

Difficulties in Reading Comprehension among EFL Learners at Intermediate Level and Recommended Strategies

Tayyaba Tajamal

Associate Lecturer

Department of English

University of Gujrat

Sub-Campus, Narowal

Punjab, Pakistan

ABSTRACT: The study is to analyze the difficulties in reading comprehension among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners and strategies to overcome those difficulties. The objectives of the study are to find out the difficulties faced by students in reading comprehension and strategies to improve reading comprehension. It will increase awareness among teachers regarding the problems in reading comprehension which students come across and enable teachers to use reading comprehension strategies. The researcher has used 'Quantitative Method'. Questionnaire is used to collect data. Sample of the study is included 30 students. The quantitative data is tabulated and analyzed by using SPSS Statistics. It is evaluated that students of English language have problems in reading comprehension as they are unable to understand the words, long sentence structure and complicated vocabulary. Neither they are able to find out central idea nor specific information provided in the paragraphs. The findings of the study also reveal that the students at Intermediate level are quite unaware about the use of reading comprehension strategies such as Pre-reading, While-Reading and Post-reading. The recommended strategies are: predicting, analyzing, inferring, summarizing, questioning and visualization.

Key words: Reading Skill, Reading Comprehension, Difficulties, Strategies

1. Introduction

Language is considered as the means of communication among human beings. Now-a-days English language is used in every filed of life in Pakistan. It is being taught as a compulsory subject in Pakistan. English language has four basic skills, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. Teaching and learning of English language skills is very important. Farooq & Ahmad (2002, p.43) say that the teaching activities play a significant role in teaching-learning process. The students have to face different problems in learning English language skills. Specifically, the EFL learners, as the study is conducted in Pakistani Context among English as foreign language (EFL) learners, they have to face problems in learning English language skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. The present study is designed to find out the problems in reading comprehension and recommended strategies as well. As it is discussed earlier that teaching and

learning are inter-related to each other. Therefore, the researcher's purpose is not only to find out the problems but also to recommend strategies which will help to overcome those problems.

Soemantri (2011, p.74) describes that reading is one of the most important skills among all English language skills. It is very important to learn Reading skill i.e. to learn reading comprehension, to understand the main ideas of the text, to learn skimming, scanning, reading for ideas, reading for meanings and other sub-skills. For EFL learners it has become inevitable to learn Reading Skill and its sub-skills. Afflerbach (2007) defines that reading is a dynamic and complex process. It comprises of skills to read, strategies to learn how to read, prior knowledge, prediction, visualization and critical thinking etc. There are different types of reading skill as Intensive reading, Extensive reading, Skimming and Scanning. Reading comprehension involves learning of reading skill and its types.

Reading skill is involved reading comprehension. The EFL learners are needed to learn reading comprehension at first when they started to learn Reading skill. Reading comprehension is very important at all levels of English language learning among EFL learners. Here, the main concern is the learners of intermediate level. Cooper (1986) describes that reading comprehension is a practice or an activity in which a reader can construct meanings through interaction with the text.

Davenport (2007) explains that reading comprehension includes different questions like to find out the main idea of the text, integrate the author's opinion given in the text, the title for the passage, reading for meanings and supporting details. Mahmoud (2015, p.) defines that reading comprehension is the process to extract meanings from the text and integrate those meanings with reader's cognition. Integrating meanings from the text play its important role in understanding the meanings. While learning reading comprehension the EFL learners have to face lot of problems. The problems which they face are of different types. The students feel problem to earn the main idea of text, to locate specific information, to comprehend the vocabulary, complex sentence structure, skimming and scanning. Reading comprehension is very complex and difficult process. Keeping in view the problems in reading comprehension among EFL learners, the researcher recommended strategies to overcome those problems.

The study will be significant for the teachers as it will create awareness among the teachers regarding the problems in reading comprehension which the students come across. The important significance of the study is that it will give information to teachers to find out different strategies, which they can use to control the difficulties of their students in reading comprehension.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

- i.** Find out the difficulties in reading comprehension among EFL learners at Intermediate level.
- ii.** Recommend the strategies to overcome the problems in reading comprehension among EFL learners at Intermediate level.

1.3 Research Questions

- i. What are the difficulties in reading comprehension among EFL learners at Intermediate level?
- ii. What are the recommended strategies to overcome the problems in reading comprehension among EFL learners at Intermediate level?

