

Challenges of Mastering Reading Skills among students in the Faculty of Arts, Yarmouk University

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the challenges facing Jordanian first-year students at Yarmouk University in mastering reading skills and attempts to identify the major causes of the low performance of the students in this skill. A descriptive-analytical approach was adopted to conduct this study. The tools which were used to collect data for this study were a questionnaire and observation. The questionnaire included 50 items and was distributed to a sample of 50 students randomly selected from the population of the study. The collected data were tabulated, classified, and analysed using SPSS. The study came up with several important results. It was found that there were linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical problems that constituted real challenges for the students and stood behind the students' low performance in reading. It was also noticed that poor teaching methods, lack of enough practice, and inhibition stood as further obstacles that negatively impacted students' performance. The study gave a number of recommendations to improve students' performance in reading: these include stressing extensive reading, creating a comfortable environment in the classroom, and adopting modern evaluation and assessment techniques.

Keywords: Comprehension; Fluency; Phonology Awareness; Reading Skills; Vocabulary.

Introduction

To master English language skills, learners need to "construct" their knowledge by understanding through many channels: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Such mode of learning is called 'constructivism' where learning is based on learner's active contribution in successful communication which needs the mastery of several competencies such as i) linguistic competence that entails knowing grammatical rules (Chomsky, 1965); ii) sociolinguistic competence that means knowing the interpretation of meaning in different language contexts (Hymes, 1972); iii) functional or rhetorical competence that entails mastery of producing messages relevant to achieve

personal goals (Lambert & Gillespie, 1994). It is vital for students in the 21st century to learn English communication skills to stimulate additional growth to secure their future careers through achieving academic success and finding lucrative jobs. It is well known that without a reasonable command of English, academic achievement or job opportunities would remain unrealizable dreams. In spite of the critical need for mastering the four language skills and in spite of the tremendous effort exerted by the government as represented by the Ministry of Education and universities, the student's level of performance in English remains far from being satisfactory. As a teacher, the researcher notices that Jordanian students face significant difficulties in mastering the major English language skills. This situation makes it necessary to launch an urgent investigation to identify the causes behind these problems and to suggest practical solutions to overcome these problems.

Learning English in Jordan is still rather problematic and challenging despite the enormous number of effort and money spent to improve the situation. Abdul Haq (1982) and Wahba (1998) have pointed out the problem of learning English in Jordanian settings especially in making errors in writing, syntax, lexis, and pronunciation. There seems to be a wide consensus among Jordanian educators that the current level of English among public schools' graduates is far from satisfactory. Rababah (2005) pointed out that Arab learners face many problems in all the language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. He argued that "there have been a lot of complaints made about the weakness of school graduates in English who join the universities as English language majors and English language learners in general."

English in Jordan is widely recognized as a foreign language and is learned via Jordanian or, in some cases by non-Jordanian Arab, teachers whose mother tongue is Arabic. It is learned formally in classrooms where there is little direct exposure to language use in natural communicative situations. Colloquial Jordanian Arabic is the mother tongue used in a variety of local dialects. The only way to acquire English is through formal schooling contexts. Spoken English is not used in the daily lives of people. (Rababah 2005).

Typically, students in Jordanian Universities, as is the case in many other Arab countries, English are solemnly adopted as a medium of instruction (Umar, 2016). However, abundant published studies show that Jordanian EFL learners come across problems and difficulties in all language skills. According to EFL researchers (Al-Makhzoumi, 1986; Al-Qatawneh 2005; Al-Sobh, and Al-Abed Al- Haq, 2012; Rababah, 2005), reading is viewed as the utmost energetic skill for students in the classroom context and extracurricular environment (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). Students at universities are oftentimes assigned reading texts with the ultimate objective of raising their standard of English and qualifying them to benefit by instruction provided through the English medium (Zahran, 2016). However, in spite of the tremendous effort made by both teachers and students during their learning, the researcher notices that the students reading skills remain far away from being satisfactory. Along the same line, students' speaking skill is generally rated at even a much lower level than that of their reading skill.

Although many university textbooks include clear activities that aim to improve speaking, activating background knowledge, and paraphrasing or short talking, the impact of these techniques on actual speaking practice or reading of the students is hardly noticeable. Some academic speaking skills such as giving an oral presentation or participating in classroom discussion require a much broader range of vocabulary knowledge, grammatical sophistication, and discourse competence than is the case with typical daily life (Biber, 2007). Consequently, students face significant difficulties when reading English textbooks related to their specialization and this has a negative effect on their speaking skills. This situation may lead to students' frustration and may induce them to develop negative attitudes towards both speaking and reading which may, in its turn, result in students' low achievement or, even worse failure in their respective fields of study.

To avoid the unnecessary tragic consequence of students' failure in English, and hence familiar in their academic specialization, this study is launched to develop reading skills through strengthening the reading skills and using more effective teaching techniques.

This study, therefore, tries to find answers to the following questions:

- 1- What are the main problems of mastering Reading skills among Jordanian students?
- 2- What are the main causes of the weakness of communication in mastering Reading skills?
- 3- What are the main factors that encourage students to develop reading skills?

