

## Reading Comprehension Difficulties Faced by Sudanese School Learners: A Case Study

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### ABSTRACT

The study intends to investigate the reading problems encountered by Sudanese EFL secondary school learners in reading texts and comprehension. The researchers prepared a questionnaire for EFL teachers and a test for EFL students as tools for data collection. The sample includes 20 teachers and 20 students randomly selected from El Hasahisa secondary schools in Gezira State, Sudan. The researchers used an analytical-descriptive method to collect data, which were further calculated and analyzed with SPSS Program. The findings indicate that Sudanese secondary school students face problems in reading and answering reading comprehension questions. Students' lack of vocabulary, motivation, students' inadequate understanding of the relationship and functions of words within sentences, idioms and figurative meanings, insufficient study material, lack of teacher's training, traditional teaching methods contribute to the main barriers of reading and comprehending texts. The paper concludes with some concrete and constructive suggestions that would indubitably lessen these problems to get the desired performance.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a complicated and interactive process comprising of psychological, linguistic, and sociological facets. Learning EFL today has become a need of the hour and improving English proficiency gains a significant position in this language acquisition (Sharma, 2018:56). The reader in this process constructs the meaning of the texts and relates to his personal experience. This activity involves greater levels of attentiveness and adds to the conversational skills of the reader. Today, in this era of development globally, it is considered an essential skill required for success. However, efficient reading is an intricate and painstaking skill to master due to its complex process. In reading, readers do not only rely on the features of the text they are facing but it also involves the features of readers and tasks (Ebrahimi, 2012). This leads to tailor reading instruction to help students get through the reading process effectively. Effective reading means a better understanding of the text, and what the writer tries to present in his writing. This requires readers to have prior knowledge, personal experience and competence to correlate with the text while reading. Razali and Razali (2013) stated

that some readers use their background of knowledge and experience to compose meaning from the text in the reading process, and then the readers will connect the ideas in the text to what they already know in order to get the comprehension of the text. Even most people can comprehend the material what they read after reading word-by-word and they are spending a lot of time repeating the difficult term of the text.

The research will ensue through the research objectives, varied reading problems, research methods of data collection and analysis, discussion and finally conclusion bringing up some suggestions to improve the vital communication skill.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It is believed that there are good reasons for using the extensive reading procedure much more than it is being used today. One could argue that students "learn to read by reading" (Smith, 1985: 88) and that "comprehension will take care of itself" (Pearson, cited in Cooper, 1987: 77). In other words, students with a certain level of ability in English can learn to read by extensive reading alone. Experiments have shown (if not conclusively) that reading ability can

improve as much with extensive reading as with skills training (Robb & Susser, 1989). At present, we cannot claim that extensive reading is sufficient for most EFL students to learn to read English. Most likely, skills and strategies training are also necessary. However, we also observe that the existing reading instruction focusing on teaching (skills and strategies) training isn't at par. As Jolley (1985) believed that, because students do not spontaneously apply the skills presented in skill lessons, instruction and activities to encourage the development and automatic use of comprehension skills must be incorporated into daily instruction. The general reading procedure comprises just this kind of activity. Further, the students don't get the opportunity to use English outside of class. The wide exposure to a bit longer tasks of reading simple and easy passages and books will indubitably boost exposure to the target language, perhaps better than translation or skills assignments, which may involve cognitive skills in the native language. Moreover, extensive and wide reading paves the way to tremendous resources of building plans and strategies. Through this route, the teachers may anticipate students develop their reading skills and good performance ahead.

It is noteworthy to mention that a motivated, keen and aspiring student develops his reading that side-by-side also develops his writing skills. Over time, students improve their vocabulary, reading propensity and writing skill. Conversely, a student with low reading ability will encounter many problems in learning process. Moreover, the students will feel ashamed in adapting themselves to their school environment. On the contrary, the onus lies on teachers to equip with more skills in teaching grammar and vocabulary that facilitate easy, fast and sound learning. Teaching reading should pursue a sole idea to enhance students' ability and knowledge of the material of the reading text. Such as: the ability to read various texts in English, the ability to adjust reading styles according to the purpose of reading (i.e. skimming, scanning), and the ability to have a critical perspective on the content of the texts (Alyousef, 2005).

