

AN INVESTIGATION ON READING COMPREHENSION PROBLEMS FACED BY UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract. The study investigates the reading comprehension problems faced by university students in Shaheed Benazirabad, Sindh, Pakistan. Reading comprehension problems are one of the major concerns faced by undergraduates because it is part of almost all examinations that assess reading competency. By understanding these issues, the research seeks to provide insights into how teachers can better support students in developing effective reading strategies and also examine students' better use of strategy to foster reading comprehension. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. A sample of 120 undergraduates from various disciplines was surveyed to assess their reading comprehension skills and identify common difficulties. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with 5 participants to explore their experiences and perceptions related to reading comprehension. The findings of the research showed that lack of vocabulary, inadequate knowledge of L2, difficulty in pronouncing the words, selection of text, and lack of interest in reading comprehension are the major problems faced by university students during the reading comprehension process. The results also showed that students possess both positive as well negative attitudes toward reading comprehension. Moreover, teachers suggested some strategies to overcome reading comprehension problems. To overcome reading comprehension problems, appropriate strategy, a supportive environment, background knowledge, and teachers' motivation play a constructive role. Last but not least, limitations were identified, and areas for further studies were recommended.

Keywords: *reading comprehension problems, vocabulary, attitude, focus and metacognition*

Introduction

Reading comprehension plays a vital role in academic achievements, especially for undergraduate-level students who look forward to a professional career as well. Students face difficulty in comprehending and interpreting the text due to spending insufficient time with reading in their daily routines. Brown and Pressley (2023) strongly recommend that one should make reading part of a to-do list on a daily basis. However, it varies and depends on the lifestyle of individuals. The fact is that competency in reading skills determines success, and lacking over may lead to failure in the long run. Reading comprehension refers to the understanding of the text by coding and decoding. It is associated with the cognitive capabilities of the readers (Grabe and Stoller, 2019). There is significant research that supports the notion that reading comprehension encompasses the cognitive process that has been extensively studied. To achieve full comprehension, readers must draw a conclusion, which involves integrating the explicit information presented in the text with their prior knowledge. Apolinario et al. (2024) stated that the complexity of processes is heightened when conducted in a foreign language due to the potential challenges students may have with syntax. In language learning, individuals encounter several challenges related to grammar, vocabulary, and culture. However, it is absolute that word recognition is the first step of the reading process and fundamental linguistic activity as well (Li et al., 2024). On the

other hand, reading comprehension is beyond and requires more than a decoding process (Wang et al., 2019). It is also a process to solve complex problems by which L2 readers actively derive meaning by making discourse of text (Hedgcock and Ferris, 2018). L2 readers try to decode the text, and the main issue they encounter knows the meaning of the text. If the word is unfamiliar, the average reader refers to dictionary use.

According to Ali et al. (2022) and Rafiq et al. (2021), Pakistani students confront reading problems, and due to this reason, they are far behind with less reading comprehension skills. As far as the students feel reluctant to participate in reading activities owing to anxiety, negative attitude, and less support as well as awareness of using reading strategies. Thus, the study intends to present difficulties associated with reading comprehension skills at the undergraduate level in the Sindh Province of Pakistan. These difficulties are often rooted in various factors, including inadequate prior knowledge, limited vocabulary, and ineffective reading strategies. This also helps to make aware of current reading teaching practices in the university to boost reading comprehension skills. To accomplish such factors, the following research questions were constructed.

Research questions

The research questions can be include: (1) What are the reading comprehension problems faced by undergraduate students? (2) What are the attitudes of undergraduate students towards reading comprehension skills? (3) What are the reading strategies used by teachers to improve the reading comprehension skills of undergraduate students?

Literature review

Snow and Sweet (2003) added up the report of the RAND Reading Study Group and explained reading comprehension as below:

“The process of concurrently creating and extracting meaning.... determining how words are represented in print and properly and quickly translating print to sound (extracting), all while creating a depiction of the data being offered, which invariably necessitates creating new interpretations and fusing new and old knowledge (constructing meaning)”.

