

Reading Comprehension Problems Encountered By EFL Students at Ajloun National University

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Abstract

This research aimed at investigating the reading comprehension problems encountered by students of Ajloun National University. The study aims also to provide more insight into the factors affecting the students' reading comprehension. For this purpose, the researchers used a questionnaire that includes general statements about the main problems that face students in reading comprehension. The participants of this study were 20 EFL students (10 males & 10 females) from the Department of English Language and Literature at Ajloun National University. The study results indicate that students have high estimation to certain problems they encounter in reading comprehension as a result of the complexity of the texts, anxiety, and word recognition (decoding). The findings of the study also revealed that there were statistically significant differences between male and female students in their reading comprehension challenges in favor of female student

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, EFL, Ajloun National University Students.

1.1 Introduction

Reading plays a crucial role in our lives. It is a significant part of everyday living that one cannot imagine life without it. There are four language skills that are used to attain English language proficiency: listening, speaking, reading and writing (Chawwang, 2008). Reading is a significant skill that learners should know. Learners read texts for various goals from gaining information to enjoyment. It helps learners to be familiar with the subjects of their majors and improve their language knowledge (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

Reading is an interactive process in which the writer and the reader dialog through a text. Barnett (1989, cited in Omaggio, 1993) defines reading as communication, as a mental process, as the reader's active participation in the creation of meaning, and as a manipulation of strategies. Moreover, Day and Bamford (2000) posit that reading is the construction of meaning from a printed or written message.

Reading is important because it is one of the most frequently used language skills in everyday life, as witnessed by the use of Internet. Students search for information through the web and most of it is published in English. "As a skill reading is clearly one of the most important, in fact in many instances around the world we may argue that reading is the most important foreign skill, particularly in cases where students have to read English material for their own specialist subject but may never actually have to speak the language; such cases are often referred to as English as a library language" (McDonough & Shaw, 1993, p. 89)

Pressley (2002), the characteristics of "a good reader" can be summarized as follows: a) are active while reading and they have explicit aims related to the text. b) Look through the text before reading and while reading they always make guesses about what is going to happen in the next session. c) Look through the passages and they try to guess the meaning and structure of words from the context. d) Use their background knowledge and check their understanding. e)

Restructure the meaning, repeat it and question it. f) Think about the characters and events when reading fictional texts. They tend to summarize informative texts. g) Assume reading as a productive process.

Reading comprehension skills are important for students to become effective readers. These skills allow us to read proficiently and learn effectively (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Most EFL (English as Foreign Language) learners may face comprehension problems while reading a text but proficient readers would face the problems by applying effective reading strategies to solve the comprehension challenges (Tobing, 2013).

1.2 Statement of Problem

There is an unclear picture about the most popular reading comprehension problems encountered by students of Ajloun National University. The students are expected to perform academically while also facing the challenge achieving English language proficiency.

Many researchers noticed that students are quite weak in English in general and reading in particular, as a result, they still find difficulties in reading comprehension. They also rely on word-to-word translation when reading English. Al Ma'ani (2007) emphasized that there are two main reasons stand behind students' poor comprehension skills. Firstly, when teaching reading, most of the EFL teachers concentrate on assessing students' comprehension at the word and sentence levels rather than concentrating on teaching reading comprehension. Secondly, students' lack of reading comprehension strategies is also considered a major cause of students' poor comprehension skills. Considering the challenges and difficulties of foreign language reading, especially the cognitive, cultural and linguistic aspects, all prove that EFL language reading is much more difficult and complicated than that in L1. In order to help learners better in enhancing their reading comprehension and tackle their reading comprehension problems, students need to identify their problems first and then think of appropriate strategies in order to improve their reading comprehension.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This research aimed at investigating the reading comprehension problems encountered by students of Ajloun National University. The study aims also to provide more insight into the factors affecting the students' reading comprehension.

1.4 Research Questions

The research aims to provide answers for the following research questions:

- 1- What are the main problems encountered by Ajloun National University Students in reading comprehension?
- 2- Are there any statistically significant differences between male and female students in their reading comprehension challenges?

