



## An Investigation into the Reading Comprehension Problems Faced by the Pakistani Students at University Level

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### ABSTRACT

*Reading is one of the important and major skills of language learning. It has multifarious functions. However, it is very difficult and time-consuming process to become expert in reading comprehension. Therefore, the main purpose of this study was to investigate the Reading Comprehension (RC) Problems faced by students at University level. This study was intended as an attempt to unfold problems in reading comprehension confronted to English language users in general and to the students of Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST) Kohat and Federally Administered Tribal Areas, FATA University, District Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan in particular. The researchers conducted a study of 64 students and 9 teachers of the English departments of Kohat University of Science and Technology, Kohat, and FATA University, Kohat by using a questionnaire employing Likert-scale and semi-structure interviews. This research study yielded important results. Some of the problems highlighted by the study regarding reading comprehension are: Long Sentence sentences understanding, weak grammar, lack of vocabulary, frequently consulting dictionary, long sentences, and lack of English texts reading. It is also shown by the study that English teachers encourage students towards reading. Because they believe that reading is an important skill for language learning.*

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## INTRODUCTION

English is nowadays a language of the world. Throughout the world, English is a means of communication. Harmer, J (2006) says “Like Latin in Europe in the Middle Ages, English seems to be one of the main languages of international communication ...[and] it is a lingua franca.” However, in Pakistani schools English occupies an important place as it is one of the compulsory subjects. Rahman, T (2020) says “Pakistani English (PE) is a non-native variety of English with a certain distinctive feature of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, which are not found in British Standard English.” Listening, speaking, reading and writing are the four main skills that learners require for effective communication while using language. It is a general observation that the skill, which is used more than the rest while studying at a university level is the reading skill. Therefore, this study mainly focuses on reading comprehension. Hill, C (2011) defines comprehension as:

An acquired skill that is focused on the understanding of input. Comprehension is the ability to take in information, analyze it in its respective segments, and come up with an understanding of the input in a cohesive and accurate manner. Well-developed comprehension abilities involve interactive strategy use to come up with a meaningful understanding of the input (Hill, C 2011:p62).

The term ‘comprehension’ can be defined as the action or fact of understanding with the mind and it refers to the power of receiving and gaining ideas. Simply, comprehension is the process of receiving language; listening or reading input. This study aims to investigate whether students of Kohat University of science and Technology (KUST) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas, FATA University, District Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan have reading comprehension problems. From the researcher’s personal observations, which have been developed from the researcher’s 8 years experiences as a teacher and student of BS and Mphil English through interaction with other students of English, and teachers at KUST and FATA University. It is observed that students and teachers in departments of English focus more their attention to the mastery of other skills rather than to the strategies/techniques for improving reading comprehension.

Haas, C., & Flower, L. (1988) reveal that construction of meaning is the purpose of reading. Though the process of reading seems very simple to simple literate person yet it very complex process in real sense because during reading a reader looks at the symbols to produce sounds i.e. phonemes in order to articulate words and sentences. Thus, through this way

understanding comes. It implies that rudimentary or embryonic understanding of various written texts is based on endless invisible cognitive processes which function together at lightning speed in order to bring comprehension of that very text.

Furthermore, the nature of reading and a way of teaching English have been the subject of much debate in Pakistan. What the reading process is and how English reading could be taught are two problems facing every classroom. In this context it is also important to remember that intellectual, physical, emotional and social developments are also involved in reading readiness skills. The term 'reading readiness' refers to the collection of integrated abilities and skills that these learner needs in order to learn the complex process called reading. Moreover, in Pakistan, some academic courses are designed to enhance reading comprehension at university level such as "Academic Reading and Writing", "Advanced Academic Reading and Writing" among others.

Therefore, the present study is more concerned with English language in the given context. English language has a distinct role and importance in the world. It is an international language owing to the large number of native speakers across the world and many others use it as a second language for multi-purposes.

Approximately, all living languages consist of four major components: Vocabulary (lexemes) Grammar (words structure) pronunciation on sounds, and their meanings (Semantics). All these components are playing a peculiar role in learning or acquiring a language. However, the leading factors are vocabulary and their proper meanings among others in learning a language. Owing to lack of proper vocabulary and their incorrect use, neither pronunciation would work nor grammar.

