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THE IMPACT OF READING COMPREHENSION CHALLENGES ON VOCABULARY ACQUISITION IN TESL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of reading comprehension challenges on vocabulary acquisition among TESL students at a selected tertiary institution. Reading is a fundamental skill influencing other language abilities, such as writing, speaking, and listening. However, TESL students at this institution encounter significant difficulties in reading comprehension, which hinders their ability to acquire new vocabulary effectively. The research aims to identify these students' most problematic reading skills and analyze how these challenges affect their vocabulary development. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed, with data collected via a questionnaire distributed to TESL students using Google Forms. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel 2019 to uncover patterns and trends. Preliminary findings suggest that students struggle with key skills such as decoding, inferencing, and the application of metacognitive strategies during reading tasks. These challenges are expected to have a detrimental effect on their vocabulary growth. The study's findings aim to contribute to TESL education by informing curriculum design and teacher training programs. By addressing these reading comprehension difficulties, educators can support improved language proficiency and academic outcomes for TESL students. |

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Reading comprehension,
Vocabulary acquisition,
Reading skills,
Descriptive quantitative,
Metacognitive strategies |

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill closely linked to other essential skills such as writing, speaking, and listening. For students to learn effectively, it is crucial that they engage in extensive reading and fully comprehend the material. As Grabe and Stoller (2019) suggest, reading instruction can be understood as a process of extracting and analyzing information from texts, indicating that students acquire knowledge and information through reading as an integral part of their education. A student who enjoys and frequently engages in reading tends to develop the skills necessary to write well (Eslit, 2023), as reading helps expand vocabulary and improve writing abilities. Conversely, students with poor reading skills often struggle

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in the learning process and may experience self-consciousness when adapting to their educational environment. Furthermore, competent teachers must have a strong command of grammar and vocabulary, and a key goal of reading instruction is to build students' comprehension of content in texts, enabling them to read various types of English texts, adapt reading strategies to different tasks (e.g., skimming, scanning), and think critically about the content (Grabe & Stoller, 2019).

Recent research has highlighted the prevalence and impact of reading comprehension challenges among TESL students. For example, Zhang and Elder (2022) explored the effects of extensive reading on vocabulary acquisition in ESL learners, illustrating the interconnectedness of reading and language skills development. Similarly, Akbari (2021) examined the impact of vocabulary teaching strategies on TESL learners' vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension, emphasizing the importance of targeted instructional approaches in addressing language learning challenges. Additionally, studies have underscored the multifaceted nature of reading comprehension and its implications for language learning outcomes. Wang and Geva (2023) conducted a longitudinal study examining the reciprocal relationships between reading comprehension and vocabulary development in English language learners, highlighting the dynamic interplay between these skills over time.

In the context of TESL education at a selected tertiary institution, it is essential to understand the specific challenges that students face in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition to design effective instructional interventions and support services. This study aims to build upon previous research findings by examining existing literature within a specified timeframe, contributing to a deeper understanding of how reading comprehension challenges impact language learning outcomes among TESL students at this institution. The pervasive challenges in reading comprehension among these students significantly hinder their vocabulary acquisition, presenting a critical research problem: identifying which specific aspects of reading comprehension are most problematic and understanding how these difficulties translate into deficiencies in vocabulary acquisition. Investigating this relationship is crucial for developing targeted pedagogical strategies and interventions. By identifying the root causes and extent of the impact, educators can tailor their teaching approaches to address these deficiencies, ultimately enhancing the overall language proficiency of TESL students at the selected institution. This research seeks to bridge the gap between reading comprehension skills and productive language abilities, providing a comprehensive framework for improving TESL education outcomes.

While this study has the potential to make significant contributions, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research focuses exclusively on TESL students at this selected tertiary institution, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other settings or institutions, as the specific demographic and educational environment at this institution could influence the results (Ellis, 2021). Additionally, the study relies on self-reported data and assessments of reading comprehension and vocabulary, which can introduce potential biases and inaccuracies. The cross-sectional design of the study, while useful for identifying correlations, does not allow for the examination of long-term effects or changes over time, and therefore cannot definitively establish causation between reading comprehension difficulties and weaknesses in vocabulary acquisition (Palfreyman & Gieve, 2020). Finally, external factors such as socio-economic background, prior educational experiences, and individual differences in learning styles are not thoroughly controlled, which could affect the outcomes. Despite these limitations, the study serves as a valuable starting point for understanding and addressing the challenges TESL students face in developing essential language skills (Richards, 2019). |

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Reading Comprehension

Pang et al. (2003) emphasized that reading entails more than just decoding written texts; it involves both perceiving the words and engaging in cognitive processes to comprehend the meaning conveyed. It is an interactive exchange between the reader and the text, where the reader utilizes their knowledge, skills, and strategies to extract meaning from the letters, words, sentences, and paragraphs presented. Mastering the skill of reading is crucial, as it enables students to grasp the information conveyed by the writer effectively. Grabe and Stoller (2002) asserted that reading comprehension involves not only understanding the information presented in a text but also interpreting it effectively. They emphasized that reading without comprehension is devoid of meaning and serves no purpose.