Literature Review

Reading has been described in a variety of ways to explain the process of what happens when one reads and how one comprehends a text. According to (Allen and Bruton 1998), reading is a complex process of making meaning from a text, for a variety of purposes and in a wide range of contexts. (Grabe and Stoller 2002) define reading as the ability to draw meaning from the printed page and interpret the information appropriately. Reading is a psycholinguistic process in that it starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs; there is thus an essential interaction between language and thought in reading. In this sense, reading not only includes encoding the language or the written word, but it also goes beyond the information in relation to the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Anderson et al. (1985) define reading as the process of making meaning from written texts. It needs the harmony of a lot of related sources of information. According to Wixson, Peters, Weber, & Roeber (1987), reading is the process of creating meaning that involves: (a) the reader's existing knowledge; (b) the text information; and (c) the reading context. (Grabe, 1991 as cited in Alyousef, 2005) defines reading as an interactive process between readers and texts that results in reading fluency. Readers interact with texts as they try to extract meaning and there are different types of knowledge: linguistic or systemic knowledge (bottom-up processing) and schematic knowledge (top-down processing). (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Ahmadi 2012) states that the main goal of reading is to gain the correct message from a text that the writer intended for the reader.

Models of Reading

Bottom-up

Bottom-up Also known as 'part to whole' models, bottom-up reading models emphasize a single direction (from bottom to top) processing of text. They describe the reading process in terms of serial steps in which "the direction of processing is from 'bottom-level' features of text to 'higher levels'". (Davies, F. 1995:169). Stated differently, the bottom-up models of the reading process perceive reading as a decoding process that involves reconstructing the author's meaning via recognizing the letters and words (Gough 1971; Widdowson, 1979 in Carrell, et al, 1988). According to Nunan, reading is basically a matter of decoding a series of written symbols into their aural equivalent for the sake of creating meaning from texts (Nunan, 1995, in Vaezi, 2003). The writer is perceived as a transmitter of a message, the reader as a receiver of that message, while the visual system is a communication channel through which the message is transmitted (Emerald, 1991:12)

(Carrell, 1989) said that the main focus of this model is the smaller units of a text like letters, words, phrases, and sentences. The reader reads all of the words in a phrase, or a sentence before understanding it. This model starts with decoding the smallest linguistic units, particularly phonemes, graphemes, and words, and then makes meaning from the smallest to the largest units. The reader uses his/her background knowledge to the information that they find in the texts. There are some difficulties with this model. One of the drawbacks is that the reader is successful in reading when he deciphers the linguistic units and understands the connection between words. The reader is not able to keep in his memory the meaning of every word. The other difficulty is that it is not possible to connect one word to the other words.

Top-down

Top-down developed within the framework of psycholinguistics, top-down models of the reading process assume that fluent readers first anticipate the meaning of the text before checking the available syntactic and graphic clues. To these models, the reader, rather than the text, is at the heart of the reading process. They emphasize the reader's interpretation of texts by guessing the meaning based on their background knowledge. In opposition to bottom-up models, they describe the processing sequence proceeding from predictions about meaning (Top) to attention progressively to smaller units of texts (Down).

(Goodman, 1967 as cited in Ahmadi & Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2012) describes reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" in which readers apply their previous knowledge to relate with a text and to connect these to new information found in the text to understand it. The readers do not read every word of a text, but they focus on identifying the next words. They try to guess the meaning of words or phrases. Readers begin forecasting from the title of the reading text that permits them to restrict the scope of their reading. Then they assume the message the writer wants to transfer and change their hypotheses based on what they read in the text. Comprehension starts with higher levels of processing and continues to the application of the lower levels (Nuttall, 1996 as cited in Ahmadi & Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2012).

Reading is an astoundingly complex cognitive process. While we often think of reading as one singular act, our brains are actually engaging in a number of tasks simultaneously each time we sit down with a book. There are five components to the process of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and fluency. These five components work together to create the reading experience. As learners learn to read, they must

develop skills in all five of these areas in order to become successful readers.

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is part of a large construct in coding and retrieving verbal information known as phonological processing (Smith, Simmons, Kameenui, 1995) and it is conscious ability to detect and manipulate sounds (Cossu, Rossini, Marshall, 1993; Torgesen, Wagner, Rashotte, 1994). This manipulation includes moving, combining, deleting, and adding syllables or sounds. Spoken Language can be broken down in many different ways, including sentences into words into syllables, onset and rime, and individual phonemes (Chard, Dickson 1999; & Wanger, 1994). Phonological awareness is the understanding of these different ways and manipulating of these units.

Phonological awareness is a general ability with multiple dimensions of varying complexity that use a single modality- Auditory- and refers to all sizes of sound units, such as words, syllables, onset-rimes, and phonemes. The latter is called phonemic awareness. So Phonological awareness is a general term and means a general understanding at all levels of the word including phonemic awareness which is the understanding that words are made up of individual sounds or phonemes and the ability to manipulate these phonemes either by segmenting, blending, or changing individual phonemes within words or create new words.

Chard and Dickson, (1999: p 3) state that "explicit instruction in phonological awareness skills is very effective in promoting early reading". However, instruction in early reading (specifically explicit instruction in letter-sound correspondence) appears to strengthen phonological awareness, and in particular the more sophisticated phonemic awareness" (p.3). In short, phonological awareness has a causal and reciprocal relation to reading acquisition. In other words, phonological awareness facilitates reading and it is facilitated by reading instruction. (Wanger, 1994; & Torgesen, Wagner, Rashotte, 1994).

