An Investigation into Iranian EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Problems and the Tentative Solutions: Learners' Perceptions in Focus

Saeedeh Torabi
Islamic Azad University, Science and Research Branch, Iran, *saeede.torabi@yahoo.com*

Roohollah Maleki
Imam Khomeini International University, Iran, *malekiamar73@yahoo.com*

The present study set out to explore Iranian EFL learners' Reading Comprehension Problems (RCPs) and the tentative solutions for such problems from learners' perspectives. The participants included 20 female EFL learners within the age range of 18 to 28 studying at the intermediate level of language proficiency at Safir language institute in Tehran. The participants were selected based on convenience sampling. In order to collect the data, semi-structured interviews were held. The interviews were recorded and then to analyze the collected data, content analysis was employed. The results of data analyses indicated that vocabulary knowledge, text origination, grammar, limited time and anxiety were the problems of reading comprehension mentioned by participants. Learners offered four solutions for their RCPs including: working more on vocabulary, improving grammar, teachers' help for anxious students and teachers' offering more time for learners to read. EFL teachers are encouraged to take the RCPs into account while dealing with reading texts and tasks.

Keywords: EFL learning, reading comprehension, RCPs, learning, EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

Reading is considered to be a main channel of input for foreign language learners. Life without the ability to comprehend texts can pose many obstacles in people's daily lives in general and academic lives in particular (LervAag, Hulme, & Melby-Lervåg, 2018). Due to the vital role of this skill in both daily and academic contexts, reading has been the focus of many investigations quite recently (e. g., Atkinson, Slade, Powell, & Levy, 2017; Chen, Cui, Ma, Wang, & Hu, 2018; Cox-Magno, Ross, Dimino, & Wilson, 2018; Javadi, & Mohammadi, 2019; Kazemi, & Vahid Dastjerdi, 2019; LervAag, Hulme, & Melby-Lervåg, 2018; Tay, Luu, Hui, & Su, 2018; Teimourtash, & Yazdanimoghaddam, 2018; Welbl, Stenetorp, & Riedel, 2018). The effective teaching of language skills has been the concern of language teachers and researchers for a long time and reading has not been an exception (LervAag, Hulme, & Melby-Lervåg, 2018).

Fahim and Saeepour (2011) declared, reading plays a significant role in second language curriculum and thus reading comprehension is the goal of many educational programs. Obviously, if people do not possess an adequate level of reading comprehension ability, they would have to face the complicated issue of following the words without deriving any meaning. As Denton, Wolters, York, Swanson, Kulesz, and Francis (2014, p. 67) believed, comprehend a text, the reader should go through several processes: a reader must be able to "decode words, access word meaning, and construct meaning from sentences and larger section of text, while correlating them with their background knowledge to create a mental model of the text".

Campbell and Malicky (2002) maintained that reading theorists generally divide reading models into three categories: bottom-up, top-down, and interactive. Each model focuses on particular aspects considered by its advocates to play the important function in the reading process. Bottom-up models focus more on the one-way flow of information from the lower-level perceptual analyzing systems, which proceeds through a linear hierarchy moving from letter recognition to decoding at the phoneme level to word recognition, to higher level semantic mechanisms, such as the recognition of syntactic and semantic relationships and the integration of text material (Hudson, 1998). Bottom-up processing would advance reading as a problem of decoding a series of written symbols. As Yigiter, Saricoban, and Gurses (2005) believed, as research demonstrated students sometimes could not understand the text they read in this way, bottom-up processing was considered to be insufficient for clarifying the reading process.

Campbell and Malicky (2002) noted that the top-down model of reading, on the other hand stresses the movement of information from higher levels, such as anticipation of semantic cues, prediction, and hypothesis formation, to lower-level perceptual analyzing systems, such as decoding at the grapheme-phoneme level to word recognition and pattern recognition routines. Yigiter et al., (2005) theorized that readers carry their prior knowledge, their expectation of how the working of language, and their interest, motivation and attitudes towards the text and its content to this process. Thus, Campbell and Malicky's (2002) acknowledged that the bottom-up theory puts stress on the text, while top-down and interactive theories put stress on the reader.

Campbell and Malicky (2002) observed that the interactive model of reading tries to blend the crucial insights of bottom up and top-down models. This kind of reading model works in both a top-down and a bottom-up manner simultaneously and are bidirectional in nature. Similarly, Carrell (1993) reported that it is possible to divide the interactive models into two types. The first kind is rooted in the interaction of componential cognitive reading processes, while in the second the focus of interaction is on the product of the interaction of readers' background knowledge (schema) with the text information during the comprehension process. Besides, Stott (2001) approved that Schema Theory is founded on the process of blending textual information with the background information that readers bring to the text. Thus, the interactive reading theory incorporates the reader's background knowledge or schema, the textual information and the interaction process between them that creates the active construction of meaning (Campbell & Malicky, 2002).

Lack of comprehension skills may be due to several causes that prevent learners from understanding the basic concept of passages. As Alber-Morgan, Ramp, Anderson and Martin (2007) concluded, these reading problems may root in students' insufficient academic instruction which is recognizable through an obvious lack of fluency in reading. As Alber-Morgan et.al (2007) indicated, having difficulties in comprehending variable text formats and being unwilling to read or spend time can be the possible reasons for RCPs.

ERGÜL (2014) evaluated the frequency of third grade students who had not attained the grade level reading skills and their reading skills regarding the risk for having learning disabilities. In this study, 112 students in 38 classrooms were recruited. In fact, the teachers were wanted to identify the students with reading problems in their classrooms. Recognized students were asked to read a grade level text. The fluency and accuracy of the students' reading comprehension were analyzed. Participants of the study were assigned to one of the reading stages (i.e., frustration, instruction, and independent) on the basis of the number of words read correctly in the passage. Finally, the researcher found that about 13 percent of participants expressed to have difficulty in reading. In fact, the results revealed that reading fluency rates in all three reading levels were much lower than the reading fluency norms identified for third graders. Also, the most frequently committed reading errors were found to be syllable repetition and incorrect reading.

