

"Difficulties in Reading Comprehension by Arab Students at University Level"

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1. Introduction:

Language is one of the main ways people communicate. Languages consist of a sophisticated system of written and spoken symbols used to exchange information and ideas. Reading is one of the four basic language skills and is particularly important because of its crucial role in education and knowledge acquisition. English is taught in schools and colleges in Libya as part of the curriculum and is considered a foreign language (EFL) (Kirkpatrick, 2009). However, one of the problems faced by students at university level is reading comprehension difficulties. Studies indicate that reading requires the ability to perceive written words, understand texts, and decode their contents. Reading is an advanced cognitive activity that supports the development of critical thinking and information acquisition. This process is characterized by its function of interpretation and analysis, as well as its overlap with visual ability. According to Yagcioglu and Deger (2002), reading is the cornerstone of lifelong learning, so teaching reading requires precise scientific methods that complement the learning process. (Yagcioglu, D., & Deger, M. (2002)

Poor pronunciation, lack of vocabulary, and inability to understand grammatical patterns are all major factors contributing to the reading challenges faced by Libyan students. Reading is a mental activity that requires in-depth analysis and engagement with texts rather than being a mere memory exercise. As a result, it is essential to enhance reading abilities by creating an engaging learning environment and using contemporary technology in English language teaching. (Smith, F., & Taylor, J., 2015) Given the importance of reading in higher education, it has now become necessary to study the challenges faced by Libyan students and create innovative teaching methods that meet their cultural and academic requirements.

1.1. Problem Statement

A large group of Libyan university students confront multiple challenges in understanding texts written in English, which directly affects their academic achievement and their ability to benefit from the materials. These difficulties are represented by several factors, including weak basic language skills such as pronunciation and understanding grammar, and lack of exposure to English texts in an appropriate educational environment.

This study focuses on analyzing the most prominent reading difficulties facing by Libyan students, such as weak linguistic knowledge, difficulty interpreting the meanings of vocabulary from context, and inability to interact effectively with academic texts. It also aims to examine the most appropriate methods for assessing their ability to understand texts, whether through open-ended or multiple-choice questions, to provide practical recommendations for improving English language learning outcomes at the university level.

1.2. Research Questions

This study focuses on answering a set of questions to understand the reading difficulties faced by Libyan university students when dealing with texts written in English. These questions are:

1. To what extent do different reading difficulties, such as lack of vocabulary, difficulty in pronunciation, and understanding grammar, affect the ability of Libyan university students to comprehend English texts?
2. What role do the learning environment and the educational methods used play in enhancing or reducing these difficulties?
3. What are the most effective questions in assessing the level of comprehension of English texts among Libyan students?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to identify the basic aspects that affect students' ability to comprehend English texts and suggest educational methods that help improve their academic performance.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Reading and Reading Difficulties:

According to Deavers (2000), Reading is an essential tool for knowledge transfer and the habit of reading is an academic activity that increases skills in reading strategies. Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction between the reader, the text, and the context of the reading situation (Dadzie, 2008). Reading habits, therefore, play a very crucial role in enabling a person to achieve practical efficiency (Hadfield, J. & Hadfield, C,2008).

Students with reading difficulties show unexpected reading problems based on factors such as age, cognitive ability, intervention, and the amount and quality of training they receive. It can be described as challenges in comprehension, sight word reading, and single word reading. As texts consist of words or syllables, problems processing spelling and writing are often associated with reading impairment. Despite efforts to address this problem, the challenge will continue for students with it. Although it is still characterized by a slower rate, reading abilities in these students may improve (Eissa et al., 2012).

Regardless of the underlying factors that contribute to reading difficulties, there are several types of challenges that are frequently observed among students. According to Devers (2000), these challenges include issues with reading habits, word recognition errors, comprehension difficulties, and a host of other symptoms.

For professional or educational reasons, studying English has been a top priority for many people in recent years. Innovative teaching strategies and procedures have been developed as a result of identifying the needs of students studying English (Tabby, 2004). One such approach that seeks to address students' requirements in a systematic and targeted manner is English for Specific Purposes (ESP). According to (Ogbode ,2010), one of the most common forms of reading to achieve intended goals is focused reading. It serves as the basis for outcome-oriented reading because it successfully promotes academic and professional goals.

2.1. Related Studies:

Several studies have been conducted to identify the main reasons for the difficulties of reading comprehension in English as a foreign language among university students. The study "Reading Comprehension Difficulties among EFL Learners: The Case of First- and Second-Year Students at Yarmouk University in Jordan" conducted by (Mohammad Qarqaz and Radwan Ab Rashed in 2017), which aimed to analyze the reading comprehension difficulties among students at Yarmouk University in Jordan. The data were collected using questionnaires distributed to 200 students, where the questionnaires included demographic information about the participants, their preferences, and their difficulties in reading.

