

Reading Comprehension Difficulties: A Case Study on Saudi High School EFL Learners

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Abstract:

The ability to read and comprehend texts has long been considered critical for achieving success in academic pursuits. While a myriad of studies has investigated the components that affect 'learners' reading comprehension, there are a limited number of investigations into such elements in the Middle East and North Africa. The following article will discuss the experiences of students from Albaha secondary school in Saudi Arabia and the group's difficulties with reading comprehension in the English as a Foreign Language ('EFL') studies. The specific focus is Saudi high school EFL 'learner's reading comprehension ability. To gather data, a sample of twenty (n= 20) Saudi high school EFL learners completed two research instruments: (i) an adapted reading comprehension test and (ii) focus group discussion ('FGD'). The results showed that for students in Saudi Arabia, the reading comprehension levels were quite low. However, the findings did indicate that motivated students were willing to learn and did understand the need for English language acquisition. However, there are several issues affecting their reading comprehension ability. For example, the road blocks include the school environment, textbooks, English teachers, English teachers, and learners. This paper provides useful insights for Saudi Arabian educational stakeholders to improve reading comprehension in L2 contexts.

Keywords: Saudi (L2) learners; difficulties; high school.

1. Introduction

Academic success often depends on the ability of students to read and fully understand written texts. While it is well recognized that reading skill is crucial to language learning, several factors are inherent in the comprehension process, which may present challenges to some readers in acquiring the skill. According to Scanlon, Anderson, and Sweeney (2016), reading is an interactive process that combines reader variables, such as the purpose of reading, background knowledge, interest in the topic and variables, such as structure and vocabulary, which interact with each other to create specific meanings from the text.

Many second language learners report that they cannot efficiently comprehend what they read (Matsuoka & Hirsh, 2010). Research on reading comprehension has relentlessly attempted to account for this phenomenon; however, the general pattern of results suggests that reading

comprehension is influenced by numerous factors, irrespective that some factors are more influential than others. For example, one line of research attributes comprehension failure to 'students' inability to use effective reading tools (Egan, 2014; Leckie, 2013; Kung, 2012; Cid, 2009; Cullinan & Bagert, 1996), whereas others associate 'students' inability to use effective reading strategies with the lack of enough prior knowledge (Kintsch, 1994; 2004). Research also suggests that reading and comprehending is an innate skill, while others argue it is acquired while attending school (Tong, 2015; Ellett, 2014; Bell, 2012).

The literature on reading comprehension and the aspects that contribute to language reading comprehension among ESL/EFL learners has grown over the last five decades, particularly with regards to studies with university-level students. However, the availability of evidence about EFL secondary school 'students' reading comprehension is still relatively scarce, especially among Saudi EFL learners. Based on the status quo, it might be reasonable to argue that understanding the factors that influence/determine 'reading comprehension plays would play a central role in devising effective strategies to assist students in improving their reading comprehension.

2. Literature Review

2.1 EFL Saudi Arabian students

There are several sources that affect the Saudi 'student's ability to perform well in learning ESL. These include the community, culture, religion, learning practices, and 'learners' Arabic mother language learners.

Several researchers have identified numerous further challenges and difficulties related to reading and reading comprehension in English in the Saudi EFL context. These include learning practices and the lack of training available for improving Saudi EFL 'learners' reading comprehension skills. Others relate these reading difficulties to the students themselves. For example, Saudi students have difficulty in developing the knowledge of English vocabulary, making it difficult to acquire reading skills. There are also problems with insufficient time allocated to the task and EFL material's level of and attentiveness. Students may not fully understand how learning English would benefit them and therefore may not be motivated in their studies (Alsamadani, 2009; Alebsi, 2002; Awad, 2002; Al-Ebsi, 1997; Kondarge, 1991; Al-Sulaimani, 1990). The government of Saudi Arabia is also highly concerned that its students acquire English language skills since it is the language of policy statements, science, and technology and an important step for modernization (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Elyas & Picard, 2010; Al-Seghayer, 2005).