Probably many adults suffer from a lack of comprehension ability. As Denton, Wolters, York, Swanson, Kulesz, and Francis (2014) found out, the most recent statistics collected by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) revealed that "only 36% of eight grade students were classified as proficient readers and 22% of eight graders were unable to read and comprehend text at even a basic level" (p. 1). Shehu (2015) explored RCPs encountered by foreign language students. The results indicated that the RCPs were related to a) New words, b) Background knowledge, c) Type of the text, d) Organization, d) Lack of illustration, e) Tenses, f) Linking words, g) Pronouns.

Likewise, Qrqez and Ab Rashid (2017) probed reading comprehension difficulties among EFL learners. They found that EFL learners face several problems in the reading process, such as ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited available time to cognitively process the text. Likewise, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) investigated reading comprehension difficulties among EFL learners in higher learning institutions. The results indicated that the participants RCPs were rooted in a) Vocabulary knowledge, b) Prior background knowledge, c) Grammatical knowledge, d) Word difficulties, e) Lack of attention, f) Syntactic knowledge, g) Meaning of phrases, h) Text structure. Moreover, anxiety and environmental factors such as noise in the environment and unfavorable weather were also found to be the sources of RCPs.

Khataee (2018) set out a mixed method study to investigate reading problems among Iranian EFL learners. The participants were 63 EFL learners from an institute in Mashhad, Iran. At first, the participants took reading comprehension tests. In fact, the purpose of these tests was to determine their level of reading comprehension ability. 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 comprehension learners and poor comprehension learners were recognized. Then, they were asked to complete a questionnaire about their difficulties through the process of reading comprehension. The results of her study uncovered that good comprehension learners encountered problems like difficulty of the content (82.35 percent) and unknown vocabulary (64.70 percent). Also, the results revealed that poor comprehension learners faced problems like unknown vocabulary (100 percent) and shortage of time (89.13 percent). Consequently, she concluded that helping students in overcoming these types of difficulties for improving their reading comprehension would be helpful for them.

Similarly, Al-Jarrah, & Binti Ismail (2018) carried out a study to explore the reading comprehension difficulties among Arab EFL learners in higher learning institutions. They found out that the Arab's main RCPs were mainly vocabulary knowledge, prior knowledge, grammatical knowledge, word difficulties, lack of attention, syntactic error, meaning of phrase, and text structure.

Dara (2019) probed English RCPs of Cambodian high school students using both qualitative and quantitative approaches with 223 students and six English teachers from the two high schools in Kep province, China, as the direct responders. He employed both questionnaire and interview to collect data and used factor analysis and qualitative description in order to analyze and interpret the data. He came to the conclusion that lack of language knowledge and motivation were the most prominent English reading problems whereas students' personality and learning methods and teacher's personalities were found the peripheral reading problems although the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport had included this subject into the state curriculums for lower secondary to tertiary educations since 1993. Dara (2019) offered further root causes including family issues, English study time, learning and teaching materials, and library accesses for further deeper analysis in exploration of this issue at lower secondary school,

Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills for EFL learners who possess fewer opportunities to communicate and develop in English. In fact, reading comprehension is one of the essential language skills for those learners who want to read in order to obtain knowledge (Puspita et al., 2020). Putting emphasis on the importance of reading comprehension skill, recognizing the most

shared problems of reading comprehension is of utmost importance. Thus, it is essential for the EFL teachers to determine the central reading comprehension difficulties of learners first and then aid them to become good and fast readers.

Based on the most recent scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a significant number of fourth-and eighth-grade students in the United States are failing to read satisfactorily (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019). Precisely, 32 percent of all fourth-grade students were detected to be reading below basic stages, denoting difficulties with making simple inferences and finding relevant information in order to support their understanding of a text. This statistic sees an alarming increase among students identified as having learning disabilities, with 68 percent of struggling fourth graders reading below basic stages. This is hardly unexpected in view of the fact that difficulties with reading comprehension are common among students recognized with learning disabilities (Lerner, 2003).

Since reading comprehension is an important skill, it is vitally important to explore the problems that learners encounter during this process and the tentative solutions for alleviating such problems. Moreover, the current researchers are in fact teaching English in different language institutes in Iran and have confronted the RCPs of their learners at different classes and they have been curious to know the main RCP and the pertinent solutions to help their own leaners and other learners as well. So, they decided to set out an empirical study inspecting this issue cooperatively. Besides, in the Iranian EFL context, to the best knowledge of the researcher, few studies to date have explored Iranian EFL learners RCPs and tentative solutions for the existing problems from learners' perspectives. In fact, this problem is not a new topic in some countries, however it is still worth inspecting in Iran since there is a great shortage of research findings that can help to detect the problems, discover the causes and take effective measures to solve the problems for the aim of improving the English teaching in this country. Kazemi and Vahid Dastjerdi (2019), highlighting the efforts made by the authorities nationwide and materials developers to improve Iranian EFL learners' reading skills, contend that Iranian EFL learners still have problems when it comes to reading comprehension. Moreover, although some investigations have so far explored RCPs both in the Iranian English Language Teaching (ELT) context and the international session of ELT, few, if any have delved into the tentative solutions offered by learners for the problems. Notably, due to the multidimensionality (Khreisat & Mugableh, 2020) and multi-perspective (Kim, 2019) nature of the reading process any solutions provided in regard to RCPs are likely to provide coverage of one or a few dimensions of the comprehension process and cannot be considered fixed solutions when it comes to the dynamic interplay of a multitude of variables (Koumachi, 2020) involved in this process. Thus, the current study, in an attempt to add further knowledge to this issue and corroborate the recent few findings, was an endeavor in examining Iranian EFL learners' RCPs and the tentative solutions with a focus on learners' perceptions. Therefore, the following research question was formulated:

