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**FACTORS INFLUENCING EFL LEARNERS' READING  
COMPREHENSION SKILL AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT**

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**Abstract**

*Reading comprehension is a complex language skill that requires the interaction of several subskills and cognitive processes. This article examines the elements that affect reading comprehension proficiency, grouped into reader and text variables. It explores several text- and reader-related factors that support EFL learners' reading performance. Text type and rhetorical structure, vocabulary and lexical knowledge, and the role of automaticity in fluent word recognition are among the important textual elements examined. The study also examines reader-specific factors such as motivation, reading purpose, language skills, and the significant influence of prior knowledge and cultural background on a student's capacity to construct meaning. By emphasizing these factors, the present paper underscores the need for teachers to consider students' interests and prior knowledge when selecting materials to enhance comprehension and the overall learning process.*

**Keywords:** *Reading Comprehension, EFL Learners, Text variables, Reader variables, Lexical Knowledge*

**Introduction**

Reading is considered a challenging task by the vast majority of Moroccan high school students and a complex language skill that requires the interaction of other sub-skills, including skimming, scanning, careful reading, and predicting. Additionally, this chapter highlights the importance of schemata theory in activating students' prior knowledge and its application to classroom reading instruction (Snow, 2002).

Comprehension is defined by Bernhardt (1987, p. 66) as “the process of relating new or incoming information to information already stored in memory (background knowledge),” whereas reading comprehension is a process with multiple stages that involves grasping technical concepts and psycholinguistic terminology and shaping reading effectiveness. Goodman (1988) views reading as a receptive language process, and he asserts that it 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” (p.12).



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### **Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension**

Reading comprehension is a complex skill that involves multiple factors, all of which contribute to its success (Oakhill et al., 2019; Sahriana, 2010). This section, therefore, discusses factors that may affect reading comprehension.

#### **Text variables**

One factor that primarily affects reading comprehension is the text. Compared with other reader-related aspects, text-related factors have received very little research. According to Davies (1995), a text is “a coherent piece of writing exhibiting both structure and texture, assignable to a single author or cooperating writers, with clearly defined borders making the beginning and conclusion of the writing” (p.194). The author(s) has created a work with a clear beginning and end. Coherence and cohesion are requirements for the delivery of this print. The text may consist of one or more paragraphs and may be written in either prose or verse. Depending on the message it conveys, it may take various forms. In addition, when examining how a text affects reading comprehension, vocabulary, sentence structure, and grammar are essential factors to consider (Labioid, 2007).

#### **Text Type**

The reader’s comprehension is also likely influenced by the text type. Each type has distinct qualities with respect to the general theme and its organization. Additionally, the text type determines the vocabulary and sentence structure. Davies (1995) argues that a text is defined by its rhetorical purpose. He further notes that a text is either explanatory, persuasive, or descriptive. These features serve as markers of the author's social objectives rather than as reflections of the text’s difficulty or content. Furthermore, he identifies more specialized lower-level rhetorical functions, including comparison-contrast, cause-effect, argument-exemplification, problem-and-solution, and general-to-specific patterns, in the text. Each form of writing reveals a specific developmental trajectory and a particular sequence of the writer’s thoughts. To ensure that readers successfully follow the writer's flow of ideas, they must be aware of various forms of development (Labioid, 2007).

In general, there are two major types of texts: narrative and explanatory. The reader should be familiar with the many components of the narrative text. They must remember that a narrative passage typically provides a biography while also telling a story, whether it is a folktale, a short story, a fable, a myth, a fantasy, a legend, or a work of science fiction. It consists of an opening section, the main action, and a conclusion. The narrative text focuses on specific components, including characters, settings, themes, conflict, the series of events that resolve the plot, and the resolution of the conflict. Rumelhart (1980) claims that these story grammars are beneficial for comprehending a significant portion of the story to be read. As a result, the reader's comprehension is influenced by their understanding of the features outlined above.



