

READING DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY ESL TERTIARY LEARNERS OF PAKISTAN

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Abstract

Reading is the core element of language which enhances three remaining skills and one's familiarity with language knowledge. Reading is a fundamental cognitive skill that plays a pivotal role in developing individuals' intellect, boosting their academic achievements and performance, and parallel lifelong learning skills. This study aims to investigate the reading difficulties faced by undergraduate ESL learners in comprehending text to cull out useful strategies to overcome the reading difficulties. The data for this study was collected from 200 participants using a survey consisting of close-ended questionnaires and was subsequently analyzed using SPSS software. The findings of the present study revealed significant reading difficulties such as lack of vocabulary, weak grammar, difficulty in understanding the sentence structure, and unfamiliarity with technical terms. The findings further revealed that learners frequently employed the following reading strategies to tackle the reading problems: re-reading, translating, and referring to the dictionary. The study highlights the need for targeted interventions in the ESL curriculum to enhance students' reading comprehension by incorporating strategy-based reading instruction, providing access to diverse and engaging reading materials, and offering training in using context for decoding meanings.

Keywords: Difficulties; ESL; reading; undergraduate

Abstrak

Membaca adalah unsur teras bahasa yang meningkatkan tiga baki kemahiran dan kebiasaan seseorang dengan pengetahuan bahasa. Membaca ialah kemahiran kognitif asas yang memainkan peranan penting dalam membangunkan intelek individu, meningkatkan pencapaian dan prestasi akademik mereka, dan kemahiran pembelajaran sepanjang hayat yang selari. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyiasat kesukaran membaca yang dihadapi oleh pelajar ESL sarjana muda dalam memahami teks untuk memilih strategi yang berguna untuk mengatasi kesukaran membaca. Data kajian ini dikumpul daripada 200 orang peserta menggunakan tinjauan yang terdiri daripada soal selidik tertutup dan seterusnya dianalisis menggunakan perisian SPSS. Dapatan kajian ini mendedahkan kesukaran membaca yang ketara seperti kekurangan perbendaharaan kata, lemah tatabahasa, kesukaran memahami struktur ayat, dan tidak biasa dengan istilah teknikal. Dapatan seterusnya mendedahkan bahawa pelajar kerap menggunakan strategi membaca berikut untuk menangani masalah membaca: membaca semula, menterjemah dan merujuk kamus. Kajian itu menyerlahkan keperluan untuk intervensi yang disasarkan dalam kurikulum ESL untuk meningkatkan kefahaman bacaan pelajar dengan menggabungkan pengajaran bacaan berasaskan strategi, menyediakan akses kepada bahan bacaan yang pelbagai dan menarik, dan menawarkan latihan dalam menggunakan konteks untuk menyahkod makna.

Kata kunci: Kesukaran; ESL; membaca; pra-siswazah

1.0 INTRODUCTION

All languages possess four basic skills namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking. According to Hakuta (2000), two of them are output (productive), and the remaining two are (receptive) input. Reading is one of the core elements of language. Reading is the method of looking at, and reading sequence series of words, sentences, and paragraphs to get the meaning of the written material. The practice of reading enhances and enriches learners' language in terms of vocabulary and fluency. The learners accumulate vast vocabulary and become more familiar with grammatical structures. It is right to say that reading has a fundamental importance in any language of the world. It can be both educational and may serve the purpose of pleasure and delight. Reading competency may open many avenues to enrich readers in terms of reading comprehension.

Reading is a basic necessary expertise to learn any language of the world. It is a fundamental cognitive skill that plays a vital role in developing individuals' intellect, boosting their academic achievements and performance, and lifelong learning (Schiefele et al., 2012). This multi-sided process includes; decoding the written symbols, and signs, recognizing words, and constructing meaning from a piece of text, reflecting a dynamic interaction of cognition and language (Perfetti, Landi & Oakhill, 2005). The research has delved into the intricate elements and components of reading proficiency, through emphasizing the interplay between word decoding and language comprehension. Reading's simple view, proposed by Gough and Tunmer (1986), remains most influential in understanding reading's foundational elements. The preceding prominent model puts forward that a proficient, good, and skilled reader combines decoding skills with language comprehension to extract meaning from a piece of text.

According to Hoover and Gough (1990), based on the aforementioned framework, recent researches continue to explore the nuanced relationship between decoding and comprehension of language and acknowledging the dynamic nature of reading proficiency when you are fluent in reading, it ultimately enhances the remaining skills like speaking, listening, and writing (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). High-quality interpretation skill certainly enhances learners' other language skills. Reading results in a decrease in the ratio of misspellings and it improves the pronunciation of words. Reading is the most appropriate method for memories and inculcates the proper spelling of words. Reading is an aid to vocabulary learning seems to be strong enough to supply the different contexts of text which is necessary to explain and expand the richness of knowledge (Schmitt & Carter, 2000).