RQ: What are Iranian EFL learners' RCPs and the tentative solutions from Iranian intermediate EFL learners' perceptive?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the present study were 20 EFL learners studying at Safir language institute in Tehran. They were studying English at the intermediate level of language proficiency and were selected based on convenience sampling. Persian was the mother tongue of all the participants and they ranged in age from 18 to 28 and were female EFL learners. Table 1 displays the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1
Demographic information of the participants

Number	Gender	Nationality	Age Range	Mean Age	Proficiency Level
20	Female	Iranian	18-28	23.50	Intermediate

Instruments

Semi-structured interview

In the first step of designing the semi-structured interview, broad questions were structured on two main issues of the RCPs and the suggested solutions. And, in the second step, two EFL experts deleted or modified a few questions, formed new ones, and placed them in a logical sequence. The validity of the interview questions was verified in two steps. Initially, the literature on studies related to RCPs was reviewed to develop an in-depth understanding of the interview questions (Ahlin, 2019) and the corresponding interview protocols in regard to RCPs. Following that, appeal was made to expert opinion and the items were given to two ELT university teachers who evaluated the questions regarding comprehensibility, clarity, and relevance. Moreover, the interview protocol was pilot tested on five participants, purposefully selected from those who seemed more extroverts in expressing one's own ideas. Thus, the order of the protocol questions was revised slightly and additional probing questions were developed. The final three interview questions are as follows: 1) Do you find comprehending English texts difficult? To what extent? 2) Why do you find comprehending the texts difficult? And 3) What solutions can you offer for alleviating your RCPs? To augment reliability concerns and enhance the trustworthiness of the interview results two steps were taken. Firstly, the interview contents were coded by the two researchers independently (Dornyei, 2007). Moreover, member checking was also used in which the extracted themes from four interviews were given to the participants to ensure the appropriate interpretation of the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Research Design

This study utilized phenomenology, as a qualitative approach, to address Iranian EFL learners' RCPs and the tentative solutions. As Merleau-Ponty (1956) theorized, in phenomenology, the researcher transcends or suspends past knowledge and experience in order to know a phenomenon at a deeper stage. Colaizzi (1978) and Streubert and Carpenter (1999) held that phenomenology is an attempt to approach a lived experience with a sense of *newness* to elicit rich and descriptive data. Bracketing is a process of setting aside one's beliefs, emotions, and insights to be more open or realistic to the phenomenon (Colaizzi, 1978; Streubert & Carpenter, 1999). As an EFL researcher interviewing with the learners with RCPs, it was necessary for the interviewer to acknowledge and attempt to bracket those experiences. Colaizzi (1978) maintained that the success of phenomenological research questions depends on the extent to which the questions address lived experiences independent of theoretical explanations.

Data Collection Procedure

First, 20 female intermediate learners within the age range of 18 to 28 were contacted by the researcher. In order to collect the data, semi-structured interviews were held to the participants of the study over 5 months. After obtaining informed consent, each participant was asked to take part in the face-to-face individual interview with the researcher. Each interview session attended individually by the interviewees lasted approximately 10 minutes. This method is based in conversation, with the emphasis on researcher's asking questions and listening, and respondents answering (Jamshed, 2014). In this method of interview, interviewees are considered as meaning makers, not passive conduits for retrieving information from an existing vessel of answers. In semi-structured interviews, the whole process of interviewing changes throughout the continuum of highly-structured to highly unstructured

in that the predetermined questions were not necessarily asked in a fixed order but rather in a more flexible manner (DeJonckheere, & Vaughn, 2019). Moreover, the answers were not predetermined in the form of any response category, either (Jamshed, 2014). During interviews, the interviewees were allowed to answer the questions and proceed in their own way in an informal situation. To interview the participants, they were asked a set of three interview questions. The interview protocol was pilot tested with one participant, purposefully selected from main sample of the study. Accordingly, the order of the protocol questions was revised slightly. The final interview questions were 1) Do you find comprehending English texts difficult? To what extent? 2) Why do you find comprehending the texts difficult? Name the reasons, and 3) What solutions can you offer for alleviating your RCPs? The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Then to analyze the collected data, content analysis was drawn upon. In content analysis which is a data coding technique, the recurring themes or patterns are extracted out of the transcripts. To analyze the collected data in the present study, the interview contents were thematically analyzed drawing on the tenets of content analysis proposed by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). According to them, content analysis is the most common form of analysis when dealing with qualitative data. They enumerate five stages for content analyses including a) getting familiar with data, b) coming up with initial codes, c) looking for themes among codes, d) reviewing the themes, d) defining and labeling the themes, and e) producing the final report. The five stages were taken into consideration to analyze the collected data in this study and answer the research question.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, content analysis was used. In content analysis which is a data coding technique, the recurring themes or patterns are extracted out of the transcripts. To analyze the collected data in the present study, the interview contents were thematically analyzed drawing on the tenets of content analysis proposed by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). According to them, content analysis is the most common form of analysis when dealing with qualitative data. They enumerate five stages for content analyses including a) getting familiar with data, b) coming up with initial codes, c) looking for themes among codes, d) reviewing the themes, d) defining and labeling the themes, and e) producing the final report. The five stages were taken into consideration to analyze the collected data in this study and answer the research question.

The written transcripts were read some times to attain a general feeling for them. The authors coded all segments of the text and compiled themes by the codes. In the process of data analysis, the thoughts of separate interviewees were reconstructed into a meaningful category by the processes of data reduction, combining the same or similar codes, induction, and identifying new meaningful ideas emerging from the gathered data. From each transcript of each interviewee, significant phrases or sentences that pertained directly to the RCPs were recognized. Meanings were then constructed from the important statements and phrases. The constructed meanings were clustered into themes permitting for the emergence of themes common to all of the transcripts.

