The Role of Reading Comprehension in Improving EFL Learners
A Case Study of Secondary Schools, Khartoum North Locality, Khartoum State

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Abstract
Reading is considered as one of the most important and a useful component for student's learning process. Reading skills enable learners to comprehend any type of texts, which eventually enable them to have greater understanding. This study aims to identify the reading difficulties that countered by students, Investigate the role of reading comprehension in developing students. The analysis has led to these results: Learners can comprehensibly write about the topic after being taught in reading comprehension class. Reading comprehension requires much attention and following up, so it's difficult to be taught in overcrowded classes. The study recommended teachers should be trained to teach English language, encourage their students to be involved in reading not only in classes but also outside the classroom, divide the pupils into group and pair works in order to develop their reading comprehension.

Keywords: reading comprehension, intensive and extensive reading, skimming and scanning, reading deficiency

1. Introduction

Reading is a very complicated process where the brain is activated through noting a word, decoding it and identifying the related meaning. Therefore ,language educators e.g. Sofia (2006) Smart (2005) indicates that teaching reading serves several purposes: keep abreast of the style of writing and new vocabulary; a mean for mental development and enlighten one's mind; stimulate the muscles of the eyes; involve greater levels of concentration and add to the conversational skills; enhance the knowledge acquired consistently and can open many fields and aspects; help the reader to decipher new words and phrases that come across in every day conversations; help people to stay in touch with contemporary writers and make them sensitive to the global issues; be a basic tool in academic success which can develop a person creativity to create a picture in his / her mind; cultivate the individual thinking skills to think about characters and events in the passage or the story; increase the ability to understand concepts and ideas. So, it develops critical thinking and helps students to think and make good decision; develop more fluency in language and communication; develop positive value in the students; improve the learner ability.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This study is carried out to achieve the following objectives

    a. Identify the reading difficulties that countered by students.

    b. Investigate the role of reading comprehension in developing students.

    c. Help the EFL learners to improve their reading skills.

1.2 Questions of the Study

    a. What the difficulties in readingencountered by students?

    b.   To what extent reading comprehension helps in developing students?

    c. What are strategies that can be used to improve EFL Learners?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1The Reading Skill Defined

Listening, speaking, reading and writing are regarded as the four fundamental skills to acquire/learn a foreign language. The reading skill is a necessary skill for a language acquisition because it has positive effects on vocabulary knowledge, spelling as well as the

learners' writings. Reading is viewed as an interactive process between the reader and the writer in which the former has to understand the message of the passage and then to decode it. Moreover, it is a dynamic process in which information from the text and knowledge possessed by the reader interact to enable him to construct meaning before, during and after reading. In this respect, Goodman (1973: 162) states that:

> *"learner Interacts with a message encoded by the writer. He concentrates his total prior experience and concepts he has attained, as well as the language competence he has achieved".*

Similarly, Dubbin (1982:125) assumes that the task reading is a complex skill that contains a number of psychological, physical and social elements. Therefore, reading is considered as the most difficult language skill, which involves the interaction of multiple cognitive, meta-cognitive, linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects. i.e.; some other sub-Skills operate all together in order to perform the task. Reading is not a passive task, but rather an active one. In fact, reading requires both the learner's mental and experimental inputs to comprehend the written message. In highlighting the importance of reading comprehension, Rivers (1981:147) stated that "reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but also as a means of consolidating and extending knowledge of the language". Reading is composed of two parts; the written form, and the meaning of the conveyed message. In this regard, Penny, Ur (1996: 138) defines reading as follows:

> *"Reading means reading and understanding. A foreign language learner who says, I read the words but I don't know what they mean is not, therefore, reading in this sense. He or she is merely decoding translating written symbols into corresponding sounds."*

