

Reading Comprehension Challenges of English-Major Students: A Study of Afghan Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Reading comprehension is a vital skill for academic achievement, particularly for EFL students. Insufficient reading comprehension presents a considerable obstacle for Afghan students pursuing English Literature at Kandahar University. This research endeavours to identify the primary challenges faced by Afghan learners in their reading comprehension.

Method – A quantitative research approach was used, involving a 13-item questionnaire given to 103 undergraduate students out of a total of 140 from the Department of English at Kandahar University. The data collected were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations with SPSS 27.

Results – The results indicate that students frequently encounter difficulties due to limited vocabulary, word recognition issues, and reading strategies such as identifying main ideas, comprehending meaningful content, distinguishing primary ideas from supporting details, and summarizing texts. Additionally, affective factors, including reading anxiety, stress, and low self-confidence, are identified as significant challenges. These elements collectively and variably impact students' reading comprehension.

Findings – The findings emphasize that prioritizing vocabulary development, delivering explicit instruction in reading strategies, and establishing a supportive classroom environment are fundamental for aiding students in overcoming challenges, addressing affective factors, and enhancing reading comprehension skills. Reading should be regarded not merely as a skill to be acquired, but as a fundamental component of meaningful learning and academic success.

Originality / Novelty – This research offers one of the few empirical insights into the specific reading comprehension challenges faced by Afghan English major students at Kandahar University and provides important implications for curriculum development and teaching improvements in similar EFL settings.

Keywords: *Reading comprehension, Vocabulary, Anxiety, Skills, Challenges.*

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1. Introduction

Reading comprehension, which is a major concern, has various definitions. Reading comprehension results from complex interactions between the text, the reader, the reader's background knowledge, the reader's L1 and L2, the setting, reading strategies, and how the reader makes decisions based on their understanding and abilities (Yukselir, 2014). It is a thinking process that requires the reader to make inferences from written text, because without engaging in this thinking process, the reader cannot fully understand the text (Fitriani, 2015). Reading comprehension means having the ability to derive meaning from what is read (Birch, 2002).

Reading is one of the most important skills that helps students gain more knowledge about issues they need to understand in their work, personal life, and education. Reading is beneficial, fundamental, and a core skill for acquiring new information, understanding, accessing alternative explanations, and interpretations (Yukselir, 2014). Reading is a complex skill involving several physical, psychological, and social elements. It indicates that reading is a skill that involves the interaction of multiple cognitive, meta-cognitive, linguistic, and sociolinguistic factors (Dubin, 1982). Reading comprehension is a major challenge for EFL students. Reading in a foreign language is completely different from reading in one's native language because a foreign language demands many skills and a high level of language proficiency. Reading comprehension is the ability to process a text, understand its meaning, and connect it with what the reader already knows. Westwood (2009) stated that reading comprehension occurs when the reader actively thinks, and with that active thinking, processes and constructs meaning, which ultimately leads to a deeper understanding of the text. Comprehension is more than just decoding words; it involves constructing concepts and meanings through cognitive, linguistic, and social processes (Snow, 2002).

Reading comprehension is a dynamic process that includes making predictions, interpreting information, summarizing main ideas, questioning ideas, analysing concepts, and clarifying unclear points. To make all these happen, language skills are required. Language proficiency includes four areas: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Comprehension is a multifaceted, creative process that depends on speech sound, arrangement of words in given sentences, meaning of words and phrases in a language, and how context contributes to meaning (Tompkins, 2011). Reading comprehension occurs when the reader understands the content, which depends on their language skills. Good reading comprehension skills are key factors in effective language learning, and are essential for interpreting meaning from the text, engaging in academic discussions, attending lectures, and everyday communication (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Good reading promotes meaningful learning, vocabulary expansion, and overall language proficiency enhancement.

Multiple essential roles; language acquisition, vocabulary development, grammatical awareness, and understanding sentence structures are played by reading. It helps learners develop comprehension strategies and allows them to encounter and internalize new vocabulary in various contexts such as narratives, simplified passages, technical, non-technical, formal, or informational texts. Nation (2009) revealed that reading is among the most important skills for gaining knowledge and improving communication abilities, thus significantly impacting students' academic performance and overall language proficiency. For those learning English as a foreign (EFL) or second (ESL) language, reading comprehension is a key component and serves as a vital bridge to understanding different perspectives, thoughts, cultures, ideologies, contexts, and complex academic materials. It provides access to a broad range of ideas, cultural backgrounds, and academic disciplines.

