

REVIEW ARTICLE

A Comprehensive Review of Reading Challenges and Instructional Solutions for Saudi EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT – Immense research has been done on the process of reading strategies and difficulties associated with reading in both native language and foreign language. Existing research suggests a need to investigate the hindrances that learners face in reading. This systematic literature review attempts to identify the difficulties faced by Saudi English language learners in reading and the possible solutions recommended. This study focuses on the implications of English reading which is being taught to Saudi EFL learners. This research selected 7 articles to review from an initial total of 140 Scopus indexed journal articles. The focus of the research identified the challenges that hinder the reading skill development of both learners and teachers. These issues include ineffective study materials, lexical difficulties, low levels of reading comprehension, lack of motivation, ineffective reading strategies and other related problems. Findings conclude solutions to these difficulties, such as training teachers in linguistics, using different diversified methods to teach reading, acknowledging students' learning preferences and styles, encouraging, and motivating the students, and organizing extra classes. Overall, this exploration will become significant for teaching instructors in creating meaningful reading materials or lessons in view of the concerns and preferences of learners. This will result in the enhancement of the Arab learners' reading skills.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the most important skills among the four language skills, and this importance extends to English reading competence. Although English has long been taught in Saudi schools, students' overall language proficiency remains below expected standards (Wedell & Alshumaimeri, 2014). As English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), it is commonly treated as an academic subject rather than a medium of everyday communication (Liton, 2013). Historically, English became the primary foreign language introduced in Saudi schools in 1984 (Maherzi, 2011), and it has since expanded across schools, colleges, and universities (Liton, 2013). This expanded presence increases exposure to English but simultaneously heightens the need for students to acquire adequate reading skills to engage with academic materials.

Reading proficiency develops through linguistic comprehension and decoding skills (Alotaibi, 2022). However, EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia remain largely traditional, relying on memorization and instructor-led repetition (Alharbi, 2022). Students often lack the ability to evaluate their own reading proficiency, making them unaware of expected skill levels. Teachers, in turn, may assume students have sufficient reading abilities once alphabetic and phonetic foundations are taught, underestimating the complex linguistic and cognitive demands of proficient reading (Alshumaimeri & Alasmari, 2012).

Despite ongoing educational reforms, many Saudi EFL students struggle to master basic English skills taught at earlier stages, leading to difficulties in university-level reading. Problems such as limited vocabulary, lack of comprehension, low motivation, and insufficient knowledge of reading strategies have been widely documented (Samad et al., 2017). These barriers contribute to weak reading proficiency and hinder academic success. Saudi EFL learners frequently struggle to infer word meanings in context, identify main ideas, and comprehend texts effectively (Al-Khaza'leh, 2019). Comprehension difficulties persist even among students who read fluently, highlighting the need for instructional focus on deeper processing skills (Halim & Shah, 2021). In addition, factors such as gender and content familiarity influence reading comprehension outcomes (Alharbi, 2022).

Although reading proficiency has been broadly studied, the literature reveals a lack of systematic investigation into the specific reading challenges faced by Saudi EFL university students. Studies acknowledge that certain aspects, such as reading anxiety, remain understudied despite their significant impact (Bensalem, 2020; Zhou, 2017). Research also reflects ongoing gaps in understanding the causes and manifestations of reading difficulties among EFL learners, particularly in academic contexts (Chow et al., 2017; Ismail, 2015; Sabti et al., 2016; Tien, 2017). These challenges impede language acquisition, reduce learners' confidence, and limit their ability to apply effective reading strategies (Bensalem, 2020; Ismail, 2015). Given that Saudi students have historically struggled with reading competence (Al Nooh, 2013; Bensalem, 2020), a focused investigation of these issues remains necessary.

In response to these gaps, this systematic literature review aims to critically examine the multifaceted reading challenges encountered by Saudi EFL students and evaluate the effectiveness of proposed solutions in existing research. Rather than merely

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summarizing prior studies, this review seeks to identify patterns, contradictions, and gaps, offering a theory-informed synthesis grounded in cognitive, social constructivist, and connectivism perspectives. The findings also aim to support educators, curriculum designers, and policy-makers in improving instructional practices, strengthening curriculum planning, and enhancing students' reading preparedness for academic contexts.