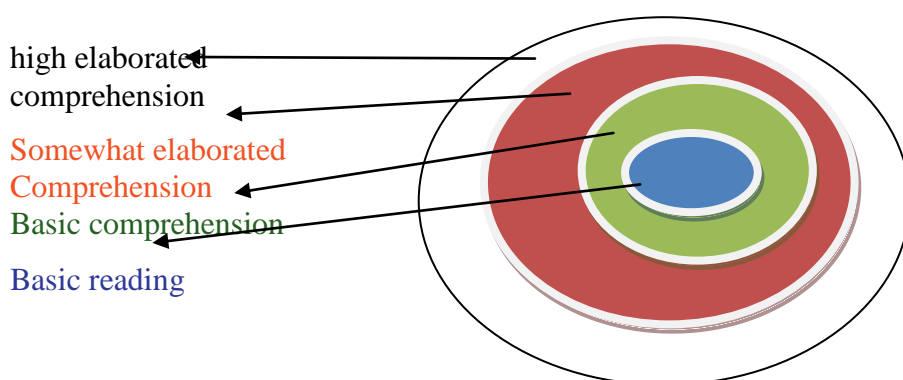### 2.2 Aspects of Reading Comprehension

Unfortunately**,** there are not assessments for accurately measuring all aspects of reading comprehension. As was noted in the Rand Reading Study Group Report:

Currently, widely used comprehension assessments are heavily focused on only a few tasks: reading for immediate recall, reading for the gist of the meaning, and reading to infer or disambiguate word meaning. Assessment procedures to evaluate learners' capacities to modify old or build new knowledge structures, to use information acquired while reading to

solve a problem, to evaluate texts on particular criteria, or to become absorbed in reading and develop affective or aesthetic responses to text have occasionally been developed for particular research programs but have not influenced standard assessment practices. Because knowledge, application, and engagement are the crucial consequences of reading with comprehension, assessments that reflect all three are needed (Rrsgr, 2002).

The easiest aspect of comprehension to measure is that of vocabulary. Two common assessments are the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) and the Test of Word Knowledge (TOWK). A Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) should be consulted to rule out speech/language impairments if deficit in expressive or receptive language is suspected. The SLP can also be very helpful in assessing any area related to vocabulary development. Example of assessments for passage comprehension (typically retell and inference) include :

1. Diagnostic Assessment of Reading Second Addition (DAR-2)
2. Qualitative Reading Inventory-IV (QRI-IV)
3. Developmental Reading Assessment 2 (DRA-2)
4. And other Informal Reading Inventories Passage reading fluency assessments that are related to reading comprehension include the AIMS web Maze CBM or other CBM maze passages.

2.3 Definition of Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension consists of more than just reading the words on the page. Text reading, according to a cognitively based view is an interactive process rather than just a set of skills (Dole, and et al, 1991)*"A good definition of reading comprehension might be the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language"*.

In seeking to understand the comprehension of a text as a whole, mental model theories have been influential. According to these, when we read, or when we listen to

someone speaking, we construct a mental model of what we have read or heard. This model is not the text itself, but a representation of it (Johnson-Laird, 1983). Using Johnson-Laird's framework, Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) proposed the term 'situation model' to mean a model which goes beyond the text representation and integrates inference and background knowledge to construct meaning. According to McNamara and Magliano (2009) this first major processing model of comprehension has provided the foundation for most of the subsequent models. Kintsch developed the theory further and proposed a two-stage Construction-Integration model, whereby as words or phrases are read (or heard) they set off associations in a spreading fan (Kintsch, 1988). These associations are refined by the context until a stable interpretation emerges. Later this Construction-Integration model was modified to become more interactive (Kintsch, 1998). Instead of all associations being activated in a bottom-up fashion, they are activated by the strength of the associations in memory and, as the reader proceeds the context strengthens those associations which are more appropriate and inhibits those which are less likely. When the reader makes more connections within the text and generates more prior knowledge then a stronger situation model is made, which in turn leads to a stronger representation in long term memory (McNamara and Magliano, 2009).

