

An Exploratory Study of the Challenges Faced by Secondary EFL Learners in Reading Comprehension

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Abstract:

Reading is one of the four essential language skills in teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language, and it requires active interaction between the author, the reader, and the text. Any disruption may cause misunderstanding. This study investigates reading comprehension challenges faced by second-year foreign languages pupils at Guettal Aissa Secondary School in Barika and identifies contributing factors. Using a quantitative approach, an eighteen-question questionnaire was administered to thirty three pupils, and the data were analyzed using SPSS-25. The findings showed problems mainly in grammar, making inferences, vocabulary, and time constraints. The results indicated that inadequate teaching methods, poor vocabulary, lack of reading habits, and unawareness of reading strategies were key causes. The study concluded that teachers' insufficient training and learners' limited use of strategies contribute to these difficulties and suggested pedagogical implications and future research on digital tools.

Key words: EFL, reading comprehension challenges, contributing factors, reading strategies, second-year secondary pupils.

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1. Introduction

Reading is a vital language skill that holds great importance, as it plays a key role in gaining knowledge, particularly in academic settings. It is the most important skill among the four language skills, as it can improve overall language proficiency (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Krashen & Brown, 2007). Yukselir (2014) considers reading to be one of the most beneficial, fundamental, and central skills for students to master, enabling them to learn new information, gain access to alternative explanations and interpretations, and initiate the synthesis of critical evaluation skills. Hung and Ngan (2015) have also said that reading is a basic skill that can improve students' vocabulary, fluency, speaking and writing, and finally can help them master their target language. Thus, it is evident that successful students must possess strong reading abilities. Moreover, Rivers (1981) said that "reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language" (p. 147).

Notably, according to Stauffer (1969), reading entails comprehending, which highlights the importance of text comprehension. Therefore, reading comprehension is the essence of reading and the active process of constructing meaning (Durkin, 1993). It is also defined as "a complex interaction among automatic and strategic cognitive processes that enables the reader to create a mental representation of the text" (Van den Broek & Espin, 2012). In this regard, it is widely acknowledged that reading comprehension involves more than just identifying words or even comprehending them as they are presented to the viewer. Hence, it is a dynamic skill that involves adapting how one processes written material. It focuses on building an understanding of the text's content, interpreting its meaning, and connecting it with the reader's existing knowledge and purpose.

In fact, reading comprehension is one of the most often discussed subjects in EFL reading classes nowadays. While many students in middle school, high school, college, and even adulthood have learned to read, others will find it difficult to comprehend what they are reading (Mol & Bus, 2011). According to Bani Issa (2004), as comprehension is a personal creation of meaning, reading comprehension may be considered a problem that faces students of English as a foreign language. Therefore, it is fundamental to realize that understanding the text is the primary goal of reading and that reading texts in a foreign language differs from reading in one's first language. Additionally, EFL learners, who face difficulties with reading, often struggle in school and tend to perform poorly and there are obviously some factors that may cause problems in their reading comprehension process. More importantly, as English is taught in Algeria as a foreign language, it is possible that EFL learners may encounter challenges in reading comprehension. Therefore, identifying reading comprehension challenges faced by EFL learners is vital for addressing these problems and fostering their reading comprehension skills.

Basically, this study aims to explore reading comprehension challenges experienced by second-year foreign languages pupils at Guettal Aissa Secondary School in Barika. It also seeks to find out the factors that contribute to these problems. The findings are also meant to provide teachers with new perspectives that may help their pupils overcome those obstacles and enhance their reading comprehension abilities in secondary schools.

2. Literature Review

This section concerns a few theoretical concepts and empirical studies that deal with the challenges that EFL learners encountered in reading comprehension.

2.1. Reading

Sweet and Snow (2003) define reading as a process of constructing meaning from text. While Grabe and Stoller (2002) point out that reading is drawing and interpreting meaning from the printed page to become solid information. Alyousef (2006, p. 64) has also argued that "reading can be seen as an interactive process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity or reading fluency." Therefore, reading is commonly called a "psycholinguistic guessing game" in which a

reader makes guesses and matches any experience with the information given in the reading task. (Goodman, 1967).

2.2. Reading Comprehension

One of the prominent components of reading skill is reading comprehension. In literature, reading comprehension has been defined in a number of different ways by various experts. According to Hornby in Irwan (2010), he mentioned that reading comprehension defines reading the text with the rule of understanding the written codes. Therefore, reading comprehension is a cooperative process among the written text and the reader's upbringing knowledge (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1984).