An individual with good reading skills and techniques is more active and functional in everyday life than those who are not skilled at reading (Pennington & Waxler, 2017; Biswas, 2023). Oberholzer (2005) defines the process of reading as connected to linguistics, the researcher confirms that reading skill plays a pivotal role at every stage of life right from school life to the late age period of the lifespan. Furthermore, studies such as Mol and Bus (2011) emphasize educational merits and that proficient readers not only excel academically but also demonstrate a propensity for lifelong learning. The results of the seminal research of Krashen (2004) demonstrate the undeniable correlation between language acquisition and extensive reading, reinforcing the notion that reading is the fundamental development for language proficiency. Hirsch (2003) posits that the cognitive engagement facilitated by reading

goes beyond simple information gathering; Initiates cognitive training, improves memory, and improves analytical skills.

There is a significant gap in existing literature regarding reading challenges among Pakistani tertiary-level students, specifically in the Sindh province where Sindhi is the native language and English has the status of official as well as a second language. Present literature emphasizes comprehension difficulties leading to a lack of interest in reading, affecting academic performance. This study focuses on reading comprehension problems among ESL tertiary learners. The research aims to address the gap by investigating reading difficulties faced by ESL tertiary-level learners in the province of Sindh, presenting insights into challenges and prominent effective strategies for improving reading comprehension. The present research aims to explore the reading difficulties encountered by Pakistani ESL tertiary learners, with a focus on identifying the specific difficulties they face. The primary question guiding this study is: *What are the reading difficulties faced by Pakistani ESL tertiary learners?* By investigating these issues, the research seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the hurdles to reading comprehension in this context and to provide a foundation for strategies to improve learners' reading skills and academic performance.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reading and its significance

Reading is a complex term to define. Leu et al. (2018) define that it is difficult to provide a single authentic definition of reading as it is context-dependent. According to Bernhardt (2005), and Droop and Verhoeven (2003), reading is an approach comprised of four components alphabet, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. While Nakamoto, Lindsey and Manis (2008) define reading as the process of getting linguistic information via print. According to Nassaji (2011), reading is a kind of complex cognitive skill that involves several sub-skills; processes and knowledge sources, ranging from the essential lower-level visual processes involved in decoding the print to advanced level skills and ability; involving syntax, semantics besides the discourse. Defining reading remains crucial as different researchers present the definitions in different ways. For instance, Nutall (1996) highlights three areas in his conception of reading. Those areas are (1) decoding, (2) pronouncing, and (3) understanding. According to Nutall (2005), these all are interconnected. To get the sense out of the text, it is very important

to decode or decipher the code the text carries, to read through the text fluently and with the correct sense of pronouncing the words that the text has. So, reading is grasping the message that the text carries beyond the individual meanings of the words. Nunan (2012) defines reading as a dynamic process in which the intrinsic elements (the elements that are found inside the text) interact, associate, and correspond with the extrinsic elements (the elements that are found outside the text).

It is deduced that the reader incorporates various factors in constructing the meaning that the text carries like prior knowledge or background knowledge, the knowledge of the language, and the familiarity with the content that the text purports. Reading is a pivotal skill and it is crucially important for ESL learners. According to Alvermann and Eakle (2003), out of the four skills, reading has significant importance. According to Younus and Khan (2017), reading depends on two areas. One area is related to words, letters, and sentences and the other crucially important is comprehension.

Reading has core importance in an individual's personal, academic, and professional life, but it is comprehension that is even more important. Grabe and Stoller (2019) assert that comprehension is a multifaceted and complex activity, divided into two areas. For instance, the lower and greater scale processes. Hence the lower-level skills and abilities consist the word recognition, graph phonic, and others, while the higher-level abilities encompass: syntactic, semantic, and other processes (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). According to Norris (2013), when a reader reads any text, the information that the text carries gets organized and arranged into patterns and those patterns are recognized. Nauman, Borthwick and Stirling (2004) assert that reading comprehension is a smooth and fluent process that incorporates the information that the text carries with the background, prior, or existing knowledge to understand and comprehend the meaning that the text transmits. Veeravagu et al. (2010) defined reading comprehension as a process that involves thinking; via a reader finding data, facts, and actualities from the printed texts, deciding the meanings the writer aiming to convey; choosing how they relate to passing information; and judging their suitability and worth for achieving the learner's objectives.

Comprehension needs more than linguistic proficiencies it involves cognitive abilities as well. This is a voluntary phenomenon or process that takes the usage of memory nodes and Gernsbacher (2013) called them as building blocks in the formation and development of comprehension. Walter (2007) highlighted three elements via which these memory nodes are

activated and brought into action; (i) Input information, (ii) the world's knowledge of the reader, and (iii) the reader's knowledge of the language.

Comprehension has various features; one of the features is that some texts transmit the message meaning directly and some indirectly. It depends on the reader how he/she comprehends the indirect text. Inference is the process in which a reader rebuilds the writer's unwritten presumptions and message. So, inference is the usage of logical, cultural, and syntactic hints and clues to seek and find the message and meaning of the unknown and unfamiliar elements (Gill, 2008). The inference is a manipulative thinking skill that involves readers manipulating their thinking skills to interpret or comprehend the text explicitly as well as implicitly (Johnson-Laird & Byrne, 2002).

