Difficulties that Students Face in English Department at Al-Zawia University When Comprehending a Text

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Abstract

This study was aimed to identify the reading comprehension difficulties encountered by some English Language students at Al-Zawia University, as well as to draw the students' attention to use reading comprehension skills which help in comprehending a text. The study sample consists of 100 students as participants. The data were collected by using reading comprehension test. The data collected from the test was analyzed statistically. The results of the analysis indicated that some English Language students failed to comprehend a text because they lack the reading comprehension skills, namely, getting the main idea, inferring meaning, and determining the meaning of vocabulary from context. This can be noticed clearly from the answers to the test. In order to find appropriate solutions to the difficulties which the students encounter, it has been recommended that practice and focus should be made on the reading comprehension skills.

1. Introduction

The area under investigation is reading, specifically reading comprehension. Foreign language reading research has grown significantly over the last fifteen years. Referring to foreign language reading, Robb and Susser (1989) say that, "In many parts of the world, reading has traditionally been the skill most emphasized in English foreign language situations, and this is still true today in spite of the current emphasis on oral/ aural approaches" (p.239).

For many people, according to Zhang (2008, p.197), reading is one of the most important of the four skills in a language, especially in English as a second or foreign language. Reading is, also, a very important skill for learners to expand their knowledge of language. Carrel (1988) observed that for English as a second language and English as a foreign language students reading may be the most important of the four skills.

Reading comprehension is an important skill for the majority of learners; therefore, how to improve students' reading comprehension has been drawing researchers' attention. According to Pang, et al (2003):

> …reading is a complex activity that involves both perception and thought. Reading consists of two related processes: word recognition and comprehension, word recognition refers to the process of perceiving how written symbols correspond to one's spoken language. Comprehension is the process of making sense of words, sentences, and connected text. (p.6)

Having good reading comprehension skills is not only useful for reading tests but is also important for academic studies. In addition, they are important for learners to understand what they read. According to Kudo &Bazan (2009), the reason for reading is comprehension which is defined as the process through which meaning is extracted from written language.

However, the major difficulties encountered by some students in the English Department at Al-Zawia University when they read English texts include the inability to employ effective reading comprehension skills. Using these skills facilitate learners' reading comprehension especially for second language readers. Because most of students in the English Department, at Al-Zawia University encounter difficulties in comprehending English reading text, this study aims to find out some frequent difficulties that face those students in reading comprehension and to explain how to overcome these difficulties.

2. Comprehending a Text

Since the purpose of reading is to extract meaning from the printed text, comprehension is the goal of reading. If students read words in a text without getting their meaning, one would not call that reading. The ability to understand a written text, which is usually referred to as reading comprehension, is one of the important skills that should be learned. Reading must, therefore, be regarded as an interaction between the reader and the written language through which the reader attempts to construct a message from the writer.

To comprehend a text, the reader employs a number of skills that are required in reading comprehension. Without these skills, students are unable to grasp the complexities of current affairs in the books, newspapers, etc. In a study conducted by Elbleazi (2006), and consisted of 124 students from the English Department, at Al-Fateh University, Libya. The study aims to investigate the comprehension difficulties encountered by the fourth year English language students. The research used a cloze test, a translation test, and a questionnaire to collect data. It was demonstrated that students were not trained in reading skills. Therefore, their comprehension was deficient and their concentration was on language learning rather than on comprehension.

In their seminar papers on text comprehension, Kintsch and van Dijk (1978), cited in Goff (2004), made a difference between micro and macro levels of understanding text. The micro level means understanding the text on a sentence by sentence basis. A macro level, on the other hand, involves constructing a schematic representation of the other overall gist of the content. Davis (1944) constructed tests to measure nine reading skills. These skills are:

1)   Knowledge of word meaning.
2)   Ability to select the appropriate meaning for a word or phrase in light of its particular contextual setting.
3)   Ability to follow the organization of a passage and to identify antecedents and references to it.
4)   Ability to select the main thought of a passage.
5)   Ability to answer questions that are specifically answered in the passage.
6)   Ability to answer questions that are answered in a passage but not in words which the questions are asked.
7)   Ability to draw inferences from a passage about its contents.

8)   Ability to recognize the literacy devices used in a passage and to determine its mood and intent.