Methodological rigor was accomplished via the application of verification, validation, and validity (Meadows & Morse, 2001). The first step in attaining validity of a research project is verification. In fact, the verification was achieved using literature searches, bracketing past experiences, using an adequate sample, keeping field notes, identification of negative cases, and interviewing until saturation of data was attained (Frankel, 1999; Meadows & Morse, 2001). The validation, as a within-project evaluation, was brought about through multiple methods of data collection (i.e., observations and interviews), data analysis and coding by the more experienced researcher, member checks by subjects and central informants, and audit trails. In fact, in order to verify and trust the themes, four informant participants were asked to review the emerged themes and reflect on them as the member-checking procedure. And finally, validity is the ultimate goal of research and was based on trustworthiness and external reviews (ibid).

FINDINGS

As mentioned before, to answer the research question of the present study, the participants were interviewed via three interview questions. In fact, the researchers read transcriptions carefully, analyzed the codes, constructed larger concepts and themes in order to arrive at broader meanings and communications addressing the research questions of the study. For the purpose of clarity and comprehensibility, we explained the results of analyses per se based on each interview question in the following sections.

Interview question 1. Do you find comprehending English texts difficult? To what extent?

Analyzing the data revealed that that reading comprehension is considered a problem for most of the participants of the present study. In fact, in the natural world, the children do not learn reading in addition to writing before pre-school but they learn other skills. Generally, the results indicated that EFL learners have difficulty in reading comprehension and it is high. For instance, one of the students noted:

...I'm to some extant good at listening, writing, and speaking skills but not in reading comprehension. In fact, I can't understand the author's main idea, and when taking the tests, I receive low grades for reading comprehension.

Another respondent maintained:

... In my opinion, reading comprehension is not an easy task needing much practice to be stronger. In addition, most of my classmates' fear from reading tests and exercises, and the teachers don't assign enough time for teaching reading comprehension.

Out of the 20 participants in the study, eight students mentioned that they find comprehending English texts absolutely difficult; five of them commented that they found comprehending texts very difficult; and 3 held that comprehending English texts was quite difficult for them. The remaining 4 participants believed that comprehending English texts was a bit difficult for them as most of the time they found it easy to manage.

Interview question 2. Why do you find comprehending the texts difficult?

From 20 verbatim transcripts, 85 significant statements were extracted. Table 2 represents examples of significant statements with their formulated meanings. In fact, each statement was read carefully in order to draw the underlined meaningful notion behind it. For instance, as seen in Table 2, in the statement uttered by one of the interviewees as "I am always worried about knowing words when I read texts. I should use a dictionary a lot and even one or two unknown words make it difficult for me to understand the text" the meaning "Knowing enough word is important for reading comprehension" was emanated. Another example, as shown in Table 2, is "Usually in the class, the teachers don't give enough time to read, and also in the exams, the allotted time is so low that I can't finish the reading "that reflected the meaning" Time restriction can affect the reading comprehension negatively.

Table 2

Selected examples of significant statements of EFL learners with reading problems and related formulated meanings

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning
I am always worried about knowing words when I read texts. I should use a dictionary a lot and even one or two unknown words make it difficult for me to understand the text.	Knowing enough word is important for reading comprehension.
Actually, I'm not good at finding the relationship between the paragraphs and understanding the whole meaning and purpose of the of the passages I read.	Figuring out the organization and genre of passage influences the amount of reading comprehension.
While reading the texts, I face several complex grammatical structures and understanding them takes my time and energy to the comprehend the meaning and message of the passage.	Structural knowledge affects the process of reading comprehension.
Usually in the class, the teachers don't give enough time to read, and also in the exams, the allotted time is so low that I can't finish the reading.	Time restriction can affect the reading comprehension negatively.
I think teachers should talk with us when we have problems in reading. Sometimes when they understand that we have a problem, I feel a bit better.	Feeling anxiety can decrease the RCPs.

For the purpose of the final themes to be emerged, the researchers examined the formulated meanings pondering over them. They wanted to arrive at larger categories signifying the main reading problems. For example, as set forth in Table 2, from the formulated meaning "Knowing enough word is important for reading comprehension" the theme "Vocabulary knowledge" emerged, and from the meaning "Feeling anxiety can decrease the RCPs", the category "Anxiety" was drawn.

Table 3

Example of five theme clusters with their associated formulated meanings

Formulated Meaning	Theme cluster
Knowing enough word is important for reading comprehension.	Vocabulary knowledge
Figuring out the organization and genre of passage influences the amount of reading comprehension.	Text organization
Structural knowledge affects the process of reading comprehension.	Grammar
Time restriction can affect the reading comprehension negatively.	Limited time
Feeling anxiety can decrease the RCPs.	Anxiety

Finally, after arranging the formulated meanings into clusters, the results revealed 5 themes as the main RCPs, i.e., "Vocabulary knowledge", "Text organization", "Grammar", "Limited time", and "Anxiety". These main aspects or reading problems were organized from the highest frequently mentioned one (as the most important one) to the lowest frequently expressed by the interviewees in terms of frequencies and percentage (Table 4 & Figure 1).

As set forth in Table 4 and Figure 1, 17 learners (85%) mentioned that *'Vocabulary knowledge'* was the source of their reading problems. In other words, they said that low range of vocabulary knowledge deteriorates the speed and accuracy of reading comprehension. According to Baumann (2005) and Kharaghani (2015), there is a close relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. That means incomprehensible vocabulary may discourage the readers to continue the reading act. It can act like a hindrance in the process of reading comprehension. For example, one of the respondents noted:

...I am always worried about vocabulary when I read texts. I should use a dictionary a lot and even one or two unknown words make it difficult for me to understand the text.

Another one uttered:

...During the reading activity I confront several unknown words and foreign cultural and abstract names in which I don't have the meaning and enough information. I think knowing lots of words can help me read faster and more correctly.

