Reading Failure among Iranian EFL Learners: Study of Underlying Problems

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ABSTRACT

Reading comprehension is the most important in the four skills particularly when English is taught as a foreign language or as a second language (Carrell, Devine, & Eskey, 1988). The present study used a mixed method design to investigate the major comprehension problems encountered by Iranian EFL advanced learners through reading comprehension process. Participants were 63 students from an institute in Mashhad, Iran. First, the participants took reading comprehension tests, the purpose of which was to determine their level of reading comprehension. After a comparison between their scores and the mean score of the whole group and also the teacher's determination during a specified term, good comprehenders and poor comprehenders were identified. Second, they were asked to fulfill a questionnaire about their difficulties through the process of reading comprehension. Good comprehenders faced problems such as difficulty of the content (82.35%) and unknown vocabulary (64.70%). Poor comprehenders had problems such as unknown vocabulary (100%) and shortage of time (89.13%). Thus, it can be concluded that helping students in overcoming these kinds of problems for enhancing their reading comprehension will be beneficial for them.

1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is one of the most essential skills for EFL learners who have fewer opportunities to communicate and improve in English. It is one of the necessary language skills for those who read to gain knowledge. Given the importance of reading comprehension skill, identifying the most common causes of reading failure is of great importance. It is necessary for the teachers to first recognize the main reading comprehension problems of learners and then help them to be good and fast readers.

Many researchers have emphasized the significant role of reading comprehension skill for EFL learners (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Alfassi, 2004; Dreyer & Nel, 2003). Carrell (1987) believed that there are two reasons for this statement that reading is the most important skill in language learning, "First, most foreign language students often have reading as one of their most important goals." "Second, different pedagogical processes served by written texts help reading to receive this special focus." EFL learners need reading skill for obtaining knowledge from texts and also fluency. According to Carrell, Devine, and Eskey, (1988), reading skill is the most important in the four skills particularly when English is taught as a foreign language or as a second language.

Reading is a multidimensional skill and consists of a complex combination of a cognitive, linguistic and non-linguistic skills from low-level processing abilities to high-order knowledge of text representation and integration of ideas with global knowledge. (Nassaji, 2003). According to Dubin, Eskey, Grabe, and Savignon (1986), the knowledge crucial to reading comprehension is classified into two types: knowledge of form and knowledge of substance. Knowledge of form is linguistic in nature and consists of graphophonic, lexical, syntactic and semantic knowledge. Knowledge of substance entails cultural and pragmatic knowledge.

A reading process is a productive activity for making sense of a message, and to interpret, analyze, or predict the meaning of the text to arrive at comprehension and a reader is an active participant who has a central role as an interpreter, analyzer, and predictor of the text. So a reader is not just a passive person who receives information from the text but the one who gives meaning to the text. Hengari (2007) indicated that

reading comprehension is the ability to make sense of written texts and this ability includes word recognition, comprehension and interpretation, and application of what is in the text. Therefore, readers need to interact with the text to extract meaning from it. Reading performance, good or poor, reflects the ability of the readers in inferencing, predicting and using their previous knowledge during the reading comprehension process and the students being taught to read must understand the relationship between reading and their language. Snow (2002) also indicated that reading comprehension is "the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" and this process does not occur unless teachers identify and stop the causes of reading comprehension difficulties of learners. So the mental processes of the readers are important for researchers and it is proved by many researchers in the proposal of reading models. These models, from the ones that are linear in nature, such as bottom-up processing (Goodman, 1967; Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983; Hayes, 1991) and top-down processing (Goodman, 1967; Coady, 1979; Dubin, Eskey, Grabe, & Savignon (1986) to interactive processing (Rumelhart, 1980; Gove, 1983), demonstrates the efforts that the theorists have delved into what happens when readers are reading and the importance of this fundamental skill (Chang, 2005).

There are three major research questions involved in this study: (1) what are the major reading comprehension problems of Iranian advanced EFL learners? (2) Is there any difference between the reading comprehension problems of good and poor EFL learners through reading comprehension process?