2. Literature Review

Albdour (2015, p.62) describes that reading comprehension is the mental process in which the reader derives the meanings from any written material and integrate/assimilate those meanings into cognitive structure. When a reader reads any text, he stimulates his mental schema for the subject, develops his suppositions and notions about the content or text which he or she is reading. Then he or she uses his skills of reading comprehension or reading comprehension strategies to identify the letters, words, sentence structure, knowledge of other languages besides his or her general knowledge and culture. Albdour (2015, p.62) as cited in Neff et al. (1999) describes that while extracting meanings from the text, the reader uses some cognitive strategies. He uses these strategies to have the clarity of vocabulary and knowledge of the world, to comprehend the information and notions included in the text or to reconstruct those meanings by understanding the text based on the personal experiences which the reader has.

Albdour (2015, p.63) states that teaching reading comprehension by using different strategies is very important for learning reading comprehension among learners. The curriculum should include such strategies which the teachers can use to teach students. So, the learners have to face a lot of problems in reading comprehension.

Albdour (2015) in his study "The Difficulties that Seventh Grade Students Face in Comprehensive Reading Skill for English Curricula" discusses different problems which the students of seventh grade have to face in reading comprehension. The purpose of the study was to find out the difficulties in the area of reading comprehension of seventh grade students in English language curricula. The problems are like these:

- i. The students focus on English grammar when they read any English material. They become confused in grammar to understand the meanings.
- ii. The students avoid using modern strategies and techniques in understanding the English text. They did not know how to activate their prior knowledge in order to understand any subject.
- iii. The students are weak in understanding the difficult vocabulary in the given text.
- iv. The students try to focus only on their own textbooks while reading.
- v. The students do reading comprehension just to get good marks in their exam. They do not try to effort for their language development.

Dwiarti (2005) in his study "An Analysis of Students' Problems in Finding the Main Idea of the Text at Second Year" found various problems in finding the main idea of the text among the learners of second year. The problems are:

- i. The students have very rare interest towards reading.
- ii. The students have very low background knowledge while reading any English text.

- iii. The students have lack of vocabulary. They have to face difficulty to understand the meanings of difficult words.
- iv. The students are nor very aware about the parts of the paragraph to infer the meanings.

Soemantri (2011, p. 75-76) in her study “Reading Comprehension Problems Encountered by The Students of Higher Education” describes that students have to face problems in reading comprehension. The purpose the study was to find out problems which the students have to face in speed reading and reading comprehension. She found seven problems to which the students have to come across in reading comprehension. These are that:

- i. The students have less vocabulary for difficult words while reading any text.
- ii. They did not use reading strategies to read any text.
- iii. They consider reading comprehension is not a good habit. They are not motivated to reading comprehension.
- iv. They need to go back to the sentences or paragraphs again and again to infer the meanings and extract the information when they read any text.
- v. They reduce their speed of reading when they find the main idea in the text.
- vi. They did not reduce their speed of reading when they do not find any main idea in the text.
- vii. They do reading comprehension in order to search the key words and main idea.

Anderson (1991) defines reading strategies as these are cognitive steps which readers can use in order to understand, learn, save and retrieve data from any written material. Phan (2006, p. 01) discusses that reading comprehension involves certain reading strategies as skimming, scanning, guessing, recognizing the words, sentence structure, reading for meanings, reading for ideas, predicting, accelerating the prior knowledge, drawing inferences, finding main ideas from the text and finding supporting details from the text.

Hans (2015, p. 65) explains in his study “Different Comprehension Strategies to Improve Student’s Reading Comprehension” that for good reading comprehension, a reader should use different reading strategies. A good reader will be able to understand the information or ideas given in the text if he uses reading strategies. Some reading strategies are prediction, connecting ideas given in the text, inferring, summarizing, analyzing and criticizing. He also state some other reading comprehension strategies as Question and answer strategy, paragraph shrinking, concept map, story sequence and jigsaw.

Duke and Pearson (2002, p. 206) describes the characteristics of good readers. They said that good readers involve themselves in different reading comprehension strategies when they read. Good readers try to find out the meanings of difficult words. They accelerate their prior knowledge with the text which they start to read. They try to find out the author’s opinions, beliefs and customs while reading any text. They revise, summarize and analyze when they read any text.