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The concepts of reading and comprehension are interconnected and inseparable; understanding is synonymous with comprehending. Therefore, reading comprehension lies at the heart of the reading process, guiding readers to derive meaning from the text they encounter.

2.2 Reading Comprehension Strategies

Students must practice reading frequently and employ a range of techniques to enhance their reading abilities. The effectiveness of these techniques directly influences how well a learner comprehends the material, demonstrating that strategic reading plays a crucial role in understanding text. Nuttal (1982) categorized reading techniques into four main types: skimming, scanning, extensive reading, and intensive reading.

Skimming, as defined by Grellet (1999), involves reading a text quickly to grasp its main themes. This technique helps students build confidence and recognize that they can understand the gist of a document without reading it in full. By skimming, readers can identify the core idea of a piece before engaging in a more detailed reading, which can be done by quickly scanning the header, title, images, or the first and last few lines (Islam and Steenburgh, 2009).

Scanning, on the other hand, is a technique where one quickly reads through a text to find specific information (Grellet, 1981). This method allows students to locate key details, such as dates, numbers, or names, without needing to read the entire text. For example, a student might scan a phone book to find a specific number, efficiently bypassing irrelevant information.

Extensive reading, as described by Long and Richards (1987), involves reading a large amount of engaging material with a focus on understanding the overall meaning, even if some words are unfamiliar. Brown (2001) further elaborates that extensive reading is done to gain a broad understanding of a text, which in turn increases readers' satisfaction and confidence.

Lastly, intensive reading involves a more detailed examination of the text. According to Macleod (2011), this includes identifying words that signal a change in topic, comparing main ideas with details, drawing inferences, and analyzing how the sequence of information impacts the overall message. These in-depth reading exercises are essential for a thorough understanding of the text.

2.3 Reading Comprehension Aspects

Nuttal (1982) identified five key components of reading comprehension that students must master to understand a text effectively: recognizing the main idea, locating references, drawing conclusions, paying attention to details, and understanding vocabulary. These components often present challenges for students striving to comprehend texts.

Determining the main idea is crucial, as understanding a paragraph or short selection relies heavily on identifying its central theme. According to Longan (2022), the main idea is typically found in the first sentence of a paragraph but may also appear in the second or third sentence (Vener, 2022). This variability can make it difficult for students to pinpoint the main idea, especially when the central theme is not immediately clear.

Locating references involves understanding the antecedents of pronouns—terms or phrases that pronouns refer to. Sharpe (2015) explains that students must be able to identify these references within sentences to grasp the meaning behind pronouns that represent people, places, or things.

Understanding vocabulary is another critical component. While reading, students can expand their vocabulary by looking up new terms in a dictionary and deducing meanings from context. Sharpe (2015) suggests that context can help students generate broad meanings for words, enabling them to understand a paragraph without needing to consult a dictionary for every unfamiliar term. However, a lack of vocabulary knowledge can impede comprehension.

Making inferences requires students to combine textual cues with prior knowledge to draw conclusions. Kopitski (2017) notes that this skill allows students to develop hypotheses and make inferences from the information presented in the text,

even when the meaning is not explicitly stated. This process is essential for answering questions that ask students to deduce or conclude based on the text.

Finally, paying attention to detail is crucial for answering questions commonly found in reading assessments. These questions test students' ability to understand directly quoted content. For example, students may be asked who was involved in a specific event or to identify correct or incorrect details from the text. The scanning method can be particularly useful here, allowing students to locate specific information quickly by highlighting or underlining key words in the question and then finding synonyms for them in the text.

2.4 Reading Comprehension Challenges

A difficult task, such as mastering reading comprehension, often involves complexity, which is evident when students make mistakes or errors in learning (To & Asma Albishari, 2023). Many students frequently struggle with reading comprehension, leading to poor performance on reading tests. These challenges can be attributed to a variety of internal and external factors (Callula Killingly et al., 2024). Internal influences include physical, intellectual, and psychological elements, while external factors encompass the home and school environment. During reading, students often become aware of several internal factors that affect their comprehension, such as difficulties in understanding complex sentences, a lack of prior knowledge, struggles with employing reading strategies, and trouble concentrating (Fajar, 2019).