2. Reading Comprehension: Theoretical Background

There are a lot of theories on reading comprehension. We are going to focus on two important approaches: 'bottom-up' and 'top-down`. `Bottom up` theory is based on the smallest linguistic units of a text from which particular knowledge schemas are activated. In this theory the process of comprehension starts with words (their pronunciation, semantic value, morphology, etc.), that give access to more extensive units like syntagmas, sentences, paragraphs and finally to understand the whole text. Carrel and Eiserhold (1983) have mentioned these approaches in other words. They indicated that reading comprehension happens in two directions, from bottom up to the top and from the top down to the bottom of the hierarchy. Bottom-up processing is activated by specific data from the text, and top-down processing starts with general to confirm these predictions. These processes occur simultaneously and interactively, which adds to the interaction or comprehension between bottom-up and top-down processes. Nunan (1991) believes that the process of reading in this view is decoding a series of symbols from written into aural equivalents to have access to the meaning of the text. The meaning of each paragraph is determined by the prior interpretation of each sentence of the paragraph that is made by interpreting each word in each sentence.

According to Nunan (1991), Dubin and Bycina (1991), the 'bottom-up' model consists more general aspects of comprehension such as: the gist of every paragraph, the title of the text, etc; and goes into smaller linguistic units. Top down approach is based on the previous knowledge or background knowledge of the readers. So to understand the whole message of a text, first the readers have to comprehend a paragraph then understand the meaning of each sentence and word that make up the message. Top-down approach activates high level schemas that help readers comprehend the passage. Top-down and bottom-up models are important in every research that is related to reading comprehension process.

2.1 Metacognitive View & Reading Comprehension

Metacognition is the control readers execute on their ability to understand a text (Block, 1992). It involves considering the processes of the mind while one is reading. Klein (1991) believes that high level readers try to find the purpose of the reading before starting to read. Then they identify the type of the text. After that, they try to project the writer's purpose of writing the text and scan the text to identify the details. And finally, inferencing or making predictions about the next happenings, based on prior knowledge is what readers do during reading comprehension process.

2.2 Schema Theory & Reading Comprehension

According to Piaget (1972) in Craig (1989, p. 36), "Schemata" is a term for mental patterns that form experiences, ideas and information; individuals' schemas change as they grow. The theoretical base of

the background theory is schema theory. Rumelhart (1980, P.34) defined the word schema as "a data structure for representing the genetic concepts stored in memory" and indicated that schema theory explains how readers use their prior knowledge to comprehend and learn from text. Medin and Russ (1992, p.246) define it as "a general knowledge structure used for understanding". It is also defined by Anderson and Pearson (1984, p.42) as "an abstract knowledge structure". Rumelhalt (1980), Carrell (1981) and Hudson (1982) have applied it, when examining the importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension process.

According to the basis of this theory, the written text does not carry meaning by itself and it just direct readers to how they should construct meaning from their own prior acquired knowledge. Based on the studies by Carrell (1987) and Irwin (1991), students become discouraged when they confronted by passages that consists of too much unfamiliar vocabulary or had not been internalized. In these studies, presenting the words before starting the text was not effective for the students. Participants of these studies have mentioned that they had difficulties in understanding idioms because they could not be translated directly. Many other participants indicated that some of the materials and texts used in the classroom did not align with their schemata. Therefore the absence of a familiar schema can be a serious barrier to comprehension.

Barrlett (1932), Adams and Collins (1979), and Rumelhart (1980), stated that prior knowledge is the readers' background knowledge (previous knowledge), and the prior acquired knowledge structures are called schemata. This theory indicates that an interactive process between the text and the reader is needed for a complete comprehension. There should be a link between the readers' background knowledge and the text for the process of comprehension. So the readers should have the ability to relate what they read to their previous knowledge. Anderson (1977, p.369), stated that "every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well".

2.2.1 Different Types of Schemata

Three types of schemata are content schemata, formal schemata, and Cultural schemata. Formal schemata are related to the rhetorical structure of the text. Content schemata, that is about the content of a text read. Cultural schemata are about the general aspects of cultural knowledge shared by larger parts of a cultural population.

Different researchers may have different classifications for example Carrell (1988) had also added linguistic schemata to these three types. Formal schema refers to "background knowledge of the formal, rhetorical organizational structures of different types of texts" (CarrelL and Eisterhold, 1983, p.79). Researchers believe that schema or macro- structure refers to file underlying structure which accounts for the organization of a text or discourse. Stories, reports, description, letters, and poems are Different kinds of texts and are distinguished by the ways in which the topic and other information are related to each other to form a unit.

Content schema refers to "background knowledge of the content area of the text" (CarrelL and Eisterhold, 1983, p.80). It includes information about what is happening in a certain topic, and how the events can be linked to each other to form a coherent text. For example, schema for going to a restaurant would include information about, menus, paying the bill services (giving a tip), ordering dishes and so on. Cultural schema is usually categorized as content schema. Alexander, Schallert, and Hare (1991) made a distinction between content knowledge and topic knowledge. They believe that content knowledge refers to the reader's information of physical, social and metal world, but the topic knowledge is refers to the knowledge related to a specific reading comprehension text.

