

INVESTIGATING EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' READING DIFFICULTIES AND STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING THEM: AN ANALYTICAL CASE STUDY

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Abstract

This research explores the challenges that undergraduate students face while reading and how they approach them to alleviate the challenge. The study used mixed-methods design and collected data from 60 participants who responded to a survey questionnaire that captured the reading challenges and strategies for overcoming the challenges. Subsequently, the collected data were analysed using SPSS software. The findings suggest that common issues include understanding complex vocabulary, recalling word meanings, and efficiently handling the time required to read academic texts. In addition, students reported struggling to understand long passages, identify key ideas, and infer meaning from contextual cues. In terms of strategies, students most frequently rely on reviewing texts, focusing on unknown vocabulary, and using note-taking strategies. Other common practices include visualising textual information, summarising the main ideas before reading, and group discussions on texts. The study's findings indicate that the students of the Department of English and Applied Linguistics, University of Lakki Marwat, face grave reading problems; however, they use various strategies to cope with the problems. The analysis suggests the necessity for improving the students' reading comprehension and vocabulary retention through focused instructional strategies and appropriate support.

Keywords: *Academic Texts, EFL Students, Reading Difficulties, Reading Strategies, SPSS Analysis, Vocabulary Comprehension*

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1. Introduction

Reading is an influential language skill used to recognise, perceive, and interpret printed or written words. It is an essential ability of a learner to have a good command of reading in any language. Anderson (1991) states that reading is an important skill to learn. If ESL/EFL learners are taught to read with skills, they will be well-prepared to gain immense progress and development in most educational and academic fields. Generally, EFL learners become good readers in different fields when they obtain and expand their understanding.

Reading efficiently is one of the essentials of comprehension and interpretation of any text. The students will have difficulty taking further education unless their reading skills have been enhanced. In addition, reading is a competency in the learner's life, and successful learners are reading-intensive. More than that, reading and comprehension in the first language are a different experience than reading in the second language. Goodman (1973) argues that learners begin reading in a second language employing a different knowledge base compared to that when readers read their native language. He asserts that most native language readers already know several words and basic grammar before they begin reading. On the other hand, most second-language or foreign-language readers do not have those capabilities since they are beginning the language.

There are four essential skills to become proficient in English language. These basic skills are divided into two groups. The first group is productive skills, and the other is receptive skills. Listening and Reading make up receptive skills. Productive skills include speaking and writing. Receptive skills are acquired through the reception of language from oral or written material. Here, the student decodes meaning to understand the receptive material. Reading as a language skill will always be taken very seriously since it is a significant means of gaining information for school. It remains one of the widely used skills to show linguistic competency worldwide. Additionally, when one lacks the skill of reading, he or she tends to be weak in academic performance. Besides, a person encounters many difficulties outside of the academic context due to illiteracy in reading (Zwiers, 2008). Properly developed reading skill proficiency is also necessary for students in academic life. Otherwise, low-performing students face problems in their educational and social lives.

As stated above, reading skills are essential for students of all levels. However, it is most important for the students at the undergraduate level as they face complex and challenging texts daily, for which they need highly improved, advanced, and enhanced reading and comprehension skills. Anderson (1999) stated that reading is an influential skill to master. Unfortunately and unluckily, students at the undergraduate level are observed to face many reading difficulties.

The current study investigates students' various reading difficulties in English texts at the undergraduate level in the Department of English & Applied Linguistics, University of Lakki Mrawat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). This study attempts to learn about the various reading techniques that students at the undergraduate level use to overcome these reading difficulties while reading English texts.

1.2. Research Questions

- I.** What are the key academic reading challenges encountered by EFL undergraduate students in the Department of English and Applied Linguistics at the University of Lakki Marwat?
- II.** What strategies do EFL undergraduate students in the Department of English and Applied Linguistics at the University of Lakki Marwat employ to address their academic reading difficulties?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Reading

Reading refers to the act of deriving meaning from written symbols. Rivers (1981) believed that "reading is the most significant activity in every language class, not simply as a resource of information and a delightful activity, but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's which are knowledge of the language" (p. 147). To construct meaning, readers should use what they already know while reading. According to Goodman (1973), learners "interact with a text produced by the author. He has concentrated his total earlier experiences and concepts and the language competence he had achieved" (p. 162). On the oprediction and (1991) enumerates four distinctive word recognition strategies: decoding, reading through analogy, reading through prediction, and recognising words through sight and contextual clues. Thus, Hoover and Gough (1990) describe language comprehension as the ability to accept lexical information (i.e., semantic information at the word level) and infer the sentence and discourse interpretation. Language comprehension is often

operationalised using listening comprehension tasks. According to several studies, over 70% of the variation in reading comprehension can be explained by deciphering and linguistic understanding (Catts, Hogan, & Adlof, 2005).

