

Iraqi EFL Preparatory School Students' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract:

Reading is one of the four essential skills of any language, and it plays an important role, particularly in the early stages of language learning. It is a receptive skill that involves decoding and understanding a written text. Its significance that it is a crucial skill in EFL context; it is indispensable to the learning process, arises from the fact that comprehending the information received as an input is the key factor in language learning and that highlights the important role comprehension plays in reading. Reading comprehension is accentuated as a sophisticated process that involves learners' background knowledge, numerous strategies, as well as environmental factors within the process.

The purpose of this study, finding out Iraqi EFL preparatory school students' level of reading comprehension. Accordingly, a sample of (385) students from different Iraqi preparatory schools in Baghdad city/Directorate of Education Al-Rusafa 2nd, for the academic year 2022/2023. The instrument is used to achieve the aim of this study: a Reading Comprehension Test. The finding reveals that the students have an insufficient level of reading comprehension.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Reading Comprehension Test, Iraqi EFL preparatory school students.

I. Introduction:

Reading comprehension is one of the main sources that provides learners with essential input and it plays a very crucial role in second language learning process. It is one of the language skills whose mastery is an indication of language achievement which is the essential aim of teaching (Harmer, 2007).

Reading comprehension is not an easy task, i.e. students usually encounter certain difficulties in deducing meaning out of the written text (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Ahmadi (2013) asserts that reading comprehension is a multifaceted process that implicates a combination of both text and readers, it refers to readers' ability to understand the superficial and the veiled meanings of the text using metacognitive reading strategies.

The problem of the present study is succinctly investigated through responding to the following question: What is Iraqi EFL preparatory school students' level of reading comprehension?

II. Literature Review:

2.1 Receptive Skills:

Receptive skills consist of reading and listening, they provide language learners with input. During the process of learning a language, students often learn receptive skills first and subsequently productive skills. Later, the two will overlap and play a crucial role in boosting other skills. The most significant distinction between reading and listening is that listening provides less assistance to students than written materials and it is a real-time activity, i.e. there is no way to repeatedly hear the information. However, this does not imply that the reader or listener is a passive participant, as both skills demand learners' active engagement (Schmitt, 2010).

Goodman (1976, p. 2) says that reading is a "psycholinguistic guessing game". The reader actively interacts with the text while trying to decode, extract, and construct meaning from his or her own perspective (Sheth & Chauhan, 2015; Wong, 2020). The final message is depending on both the author's intention and the reader's interpretation. Thus, reading comprehension is an interactive process between the reader and the text, during this process the reader interacts with a variety of language skills and strategies (Yapp et al., 2021).

2.2 Reading:

Reading is one of the basic English skills that plays a crucial role in classrooms where language learning is the main goal (Habeeb & Abbas, 2018). It regards as a highly efficient skills to learn the language (Nuttal, 1996). Reading is a means of obtaining information from the external world, it is essential for foreign language skills in cases where students are required to study English material for their own specialized field but have never spoken the language. In this regard, it is known as "English Library Language" (McDonough & Show, 2003, p. 89).

Fischer (2004) points out reading as the speaking of writing. He argues that if writing is regarded as an expression, then reading is regarded as an impression. This idea may infer that when humans first established writing, they devised a technique or system for converting spoken words into coded symbols, fonts, and visuals. Then, in order to understand these concepts and words, humans had to decode and understand these written symbols. This process of interpreting written material is eventually named (reading). Consequently, he asserts that reading came into existence a very long time ago, much like writing, whose date of origin varies from one civilization to another based on the time those civilizations created their writing systems.

In an effort to comprehend reading's historical evolution and its working mechanism, two contradictory theories came to light as experts looked into the topic. The first theory was about the system of sounds and its proponents claimed that reading is a (phonological procedure) which takes place alphabet by alphabet and word by word till that specific uttered sound establishes any meaning. On the other hand, the second theory was related to graphics, and its proponents claimed that reading is a (visual semantic process). Both theories are acceptable, according to Fischer (2004), because reading at the initial level requires phonological identification of written form, and when one's flow of reading becomes smooth, their reliance on sound is reduced and they rely more on visuals.

