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RESEARCH PAPER

Exploring Reading Challenges Experienced by Pakistani Undergraduate Students: A Case Study of Sukkur IBA Computer Science Students with Proposed Suggestions

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts to explore the reading challenges faced by Pakistani EFL undergraduate students. The main purpose is to identify the reading difficulties encountered by students in reading and how those difficulties can be addressed. The study is qualitative in nature. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews and reflective diaries from ten students enrolled in the first semester of Sukkur IBA University. Data analysis was conducted through thematic analysis and personal interpretation techniques to explore the challenges experienced by students. The results showed five major challenges experienced by the learners: a lack of required vocabulary to understand the text, weak grammatical knowledge, which hinders sentence comprehension, a lack of motivation, a lack of consistency in reading, and issues with reading material. The study recommends that the above challenges can be tackled by providing free choice to students for selecting reading material, and more exposure to reading multiple genres of reading. Based on the findings. To achieve this, the teacher's role is predominant in developing their reading abilities of the students.

Introduction

In EFL classrooms, reading is a fundamental skill for enhancing overall language proficiency and academic achievement. Research has shown that vocabulary growth, grammatical competence, and reading strategies are key to effective reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000; Grabe & Stoller, 2019). The extensive exposure to varied and meaningful texts, beyond textbooks, can enhance reading proficiency, motivation, and minimize reading anxiety among learners when they read voluntarily and extensively (Krashen & Mason, 2017; Day & Bamford, 2002). Thus, it is essential to encourage reading proficiency and reading habits for EFL learners (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018).

In Pakistan, reading ability is linked to effective reading comprehension and sound vocabulary for better achievement across disciplines (Rubab, Kadir, & Naveed, 2022). However, the classroom practices often remain textbook-bound, with limited opportunities for sustained reading, which limits reading habit formation and fluency development for students. To deal with this, it is essential to provide more reading exposure to students. This approach offers a viable pathway to richer reading input,

increased motivation, and improved comprehension (Renandya, 2007; Day & Bamford, 2002). Therefore, reading amount should be increased in the EFL classrooms. In today's era, reading is losing its significance among students, and its neglect is hindering the academic achievement of students. However, research studies have shown that poor reading proficiency results in poor language skills, which consequently affects the academic performance of the learners. Moreover, engaging students in pleasure reading can help improve their reading proficiency, as has been suggested by (Ismail et al., 2017; Krashen & Mason, 2017).

Although reading has great significance, it is not practiced properly in Pakistani EFL classrooms. Moreover, traditional methods of reading are employed by the teachers, which limit their reading to textbooks only. Hence, some valuable techniques may be used to bring more reading exposure to the classrooms. In literature, various quantitative studies are available that have investigated the challenges of the learners in reading, but very studies are available that have explored the reading challenges of the learners. This study will probably be one of the few studies of this nature in the literature.

Literature Review

Vocabulary is the common issue that most learners face in reading. Moreover, this is a primary barrier to reading comprehension. Research has revealed that readers generally need 95–98% lexical coverage to understand texts effectively (Laufer, 2016). However, in Asian EFL contexts, limited vocabulary depth and breadth impede reading comprehension and text integration (Nibras, 2024). Moreover, Pakistani findings similarly show that reading activities support vocabulary growth and broader language development (Kalhoro et al., 2025; Jawaid et al., 2025). These studies have reported that participants identified vocabulary as their biggest reading hurdle.

Besides the vocabulary knowledge, which is considered very essential, the syntactic competence also enables parsing of complex sentences and cohesive devices; without it, comprehension weakens even when words are known (Alderson, 2000; Koda, 2005; Grabe & Stoller, 2019). Therefore, enhancing one's grammatical knowledge is of great importance for comprehension to develop. Various studies show that, in addition to good vocabulary, insufficient grammar is also a barrier to effective reading abilities (Ali et al., 2024). Pakistani undergraduates frequently struggle to process academic texts due to insufficient grammar proficiency (Rubab & Shah, 2022). These studies have reported difficulties among students with sentence structure, modifiers, and punctuation, and thus, it disrupts the meaning-making of the text.

