

A Study of Challenges and Factors Affecting English Reading Comprehension in Young Arab EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at exploring some of the reading comprehension difficulties that Jordanian 9 graders encountered. It also sought to shed light on the factors that cause such problems. Data were collected qualitatively (interviews with 5 teachers and 2 school supervisors) and quantitatively by means of a questionnaire to which 70 female 9 graders responded. Results showed that grammar, new words, homonyms and homographs, among others, hindered reading comprehension. Results also revealed a wide range of factors that could lead to reading comprehension difficulties. These factors were grouped as personal, Linguistic, curricular, and resources related factors. A few recommendations were presented.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Challenges, Factors, Young Students, EFL

INTRODUCTION

Reading is an intellectual work that aims to understand the text. It is an interactive process that arises from the relation between the reader and the text, thus, leads to the understanding of the meaning and the main ideas of that text. Comprehension is the main aim of reading, through an attempt to group the major ideas in the text and to find the analytical methods that help achieve that goal. In this sense, there are two kinds of concentration on reading. First: reading for getting new data, ideas, knowledge, details, and new vocabulary which might stem from students' culture. Second: reading for understanding which is of several types: scanning, skimming, reading to learn, reading for general notion, reading for critical evaluation, and reading for combining information (Carrell & Grabe, 2010). These types include scanning which is a reading skill which requires recognition of several visual forms such as word, phrase, or number. Reading for understanding is a process that requires a visual and semantic operation in addition to focusing on the text outline. Meanwhile, reading to learn does not only require outlining the text but also elaborating on other various parts of information upon various groups of data (Carver, 1992). There are many difficulties that students may encounter in reading such as unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar content, sentence pattern, background knowledge and inappropriate or different structure patterns in addition to inadequate reading strategies which help in comprehending the text.

Reading comprehension is concerned with the ability to pay attention to written information, which can sometimes be a difficult process for readers (Carver, 1992). Students should follow elaboration that helps them take in information and understand the main ideas from the text. This will help their retention and understanding of the text. So, sooner or later, students will gradually read and analyze the text to solve the problem encountered. For example, readers are given a simple text to read at first then are gradually given a complex one to comprehend by themselves. Consequently, they can try out the strategies of perfect reading that solve their problems. Harmer (2001) said, "Any exposure to English is a good thing for language students. At the very least, some parts of the language stick in their minds as part of language acquisition" (p.68).

Statement of the problem and its significance

The Jordanian Ministry of Education stresses the importance of teaching all language skills in all stages of teaching from grade one to grade twelve. Despite that, students still face many challenges in comprehending texts. It is worthy to investigate the difficulties that the ninth graders encounter in reading comprehension classes and find out the sources that cause such difficulties. This study may help students, teachers and language planners which may fill a gap in the literature.

Objectives and questions of the study

This study aims to:

1. Investigate the possible difficulties that nine-grade Jordanian students encounter in English reading comprehension (professional perspective), and
2. Explore the factors that stand behind these difficulties (students' perspective).

To fulfill these objectives, the following questions guided the study:

1. What are the possible difficulties that nine-grade Jordanian students encounter in English reading comprehension?
2. What are the factors that stand behind these difficulties?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section presents a few theoretical and empirical studies that deal with the difficulties that readers encounter in reading comprehension tasks. Theoretically, scholars like Oakhill & Elbro (2014) believe that reading comprehension is a complex process which requires the organization of prior cognitive skills and abilities. Besides, when readers are not able to understand the whole text, they will encounter difficulties in decoding words in such text. Reading comprehension generally depends on comprehending the target language. This requires comprehending words, sentences, contexts of the text. Yet, comprehension typically requires the previous knowledge of incorporating these words and sentences within understanding of the context and the meaning of the text.

In the same vein, Treheane & Doctorow (2005) explain that other problems influence learners' reading comprehension skills. Such problems are learners' reading situations, helpful teaching on comprehension style, text type, and being aware of several reading comprehension strategies.

Childs (2008) believes that focusing on wide reading materials and depending on background knowledge and comprehension were the main two elements that are connected with thinking, which means thinking mechanism and authentic interest in reading comprehension are the best principles for learners' success and achievement. Due to the range of general knowledge and analytical skills, these lead to acquiring the ability to comprehend well.