The insights generated from this review are expected to inform strategies for developing reading skills among Saudi EFL learners and assist lecturers in understanding students' perceptions of their own reading processes. Ultimately, the study aims to strengthen academic curricula and contribute to improved reading instruction at the tertiary level.

The research questions guiding this systematic review are:

1. What are the reading problems faced by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia?
2. What are the solutions that could assist teachers and learners in overcoming these reading problems in the Saudi EFL context?

1.1 Importance of Reading Proficiency

Reading proficiency has consistently been recognized as a fundamental component of language learning, particularly within academic contexts. The ability to read effectively enables learners to access knowledge, engage in higher-order thinking, and participate meaningfully in social, educational, and professional environments. In EFL settings such as Saudi Arabia, reading serves as a cornerstone for overall language competence and supports the development of vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills (Alharbi, 2022; Alshehri, 2014; Ruhil Amal et al., 2023). As English functions primarily as a language of academia, science, and employment, the acquisition of strong reading skills becomes essential for university success and future career opportunities.

Research has repeatedly emphasized the centrality of reading comprehension in foreign language learning. Recent research published in the International Journal of Language Education and Applied Linguistics highlights that targeted reading interventions and instructional strategies significantly improve EFL learners' reading proficiency, underscoring the crucial role of reading as a foundational skill for wider language development (Mukhtar et al, 2025). Fitria (2019) noted that learners who understand lexical items more efficiently demonstrate higher levels of comprehension, which subsequently increases their motivation to read. Reading comprehension is not merely a mechanical process; it is an interactive practice requiring the integration of linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, and cognitive processing skills (Nezami, 2012; Pourhosein & Sabouri, 2016; Ahmadi, 2017). Readers draw upon prior knowledge and contextual cues to decode meaning, make inferences, and construct understanding. Consequently, the level of a learner's lexical and semantic awareness plays a critical role in their ability to comprehend texts quickly and effectively (Ahmadi, 2017). Developing strong reading proficiency is therefore essential for academic success and for enabling EFL learners to navigate increasingly complex English texts at higher levels of education.

Given these wide-ranging benefits, developing strong reading proficiency is vital not only for academic achievement but also for fostering learners' confidence, autonomy, and long-term engagement with English. The importance of reading therefore extends beyond the classroom, influencing learners' motivation, cognitive development, and readiness to participate in global knowledge communities.

1.2 Reading Problems of Saudi Learners

English learners in Saudi Arabia face many challenges in reading English. According to Nezami (2012), the general reading problems Despite the importance of reading proficiency, many Saudi EFL learners encounter persistent difficulties in developing effective reading skills. Research highlights a range of linguistic and cognitive challenges that disrupt comprehension. Nezami (2012) identified spelling difficulties, pronunciation issues, and limited vocabulary knowledge as common barriers among university students, noting that insufficient lexical mastery often contributes to below-average reading performance. Similarly, Alsubaie (2014) emphasized that meaningful reading requires the ability to interpret ideas accurately; however, Saudi learners frequently misinterpret texts due to weak semantic knowledge and insufficient exposure to varied reading materials.

A recurring concern in the Saudi context is the abrupt shift from short, controlled EFL texts in classrooms to lengthy, complex passages in higher education. Abdalla and Louis (2012) observed that when learners lack experience with extensive or rapid reading, they often resort to translation as a coping mechanism, which further hinders the development of independent reading skills. These comprehension problems not only impede language development but also affect learners' performance in content courses at the tertiary level.

Moreover, cognitive demands associated with reading increase significantly when students encounter dense and complex texts. Alotaibi (2022) noted that even fluent readers struggle with comprehension when faced with cognitively demanding materials, and such challenges are amplified for EFL learners. With competing priorities and distractions, many students find it difficult to sustain focus and engage deeply with reading tasks. Collectively, these factors highlight the multifaceted nature of reading difficulties among Saudi EFL learners and underscore the need for targeted pedagogical interventions.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Selection Criteria and Procedure

This systematic literature review employed a structured and rigorous research method to examine the reading challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners and the solutions proposed in existing studies. A systematic review approach was chosen because it enables an

objective, comprehensive, and transparent synthesis of research evidence. The review process involved four key stages: (1) identifying relevant keywords and constructing a search strategy; (2) searching Scopus databases for studies published between 2017 to 2023; (3) screening and selecting studies based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria; and (4) extracting, analyzing, and categorizing findings using thematic synthesis. Only empirical studies focusing on reading difficulties, reading comprehension, or reading instruction among Saudi EFL learners were included. The selected studies were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, methodological trends, and research gaps. This method ensured a systematic, replicable process and provided a solid foundation for synthesizing the challenges and potential solutions related to EFL reading in the Saudi context.