Reading comprehension is a complex, multiple task ability. These processes were divided into two equally difficult main types, lower-level and higher-level processes (Stroller, et.al., 2002). The lower-level abilities include word recognition, graph phonics and others, while the higher-level abilities included syntactic, semantic and other processes. In order to be able to comprehend what is read, a person needs to be familiar with text structure and topic, aware of reading strategies, how to use these strategies in the processing of material and word recognition (Pang, 2008).

2.3. Reading Comprehension Problems

Reading comprehension is concerned with the ability to pay attention to written information, which can sometimes be a difficult process for readers (Carver, 1992). For a long time, reading comprehension issues have been a common problem in EFL teaching and learning environments. Several studies have demonstrated that the majority of EFL students frequently struggle with understanding texts in English. One of them, was conducted by Qrquez and Rashid (2017) in Jordan, investigated the reading comprehension difficulties faced by first and second-year students at Yarmouk University, highlighting the challenges they encountered while reading English as a foreign language. The study used a questionnaire as a research tool to gather data from 200 students at Yarmouk University. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: the students' language preferences and the students' reading difficulties. The findings of this study revealed that the respondents faced several problems in the reading process, including unclear words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and a lack of time to process the text cognitively. Another study (Hassan & Dweik, 2021), entitled 'Factors and Challenges in English reading comprehension among young Arab EFL learners', explored the difficulties that 9th-grade Jordanian female students faced in reading comprehension tasks in English, and the factors that contributed to these difficulties, through a mixed-methods approach combining a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The overall analysis of data showed that vocabulary, grammar, and syntax are major difficulties faced by students in reading comprehension tasks, and that time constraints, lack of vocabulary, background knowledge, and interesting text topics, as well as teaching methods and resources, also contributed to these difficulties. In addition, in Pakistan, a study (Raheem et al., 2021), called "Reading Difficulties of Primary School English Language Learners: A Case Study of District Dera Ghazi Khan", used a qualitative approach, collecting data through semi-structured interviews with English language teachers and non-participatory observation of students' reading classes. Thematic analysis was applied to extract data from the interviews, and a checklist was used to collect data on students' reading difficulties. The study found that most of the students were facing a number of difficulties in terms of their English reading skills. These difficulties were related to decoding of lexical items, mispronunciation of words, identifying and reading a multi-syllabic word, etc. Lack of phonological awareness, inadequate teaching methodology, and lack of motivation from parents and teachers were key factors contributing to reading difficulties. The study also declared that students who were encouraged to read at home were more fluent readers and had a better understanding of the text, while those who lacked motivation struggled with decoding, fluency, and vocabulary.

Moreover, Suliman's study (2023), "An Investigation of Reading Comprehension Difficulties amongst EFL Students at Qassim University," sought to explore the reading comprehension difficulties of EFL students and identify the factors contributing to them. The study used a quantitative design, with a closed-ended questionnaire consisting of 18 items divided into three

dimensions: lack of linguistic knowledge, the teacher's lack of teaching experience, and the requirement for teaching reading. The study found that EFL university students' reading comprehension was weakened by limited knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and grammar, as well as low working memory abilities and sociocultural context, as well as poor teaching methods, including a lack of emphasis on reading comprehension and inadequate pre-teaching of new vocabulary and grammatical elements. Meanwhile, a similar study (Ahmed & Daff-Alla, 2023) discussed the problems encountered by Saudi EFL learners in English reading comprehension in a given text. The descriptive approach with its quantitative component was the technique used for data collection through a questionnaire distributed to 150 experienced English language instructors at Albaha University and other Saudi universities. This study showed that Saudi EFL students had trouble in understanding text when they encountered new words or unfamiliar vocabulary. They had several reading issues when they tried to read texts written in English. Lack of comprehension of the English text or text structure that they read was the main challenge Saudi EFL learners encountered, followed by inattention, difficult words, and grammatical knowledge. The study concluded that vocabulary knowledge was essential for understanding English-language text, and that reading strategies and teacher support could help improve reading comprehension.

