Investigating the Relationship between Self-Efficacy and Reading Comprehension among Iraqi Secondary School EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Several reports suggest that self-efficacy is a critical determinant of reading comprehension among EFL learners. While extensive work has assessed the relationship between self-efficacy and reading performance, little to no information exists on how self-efficacy influences reading among Iraqi secondary school EFL learners. Additionally, there is also a scarcity of studies employing focus group discussions that probe into the educational and contextual issues contributing to students' difficulties in reading comprehension. This study uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to identify the factors affecting reading comprehension challenges among Iraqi secondary school EFL learners. Participants completed a survey on self-efficacy and a reading comprehension test, and a group of participants took part in a focus group discussion. Relationship analyses were conducted to assess the direct link between self-efficacy and reading comprehension, and students' narratives from group discussions were transcribed to gain in-depth insights. Results revealed that self-efficacy has a positive and significant impact on students' reading comprehension scores. Learners with higher self-efficacy scores performed better in their reading comprehension tests, while those with lower self-efficacy showed poorer performance. The qualitative findings further highlighted five key factors behind reading comprehension challenges: limited vocabulary, lack of interest, inadequate practice, insufficient support, and ineffective teaching approaches. These results provide useful insights for educators and policymakers on the factors that both facilitate and impede reading comprehension among Iraqi secondary school EFL learners.

Keywords: Reading comprehension; self-efficacy; vocabulary size; teacher, Iraq

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension requires a complex set of conscious and cognitive efforts, including the ability to infer and deduce meaning (Paige et al., 2024; Platas-García et al., 2020). Self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their ability to successfully engage in a difficult task (Schunk, 2023; Schunk & Pajares, 2002), is construed as detrimental in shaping reading behaviors and outcomes. Beliefs about one's reading abilities can significantly impact the amount of effort into what to read and how to read (Bandura, 1997, 2012). Studies indicate that students who have strong beliefs about their reading ability are more likely to persist in the face of challenges in reading and more likely to perform in their reading tests (Apriliyani & Usuludin, 2023; Cho et al., 2021; Martinez, 2019; Oranpattanachai, 2023; Shehzad et al., 2021). In contrast, individuals who hold a weak sense of self-efficacy may struggle in reading and may employ minimal effort to engage with difficult tests, consequently demonstrating inferior reading performance and poor comprehension outcomes (Almohammadi, 2023; Sofyan & Jayanti, 2019).

Numerous studies have investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and reading comprehension in various educational contexts (e.g., Alharbi, 2021; Cho et al., 2021; Clark, 2020; Liu et al., 2024;

Oranpattanachai, 2023). These studies generally showed that higher levels of self-efficacy were almost exclusively associated with better reading comprehension outcomes. For instance, Taghizadeh and Jamali (2018) found a direct relationship between self-efficacy and reading comprehension among 50 intermediate Iranian EFL learners. They employed a questionnaire on self-efficacy and a reading test, among other tests. Taghizadeh and Jamali (2018) reported a significant and positive relationship between self-efficacy and reading comprehension, suggesting that self-efficacy plays a critical role in reading comprehension.

In another study, Sofyan and Jayanti (2019) examined the relationship between reading self-efficacy and reading comprehension among secondary school science students. They employed a reading self-efficacy questionnaire and a reading comprehension test. Their results revealed a significant and positive correlation between students' beliefs in their reading ability and their comprehension test scores. Similar findings have been reported in studies of Iranian EFL students (Javad & Masood, 2019), Saudi EFL students (Mohammed, 2022), Chinese EFL primary school fourth-graders (Liu et al., 2024), and learners of various ages and backgrounds (see review for Yang & Gan, 2024).

From a theoretical standpoint, discussions about the impact of self-efficacy on reading comprehension are largely grounded in Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory. Bandura posits that self-efficacy influences the cognitive and emotional processes underlying task performance. In reading comprehension, self-efficacy plays an important role in determining how likely an individual would go through difficult texts and how likely they would withstand in the face of difficulties. Positive social feedback, psychological status, and successful experiences often contribute to the development of reading self-efficacy, fostering confidence and competence (Bandura, 1977; Schunk, 2023). Consequently, students with high reading self-efficacy may feel motivated and capable of completing the task successfully, while those with low self-efficacy may experience anxiety and self-doubt (Naseri & Zaferanieh, 2012; Oranpattanachai, 2023; Sofyan & Jayanti, 2019), leading to poorer performance on reading comprehension tests.

