

Reading Comprehension Problems among First and Second Year EFL Students at Shaikh Zayed University in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

It is obviously clear that strong reading comprehension has a significant influence on students' success at university. This study aims to investigate reading comprehension problems among first and second year EFL students at Shaikh Zayed University in Afghanistan. Fifty EFL first and second year students from the Department of English participated in the survey. The study used a random sampling design of a quantitative approach. The data were gathered through a five-point Likert scale style questionnaire adopted from Abu Abeeleh, Al-Ghazo, and Al-Sobh (2021). The data were analyzed through SPSS V.23 software to calculate the descriptive statistics, frequency, percentage and mean score. The results indicated that great majority of respondents agreed on the reading comprehension problems. Students had problems in understanding the meaning of new words, feeling anxious and upset were also their problems when they read something in English and cannot understand it. Identifying the aim, no confident, extraction of main and detailed ideas from the text also hindered reading comprehension. Understanding the text's overall meaning and translating every word individually, summarizing the main ideas, distinguishing between the main idea and supporting ideas and stressed were their major reading comprehension problems as well. The findings of the study are essential for English language professors in Afghan EFL classrooms in responding to the problem above. This study proposes that students should be taught reading comprehension strategies such as skimming, scanning, making inferences, looking for main idea, making predictions, improving vocabulary, etc.

Keywords- Reading Comprehension, Problems, EFL, First and Second Year Students.

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading, writing, listening and speaking are the four essential skills that make up basic language proficiency. When communicating, people often use a combination of these skills at the same time.

These four language skills play a key role in English language learning as well. Reading comprehension in English is one of the significant skills for developing professional knowledge.

According to Hung and Ngan (2015), reading is a fundamental skill that improves students' vocabulary, fluency, speech and writing, and finally helps them master their target language. Therefore, it's a no-brainer to say that good reading skills are crucial for successful students.

In teaching and learning, the reading process seems contentious and important. Extensive research has involved in reading a foreign language, and the related characteristics and problems of these languages (Alharbi, 2022).

Ancheta (2018) stated that the ability of the students to comprehend a text and derive meaning from it, as well as their capacity to convey this meaning to others, is known as comprehension. Furthermore, the main purpose of reading is comprehension, which is accomplished by making an effort to organize the text's essential concepts and by identifying the analytical techniques that contribute to achieve this goal. There are two types of reading focus in this sense. First, read to learn new information, concepts, details, and language that may

come from the cultures of the students. The second is reading for comprehension, which may take many different forms, including scanning, skimming, reading to learn, reading for broad concepts, reading for critical analysis, and reading to combine knowledge (Carrell & Grabe, 2010).

The phrase reading comprehension is frequently used in reference to language and literacy assessments. Understanding what is being said in the printed text requires more than just being able to identify the words in the text. Reading comprehension skill plays a huge role in our education. Ali (2022) explains that reading is one of the important skills of English. It is extremely important for all English learners, both at the high school and university level. Mastering basic reading skills will lead to student success and differentiation. By definition, reading is generally recognized as the reader's attempt to understand the hidden mysteries of a written text and to appreciate its linguistic and aesthetic beauty and subtlety. It is a thought-related process to understand and capture meaning, whether the meaning is clear or vague. Without grasping the meaning of a text, reading will be seen as a useless and fruitless act.

Moreover, reading is intellectual work aimed at understanding text. It is an interactive process that arises from the relationship between the reader and the text, thus leading to understanding the meaning and gist of this text. Comprehension is the primary goal of reading, by trying to gather the main ideas of the text and find analytical methods that help achieve this goal (Hassan & Dweik, 2021). It is impossible to overstate the value of reading as a language proficiency. It is one of the most important ways to receive knowledge, particularly for educational purposes. One of the most widely used language ability worldwide is reading. Additionally, kids that struggle with reading also perform poorly academically. They also encounter several difficulties outside of the classroom as a result of their reading deficit (Mundhe, 2015).

Much research has been conducted regarding reading comprehension problems at different universities in the world. In respect to this study, the research has not been conducted concerning the reading comprehension problems among EFL students at any university in Afghanistan. Therefore, this research was conducted to investigate reading comprehension problems among EFL first and second year students at Shaikh Zayed University in Afghanistan.

Research Objective

To investigate the reading comprehension problems among first and second year EFL students at Shaikh Zayed University in Afghanistan.

Research Question

What are the reading comprehension problems among first and second year EFL students at Shaikh Zayed University in Afghanistan?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Comprehension

According to Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), reading comprehension is an important skill that helps the development of different learning tasks of learners. It helps them decipher a text, analyze, interpret and express their own ideas about the written material. Reading comprehension needs different reading skills such as a word recognition, fluency, lexical knowledge, and pre-existing knowledge to be undertaken quickly so that the reader gets knowledge from text. Reading in a first language and reading texts in a foreign language are not the same thing. It's likely that EFL readers have read a lot in their native tongue before. Marcelina (2020) stated that reading is the most common and effective approach to increase one's vocabulary, therefore learning English without reading will severely hinder one's capacity to study the other three expertise. According to Khan et al. (2020), we cannot ignore how important reading comprehension skills are to desirable foreign language skills. Reading helps learners immerse themselves in the target language and learn effectively.