2.2. Reading Difficulties

Since the beginning of the 1960s, a lot of studies has focused on reading challenges, primarily addressing students with Dyslexia and other low reading proficiency (Vellutino et al., 2004). According to Lyon, Shaywitz, and Shaywitz (2003), Dyslexia is “a neurobiological learning disability that is characterised by difficulties with fluent and accurate word recognition, decoding abilities, and poor spelling” (p. 2). Three difficulties based on reading disabilities are identified by the double-deficit hypotheses: selective rapid automated naming inadequacies, combined deficits, and specialised phonological impairments (Wolf & Bowers, 1999). Because they read less, students who struggle with reading have a smaller vocabulary and a lower level of general knowledge than their peers (Yunus, Mohamad, & Waelateh, 2016; Ismail & Yusof, 2016).

2.3. Comprehension Types

Comprehending a language is not merely comprehending individual lexical items but an active engagement with the content to form a mental construct (Rashid, 2012). To make sense of what has been written, a learner needs to synthesise across different levels of abilities to glean meaning and create meaning. How hard it is to comprehend a particular subject depends on the sophistication of the vocabulary used. Significant differences exist between the forms of language used in daily conversations and those applied in classrooms (Westby, 2012). The informal discussions are used to support routine activities and personal experiences. Academic language involves unique vocabulary, more complex grammatical structures, and different patterns of organisation that must be used to communicate content about intricate interrelations (Zwiers, 2008).

2.4. Earlier Studies

After reviewing previous research on children’s reading comprehension challenges, Nation (2004) came to the conclusion that not all language learners and students who struggle with reading comprehension also struggle with fundamental decoding. A more recent study examined the reading challenges of third-grade students in one primary school in Namibia’s Khomas education district who were learning English as a second language. Hartney (2011) used a mixed-methods approach in this case study to demonstrate that many kids are unable to read correctly and lack the necessary reading skills.

Raihan and Nezami (2012) studied reading comprehension strategies and general problems that Arab EFL learners face while studying at Najran University, Saudi Arabia. In this regard, this study aimed to identify the root cause of suboptimal reading comprehension shown by university students. In this study, data were collected through questionnaires sent to the teachers. The students' reading sessions were also observed. According to this study, students have highly significant problems with spelling and pronunciation.

Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013) attempted to identify the prevailing scenario of education and ELT in Saudi Arabia. They highlighted some problems associated with teaching English, such as low student performance and scarcity of relevant learning material. They recommended that the challenges associated with teaching English should be overcome through a collective effort by syllabus designers, policymakers, educators, textbook writers, and learners.

Elwér (2014) thoroughly examined the diverse cognitive and linguistic profiles among students exhibiting inadequate reading comprehension from a longitudinal viewpoint. The study revealed significant instability in several deficient oral language abilities, including grammar, vocabulary, and verbal memory, across multiple assessment periods for those identified as weak oral comprehenders. Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015) identified individual preferences and practices EFL learners have towards reading in connection to varied personal practices during reading in L1 and L2 by administering a 10-item questionnaire in a Likert scale format. The students' responses reflected an uninterest and lack of motivation about 'academic reading' in L1 and L2. Contrary to the above studies, Ali, Khan, and Khalid (2022) focused on teachers' perspectives on addressing reading skills at the intermediate level. They found that the student's reading difficulties could be attributed to the lack of focus on reading skills in language classes.

The studies mentioned above focused on different aspects of reading skills. However, none focused on undergraduate students' reading difficulties and the strategies they adopted to overcome them. Moreover, only a few studies investigated students' reading difficulties in backward areas. To fill this gap, the study attempts to analyse the reading difficulties of undergraduate students of the University of Lakki Marwat..