McNamara and Magliano (2009) reviewed the principal models which build on the Construction-Integration model to a greater or lesser extent, i.e. the Structure-Building, Resonance, Event-indexing, Causal Network, Constructionist and Landscape models. They argue that the Construction-Integration model, the Structure-Building model and the Landscape Model attempt to describe the basic and overall comprehension processes, whilst the other four models are concerned with the processes that go on beyond the information in a target sentence, e.g. retrieving background knowledge and making inferences. The authors concluded that the models differ largely in terms of their foci and the fact that they describe different comprehension situations. Thus, the Construction-Integration model is concerned more with explaining the comprehension of more challenging expository texts, whilst other models explain the comprehension of easier narrative texts by readers who do not have any difficulties (e.g. the Structure-Building model). McNamara and Magliano go on to argue that the models are not therefore contradictory, but they may be too limited, in that they fail to account for differences in the reader and the text. According to Snow(2002)"*Consideration is needed of the differences between skilled and less skilled readers and of how comprehension is affected by the reader's goals and the social context"*.

Another way of differentiating between the various models of comprehension was that proposed by Graesser (2007)who distinguished between those models which use a bottom-up explanation (e.g. Construction-Integration) and those which are strategy-driven (e.g. the Constructionist model) and therefore see comprehension as more of a top-down process. The Constructionist model (Graesser, Singer and Trabasso, 1994) is based on reader goals, coherence of text and explanation. Reader goals are one of the aspects of comprehension that McNamara and Magliano considered to be lacking in comprehension models generally and they suggest it may be because much research in the past has been carried out in the laboratory where readers are given a text and told to read it, thus leaving out any element of free will.

Coherence refers to the way that the reader seeks to make a situation model which makes sense at the local and global level, and explanation refers to the way skilled comprehends try to explain what is happening in the text. In contrast to the laboratory based research McNamara and Magliano(2009:330) consider to characterize other models of reading comprehension, the Constructionist model is the one they consider to be the most applicable to the study of comprehension in authentic educational settings, since it seeks to describe *" a highly-motivated, strategic reader who routinely engages in goal-directed, effortful processing during comprehension"*. According to McNamara (2007), the strategies a reader uses, their meta cognitive awareness and their goals are aspects which have large effects on comprehension.

2.4 Types of Reading

The reading skill can be divided into two main types; intensive and extensive reading. Hafiz and Tudor (1989: 5) compared between the two types:

In intensive reading activities learners are exposed to relatively short texts which are used either to exemplify specific aspects of the lexical, syntactic or discourse system of the L2, or to provide the basis for targeted reading strategy practice the goal of extensive reading, on the other hand, is to flood learners with large quantities of L2 input with few or possibly no specific tasks to perform on this material.

2.4.1 Intensive Reading

Intensive reading refers to detailed focus on the reading texts which usually take place in classrooms. It tends to develop the strategies of the learners. In this respect, Nuttal (1982:

23) claims that: *"The intensive reading lesson is intended primarily to train students in reading strategies".* However, sometimes the learner may prefer to read the text in which he/she divides it into parts and then to read each part alone in order to comprehend it very well.

In palmer's view (1964) on intensive reading, the learner focuses on using the dictionary in which he has to analyze, compare and translate while reading texts. Therefore, the use of a dictionary helps the learner to progress in his language learning process. However, this may interrupt the learner's reading speed. In the same line of thought, the Reading comprehension task for Harmer means not to stop for every word neither to analyze everything (Harmer 2001) that is to say, the reader should not stop at every single point or analyze each idea alone, but rather he should make a general comprehension of the text and to extract the meaning by taking the content into account.

2.4.2 Extensive Reading

Extensive reading refers to reading that learners often do away from the classroom for instance: reading novels, magazines, and newspaper articles. etc. Hafiz and Tudor (1989: 5) mentioned that:

> *"The pedagogical value attributed to extensive reading is based on the assumption that exposing learners to large quantities of meaningful and interesting L2 material will, in the long run, produce a beneficial effect on the learners "command of the L2".*

Extensive readers read for the sake of pleasure. This type is labeled as joyful reading by Day in (1998). Through extensive reading, the reader enriches his background knowledge, and expands his vocabulary; he also recognizes the spelling forms. Therefore, the learner chooses his\her own books and reads at his\her pace. Then, the teacher has to guide learners to select books depending on their levels of comprehension that lead to comprehensible input. According to Day and Bamford (1998) extensive reading is a part of second language curriculum i.e. as a separate course as a part of an existing reading course as a non –credit addition to existing course, and as an extra-curricular activity. Thus, students have to rely on themselves and gain knowledge from their readings outside the classroom.