As shown in Table 4 and Figure 1, sixteen learners (80%) pointed out that 'Text organization' was the source of their reading problems. In fact, by text organization they mean they are not aware of rhetoric and discourse organization of the passage set by the writers and the way these writers intend to realize their meaning within the text. As one of the interviewees commented:

...I always have the problem of finding the main ideas being explained in the paragraphs. It is also difficult for me to find the gist of the whole text and the relationship between paragraphs in a large text.

Moreover, another student said:

...I find it hard to make a relationship between the different parts of the passage in order to come to a final meaning and understanding. Actually, I can't guess the author's pint of view completely. That's why I can't answer the questions related to the main idea and intention of the writer.

According to the results displayed in Table 4 and Figure 1, 13 learners (80%) referred to 'Grammar' as another source of their reading problems. Actually, as Iwan (2016) found, there is a significant effect of grammar mastery on the reading comprehension skill of grade XI students at State Senior High Schools in Tangerang. In the present study, it was uncovered that lack of grammatical knowledge leads to reading comprehension difficulties for Iranian EFL learners. For instance, one of the participants held:

...Many times, there are grammar structures in the text that I do not understand. When there is an unfamiliar grammar structure, I usually cannot find the meaning of the text.

Likewise, one of the interviewees reported:

…The thing that bothers me greatly during reading process is long and complex sentence structures wasting much time of me to comprehend and digest their meanings and interpretations. We learn few grammatical points in each lesson of our books that I think they are not enough. Maybe we need to read grammar books outside the class by ourselves so as to be familiar with a greater number of important grammatical points.

Table 4

RCPs mentioned by the participants along with the respective percentages

Problem	Frequency	Percentage
1. Vocabulary knowledge	17	85%
2. Text organization	16	80%
3. Grammar	13	65%
4. Limited time	12	60%
5. Anxiety	11	55%

As evident from Table 4 and Figure 1, limited time as the source of reading problems was reported by 12 (60%) learners. As one of the respondents said:

...I always find that I need much more time for reading texts. Sometimes when I am in the middle of the text, the teacher starts asking comprehension questions.

Besides, Table 4 and Figure 1 show that anxiety was mentioned by 11 (55%) learners (80%). According to one of the learners:

...I am usually a bit uncomfortable when I am reading English texts. I do not really have this problem when I am writing or speaking in English but for reading, I have this problem.

Similarly, another participant maintained:

…We need to spend more time for reading comprehension exercises. Usually, the teachers don't assign sufficient time to us to read carefully, so we often get disappointed and discouraged to follow him and answer the questions related to the text.
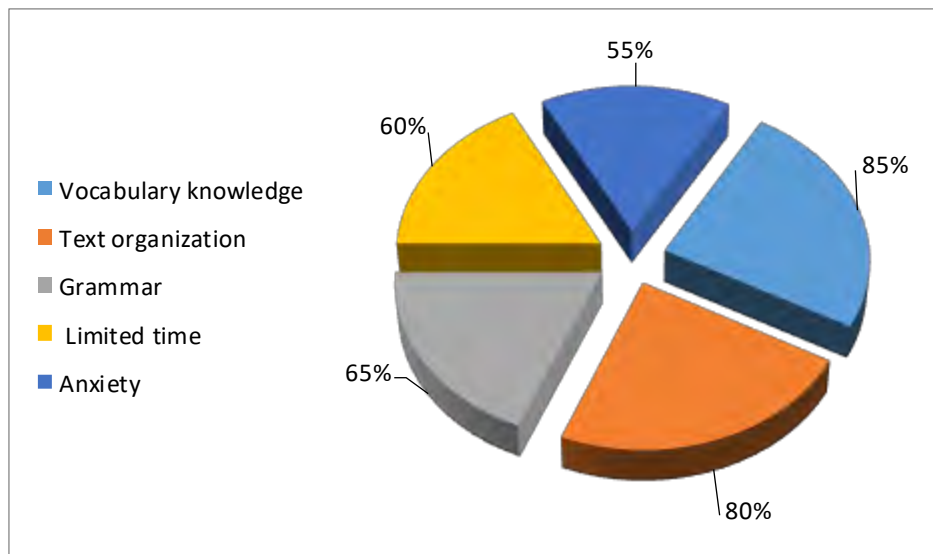
Figure 1
Percentages of RCPs

Interview question 3. What solutions can you offer for alleviating your RCPs?

After analyzing the transcripts, the statements and codes that related to the solutions of the reading problems, the current researchers arrived at four main themes as the main solutions to solve the reading comprehension of the adult EFL learners. These four solutions were organized from the highest frequently reported one (as the most important one) to the lowest frequently mentioned by the interviewees in terms of frequencies and percentage (Table 5).

As it's observable in Table 5, 16 learners (80%) mentioned that working more on vocabulary can be a solution to their reading problems. In fact, they believe that they will read more fluently and accurately if they learn and know more range of English words. For example, one of the respondents stated:

.... I think if teachers teach all the vocabulary in the texts and also help us read more vocabulary ourselves, our reading will be better.

Additionally, one of them spoke:

...The meaning of the passage and intention of the writer is delivered via the words, so we need to learn more words in order to read better and take the reading comprehension tests better than before. If the time of class is not enough for learning new words, the teachers can introduce nice and useful books to use at home.

As seen in Table 5, 16 learners (80%) pointed out that improving grammar could lead to alleviating their reading problem. As one of the interviewees commented:

...Teachers should focus on the grammar of the texts and after the reading should help us understand the grammar points which are difficult in the reading.

Equally, in the words of another student:

...For me, it's helpful to learn a greater number of grammatical items to help us read better and comfortable and with less time. We can also use internet and websites and resources to learn more grammars if the time of class is not enough.

Table 5 shows that 15 learners (70%) referred to teachers' help for anxious students as the possible solution for their reading comprehension. For instance, one of the participants held:

...I think teachers should talk with us when we have problems in reading. Sometimes when they understand that we have a problem, I feel a bit better.