In Indonesia, research was carried out to analyze the students' difficulties in reading comprehension skills using descriptive qualitative method and a purposive sampling, 98 students of Basic Reading Class at English Education Program in University of Indraprasta PGRI were engaged (Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023). The key findings of the study were all students experienced difficulties, with the most common being distinguishing between main ideas and supporting details, in addition to getting the main idea between paragraphs, and understanding vocabulary. It also showed that students often used predicting, dictionary and context clues, and skimming and scanning strategies to get the information from the texts. Another important study was conducted there, in 2024, by Wenssy Steva Nussy and Noni R. Pekpekay, in order to explore the obstacles of (EFL) students in semesters two and four of the English Education Study Program, to enhance understanding and provide insights into improving EFL students' reading comprehension skills. Using both questionnaires and interviews, the results of the study indicated that limited vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, motivation, and confidence were significant obstacles to reading comprehension, and that lecturers have recommended various strategies, including reading enjoyable and accessible books, practicing reading diligently, and employing techniques like Wrap Up, Collaborative Strategic Reading (CSR), and Click and Clunk. On the other hand, at the secondary level, another research (Amrullah et al, 2024), entitled 'Students Difficulties in Reading Comprehension in relation to their learning styles', was done simultaneously to find out what problems students often faced when they learned to understand what they read, what made these problems happen, and how these problems differed based on how students liked to learn. To meet this end, the research looked at students in class XI.A at SMA Insan Cendekia Syech Yusuf and used a questionnaire called The VARK 8.0, and interviews. The study identified eleven factors causing students' difficulties in reading comprehension, including limited vocabulary, lack of fluency, length of the text, problem in recalling after reading, grammatical structure, students' interest, teacher explanation, learners' background, physical problem, technical problem and limited time.

In sum, the previous studies mentioned above clearly stated that the difficulties most EFL learners struggled with were caused by a combination of factors and that those difficulties could be addressed by implementing effective strategies such as improving vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, and selecting readings based on students' interests. They also highlighted the importance of considering the factors that influence reading comprehension, such as age, sex, field of study, academic achievement, and the number of years studying in the university, or high schools. More importantly, they suggested further research to find effective ways to tackle the reading comprehension difficulties faced by EFL learners in various educational settings and

contexts and at different levels as well. Also, future empirical investigations should examine the effectiveness of tailored teaching approaches including the use of technology and online resources, and to provide ongoing support and guidance to help EFL learners overcome their reading comprehension challenges and improve their reading comprehension results.

In the Algerian context, a great deal of studies were conducted, aiming at investigating EFL learners' reading comprehension difficulties in different parts of the country and with different levels (secondary, middle, and university level). Firstly, at the secondary level, in Tlemcen Province, a study (Babaiba Medjahdi, 2015) entitled 'Reading Comprehension Difficulties among EFL Learners: The Case of Third-Year Learners at Nehali Mohamed Secondary School.', used a questionnaire and interview with third-year learners and teachers at that school. The questionnaire contained nine multiple-choice questions and was used to collect data from the learners. The results of this study showed that most learners faced difficulties in reading comprehension due to various causes, including pronunciation, ambiguous words, and text selection, with a lack of reading habit also being a significant factor. A similar study (Boukhobza & Cherid, 2017), entitled 'An Investigation of Reading Comprehension Difficulties and Strategies in English Language as a Foreign Language', investigated the major reading difficulties faced by third-year pupils in Abd Elhamid Ben Badis Secondary School- Jijel and their use of reading strategies. For this purpose, the study used three means of data collection: a reading comprehension test, a pupil questionnaire, and a think-aloud procedure. The latter was used to develop knowledge about learners' actual strategy use in a specific reading situation. The findings revealed that pupils encountered various difficulties such as lack of background knowledge, vocabulary, and topic genre, and that both proficient and poor readers adopted different strategies in the reading process. Likewise, the research of Benguedda (2018) explored the reading difficulties faced by first-year 'Ahmed BEY' secondary school pupils in the scientific stream of Oudjida –TLEMEN-, and identified the causes of these difficulties, as well as how the learning and teaching processes tackle the reading skill. The research used triangulation of instruments, including a questionnaire, an interview, and a classroom observation, to collect both qualitative and quantitative data. The key findings of the study were that lack of reading and types of texts were the major causes of hindering pupils' reading comprehension, and that most EFL pupils suffered from understanding ambiguous and new words, and some pupils also face difficulties in grammar and pronunciation. The study also found that the lack of reading was a major cause of miscomprehension among EFL pupils. In addition to this, a study by Boudiaf (2020) focused on third-year students' reading comprehension difficulties in Saadi Tahar Harat secondary school in Constantine. This research used a questionnaire-based approach, with two questionnaires designed and administered to students and teachers. The findings highlighted major difficulties, including insufficient lexical (vocabulary) and syntactic (grammar) knowledge and difficulty in recognizing text structure. In addition to challenges with reading fluency, low awareness, and the use of reading comprehension strategies.