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### **Vocabulary**

Reading comprehension is significantly affected by vocabulary, which constitutes a substantial part of the text. EFL readers frequently encounter issues with new textual pieces that they ignore. It is one of the barriers to natural and free reading. Put differently, a reader who encounters such issues frequently turns to dictionaries for definitions. Knowing that a lexical term may have different definitions depending on context can help a reader identify the correct definition, even as they become increasingly confused. This is likely a waste of time and effort, as it typically demotivates readers and impairs their attention (Alyousef, 2005). In the same vein, Coody & Huckin (1975) state that vocabulary plays a key role in ensuring that readers can understand texts; once a passage's lexis has been covered, understanding also occurs. This is a common norm in any language, whether foreign, second, or native. For this reason, vocabulary knowledge is recommended, whether it be in your native language or a target language.

Additionally, when reading for general understanding, readers may skip words they do not understand to infer their meaning from the surrounding context. In other situations, the reader should have a reasonable proportion of terms they are familiar with and very few unfamiliar words when reading a text carefully and attentively, with the goal of thorough comprehension. Generally, lexical knowledge is important for comprehension. The degree of understanding the type of meaning the reader seeks to achieve determines how much of this knowledge is conveyed (Labioud, 2007).

Perfetti (2002) identifies additional factors that influence reading comprehension, such as vocabulary and word understanding. He asserted that understanding sentences requires identifying words and proposed that reading skills are supported by a working knowledge of words, including their spelling, pronunciation, morphology, and meaning.

### **Automaticity**

Automaticity refers to the reader's quick word recognition. Fluent reading largely depends on automaticity. In other words, if the reader is good at word recognition, their attention will be directed toward understanding rather than wasting time on the decoding process. Rapid word and sentence recognition will free readers' time, allowing them to focus more on developing their own interpretations of the content they read (Hawkins, 1991; Roembke, 2019; Fisher, 2016). In addition to accurate reading, effective reading comprehension requires automatic, fluent reading. Many struggling readers lack the automaticity and fluency necessary to quickly understand what they read. Research on the development of accurate decoding indicates that a systematic code-based strategy is critical for teaching initial reading skills (Hook & Jones, 2002; Cotter, 2012; Rupley et al., 2009).



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### **Lexical Knowledge**

One factor affecting text readability is lexical knowledge. Reading and comprehension are independent processes, but they cannot be distinguished when texts contain numerous lexical terms that students do not understand. This suggests that some learners read without deriving meaning from the text. The beginning of a sentence, for instance, may be forgotten by certain readers before they get to the end (Owu-Ewie, 2015). When other readers process texts, they make "miscues," deviating from the exact meaning. For this reason, it is recommended that teachers include one or two unfamiliar vocabulary items in a passage. The rationale for this recommendation is that reading itself, rather than vocabulary, is the goal of reading comprehension (Day, 1994).

As illustrated above, the major problems learners encounter in EFL classrooms stem from difficulties in grasping the meanings of vocabulary items or encountering unknown lexical items mentioned in the text. This leads us to say it would be better for teachers to take into consideration the learner's background knowledge in terms of the lexical items they use, since this latter either motivates or demotivates learners to grasp the meaning of the text.

### **Reader variables**

Scholarly research demonstrates that readers' cognitive and affective abilities influence their comprehension. These include the reader's level of interest in the text, their reading purpose, their language skills, their cultural background, and their familiarity with the text's subject matter. The reader's level of comprehension will probably depend on each of these factors (Taboada et al., 2009)

### **Motivation**

Reading is closely tied to students' level of motivation. When students are motivated to read, they strive hard to overcome the challenging content. Two variables can influence one's motivation: internal factors, such as interest and attitude, and external factors, like the material and the teacher. Students can apply reading motivation to expand their knowledge, comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition. Understanding the ideas and how they relate to one another is what is meant by the term "comprehension" (McNamara, 2010, p. 4). Assuming that students must understand what is being covered, comprehension is crucial in learning activities. According to Moore (2014), reading comprehension is a sophisticated interaction between automatic and strategic cognitive processes that enables the reader to form a mental image of the text. Students can understand the meaning of the words, sentences, and texts they read through reading comprehension (Smith et al., 2023).



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It becomes clear that reading is a crucial component of any learning process, and teachers play an important role in enhancing pupils' learning. Engaging pupils in their own education is a challenging task for teachers. Alyousef (2006) argues that one of the instructors' duties is to encourage reading by choosing the right materials, particularly for early learning stages to stimulate education and student achievement.