It is also essential to develop a positive reading attitude to enhance the reading skills of learners. Furthermore, positive attitudes drive sustained engagement, which ultimately improves the reading comprehension ability of the learners. Free voluntary reading fosters language growth when learners choose interesting texts at the right difficulty level (Krashen & Mason, 2017; Day & Bamford, 2002). In Pakistan, weak reading cultures and exam-focused practices often limit reading habit formation. Therefore, for proper reading engagement and motivation, the learners must be given more reading exposure. Furthermore, the reading culture may also be introduced in the classroom and outside the classroom contexts. Dependence only on vocabulary development and grammatical competence will not be sufficient for the development of their reading comprehension. Therefore, low intrinsic motivation and difficulty sustaining focus become typical barriers when the reading input is limited.

Another important challenge that EFL learners face is reading for a longer period. As the classroom mainly focused on the textbook-based reading, teachers focused only on short texts and examination-based comprehension exercises, so the learners remained deprived of reading-rich input. However, research has proved that regular exposure to longer texts builds fluency, speed, and comprehension (Day & Bamford, 2002; Grabe & Stoller, 2019). However, students accustomed to short passages often find long novels and sustained reading challenging (Nibras, 2024). In another study, when participants were tasked with reading 400–500 pages for the first time, they reported fatigue and inconsistency in the reading. Hence, the study underscored the need for more reading input through ER to increase students' reading consistency and reading input. (Renandya, 2007)

To improve the reading ability of the learners, it is also essential to provide the appropriate text which should not be above the difficulty level of the learners, and it should be at the learners' level, and it should not be in mismatch with the cultural orientations of the learners, and which will strongly develop their reading comprehension. Assigning materials designed for native speakers can overwhelm learners with archaic or low-frequency vocabulary (Renandya, 2007; Grabe & Stoller, 2019). In Pakistani classrooms, foreign-authored novels may feel linguistically and culturally distant, reducing engagement of the learners in reading (Iqbal & Aziz, 2025). Therefore, students often encounter this problem very frequently. Hence, this also affects their reading comprehension ability. The above studies have revealed that students encounter various issues in reading from multiple factors, which can be handled with effective teaching of reading skills. Based on the literature, the present study attempts to explore the reading challenges of the learners, providing suggestions to deal with this issue. This study will fill the gap in the literature because the previous studies have not been conducted qualitatively in this area of investigation.

Material and Methods

The qualitative study design was employed in the study. This study design explored Pakistani undergraduate EFL learners' perceived reading challenges during their first semester at Sukkur IBA University and explored the proposed suggestions. The main purpose of using this research design was to explore a thorough understanding of the research problem in the context of Pakistan. The population of the study consisted of first-semester students of Computer Science students. For the sample size. A purposive sampling technique was used. The study sample consisted of ten students who were enrolled in the Functional English language course in the 2024 academic year. The design prioritized rich, contextualized accounts of learners' experiences with vocabulary, grammar, motivation, material difficulty, and cultural fit. All the participants were chosen purposely for certain characteristics. The students who were attending reading classes regularly. The participants consisted of six males and four females; their ages were between 17 and 19. Moreover, all participants had the same academic background.

Instrumentation

In this study, two instruments were used: (a) semi-structured interviews probing various challenges faced by students. The interview guide was developed by reviewing the relevant literature and the relevant studies conducted on reading challenges in various settings around the world. When the interview guide was developed, it was then sent to three experts for validation. After the validation process, the interview guide was

piloted. Based on the experts' suggestions and the pilot study results, the interview guide was revised. Besides, semi-structured interviews, reflective diaries were also employed as data collection tools. (b) Reflective diaries captured students' feelings and attitudes about week-by-week experiences of their reading difficulties. Students also received brief guidelines and a sample entry to support consistent diary writing at the start of the regular semester. Ten students were provided with diaries, but eight participants returned their diaries at the end of the semester. The validity and reliability of both tools were checked.