Secondly, at the middle level, a study (Yakoub & Lemzeri, 2020), entitled 'Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Comprehension Difficulties among EFL Learners: The Case of Fourth Year Middle School Learners, Jijel', investigated the role of reading techniques in enhancing learners' reading comprehension level, using a questionnaire administered to fourth-year middle school teachers. This scholarly work revealed that fourth-year middle school learners encountered major problems in the reading process, including difficulties with vocabulary, comprehension, and reading strategies and that teachers could help them overcome these difficulties by teaching reading strategies. Another study by Mime (2021), called 'Investigating Reading Comprehension Difficulties among EFL learners: The case of Four-middle school pupils in 27th February 1962 school in Ouargla', used different methods, including a questionnaire with the target participants, an interview with teachers, and a practical exercise in the class with pupils to collect data. This research showed that those pupils faced difficulties in terms of insufficient time, bad selection of texts, and inadequate approach. A related investigation (Bouta & Amour, 2022) was carried out about the reading comprehension difficulties of fourth-year middle school learners in Bordj Bou-

Arreridj city, and the role of reading techniques in enhancing their reading comprehension level. The key findings of the study revealed that the participants encountered major problems in the reading process, including difficulties with vocabulary and comprehension and lack of motivation too.

Thirdly, at the university level, a study by Douadi (2022) investigated the difficulties of EFL first-year students' reading Comprehension at the English Department of Biskra University, using a qualitative approach, with a semi-structured questionnaire distributed to the students and a semi-structured interview conducted with the teachers. The descriptive method was used to analyze the acquired data. This scholarly work found that those learners struggled with reading comprehension mainly owing to their limited vocabulary and lack of practice, motivation, and concentration. A parallel study called 'The Impact of Reading Comprehension Difficulties on Students' level: A Case Study of Third Year EFL Learners at the University Centre of Mila', was conducted by Djamaa Chiraze and Kerrouche Djanette in 2023. In order to collect the required data, both a test and a questionnaire were used as research instruments and distributed to teachers and third-year EFL students at Mila University Center. The findings demonstrated that a large number of students struggled with reading comprehension, primarily due to their limited vocabulary, poor text comprehension, and lack of reading practice.

All in all, it is evident that these previous studies employed a variety of methodological approaches, including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, suggesting that no gap exists in terms of research design. On the other hand, they reported approximately similar findings in terms of challenges faced by Algerian EFL learners at the secondary (first and third-year pupils), the middle and the university level too. However, the current study focuses on second-year secondary pupils in the foreign languages stream at Guettal Aissa Secondary School in Barika. This context and setting difference highlight a gap in the literature, which is what this study attempts to fill.

3. Research Methodology

This study was mainly constructed for the sake of revealing the reading comprehension difficulties that learners encountered during the reading process, as well as to find out the contributing factors that cause those problems. To meet this end, a quantitative approach was used.

3.1. Setting and Participants

Broadly speaking, reading comprehension is the cornerstone of effective language acquisition, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. A persistent challenge in reading comprehension was identified during a formal discussion among five EFL teachers at Guettal Aissa Secondary School in Barika, following the analysis of second-term exam results. This analysis revealed that a significant majority of second-year pupils in the foreign languages stream struggled with comprehension questions, both in examinations and during classroom activities, despite being the only stream and level with five English sessions per week, compared to other streams and levels. Therefore, the study took place in May 2025 at Guettal Aissa Secondary School in Barika. It utilized purposive sampling technique, and the participants were thirty-three second-year pupils in the foreign languages stream. The majority of the sample were females, with 29 females and 4 males participating, suggesting that female learners tend to be more engaged in foreign language studies, while males are more inclined toward scientific and technical fields. The participants were teenagers, with most of them aged 17, while others were 16 or 18 years old. Most of the participants had between 5 and 7 years of experience studying English, while 6 of them had more than seven years of experience, often due to repeating school years as a result of academic challenges.

3.2. Research Instruments

To further investigate the nature of these difficulties, a quantitative research tool, specifically a printed questionnaire, was administered to the participants. According to Creswell (2011), quantitative research consists of strategies of inquiry and collects data using predetermined instruments that yield statistical results. By definition, questionnaires "are any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by

writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers” (Brown, 2001, p. 6). According to Sugiono (2013), questionnaires are an efficient data collection technique if the researcher knows exactly the variables to be measured and what is expected from respondents.