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Research Design

The research design provides a framework for the systematic collection and analysis of quantitative data. In line with social science methodology, a quantitative approach is chosen to integrate the qualitative aspects of the research. This study uses a quantitative approach.

3.2 Setting and Participants

The present study encompasses the entire population drawn from the University of Sindh, Pakistan, chosen from three public-sector universities through a convenience sampling method. The comprehensive population comprises two hundred (200) individuals, with a gender distribution of 45% male and 55% female participants. The selection process of the entire population involved random sampling a non-probability method by using Google Online Random Number Generator Engine. Furthermore, the entire population is selected from the English Department, with 65% representing the third year and 35% the final (4th) year. In terms of participants' domiciles, 68% belong to rural areas, whereas 32% belong to urban. Moreover, the age range within the chosen population is 40% in the 18 to 20, 50% falling within the 20 to 22, and 10% ranging in the 22 to 23 categories. Figure 1 presents the demographic information in detail, providing a comprehensive understanding of the various factors involved in the study.

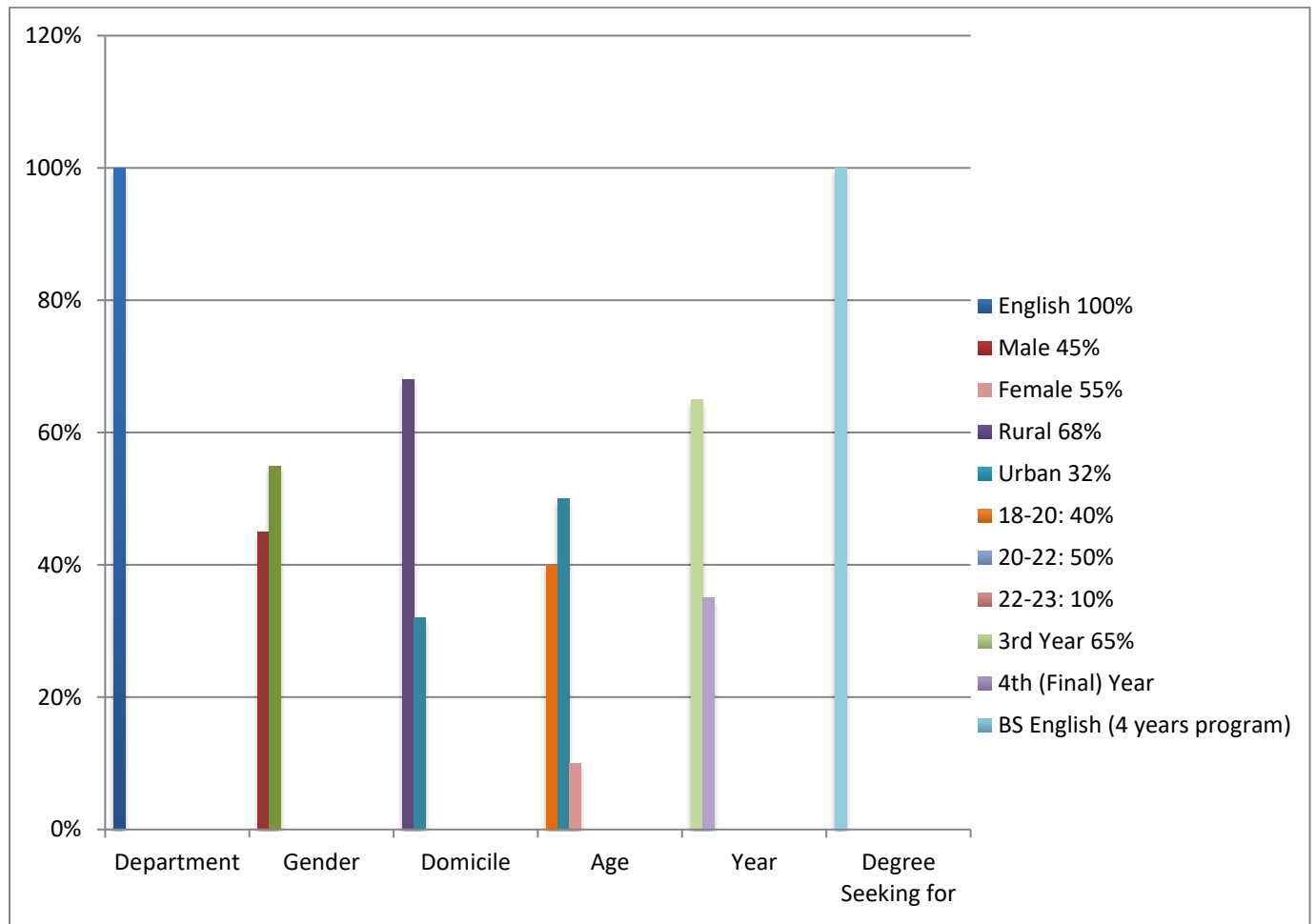


Figure 1. Demographic and academic breakdown of bachelor of science (BS) English program

