Research Article

Reading Comprehension Challenges in Iranian EFL Classrooms

Hossein Rezaee[1], Sara Rezaei[2], & Azam Rezaee[3]

[1] English Department, Farhangian University, Arak, Iran

[2] Medical Department, Medicine University, Arak, Iran

[3] Ministry of Education, Khomein, Iran

Abstract

Reading comprehension is a vital component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, yet many Iranian learners face persistent obstacles in this area. This article explores the major challenges Iranian students encounter in developing effective reading comprehension skills. These challenges are categorized into four main areas: linguistic difficulties, such as limited vocabulary and complex grammar; cognitive and strategic issues, including the lack of reading strategies and background knowledge; pedagogical shortcomings, such as traditional teaching methods and insufficient teacher training; and sociocultural factors, like exam-oriented learning and low motivation. The article concludes by suggesting practical solutions, including strategy-based instruction, the use of authentic and engaging texts, teacher development programs, and the integration of digital tools. By addressing these multifaceted challenges, Iranian EFL educators can foster more effective and meaningful reading experiences for their students.

Keywords

reading comprehension, EFL learners, language learning difficulties, educational challenges

1. Introduction

Reading is widely recognized as a vital component of second and foreign language learning, as it not only fosters vocabulary development and grammatical accuracy but also enhances overall language proficiency (Grabe & Stoller, 2013). Among the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—reading is often considered the most essential for academic purposes, particularly in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) settings like Iran, where learners have limited opportunities to interact with English outside the classroom (Alderson, 2000). In these contexts, reading becomes the main source of exposure to the target language, yet Iranian learners consistently underperform in reading comprehension tasks despite extensive instruction throughout their formal education (Pishghadam &

Ghonsooly, 2011; Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010).

Several interrelated factors contribute to these persistent challenges. From a linguistic perspective, EFL students in Iran often lack sufficient vocabulary depth and struggle with unfamiliar grammatical constructions, which impede their ability to decode and interpret texts effectively (Kiany & Shiramiry, 2002). Additionally, research has shown that many students are unfamiliar with or fail to apply effective reading strategies, such as predicting, summarizing, and inferring meaning (Anderson, 2003; Tavakoli, 2014). Without such strategies, students are likely to become passive readers who focus on translating individual words rather than engaging with the broader meaning of the text.

Pedagogically, reading instruction in Iranian schools often relies on outdated methods. The grammar-translation approach continues to dominate the curriculum, encouraging rote memorization and literal translation rather than fostering interactive or meaningful engagement with texts (Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). Textbooks frequently lack authenticity and fail to match students' interests or language levels, which can result in disengagement and frustration (Ahmadi & Barabadi, 2014). Moreover, insufficient teacher training in reading strategy instruction exacerbates these problems, as teachers may not be equipped to teach reading as an active, purposeful skill (Birjandi & Alemi, 2010). Sociocultural and systemic factors also play a role. The Iranian education system places a heavy emphasis on high-stakes testing, which typically assesses surface-level understanding rather than deeper comprehension or critical thinking skills (Tavakoli & Koosha, 2016). As a result, students often develop test-taking strategies rather than genuine reading proficiency. Furthermore, reading in English is rarely encouraged beyond the classroom, and a lack of access to English books and reading materials contributes to limited reading practice. Cultural attitudes toward English learning, which may prioritize grammar and translation over communicative competence, further hinder the development of reading habits among students (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015).

Given these complex and interconnected barriers, there is an urgent need to examine the specific challenges Iranian EFL learners face in reading comprehension and to explore practical, research-informed strategies for addressing them. The present article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of these challenges and suggest actionable recommendations for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to improve reading instruction in Iranian EFL contexts.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the reading comprehension challenges faced by Iranian EFL learners. A descriptive-interpretive approach was used to gain in-depth insights into students' experiences, teachers' perspectives, and classroom practices related to reading comprehension. To complement qualitative findings, limited quantitative data were also collected through a brief questionnaire to identify the frequency of specific reading-related issues.

2.2 The Participants

included 60 EFL learners and 10 English language teachers from three high schools and two language institutes in Tehran, Isfahan, and Arak. The students, aged between 15 and 18, were at intermediate to upper-intermediate proficiency levels based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). The teachers had at least five years of experience in teaching reading to EFL learners. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on individuals who had direct experience with reading instruction and comprehension tasks in classroom settings.

2.3 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using the following tools: Semi-structured interviews: Conducted with 10 EFL teachers to gather insights about their instructional practices, observed student difficulties, and perceptions of effective strategies. Focus group discussions: Held with groups of 5-7 students to encourage open discussion about their reading habits, comprehension struggles, and classroom experiences. Student questionnaire: A 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire was distributed to 60 students to assess the prevalence of challenges such as vocabulary gaps, lack of strategy use, and motivational issues. Classroom observations: Five reading comprehension sessions were observed using an observation checklist that focused on teaching strategies, student engagement, and teacher-student interaction.

2.4 Data Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were transcribed and analyzed thematically using content analysis. Recurring themes were identified, coded, and categorized into linguistic, cognitive, pedagogical, and sociocultural domains. Quantitative questionnaire responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages and mean scores) to provide a broader context for interpreting the qualitative results.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and gave informed consent prior to data collection. All responses were kept confidential, and participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous. The study was approved by the research ethics committee.