2.4.3 Reading Sub-Skills

There are different types of learning strategies which help learners to solve their problems and improve their language competency. Many research works have been done on learning strategies and studied the effectiveness of using them in the learning process.

To start with, Oxford (1990) gives a definition to the concept of reading strategies as actions that make the learning task easier, enjoyable, effective and self –directed. The term strategy refers to learning techniques that help learners solve the problems they face whenever they read. For Aderson(1991) reading strategies means cognitive steps which readers can take into account in order to acquire, store and retrieve data. In reading comprehension, there exist four major categories of strategies: skimming, scanning, careful-reading and predicting. These are considered at the same time as the sub-skills of reading. In this sense, Phan(2006:01) states that:

> *"The strategies may involve skimming, scanning, guessing, recognizing cognates and word families, reading for meaning, predicting, activating general knowledge, making inferences, and separating main ideas from supporting ideas".*

2. 4.4 Skimming

Skimming is a common technique in reading comprehension. It is a method of rapidly moving the eyes over text with the purpose of getting only the main ideas and a general overview of the content. In other words skimming is to read more in less time and to help the learner to cover a vast amount of material very quickly. In sum, when skimming, learners go through the text quickly in order to gist of it and have an idea of the writer's intention.

2.4.5 Scanning

Scanning is a speed-reading technique and a useful reading activity in which learners need specific information without dealing with the whole text. This means, they do not read all the text word by word, but rather they extract specific information (names, dates, statistics) without reading all the passage. In short, when scanning, learners try to locate particular information by moving their eyes over the text rapidly, and then get the required information to complete a certain task.

2.4.6 Careful Reading

This reading strategy requires from the reader to obtain detailed information from the entire text. Moreover, the reader is expected to read slowly and to reread the text for the sake of connecting and comparing information with his prior knowledge. In the same line of

thought, Urquihart and Weir (1998) argue that this type of reading takes the meaning of reading to learn i.e., the learner reads for the sake of learning also its reading speed is rather slower than skimming and scanning since the reader attempts to obtain detailed information.

2.4.7 Predicting

Predicting is a very useful sub-skill that the reader may use it in which he makes predictions relying on his previous knowledge and then extracts the meaning of the text even if there exist unfamiliar words in the text, so that he gets the meaning from the whole passage. Learners use information from graphics, text and experiences to anticipate what will be read, viewed, heard and to actively adjust to comprehension while reading, for example before and after a chart, students' list predictions before and after reading. As they read, students either confirm or reject their predictions.

2.5 Reading Deficiency

One of the most compelling reasons to view reading deficiency as the derivative of a language deficiency is that success at learning to read is associated with the adequacy of certain linguistic short-term memory skills.

In our work at Haskins Laboratories, my colleagues and I have found clear indications of this association in a variety of different studies of good and poor beginning readers. For the moment, however, let me put aside a discussion of those studies in order to consider first the short-term storage requirements of normal language processing, and to summarize some recent findings as to how these requirements are met by the mature language user.

An adequate short-term memory is essential to language comprehension simply because the component words of a phrase or sentence must often be held temporarily, pending extraction of the meaning of the whole phrase or sentence (Baddeley, 1978), it is for precisely this reason that many current models of sentence processing explicitly include some form of short-term memory buffer as a part of their parsing device (Kimball, 1975), some consideration has been given to the form of memory representation that mediates human parsing. Current psychological theory has it that some level of phonetic representation is likely to be involved, this being an abstract representation of the articulatory gestures that constitute the material being parsed (Liberman, and et al, 1972).