### **3. PROBLEMS OF EFL STUDENTS IN READING SKILLS**

Many students consider *how to learn to read* is one of the most wearisome and tedious activities they ever visage. This phenomenon, all too often, substantially becomes constriction that not only demotivates but also scares them away from reading. The barriers they face constantly overshadow their desire to read, without proper guidance, they never overcome them. (Smith, 1994:26) In fact, the presence of reading difficulty cases in secondary schools in Sudan

constitutes a serious problem in academic development. Sanford (2015) considers that one of the most important factors that impede students' reading comprehension is phonemic awareness, the ability to process the individual sounds of letters, which is needed for word recognition. Poor working memory, lack of vocabulary knowledge low prior knowledge, lack of breadth in vocabulary and motivation are other factors that may influence students' reading process. Sharma (2018) observes that there are differences in pronouncing vowels and consonants in English and few sounds don't exist in the Arabic language. Schroeder (2005) suggests that reading difficulties nearly occur on a continuum, which includes students experiencing reading difficulties, students with a learning difficulty, numerous students who just need good reading assistance and students who make effort and struggle with reading. It doesn't conclude all who cannot read well are disabled readers but some are. Conversely, some of the students who are seemingly progressing fairly well are in reality reading difficulty cases (Al-Khuli, 2000).

Reading difficulty comprises of features such as: difficulties in single word reading, initial difficulties decoding or sounding out words, difficulties reading sight words, insufficient phonological processing; the understanding that sentences are comprised of words, words are made up of syllables and syllables are made up of individual sounds or phonemes, expressive or receptive language difficulties and difficulties with comprehension. The processing difficulties may also be revealed in spelling and writing. Lundberg and Høien (2001) assert that the reading difficulties are not the result of generalized developmental delay or sensory impairment, therefore, a student with a reading difficulty shows difficulties in reading skills that are unexpected in relation to cognitive ability, intervention, quantity and quality of instruction, and age. Besides, difficulties with reading, decoding, comprehension, retention are a few that contribute to reading problems.

The objectives, research questions, material, methods, data collection, analysis, discussion and conclusion are explained in the succeeding paragraphs.

### **4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The study intends to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate difficulties that EFL secondary school learners face in reading and comprehension
2. To suggest possible teaching techniques that improves students' reading comprehension.

### **5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the difficulties that EFL secondary school learners face in reading and comprehension?
2. To what extent can extensive reading improve students reading comprehension?

**6. MATERIAL AND METHOD**

The participants of this study were EFL secondary school students and teachers at El Hasahisa Locality, Gezira State, Sudan. A questionnaire for (20) EFL teachers and a written test were prepared for 20 EFL students for data collection. The test includes five

areas of assessment: reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. The students are asked to answer the comprehension questions and fill gaps with a suitable vocabulary and grammar that fit the meaning of the English language context. They are also asked to write with correct spelling and punctuation in the test. The data collection, analysis and results using statistical analysis are discussed herewith.

**6. DATA ANALYSIS**

**The analysis of the Teachers' Questionnaire:**

**Statement 1 Some reading materials are difficult to understand because of many idioms and figurative meanings.**

**SM1**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	Neutral	8	40.0	40.0	40.0
	Agree	12	60.0	60.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

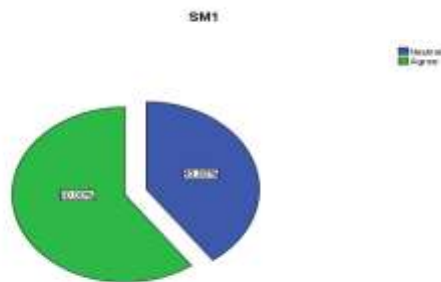


Table & diagram (1) Difficulty of many idioms and figurative meanings

According to the statistical analysis of table (1), most respondents (60%) agree and (40%) neutral that, some reading materials are difficult to understand because of many idioms and figurative meanings. The result

concur with Sharma (2018:43) that the curriculum must contain unambiguous and unequivocal goals and objectives.

**Statement 2 Some reading passages are difficult because of many new words.**

**SM2**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid	Disagree	13	65.0	65.0	65.0
	Neutral	3	15.0	15.0	80.0
	Agree	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

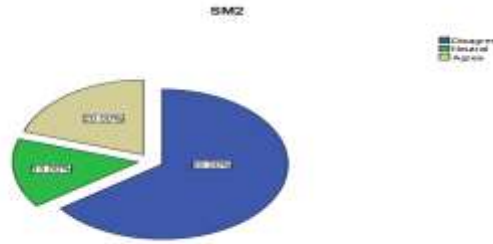


Table & diagram (2) Some reading passages are difficult because of many new words.

