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Exploring the Difficulties that Face Iraqi EFL Intermediate Students in Answering the Unseen Passage

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استكشاف الصعوبات التي تواجه طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية العراقيين في المستوى المتوسط عند

الإجابة على النص غير المألوف

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مديرية تربيته نينوى ماجستير لغة انكليزية

Abstract

Unseen passages are used in English tests to check the ability of EFL students in grasping the meaning of the text and answering the questions correctly. This paper deals with the difficulties that EFL students encounter in understanding unseen passages. The researcher employed a questionnaire with generic remarks regarding the key issues that EFL students encounter when reading the unknown parts. The study included 20 EFL first intermediate learners (10 males and 10 females) from Al Mahallabya Middle School for Boys and Girls in Nineveh Governorate. The findings reveal that the participants encounter many problems in the process of reading the unseen passages such as the complexity of the texts, anxiety, unfamiliar vocabularies and limited time to understand the text. **Keywords:** EFL, Unseen passage, Reading comprehension, Reading difficulties

الخلاصة

القطع الغير مرئيه تستخدم في اختبارات اللغة الانكليزية للتحقق من قدرة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية على فهم معنى النص والإجابة على الأسئلة بشكل صحيح. تتناول هذه الدراسة الصعوبات التي يواجهها متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في فهم المقاطع غير المرئية. استخدم الباحث استبياناً يتضمن عبارات حول المشكلات الرئيسية التي يواجهها متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلفة أجنبية في فهم المقاطع غير المرئية. المشاركون في هذه الدراسة هم ٢٠ طالباً وطالبة للصف الاول المتوسط (١٠ ذكور و ١٠ إناث) من ثانويه المحلية الثانوية للبنين والبنات في محافظة نينوى. تكشف النتائج أن المشاركين لديهم الكثير من المشكلات التي يواجهونها في عملية قراءة المقاطع غير المرئية مثل تعقيد النصوص والقلق والمفردات غير المألوفة والوقت المحدود المتاح لفهم النص.

1. Introduction

Reading is such an important aspect of our educational system and social lives that it is impossible to fathom living without it. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four language skills required for English language proficiency (Grabe and Stoller: 2002, 23). Reading is an important ability that students should possess. It allows students to become more familiar with their key subjects while also improving their language skills. Koda (48:2005) defines reading comprehension as a mental process in which students engage in the formation of meaning and use reading recognition procedures. Reading takes place when meaning is made of what has been written or typeset. Put simply, reading comprehension skills are suffering in students' quest to read well — to be able to understand the text being read and process and retain it. Reading effectively involves active mental effort in reading the text, as readers determine author's meaning by deciphering words and sentences. Several EFL (English as a foreign language) learners experience difficulties in understanding unknown texts; yet good readers usually deal with them by using reading strategies effectively (Nation, 2004:93).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Studies have shown that EFL students usually encounter problems in English, especially reading, and as a result they find it difficult to comprehend unfamiliar texts. Translation one of the most reached for strategies used by students, results in word-for-word translation that rejects meaning making. Two primary factors have been reported to lead to poor reading comprehension among students. One, many EFL teachers tend to test words or sentences more than reading for comprehension in paragraphs. Second, students lack opportunities to learn specific comprehension-enhancing strategies. EFL teachers notice all the time that reading in English is a helluva harder and messier proposition than reading in their students' own language. In order to better understand and overcome the invisibleness of texts, students must identify reasons why they have difficulty with readjusting their strategies and thereby foster deeper reading intelligibility.

1.3 Study Purpose

In the current study, I want to investigate problems faced by EFL learners in Nineveh governorate as far as reading comprehension is concerned. Second, it also aims to take a holistic view of the forces that affect how much EFL learners are able to understand unfamiliar texts.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

This study will only cover first intermediate EFL learners at Al Mahallabyah Secondary School for Boys and Girls, Nineveh Governorate. Additionally, the survey is limited to implementation and was conducted during the first semester of 2022–2023. A questionnaire is the main instrument employed in this research.

1.5 Research Questions

In response, this paper asks two questions:

1. What problems are often encountered by Nineveh Governorate students when they read an unfamiliar text?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female in terms of reading comprehension problems of EFL learners?

