 (5.0%)	4 (10.0%)	2 (5.0%)	18 (45.0%)	14 (35.0%)	40	3.95	1.13
2	I have difficulty recognizing the meaning of some words when I read English texts.	4 (10.0%)	6 (15.0%)	6 (15.0%)	18 (45.0%)	6 (15.0%)	40	3.40	1.22
3	Difficulty in word recognition affects my understanding of English texts.	4 (10.0%)	2 (5.0%)	2 (5.0%)	28 (70.0%)	4 (10.0%)	40	3.65	1.08
4	Complex grammatical structures make English texts difficult for me to understand.	6 (15.0%)	4 (10.0%)	6 (15.0%)	22 (55.0%)	2 (5.0%)	40	3.25	1.19
5	I often struggle to identify the main idea when reading English texts.	4 (10.0%)	10 (25.0%)	4 (10.0%)	18 (45.0%)	4 (10.0%)	40	3.20	1.22
6	Long and complex texts make it difficult for me to understand the content.	2 (5.0%)	10 (25.0%)	10 (25.0%)	16 (40.0%)	2 (5.0%)	40	3.15	1.03
7	I often need to translate English texts into my first language to understand them.	6 (15.0%)	20 (50.0%)	4 (10.0%)	10 (25.0%)	0 (0.0%)	40	2.45	1.04
8	Lack of reading practice in English affects my reading comprehension.	2 (5.0%)	6 (15.0%)	8 (20.0%)	16 (40.0%)	8 (20.0%)	40	3.55	1.13
9	I find it difficult to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from context.	4 (10.0%)	18 (45.0%)	2 (5.0%)	10 (25.0%)	6 (15.0%)	40	2.90	1.32
10	I find it difficult to understand texts when I do not have enough background knowledge about the topic.	4 (10.0%)	8 (20.0%)	6 (15.0%)	16 (40.0%)	6 (15.0%)	40	3.30	1.24
11	Lack of background knowledge about a topic makes reading comprehension difficult.	2 (5.0%)	10 (25.0%)	4 (10.0%)	16 (40.0%)	8 (20.0%)	40	3.45	1.22
12	The complexity of English texts makes reading comprehension difficult for me.	5 (12.5%)	5 (12.5%)	5 (12.5%)	23 (57.5%)	2 (5.0%)	40	3.30	1.16
13	Relying on word-for-word translation makes it difficult to understand the overall meaning of a text.	2 (5.0%)	6 (15.0%)	4 (10.0%)	18 (45.0%)	10 (25.0%)	40	3.70	1.16
Overall Mean							3.33		

Table No. 2 shows that there are a number of factors contributing to low levels of reading comprehension for Afghan EFL learners. The highest mean score was for limited vocabulary ($M = 3.95$) and the need to rely on word-for-word translation ($M = 3.70$). Other factors include word recognition difficulties, lack of prior knowledge, and lack of reading practice. The overall mean score for the section was 3.25, showing that the participants generally see these factors as contributing to their level of reading comprehension.

Results Related to the Second Research Question

Table 3. Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension

No.	Statement	SD n (%)	D n (%)	N n (%)	A n (%)	SA n (%)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
14	Learning more English vocabulary can improve my reading comprehension.	2 (5.0%)	4 (10.0%)	0 (0.0%)	18 (45.0%)	16 (40.0%)	40	4.05	1.13
15	Improving word recognition skills can help me understand English texts better.	0 (0.0%)	4 (10.0%)	6 (15.0%)	20 (50.0%)	10 (25.0%)	40	3.90	0.90
16	Activating background knowledge before reading can improve understanding.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.0%)	24 (60.0%)	14 (35.0%)	40	4.30	0.56
17	Regular reading practice can improve reading comprehension.	2 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	22 (55.0%)	16 (40.0%)	40	4.25	0.90
18	Teachers should teach specific strategies for understanding English texts.	2 (5.0%)	2 (5.0%)	4 (10.0%)	20 (50.0%)	12 (30.0%)	40	3.95	1.04
19	Discussing texts with teachers or classmates can improve reading comprehension.	0 (0.0%)	4 (10.0%)	8 (20.0%)	26 (65.0%)	2 (5.0%)	40	3.65	0.74
20	Reading a text more than once helps me understand it better.	0 (0.0%)	4 (10.0%)	6 (15.0%)	20 (50.0%)	10 (25.0%)	40	3.90	0.90
21	Using a dictionary helps me understand difficult words in a text.	0 (0.0%)	6 (15.0%)	2 (5.0%)	24 (60.0%)	8 (20.0%)	40	3.85	0.92
22	Learning how to identify the main idea can improve reading comprehension.	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (10.0%)	26 (65.0%)	10 (25.0%)	40	4.15	0.58
23	Learning how to guess the meaning of unknown words from context can improve reading comprehension.	0 (0.0%)	4 (10.0%)	4 (10.0%)	30 (75.0%)	2 (5.0%)	40	3.75	0.71
24	Reading different types of English texts can help improve reading skills.	0 (0.0%)	2 (5.0%)	2 (5.0%)	22 (55.0%)	14 (35.0%)	40	4.20	0.76
25	Summarizing a text after reading can help improve understanding.	2 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (20.0%)	18 (45.0%)	12 (30.0%)	40	3.95	0.99
26	Avoiding word-for-word translation can help improve reading comprehension.	2 (5.0%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (10.0%)	22 (55.0%)	12 (30.0%)	40	4.05	0.93
Overall Mean								4.00	