Despite everything, reading comprehension remains a concern for EFL learners, as Kasim and Raisha (2017) stated that students face both linguistic and non-linguistic reading comprehension problems, but mostly experience the areas of linguistic problems such as vocabulary. EFL students often struggle to understand texts due to anxiety, low motivation, stress, and insufficient exposure to reading materials, interest, recognition of words, and environmental conditions like an unsafe place (Dennis, 2008). However, improving reading comprehension should be a priority because it can enhance overall language proficiency (McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Krashen & Brown, 2007). "Reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's which are knowledge of the language" (Rivers, 1981, p. 147).

For Afghan students majoring in English, engagement with English texts poses considerable challenges that may impede their educational performance and development. Despite the recognized importance of academic accomplishments, numerous Afghan students encounter difficulties in comprehending English textbooks. These students experience various obstacles during reading activities in English, which can differ among individuals. Several studies suggest that factors such as lack of motivation, limited reading exposure, and inadequate reading skills may affect students' reading comprehension. Additionally, factors such as reading anxiety and the complexity of texts have been recognized as influencing students' capacity to understand written material. Situations where students read without grasping the main argument or core concepts can lead to frustration and hinder their academic advancement.

Reading is a fundamental skill extensively taught from the outset of the academic curriculum, spanning from the first to the final semester in the Department of English in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, a significant number of Afghan students pursuing English studies continue to encounter difficulties in reading comprehension. Several studies have underscored that EFL students often struggle with issues such as limited vocabulary, word recognition difficulties, low motivation, lack of reading strategies, and anxiety (Rahmani et al., 2023). Despite the increasing importance of English proficiency in Afghan Higher Education, there remains a paucity of research investigating the reading comprehension challenges faced by Afghan English major students at the university level. If these challenges remain unaddressed, they may negatively affect students' academic performance, meaningful learning experiences, self-confidence, motivation to engage with English texts, and overall English language proficiency. Therefore, it is imperative to analyse these difficulties within their contextual framework to formulate practical recommendations aimed at enhancing learners' reading comprehension skills.

The study aims to investigate the challenges faced by students studying English Literature in their reading comprehension at Kandahar University and to identify practical strategies that can enhance their understanding of English texts.

1.2. Research Questions

1. What are the main reading comprehension difficulties faced by Afghan students majoring in English?
2. What might be the suggestions to help students improve their reading comprehension?

2. Literature Review

Reading comprehension is an important skill for those who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Reading comprehension is essential in both types, whether intensive or extensive reading. Intensive reading involves close analysis of texts in the classroom to develop learners' reading strategies and train them appropriately (Nuttal, 1982). It often includes dividing texts into smaller parts and using dictionaries to analyse and translate vocabulary, which results in slower reading (Palmer, 1964). Harmer (2001) emphasized that effective comprehension must avoid stopping for every individual term and instead focus on grasping the overall meaning. Conversely, extensive reading involves reading a large amount of enjoyable, meaningful material outside the classroom. It is based on the idea that broad exposure to L2 input enhances language development (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989). Extensive reading improves background knowledge, information, vocabulary, and fluency, as learners select texts at their level and read at their own pace. According to Day and Bamford (1998), it can be part of the curriculum or an extracurricular activity that promotes independent reading. Reading comprehension varies depending on the context. Depending on the situation, the reader must decide how to approach comprehension. Smith and Read (2005) introduced four levels of reading comprehension: literal, inferential, critical, and creative. Literal comprehension involves understanding explicit information, recalling details based on prior knowledge, and recognizing main ideas. Inferential comprehension goes beyond the text; it requires readers to interpret implied meanings, make predictions, and identify unstated relationships. Critical comprehension, the third level, focuses on evaluating the validity, appropriateness, accuracy, reliability, and bias of the text, enhancing personal judgment. Finally, creative comprehension extends beyond the author's message, allowing readers to generate new ideas and insights inspired by the text. Different types of language comprehension do not only involve understanding individual words or reading comprehension; they also involve various components and require active engagement with the content to create a mental picture (Rashid, 2012).