As per Snow and Sweet (2003), the reader, the text, and the activity are the three main elements that engage in reading comprehension. The working of these three dimensions occurs simultaneously as these elements are unable to function in isolation. In addition, they were of the view that the sociocultural background of the emerging reader both impacts and are impacted by the reading comprehension process included in these three components. Reading comprehension is regarded as a process that is related to an intentional act of a reader before, during, and after reading a text. According to Grabe and Stoller (2019), researchers commonly define reading comprehension as the cognitive processes involved in higher-level understanding of written texts. Etemadfar et al. (2019) contributed that reading comprehension is dealing with the process of thinking and deriving interpretation before, during, and after reading by aiding previous knowledge and the information which is found in the written text; whereas comprehension is recognized as the primary objective of reading, as supported by

scholarly works such as those by Grabe (2009) and Koda (2005). To achieve full comprehension, readers must draw a conclusion, which involves integrating the explicit information presented in the text with their prior knowledge (Grabe and Stoller, 2019; Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005). Since literacy is difficult because, during this process, the learners prefer to use their English Language knowledge, world knowledge as well as their appreciation of written conventions in order to form connections with their own ideas.

Reading problems

In academics, one of the most significant abilities that supports success in all subjects in higher education is reading comprehension. However, a lot of students encounter many difficulties when it comes to understanding what they read. For this reason there occurs impairment in their academic achievement due to reading difficulties. Therefore, the literature counts a number of problematic reading issues that students deal with, such as a limited vocabulary, trouble reading discipline-specific texts, and difficulties with complicated sentence structures.

Vocabulary knowledge

Research on vocabulary suggested a gap in addressing vocabulary knowledge. The previous studies revealed that students with limited knowledge of vocabulary face serious reading problems, which create hindrances to comprehending the text, and most of the time, it happens when new terms are introduced that are somehow technical to understand (Teng and Mizumoto, 2025). Moreover, in second-language reading, inadequate linguistic resources may contribute to compounded problems in understanding the content completely (Zhang and Zhang, 2022). The undergraduates in Pakistan, more specifically in regions like Shaheed Benazirabad, face noticeable issues while reading because they have less exposure to academic English apart from the classroom dynamics, which makes reading more difficult to interact with sophisticated academic material.

Complex syntactic structure

The development of understanding and being able to interpret the complex syntactic structure is another skill in the reading comprehension process. Furthermore, it can be commented that the lack of competence in the area of sentence structure makes it difficult for the readers to understand the arguments in academic reading texts, which can be the major cause of misinterpreting or misunderstanding the text (Tong et al., 2025). In the field of research in sentence structure and reading comprehension, clauses, technical jargon, or dense material are found to be investigated as the most frequently occurring problems while comprehending complex phrases (Spencer and Wagner, 2018). Besides this, comparing vocabulary knowledge and sentence knowledge, Cai and Yao (2022) revealed that in reading comprehension, syntactic knowledge outperformed vocabulary knowledge. In addition, Paradis et al. (2017) have also investigated age, input, and cognitive characteristics that support the understanding and implementation of complicated English sentences. In the context of Pakistan, most undergraduates struggle due to their inability to derive meaning from complex sentences, which affects reading comprehension.

Text selection

In academic settings, the texts that are being used in the classroom highly influence the understanding power of students. As it is explored in the research, the interest and background knowledge of students are considered the main elements while selecting the text, and their ignorance suffers the understanding (Vaughn et al., 2024). Reading texts that are not related to the experiences of readers or are overly difficult might be the cause of disinterest as well as lack of derive, which further strengthens comprehension problems (Winch, 2018). Moreover, in understanding the reading text in the case of Pakistani students, both linguistic and cultural backgrounds contribute equal parts to catch the attention of readers to select a text. So, the differences in linguistics and cultural backgrounds create problems for the students in Pakistan (Ali et al., 2022).