3. Research Methodology

The reading problems and comprehension barriers are addressed through a mixed-methods design to establish the nature in which these challenges confront the undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of English and Applied Linguistics,

University of Lakki Marwat. Integrating quantitative and qualitative data would ensure an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon.

3.1.Participants

The study involved 60 undergraduate students distributed across various semesters within the Department of English and Applied Linguistics. It was volunteer-based participation where sufficient time was given to complete the survey, with proper instructions provided beforehand.

3.2.Data Collection Instruments

A survey questionnaire was used to collect data on students' reading problems and strategies to overcome them. The questionnaire included statements about different kinds of problems and the specific strategies adopted by the students.

3.3.Data Collection Procedure

A total of 60 students were selected from the 4th, sixth, and 8th semesters through simple random sampling by drawing 20 students from each group of 4th, 6th, and 8th semesters and asked to fill the set of questions.

3.4.Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analysed using SPSS version 23. Quantitative data from closed-ended survey questions were converted into percentages using Microsoft Excel, and tables were created in SPSS. Qualitative responses were analysed to identify key themes in the reading strategies used by students.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

The data analysis has been divided into two sections: Section 1 deals with the reading difficulties faced by undergraduate-level students of the Department of English & Applied Linguistics, University of Lakki Marwat. Section 2 deals with students' strategies to overcome their reading challenges.

4.1.Reading Difficulties Faced by Students

As noted above, undergraduate students face numerous difficulties while dealing with the diversified written texts of the English language. The current section provides a close reading analysis of the difficulties encountered by the students while reading the texts in the Department of English and Applied Linguistics, University of Lakki Marwat. To provide close and accurate analysis, this section is designed to represent the data generated by SPSS.

4.1.1. Understanding Complex Vocabulary

One of the major problems found in the study is the problems students face in understanding the complex vocabulary while reading English literature. Data gathered from the survey indicates how common this problem is for the students:

Do you often find it challenging to understand big words in English texts?					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Never	4	6.7	6.7	6.7
	Rarely	3	5.0	5.0	11.7
	Sometimes	42	70.0	70.0	81.7
	Often	11	18.3	18.3	100.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The table shows that 70% of the students stated that they “sometimes” find it difficult to understand complex terminology in the texts written in English. In addition, 18.3% of the students replied that they “often” fail to understand the meanings of larger vocabulary items. The findings indicate that vocabulary comprehension is a serious problem for most students of the Department of English and Applied Linguistics at the University of Lakki Marwat. This problem can hinder their general reading comprehension; therefore, they may have difficulty understanding academic texts fully.

4.1.2. Retaining Word Meanings While Reading

Another common problem found by the study is that students cannot remember the meanings of words as they read. Summary of the survey responses to the relevant question is:

Can you remember the meanings of the words as you read?					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	9	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Often	25	41.7	41.7	85.0

Sometimes	19	31.7	31.7	43.3
Rarely	6	10.0	10.0	11.7
Never	1	1.7	1.7	1.7
Total	60	100.0	100.0	

It has been established that a significant percentage of students, that is, 41.7%, “often” struggle to retain the meanings of words in their minds while reading. In addition, 31.7% of the respondents indicated that they “sometimes” forget the meanings of words.

This trend shows that vocabulary retention remains a concern for most students, which could affect the overall meaning and coherence that students obtain from reading academic texts.

4.1.3. Time Consumption in Reading Course Materials

The students face difficulties in providing the appropriate time to involve themselves with the varied English texts incorporated into their curriculum. The responses to the question about the amount of time spent reading are as follows:

The various texts in the English language in your course are taking too much time to read.

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	7	11.7	11.7	100.0
	Often	10	16.7	16.7	88.3
	Sometimes	20	33.3	33.3	71.7
	Rarely	17	28.3	28.3	38.3
	Never	6	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The findings demonstrate that 33.3% of students “sometimes” perceive the reading materials as time-consuming, whereas 28.3% acknowledge this difficulty as happening “rarely. In addition, 16.7% and 11.7% of students indicated that the time needed to engage

with their course materials is “often” and “always” a concern, respectively. The outcomes of this research point to some of the problems students have in terms of time management while performing long reading assignments that may exacerbate reading difficulties. The notion that reading assignments take much time deters practical study skills since students will have less time to read and memorise information.