However, according to research on Saudi EFL learners, various challenges impact language development and hence the Saudi 2030 Vision. For instance, the Saudi test-takers consistently scored low in their English proficiency tests, specifically in their reading comprehension test (IELTS, 2012).

2.2 Reading Comprehension

The ability to process and understand the meaning of a text is referred to as reading comprehension (Al-Rubaye, 2012). The skill can also be defined as one's ability to make sense of the written text by processing its information and relating it to one's pre-existing knowledge (Grabe, 2009). Reading comprehension requires a person to understand each paragraph and how it relates to the entire text. It also involves comprehending the text's organization, references, and antecedents. Students are required to identify the main idea of the text, understand the writer's point of view, purpose, intent, and make inferences about the writer (Graesser, 2007). Although reading skills appear to be taken for granted by educators due to the assumption that students have already acquired solid skills (Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006), the ability to comprehend written text is considered a key component of literacy and has a significant effect on ' academic success. Even though the literature recognizes that reading skills are essential for effective language learning, the reading comprehension process is subject to many inherent factors that make reading, as a receptive skill,

tricky to define in terms of the specific skills and strategies it requires. According to the literature, reading can be defined as an interactive process involving both *reader variables* (i.e., the *purpose* for reading, 'reader's background knowledge, 'reader's interest in the topic, and so on) and *text variables* (i.e. the specific text structure and lexis used). Both of which interact to allow the reader to comprehend specific meanings from a given text. Numerous works have examined the specific components affecting learners' ability to read and comprehend a written text. Still, these studies had little attention to the Saudi students in schools which makes this study particularly important to the literature.

2.3 Problems in Reading Comprehension

A number of researchers have studied the problems of student with reading and comprehension. In Chawwang, (2008) researcher observed difficulties in Thai students learning EFL reading skills. Their study showed that the majority of the students struggled with reading in English. One of the biggest problems that was recognized was the ability of the students to retain adequate knowledge in vocabulary skills (Gunning, 2002). Understanding vocabulary is important for students to comprehend complex ideas in their English reading materials and textbooks, such as technical expressions (Qian, 2002; Carlisle, 2000;). Students who struggle with retaining vocabulary knowledge will most defiantly experience greater difficulties in comprehension of technical terminology. This also complies with understanding the use of antonyms, synonyms, and words that have more than one connotation (Vilenius-Tuohimaa, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2008; Nuttall, 2000; Carlisle, 2000).

Another area that influences comprehension is the complexity of the text. When a student improves their fluency, they will have a greater control and understanding of text. This means that the oral ability of the student is related to how well students can read. This is because students acquire new vocabulary skills through listening. The acquisition of a vast vocabulary has a direct impact on how well a student is able to comprehend new words. It also assists them by relating context and how words are commonly used (Dennis, 2008).

Complex sentence comprehension is also one of the major problems commonly faced by EFL students and their reading skills. Complex sentences refer to sentences that use many clauses and conjunctions like, however, because, although, and (Scott, 2009). Reading and comprehension difficulties for EFL learners also include coordinating conjunctions, nominalizations, prepositional phrases, and participial phrases. This causes problems in EFL students because the complexity of writing and different writing styles make it harder to understand (Nuttall, 2000). Trehearne and Doctorow (2005) provide a number of useful tools to remedy these difficulties such as text form, reading habits, learning methods, and improved reading and comprehension tools.

Text organizing and concentration have also been observed to increase the level of difficulty in reading and comprehension skill (Meniado, 2016; Perfetti, Landi, & Oakhill, 2004). Davoudi and Yousefi (2015) argue that the difficulties in reading for some learners are influenced by environmental, biological, and instructional factors. The author contented by stating that for some unknown reason, those with reading problems also show inadequate comprehension skills. For a number of these students, the problems of comprehension have much to do with the inability to recognize words. The environmental circumstances can also influence reading and comprehension. A disorganized environment can play a major part in adding greater difficulty of reading and comprehension. It has been observed that in a more controlled and peaceful environment, student have a better reading ability. Insecure domiciles also have been observed to increase difficulties in concentration while reading. However, safe environments provide a better opportunity to improve reading comprehension. Noisy environments have been shown to effect learners focus, such as areas with radios or television on at high volumes (Dennis, 2008).