Precisely, it is through reading skill students /learners can improve their vocabulary of target language and it is the proper way to learn English language. Therefore, students could be made clear about the importance of reading skill and its role in language learning. They may be equipped with all the techniques and factors of reading in order to improve their language. The most important and crucial factor in reading is "Reading Comprehension" that could be focused the most. Students should be encouraged towards reading. The more students read the more they will build their word power. Whenever they are reading, they will come across many new words and they will like to know the meaning and use of those unknown words. So, through reading comprehension skills they would come to know new words and their language would be improved. Unfortunately, our education system does not focus on reading comprehension and on its importance. At school and college level, teachers have misunderstanding that vocabulary can be increased by memorizing difficult and individual words with their literal meanings. They do not pay any special attention to the skill of reading comprehension. In our educational system the skill of reading comprehension mostly introduced at higher classes that is BA, BSC, MA, and BS

program. This skill is seemed to be lacking at school and even at college level. At these levels, students are given texts to read and asked them to memorize difficult words and their meanings in Urdu or in native languages. After memorizing meanings of the words if they are asked to use these words in sentences many grammatical and contextual mistakes would be found. Thus, there is no proper, practice given to the students in reading skills.

**Aims and objectives:**

- To explore the factors that affect reading comprehension of KUST and FATA University students while reading in English at undergraduate level
- To investigate techniques and strategies of reading comprehension which are more effective for the students of KUST and Fata University

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many researchers have conducted research studied on the importance of reading and reading comprehension. For instance, A'isyah (2010) has published article on problems in learning of reading. The results of his research showed problems in learning reading faced by the students at first stage are: vocabulary learning, issues in meanings of words, main idea, and pronunciation. He also found out various solutions students' problems in learning reading, such as; for vocabulary, language teachers should give vocabulary, which is difficult for the students first, and then explain meaning of each difficult word in the mentioned list of vocabulary. For main idea, he has suggested that teachers should explain what the main idea is and provide an example for the main idea from the text they are reading. Likewise, for pronunciation, he has mentioned that teachers should motivate their students to practice English in their daily life and the teacher must pronounce difficult words first, and then all by the students together.

According to A'isyah (2010) "Reading is one of the skills in learning English. It is defined as an understanding a message conveyed by the writer through visual and non-visual information. It is important to learn reading since it (1) helps us to and think a new language, (2) helps us to build a better vocabulary, (3) makes us to feel more comfortable with written English, (4) can help us to plan study in English-speaking country. The reading activity needs a process by which people comprehend what they read. That process happens when they face written symbols, they look at them through their eyes then their mind will process them. Since then, a process of viewing changes into a process of comprehending. This process is called a cognitive process" (P233)

Cromley (2005) has conducted research on reading comprehension component processes in early adolescence. According to him, "reading is a critical academic skill, one which is necessary for

success in all academic domains” (p: 25). He discussed that vocabulary and background knowledge made the greatest total contribution to reading comprehension. Results of his research also suggest that vocabulary and background knowledge might be the first targeted for interventions with “basic” level students who struggle with reading comprehension. He divided students into four levels that are “below” basic level,” basic” level, “proficient” level and “advanced” level. Therefore, this research study is highly concerned with “advanced” level. He also clarified that students at the Proficient level are “able to show an overall understanding of the text, including inferential as well as literal information... to extend the ideas in the text by making clear inferences from it, by drawing conclusions, and by making connections to their own experiences”. At the Basic level, students “should demonstrate a literal understanding of what they read and be able to make some interpretations” (p: 30). At the Below Basic level, students do not even demonstrate this level of performance. At the Advanced level, students “describe the more abstract themes and ideas of the overall text”.

Mihara (2011) says according to schema theory that;

Comprehending a text is an interpretive process involving the reader’s background knowledge and the text itself. Prior knowledge, which is organized and stored in the reader’s mind, is termed *schema* (plural *schemata*). The reader tries to activate an appropriate schema based on clues provided by the writer in the text.

According to this theory, readers can comprehend the text only if they reconstruct its content by relating their own schemata to the new information in the text (P: 51). He investigated the effects of three pre-reading strategies on the reading comprehension of Brazilian university students. He argued that vocabulary pre-teaching was significantly less effective than pre-questioning and pictorial context.

According to Susiana (2017), reading is transaction among the reader, the text, and the intention of the author. She posited that each reader brings his own feelings, personality, and experiences to the text and that each reader is different each time he revisits a particular text. Background knowledge is what the reader brings to the reading event. Each reader’s interpretation and each reading of the text are potentially unique.