Alternatively, Lin (2011) attempts to clarify the notion of reading by analysing and combining the definitions offered by several studies in order to provide a more comprehensive definition. He views reading as a collaboration between three elements: the reader who comprehends the text, the written material being read, and the activity in which comprehension happens. His definition emphasizes the reader's reading purpose as a critical component of the overall process, as Grabe (2009) emphasizes the necessity to adopt the process of reading in order to achieve specific learning objectives and complete understanding, as Carroll (1971) affirms.

Anderson (1999) adds an additional element to the definition of reading that is more applicable to the context of English as a foreign/second language (EFL/ESL). He takes into account the reader's previous experience as well as his or her background knowledge, which signifies both L1 and L2 reading proficiency and habits. Furthermore, McNamara (2007) asserts that reading should not be limited to the ability to decode text; rather, it should be conceptualized as a medium for exchanging ideas; the process entails the effective collaboration of text decoding and exchanging ideas through the use of appropriate comprehension strategies. Due to their concealed nature and the need for introspective data-gathering methods, the majority of learning strategies cannot be observed in the classroom, (Sundus A.J. 2022).

2.3 Reading Comprehension

Reading is a useful skill in the field of teaching EFL since the ability to read and comprehend a text is viewed as essential for students' comprehension progress (Hooshang & Rezaeian Tiyaar, 2014). Students can be taught how to make these decisions, (R. K. Elaf, 2022).

McNamara and Magliano (2009) provide a very clear definition of reading and its relationship to comprehension by describing it as a process of negotiation between the reader and the author, and this process includes all linguistic factors, such as phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic. It can also include emotional and psychological factors examined in pragmatics, such as the expected speech acts performed by the addressee in the text. Reading comprehension is best understood as the ability to read text, process it and comprehend its meaning (Sundus A.J., 2022).

Reading comprehension is a result of conscious reading that broadens and develops students' experiences, activates their intellectual skills, and provides students with the necessary information to solve many personal problems, i.e. to identify their tendencies in order to increase its breadth and depth, as well as to develop a sense of self and others. It is appropriate for them due to that it stimulates curiosity as well as reflection, increases a social issues awareness, fosters a critique spirit for books, and fosters a sense of cultural belonging in the individual (Raslan, 2015). The most important presumption is that the student and the teacher would take care of the structure spontaneously (Krebt, 2017).

According to Fadlallah (2015), comprehending the reading material particularly in educational settings is crucial. It seeks to improve learners' language, provide them with rich ideas, familiarize them with useful information, teach them the criticism skills, and accustom them to express opinions as well as make judgments. Jad (2013) says that reading comprehension is a complicated and multi-leveled skill that requires mental skills and abilities as well as a lot of practice, instruction,

interpretation, analysis, and criticism. Language proficiency is obligatory in translation practice (Krebt, 2022).

Additionally, Duffy (2009) asserts that comprehension is:

- Proactive, the reader actively studies and monitors the meaning.
- Tentative, one action has an effect on another.
- Prior personal experience influences the reader's interpretation.
- Transactive, the writer's aim in the text is relevant to the reader's background.
- Thoughtful, the reader follows the author's instructions in a text.
- Imagistic, in which the reader generates an image in his or her mind.
- Inferential, in which the reader draws his or her own conclusions about what is happening in the text.
- Reflective, a competent reader reflects on the material and analyses it by considering how the newly acquired knowledge can be applied effectively.

Generally speaking, comprehension is the goal of reading; without comprehension, reading would be empty and pointless in addition to that students would be unable to develop academically from one learning stage to the next. Whether students read for pleasure, to study, or to find information, it is crucial that they determine their goals. EFL teachers play a crucial role in supporting their students in comprehending reading materials by adopting the appropriate strategies to inspire students' thinking and strengthen their mental abilities in constructing comprehension (Beck & Mckeown, 2001).