Phonemic awareness falls under phonological awareness, which comes under a broader area of metalinguistic awareness (Chapman, 2003). Phonemic awareness focuses on the sounds of the phonemes which help to increase decoding and reading skills. This becomes one of the hardest parts of reading because students have a hard time breaking down speech into the smallest units of sound (Blachman, Ball, Black, & Tangel, 2000).

Phonemic awareness is a critical part of the reading (Chappell, Stephens, Kinnison, & Pettigrew, 2009). It is the process of understanding the sounds in the English

language (Pullen & Lloyd, 2007). It focuses on the phonemes, which are the units of sound that correspond with the letters of the alphabet (Chappell et al., 2009). Students who have been taught phonemic awareness are able to break apart the sounds in a word as well as blend together the sounds to create words (Chapman, 2003). These skills are important for students to be able to spell and decode words.

Reading is an essential part of life and a major focus of elementary school teaching. The use of phonics to aid in teaching children to read is an important component of successful reading programs. Integrating phonics into reading programs is a successful way to teach phonics; however there are still teachers who teach phonics and reading separately and therefore their students are not successful (Ellis, Hatcher & Hulme, 1994). When reading is connected to phonics, students learn the important skills that are not learned through phonics instruction in isolation. In addition, the integration of phonics into reading programs has shown to be more effective in teaching students to decode words (Lapp & Flood, 1997). It is important to start students in phonics instruction in elementary school because students who have phonics instruction early have a higher reading ability than those students who do not have a strong foundation in their early education (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl & Willows, 2001).

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is one of five core components of reading instruction that are essential to successfully teach children how to read (National Reading Panel, 2000). Vocabulary knowledge is important because it encompasses all the words one must know to access his background knowledge, express his ideas and communicate effectively, and learn about new concepts. "Vocabulary is the glue that holds stories, ideas and content together... making comprehension accessible for children." (Rupley, Logan & Nichols, 1998/99). Students' word knowledge is linked strongly to academic success because students who have large vocabularies can understand new ideas and concepts more quickly than students with limited vocabularies. The high correlation in the research literature of word knowledge with reading comprehension indicates that if students do not adequately and steadily grow their vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension will be negatively affected (Chall & Jacobs, 2003).

One of the oldest findings in educational research is the strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Word knowledge is crucial to reading comprehension and determines how well students will be able to comprehend the texts they read in middle and high school. Comprehension is far more than

recognizing words and remembering their meanings. However, if a student does not know the meanings of a sufficient proportion of the words in the text, comprehension is impossible. Vocabulary experts agree that adequate reading comprehension depends on a person already knowing between 90 and 95 percent of the words in a text (Hirsch, 2003). Knowing at least 90 percent of the words enables the reader to get the main idea from the meaning and guess correctly many of the unfamiliar words meaning, which will help them learn new words. Readers who do not recognize at least 90 of the words will not only have difficulty comprehending the text, but they will miss out on the opportunity to learn the new words.

Comprehension

Comprehension is a complex process that has been understood and explained in a number of ways. The RAND Reading Study Group (2002) stated that comprehension is "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language". (Duke 2003) believed that readers actually move through the text, finding their way, evaluating the accuracy of the text to see if it fits their personal agenda, and finally arriving at a self-selected location. A common definition for teachers might be that comprehension is a process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with the text through the combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text, and the stance the reader takes in relationship to the text. As these different definitions demonstrate, there are many interpretations of what it means to comprehend a text.

Kintsch (1998) and van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) defined reading comprehension as the process of creating meaning from text. The purpose is to get an understanding of the text rather than to acquire meaning from individual words or sentences. The outcome of reading comprehension is the mental representation of a text meaning that is combined with the readers' previous knowledge. This is called a mental model (Johnson-Laird, 1983) or a situation model (Kintsch, 1998). This model defines what has been learned (RAND Reading and Study Group, 2002). Keenan, Betjemann, and Olson (2008) expressed that reading comprehension needs the successful expansion and arrangement of a lot of lower-and higher-level processes and skills. Accordingly, there are many sources for possible comprehension breaks and these sources are different based on the skill levels and age of readers.

Comprehension occurs in the transaction between the reader and the text (Kucer, 2001; Rosenblatt, 1978). The reader brings many things to the literacy event, the text has certain features, and yet meaning emerges only from the engagement of that reader with that text at that particular moment in time.

In order to comprehend, readers must be able to read the words. Some level of automatic decoding must be present so that short-term memory can work on comprehending, not on decoding, words. Teachers help students get to this level of automatic decoding by providing instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics at all grade levels. If students put too much mental energy into sounding out the words, they will have less mental energy left to think about the meaning. While teachers in the primary grades work with phonemic awareness and phonics, teachers in the intermediate grades support students' continued development of automatic decoding through spelling, vocabulary, and high-frequency word activities.

Fluency

Fluency is the ability to read text accurately, quickly. It occurs without conscious effort when all the component skills of reading are in place, so the reader can focus on the meaning of a text. Fluent readers can maintain their skills over very long periods of time and can generalize across texts.