To address these questions, the researchers used a questionnaire that includes general statements about the main problems the students face.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study provide information on the reading comprehension problems encountered by Ajloun National University students. This information could be used as a guideline for students for using the appropriate techniques and strategies while interacting with texts in order to improve their reading comprehension ability. The study may also help the teachers to better understand their students' reading comprehension problems and to find an appropriate way for teaching reading.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to the English language students at Ajloun National University. It is also limited to the period of implementation of the study which took place during the second semester 2019-2020. The research instrument is the questionnaire.

1.7 Definition of Terms

Reading Comprehension. Reading comprehension refers to reading ability or reading competence, and the terms are often used interchangeably. It is defined as the process of extracting and integrating information from a written text in English while applying readers' background knowledge and knowledge of English language (Koda, 2005).

Ajloun National University (ANU) is a Jordanian private educational institution of higher education. It is located on Ajloun Irbid road, 13 km from Ajloun city and 17 km from Irbid.

2. Review of Related Literature

Reading does not include only reading the text, but it means to understand and comprehend the text. Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills to be acquired during a language course. As comprehension is a personal creation of meaning, reading comprehension may be considered a problem that faces students of English as a foreign language (Bani Issa, 2004). In this chapter, I discuss the literature relevant to this study.

2.2 Theoretical Literature

Reading comprehension is a complex process that involves components, processes, and factors with the aim of finding better ways of improving it among learners (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). In reading a text, students face many problems obstructing their reading comprehension. For example, the problems related to background knowledge, cultural knowledge, and knowledge of text type (Chawwang, 2008).

Researches on reading comprehension show that EFL learners face some difficulties when they read. In fact, students suffer mainly from understanding vocabulary. This problem may fall into multiple categories among them, learners may have difficulties for example with words that have similar lexical forms; some words seem to be phonetically the same (in terms of sounds) as in "boss" and "bus", also in "cut" and "cat", other words seem to be similar at the level of morphology like the words "receptive" and "deceptive".

2.2.1 Definition of Reading Comprehension

Birsch (2011) defined reading comprehension as the ability to get meaning from what is read. According to Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016), 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.

Tompkins (2011) defined reading comprehension as the level of comprehending a text. He argues that comprehension is a creative process that hinges on four skills called phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.

2.2.2 Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension Skills

Some studies have indicated that the students' reading comprehension is affected by several factors. According to Dennis (2008), one of the factors that impact learners' reading comprehension is the complexity of the texts. Such factor is affected by the reader's strength and fluency in language and their comprehending of its applications and different meanings.

The environmental conditions also influence the learners who try to read a passage. If learners are in an unsafe place, they find it difficult to focus on their reading. Readers may lose their concentration in understanding a text when there are noises like televisions or radios (Dennis, 2008). The anxiety is also a factor that affects the learners' reading comprehension. Exams, class works, or homework situations may put pressure on the learners' reading for enjoyment. Learners differ in their reaction toward examinations, as some react positively while others are overwhelmed by the pressure to perform a reading activity (Dennis, 2008).

Dennis (2008) also indicates that interest and motivation are very important in developing the learners' reading comprehension. If the readers find the reading material monotonous, they will have a lot of problems in concentrating on their comprehension. Hollowell (2013) finds that medical problems are a factor that affects the learners' reading comprehension. Poor reading comprehension skills may be related to the medical difficulty that does not get addressed until the child is older. This involves attention deficit disorder (ADD), speech problems, and hearing impairments.

Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) indicate that decoding or word recognition has an impact on learners' reading comprehension. Readers who have problems in decoding and recognizing words find it difficult to understand the meaning of passages than those without decoding problems. Learners who have enough vocabulary can clarify the meaning of passages faster than those who should guess the meaning of unfamiliar words according to the clues of context.