4.1.4. Difficulty in Understanding Lengthy Texts

The data indicates that many students struggle to understand lengthy English texts. The frequency distribution of responses is as follows:

Do you find it challenging to realise the meaning of a lengthy text?					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	3	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Often	8	13.3	13.3	95.0
	Sometimes	30	50.0	50.0	81.7
	Rarely	13	21.7	21.7	31.7
	Never	6	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The results show that 50% of students “sometimes” struggle with lengthy texts, while 13.3% report facing this difficulty “often.” A small percentage (5%) said they face this challenge “always,” while 10% never find lengthy texts difficult. This may imply that several students in the Department of English & Applied Linguistics at ULM find reading long texts challenging, affecting their comprehension and retention. The problem with extended texts may be related to the cognitive load associated with processing dense information, resulting in problems with the task of academic reading.

4.1.5. Identifying the Main Idea in English Texts

The responses show students’ struggles in identifying the main idea of English texts, which is reflected in the following data:

Is it difficult for you to point out the main idea of a text in English?
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		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	1	1.7	1.7	100.0
	Often	6	10.0	10.0	98.3
	Sometimes	20	33.3	33.3	88.3
	Rarely	18	30.0	30.0	55.0
	Never	15	25.0	25.0	25.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

A third of the respondents, or 33.3% of the student population, reported that they “sometimes” have trouble identifying the main idea, while 30% said they have this problem “rarely.” However, 10% said they “often” have trouble with this task, and 1.7% said it is always a problem. These findings point to identifying key points in a text as a common problem of students, which may compromise their ability to summarise, analyse, and remember important information from academic texts.

4.1.6. Anxiety Caused by Lengthy Sentences

The data shows how long sentences provoke anxiety in students, and the distribution afterward is as follows:

Do lengthy statements make you feel anxious?					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	3	5.0	5.0	100.0
	Often	21	35.0	35.0	95.0
	Sometimes	20	33.3	33.3	60.0
	Rarely	10	16.7	16.7	26.7
	Never	6	10.0	10.0	10.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The findings reveal that 35% of the students “often” experience anxiety when confronted with long sentences, while 33.3% “sometimes” undergo this feeling. Further, 5% of the respondents replied that they feel anxious “always,” while 10% claimed they had never experienced this issue. It suggests that the intricacy and length of the sentences contribute significantly to reading difficulties, making it harder for students to stay focused and understand the meaning of texts. Anxiety due to complex sentence structures can deter students from reading further and consequently worsen academic performance.

4.1.7. Boredom While Using a Dictionary for Difficult Words

The responses to using a dictionary for understanding difficult words are as follows:

Do you feel bored When you use a dictionary for difficult words?					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	8	13.3	13.3	100.0
	Often	12	20.0	20.0	86.7
	Sometimes	13	21.7	21.7	66.7
	Rarely	10	16.7	16.7	45.0
	Never	17	28.3	28.3	28.3
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The data indicates that 28.3% of pupils report “never” feeling bored using a dictionary, while 21.7% reported that it is “sometimes” boring. Furthermore, 20% of respondents reported that they “often” get bored when looking for complex vocabulary, and 13.3% of pupils reported getting “always” bored when doing this. Such results indicate that perhaps many pupils would rate their dictionaries as somewhat dull, which leads to a lower motivation to use this activity for vocabulary appropriation. This will affect their understanding of academic literature, particularly when they meet new vocabulary.

4.1.8. Difficulty in Elaborating, Inferring, or Predicting During Reading

Responses to the question about difficulties during elaboration, inference, or prediction while reading are shown below:

Do you Have difficulty elaborating, inferring, or predicting while reading English texts?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	2	3.3	3.3	100.0
	Often	12	20.0	20.0	96.7
	Sometimes	25	41.7	41.7	76.7
	Rarely	11	18.3	18.3	35.0
	Never	10	16.7	16.7	16.7
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

A significant percentage of students (28.3%) “sometimes” experience difficulties in elaborating, inferring, or predicting during reading, while 23.3% report experiencing these difficulties “often.” In addition, 13.3% always find these cognitive tasks difficult “always.” These results highlight the complex cognitive processes involved in reading comprehension. Students who experience difficulties elaborating, inferring, or predicting may face additional barriers to understanding and engaging with academic texts, which can influence their academic achievement.

