

Reading Comprehension Challenges in the EFL Classrooms

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Abstract—Several studies in the field of education have delved into the reading comprehension challenges encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and the perspectives of stakeholders within EFL classrooms on this issue. This paper specifically and extensively explores both linguistic and non-linguistic reading comprehension obstacles that are encountered by EFL learners. It also aims to explore the key factors that cause such difficulties. In addition, it attempts to identify how students handle reading comprehension texts and their accompanying activities. The study consisted of a group of undergraduate students in the English Department at Al-Qunfudhah University College, Saudi Arabia. A qualitative approach, including observation and semi-structured interviews, was conducted to collect data. The findings showed that most students encountered some difficulties related to linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of reading comprehension. Additionally, the results revealed certain key factors, such as a lack of awareness about the importance of reading, a lack of good reading habits, and teaching methods, that might lead to such difficulties. Finally, the classroom observations indicated that students had some misconceptions about the practice of reading while reading the given texts. A number of recommendations were included in this study to overcome such obstacles.

Index Terms—reading comprehension, reading challenges, strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading is considered one of the most important receptive skills. It is required for knowledge, pleasure, and the understanding of what is read. As Oakhill et al. (2015) state, “reading comprehension is important, not just for understanding text, but for broader learning, success in education, and employment” (p. 1). Readers read different kinds of texts, such as published articles, reports, short stories, reviews, and poems, for different purposes, and possessing good reading skills plays a vital role in understanding and learning. However, there are several other reasons behind why someone should read, such as improving vocabulary and grammar knowledge, acquiring a language, and developing reading comprehension (Harmer, 2007).

One of the goals of reading comprehension is identifying meaning from the text. Kırmızı (2011) notes that “comprehension involves constructing meaning that is reasonable and accurate by connecting what has been read to what the reader already knows and thinks about all of this information until it is understood” (p. 290). Therefore, reading comprehension enables readers to understand the gist of a text and its supporting details. Also, reading comprehension helps students become active readers. Qarqez and Ab Rashid (2017) point out that a reader needs to decode the words to make them comprehensible. Oakhill et al. (2015) further report that decoding words in the text is a crucial process central to comprehending the entirety of the text successfully.

Reading comprehension is becoming an increasingly key component among the various reading skills. First, it gives students the opportunity to understand the text effectively. Comprehension skills enable readers to use their background knowledge and context to understand what is read and link the main idea with other relevant information. Also, reading comprehension texts encourage readers to use different techniques - skimming, scanning, and predicting - to become better readers. Indeed, a wide range of skills is demanded here. However, in order to be effective readers, students need to identify different comprehension techniques, from simple to complex, to support themselves in dealing with different levels of text complexity.

A number of different activities can be applied to contribute to the enhancement of reading comprehension and to evaluating readers' comprehension skills. These include pre-reading activities, while-reading activities, and post-reading activities, which, accompanied by reading comprehension texts, are valuable exercises that students need to master (Güzel, 2022). However, several issues can lead to EFL students facing reading comprehension difficulties.

To meet the objectives of this study, the paper adopted a qualitative research framework comprising interviews and classroom observations to identify, describe and explain the main linguistic and non-linguistic challenges students encounter in their reading comprehension, as well as exploring a number of measures taken to overcome these challenges. The research offers some reflections on how EFL learners can better handle reading comprehension texts and activities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading comprehension challenges are not limited to low-level students; even higher-level learners may struggle to comprehend a text. Such challenges can arise for several reasons. Some of them are related to linguistic factors, while others are related to non-linguistic factors.