1.6 Significance of the Study

The results of this analysis have positive implications for those students who face reading problems in Nineveh EFL. These insights can be very useful when it comes to students starting reading / using strategies and techniques in order to help them understand the new, read material. Additionally, the results may help teachers to have a better understanding of what might be problematic for their students in terms of learning, so that they can teach reading in a more effective way.

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Reading

Reading, as a skill, has to be cultivated by active reading process which involves the reader's interface with the text. In order for the writer to convey a message, the reader must be able to decode what was intended. According to Rivers (1981:147) reading is the most important activity in any language classroom because it gives information, pleasure and helps to reinforce extend one's understanding of a language. Successful readers rely upon their prior knowledge to make sense of what they are reading. Goodman (1973:162) further points out that EFL readers have to interact with messages encoded by the writer on the basis of prior experiences, conceptual depth and extent, and operative language knowledge. Four methods of identifying words have been identified by Ehri (1991:131): decoding, analogysupported reading, context prediction and recognition of whole words by sight. Studies show that EFL readers often have difficulties in comprehending unfamiliar texts, leading to a growing body of work the purpose of which is to examine causes for such problems. For example, Raihan and Nezami (2012) investigated EFL Arab students' general reading problems and comprehension strategies at Najran University in Saudi Arabia. Based on teacher questionnaires and classroom observations, they discovered that students had particular difficulty with spelling and pronunciation. Medjahdi (2015) investigated reading problems EFL learners experienced in carrying out reading tasks and reasons which caused it. Using questionnaires and interviews, the research was carried out with third year students and teachers from nehalet mohamed secondary school in Algeria. It was found that most students encountered comprehension problems because of pronunciation and unfamiliar words, as well as the characteristic of the text in which they read. Likewise, Rafieyan (2015) explored teaching problems of EFL reading comprehension in ESP courses from the perspective of 300 participants. Based on their chi-square analysis, fifteen syntactic categories were recognized as real barriers to comprehension of ESP texts. The study found that raised teacher awareness of learner problems could improve assistance in instruction and mentioned that learners' difficulty often results from lack of enough background knowledge, understanding about the

culture and the editor and the type of text, among other things. In general, EFL learners would have difficulty in mastering perplexing words and unfamiliar lexicon. These results raise several possible reasons for the reading comprehension problem. Restricted vocabulary, syntactic difficulties of sentence structure, are widely accepted as major limitations in text comprehension.

2.2 Linguistic and Cognitive Aspects of Reading Comprehension

Reading is a key skill for all EFL learners. It refers to the method of bringing meaning out and building it up from written language in active interaction (Kahmi & Catts, 2012:23). There are several reasons why children may have trouble understanding what they read, including learning disabilities, phonological awareness, and a lack of vocabulary. Reading abilities consist of several components. The Reading Panel identified the following components: Phonetic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that words are composed of a collection of separate sounds. It also includes the ability to hold onto those sounds, properly combine them into words, and then separate them again. Phonics is the relationship between a single letter and its sound, but only in the context of the written word. Phonics is especially important in opaque orthographies such as English, where youngsters must acquire the spelling of many words (Ibid.).

2.2.1 Complexity of Texts

Many studies show that EFL students' reading comprehension of unknown sections is influenced by a variety of circumstances. According to Dennis (2008:19), one of the most important aspects influencing students' reading comprehension is the complexity of the texts. This aspect is influenced by the fluency and strength of EFL readers, as well as their understanding of the many meanings.

2.2.2 Anxiety

Anxiety is also one of the factors that might affect EFL students' reading comprehension substantially. Added stressors, like exams, in-class writing assignments and homework could impede students' abilities to process texts productively. Students react differently to assessment contexts: some of them are able to handle the situation even in a positive way; however, others may be placed under an increased level stress which impairs their understanding ability, while others fear, and as a result, they have difficulty concentrating on their knowledge of the unknown material. The ambient conditions also have an impact on EFL learners who attempt to read an unknown piece; for example, if EFL learners are in a hazardous atmosphere, they find it difficult to focus on their reading. When there are noises, students may lose concentration while trying to interpret an invisible paragraph. (Ibid: 22).

