JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY SCIENCES AND INNOVATIONS

VOLUME 05, ISSUE 01
MOPNTHLY JOURNALS

ISSN NUMBER: 2751-4390
IMPACT FACTOR: 9,08

READING DIFFICULTIES FACED BY EFL LEARNERS AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL

Samarkand state institute of foreign languages 2- year student
Akhtamova Sevinch Shukhratovna
Supervisor: ***Pardayeva Aziza Rahmatullayevna***
+998889442225

Abstract

Reading is one of the most essential skills in learning English as a foreign language, especially at the secondary school level where academic demands increase. However, many EFL learners face serious difficulties in reading comprehension, which negatively affects their overall language performance. This article examines the major reading difficulties encountered by secondary-level EFL learners, such as limited vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, poor reading strategies, and low motivation. It also discusses modern pedagogical approaches and classroom practices that can help learners overcome these challenges and improve reading proficiency.

Keywords

EFL learners, reading difficulties, secondary education, reading comprehension, language learning

Introduction

Reading plays a crucial role in second and foreign language learning, as it supports vocabulary development, grammar awareness, and critical thinking skills. At the secondary level, students are expected to read longer and more complex texts, including academic and subject-related materials. For many EFL learners, this transition creates significant challenges. Reading in a foreign language requires not only linguistic knowledge but also cognitive and strategic skills. Understanding the nature of reading difficulties is therefore essential for teachers to design effective instruction and support learners' academic success.

One of the most common reading difficulties among secondary-level EFL learners is limited vocabulary knowledge. When learners encounter a high number of unfamiliar words, they struggle to understand the overall meaning of the text. This often leads to slow reading, frequent dictionary use, and loss of motivation. Vocabulary gaps prevent learners from making connections between ideas and understanding implicit meanings.

Another major difficulty is insufficient background knowledge. Reading comprehension depends heavily on prior knowledge and familiarity with the topic. EFL learners may fail to understand texts that are culturally or contextually unfamiliar, even if the language level is appropriate. This lack of schemata makes it difficult for learners to predict content, infer meaning, and interpret information accurately.

Poor use of reading strategies is also a significant challenge. Many secondary-level learners rely on word-by-word reading and focus too much on accuracy rather than meaning. They may lack essential strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and summarizing. As a result, reading becomes a stressful and time-consuming activity instead of a purposeful process.

Motivation and attitude toward reading also influence learners' performance. Some EFL learners perceive reading as boring or difficult due to previous negative experiences. When texts are not relevant to learners' interests or real-life needs, engagement decreases. Low confidence and fear of failure further reduce learners' willingness to participate in reading activities.

In addition, limited exposure to English outside the classroom affects reading development. Many learners interact with English only during lessons, which restricts practice opportunities. Without regular reading habits, learners struggle to build fluency and automaticity in reading.

Modern EFL pedagogy emphasizes strategy-based and learner-centered reading instruction. Teachers are encouraged to explicitly teach reading strategies and model how skilled readers approach texts. Pre-reading activities such as discussing topics, predicting content, and activating background knowledge help learners prepare for reading. During-reading and post-reading tasks support comprehension and critical thinking. Reading at the secondary level requires higher-order cognitive skills such as inference, evaluation, and synthesis of information. One of the most persistent difficulties faced by EFL learners is inadequate word recognition skills. Learners often struggle to recognize words automatically, which slows down reading and disrupts comprehension. This difficulty is closely related to insufficient exposure to written English and limited opportunities to practice reading extensively.

Another important challenge is the imbalance between decoding and comprehension. Many EFL learners devote most of their attention to decoding individual words and sentences, leaving little cognitive capacity for understanding the overall message of the text. This bottom-up reading approach prevents learners from using top-down strategies such as predicting meaning and drawing conclusions. Effective reading instruction should therefore promote a balanced approach that integrates both decoding skills and comprehension strategies.

Background knowledge plays a crucial role in reading comprehension, yet many secondary-level EFL learners lack familiarity with the topics and cultural references found in English texts. This gap limits their ability to interpret meaning and evaluate ideas critically. Activating prior knowledge through discussion, visuals, and guiding questions before reading can significantly enhance comprehension and engagement.

Affective factors such as anxiety, low self-confidence, and negative attitudes toward reading also contribute to reading difficulties. Learners who have experienced repeated failure may develop avoidance behaviors and resistance to reading tasks. Teachers can address these emotional barriers by selecting texts that match learners' proficiency levels and interests, as well as by creating a supportive learning environment that encourages effort rather than perfection.