9)   Ability to determine a writer's intent or point of view, i.e. to draw inferences about a writer.

In agreement with Dewey's conclusions in his 1935 study, Feder (1938) suggested that reading for information and for inference requires different mental skills (cited in Davis, 1944). The study by Feder was one of the first to use factor analysis to analyze test results statistically to determine the basis parts of reading (cited by Davis, 1944).

Duke and Pearson, (2002, pp.214-222), investigated other skills. They consider effective in improving students' comprehension of a text. The skills include prediction, thinking aloud, story structure, informational text structure, summarization, and questioning. Nuttall (1996, p.118) explained that if a reader   understands a text, he could predict with a fair chance of success what is likely to come next and what is not.

Other researchers found that other skills can help readers to be effective and increase comprehension. These skills include:

-       finding main ideas and supporting details.
-       making inferences and drawing conclusions
-       recognizing a text's patterns of organizations.
-       perceiving conceptual relationships.
-       testing your knowledge and understanding of the material through application.

According to Orega & Moreira (2005), "the ability to read and understand written texts in English is particularly relevant for students in Higher Education, especially in the context of a language course."(p.2)

Students find it difficult to read more complex texts, and to do reading tasks that require practice skills of reading comprehension, a reason that lead the researcher to focus on three of the most important reading comprehension skills: getting the main idea, inferring meaning, and determining the meaning of vocabulary.

2.1 Getting the Main Idea

The main idea of reading refers to the central thought or message being expressed. It tells you what the text is about. That is, getting the main idea helps learners understand the point(s) the writer is attempting to express and this will increase learners' comprehension. Nuttal (1996) says that a reader reads to get a message from the writing; this message might be facts, ideas, or feeling.

The main idea is the most important part of a paragraph, a text, or a story. Grellet (1981), for example, indicates that reading involves skills. He mentions the main ones. Distinguishing the main idea from supporting details was one of these skills. He says that this skill is one of the different ways in which certain information may be presented and organized. Parrot (1993) says that extracting the main idea from a text is one of the sub-skills which may be involved in efficient comprehension.

Reading involves more than looking up unfamiliar words in a dictionary. It involves abstracting logical ideas from the printed page or drawing unified thought of connected sentences (Sultan, 2005). McWhorter (2006) says that to read a paragraph most efficiently, a reader should be familiar with the four essential parts of a paragraph, which are: topic, main idea, details, and transitions, and be able to identify and use these four parts as s/he reads. In

addition, Nuttal (1996) says that a reader reads to get a message from the writing; this message might be facts, ideas, or feelings.

2.2 Inferring Meaning

It is the ability to create a personal meaning from a text. Kispal (2008) states that "poor inferencing causes poor comprehension…" (p.2) and he adds that having wide background knowledge facilitates the inference skill. He suggests that the skill of inference is needed, not to be able to 'read between the lines', to detect the unspoken hidden meanings or to draw one's own personal conclusions about a text. It is needed to understand the effects achieved through choices in vocabulary, to recognize what the writer is trying to accomplish through the whole text and to appreciate what the impact on the reader may be (p. 6). In addition, Nuttal (1996) says that inference can be used "when the writer expects the reader to draw certain unstated conclusions from facts, points in an argument, etc." (p. 114).

2.3 Determining the Meaning of Vocabulary

Reading comprehension is a process of how information is processed from the text into meanings, starting with the information from the text, and ending with what the reader gains. Learners need to read more and more to improve and expand their vocabulary in order to be able to use the words in context. In one study, that was done by Abul-Qasim (2010), and dealt with the learning of vocabulary through reading short stories. The findings of the study demonstrated that reading short stories may help learners to improve their vocabulary, and the study concluded that learners who know more words understand more of what they read than learners who know fewer. The researcher believes that for learners to learn vocabulary of a foreign language, the best way is to introduce them to read some short stories rather than give those lists of words.

Comprehending a text may be either easy or hard and this, sometimes, is related to the difficulty and altering of the words in a text. Marks et al. (1974) found that 15% of the words in several elementary school texts were replaced with high-frequency (easy) or low-frequency (hard) synonyms. Reading comprehension was significantly increased with the easy group and reduced in the hard group.