2.2.3 Background Knowledge

One factor associated with reading is lack of skill in using background information. Skilled readers connect and integrate new information with what they already know about the world, their experiences in it, or what they have experienced for themselves on a topic. Hartney (2011:57) argues that it is background, vocabulary, reading fluency, active engagement/ involved participation and critical thinking that are important factors influencing comprehension of any given piece of written matter. Previous knowledge in EFL is used to connect with the content they are reading by linking familiar information. Understanding meaning of familiar words and their relationship in a passage is also, indispensable part of comprehension. Even when writing smooth, we must first have to be able to identify a word's part of speech, meaning, and how it functions within a certain sentence. Using a vocabulary approach may be helpful. As learners become more skilled at reading, they spend less time decoding words and can attend to the meaning of sentences as a whole, enabling response at increasingly deeper levels. In this regard, EFL learners with a more extensive vocabulary are expected to understand texts more effectively compared to those who need to rely on context in order to infer the meaning of unknown vocabulary.

3. Methodology of the Study

A number of studies have explored the difficulties that students encounter when understanding reading, including (a) difficulty with the level and quality of texts, (b) anxiety about tests, (c) environmental factors during testing situations, (d) exposure to unfamiliar words in text, and (e), time constraints. Based on this research, the current study seeks to gain some insight into reading comprehension problems of EFL students. The results may also enable teachers to better understand the challenges faced by their students and determine successful methods for teaching reading comprehension. The research methodology that used in this study will be explained within this chapter. This includes details of the study participants, how data was collected, instruments used and their validity and reliability, and statistical methods.

3.1 Participants of the Study

The sample of the study included 20 Iraqi EFL students, 10 boys and 10 girls, Al Mahallabya secondary school for both sexes in Nineveh Governorate.

Table 1 shows that 50% of the sample was male and 50% was female

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	10	50%	50%	50%
	Female	10	50%	50%	100%
	Total	20	100%	100%	

3.2 Instruments of the Study

The researcher developed a questionnaire focused on the reading comprehension problems of EFL learners. Twenty questionnaires were delivered and returned, which was enough for analysis. Answers to the questionnaire were rated on a Likert scale, according to the points:

- Totally agree: 5 points
- Agree: 4 points
- Neutral: 3 points
- Disagree: 2 points
- Completely disagree: 1 point

3.3 Validity of the Instrument

In order to establish the content validity of the questionnaire, it was examined by four EFL university teachers at different academic positions. After obtaining some feedback on the OBA PTSD scale, the researcher amended a number of items for clarity and relevance.

3.4 Reliability of the Instrument

Following administration of the survey and collection of main study data, testing for reliability was completed with a sub-sample of seven students. The answers provided were subjected to statistical tests and the results showed a high Cronbach's Alpha value which was higher than 0.74, meaning that the instrument can be used on data gathering safely. The categories used in the interpretation of the responses of the questionnaire, was:

- Mean scores between 1.00 and 2.33 represent low expectation
- An average value between 2.34 and 3.66 is a moderate estimation
- High estimation was on average from 3.67 to 5.00.

3.5 Procedures

Data collection began in 2023 upon receiving the study's approval. After the questionnaires were written, SPSS was used for the analysis of quantitative data. Both simple and multiple regressions were utilized in this analysis to assess the relations among variables.

٤. Results and Discussion

Results concerning the first research question: What are the problems that encounter first intermediate EFL students in reading unrehearsed texts?

Table 2

SEs and SDs (in brackets) of reading comprehension problems

No.	Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I had trouble figuring out the meanings of certain unfamiliar words in the unseen passage.	3.9500	1.99868
2	I had a challenge because of the restricted time to study the unseen part.	3.6500	1.81273
3	I had difficulties guessing the meanings of some new words..	3.8500	1.08942
4	I faced difficulty in answering questions about the unseen passage.	3.5500	1.27630
5	I faced difficulty due to slow reading speed of the unseen passage.	3.9000	1.02084
6	I normally translate word for word while I'm reading.	3.9500	1.88704

7	I feel stressed while reading the unseen passage.	3.7500	1.01955
8	I faced a trouble with letter and word recognition	3.5500	1.68633
9	I constantly believing that other pupils are better at language than me..	3.9500	2.99868
10	I get upset when I can't grasp what I read in English.	3.2500	1.96655
Average		0.989	3.704

