

## DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY SAUDI EFL LEARNERS IN ENGLISH READING COMPREHENSION

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### Abstract:

This study is designed to investigate and discuss the problems encountered by Saudi EFL learners in English reading comprehension in a given text. The descriptive approach with its quantitative component is the technique used for data collection. To achieve these objectives, data of this study were collected from a questionnaire distributed to 150 experienced English language instructors at Albaha University and other Saudi universities. The questionnaire consists of twenty statements that served to achieve the goals of the study. This study concludes that vocabulary knowledge is essential for reading comprehension, the text's structure hinders comprehension, and reading strategies are helpful in comprehending English text. Finally, the study has valuable implications in that the students should be taught how to read every English text according to the purpose of reading, and English language teachers should explain a few keywords during the reading process.

**Keywords:** Saudi EFL Learners, cultural context, meta-cognitive, background knowledge, reading strategies

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

For students who have grasped some fundamental vocabulary and structure in English, reading is a necessary aspect of the language acquisition process. Reading is a challenging activity since it involves establishing a connection between the reader and the text, (Pearson & Fielding, 1991). As a result, successful and well-directed reading for pupils taking a foreign language can be crucial for boosting motivation and self-assurance. The most essential prerequisite for easy reading knowledge, according to Grabe and Stoller (2011), is quick and automatic word recognition (or lexical access, which calls up a word's definition as it is recognized). Reading in a foreign language should ideally help students improve their overall reading skills so they can extract information from texts and build interpretations.

Reading is a crucial language ability, and there are many different methods for teaching it, according to McWhorter (1987). These were based on many hypotheses that attempted to explain language learning and acquisition. The vocabulary and content of the reading approaches may vary as a result of the diversity of theoretical viewpoints. Methods and techniques are offered by each strategy, and they are integrated to get the optimum outcome. Different reading models have been established throughout the history of skill development for various reading instruction objectives.

In reading comprehension at different levels, it has been observed that when reading English text students do not understand lexical and they are not aware of text structure and discourse organization, they fail to apply the strategies to text in English. Students without sufficient vocabulary knowledge mostly face reading comprehension difficulties (Nor & Rashid 2008). The researcher in this study utilized a questionnaire to collect information as she investigated the problem. The findings were examined and spoken about. There have been suggestions made to



aid EFL students in improving their reading abilities. To do so, this study will respond to the following questions:

- 1) To what extent is vocabulary knowledge important for comprehending English text?
- 2) To what extent are reading strategies improving comprehension of English text?

Thus, the study adopts that vocabulary knowledge is essential in reading comprehension, and reading strategies are helpful in comprehending English text. The significance of this study is to analyze the difficulty of English reading comprehension encountered by Saudi EFL learners.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The difficult cognitive task of getting meaning from symbols is reading. It is a process for handling language. The main indicator of the effectiveness of this technique is reading comprehension. Reading is a useful tool for communicating, picking up new words, and exchanging information. Usually, the symbols are written or printed in visual form, but they could also be tactile. (Braille). As with all languages, there is a complicated relationship between the text and the reader that is influenced by prior knowledge, experiences, attitude, and the linguistic community, which is embedded in a certain culture and society. Readers use a variety of reading techniques to decode (convert symbols into sounds or visual representations of speech) and comprehend. The reader can use context to discern the meaning of any unfamiliar words.

Reading has a long history that begins with the development of writing in the fourth millennium BC. It has not always been the case, even if reading print text is now a significant way for the general public to get information. With a few exceptions, before the Industrial Revolution, only a small portion of the population in many nations was regarded as literate. The Islamic world and classical Athens were two pre-modern nations with relatively high literacy rates., (Andrew J. Coulson 2008).

Grabe & Stoller define reading as the ability to effectively interpret written text and apply that understanding. (2002:9). According to Byrne, reading is the correlation of the spoken sentence's sound with the symbols that are presented visually. (1971:102). The most fundamental prerequisite for effective comprehension of reading, according to Grabe and Stoller (2011), is lexical access, the bringing up of a word's meaning as it is recognized, is the quick and automatic recognition of words.

### 2.2 READING COMPREHENSION

Reading comprehension has been an ignored subject in the teaching of English as a second language, but this realization has only lately been made by educators and textbook authors. The ability to comprehend and effectively interpret the information in a text is described as reading for comprehension by Grabe & Stoller (2002). Intermediate and advanced-level reading materials typically start with a book and end with a set of direct reference questions or multiple-choice questions.