4.2.Strategies that students Use to Overcome the Reading Difficulties**4.2.1. Highlighting Unfamiliar Words**

Highlighting unfamiliar words in different texts is a significant strategy for readers. The following are the details of the students’ responses.

Do you highlight words you do not understand when reading an English passage?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	12	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Often	25	41.7	41.7	80.0
	Sometimes	11	18.3	18.3	38.3
	Rarely	10	16.7	16.7	20.0

Never	2	3.3	3.3	3.3
Total	60	100.0	100.0	

About 61.7% of respondents indicated that they “often” or “always” highlight unfamiliar words while reading. This practice suggests that students engage with the text actively by marking challenging vocabulary that will be reviewed later. Underlining serves as a technique for focusing attention on spots of difficulty and helps promote vocabulary development. This technique allows learners to create a visual cue for vocabulary that requires further interaction, which can then be consulted or researched for better understanding. Such a strategy shows the students’ initiative in advancing their linguistic skills.

4.2.2. Reading Aloud Outside of Class

Reading aloud is also one of the useful techniques for enhancing understanding of texts. The students’ responses to the questions reading aloud are the following.

Do you read aloud outside of the classroom context? For some students, this can be an excellent strategy to remember more information from the text.

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	9	15.0	15.0	100.0
	Often	8	13.3	13.3	85.0
	Sometimes	14	23.3	23.3	71.7
	Rarely	6	10.0	10.0	48.3
	Never	23	38.3	38.3	38.3
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

A significant number of respondents, 28.3%, indicated that they “never” read aloud outside the instructional environment, 23.3% stated they read aloud “sometimes,” and 28.3% said they read aloud “often” or “always.” While this technique is less common outside of the classroom, it still provides an excellent technique to help understand and retain information. To these students, it presumably acts as a method of maintaining

concentration and memory for the information. Reading aloud also supports the purposes of fluency and articulation so students remember the message in the case of exams or discussions.

4.2.3. Taking Notes While Reading

Teachers always ask students to take notes while reading different texts. The following table presents students' responses to the question on the reading-aloud technique.

Do you take notes while reading English texts?					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	17	28.3	28.3	100.0
	Often	14	23.3	23.3	71.7
	Sometimes	19	31.7	31.7	48.3
	Rarely	7	11.7	11.7	16.7
	Never	3	5.0	5.0	5.0
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Note-taking has also been accepted as a good technique for students. Indeed, 51.7% of the subjects indicated that they "often" or "always" do it when reading. It enables them to note important points, integrate ideas, and reinforce memorisation of key ideas. In addition, note-taking helps students organise information and review material later. This exercise demonstrates an active reading strategy in which the student interacts with the information by underlining key terms and organising the material to maximise understanding and retention.

4.2.4. Starting Over When Confused

Students always get confused when they start reading challenging texts. As a strategy, students start over from the beginning. It results in better comprehension of the text. Students' responses to the question on this idea are presented in the following table.

When you become confused about something while reading, do you start over and try to figure it out?
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		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	20	33.3	33.3	100.0
	Often	18	30.0	30.0	66.7
	Sometimes	12	20.0	20.0	36.7
	Rarely	5	8.3	8.3	16.7
	Never	5	8.3	8.3	8.3
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

When students experience ambiguity while reading, the majority (58.3%) of them report that they “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” select to start over in hopes of improving their understanding. Such behaviour suggests that students work to overcome the problem by rereading the text rather than continuing with the text because they cannot understand it. By beginning anew, students seek a more precise understanding of the subject matter, thereby resolving any ambiguities and strengthening their comprehension. This illustrates a systematic and determined strategy for surmounting difficulties associated with reading comprehension.

4.2.5. Creating a Map of Information to Understand Text

Educationists usually advise students to create different mind maps to enhance their understanding of the texts. The following table presents a detailed description of students’ responses to the item on creating a mind map.