Comprehending reading texts goes beyond vocabulary knowledge, comprising as it does phonological, lexical, and syntactical knowledge. Qarqez and Ab Rashid (2017) reveal some examples of the difficulties readers encounter when comprehending such aspects, including ambiguous words and unfamiliar vocabulary. Similarly, Satriani (2018) reports that students encounter numerous linguistic obstacles in reading comprehension, naming complex grammar and sentence structure among them. Likewise, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) identify some linguistic problems such as lack of linguistic knowledge, vocabulary and grammar, and the inability to recognize the type of text structure. Oakhill et al. (2015) contend that “if a reader cannot understand word meaning and has trouble understanding at the sentence level, then, obviously, comprehension of the text as a whole will be compromised” (p. 30). Similarly, Kasim and Raisha (2017) point out that readers that face some challenges related to meaning variations, such as distinguishing between homonyms or homophones, also exhibit a lack of knowledge when it comes to collocations and idioms. Raihan and Nezami (2012) found that the students in their study faced obstacles related to spelling and pronunciation. In other words, vocabulary knowledge is essential but is insufficient to comprehensively understand a text. Thus, readers need to go beyond text content and make an interpretation based on other clues.

Reading comprehension also entails acquiring non-linguistic abilities to go beyond the text. The capacity of reading a written text is important, but non-linguistic competence is essential to comprehend, analyze, and evaluate texts successfully. Several studies have identified non-linguistic reading comprehension challenges. Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018), for example, mention a lack of attention as one of the problems that lead to failure when it comes to reading comprehension. Febriani et al. (2019) reported that the students in their study faced challenges with the reading process, motivation, background knowledge, strategies, and language knowledge. Furthermore, Khataee and Dowlatabadi (2023) state that background knowledge “can facilitate EFL learners’ reading comprehension” (p. 2). Likewise, Yousef et al. (2014) argue that there is a relationship between prior background knowledge and reading comprehension. Readers’ prior knowledge, in short, can help them comprehend a text. Similarly, Smith et al. (2021) mention that a lack of background knowledge results in an inability to comprehend a text and infer meaning successfully. Long and unfamiliar texts and a lack of motivation limit students’ reading comprehension (Satriani, 2018). Hence, successful reading comprehension demands acquiring different skills and strategies.

A number of approaches, for example, metacognitive strategies, can be applied to the comprehension of reading texts effectively, thereby reducing potential reading comprehension difficulties. Sheorey and Mokhtary (2001) define metacognitive strategies as “those intentional, carefully planned techniques by which learners monitor or manage their reading” (p. 436). Other studies have discovered the correlation between metacognitive strategies and reading comprehension performance. For example, Bouknify (2023) says that metacognitive strategies enable readers to comprehend what they read and reflect on their own understanding. Alqahtani (2019) argues for a strong link between metacognitive strategies and reading comprehension. Metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluation contribute positively to reading comprehension and, in turn, academic success. These strategies support students to interact with the text, monitor their understanding, and control their comprehension processes (Samarajewa, 2023). Therefore, it is advocated that such strategies should be incorporated in the EFL classrooms.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Statement of the Problem*

Despite teachers' ongoing efforts to improve students' reading comprehension, students still encounter challenges in reading comprehension texts and their activities. This critical problem could affect their language proficiency and academic performance. Consequently, this paper attempts to investigate the challenges and factors that cause such failures.

B. *Significance of the Study*

This study is crucial to enhancing stakeholders' understanding of the reading comprehension difficulties that EFL learners face. It also encourages both learners and teachers to identify the appropriate techniques for teaching and learning in class. Additionally, it provides stakeholders with important recommendations to reduce such obstacles. Moreover, this paper also hopes to encourage lecturers to take further steps in assessing their teaching approaches in the EFL classroom, as well as seeking to create a connection between reading comprehension difficulties among EFL learners and reading strategies and techniques.

C. *Aims and Research Questions*

This study aims to:

1. Identify the potential reading comprehension challenges encountered by EFL learners.
2. Explore the factors that lead to such challenges.
3. Explore how students deal with reading comprehension texts and their activities.

To achieve these aims, this paper will seek answers to the following key research questions:

1. What reading comprehension challenges are encountered by EFL learners?
2. What are the key factors that lead to such challenges?
3. How do students deal with reading comprehension texts and their activities?