Fluency requires background knowledge of the material being read, rapid retrieval of the relevant vocabulary, and knowledge of syntax and grammatical forms that allow the reader to predict upcoming words to assist speed and accuracy. All these processes must be integrated and highly automated, so that maximum cognitive energy is available to focus on meaning.

Fluency is one of the key contributors to reading development as identified in the Report of the National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000), and in the past decade, it had been the subject of renewed attention (Kuhn et al, 2010). The most compelling reason for this renewed interest is the strong correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension (Allington, 1983; Samuels, 1988; Schreiber, 1980). The link is so close that fluency and comprehension can be seen as interdependent. Fluency can only occur if the reader comprehends the material as it is read in order to pause and phrase groups of words appropriately. Similarly, if reading is hesitant and disjointed, meaning is lost. The two elements support each other.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were full-time students, who were studying English as their major subject and were to be trained later to become English language teachers. They were 50 students in the Faculty of Arts, at Yarmouk University. They were randomly taken to form

the sample of this study. The design of the English course reflected the students' needs for professional language, and the course was adjusted to the requirements for a Bachelor of English degree. The proficiency level of the students was either medium or low in their speaking and reading as reflected by the placement test.

Instruments

This research adopts the questionnaire and observation for collecting its data from the students of English language departments at Yarmouk University.

Procedure

To collect data for this study, two instruments were used: a questionnaire completed by the 50 students. The second instrument used is observation. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher in accordance with the accepted standards of constructing surveys suggested by Dörnyei, (2003). The questionnaire consists of 50 statements to which students responded on a 5-point Likert's scale ranging from very easy to very difficult in response to each item. Students' self-assessments have been used as a means of encouraging learners to reflect on their learning experience, achievements, or failures. Observation is the second instrument used in the process of collecting the data of this research. The researcher will attend some lectures with the target subjects to observe the nature of their classroom participation and interaction. The classroom is regarded as one of the most important communication contexts, especially in the process of Second Language and foreign language learning. It is important also to mention that the data will later be analyzed by one of the methods of data analysis.

Result

This study reveals that Jordanian students of English face significant difficulties in mastering reading skills. Reading difficulties encountered by college students in Jordan are largely due to linguistic factors, psychological factors, poor teaching methods, lack of practice, and inhibition. Students are unable to speak in English because they lack the necessary vocabulary items and grammar structures that they could use when speaking. They also lack sentence formation skills, and this forces them to resort to using their mother tongue. Students also fear making mistakes in reading in front of their classmates and they see this as very embarrassing. This situation leads to students' withdrawal and forces them not to read to avoid such embarrassing situations. Research on English language teaching methodology reveals the main factors that may contribute to the existence of these reading difficulties and these are summarized in the following points: teachers' perceptions and erroneous beliefs of teaching reading, poor teaching strategies, imbalanced curriculum, lack of

extracurricular activities, and out-dated assessment regulations. The study shows clearly that teachers believe in the importance of teaching reading, yet they do not spend enough time because priority is given to the coverage of the textbook topics, which focus on teaching speaking and writing rather than reading. The teaching strategies that are used by the teachers emphasize teaching the form of the language, which is characterized by focusing on teaching grammar rules and vocabulary items separately. Students are required to produce short accurate sentences while the communicative use of the language is almost neglected. In addition, teachers think it is very important to use L1 in order to give the meaning of some words and explain the grammar rules. They believe that using L1 is necessary to make sure that the students understand the meaning and get the intended point.

In brief, the results of the study indicate that the students face many problems in reading in the areas of phonemic awareness, phonic, vocabulary, grammatical structure, fluency and comprehension, and failure to adhere to pragmatic rules. Shortage of knowledge in these language components reflects negatively on students' achievement and performance in speaking and reading.

The results of the study have clearly pointed out that there are a number of issues that have to be tackled in order to help students improve their reading skills. Different scholars have stressed the importance of vocabulary for all communication activities. It is demonstrated that communication without adequate knowledge of vocabulary will hardly take place and will soon break down and collapse. Scholars pointed out that one of the most useful ways to improve communication skills is extensive reading. Extensive reading will help the students to develop the ability to express ideas and feelings, whilst also enlarging the size of their vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge is one of the crucial factors that enhance fluency in speaking. Reading introduces learners to a wider body of language, knowledge, and contexts. Reading helps learners build up better grammar skills. As learners develop stronger reading skills, they develop more sophisticated speaking abilities. At the same time, it is found that good speakers with proper articulation skills can manipulate these skills to aid and promote their reading capacities. This scenario reflects the interplay between reading and speaking skills.

It is always believed that competent teachers play a very essential role in helping their students to master different language skills. In fact, they represent the cornerstone in any educational process. To have competent English language teachers and instructors, the university should often conduct in-service training to train the

instructors on how to effectively use the English language in classrooms. They should try to bring reforms in the pattern of examination. Separate marks could be allotted to test the spoken language of the students. An attempt should also be made to give rewards to those students who perform well in the English examination. Furthermore, the government should facilitate all colleges with language laboratories. The Government may encourage the administration at the university to develop the aural and oral skills of the students through manipulation of these facilities.