All of them are native speakers of English who suffer from no known neurological impairment. They are identified by their teachers as being "good," "average," or "poor" readers, a status that we confirm by administering standard reading tests to each child (Jastak, Bijou, and Jastak, 1965). Administration of these tests has typically revealed the "good"

readers to be reading at a level one or more years above their grade placement, whereas the "average" readers are reading at a level between one year above and one-half year below placement.

To strengthen these findings about poor readers' ineffective use of phonetic representation, my colleagues and I followed the study of letter~ string recall with a study of the role of phonetic representation in recall of other, more ecologically valid material such as spoken word strings and spoken sentences (Mann et al, 1980). In that study, the subjects were again good and poor readers from a second-grade classroom. This time, however, the good readers had a slightly higher mean IQ than the poor readers. The experiment involved having the children in each group repeat strings of five spoken words, and also the words of 13-word sentences that were either meaningful or semantically anomalous.

The materials included many different items of each type, but for word strings and both types of sentences, half of the items contained a high density of phonetically confusable (i.e., rhyming) words. whereas half contained phonetically non confusable words instead. As well as for both meaningful and semantically anomalous sentences, good readers made fewer errors than poor readers as long as the material was phonetically non confusable. For all three types of material, however, they fell to the level of the poor readers when the material contained a high density of phonetically confusable words. In this experiment, although good readers tended to have higher IQ's, a significant interaction between reading ability and the effect of phonetic confusability was obtained when the results were subjected to an analysis of covariance that adjusted for any differences in IQ. Once again, intelligence alone was not the source of the good readers' more effective use of phonetic representation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample of the Study

The sample of the study was Sudanese teachers of English (50 teachers) from different schools who were responded to the questionnaire.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

The researcher used two tools to collect the data for this study. These tools are, a questionnaire for teachers.

3.3 Procedures

The questionnaire is designed and used as a tool to collect data for investigating the topic the diagnosing reading comprehension problems encountered by secondary school students, at secondary school this questionnaire is distributed to the EFL teachers at secondary school.
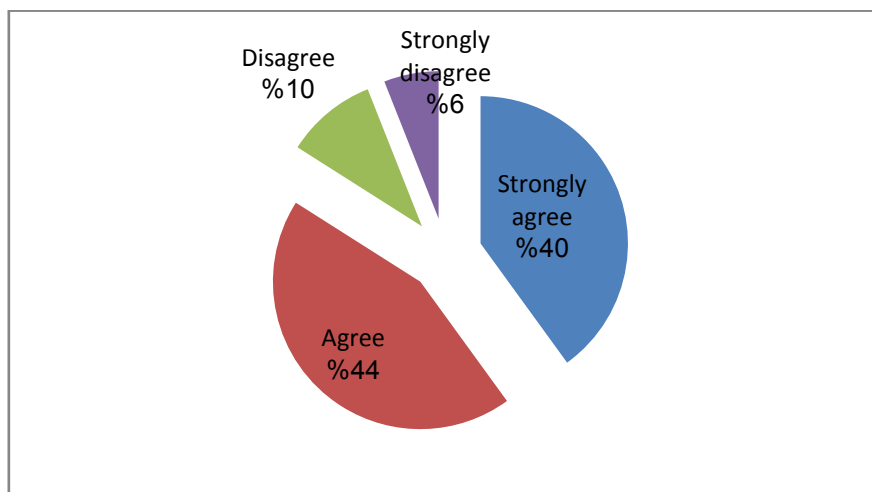
4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The Analysis of the Result of the Questionnaire

Reading material is not relevant to students' life

Table (4. 1)

Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	20	40.0
Agree	22	44.0
Disagree	5	10.0
Strongly disagree	3	6.0
Total	50	100.0

Figure(4.1)

From above table and diagram (4.1) show that, (84%) of the respondents agree that reading material is not relevant to students' life (16%) of the sample disagree with the statement. Therefore the statement is accepted.