The study conducted by Alexander, Schallert, and Hare (1991) showed that both content and topic knowledge contribute differentially but idiosyncratically to the readers' comprehension ability. Rivers and Temperley (1978, p.202) stated that all cultural knowledge is "socio- cultural meaning" which is "meaning which springs from shared experiences, values and attitudes". According to Johnson (1981), and Carrell (1981), the implicit cultural knowledge presupposed by a text activates the reader's own cultural background knowledge of content to make texts whose content is based on one's culture easier to read and understand than syntactically and rhetorically equivalent text based on a less familial-, more distant culture.

The interpretation of the same information is different from one individual to another. Steffenson et al (1979) have showed this matter. Cultural differences are

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important and without cultural awareness there may be no efficient and complete comprehension process. Linguistic schema is about the about vocabulary and grammar knowledge of the readers. It has a crucial role in comprehension of different texts. Eskey (1988, p. 94) believes that "good readers are both decoders and interpreters of texts, their decoding skills becoming more automatic but no less important as their reading skill develops".

2.3 Background Knowledge & Reading Comprehension

Background knowledge is also referred to as subject knowledge or topic familiarity of learners. Every material in reading comprehension needs specific background knowledge. Different studies emphasized the importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension process and stated that relevant background knowledge will increase the performance of students in the process of reading comprehension (Pritchard, 1990; Nelson, 1987; Bensoussan, 1998).

Dubin, Eskey, Grabe, and Savignon (1986) believes that prior knowledge is readers' 'knowledge crucial to reading' and is categorized into two types: 'knowledge of form' and 'knowledge of substance' (p. 18). The knowledge of form provides expectations about the language of the text and making correct identifications of forms in text. Knowledge of form consists of recognition of graphophonic, lexical, syntactic/semantic and rhetorical patterns of language (Dubin, Eskey, Grabe, & Savignon, 1986). Knowledge of substance, on the other hand, consists of pragmatic and subject-specific information and provides expectations about the larger conceptual structure of the text. According to Rumelhart's (1994), the knowledge of form is classified into syntactic, semantic, orthographic and lexical knowledge.

Readers construct meaning not only according to the text they are reading but also according to their knowledge and experiences. So the learners' prior knowledge is an important factor that influences their comprehension. Different Studies have showed the positive effects of background knowledge on reading comprehension of EFL learners. For example, several studies investigated the importance of background knowledge according to the culture emphasized in the text and demonstrated that when readers are culturally familiar with the text, they had a better performance on comprehensive questions (e.g., Johnson, 1982; Lee, 2007; Alptekin, 2006). According to a study by Yuet and Chan (2003) background knowledge was more beneficial to low proficiency learners. Yuet and Chan (2003) and Alptekin (2006) also indicated that the topics of texts should involve a wider range of language proficiency levels. This happened because the majority of the researchers used advanced English proficiency learners as the participants of their studies.
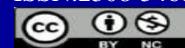
Based on schema theory the purpose of activating appropriate background knowledge of texts is to produce better reading comprehension performance in readers, so teachers should be the activators and facilitators of acquisition of suitable background knowledge of students in English classrooms. Teachers should also emphasize the important role of background knowledge in reading comprehension and try to improve EFL learners' background knowledge so that they will have a better performance in comprehending the text and answering the comprehensive questions.

2.4 Vocabulary Knowledge & Reading Comprehension

Many researchers showed the importance of vocabulary knowledge in the process of reading comprehension and emphasized the strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. For instance the role of vocabulary knowledge on learners' reading performance has been examined by Zhang and Annual (2008). Other researchers such as Joshi and Aaron (2005) stated that vocabulary knowledge can determine the level of reading comprehension ability of the readers.

Hirsch (2003) indicated that there are three principles that have useful implications for improving EFL learners' reading comprehension skill. One of them is fluency that helps the mind to concentrate more on comprehension, another one is breadth of vocabulary that increases comprehension and finally, domain knowledge increases fluency, broadens vocabulary and enables deeper comprehension. Results also indicated that the learners' vocabulary knowledge at the 2000 word and the 3000 word levels was obviously related with the number of correct answers to the comprehensive questions.

Vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension has the same effect of background knowledge in reading comprehension. For example Cromley and

Azevedo (2007) stated that background knowledge and vocabulary knowledge of the readers both had significant effects on their reading comprehension ability. Many researchers believe that vocabulary learning, facilitates decoding, which constitutes an important element of reading. It was concluded that a lack of vocabulary knowledge in the test passages followed by questions is related to the sixth and fifth grade learners' reading test performance (Garcia, 2009). Restricted vocabulary level along with a lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge can be a major barrier to EFL learner comprehending the meaning of the text.

There are several studies that used vocabulary size scores to consider the comprehension levels of learners (e.g., Alderson, 2000; Joshi, 2005; Ricketts, Nation, & Bishop, 2007; Manyak & Bauer, 2009). For example Laufer (1997) and found a strong relationship between different types of vocabulary size tests and reading comprehension tests.

Other researchers that conducted researches in this field are Sanchez and Garcia. Sanchez and Garcia (2009) investigated the relationship between text cohesion vocabulary which is a part of rhetorical competence and reading comprehension while taking into account readers' word decoding skills and background knowledge. According to their results, text cohesion vocabulary increases the learners' reading comprehension scores in expository passages especially in middle school students.

Rydland, Aukrust, and Fulland (2012) also examined the importance of word decoding, first and second language vocabulary and background knowledge on language learners' reading comprehension performance. They used two types of reading tests in their study. The first one is Woodcock Passage Comprehension and the second one is a Global Warming Test. The results exhibited that, word decoding and vocabulary knowledge have a positive effect on participants' reading performance in Woodcock Passage Comprehension, while background knowledge was the determiner of participants' scores in Global Warming Test. Other studies (e.g., Keenan, Betjemann, & Olson, 2008, Lervag & Aukrust, 2010, Rydland, Aukrust, & Fulland, 2012) showed that the effect of word decoding and vocabulary on reading comprehension is different according to the way reading comprehension is measured.

2.5 Word Identification & Reading Comprehension

Word identification skills will give students the ability to decode words that are in their language vocabularies. Developing the capacity to process longer, multi-syllable words and the development of fluency are two major word identification goals for most students. Therefore it is essential for the students to have this ability in order to function at a stage of development at which they can associate sounds with letters or words. They should also practice in processing words to improve strategies for identifying different syllables words. For this to be true, teachers should form strategies that are flexible so that words can be divided into pronounceable units. Students who want to improve their word identification skill to increase the capacity have to recognize large store of words rapidly, automatically so that they will have fluent reading skill.

Harris and Hodges (1995) defined Fluency as "freedom from word identification problems that might hinder comprehension in silent reading or the expression of ideas in oral reading or automaticity". Two important aspects of fluency are rapid decoding and accuracy. Having fluent word identification is not enough for complete comprehension because limited comprehension may be the result of slow reading. Practice is the most effective way in improving students' fluency.

2.6 Interest and Reading Comprehension

Students show more motivation, engagement, and positive effects in comprehending tasks that they are interested in (Ainley, Hidi & Berndorff, 2002; Renninger, 1998, 2000). Hidi (1990) indicated that interested learners show higher levels of recall. Interest can also increase important capacities to learner autonomy, such as being able to attend and find meaning, use effective learning strategies, and set goals (Renninger, 2000). Students with interest have specific goals and plan to reach them, and have more effective learning behaviors (Lipstein & Renninger, 2006).

There are lot of studies about interest and its importance in reading comprehension but it has the capacity to conduct more studies on it. Interest can be categorized as individual, situational and topic interest. A stable and enduring inclination to engage with activities or objects is called individual interest (Bergin, 1999; Hidi, 1990; Hidi,

Berndorff, & Ainley, 2002; Renninger, Hidi, Krapp, & Renninger, 2014; Schiefele, 1999). Situational interest refers to an emotional state and can be activated by features of environmental. Textual coherence and comprehensibility, novelty and personal relevance are factors that can activate situational interest (Hidi & Baird, 1986). Topic interest refers to interest activated by a certain topic or theme. It has the characteristics of the situational and individual interest with contributions of either depending on students' information, experiences and the perceived value of a topic (Ainley, et al., 2002; Bergin, 1999; Renninger, 2000; Wade, Buxton, and Kelly, 1999). Choosing the title of a text is an important process and needs great attention. Students that are uninterested in science might find this topic interesting because of compelling qualities (such as novelty).

Interest influence reading skills in different ways. Sentences with contents that are interesting for readers are more likely to be remembered than low-interest sentences (Anderson, et al. 1984). Students experience situational interest while reading resulted in improved recall (Schraw, Bruning, and Svoboda, 1995). Positive effects of interest have been showed in researches conducted under specific conditions, such as reading silently and aloud and reading with required post-tasks (Anderson, et al. 1984). It is one of the factors that improve reading comprehension by engaging students more with the text and increasing their attraction (Hidi, 2001; for another viewpoint, see Shirey & Reynolds, 1988).