3. Data of the Study

To find whether the reading comprehension skills can help learners comprehend a text and lack of these skills lead to inability to comprehend what they read, one type of data was collected (i.e., a test). The questions of the test were selected from the Broukal & Nolan-Woods' (1990) "Preparation for TOEFL".

A test was designed to examine some reading comprehension skills (getting the main idea, inferring meaning, determining the meaning of vocabulary from context) and was administrated to one hundred students at the Department of English, Al-Zawia University. Since the study is based on three skills of reading comprehension, the test included three parts. Each part was devoted to a certain skill. The first part, which was about getting the main idea skill, consisted of five questions; the second part, which is dealt with inferring the meaning skill, also consisted of five questions, while the last part, which was related to determining the meaning of vocabulary from context, consisted of ten questions. All questions were related to reading comprehension and they were all multiple choice questions. The first part consisted of a passage and five questions about the passage, each question had four answers. The subjects were asked to read the passage and then answer the questions by choosing the correct answers. So was the second part, which was centered on inferring meaning skill. The third part was centered on determining the meaning of Vocabulary from

context skill. It consisted of ten questions, each question had four answers. The subjects were asked to choose the correct answer. The purpose of these questions was to know if using reading comprehension skills can help subjects comprehend what they read.

4. Participants

A total of one hundred students from the English Department at Al-Zawia University participated in the study. They were second year students, males and females. Their ages were between eighteen and twenty. They had the same educational background, i.e., they have been learning English for about six years. The main reason for choosing this level for this study is that students study reading comprehension subject only in the first and second years. The researcher wanted to know if the students benefited from their studying reading comprehension in these two years and if they could comprehend what they read.

5. Data Analysis

The test consists of twenty questions, which were about reading comprehension skills. The twenty questions are divided into three parts. The questions of the first part were (5) which examined the subjects' ability to get the main idea. The questions of the second part were also (5) which were designed to test the subjects' ability to infer meaning from what they read. The questions to the first part of the test were (5) and the number of marks was (5), and so was the case in the second part; whereas the third part questions were (10) and the number of marks was (10). Subjects who scored less than 3/5 in the first and in the second parts were considered to have "failed", while those who scored 3/5 or more were considered to have "passed", whereas in the third part, those who scored less than 5/10 were considered to have "failed", while those who scored 5/10 or more were considered to have "passed".

5.1 The First (1st) Part of the Test

There were five questions that have been answered by the participants in this part. The purpose of these questions is to investigate the participant's ability of getting the main ideas from the passage and their ability to choose the correct answer. Based on the answers of this part of the test, it was found that the participants lack the skill of getting the main idea and the table below shows that clearly.

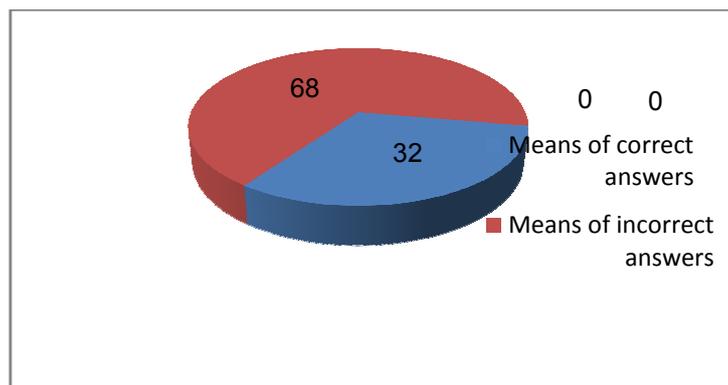**Table 1:** Correct and incorrect answers of the 1st part of the test