By the same token, another one reported:

...We need the teachers' support during the reading tasks and help us by giving clues, teaching us compensation strategies and comments when facing reading problems.

Besides, as evident from Table 5, teachers' offering more time for learners to read was mentioned by 13 (65%) learners. As an illustration, one of the respondents said:

...When we are doing reading, teachers should always wait for slow students to finish reading and answer the questions.

In the same way, one of the participants reflected:

…reading comprehension is not easy for us therefore we need more time and patience to read so as to comprehend the meaning the writer wants to transmit. I think the teachers estimate the necessary time for reading on the basis of their own reading ability not us.

Table 5

Solutions for Alleviating Learners' Reading Comprehension Difficulties Offered by the Participants along with the Respective Percentages

Solution	Frequency	Percentage
1. Working more on vocabulary	16	80%
2. Improving grammar	16	80%
3. Teachers' help for anxious students	14	70%
4. Teachers' offering more time for learners to read	13	65%

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed at investigating Iranian EFL learners' RCPs and the tentative solutions for such problems from learners' perspective. The results of data analyses revealed that vocabulary knowledge, text origination, grammar, limited time, and anxiety were the problems of reading comprehension mentioned by participants. Learners offered four solutions for their RCPs including: working more on vocabulary, improving grammar, teachers' help for anxious students and teachers' offering more time for learners to read.

Vocabulary knowledge was referred to as a problem in the reading comprehension process. The relationship between word knowledge and reading comprehension has been corroborated in many investigations (e.g., Nation, 2001; Read, 2004; Schmitt, 2000). Nation (2001) maintains, knowledge of vocabulary is the best predictor of reading comprehension. In a similar vein, Read (2004) notes that, word knowledge is a significant factor contributive to successful reading comprehension. As Schmitt (2000) asserts, the number of known and unknown words in a text is an important and highly relevant factor when it comes to RCPs. Another reading comprehension problem of the learners in the present study was text organization. It has been revealed that text organization is an effective factor which is highly contributive to the reading comprehension process (Gajria et al., 2007). Learners who do not have the required skills to identify the organization of a given text fail to comprehend the text and have to struggle with comprehending the reading content unless they are provided with due instruction in terms of how the text is organized to achieve the writer's purpose.

The third problem of reading comprehension voiced by learners in the current study was grammar. As Grabe (1991, p. 280) notes, "fluent readers need a sound knowledge of language structure and a large recognition of vocabulary". Moreover, Bernhardt (1991) asserts that syntactic knowledge is a

substantial factor based on which readers get to comprehend written texts. Limited time was identified as another problem during the reading comprehension. Insufficient time for reading activities has been found to hinder the reading comprehension process (Chang, 2012). Therefore, readers should be provided with adequate time proportionate to the reading activity to have successful reading comprehension. Anxiety was mentioned as another problem during the reading comprehension process. Anxiety has long been identified as a debilitating factor with different language skills in general and reading in particular (Çapan & Pektas, 2013). As Saito et al., (1999) maintain, knowledge of vocabulary and grammar cannot lead to successful reading comprehension unless learners can manage their reading anxiety.

The results of the present study concerning RCPs are in congruence with those of Shehu's (2015) investigation. Shehu (2015) found that insufficient vocabulary knowledge and text organization were two problems for learners in the reading comprehension process. Moreover, Shehu (2015) came to the conclusion that inadequate knowledge of grammar including knowledge of tenses, linking words and pronouns were also among the RCPs. Similar to the findings of the current study, Qrqez and Ab Rashid (2017) found unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited available time to cognitively process the text as the RCPs. Likewise, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) maintained that vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge, text structure and anxiety to be the sources of RCPs.

The findings of the present study also support the literature (e.g., Block & Israel, 2005) in that vocabulary is the main component in the reading comprehension process. As Block and Israel (2005) expressed, direct teaching of vocabulary in context improves both vocabulary and reading comprehension. Moreover, the findings of the present study support the bottom-up processing in reading comprehension in that vocabulary is the underpinning element which contributes to the bottom structure of the reading text which leads to comprehension (Campbell & Malicky, 2002). The results of the current study also substantiate the top-down model of reading comprehension in which the text organization is one of the main elements in the reading process (Yigiter et al., 2005).

CONCLUSION

Bas Based on the results of the current study, learners offered four solutions for their RCPs. These solutions are considered tentative because of two reasons. Firstly, reading is a multidimensional process (Khreisat & Mugableh, 2020) and not only reading components such as vocabulary and grammar and affective and temporal factors such as anxiety and time are vitally important but also the reading processes, skills, and strategies have also been found to contribute to the reading comprehension process (e.g., Campbell & Malicky, 2002; Çapan & Pektas, 2013; Cox-Magno et al., 2018; Daftarifard & Samadian, 2020; Yigiter et al., 2005). Hence, in the current study the solutions offered by learners are considered tentative. Secondly, language teachers are also considered as agents at least in the instructional practices in regard to the reading comprehension processes (Biesta et al., 2015) and thus their voices should be acknowledged in terms of solutions to RCPs. Therefore, should one intend to transcend the tentativeness nature of solutions they ought to consider RCPs from a multi-dimensional and multi-agentive perspective which cannot receive authoritative coverage in a single study. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to adopt more inclusive dimensions and perspectives when exploring RCPs to provide a more comprehensive and clear picture of RCPs and the emergent solutions.

The main problems of reading comprehension identified in the current study included vocabulary knowledge, text origination, grammar, limited time, and anxiety. The results of the current study support the previous empirical and theoretical literature concerning RCPs. However, since the reading comprehension process is a multi-faceted factor with many underlying cognitive aspects, the findings of the present study cannot be taken conclusive (LervAag et al., 2018). Accordingly, more research studies are needed to shed light on various aspects of the reading comprehension process and enrich

the literature further. The results of such studies can also provide EFL stakeholders with more knowledge and awareness concerning the reading comprehension process which can in turn establish a rigorous platform for teachers in helping EFL learners tackle their RCPs and become more efficient readers.