Reading Comprehension Problems

According to Pourhosein Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016), reading comprehension requires a variety of reading skills, including word recognition, fluency, lexical knowledge, and prior knowledge to be completed rapidly so that the reader can learn from the text. Kasim and Raisha (2017) states that reading comprehension issues have long been a common challenge in EFL teaching and learning environments. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the majority of EFL students frequently struggle to understand English texts. There are variety of factors that EFL learners encounter reading such as Ashraf (2023) asserted that reading can be termed as the most difficult skill for EFL learners. Some of the factors that make reading difficult for EFL learners are: lack of comprehension, lack of vocabulary, lack of grammatical ability, lack of ability to understand new vocabulary and meaning. Dennis (2008) stated that there are several factors that influence reading comprehension ability. These factors include the complexity of the text being read, environmental factors, feelings of anxiety during comprehension, the level of interest and motivation, the ability to read or understand words, the speed of decoding, and medical conditions.

Many research has been conducted in different contexts regarding difficulties in reading comprehension of EFL learners. Satriani (2018) conducted a related research in Indonesia. He has found that the learners' difficulties in reading comprehension were; no motivation of students, reading a little, not understanding a reading text and low reading skill. Iqbal et al. (2015) conducted a study and then results revealed that poor vocabulary knowledge, cramming habits, and lack of interest in learning creativity in reading played a role in hindering comprehension. Hamra and Syatriana (2010) conducted a

research in Indonesia and found that the low reading comprehension of Indonesian secondary school students is due to students' lack of vocabulary, learning support, and motivation to read.

Moreover, Abu Abeeleh, Al-Ghazo & Al-Sobh (2021) conducted a related research at Ajloun National University. Their results indicated that complexity of texts, anxiety and word recognition (decoding) are factors affecting students' reading comprehension. Likewise, Hezam et. al. (2022) have conducted the same research and their results showed that most students have the same problem, i.e., lack of vocabulary, word recognition. They add that one of the major obstacles to understanding the meaning and main concept of a text is vocabulary.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using quantitative approach to investigate reading comprehension problems among Afghan undergraduates. Survey design is used for this research. According to Creswell (2012), survey

research designs are the quantitative research's procedures in which investigators describe the attitudes, behaviors, opinions, and characteristics of a sample or entire population by providing a survey. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012) add that survey research is used for the collection of data to answer questions or test hypotheses about people's opinion based on some topic or issue. The participants of this research were 27 first year and 23 second year EFL students from the Department of English at Shaikh Zayed University in Khost, Afghanistan. A Likert scale survey questionnaire consists of 13 items was used in this research. The questionnaire was adopted from Abu Abeeleh, Al-Ghazo, and Al-Sobh (2021). Each item contains a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree as: (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree and (5) strongly Agree. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire given online via Google Form. The data derived from questionnaire, were analyzed by descriptive statistics techniques through the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 23. Also, the data computed into frequency, percentage and mean and are tabulated accordingly.

Table 1: Summary of the Demographic Information

Gender	Frequency	Percent
Male	50	100
Age	Frequency	Percent
19	19	38
20	13	26
21	13	26
22	5	10
Year of experience learning English	Frequency	Percent
3-5	28	56
6-7	13	26
8-9	9	18
Students' year of study	Frequency	Percent
First	27	54
Second	23	46

IV. RESULTS

This section presents the results obtained from the questionnaire regarding the research question "what

are the reading comprehension problems among first and second year EFL students at Shaikh Zayed University in Afghanistan?". To answer this question, frequency, percentage and means were calculated as shown in Table (2).

Table 2: Reading Comprehension Problems Among First and Second Year EFL Students

No	Items	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean
1	I faced a problem in figuring out the meanings of some new words in the reading text.	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (4%)	26 (52%)	22 (44%)	4.4
2	I faced a problem in identifying the aim behind reading comprehension.	1 (2%)	4 (8%)	2 (4%)	27 (54%)	16 (32%)	4.0
3	I faced difficulty in guessing the meanings of some new words.	0 (0%)	1 (2%)	2 (4%)	33 (66%)	14 (28%)	4.2