One common issue is that many students struggle to comprehend lengthy sentences with intricate grammar. Barfield (1999) found that about 20% of academic texts and 12% of graded stories contain long sentences that are challenging for students, which prevents them from grasping the main idea of the text. Additionally, students who lack strong reading strategies often find it difficult to understand what they are reading. Duarte (2005) notes that without strategies like skimming and scanning, students may become disheartened by their inability to score well on reading comprehension tests. These students often focus too much on visual cues during their initial word-by-word reading, which slows down their reading speed and hinders comprehension. They may also miss the text's central theme due to an overemphasis on details (Mei-yu, 1998; Fajar, 2009).

Another significant factor contributing to reading comprehension issues is difficulty concentrating. Mental health problems can impede students' ability to pay attention, which is crucial for understanding the material. Shaw (1959) emphasized that careful reading is essential for comprehension, yet many students struggle to maintain focus, making it difficult or impossible for them to understand what they read. This lack of concentration can exacerbate poor performance in literacy examinations and further hinder students' reading abilities.

This paragraph weaves together the key points, emphasizing how these components contribute to overall reading comprehension.

2.5 Vocabulary Acquisition

Vocabulary acquisition is a crucial part of language learning, involving the process of learning and integrating new words and phrases into one's vocabulary. Extensive reading provides varied contexts for encountering new words, enhancing the ability to infer meanings and retain vocabulary, supported by the Input Hypothesis, which states that language is best acquired through slightly challenging input (Krashen, 1985).

This complex process includes initial exposure, understanding, retention, and application of new terms. It involves both receptive knowledge (recognizing and understanding words in listening and reading) and productive knowledge (using words accurately in speaking and writing) (Nation, 2019). The acquisition of vocabulary is closely intertwined with reading comprehension.

When students struggle to understand texts, they are less likely to come across and learn new words (Nation, 2020). The incidental learning hypothesis suggests that much of vocabulary learning happens naturally through extensive reading (Hulstijn, 2021). Vocabulary acquisition is also linked to overall language proficiency, enabling better comprehension, expression, and

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critical thinking (Ng & Muhammad Naim Rosli, 2023). Understanding these factors can help educators develop effective strategies to improve vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency. |

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Research designs outline how studies are conducted, using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods to guide research tasks (Creswell, 2020). The study connects conceptual research challenges with relevant empirical data (Boru, 2018). The design sets the procedures for collecting and analyzing data to address the research question (Grey, 2014).

This study uses a descriptive quantitative approach, focusing on numerical data to identify reading comprehension challenges among TESL students at a selected tertiary institution (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2019). Data was collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 100 TESL students using Google Forms. The questionnaire included a four-point Likert scale to measure students' opinions and attitudes, validated through a pilot test with 15 students, showing high reliability with Cronbach's Alpha scores of 0.80 and 0.85.

The sample consists of 100 TESL students from this institution. A simple random sample was used to select respondents, ensuring each student had an equal chance of being chosen (Hayes, 2021). This method provides a fair representation of the group.

Pilot testing was conducted with 15 students to ensure the questionnaire's validity and reliability. Data collected was analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2019, with results presented in tables and charts for clarity. Proper data analysis is essential to maintaining research integrity (Shepard, 2022). |

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Specific Reading Comprehension Challenges

Table 1. Reading comprehension challenges

Item (s)	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Mean (x)
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
I find it difficult to understand the main ideas in English texts.	5	5	25	25	58	58	12	12	2.77
I struggle to understand the complex sentences in English.	8	8	24	24	51	51	17	17	2.77
I often need to reread passages multiple times to understand them.	2	2	9	9	63	63	26	26	3.15
Certain topics makes reading comprehension difficult. (e.g politics, science and etc.)	2	2	13	13	61	61	24	24	3.07
I find it is challenging to infer meanings from the context.	5	5	14	14	62	62	19	19	2.95
I find it is difficult to comprehend the meaning of a lengthy paragraph when I read a text.	4	4	35	35	53	53	8	8	2.65
I did not know how to skim the text.	13	13	40	40	42	42	5	5	2.50
I was unable to scan the text for/to find certain details.	11	11	37	37	41	41	15	15	2.56

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According to Table 1, the highest mean score is observed in Question 3, with a value of 3.15. This question states, “I often need to reread passages multiple times to understand them.” The majority of respondents agreed that the main challenge in reading comprehension lies in the need to reread passages multiple times for clarity. Conversely, the lowest mean score is found in Question 7, “I did not know how to skim the text,” which has a mean of 2.50. This indicates that TESL students generally disagreed with the statement.