Findings

The analysis of interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussions, and classroom observations revealed four major categories of challenges faced by Iranian EFL learners in reading comprehension: linguistic barriers, cognitive and strategic deficiencies, pedagogical shortcomings, and sociocultural influences. Each category is discussed below, supported by participant responses and observed patterns.

Linguistic Barriers

A significant majority of students (83%) identified limited vocabulary as the main obstacle to reading comprehension. Students reported encountering unfamiliar words and idiomatic expressions in almost

every reading task, which forced them to rely heavily on dictionaries and hindered the flow of understanding. One student noted: > "When I read an English text, I stop many times to translate unknown words. This makes reading boring and slow." Teachers echoed this concern, highlighting that insufficient exposure to authentic English materials prevents students from building a robust vocabulary base. Moreover, complex grammatical structures, particularly relative clauses, passive voice, and conditionals, were found to confuse students. Observation data showed that students frequently asked teachers to explain sentence structures rather than focusing on the overall meaning of the passage.

Cognitive and Strategic Deficiencies

The findings indicated that many learners lacked effective reading strategies such as skimming, scanning, predicting content, and summarizing. Instead, most students read texts word-by-word and attempted to translate each sentence into Persian, a process that significantly slowed reading speed and reduced comprehension. Focus group discussions revealed that only a minority of students (about 25%) had ever been taught how to use strategies like inferring meaning from context. A teacher explained: > "Most students think reading means translating. They don't know how to guess meaning, find the main idea, or read for specific information." In addition, insufficient background knowledge about the cultural and topical content of texts often led to misunderstanding. For instance, students struggled with texts involving Western holidays, historical events, or idiomatic expressions, as these were unfamiliar concepts in their own cultural context.

Pedagogical Shortcomings

Classroom observations showed that traditional teaching methods, particularly the grammar-translation approach, dominate reading instruction. Teachers frequently asked students to translate texts line by line rather than guiding them to focus on comprehension or discussion. This method limited opportunities for critical thinking and interactive reading activities. Teachers also admitted a lack of training in teaching reading strategies. As one teacher stated: > "We mostly focus on grammar and vocabulary because that's what students need for exams. I wish I could spend more time on comprehension and reading for meaning." Another pedagogical issue identified was the limited variety and authenticity of reading materials. Textbooks often featured outdated or overly formal texts that failed to engage students. Approximately 70% of students reported that they rarely read English materials outside of the classroom because they found textbooks "dull" or irrelevant to their interests.

Sociocultural Influences

The findings highlighted a strong exam-oriented culture within Iranian schools and institutes. Students reported reading mainly to prepare for tests, which typically assess word-level knowledge and translation rather than comprehension skills. This exam pressure encouraged rote learning and

discouraged extensive or pleasure reading. Furthermore, low motivation was a recurring theme. Nearly 60% of students stated that they did not enjoy reading in English because they viewed it as "difficult and stressful." Teachers linked this lack of motivation to limited exposure to English reading materials outside of class, as English books and magazines are not widely available or promoted in students' daily environments.

Summary of Findings

In summary, the findings suggest that Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension challenges arise from a combination of linguistic limitations (vocabulary and grammar), a lack of cognitive strategies, outdated pedagogical approaches, and sociocultural factors such as exam-driven education and low motivation. Addressing these challenges requires not only improving classroom practices but also fostering a broader reading culture among students.

References

Ahmadi, S. M., & Barabadi, E. (2014). Challenges to English reading comprehension for Iranian learners. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World*, *6*(4), 313-326.

Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing reading*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511732935

Anderson, N. J. (2003). Scrolling, clicking, and reading English: Online reading strategies in a second/foreign language. *The Reading Matrix*, *3*(3), 1-33.

Birjandi, P., & Alemi, M. (2010). The impact of strategy-based instruction on EFL learners' reading comprehension. *Journal of Teaching Language Skills*, *2*(2), 1-27.

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2013). *Teaching and researching reading* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315833743

Kiany, G. R., & Shiramiry, E. (2002). Vocabulary recognition and reading comprehension of EFL learners. *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities of Shiraz University*, *18*(1), 35-49.

Pishghadam, R., & Ghonsooly, B. (2011). A mixed-methods study of reading strategy use in Iranian EFL learners. *Iranian Journal of Applied Language Studies*, *3*(2), 121-146.

Riazi, A. M., & Mosalanejad, N. (2010). Evaluation of learning objectives in Iranian high-school and pre-university English textbooks using Bloom's taxonomy. *The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language*, *13*(4), 1-16.

Sadeghi, K., & Richards, J. C. (2015). Teaching reading in Iran: Are teachers teaching reading strategies? *The Reading Matrix*, *15*(1), 137-154. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746029-7

Tavakoli, M. (2014). The effectiveness of metacognitive strategy instruction on reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, *3*(5), 213-219.

Tavakoli, M., & Koosha, M. (2016). Examining Iranian EFL learners' attitudes toward extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *28*(2), 292-311.