3. Research Methodology

The research is descriptive in nature. Descriptive research is used to describe the current situation of some phenomenon. The present study is conducted to describe the current situation

of problems in reading comprehension at Intermediate level. Quantitative Method is used to collect data. The population of the study is 200 students at Intermediate level in Nrowal District. The researcher used Simple random sampling technique so that subjectivity could be avoided. This sampling technique helped the researcher to describe the participants' responses, during analysis. In order to select the samples for data collection, the researcher personally went to colleges, visited the class rooms and selected students randomly. The sample of the study included 30 students, selected randomly at Intermediate level.

Questionnaire is used to collect data. The researcher designed questionnaire to find out the problems in reading comprehension at Intermediate level. The questionnaire also includes some questions related to reading comprehension strategies. The rationale for including questions for reading strategies is to ask students either they do reading comprehension by using reading strategies or not. The data collected from questionnaire is tabulated and analyzed by using SPSS Statistics.

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Analysis of Questionnaire

The following analysis is based on the difficulties in reading comprehension among ESL learner at Intermediate Level and recommended strategies through questionnaire (Appendix)

Table 1: Students' opinion about Reading Skill

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I like to learn English Language.	30	1	5	4.87	.730
2	My favorite skill in English language learning is Reading Skill.	30	1	5	4.07	1.721
3	I am interested more in Reading Comprehension in Reading Skill.	30	1	5	4.07	1.721
4	I read English books, articles, short stories and novels.	30	1	5	1.93	1.721
5	I read English just for pleasure.	30	1	5	1.40	1.221

Table 1 describes the students' opinion about reading skill. Analysis of table shows that the students at Intermediate Level like to learn English language and reading comprehension. Most of the students do not involve themselves in reading different extracts of English as books, articles, short stories and novel. The analysis of table demonstrates that Mean value and Standard deviation has relationship to each other. In the table, there is low standard deviation, which means the values in statistical data set are very close to the Mean value.

Table 2: Purpose of Reading Comprehension

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
6	I read English to obtain general knowledge.	30	5	5	5.00	.000
7	I read English only for Academic Purposes.	30	5	5	5.00	.000
8	I read English to enhance my vocabulary.	30	1	5	4.87	.730
9	Reading Comprehension is a difficult task for me.	30	1	5	4.87	.730
10	I feel problem in understanding the meanings of the difficult words/phrases in English.	30	1	5	4.87	.730

Table 2 describes the purpose of reading comprehension for which the students read English language. The analysis of the table illustrates that the students at Intermediate Level read English only for academic purposes, to get general knowledge and to enhance their vocabulary. In spite of their interest in reading comprehension, they feel that reading comprehension is difficult task for them. The result of statistical values observes low standard deviation which means the values in statistical data set are very close to the Mean value.

Table 3: Difficulties in Reading Comprehension

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
11	I feel problem to understand the meanings/main idea of the passage because of the lengthy sentence structure.	30	1	5	4.87	.730
12	I feel problem to find out the central idea of the paragraph.	30	1	5	4.20	1.627
13	I feel problem to find out the specific information from the paragraph.	30	1	5	4.47	1.383
14	I translate my English lesson in Urdu when I feel problem to understand the paragraph/paragraphs.	30	5	5	5.00	.000
15	My English Teacher uses different Reading Comprehension Strategies.	30	1	1	1.00	.000

Table 3 discusses the difficulties in reading comprehension which the students feel at Intermediate Level. Analysis of the table shows that the students feel problem to understand the main idea of the paragraph, meanings, sentence structure of complex sentences and to find out

the specific information from the paragraph. Due to these problems, the students translate the English text into Urdu to comprehend the passage. The analysis also indicates that the teachers do not use reading comprehension strategies. The result of statistical values observes low standard deviation which means the values in statistical data set are very close to the Mean value.

Table 4: Reading Comprehension Strategies

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
16	I consult thesaurus to understand the meanings of difficult words/phrases.	30	1	5	2.47	1.961
17	I start reading my English lessons/reading comprehension by activating prior knowledge about the topic.	30	1	5	2.20	1.864
18	I stop reading when I cannot understand the difficult words/phrase/long sentences in English while reading.	30	1	5	4.87	.730
19	My English teacher activates my prior knowledge before reading comprehension.	30	1	5	2.60	1.993
20	My English teacher asks me to guess the meanings of the words/phrases within the paragraph while reading.	30	1	5	1.53	1.383

Table 4 labels reading comprehension strategies. The analysis of the table depicts that the students at Intermediate Level are not involved in different reading comprehension strategies. The students did not activate their prior knowledge before reading. They stop reading when they feel any difficulty to read difficult words, phrases and long sentences. The analysis of the table portrays that the English teachers did not involve the students in reading comprehension strategies. The English teachers did not involve students in before reading and while reading comprehension strategies. The result of statistical values observes low standard deviation which means the values in statistical data set are very close to the Mean value.