Studies have highlighted several problems, including limited vocabulary, language deficiency, difficulties in understanding lexical and syntactic knowledge, language inaccessibility, poor reading skills, affective factors, and limited exposure to target language textbooks faced by learners in EFL classrooms (Alyousef, 2006; Rahman, 2004; Fitriani, 2015; Grabe, 1991). Febriani et al. (2019) conducted a study based on reading comprehension challenges and reported that learners' main concerns found in their study were motivation, background knowledge, strategies, and language knowledge. Poor reading strategies, Limited vocabulary, difficulty identifying main ideas, word-for-word translation, reading anxiety, and lack of exposure to diverse texts significantly hinder learners' comprehension. Poor reading comprehension happens when the reader has Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) stated that poor vocabulary and grammar knowledge, as well as the inability to recognize text structure or form, are also challenges that make comprehension difficult. A strong vocabulary base is valuable for understanding reading material because one of the primary issues related to reading comprehension is poor vocabulary knowledge, which hampers students' efforts to deduce meanings within context and understand the text's meaning (Hamouda, 2021; Manihuruk, 2020). Hezam et al. (2022) investigated reading comprehension difficulties. They stated that reading materials often contain unfamiliar terms and complex grammatical structures, which pose challenges to comprehension. Rahimi and Sahragard (2008) found a positive link between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension, showing that learners with broader vocabularies perform better on comprehension tasks. Limited vocabulary and background knowledge affect not only understanding individual words but also slow the overall reading process and cause fragmented comprehension (Van, 2021).

Another common challenge for EFL learners is identifying main ideas and supporting details. This problem often happens from insufficient training in analytical reading skills and limited exposure to academic texts. This weakness can lead to misunderstandings of main points and hinder learners' ability to summarize and retain information. Hezam et al. (2022) also observed that many students struggle to identify central themes due to poor strategy training and limited reading materials. Word-for-word translation is another common issue among EFL students when translating from English into their first language (L1). Translation can have negative impacts on students' reading skills. Translation can offer temporary understanding, but overreliance on it slows reading speed and prevents direct thinking in English. The use of translation is useful when it is used in moderation and for specific needs (Genge, 2024). Cain and Oakhill (2011) emphasized that skilled readers should use reading comprehension strategies for effective reading. Gilakjani & Sabouri (2016) emphasized that most readers use reading comprehension strategies (predicting, forecasting, deducing, summarizing, examining, and evaluating) to comprehend well. This suggests that reading comprehension strategies can enhance readers' reading comprehension.

Emotional factors, such as anxiety, also significantly impact reading comprehension. Saifi and Islam (2021) explained that fear of failure, pressure, and unfamiliar sentence structures can reduce confidence. A low level of confidence itself increases the anxiety level and makes the learners reluctant to read comprehensively. Macdonald et al. (2021) in their study found that reading anxiety significantly correlated with reading comprehension. When learners are competent in their reading comprehension strategies, they tend to read less and get anxious. Anxiety is a problem that then leads to a negative impact on students' reading comprehension (Jafarigohar & Behrooznia, 2012). Effective reading relies on mastering a range of strategies. Fostering motivation, students' interest, a comfortable learning environment, paying attention to anxiety, and promoting self-efficacy are all important to consider for the purpose of meaningful reading (Dhaka, 2024). Motivation is essential because it makes learners engage with reading (Toste et al., 2020).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adapted a quantitative research design to investigate the reading comprehension difficulties among Afghan EFL learners at Kandahar University. A descriptive survey design was selected. According to Creswell (2012), survey designs are effective for clearly describing a group's characteristics.

3.2. Population and Participants

The target population for this study consisted of undergraduate EFL students who were enrolled at Kandahar University during the 2024-2025 academic year. For the determination of the sample size, Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size table was employed. According to this table, a sample of 103 students out of 140 was deemed representative of the population. These students were selected through convenience sampling and were available during regular class hours to participate. The participants included Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors.

3.3. Instrument of the Study

Data were collected using a questionnaire from undergraduate EFL students. The questionnaire was adapted from Abu Abeeleh et al. (2021). The questionnaire consisted of 13 items based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). It aimed to assess various challenges of English reading, such as understanding new vocabulary, identifying the main idea, summarizing, and reading anxiety.

3.4. Pilot Study

Table 1.

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.818	13

To examine the clarity, appropriateness, and reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted. The questionnaire consisted of 13 items measuring students' perspectives towards reading comprehension challenges. The pilot test was administered to a group of 40 English major students. The collected data were analysed using SPSS, and the internal consistency of the scale was assessed through Cronbach's alpha. The results showed a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = 0.818$, indicating a high level of internal consistency and confirming that the questionnaire items were suitable for use in the main study.

3.5. Data Collection and Data Analysis

Quantitative data were obtained through a structured questionnaire. Data were coded and analysed using SPSS (version 27). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, percentage, and frequency counts) were computed to summarize participants' responses. These methods allowed the researchers to measure participants' agreement or disagreement with each item.