It is an important point to know interest is different from intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to absence of external control or reward (Deci, 1981; Bergin, 1999). Interest refers to student's engagement and interaction with a specific object (Krapp, et al. 1992). An interested person is one attracted in a specific topic for some reasons that are related to previous experience and knowledge.

2.7 Factors Affecting Reading Comprehension: Some Empirical Studies

Text comprehension is a complex cognitive skill in which the readers construct meaning by linking all the available resources from both the written text and their previous knowledge. Successful comprehension of the text is the result of correct implementation of psychological recourses (Yazdanpanah, 2007). One of these psychological resources is the readers' stored or background knowledge. Background knowledge is discussed in the literature under the concept of schema theory. Schema is the technical term used to describe how readers process, organize, and store information in their minds. We organize information in our long-term memory using schemas, or schemata (Widdowson, 1983). Rumelhart (1982) described schemata as "the building blocks of cognition".

There are many factors affecting reading comprehension ability. For example Snow, Burns, and Griffith (1998) indicated that "Adequate progress in learning to read English beyond the initial level depends on sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency with different texts" (p. 223). Stricker, Roser, and Martinez (1998) also stated that "As automaticity in word recognition develops, students read faster and have greater opportunity to gain meaning from the text. So difficulty in recognizing individual words hampers the ability to gain meaning from the text. As a reader pauses to decode unfamiliar words, thoughts about the portion of text may be disrupted because readers need to make connections between ideas within a text. If reading proceeds too slowly, such connections are difficult to make. Thus, accurate word recognition must be completed rapidly for fluency to occur." (p. 299)

Samuels, Shermer, and Reinking (1999) stated that alternate attention between decoding and comprehension is necessary for beginning reading and this process places a heavy demand on memory. With practice, the novice reader becomes fluent. The visual unit in fluent reading is the whole word, making the process fast and effortless. In another study, Intarasombat (2002) studied the effect of vocabulary development on reading comprehension. Participants were 40 students in the science program. The instruments of the study were vocabulary tests and reading comprehension tests. The reading comprehension test was used to measure the students' reading comprehension ability. The participants' mean score in the vocabulary test and reading comprehension test was low. Results showed that the students had limited vocabulary knowledge and this area caused them problems of English reading comprehension.

In a more complete study, Tanghirunwat (2003) considered the reading difficulties of Thai engineers reading

manuals and textbooks. The participants were 50 employees of telecommunication companies. For collecting the data questionnaire was used about the participants' difficulties with vocabulary, grammar and the content of technical texts. The results showed that Thai engineers' problems were in vocabulary, grammar, and content. It was also revealed that the students had difficulties with technical vocabulary, new vocabulary stemming from new technologies, and technical vocabulary in the telecommunication field. They had difficulties with grammar in the areas of compound sentences, complex sentences, complex noun phrases, and passive voice.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants were 63 Iranian learners studying English as a foreign language in an institute in Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi, Iran. They were selected randomly from 82 advanced learners. They were both male and female and had the same background knowledge. Their age ranged from 16 to 19 with a mean age of 17 years old and SD of 1.06 years. According to the results of the reading comprehension tests, measuring the participants' reading comprehension, and generally their English reading- proficiency levels, the majority of the participants seemed to be at low levels of comprehension. Approximately 74% of the scores were below the mean score and 26% were above the mean score. Based on the results of reading comprehension tests and the teacher's determination during a specified term, participants were divided into two groups of good comprehenders (group one) and poor comprehenders (group two). There were 17 students in group one and 46 students in group two. The participants' ages ranged from 16 to 18 years old in group one and from 16 to 19 years old in group two.