2.4 Levels of Reading Comprehension

Reading is an intellectual activity that includes deriving meaning from written words or symbols, Students can read at several levels of comprehension. In this case, many educationalists classify levels of comprehension based on different depths of comprehension and interpretations of what is meant. Growth of attention on learning in classrooms becomes the vogue now as it proves its striking effect on students' progress in learning foreign languages (Alsaadi & Shahad Hatim, 2016).

Lynsky and Stillie (2009) classify five stages of reading comprehension:

- **Literal level**, in which learners answer questions by referring directly to the text; answers are presented plainly in the passage. This work is not difficult and is appropriate for beginners; however, it is insufficient.
- **Reorganization level**, in which learners classify, gather, and organise explicitly stated knowledge from several sources.
- **Inferential level**, in which learners detect information expressed in a text, requiring beyond-the-lines reasoning and deduction. This is known as reading between the lines. Learners must be instructed at this level.
- **Evaluation level**, in which students understand and evaluate the writer's assumptions based on his viewpoint, attitude, and tone.
- **Appreciative level**, in which learners respond to a text with an understanding of its language, use, and emotions. This classification of reading comprehension is appropriate for advanced learners since it requires comprehension, analysis, and judgment based on universally and academically accepted standards.

Megan (2006) describes three reading comprehension levels:

- **Independent level:** It is the highest level, in which learner's understanding stay strong throughout the reading.
- **Instructional level:** It is the midst level, in which students actively interact with the topic and spend much more time on-task.
- **Frustration level:** It is the lowest level, in which students continue to demonstrate high rates of off-task behavior during classroom activities. This indicates that they are not paying attention and are frequently distracted from the reading task.

2.5 Models of Reading

2.5.1 Bottom-Up Processing

In a bottom-up processing, the reading process is driven by a written text and the reader decodes the text sequentially, beginning with the letters. This model regards the written text as a collection of individual words and each word must be decoded separately. It places strong emphasis on word identification and phonics understanding (Hardin, 2001). Foreign language learners who have learned English through the grammar-translation method (GTM) use the bottom-up model while reading a text (Sidek, 2012).

Gough (1972) provides a well-known example of the bottom-up reading model, in which the reader identifies isolated alphabets, transforms a sequence of alphabets into a series of organized phonemes, and finally comprehends them as a word. Then, the reader moves to the next word and continues in this manner until every word in a phrase is successfully comprehended, i.e., before comprehending the full sentence, the reader reads each individual word. This method named (bottom-up) due to the fact that it employs a sequential process.

To understand a text, the reader must deal with the alphabet, words, phrases, and sentences (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). This model is also associated with 'phonics' teaching methodologies, which assert that the reader must learn to recognize alphabets before tackling words. (Alderson, 2000). This model corresponds well with the audio-lingual method that developed in the 1960s for teaching English to ESL/EFL learners; due to the fact that it concentrates on decoding sound-symbol associations throughout the reading process, the bottom-up model fits it well (Lally, 1998).

2.5.2 Top-Down Processing

It is well understood that the top-down processing is the opposite of the bottom-up processing. The top-down processing proposes that a reader should begin with the largest component such as the full written text. Although it appears impossible, a reader is able to comprehend the full text before moving on to paragraphs, sentences, phrases, words, and finally alphabets. The term (top-down) is used to describe a way of interpreting a text; nevertheless, the reader's expectations play a vital role; thus, the term (top-down) can be deceptive (Urquhart & Weir, 1998). Therefore, Urquhart and Weir (1998) suggest using the terms (text-driven) and (reader-driven) instead of (bottom-up) and (top-down) to illustrate the difference.