Language is not practiced outside the classroom

Table(4.2)

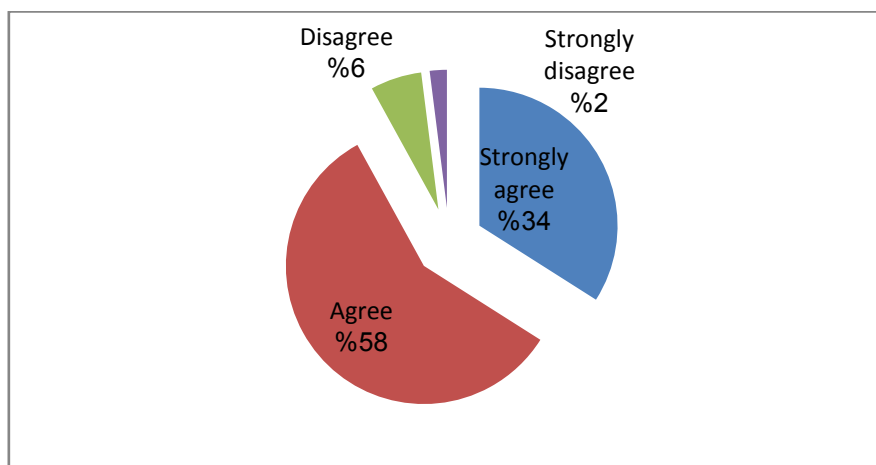| Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	17	34.0
Agree	29	58.0
Disagree	3	6.0
Strongly disagree	1	2.0
Total	50	100.0

Figure (4.2)

Table and diagram (4.2) show that, (92%) of the respondents agree language is not practiced outside the classroom(8%) of the sample disagree with the statement. Therefore the statement is accepted.

There are no additional activities attached to the student's book

Table(4.3)

Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	13	26.0
Agree	27	54.0
Disagree	8	16.0

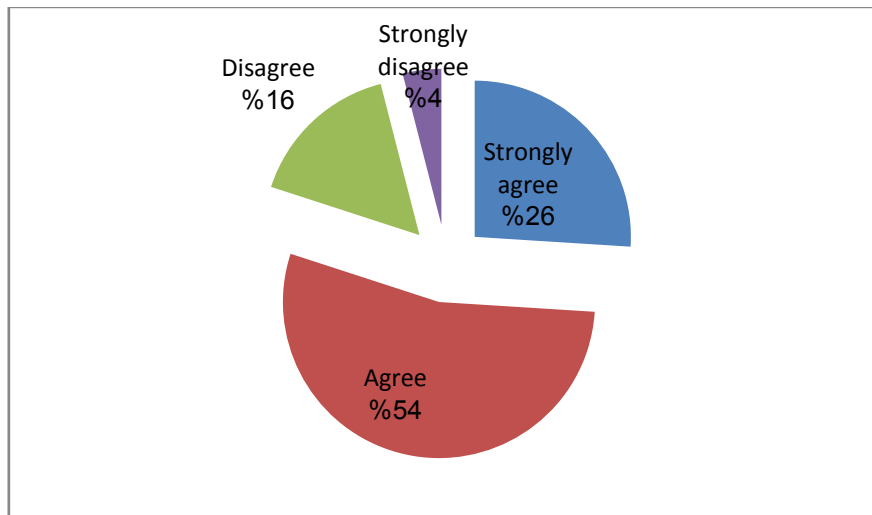|			
	Strongly disagree	2	4.0
	Total	50	100.0

Figure (4.3)

Table and diagram (4.3) show that, (80%) of the respondents agree that there are no additional activities attached to the student's book (20%) of the sample disagree with the statement. Therefore the statement is accepted.