Learners' attitude and reading comprehension skills

The relationship between the attitude of English learners and reading comprehension skills is undeniable. As these attitudes influence and shape the need of how and why to read in English language. Literature brings forth many factors that foster positive or negative attitudes of students toward reading, like social factors, personality traits, educational needs, and other factors that collectively affect the attitude of learners toward developing reading comprehension capabilities (Getie, 2020). Students' attitude matters a lot in order to improve reading skills which ultimately assist them to perform better in comprehension. According to research, motivation is one of the most celebrated positive attitudes while enhancing reading comprehension skills. The reason is its engaging derive which involves the readers in understanding even difficult text (Radiyah et al., 2023). In the context of Pakistan, the research has hypothesized that a positive attitude can possibly develop the interest of students to read, which can also support them in coming up with problem-solving skills to overcome reading difficulties. On the contrary, previous investigations have proved that learners develop negative attitudes when they encounter repeated failures, lack of interest, and a sense of helplessness, and finally, they decide to make no effort to improve their comprehension skills, which results in barriers in achieving success in reading abilities (Rafi et al., 2021). Thus, the positive and negative aspects of learners' attitudes impact their reading comprehension skills at a large scale, which can be further improved after learning about the use of reading strategies by ELTs in order to enhance understanding in reading comprehension.

The use of reading strategies by ELTs to improve reading comprehension skills

Reading strategies are techniques that are applied to understand the text. English language teachers practice such strategies to teach their students for the purpose of facilitating them in self-monitoring their reading problems. Therefore, it can be claimed that ELTs play a central role when there is a need to address students' what, how, and why to reinforce reading strategies if they face challenges in comprehending the texts. Using skimming, scanning, summarizing, questioning, and interference as reading strategies, ELTs can work to help the readers understand more complex text. The research has shown the crucial function of instructions in reading strategies for the cause of improving comprehension capabilities (Li et al., 2024). So, the teachers can use modeling strategies to demonstrate how to use reading strategy while reading as per the nature of the reading task, which the readers can practice independently (Pressley et al.,

2023). However, in Pakistan, where there is an intense need to instruct students about the use of reading strategies, many students are lacking in reinforcing strategies due to their less exposure to explicit instructions (Ur Rehman, 2021).

Besides this, in the world of reading research, metacognitive strategies involve thinking about thinking (Flavell, 1979). These strategies allow the readers to regulate the reading process by planning, monitoring, and evaluating the reading text. Thus, metacognitive reading strategies empower the students to work for self-regulation when encountering reading confusion and take the required steps to improve reading comprehension skills. Such reading strategies and their application in classrooms benefit struggling readers and encourage them to read complicated texts. In addition, other strategies are also present in the canon of research in collaborative learning strategies are investigated as productive strategies to solve comprehension problems (Anas, 2017). Moreover, studies have indicated that collaborative education might improve comprehension by enabling students to exchange diverse viewpoints, elucidate misconceptions, and expand upon one another's concepts (Susanti and Lailiyah, 2021). Collaborative learning can also offer a supportive setting in Pakistani higher education, where students are more at ease discussing their struggles and asking for assistance from their colleagues (Saeed and Gull, 2023).

The literature on reading comprehension reveals the intricate interactions among several elements that affect undergraduates' comprehension and interaction with scholarly writings. Success in reading comprehension is significantly influenced by students' attitudes toward reading, text choice, and vocabulary knowledge. Instructors are essential in helping students overcome these obstacles because they employ efficient reading strategies and have a positive outlook on their talents. The results of this literature review highlight the need for focused instructions that address the intellectual and affective elements of reading comprehension in the context of Pakistani higher education, where linguistic and resource constraints are common.