Pang, Muaka, Bernhardt, and Kamil (2003) think that reading is "understanding written texts" (p.6). They believe that reading includes two interrelated processes: prior knowledge and comprehension. They define prior knowledge as the process that helps learners to improve and expand their abilities of comprehension, while comprehension is the process of making the meaning of words or sentences in the text. Pang and colleagues also state that readers should have background knowledge, vocabulary, and other strategies to understand written texts. Biancarosa & Snow (2004) stress that students who encounter difficulties in reading comprehension, including those with learning disabilities (LD) who have been identified as having problems with English language skills and background knowledge, may be exposed to problems in reading words or sentences. They may fail to comprehend what they read, they may lose the reading fluency needed to facilitate understanding or they may be misusing or achieving strategies to aid them in comprehending the core of a text, and to understand main ideas.

Cain, Oakhill, & Bryant (2000) believe that students struggle with reading comprehension, and fail in the automatic recognition of words, sentences as a result of poor memory, and loss of strategies related to reading comprehension or ideas in the text. Such students may suffer from (limited reading comprehension strategies). Thus, of these reasons lead to reading failure.

Kamil, Borman, Dole, Kral, Salinger & Torgesen (2008) believe that reading comprehension strategy instruction is considered one of the most important activities in classroom intervention. This aims to improve the reading comprehension for readers and improve their level in analyzing and thinking while reading any text. They think that teaching depends on teacher modeling through an explanation of the strategies that are related to reading comprehension and adds a variety of practices in a classroom. Comprehension strategies include procedures that readers use to understand the texts, such as summarizing, identifying the main ideas, paraphrasing, and analyzing data.

Empirically, Wutthisingchai (2011) conducted a study that aimed to verify English reading comprehension difficulties as recognized by Mathayom 5 students, reading the academic texts utilized in the English program at Thai Christian School in Bangkok, and to articulate if those Mathayom 5 students from various English programs had the same difficulties in reading comprehension. The students in the study were forty-eight Mathayom 5 students from various English programs at Thai Christian School in the academic year of 2010. A 20-item questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale was utilized to gather information. Descriptive statistics were utilized to resolve the information. There were mean, percentage, frequency, and standard deviations. According to the statistical information, the total outcome showed that most of the students were not sure whether they had difficulties in reading comprehension. Furthermore, on average, the students understood that motivation might be the first barrier affecting reading comprehension. Prior knowledge and lack of reading strategies were perceived as the second and

third barriers, respectively. Though, Mathayom (5) students from the various English programs perceived difficulties of reading comprehension similarly. Chinese Language- Social Science students demonstrated to be more aware of language difficulties and some culturally varied than the other sets.

Regionally, Nezami (2012) conducted a study that aimed to identify the main difficulties Saudi students encountered in comprehending English reading skills. This study aimed to find out reading problems inside classrooms faced by Arab learners in general. The researcher surveyed students of the preparatory year (boys) and community college (boys), and a survey of (36) questions in total. The study came with the wide categories of difficulties such as incompetence in skimming and scanning of the reading material, lacking vocabulary knowledge, poor reading skills and losing focus.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach for this study was a mixed one (quantitative and qualitative). According to Dweik, Nofal & Al-Obaidi (2019), a mixed-method is useful since the qualitative data “allows for cross-checking the results obtained by the questionnaire” as well as “alleviating the potential pitfalls of each method” (p. 107). The questionnaire elicited the quantitative data which dealt with the possible factors that cause difficulties that students encounter in reading comprehension from the students’ perspective, whilst the semi-structured interviews contribute to the qualitative data that deal with the factors that cause such difficulties from the teachers’/supervisors’ perspectives. The study included a total of 77 participants, namely, 70 female students who have been studying English as a foreign language since the first grade. It also incorporated seven stakeholders (5 teachers and 2 supervisors) who were involved in teaching English, specifically grade nine. This sample was chosen conveniently from public schools located in Amman during the academic year 2019-2020. The participants were approached after permission letters were obtained from the Ministry of Education and school. Google forms were used for building and distributing the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was based on an open-ended pilot questionnaire that was distributed to 10 participants who did not belong to the sample. Additionally, it was based on previously conducted research (e.g., Dweik, 1986; Qarqez & Abo-Rashid, 2017). The questionnaire was prepared in Arabic and was comprised of two sections. The first section consisted of the information sheet and demographic data of the participants. The second section included 23 statements to each. The participants responded by expressing their opinion using a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, and strongly disagree). The questionnaire was validated by a panel of experts who commented on the suitability of both form and content of the questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire was measured using the test-retest technique which showed relative consistency.