Data collection

Data were gathered at the end of the fall 2024 regular semester. One-to-one interviews (25–35 minutes) were conducted in person, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Reflective diaries were collected at semester's end. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly assured.

Data analysis

In this qualitative study, thematic analysis techniques and personal interpretation were used for data analysis. The thematic analysis technique is easy, flexible, and transparent. Moreover, it is widely used by researchers. The researchers employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six steps of thematic analysis (familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing, defining/naming themes, and reporting) to identify recurring patterns across interviews and diaries (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To analyze the reflective diaries data, the researchers read the diaries repeatedly and intensively, and the interview results were supported with the relevant citations from the diaries. Member checking techniques were used to check the reliability and validity of the data. For this, two participants were selected to review the transcripts and interpret the data. After this, discrepancies were resolved through negotiation between the participants and the researchers. Themes were organized around language-related barriers (vocabulary, grammar), motivational factors, material appropriateness, and reading continuity. Triangulating interviews with diaries enhanced credibility.

Results and Discussion

Reading Challenges Experienced by the Students

To explore the challenges in detail, the learners were asked during the interview what challenges they faced while reading. The overall challenges are presented below:

Most of the participants reported problems with vocabulary, and they considered it a main hurdle to understanding any reading. The results highlighted that they could hardly understand any text due to difficulty with the vocabulary used in the material.

I was unable to understand the meaning of the difficult word during the first reading, as I came across those words first time in my life. So, while reading, we encountered problems with the new words (P3). Likewise, one of the participants said that she encountered many unfamiliar words in her life (P2).

Another participant wrote in the diary that the main problem was to comprehend the meaning of the words that I came across first time in my life. (P1). Some amazing comments emerged from the students, as one respondent remarked *that reading and pronouncing the word was a challenge for me (P5).* Some participants also mentioned that they faced

difficulties in understanding the contextual meaning of new texts, as I struggled to comprehend the contextual meaning of the words *(P2).* All the above comments revealed that students had serious issues with vocabulary. Moreover, it was an immense obstacle to their reading abilities.

In addition to the challenges of the vocabulary, some participants commented that they faced challenges in comprehending the grammatical structures found in the text.

One student commented tha*t tenses and parts of speech were a big problem in understanding any text. I could not understand the proper use of a word (P6).* Similarly, another participant remarked that grammatical structures were also a challenge during the reading of any text.

One student wrote in the diary:

I always felt trouble in identifying the proper use of words like the use of adjectives, comparative superlative, and the perfect choice of words, and the proper use of tenses (P2). These comments showed that the student had issues with grammatical points in reading and understanding any text.

Apart from the problems of vocabulary and grammar, some students remarked that they found no interest in reading. Participant 06 commented that *I suffered from a lack of interest in reading, as reading to me was a new thing since in my previous schooling, I had never read anything, excluding my textbooks (P10).*

Similarly, one respondent wrote in her diary that she did not like reading because she was not motivated to read**.** *It was also a challenge to be a reader as I was not internally motivated to read any material (P8). During reading, I always lost my reading interest and reading motivation for reading as I had anxiety about comprehension, so I always lost my interest in reading (P6).*

The above comments suggest that difficulty in comprehension and lack of reading motivation, and negative reading attitudes were big hurdles to their reading interest.

Moreover, some participants felt that they lacked consistency in reading as they had to read multiple materials, but before joining the BS program, they had never read for a long time. Here, this was a new reading experience for them as they felt difficulty managing this new reading experience.

One student wrote in the diary that:

During my previous schooling, *the students remarked that before joining the BS program, I was not used to reading novels, and there was always an issue of continuity and consistency in reading.* The comments indicate that maintaining reading consistency was also a big challenge for them.