Despite numerous reports that highlight the critical role of self-efficacy in task performance, there remains a noticeable gap in the literature regarding its influence on reading comprehension among EFL learners at low levels of education, particularly Iraqi secondary school students (Muhsin & Dehham, 2022). Iraq, with its complex sociopolitical history and an educational system that has faced numerous challenges (Jawad & Al-Assaf, 2014), provides a unique context for examining the relationship between self-efficacy and reading comprehension. Students encounter significant language learning challenges due to ongoing conflicts, economic instability, and limited resources, all of which have impacted their learning experiences (Al-Azawei et al., 2016; Ali et al., 2023). Understanding how self-efficacy affects their reading comprehension can offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers, highlighting factors that may bolster students' resilience in overcoming language learning difficulties.

Moreover, since reading comprehension is a multifaceted complex process, which involves not only individual factors like self-efficacy but also broader educational and contextual issues, the study employs a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of students' challenges. It specifically uses a focus-group discussion to probe information about students' experiences with reading comprehension and the process of teaching and learning in their classrooms in Iraq. Through these discussions, the study aims to uncover the particular challenges that students face in reading comprehension and to explore whether these challenges are individualized or context-dependent.

All in all, our study aims to investigate the following research questions:

1. What is the level of reading self-efficacy among Iraqi secondary school EFL learners?

2. What is the relationship between students' self-efficacy and reading comprehension performance?

3. What challenges do Iraqi secondary school EFL learners encounter in reading comprehension?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of 180 Iraqi secondary school EFL students were recruited to participate in the study (age in years, M = 17.8, SD = 0.40). All students attended public secondary schools in Iraq. They shared some characteristics related to their age, gender, and level of education, thereby maintaining some sort of homogeneity necessary for the current investigation (Creswell, 2021). All students were in Grade 12 in their school, with 51% female. A notable characteristic among all students is that English is a foreign language and used only in formal contexts; therefore, not regularly used in everyday communication.

Instruments

Three instruments were used to gather quantitative data: the Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS) (Henk & Melnick, 1995) to examine the level of self-efficacy among participants, a reading comprehension test to measure students' reading performance, and a qualitative focus-group discussion to probe information about the particular challenges encountered by participants in reading comprehension. Further elaboration on each instrument and how it was administered is outlined in subsequent sections.

Reader Self-Perception Scale (RSPS)

Self-efficacy refers to one's belief in their reading ability and how likely they are to endure a challenging task. It represents a motivational factor that helps individuals perform more effectively at a given reading task and how likely they are to bounce back from a certain obstacle (Henk & Melnick, 1995). This study measured students' reading self-efficacy using the Reader Self-Perception Scale for Henk and Melnick (1995, p. 472). It is a questionnaire that consists of 33 items. It comprises four main sources of self-efficacy; namely, progress, observational comparison, social feedback, and psychological state.

Henk and Melnick (1995) define the personal progress (PR) as a source of self-efficacy by which individuals compare their present reading ability and past performance. The Observational Comparison (OC) was designed to assist students make comparisons between their reading performance and that of other classmates. As for the social feedback, this scale provides an estimate of how often students are motivated to read based on outside social resources, such as their teachers, parents, or classmates in the same learning environment. The Psychological state (PS) refers to the readers' feelings and impressions towards their own reading and comprehension practices. All together, these items of the questionnaire provide estimates about students' perception of their ability in reading, and how their psychological states may influence their reading performance.

It is worth mentioning that each item of the questionnaire corresponds to one of the aforementioned sources of self-efficacy: personal progress, observational comparison, social feedback, and psychological state. Therefore, the participants of the study were required to rate the frequency with which these items describe their behavior and perception of reading on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging between "Never" to "Always".