To identify relevant studies for this review, a structured search strategy was employed using a combination of keywords and Boolean operators. The following search string (figure 1) was used. This string was designed to capture articles that focused on reading-related challenges among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The terms "reading problems" and "reading difficulties" were included to ensure a comprehensive retrieval of studies discussing various aspects of reading challenges, while "EFL learners" narrowed the results to the specific target population. The search was conducted within the title, abstract, and keyword fields to maximize relevance and specificity. Figure 1 illustrates the search string used in the database search process.

Figure 1

The search string for Scopus

(TITLE-ABS-KEY ("reading problems") OR TITLE-ABS-KEY ("reading difficulties") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("EFL learners")

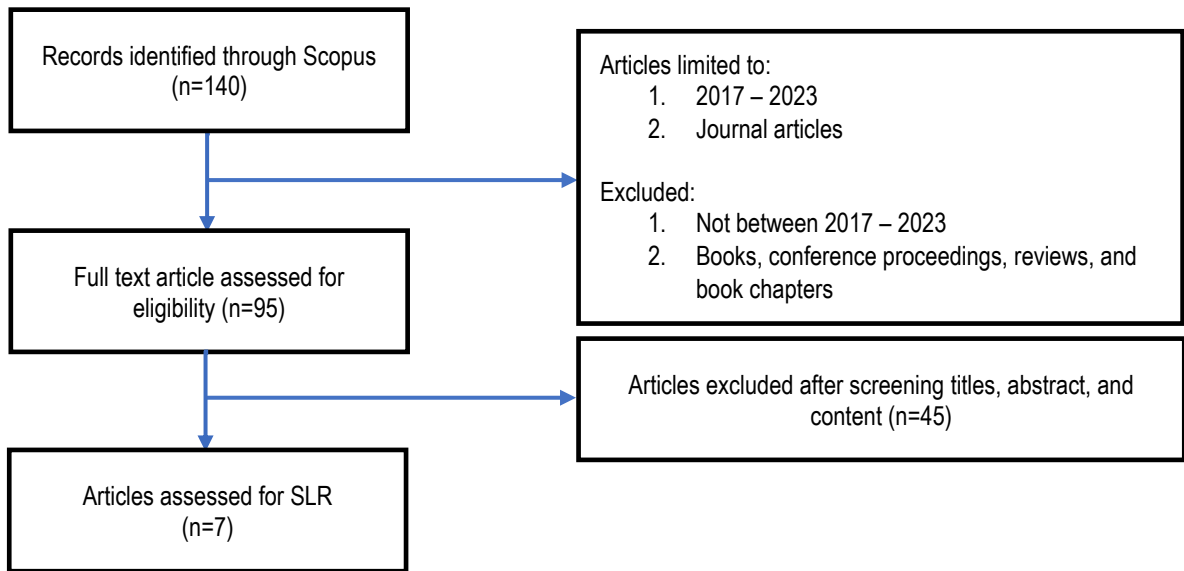
In the first stage, thorough research was conducted on Scopus database by using the following keywords "reading problems" or "reading difficulties" and "EFL learners". Using the advanced search function in the Scopus database, the following research string was used: #reading problems #EFL learners. The database had a total of 140 articles. Figure 1 illustrates the string search captured in Scopus database.

2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

This research reviewed articles published in high impact journals listed in the Scopus database. Articles that were selected in this SLR consist of high-quality papers published between 2017 – 2023. This is to ensure that the issues highlighted in the articles relate to problems that are current. PRISMA or Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Literature Reviews and Meta-Analyses protocols were adapted to conduct the SLR in this study. The aim of this systematic literature review is to identify and synthesize articles on reading challenges and problems among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. As shown in Figure 2, the study selection process followed a systematic screening approach.