Teachers do not motivate and encourage students to write comprehension

Table(4.4)

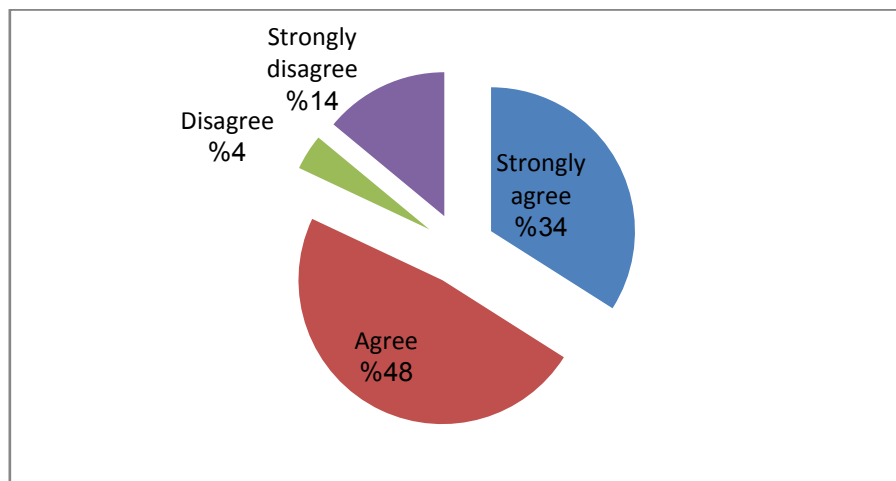| Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	17	34.0
Agree	24	48.0
Disagree	2	4.0
Strongly disagree	7	14.0
Total	50	100.0

Figure (4.4)

Table (4.4) explains that the majority of the respondents agree (82%), while (18%) disagree. According to respondent agree teachers do not motivate and encourage students to write comprehension.

EFL learners to compose coherent pieces of reading

Table(4.5)

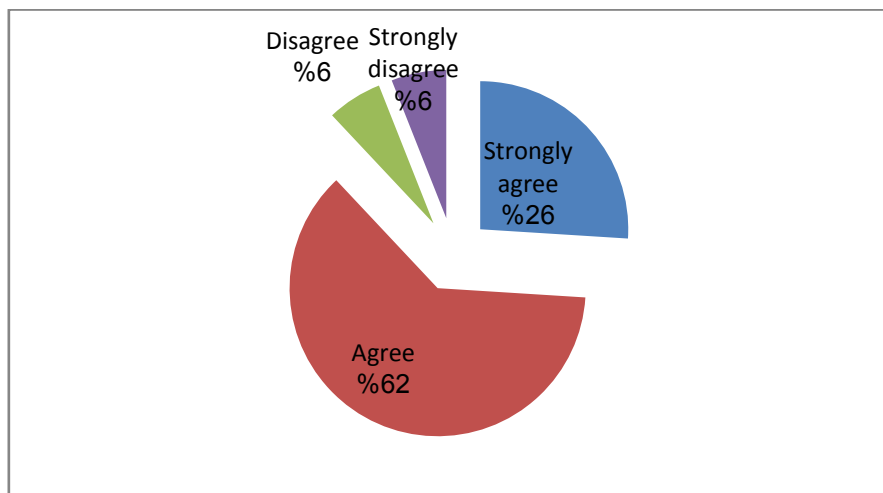| Options	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	13	26.0
Agree	31	62.0
Disagree	3	6.0
Strongly disagree	3	6.0
Total	50	100.0

Figure (4.5)

From above table and diagram (4.5) show that, (88%) of the respondents agree that EFL learners to compose coherent pieces of reading, (12%) disagree with the statement. Therefore the statement is accepted.

5. CONCLUSION, FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

This study investigated whether the reading comprehension is effective in improving EFL students. Reading comprehension is a facilitating factor to EFL learner's to improve their reading skills.

5.2 Findings

1. Using reading comprehension increases students' performance in EFL classes.
2. The influence of reading comprehension on improving EFL learner performance.
3. Learners can comprehensibly write about the topic after being taught in reading comprehension class.
4. Reading comprehension requires much attention and following up so it's difficult to be taught in overcrowded classes

5.3 Recommendations

1. Teachers must be trained who teach English language.
2. Teachers should encourage their students to be involved in reading not only in classes but also outside the classroom.

3. Teachers should divide the pupils into group and pair works in order to develop their use of reading comprehension.

4. Teachers need techniques and strategies of teaching reading comprehension.

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