Table No. 3 reveals that various strategies can be employed to facilitate reading comprehension. The strategies with the highest mean scores were activating background knowledge ($M = 4.30$), regular reading practice ($M = 4.25$), and reading different types of texts ($M = 4.20$). Vocabulary development, strategy instruction, and using a dictionary were also found to be effective strategies. The mean score for this section was 4.00. This reveals that the participants agree on the effectiveness of these strategies for enhancing reading comprehension.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that there are certain factors that cause reading comprehension difficulty for Afghan EFL students. The results indicate that the students' vocabulary knowledge was considered one of the most important factors affecting reading

comprehension, with a mean score of 3.95. This shows that most of the students agreed that their vocabulary knowledge was not sufficient for understanding reading texts, which makes it difficult for them to read and understand English texts. This result is consistent with previous studies that highlighted the role of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension, as students need sufficient vocabulary knowledge for understanding the meaning of what they read.

Another significant factor that was identified in the study is the difficulty in word recognition, which was rated a mean of 3.65. The ability to recognize words is a significant aspect in reading because the reader should be able to recognize words quickly in order to comprehend the text. When students find difficulties in recognizing words, they may be more concerned with decoding rather than comprehending the meaning of the text.

The findings also show that limited prior knowledge influences learners' comprehension, and its mean score is 3.45. It is possible that the learner will find it difficult to comprehend the ideas in the text because he/she does not know anything about the topic in the text. Background knowledge helps the learner to relate the new information to what he/she already knows.

Moreover, participants agreed on a negative effect of relying on word-for-word translation on reading comprehension with a mean score of 3.70. EFL students usually translate a text directly into their first language in order to understand it. Nevertheless, this technique may prevent students from understanding the overall meaning of a text and may slow down their reading process.

Other factors such as grammatical complexities, long texts, and lack of reading practices also contributed to difficulties in reading, though their average means were slightly lower than the ones discussed earlier. The overall average mean for this section was 3.25, which implies that participants generally believe that these factors affect their reading comprehension.

The second research question was concerned with the instructional and learner strategies to improve reading comprehension. The findings indicated that the participants were in total agreement that several strategies can be used to improve reading comprehension.

One of the strategies used to improve reading comprehension in this study was activating background knowledge before reading, which achieved the highest mean score of 4.30. This indicates that students can improve their understanding of the text by connecting the topic of the text to their background knowledge.

The other strategy used in this study to improve reading comprehension was regular reading practice, which achieved a mean score of 4.25. This indicates that students can enhance their reading comprehension skills by regularly practicing their reading.

The participants also agreed that students can develop their reading skills by reading different kinds of English texts, which achieved a mean score of 4.20. This indicates that students can improve their reading skills by being exposed to different kinds of texts because this will improve their ability to read different topics in English.

Other strategies such as vocabulary development, improving word recognition skills, using dictionaries, identifying the main idea, and summarizing were also found to be useful in improving reading comprehension skills. In addition, it was agreed that teachers should be teaching specific reading strategies, which points to the significance of support in improving reading skills.

The average mean score for this section was 4.00, which suggests that there is an agreement among the participants that the strategies are useful in improving reading comprehension skills.

In conclusion, the results of this study reveal that limited vocabulary, word recognition, lack of prior knowledge, and word-for-word translation are all important factors affecting reading comprehension for Afghan EFL students. In addition, using prior knowledge, increasing vocabulary, reading practice, and using reading strategies can all play a fundamental role in improving students' reading comprehension skills.

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