Figure 2

Study selection process



The selection of articles for this systematic literature review followed a rigorous screening process grounded in pre-established inclusion and exclusion and followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and rigor in the review process (Page et al., 2021) to ensure the relevance, quality, and focus of the studies. The articles selected were chosen after identifying the inclusion and exclusion criteria. For example, only articles which were published between the year 2017 and 2023 were selected for assessment. Articles which were not published between the year 2017 and 2023 were excluded. After screening titles, abstracts, and content more articles were excluded due to the following reasons: studies done in countries other than Arab countries, studies not related to reading issues, studies which only focused on the difficulty level of reading text, articles about dyslexia and learners with disabilities. Articles which focused on poetry reading, vocabulary sizes and vocabulary

issues only were also excluded. Further articles on grammar difficulties, comparison about English and French, and gender-based reading preferences were also excluded as they did not align with the primary focus of this review.

2.3 Publications

In the span of six years, from the year 2017 to year 2023, the author was able to identify seven articles related to reading difficulties of EFL learners in the Scopus database. The articles selected consist of those published in 2017 (n=1), 2021 (n=5), 2022 (n=1). These studies were conducted in many different universities and institutions. As shown in Table 1, the seven journals identified in the Scopus database demonstrate the distribution of publication sources relevant to the research topic.

Table 1

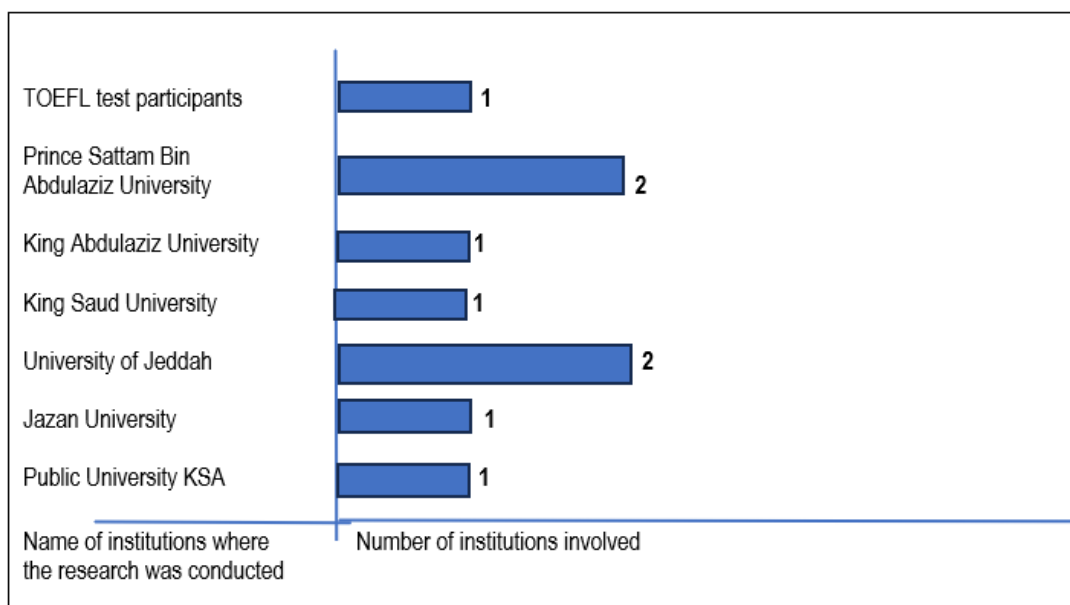
Distribution of seven journals within Scopus

Journal Title	Total
Journal of Language Teaching and Research	2
Reading Psychology	1
International Journal of Advanced Computer Science and Applications	1
Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies	1
Journal of Education and e-Learning Research	1
The ASIAN ESP Journal	1

Out of the seven studies, two studies were conducted in Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University and University of Jeddah. Other studies were conducted in Jazan University, Public University KSA, King Saud University and King Abdul university. One study was conducted on TOEFL test participants in Saudi Arabia. A study by Omar and Alluqmani (2021) was conducted in three universities: King Abdul Aziz University, King Saud University and Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University. Figure 3 presents the institutions where the selected studies were conducted.