2.2.3 Effective Strategies for Improving Reading Comprehension Skills

His application of effective comprehension strategies is very important when learners want to improve their reading comprehension skill. These strategies provide particular instructions for expanding comprehension skills (Cain & Oakhill, 2009).

Each kind of texts requires using different reading strategies. Some readers interact with texts by using strategies such as predicting, forecasting, deducing, summarizing, examining, and evaluating (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). There are some useful strategies for improving reading comprehension skill. They are reciprocal teaching, instructional conversations, visualization, partner reading, multiple reading strategies, assessment, and running records. According to reciprocal teaching, teachers teach learners to predict, summarize, clarify, and ask questions for parts of a text. These strategies have been regarded as effective strategies for developing learners' reading comprehension skill. That is, learners will develop stronger reading comprehension skills on their own if teachers give them mental instruments for understanding a text (Pressley, 2002).

2.3 Empirical Studies

There are many studies that were conducted to investigate the reading comprehension problems encountered by EFL students.

Alshumaimeri (2011) conducted a study entitled: "**The Effect of Reading Method on the Comprehension Performance of Saudi EFL Students**". This study investigated the relative effects of different reading methods on the comprehension performance of Saudi EFL 10th grade male students. This research used a classroom-based, quasi-experimental design. The sample consists of 145 Saudi male students in the 10th grade in a secondary school in Riyadh, KSA. The collected data consisted of the comprehension scores obtained from five multiple-choice questions designed for each of three selected passages read by the participants in three ways (oral, silent and sub vocalizing). The findings revealed a significant difference between oral reading and sub vocalizing, and between oral reading and silent reading. Oral reading had the greatest effect on comprehension performance among the three reading methods examined. All groups reported that oral reading was the most preferred reading method with the majority of respondents feeling the style best supported comprehension. Feedback suggested that oral reading was preferred specifically because it helps in memorizing words and texts, concentration, and practicing and pronouncing words for real world encounters.

Rahimi & Talepaskan (2012) conducted a study entitled: "**Exploring EFL Learners Reading Comprehension Problems in Reading ESP Texts**". This study aimed at exploring the EFL learners' reading comprehension problems in reading ESP texts in ESP classes. The study sample consisted of 185 students who were learning English as a foreign language. Chi-square analysis showed that 15 major syntactic categories are serious hurdle to reading comprehension of ESP texts. The study assumed that if teachers get aware about their learners' problems, they can better help learners tackle their problems.

Elmadwi & Shepherd (2014) conducted a study entitled: "**A Critical Study of the Problems Faced by the Libyan Students in Reading and Comprehension of English as a Foreign Language**". This study aimed at exploring the reading strategy most often used among Libyan university students, to show how male and females use learning strategies when they face a text in English, and also to show the relationship between the learners' strategies use and their EFL proficiency. A random sample consists of 120 students (60 males and 60 females) in the English Department at Zawia University, Libya. The researcher used a quantitative research method. Data collection methods involve two techniques; a test and a questionnaire for students. The results of the study show that the most frequently Reading strategies used was meta-cognitive strategies, there is a statistically differences between male and female learners in their use of language learning strategies. Furthermore, the results also show differences between students' level of proficiency and their use of language learning strategies.

Medjahdi (2015) conducted a study entitled: "**Reading Comprehension Difficulties among EFL Learners: the Case of Third-Year Learners at Nehali Mohamed Secondary School**". This study aimed at investigating the reading difficulties that third-year secondary school learners face, and at identifying their reading problems and the reasons behind their weaknesses in performing the reading task. The study sample consists of third year learners and teachers at Nehali Mohamed Secondary School in Algeria. The researcher used a questionnaire and interview as research instruments. The study revealed that the most of the learners have difficulties in reading comprehension at the level of pronunciation and ambiguous words which prevent them from understanding the passage, as well as the nature of the selected text has an impact on the learners' reading achievement.