This questionnaire was adopted from a previous study conducted by Babaiba Medjahdi (2015). Its structure was arranged from general to specific in order to familiarize pupils with the topic of the research. It was composed of closed-ended questions (e.g., multiple choice, Likert scales, yes/no) to facilitate the process of answering. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section covered learners’ background information. The second section explored their perceptions of reading. The third section was devoted to identifying their difficulties in reading comprehension, the reading strategies used by learners, and the techniques adopted by teachers to improve reading comprehension skills. As for reliability, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used to test the consistency of the data collected, yielding a high value of 0.986, which indicated that all questions were designed consistently. Thus, the questionnaire was both valid and reliable.

Additionally, the questionnaire was distributed in the classroom. Although it was written in English, the researcher explained each question in Arabic because most pupils had low proficiency in English, ensuring the collection of valid information. During the session, the researcher moved around the classroom to ensure that pupils answered the questionnaire correctly. Afterward, the researcher collected all the completed questionnaires. Finally, the data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS); in other words, the quantitative data was analyzed statistically.

4. Results

This study is set to investigate the difficulties in reading comprehension faced by Secondary second-year EFL pupils in the foreign languages stream at Guettal Aissa Secondary School in Barika and to find out the factors that cause them. This section deals with interpreting and reporting results collected from the questionnaire.

Table 1: Learners’ Perceptions of the Importance of Reading Comprehension

1-How important do you think reading comprehension is for learning English?	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
a-Very important	17	51.5%	51.5%	51.5%
b-Moderately important	12	36.4%	36.4%	87.9%
c-Slightly important	4	12.1%	12.1%	100.0%
d-Not important at all	00	00%	0.0%	
Total	33	100.0%	100.0%	

Table 1 shows pupils’ attitudes towards reading comprehension for learning English. The results indicate that (51.5%) of respondents consider reading comprehension very important, while (36.4%) of them regard it as moderately important. In addition, (12.1%) of the sample perceive it as slightly important, whereas no respondents considered it not important at all. This indicates that the majority of the respondents acknowledge the value of reading comprehension for learning English; thus, they may be more motivated to improve their reading comprehension skills.

Table 2: Learners’ Main Purposes for Reading

2-What is your primary goal of reading?	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
a- To enrich general knowledge.	12	36.4%	36.4%	36.4%
b- To increase vocabulary.	6	18.2%	18.2%	54.5%
c- For academic needs.	8	24.2%	24.2%	78.8%
d- For pleasure.	7	21.2%	21.2%	100.0%
Total	33	100.0%	100.0%	

Table 2 illustrates pupils' main purposes for reading in English. The results indicate that 36.4% of respondents read to enrich their general knowledge, 24.2% read for academic needs, 21.2% read for pleasure, and 18.2% aim to increase their vocabulary. This suggests that pupils have varied motivations for reading, with a particular focus on knowledge enrichment and academic improvement.

Table 3: Frequency of Reading in English Outside the Classroom

3-How often do you read in English outside the classroom?	Frequency	Percentage	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
a-Always	2	6.1%	6.1%	6.1%
b-Often	7	21.2%	21.2%	27.3%
c-Sometimes	13	39.4%	39.4%	66.7%
d-Rarely	6	18.2%	18.2%	84.8%
e-Never	5	15.2%	15.2%	100.0%
Total	33	100.0%	100.0%	

Table 3 indicates the frequency with which learners read in English outside the classroom. The results show that 39.4% of respondents sometimes engage in reading in English, while 21.2% do so often. A smaller proportion of participants reported rarely reading in English (18.2%) or never reading at all (15.2%). The lowest percentage, 6.1%, indicated that they always read in English outside the classroom. Therefore, the results suggest that learners' reading in English is generally infrequent, which may have a negative impact on their language development.

Table 4: Learners' Preferred Types of Reading Materials

4-What types of reading materials do you enjoy?	Frequency	Percentage
a-Storybooks	10	30.3%
b-Textbooks	3	9.1%
c-Articles	1	3.0%
d-Websites/blogs	6	18.2%
e-Social media posts	21	63.6%
f-All of the above	4	12.1%

Table 4 highlights pupils' preferences for types of reading materials. According to the data, 63.6% of respondents enjoy reading social media posts, 30.3% prefer storybooks, 18.2% like websites or blogs, 9.1% choose textbooks, 3.0% select articles, and 12.1% enjoy all types. This indicates that pupils tend to favor digital and informal reading materials over traditional sources.