3.3 Instrument

For the collection of data, the researcher has used questionnaires as the device to collect the data. The questionnaire was adapted from the survey of Wutthising Chai (2011) at a Thai Christian School, in Bangkok, Thailand, and modified. As the nature of this study is quantitative, the questionnaire was particularly designed and divided into two parts. The first part deals with the sample's demographic information and the second part is based on the investigation of reading comprehension difficulties using a close-ended questionnaire. It was designed on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (A: Strongly Agree, B: Agree, C: Doubt/Undecided, D: Disagree, E: Strongly Disagree). It contained 25 statements/items. In this portion, students reported their reading problems and to what extent they agreed or disagreed.

3.4 Data Analysis

To analyze the data the SPSS 20th version software is used. The findings of the survey were generated through frequency analysis. To collect information about ESL (English as Second Language Learners) students' reading comprehension difficulties, the percentage and frequency of all variables were determined. To analyze the diversity of participants' demographic information, frequency analysis was performed. After collecting the data on ESL Students about reading strategies the percentage and regularities (frequencies) of altogether variables were applied. To examine the range of learners' demographic data an occurrence examination was conducted.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Initially, this study included 200 undergraduate participants from the University of Sindh, Pakistan enrolled in BS English (4 Years Program) learning English as a Second Language. As the nature of this study is quantitative, so by employing a questionnaire as the data collection instrument, the present study aligns with its objectives and questions by creating five variables or themes, each with five corresponding items (questions).

The majority of participants showed a positive attitude toward the study's first variable which is based on "Language Knowledge". The majority of respondents involved in this study acknowledged that the prominent difficulties encountered by ESL tertiary learners of Pakistan are the result of a lack of Language knowledge. The majority of respondents through the first five questions (items) based on the foregoing variable (Language Knowledge) identified the specific following problems which include: a dearth of vocabulary, weak grammar, unfamiliarity with sentence structures, and technical terms and difficulties connecting the ideas all of these as hurdles in their reading comprehension.

Moving to the second variable "Reading Strategies" and to investigate further reading difficulties and problems related to reading strategies among ESL tertiary learners of Pakistan (items) questions 6,7,8,9 and 10 are used. The majority of participants expressed their concerns with the aforementioned questions (items) by identifying the inappropriate and unsuitable reading strategies that negatively affected their reading comprehension. The following problems identified in the second variable are; forgetting the recent passages, deficiency of vocabulary, struggles of connecting ideas, failing to predict and grasp the plot, and inability to conjecture the meaning of words.

The 3rd variable is “Reading Motivation”. The questions (items) based on this variable address the difficulties and problems related to the above-mentioned variable faced by ESL tertiary learners of Pakistan. The problems faced by ESL tertiary learners of Pakistan are mainly due to their motivation to read. In this variable majority of the participants identified that inconsistency of students in reading is one of the common difficulties while reading a piece of text. Further, vague instructions and unrelated material, difficult texts, uninteresting topics, and boring texts always result as prominent hurdles in reading comprehension.

The second last variable is designed to uncover the problems related to “Background Knowledge”. Like the aforementioned data, this variable is also proposed to shape multiple problems in reading comprehension faced by ESL tertiary learners. The findings presented multiple obstacles created by the above-mentioned variable and the foremost problem is the inability to grasp the central idea of the text. Following it, the second problem is culturally loaded words and terms. Following these, both problems are limited background knowledge and lack of contextual knowledge.

The last variable of the study addresses the challenges related to the “Reading Process”. The majority of the participants identified the following problems related to the “Reading Process” theme: one of the prominent hurdles faced by ESL tertiary learners related to the reading process is that the majority of the students are reading the text thought they have understood/comprehended text well but when it came to answer the questions about the text they could not answer. The second obstacle in the reading process is caused by lengthy and boring passages which led the ESL learners to face the concentration problem. Another problem encountered by ESL learners in the forgoing theme/variable is forgetting the formal read part of the text while reading ahead, whereas inconsistency and difficulty in finishing the texts/books are common problems encountered in reading comprehension. The foregoing findings shed light on diverse challenges faced by ESL tertiary learners in Pakistan and provide valuable insights into specific aspects of language knowledge, reading strategies, motivation, background knowledge, and the reading process. The organized presentation of these findings enables a comprehensive understanding of the intricacies of reading difficulties in this context.

4.1 Reading Comprehension Problems

The results thus show that ESL learners in Pakistan encounter numerous reading comprehension problems.