The College of Arts at Yarmouk University should arrange guidance orientation programs and manuals that provide instructors with necessary information on how to manage their English language lessons and how to tackle reading skill. They may encourage the administration of the English Language Departments to conduct reading diagnostic tests in English and use other evaluation techniques that highlight and measure students' actual abilities in different language skills. The administration should often insist on the instructors to assess the development of students' proficiency in English on regular basis. The information on students' development in English should be communicated to students at regular intervals. They may also arrange special coaching classes for slow learners and weaker students.

Often the supervisors have to directly supervise the way of providing English lessons. Through this type of supervision, these administrators can give suggestions for improvement in the curriculum. The supervisors have to motivate the instructors to imbibe the culture of referring to dictionaries among the students. They may also encourage the students to read English news during break hours and at leisure time. The key role of the administration is to insist that the English instructors should converse in English with the students even outside the classroom in the university campus. To enhance the spoken aspects of the language, the instructors should allot separate periods for spoken English. If time permits, they could also extend the duration of the English class. English language instructors have to encourage the students to communicate in English all the time and completely avoid the use of the mother tongue. Teachers should create a student-friendly and learner-centered environment and motivate students for participative learning. They should also strengthen the communication skills of the students by encouraging them to raise their confidence in themselves to speak English. While taking classes, the instructors should pay attention to individual students. This has to be done to cater to individual differences.

Discussion

1 Phonological Difficulties

Table 1 below reports the student's view regarding the level of difficulty of phonological aspects they encountered when speaking or reading a text. These involve the following categories: (1) sounds segmenting words in sentences, (2) isolating medial and final sound, (3) segmenting syllables and phonemes in a word, (4) deleting or substituting syllables and phonemes in words

Table 1 Percentages & Frequencies of Students' Responses regarding Phonological Difficulty

	Aspect of difficulty	Very easy		Easy		Neutral		Difficult		V. difficult	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1-	Discriminating words or sounds	12.5	25	15	30	10	20	5.5	11	7	14
2-	Rhyming	13.5	27	25	50	10	20	1.5	3	0	0
3-	Blending syllables	12.5	25	14	28	12.5	25	7.5	15	3.5	7
4-	Blending phonemes	6	12	14	28	16.5	33	7.5	15	6	12
5-	Isolating initial sounds	6.5	13	14	28	15	30	13.5	27	1	2
6-	Isolating medial / final sounds	5.5	11	8	16	10	20	12.5	25	14	28
7-	Segmenting words in sentences	3	6	9	18	11	22	12	24	15	30
8-	Segmenting syllables/phonemes in words	4	8	7.5	15	10	20	13	26	15.6	31
9-	Deleting or substituting syllables/phonemes in words	3	6	8	16	10	20	12.5	25	16.5	33

With reference to segmenting words in sentences 54% of the respondents classify this issue as difficult or even very difficult, and 22 % chose "neutral" to describe their perception of the level of difficulty of this skill. Regarding isolating medial sounds 53% of the sample indicated that it was difficult or very difficult, and 20 % considered this skill as neither easy nor difficult. With references to item 8 which focused on segmenting syllables/ phonemes in words, 57 % of the respondents felt that it was difficult or even very difficult. However, 20% of the students considered segmenting syllables/phonemes as neither easy nor difficult. While 20% felt that deleting or substituting syllables/ phonemes in words was neither easy nor difficult, 16 % viewed it as easy. However the majority of the subjects i.e., 58% felt it was difficult to delete or substitute syllables/ phonemes in words while reading and speaking. Rhyming was viewed as easy or even very easy

by 77% of the students, and as neither easy nor difficult by 20%. Interestingly enough, only 3% considered rhyming as difficult. At another level, the absolute majority of the subjects, i.e., 55% indicated that the skill of discriminating word or sound was easy or even very easy, while approximately one-quarter of this group viewed it as difficult or even very difficult. With reference to the students' responses to item 3 which focused on the skill of blending syllables, 53% perceived it as easy or very easy and 25% felt that it was neither difficult nor easy. On the other hand, 22% considered blending syllables as difficult or even very difficult. In response to item No. 4, 40% of the students felt that the skill of blending phonemes was easy or very easy and approximately, one-third, i.e., 33% of respondents claimed that it was neither difficult nor easy. However, only 27% of students felt that it was difficult to blend phonemes.

2 Students' Perception of Phonic Items Difficulties*Table 2 Percentages & Frequencies of Students' Response for Phonic Difficulty.*

	Aspect of difficulty	Very easy		Easy		Neutral		Difficult		V. difficult	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
10-	Matching letters to sounds accurately and fluently	5	10	2.5	5	12.5	25	25	50	5	10
11-	Blending/spelling sounds in simple words	6	12	7	14	10	20	17	34	10	20
12-	Reading monosyllabic words fluently	4	8	22.5	45	15	30	7.5	15	1	2
13-	Reading compounds, contractions, possessives	3.5	7	5.5	11	11	22	11.5	23	18.5	37
14-	Reading multisyllabic words	1	2	4	8	7.5	15	17.5	35	20	40
15-	Using word meaning and context to confirm decoding	2.5	5	5	10	15	30	17.5	35	10	20
16-	Using word structure to recognize words (prefixes, suffixes)	3	6	5.5	11	15	30	14	28	12.5	25
17-	Reading/spelling irregular words accurately and fluently	4	8	1.5	3	10	20	20	40	5.5	11