3.2. Instrumentation

The instrumentation included two reading comprehension tests and a questionnaire used by Zheng Lin (2002). Each test contains three passages that were selected from the book Select Reading written by Lee and Gundersen in 2001 to measure participants' reading comprehension ability. Each of the passages followed by 16 questions and the whole test has 48 questions. The researcher was cautious to choose texts that are according to the participants' level of proficiency and background knowledge. Text difficulty and topic familiarity were also taken into consideration because these factors may affect their reading comprehension. The research also benefit a questionnaire used by Zheng Lin (2002) about the participants' difficulties through the process of reading comprehension. The test was piloted at two different times: with 12 upper intermediate EFL students and with 10 advanced EFL students. The researcher made revisions based on the results of the pilot tests. The results showed that six items were inappropriate and were discarded and substituted by suitable items.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The data were collected from 63 advanced EFL learners in an institute in Mashhad, Iran. For the purpose of this study, all the participants were asked to take two reading tests to determine their reading comprehension ability. The tests were designed according to the students' level and were piloted two times first on 12 upper intermediate EFL students and second on 10 advanced EFL students. The questions (6 questions) that were too easy or too difficult were identified and replaced by more appropriate questions. The researcher used texts from the book Select Reading written by Lee and Gundersen in 2001 and each test consists of three passages and participants had to answer 16 questions after each passage based on the information in passage. So each reading comprehension test had 48 questions. During the reading tests, the discussion between participants was avoided and they should silently read the passages and answer the questions. In addition, after the reading comprehension tests, finally, participants had to fulfill a questionnaire about their difficulties through the process of reading comprehension. According to the participants' test scores and the teacher's determination during a specified term, participants were divided into two groups of good comprehenders (group one) and poor comprehenders (group two) and the identified problems were considered based on this group division.

4. Results and Discussion

This research investigated these questions: (1) What are the major reading comprehension problems of Iranian EFL advanced learners? (2) What are the major reading comprehension problems of good comprehenders and poor comprehemders? (3) Is there any difference between the reading comprehension problems of good and poor EFL learners through reading comprehension process?

Therefore this study aimed at considering the major reading comprehension problems encountered by the Iranian advanced students that learn English as a foreign language. First two reading tests with different parts in vocabulary and sentence structure to determine the students' reading comprehension ability were administered. The results of the reading comprehension tests are shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: Mean Score of Test 1 and Test 2

Reading Comprehension Test	N	Mean
Test 1	63	28.1269
Test 2	63	27.8729

Table 2: Maximum and Minimum Scores

		Test one		Test two	
Group	N	Maximum	Minimum	Maximum	Minimum
Group one	17	46	36	46	35
Group two	46	32	15	31	17

As shown in the table, the mean scores of the participant in both tests are approximately the same. It implies both tests measured the participants' reading comprehension ability appropriately. As shown in Table 2 about 26 % of the whole participants (17 students) had scores above 33 and it means that they have answered more than 75% of the questions correctly. Others that were about 74% of the participants had lower scores. Based on these scores and the teacher's determination during a specified term the participants were divided into two groups: those who had scores below (poor comprehenders) and those who had scores above the mean score and had answered more than 75% of the questions (good comprehenders).

Table 3: Results of Reading Comprehension Tests

		Test one		Test two	
Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Group one	17	40.1764	3.0338	39.8823	2.9681
Group two	46	23.6739	5.4095	23.4347	5.2941

As shown in Table 3, the mean score of good comprehenders is 40.1764 in the first reading comprehension test and 39.8823 in the second reading comprehension test. The mean score of those who were not successful in answering the comprehensive questions or poor comprehenders is 23.6739 in the first test and 23.4347 in the second test. So that the mean scores of the group one is higher in both tests. We can observe that the mean score of the group two is lower in both tests.

By comparing these means, we can observe that the majority of the participants had lower scores that shows their weak comprehension ability.

The division of participants into two groups of poor and good comprehenders helped the researcher in identifying the problems of EFL learners according to their reading comprehension ability. After the comprehension tests, the participants were asked to fulfill a questionnaire about their difficulties through the process of reading comprehension.

Table 4: The Problems of Students during Comprehension Process

Comprehension Problem	Number in Group 1	Number in Group 2
Unknown vocabulary	11	46
Too complicated syntax and/or formal structure	6	31
Unfamiliar content	10	37
Lack of the necessary sociocultural background knowledge	6	33
Unusual sentence length.	3	28
Unable to decide on the sense	4	22
Nervousness	0	14
Difficult or boring content	14	36
Shortage of time	12	41
Failure in applying effective Reading strategies	8	40
Inferencing problems	3	11
Slow reading	3	35
weak memory	6	34
carelessness	0	29
slow identification of words	4	19

Table 4 shows the problems of the students and the frequency of each problem in both groups. So we can identify the major reading comprehension problems of both poor and good students.

As we see in chart 1 (See Appendix), the main problems of the students through the process of reading are unknown vocabulary, shortage of time, difficult or boring content, and failure in applying effective reading strategies.