Research design

This study used a mixed-methods approach. It digs into the reading comprehension problems that university students face in Shaheed Benazirabad, Sindh, Pakistan. Mixing methods helps to look at the issue deeply by quantitative and qualitative. This way, the study might help to present an understanding of the hurdles students face and find ways to help them overcome those hurdles. The research took place at a university in Shaheed Benazirabad. The data was collected from a group of 120 undergraduate students from different backgrounds. This sample size was chosen carefully to show a true picture of student challenges across various fields of study. Also, five teachers were picked for extra interviews. The study focused on those who had big struggles understanding written material. The interview aimed to explore what these teachers think & experience when they teach reading comprehension. This investigation looked at how well undergraduates understand the idea of reading and found common obstacles they encounter. A survey was created using a Likert scale & closed questions to gather information systematically. The survey touched on several topics like how vocabulary skills affect understanding, issues with reading texts in a second language, & how mispronouncing words impacts comprehension. The kinds of texts students read play a big part, too, these affect their interest, understanding, & feelings toward reading.

To make sure the study included students from different fields, it used stratified random sampling. This method helped us get a better grasp of reading comprehension

issues across various academic areas. To ensure many participated, the survey online through academic networks was distributed. The study promised anonymity to encourage honest responses about their challenges. For clearer context around the numbers, the study also looked closely at the students facing these challenges. A semi-structured interview guide was designed to explore specific and more deeply, like how syllabus content & classroom atmosphere impact reading skills, personal experiences with difficulty in understanding the text, thoughts on vocabulary challenges, learning a second language, & choosing suitable texts, plus what solutions they believe work best. This allowed us to really explore their key issues in depth. The interviews were conducted in comfortable settings, either face-to-face. Each interview took about 45 to 60 minutes and was recorded with consent so that the study could accurately transcribe and analyze the conversations. After the interviews were transcribed word-for-word, the qualitative data went through thematic analysis. This means the study looked for recurring ideas and themes connected to the teachers' reading challenges and problem-solving teaching strategies. In summary, both numeric and qualitative data were compared to give us a complete understanding of the reading comprehension issues faced by students. By blending these insights together, we can trust what the survey says even more and get closer to understanding outside factors that influence reading ability.

Results and Discussion

The findings showed several important factors: student attitudes, choice of text, pronunciation problems, second language skills, and vocabulary knowledge all played significant roles in how well they understood what they read. Additionally, the use of reading strategies to improve reading comprehension skills was examined to get a deeper understanding of providing different techniques to overcome reading difficulties. Let's present all of them one by one research question theme-wise.

What are the reading comprehension problems faced by undergraduate students?

The above table describes the results of question one, which was meant to highlight the reading comprehension problem faced by the students. The table revealed that lack of vocabulary was the prime obstacle to reading comprehension; the mean $M=4.2$ referred to the maximum number of participants, 68%, who believed so forth. The second most faced difficulty was complex sentence structure, and it secured $M=3.6$ and 54%. In the same order, the next one, retention of the information, was also one of the difficulties; it secured $M=3.6$, and 47% of participants considered it a challenging part while comprehending the text. Inference-making and negative attitude were also the key elements in the same line, and both had the same mean ($M=3.4$) and 40%. Last but not least, unawareness of reading strategies and focus while reading secured the lowest mean score, i.e., $M=3.2$ and 35%. Overall, the descriptive results state that reading comprehension is the most important and integral part of language learning, and above stated difficulties must be resolved by training undergraduates.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of reading comprehension problems.

Reading comprehension problem	Mean score	Percentage (%)	Analysis summary
Vocabulary Difficulty	4.2	68%	Unfamiliar/complex text hinders comprehension, especially for non-native readers.
Complex Sentence Structure	3.8	54%	Lengthy sentences with multiple clauses cause confusion
Retention of Information	3.6	47%	Linked to cognitive load from processing

Inference Making	3.4	40%	difficult vocabulary and complex sentences. Expected difficulty in illustrating conclusions or comprehending indirect meanings.
Negative Attitude	3.4	40%	Do not like to read lengthy passages and feel it is a boring activity to comprehend the text.
Unawareness of Reading Strategies	3.2	35%	Do not know how to apply reading method and no technique such as metacognition.
Focus and Construction	3.2	35%	Mind-making affects over a third of students and may be exacerbated by external interruptions or concentrated academic texts.