The top-down model emphasizes the necessity of schemata that adopts by the reader while reading. Schemata are webs of information (i.e., the reader's prior

knowledge) stored in the reader's brain; they represent general views of a particular item, event, or circumstance; and they facilitate comprehension of new information in the text (Alderson, 2000; Rashidi & Soureshjani, 2011). In the top-down model, the reader activates a schema that he/she considers relevant to the new information in the text and comprehends the material based on his/her own schema (Alderson, 2000). The reader's schema greatly influences how he/she deduces written content and how stores in memory (Alderson, 2000). This interpretation is based on a well-known reading theory known as (schema theory), which states that knowledge and comprehension of a text may be obtained by activating the schema (Alderson, 2000).

Schema theory views that a written text alone does not convey meaning; rather, it is responsible for guiding readers in the construction of intended meaning by applying their prior knowledge and experience with the subject matter (Carrell, 1983). It denotes that a written content comprehension depends on the reader's experience and prior knowledge. The author of text thinks that readers will understand its meaning in the same intended manner. However, the reader's comprehension may differ from the author based on their experience and prior knowledge. Consequently, before creating a text; depending on the kind of written materials, e.g., manuals, web pages, and reports. It is essential for authors to identify the anticipated experiences and knowledge of the target audience in relation to the subject (Carrell, 1983).

2.5.3 Interactive Processing

Bottom-up and top-down reading models may have failed to explain the reading process in a full and accurate way. Several researchers (e.g., Bensoussan & Kreindler, 1990; Grabe, 1991; Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009; Hudson, 2007; Liontas, 2002) conclude that effective readers utilize a combination of both models. This particular model is known as the interactive reading model, in which both bottom-up and top-down models work and cooperate to understand a written text which depends on the kind of text, the reader's aims, and the purpose of reading (Alderson, 2000).

Bensoussan and Kreindler (1990) describe the interactive model of reading as a collaboration between the bottom-up model of concepts given at the sentence level and the top-down model of schema that is activated by the text.

2.6 Factors Affect EFL Students' Reading Comprehension

It is well recognized that a variety of factors can affect a person's ability to comprehend; "comprehension is what has been gained from reading a text" (Pugh, 1978, p. 73). On the other hand, Harris and Sipay (1972) present the most common factors that can affect reading comprehension, which are:

- a) **Interest:** is crucial to comprehension, especially for struggling readers.
- b) **General intelligence:** is correlated with the ability to comprehend what is being read. It requires abilities such as reasoning, problemsolving, and concept formulation.
- c) **The learner's meaningful vocabulary:** is an essential component of comprehension. This requires both an understanding of the several meanings of polysemantic terms and the ability to determine which of the multiple meanings best fits the current situation.

- d) **The degree of language proficiency:** establishes reasonable reading comprehension limits. Because word recognition is a big concern, learners' reading comprehension is likely to match their hearing comprehension, as it is unlikely that they would comprehend printed material that they would not have understood if it had been read to them. Therefore, language proficiency is a crucial factor in determining reading comprehension.
- e) **The experiential background of the learner:** has an effect on comprehension since the concepts developed via prior experiences that influence how people comprehend what they read. Prior knowledge facilitates comprehension by facilitating the reader's ability to comprehend the text on the page. When the author's and reader's backgrounds are similar, the fuller comprehension may happen. while, a lack of experience may significantly hinder comprehension. For instance, a rural child who has never seen a traffic light will likely fail to comprehend a story about a child crossing the street safely with the aid of such a device.
- f) **Cognitive style:** refers to the person's preferred and regular response to situations that necessitate some form of intellectual behavior.