Question Number	Correct Answers	Incorrect Answers
1	27	73
2	31	69
3	21	79
4	50	50
5	31	69
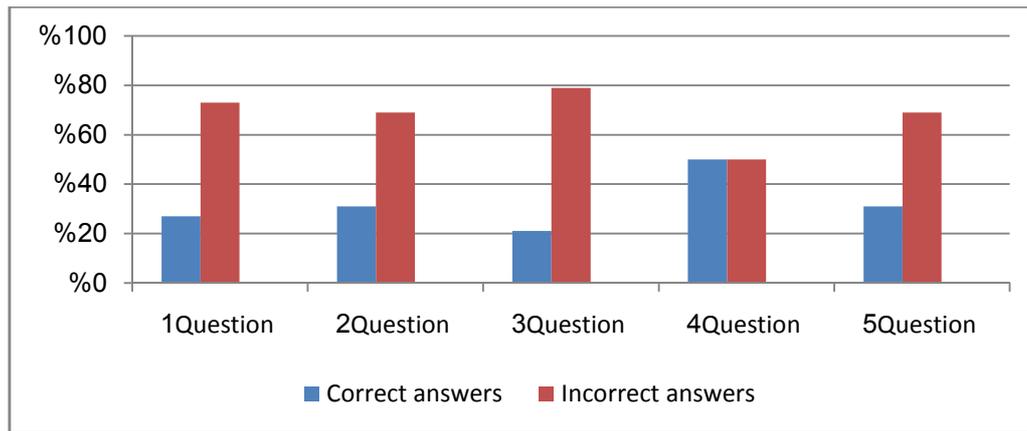
Graph 1: Percentage of correct and incorrect answers of the 1ˢᵗ part of the test

From table (1) and graph (1), we can infer the following:

The mean for the correct answers on the five questions was (32) with a standard deviation of (10.86); while the mean for the incorrect answers was (68) with a standard deviation of (10.86). Besides, the value of coefficient variation for the correct answers was (33.9), while the value of the coefficient variation for the incorrect answers was (15.9).To understand simply, the next graph shows the means of correct and incorrect answers:


Graph 2: Means of correct and incorrect answers

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of the sample's scores on the 1ˢᵗ part of the test

Score out of 5	Frequency of students	Percentage
0	21	21%
1	27	27%
2	27	27%
3	19	19%
4	5	5%
5	1	1%
Total	100	100%

From table (2), based on the frequencies of scores, one may note that (75) participants scored less than (3) and the percentage was (75%), whereas, only (25) participants had passing scores on this part of the test and the percentage was (25%). This table shows that a big

number of participants were not able to use the skill of getting the main idea. However, if students had difficulty using this skill, it would be difficult for them to comprehend what they read easily. It has been founded that the participants had difficulties using this skill in their reading. The graph below shows clearly that.
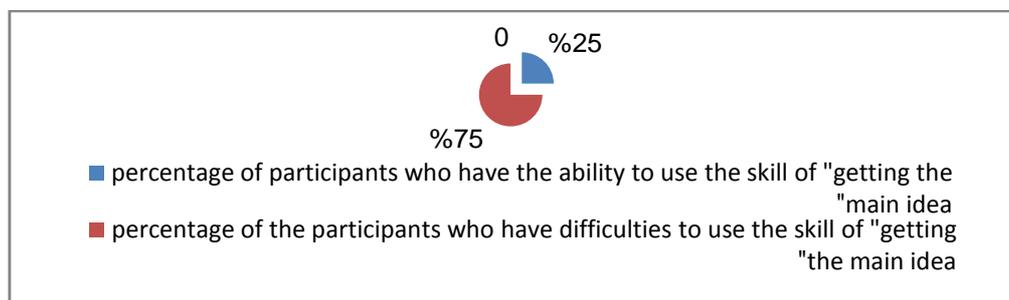

Graph 3: Percentage of having the ability & difficulty to use the "getting the main idea" skill

5.2 The Second (2nd) Part of the Test

The purpose of the five questions of the 2nd part of the test is to investigate the subjects' ability to infer meaning from the passage and their ability to choose the correct answer. Based on the participants' answers of this part of the test, it was noted that the students have difficulties in using the skill of inferring meaning. The table below shows that.

Table 3: Correct and incorrect answers to the questions of the 2nd part of the test