Table 5: Activities to Use Reading Comprehension Strategies

Sr. No.	Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
21	My English teacher provides me the synonyms of difficult words while reading comprehension.	30	1	5	2.20	1.864
22	My English teacher gives me the chance to summarize the paragraph/paragraphs after reading comprehension.	30	1	1	1.00	.000
23	My English teacher gives me the task to analyze the sentence structure within the paragraph/paragraphs.	30	1	5	1.13	.730
24	My English teacher gives me the task of filling the gaps/sentence completion after reading comprehension.	30	1	1	1.00	.000
25	My English teacher asks questions before, while and after reading comprehension.	30	1	1	1.00	.000

Table 5 points out that the English teachers did not give any platform to use reading comprehension strategies to students at Intermediate Level. The analysis of the table shows that the English teachers did not give chances to students for before, while and after reading comprehension strategies as summarizing the paragraphs, analyzing the sentence structures and filling the gaps etc. The result of statistical values observes low standard deviation which means the values in statistical data set are very close to the Mean value.

5. Findings

1. It was found from the results of the questionnaire that 97% students like to learn English Language. 81% students depicted that Reading Skill is their favorite skill in English language skills and they are interested in reading comprehension. 38% students said that read English books, articles and novels. 28% students showed that they read English just for pleasure. This shows that the students are interested in learning English reading skill but they are not habitual to read English books which will enhance their reading skill.
2. It was resulted that 100% students agreed that the read English books only for academic purposes. 97% students said that reading comprehension seems difficult to them at intermediate level. They feel problem to understand the meanings of difficult words and phrases. This depicts that students do reading comprehension only to pass the exams.

3. It was found that 97% students feel problem to comprehend the main idea of the passage because of lengthy sentence structure. 89% students agreed that they feel problem to find out specific information from paragraph. It was found that 100% students translate English language in Urdu when they cannot understand the meanings of difficult vocabulary. 20% students said that their English teachers use different reading comprehension strategies. This shows that students at Intermediate level have to face different reading comprehension problems and their English teachers did not use different reading comprehension strategies.
4. It was resulted that 49% students consult thesaurus to understand the meanings of difficult words. 44% students activate their prior knowledge about the topic before reading. 97% students agreed that they stop reading English paragraph when they cannot understand the difficult words, phrases and complex sentence structure while reading. 30% students said that their English teachers involve them in while reading strategies. This represents that students themselves did not involve them in reading comprehension strategies because their teachers did not give them opportunity of reading comprehension strategies.
5. It was found that 80% students agreed that their English teacher did not give them platform for before, while and after reading comprehension strategies. The English teachers did not involve the students in summarizing, analyzing, predicting and sentence completion activities.

6. Conclusion

It is concluded from the results of the questionnaire that students at Intermediate level have to face lot of difficulties in Reading Comprehension. The students face problem to find the main idea, central idea and to locate specific information from the paragraphs because the complexity of reading comprehension increases at intermediate level. The students are not able to read for meanings and to read for ideas. The long/complex sentence structure, difficult words and phrases become difficult to comprehend for students. Being non-native readers, they have to switch to Urdu language while reading English books if they cannot understand the idea given by author and meanings of difficult words. They consult English to Urdu dictionary in order to understand English language.

It is also concluded that the English teachers did not involve students in reading comprehension strategies. The English teachers did not activate the prior knowledge of students before reading. They did not ask questions from students while reading any English text. Their purpose becomes only to read the text not to enable students in reading comprehension. Most of the time, they did not conduct activities of reading comprehension or use strategies of reading comprehension. They did not provide any opportunity to students to predict, summarize, analyze, infer the meanings and visualize any English paragraph while reading and after reading.

6.1 Recommendation

The recommendations of the stud are as follows:

1. The English teachers should use different reading comprehension strategies at Intermediate level.
2. Before-Reading, While-Reading and After-Reading strategies should be used to enable students to do effective reading comprehension.
3. Single Strategy Instruction and Multiple Strategy Instruction Strategies should be used at Intermediate level for reading comprehension.
4. Activities like Questioning, Analyzing, Predicting, Inferring, Summarizing and visualizing should be used for enhancing reading comprehension ability.
5. The students should themselves be involved in reading comprehension strategies.