Table 5: Main Challenges Faced by Learners in Reading Comprehension

5-What are the main challenges you face in reading comprehension?	Frequency	Percentage
a-Vocabulary (understanding unknown words)	13	39.6%
b-Grammar (understanding sentence structure)	16	48.5%
c-Understanding the main idea of the text	11	33.3%
d-Understanding the connection between different parts of the text.	7	21.2%
e-Answering questions about the text	6	18.2%
f-Identifying details in the text	10	30.3%
g-Making inferences (reading between the lines)	15	45.5%
h-Losing focus while reading	11	33.3%
i-Time management (reading within a time limit)	13	39.4%
j-All of the above	9	27.3%

Table 5 shows the main challenges learners face in reading comprehension. The most reported difficulty was understanding grammar, particularly sentence structure, with sixteen pupils (48.5%)

indicating this as a challenge. Making inferences, or reading between the lines, was also a common difficulty, reported by fifteen learners (45.5%). Vocabulary, or understanding unknown words, was challenging for thirteen pupils (39.6%), while time management during reading was similarly reported by thirteen respondents (39.4%). Understanding the main idea and losing focus were each mentioned by eleven learners (33.3%). Identifying details in the text was noted by ten pupils (30.3%), and answering questions about the text was challenging for six learners (18.2%).

Additionally, nine respondents (27.3%) reported facing all of the above challenges, highlighting the variety of obstacles learners encounter in reading comprehension.

Table 6: Causes of Reading Comprehension Difficulties

6-What are the causes behind your reading comprehension difficulties?	Frequency	Percentage
a-Lack of reading habits.	18	54.5%
b-Lack of motivation for reading.	10	30.3%
c-Lack of time to practice reading.	12	36.4%
d-Lack of reading comprehension strategies.	18	54.5%
e-Lack of vocabulary knowledge.	19	57.6%
f-Difficulty of reading materials.	16	48.5%
g-The teaching method adopted by your teacher.	20	60.6%
h-All of them.	6	18.2%
i- Other (please specify)	8	24.2%

Table 6 outlines the main causes behind learners' difficulties in reading comprehension. The most commonly reported cause was the teaching method adopted by the teacher, indicated by twenty pupils (60.6%). Lack of vocabulary knowledge was also a major factor, with nineteen respondents (57.6%) highlighting that limited word knowledge hinders their understanding of texts. Similarly, lack of reading habits and lack of reading comprehension strategies were each reported by eighteen learners (54.5%), suggesting that both insufficient practice and limited strategic awareness contribute significantly to reading challenges.

Difficulty of reading materials was mentioned by sixteen pupils (48.5%), while lack of time to practice reading was reported by twelve learners (36.4%). Lack of motivation for reading was indicated by ten respondents (30.3%), showing that affective factors also play a role in comprehension difficulties. Additionally, eight learners (24.2%) specified other causes, and six pupils (18.2%) selected all of the listed options, reflecting that multiple interrelated factors may contribute to reading comprehension difficulties.

Table 7: Strategies Used by Learners to Improve their Reading Comprehension

7-What strategies do you currently use to improve your reading comprehension?	Frequency	Percentage
a-Before I read the text, I look at the title and pictures to predict the content.	15	45.5%
b-I look quickly at the whole text to see how long it is and how it is organized.	16	48.5%
c-I read slowly and carefully to understand the details.	10	30.3%
d-I connect the content of the text with what I already know.	3	9.1%
e-I try to understand hidden meanings or ideas that are not directly said.	5	15.2%
f- I try to find the main idea of each paragraph.	2	6.1%
g- I skip unknown and difficult words if I can still understand the gist.	11	33.3%
h- I write short summaries to remember key ideas of the text.	2	6.1%
i- None of them.	5	15.2%

Table 7 presents the strategies learners currently use to enhance their reading comprehension. The most frequently used strategy was looking quickly at the whole text to see its length and organization, reported by sixteen pupils (48.5%). Predicting the content by examining the title and pictures was also common, with fifteen respondents (45.5%) indicating that they rely on this approach before reading. Additionally, eleven learners (33.3%) mentioned that they skip unknown or difficult words when they can still understand the general meaning of the text, suggesting a focus on overall comprehension rather than word-by-word decoding.