| Number of question	correct answers	Incorrect answers
1	12	88
2	52	48
3	41	59
4	27	73
5	18	82
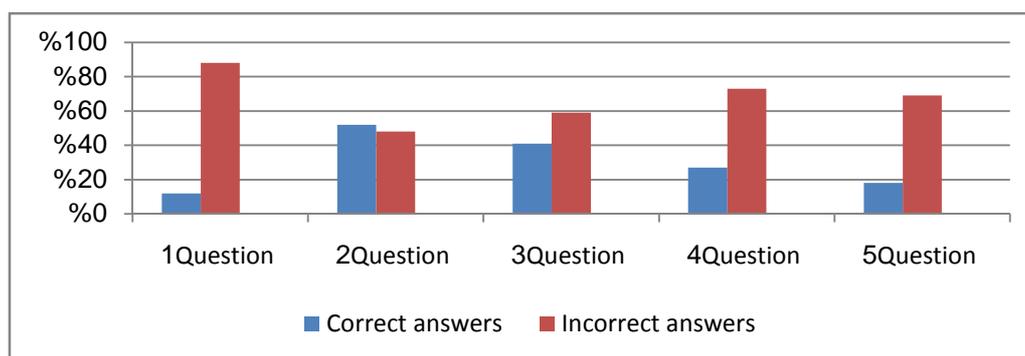
Graph 4: Percentage of correct and incorrect answers of the 2nd part of the test

From table (3) and graph (4), we can calculate the following:

The mean for the correct answer of the five questions was (30) with standard deviation of (16.03), while the mean for the incorrect answers was (70) with standard deviation of (16.03). Besides, the value of the coefficient variation for the correct answers was (53.43), while the

value of coefficient variation for the incorrect answers was (22.9). Graph (2) shows the means of correct and incorrect answers.
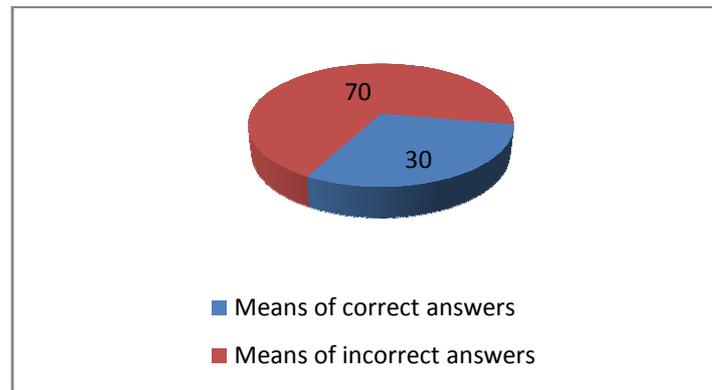

Graph 5: Means of correct and incorrect answers

Table 4: Frequencies and percentages of the sample's scores to the 2nd part of the test

Score out of 5	Frequency of Students	Percentage
0	12	12%
1	35	35%
2	38	38%
3	9	9%
4	6	6%
5	0	0%
Total	100	100%

From the table above, one notes that (85) subjects had low scores of less than (3) and the percentage was (85%). Whereas, only (15) subjects had pass scores on this part of the test and the percentage was (15%). Table (6) shows that only (15%) of the subjects had good scores. All the other subjects did not have acceptable scores. This confirms what the researcher hypothesized in this study. Moreover, this proves that students who lack the skill of reading comprehension have difficulty in comprehending a text.
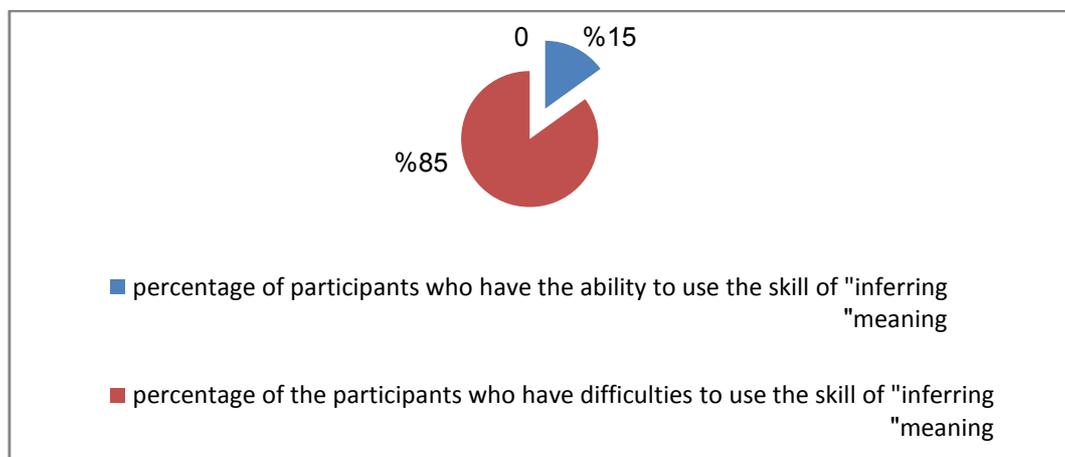

Graph 6: Percentage of having the ability & difficulty to use the "getting the main idea" skill

5.3 The Third (3rd) Part of the Test

This part of the test consisted of ten questions. The purpose of these questions is to investigate the subjects' ability of comprehend the meaning of vocabulary from context. The answers of these questions showed that the percentage of the incorrect answers was the highest. Table (5) and graph (7) below show that.