### **Purpose of Reading**

The reader approaches the text with several goals in mind, and these goals affect how he reads and the level of comprehension he achieves. Reading can be done for enjoyment. As a result, he may not pay close enough attention to pick up details in the text. Unless it doesn't affect his general comprehension, the reader may skip long passages. Here, the reader's goal is to gain broad knowledge without sinking into details. This is what happens when a reader reads extensively and seeks broad meanings. The reader may also approach the text for in-depth study. As a result, the reader studies the text with much focus to gather all the information necessary for accuracy. The reader's aim may go beyond enjoyment and in-depth comprehension to criticism and assessment. As a result, he seeks to contribute to the text by expressing his own opinions on what he has read. The reader may also skim the text to grasp the gist. Skimming can help assess the material's relevance to the reader's objective, or it can reveal that the text is off-topic. Additionally, readers can skim documents such as menus, phone books, and even texts to locate specific information (Labioud, 2007; Broek et al., 2011).

While reading, the reader should have a goal in mind. If he gets lost in a text and reads without purpose, reading will be useless. Wallace (1980) argues that it is essential to have a purpose for reading. According to this researcher, a reader who begins without a clear goal or with some degree of confusion is more likely to become disinterested in reading. Additionally, his comprehension results will likely be poor, if not nonexistent. Walking without a destination will fail. Students cannot interact with the text without having a clear goal, whether that goal is to find joy, information, or answers to questions. It is one way of minimizing the reader's time and effort. Furthermore, it guarantees his interest and passion while reading.

It is important to note that the motivation for reading a text can change throughout time. We can initially read the text for enjoyment. When reading with this objective in mind, some passages may have an impact on us that they might not have on us when reading for a different purpose. One text may be read, understood, and appreciated differently depending on the purpose. As a result, reading purposes understood as "not static" indicate that we may return to a text and make quite different meanings with it on each occasion." (Chandler, 1995, p.13).



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### **Interest Level in the Text**

Teachers should select learning materials for their pupils that are appropriate for their age, culture, and learning level. The teacher must understand each student's level to use the reading materials effectively and help each student advance at his or her own pace. ESL teachers play a crucial role in supporting students with diverse needs and helping them acquire a second language (Mahmoud, 2019; Tety, 2016). According to Alyousef (2006), one of the teacher's duties is to select appropriate materials to encourage reading, particularly for students in the early stages of learning.

A text that captures the reader's interest through its aesthetic elements, word choice, and theme is likely to motivate the reader to sink into it. As he progresses through the text, the reader becomes increasingly eager to finish it. He typically reads the same passage several times, expanding his understanding with each reading. In light of this, the reader's preferences and motivation play a significant role in reading comprehension. Widdowson (1978) argues that readers typically attend to material relevant to their interests and are unconcerned with texts that fail to stimulate their interest or curiosity. Boredom and difficulty with reading may decrease when readers select texts that match their preferences. Specifically, students' motivation depends on how well the passage's topic captures their attention and interest (Richard, 1994).

### **The Reader's Language Proficiency**

The ability to read a foreign language depends on the reader's proficiency in that language. Additionally, how well a reader understands a text depends on how well they understand the language's linguistic features. He should have no trouble understanding the text if he has a large vocabulary, is familiar with the many cohesive devices, and is skilled in the various sentence patterns. The reader cannot proceed to make predictions or anticipate the text's meaning without first attending to the linguistic information displayed on the page, which serves as a stimulus for the reader's own contributions to comprehension. Thus, the reader cannot continue to guess and anticipate if he does not understand what is presented on the page. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the reading process is hindered by language difficulties (Bouvet, 2002).

### **Culture**

One factor affecting EFL readers' comprehension of reading passages is culture. For reading theorists, this idea presents a serious problem. Some believe that reading will prepare EFL readers to interact with and understand the target culture. Readers of literature in a foreign language have a good chance of learning about that culture's way of life. It is an opportunity to gain a clearer understanding of the cultural heritage of foreigners (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Chihara et al., 1989; Bensalah, 2020). According to other reading theorists, comprehension is



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hindered by the target culture. Even if the reader has a high level of language proficiency, they are unlikely to fully understand the cultural context of the text. Thus, cultural ignorance can cause comprehension difficulties, which are considered a double-edged factor in FL reading comprehension (Labioud, 2007; Rasmayanti, 2022).