Reading slowly and carefully to understand details was reported by ten pupils (30.3%), while trying to uncover hidden meanings or ideas not directly stated was mentioned by five learners (15.2%). The same percentage (15.2%) indicated that they do not use any of the listed strategies. Connecting the text to prior knowledge was used by only three pupils (9.1%), whereas identifying the main idea of each paragraph and writing short summaries were the least used strategies, mentioned by two learners each (6.1%). Overall, the results show that while some learners adopt effective pre-reading and global strategies, the use of deeper comprehension strategies remains limited.

Table 8: Teachers' Strategies to Improve Learners' Reading Comprehension

8- How does your teacher help you when you do not understand the text?	Frequency	Percentage
a- Using L1 for explanation.	14	42.4%
b- Using only L2 for explanation.	8	24.2%
c- Asking you to use dictionaries (online or print).	25	75.8%
d- Asking you to reread the text multiple times.	13	39.4%
e- Encouraging you to guess the meaning by using contextual clues.	12	36.4%

Table 6 illustrates how teachers assist learners when they do not understand a text. The most commonly reported form of support was asking learners to use dictionaries, with twenty-five pupils (75.8%) indicating this method, suggesting that teachers frequently promote independent vocabulary exploration. Using L1 for explanation was reported by fourteen learners (42.4%), reflecting the use of the first language as a scaffolding tool. Other support strategies included asking learners to reread the text multiple times, mentioned by thirteen respondents (39.4%), and encouraging them to guess meanings using contextual clues, reported by twelve pupils (36.4%). Using only L2 for explanation was the least cited method, selected by eight learners (24.2%), indicating that exclusive use of the target language is less common in these classrooms.

Table 9: Learners' Exposure to Reading Comprehension Strategy Training

9- Does your teacher train you to use reading comprehension strategies?	Frequency	Percentage
a- Yes	6	18.2%
b- No	27	81.8%
Total	33	100.0%

Table 9 highlights key classroom factors that influence pupils' reading comprehension. Concerning teacher training, twenty-seven pupils (81.8%) reported that their teacher does not train them to use reading comprehension strategies, suggesting that learners lack guidance on how to process and interpret texts effectively.

5. Discussion:

This research aimed to identify the reading comprehension challenges faced by second-year secondary learners in the foreign languages stream at Guettal Aissa Secondary School in Barika, as well as the causes behind these challenges. According to the collected data, more than half of the respondents recognized reading comprehension as very important for learning English, showing awareness of its value and potential motivation to improve their skills. Many pupils stated that their primary goal of reading is to enrich general knowledge, indicating academic and informational

motivation. However, exposure to English outside the classroom remains limited, as learners reported reading only sometimes. Social media posts were favored by most learners, revealing a shift toward short, digital materials rather than extended academic texts. More importantly, Grammar—particularly understanding sentence structure—emerged as the main challenge, reported by nearly half of the participants. This difficulty with grammar also appears to contribute to challenges in making inferences and understanding overall text meaning, as syntactic knowledge is crucial for interpreting implicit ideas and logical connections. These findings are consistent with previous research. Hassan and Dweik (2021) found that grammar and vocabulary posed significant obstacles for 9th-grade female students. Similarly, Benguedda (2018) and Boudiaf (2020) emphasized that grammar remains a persistent challenge among secondary learners. Ramadhianti and Somba (2023) also reported that students struggle with distinguishing main ideas from supporting details and understanding vocabulary, further reinforcing the impact of structural and lexical difficulties on comprehension.