Table 5: Correct and incorrect answers to the questions of the 3rd part of the test

Question Number	Correct Answers	Incorrect Answers
1	54	46
2	49	51
3	29	71
4	14	86
5	19	81
6	26	74
7	19	81
8	25	75
9	27	73
10	13	87
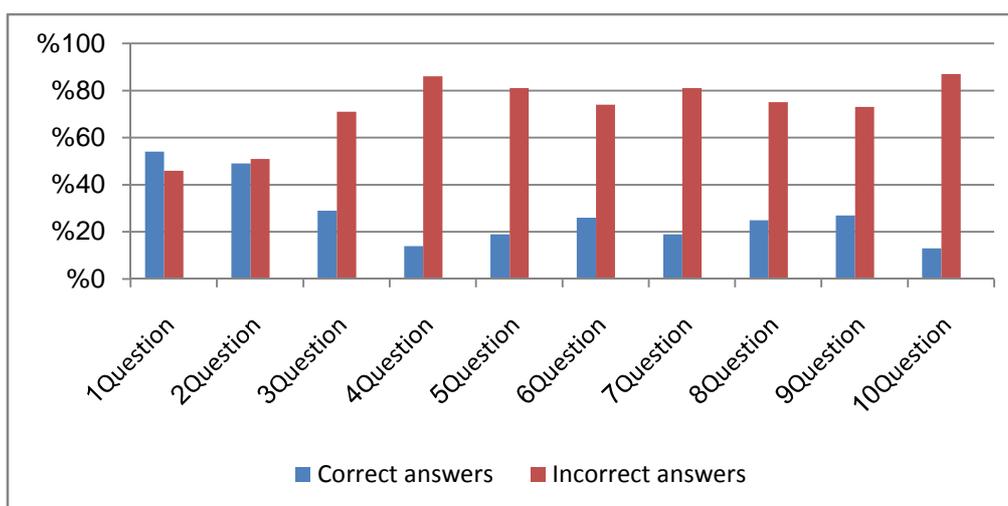
Graph 7: Percentage of correct and incorrect answers of the 3rd part of the test

From table (5) & graph (7), we can calculate the following:

The mean for the correct answers of the ten questions was (27.5) with a standard deviation of (13.87), while the mean for the incorrect answers of the ten questions was (72.5) with standard deviation of (11.89). Furthermore, the value of the coefficient variation for the correct answers was (50.4), while the value of the incorrect answers was (16. 17).
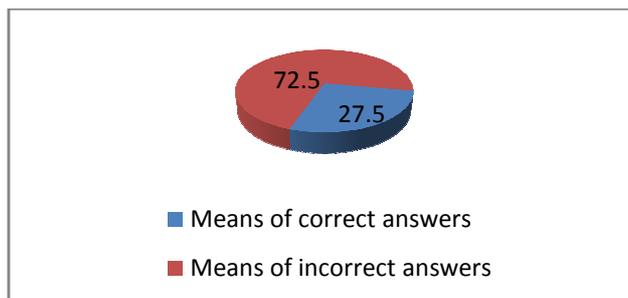
Graph 8: Means of correct and incorrect answers

Table 6: Frequencies and percentages of the sample's scores on the 3rd part of the test

| Score out of 10	Frequency of students	percentage
0	0	0%
1	11	11%
2	18	18%
3	32	32%
4	29	29%
5	6	6%
6	4	4%
7	0	0%
8	0	0%
9	0	0%
10	0	0%
Total	100	100%