Besides the above challenges, some of the participants had problems with the reading material prescribed for them. They were recommended some novels and magazine articles, and also newspaper articles, so the language and the content in some of the novels were very difficult.

One student wrote in the diary that "We were recommended some novels for additional reading, but the content was difficult for us to comprehend, as novels were mainly written for native speakers, so I think it was challenging to understand. *Another participant* mentioned that the content in the reading material was beyond their level, so I was unable to understand anything in the text. (P5). All these comments suggest that the reading content was not up to their level and choice, which resulted in their poor comprehension.

There is one more worthwhile point to mention here, that the prescribed novels were mostly written by foreign authors. So, the students found it more challenging to understand the context and examples given in them. Some of the participants were of the view that they inherited poor English language skills and a particularly poor English reading culture, so the direct shift from their first language to a foreign language was a huge challenge for them.

From the interview data and reflective diaries, it was also found that students also encountered challenges in cultural variation in the material, and they were previously closer to their cultural context; the reading difficulty was also due to this difference in cultural norms and traditions in the reading context. Thus, it can be determined that the participants faced several challenges in reading, for example, the challenges were related to language, culture, interest, motivation, and consistency. The next discussion is how students handled all those reading challenges.

Suggestions for Addressing Reading Challenges

When participants were asked for suggestions to improve reading comprehension, students offered their suggestions based on their participation in the first semester of the BS program.

With regard to free choice of reading material, the prominent finding was that almost all participants favored the free choice, and none favored the idea of imposing choice on them to develop their interest and love for reading. Participants remarked that imposing any reading material would not be beneficial for the learners. In addition to this, some participants said that students should be provided more reading material and a conducive environment in the classroom, and a fixed time of around 30 minutes to 1 hour for individual silent reading in the classrooms should be dedicated to reading. Students should also access reading material from different blogs, newspaper articles, and websites. Similarly, another participant remarked that the *teachers must allow their students to read books of their own joy, but they need to read a single book every week and come up with a summary and present it in class. (P10).*

Regarding reading material, all participants liked the reading material. However, there were some participants who suggested that reading material was good, but it should be made more interesting and engaging for the learners so that they could continue reading. The interview data also revealed that the presently used material does not contain modern topics, and old and traditional contents have been followed in the classes, which lessens students' motivation towards reading, but it also increases their disinterest in reading. One participant commented that the present prescribed material needs to be updated and revised, and topics of various genres should be included in future reading sessions. *There are different types of terms for any specific subject. So, I think that if those terms are included in the classes, it will help students understand the technical terms and words of any subject (P3).*

The interview data and the reflective diary data revealed that although different reading activities were performed in the reading classes, there were more activities that needed to be incorporated in the future reading sessions of the classes.

In the reading session, activities are both a must and useful. Those activities should be of a different nature, like one student said that group discussion is important for understanding the reading material to understand it properly. Merely reading in the reading classes would not be useful unless some interesting and fun activities are involved in the classes; *we must involve some activities, including group discussions (P6).* There were some other activities suggested by a participant. *The class should be fun, like activities, like the teacher showing videos or a story before starting the class (P6).* There must also be a more interactive nature of reading activities in the classes, as it will increase the confidence of the learners to speak and enhance their reading comprehension. (P7).

Discussion

The results of this study imply that vocabulary was a big hurdle for students in understanding any text, as the learners encountered the vocabulary for the first time in their lives. Moreover, they didn't know different reading techniques to understand the meanings of new words. The results indicate that students had serious problems with vocabulary**.** Additionally, the findings also imply that learners suffered from poor grammar competence, which was also a barrier to them in reading comprehension. Therefore, it can be assumed that some participants had a very poor academic background and that even basic grammar rules were not known to them. Various studies have also provided similar findings regarding vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension (Kalhoro et al., 2025; Jawaid et al., 2025; Ha Le, 2021). Findings also determined that learners did not have a reading interest, and they had reading anxiety. Moreover, they had no positive reading attitudes**.** Hence, it could be deduced that problems in reading comprehension and a lack of motivation were hurdles for them to cultivate their interest in reading (Trushchelev, 2025).