Figure 3

Institutions where the studies were conducted



Multiple institutions were targeted to collect data to investigate the reading difficulties and challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners. All the studies were conducted in various public universities across Saudi Arabia. One study was conducted on Saudi TOEFL test participants. Two studies were conducted in Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University and two more in University of Jeddah. There were different universities in which research was conducted once, like King Abdulaziz University, King Saud University, Jizan University and Public University KSA.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of this SLR was to identify the problems faced by EFL learners particularly Saudi Arabian students in reading English. All the seven papers concentrated on the issues related with reading including the problems or challenges or difficulties faced

by the learners. As shown in Table 2, the key results and conclusions from the seven studies reviewed are synthesized to highlight the major findings relevant to reading challenges and solutions in the Saudi EFL context.

Table 2

Results and conclusions from the seven articles used in the SLR

Author	Findings	Suggestions
Omar, Hussein & Alalwi (2021)	Irrelevant study material; Failure in decoding (to decode)	Need computer assisted collaborative reading model
Omar & Alluqmani (2021)	Cultural, linguistic & historical context of English in Saudi Arabia; Lack of prerequisite knowledge Irrelevant study material	Computer based model to be implemented through in-sessions support courses
Alasmari (2021)	Linguistic difficulty; Lack of collaboration and cooperation; Lack of digital literacy	Adoption of internet reciprocal teaching
Sharma (2022)	Difficulty in decoding words; Inadequate lexical knowledge; Lack of interest & motivation; Insufficient reading techniques; Lack of prior knowledge; Poor reading habits	Implement reading coupled with technology; Read regularly; A need to be motivated to be determined struggling readers
Alkhaleefah (2017)	Lexical difficulties of words; Difficulty in comprehending concepts; Lack of relevant schema Problem in comprehending writing style	EFL learners need to be taught how to plan, regulate, and monitor their strategic processing when reading different text types.
Halim & Shah (2021)	Less involvement in pair/group work; Inadequate demonstration of reading strategies; Reluctance to ask help; Focus and concentration difficulty	Trying to be motivated. Self-practice to be familiar with text. Train students to use various reading strategies; Encourage group/ pair work.
Alasmari & Sultan (2021)	Linguistic & reading skill deficiency; Motivation and anxiety issues; Retention difficulties; Ineffective teaching material; Complexity of reading textbooks	Identify linguistic challenges; Provide a series of strategies and vocabulary learning skills; Find and create ways to increase motivation and decrease anxiety

To analyze the selected studies, thematic analysis was employed following the widely recognized framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method was chosen for its flexibility and effectiveness in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The six-phase process, familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report, was systematically applied to the findings of the included studies. This approach allowed for the synthesis of diverse findings related to reading challenges among Saudi EFL learners and the strategies proposed to address them. Themes were developed inductively, grounded in the data, ensuring that the analysis remained both data-driven and closely aligned with the review's research objectives.

3.1 Reading Problems of EFL Learners

EFL learners in Saudi Arabia face several difficulties in reading English references. In general, there were several primary reasons that were identified in these articles which included:

- Ineffective study materials
- Lexical difficulties
- Low levels of Reading comprehension
- Lack of motivation and poor reading habits
- Ineffective reading techniques and strategies

These primary factors have been identified as the problems faced by learners by the above authors. Sharma (2022), Omar and Alluqmani (2021) and Halim and Shah (2021) have mentioned insufficient reading strategies and failure in decoding as major reading problems of the students, whereas lack of prerequisite knowledge, digital literacy and teamwork were mentioned by Alasmari (2021) and Alkhaleefah (2017). Alasmari (2021) and Sharma (2022) identified ineffective teaching materials, lexical difficulties, and motivational issues as a major concern for reading students. Alkhaleefah (2017) and Shah (2021) stated the students' inability in comprehending writing style and reluctance to ask help as obstacles in developing their reading skills.

Similarly, Alkhaleefah (2017) documented the obstacles that interfere with the development of a learner's reading abilities: insufficient information, need for foreign language exposure, apprehension, low self-esteem, and incompetent teaching methods. The obstacles associated with the physiological attributes of the reader include dearth of intellect, limited semantic understanding, impoverished eyesight and unwarranted interference and disturbance during lectures.