4. Findings

Table 2. Demographics of Participants

Class					
Valid		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Freshmen	30	29.1	29.1	29.1
	Sophomores	34	33.0	33.0	62.1
	Juniors	28	27.2	27.2	89.3
	Seniors	11	10.7	10.7	100.0
	Total	103	100.0	100.0	
Age					
Valid		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent

18-24	97	94.2	94.2	94.2
25-34	6	5.8	5.8	100.0
Total	103	100.0	100.0	

The findings related to learners' demographic information show that the majority of respondents are at all four academic levels. Freshmen make up 29.1%, sophomores are the largest group at 33.0%, juniors account for 27.2%, and seniors have the smallest proportion at 10.7%. Overall, the numerical data indicate that the sample was well-balanced across lower and upper levels, with a slightly higher concentration in the first two years of study.

The statistics show that the vast majority of participants belong to the younger age category. Specifically, 94.2% of the respondents were between 18–24 years old, while only 5.8% (n = 6) were in the 25–34 age group.

Table 3. Numerical data of the 5-point Likert scale Questionnaire

No.	Statement	5-Point Likert Scale Strongly Disagree-Strongly Agree					Mean	Std. Deviation
		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree		
1.	I faced a problem in figuring out the meanings of some new words in the reading text.	3 (2.9%)	13 (12.6%)	6 (5.8%)	29 (28.2%)	52 (50.5%)	4.1068	1.15396
2.	I faced a problem in identifying the aim behind reading comprehension.	13 (12.6%)	19 (18.4%)	1 (1.0%)	24 (23.3%)	46 (44.7%)	3.6893	1.50182
3.	I faced difficulty in guessing the meanings of some new words.	0 (0.0 %)	20 (19.4%)	11 (10.7%)	26 (25.2%)	46 (44.7%)	3.9515	1.15791
4.	I faced a problem in distinguishing the main ideas from the supporting ideas in the reading text.	5 (4.9%)	32 (31.1%)	16 (15.5%)	22 (21.4%)	28 (27.2%)	3.3495	1.30391
5.	I faced difficulty in extracting the main and detailed ideas in the text.	11 (10.7%)	19 (18.4%)	16 (15.5%)	25 (24.3%)	32 (31.1%)	3.4660	1.37780
6.	I faced difficulty in recognizing the total meaning of the text.	5 (4.9%)	23 (22.3%)	12 (11.7%)	30 (29.1%)	33 (32.0%)	3.6117	1.27751
7.	I usually translate word by word when I am reading.	6 (5.8%)	35 (34.0%)	9 (8.7%)	23 (22.3%)	30 (29.1%)	3.3495	1.36273
8.	I feel stressed when reading a text in English in the classroom.	8 (7.8%)	30 (29.1%)	11 (10.7%)	31 (30.1%)	23 (22.3%)	3.3010	1.31235

9.	I never feel quite sure of myself when I am reading in the classroom.	6 (5.8%)	36 (35.0%)	10 (9.7%)	11 (10.7%)	40 (38.8%)	3.4175	1.44524
10.	I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am.	10 (9.7%)	20 (19.4%)	8 (7.8%)	24 (23.3%)	41 (39.8%)	3.6408	1.42012
11.	Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it.	3 (2.9%)	24 (23.3%)	8 (7.8%)	33 (32.0%)	35 (34.0%)	3.7087	1.24169
12.	I feel upset when I don't understand what I read in English.	4 (3.9%)	29 (28.2%)	8 (7.8%)	36 (35.0%)	26 (25.2%)	3.4951	1.25146
13.	I faced difficulty in summarizing the main ideas of the text.	4 (3.9%)	30 (29.1%)	8 (7.8%)	9 (8.7%)	52 (50.5%)	3.7282	1.42934

The above table displays students' responses to statements about reading comprehension challenges, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). The average scores ranged from 3.30 to 4.10, suggesting that most respondents generally agreed with the described difficulties. Standard deviation (SD) values ranged from 1.15 to 1.50, which are acceptable for research, indicating a moderate variation in responses and consistent perceptions among participants.

In item 1, "I faced a problem in figuring out the meanings of some new words," more than 78.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, yielding the highest mean ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.15$). On the other hand, 15.5% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 5.8% remained neutral. This shows that unfamiliar vocabulary is one of the most prominent barriers to students' reading comprehension.