What are the attitudes of undergraduate students towards reading comprehension skills?

The above figure stated the reading attitude of the participants towards reading comprehension skills. The findings revealed that the majority of the participants (53%) had a negative attitude towards reading, and 47% of them were positive. The findings of the research question were surprising because they stated the reading attitude of undergraduate students for reading comprehension skills. Although reading comprehension is the most challenging academic task, it is part of almost all examinations in Pakistan. It has more extrinsic value than intrinsic in the Pakistani context (Khan et al., 2023). However, the worthwhile point to be noted here in the findings was that the majority of the participants had negative attitudes because the majority of them failed to get good scores in the various reading comprehension examinations. According to Shang (2018), reading material makes reading comprehension more conducive and active, and it increases a positive reading attitude. But, in the Pakistani context, the reading passage is provided in the text, which carries difficult vocabulary, and this may be one of the causes of negative reading comprehension attitudes. In short, the reading difficulties discussed above in its first research question may be almost all the reasons for negative attitudes for the majority of the participants.

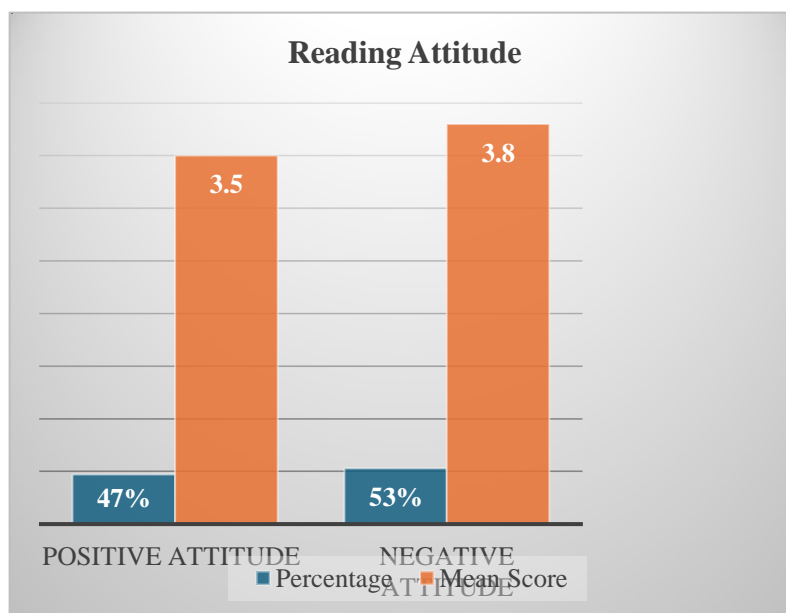


Figure 1. The reading attitude.

What reading strategies are used by teachers to improve the reading comprehension skills of undergraduate students?

The findings of the research objective were based on semi-structured interviews conducted by five university teachers who shared their in-depth personal experience reading the application of reading strategies. All of these are explained in thematic analysis, respectively.

Use of active reading strategies

The instructors have often stressed how the active use of some reading strategies is significant to involve students in achieving success in reading comprehension. Among them, they discussed about given strategies: (1) Annotation: it helped the learners to understand and remember the text. For this reason, the teachers assisted the students to underline, highlight, and annotate readings (Idami et al., 2021). (2) Questioning: in this reading strategy, the teachers worked to activate the cognitive faculties of the students by asking and answering questions related to the reading task (Harunasari et al., 2023). (3) Summarization: in the end, the teachers guided the students on how to summarize the text in order to strengthen their comprehension and keep in their memory some important details about the readings after applying summarizing as a reading strategy (Sari et al., 2020).

Integrative learning

One of the most important themes is integrative or contextual learning strategies, which perform a prominent role in improving reading comprehension as per the practice of teachers in the classrooms (Syahputri and Mariyati, 2019). In which the teachers consider background knowledge activation as pre-reading activities that help the students to relate the existing information with prior knowledge. In addition, the teachers shared that contextual vocabulary instruction works analytically to teach the new words by connecting to the context rather than teaching in isolation, which contributes to getting effective results in enhancing reading comprehension skills.