One important factor to consider when teaching reading comprehension in EFL classes is students' prior knowledge. Instructors have to base their teaching on the readers' previous knowledge because their knowledge about a particular topic will motivate them to read the text and interact with it, and this can be achieved only when teachers consider students' prior knowledge while teaching a particular passage (Jiménez, 2007; Alhaisoni, 2017; Natsir, 2016; Mulatu, 2022). Furthermore, readers are more likely to understand a text's topic if they are already familiar with it. Reading without prior knowledge of the subject matter prevents one from understanding the text's full meaning. The overall meaning will always be unclear, even though he may understand individual words, phrases, and sentences. Every time the author fails to establish a clear sense, the reader is left wondering what the author is trying to get at. Poetry is a good example of a material that readers often struggle to comprehend because they are unfamiliar with its subject matter. They typically consider reading and comprehending poetry challenging. Although the words and sentences in many verses may be understood, the overall meaning or message of the poetry is sometimes missed. If readers are aware of the poem's theme or subject matter before reading, their reading experience will differ, and their comprehension is likely to improve (Labioud, 2007).

### **Knowledge of the Topic**

One important factor to consider when teaching reading comprehension in EFL classes is students' prior knowledge. Instructors have to base their teaching on the readers' previous knowledge because their knowledge about a particular topic will motivate them to read the text and interact with it, and this can be achieved only when teachers consider students' prior knowledge while teaching a particular passage (Jiménez, 2007; Alhaisoni, 2017; Natsir, 2016; Mulatu, 2022). Furthermore, readers are more likely to understand a text's topic if they are already familiar with it. Reading without prior knowledge of the subject matter prevents one from understanding the text's full meaning. The overall meaning will always be unclear, even though he may understand individual words, phrases, and sentences. Every time the author fails to establish a clear sense, the reader is left wondering what the author is trying to get at. Poetry is a good example of a material that readers often struggle to comprehend because they are unfamiliar with its subject matter. They typically consider reading and comprehending poetry challenging. Although the words and sentences in many verses may be understood, the overall meaning or message of the poetry is sometimes missed. If readers are aware of the poem's theme or subject matter before reading, their reading experience will differ, and their comprehension is likely to improve (Labioud, 2007).



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### Reading Difficulties for ESL Learners

Reading in a second language presents numerous challenges for learners. According to Gibbons (2002), a successful reader of a particular book requires four literacy abilities. EFL students face difficulties at multiple levels. First and foremost, the reader should be a codebreaker, which implies familiarity with basic formats and text components, such as the alphabet and writing orientation. Although this type is necessary in language, it does not provide comprehension of meaning. Second, the reader is assumed to link the text to his/her previous knowledge, including global and cultural knowledge, and text structure, which necessitates a strong understanding of the passage's explicit and implicit information. Third, the reader is referred to as a text user when they can apply the information in the text to various activities and social contexts. Fourth, readers, as text analysts, should be able to evaluate texts critically and infer what is implied as well as what is explicitly stated. When readers first encounter a passage, they may use their critical thinking to recognize that any text has a specific theme or point of view, which helps them read more effectively. A reader needs to be effective to perform well in the aforementioned areas.

### Conclusion

Given the aspects examined in this article, reading comprehension is a complex process shaped by the interplay of text-related and reader-related variables. For Moroccan EFL learners, efficient meaning creation depends not only on language skills such as vocabulary knowledge and automatic decoding (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), but also on the effective activation of prior knowledge and cultural schemata. As Carrell (1987) suggests, students must be motivated by resources that correspond with their interests and specific reading aims in order to graduate from being a basic "code breaker" to a critical "text analyst" (Freebody & Luke, 1990). To facilitate and reduce reading challenges and create a more engaging learning environment, instructors should use a strategic approach to content selection that prioritizes learners' previous knowledge and communication goals. By addressing these multiple effects, instructors can help students overcome the challenges of foreign-language reading and achieve higher levels of comprehension (Clarke, 1980).

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