D. Pilot Study

This study reports on a pilot study that was undertaken at Al-Qunfudhah University College in 2024 as a practical guide to meeting this paper's aims. The intended benefits identified in conducting such a pilot study include:

1. Raising students' awareness of using key reading comprehension strategies and skills.
2. Monitoring students' reactions to reading texts.
3. Exploring aspects of students' strengths and weaknesses in the classroom.
4. Exploring students' reading comprehension challenges and how they deal with reading texts.
5. Linking the key findings of another research method (interviews) with students' actions in the classroom.

A total of 48 undergraduate students participated in this study. None of the students reported physical or mental disabilities. They were taught strategies such as skimming, scanning, and predicting, as well as how to employ them before, during, and after reading. They were exposed to six reading texts with pre-reading activities, during-reading activities, and post-reading activities. Notes were made to track the students' progress and the way they dealt with comprehension texts. Besides notes, the students were asked to read the texts and answer a series of questions and then to write down their feedback after each comprehension text regarding the difficulties they encountered reading the texts.

E. Ethical Considerations

To protect the participants' rights and ensure there were no ethical issues that would have negative consequences for the participants during data collection in this study, ethical considerations were considered, namely:

1. The privacy of the participants and their information will remain anonymous and be respected and secured.
2. Politeness and patience are required.
3. Criticism of participants' thoughts and opinions will be avoided.
4. The participants were asked to sign a consent form.
5. The participants were provided with a copy of the information sheet.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are based on qualitative data, including semi-structured interviews with lecturers, structured interviews with students, and classroom observations.

A. Findings of the Lecturer Interviews

Four lecturers were interviewed face to face. Two techniques were followed - using a recorder and taking notes on interview sheets. Each interview lasted between 30-35 minutes. The data were transcribed and printed to make brief notes. They were categorized into major and sub-themes based on the given answers to aid analysis of the data. Figure 1 displays the interview themes.

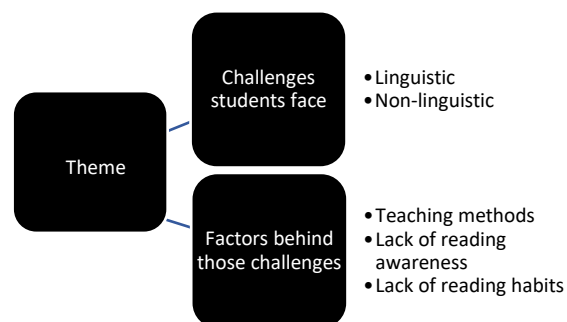


Figure 1. Interview Themes (Lecturers)

In response to the first theme - challenges that learners encounter in the EFL classrooms - the respondents expressed their concern about certain difficulties that hinder learners' reading comprehension. These difficulties include

insufficient vocabulary knowledge, lack of practice, lack of strategic reading, and the interference of their native language. Here are some different excerpts from the interviews:

Interviewee 1: The biggest challenge students face in reading comprehension is vocabulary knowledge. They do not have enough vocabulary to understand the content. A good vocabulary knowledge enables them to understand reading texts successfully.

Interviewee 1: Dictionaries are one of the most used tools in learning English. However, EFL learners use them as a sole source. They need to use some strategies to learn and read successfully.

Interviewee 2: In reading classes, I find my students rely heavily on their native language, Arabic. They use Google to translate words and sentences.

Interviewee 4: Most students are not familiar with reading strategies like skimming, scanning, and summarizing. So, they struggle with reading texts.

Regarding the key factors that may lead to reading comprehension difficulties, the lecturer respondents reflected on some factors behind such difficulties, such as teaching methods, a lack of awareness in society of the significance of reading, and a lack of reading habits. One major factor that leads to reading comprehension deficits is teaching approaches. There was a consensus among the lecturer respondents about the deficiency in strategy implementation in the classroom. Another factor mentioned was lack of reading awareness, mentioned by two interviewees. Additionally, a lack of good reading habits was also noted. Most notably, the interviewees acknowledged that students do not show much interest in reading books or other materials. Besides these factors, a lack of motivation and interest contributes to these difficulties.

Interviewee 1: Some English teachers still focus on the traditional approach; they ask students to read the given text silently and do its activities.