Can you create a map of the information you get from the text to understand it better?					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	8	13.3	13.3	100.0
	Often	22	36.7	36.7	86.7
	Sometimes	18	30.0	30.0	50.0
	Rarely	4	6.7	6.7	20.0
	Never	8	13.3	13.3	13.3

Total	60	100.0	100.0
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The results indicate that while 36.7 per cent of the students “often” rely on drawing a map or diagram of textual information, 30 per cent “sometimes” depend upon it. Many students frequently rely on this mapping technique for better understanding and remembering the content. The visualisation of text contents in the form of diagrams or mind maps helps the students organise complex information and develop meaningful relationships among these key concepts. Nonetheless, 13.3% of students indicate that they never utilise this strategy, suggesting that for specific individuals, visual aids may not constitute a standard component of their reading methodology. This observation underscores the variety of strategies students adopt to improve their understanding.

4.2.6. Identifying Key Vocabulary Words in Texts

Almost all texts have specific keywords that indicate the ‘aboutness’ of the text. Therefore, it is important to search for keywords in the text. It enhances comprehension. Students’ responses to the question on keywords are presented below.

Do you try to find the key vocabulary words from English texts?					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	15	25.0	25.0	100.0
	Often	22	36.7	36.7	75.0
	Sometimes	10	16.7	16.7	38.3
	Rarely	12	20.0	20.0	21.7
	Never	1	1.7	1.7	1.7
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

A very significant proportion of students (61.7%) report either “often” or “always” paying attention to identifying needed vocabulary words when reading in English, thereby making vocabulary building the foremost goal for a large section of the learners. The next 16.7% of them report doing so “sometimes.” Thus, 21.7% of the students very rarely follow this practice. The consistent use of vocabulary identification practices shows that students know the importance of gaining key vocabulary in English literature for better understanding. This helps them build their language skills and expand their overall knowledge base.

4.2.7. Creating Questions to Enhance Understanding

Teachers often advise their students to ask questions about the text before reading it. This helps the students focus on the text, leading to a better comprehension of the text. The students responded to this item in the following numbers.

Do you create questions to help you understand the text better while reading?					
		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	11	18.3	18.3	100.0
	Often	15	25.0	25.0	81.7
	Sometimes	24	40.0	40.0	56.7
	Rarely	6	10.0	10.0	16.7
	Never	4	6.7	6.7	6.7
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

A large percentage of students, 65% of the students, “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” ask questions when reading to enhance their comprehension of the text. This means that students widely use question-based strategies to increase their understanding and clarify concepts. The process of asking questions makes a student read actively and critically, enabling them to focus on the material and engage with it at a deeper level. On the other hand, 16.7% of the students indicated that they “never” or “rarely” use this strategy, which may imply that some students will not likely generate questions when reading. This difference may be attributed to individual differences in study skills or personal preferences.

4.2.8. Making Personal Connections to the Text

Writers and readers are human beings with their own experiences. Writers do not write in the air; instead, they reflect upon their personal experiences in the world while writing different texts. Similarly, readers also draw on their experiences to make sense of the written texts. They make a personal connection to the text while reading it. When students were asked this question, they responded in the following way.

Do you try to make a connection to the text for yourself while reading English texts?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	10	16.7	16.7	100.0
	Often	19	31.7	31.7	83.3
	Sometimes	23	38.3	38.3	51.7
	Rarely	4	6.7	6.7	13.3
	Never	4	6.7	6.7	6.7
	Total	60	100.0	100.0	

The data shows that 38.3% of students “sometimes” try to create personal connections with the text they read, while 30% “often” or “always” do so. Connecting content to personal experiences or prior knowledge helps readers connect the information to their own lives and, therefore, increases the meaning and memorability of the text. On the other hand, 13.3% of the students report that they “never” or “rarely” try to make personal connections with the text. This means that although making the text relevant to personal experiences can help understand and engage, it may not be universally effective or necessary for all learners. For some, emphasis may be placed on other comprehension methods.

4.2.9. Participating in Group Discussions after Reading

Group discussions also help in improving the reading skills of the students. Students’ responses to the item in group discussion after reading a text are presented in the following table.