In some cases, difficulties in comprehension may be attributed to language or cognitive process deficiencies. Motivation and concentration can also be contributing factors that could influence

'student's comprehension. This is because certain groups or readers can understand common words and expressions, but struggle with the understanding of larger sentences (Anmarkrud & Bråten, 2009; Laing & Kamhi, 2002).

3. Research Questions

The present study addresses the following research questions:

1. What current level of L2 reading comprehension for ESL in Saudi high school learners?
2. What problems do Saudi high school learners encounter in EFL reading comprehension?

4. Materials and Methods

4.1 Research Design

The present study seeks to investigate the difficulties that Saudi EFL learners face in reading comprehension. This study used a mixed-method design that depends on two types of data: namely, quantitative data and qualitative data collection phases. Phase 1 was the quantitative data collection stage which involved a reading comprehension test. Phase 2 involved the qualitative data collection stage that includes a focus-group discussion (FGD) to elicit information on Saudi high school EFL learners' difficulties in reading comprehension.

4.2 Participants

The present study samples Saudi Arabian public high school EFL students (n=20) who follow Saudi 'Arabia's Education 'Ministry's curriculum and testing procedures. Specifically, these participants do not use English as their regular L2 in daily life; rather, they are native L1 Arabic speakers study English as a compulsory academic subject they are required to pass to progress on to higher education at college or university.

4.3 Instruments

In general, past studies investigating vocabulary size and reading comprehension have relied on quantitative data collection from data from tests given to the participants. Thus, this study used two main research instruments. First, the researcher assessed the 'participants' reading comprehension in English using Reading Comprehension Test (RCT) to address the first research question. Second, the focus group discussion was utilized to address the second research question (i.e., What are the difficulties Saudi high school EFL learners face in reading comprehension?).

4.3.1 Testing Reading Comprehension

Testing the reading comprehension ability is comprised of two reading passages and a set of multiple-choice questions. The first passage, The Planet Mars, is 250 words long, and the second text, The Mysterious Bermuda Triangle, is 385 words long (see Appendix B). Each passage is followed by six multiple-choice questions based on the reading text – a total of 12 questions in all. One point was given for each correct answer, giving a maximum score of 12 points.

These two reading passages are taken from material provided by [2] and were selected based on their appropriateness for the 'participants' current reading abilities. This was to ensure that the participants would be able to read and understand the passages to some extent. Also, the two reading 'passages' linguistic and textual information, as well as the vocabulary content frequency, are similar to the 'participants' current English EFL textbooks. It is hoped that this approach would enhance the reading 'test's content validity in terms of accurately measuring the 'participants' level of reading comprehension. To further ensure that the two reading passages and their associated questions would ensure content validity in terms of measuring the 'participants' level of reading comprehension, the tests were presented to the 'University's linguistic experts for approval.

4.3.2 Focus Group

A discussion with the Focus Group ('FG') was used to address the second research question (i.e., What are the difficulties Saudi high school EFL learners face in reading comprehension?). The discussions were conducted during the students' class hours, and each lasted 20 minutes over session. The participants were asked to offer views in their mother tongue (Arabic) about the difficulties they faced in reading comprehension. The discussion was audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English. Reaching saturation point in data gathering during the FG was observed by the researcher. The decision to stop gathering further data on a particular topic in the FG was made based on the tendencies of the respondents to repeat the same information and not giving any new information about the investigated phenomena. Thus, the principle of data saturation was applied.

4.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection proceeded in two stages: in stage one, the participants completed the RCT; in stage two, the participants participated in FG.

Stage One: In line with standard research practices when dealing with schools in Saudi Arabia, the school supervisors were contacted by the researcher to arrange a convenient time for the participants to complete the test. The researcher introduced himself to the class and explained the study and what was required of them in terms of completing the reading comprehension test ('RCT'). Notably, the participants were also informed that they should simply do their best on the test and that any responses or errors they made on the tests would not be used to assess them academically, and that participation would remain anonymous and used for the purposes of the research. Participants were instructed to read the two texts and complete the multiple-choice questions according to their understanding. The researcher made it clear that if the students had any questions about the tests or reading passages, they should ask for help. Finally, the RCT were collected, and the students were thanked for their participation.