A study by Al-Jahwari & Al_Humaidi (2015) entitled: "**Prior Knowledge in EFL Reading Comprehension: Omani Teachers' Perspectives & Classroom Strategies**". This study aimed at investigating three main aspects related to prior knowledge in EFL reading comprehension in Oman: teachers' view of the role of prior knowledge, the instructional strategies they use for activating students' prior knowledge, and the difficulties they face when activating students, prior knowledge. The researchers used three instruments: a questionnaire, an observation checklist, and a semi-structured interview. The study sample consisted of 82 teachers in Batinah North Region for the Academic Year

2009-2010. The findings of the study showed a strong agreement of the role of prior knowledge in text comprehension, a heavy reliance on limited number of techniques and a clear attribution of the difficulties to sources such as students' limited linguistic competence and lack of adequate teacher training on schema theory and its instructional techniques.

As it can be seen in the studies, there are many factors that cause the problems of reading comprehension. The researcher realized that students' reading problems concerning vocabulary and sentence structure are regarded as a barrier to understand texts. Few researches have been done to investigate students' reading comprehension problems related to these six areas: (a) Complexity of the text, (b) Anxiety (c) Environmental Conditions, (d) Interest and Motivation, (e) Word Recognition (Decoding) and, (f) Medical Problems.

In addition, few researchers have studied the reading comprehension problems encountered by Jordanian universities students in general and Ajloun National University in particular.

Therefore, this study came to focus on the reading comprehension problems of university students. The study may also help the teachers to better understand their students' reading comprehension problems and to find an appropriate way for teaching reading.

3. Methodology of the Study

This section deals with the research methodology and procedures. It includes the different aspects of research methodology; the participant of the study, the research hypotheses, data collection, the research instrument and its validity and reliability, and appropriate statistical analysis.

3.1 Participants of the Study

The participants of this study were 20 third year EFL students (10 males & 10 females) from the Department of English Language and Literature at Ajloun National University.

Table (1)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	MALE	11	55.0	55.0	55.0
	FEMALE	9	45.0	45.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

Table No. (1) Shows that % 55 of the sample was males, and %45 was females.

3.2 Instruments of the Study

A questionnaire was prepared by the researcher in view of the literature. The questionnaire addressed the potential areas of challenges to the students such as a problem in figuring out the meanings of some new words, difficulty in guessing the meanings of some new words, distinguishing main ideas from supporting ideas in the reading text, the classroom size which deters the comprehension of the reading texts, rarity of using the dictionary to look up meanings of difficult words in the reading text, lack of training on comprehending the text, reading the text to pass the exam instead of enjoying and interacting with it. A total of 20 questionnaires were distributed and collected, the 20 questionnaires data were suitable to be tested. Likert Scale) was used in order to answer the questionnaire items based on these values:

- **Totally Agree:** (5) points
- **Agree:** (4) points
- **Neutral:** (3) points
- **Disagree:** (2) points
- **Totally Disagree:** (1) point

3.3 Validity of the Instrument

The questionnaire was forwarded to 4 university EFL teachers of different ranks to check its content and the relevance of the items. Modifications were done according to their suggestions.

3.4 Reliability of the Instrument

After the application of the questionnaire and the collection of the relevant data from the sample of the current study, a smaller number of 7 students out of the sample of this study were given the questionnaire to respond to in order to establish the reliability coefficient. Cronbach's Alpha values were more than %74.2 which indicates that the questionnaire has suitable reliability, to analysis its data.