4	I faced a problem in distinguishing main ideas from supporting ideas in the reading text.	0 (0%)	8 (16%)	4 (8%)	33 (66%)	5 (10%)	3.7
5	I faced difficulty in extracting main and detailed ideas in the text.	0 (0%)	8 (16%)	2 (4%)	27 (54%)	13 (26%)	3.9
6	I faced difficulty in recognizing the total meaning of the text.	0 (0%)	11 (22%)	0 (0%)	28 (56%)	11 (22%)	3.7
7	I usually translate word by word when I am reading.	1 (2%)	7 (14%)	3 (6%)	25 (50%)	14 (28%)	3.8
8	I feel stressed when reading a text in English in the classroom.	1 (2%)	8 (16%)	3 (6%)	25 (50%)	13 (26%)	3.8
9	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am reading in the classroom.	1 (2%)	4 (8%)	4 (8%)	29 (58%)	12 (24%)	3.9
10	I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	2 (4%)	5 (10%)	1 (2%)	27 (54%)	15 (30%)	3.9
11	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	0 (0%)	4 (8%)	2 (4%)	32 (64%)	12 (24%)	4.0
12	I feel upset when I don't understand what I read in English.	0 (0%)	4 (8%)	2 (4%)	25 (50%)	19 (38%)	4.1
13	I faced difficulty in summarizing the main ideas of the text.	0 (0%)	9 (18%)	2 (4%)	25 (50%)	14 (28%)	3.8
Total		0.9%	11.2%	4.4%	55.6%	27.6%	3.9

The results of Table 2 illustrate that the percentage of agreement for each item is between 76% and 96%. The overall percentage indicated that great majority of respondents 83.2% agreed on reading comprehension problems among them. For item (1), 96% of respondents with mean score 4.4 agreed that they faced problem when they figure out meaning of new words in the reading text. Also, for item (3), 94% of respondents with mean score 4.2 agreed that they faced difficulties in guessing the meaning of new words. Similarly, the results for item (11), showed that 88% of respondents with mean score 4.0 agreed that even if they are well prepared for language class the feel anxious about it, while 8% disagreed and 4% are neutral. In the same way, 88 % of respondents with mean score 4.1 showed their agreement on item (12) that they feel upset when they do not understand what they read in English. For item (2), the mean score is 4.0 and percentage of respondents' agreement is, 86% which indicate that they faced the problem in identifying the aim behind the reading comprehension while 8% of respondents disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed. Similarly, for item (10), 84% of respondents with mean score 3.9 agreed that they think that the other students are better at language than they are. While 10% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed and only 2% were neutral. Also, for item (9), 82% of respondents with mean score 3.9 indicated their agreement that when they read in class, they never feel completely confident in themselves, while 8% disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed

and 8% were neutral. For item (5), 80% of respondents with mean score 3.9 agreed that they had trouble in extracting main and detailed idea in the text while, 16% disagreed and 4% were neutral. 78% of respondents with mean score 3.7 and 3.8 agreed on items (6) and (7) respectively showed that they had problem in recognizing the total meaning of the text as well as they usually translate word by word when they are reading. While, 22% and 14 % of respondents disagreed respectively and 6 % were neutral for both items. Likewise, for item (13) 78% of respondents with mean score 3.8 agreed that they had problem in summarizing main ideas of the text but 18% disagreed and 4% were neutral. For both items (4) and (8) 76% of respondents with mean score 3.7 and 3.8, showed their agreement respectively that in the reading text, it was difficult for them to separate the main ideas from the supporting ideas in reading text as well as they when they read an English text in class, they feel stressed while, for both items 16% of respondents disagreed.

V. DISCUSSION

The overall percentage mentioned above of agree and strongly agree for the reading comprehension problem among Afghan first and second year EFL students is 83.2% and mean score is 3.9. It revealed that great majority of respondents agreed on the reading comprehension problems among them whereas the

reading 12.1% were disagreeable and 4.4% were neutral. The students agreed that they have problems in understanding the meaning of new words in reading and they cannot make guessing the meaning of some new words. The students also showed that they feel anxious even they have good preparation for language class. Similarly, they feel upset when they read something in English and can't understand it. In identifying the aim behind the reading comprehension, they have encountered problem. The results also showed that every student think that the other students are good at language than he is. Also, they showed that whenever they read in class, they never feel confident and they also found it difficult to extract main and detailed ideas from the text. The results indicated that the students had trouble understanding the text's overall meaning and they translate every word individually when they are reading. Likewise, the students found it difficult to summarize the main ideas of the text as well as they had trouble distinguishing between the main idea and supporting ideas when they are reading a text. The results also revealed that students feel stressed when they read English texts in the classroom.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study explored reading comprehension problems among first and second year EFL students at Shaikh Zayed University in Afghanistan. The results of the study indicated that first and second year students faced reading comprehension problems. They have problems in understanding the meaning of new words in reading and they cannot make guessing the meaning of some new words. They feel anxious even they have good preparation for language class as well as they feel upset when they read something in English and can't understand it. The students also had trouble in identifying the aim behind the reading comprehension. Moreover, every student think that the other students are good at language than he is. Also, they showed they never feel confident whenever they read in class and they they cannot extract main and detailed ideas from the text. They also had trouble understanding the text's overall meaning and they translate every word individually when they are reading. Likewise, the students found it difficult to summarize the main ideas of the text as well as they had trouble distinguishing between the main idea and supporting ideas when they are reading a text. The results also revealed that students feel stressed when they read English texts in the classroom.

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