Table (2) shows that most respondents (65%) disagree, (15%) neutral and (20%) agree that, some reading passages are difficult because there are many new words.

**Statement 3 Students find it difficult to comprehend the sentences that have complex structures.**

**SM3**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid Disagree	1	5.0	5.0	5.0
Neutral	5	25.0	25.0	30.0
Agree	14	70.0	70.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	



Table & diagram (3) Students find it difficulty in the sentences that have complex structure

Table and diagram (3) show that most respondents agree that, students find it difficult to comprehend the sentences that have complex structures. The results show (70%) sample agree, (25%) neutral and (5%) disagree with the statement.

**Statement 4 Many reading materials are difficult because they don't have enough background knowledge.**

**SM4**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid Disagree	5	25.0	25.0	25.0
Neutral	7	35.0	35.0	60.0
Agree	8	40.0	40.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	



Table & diagram (4) Students find it difficult in the sentences that have complex structures

According to the statistical analysis of table (4), most respondents (40%) agree, (35%) neutral and (25%) disagree that many reading materials are difficult

because they don't have enough background knowledge.

**Statement 5 Students find difficulties in understanding the words with different syntactical functions and varieties of 'inflectional endings**

**SM5**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid Neutral	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
Agree	17	85.0	85.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

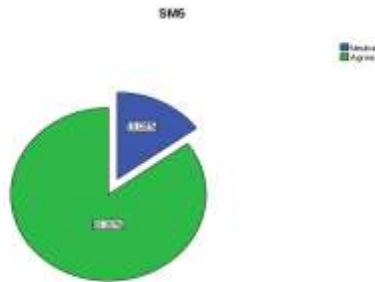


Table & diagram (5) Words with different syntactical function

Table (5) shows that most respondents (85%) agree and (15%) neutral that students find difficulties in

understanding the words with different syntactical functions and varieties of 'inflectional endings

**Statement 6 Students have difficulty understanding the materials because of poor strategy use**

**SM6**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid Disagree	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
Neutral	4	20.0	20.0	35.0
Agree	13	65.0	65.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

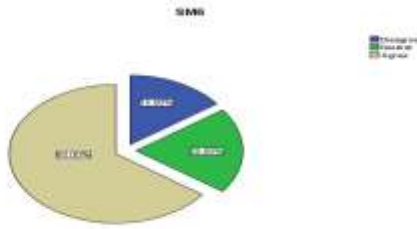


Table (6) Students' difficulty in understanding the materials because of poor strategy

According to the statistical analysis of the statement most respondents (65 %) agree, (20%) neutral and (15%) disagree that students have difficulty

understanding the materials because of poor strategy use.

**Statement 7 The reading passage may be difficult when the author's and students' cultures are different**

SM7

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Disagree	2	10.0	10.0	10.0
Neutral	3	15.0	15.0	25.0
Agree	15	75.0	75.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

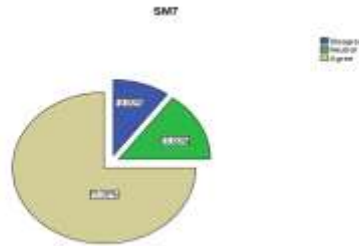


Table & Diag. (7) Reading passage may be difficult when the author's and students' cultures are different

The statistical analysis in the table (7) shows that, most respondents (75%) agree, (15%) neutral and (10%)

disagree that the reading passage may be difficult when the author's and students' cultures are different.

**Statement 8 Students often get frustrated when reading English texts**

SM8

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative %
Valid Disagree	11	55.0	55.0	55.0
Neutral	5	25.0	25.0	80.0
Agree	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

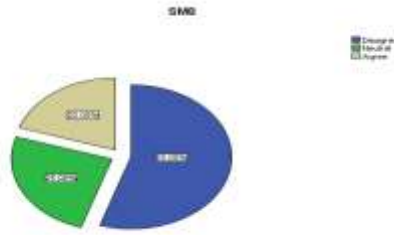


Table (8) Students often get frustrated when reading English texts

Table (8) shows that most respondents (20 %) agree and (25%) neutral and (55%) disagree that, students often get frustrated when reading English texts.