References

Anderson, N.j.(1991). *Individual Differences in Strategy Use in Second Language Reading and Testing*. In Modern Language Journal.

Afflerbach, P. 2007. *Understanding and Using Reading Assesment K-12*.University of Maryland: College Rark.

ALBDOUR, W. M. (2015). The Difficulties that Seventh Grade Students Face in Comprehensive Reading Skill for English Curricula. *Journal of Education and Practice, Vol.6, No.27*,(ISSN 2222-1735 (Paper) ISSN 2222-288X (Online)), 61-74.

Cooper, J. D. 1986. *Improving Reading Comprehension*. Boston: Hough ton miffin Company.

Dwiarti, E. 2005. *An Analysis of Students' Problems in Finding the Main Idea of the Text at Second Year of SMU Kosgoro Sekampung, East Lampung* . A Script, FKIP, University of Lampung.

Davenport, R. A. 2007. *Mastering the SAT Critical Reading Test*. Canada: Wiley Publishing, Inc.

Farooq, U. (2002). *Module Teaching of English for Classes VI-VIII for Master trainers of In-Service Training Programme* (First ed.). Abbottabad: Directorate of Curriculum and Teacher Education NWFP, Abbottabad.

Hans, D. A. (2015, September). DIFFERENT COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT'S READING COMPREHENSION. *International Journal of English Language Teaching, Vol.3, No.6*, 61-69.

Pearson, N. K. (2002). *Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension* (Third ed.). International Reading Association.

Phan, N. (2006). *Effective Reading*. Teachers Article.

Soemantri, A. S. (2011, December). READING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY STUDENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION. *Jurnal Computech & Bisnis, Vol. 5, No. 2*(ISSN 1978-9629), 74-80.

Appendix Questionnaire

Dear respondent, thank you very much for giving your precious time and corresponding to the statements of this research project. This research is about “Problems in Reading Comprehension and Strategies among EFL learners at 10th Grade.” The information which you will provide, will be kept confidential. The results of this survey will be used only for research purposes. Your opinion will be highly valued. If you want to quit at any stage, you can.

Part 1: Please Tick (✓) ONE of the following items or write your response in the space to provide the respective information.

Gender: a) Male b) Female

Institution: a) Government b) Private

Name (Optional): _____

Age (Optional): _____

Level: _____

Part II: Please read the statement carefully and give your best opinion by ticking (✓) in the relevant column.

SA: Strongly Agree, **A:** Agree, **N:** Neutral, **D:** Disagree, **SD:** Strongly Disagree

Sr. No	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
		5	4	3	2	1
1.	I like to learn English Language.					
2.	My favorite skill in English language learning is Reading Skill.					
3.	I am attracted more in Reading Comprehension in Reading Skill.					
4.	I read English books, articles, short stories and novels.					
5.	I read English just for pleasure.					
6.	I read English to get general knowledge.					
7.	I read English only for Academic Purposes.					
8.	I read English to enhance my vocabulary.					
9.	Reading Comprehension is a difficult task for me.					
10.	I feel problem in understanding the meanings of the difficult words/phrases in English.					
11.	I feel problem to understand the meanings/main idea of the passage because of the lengthy sentence structure.					
12.	I feel problem to find out the central idea of the paragraph.					
13.	I feel problem to find out the specific information from the paragraph.					

Sr. No	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
		5	4	3	2	1
14.	I translate my English lesson in Urdu when I feel problem to understand the paragraph/paragraphs.					
15.	I do/My English does different Reading Comprehension Strategies.					
16.	I consult thesaurus to understand the meanings of difficult words/phrases.					
17.	I start reading my English lessons/reading comprehension by activating prior knowledge about the topic.					
18.	I stop reading when I cannot understand the difficult words/phrase/long sentences in English while reading.					
19.	My English teacher activates my prior knowledge before reading comprehension.					
20.	My English teacher asks me to guess the meanings of the words/phrases within the paragraph while reading.					
21.	My English teacher provides me the synonyms of difficult words while reading comprehension.					
22.	My English teacher gives me the chance to summarize the paragraph/paragraphs after reading comprehension.					
23.	My English teacher gives me the task to analyze the sentence structure within the paragraph/paragraphs.					
24.	My English teacher gives me the task of filling the gaps/sentence completion after reading comprehension.					
25.	My English teacher asks questions before, while and after reading comprehension.					