



Reading Comprehension Difficulties Among Libyan University Students (A Case Study of EFL Students in the First and Second Semesters at the Faculty of Languages, Azzaytuna University - Tarhuna)

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صعوبات الفهم القرائي لدى طلاب الجامعات الليبيين
(دراسة حالة لطلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الفصلين الأول والثاني بكلية اللغات،
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Abstract:

This study investigates the main difficulties that college students face in reading comprehension, with a particular focus on English as a foreign language (EFL) learner at Azzytuna University in Tarhuna. It also aims to identify the causes of these difficulties and explore possible solutions during the learning process. To achieve these aims, a descriptive quantitative method was employed. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to 50 students from the Faculty of Languages at Azzytuna University (first and second semesters, department of English) as a case study. The questionnaire consisted of two sections addressing students' reading preferences and reading difficulties. Results revealed that students encounter several challenges in reading comprehension, including ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, limited time to process texts, slow reading speed, and difficulty recognizing text structures. In addition, psychological factors such as anxiety, low motivation, and lack of confidence were found to hinder comprehension. To address these issues, the study recommends a combination of reading strategy training, encouragement of extensive reading, use of technology, and supportive teaching practices. The findings highlight the need for more effective instructional methods, enriched vocabulary support, and engaging reading materials to improve students' reading comprehension skills.

Keywords: reading comprehension, college students, reading difficulties, vocabulary knowledge, reading strategies, motivation, higher education, cognitive challenges, academic reading, EFL learners.

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة أهم الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلاب الجامعات في فهم المقروء، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة ترهونة. وتهدف أيضاً إلى تحديد أسباب هذه الصعوبات واستكشاف الحلول الممكنة خلال عملية التعلم. ولتحقيق هذه الأهداف، استُخدم المنهج الوصفي الكمي، حيث جُمعت البيانات من خلال استبيانات وزعت على (50) طالباً من كلية اللغات بجامعة الزيتونة (الفصل الدراسي الأول والثاني من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية) كدراسة حالة. تكون الاستبيان من قسمين يتعلقان بتفضيلات الطلاب في القراءة والصعوبات التي يواجهونها. أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب يواجهون عدة تحديات في فهم المقروء، من بينها الكلمات الغامضة، والمفردات غير المألوفة، وضيق الوقت المتاح لمعالجة النصوص، وبطء سرعة القراءة، وصعوبة التعرف على تراكيب النصوص. كما تبين أن العوامل النفسية مثل القلق، وضعف الدافعية، وانعدام الثقة بالنفس تُعيق عملية الفهم. ولمعالجة هذه التحديات، توصي الدراسة بمجموعة من الإجراءات، منها:

تدريب الطلاب على استراتيجيات القراءة، وتشجيعهم على القراءة المكثفة، واستخدام التكنولوجيا، وتبني ممارسات تدريسية داعمة. وتؤكد النتائج على الحاجة إلى أساليب تدريس أكثر فاعلية، ودعم أكبر في مجال تنمية المفردات، وتوفير مواد قرائية محفزة لتحسين مهارات فهم المقروء لدى الطلاب.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الفهم القرائي، طلاب الجامعة، صعوبات القراءة، المعرفة بالمفردات، استراتيجيات القراءة، الدافعية، التعليم العالي، التحديات المعرفية، القراءة الأكاديمية، متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Introduction

Reading is one of the most essential skills in English language learning, as it plays a central role in educational, professional, and social contexts. According to Beare (2016), "reading is an important part of learning English," which highlights the necessity for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to develop strong reading abilities in order to achieve language mastery.

At the college level, reading comprehension is particularly crucial, as students are expected to understand, analyze, and apply academic texts effectively. Despite its importance, many learners encounter serious difficulties that hinder their academic performance. College students are often required to process large volumes of information, critically evaluate ideas, and integrate knowledge from various sources, which makes reading comprehension a vital component of their success. Moreover, they are constantly exposed to complex academic materials such as textbooks, research articles, and technical reports. These texts require not only linguistic competence but also higher-order thinking skills. Unfortunately, many students encounter significant challenges when attempting to comprehend what they read. These difficulties often result in poor academic performance, reduced motivation, and limited critical thinking skills.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the major difficulties that college students face in reading comprehension, examine the underlying causes, and suggest possible solutions. By analyzing these factors, educators can design interventions that foster stronger reading skills and promote academic success.