2.7 Improving Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension involves concentration, a mental framework for retaining concepts, and effective study techniques. Martin (1991) proposes the following steps to improve reading comprehension:

- a) **Develop a broad background:** the learners have to broaden their background knowledge by reading newspapers, magazines, and books. The teacher encourages students to read any book or short story in English that develop their reading. Then, the teacher has to ask them to summarize what they read in a paper. Eventually, gives a prize to the best summary to encourage students.
- b) **Know the structure of paragraph:** good writers construct paragraphs that have beginning, middle and end. Often, the sentence gives an overview that helps readers to provide a framework for adding details.
- c) **Identify the types of reasoning:** the author uses cause-and-effect, hypothesis, model building, or deduction systems. Good readers know these different types of reasoning.
- d) **Anticipate and predict:** smart readers try to anticipate and predict future ideas and questions of the author. If they are right, it reinforces their understanding and if they are not, it helps them to make quick adjustments.
- e) **Create motivation and interest:** the students have to make preview to materials, ask questions, and discuss ideas with classmates. Stronger interest leads to better comprehension.
- f) **Pay attention to supporting cues:** the students have to study the headings, pictures, and graphs as well as read the first and last paragraph in any chapter, or the first sentence in each text. The first sentence of any text is very important, because it gives the reader an idea about the whole text.

III. Methodology

3.1 Population and Sampling

The population in this study is Iraqi EFL 5th preparatory school students in Baghdad of General Directorate of Education Al- Rusafa 2nd during the academic year 2022/2023. As a sample, (385) students are randomly selected for the present study.

3.2 Instrument

The instrument has been used in order to collect the required data:

- Reading Comprehension Test.

A reading comprehension test is constructed by the researcher while the passages of it are adopted from the British Council in order to evaluate students' performance in reading comprehension. It includes two reading passages; the first passage is followed by a multiple-choice question and a true/false question. The second passage is followed by an essay question and a filling-gap question. While the third one is a cloze test. Each of these questions includes six items, except the multiple-choice question in the first passage and the cloze test include five items.

3.3 Reliability

A group of (40) Iraqi EFL preparatory school students from the Educational Directorate of Baghdad is randomly selected for the purpose of conducting the pilot administration of the test. The pilot administration is carried out in order to achieve the following goals:

1. The clarity of items and instructions in the test.
2. The amount of time participants set aside to complete answering the test.

In the reading comprehension test, the equation (Kuder Richardson) is used to extract the reliability. The reliability coefficient value of the test is (0.91) which is considered as good evidence of the consistency and homogeneity of the items.

IV. Results

To find out Iraqi EFL preparatory school students' level of reading comprehension, the reading comprehension test is administered to the participants' sample. After sorting the answers, the arithmetic mean of the scores of this sample on the test amount to (25.145) degrees, with a standard deviation of (6.052) degrees. The difference statistically is not significant at the level of significance (0.05), as the calculated t-value (0.472) is lower than the critical value of (1.96), with a degree of freedom (384), and this means that the research sample has an insufficient level of reading comprehension as shown in table (1) and Figure (1).