Stage Two: involved FGD to elicit information on the difficulties Saudi high school EFL learners face in reading comprehension.

5. Results

The current study investigates Saudi high school EFL 'learner's reading comprehension. Saudi high school EFL learners' reading comprehension was calculated by totaling all the reading comprehension test scores based on 12 items. According to these results (Table 1) the minimum score for reading comprehension test among respondents was 1 and the maximum score was 11, while the mean was $M=12.60$ with a standard deviation of $SD=5.04$.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics related to the reading comprehension test

Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	11	12.60	5.04

The reading comprehension scores were categorized into 'low' and 'high' using a cut-off point of 6 (the midpoint between 0-12). The frequency analysis results (Figure 1) show that the majority of participants (90%) had 'low' reading comprehension scores (<6) while only 10% achieved 'high' reading comprehension scores (>6).

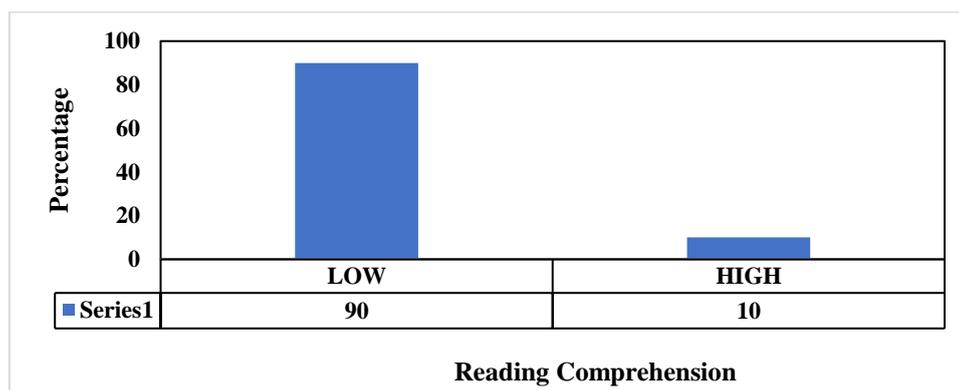


Figure 1. Reading Comprehension percentages categorized into 'high' and 'low'.

In order to proceed to the next question concerning the problems Saudi students are having in high school level EFL reading and comprehension, data from a focus group of 20 EFL learners was analyzed. The data analysis revealed four main themes: factors that could affect the learners' reading comprehension. Each of these four themes was further categorized into specific sub-themes as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 : Themes Emerging from the FGD (Qualitative Phase)

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Factors Related to Learners	1. Lack of Vocabulary 2. Lack of Practice 3. Lack of interest 4. Effect of Mother Tongue (Arabic)
2. Factors Related to School Environment	1. Lack of resources 2. Noise of Environment 3. Lack of Time
3. Factors Related to Textbook	1. Kind of Text 2. Ambiguous words 3. Presentation of Skill
4. Factors Related to English Teachers	1. Teaching Methods 2. L 2. lack of Supports

5.1 Factors Related to Learners

As shown in Table 4.25, learner-related factors were among the main themes identified in the data analysis of the focus group discussion responses. The analysis further revealed four sub-themes under this central theme. These included students who lacked vocabulary, practice, interest, and suffered from effects of mother tongue (Arabic). These issues are discussed further.

The findings indicate that the EFL learners were aware of the difficulties they faced while reading English texts. The learners mentioned that their lack of vocabulary (the first sub-theme) knowledge impeded their ability to learn and comprehend English texts. For example, one of the learners stated, "Having a lot of vocabulary items help to understand the English text and is the easiest way to read in English without feeling board" (participant 1).

Similarly, another learner added, "A lot of vocabulary knowledge means simple English words and good achievement in reading comprehension" (participant 3). For this learner, vocabulary enables him to practice understanding sentences and anticipate the meaning of the whole text in English. Participant 6 also reported, "I like to read short stories rather than my English course book because the kind of texts in short stories have simple vocabulary that I already know". In contrast, participants 1, 3, and 8 mentioned that they considered having vocabulary knowledge as a shortcut to understand

English texts and identify or recognize words that are meaningful in their day-to-day activities.