Matching letters to sounds accurately and fluently was viewed as neither easy nor difficult by 25% of the students, whereas 60% of these students viewed it as difficult or even very difficult. On the other hand, only 15 % felt that it was easy for them to match letters to sounds accurately and fluently. Blending/spelling sounds in simple words was viewed as difficult or very difficult by 54 % of the subjects and classified as neither easy nor difficult by 20%. However, 26% of students considered blending/spelling sounds in simple words as easy or even very easy. Along the same line, reading multisyllabic words was described as difficult or even very difficult by 75% of the subjects of the study and only 10% of them viewed it as easy or very easy. 15% of this group were found neutral claiming that it was neither easy nor difficult to read multisyllabic words. With reference to the students' responses to item 17 which focused on the skill of reading or spelling

irregular words accurately and fluently, 21 % perceived it as easy and 20 % felt that it was neither easy nor difficult. On the other hand, 40% considered this skill as difficult. With respect to using a word meaning and context to confirm decoding, 55% of the students viewed it as difficult, or even very difficult, and 30% considered this skill as neither easy nor difficult. At another level, only 15% of the students claimed that this skill is easy. Regarding the skill of using word structure (prefixes, suffixes) to recognize word meaning, 53% of the respondents found it difficult, or even very difficult, and 30% chose 'neutral' to describe their perceptions of the difficulty of this skill. With reference to item 12 which focused on the skill of reading monosyllabic words fluently, 17% of the respondents felt that it was difficult or even very difficult. 30% of the students considered reading multisyllabic words as neither easy nor difficult.

3. Fluency issues during Speaking and Reading*Table 3 Frequencies and percentages of Students' responses for Fluency items.*

	Aspect of difficulty	Very easy		Easy		Neutral		Difficult		V. difficult	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
18-	Reading sounds accurately and fluently	7	14	8	16	8.5	17	15	30	11.5	23
19-	Blending and reading individual words accurately and fluently	7.5	15	18	36	12.5	25	10	20	2	4
20-	Reading common phrases accurately and fluently	2	4	4.5	9	16.5	33	15	30	12	24
21-	Reading connected text accurately and fluently	3	6	5	10	11.5	23	16.5	33	14	28
22-	Focusing on increasing fluency in reading and speaking skills	21	42	5	10	16	32	5.5	11	2.5	5
23-	Reading attending to punctuation, expression, intonation, etc.	2.5	5	5.5	11	12.5	25	14.5	29	15	30
24-	Self-correcting word-recognition errors	2	4	4	8	17.5	35	16.5	33	10	20

Table 3 above, reports the fluency level during speaking and reading. It is revealed that reading sounds accurate and fluently was viewed as easy by 30 % and as neither easy nor difficult by 17%. However, 53% considered reading sounds accurately and fluently as difficult or very difficult. 36% of the students indicated that the skill of blending and reading individual words accurately and fluently was easy, while 25% of the students showed that their perception of the difficulty of this skill was neither easy nor difficult. In response to item No.20, only 13% of the students reported that reading common phrases accurately and fluently is easy but more than half of this group reported it as difficult or even very difficult. Approximately, one-third of the group, i.e., 33%

said this skill is neither easy nor difficult. Along the same line, 61% of the sample claimed that it is difficult to read connected text accurately and fluently. With reference to the students' responses to item 22 which asked about focusing on increasing fluency in reading and speaking skills, 42% of the students perceived it as easy and 32 % felt that it was neither easy nor difficult. On the other hand, 16 % considered this skill as difficult or very difficult. Item No.23 inquired about the skill of attending to punctuation, expression, intonation, etc. while reading. In response to this item, it is revealed that a majority 59% said it is difficult or even very difficult to focus on punctuation and intonation while reading. Only 16% said that it was easy or very easy

4. Vocabulary Learning and Reading and Speaking Skills

	Aspect of difficulty	Very easy		Easy		Neutral		Difficult		V. difficult	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
25-	Naming and using basic concepts	7.5	15	15.6	31	15	30	12	24	0	0
26-	Identifying and sorting words into categories, sets, or groups	12.5	26	15.6	31	14.5	29	5	10	2	4
27-	Categorizing words hierarchically	3	6	5	10	15.6	31	12.5	25	14	28

28-	Using semantic maps/organizers to show word relationships	6.5	13	15	30	13	26	10	20	5.5	11
29-	Learning new vocabulary across a variety of contexts	4.5	9	8.5	17	11	22	14.5	29	11.5	23
30-	Reviewing new and previously learned vocabulary	10	20	17.5	35	10.5	21	8	16	4	8
31-	Using previously-learned vocabulary (in oral and written language) and across contexts	14	28	20	40	8	16	3	6	5	10
32-	Understanding common synonyms and antonyms	8	16	16.5	33	15	30	7.5	15	3	6
33-	Using word structure to infer word meaning	5	10	7.5	15	10	20	12.5	25	15	30
34-	Identifying multiple-meaning words	4.5	9	9.5	19	11	22	13	26	12	24
35-	Using a dictionary to find word meaning	30	60	7.5	15	2.5	5	6	12	4	8

Table 4 Students' response frequencies in percentages for Vocabulary items.