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five teachers and two school supervisors. One of the advantages of semi-structured interviews is that the participants feel free to speak about whatever they find important instead of having the researcher dictates the direction of the interview (Barbour, 2008). The face-to-face interviews lasted for about 40 minutes. The interviews were undertaken in English upon the participants’ preference. The interview schedule consisted of two main questions concerning the problems that learners encounter in reading comprehension tasks and the causes of these problems.

The results of this study may not be generalized to all students in Jordan, as it is only limited to a certain level of learners of the English language, namely nine-grade Jordanian students. The results of this study are restricted to Jordanian public schools in Amman. It is also limited to the sample and instruments used in this study as well as to the time of the study namely the academic year 2019-2020.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the interviews

This section presents the analysis of the data obtained from the interviews with teachers of English. The interviews sought to probe difficulties that female 9th-grade students encounter in relation to reading comprehension tasks along with the factors that cause these difficulties. The interviewer mainly asked two main questions which were:

1. What are the difficulties that grade 9 students face in reading comprehension tasks?
2. What are the possible causes of these difficulties?

In response to the first question, there was a consensus among teachers that vocabulary is the most problematic issue. They reported that new vocabulary hindered the students’ understanding of the reading text. One interviewee mentioned that “the main difficulty that the students face is their inability to understand English texts”, ascribing this difficulty to vocabulary in general. Another one believed that “the students think that reading is just to understand the meaning of the words”. Additionally, most of them reported new vocabulary is frustrating to students. One of

them claimed that “students’ inability to find meanings of the new vocabulary will make them frustrated and they might abandon the reading task”. In the same vein, another interviewee indicated that “many students do not know how to use dictionaries and if they do, they do not know which dictionary entry to choose”.

Similarly, confusing meanings of homographs and homophones seemed to be one of the problems that the students faced. In fact, a word like *bank* has different meanings of which one is common. Thus, the students will not hesitate to pick the common meaning. As reported by one of the interviewees, the students “have the problem of mixing words such as through and throw”. It seems that the students have a problem in word recognition, which hinders their understanding of the given text.

These results comply with the findings of other studies (e.g., Cain et al., 2000; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Nezami, 2012; Alkhawaldeh, 2012; Iqbal et al., 2015; Qrqaz & Abo Rashid, 2017). For example, Qarqez & Abo-Rashid (2017) reported that Jordanian university students had difficulties in dealing with reading comprehension tasks due to uncommon and ambiguous words. Also, Cain et al. (2000) found that students struggled in reading due to their failure to recognize words.

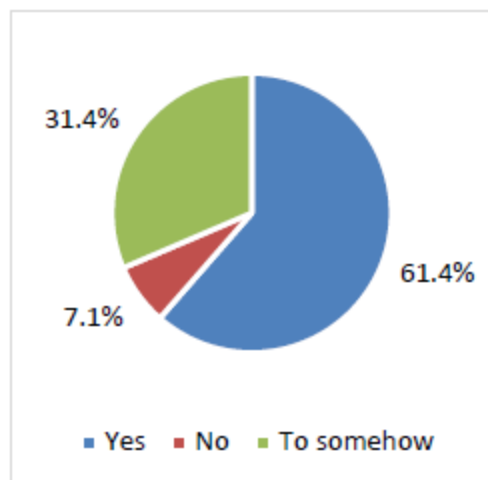
In addition to vocabulary, many interviewees identified grammar and syntax as problematic to the students. In their opinion, students repeatedly complained about misunderstanding due to grammatical structures. One interviewee mentioned that “meaning is sometimes conveyed through grammar. Our students are poor at grammar and the language in general”. Yet, another interviewee reported that the students faced problems in understanding functions of cohesive devices. This interviewee mentioned that “they don’t have the basic syntactic and lexical structures to combine between sentences. For example, they don’t understand the function of words like however.” Such results correspond to those of Oakhill & Elbro (2014) who maintained that reading comprehension depends on comprehending the target language. Oakhill & Elbro (2014) also stressed that comprehension typically requires the knowledge of incorporating these words and sentences within understanding of the context and the meaning of the text.