Perffetti, Van Dyke, and Hart (2001) claim that the reader creates an event model from the text base by combining data from several sources and making additional deductions. As a result, a state model is fundamentally agonistical in its style of symbol, as opposed to a text basis, which consists of propositions deriving from sentences. The ability to oversimplify or evaluate comprehension and utilize techniques as necessary is required for the formation of text models and situational models. (1996)Gough Hoover and Peterson state that "Skilled reading needs skill in both decoding and comprehension reading ability".

Numerous research looked into pupils' problems with reading comprehension. Thai EFL learners' difficulties with reading in English were examined by Chawwang (2008). The survey discovered that the majority of students have trouble reading literature written in English. One of the major problems was acknowledged to be inadequate vocabulary proficiency. (Gunning, 2002).



Understanding tough reading materials, such as textbooks, especially those containing technical terms, necessitates a large vocabulary, (Carlisle, 2000; Qian, 2002). This is due to the difficulty that students with limited vocabulary knowledge have understanding technical phrases like superordinate, synonyms, antonyms, or words with numerous connotations (Vilenius-Tuohimaa, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2008; Nuttall, 2000; Carlisle, 2000).

Developing a student's comprehension of a written text is the primary goal of comprehension instruction. "The goal of understanding is to link the thoughts on the side to what you already know," according to Martin (1991). If you don't know anything about the issue, words from a text feel like putting water into your fingers. You don't retain much. In an EFL classroom, the majority of the goals are to support students in reading proficiently and efficiently. According to Chorney (2005), "Interactive reading is a procedure in which readers are in control of the material they are reading. Due to their ability and freedom, they can use this control to affect how people read.

### 2.3 IMPORTANCE OF VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

The National Reading Panel of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD, 2000) acknowledged vocabulary training as a crucial ability that kids require to develop and progress their reading presentation. There is a compelling sign that vocabulary education helps students' speaking and listening vocabulary as well as their reading comprehension and writing excellence (Joshi, 2006; Kame'enui & Baumann, 2012). For a child to succeed in school, having a strong vocabulary, and counting both oral and written vocabulary is essential, (Kamil et al., 2008).

Over the past 25 years, research on vocabulary knowledge with students who have learning incapacities has frequently found that teachers should give students (1) explicit vocabulary instruction, (2) multiple exposures to new words, (3) enough chances to use words in activities like argument and writing, and (4) approaches to help students regulate word meanings on their own (Farstrup & Samuels, 2008; O'Conner, 2007). The study has also shown that it is beneficial to pre-teach pupils the definitions of words that are important for gaining background information and required to understand the major ideas of the text they will be reading. This holds for all students of school age and applies to all subject areas.

Vocabulary is important for all L2 skills, academic success, and background information in addition to reading. One of the issues that EFL learners have is vocabulary because they struggle to comprehend their concepts as obviously as they would like to and to understand the ideas that are being communicated to them. They also have trouble understanding newscasts and radio programs. Their low vocabulary hinders their ability to write and read. So, teaching vocabulary is a crucial component of learning a language. It aids in the development of practical abilities in both receptive and productive language use. Additionally, vocabulary is important for communicating. Parry (1991:649) says, "We should encourage our students to read as much as they can before they leave our classes to lay a solid foundation for the vocabulary building that will be done in academic courses."

### 2.4 STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING READING

All agree that effective reading comprehension techniques are crucial for learning. However, once kids enter middle and high school, subject-specific texts can present a greater barrier. Oxford and Crookall (1989) define strategies as learning practices, attitudes, approaches to solving issues, or study procedures that improve the effectiveness and efficiency of learning. Procedures that aid in completing a learning assignment are known as learning techniques. When beginning language learners are coping with a new language task, strategies are most frequently deliberate, goal-driven methods.

Everybody acknowledges the importance of better reading comprehension techniques for learning. In contrast, subject-specific textbooks can present a greater barrier, particularly when pupils enter middle and high school. Strategies are learning tactics, behaviors, problem-solving procedures, or study abilities that increase the effectiveness and efficiency of learning, according to Oxford and Crookall (1989). Learning tactics are methods used to finish a learning



activity. When learners are initially navigating a foreign language task, strategies are most frequently deliberate, goal-driven processes. At that point, both the quantity and complexity of the reading increase. The outcomes could have a detrimental effect on subject learning, which will be a key factor in determining academic achievement. One way to improve pupils' reading comprehension skills is by teaching them to spot word clues that hint at a particular structure. For instance, the phrases "however" and "both" may appear in compare/contrast paragraphs. Students can compare and contrast topics using visual organizers like Venn diagrams to aid in this process. Then, the students can summarize the material to help them understand it better. Additionally, students need to utilize comprehension tactics including learning new words before reading, figuring out how to identify important material in text using cues like titles, subheadings, visuals, and summary statements, and identifying words that suggest relationships between ideas.