### **Historical Perspective**

Palmer.H (1917) in Britain and West. M (1926) cited in Bamford, J., & Day, R. R. (1997) in India pioneered the theory of Extensive Reading (TER). They considered extensive reading as one of the approached to learning a foreign language. Palmer used the term "extensive reading" to distinguish it from "intensive reading". Likewise Broughton (1978) also claimed the importance of ‘extensive reading’ in second language learning programs. Nuttall (1982) argued

that Extensive Reading should be "standard practice" in L2 learning classroom. She suggested the following "slogan":

"The best way to improve your knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among the speakers. The next best way is to read extensively" (P.168). Krashen (1984) gave arguments in favour of 'extensive reading' because he believed that extensive reading automatically contribute to writing skills competency. Krashen in (1993) used the term "free voluntary reading" for extensive reading. He further claimed that 'free voluntary reading' works like a "bridge" to closely bring together *academic* language and *communicative* language competences.

Furthermore, Elley (1996) prepared a report consists of 210,000 students and 10,000 teachers enrolled in 32 educational systems across the world. He concluded that "instructional programs that stress teacher directed drills and skills are less beneficial in raising literacy levels than programs that try to capture students' interest and encourage them to read independently."

The above-mentioned works showed the importance of reading in general and extensive reading particular, still there is lack of research and inclination towards the study and practices of reading in classroom settings. Therefore, this area of reading needs further investigation.

### **Intensive Reading**

An intensive reading means reading a text line by line with specific intension in mind. During intensive readers often refers to a dictionary to check the grammar of text and meaning of known words in order to comprehend the text. Brown (2007) says intensive reading is usually "a classroom-oriented activity in which students focus on the linguistic or semantic details of a passage. Intensive reading calls students' attention to grammatical forms, discourse markers, and other surface structure details for the purpose of understanding literal meaning". Reading text through intensive reading could lead to the increasing of general knowledge and comprehension skills of second language learning. The grammar-translation approach is one the old ways of reading where a teacher works on text and translating the text in local or supporting language. It implies that the main goal of intensive reading contributes to the understanding of the text. The of translation of the text enables learners to comprehend the text when they try to translation some of the text by themselves and it also allows the teachers to assees the teaching and learning process.

Brown (1989) further shows that intensive reading focuses "the attention to grammatical forms, discourse markers, and other surface structure details for the purpose of understanding literal meaning, implications, rhetorical relationships, and the like." He calls it a "zoom lens" strategy for the understanding of a text.

In addition, an intensive Reading is also known as "Narrow Reading". It means that students may read specific selection(s) written by the particular author or various texts on the same topic. When this process comes again and again students may get opportunities to comprehend of the text in logical and sequential way.

### **Reading in Chunks**

The human eyes are capable of reading group of written symbols, letters and words; it does not necessarily progress word by word. Studies have shown that a skilled reader can take in a single eye glance

1. Four or five uncounted letters
2. Two uncounted words
3. Four or five words in a meaningful sequence (E.g. a phrase or a short sentence)

Reading in chunks does not merely increases the speed and comprehension of reading but also makes the reader free from the undue attention to read individual letters and words. It has been found that an individual letter is not necessary for word identification, that individual words are not necessary for word identification, and that individual words are not essential for sentence completion. It has been shown that good readers are not proof-readers, since attention to small detail is not part of their reading strategy. Such readers 'correct' in accuracies of print as they go along.

Apart from slowing down the reading speed, stopping at individual words hinders comprehension. As a reader is engaged in worrying over the individual meaning of separate words, he is in danger of missing the overall meaning of the sentence as a whole. Such a reader 'cannot see the wood for trees.'

### **Silent Reading**

In most of the schools and colleges in Pakistan, reading aloud is still regularly practiced and there is very little encouragement of silent reading. True reading is silent reading. It is a two-way process of negotiation between the writer and reader. It is not appreciated that reading aloud brings with it its own problem.

The reader of the text has to think and rethink as he proceeds. Sometimes he has to pause and then refer back; sometimes he has to skip a head a check a prediction. All this can be done quite naturally when reading silently, but is denied to the reader who is forced to read aloud. Reading aloud, therefore, tends to be completely receptive in character since opportunities for reflection and response are minimized. Reading aloud does not merely free the readers to negotiate the texts

it also hinders the readers speed of reading because it takes time to pronounce each and every single word of the text.