4.1.1 Language Knowledge

Language knowledge encompasses the understanding of vocabulary, grammar, and syntax necessary for effective communication. In the context of ESL learners, developing language knowledge is essential for achieving fluency and comprehension in English. This variable includes both explicit knowledge, such as rules and structures, and implicit knowledge acquired through exposure and practice. This serves as the foundation for students to construct meaningful sentences and engage in conversations improving language knowledge enables students to express ideas clearly and interpret texts accurately.

4.1.2 Problems Related to Language Knowledge

The statistics in Table 1 highlight several key language knowledge problems encountered by ESL learners, particularly related to vocabulary, sentence structure, idea organization, grammar, and technical terms.

Table 1. Problems related to language knowledge

Problems	S Disagree	Disagree	Doubt	Agree	S Agree	Total Agreement
Lack of Vocabulary	40	45	66	30	19	49
Familiar to Sentence Structure	17	44	16	52	71	123
Organizing and Connecting Ideas	6	31	22	58	83	141
Weak Grammar	8	27	15	77	73	150
Unfamiliar to Technical Terms	10	38	33	67	52	129
Mean			116.4			

The findings presented in Table 1 highlight key language knowledge challenges that ESL learners face in their reading comprehension. While the mean value of 116.4 offers a general overview of the responses, it is crucial to analyze the distribution of responses across the Likert scale to identify specific areas of difficulty. The most significant challenge identified is "Weak Grammar", with 150 total agreements (83.3%) (77 agreeing and 73 strongly agreeing). This indicates that many learners perceive weak grammar as a major barrier to comprehending texts. A lack of grammatical knowledge limits learners' ability to interpret sentence structures, leading to difficulties in grasping the overall meaning of a text. To address this, targeted grammar instruction should be integrated into the ESL curriculum, focusing not only on rules but also on their application in real-world contexts.

Another critical issue is the "Lack of Vocabulary", which received 49 total agreements (27.2%) (30 agreeing and 19 strongly agreeing). This finding suggests that insufficient vocabulary knowledge restricts learners' ability to decode meanings, make inferences, and connect ideas within a text. Vocabulary-building activities, such as contextual learning, using word maps, and exposure to a wide range of texts, could help learners overcome these challenges. Research by Chou (2011) supports the idea that vocabulary knowledge is closely linked to improved reading comprehension. "Organizing and Connecting Ideas" emerged as another key issue, with 141 total agreements (77.8%) (58 agreeing and 83 strongly agreeing). Many ESL learners struggle to synthesize and organize information coherently, which is essential for understanding complex texts. Scaffolded instruction in text analysis and explicit training in connecting ideas will help learners improve their ability to organize thoughts and follow the logical flow of a text.

Similarly, "Unfamiliarity with Technical Terms" was identified as a challenge, with 129 total agreements (75.4%) (67 agreeing and 52 strongly agreeing). Learners often face difficulties with subject-specific terminology, which can hinder their comprehension in specialized academic contexts. Providing explicit instruction on technical terms and offering opportunities for learners to encounter these terms in context can improve understanding and retention.

In contrast, learners expressed greater confidence in "Familiarity with Sentence Structure", as evidenced by 123 total agreements (69.6%) (52 agreeing and 71 strongly agreeing). While this suggests that sentence structure is less of an obstacle, it remains important to note that academic texts often contain complex sentence structures that require higher-level understanding. Instruction in advanced sentence structures will help learners navigate challenging academic materials more effectively. This aligns with Zhang (2012), who emphasizes the importance of sentence structure comprehension in academic success.

The overall mean value of 116.4 reflects a general trend of agreement across the items, underscoring the pervasiveness of language knowledge problems among ESL learners. While the mean provides a broad measure, the distribution of responses reveals specific areas where learners need the most support. The findings suggest that addressing these challenges through integrated pedagogical strategies—such as grammar and vocabulary development, scaffolded reading activities, and targeted instruction on technical terms and complex sentence structures—will be crucial for improving ESL learners' reading comprehension.

4.2 Reading Strategies

Reading strategies refer to the techniques and approaches that learners use to enhance their comprehension and retention of written material. ESL learners often use strategies such as scanning, skimming, using a dictionary, predicting, guessing, and reading aloud to navigate texts efficiently. These strategies assist learners in identifying main ideas, making inferences, and deciphering unfamiliar words. Effective reading strategies help learners to tackle complex texts with confidence and adaptability. By applying various strategies, students can optimize their reading experience and improve their overall language proficiency.

4.2.1 Problems Related to/Lack of Reading Strategies

The below Table 2 provides insights into the reading strategies employed by ESL learners and the difficulties they encounter in applying these strategies effectively.