Based on the findings of the present study, EFL teachers are encouraged to provide EFL learners with more instruction concerning vocabulary items to equip them with the required vocabulary they need to comprehend texts. Moreover, EFL teachers are recommended to work more on teaching the grammatical items in target texts to alleviate reading comprehension difficulties. Additionally, EFL teachers should teach EFL learners about how texts are organized in an attempt to help them with more effective reading comprehension. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to pay more attention to anxious learners in an attempt to reduce their anxiety while reading and also provide them with more time when it comes to reading comprehension tasks.

Like most empirical studies, the current study had some limitations which can be addressed in the future. The participants of the present study were all female from the intermediate language proficiency level and within the age range of 18 to 28. Similar studies with male participants from other proficiency levels and other age ranges can provide more comprehensive results concerning RCPs. The present study made use of interviews as its only method of data collection. In the future, researchers are encouraged to use other means of data collection such as questionnaires, observation and think-aloud protocols to come up with more comprehensive results. In the present study, the researcher focused on learners' perspectives. A similar study can be carried out focusing on teachers' perspectives towards EFL learners RCPs and the possible solutions.

REFERENCES

Ahlin, E. M. (2019). Semi-structured interviews with expert practitioners: Their validity and significant contribution to translational research. *SAGE Research Methods Cases.* https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526466037

Alber-Morgan, S. R., Ramp, E. M., Anderson, L. L., & Martin, C. M. (2007). Effects of repeated readings, error correction, and performance feedback on the fluency and comprehension of middle school students with behavior problems. *The Journal of Special Education, 41*(1), 17-30. https://doi.org/10.1177/00224669070410010201

Al-Jarrah, H. & Binti Ismail, N. S. (2018). Reading comprehension difficulties among EFL learners in higher learning institutions. *International Journal of English Linguistics, 8*(7), 32-41. https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v8n7p32

Atkinson, L., Slade, L., Powell, D., & Levy, J. P. (2017). Theory of mind in emerging reading comprehension: A longitudinal study of early indirect and direct effects. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 164*, 225-238. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2017.04.007

Auerbach, C. E., & Silverstein, L. B. (2003). *Qualitative data: An introduction to coding and analysis*. New York University Press.

Baumann, J. F. (2005). Vocabulary-comprehension relationships. In B. Maloch, J. V. Hoffman, D. L. Schallert, C. M. Fairbanks, & J. Worthy (Eds.), *Fifty-fourth yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 117-131). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.

Bernhardt, E. B. (1991). *Reading development in a second language: Theoretical, empirical, and classroom perspectives*. Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Biesta, G., Priestley, M., & Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency, *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 21*(6), 624-640. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044325

Block, C., & Israel, S. (2005). *Reading first and beyond: The complete guide for teachers and literacy coaches*. Corwin Press.

Campbell, P. & Malicky, G. (2002). The reading strategies of adult basic education students. *Adult Basic Education, 12* (1), 3-19. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1046.9430&rep=rep1&type=pdf

Çapan, S. A., & Pektas, R. (2013). An empirical analysis of the relationship between foreign language reading anxiety and reading strategy training. *English Language Teaching, 6*(12), 181-188. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1078468.pdf

Carrell, P. L. (1993). Evidence of a formal schema in second language comprehension. In J. W. Oller, (Ed.), *Methods that work: Ideas for literacy and language teachers* (2nd Ed.) (pp. 191-205). Heinle.

Chang, C-S. (2012). Improving reading rate activities for EFL students: Timed reading and repeated oral reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 24*, 56–83. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ974104.pdf

Chen, Z., Cui, Y., Ma, W., Wang, S., & Hu, G. (2018). Convolutional spatial attention model for reading comprehension with multiple-choice questions. *International Journal of Instruction, 14*(5), 421-432. https://doi.org/10.1609/aaai.v33i01.33016276

Colaizzi, P. F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it. In R. Vaile & M. King (Eds.), *Existential phenomenological alternatives for psychology* (pp. 48-71). Oxford University Press.

Cox-Magno, N., Ross, P., Dimino, K., & Wilson, A. (2018). Metacognitive reading strategy and emerging reading comprehension in students with intellectual disabilities. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 8*(1), 195-209. https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1301&context=jerap

Daftarifard, P., & Samadian, T. (2020). Possibility of cluster strategy use by readers in response to filling the blank test. *Anatolian Journal of Education, 5*(1), 29-40. https://doi.org/10.29333/aje.2020.513a

Dara, D. (2019). Investigating English reading comprehension problems of Cambodian high school students. *American International Journal of Social Science, 8*(3), 51-56. http://www.aijssnet.com/journals/Vol_8_No_3_September_2019/8.pdf

DeJonckheere, M., & Vaughn, L. M. (2019). Semi-structured interviewing in primary care research: a balance of relationship and rigor. *Family Medicine and Community Health, 7*(2), 128-139. https://doi.org/10.1136/fmch-2018-000057

Denton, C. A., Wolters, C. A., York, M., Swanson, E., Kulesz, P., & Francis, D. J. (2014). Adolescents' use of reading comprehension strategies: Differences related to reading proficiency, grade level, and gender. *Learning and Individual Differences, 8*(3), 221-235. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2014.11.016

Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.

ERGÜL, C. (2014). Evaluation of reading performances of students with reading problems for the risk of learning disabilities. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice,12*(3), 2051-2057. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1000909.pdf

Fahim, M., & Sa'eepour, M. (2011). The impact of teaching critical thinking skills on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 2*(4), 867-874. https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.2.4.867-874

Frankel, R. M. (1999). Standards of qualitative research. In B. F. Crabtree & W. L. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 333-346). Sage.