Collaborative reading practices

In order to make reading enjoyable and promote cooperative learning, the teachers empathized with collaborative reading activities. In such reading activities, group discussions are practiced to converse and exchange ideas about the reading tasks, which foster understanding and facilitate the students to avoid confusion in reading (Liu et al., 2024). Besides this, peer review is another practice in which the students are independent to comment on each other's work. This review session functions in reinforcing strength in their own ideas with the help of cognitive faculties.

Differentiated instruction

The teachers employ differentiated instruction to address the diverse needs of the students in which different tailored reading material is being given to the students considering the interests and abilities of the learners (Yapp et al., 2023). Furthermore, the teachers divide the students into flexible groups as per their level and needs for the purpose of ensuring targeted support and classroom interaction.

Educational technology integration

The integration of E-technology is the next productive strategy for establishing certain goals while instructing about the use of reading strategies. Online resources, digital tools, reading apps, and software are engaging platforms for the students as they activate their keen interests by providing interactive reading material. It is also identified that multimedia, audio, video recordings, and interactive e-books also provide diverse approaches to reading that meet with demands of the students (Graesser et al., 2019). Thematic analysis of the interviews indicates that university lecturers employ a variety of reading strategies to enhance their students' reading comprehension abilities. Key techniques found in this study include differentiated instruction, collaborative practices, integrative or contextual learning, active reading strategies, and educational technology integration. All of these strategies are meant to improve students' comprehension, interest in, and recall of the text. Since, future studies could examine how well these strategies work in various educational settings and how they affect the performance of students respectively.

Implications of the findings

Specific implications are presented of the findings in concluding the study. As stated in the introduction section, reading plays a crucial role in achieving academic success. Despite of importance of reading, undergraduates face different challenges in comprehending the text altogether. The findings imply that teaching the English language in Pakistan needs a change in order to change learners' attitudes from negative to positive by getting high scores on various reading comprehension tests. The use of reading strategies by ELTs is not adequate as per the needs of the students because the results showed students face reading comprehension problems and cannot deal with difficult text. Therefore, the reading strategies require more focus and variety as per the cognitive abilities of the language learning process. Because the illustrated reading strategies practiced for improving reading understanding failed to overcome reading difficulties and perform better in comprehension tests. The main implication of the findings is that reading comprehension can significantly be enhanced by using different strategies. Such strategies can contribute to students' better performance in understanding the reading text critically.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to address reading comprehension problems in undergraduates of Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University Shaheed Benazirabad, Pakistan, through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. They were moving forward. The study aimed to give insights into reading problems and their solutions to improve reading comprehension. In the first and second stages, the data was collected quantitatively from the students regarding reading comprehension problems and the attitude of students toward reading. Secondly, the teachers were interviewed for the reason of strengthening the findings of the research. The study revealed important results. As per the data collected and then analyzed, students have serious reading problems that directly impact their reading comprehension. In conclusion, English teachers and students are mostly following more common strategies to solve reading

comprehension problems by overshadowing psychological factors that are yet to be investigated.

The teachers and students are recommended to work on the employment of reading strategies as their application affects both reading comprehension test scores and learners' attitudes. In this regard, intervention programs can be planned in the university which can yield positive outcomes in improving reading skills. The learners who have with positive attitude towards reading can work for further improvement by integrating relevant reading material. Books like novels, short stories, and poetry can effectively work to engage the students and teach them how to read and monitor reading comprehension. In this way, the students can learn new vocabulary, too. More importantly, the teachers can be trained to instruct their students what, how, when and why to apply certain reading strategies like metacognitive reading strategies to self-regulate their reading process. It is recommended that future studies be conducted on reading skills such as fluency and phonics and the use of metacognitive strategies. Besides, it is recommended that future studies be performed at college or school levels, too, in order to contribute to the canon of reading research.

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Conflict of interest

It is hereby declared that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

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