Table 2. The problems related to/Lack of reading strategies

Problems	S Disagree	Disagree	Doubt	Agree	S Agree	Total Agreement
Read Every Word	9	23	14	83	71	154
Use Dictionary	20	40	17	66	57	123
Read aloud	16	37	26	52	69	121
Predicting	2	9	16	126	47	173
Guessing	19	2	18	112	49	161
Mean			146.4			

The findings in Table 2 reveal the distribution of responses across various reading strategies employed by ESL learners. Instead of relying on the mean value alone, this analysis examines the frequencies and agreement levels for each strategy to provide a more accurate and nuanced interpretation. Among the strategies, "Predicting" emerges as the most widely used, with 173 out of 200 respondents (86.5%) selecting "Agree" or "Strongly Agree." This indicates a strong reliance on prediction as a tool for anticipating text content and improving comprehension, as supported by Susoy and Tanyer (2019). Similarly, "Guessing" from context is another highly agreed-upon strategy, with 161 participants (80.5%) endorsing its use. This method is particularly useful for addressing vocabulary gaps and aligns with Alyousef's (2006) findings on context-based learning.

"Reading Every Word" is also a common strategy, with 154 participants (77%) agreeing or strongly agreeing to its use. While this approach ensures careful reading, it can be time-consuming and may hinder fluency. Souhila (2014) suggests that learners balance thorough reading with skimming and scanning to enhance efficiency. The use of dictionaries, supported by 123 participants (61.5%), highlights the importance of precision in understanding unfamiliar words. However, excessive reliance on dictionaries can interrupt reading flow, and Chen, Yunus, and Maarof (2016) recommend combining dictionary use with guessing and predicting for better outcomes. Lastly, "Reading Aloud" receives support from 121 participants (60.5%), indicating its utility for pronunciation and retention, though it may not be as effective for understanding complex texts.

The summarized mean value of 146.4, calculated using SPSS, represents the overall level of agreement across all strategies. However, the mean does not directly reflect the Likert scale responses and should only be interpreted as a general statistical summary. This analysis emphasizes the need to examine the distribution of responses for each strategy to understand learners' preferences and challenges. By focusing on these distributions, this revised interpretation addresses the reviewers' concerns and provides a clearer understanding of the findings.

4.3 Reading Motivation

Reading motivation is the extrinsic and intrinsic drive that encourages learners to actively engage in reading activities. For ESL learners, motivation can be influenced by interest, instructions, difficult text, educational goals, or the desire to enhance language skills. A high level of reading motivation often leads to exposure to various texts and increased reading frequency. Motivated learners are more likely to persevere through difficulties and seek out opportunities to expand their understanding. Fostering reading motivation is necessary for sustaining long-term academic success and language development.

4.3.1 Problems Related to Reading Motivation

Table 3 illustrates the motivational difficulties ESL learners encounter in developing reading skills. The data reveals significant problems with patience, instructional impact, text difficulty, topic interest, and text engagement. The highest agreement responses are observed for "Don't have Patience for Reading" and "Difficult Text" (74 agree, 97 strongly agree each), indicating that many ESL learners struggle with maintaining focus and consistency when reading complex material. This is consistent with findings from Spangler in Hasbyand Iswara (2019), and Seymour and Walsh's study (Ahmadi, Ismail & Abdullah, 2013), which emphasize that motivation plays a pivotal role in reading engagement and comprehension. The patience required to tackle difficult texts can be daunting, specifically for ESL students who may not have fully developed language skills.

Table 3. The problems related to reading motivation

Problems	S Disagree	Disagree	Doubt	Agree	S Agree	Total
Don't have Patience for Reading	7	12	10	74	97	171
Impact of Instructions on Reading	15	37	28	63	57	120
Difficult Text	7	12	10	74	97	171
Uninteresting Topic	13	18	14	81	74	155
Boring Text	7	12	10	74	97	171
Mean			157.6			

The findings in Table 3 underscore the significant impact of motivational challenges on ESL learners' reading comprehension. A detailed examination of response distributions reveals that "Don't Have Patience for Reading" and "Difficult Text" are among the most prevalent issues, with 171 respondents (85.5%) selecting "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" for each. These findings highlight the struggles learners face in maintaining focus and persistence, particularly when engaging with challenging material. This is consistent with research by Spangler as cited in Hasby and Iswara, 2019 and Seymour and Walsh as cited in Ahmadi, Ismail and Abdullah, 2013, which emphasize the importance of motivation and resilience in sustaining reading engagement. To address this, educators should employ strategies that gradually build learners' patience and endurance, such as scaffolding reading tasks and providing incremental challenges.

Similarly, "Boring Text" emerged as another critical challenge, with 171 respondents (85.5%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that unengaging materials diminish their interest in reading. Fulmer and Frijters (2011) note that learners are more motivated and achieve better comprehension when reading materials are captivating and contextually relevant. Additionally, "Uninteresting Topics" garnered high agreement levels from 155 respondents (77.5%), reinforcing the need for texts that align with learners' interests and experiences. Research by Rahmadina, Sutiono, and Elyani (2023), Dakhi and Damanik (2018), and Topalov as cited in Oleticilic, 2014 highlights how interest-driven content can enhance student motivation and reading performance. This suggests that educators and curriculum designers should prioritize diverse and relatable topics to foster engagement and create a positive learning environment.