Table 4 above shows the relationship between vocabulary learning and reading and speaking skills. It is found that naming and using basic concepts, i.e., (using vocabulary items to name different concepts) was viewed by 30% as neither easy nor difficult, while 40% viewed it as easy. On the other hand, 27% felt that it was difficult for the students to name and use basic concepts. Using previously learned vocabulary (in oral and written language) and across contexts was viewed as easy by 40% and as neither easy nor difficult by 16%. However, only 10% of the subjects of this study considered using previously learned vocabulary (in oral and written language) and across contexts as very difficult. 31% indicated that the skill of identifying and sorting pictures and images was easy, while 29% of the students showed that this skill was neither easy nor difficult. With reference to the students' responses to item 28 which focused on the skill of using semantic maps/organizers to show word relationships, 30% of the students perceived it as easy and 26% felt that it was neither difficult nor easy. On the other

hand, 20% considered this skill as difficult. Understanding common synonyms and antonyms were considered easy by 33% of the students and neither easy nor difficult by 30%. However, 15% felt that it was difficult to understand common synonym and antonym. The skill of categorizing words hierarchically is viewed as difficult or very difficult by 52% of the students, and 31% considered this skill as neither easy nor difficult. Regarding the skill of learning new vocabulary across a variety of contexts, 29% of the respondents found it difficult, 23% indicated that it was very difficult, and 22% chose "neutral". With reference to item 33 which inquired about using word structure to infer word meaning, the majority of 55% of the students felt it is difficult or very difficult, while 20% marked it as neither easy nor difficult. With respect to the skill of identifying multiple-meaning words, it was seen as difficult or very difficult by exactly 50% of the sample, but it was categorized as neither easy nor difficult by, 22% of the subjects. The last item in this section enquires about the use of a dictionary to find word meaning. The absolute majority of the subjects of this study perceived it as easy or even very easy. Indeed, 75% believed it to be easy and only 8% classified this skill as very difficult.

5. Level of Students' Comprehension

Table 5 Percentages of Students' level of Comprehension.

	Aspect of difficult	Very easy		Easy		Neutral		Difficult		V. difficult	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
36 -	Identifying supporting ideas	3	6	16. 5	3 3	15	30	12	2 4	3.5	7
37 -	Reading carefully to understand a text	5	10	21. 5	4 3	14. 5	29	1.5	3	7.5	15
38 -	Identifying key ideas	7.5	15	18	3 6	15	30	5.5	1 1	4	8
39 -	Understanding the organization of a text	8.5	17	16. 5	3 3	12. 5	25	5	1 0	7.5	15
40 -	Taking a brief, relevant notes	4	8	6	1 2	10. 5	21	19. 5	3 9	10	20
41 -	Retelling story including important information (e.g., characters)	7	14	9.5	1 9	13	26	12. 5	2 5	8	16
42 -	Sequencing events from the text.	7.5	15	15	3 0	15	30	6.5	1 3	6	12
43 -	Using own words in note-taking	5	10	9	1 8	11. 5	23	16. 5	3 3	8	16
44 -	Reading quickly to get the overall meaning	4.5	9	13	2 6	16. 5	33	13. 5	2 7	2.5	5
45 -	Reading quickly to find information	7	14	15. 5	3 1	11. 5	23	13. 5	2 7	2.5	5
46 -	Working out the meaning of difficult words	5	10	8	1 6	16. 5	33	18	3 6	2.5	5
47 -	Drawing conclusions based on content	7.5	15	14	2 8	17	34	7.5	1 5	4	8
48 -	Understanding specialized words	6	12	21. 5	4 3	10. 5	21	8	1 6	4	8
49 -	Connecting text to personal experience, prior knowledge, other texts, etc.	7.5	15	14	2 8	16. 5	33	4.5	9	7.5	15
50 -	Using charts, tables, diagrams, or maps to learn about a topic	10	20	18	3 6	11	22	7	1 4	4	8

As shown in Table 5, the most difficult reading skill for the students in this questionnaire are (1) taking a brief and relevant notes, (2) using their own words in note-taking, (3) working out the meanings of difficult words, and (4) identifying supporting ideas. In detail, it is found that at least one-third of the subject (33%) claimed that it is easy to Identify supporting ideas and that 55% considered reading carefully to understand a text as an easy or even very easy task. It is also revealed that the majority of students (51%) found no difficulty in identifying key ideas nor do they find problems in the understanding organization of a text. With

reference to taking brief notes, 59% of the students viewed it as difficult, or even very difficult, and 21% considered this skill as neither easy nor difficult. Regarding the skill of using their own words in note-taking, approximately half of the participants (, i.e., 49%) found it difficult, or very difficult, and 23 % chose neither easy nor difficult to describe their perceptions of the difficulty of this skill. With reference to item 46 which focused on working out the meaning of difficult words, 36% of the respondents felt that it was difficult, and 5 students (10 %) marked this skill as very difficult. However, 33% of the students considered