Numerous techniques exist that can help learners in reading more quickly and efficiently. First, to obtain a sense of the structure and content of the selections of reading, preview titles, section headings, and photo captions. Second, by employing subject-specific knowledge, one can anticipate language and content as well as judge understanding; Make predictions about the structure of discourse using text type and purpose knowledge; and forecasting by using the information to create predictions about the language, content, as well as writing style. Thirdly, Using the text's concepts and prior knowledge of the subject as cues to the unfamiliar terminology rather than taking the time to look them up is known as "guessing from context.". The fourth step is to assess understanding by reiterating the facts and concepts from the text. (Nuttal 2005).

Most reading comprehension programs now use teacher-directed teaching to teach students explicit skills, followed by extra student practice. The discussions' main goals are to foster critical aesthetic thought about texts and to stimulate complete classroom participation. The website ((into a book)) is a fantastic resource for elementary instructors on these particular comprehension techniques. There are songs, booklists, and activities that teach these particular teaching techniques. According to one of the posters from the book website, kids can use their prior understanding of a subject to help them understand the subject that they are learning right now. The definition of past knowledge is using what you already know to grasp something new. Florida, 2001.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the method used for data collection is the descriptive approach with its quantitative dimension. To conduct the investigation, the researcher chooses the descriptive-analytical method. The data of this study is collected using a questionnaire. A 20-item questionnaire was given to (150) experienced teachers of the English language at Albaha University and other Saudi universities. The questionnaire was measured by a group of professional Ph.D. holders from the English department at Albaha University to ensure its validity. To address the following research questions: (1) To what extent is vocabulary knowledge useful for understanding English text? (2) How much do reading techniques aid in text comprehension in English? the researcher analyzed the data and presented the findings.

#### 3.1 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected shows that of the 150 participants, 95.3% were males and 6.7% were females; 97.7% were non-Saudi and 3.3% were Saudi; all of the participants were an instructor of English language; 65.1% had more than 15 years of teaching experience, 20.9% 10-15 years, 9.3% 5-10 years and 4.7% 0-5 years teaching experience.

**Table 1. Questionnaire statements and percentage responses**

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1) Vocabulary knowledge is important for comprehending English text	81.4%	18.6%	0%	0%	0%

2) Reading comprehension enables students to increase their vocabulary.	81.4%	18.6%	0%	0%	0%
3) A lack of vocabulary causes reading difficulties	46.5%	46.5%	4.7%	0%	2.3%
4) Students find difficulties in comprehending a text.	27.9%	62.8%	9.3%	0%	0%
5) Students come to university with a weak standard of English vocabulary.	53.5%	32.6%	14%	0%	0%
6) Students seem careful about the whole meaning while reading a text.	18.6%	41.9%	14%	20.9%	4.7%
7) Students pay attention to new lexical.	14%	32.6%	18.6%	30.2%	4.7%
8) The structure of the text causes reading problems for students.	14%	48.8%	14%	20.9%	2.3%
9) Background knowledge about the passage makes it easy to understand.	55.8%	39.5%	2.3%	2.3%	0%
10) Student who is a poor reader at the school level is more likely to be poor at the university level.	34.9%	32.6%	11.6%	14%	7%
11) A lack of interest in reading English leads students to difficulties in reading comprehension.	46.5%	46.5%	4.7%	2.3%	0%
12) Students make predictions about what the author is going to say.	58.1%	41.9%	0%	0%	0%
13) Cultural difference between English and Arabic inhibits passage understanding.	14%	58.1%	16.3%	11.6%	0%
14) Linguistic knowledge is necessary for reading comprehension.	20.9%	58.1%	4.7%	16.3%	0%
15) Students guess the meaning of different words from the passage.	18.6%	46.5%	11.6%	20.9%	2.3%
16) Teacher asks students to answer some questions after reading the second time.	23.3%	53.5%	16.3%	4.7%	2.3%
17) Memorizing spelling improves student reading skills.	18.6%	60.5%	9.3%	9.3%	2.3%
18) Using prediction like (images, diagrams, and pictures) in teaching reading comprehension ease students' understanding.	48.8%	46.5%	2.3%	0%	2.3%
19) Using skimming and scanning helps learners to comprehend English text.	46.5%	46.5%	2.3%	4.7%	0%
20) The performance of the students is enhanced by thorough reading in the classroom.	37.2%	55.8%	2.3%	4.7%	0%

For item 1, the responses of participants show that 81.4 of them strongly agree, 18.6 agree, making 100% overall agreement as shown in the table1 above, vocabulary knowledge is important for comprehending English text.