This table shows that the subjects' performance was very poor. It indicates that about (90) subjects lack the ability of determining the meaning of vocabulary from context. This means that (90%) of the subjects failed to extract the meaning of vocabulary, while only (10%) passed this test. This performance proved what the researcher hypothesized in this study and this agrees with what Abul-Qasim (2010) said in his study that learners need to read more and more to improve and expand their vocabulary during reading in order to use and understand these words in context.
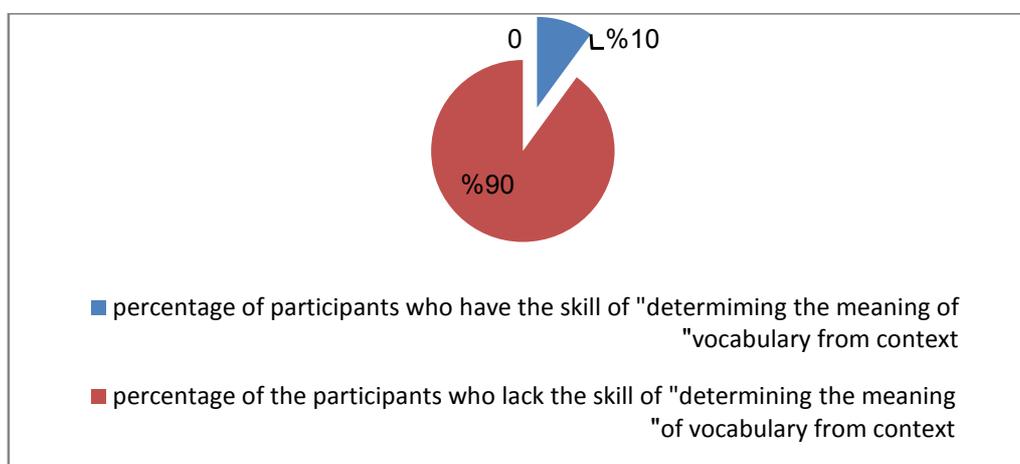
Graph 9: Percentage of having the ability & difficulty to use the "getting the main idea" skill

6. Results

It is important to use some questions which are related to reading the comprehension skills (getting the main idea, inferring meaning, and determining the meaning of vocabulary from context), to know if the students are able to comprehend a text, using these skills, easily and clearly. Each of these was analyzed and the descriptive statistics is shown in the following graph.
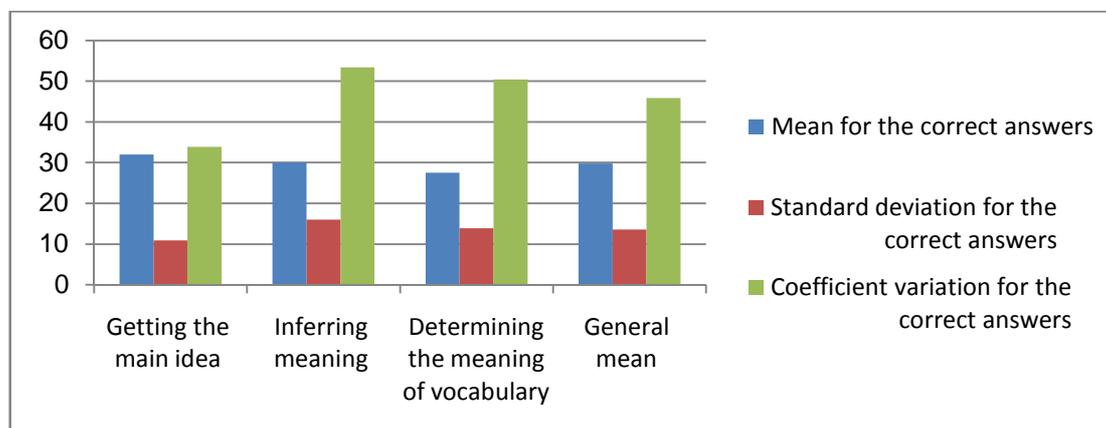
Graph 10: Descriptive statistics of the subjects' score

The above graph shows the weak performance of the subjects on the test. It can be observed from the graph that the mean for the correct answers of the first part was (32). This indicates that the subjects' performance was poor, and so was it in answering the questions of the second part. The mean of the correct answers was (30); whereas their performance on the third part questions was the poorest. This indicates that the subjects were unable to comprehend what they read easily. The values of the mean were relatively low. The weak value of the mean of the correct answers of the three parts of the test was about (29.83).The determining the meaning of vocabulary from context skill is the weakest skill among the three. The mean of the correct answers was (27.5). The low values of the mean prove the hypothesis of this study. Thus the results answered the question of this study and confirmed its main hypothesis.