As we have recorded the merits and merits of almost each type of reading. It is very crucial to know about the functions and strategies each type of reading in order to get true meanings and ultimately the understanding of the texts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In the present study employed both quantitative methods i.e. questionnaire (contains 11 items for students) and qualitative tools i.e. semi-structured interview conducting from English teachers in order to answer the research questions. Mixed-method approach was followed with the aim to investigate reading Comprehension level of the KUST and FATA University students. On the basis of available literature and accordance with purpose of the present study questionnaires and interviews were constructed in order to meet with for goals of the study. Furthermore, Piloting study was conducted before the data collection process.

### **Research Sites and Sample**

The present Research sites are two English Departments from KUST and FATA University District Kohat Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Pakistan. The sample for the questionnaire consists of 64 Postgraduate students enrolled in BS English in both Universities. Furthermore, 9 teachers for interview were selected who were teaching in both universities in order to strengthen the data.

### **Procedure for Data Collection and Analysis**

Firstly, questionnaires were administered to the willing participants (students) for data collection. Secondly, interviews were conducted from teachers. While conducting data from the participants, research ethics were taken into consideration. Numerical data collected through questionnaires were analyzed through SPSS in order to take percentages and frequencies from the numbers as shown above in table No 1 the qualitative data were analyzed through exploratory content analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated and are given together in the analysis

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

**Table 1 Shows Students' Responses to the Questionnaire Statements**

No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

						ee
1	I can easily understand long sentences.	1.56%	26.56%	6.25%	53.12%	12.5%
2	Students can easily understand text by guessing meaning even if they have weak vocabulary.	6.25%	51.56%	10.93%	21.87%	51.56%
3	By the time students reach the later part of a sentence, they forget the meaning of the earlier part.	3.12%	26.56%	7.8%	46.87%	4.68%
4	Students believe when there are examples in the text, it helps them to understand the text in a better way.	46.87%	34.37%	4.68%	7.8%	4.68%
5	Outside of class, students do not read materials that are written in English.	26.56%	42%	7.8%	9.37%	14%
6	Students' grammar is weak and it negatively affects their reading comprehension.	25%	57.8%	10.9%	3%	3%
7	Students believe reading is important in learning a language.	45.31%	40.62%	1.56%	6.25%	6.25%
8	Frequently consulting dictionary while reading English text makes it difficult to understand the text.	17.18%	31.25%	14.6%	29.68%	7.81%
9	I understand meaning of individual words but do not meaning of the whole sentence.	9.37%	41.81%	4.68%	30.06%	9.37%
10	Unfamiliar words are a big obstacle in comprehending a text.	21.87%			6.25%	00
11	Students can better understand a text if linking words like, therefore, however, nevertheless, are used in the text.	18.75%	56.25%	15.62%	26.56%	3.12%
			39%	12.5%		

## **Understanding Long Sentences**

As data could be seen in response to item 1 in table 1 that the highest number of students (53.12%) disagree with the statement that (they can easily understand long sentences). This indicates that students at KUST and FATA University have problems in understanding long sentences. Interestingly, data conducted from teachers through interviews also supports the same argument i.e. at both universities' students have problems in comprehending long sentences. Moreover, Kathleen said in his book "Helping Students Understand Complicated Sentences" that students faced problems in long sentences when there are such sentences used by the writer that contains multiple subjects and predicates, embedded clauses and phrases, passive voice, and/or unusual word orders.

### **Examples in the text help students in understanding**

The data could be seen to item 4, in table 1, reveals that students understand a text written target language when there are examples provider by the writers because the highest number of students (46.87%) strongly agree with the statement. Along with students' views out of nine English Teachers 7 teachers strongly agree with the same statement. This indicates that there are similarities in the students and teachers' views. It implies that by the help of examples students can understand the text in a better way while learning a target language.

### **Reading apart from the course Contents**

As data could be seen to item 5, in table 1, show that the highest number of students 42% are agree with the statement that outside of class, students do not read materials that are written in English. This indicates that students at KUST and FATA University do not read materials that are written in English e.g. (English newspaper, novel etc.) apart from their courses include materials. However, interestingly there is contrast in the opinions of students and teachers. One the reasons could be that teachers are encouraging students at university level to read texts that are written in English but still they have not developed this habit. Therefore, teachers think differently. Other researchers also comment that English may be easily learned by reading materials that are written in English as Karam (2014) stated that many studies showed the positive effects of using newspaper-based instruction. He further added that students who read newspaper as a principle source of material have better achievement in social studies, language

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arts and mathematics than their match counter parts, which rely only on textbooks. Reading skills increase two grade levels for students who read newspapers compared to those using traditional methods.