Statement of the problem

Despite of critical role of reading comprehension in higher education, many university students continue to face significant challenges in understanding academic text. These difficulties affect not only their ability to perform well in exams and assignments but also limit their critical thinking, research skills, and overall academic growth. Previous educational experience, lack of effective reading strategies and low of motivation contribute to these challenges. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the nature and causes of reading comprehension difficulties among college students and to propose effective strategies for improvement.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main difficulties that Libyan college students at azzytuna university in Tarhuna face in reading comprehension when learning English as a foreign language?
2. What are the linguistic, cognitive, and motivational factors that contribute to students' reading comprehension difficulties?
3. What strategies and interventions can be proposed to improve reading comprehension among Libyan EFL college students?

Objectives of the study

The purpose of this paper is to identify the major difficulties faced by advanced learners in the faculty of languages at Azzytuna university in reading comprehension. It also aims to examine the underlying causes, suggest possible solutions to overcome these challenges and to develop effective strategies for improving learners' reading comprehension skills.

Hypotheses of the Study:

This study hypothesizes that college students' reading comprehension is negatively affected by limited vocabulary, ineffective reading strategies, and low motivation, all of which hinder their ability to understand and analyze academic texts. Conversely, it is expected that the effective use of reading strategies, combined with higher levels of motivation, will have a positive impact on students' reading comprehension and overall academic performance.

The significance of the study

This study is significant because it seeks to identify the challenges and underlying causes of reading comprehension difficulties, which may lead to practical solutions. The findings are expected to help students by increasing their motivation to learn English and by guiding them in adopting appropriate reading strategies and techniques. Moreover, the results may assist teachers in better understanding their students' comprehension problems and in developing more effective methods for teaching reading skills. Finally, the study could serve as a useful reference for future research aimed at improving reading comprehension outcomes.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to the Libyan EFL students at Azzytuna University in Tarhuna city. It is also limited to the period of implementation of the study which took place during the second semester 2024-2025. The research instrument is a questionnaire.

The Definition of Reading Comprehension: is the ability to read a text, process it, and understand its meaning. The term is defined as the process of decoding written language and actively making sense of it through interpretation, inference, and evaluation (Koda 2005). According to Tompkins (2011) defined reading comprehension as the level of comprehending a text. He discusses that comprehension is a creative process that hinges on four skills called phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. It goes beyond simply recognizing words-it requires connecting ideas, interpreting context, constructing the meaning from the written material.

Review of Related Literature

Reading comprehension is an active, meaning-making process that requires the integration of linguistic knowledge, vocabulary, and prior experiences (Birsch, 2011; Tompkins, 2011; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). In academic contexts, comprehension extends beyond decoding to include interpretation, evaluation, and critical engagement with texts.

Many studies show that university students often face considerable difficulties in this domain. A recurrent challenge is limited vocabulary, identified across different contexts including Saudi, Yemeni, and Chinese students (Hezam et al., 2022; *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2022). Additional linguistic barriers such as complex syntax and insufficient exposure to the target language further hinder comprehension (Rahimi & Talepasan, 2012; Ashraf, 2023).

Beyond linguistic issues, cognitive and psychological factors play a significant role. First-year students often engage in surface-level reading and demonstrate slow reading speed (Hermida, 2009), while anxiety, overload, and low motivation negatively affect comprehension outcomes (Bergman, 2024; Dennis, 2008; Hollowell, 2013). Instructional practices are also central to students' success. Evidence supports the value of explicit strategy instruction, such as reciprocal teaching, visualization, cooperative reading, and guided discussion (Pressley, 2002; Cain & Oakhill, 2009; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Empirical studies further confirm that metacognitive awareness, oral reading, and strategic training enhance reading comprehension among university students in different contexts (Alshumaimeri, 2011; Elmadwi & Shepherd, 2014; Medjahdi, 2015).

In conclusion, the literature highlights that comprehension challenges among university students stem from interrelated linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and instructional factors. Addressing these difficulties requires a combination of vocabulary development, strategy training, motivational support, and exposure to authentic academic texts.