Chart 2 (See Appendix) shows the major comprehension of good comprehenders. According to this chart difficult or boring content is the main problem of good comprehenders. These students believe that teachers should use update texts that are appropriate for their level. Students also believe that providing background knowledge or prior knowledge is very beneficial for them.

Chart 3 shows the major comprehension of poor comprehenders. According to this chart unknown vocabulary is the most important problem of poor

comprehenders. These students believe that pre-teaching of the vocabularies is necessary before teaching the texts.

The results of this study revealed similar findings to the ones in the study of Alderson (2000), Alptekin (2006), Ketchum (2006), Oller (1995), Pulido (2003), and Steffensen et al. (1979) who indicated that prior knowledge has positive effects on reading comprehension. This study also emphasized the results of another study that indicated sentences with contents that are interesting for readers are more likely to be remembered than low-interest sentences (Anderson, et al. 1984). There are also several studies that have similar results for example in other studies vocabulary size scores was used to consider the comprehension levels of learners (e.g., Alderson, 2000; Joshi, 2005; Ricketts, Nation, & Bishop, 2007; Manyak & Bauer, 2009). A strong relationship between different types of vocabulary size tests and reading comprehension tests was also found (Laufer, 1997). In general results showed that the, the main problem of the most of the students is limited vocabulary knowledge and also lack of prior knowledge based on what they write in questionnaire.

5. Conclusion

The study was, in fact, an attempt to identify the main comprehension problems encountered by Iranian advanced EFL learners through reading process. In conclusion, the results from the present study elucidate the main comprehension problems of the poor comprehenders and also students with better performance or good comprehenders that study English as a foreign language. It can be concluded that helping students in overcoming problems such as unknown vocabulary, shortage of time, difficult or boring content, and failure in applying effective reading strategies will be beneficial for them. Vanichakorn (2004) stated that the major difficulties of the EFL learners' in reading comprehension are lack of reading strategy knowledge, lack of reading resources, lack of strong reading culture, and teachers' use of unsuccessful teaching methods.

According to a study by Quian (2002) about the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic reading performance, using a combination of vocabulary depth and size measures is beneficial for improving the ability to predict reading performance. Grammar is also as important as vocabulary in predicting reading performance. A study about relative significance of syntactic knowledge and vocabulary breadth showed that syntactic knowledge was a better predictor of text reading comprehension than vocabulary (Shiotsu and Weir, 2007). It was also found that the relative significance of syntactic variable was not just limited to the lower level students alone. So helping students in improving their knowledge of grammar will be beneficial for them. The participants who did not know the meaning of some of the words in the passage are unable to answer the corresponding reading comprehension questions. By reviewing studies (Alderson, 1993; Berry, 1990), we can conclude that both lexical and syntactic knowledge are required to reading comprehension. Purpura (2004) also indicated that grammatical knowledge includes knowledge of phonological, lexical and cohesive forms along with their meanings.

According to Pulido (2003) meaning construction during reading comprehension is an important cognitive skill and needs using a type of linguistic knowledge and is related to the vocabulary which is associated with the text named passage sight vocabulary (PSV). PSV is the knowledge of the forms and common meanings of vocabulary which are specifically related to the text at hand, and are recognized automatically, irrespective of context (Pulido, 2000, 2007; Pulido & Hambrick, 2008). Inferencing is heart of reading comprehension and teaching different kinds of inference and improving students' inferencial comprehension will help them a lot.

For improving EFL learner' reading comprehension ability teachers should use text with topics that are interesting for students. The majority of the learners focus on getting information without keeping time, but time is an important factor. It means that the EFL learners just focus on comprehending and they do not pay attention to the time so they may comprehend the text but they don't have enough time to answer the comprehensive questions. It is necessary for the teachers to explain about the importance of the time for the learners. Developing students in speed reading is not considered as a necessary ability by teachers. The majority of the learners have problems in reading speed and reading comprehension it means that they don't know how to read quickly and how to comprehend the text well (Speece & Ritchey, 2005; Giangiacomo & Navas,

2008; Snellings, van der Leij, de Jong, & Blok, 2009; Silva & Capellini, 2010).

Using update texts and passages that are exciting for learners and also using texts that are related to EFL learners' information, level and previous experiences, interest, and need can be beneficial in improving EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. Teachers should also teach different strategies and techniques that help EFL learners improve their word identification.