3.1.1 Ineffective Study Materials

Reading problems can be caused by irrelevant study materials that can also adversely affect learners reading skills (Alasmari and Sultan, 2021; Omar et al., 2021; Omar and Alluqmani, 2021). If found to be lengthy, out of interest or irrelevant, learners will attempt the reading text as a burden rather than comprehending and enjoying the text. For example, Omar and Alluqmani (2021) conducted a study based on a case study design within three Saudi universities. Data was collected among 24 ESL lecturers with firsthand teaching experience in teaching and learning. Unstructured interviews were used as a tool and thematic content analysis was adopted for data analysis. Two subsequent rounds of interviews were conducted and in the first-round participants were questioned about the EFL learners' challenges and needs. According to the participants, one of the reasons students scored lower in reading courses and activities was because of inadequate study materials. Most of the participants expressed that a major reason for the low achievement in reading skill performance was the use of ineffective study materials.

The reading materials selected are not in their area of interest and the learners are not generally motivated. The students expressed the need of considering their background and professional courses while selecting reading materials. Few students complained that the reading materials and texts are the same for different programs (e.g., medical, engineering, human resources management, safety, and firefighting). This has made the different needs of different language learners apparent. Based on this, a collaborative reading model was developed using CALL and voluntarily applied by the participants to help struggling readers with their performance. Finally, all the participants stressed that they had observed a positive response from the students to the given model. They stressed that it had a crucial impact on the students' reading performance and achievement.

3.1.2. Lexical Difficulties

Several studies have found that that lack of lexical knowledge is a major hindrance while reading (Alasmari 2021; Alasmari & Sultan 2021; Alkhaleefah, 2017; Sharma, 2022). Sharma (2022) followed an experimental and observatory approach and observed 150 students at Jazan University. The study identified inadequate lexical knowledge as a major factor for committing mistakes during reading comprehension assessment. Many participants had insufficient lexical knowledge which caused obstruction in language growth and poor reading comprehension. This limitation restricted learners' ability to process texts efficiently, as they were often forced to pause frequently to decode unfamiliar words. Such interruptions often broke the flow of reading, making it harder for learners to maintain coherence and apply higher-level comprehension strategies such as inference and summarization (Alqahtani, 2020). As a result, many learners relied on shallow processing, focusing on individual words rather than developing a deeper understanding of the overall meaning of the text (Nation, 2022; Zhang & Zou, 2022). Over time, repeated exposure to such lexical challenges may lead to frustration and reduced engagement, further limiting opportunities for vocabulary growth and reading development. Whereas participants with good vocabulary knowledge were able to read in less time and showed better understanding of the texts. In general, many students had inadequate words in their knowledge which in result causes poor comprehension. Due to this, students were even a bit hesitant when they were asked to share their reading difficulties. This finding highlights the central role of lexical competence in facilitating effective reading comprehension among EFL learners. Limited vocabulary not only slows down the reading process but also increases cognitive load, making it difficult for learners to infer meaning from context. Consequently, persistent lexical difficulties may negatively affect learners' confidence and willingness to engage actively in reading tasks.

3.1.3. Low Levels of Reading Comprehension

In Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, EFL students are unable to interpret certain terms used in specific texts as well as summarize texts in English. Incomprehension was a crucial factor in restricting the reading abilities of EFL students. Alkhaleefah (2017) conducted a study to investigate the reading problems and strategies of four male Saudi EFL students. Using a case study approach, the four male students were identified as two good and two bad readers. Data revealed that comprehension difficulty was a common problem which had been reported both in good and bad readers. Both type of readers had difficulty in comprehending narrative and expository texts. The readers interviews and the verbal protocols revealed different explanations to the variation of comprehension difficulties reported in both the texts. One of it is that the narrative texts not only posed lexical difficulties for both the type of readers but also difficulties in rhetorical structuring of the actions throughout the story. The verbal protocols of both the readers' indicated another problem which was related to selection of words and phrases in the texts. This made the readers recognize their difficulty to grasp and comprehend the word/phrase concept or idea. It was concluded that poor readers had more frequent instances of comprehension difficulty than good readers. Hence, it is imperative that students develop their comprehension ability to improve their professional and educational qualifications (Alasmari & Sultan, 2021).