**Statement 9 Reading passages are difficult because they cannot predict what would come next**

**SM9**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Neutral	3	15.0	15.0	15.0
Agree	17	85.0	85.0	100.0
Total	20	100.0	100.0	

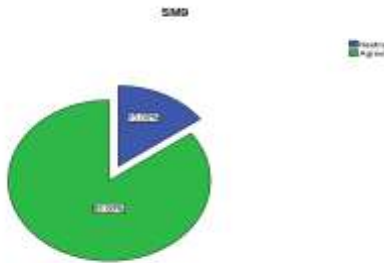


Table & Diag. (9) Reading passages cannot predict what would come next

Table (9) shows that reading passages are difficult because they cannot predict what would come next, (85%) of respondents disagree and (15%) neutral with the statement.

**Statement 10 Teachers' training impacts on students' ability in reading**

**SM10**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Agree	20	100.0	100.0	100.0

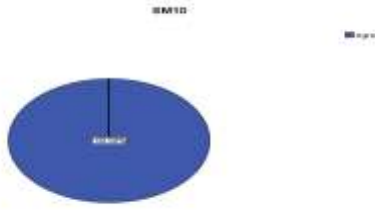


Table (10) Teachers' training impacts on students' ability in reading

Diagram and table (10) show that the whole of respondents (100%) agree that, teachers' training impacts on students' ability in reading.

**The Analysis of the Test: Comprehension Skills: Short answers**

Options	Frequency	Percent
Write correct answers	9	45.0
To some extent	2	10.0
Do not able to write correct answers	9	45.0
Total	20	100.0

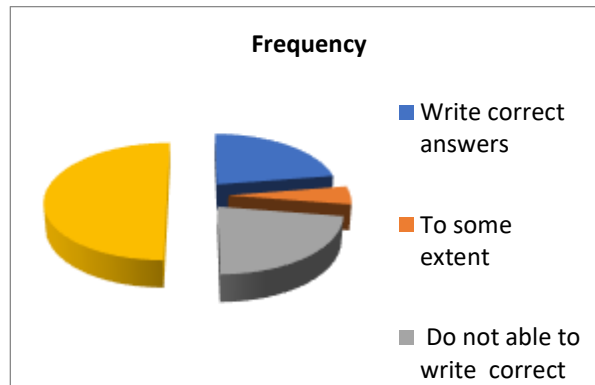


Table and Figure (11) learners' answers to reading comprehension

According to the statistical analysis of table (11), only (45%) of the sample comprehend the text successfully and wrote the correct answer to the comprehension questions. However, (10%) of the sample to some extent comprehend the text as they have some

problems related to the lake of awareness about reading comprehension. However, (45%) of the sample was not able to write correct answers. It seems that those students who encountered many problems in reading comprehension.

**Writing the correct Vocabulary:**

Options	Frequency	Percent
Write with correct vocabulary	10	50.0
To some extent	4	20.0
Write incorrect vocabulary	6	30.0
Total	20	100.0



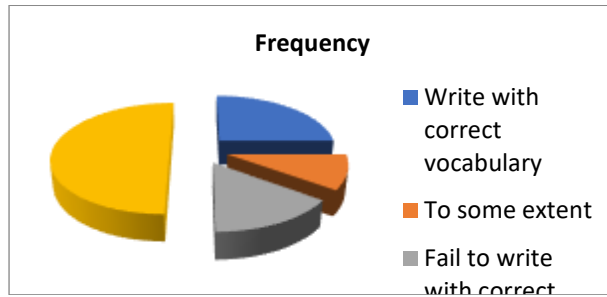


Table and figure (12) EFL learners' writing vocabulary

According to the statistical analysis of table (12), half of the sample writes with correct English vocabulary items in the test. However, (20%) of the students have

a few vocabulary items to use in the test and (30%) of the sample failed to write with correct vocabulary.