For Item 2, "I faced a problem in identifying the aim behind reading comprehension," 68% agreed or strongly agreed ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 1.50$), 31% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 1.0% remained neutral. The numerical data collected for item 2 indicates that many students find it difficult to determine reading goals or objectives.

The findings of Item 3 "I faced difficulty in guessing the meanings of new words" supports that 69.9% of students agreed or strongly agreed ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.15$), 10.7% remained neutral, and 19.4% strongly disagreed or simply disagreed which overall indicates that the lexical knowledge is a challenge for EFL learners and causes problems in misunderstanding or meaningful learning.

Item 4, with 48.6% strong agreement or agreement ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.30$), reveals that distinguishing main ideas from supporting ideas in the reading text is a moderate challenge for students in their reading. 15.5% remained neutral, and 36% strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement.

The responses to item 5 show that many students had trouble identifying main ideas and supporting details while reading. Only 29.1% reported strong disagreement or disagreement with this issue, while 15.5% said they sometimes struggled. Meanwhile, a larger percentage, 55.4%, reported often facing difficulties and strongly agreed or agreed that they encountered this challenge.

The mean score of item 5 $M = 3.46$ ($SD = 1.37$) indicates that, on average, participants tend to experience this difficulty at a moderate to high level. This suggests that extracting main and detailed ideas is a common challenge in reading comprehension among students.

Item 6 indicates that most learners find it difficult to understand the overall meaning of a text. Only 27.2% expressed disagreement. About 11.7% ($n = 12$) remained neutral. Notably, a large number of

participants reported higher levels of difficulty: 61.1% chose either strong agreement or simply agreement ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.27$). The students' responses suggest a common tendency to struggle with grasping the overall meaning of texts.

In Item 7, "I usually translate word by word when I am reading," 51.4% ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.36$) of the respondents stated that they most of the time rely on translation while reading in English. Instead, 8.7% remained neutral and 39.8% showed strong disagreement or simply disagreement.

Items 8 through 12 predominantly explore affective factors. In Item 8, "I feel stressed when reading a text in English in the classroom." A total of 52.4% of students either strongly agreed or agreed; 10.7% remained neutral; and 36.9% expressed strong disagreement or disagreement. This suggests that students experience stress during classroom reading ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.31$). Regarding Item 9, "I never feel quite sure of myself when I am reading in the classroom," 49.5% reported feeling unsure of themselves ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.44$), 9.7% remained neutral, and 40.8% expressed strong disagreement or disagreement. This indicates that students are moderately uncertain of themselves when reading in the classroom. For Item 10, "I keep thinking that the other students are better at language than I am," 63.1% demonstrated strong agreement or agreement, 7.8% remained neutral, and 29.1% showed strong disagreement or disagreement. Overall, the statistical results ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.42$) suggest that negative self-talk impacts students' reading performance. Concerning Item 11, "Even if I am well prepared for language class, I feel anxious about it," 66% of respondents ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.24$) indicated experiencing anxiety despite preparation; 7.8% remained neutral; and 26.2% expressed strong disagreement or disagreement. The data for Item 12, "I feel upset when I don't understand what I read in English," reveals that students often feel frustrated when comprehension declines, with 60.2% ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 1.25$) indicating strong agreement or agreement; 7.8% remaining neutral; and 32.1% strongly disagreeing or disagreeing. These findings collectively affirm the influence of reading anxiety and diminished self-confidence on reading comprehension performance.

Finally, Item 13, "I faced difficulty in summarizing the main ideas," gained strong agreement from 59.2% of participants ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.42$), 7.8% remained neutral, and 33% revealed their strong disagreement with the statement. It highlights that higher-order comprehension skills, such as synthesis and summarization, are notably weak.

In summary, the findings show that Afghan English major students encounter significant comprehension challenges at three interconnected levels: first, linguistic limitations, especially in vocabulary; second, strategic weaknesses such as pinpointing or extracting main ideas; and third, emotional barriers like anxiety and low self-confidence. The relatively high means and acceptable SD values confirm the reliability of these patterns and highlight the urgent need for targeted instruction in vocabulary building, reading strategy training, and emotional support in classrooms. The results carry several key pedagogical and curricular implications for EFL settings in Afghanistan. The prevalence of vocabulary issues stresses the necessity for systematic and explicit lexical instruction integrated into reading courses. Additionally, the identified deficiencies in reading strategies suggest that instruction should prioritize process-oriented training, especially in identifying main ideas and extracting essential information. The emotional challenges of anxiety and low self-confidence emphasize the importance of supportive classroom practices that diminish cognitive and emotional obstacles to comprehension. The results, as reflected in the percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations, indicate that there is a need to implement an integrated teaching approach that simultaneously addresses learners' linguistic skills, reading strategies, and emotional factors to enhance reading comprehension.