3.1.4. Lack of Motivation and Poor Reading Habits

Several studies have identified that low levels of motivation and interest seem to be one of the major problems in reading among Saudi EFL learners (Alasmari & Sultan 2021; Halim & Shah 2021; Sharma 2022). Sharma (2022) stated that the key ingredient to develop reading is motivation. If readers are motivated to read, then they interact and analyse, discuss, and summarize the texts easily. This concept has been considered as an important element in motivating English language learners. For example, Alasmari and Sultan (2021) conducted a study on 72 BA students at the University of Jeddah to find the most common reading difficulties Saudi learners face. Two tests and a questionnaire were used for data collection. Data revealed that one of the personal factors which influence

reading skill acquisition was motivation. Among the cognitive variables, motivation was one of the major factors highlighted by Saudi students. Sharma (2022) stated that organized and planned curriculum (with multiple activities) and effective teaching strategies eventually create interest and motivate students. It was concluded that the lack of reading habits and motivation were the major factors which explained the failure of EFL students to reach a proficient reading level.

3.1.5. Ineffective Reading Techniques and Strategies

It has been argued that students are required to apply reading strategies to become efficient readers. Some studies argue that without appropriate instructional guidance, reading strategies may be applied ineffectively, leading learners to adopt superficial or habitual techniques that do not yield deeper comprehension gains (Hatmanto, 2020). However, according to Alkhaleefah (2017), Saudi EFL students have been taught few reading strategies, but they engaged in almost no preparation techniques such as reading titles, looking at photos etc. They directly read and became anxious and confused as they are not prepared. A prime implication of Alkhaleefah's (2017) research is that the Saudi English language learners must be taught to recognize and monitor their reading and comprehension breakdowns while reading a variety of texts. They also lack in using a variety of strategies related to words and texts to solve their encountered reading difficulties. The study implied a need to teach Saudi EFL learners how to plan, monitor and regulate their strategies while dealing with different types of texts. Moreover, there has been a growing perception that graduate level students in Saudi Arabia fail to reach the predicted level of proficiency in the English language course. Educators in lecture halls adhere to the classic practice of focusing on memorizing rather than learning and understanding. The educators of Saudi Arabia are unable to stimulate a positive classroom environment in addition to underdeveloped interactive skills due to dearth of communication in classrooms (Halim & Shah, 2021).

3.2 Solutions

3.2.1. Vocabulary Gains

To improve language proficiency, it is crucial for students to learn vocabulary while educators should encourage the students to increase their vocabulary to enhance language proficiency. Psychometric studies prove that vocabulary plays a key role in developing reading skills while reading comprehension is enhanced by correlating vocabulary and existing knowledge. Sharma (2022) found the need for students to be persistently encouraged for regular reading. This will expand their vocabulary which in turn will widen and develop their knowledge and comprehension. Omar and Alluqmani (2021) recommended the launching of in-session support courses to improve foreign language learners' vocabulary and retention skills. This will help struggling readers language needs. The incorporation of CALL activities in reading classes could greatly improve EFL students' vocabulary skills and textual understanding (Omar et al., 2021; Omar & Alluqmani, 2021). These findings suggest that vocabulary development is both a prerequisite for and an outcome of effective reading instruction. Regular exposure to meaningful texts allows learners to encounter vocabulary in authentic contexts, thereby strengthening word retention and depth of word knowledge. Consequently, systematic vocabulary-focused interventions can contribute to sustained improvements in reading comprehension and overall language proficiency.

3.2.2. Motivation to Read

Research further indicates that providing learners with engaging reading opportunities and collaborative reading activities can significantly enhance EFL learners' motivation, engagement, and overall reading comprehension outcomes (Meyer et al., 2024; Khonamri et al., 2024; Anquodi et al., 2024). Educators, at the primary level of education, should encourage students to read by presenting diverse methods and options to engage them and follow policies, for example conducting surveys on the kind of reading material considered hard and easy. According to Alasmari and Sultan (2021), providing learners with materials that interest them can also motivate learners to set reading goals and increase their motivation. In turn, students become more responsible in their reading and find ways in which to understand the reading materials better. The study also found that focus, determination, and participation as key elements in reading motivation. Thus, learner's reading proficiency are enhanced through motivation. This indicates that motivation functions as a critical affective factor influencing reading engagement and persistence. When learners are intrinsically motivated, they are more likely to employ effective reading strategies and sustain attention during challenging tasks. Therefore, fostering motivation can indirectly enhance comprehension outcomes and promote long-term reading habits among EFL learners.