Interviewee 2: Unfortunately, our students read in the classroom only when they are obliged to.

Interviewee 3: Nowadays, the young generation spends too much time on social media and less time reading. They do not read as much as they should.

Interviewee 4: Students should navigate the barriers to reading and develop good reading habits.

Interviewee 3: Sometimes, some students do not like to read in the classroom because they do not have the motivation to read, and some topics do not attract their attention.

B. Findings of the Student Interviews

Seven undergraduate students were interviewed face-to-face in the college library of Al Qunfudhah University College. Two techniques were followed - using a recorder and taking notes on interview sheets. Each interview lasted 30-35 minutes. Next, the data were transcribed and printed out to make brief notes. They were then categorized into major and sub-themes based on the answers given for analysis of the data. Figure 2 displays the interview theme.

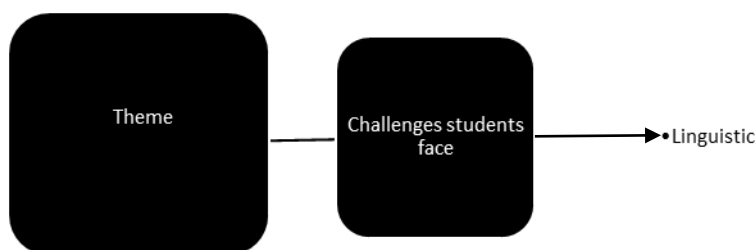


Figure 2. Interview Theme (Students)

The theme was challenges that students encounter in the EFL classroom. The participants acknowledged that one of the key challenges was vocabulary. Some of them said that they often use a dictionary to translate the given text word-by-word to understand the content. Another reason for reading comprehension deficits was grammar. Some students reported that existing pronouns in written texts limit their comprehension. Here are some different excerpts from the interviews:

Interviewee 1: I can read texts, but I cannot understand them. So, I face some problems in reading a text if I do not translate every single word using a dictionary.

Interviewee 2: I do not like reading comprehension texts because I spend much time translating the whole text word by word.

Interviewee 2: I do not know how to guess what the content of the text is about.

Interviewee 3: When I find pronouns in a text, I feel confused and cannot understand the written text.

Interviewee 5: It is too difficult when the text includes clauses, present perfect, and passive voice. So, I do not like such texts.

C. Findings From Classroom Observations

The process of observation went through three phases. The first phase was pre-observation, where key points such as the interviewees' backgrounds and experience of the given topic were discussed along with the skills and strategies that can be used to deal with the text. The second phase was observation, where the behaviors and reactions of the students towards reading comprehension texts were observed. Finally, the last phase was post-observation, where what was observed was discussed with the class.

Based on the classroom observations, it was noted the students who were observed had no physical or mental disabilities that might affect their reading comprehension. Nonetheless, two major points were identified: the first point was that the students encountered some difficulties related to reading comprehension texts and their activities. Indeed, both linguistic and non-linguistic reading challenges were observed. The second point was related to the attitudes and reactions of the students to reading comprehension. Based on both the feedback and their behavior exhibited before reading, while reading, and after reading, most of them could not initiate and connect their prior knowledge with the texts. Moreover, they could not correctly recognize the purpose and the main ideas from the supporting details when they read the given texts. Finally, they were unable to reflect upon their reading skills and abilities. Table 1 below sets out these issues.

TABLE 1
KEY FINDINGS BASED ON CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

| Linguistic challenges | Non-linguistic challenges |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vocabulary: ambiguous words, phrases, and idioms Grammar: connecting personal pronouns to their referents, word order, clauses, and passive voice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of background knowledge Lack of concentration Inability to differentiate main ideas from supporting details Inability to implement reading skills and strategies |

With regard to reading activities, the student participants did not respond positively to the communicative approach. Most of them tried to avoid open-ended questions that invited them to reflect on their background knowledge experiences. In fact, they preferred objective questions such as multiple choice, matching, and yes/no questions over subjective questions. Most of the students read the given activities before they read the texts, then they did the activities. Three remarkable points were noted in the classroom: the first one is that the students did not work collaboratively. Instead, they did the activities individually and avoided group discussions. The second point is related to their abilities to do the activities. There was a clear inability to deal with questions related to reading for gist, with such questions as, for example, "What is the writer's attitude towards...?" and "Read the text on page 91. Where might it come from?" Also, they struggled with post-reading activities such as "What is your opinion about...?" and "After reading the text, would you make any changes to your everyday life? Why? Why not?" Additionally, some students did not use their own words to answer the questions. They copied long sentences directly from the texts.