For item 2, the responses of participants show that 81.4% of them strongly agree, and 18.6% 18.6 agree, making 100% overall agreement as shown in table1 above, this indicates that reading comprehension enables students to increase their vocabulary.

For item 3, the responses of participants show that 46.5% of them strongly agree, 46.5% agree, making 93% overall agreement and 4.7% not sure and 2.3% strongly disagree, as shown in Table 1 above a lack of vocabulary causes reading difficulties.



For item 4, the responses of participants show that 27.9% of them strongly agree, 62.8% agree, making 90.7% overall agreement, and 9.3% not sure, as shown in Table 1, students find difficulties in comprehending a text.

For item 5, the responses of participants show that 53.5% of them strongly agree, 32.6% agree, making 86.1% overall agreement and 14% not sure, as shown in table 1, students come to university with a weak standard of English vocabulary.

For item 6, the responses of participants show that 18.6% of them strongly agree, 41.9% agree, making 60.5% overall agreement and 14% not sure, 20.9% disagree and 4.7% strongly disagree, as shown in table 1, the majority of participants agree that students seem careful to the whole meaning while reading a text.

For item 7, the responses of participants show that 14% of them strongly agree, 32.6% agree, making 60.5% overall agreement and 18.6% not sure, 30.2% disagree and 4.7% strongly disagree, as shown in table 1, the majority of participants agree that students pay attention for new lexical.

For item 8, the responses of participants show that 14% of them strongly agree, 48.8% agree, making 62.8% overall agreement and 14% not sure, 20.9% disagree and 2.3% strongly disagree, as shown in table 1, the majority of participants agree that the structure of the text causes reading problems to students.

For item 9, the responses of participants show that 55.8% of them strongly agree, 39.5% agree, making 95.3% overall agreement and 2.3% not sure, 2.3% disagree, as shown in table 1, background knowledge about the passage makes it easy to understand.

For item 10, the responses of participants show that 34.9% of them strongly agree, and 32.6% agree, making 67.5% overall agreement and 11.6% not sure, 14% disagree and 7% strongly disagree, as shown in table 1, the majority of participants agree that the student who is a poor reader at school level is more likely to be poor at the university level.

For item 11, the responses of participants show that 46.5% of them strongly agree, 46.5% agree, making 93% overall agreement and 4.7% not sure, 2.3% disagree, as shown in table 1, the majority of participants agree that a lack of interest in reading English leads students to difficulties in reading comprehension.

For item 12, the responses of participants show that 58.1% of them strongly agree, and 41.9% agree, making 100% overall agreement as shown in the table 1 above, this indicates that the students make predictions about what the author is going to say.

For item 13, the responses of participants show that 14% of them strongly agree, 58.1% agree, making 72.1% overall agreement and 16.3% not sure, 11.6% disagree, as shown in table 1, the majority of participants agree that cultural difference between English and Arabic inhibits passage understanding.

For item 14, the responses of participants show that 20.9% of them strongly agree, 58.1% agree, making 79% overall agreement and 4.7% not sure, 16.3% disagree, as shown in table 1, the majority of participants agree that linguistic knowledge is necessary for reading comprehension.

For item 15, the responses of participants show that 18.6% of them strongly agree, and 46.5% agree, making 65.1% overall agreement and 11.6% not sure, 20.9% disagree and 2.3% strongly disagree, as shown in table 1, the majority of participants agree that the students guess the meaning of different words from the passage.

For item 16, the responses of participants show that 23.3% of them strongly agree, 53.5% agree, making 76.8% overall agreement and 16.3% not sure, 4.7% disagree and 2.3% strongly disagree, as shown in table 1, the majority of participants agree that the teacher asks students to answer some questions after reading the second time.

For item 17, the responses of participants show that 18.6% of them strongly agree, 60.5% agree, making 79.1% overall agreement and 9.3% not sure, 9.3% disagree and 2.3% strongly disagree, as shown in table1, the majority of participants agree that memorizing spelling improves student reading skill.

For item 18, the responses of participants show that 48.8% of them strongly agree, 46.5% agree, making 95.3% overall agreement and 2.3% not sure, and 2.3% strongly disagree, as shown in table1, the majority of participants agree that using prediction like (images, diagrams, pictures) in teaching reading comprehension ease students' understanding.