working out the meaning of difficult words as neither easy nor difficult. Reading quickly to get overall meaning was viewed by most of the students as neither easy nor difficult. However, 33% indicated that this skill was neither easy nor difficult, while 26 % viewed it as easy. On the other hand, 27% felt that it was difficult for them to read quickly to get the overall meaning. Reading carefully to understand the text was viewed as easy by 43% and as neither easy nor difficult by 29%. However, 15% of students considered reading carefully to understand a text as very difficult. 36% of the participants indicated that the skill of identifying key ideas was easy, while 30% of the students showed that this skill was neither easy nor difficult. 43% of the total sample of the participants claimed that understanding specialized words was easy and one-third of the sample assumed that they find no difficulty in connecting text to personal experience, prior knowledge, other texts, etc. With reference to the students' responses to item 50 which focused on using charts, tables, diagrams, or maps to learn different texts, 36% perceived it as easy and 22% felt that it was neither difficult nor easy. On the other hand, 22% considered this skill as difficult or even very difficult.

Conclusion:

It has become crystal clear through the proceedings of this research, that the first cause that is responsible for the students' problems in reading English is that the environment does not support the students to read English frequently. So the solution should focus on creating a learning environment conducive to learning. Anyway, the solution is in the students' hands. They can have an English reading club that consists of their own classmates. The students can share and read about anything in English during that time. In this club, they can learn together. Students can correct each other without feeling embarrassed. Many researchers suggest that involving students in extracurricular activities can provide the learners with more chances to use the language, and the classroom will not be the only place where they are exposed to the English language. Secondly, Lecturers should create a comfortable environment by strengthening the confidence of their students and making them feel comfortable so that they can be quite successful and competent English language learners. Thirdly, instructors should not try to correct the minor errors of students when they struggle to get their meanings across. Instructors can also speak to the students privately to eliminate any embarrassment. Fourthly, Lecturers should create a suitable and friendly environment while they are reading. The instructors should encourage all students to speak with them in English all the time. Fifthly, some more modern evaluation and assessment techniques should be adopted in the evaluation of students' performance in English. To achieve this, all English instructors, English supervisors, college administrators, and staff of the Ministry of

Education should work together. Assessment tool designers and curriculum designers should work cooperatively in order to reach an alignment between what is introduced in the textbooks and how it should be assessed.

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Appendixes

A- Students questionnaire on the Components of Reading

1- Phonological Difficulties

	Aspect of difficulty	Very easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	V. difficult
1-	Discriminating words or sounds					
2-	Rhyming					
3-	Blending syllables					

4-	Blending phonemes					
5-	Isolating initial sounds					
6-	Isolating medial / final sounds					
7-	Segmenting words in sentences					
8-	Segmenting syllables/phonemes in words					
9-	Deleting or substituting syllables/phonemes in words					

2- Students' Perception of Phonic Item Difficulties

	Aspect of difficulty	Very easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	V. difficult
10-	Matching letters to sounds accurately and fluently					
11-	Blending/spelling sounds in simple words					
12-	Reading monosyllabic words fluently					
13-	Reading compounds, contractions, possessives					
14-	Reading multisyllabic words					
15-	Using word meaning and context to confirm decoding					
16-	Using word structure to recognize words (prefixes, suffixes)					
17-	Reading/spelling irregular words accurately and fluently					

3- Fluency issues during Speaking and Reading

	Aspect of difficulty	Very easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	V. difficult
18-	Reading sounds accurately and fluently					
19-	Blending and reading individual words accurately and fluently					
20-	Reading common phrases accurately and fluently					
21-	Reading connected text accurately and fluently					
22-	Focusing on increasing fluency in reading and speaking skills					
23-	Reading attending to punctuation, expression, intonation, etc.					
24-	Self-correcting word-recognition errors					

	Aspect of difficulty	Very easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	V. difficult
25-	Naming and using basic concepts					
26-	Identifying and sorting words into categories, sets, or groups					
27-	Categorizing words hierarchically					
28-	Using semantic maps/organizers to show word relationships					
29-	Learning new vocabulary across variety of contexts					

30-	Reviewing new and previously-learned vocabulary					
31-	Using previously-learned vocabulary (in oral and written language) and across contexts					
32-	Understanding common synonyms and antonyms					
33-	Using word structure to infer word meaning					
34-	Identifying multiple-meaning words					
35-	Using dictionary to find word meaning					

4- Vocabulary Learning and Speaking Skills

	Aspect of difficult	Very easy	Easy	Neutral	Difficult	V. difficult
36-	Identifying supporting ideas					
37-	Reading carefully to understand a text					
38-	Identifying key ideas					
39-	Understanding organization of a text					
40-	Taking brief, relevant notes					
41-	Retelling story including important information (e.g., characters)					
42-	Sequencing events from text.					
43-	Using own words in note taking					
44-	Reading quickly to get overall meaning					
45-	Reading quickly to find information					
46-	Working out meaning of difficult words					
47-	Drawing conclusions based on content					
48-	Understanding specialized words					
49-	Connecting text to personal experience, prior knowledge, other texts etc.					
50-	Using charts, tables, diagrams, or maps to learn about topic					

5- Level of students' Comprehension