This study aimed at exploring reading comprehension difficulties encountered by students in EFL classrooms, and it attempted to identify the potential factors underlying such problems. Three research questions were addressed in relation to reading comprehension challenges: the reading comprehension challenges encountered by students, factors that may lead to such issues, and the attitudes and behavior of students toward reading comprehension.

1. What reading comprehension challenges are encountered by students in the EFL classroom?

This question aims at identifying reading comprehension deficits. Classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with lecturers, structured interviews with students, and students' feedback were used to collect the data. Based on the results, it can be said that reading comprehension can be challenging in EFL classrooms. Such challenges are related to linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Most students are confronted by obstacles and fail to comprehend texts successfully. The first obstacle is related to linguistic challenges, including lexical and grammatical ambiguity. Based on the classroom observations and students' feedback, the students showed a preference for using dictionaries to determine the meanings of words. Although they could understand the meaning of some single words, they exhibited an inability to understand the proper meanings of unknown words, idioms, and phrases. As a result, they could not comprehend the content and the main point behind the text. It seems that the students were unaccustomed to dealing with words out of context. To overcome this problem, learners must follow and use the context clues that a writer gives in a text and use the skills and strategies they have been taught, since there is a strong association between context clues and implementing reading comprehension skills and reading comprehension.

There were some signs indicating that the observed students struggled with grammar and vocabulary knowledge in context. First, during their reading classes, they expressed frustration with statements such as, "It is difficult to find out

the right meaning,” “I cannot find out the meaning of ...,” and “I am not good at that.” Another sign is that they read every single word and used their dictionaries as a sole source to find the meaning of unknown words individually. As a result, they failed to understand the content and the author's message well. Additionally, some students created their vocabulary list with their meanings in Arabic to help them memorize any new words. This concurs with Al-Jarrah's and Ismail's (2018) finding that EFL learners translate the meaning of words and/or sentences into their native language. Furthermore, other students divided the text into separate parts. They overlooked sentences that included unfamiliar words and phrases and did not try to guess the meaning based on context. It is thus not surprising that the students were unable to read effectively.

Another consequence of such a traditional approach is that the students lost their concentration and wasted time because they relied heavily on translating words in an isolated way. Similarly, Bouknify (2023) argues that “reading is not limited to reading and translating” (p. 42). Likewise, Oakhill et al. (2015) suggest that readers can guess the meaning of a word based on the context rather than looking up the meanings of all unknown words. For Gedik and Akyol (2022), students can use clues based on the context, such as synonyms and antonyms, to understand the written text.

One more reason why students encounter reading comprehension difficulties in the EFL classroom relates to grammatical knowledge, such as parts of speech, clauses, word order, and passive voice. Firman et al. (2021) conducted a study related to the abilities and difficulties of learners concerning reading comprehension. They found that one of the most common difficulties students face is low grammatical competence. In this regard, Hamidah (2016), Mahmood (2022), and Satriani (2018) all report that, to understand a text successfully, readers need to identify the grammatical rules and units to carry meanings. Similarly, Jeon and Yamashita (2014) state that “Grammar knowledge, if fully developed, enables readers to analyze and integrate syntactic information at the phrase, clause, and sentence levels, a crucial task for achieving comprehension” (p. 165). Likewise, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) report that students with insufficient knowledge of grammatical rules tend to run into obstacles in reading comprehension. However, with the realization that linguistic structure is an essential competence but not a sufficient component of reading comprehension, learners need to go beyond the content.