Reading Comprehension Test

This test aimed to assess students' reading comprehension ability. It is a standardized reading test adopted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In the CEFR, language proficiency is described on a six-point scale, ranging from A1 for beginners to C2 for advanced language speakers. Our study selected reading texts from the B1 level, as these reading texts are specifically designed for high school students. The reading comprehension test consisted of two parts, with 5 questions in each, making a total of 10 reading questions. Each question was worth 1 point, resulting in a total score of 10 points for the test.

Procedures

Before data collection, official approvals were obtained from the Ethics Committee at UiTM in Malaysia and the concerned secondary schools in Iraq. As part of the standard procedure, participants were given the questionnaire and the reading task, and were asked if they had any inquiries regarding the clarity of the items. They were informed that participation in the research was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. However, they were also instructed to cooperate and answer the questions to the best of their knowledge.

Data collection took place in the classroom during regular class hours. It took approximately 45 minutes for participants to complete the tasks. Participants were informed that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and kept strictly confidential. After the questionnaires and reading test were collected, all responses were entered into IBM SPSS for analysis.

Students were then asked if they would volunteer to participate in a focus group discussion, which aimed to explore the challenges they encountered in reading comprehension. The discussions were conducted in a quiet room, and the conversations were recorded for transcription and analysis.

Preliminary Analyses

Before data analysis, exploratory checks were conducted to ensure the data was clean and free of missing values. Specifically, the analysis examined whether any participants had a mean score more than 3 SD above the average, as these participants might have been less cooperative and used a single-type response across all questions (Field, 2018). The analysis showed that only two participants were removed from the total number of participants (>1%).

To further ensure that the distribution of data followed a normal distribution, Skewness and Kurtosis were assessed. These analyses provide insights into the characteristics of the data distribution (Koziol et al., 2016). Results revealed that all data points fell within the acceptable range of -2 and +2, confirming that the data met the assumptions of normality (Hatem et al., 2022; Jammalamadaka et al., 2021).

For the reading test, a split-half reliability test was employed to measure internal consistency (Field, 2018). The Spearman-Brown correlation coefficient for the test was 0.852. According to Guilford's Rule of Thumb, this indicates a strong and positive relationship between test items ($r > .8$), providing evidence of the instrument's reliability.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Level of Self-efficacy among Iraqi Secondary School EFL Learners

Descriptive statistics were employed to calculate the mean and standard deviation of participants' responses. The results obtained from the descriptive analyses are presented in Table 1 and visually illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Table 1: Level of self-efficacy among Iraqi secondary school EFL students

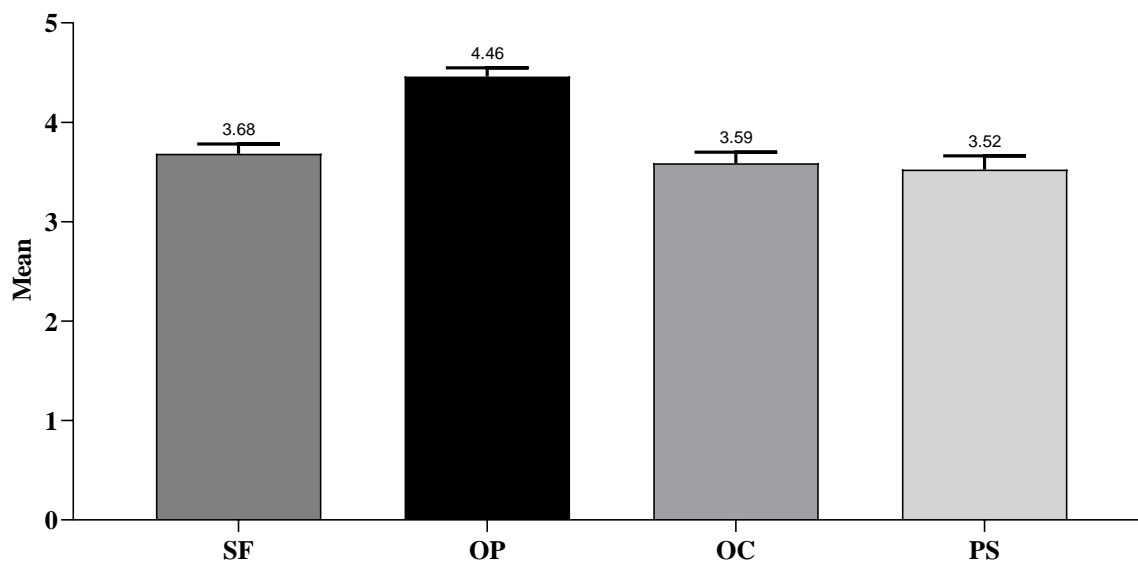|	Mean Score	SD	Level
Social Feedback (SF)	3.68	.671	High
Observing Own Progress (OP)	4.46	.595	High
Observational Comparison (OC)	3.59	.739	Moderate
Psychological State (PS)	3.52	.939	Moderate