### Using Correct Grammar in the English Language

Options	Frequency	Percent
Using correct grammar	12	60.0
To some extent	3	15.0
Fail to use correct grammar	5	25.0
Total	20	100.0

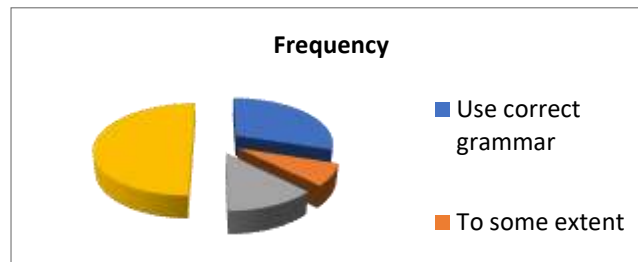


Table and figure (13) Using correct grammar in the answers

According to the statistical analysis of table (3), over half of the sample (60%) writes with correct grammar in the written test. Besides, (15%) of the respondents

to some extent write the grammar in the test and (25%) of the students use incorrect grammar in the test.

### Punctuation

Options	Frequency	Percent
Write with correct punctuation	8	40
To some extent	6	30
Fail to write with correct punctuation	6	30
Total	20	100

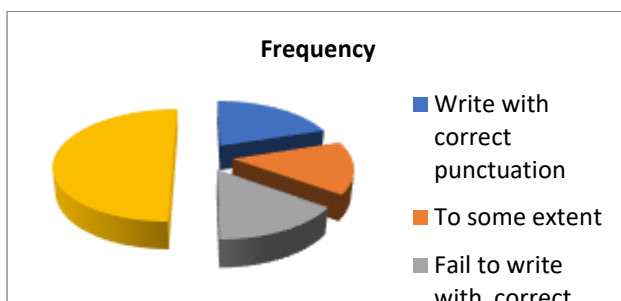


Table and diagram (14) EFL learners' punctuation

According to the statistical analysis of table (14), only (40%) of the sample write the answers with correct punctuation, (30 %) of the sample to some extent write punctuation and (30 %) of the sample failed in writing with correct punctuation in the test.

### 8. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A questionnaire for the teachers of secondary schools and a test for the students were used for data collection. The data analysis shows that many students find difficulties in reading comprehension. The findings of the study indicate that Sudanese secondary school students face problems in reading and answering reading comprehension questions. Lack of motivation, vocabulary, interest and anxiety also deter students reading comprehension. Many students still depend on the dictionary when they find new words or difficult words in the text. It makes them unable to understand the meaning of the words contextually and the text thoroughly. Students' inadequate understanding of the relationship and functions of words within sentences often cause reading problems. Therefore, many idioms and figurative meanings in text deter them to comprehend the text.

In the analyses of the test, table (11) shows that only (45%) of the sample comprehend the text successfully and wrote the correct answer of the comprehension questions. The statistical analysis of table (12) also shows that only half of the sample writes with correct English vocabulary items in the test. However, in the table (13) (60%) of the sample write with correct grammar in written test and finally, table (14) affirms only (40%) of the sample write the answers with correct punctuation.

### 9. CONCLUSION

This study aims at exploring the causes of EFL students' difficulties in reading skills and comprehension. The results from the data analysis point to the dependency of students on dictionary to find the meanings of new words or difficult words in the text, anxiety to understand the meaning of the words contextually, difficulties in reading related to syntactic analysis and semantic analysis, inadequate understanding of the relationship and functions of

words within sentences, poor language knowledge and use of idioms and figurative meanings in text are some of the major problems the students encounter in reading skill. It makes imperative for the teachers to plan and create activities connecting students' interest and curriculum to arouse students' involvement, fun, and keenness to pursue extensive reading. The teachers ought to conjointly devise, evolve and adopt new teaching methods and approaches to facilitate, help and guide students to develop reading skills that lead to better comprehend the given texts. Organizing training programs for teachers, enrich-activity-based curriculum, establishing language laboratory, using authentic educational websites, availability of state-of-the-art academic resources are a few that may facilitate teachers and students to smoothen the teaching-learning process. Furthermore, most students are addicted to social media (SM) and the teacher can make the most effective use of it to plan-arrange various activities at par with learning objectives and the studies proved worth helping the students in the language learning process. Sharma (2019) mentioned that the students' interaction on SM enables them to produce the target language; listening, reading and then write comments, and ask questions, which in turn develops a learner-centered approach, augments motivation and creates a well-controlled active learning environment. This research doesn't confine its scope to students' reading difficulties though opens new boulevards for researchers to explore more in other realms of language learning and acquisition in the future.

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