7. Discussion and Interpretations

This study seeks to explore the effects of reading comprehension skills on text comprehension. In general, the students' performance was weak. They seem to have performed better in the first part of the test than in the second and third parts. Whereas the percentage of the correct answers in the first part was about (32%), in the second part it was (30%), and in the last part (27.5%).

These results can be interpreted to account for the students' failure in the reading comprehension test. Students may perform better on a text whose reading content is related to their general field of study than on reading comprehension text whose content is related to another subject. This can be interpreted to mean that they did not seem to be advantaged when they were tested on a text related to their field of study.

It is also possible that students may not have been equally matched in language ability. Although they were at the same instruction level, some students seem to be good readers than others. Reading is a complex process and needs a sufficient amount of second language knowledge to make effective use of skills and strategies in order to understand the text.

Furthermore, when students were asked to give meanings of vocabulary items, they gave the usual meanings, i.e., they gave the meanings that they memorized and usually used, not thinking that a word may have more than one meaning. This is related to the way they used in learning and explaining words. This means that they learned the words separately and not in context. For example, their performance on the last question in the third part of the test: (31%) was the percentage of the correct answer which was (slogans), the same percentage of students have selected the answer (devices), (30%) have selected the answer (motifs), while (40%) have selected (symbols) which was similar but not identical meaning to the correct answer. In addition, some students may read a text and they do not have any aim to read and they answer randomly if they are asked to answer questions. They may read only because they are constrained to do.

8. Conclusion

It can be said that reading is an interaction between the reader and the text. As Singhal (1988) said "readers use mental activities in order to construct meaning from text. These activities are generally referred to as reading strategies or reading skills" (p.5).

There was a number of reading comprehension skills which considered very important and helpful in comprehending a text. Among these skills, getting the main idea, inferring meaning, and determining the meaning of vocabulary from context. Lacking such skills in reading comprehension might cause misunderstanding and misinterpretation in comprehending a text.

Based on the obtained results, it can be detected that students in English Department at Al-Zawia University encounter difficulties in comprehending a text. During the test, it has been founded that a big number of participants failed to select the correct answers, and the analysis of the test indicated that the majority of the students showed remarkably low gains.

From the findings, it is realized that the difficulties that encountered the students could be attributed to the lack of the essential reading comprehension skills and lacking such skills make students unable to comprehend the texts they read. But if they have the ability to use these skills, they will understand and comprehend texts better because reading comprehension skills are useful and enable learners to decode the meaning and comprehend correctly and may help the learners become more fluent and efficient in second language reading. These findings have several explanations. One of these explanations, for example, that this lack of skills is due to the difficulty in using these skills.

9. Recommendations

Based on the results and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations concerning the teacher and the learner can be made.

The Learner

1-   Learners are partially responsible for the general weakness in reading. They should give more attention to reading in general and reading comprehension in particular because this skill is better learned than taught and can be improved by the students themselves.
2-   Learners should try to guess the correct meanings of unfamiliar words from contexts.
3-   Learners should determine the importance of what is read. They should know how to differentiate between important and unimportant information to identify themes.
4-   They must know how to grasp the general ideas of the text.
5-   They must recognize that reading is mainly for comprehension.

6-   Students need to practice and focus on reading the comprehension skills to be able to use these skills in comprehending texts.

7-   Learners should increase their abilities with vocabulary. It is advisable that they try to guess the meanings of the words they do not know or simply ignore them if they do not look important to understanding the text.

The Teacher

1-   Teachers should help students discover the purpose and benefits of reading.

2-   More emphasis should be placed on reading the comprehension skills so that students can be able to comprehend a text correctly.

3-   Teachers should select texts purposefully to support comprehension development, teach reading comprehension with multiple genres of text and choose texts which are of high quality with richness and depth of ideas and information.

4-   Teachers should explain the new words in English and teach them through the context and not separately.

5-   They should teach students how to use reading comprehension skills, individually or in combination. In other words, teachers should encourage the students to infer meaning from what is read. Determine meanings of unknown words by making connections, and reading the text. Make predictions and confirm these predictions while continuing to read.

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