Concerning maintaining consistency in reading. It is implied that learners were introduced to this new reading experience of teaching reading. Moreover, they were always exposed to traditional methods of reading, so they found it a big challenge at the start of their regular programs, and they took some time to adjust to it. Finally, it can be assumed that developing reading consistency was a challenge for both teachers and students. There could be various reasons, but one possible reason could be that teachers may have felt it difficult to inculcate the value of reading among the students (Mukherjee, 2025).

Furthermore, the results also suggest that reading content was alien to students, and it was beyond their level. And the material of Pakistani writers should be prescribed for the students. Therefore, the material should be revised keeping in view the needs of the students. This challenge is because students are normally provided content in their mother tongue, and English was quite a new experience for them. Moreover, their previous academic journey did not provide them with any reading experience. Likely, cultural differences in the material authored by a foreign author were also the key reading challenge for them (Iqbal & Aziz, 2025).

The following section provides the suggestions of the EFL learners to be incorporated into the reading classes. The major suggestions are that students' choice for selecting and reading material must always be prioritized, second, the material must be

interesting, easy, and in bulk quantity, third, students should get more reading input inside and outside classrooms. Teachers should make the sessions engaging and motivating for the students, and more specifically, learner-centered sessions should be emphasized, and at the same time, involvement of the learners in the activities should be maximized. Reading in the classes should be encouraged with numerous activities and tasks for the students. Those tasks should be interactive and engaging. Teachers should bring ICT into the classrooms and provide websites and Internet sources for the students to read. Students should read blogs and other social media sources. Teachers should also use some games and fun activities in the classes. Material must be revised and updated, keeping in view the modern and present needs of the students. Reading amount, in the form of books, should be increased. Motivation of the students towards reading must be at its peak so that reading becomes the core of their life, and this relies on teachers to think deeply to bring students' motivation towards reading in English. Teachers must make students realize the value and importance of reading in their practical and professional lives. The above points are highlighted by the participant based on their active and regular practices of reading classes in the regular program.

Conclusion

This research demonstrated that Sukkur IBA undergraduates have several reading problems, such as a lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, a lack of motivation, an inability to maintain reading, and poor reading materials. All these barriers restrict the effective reading ability of the learners. All the above challenges can be handled by providing students with more reading input, culturally relevant reading, and giving students the choice of increasing motivation. They also need to be taught explicitly about vocabulary, grammar, and reading strategies. Although this research was also restricted to one institution and a small sample, the results underline the importance of additional motivating and context-sensitive reading activities in Pakistani EFL classrooms.

Recommendations

- It was also suggested by some participants that the teacher should play a more active role in bringing students towards reading. They must motivate and encourage students to read the content. The nature of reading classes should be made more student-centered, and teachers should help students realize the importance and value of reading for them. To do this, teachers should increase reading time for students and provide students variety of reading material. It was also realized by the new participants that ICT should be integrated into the reading session, which would provide students with more reading opportunities.

- To attract and motivate students towards reading activities like arrangement of competitions should be organized, and students should be provided with rewards, and teachers should provide students with a pre-listed vocabulary about the passages to be read in the classes.

- The reading amount should be increased. Moreover, teachers should design strategies to encourage students' participation in the reading classes. For example, there should be more reading from students in the classes.

- It is always a challenging task for teachers to maintain the interest and motivation of the students towards reading. To do so, teachers must keep applying and

changing different strategies and techniques depending on the needs of the students.

- Teachers should get feedback from students in the form of writing a summary or a presentation about the reading.

- Teachers should perform certain activities in the classes that would become a source of entertainment and interest in the reading classes.

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