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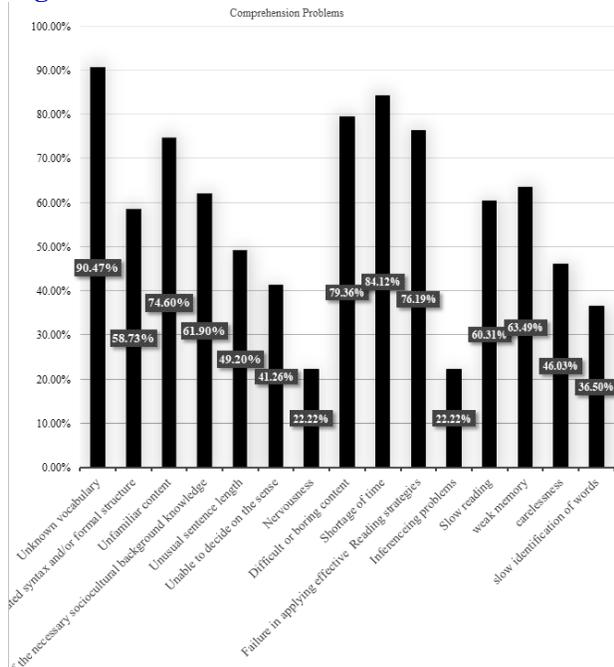
Appendix: 1 Figures 1, 2 & 3

Figure: 1

Comprehension Problems

Figure: 2
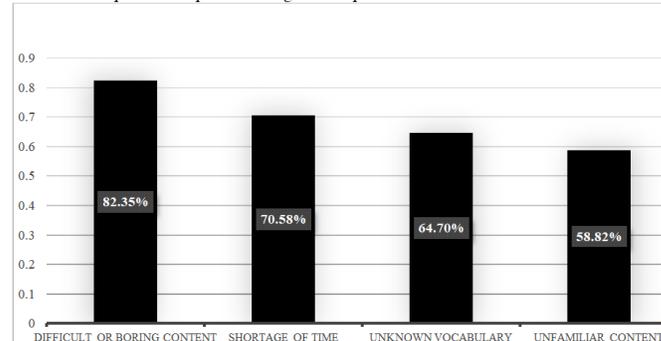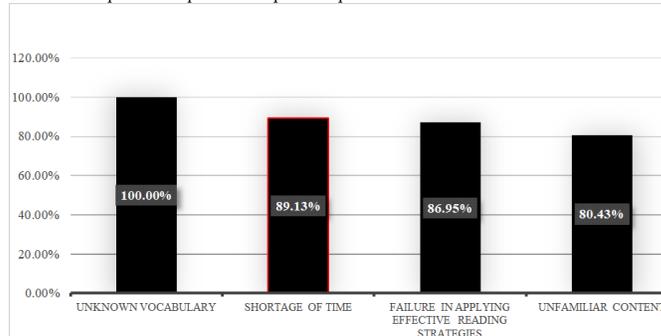

The main comprehension problems of good comprehenders

Figure: 3

The main comprehension problems of poor comprehenders

Appendix: 2 questionnaire on English reading comprehension (Translated version)

1) The major factors that cause difficulty in reading comprehension are: (You may choose more than one factor. Please rank the factors you choose in order from most important to least important.)
   A) Unknown EFL vocabulary.
   B) Too complicated syntax and/or formal structure.
   C) Unfamiliar content.
   D) Lack of the necessary sociocultural background knowledge.
   E) Unusual sentence length.
   F) Other factors such as: (Please specify.)

2) The English text, which contains no new words, might not be comprehensible, mainly because of the following factor(s): (You may choose more than one factor. Please rank the factors you choose in order from most important to least important.)
   A) Unable to decide on the sense in which a word is used when the word may be used in several different senses.
   B) Unable to understand the idioms in the text.
   C) Unable to understand the subject content.
   D) Lack of the necessary sociocultural background knowledge.
   E) Unable to understand the syntax and/or the formal structure used in the text.
   F) Unusual sentence length.
   G) Other factors such as: (Please specify.)

3) The major factor(s) that could cause poor performance in reading comprehension are: (You may choose more than one factor. Please rank the factors you choose in order from most important to least important.)
   A) Nervousness.
   B) Difficult or boring content.
   C) Shortage of time.
   D) Lack of necessary sociocultural knowledge.
   E) Other factors such as: (Please specify.)

4) Suppose you read an English text or sentence for the first time. If you find it easy to understand, it is mainly because of the following factor(s): (You may choose more than one factor. Please rank the factors you choose in order from most important to least important.)
   A) Absence of unknown EFL vocabulary.
   B) Simple EFL syntax.
   C) Interesting content.
   D) Familiar sociocultural background.
   E) Other factors such as: (Please specify.)