Learners who struggle with reading comprehension because of linguistic structure need to start by improving their linguistic competence. Comprehending ambiguous lexical items that have different meanings and grammar uses requires understanding the relationship between linguistic knowledge and reading comprehension. Limits to linguistic knowledge hinder students' reading comprehension. Hence, teachers and students should keep in mind that students need a thorough knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical rules to understand sentence structures and enhance their comprehension. Several studies have reflected on the strong relationship between linguistic knowledge development and reading comprehension. For example, Gedik and Akyol (2022) and Masrai (2019) state that to be able to read successfully, readers need to have a good amount and great understanding of vocabulary. Likewise, Li and Kirby (2015), Oakhill et al. (2015), and Qian (2002) all note how vocabulary knowledge reinforces the reading process. Moreover, Hassan and Dweik (2021) and Oakhill et al. (2015) assert that reading comprehension requires incorporating words and sentences to carry meanings.

One non-linguistic difficulty that contributes to low reading comprehension is a lack of background knowledge. Most students focused on reading the given texts rather than on using their prior knowledge. They could not activate and connect their prior knowledge with the new information presented in the text. Different studies show that activating learners' background knowledge facilitates reading comprehension skills (Deshpande, 2016; Hassan & Dweik, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Similarly, Hamidah (2016) claims that students need to be encouraged to use their background knowledge before reading texts for better understanding. Abdelaal and Sase (2014) likewise argue that there is a strong association between high prior knowledge and reading comprehension. Activating such knowledge about content enables students to reflect on what they know before they read and comprehend the content more adequately.

Based on the results, another reason for reading comprehension difficulties is a simple lack of concentration. It was observed that the students struggled to pay attention in class. In this regard, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) concluded that one of the reading comprehension difficulties learners face is paying sufficient attention in the classroom. In the same vein, Soemer and Schiefele (2019) stated that readers need to pay close attention to reading comprehensively. Spears (2013) also mentions some factors that lead to poor concentration, such as personal issues, sleep deficiency, and financial difficulties. Similarly, Flemming (2011) points out that readers need to generate questions and answer them while they read to keep them focused. Also, learners need to be engaged with materials they are interested in to maintain their attention.

The inability to identify a text's main idea(s) and differentiate them from supporting details is a third challenge that the students encountered in the classroom. The notable point here is that they could not distinguish the main ideas from supporting details, while others encountered difficulties identifying the purpose of the texts. Some of them were unable to recall and say in their own words the essential information from the text. The reason behind that may be related to the influence of the traditional approach inside the classroom and the learners' native language. Recognizing the key ideas and supporting information is important for student comprehension. Being able to differentiate between main ideas and supporting information would enhance comprehensive understanding. This finding concurs with research conducted by

Madkour (2016) and Nur et al. (2022), who found that one of the difficulties students face in the classroom is determining the main idea and the relevant information in the text.

Another notable reason for a lack of understanding of a text is that many students do not read strategically. Reading comprehension strategies help students develop and strengthen their reading and show them how to tackle a text they are finding it difficult to understand. For example, using certain strategies would allow them to make predictions to describe what will happen next and infer the implicit meaning in a passage. Therefore, increased attention should be given to teaching a set of reading comprehension strategies and techniques such as skimming, scanning, summarizing, predicting, inferring, and generating questions, and how to implement them based on reading genres. Several studies have identified a correlation between reading comprehension and employing reading strategies and techniques (Banditvilai, 2020; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Park & Kim, 2017). Using reading strategies and techniques helps learners in multiple ways: it enables them to read purposefully, it influences the way they read the material, it monitors their comprehension of the text, and it helps organize text structure; as a result, reading comprehension is developed.