5. Discussion

The present study found that Afghan English major students at Kandahar University face several challenges in reading comprehension. These include having trouble understanding common vocabulary, summarizing texts, distinguishing main ideas from supporting details, figuring out the meaning of new words, and extracting main and supporting ideas. Additionally, it is revealed that students feel stressed, anxious, and have low self-confidence when reading English texts. All of these factors contributed to poor reading comprehension among students. These challenges are not unique to Afghan learners; in fact, reading comprehension challenges have been found in many EFL settings. Various studies have proved that such difficulties are common among EFL learners in different educational contexts.

According to the findings of the study, it is evident that obstacles faced by Afghan EFL learners include understanding vocabulary, reading anxiety, and lack of confidence. This aligns with the research of Qunayeer (2021) and Hu et al. (2022), who identified vocabulary knowledge as a significant predictor of comprehension and noted that lexical competence is closely related to the ability to infer word meanings from context. Additionally, among English learners, diminished motivation and emotional factors further contribute to difficulties in reading comprehension, underscoring the complexity of the educational environment influencing these students.

The study showed that students often struggle to understand the meanings of new words and to guess them. When reading a new work, whether it is simply a text or a project, encountering new terms is common. Wang et al. (2023) in their study indicated that English major students face unique obstacles in project-based courses due to their need to comprehend complex academic texts. This requirement often results in having less than adequate reading comprehension skills and can even increase their perceived difficulties. However, skilled readers can effectively use their background knowledge and writing strategies to make these challenges easier. In contrast, those with lower reading skills continue to struggle, highlighting the need for targeted reading skill interventions. Abu Abeeleh et al. (2021) observed that many learners face reading comprehension challenges because they are not competent in reading strategies, such as prediction and inference, which can help them make sense of unknown words.

When reading a text, it's important not only to read but also to extract main and supporting details, distinguish between main ideas and supporting ideas, understand the overall meaning, and be able to summarize the entire text. The findings of this study indicate that these are also the challenges Afghan students face in reading comprehension. This aligns with Kasim and Raisha (2017), who found that reading comprehension problems are not only linguistic but also non-linguistic. Their study identified non-linguistic challenges such as the inability to connect ideas, difficulty differentiating main and supporting points, lack of reading strategies, cultural knowledge gaps, and text length as key issues.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools have been introduced as potential aids for addressing these challenges; however, they also demonstrate promise in enhancing vocabulary and critical thinking skills, as there exists a risk of overreliance, which could impede genuine skill development (Chea and Xiao, 2024). Consequently, educators must employ strategies that balance technology-assisted learning with traditional teaching methods. Additionally, pedagogical approaches are crucial in the development of reading skills. Isa (2023) advocated that teachers should instruct skills that facilitate text comprehension. He proposed that effective comprehension strategies and skills need to be imparted appropriately to aid learners in understanding texts comprehensively.

These findings indicate that reading comprehension improves through experience; as students gain increased exposure to English and structured instruction, their reading abilities develop. Therefore, it is imperative to introduce robust reading strategies early in university curricula to assist students in establishing a solid reading foundation.

6. Conclusion

Based on the statistical findings regarding students' perspectives, it can be concluded that the majority of English major students encounter challenges in reading comprehension. Various factors, such as limited vocabulary, inadequate reading comprehension skills and strategies, overreliance on word-for-word translation, and affective factors, have contributed to learners' inability to comprehend texts meaningfully. Firstly, there is an urgent need to provide professional guidance to learners and to teach them effective strategies to address the difficulties encountered during reading. Without sufficient guidance, learners may never achieve autonomy in reading. Secondly, reading instruction should not be delivered in isolation but rather integrated with other language skills. Consequently, reading should be incorporated into a comprehensive language program that fosters the development of all four skills. This research affirms that numerous Afghan EFL learners face difficulties in reading comprehension. The primary issues include limited vocabulary, challenges in distinguishing main ideas from supporting details, an inability to effectively summarize, and a pronounced tendency to translate words literally. Furthermore, a significant number of students reported experiencing anxiety, stress, and low confidence during reading activities, which further hindered their comprehension. Most students lack effective reading strategies and would greatly benefit from targeted instruction along with emotional support. Addressing these issues is essential for improving students' academic performance and guiding learners toward becoming more successful and autonomous readers of the English language.

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