Similarly, participant 4 mentioned, "I like to read short story booklets because they have pictures that help me to understand English vocabulary and comprehend text more easily". In this regard, English texts, especially those with pictures, help learners understand English vocabulary, which enables them to comprehend texts more easily. In this case, vocabulary knowledge is a determinant factor for the school EFL learners to grasp any English reading texts fully.

The second sub-theme that emerged during the FGD was lack of school practice. For example, one participant reported that practicing reading was very helpful for learning English. The learner pointed out:

"My father used to give me activities in reading English texts such as short texts in the newspaper, or short stories. I would try to read some sentences and the main headlines and subheadings under his supervision followed by a discussion about reading procedures. This way helped me a lot, but there was no chance to practice reading this way".

The response indicates that the participants did not have enough time to practice reading in class. The majority of the participants mentioned that this lack of practice impedes their ability to learn and comprehend English texts. Another participant also reported, "We have only four English classes a week, which concentrate on grammar rather than other language skills; how can I be perfect in reading without more practices?" (participant 5). The outcome suggests the 'learners' desire to learn English, particularly reading comprehension of English texts.

For sub-theme three, 'lack of interest', more than two-thirds of the participants agreed they had little interest in reading in English and this greatly affected their motivation. They emphasized that most Saudi school students have little interest in reading in English. In addition, this lack of interest in reading causes students to experience reading difficulties because they cannot interact effectively with the text if they have no interest in reading. The finding was evident in their responses. For instance, two participants stated:

"I do not prefer reading English texts" (participant 18)

"The teacher forces me to read and participate in English reading tasks, but I am not interested in that". (participant 12).

Therefore, while teachers may have a difficult job motivating such students, they should try to provide their students with a range of different reading activities that might help them improve their reading abilities and create interest and pleasure while reading. However, given the syllabus, available textbooks, and other resources and time constraints, it may be difficult for teachers to respond adequately to motivate their students.

Moving on to sub-theme four, effect of the mother tongue (Arabic), most participants believed that their difficulties in reading English texts were because of the effect of their mother tongue. One prime example is that the English language text is written left to right. This becomes confusing for Arabic students who are taught to read and write from right to left, contributing to the students' reading difficulties. If the students transfer the strategies, they used in reading Arabic texts to reading English texts, this could lead to them experiencing phonological difficulties. For instance, Arabic requires reading all the letters in a word, but English has many silent letters that are not pronounced. An example of this is evident in one of the 'learner's response:

"I am dealing with English texts as I am dealing with Arabic texts" (participant 14).

Meanwhile, another learner added, “I used to compare reading English texts with Arabic texts and I always get confused” (participant 7). In this instance, it is not surprising to find students citing their mother tongue as contributing to their reading difficulties as they could be influenced by their mother tongue—a possible case of negative transfer.

5.2 Factors Related to School Environment

As shown in Table 4.25, factors related to the school environment are the second main theme identified in the FGD data analysis. The analysis further revealed four sub-themes under this main theme: lack of resources, lack of facilities, environmental noise, and lack of time. Each of these sub-themes is discussed as follows.

According to the first sub-theme, lack of resources, all 16 participants all agreed that they require more English-language resources to study and practice, enabling them to improve their reading skills, especially in a country such as Saudi Arabia is not the official language. In addition, seven participants mentioned a lack of teaching aids in their schools, such as electronic dictionaries, PCs with internet access, and English libraries for reading and studying English in their free time. One reason cited for this opinion was:

“English is not the official language of our country, so there is a need to practice inside and outside of classrooms as well as getting access to new different kinds

of recourses; in the current situation, English is only studied sufficiently enough to pass exams and course to earn better grades”.