However, reading is more than comprehending sounds and decoding words; good readers need to go beyond linguistic structure to develop their ability to comprehend what they read and to infer the embedded information by collecting clues from the texts. In order to achieve this, they need to improve their capability to analyze and interpret the text effectively. Hence, employing a set of key comprehension skills and strategies in the EFL classroom is required. Such skills and strategies enable learners to link what they read to their background knowledge and previous experience to activate their competence. Firman et al. (2021) argue that linguistic competence is not enough; learners need to integrate reading strategies. A deeper dive into how to successfully teach and implement reading comprehension strategies should be taken into consideration. Numerous studies in the field have pointed to the importance of building reading comprehension strategies and skills and applying them in reading classes (Bouknify, 2023; Ismail & Tawalbeh, 2015; Nur et al., 2022; Palani, 2012; Samarajeeva, 2023; Talebi, 2015).

2. *What are the key factors that lead to such challenges?*

Identifying the main factors behind students' difficulties in reading comprehension is important for reducing such difficulties. Based on the findings from both classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with lecturers, it can be inferred that certain factors lead to poor reading comprehension. One of the critical factors is teaching and learning approaches. Bouknify (2023) states that students face challenges because teachers use traditional approaches to teaching reading skills. Similarly, Sofi (2015) found that the dominant teaching approach in the EFL classroom is the Grammar-Translation method. Teachers need to apply different useful approaches rather than focusing on such traditional approaches (Cao, 2023). Abdulkader (2016) concurs that EFL teachers have positive attitudes about using communicative approaches, but, nevertheless, they continue to focus on traditional approaches. Likewise, Al-Ahdal et al. (2014) also claim that English teachers should pay more attention to communicative approaches than traditional approaches. The focus on teacher-centered rather than student-centered methods may be attributed to such factors as a lack of emphasis on communicative approaches at the institutional level, a gap between teachers' beliefs and practices in the classroom, and a heavy reliance on students' native language. Thus, it is significant to shift from traditional methods to more effective methods related to communicative competence to improve learners' reading comprehension abilities and skills.

The second fundamental factor behind such obstacles is related to a lack of reading awareness that creates barriers to effective and purposeful reading. Although there are some important aspects, such as problem solving, critical thinking, and other skills related to social life influenced by reading, students tend to pay less attention to reading skills. Reading enhances learners' metacognitive and cognitive abilities, which develop their comprehension as a result. Additionally, it enriches learners' knowledge and encourages insights that enable them to navigate the difficulties they encounter in their life. Hence, student awareness of the significant role of reading should be raised to develop their reading comprehension skills.

The final key factor is related to students' reading habits. Despite the revolution of technology and the proliferation of easily available reading materials, there is a lack of good reading habits among the younger generations in some parts of the globe. Palani (2012) notes that "reading habits are an essential and important aspect for creating the literate society in this world" (p. 90). Similarly, Firman et al. (2021) show that learners encounter reading comprehension challenges because of their lack of good reading habits. Satriani (2018) states that learners suffer from a lack of motivation when it comes to reading, so they rarely read. One of the many issues confronting students nowadays is, perhaps, not their inability to read but their lack of interest. As a result, they have poor reading habits. Brassell and Rasinski (2008) mention that, "Students comprehend more when they are interested in the topic" (p. 29). Whatever the cause, the cumulative effect of poor reading habits is that learners often lose confidence in their capability to read texts.

3. *How do students deal with reading comprehension texts and their activities?*

The classroom observations and the interviews with lecturers and students revealed a number of misconceived practices that the student participants committed reading the given texts, namely: concentrating on linguistic competence (lexical and grammatical knowledge); reading and translating single words; reading the given text once; and answering the comprehension questions based on finding the common key words between questions and sentences in the text. Such misleading ideas are significant barriers to successful learning. Regarding the first misleading idea, focusing on linguistic structure, Talebi (2015) found that the students he observed in the classroom displayed good

linguistic competence, but they showed an inability to use reading comprehension strategies, resulting in reading comprehension problems. Likewise, Firman et al. (2021) and Hymes (1972) argue that linguistic knowledge is essential but is not enough to use the target language successfully. Similarly, Clifton and Duffy (2001) assert that “one must go beyond linguistic structure to understand fully how sentences and texts are understood” (p. 190).