The Questionnaire Correcting Method

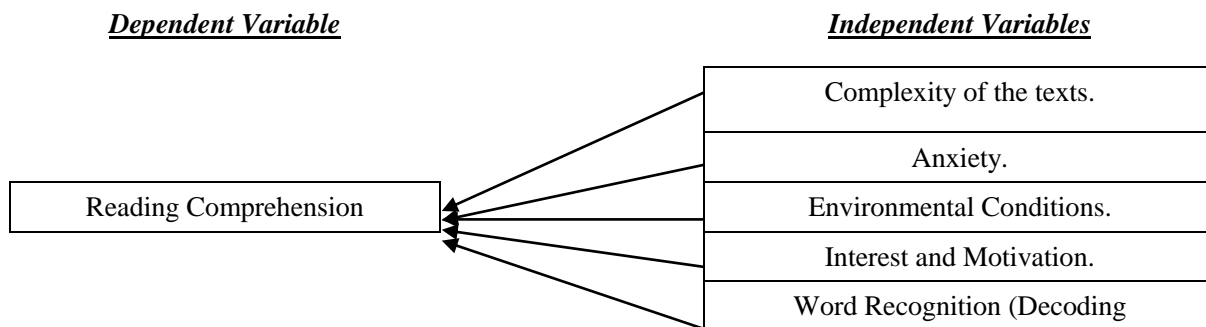
The researchers used the following categories to judge the items estimation:

- Means (1-less than 2.33) low estimation
- Means (2.34-less than 3.66) medium estimation
- Means (3.67-5) high estimation.

3.5 Procedures

After getting the permission to conduct the research, the data collection was conducted in 2020. After completing the questionnaires, the quantitative data will be analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The specific data analysis tool used is regression, both simple and multiple regressions.

3.6 Study Model



4. Results and Discussion

Results related to the first question of the study:

What are the main problems encountered by Ajloun National University Students in reading comprehension?

Table (2)
Means and Std. Deviation of Reading Comprehension Problems

No.	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I faced a problem in figuring out the meanings of some new words in the reading text.	3.9500	.99868
2	I faced a problem in identifying the aim behind reading comprehension.	3.6500	.81273
3	I faced difficulty in guessing the meanings of some new words	3.8500	1.08942
4	I faced a problem in distinguishing main ideas from supporting ideas in the reading text	3.5500	1.27630

5	I faced difficulty in extracting main and detailed ideas in the text	3.9500	1.09904
6	I faced difficulty in recognizing the total meaning of the text	3.9000	1.02084
7	I usually translate word by word when I am reading	3.9500	.88704
8	I feel stressed when reading a text in English in the classroom.	3.7500	1.01955
9	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am reading in the classroom.	3.5500	.68633
10	I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	3.9500	.99868
11	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	3.3500	1.13671
12	I feel upset when I don't understand what I read in English	3.2500	.96655
13	I faced difficulty in summarizing the main ideas of the text	3.5000	.76089
Average		3.704	0.989

Table No. 2 indicates the attitudes of the participants towards questionnaire statements; Average mean (3.704), standard deviation (0.989). It is noted that the average mean was more than (3.500), that indicates that there is high degree of estimation for the variables of the study.

The analysis of questionnaire reveals that these students are suffering from problems, such as figuring out the meanings of some new words in the reading text, extracting main and detailed ideas in the text, keeping thinking that the other students are better at language than he/ she is, recognizing the total meaning of the text, guessing the meanings of some new words, feeling stressed when reading a text in English in the classroom. The study participants usually translate word by word when they read a text.

The study participants have moderate estimation of the problem in identifying the aim behind reading comprehension, problem in distinguishing main ideas from supporting ideas in the reading text, difficulty in summarizing the main ideas of the text. Even if they are well prepared for language class, they feel anxious about it. They feel upset when they do not understand what they read in English. They never feel quite sure of themselves when they are reading in the classroom.

Results related to the Second question of the study:

Are there any statistically significant differences between male and female students in their reading comprehension challenges?

To answer this question, arithmetic mean, and standard deviation were run the results shown in table (3):

Table (3)

Means and Std. Deviation of RCP according to gender

No.	Statement	Males		Females	
		Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean
1	I faced a problem in figuring out the meanings of some new words in the reading text.	3.818	1.168	4.111	0.782
2	I faced a problem in identifying the aim behind reading comprehension.	3.818	0.751	3.444	0.882