Table 2 presents the participants' responses to the questionnaire items. The overall mean score was 3.704, with a standard deviation of 0.989. Notably, the mean exceeds 3.5, suggesting a satisfactory level of assessment for the variables under investigation. Upon analyzing the questionnaire, the researcher concluded that the participants face several challenges, beginning with difficulties in understanding the meanings of unfamiliar words. Second, limitation of time affects EFL students in a negative way. Third, guessing the meaning of the difficult words. Fourth, there is a difficulty in answering the questions about the unseen passage. Fifth, slow reading speed of the unseen passage is also problematic. Sixth, translating word by word while reading affect EFL negatively. Seventh, the emotional state of EFL affects their ability of reading. Eighth, EFL encounter trouble with letter and word recognition. Ninth, keep assuming that the other EFL students are better at language than he or she is. Finally, occasionally EFL students don't grasp what they read in English, which makes them unhappy. **Results for the study's second question:** The aim of the study was to investigate whether there are any statistically significant differences between male and female EFL students in terms of their reading comprehension difficulties. In order to answer this question, the average and standard deviation of the same data from Table 3 were calculated.

Table 3

Reading Comprehension Problems (RCPs) according to Gender Means and Standard Deviations

No.	Statements	Male		Female	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	I had trouble figuring out the meanings of certain unfamiliar words in the unseen passage.	3.918	1.668	4.411	0.722
2	I faced a problem due to the limited time to understand the unseen passage.	3.918	0.761	3.434	0.892
3	I had difficulties guessing the meanings of some new words.	3.636	1.120	4.111	1.044
4	I faced difficulty in answering questions about the unseen passage.	4.233	0.766	2.687	1.235
5	I faced difficulty due to slow reading speed of the unseen passage.	4.263	0.902	3.526	1.266
6	I normally translate word for word while I'm reading.	4.173	0.935	3.424	1.114
7	I feel stressed while reading the unseen passage.	1.182	1.751	3.322	1.193
8	I faced a trouble with letter and word recognition	4.809	0.529	3.101	0.501
9	I constantly believing that other pupils are better at language than me.	3.100	0.512	3.689	1.264
10	I get upset when I can't grasp what I read in English.	3.617	1.134	2.879	1.154
Average		4.950	0.720	3.321	1.019

Gender differences in participants' responses to questionnaire statements are provided in Table 3. For boys, the average score for reading comprehension problems was 4.950 (SD = 0.720). On average, girls scored 3.321 (SD = 1.019). It is obvious that boys reported more reading comprehension difficulties than girls which shows "moderate" in essay difficulty. The relatively higher reading comprehension scores among girls can be attributed to the fact that in most schools, there are more English lessons for girls which help to improve their reading comprehension. Moreover, girls tend to handle reading strategies more efficiently than boys which results in stronger reading proficiency among them.

5. Conclusions

Yet, as we have seen throughout this research, reading is the important skill of learners in learning a language. The results show that the first level of intermediate EFL learners encounter many difficulties in understanding strange passages, especially some strange words, strange terminologies and in a short time. English teachers must find ways to deal with such difficulties. The researcher suggests that further inquiries must use qualitative research in Iraqi EFL classes to be followed and to examine how reading is taught and learned. These classroom observations may yield deeper understanding regarding challenges experienced by teachers in teaching reading. It would be interesting to delve deeper into the way students react to English teachers' instructional practices aimed to promote reading comprehension.

6. Recommendations

The researcher advises the following.

1. Examining EFL learners' level and prior knowledge in reading comprehension of the unseen passage.
2. Encouraging EFL students to read as much as possible to aid in the process of English language acquisition.
3. Encouraging EFL students to re-read unnoticed passages in order to read more quickly and fluently.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire

Part (A) Information regarding EFL pupils

Please place (x) in the relevant location.

Sex: Male () Female () Part B Mark the appropriate answer by assigning (X).

No.	Statements	Totally Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Totally Disagree
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1	I had trouble figuring out the meanings of certain unfamiliar words in the unseen passage.					
2	I had difficulty understanding the unseen portion because of time constraints.					
3	I faced difficulty in guessing the meanings of some new words.					
4	I faced difficulty in answering questions about the unseen passage.					
5	I faced difficulty due to slow reading speed of the unseen passage.					
6	I usually translate word by word while I am reading					
7	I feel stressed while reading the unseen passage.					
8	I faced a trouble with letter and word recognition					
9	I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.					
10	I feel upset when I don't understand what I read in English					