The third problem that language teachers reported was time constraints. Time was identified as a problem in the sense that the available time for students to cognitively process meaning as well as time in relation to training/teaching. One of the interviewees, for example, believed that “there’s no enough time to train students efficiently on reading” which could be due to number of students in class as reported by Alkhawaldeh (2012). What is of importance here is the other aspect which concerns the time that students need to cognitively process meanings and relations in the text. In this regard, several interviewees indicated that the students complained about the time allocated to the given reading task. One interview reported that “for example, the students need five minutes to find, for example, a date in the first paragraph”. Another interviewee said that “I don’t know whether our students have poor memory, or they are not focusing”. Here it could be said that students lacked speed in reading, and they were not given proper chances to be trained. Such results are consistent with those of Qarqez & Abo-Rashid (2017), Alyousef (2015), Alkhawaldeh (2012), and Nezami (2012) among others. Qarqez & Abo-Rashid (2017) found that the time that students had to cognitively process the text imbedded reading comprehension. Alyousef (2015) found that memory problems were salient among their participants while Nezami (2012) reported concentration problems among English learners in Saudi Arabia. In the following section, results of the quantitative data are presented.

RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In this section, I present the responses reported by seventy 9th-grade female participants who responded to the questionnaire, followed by a description of the data obtained from the seven interviewees.

The questionnaire aimed to explore the potential factors hindering the learners’ understanding of reading comprehension texts and included 23 items. The first item sought to identify whether the participant had reading comprehension difficulties. The responses reported in Figure 1 show that most respondents indicated that they had reading comprehension difficulties even though they started learning English at the age of 6. Forty- three (43) participants (61.4%) reported that they usually found it difficult to understand reading comprehension texts while 22 of them (31.4%) reported facing difficulties occasionally. Only 5 participants (whose demographic data suggested their status as high achievers) claimed not having difficulties.



Students' self-reporting of having reading comprehension difficulties

Against this backdrop, I moved further to explore the potential factors contributing to these difficulties. The overall analysis of the questionnaire responses revealed that the participants encountered reading comprehension challenges that seemed to be derived from a range of factors which will be explained in the following sub-sections.

Personal factors

The participants were asked whether attitudinal factors could contribute to having reading comprehension difficulties. Figure 2(A) presents the responses to whether interest in English or otherwise is a possible reason for having reading comprehension difficulties. While 34 of them disagreed with the statement, 17 agreed and 19 remained undecided. Such responses suggest that although almost half of the participants were interested in English, they faced reading comprehension difficulties.

Likewise, while English as a language is of interest to the participants, it could be reading as a habit that the students lack. Thus, the participants were asked whether they lack the habit of reading in general. As shown in Figure 2(B), the participants were divided (though unevenly) between having and lacking reading habits. Thirty-six participants agreed that they did not read regularly whereas 26 disagreed with the statement, and 8 chose undecided.