Instructional practices may also influence learners' reading difficulties. In some contexts, reading instruction focuses mainly on testing comprehension rather than teaching how to read. When learners are asked to answer questions without guidance on strategies, improvement remains limited. Explicit instruction in reading strategies, combined with guided practice, helps learners understand the reading process and apply strategies independently.

The integration of technology has introduced new opportunities to support reading development. Digital reading platforms offer interactive features such as glossaries, audio support, and comprehension checks, which assist learners in overcoming linguistic barriers. Technology also enables personalized learning, allowing learners to read at their own pace and according to their interests.

Finally, the role of the teacher extends beyond instruction to modeling effective reading behavior. When teachers demonstrate how to approach texts, think aloud, and reflect on meaning, learners gain insight into the reading process. This modeling supports the development of strategic and confident readers at the secondary level.

The use of authentic and level-appropriate texts increases motivation and relevance. Digital resources, online articles, and interactive reading platforms provide diverse and engaging materials. Extensive reading programs also encourage learners to read regularly for pleasure, which improves vocabulary, fluency, and confidence over time.

Creating a supportive classroom environment is equally important. Teachers should focus on meaning rather than excessive error correction and encourage discussion and collaboration. When learners feel confident and supported, they are more willing to take risks and develop effective reading skills. Reading comprehension at the secondary level requires learners to process complex texts that include abstract ideas, unfamiliar vocabulary, and varied text structures. One of the central difficulties faced by EFL learners is limited lexical knowledge. Without sufficient vocabulary depth and breadth, learners struggle to recognize key words and phrases, which prevents them from constructing overall meaning. This often results in overdependence on dictionaries and translation, interrupting reading fluency and reducing comprehension.

Grammatical complexity also poses a challenge for secondary-level learners. Academic texts often contain long sentences, passive constructions, and complex clauses that are difficult for EFL learners to interpret. When learners focus too much on decoding sentence structure, they lose track of the main ideas of the text. Teaching learners to identify key information rather than analyze every grammatical detail can help reduce this difficulty.

Another significant issue is weak reading fluency. Many EFL learners read slowly and lack automatic word recognition, which limits their ability to process information efficiently. Slow reading speed places a heavy cognitive load on learners, leaving fewer mental resources for comprehension and interpretation. Fluency development through repeated reading and extensive reading activities is therefore essential at the secondary level.

Metacognitive awareness is also limited among many EFL learners. They may not know how to monitor their understanding or recognize when comprehension breaks down. As a result, learners continue reading without meaning. Explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies, such as self-questioning, summarizing, and clarifying misunderstandings, helps learners become more active and independent readers.

Text type and genre present additional challenges. Secondary-level learners are exposed to a wide range of genres, including narratives, expository texts, and argumentative passages. Each genre requires different reading approaches, yet many learners apply the same strategies to all texts. Teaching genre awareness helps learners understand text organization, purpose, and expected language features, leading to improved comprehension.

Assessment-related pressure also affects reading performance. High-stakes exams often emphasize accuracy and speed, increasing anxiety and discouraging risk-taking. Learners may focus on answering questions rather than understanding the text. Formative assessment practices, such as reflective reading tasks and comprehension discussions, provide more meaningful insights into learners' reading development and reduce stress.

Sociocultural factors further influence reading difficulties. Learners may find texts challenging when cultural references, values, or assumptions differ from their own experiences. This cultural gap can limit interpretation and engagement. Teachers can bridge this gap by providing background information and encouraging learners to relate texts to their own contexts.

Finally, limited reading habits outside school remain a major obstacle. Many secondary-level EFL learners view reading as an academic requirement rather than a source of enjoyment. Without regular exposure to English texts, progress remains slow. Encouraging independent reading through choice, digital platforms, and age-appropriate materials fosters positive attitudes and long-term reading development.

Conclusion

Reading difficulties faced by EFL learners at the secondary level stem from linguistic, cognitive, and affective factors. Limited vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, ineffective reading

strategies, and low motivation all contribute to poor reading comprehension. However, these challenges can be addressed through modern, strategy-based instruction and meaningful reading practices. By providing appropriate support, engaging materials, and a positive learning environment, teachers can help secondary-level EFL learners become more confident and successful readers, which in turn enhances their overall language proficiency.

References

1. Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. *Teaching and Researching Reading*. Pearson Education, 2011, pages 29–68.
2. Harmer, J. *How to Teach English*. Longman, 2007, pages 99–124.
3. Nation, I. S. P. *Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing*. Routledge, 2009, pages 21–55.
4. Nunan, D. *Practical English Language Teaching*. McGraw-Hill, 2003, pages 68–91.
5. Urquhart, A. H., & Weir, C. J. *Reading in a Second Language*. Longman, 1998, pages 40–73.
6. Richards, J. C. *Curriculum Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, pages 117–138.