Based on the above point of view, there seem to be two related opinions from the participants who all seemed to support the view that English and particularly readingskills require more recourses to help them practice reading and improve their readingcomprehension. Thus, since the resources are not available, the participants felt that itwas quite pointless to conduct the reading activity in English in school. Second, a minority (four participants) viewed learning English reading skills as crucial, and these could occur at home as there is more time for carrying out such an activity. This finding could be explained by the fact that in many Saudi high school classrooms, materials for English learners seem to be seriously lacking, and those thatare available are often not related to the reading-skill goals.

The second sub-theme that emerged from the data analysis is environmental noise. From the 'learners' responses, it is clear that the 'students' learning environment seems to have negative effects on 'student's ability to improve their reading skills. The noisy environments, according to the participants, had a direct effect in their ability to concentrate on their reading material. Out of the 20 participants, 18 stated their reading and comprehension ability was affected negatively because of their environment. One participant stated that their concentration is greatly impacted due to the noise erupting inside and outside the class. This shows that the loss of 'student's ability to focus while reading is directly impacted by the noisy environment.

The third sub-theme, lack of time to read English texts, may affect the development of reading comprehension skills among Saudi EFL learners, leading to limited vocabulary knowledge in English. A total of 17 participants agreed that they did not read regularly, and they blamed this on the limited time available in English classes. Several participants voiced out their opinion on this matter as follows:

"Sometimes, we like to read because the topic is interesting, but there is not enough time to read inside the classroom" " (participant 11)

“Having enough time help me to comprehend very well especially, but theclass session is only 54 minutes and the actual practice of reading is only about 10 minutes which is not enough to read and to answer the questionsand discuss them with the teacher; the teacher asked us to do the practice at home”. (participant 4).

5.3 Factors Related to Textbook

As shown in Table 4.25 earlier (p,151), the third central theme, 'factors related to the 'textbook', identified from the data analysis, further revealed three sub-themes: types of text, ambiguous words, and the presentation of reading skills. Each of these is discussed as follows.

From their responses, the EFL learners agreed that reading complicated textbooks is one of the factors that led to reading difficulties. The first sub-theme, type of text, washighlighted by a few of them as affecting the difficulty of a given text. The learners further explained that this difficulty depends on the complexity of the text and the 'learners' preparedness. For example, the same text can be easy for onelearner but difficult for another. In addition, the majority of the FGD participants reported having no ability to guess the meaning of new English words because some texts were related to the medical field or other fields unfamiliar to the learners. This was evident in one of the 'learners' responses": " I am suffering a lot with unfamiliar texts especially in examinations, where we are not allowed to use a dictionary; how can I deal with this kind of text"?" (participant 8). This suggests the need for teachersor the Ministry of Education (which has the authority to select the textbooks schools and universities use) to select reading textbooks carefully. Reading appropriate textbooks in terms of

subject matter and level can help students to learn or construct new knowledge. In contrast, poorly chosen texts can frustrate students and cause them to stop reading, as appears to be suggested here by the 'students' responses.

The second sub-theme under this category is ambiguous words. A total of 16 individuals stated that they felt difficulties with ambiguous vocabulary. The respondents also stated that they believe rapid access to accurate meaning of words was an important factor of reading and comprehension. One example is the statements from Participant 7 who points out that definitions in the English language may have multiple meanings and it is difficult to predict the exact definition. The observed responses received showed that the participants struggled with ambiguous words and contexts. These difficulties negate the ability to gain long-term understanding concerning word-meaning frequency, affecting their ability to comprehend English texts. When asked about this, five (5) participants pointed out that they were able to provide the correct meaning of the phrases in sentences.

The last sub-theme in this category is the presentation of reading skills. This refers to how teachers and textbooks explain reading skills and how to use them. For example, a total of 12 participants reported, "The textbook used was inappropriate for our level, especially in reading lessons in terms of teaching us how to use reading strategies". This highlights that the textbook presentation and teaching of reading strategies by the teachers appears to be poor.

5.4 Factors Related to English Teachers

As shown in Table 4.25 (P,151), factors related to teachers is another of the main themes. Three analyses further revealed three sub-themes under this main theme: teaching methods, lack of support, and assessment methods. Each of these sub-themes is discussed as follows.