Figure 1: Mean of self-efficacy types among Iraqi EFL learners

As given in Table 1 and illustrated in Figure 1, observing one's progress was the most frequent aspect of self-efficacy among participants (M= 4.46, SD= 0.595). This was followed by students relying on social feedback received from their surrounding environment, such as their family and teachers (M= 3.68, SD= 0.671). At a lower rate comes observational comparison, especially observing the difference between students' perception of reading performance and other classmates' performance (M= 3.59, SD= 0.739). Finally, the psychological state was the least source of self-efficacy in reading among the participants (M= 3.52, SD= 0.939). To further understand the dominant strategies that participants employ to strengthen their self-efficacy, an item-based analysis was carried out for each of the four sources of self-efficacy in the questionnaire: social feedback, observational progress, observational comparison, and progress. Results and findings are reported in the following subsections.

Social Feedback

Social feedback examines the extent to which Iraqi secondary school EFL students are influenced by feedback received from teachers, peers, and family members. General findings revealed that participants had high levels of self-efficacy received from social feedback (M = 3.68, SD = 0.671). However, examining the items of the scale revealed that the sources of social feedback were more influential than other sources. This is shown in Table 2 below. The social feedback that was more influential to students' self-efficacy was entered first.

Table 2: Self-efficacy related to social feedback

Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Level
People in my family think I read pretty well.	4.20	.917	High
My teacher thinks that my reading is fine.	4.15	1.137	High
My classmates like to listen to me read.	3.72	.933	High
People in my family like to listen to me read.	3.67	1.318	High
Other students think I'm a good reader.	3.63	.718	Moderate
I can tell that my teacher likes to listen to me read.	3.56	1.046	Moderate
My teacher thinks I am a good reader.	3.56	1.099	Moderate
People in my family think I am a good reader.	3.53	1.131	Moderate
My classmates think that I read pretty well.	3.13	.877	Moderate

According to the data in Table 2, the social feedback received from students' families (M= 4.20, SD= 0.917) was much more effective for students' self-efficacy than the feedback received from teachers (M= 4.15, SD= 1.137) and classmates (M= 3.72, SD= 0.933). Obviously, the feedback received from their classmates was not as much effective to their overall self-efficacy, where students generally showed only moderate levels of approval

Personal Progress

This scale refers to one's comparison of their current state of reading performance with their old reading ability (Henk & Melnick, 1995). This specifically involves acts of monitoring and reflecting on one's personal growth and improvement. Such comparisons are likely to lead to positive attitudes that bolster students' ability to accomplish tasks and achieve goals (Pajares, 2003; Shehzad et al., 2019). The study examined students' responses, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Self-efficacy related to observing one's progress

Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Level
I read faster than I could before.	4.65	.478	High
Reading is easier for me than it used to be.	4.54	.963	High
When I read. I recognize more words than I used to.	4.53	.768	High
I read better now than I could before.	4.45	1.047	High
When I read, I need less help than I used to.	4.45	.864	High
I can figure out words better than I could before.	4.44	.830	High
I understand what I read better than I could before.	4.39	.832	High
I am getting better at reading.	4.34	1.053	High
When I read, I don't have to try as hard as I used to.	4.34	.914	High

Based on the results presented in Table 3, it is obvious that Iraqi secondary school students acknowledge improvements in various aspects of their current reading performance compared to their previous performance. For instance, they observed a significant improvement in their reading speed (M= 4.65, SD= 0.478) and found that reading was much easier than before (M= 4.54, SD= .963). Additionally, they expressed the belief that their vocabulary resources are bigger now (M= 4.53, SD= 0.768) and that their overall reading ability has become better (M= 4.45, SD= 1.047).

Observational Comparison

Observational comparison refers to the process through which individuals evaluate their own abilities by observing and comparing their performance to others. Iraqi secondary school students' beliefs about reading performance relative to peers were examined. The results and findings are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Self-efficacy related to comparison to others

Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Level
I seem to know more words than other students when I read.	3.76	1.170	High
When I read, I can figure out words better than other students.	3.76	1.016	High
I understand what I read as well as other students do.	3.63	1.183	Moderate
I read better than other students in my class.	3.56	1.025	Moderate
I read more than other students.	3.42	.949	Moderate
I read faster than other students.	3.40	1.209	Moderate

As shown in Table 4, the Iraqi school students recorded high levels of the belief that they have larger vocabulary resources than their classmates (*M*= 3.76, *SD*= 1.170), and they can figure out or guess more words than others (*M*= 3.76, *SD*= 1.016). However, at moderate levels, they believe they understand similarly to their classmates (*M*= 3.63, *SD*= 1.183), and they feel they have a better reading ability (*M*= 3.56, *SD*= 1.025), among others. Overall, the findings suggest that Iraqi secondary school EFL students possess moderate levels of self-efficacy regarding their reading speed, habit, and processing words in general.

Psychological State

Students' psychological state refers to their current mental and emotional condition and the belief they can perform a particular task or achieve a specific goal (Bandura, 1977; Pajares, 2003). According to Henk and Melnick (1995), students with positive psychological states are more likely to have stronger confidence, enthusiasm, and a sense of control over their reading abilities. The Iraqi secondary school students' self-efficacy beliefs in relation to current psychological states were examined. The results and findings are presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Self-efficacy at the psychological state scale

Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Level
I think I am a good reader.	3.96	.999	High
I enjoy reading.	3.78	1.028	High
Reading makes me feel good.	3.72	1.120	High
Reading makes me feel happy inside.	3.57	1.385	Moderate
I think reading is relaxing.	3.54	1.212	Moderate
I feel calm when I read.	3.54	1.258	Moderate
I feel comfortable when I read.	3.49	1.141	Moderate
I like to read aloud.	3.41	1.326	Moderate
I feel good inside when I read.	3.12	1.397	Moderate

The results in Table 5 indicate that Iraqi secondary school students generally appear to hold moderate beliefs about their psychological states. On some occasions, students perceive themselves as highly proficient readers (M= 3.96, SD= 0.999). They also enjoy reading (M= 3.78, SD= 1.028) and experience positive emotions (M= 3.72, SD= 1.120). However, most participants reported moderate levels in this scale, as seen in instances where reading evoked feelings of inner happiness (M= 3.57, SD= 1.385) or when reading was considered a relaxing and enjoyable activity (M= 3.54, SD= 1.212), among others.

Relationship between self-efficacy and reading comprehension among Iraqi secondary school EFL learners

The multiple linear regression analysis was employed to investigate the relationship between self-efficacy and reading comprehension. Before conducting the analysis, the study ensured that the dataset met the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity. Our assessments of Tolerance and VIF statistics suggested that there are no multicollinearity issues, as the model's tolerance value was above .10 and the VIF value below 10. The results of the regression analysis, presenting the relationship between self-efficacy and reading comprehension, are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Results of multiple regression analysis between reading strategies, vocabulary size, and reading comprehension

Predictor	SE	*t*	*β*	*Sig*
(Constant)	1.497	-.921		.358
Progress	.422	2.646	.241	.009

Observational comparison	.345	2.211	.204	.028
Social feedback	.405	.613	.060	.541
Psychological state	.251	-1.661	-.142	.099

$R^2 = .38$; F-test = 7.252 (p = .001)

As shown in Table 6 above, the overall regression model was significant (F (4, 173) = 7.252, $p = .001$), accounting for 38% of the variance in the dependent variable (i.e., the reading comprehension performance). The two predictor variables *progress* and *observational comparison* also appeared to be the only two independent variables that were statistically significant and positively correlated with the dependent variable ($p < 0.05$), whereas social feedback and psychological state did not significantly contribute to reading comprehension performance among Iraqi secondary school EFL learners ($p > .05$).

Difficulties in Reading Comprehension (Focus Group Discussions)

In an attempt to further explore the difficulties that Iraqi secondary school EFL learners face in reading comprehension, a focus-group discussion to obtain qualitative insights into the possible factors that facilitate or impede reading comprehension was carried out. Participants were asked prompt questions and were recorded for later transcription and data analysis. The findings from our analyses revealed that there are two main camps of themes that influence students' reading comprehension. These include student- and teacher-related factors. The corresponding themes and subthemes of our analyses are presented in Table 7 below.

Table 7: Summary of themes and subthemes of the Focus Group Discussions

Theme	Subtheme
Student-related factors	Limited vocabulary
	Lack of interest
	Inadequate practice
Teacher-related factors	Insufficient support
	Ineffective teaching approach

Limited Vocabulary

Focus-group discussions about the factors that may cause Iraqi secondary school EFL students to struggle with reading comprehension revealed that students' limited vocabulary size was one of the main challenges they encountered in reading comprehension. For instance, Respondent A reported that he faces difficulty in understanding academic terms, emphasizing the time it takes them to translate and comprehend these terms: "Yes, there are challenges; I face difficulties in understanding the academic terms, which, in turn, take time in translating and understanding." Respondent A's answer shows how difficult and time-consuming it is to deal with unfamiliar words, suggesting that limited vocabulary may significantly hamper the reading process.

Respondent B similarly suggested that new and unfamiliar words can occasionally result in difficulty in understanding the text, although sometimes they try to guess the meaning and make inferences from the context to cope with these difficulties, "I have sometimes difficulty when I face new words, but then I understand their meanings according to the context." While Respondent B's adaptive approach shows resourcefulness in using context to overcome these difficulties, it reveals how likely one's dependence on context may sometimes lead to misinterpretations and comprehension pitfalls.

In the same vein, Respondent C reported having difficulty understanding texts with unfamiliar vocabulary she mainly uses dictionaries for translation: "At first, I face challenges, but I resort to the dictionaries to translate the new words." These narratives collectively showcase the significant impact that limited

vocabulary may have on the reading comprehension process of students. They also reveal the specific strategies that Iraqi secondary school EFL learners use to overcome these comprehension difficulties, including guessing the meaning from context and using bilingual dictionaries to obtain the meaning of new words.

Lack of Interest

The second factor that adds to Iraqi secondary school students' reading comprehension difficulties is the lack of interest and motivation in learning English. This was specifically expressed via narratives made by Sahar and Mohammad who candidly reported a lack of enthusiasm and engagement in their classroom. Sahar succinctly narrates that by stating the following: "I don't have the passion for learning the English language." Sahar's candid admission of lack of interest underscores the significant role that motivation may play in language acquisition and reading comprehension. Lack of motivation to learn a new language may diminish the desire to engage with English texts, and thus low desire to invest time and effort in reading comprehension (Cho et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Liao, 2015).

Similarly, Mohammad articulated his sentiment and lack of interest by stating the following: "I don't pay attention to the teacher while he is explaining the meaning of new words, and I don't listen to English language programs." Mohammad attributes his struggles in reading comprehension to a lack of interest and lack of attention during classes. Mohammad's candid acknowledgment of inattentiveness inside his classes and lack of motivation may underscore the important role of motivation in the reading process and language learning more generally.

Inadequate Practice

The third challenge in reading comprehension according to students' perspective is attributed to inadequate practice. Mohammad acknowledged that his challenge in reading comprehension stems from a lack of listening and language exposure: "I have challenges in reading due to the lack of listening to the English language, and I'm trying to enhance my skills now." Mohammad's articulation of his experiences with reading comprehension difficulties proposes that there is a significant relationship between practice and improving reading abilities, and therefore the importance of actively practicing language in overcoming reading challenges.

Sahar expressed similar reasons behind her reading comprehension challenges: "Our schedule only has five English classes a week, and they mostly focus on grammar instead of other language skills. How can I become really good at reading without getting more practice?" Sahar's statement proposes that there is an imbalance between the teaching of language skills in her school, with much emphasis on grammar than reading skills. The limited exposure to reading classes is thought to impede her ability to excel in reading and language learning.

Insufficient Support

Insufficient support from English language instructors also seems to be as another contributing factor to students' reading comprehension challenges. This was reflected in Respondent C's candid statement which suggests that language teachers are not as cooperative as they should be: "English language instructors are sometimes fast and don't translate the new words into Arabic even when we seek for the information; it is not accepted by them." It seems that both rapid instruction and teachers' unwillingness to translate unfamiliar words give students limited opportunity to acquire new vocabulary, and hence impediments to successful reading comprehension performance.

Abdallah's feedback that instructors use advanced and unfamiliar words without sufficient explanations adds another layer to the factors that impede reading comprehension among Iraqi secondary school EFL learners: "English language instructors speak in academic or advanced words without explanation of the meaning. As

a result, we invest time to understand the meaning of these new words." It is obvious that students are not content with the way language teachers deliver their classes and use advanced vocabulary without clarification, thus leaving students in a frustrated and difficult situation.

Ineffective Teaching Approach

The discussion and feedback received from students shed light on another factor affecting reading comprehension among Iraqi secondary school EFL learners: Ineffective teaching approach. This was, for example, expressed by Abdallah's candid remarks about his teachers' teaching pace: "Lessons shouldn't be given so fast." This feedback shows how rapid delivery without clarification could overwhelm students and lead to frustration and an ineffective approach to reading comprehension practices.

Mohammad further suggests that teaching should involve clear and simple text explanations: "The way of text explanation should be simple and clear to the student." This highlights the need for instructors to employ instructional methods that cater to students' comprehension levels and avoid overly complex explanations. According to Mohammad, this can be helpful for their reading comprehension.

Respondent B's candid sentiment reveals another challenge associated with English teachers' pronunciation errors: "Words' pronunciation of the English language instructors is usually wrong." Accurate pronunciation is foundational for language understanding, and discrepancies in this aspect can lead to confusion and misinterpretation. Addressing pronunciation issues is not only about the correct articulation of words but also about creating an environment where students can rely on consistent and accurate linguistic models.

Overall, these students' perspectives suggest that having effective ways of teaching can help students become better comprehenders. The speed and clarity of instruction are important factors in influencing students' ability to take in and learn from what they are being taught. This implies that there is a need for a pedagogical shift, in terms of how one teaches students. For instance, teachers can teach at different speeds and pace depending on the students' needs. Explanations need to be clear, brief, and at the appropriate level for the students, who need to be allowed to process information at an appropriate speed so that they can fully understand what they are being taught.

DISCUSSIONS

The study examined the role of self-efficacy in influencing reading comprehension performance and used focus-group discussions to probe information about the factors that may lie behind students' struggles in reading comprehension in the classroom in Iraq. The study involved Iraqi secondary school EFL learners studying in local secondary schools in Baghdad. All participants completed a survey on self-efficacy and took a reading comprehension test. As aforementioned, the results showed that participants had relatively high self-efficacy levels, suggesting that they have positive beliefs that they can persist in the face of challenging tasks and perform well in reading tasks (Schunk, 2023; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

However, the results revealed variations in the four sources of self-efficacy: social feedback, observing progress, observational comparison, and psychological state. Specifically, the participants felt they were more motivated in language learning and reading comprehension when they received feedback from their social surroundings, and when they made conscious comparisons between their current language growth and their previous language condition. It seemed that these two practices enhanced students' self-efficacy to perform well in their English reading classroom more than the other two self-efficacy sources: observational comparison and psychological state.

While the results obtained from the survey on self-efficacy provide useful insights about the psychological factors influencing students' beliefs in their ability to perform well in reading comprehension, they further reveal that self-efficacy significantly and positively impacts their reading comprehension scores. Iraqi students whose self-efficacy scores were high were significantly more likely to perform better in their

reading comprehension test, whereas those with low self-efficacy had lower scores in reading comprehension. These results interestingly suggest that students' self-efficacy or motivation plays a significant role in their language learning success and reading comprehension more particularly (Almohammadi, 2023; Delgado-Vásquez et al., 2022; Muche et al., 2024).

The results align with previous studies that have shown that EFL learners with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to exhibit better reading comprehension performance and increased persistence when faced with challenging reading tasks (Ahmadian & Pasand, 2017; Bergey et al., 2019; Bozgun & Can, 2023; Zarei, 2018). For example, research by Schunk (2023) highlighted the positive association between self-efficacy and reading achievement among students across different educational levels. Similarly, Zimmerman et al. (1992) found that self-efficacy beliefs significantly predicted reading comprehension performance among adolescent learners.

Conversely, low self-efficacy can impede EFL learners' reading comprehension abilities by leading to negative emotions, self-doubt, and avoidance behaviors (Al-khresheh & Alkursheh, 2024; Apriliyani & Usuludin, 2023; Muche et al., 2024). When learners lack confidence in their reading abilities, they may adopt passive reading strategies, rely excessively on teacher guidance, and withdraw from reading activities (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 2023). This can result in poor comprehension, reduced motivation, and limited engagement with reading materials.

Understanding the challenges faced by EFL learners is considered crucial for educators and policymakers and our focus-group discussions revealed that Iraqi secondary school EFL learners' reading comprehension difficulties mainly stem from five key areas: limited vocabulary, lack of interest, inadequate practice, insufficient support, and ineffective teaching approach. One of the most prominent issues discussed is limited vocabulary, as students shared feedback in which they expressed that they frequently encountered unfamiliar words that led to compromised reading comprehension. These reports are in tandem with previous reports underscoring vocabulary size as a critical determinant of reading comprehension (Alzahrani et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2020; Ocampo & McNeill, 2019).

The results further revealed that students' lack of interest in learning the English language is another significant factor in their reading comprehension difficulties. They mentioned that they had low motivation and interest to engage in English activities and learn from other external resources that may improve their English proficiency. According to the participants, this lack of intrinsic motivation contributed to a lack of interest in learning English, and minimal effort in improving their reading comprehension skills. The participants' narratives are in line with propositions suggesting that motivation plays a crucial role in reading success (Barber & Klauda, 2020; Toste et al., 2020). Students who are interested in reading usually show greater engagement and comprehension.

Another important finding related to students' reading comprehension difficulties is students' inadequate practice of English outside the classroom. Several students expressed their views on the role of language practice in improving language skills and how they did not regularly engage in reading activities outside their classroom, which in turn has remarkably limited their ability to sharpen their reading comprehension skills. These narratives support previous studies highlighting the importance of language practice and engagement in reading skills and language learning more generally (Hiver et al., 2024; Krashen, 1982).

More surprisingly, students candidly shared reports suggesting that they did not receive sufficient support from teachers and their surroundings. They felt that teachers often did not spend enough time helping them develop specific reading strategies or providing individualized feedback, although it is sometimes difficult for teachers in crowded classes to give each student the attention they need. This lack of support leaves struggling readers without the guidance necessary to improve their skills. Afflerbach et al. (2020) suggests that explicit instruction in reading strategies, such as summarizing, predicting, and questioning, is essential for developing comprehension.

Finally, the students' narratives revealed that some teachers fail to use effective teaching approaches that may help students overcome challenges in reading comprehension. Students noted that they were sometimes left without sufficient clarification of unfamiliar vocabulary, or they were unable to follow due to errors in pronunciation. Teachers also delivered their classes at a high pace which made language learning relatively frustrating and difficult. These candid reports suggest that educators and policymakers should cater to students' needs and tailor new teaching approaches that are more constructive and cooperative in the classroom. Maybe a shift towards more guided reading, group discussions, and peer teaching could help students become more engaged with reading and better equipped to comprehend reading material (Barber & Klauda, 2020; Clinton-Lisell et al., 2024; Hiver et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2023; Qureshi et al., 2023).

All in all, the study provided valuable insights into the factors that are more likely to facilitate and impede reading comprehension among Iraqi secondary school students. It also explored the various student- and teacher-related factors contributing to difficulties in reading comprehension among EFL learners, and thus useful recommendations for educators and policymakers on how reading comprehension requires enhancing vocabulary instruction, making reading more engaging, providing students with more individualized support, and adopting more effective teaching approaches in the classroom. Therefore, future research may benefit from conducting interventions in which they show how remedial practices to the aforementioned factors could significantly enhance reading comprehension among Iraqis in particular and EFL learners more generally.

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