3	I faced difficulty in guessing the meanings of some new words	3.636	1.120	4.111	1.054
4	I faced a problem in distinguishing main ideas from supporting ideas in the reading text	4.273	0.786	2.667	1.225
5	I faced difficulty in extracting main and detailed ideas in the text	4.273	0.905	3.556	1.236
6	I faced difficulty in recognizing the total meaning of the text	4.273	0.905	3.444	1.014
7	I usually translate word by word when I am reading	4.364	0.505	3.444	1.014
8	I feel stressed when reading a text in English in the classroom.	4.182	0.751	3.222	1.093
9	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am reading in the classroom.	3.909	0.539	3.111	0.601
10	I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	4.000	0.632	3.889	1.364
11	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	3.727	1.104	2.889	1.054
12	I feel upset when I don't understand what I read in English	3.546	0.820	2.889	1.054
13	I faced difficulty in summarizing the main ideas of the text	3.546	0.820	3.444	0.726
Average		3.951	0.831	3.402	1.008

Table No. 2 indicates the attitudes of the participants towards questionnaire statements; according to gender. The average mean of reading comprehension problems for males were (3.951), S.t (0.831). The average mean of reading comprehension problems for females were (3.402), S.t (1.008). It is noted that the average mean of reading comprehension problems for males was at high level of estimation and more than females which was at moderate level of estimation.

To clear-out if those differences were statistically significant Paired Samples Test were run; table (4) shows the results:

Table (4)
Paired Samples Test

Gender	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower				Upper
males –	4.0248	.25768	.07769	.17485	.98606	3.189	10	.010
Females	3.4444	.46608	.14053					

Table (4) shows that t was (3.189) at significance level (0.01) which is lower than (0.05) that indicates that there are any statistically significant differences between male and female students in their reading comprehension challenges. (males have more reading comprehension problems than females). The results indicate that there are statistically significant differences due to gender (male and female) in their reading comprehension challenges in favor of males. (Males have more reading comprehension problems than females).

The questionnaire does not include questions whose answers might correlate with this results, but the researcher suggests that the females' higher level in reading comprehension may be associated with the school system factors, as the girls may have more regular lessons in language, and this can contribute to their higher level in reading comprehension. As well as, girls use reading strategies more than boys; also girls have more reading skills than boys.

5. Conclusion:

This study tried to examine the reading comprehension problems encountered by English Language students at Ajloun National University. The study results indicate that students have high estimation to certain problems they encounter in reading comprehension as a result of the complexity of the texts, anxiety, and word recognition (decoding).

The findings of the study also revealed that there are statistically significant differences between male and female students in their reading comprehension challenges. When male and female learners were compared, female learners also showed a higher performance of comprehension and indicted a higher level of EFL proficiency.

6. Recommendations

The researchers recommend the following:

- 1- It is important to make a deeper investigation on the impact of the learners' level and background knowledge on reading comprehension, so the researcher recommends that researchers conduct similar studies at other universities.
- 2- It is important to encourage students to read as much as possible, because in this way they will find a great help in their process of language learning.
- 3- Teachers should encourage students to re-read passages. They will be able to read with increased speed and fluency, which will allow them to extract more knowledge from what they read.

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Appendices
Appendix 1
Questionnaire

Part (A) Information about the students

Please assign (x) in the appropriate box, or answer the given question.

1. Sex: Male Female

Part (B) mark the suitable answer by assigning (X)

Statement	Totally Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Totally Disagree
I faced a problem in figuring out the meanings of some new words in the reading text					
I faced a problem in identifying the aim behind reading comprehension					
I faced difficulty in guessing the meanings of some new words					
I faced a problem in distinguishing main ideas from supporting ideas in the reading text					
I faced difficulty in extracting main and detailed ideas in the text					
I faced difficulty in recognizing the total meaning of the text					
I usually translate word by word when I am reading					
I feel stressed when reading a text in English in the classroom.					
I never feel quite sure of myself when I am reading in the classroom.					
I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.					
Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.					
I feel upset when I don't understand what I read in English					
I faced difficulty in summarizing the main ideas of the text					
I don't face difficulty with reference questions					
I find text mapping an easy task for me					