Have you had a group discussion once the English text reading is done?

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Always	14	23.3	23.3	100.0
	Often	14	23.3	23.3	76.7
	Sometimes	18	30.0	30.0	53.3

Rarely	6	10.0	10.0	23.3
Never	8	13.3	13.3	13.3
Total	60	100.0	100.0	

Group discussions are one of the common strategies adopted for better comprehension and engagement of a text. In the present research, 46.6% of the students “sometimes,” “often,” or “always” participate in group discussions after reading an English text, which proves that a significant proportion of students value collaborative learning. Group discussions provide an avenue to clarify doubts, exchange ideas, and deepen understanding through collective input. However, 13.3% of the students “never” participate in group discussions, and 10.0% do so “rarely.” This, therefore, means that as much as group discussions are helpful, they might not be a frequent practice for all students, probably due to time constraints, class schedules, or personal preference.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study align with existing research on the challenges EFL learners face and the strategies they employ to overcome reading difficulties. A key issue identified was the difficulty in understanding complex vocabulary and retaining word meanings, which are crucial components of reading comprehension (Nation, 2006; Alqahtani, 2015). A limited vocabulary base not only hampers comprehension but also affects students’ ability to engage with academic texts critically, a challenge widely reported among EFL learners.

Another significant finding was the challenge of managing time effectively while reading. Many students indicated that they found academic texts time-consuming, echoing Grabe’s (2009) observation that EFL learners often require more time due to increased cognitive processing demands. These findings suggest that time management skills, essential for effective reading, must be explicitly taught to help students cope with academic workloads.

The study also highlighted difficulties in understanding lengthy texts and identifying main ideas, which are critical for extracting key information from academic material. Similar challenges have been documented in research by Navarro (2021), who emphasises the role of metacognitive strategies in addressing these issues. Students in this study often struggled to maintain focus when dealing with extended texts, a problem that can lead to surface-level reading and reduced comprehension.

In terms of strategies, the findings revealed that students employ various techniques to address these challenges. Rereading texts and highlighting unfamiliar words were the most commonly used strategies, supporting Anderson's (1991) findings on the effectiveness of metacognitive approaches in improving comprehension. Visualisation and summarisation were also reported as effective strategies, enabling students to organise information and focus on critical content, consistent with the findings of Garrison and Anderson (2003).

An interesting observation was the use of group discussions and writing personal opinions after reading. These collaborative and reflective practices help students clarify doubts, engage critically with texts, and develop a deeper understanding of the material. Such strategies build critical thinking and analytical skills essential for academic success (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). However, the data also indicate that these strategies are not universally employed, suggesting variability in students' familiarity and comfort with collaborative learning methods.

Finally, the findings emphasise the importance of instructional support in addressing these challenges. Explicit training in vocabulary building, time management, and reading strategies like predicting and questioning could significantly enhance students' proficiency. Additionally, integrating digital tools, such as e-dictionaries and text mapping software, could offer modern solutions for overcoming reading difficulties, as noted by Alqahtani (2015).

6. Conclusion

The study attempted to investigate the reading difficulties of undergraduate students in the Department of English and Applied Linguistics at the University of Lakki Marwat and the stratagems they employ to overcome their reading difficulties. The findings highlight a range of challenges the students have been through, particularly with the retention of the words' meanings, the comprehension of long texts, time management for reading, and the understanding of complex vocabulary. These issues are not uncommon for students, meaning more extensive reading comprehension problems faced by many EFL learners.

The research also revealed various strategies students use to deal with these challenges. Among the most commonly used were rereading passages, focusing on unknown vocabulary, taking notes, and making mental representations. They demonstrate that language learners are conscious of the necessity of being involved in active reading and comprehension strategies to assist them in getting a better understanding of texts.

Although the results also highlight some challenges, they highlight the necessity of teaching students effective reading techniques that would help develop their comprehension skills. Such techniques include summarising main points, predicting content, and discussing in groups; all these would help overcome students' difficulties in reading and comprehending academic texts better.

Therefore, improving the students' reading problems and providing them with practical strategies will contribute to their academic success and overall linguistic competence. Further research on the effects of these strategies on students' academic performance could be conducted to find more ways to help EFL learners become better readers.

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