Gajria, M., Jitendra, A. K., Sood, S., & Sacks, G. (2007). Improving comprehension of expository text in students with LD: A research synthesis. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 40,* 210–225. https://doi.org/10.1177/00222194070400030301

Grabe, W.)1991). Current developments in second language reading research. *TESOL Quarterly, 25,* 375-406. https://doi.org/10.2307/3586977

Hsieh, H. F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research, 15*(9), 1277–1288. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687

Hudson, T. (1998). Theoretical perspectives in reading. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 18*(1), 43-60. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190500003470

Iwan, M. (2016). The effects of vocabulary and grammar mastery on students' reading skill. *Wanastra, 8*(2), 19-27. https://ejournal.bsi.ac.id/ejurnal/index.php/wanastra/article/view/1947

Jamshed S. (2014). Qualitative research method-interviewing and observation. *Journal of Basic and Clinical Pharmacy, 5*(4), 87-88. https://doi.org/10.4103/0976-0105.141942

Javadi, J., & Mohammadi, M. (2019). The effect of critical discourse-based instruction on Iranian English major students' reading comprehension. *International Journal of Instruction, 12*(1), 58-69. https://doi.org/10.29333/iji.2019.1213a

Kazemi, H., & Vahid Dastjerdi, H. (2019). Impact of density and distribution of unfamiliar lexical items on Iranian EFL learners' successful reading comprehension achievement. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research, 7*(25), 51-64. http://jfl.iaun.ac.ir/article_615578_a2253ba71ad713cfc8fbb51b3ff946b0.pdf

Kharaghani, N. (2015). The impact of vocabulary knowledge on reading comprehension ability of Iranian English learners receiving reciprocal teaching and cooperative grouping intervention program. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education, 4*(3), 47-56. https://profdoc.um.ac.ir/paper-abstract-1047039.html

Khataee, E. (2018). Reading failure among Iranian EFL learners: Study of underlying problems. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies. 6*(3). 164-176. http://www.eltsjournal.org/archive/value6%20issue3/19-6-3-18.pdf

Khreisat, M. N., Mugableh, A. (2020). Multidimensionality of EFL Recreational Reading Attitudes: An EFA and CFA Approach. *Journal of Research in Applied Linguistics*, 11(2), 57-69. https://doi.org/10.22055/rals.2020.15946

Kim, M. (2019). The perceptions of students and teachers on the practice of assessment in extensive reading. *English Teaching, 74*(4), 179-203. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1284995.pdf

Koumachi, B. (2020). Exploring the dynamic interplay between note-taking strategies and reading comprehension performance of Moroccan EFL students: A quasi-experimental study. *Randwick International of Education and Linguistics Science Journal, 1*(2), 159-170. https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v1i2.83

Lerner, J. (2003). *Learning disabilities: Theories, diagnosis, and teaching strategies.* Houghton Mifflin.

LervAag, A., Hulme, C., & Melby-Lervåg, M. (2018). Unpicking the developmental relationship between oral language skills and reading comprehension: It's simple, but complex. *Child development, 89*(5), 1821-1838. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12861

Meadows, L. M., & Morse, J. M. (2001). Constructing evidence within the qualitative project. In J. M. Morse, J. M. Swansen, & A. Kuzel (Eds.), *Nature of qualitative evidence* (pp. 187-200). Sage.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1956). What is phenomenology? *Cross Currents, 6,* 59-70. https://pdfcoffee.com/what-is-phenomenology-merleau-ponty-pdf-free.html

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (2019). *The nation's report card: Reading 2019*; National Center for Educational Statistics: Washington, DC, USA.

Puspita, R. D., Hoerudin, C. W. & Yudiantara, R. A. (2020). Integrating thematic instruction using webbed curricula model to improve students' reading comprehension on informational text. *Anatolian Journal of Education, 5*(2), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.29333/aje.2020.521a

Qrqez, M., & Ab Rashid. R. (2017). Reading comprehension difficulties among EFL learners: the case of first and second -year students at Yarmouk university in Jordan. *Arab World English Journal, 8*(3), 285-298. https://doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no3.27

Read, J. (2004). Research in teaching vocabulary. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 24*,146-161. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190504000078

Saito, Y., Horwitz, E. K., & Garza, T. J. (1999). Foreign language reading anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal, 83*(2), 202-218. https://doi.org/10.1111/0026-7902.00016

Schmitt, N. (2000). *Vocabulary in language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

Shehu, I. (2015). Reading comprehension problems encountered by foreign language students, case study: Albania, Croatia. *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, 4*(1), 91-102. https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2015.v4n1s1p91

Stott, N. (2001). Helping ESL students become better readers: Schema theory applications and limitations. *The Internet TESL Journal*. http://iteslj.org/Articles/Stott-Schema.html.

Streubert, H. J., & Carpenter, D. R. (1999). *Qualitative research in nursing: Advancing the humanistic imperative* (2nd ed.). Lippincott.

Tay, Y., Luu, A. T., Hui, S. C., & Su, J. (2018). *Densely connected attention propagation for reading comprehension*. 32nd Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS 2018), Montréal, Canada. https://arxiv.org/abs/1811.04210

Teimourtash, M., & Yazdanimoghaddam, M. (2018). The impact of fostering learner autonomy through implementing cooperative learning strategies on inferential reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. *Iranian Journal of English for Academic Purposes, 5*(2), 124-136. http://journalscmu.sinaweb.net/article_82140_3cf056c979b61561d6da9b0e341c2910.pdf

Welbl, J., Stenetorp, P., & Riedel, S. (2018). Constructing datasets for multi-hop reading comprehension across documents. *Transactions of the Association of Computational Linguistics, 6*, 287-302. https://doi.org/10.1162/tacl_a_00021

Yigiter K., Saricoban A. & Gurses T. (2005). Reading strategies employed by ELT learners at the advanced level. *The Reading Matrix, 5*(1), 22-34. https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.565.4721&rep=rep1&type=pdf