4.2 The Influence of Reading Comprehension Challenges on Vocabulary Acquisition Among TESL Students

Table 2. The impact of reading comprehension difficulties on vocabulary acquisition

Item (s)	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree		Mean (x)
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
	I regularly encounter new vocabulary in my reading materials.	2	2	7	7	64	64	27	
I find it easy to understand new vocabulary words that I encounter in texts.	1	1	13	13	65	65	21	21	3.06
I use context clues to guess the meanings of new words.	1	1	7	7	69	69	23	23	3.14
I have a problem to learn/understand new words.	11	11	37	37	41	41	15	15	2.56
I actively use new vocabulary words I learn in my writing.	1	1	14	14	60	60	25	25	3.09
Reading English texts has significantly expanded my vocabulary.	1	1	5	5	56	56	38	38	3.31

Based on Table 2, the statement "Reading English texts has significantly expanded my vocabulary" received the highest mean score of 3.31. This indicates that TESL students largely agree that reading English texts plays a critical role in enhancing their vocabulary. Conversely, the statement "I have a problem learning/understanding new words" had the lowest mean score of 2.56, suggesting that while some students face challenges in understanding new vocabulary, it is not perceived as a major issue.

TESL students at a selected tertiary institution face notable reading comprehension challenges. The most significant difficulty, reflected by the highest mean score of 3.15 for the statement "I often need to reread passages multiple times to understand them," reveals that many students struggle to fully grasp content on their initial read. This aligns with Gallagher's (2023) observation that difficulties in text comprehension are widespread among students, often stemming from unfamiliar vocabulary, complex sentence structures, and cultural references. These barriers necessitate rereading to integrate and process the information effectively (Usman Shah Toti & Samsiah Abdul Hamid, 2022). Such challenges are common among language learners, as noted by Suryani et al. (2023), and can be mitigated through targeted strategies, such as explicit instruction in reading techniques, vocabulary development, and scaffolded practice.

In contrast, the lowest mean score of 2.50 for the statement "I did not know how to skim the text" suggests that students feel relatively confident in their skimming abilities. However, while skimming is useful for locating specific information, it does not necessarily foster deeper comprehension or the ability to infer meaning and connect ideas (Field, 2021). To address broader comprehension challenges, strategies like summarizing, predicting, and questioning should be incorporated into learning. Summarizing helps students distill and retain key ideas (Hudson, 2021), predicting activates prior knowledge

and encourages active reading, and questioning promotes critical thinking and engagement (Pressley & Afflerbach, 2022). Together, these techniques can enhance comprehension beyond surface-level reading.

Despite these challenges, the study highlights the significant role of reading English texts in vocabulary acquisition. The highest mean score of 3.31 for the statement "Reading English texts has significantly expanded my vocabulary" underscores the importance of reading in building vocabulary. This finding aligns with Laufer's (2019) research, which emphasizes that reading is one of the most effective methods for vocabulary learning. It allows students to encounter words in varied contexts, facilitating repeated exposure and inference of meaning. Incidental vocabulary learning, which occurs naturally through engaging with challenging texts, is particularly effective because it mirrors first-language acquisition through context rather than rote memorization (Pavani Meganathan et al., 2019). Reading also provides the nuances and usage of words, which are difficult to grasp through memorization alone (Stahl & Nagy, 2020).

However, the lower mean score of 2.56 for the statement "I have problems learning/understanding new words" suggests that TESL students do not perceive significant difficulties in vocabulary acquisition. This contrasts with Nagy and Townsend's (2022) findings, which highlight that comprehension challenges can impede vocabulary learning. When students struggle to understand the overall context of a text, their ability to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words diminishes. This underscores the interdependent relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, as a strong vocabulary enhances comprehension, and effective comprehension facilitates further vocabulary acquisition (Webb et al., 2023). The disparity between this study's findings and prior research could be attributed to the specific context of the selected tertiary institution, which may not generalize to other settings.

5.0 CONCLUSION

TESL students at a selected tertiary institution face notable challenges in reading comprehension, which also impact their vocabulary acquisition and overall academic performance. While these challenges highlight areas for improvement, they also present opportunities for targeted instructional interventions. Addressing the need for repeated readings and enhancing comprehension skills through explicit strategies, vocabulary development, and scaffolded practice can significantly improve students' reading proficiency. By implementing comprehensive reading strategies, educators can equip students to navigate complex texts more effectively, resulting in better academic outcomes and greater confidence in their English language abilities.

The findings underscore the critical role of vocabulary in reading comprehension. Limited vocabulary hinders students' ability to infer meanings, grasp multiple word definitions, and critically engage with texts, as highlighted by Zhang & Anual (2019). This is especially problematic in content-heavy subjects like science and social studies, where specific terminology is essential. Gallagher (2023) emphasizes that insufficient vocabulary slows reading pace and disrupts understanding, while Baumann et al. (2022) confirm a strong correlation between vocabulary knowledge and academic achievement.

To mitigate these issues, educators should focus on vocabulary education and employ pedagogical strategies that enhance both vocabulary and comprehension skills. Future research should expand its scope by including participants from diverse universities and geographical regions to provide more comprehensive insights. This broader approach will help uncover regional differences in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition challenges among TESL students, contributing to more generalizable and actionable findings.

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