The second misconception practice is reading and translating each single word using bilingual dictionaries, particularly electronic ones, because of their ease of use in the class. Such an approach could help students identify the meaning of some words and may enhance learners' vocabulary acquisition, but it should be used judiciously as just of the different tools to aid learning. Even then, translating words by dictionary does not enable the students to go beyond the text and recognize the author's main message, and it does not help them to learn to read successfully. As a result, students should be taught about using the context clues that are provided in a text and how to implement them to determine the meaning of unfamiliar words, alongside the use of bilingual dictionaries.

The third misconception is reading and understanding the text from the first reading. The students read the texts once, and they did not generate evaluative and inferential questions as they read. Such an approach does not promote deeper comprehension from the first reading. Langan (2013) points out that higher levels of reading comprehension increase gradually. For Mahmood (2022), applying a variety of reading strategies enables students to read efficiently. Likewise, Istiqomah et al. (2023) stress that the learners' capability to understand a text successfully depends on their ability to implement reading strategies to comprehend the author's message. In other words, using certain strategies to plan, monitor and evaluate reading comprehension helps students read purposefully and overcome potential difficulties as and when they arise.

The final misconception is students' practices and experiences when answering questions based on the text. Most of the observed students read the activities without really engaging with the content. They read the given activities before reading the text and then tried to find the common words linking the activities and the text. They divided the text into parts and read each one separately. As a result, they encountered difficulties. Firstly, they may give wrong and/or irrelevant answers. Secondly, they might fail to identify the main idea behind the text. Thirdly, they might not connect the sentences and the paragraphs together to get the author's key message. In this regard, Madkour (2016) mentions that applying reading strategies enables learners to make links between parts of a text. The last point is that the students may not use some strategies such as predicting, making inferences, and summarizing. Implementing questions in a classroom should go through three phases: pre-reading activities, while-reading activities, and post-reading activities. Such activities take learners to the highest level of comprehension since these activities require using strategies and skills to predict, infer, and analyze the content.

V. CONCLUSION

Generally, there is a limited understanding of the significance of employing reading skills and strategies in the classroom, leading to a failure to understand texts successfully and/or comprehensively. Also, there are some misconception practices among EFL learners in EFL reading classes. This paper aimed at exploring reading comprehension difficulties and illustrating the factors that cause such difficulties. Additionally, it attempted to understand misconception practices in EFL classrooms. The study revealed some fundamental reasons that affect reading comprehension, some of them related linguistic in nature, such as an inability to recognize grammatical and lexical items in a text. Others relate to non-linguistic factors such as lack of background knowledge, deficiency of attention, inability to identify main ideas and supporting details, and failure to apply reading comprehension strategies. The results demonstrate three key factors behind such difficulties: teaching approaches (the dominant approaches were traditional ones), lack of reading awareness, and lack of good reading habits. Additionally, the results showed that the observed students exhibited some misconceived practices when dealing with reading comprehension texts and activities.

Based on the results, a number of suggestions for improving learners' reading comprehension levels can be made. Teachers may create useful materials to engage students in different reading materials and increase their interest as well as use a variety of teaching approaches based on text genres to achieve better reading comprehension. In addition, teachers should increase students' awareness of the significance of reading comprehension strategies and skills.

The outcomes of this study serve to support Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education in gaining a better understanding of such challenges and take them into consideration when designing textbooks. The results might also help lecturers create better strategies and materials to integrate into reading classes. In addition, the outcomes of this study might also encourage researchers to conduct more extensive studies in the field to cover different areas. Lastly, this study can enable universities and institutions in English-speaking countries to get a clearer picture of the reading comprehension challenges encountered by EFL students who desire to study abroad.

The current study has a number of limitations that future research might address. Firstly, the study was limited to the English Department at one institution of higher education, namely Al-Qunfudha University College. Also, the study was limited to male learners and did not include students with learning disabilities. Another limitation is that the study was limited to one semester.

Accordingly, further studies might focus on evaluating the current textbooks in use at Saudi universities to explore levels of comprehension questions. Also, further studies should be conducted to identify the other basic skills challenges

in the EFL classroom. Lastly, future research might be conducted to include female students and compare the results with male students.

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