The results showed that students have a high motivation to learn English due to their urgent need to master it. However, they confront multiple problems during the reading process, most notably: ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited time to process texts. Based on these results, the study recommended providing intensive training to improve vocabulary and enhance students' abilities to deal with academic texts. The study "Challenges and Problems of Reading Comprehension Experienced by EFL Learners" conducted by (Taha Ahmed Hazem et al. in 2022), which aimed to explore the reading comprehension difficulties faced by EFL students in the Intensive English Program at Bisha University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and to analyze gender differences in facing these challenges. This study relied on a quantitative approach, as an electronic questionnaire was distributed to 301 male and female students from the university students. The questionnaire included two sections: the first covered general information about the students, and the second focused on the challenges of reading comprehension, including linguistic and psychological problems associated with the reading process.

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The results showed that most students face common problems, most notably a lack of vocabulary and difficulty recognizing words. Vocabulary was found to be the greatest obstacle to comprehend texts and extract meanings and general ideas. The results also showed that students of both genders face similar challenges when reading English texts, indicating that these problems are common to all students regardless of gender. The study concluded that intervention is necessary to improve students' reading comprehension skills, with an emphasis on enhancing English language learning in general.

An Investigation into the Reading Comprehension Problems Faced by the Pakistani Students at University Level conducted by (Akbar Ali, et al in 2022), which aimed to analyze the reading comprehension problems faced by university students in Pakistan, with a focus on students from Kohat University of Science and Technology and University of Tribal Areas (FATA).

This study adopted a quantitative and qualitative approach, with 64 students and 9 professors from the English departments of the two universities participating. Data was collected using a Likert-scale questionnaire as well as semi-structured interviews. The questions focused on reading comprehension challenges and teaching practice.

The results showed that students confront multiple difficulties in understanding English texts, most notably: length of sentences, poor grammar, lack of vocabulary, frequent reliance on dictionaries, and lack of reading of English texts. The study also confirmed that teachers should encourage students to read as a basic skill for learning the foreign language. The study concluded that it is important to enhance students' reading abilities by improving grammar and vocabulary teaching and encouraging regular reading of English texts.

The study "The Relationship between Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Knowledge of Libyan EFL Learners at Misurata University" was conducted by (Aisha Fathi Abu Gharsa and Awisha Fathi Al-Amin in 2022), which aimed to investigate the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension among EFL students in the English Department, Faculty of Arts, Misurata University, the study relied on a test designed to measure reading comprehension and students' ability to know the meanings of vocabulary. The study also sought to test which type of questions, open or multiple choice, leads to better results in assessing students' understanding of texts.

The results showed a significant relationship between students' ability to understand texts and their performance in questions related to vocabulary knowledge. The results also showed no significant differences in students' performance between answering open questions and multiple-choice questions.

Furthermore, this study concluded that it is important to enhance students' reading skills and improve their vocabulary knowledge, with a suggestion to integrate diverse teaching methods to assess their abilities more accurately.

3. Discussion:

The studies, mentioned above, referred to multiple similarities and differences in reading comprehension difficulties among university students studying English as a foreign language. Those studies showed that reading difficulties are a common challenge for university students, with the emphasis on vocabulary deficiency as the main factor behind these obstacles. The research tools used generally relied on questionnaires and reading tests aimed at measuring the relationship between text comprehension and vocabulary knowledge, as evidenced by the study of Abu Gharsa and Al-Amin, which focused on comparing students' performance in multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

Despite the general similarities among the studies in identifying the main problems, such as weak grammar, vocabulary deficiency, and difficulty dealing with academic texts, the aspects that each study focused on showed clear variation. The study of (Qarqaz and Rashid,2017) focused on the general challenges facing first- and second-year students, while the study of (Taha Hazam et al,2022) addressed gender differences in facing reading difficulties. On the other hand, the study by (Akbar Ali et al,2022) combined quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the effect of sentence length, weak grammar, and the role of teachers, while the study by (Abu Gharsa and Al-Amin ,2022) focused specifically on the relationship between vocabulary and text comprehension.

The differences in research methodologies were also evident; while some studies, such as (Qarqaz and Rashid), relied on questionnaires only, others, such as (Akbar Ali), combined questionnaires with semi-structured interviews. As for the target audience, (Taha Hazam's) study focused on students at Bisha University in Saudi Arabia, while (Qarqaz and Rashid's) study covered students at Yarmouk University in Jordan, and (Akbar Ali's) study focused on students at Pakistani universities.

As for the results of (Abu Gharsa and Al-Amin ,2022) showed equal performance of students in multiple-choice and open-ended questions, which distinguished it from other studies that focused on the nature of the challenges rather than analyzing assessment methods. The importance of these studies in the context of the current study is highlighted by clarifying the main causes of reading difficulties among Libyan students, such as lack of vocabulary and deficient grammar. The study of (Abu Gharsa and Al-Amin) provided a specific local context for analyzing these difficulties in regard to the Libyan environment. On the hand, other studies

provided comparative insights that contribute to understanding the differences and similarities between students from diverse cultural and academic backgrounds.

4. Conclusion:

The studies reveal that reading comprehension difficulties are a common problem among university students learning English as a foreign language. Vocabulary deficiencies emerged as the primary challenge, accompanied by poor grammatical knowledge and difficulties in dealing with academic texts. The findings of these studies underscore the need to improve the students' vocabulary and grammar teaching methods. In addition, teachers should adopt innovative strategies and assist students to be exposed to real and authentic reading texts. This is to overcome and minimize the reading obstacles.

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