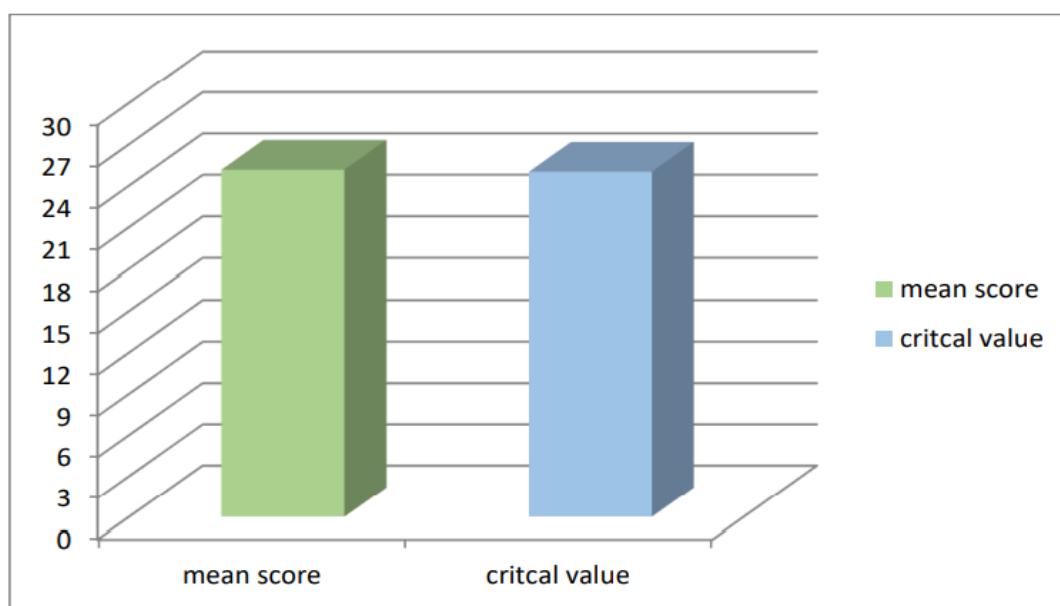
Table 1

The Arithmetic Mean, the Standard Deviation, and the T-Value of the Reading Comprehension Test

variable	N.	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Theoretical Mean	T-value		Significance 0.05
					Calculated	Critical	
Reading Comprehension	385	25,145	6,052	25	0.472	1.96	Not significant

Figure 1

The Arithmetic and Theoretical Means of Reading Comprehension Test



V. Discussion of Results

The goal of the current study is to show the Iraqi EFL preparatory school students' level of reading comprehension, as they are considered the main beneficiaries of learning English. The current study reveals that Iraqi EFL preparatory school students have an insufficient level of reading comprehension.

VI. Conclusions

In accordance with preceding survey and discussion related to the finding, aim, and question of this research, the conclusion has been drawn that Iraqi EFL preparatory school students have an insufficient level of reading comprehension.

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الاستيعاب القرائي لدى طلبة المرحلة الإعدادية العراقيين دارسي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية**همسة عبد الزهرة عاتي**Hamsa.Abdulzahra1207a@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.iq**جامعة بغداد / كلية التربية ابن رشد للعلوم الإنسانية / قسم اللغة الانكليزية****أ.م.د. سندس عبد الجبار كامل**sundus.a@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.iq**جامعة بغداد / كلية التربية ابن رشد للعلوم الإنسانية / قسم اللغة الانكليزية****الملخص:**

القراءة هي إحدى المهارات الأربع الأساسية لأي لغة، وتلعب دوراً مهماً، ولا سيما في المراحل الأولى من تعلم اللغة. هي مهارة استقبالية تتضمن فهم النص المكتوب وتظهر أهميتها في أنها مهارة حاسمة في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية؛ ويعتبر تعلمها أمر لا غنى عنه لعملية التعلم، وينشأ من حقيقة أن فهم المعلومات الواردة كمدخلات هو العامل الرئيسي في تعلم اللغة والذي يسلط الضوء على الدور المهم الذي يلعبه الفهم في القراءة. ويعتبر الفهم القرائي عملية معقدة تتضمن معرفة خلفية المتعلمين، واستراتيجيات عديدة، بالإضافة إلى العوامل البيئية.

الغرض من هذه الدراسة هو، معرفة مستوى الاستيعاب القرائي لدى طلبة المدارس الإعدادية العراقيين دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية. وبناءً على ذلك تم اختيار عينة من (٣٨٥) طالب وطالبة بشكل عشوائي من طلبة الخامس الاعدايي من مختلف المدارس الاعداية العراقية في مدينة بغداد/مديرية تربية الرصافة الثانية للعام الدراسي ٢٠٢٢/٢٠٢٣. الاداة التي تم استخدامها لتحقيق أهداف هذه الدراسة: اختبار الاستيعاب القرائي. تكشف النتائج أن الطلبة لديهم مستوى غير كافٍ من الاستيعاب القرائي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستيعاب القرائي، اختبار الاستيعاب القرائي، طلبة المدارس الإعدادية العراقيين دارسي اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية.