

## **Problems Encountered by Bachelor's Level Students in Reading English Texts**

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### **Abstract**

Reading textbooks is challenging as our school-level courses do not teach students how to improve their reading comprehension abilities. They simply memorize the word meaning and question-answers. Also, they have no idea in improving their reading skills. Reading comprehension is still crucial for their academic and personal success but it is being ignored which motivated me to research this issue. This study aimed to explore reading problems encountered by bachelor-level students in English texts. I selected four students studying compulsory English at the bachelor level as the participants purposively from two constituent campuses of TU in Rupandehi. I adopted the phenomenological research method and in-depth interviews as major research tools for collecting information using the thematic analysis technique. None of the previous research is expressive and specific on this issue so, I intend to explore it. This paper reveals students' limited and unfamiliar vocabulary, lengthy texts, unfamiliar and uninteresting text, lack of inference skills, problems with reading fluency, lack of background knowledge about the text, inadequate intensive reading practices, lack of exposure to printed materials, complex sentence structure, and lack of reading habit as problems in understanding of English texts. Hence, it may contribute to enhancing the problems that bachelor-level students face in reading English texts.

**Keywords:** Intensive reading, reading difficulties, reading fluency.

## **Introduction**

Reading is a process of decoding and understanding information from the texts. It requires identification and comprehension of the message given in the reading text. It is one of the crucial language skills since inadequate reading ability negatively impacts L2 acquisition (Alderson, 2000). The ability of readers to understand what they are reading is significantly impacted by the difficulty of the texts used in textbooks. If the texts in the textbook are appropriate for their reading level, they will have no trouble in reading and understanding it. If not, learners will find it more challenging. Richards, 1998, as cited in Chima, 2019, p.12) asserts "reading is the construction of meaning from a printed or written message." After schooling, the journey of reading begins. Reading is the process of learning a language through its graphical representation. It is the most widely used and straightforward method of understanding and receiving written or printed information (Klinger et al., 2014). Reading is a skill that enables us to understand a text's content and enhances our understanding, knowledge, skills and information which provides information that keeps students in touch of current affairs of the world.

Readers can get any message or information through reading, expanding their understanding. Pang (2013) claims that reading is the activity of comprehending written texts; it is the practice of constructing the logic of words, phrases, and associated discourse. Texts with more complex grammatical structures and complex vocabularies make reading more difficult. Students in public schools must first identify and effectively solve issues with their reading skills before their English language proficiency can advance (Wong & Abdul Aziz, 2019; Parvani & Md Yunus, 2018; Jagig & Mohammad, 2016). To better grasp the issue, I attempted to look into students' L2 reading difficulties from that of the students themselves. Reading prepares us for our professionalism and academic success is also made possible by improved reading abilities (Iftanti, 2015). Akbaşlı et al.'s (2016) research state that learners perform better when they have higher reading skills. It is an extremely complex task that requires physical and cognitive strategies such as controlled eye movement, fine motor skills, phonemic awareness, phonics, sustained attention, word decoding, and comprehension.

Nearly all intelligent people agree that reading is the most crucial activity for improving information, skills, and knowledge. Since teachers serve as role models in their communities, it serves as a model to the students to improve their reading. They create the foundation for guiding not just one person's life but the entire learning community. Their reading has both indirect and direct impacts on others. The purpose of the study was to

explore problems encountered by the bachelor-level first-year students at two constituent campuses of TU in Rupandehi district in understanding the textbook 'General English'. Therefore, I employed the following research question: What reading problems do bachelor-level students encounter in English classes?

### **Literature review**

The existing literature on problems and strategies for developing students' L2 reading skills is critically reviewed here. The focus will be on such core issues in L2 reading that are particularly relevant to this study.

### **Problems of teaching reading skills**

There are numerous issues with teaching reading in an L2 classroom. The low reading comprehension skill of pupils is one of the issues teachers confront in their classes (Shea & Ceprano, 2017). Reading procedures assist them in selecting ways to read well. The inability to recognize the more important information in text, skim, preview, use context to avoid misunderstanding, extract information from the text and engage with the text (Alderson, 2000) are results of inefficient readers.

Secondly, it's frequently assumed that students who have mastered reading in their first language will also be able to read in their second language automatically. In second-language reading, knowledge of the second language is a more important factor than first-language reading abilities. Students are naturally aware of the language structure of their L1 but, L2 reading problems occur due to inadequate knowledge of the language (Alderson 2000). Sometimes there is no transfer of skills between L1 and L2 reading skills since these reading abilities depend on the automatic activation of cognitive processing resources (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). This claim is particularly clear in the South Asian context, where students are more accustomed to the grammar-translation method and try to comprehend all texts in foreign languages by translating them into their native languages without paying attention to the linguistic characteristics of the language.

Thirdly, one of the main issues with reading may be a lack of interest in and knowledge of schematics. Harmer (2001) states students who are uninterested in or unfamiliar with the text genre might find it difficult to fully engage with it. Therefore, it is important to give students the freedom to select books that suit their interests and needs. The significance of schematic information in reading is acknowledged by an expanding body of reading research (Widdowson, 1990; Alptekin, 1993; Cook, 1997; Grabe, 1991). It is common to see literary books and real writings from the English-speaking world used as teaching resources in language classes. According to Harmer (2001), "Students have to work

hard to understand" when they encounter "real" language (p. 205). Therefore, it can be argued that readers must be able to connect their prior knowledge with the text's content (Alderson, 2000). Teachers cannot ignore the fact that schema theory is a crucial component of discourse analysis because it aids students in interpreting new references in the target language (Cook, 1997).

Reading aloud is different from the L2 reading issue that is prevalent in Asian nations including India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan. Junior schools frequently urge learners to read aloud while pointing with their index fingers to the words on the page. This technique could be the cause of their difficulty in reading. Many pupils develop bad reading habits as a result of this practice, making their reading loud, inactive, and difficult to understand. It "overloads short-term memory and leaves the reader floundering in the ambiguity of language" (Smith, 1994).

According to Shehu's study (2015), there are four general problems with reading. One of the major challenges for the students in understanding what they are reading is unfamiliar language. He also pointed out the issue of working memory. The difficulty of students remembering all of the details from the reading text is a common problem. It can be very difficult to memorize everything that is discussed in the textbook. The absence of in-depth reading presents the third challenge so students need to read widely. But they can't read intensively because of the knowledge of a small number of vocabulary. Hence, they feel difficulty in reading. Naturally, teachers advise pupils to study their literature carefully but it takes a long time.

Similarly, Alenzi's research (2019) examined how pre-university teachers perceived students' English as a foreign language (EFL) reading abilities. It also highlighted the difficulties faced by university students in their reading skills classes so that readers might obtain a complete view of the educational process. The findings demonstrated that when teachers lack knowledge of efficient teaching methods, students suffer. The results also showed that background knowledge and culture also play a great role in helping students' reading skills.

The basis of Saudi students' reading self-efficacy beliefs and reading strategies was examined in a correlational study report (Shehzad et al., 2020). The study was done on 188 participants Saudi EFL students from five Saudi public colleges. By use of stratified random sampling, participants were selected. A questionnaire containing three constructs-reading techniques, reading consciousness, and beliefs-was utilized to collect the data. The results showed that reading beliefs and self-conscious concepts were closely connected.

Metacognitive reading strategies were also closely associated with reading self-efficacy beliefs. Contrarily, the results showed that reading techniques and thoughts about reading effectiveness are strongly and favourably connected. The results of studies on EFL learners focused on some problems that readers regularly run across. Different pupils learn differently and process knowledge in different ways due to a range of psychological, cognitive, cultural, socioeconomic, linguistic, and other factors.

Similar to this, Okasha (2020) examined the effectiveness of using strategic reading techniques to improve Saudi students' EFL reading skills. The experimental group used strategic reading techniques, while the control group received traditional classroom instruction. The study's conclusions suggest that unique teaching methods are necessary for Saudi EFL students who want to advance their reading abilities. To provide feedback to EFL learners in reading, the study suggested that teachers adopt cutting-edge strategies including peer review, reading conferences and consciousness. The most recent study by Tiwari (2022) was on college students' reading English textbooks. The findings identified six recurring issues, including a lack of reading habits, a lack of English language skills, unfamiliar terms, lengthy reading texts, and textbook content. He suggests teachers to engage students actively in intensive reading to overcome barriers and develop the habit of reading literature written in a second language.

The University of Wellington (2022) has identified the six common issues that students with academic reading have mentioned. It seems that university students are supposed to read a lot. They read a lot and see reading as a challenge. Academic jargon is another hurdle for students. Students are having trouble reading because of these words. In a similar vein, one of the reading challenges is thought to be selective reading. Because they must read a lot, the students must decide which parts of the reading are most important to concentrate on. It is a common misperception that reading critically requires focusing on the most important information. However, students are unable to distinguish between the most and least significant texts in the textbook. As a result, they have trouble reading. Finally, we expect all of our students to read critically at the college level. They achieve this by thinking about what they just read, comparing it to what they already know, and deciding whether or not they accept the texts' arguments as true or untrue.

Additionally, for readers to accomplish while reading the novels, the Quod Erat Demonstrandum (Q.E.D.) foundation (2022) has created six challenges of reading. The first of these is reading comprehension, often known as the component of attention. The students have trouble determining the reading texts' most crucial message, which is a second problem.

The third difficulty is presented by new vocabulary and syntactic structures. The fourth problem, having trouble understanding abstract ideas, is comparable. Decoding words is considered the sixth task. The sixth reading challenge for young readers is comprehension. The intended meanings of the reading texts are usually difficult for students to understand.

I came across various research studies at home and abroad and carefully and critically reviewed the available literature. I made a rigorous study on several articles, dissertations and books. They helped me to identify the topic, and area and design the research questions. This issue, reading problems encountered by Bachelor's level students in reading comprehension in classrooms in the Nepalese ELT context is still less explored and updated through research. None of them explored this issue. I found theoretical, contextual, and thematic gaps. Therefore, I attempt to fill the gap by exploring students' problems in reading comprehension.

### **Methods and procedures**

I employed the phenomenological qualitative research method, which emphasizes examining and comprehending the significance that people's or groups' lived experiences attach to a social or human issue (Creswell, 2014). Willis (2007) asserts that phenomenology enables the researcher to concentrate on various and individualized realities (cited in Campbell, 2015). To gather the necessary data, I purposefully selected four students enrolled in B. Ed. first year from two TU constituent campuses in Rupandehi district considering that they had lived experiences of reading problems. To create meaning and analyze it, I used the interpretative research paradigm. In addition, the results and interpretation were presented using the qualitative research design's descriptive phenomenology methodology to reveal the participants' actual experiences.

To study the reading issues in English language classes and obtain a thorough analysis of the students' reading issues, the data was exclusively collected via unstructured interviews with research participants. To gather comprehensive information for this study, one-to-one interviews were conducted while being recorded. Due to the study's need for confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants to keep their identities secret. They were given a consent form along with a brief explanation of the study question and a clear guarantee that all data collected during the interview would be kept secure and anonymous so that nobody could identify their private and personal life. Then the recorded data was translated from Nepali into English. The information was then divided into various themes, organized and classified, examined and interpreted.

## Results and discussions

Based on the interview data, eleven themes regarding the difficulties encountered when reading the Bachelor's level compulsory textbook "General English" has emerged. Each of these concepts is given and explained individually as follows.

### **Lack of sufficient vocabulary**

If linguistic structures are the skeleton of a language, then vocabulary is its heart and body. One must be able to understand vocabulary, produce it, and do it both vocally and in writing to use it appropriately and effectively being able to recall it at will, understanding its metaphors and collocations. The vocabulary in the textbook was foreign to all of the participants, and this prevented them from understanding the content. Nearly all of the participants also mentioned that it was difficult to read and comprehend the material because of the new terms. In this context, Manoj stated:

I enjoy reading but I cannot interpret the meaning of the majority of the words in the reading texts. In such a situation, I stopped reading the text.

Although he enjoyed reading, he could not understand the meaning of the majority of the words in the reading texts. Thus, he agreed that the primary problem to reading comprehension is language. He stated that he enjoyed reading a new book but he would stop reading if he came across unfamiliar words in the reading material. Manoj added:

Students with strong vocabulary skills may read and understand texts more effectively than those with weaker vocabulary skills.

Participant's experience is in harmony with Chou (2011). He states that a learner's vocabulary size affects their reading comprehension. When learners gain a solid understanding of the several meanings of a single word, their vocabulary size grows. He added that students who are better at language acquisition are superior to those who are less proficient in vocabulary and may comprehend the material better. In this regard, Qian (2002) contends that vocabulary knowledge which helps students to quickly understand concepts in written texts is a crucial element of reading comprehension. Thus, there is a clear and substantial correlation between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. Puja stated:

Since I have guide and guess papers, the textbook was not necessary because there are new vocabularies which create problems in reading comprehension."

From the above statement, it is clear that vocabulary was one of the main issues with reading textbooks published in a second language. This finding harmonizes with Sacks and Jacobson (2004). They claimed that although vocabulary knowledge is important for

assisting students in understanding what they read, some readers find it difficult to fully comprehend a reading passage due to their limited vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, having a strong vocabulary is crucial for effective speech and writing.

### **Lengthy texts**

The reading passages were excessively long, as was noted by all participants. Long texts make them feel bored. Regarding this, Manju claimed:

Lengthy reading texts are difficult to comprehend while brief lessons would make it easy for her to understand. When passages or texts are lengthy, I forget the earlier portions of the text; it makes me difficult to recall what happened in the earlier part of the story.

In this situation, she agreed that it is difficult to understand lengthy materials but if the contents were brief, she could do it. When the texts are long, students forget the previous parts of the text which makes them difficult to remember what happened in the previous section of the text. In this line, Gita asserted:

I usually do not read the actual texts from the textbook but I only read the summaries the lecturers provide me."

Gita's experience explored that she never read the textbook's actual texts but she simply read the summaries that the lecturers gave her as the original texts are lengthy and complex to comprehend. He noted that he had to read lengthy texts more than one time to keep track of what he was reading. Participants' lived experience revealed that the length of the reading text also determines the comprehensibility of the text.

### **Complex sentence structure**

The participants said that they found it difficult to read and comprehend the texts because of the lengthy sentences that were employed in them. Rabi mentioned:

The texts with complex sentence structure were difficult to comprehend as they contained new information. So they had to read long sentences more than once to keep track of what they were reading.

Here, Rabi's lived experience of reading text indicates that it was tough to comprehend the texts with complex sentences that contained new information. The significance of being familiar with text structures was stressed by Graham and Bellert (2005). Students should be familiar with text structures, they continued, because they will come across a variety of text structures as they learn and advance in their academic careers.



### **Unfamiliar and uninteresting text**

If the texts contained in the textbooks are unfamiliar and uninteresting, the students feel difficulty to understand them as they are written at a high cognitive level. The majority of the participants claimed that they encountered problems due to unfamiliar and uninteresting texts. They also highlighted that the majority of the textbook's contents were authored by authors from other countries, who drew on their contexts and cultures to create the writings. Similarly, Gita claimed:

It is difficult for me to read and understand the textbook's reading materials because they are boring and set in a location other than Nepal.

Her expression made it clear that she did not read the texts of textbooks as they are unfamiliar and monotonous to read and understand. Her experience is in harmony with Walker (2002). He claimed that reading comprehension becomes challenging as a result of the unfamiliar texts to read and grasp which demotivates students from studying. If the materials were interesting, children would select them respectively. They chose texts according to their interest (Day & Bamford, 1998).

### **A large number of reading texts**

The participants unanimously agreed that the textbook has an extremely large amount of lessons and reading materials. Rabi believed:

The author must consider the number of texts while selecting the texts in the textbook. When there are a large number of texts in the textbooks, I become hopeless.

He believed that the author must have taken into account additional lessons suggested for them. When counted, there are 60 reading texts in all. Rabi stated that he did not study textbooks rather he read reference materials and guess papers. The participants involved in the study were determined to have bought textbooks but they believed that manuals are less expensive and simpler to understand than textbooks.

### **Lack of students' reading habits**

Reading is one of the fundamental language skills which plays a vital role in developing overall language proficiency. It also develops good pronunciation, increases vocabulary and other language skills. The habit of reading is crucial for university-level students to expand their knowledge and experience as well. Students who have strong reading habits will inevitably succeed in their academic endeavours (Green, 2002). Reading regularly broadens students' experiences and knowledge to succeed academically and beyond. The majority of interviewees admitted that they did not read frequently. On top of that, the participants confessed that they usually do not read textbooks.

Nearly all of the participants declared that they never read all of the readings assigned in the textbooks. Rabi claimed:

I only read the texts that are the most crucial in terms of exams but I do not read the other texts. I usually read the guide and summary provided by the teacher.

This idea is very much close to Loan (2009). He asserted that good readers have the opportunity to expand their horizons intellectually and multiply their opportunities. Additionally, if it is embedded in them as a habit from their early years at home and in school, it becomes a lifelong activity. They need to be exposed to a variety of textual items that are appropriate for their level and interests. Reading regularly broadens children's horizons of knowledge, which ultimately improves their overall education. Through reading, students can broaden their knowledge, narrow their focus, increase their level of interest, and develop a deeper understanding of themselves, other people, and the wider world (Akande & Oyedapo, 2018). Additionally, if it becomes a habit, it improves moral and intellectual growth as well as personal self-confidence.

### **Lack of inference skills**

Students' incapacity to infer meaning from a text they are reading is another issue that prevents them from understanding what they are reading. Rabi mentioned:

If I cannot remember the sequence of events in previous paragraphs, I cannot make a sense of the text which directly hampers the reading comprehension process.

He agreed that the low level of inferring skill of the students has been the problem in comprehending the reading text well. Rabi's experiences are consistent with Laing and Kamhi's (2002) claim that many learners have trouble understanding what they read because of the inference generation skill's difficulty.

### **Problem with reading fluency**

Students with poor reading speed read slowly. Reading fluency, according to McEwan (2007), is the capacity to quickly recite a text. A reader's ability to precisely, automatically, and swiftly comprehend a text while expressing it appropriately is referred to as reading fluency. In this regard, Manju stated:

We are unable to think about understanding and pay attention to what is happening in the text if we spend a lot of time just trying to pronounce one word. It is natural for us to struggle to understand the meaning of sentences and paragraphs when we read slowly.

Manju's view and experience make it clear that reading speed is also a problem for pupils in public schools. When they read too slowly, it prevents them from understanding the

meaning. They consequently fail to understand the passage. Lack of reading fluency (Hall & Barnes, 2017) is one of the contributing factors that lead to reading comprehension difficult. Manju's view is also well supported by Roller (2022). He stated that there are many typical reading issues, including inactive reading speed, poor comprehension while reading loudly and quietly, skipping words when reading, an inability to decipher syllables and words and correlate them with phonics, and a small vocabulary. Therefore, reading fluency is essential for enhancing learners' reading comprehension in addition to helping them read and absorb information quickly and properly.

### **Inadequate intensive reading practices**

The pupils have inadequate reading practices. They do not get any opportunity to read aloud in front of the class because there are so many students. Because of the poor reading strategies used in the classroom, the students' difficulties with word recognition and pronunciation remain undiagnosed. Students read with a lack of understanding. Rabi asserted:

The word recognition issue is brought on by students' poor command of the language as a whole. They are unable to interact with the text which makes them unwilling to read." This indicates that the insufficient command of the language of the students as a whole causes word recognition problems.

Therefore, they were unwilling to read since they couldn't interact with the text. I agree with Pressley (1998) and believe that students can improve their performance in reading comprehension tasks if teachers employ effective teaching strategies.

### **Lack of exposure to printed materials**

Learning English becomes tedious and painful when one is not exposed to it outside of the classroom. They are unable to connect to the language's true meaning, so, English becomes a language that is only used in books. As a result, they stop engaging with the content. In this vein, Manoj asserted:

I am not exposed to printed materials so I feel difficulty to comprehend the reading text.

His lived story clarified that he felt difficulty to comprehend the text due to a lack of exposure to written texts as the majority of pupils in Nepal do not use the English language in their daily lives, it just becomes a subject to learn in class.

### **Lack of background knowledge about the text**

The absence of prior knowledge about the text causes trouble in comprehending the text. To understand the text completely, learners must have background knowledge and past life experience. In this context, Gita stated:

If the teacher provides me with the background information of the text before starting the lesson, it assists me in understanding the text. Otherwise, I have to struggle a lot to understand. When my teacher provides me background knowledge about the author, the type of the text, and subject matters that are presented in the text beforehand, I understand the text better while reading.

Her experience revealed that one of the issues with reading comprehension among pupils has been a lack of prior knowledge about the subject. Students will understand the lesson effectively if the teacher gives background information on the material at the beginning of the class. Gita's personal experience appears to be in line with McEwan's (2007). He asserted that failure to properly apply prior knowledge is one of the issues that prevent students from understanding written content. One of the main causes of pupils' reading difficulties is their failure to comprehend the social context of the text they are reading. In this line, Rabi shared similar experiences:

Lack of contextual materials, I can't understand the text as much as I am supposed to understand.

His personal experience justified that he couldn't understand the text due to a lack of contextual materials. Teachers recognize that because the materials used to teach English in Nepal are written in the context of English-speaking countries, a lack of schematic knowledge makes it difficult for pupils to understand English. Nearly all student participants agree that to spark students' interest in reading, they should be given reading assignments that are situated in a familiar social context. Manju asserted:

Background information is crucial in reading comprehension. I cannot understand well in the absence of context and background information.

Her experience reminded me of the view of Oakhill et al. (2015). They also claimed that prior knowledge is crucial to helping students understand all implicit information and recall what they have read with ease.

### **Conclusion and implications**

This paper has made an effort to explore problems encountered by bachelor's level students in reading English texts. The study, therefore, has several positive effects. This research reveals that students face problems in reading comprehension due to limited and unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar and uninteresting texts, lengthy texts, large number of

texts, lack of inference skills, problem with reading fluency, lack of background knowledge about the text a lack of intense reading habits, a lack of exposure to printed materials, complex sentence structures, and a lack of self-study. The findings of the research may contribute to enhancing the problems that bachelor-level students face in reading English texts. It gives English teachers and students the knowledge to boost their reading comprehension skills.

In addition, textbook writers must consider the difficulties faced by students while including reading materials in the textbook. They should include short, interesting, local and contextual materials. The study can therefore serve as a guide for textbook writers and future researchers. The findings of this research may not be generalized throughout the country as it examined the issues through students' lived experiences and it was limited to a small sample of four students enrolled in two campuses in Rupandehi. Therefore, future researchers are required to address the difficulties that students encounter while reading textbooks covering a bigger population and a wider area across the country to legalize the findings of the study.

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