The first sub-theme is teaching methods. According to the 'participants' responses, teachers do not tend to use any particular method to enable the learners to comprehend a given reading text. The participants explained that their English teachers tended to simply read the given text aloud (or ask a student to read aloud) and then set some comprehension questions from the textbook. This suggests the tendency to use "'traditional' teacher-centred teaching approach is still used in many classroom settings in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, the participants also complained that the methods applied by their teachers were sometimes unsuitable for the text at hand. Some reading texts are based on genre, and different genres require different ways of interpreting and comprehending. Because of this, many methods have been formulated to allow students to understand different types of reading-text genres. For example, participants 3, 7, and 11 stated, "teachers follow the same style of teaching for any type of English text; underline the difficult words, do some explanations, then ask good students in the class to read, 'that's all'". Therefore, teachers must develop the skills and competence to apply more appropriate motivation techniques when learning so students can enjoy reading in English.

The second sub-theme 'lack of 'support' was also highlighted by the participants. The learners tended to think that reading in English was boring because of their teachers' lack of support and motivation. Also, they admitted having poor motivation to read and felt that the texts set by their teachers were uninteresting because they must keep on looking up the words in a dictionary to find out the meanings of many words in the text. For example, participant 2 stated, "My 'teacher's main concern is only understanding the difficult words and the teaching style for this skill is not helpful to me". The participants blamed their poor reading skills on their 'teachers' lack of support and motivation. From the 'participants' responses, it is clear that these teaching approaches cause boredom and cause them to be uninterested in reading comprehension. These findings seem to suggest that teacher support is essential in improving the reading and comprehension of students.

6. Discussion

The present study results for the fifth research question suggest that reading in English represents one of the greatest difficulties that Saudi school EFL 'learners' encounter. Consequently, these difficulties seemed to lead to poor reading comprehension. The difficulties also seem to negatively impact the 'learners' enthusiasm and motivation for reading in English. As revealed by the students' responses in the FG, all the 'participants' difficulties seem to be in line with the concerns voiced out by most of the learners in the follow-up interview on the use of reading strategies. Moreover, according to the learner participants in the FG, these difficulties arose for various reasons: ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, lack of reading strategies, and limited available time to comprehension process.

As revealed by the analysis of data for the FG, the four main themes and their respective sub-themes are further discussed together with the integration of the literature and. The first theme 'learner-related factors' produced four sub-themes: lack of vocabulary, lack of practice, lack of interest, and effect of their L1 (Arabic). These sub-themes revealed many areas for improvement in 'students' English-language skills. The findings revealed that participants face problems related to their vocabulary knowledge. The vast majority of participants said they cannot (or find it impossible to) guess the meaning from context and that they tended to use their dictionary or smartphone to find out the meanings of unknown words. Therefore, to overcome this difficulty, Saudi high-school ESL teachers could implement a vocabulary pre-teaching stage into their reading lessons to ensure that any difficult vocabulary is covered before the students read the text. Alternatively, students could be instructed as part of a reading-skills initiative to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context, an approach that has proven relatively successful in other contexts (e.g., Alsaawi, 2013). This approach relies on the psycholinguistic technique proposed by Nation (2001); namely, (i) noticing; (ii) retrieving; and (iii) generating, wherein *noticing* forms part of guessing the meaning of unknown words from context using deductive logic. These deficiencies can be addressed by the Saudi EFL teachers and the students themselves. For example, teachers can improve their 'students' vocabulary knowledge by encouraging them to keep a journal of new words, engage in reading every day, and use a thesaurus.

In summary, students must master reading skills in order to meet academic success in any target L2. The FG in this study revealed that Saudi high-school EFL learners face difficulties in reading comprehension. They encounter difficulties related to the learners, difficulties related to the environment, difficulties related to their textbooks, and difficulties related to their English teachers. Thus, policymakers and teachers need to find effective ways to tackle these issues to engage learners in more meaningful reading experiences. Also, the ESL teacher participants themselves appear to require further instruction to exploit technology in the classroom better and encourage their students to engage in SSR both in and out of the classroom. Therefore, it would be helpful for the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education to consider implementing initiatives to address these areas.

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