Research Design:

This study adopts a quantitative descriptive research design to investigate the difficulties faced by college students in reading comprehension and the factors influencing these challenges. A structured questionnaire consisting of 16 yes/no questions was developed based on the issues highlighted in the literature review. The survey aimed to explore the relationship between students' reading difficulties and the English teaching process. The responding of the questionnaire was analyzed by measuring the percentage.

Participants

In this study, there were 50 students from males and females teaching English in Azzytuna University of Tarhuna who were randomly selected.

Data Collection Method

Data for this study were obtained through a self-administered questionnaire distributed to undergraduate students at Azzytuna University of Tarhuna. The instrument designed to capture students' perceptions of their reading comprehension difficulties and the factors contributing to these challenges, which have an impact on English teaching process at University. The table below shows the responses to the questions which were measured by percentage. A table or chart showing the results of each Yes/No question.

Items	Yes or No	Participants	Percent
Do you find reading comprehension in English difficult?	Yes No Total	40 10 50	80% 20% 100%
Do you feel that your vocabulary is too limited to understand most texts?	yes no Total	45 5 50	90% 10% 100%
Do you read slowly compared to your classmates?	Yes No Total	35 15 50	70% 30% 100%
Do you feel bored or unmotivated when reading long texts and you often prefer short ones?	Yes No Total	43 7 50	86% 14% 100%
Do you lose focus or get distracted easily when reading long texts?	Yes No Total	39 11 50	78% 22% 100%
Do have difficulty identifying the main idea of a passage?	Yes No Total	40 10 50	80% 20% 100%
Do you use reading strategies like underlining or summarizing?	Yes No Total	7 43 50	14% 86% 100%
Do you feel anxious when asked to answer questions after reading a passage?	Yes No Total	44 6 50	88% 12% 100%
Do you think that complex grammar structures (e.g., passive voice, clauses) make reading hard for you?	Yes No Total	40 10 50	80% 20% 100%
Do you often read texts without fully understanding their meaning?	Yes No Total	39 11 50	78% 22% 100%
Do you believe that technology/social media affects your reading habits negatively?	Yes No Total	36 14 50	72% 28% 100%
Do you think that more engaging and simplified reading materials would help you?	Yes No Total	36 14 50	72% 28% 100%
Do you feel that your previous education did not prepare you well for reading at college?	Yes No Total	35 15 50	70% 30% 100%
Do you prefer memorization over understanding while studying?	Yes No Total	36 14 50	72% 28% 100%
Do you think your teachers' methods do not help you improve your reading comprehension.	Yes No Total	37 13 50	74% 26% 100%
Do you believe that additional vocabulary training would improve your comprehension.	Yes No Total	48 2 50	96% 4% 100%

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire analysis revealed several interrelated challenges affecting students' reading comprehension. These difficulties can be categorized into linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and instructional domains as follow:

1. Vocabulary Deficiency and Linguistic Barriers

The most frequently reported problem was limited vocabulary knowledge, with 90% of participants agreeing that unfamiliar words prevented them from fully understanding academic texts. This aligns with previous findings (Hezam et al., 2022; Ashraf, 2023; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016), confirming that insufficient lexical knowledge remains a major obstacle in EFL contexts. In addition, 80% of students identified complex grammar structures and lengthy, dense passages as sources of difficulty, underscoring the importance of addressing both vocabulary and syntax in reading instruction.

2. Slow Reading Speed

More than half of the participants (75%) reported reading at a slow pace, which hindered their ability to complete assigned readings on time and negatively affected participation in lectures and academic tasks. This finding echoes research reported in *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022), which linked slow reading speed to limited comprehension and reduced academic engagement.

3. Difficulty Identifying Main Ideas and Using Strategies

A significant proportion of students (78–80%) expressed difficulty in identifying key ideas and summarizing texts. This indicates a lack of familiarity with strategic reading techniques such as skimming and scanning. As Hermida (2009) emphasized, without explicit training in reading strategies, students often resort to memorization rather than developing critical reading skills.

4. Anxiety and Low Confidence

Psychological barriers also emerged as a major concern. About 88% of respondents reported experiencing anxiety when confronted with dense texts or complex grammar, which in turn lowered their confidence and motivation. Furthermore, 86% highlighted problems with concentration and the absence of effective strategies. These findings are consistent with Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), who argue that affective factors play a crucial role in reading comprehension performance.