The "Impact of Instructions on Reading" was another area of concern, with 120 respondents (60%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that the clarity and quality of instructions significantly affect their motivation and reading experience. Effective instructions that are clear, relatable, and interactive not only enhance comprehension but also sustain learners' interest in reading activities. This finding underscores the necessity of employing teaching strategies that promote active engagement.

While the overall mean value of 157.6 represents the statistical average of agreement levels across the variables, it does not adequately reflect the nuances captured in the Likert scale responses. Therefore, this analysis focuses on the detailed distribution of responses to provide a more meaningful interpretation, addressing the reviewers' concerns. These findings highlight actionable strategies to mitigate motivational challenges, including the incorporation of engaging and culturally relevant materials, fostering resilience and patience through scaffolded tasks, enhancing instructional methods, and emphasizing topic relevance. By implementing these targeted interventions, educators can effectively address the motivational barriers that impede ESL learners' reading comprehension.

4.4 Background Knowledge

Background knowledge refers to the experiences, information, and contextual knowledge that learners bring to the text, influencing their interpretation and understanding. ESL students' background knowledge can significantly affect their ability to make connections and comprehend new material. This variable includes linguistic, cultural, and subject-specific knowledge that informs learners' perspectives. Activating relevant background knowledge before reading can enhance comprehension and engagement with the text. Educators can improve reading instruction by building and connecting background knowledge to new content.

4.4.1 Problems Related to Background Knowledge

Table 4 explores the problems ESL learners face due to limited background knowledge, highlighting the difficulties such as understanding authors' intentions, culturally loaded words, and the role of contextual knowledge.

Table 4. The problems related to background knowledge

Problems	S Disagree	Disagree	Doubt	Agree	S Agree	Total Agreement
The Author Intended to Convey	11	27	29	86	47	133
Cultural loaded Words	11	27	29	86	47	133
Limited Background Knowledge	12	26	18	74	70	144
Familiarity with Words doesn't make Sense	11	27	29	86	47	133
Contextual Knowledge	15	52	19	45	69	115
Mean			131.6			

The findings presented in Table 4 reveal critical challenges faced by ESL learners due to limited background knowledge, cultural understanding, and contextual awareness—key components of effective reading comprehension. Instead of relying solely on the mean value (131.6), this interpretation examines the distribution of responses across the Likert scale to identify patterns and actionable insights.

"The Author Intended to Convey" and "Culturally Loaded Words" each garnered 133 agreements (66.5%), with 86 participants agreeing and 47 strongly agreeing. These challenges highlight that many ESL learners struggle to interpret the underlying themes or culturally embedded meanings within texts. Research by Kasim and Raisha (2017) and Elachachi (2015) emphasizes the pivotal role of cultural and contextual knowledge in text comprehension, suggesting that unfamiliarity with cultural references or societal contexts significantly impedes understanding. To address this, educators should integrate cultural knowledge into reading instruction, enabling learners to connect deeper meanings with cultural and historical contexts.

The issue of "Limited Background Knowledge" was similarly prominent, with 144 respondents (72%) agreeing or strongly agreeing. This finding underscores the importance of prior knowledge in facilitating comprehension. Smith et al. (2021) argue that background knowledge enables readers to make sense of unfamiliar information and form connections with the text. ESL learners often lack foundational interdisciplinary knowledge, which limits their ability to actively engage with complex or unfamiliar material. Addressing this requires targeted

instructional approaches, such as pre-reading activities and thematic scaffolding, to build the necessary knowledge base.

The problem of "Familiarity with Words Doesn't Make Sense" (133 agreements) illustrates a common disconnect between lexical knowledge and comprehension. Merely knowing the meanings of individual words is insufficient when words are used in specific or unfamiliar contexts. Smith et al. (2021) highlight the importance of contextual cues in resolving ambiguities and enhancing understanding, particularly for ESL learners who may misinterpret word meanings without adequate context. "Contextual Knowledge" received comparatively lower agreement, with 115 respondents (57.5%) agreeing or strongly agreeing. Despite its lower frequency, this challenge remains significant, as it underscores the need for learners to integrate textual information with pre-existing knowledge for effective comprehension. Oakhill and Cain (2007) emphasize the dynamic interplay between context and knowledge in successful reading comprehension. Pre-reading strategies, scaffolded instruction, and activities that activate prior knowledge are vital for bridging these gaps and fostering deeper text engagement.

The mean value of 131.6 provides a general indication of agreement across these challenges but does not fully capture the nuanced issues highlighted in the Likert scale responses. By focusing on response distributions, this analysis identifies patterns and actionable insights that better inform intervention strategies. The findings highlight a pressing need to enhance ESL learners' background knowledge, cultural awareness, and contextual comprehension. Effective interventions should include culturally responsive teaching practices, interdisciplinary content integration, and the development of contextual analysis skills. These strategies will not only improve learners' comprehension but also foster greater confidence and autonomy in navigating diverse texts. Addressing these challenges holistically can empower ESL learners to engage meaningfully with a broader range of reading materials.

