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**INVESTIGATING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY IRAQI
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH
READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS**

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**MASTER IN APPLIED
LINGUISTICS UNIVERSITI
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges Iraqi secondary school students face when learning English reading comprehension environment. Despite the increasing importance of English in academia and communication globally, most Iraqi students continue to struggle with understanding English-written texts, which affects their language learning and academic performance. The main objective of this study was to identify and understand the significant barriers that impact reading comprehension among Iraqi secondary school learners. A quantitative descriptive design was used, with a 26-item structured questionnaire distributed across five dimensions: linguistic difficulties, affective dimensions, strategic reading behaviours, cognitive difficulties, and motivation. The instrument was piloted on a sample of 60 Grade 11 public school students in South Babylon, Iraq. The findings showed students having enormous challenges in sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary. In addition, they had little use of reading strategies, less confidence, and low motivation towards reading English. All these problems are interconnected and present disadvantages in the classroom, additionally, aspects of design exacerbate these issues. The study recommends integrating clear teaching of reading strategies, adjusting curriculum content for student needs, and enhancing motivation through interesting and age-relevant reading materials. The outcome deepens the understanding of reading comprehension's intricate nature in the context of EFL and provides pragmatic implications for ELT/EL instructional designers and policymakers in Iraq and similar contexts.

Keywords: English reading comprehension, Iraqi secondary students, reading difficulties, linguistic challenges, motivation

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menyelidik cabaran yang dihadapi oleh pelajar sekolah menengah Iraq apabila mempelajari kefahaman membaca bahasa Inggeris. Walaupun kepentingan bahasa Inggeris semakin meningkat dalam bidang akademik dan komunikasi di peringkat global, kebanyakan pelajar Iraq masih menghadapi kesukaran untuk memahami teks bertulis dalam bahasa Inggeris, yang menjejaskan pembelajaran bahasa dan prestasi akademik mereka. Objektif utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti dan memahami halangan penting yang mempengaruhi kefahaman membaca dalam kalangan pelajar sekolah menengah Iraq. Reka bentuk deskriptif kuantitatif telah digunakan, dengan soal selidik berstruktur 26 item yang diedarkan merentasi lima dimensi: kesukaran linguistik, dimensi afektif, tingkah laku membaca strategik, kesukaran kognitif, dan motivasi. Instrumen tersebut telah diuji ke atas sampel 60 orang pelajar Tingkatan 11 sekolah awam di Selatan Babylon, Iraq. Dapatan menunjukkan pelajar menghadapi cabaran besar dalam struktur ayat, tatabahasa, dan perbendaharaan kata. Selain itu, mereka kurang menggunakan strategi membaca, kurang keyakinan, dan mempunyai motivasi yang rendah terhadap membaca dalam bahasa Inggeris. Semua masalah ini saling berkaitan dan memberikan kelemahan di dalam bilik darjah, tambahan pula aspek reka bentuk memperburuk isu ini. Kajian ini mencadangkan pengintegrasian pengajaran strategi membaca yang jelas, pelarasan kandungan kurikulum mengikut keperluan pelajar, dan peningkatan motivasi melalui bahan bacaan yang menarik serta sesuai dengan usia. Hasil kajian ini memperdalam pemahaman tentang sifat rumit kefahaman membaca dalam konteks EFL dan memberikan implikasi pragmatik untuk pereka bentuk pengajaran dan pembuat dasar ELT/EL di Iraq dan konteks yang serupa.

Kata kunci: kefahaman membaca bahasa Inggeris, pelajar sekolah menengah Iraq, kesukaran membaca, cabaran linguistik, motivasi

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(سورة طه: 25-28)

"My Lord, expand for me my breast, and ease for me my task, and untie the knot from my tongue, that they may understand my speech."

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of Study

One of the significant methods in analysing educational success and continuous instruction is reading comprehension. Reading comprehension in English as a foreign language (EFL) plays a pivotal role in students' academic success. The capacity to examine plays a key part, especially in students' scholastic advancement, particularly in auxiliary instruction, where learners are expected to move from basic interpretation to the next level of interpretive capacity (Nilekani & Sabouri, 2016). In any case, Studies show that EFL learners – especially those from educational backgrounds with limited exposure to English – face more difficulties in reading comprehension than in other language skills. This matter may contribute to the reading anxiety experienced by many students in Iraq. (Alabbaichy et al., 2024) watched that most Iraqi secondary schools frequently face challenges in reading comprehension, and this can be due to low self-efficacy and a need for linguistic data, (Minoza et al., 2023) Findings indicated that Thai EFL students had not completely created their reading comprehension of English composing, and this was primarily due to weak language use and poor vocabulary foundation. These outcomes are comparable to those found within the Iraqi setting. According to Raikhel (2025), the outdated programs were one of the problems that affected the core teaching and the weakness in teaching reliable English writing. This hurt the development of reading comprehension, especially in Iraqi

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Appendix A Reading Comprehension Difficulties Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims to identify the key challenges faced by Iraqi secondary school students in developing English reading comprehension. Your responses will remain anonymous and will be used solely for academic purposes.

1. Age: _____

2. Grade Level: _____

3. Do you attend any extra English classes outside of school? Yes No

Section	Item Statement	Response Scale
A. Linguistic Difficulties	1. I often do not understand the meaning of new vocabulary in reading texts.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	2. Grammar problems make it hard for me to understand what I read.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	3. I struggle to understand long sentences in English texts.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	4. I find English sentence structures confusing.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	5. My poor grammar knowledge affects my reading comprehension.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
	6. I do not know many English words, so I cannot understand the text.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5

-	7. I skip words I don't understand while reading.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
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Please respond honestly to each statement. There are no right or wrong answers. Thank you for your cooperation.

Response Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neutral
 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

-	8. I do not understand idiomatic expressions or phrases in English texts.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
B. Cognitive Difficulties	9. I find it hard to find the most important point in a paragraph.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	10. I cannot distinguish between important and unimportant information.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	11. I cannot understand new words by using the other words in the sentence.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	12. I lose concentration while reading English texts.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	13. I find it hard to make inferences while reading.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
B. Strategic Reading Behaviors	14. I don't use a dictionary for hard words.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	15. I do not take notes while reading English texts.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5

-	16. I rarely summarize what I have read.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	17. I do not reread sentences when I don't understand them.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	18. I do not try to predict what will come next in the text.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5

C. Affective Factors	19. I feel nervous when reading English texts.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	20. I lack confidence in my reading ability.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	21. I feel shy when I read wrong.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	22. I avoid reading English texts because I find them stressful.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
D. Motivation	23. I read English texts only when required	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	24. I do not enjoy reading in English.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	25. I do not believe reading helps improve my English.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5
-	26. I lack motivation to improve my reading skills.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5