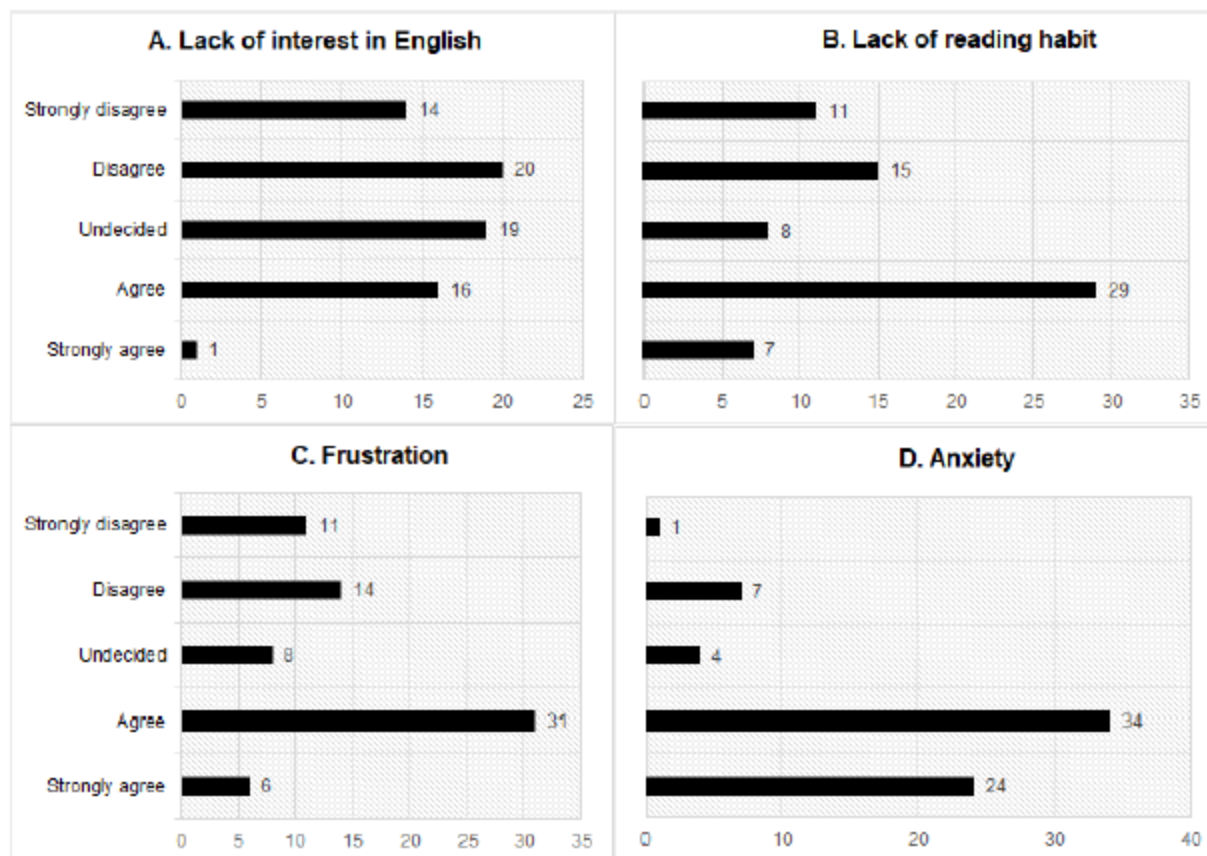


Figure1. Responses related to attitudinal/psychological factors

In addition to the attitudinal factors, the participants were asked whether their feelings (frustration and anxiety) during the reading comprehension task influence their understanding of the text. Figure 2(C) shows the responses to whether the participants feel frustrated when reading a comprehension text. Thirty-seven participants agreed with the idea that they felt frustrated whereas 25 disagreed and 8 were undecided. Similarly, the participants were asked if they felt stressed when they read an English text. Figure 2(D) shows that 58 participants agreed with the statement that they found it difficult to understand reading texts because of feeling frustrated while only 8 disagreed and 4 were undecided. These results suggest that although the participants are relatively interested in English and many of them reported having reading as a habit, they reported having a fear of reading English texts (and this could apply to the language itself). Here it could be said that motivation does not prevent students from having reading difficulties as reported by other studies (e.g., Wutthisingchai, 2011; Iqbal et al., 2015; Qarqez & Abo-Rashid, 2017). For example, Qarqez & Abo-Rashid (2017) found their participants motivated to learn English but struggling in reading and learning the language in general.