### **Weak Grammar**

Findings in could be seen to item 6, in table one reveal that weak grammar negatively effects reading comprehension problems. Students' responses indicate that their grammar is weak that is why they are facing reading comprehension problems while reading in English. The highest number of students (57.8%) and teachers are supporting the statement i.e. when Grammar is weak it creates problems in understanding the idea is also supported by Previous research studies.

### **Importance of Reading**

As respondents could be seen to item 7, in table 2, show that the highest number of students (45.31%) are strongly agree with the statement that they believe reading is important in learning a language. From the interviews of teachers and previous research finding the same arguments are supported i.e. reading plays a very vital important role in learning a language. As karam (2014) conducted research on reading skills in Pakistani context he added that reading is an essential part of our daily life. Reading is receptive skill. We use reading for personal and academic purposes and the aim is to get expressed ideas and thoughts clearly and effectively. He also argued that the skill of reading has a special importance in the Pakistani educational context because the whole education and examination system is based on the reading and writing skills.

### **Frequently Consulting Dictionary**

Surprisingly, the findings showed that frequently consulting dictionary large can also cause reading comprehension problems. As respondents could be seen to item 8, in table 1, the highest number of students (31.25%) are agree with the statement. Along with the students views data as shown in table one teachers also expressed the same idea during interview i.e. frequent use of dictionary leads dis-connectivity in thoughts while reading. Interestingly, Previous research studies also showed that frequently consulting dictionary creates problems in understanding of the text as the study conducted at women university in Japan by Caleb,(2008) L2 instructors often have different assumptions as to the effectiveness of using a dictionary while reading English text. These instructors following traditional grammar-translation methods have tended to focus on decoding text and have discouraged the extensive use of dictionaries.

## **Meaning of individual words Vs Whole Sentence**

As respondents could be seen to item 9, in table one, the data indicate that the highest number of students (41.81%) agree with the statement i.e. they understand meaning of individual words but do not meaning of the whole sentence. Teachers are also supporting the same idea.

## **Unfamiliar words**

As respondents could be seen to item 9, in table one, which show that the highest number of students disagree with the statement. But interestingly data in table 1 also reveals that the highest number of teachers agree with the same statement. This shows that there is contrast in the views of students and teachers.

## **Linking words**

The data reveal that students can better understand a text if linking words like, therefore, however, nevertheless, are used in the text. The same idea is also supported by the English teachers because the highest number of students (39%) and English Teachers agree with statement 11 as shown in table No 1. The same idea is further supported by Vivien in Book title “A helpful guide for Easy Writing” that in reading comprehension linking words such as (but, therefore, in contrast) help the readers in understanding of the text.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

To conclude the study, certain implications of the findings are presented. As stated in introduction, reading could be proper medium for language learning, reading plays an important role for word recognition and the purpose of reading is to construct meaning. Despite the importance of reading students are unable to understand or comprehend completely what they read.

The findings imply that English Language Teaching in Pakistan needs change. The traditional methods of teaching English in our schools and colleges do not encourage students to comprehend and think in target language. Reading and writing both skills are treated as the means to pass examination at school and college level. Students need more practices in mastery of grammar. The reading skills,

including reading comprehension skills also needs more focus. At schools and college levels students do not read for comprehension but they do just rote memorization and reproduce the same when required. Reading skills could be taught by current teaching methods. The main implication of the findings is that the reading skill, especially reading comprehension skills can significantly be improved by using different techniques. These techniques enable the students to read and comprehend completely.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present research was conducted to show Reading Comprehension problems faced by the students at KUST and FATA University through questionnaire and semi-structure interviews. Furthermore, the aim of the study was to provide possible solutions for reading comprehension problems. At the first stage, data were conducted from the students in order to recognize their views regarding comprehension. Secondly, teachers were interview in order to strengthen the results of the study.

The research has yielded important results. According to the data obtained and analyzed, i.e. students have reading comprehension problems. It was also concluded that all English teachers and students think almost alike regarding reading.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following points are recommended

- Suitable techniques may be employed for teaching reading skill to the students as reading in chunks etc.
- Grammar could be given more focus at school and college level.
- Students could be encouraged to read English materials as newspaper etc. outside of the class.
- Male students could be grouped with female students in class discussions.
- English original texts could be preferred by the teachers such as novel, play and literary criticism etc.
- The learners may be enabled to apply the learnt vocabulary to other similar situations.
- It is recommended that further research may be conducted in other area of reading skills such as phonics, fluency and vocabulary.
- It is also recommended that further research that may be conducted at school and college level.

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