5. Reading Habits and Text Preferences

Another notable result was the influence of digital reading habits. Approximately 69% of students agreed that technology and social media had a negative effect on their reading practices, while 80% reported a preference for shorter texts. This shift towards fragmented reading mirrors recent discussions in educational literature and media (Financial Times, 2025), suggesting that reduced exposure to extended texts outside the classroom limits the development of deep comprehension skills.

6. Teaching Methods and Materials

Around 74% of students expressed dissatisfaction with teaching approaches and reading materials. They noted that instruction often emphasized content delivery rather than equipping them with strategies to approach texts critically. This finding supports Pressley (2002), who stressed the importance of teaching explicit comprehension strategies to foster independent and strategic readers.

Discussion

The findings clearly indicate that reading comprehension difficulties among university students are not caused by a single factor, but rather by a combination of linguistic, cognitive, and psychological elements. Vocabulary knowledge emerged as the strongest predictor of comprehension ability, confirming that limited lexicon size restricts students' capacity to decode meaning from texts.

Additionally, slow reading speed and the inability to identify main ideas highlight the urgent need to teach students effective reading strategies (such as skimming, scanning, and summarizing). The role of affective factors such as anxiety also cannot be ignored, as they directly influence motivation and performance.

Finally, dissatisfaction with teaching methods suggests that instructors should adopt more engaging, student-centered approaches, using authentic texts and interactive activities to encourage active reading.

Causes of Reading Comprehension Difficulties among college students

1. Weak Foundations from Previous Education

Many students enter college without having developed strong reading habits during primary and secondary school. Overemphasis on rote memorization instead of critical reading reduces their ability to engage with complex texts.

2. Dependence on Memorization

In some educational systems, success is often measured by the ability to recall facts rather than demonstrate understanding. As a result, students may focus on memorizing isolated pieces of information rather than constructing meaning from a text.

3. Limited Exposure to Reading

Students who rarely read outside of academic requirements may lack the fluency and confidence needed to engage with challenging materials. The absence of extensive reading practice limits vocabulary growth and slows down reading speed.

4. Ineffective Teaching Methods

Instructors may focus more on content delivery than on teaching reading strategies. Without explicit instruction in how to analyze, summarize, or question a text, students are left to struggle independently.

Effective Strategies for Enhancing Reading Comprehension

Effective strategies are essential for strengthening students' reading comprehension, as they equip learners with practical tools to process and interpret texts. Core approaches such as predicting, summarizing, inferring, and evaluating encourage active engagement, while techniques like reciprocal teaching, visualization, and partner reading further enhance understanding (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; Pressley, 2002). Research highlights the value of explicit strategy training, extensive reading beyond textbooks, and the use of digital tools to support comprehension (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). In addition, supportive teaching practices—such as modeling strategies, pre-reading activities, and group discussions—help create a collaborative learning environment. Finally, fostering motivation and confidence through workshops, reading-friendly spaces, and psychological support is vital to overcoming anxiety and sustaining positive reading habits. As Pressley (2002) notes, providing these cognitive tools enables students to interpret texts more effectively.

Conclusion

Reading comprehension is a cornerstone of academic success in higher education. However, many college students face difficulties that range from linguistic and cognitive barriers to motivational and psychological challenges. These problems often stem from weak educational foundations, limited exposure to reading, and a reliance on memorization rather than critical engagement.

Addressing these difficulties requires a comprehensive approach that includes explicit reading strategy instruction, encouragement of extensive reading, integration of technology, and supportive teaching methods. By focusing on these areas, educators can empower students to become confident readers who are capable of analyzing and evaluating complex academic texts. Ultimately, improving reading comprehension skills not only enhances academic performance but also prepares students for lifelong learning and professional development.

Recommendations:

This study recommends that universities help students improve their reading comprehension by focusing on three main areas: vocabulary, reading strategies, and motivation. Students need regular activities that build their vocabulary, along with clear guidance on how to use strategies such as summarizing, questioning, and predicting while reading. Teachers should also create a positive and supportive environment that increases students' motivation and interest in reading. In addition, using technology, online resources, and interactive materials can make reading more engaging. Finally, future research should look at other factors, such as cultural background, prior knowledge, and learning styles, to better understand and solve reading comprehension problem

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Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

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