Linguistic factors

This section consists of responses related to 6 language-related factors potentially contributing to reading comprehension difficulties. As shown in Figure 3, these factors are broadly related to vocabulary and stylistics. To begin with vocabulary, the majority (57 respondents) reported that they did not have enough vocabulary to understand reading texts. Yet, although 17 of them remained undecided, only 1 disagreed. Additionally, 53 respondents agreed that they were unable to understand English texts due to confusing words. Conversely, 11 respondents disagreed with the statement and 6 were undecided. Concerning poor pronunciation, the fewest number of participants (33) indicated that their poor pronunciation hindered their understanding of reading texts while 19 disagreed with the statement and 18 remained undecided. Moreover, 52 participants agreed that they cannot identify words that were derived from familiar words whereas 9 disagreed and 9 remained undecided.

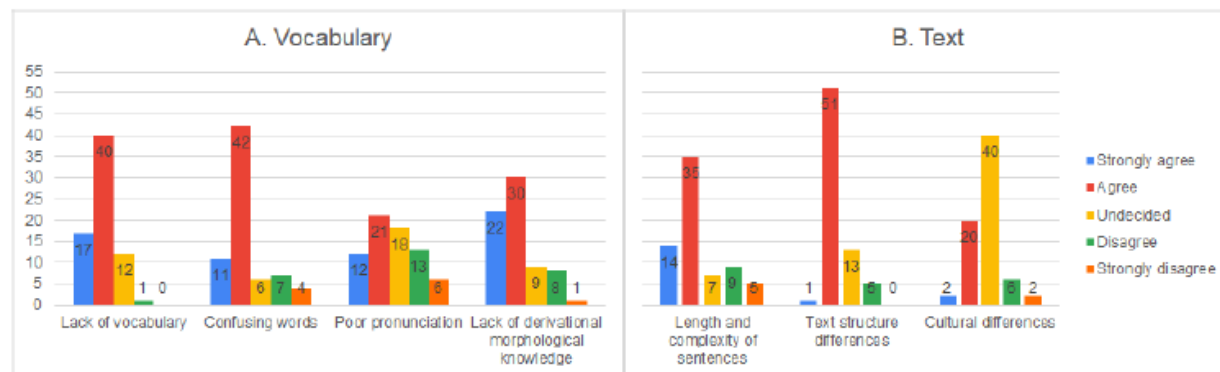


Figure 3. Responses related to linguistic factors

Lack of vocabulary seems to be one of the main factors reported in the literature (e.g. Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Nezami, 2012; Alkhawaldeh, 2012; Iqbal et al., 2015). Also, researchers like Cain et al. (2000) indicated that English learners struggled to recognize words which led to confusing words. Similarly, Alyousef (2015) maintained that students' poor pronunciation contributed to having comprehension problems.

Concerning stylistics, a considerable number of participants (49) reported that they found it difficult to understand an English reading text because English texts contained long and complex sentences. However, 14 of them did not indicate that the length and complexity of text sentences hindered their understanding, and 7 were undecided. In fact, long and complex sentences could contribute to the loss of focus problems which Nezami (2012) reported. In addition to that, 52 respondents agreed that differences between Arabic (their mother tongue) and English texts in terms of structure made it difficult for them to understand English reading texts. Yet 13 of them were undecided while only 5 disagreed with the statement. Undoubtedly, stylistic differences such as cohesion and text development between Arabic and English as well as cultural differences between Arabic and English need to be taken into consideration to improve the learner's reading skill. It could be said here that L1/L2 differences lead to linguistic interference which in turn impedes comprehension (Alkhawaldeh, 2012). Likewise, Alyousef (2015) concluded that the differences between L1 and L2 structures hindered comprehension.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed at exploring some of the reading comprehension difficulties that Jordanian 9 graders encountered. It also shed light on the factors that cause such problems. The overall analysis of the data obtained by the interviews as well as the questionnaire revealed several comprehension problems such as new vocabulary, homonyms and homographs along with the inability to find information about the text. Results also showed that reading comprehension problems resulted from a range of factors that were related to the students, the English language, the reading comprehension text, the curriculum (including teaching practices and materials), and resources available to the students. Results showed that although the participants were motivated to learn, they struggle with reading texts due to anxiety and frustration. The main language problems were lack of vocabulary and grammar knowledge, poor performance in the language, and linguistic interference. Concerning the curriculum, it was reported that background knowledge and lack of interest in the text topic were the main sources of comprehension problems. Besides, the resources that the students had proved to influence their comprehension of English texts were time and size of the class.

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