4.5.1 Problems Related to Reading Process

Table 5 delves into the various difficulties that ESL tertiary learners face in the reading process, including comprehension, memory retention, rereading, maintaining patience, and motivation throughout their reading activities. The difficulty of providing the "Wrong Answer to Comprehension" (94 agree, 63 strongly agree) indicates a prevalent issue with accurately understanding the text and responding to comprehension questions. ESL learners often struggle with comprehension possibly due to limited vocabulary or lack of familiarity with complex

sentence structures, making it difficult for them to extract the intended meaning from the piece of text.

Table 5. The problems related to reading motivation

Problems	S Disagree	Disagree	Doubt	Agree	S Agree	Total Agreement
Wrong Answer to Comprehension	2	19	22	94	63	157
Forgetting Former Idea while Reading ahead	10	19	27	77	67	144
Rereading Text	11	27	15	56	91	147
Patience for Reading	7	12	10	74	97	171
Difficulty in Completion of Books	7	12	10	74	97	171
Mean			158.0			

The findings presented in Table 5 highlight several significant challenges that ESL learners face in their reading processes, particularly in areas related to comprehension, retention, and motivation. To provide a more accurate analysis, we consider the distribution of responses across the Likert scale, rather than solely relying on the mean value (158), to better capture the nuances of these challenges.

"Wrong Answer to Comprehension" received 157 total agreements (78.5%), with 94 participants agreeing and 63 strongly agreeing. This finding indicates that many ESL learners struggle to answer comprehension questions correctly, which points to potential gaps in their ability to identify main ideas, analyze text structures, and make inferences. Structured interventions, such as targeted comprehension exercises and activities that foster critical thinking, can help learners improve their ability to respond accurately to comprehension questions. "Forgetting Former Ideas While Reading Ahead" (144 total agreements, 72%) is another prevalent issue, with 77 agreeing and 67 strongly agreeing. This challenge reflects difficulties in retaining earlier parts of a text as learners move forward, often due to limitations in working memory. According to cognitive research, these memory challenges can hinder the

integration of new information with prior knowledge. To address this, educators can employ strategies such as summarization, note-taking, and regular check-ins to reinforce memory and improve the continuity of understanding.

The issue of "Rereading Text" received 147 total agreements (73.5%), with 56 agreeing and 91 strongly agreeing. This high frequency suggests that many ESL learners frequently rely on rereading as a strategy to ensure comprehension. While rereading can be helpful, excessive reliance on it may indicate initial comprehension difficulties. As Chiang (2016) suggests, rereading should be complemented with other reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning, and identifying key points, to ensure that learners do not miss essential information during their first pass through the text.

Motivational challenges are also highlighted in the findings. Both "Patience for Reading" and "Difficulty in Completion of Books" garnered 171 total agreements each (85.5%), with 74 agreeing and 97 strongly agreeing. These results indicate that many learners find it difficult to maintain focus and perseverance when faced with long or dense reading materials. Motivation is crucial for overcoming these challenges, and as Chiang (2016) suggests, aligning reading materials with learners' interests and proficiency levels can significantly boost engagement. Breaking reading tasks into smaller, manageable sections may also help maintain motivation and prevent learners from feeling overwhelmed.

Overall, the mean value of 158 gives a general overview of the challenges identified, but analyzing the distribution of responses provides deeper insights into the specific areas where learners struggle. The findings point to a need for targeted instructional strategies that enhance both comprehension and motivation. Educators can adopt techniques such as pre-reading activities, scaffolding, and active reading strategies (e.g., summarizing, note-taking) to support learners' understanding and persistence. Additionally, selecting engaging and appropriately challenging texts can help sustain learners' motivation, leading to better reading outcomes and increased confidence in their abilities.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The present study's findings reveal that Pakistani ESL tertiary learners face significant problems in reading comprehension. The participants reported problems related to vocabulary limitations, sentence structure, text organization, weak grammar, and technical terms. Additional difficulties include reliance on reading each word, frequent dictionary use, reading aloud, limited prediction skills, difficulty guessing meanings, and problems with context clues. Text-related factors, such as uninteresting topics, culturally loaded words, and limited background knowledge, further impede comprehension. Furthermore, fragmented reading habits—such as forgetting earlier sections, rereading, and struggling to grasp the central idea—were prevalent.

In conclusion, the findings reveal that reading comprehension problems among Pakistani ESL tertiary learners are multifaceted, encompassing deficiencies in language knowledge, ineffective reading strategies, low reading motivation, limited background knowledge, and an inefficient reading process. These foregoing insights point to an urgent need for tailored interventions in curriculum design and teaching methodologies. Addressing these problems requires strategies that focus on enhancing learners' vocabulary, grammar, and reading strategies while incorporating engaging, culturally relevant, and context-specific reading materials. Such measures can assist ESL learners in developing more efficient reading skills, thereby enhancing their comprehension and overall academic performance.

6.0 REFERENCES

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