

Challenges Faced by EFL Students in Reading: a Case Study of First-Year English Language Learners

Mannonova Shaxnoza¹

¹ Academic Lyceum of UWED

Abstract:

Reading is a fundamental skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, essential for academic success and language development. However, many students face persistent difficulties in achieving a proficient reading level, which hinders their overall language acquisition. This study investigates the reading challenges experienced by first-year EFL students, aiming to identify the specific issues they encounter and the underlying causes of their weaknesses in reading comprehension. Through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including surveys, interviews, and analysis of reading assignments, the research highlights common barriers such as limited vocabulary, lack of reading strategies, and inadequate exposure to authentic texts. The findings provide insights into effective interventions and strategies to support EFL students in overcoming their reading difficulties, ultimately enhancing their academic performance and language skills.

Keywords: abilities, language learning, reading challenges.

Most people study a foreign language primarily due to academic requirements and school curricula. Additionally, many pursue language learning to enhance their career prospects, as proficiency in at least one foreign language can lead to more rewarding job opportunities. In today's world, where English is recognized as an international language, having a basic understanding of it is often considered essential. Furthermore, some learners engage in language study for specific purposes, using the language solely for particular contexts without incorporating it into their daily lives.

Generally speaking, it is understood as a drive or a trigger that leads to the following learning and it is one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of learning a foreign language. Jeremy

Harmer defines motivation as “an internal drive that encourages somebody to pursue a course of action.” (Harmer, 1991, 3).

Teaching a foreign language to children is obviously different from teaching adults. Children do not have the same access as older learners to use a language to talk about a language; in other words, it is needed a secured atmosphere in order to encourage them to become independent and adventurous in the learning of the language (Cameron, 2001: 1; Scott and Ytreberg, 1990: 10). The ability to read and comprehend texts is one of the four essential language skills, making it crucial for EFL students to achieve a strong reading proficiency. However, mastering reading can be challenging, as many students continue to struggle with various reading difficulties. This research aims to explore and address these challenges by identifying the specific problems students face in reading assignments and uncovering the underlying causes of their weaknesses.

Reading plays a central role in our educational, working, recreational, and social lives. The ability to read is highly valued and important for social and economic advancement. Reading is the most important skill among the four language skills as it can improve the overall language proficiency (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Krashen & Brown, 2007). Even though one may have reading difficulties in his or her mother tongue, the problems get worse when reading is applied to a second language, as students might be lagging behind in a number of reading components, including accuracy, comprehension, and speed. Lagging behind is a cognitive difficulty associated with the process of reading in another language (Alsamadani, 2008).

Comprehension of language does not only involve the understanding of individual words but also active engagement with the content to create a mental representation (Rashid, 2012). Successful comprehension requires coordination of skills at many levels to extract and construct meaning. The level of difficulty associated with comprehension of certain content depends on the complexity of the language used. There are important differences between the language that we use in everyday conversations and the language used in school (Westby, 2012), where everyday conversations are originally used to achieve daily tasks and share personal information. Academic language includes a different set of words, more complex grammatical structures and different text organization to express content which describes complex relationships (Zwiers, 2008)

EFL learners put significant effort into enhancing their English proficiency by engaging in activities such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, expanding their vocabulary, and striving to comprehend both written and spoken discourse beyond mere utterances, which typically refer to spoken outputs. Despite possessing the necessary capabilities to succeed, many students still face difficulties in achieving their goals, often struggling to pass or meet expected standards. These challenges, which hinder their progress, require thorough investigation.

Based on my teaching experience, identifying these challenges accurately is not an easy task and necessitates active collaboration with the students themselves. To create effective teaching-learning environments and support meaningful learning, it is crucial to first uncover these difficulties and then develop practical solutions with the students' input. As central participants in the learning process and the challenges they face, students must also be integral to the solutions, ensuring that their needs and perspectives are directly addressed.

Ideally, goal is to involve every student. In practice, though, when a lesson falls short of expectations, we often adjust our objectives. Unable to engage everyone, we settle for the participation we can achieve. Rather than recognizing that only the more advanced students are involved, we're often just relieved that someone is contributing. This can lead to overlooking the quieter, less confident students who, as a result, are left passively observing the lesson.

Reading is a crucial skill that learners must master when acquiring a new language. This study highlights the difficulties faced by secondary school EFL learners in reading comprehension,

including challenges such as ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and insufficient time to process texts cognitively. To address these issues, it is imperative for policymakers and teachers to develop effective strategies that promote meaningful and engaging reading experiences.

Future research should adopt a qualitative approach to observe EFL classrooms, particularly in Jordan, to gain a deeper understanding of how reading lessons are conducted. Detailed classroom observations can uncover barriers faced by teachers in delivering effective reading instruction while shedding light on current teaching practices. Additionally, research should focus on students' responses to various teaching approaches to understand their coping mechanisms and strategies for overcoming reading difficulties. These findings can provide valuable insights for improving reading instruction and enhancing learner outcomes.

In conclusion, the challenges faced by EFL learners in mastering reading comprehension highlight the complexity of acquiring this essential skill. Factors such as ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, limited cognitive processing time, and broader learning difficulties present significant barriers to student success. Addressing these issues requires collaborative efforts between educators, policymakers, and students. Teachers must adopt innovative strategies and approaches tailored to learners' needs, while policymakers should prioritize creating supportive frameworks for effective language instruction. Future research focusing on classroom observations and students' coping mechanisms will provide deeper insights into existing challenges and inform practical solutions. By placing students at the center of the learning process and actively involving them in problem-solving, we can foster meaningful progress and ensure that EFL learners achieve their academic and professional goals.

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