3.2.3. Use of Technology

Sharma (2022) asserts that Saudi students have a high perception towards social media (SM) usage and its usage have shown remarkable development and advancement in Saudi students' language learning in and beyond the classroom. Social media usage augments reading practices, creates constructive opinions about reading, enhances classroom participation, and further develops cognitive abilities, cultural, linguistic, and global awareness, and critical thinking skills. The students are now basking in the reflected glory of the knowledge group. For example, a study conducted using learning management system for reading of academic English texts found that students were able to achieve higher reading scores. This is because they were able to communicate online and when they communicate online, they develop their critical thinking and other language skills. Another study on Saudi EFL students concluded that the use of CALL positively influenced learners' attitude towards learning a language. They further explained that this effect is because of the inherent setting of instructional computer which triggers motivation. Their results also revealed a reciprocal relationship between reading and motivation (Alasmari & Sultan, 2021). These findings demonstrate that technology-mediated reading environments can create interactive and learner-centered experiences that extend beyond traditional classroom limitations. Digital platforms allow learners to engage collaboratively with texts, thereby promoting deeper comprehension and reflective thinking. Broader evidence suggests that technology-enhanced learning environments have been linked to improvements in personalized reading

experiences and learner involvement (Ruhil Amal et al., 2025; Urunbaeva 2025). As a result, the strategic integration of technology in reading instruction can simultaneously enhance motivation, engagement, and reading performance among EFL learners.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This review extends a preparatory understanding of the articles on reading challenges faced by English learners in an EFL context in Saudi Arabia published from 2017 to 2023. The review of literature presented interesting facts about reading skill challenges and difficulties which most English language learners in Saudi face. Based on the data collected, it can be concluded that the major challenges EFL students face, are inadequate background knowledge, lack of motivation and reading interest, insufficient vocabulary, inefficient teaching strategies and ineffective study materials. Many solutions can also be suggested which may assist the teachers and learners to overcome the issues. For example, encouraging regular reading habits, introducing in-session support courses, providing learners interesting and fascinating reading texts, giving teachers linguistic training, using technology to enhance their critical thinking skills and language competency.

The current research offers a comprehensive analysis that can inform future research by highlighting the key issues impacting the reading skills of Saudi EFL learners. In addition, this scholarly analysis can be extended to other regions as well. Consequently, it is suggested that more studies to be conducted to comprehensively explore ways in which issues related to lexical difficulties and perplexing language can be overcome by EFL students. Furthermore, examining studies on reading comprehension and the use of technology is highly encouraged to cater to the demands of digital literacy. Hence, the remarkable and important link between EFL students' motivation and reading fluency puts a strong emphasis for educators to improve learners' motivation and ultimately increase proficiency.

Despite its rigorous methodology, this systematic literature review has several limitations. First, the review was limited to articles published between 2017 and 2023, which may have excluded relevant foundational studies published earlier. Second, the search was restricted to English-language publications, potentially omitting valuable research written in Arabic or other languages. Third, the focus on English language learners in Arab countries—while intentional—limits the generalizability of the findings to broader EFL contexts. Additionally, the exclusion of studies focusing on dyslexia, disabilities, and other specialized populations may overlook important insights related to diverse learner needs. Finally, while thematic analysis provided a structured approach to identifying patterns across studies, the interpretation of themes may be influenced by researcher subjectivity, despite efforts to maintain consistency and transparency.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sara Fatima (Conceptualisation; Methodology; Data curation; Investigation; Software; Visualisation; Writing - original draft)

Asiaah Kassim (Data curation; Formal Analysis; Resources; Software; Validation; Visualisation; Writing - review & editing; Supervision)

Ruhil Amal Azmuddin (Data curation; Formal Analysis; Resources; Software; Validation; Visualisation; Writing - review & editing; Supervision)

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