For item 19, the responses of participants show that 46.5% of them strongly agree, 46.5% agree, making 93% overall agreement and 2.3% not sure, 4.7% disagree, as shown in table1, the majority of participants agree that using skimming and scanning help learners to comprehend English text.

For item 20, the responses of participants show that 37.2% of them strongly agree, 55.8% agree, making 93% overall agreement and 2.3% not sure, 4.7% disagree, as shown in table1, the majority of participants agree that using reading extensively inside the classroom improves learner's performance.

### 3.2 DISCUSSION

This study investigates the reading comprehension problems faced by Saudi EFL students. Most of those who responded to the questionnaire agreed that vocabulary knowledge is essential for understanding English-language text, reading strategies can help comprehension of English-language text, and students struggle with reading comprehension issues, as evident from their responses. There are several causes for these challenges. Nezami (2012) asserts that the deficiency of reading comprehension among college students is one of the most obvious problems that teachers face today. According to academics, a major factor influencing reading comprehension is learning vocabulary. The majority of the participants generally agreed with all the statements made above, according to the questionnaire responses.

Vocabulary knowledge is crucial for understanding English text, according to the respondents (81.4% strongly agree and 18.6% agree). A near-majority of participants (46.5% strongly agree and 46.5% agree) attribute their reading difficulties to their limited vocabulary. Hirsch (2003) asserted that improving students' vocabulary knowledge can enhance their reading comprehension because familiarity with words enables students to comprehend what they read on a deeper level. It was not the respondents' top concern because only (14% strongly agree and 32.6% agree) think students pay attention to new lexical. However, (46.5% strongly agree and 46.5% agree) agree that students have trouble understanding what they read because they are not interested in reading English. According to Carrel (1984), "First and foremost, reading instructors should employ things that their pupils are interested in, including materials that they have independently chosen..."

The respondents (58.1% strongly agree and 41.9% agree) believe that the students make predictions about what the author will say in statement 12. According to Goodman, who was cited by Clapham in 1996, "Reading should be guided by an assumption; the reader goes through a cycle of the sample of the text, making predictions about what will happen next, testing those predictions, and then modifying or confirmative them. By employing the proper reading strategies, effective teachers can aid their students in understanding the written content. Reading comprehension skills among students can be positively or negatively impacted by their academic environment. Furthermore, the majority of respondents (23.3% strongly agree and 53.5% agree) concur that teachers ask students to respond to some questions after having them read aloud a second time, and they support the idea that when students receive support from their teachers, it encourages them to develop their reading comprehension skills.

This study's goal is to examine and discuss the difficulties Saudi EFL students have with the reading comprehension of a specific text in English. The lack of vocabulary knowledge was discovered to be the main challenge faced by EFL learners. In addition, Trehearne and Doctorow

(2005) found that text form is one of the important factors affecting reading comprehension, along with factors like a lack of prior knowledge and a failure to pay attention to the text.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Every area of knowledge is thought to be best acquired by reading, which is also a crucial ability for learning any language. This study demonstrates that Saudi EFL learners struggle with reading comprehension when they come across new terms and unfamiliar vocabulary. Saudi EFL students encountered several reading difficulties when they read English texts. Lack of comprehension of the English text or text structure that they read is the main challenge Saudi EFL learners encounter, followed by inattention, difficult words, and grammatical knowledge. Therefore, teachers must devise practical solutions to address these issues to engage students in meaningful reading experiences.

Future studies are advised to observe EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia and investigate how reading courses are taught using a qualitative method. In addition to offering insights into the present practices in the classroom, close observations of the classroom will help recognize the challenges experienced by the teachers when teaching reading. Future studies should investigate how students responded to the teachers' tactics to comprehend how they coped with reading issues.

Reading is regarded as a necessary activity for learning everything, and it is a crucial skill for students to master any language. This study shows that Saudi EFL students have trouble understanding text when they encounter new words or unfamiliar vocabulary. Saudi EFL students had several reading issues when they tried to read texts written in English. Lack of comprehension of the English text or text structure that they read is the main challenge Saudi EFL learners encounter, followed by inattention, difficult words, and grammatical knowledge. Therefore, to get students interested in reading in a meaningful way, teachers must come up with efficient solutions to these issues.

Future studies should use a qualitative methodology to analyze reading instruction in Saudi Arabian EFL classes. Close observations of the classroom will be beneficial in recognizing the challenges that the teachers encounter when teaching reading and disclosing information about the present practices in the classroom. To understand how pupils dealt with reading issues, future research should look into how students responded to the teachers' tactics.

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