Regarding the causes of reading comprehension difficulties, the teaching method adopted by teachers was identified as the leading factor, reported by more than half of the learners. This supports previous research showing that instructional approaches greatly influence comprehension abilities (Raheem et al., 2021; Mime, 2021; Suliman, 2023). Other commonly mentioned causes, such as lack of vocabulary, insufficient reading habits, and difficulty of reading materials, were also reported in earlier studies (Babaiba Medjahdi, 2015; Djamaa & Kerrouche, 2023; Boudiaf, 2020). In terms of strategies, nearly half of the learners relied mainly on previewing the text before reading. While helpful, this indicates a reliance on surface-level strategies rather than deeper techniques that support comprehension, such as identifying key ideas, inferring implicit meaning, or connecting information with prior knowledge. Limited awareness of while-reading and post-reading strategies was evident, which aligns with earlier studies suggesting that insufficient strategy training contributes to comprehension difficulties (Boukhobza & Cherid, 2017; Benguedda, 2018). Additionally, teacher support practices were mostly limited to asking students to use dictionaries when encountering difficulties. While this clarifies word meanings, overreliance on dictionaries can restrict the development of inferencing and contextual guessing skills. Only a small proportion of learners were encouraged to guess meaning from context, reflecting a lack of explicit instruction in effective reading strategies, which is consistent with findings by Hassan & Dweik (2021) and Raheem et al. (2021). Classroom-related factors also contributed significantly to difficulties. A large majority of pupils reported that their teachers do not train them in reading strategies. These findings mirror previous studies emphasizing that inadequate teacher guidance and classroom support exacerbate reading comprehension challenges (Mime, 2021; Ramadhianti & Somba, 2023). Overall, the findings reveal that learners' difficulties in reading comprehension stem from a combination of linguistic, instructional, and strategic factors. Grammar problems, limited vocabulary, insufficient reading time, and overreliance on superficial strategies all contribute to learners' struggles. Teacher methodology, identified as a primary cause, plays a substantial role in shaping learners' reading experiences. Therefore, teachers should adopt more effective approaches, provide explicit strategy training, and encourage learners to become active and strategic readers. Enhancing learners' awareness of reading strategies and offering systematic guidance may help reduce, or even eliminate, the reading comprehension problems identified in this study.

6. Conclusion

This study sought to investigate the reading comprehension difficulties among second-year secondary pupils in the foreign languages stream at Guettal Aissa Secondary School in Barika and to identify the factors behind these challenges. The questionnaire data revealed several problems, with the main difficulties being grammar and making inferences, followed by vocabulary limitations and time constraints. Other obstacles included identifying the main idea, losing concentration while reading, locating details in the text, and understanding connections between different parts of a text. Less frequently encountered problems involved answering questions about

the text. Overall, these findings show that learners face multiple interconnected challenges that hinder their understanding of written materials.

The study also showed that these difficulties stemmed from various factors, primarily inadequate teaching methods and limited vocabulary, along with a lack of reading habits, insufficient practice time, low motivation, and low awareness of reading strategies. Learners mainly relied on anticipatory or previewing strategies, while neglecting during-reading and post-reading strategies, reflecting a lack of strategic reading practices necessary for deeper comprehension. Teachers rarely encouraged higher-order skills such as inferring meaning from context and often relied on dictionaries or the mother tongue for explanations. Moreover, teachers did not train students to use reading comprehension strategies, limiting learners' understanding and preventing teachers from guiding them effectively. These findings highlight the importance of explicitly teaching reading strategies, allocating enough time for practice, and providing feedback, while also suggesting future research on the use of digital tools and online resources to enhance EFL learners' reading comprehension.

7. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have several pedagogical implications for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers, highlighting both the challenges faced by EFL learners and potential strategies to enhance reading comprehension. Firstly, EFL teachers should integrate strategy-based instruction into reading sessions, encouraging learners to infer meaning from context rather than relying solely on decoding or translation. This approach not only promotes gradual vocabulary development but also strengthens comprehension and critical thinking skills. Teachers should also foster extensive reading practices by exposing learners to diverse materials and genres, including both traditional texts and digital content, which aligns with learners' preferences for short, online reading materials. Secondly, teachers require targeted training in modern teaching methods and explicit reading strategies, such as skimming, scanning, and inferring meaning from context, to effectively support learners in overcoming linguistic and structural challenges. Integrating technology into reading instruction can provide interactive and engaging ways to enhance comprehension and vocabulary. For example, online applications focusing on grammar exercises, vocabulary building, and reading comprehension can support personalized learning, allowing students to progress at their own pace and strengthen reading outside the classroom.

At the curriculum level, designers should devote greater attention to vocabulary development, reading strategy training, and the role of teacher assessment in monitoring learners' progress. Additionally, policymakers and educators should consider the limitations of this study—such as its small sample size, reliance on questionnaires, and focus on a single school context—as areas to address in future research. Subsequent studies could explore reading comprehension challenges across diverse educational settings and proficiency levels, investigate other reading skills such as fluency and phonics, examine cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and evaluate the effectiveness of innovative teaching methods and digital tools. Furthermore, research could also examine the challenges teachers face when teaching reading and the impact of reading comprehension on students' overall academic achievement in Algeria. By addressing these pedagogical considerations, educators can develop more effective, context-sensitive strategies to improve reading comprehension among EFL learners, ultimately fostering both academic growth and lifelong reading habits.

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