

**RESEARCH PAPER****Investigating the Reading Comprehension Experiences of EFL Secondary School Learners in Sindh****¹Mushtaque Ahmed Solangi*, ²Zaheer Ahmed Bango and ³Muhammad Hassan Abbasi**

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***Corresponding Author** Mushtaque.solangi@duet.edu.pk**ABSTRACT**

The study aims to explore the reading comprehension experiences of secondary school EFL students in Khairpur Mir's, Sindh. Utilizing a quantitative research approach, the investigation concentrated on secondary school learners. Through a survey methodology, the researchers administered face-to-face questionnaires comprising four open-ended questions to 60 male and female participants for data collection. The gathered data underwent analysis presented in graphs. The researchers aimed to gain a deeper insight into pupils' experiences with reading in English as a foreign language, with all participants acknowledging the significant impact of these experiences on the reading skills. The findings revealed limited positive reading experiences in English, and participants indicated infrequent engagement with quality books. This trend may be associated with the relatively diminished importance of books in the lives of adults in contemporary society. Moreover, the research provides recommendations to address reading challenges affecting the experiences of foreign language learners, offering valuable insights for decision-makers in academia, individuals, teachers, and other stakeholders.

Keywords: EFL Learners, Reading Experiences, Secondary School**Introduction**

In our inherently social world, where humans' thirst for knowledge remains a constant, educational institutions serve as crucial vessels for information acquisition. The contemporary period, marked by progress in commerce, society, and education itself, has further illuminated the significance of an enlightened populace. Language, undoubtedly, maintains its position within the educational framework, playing a vital role in shaping students' learning experience. However, it's important to acknowledge that, at the primary and secondary levels, mastering this subject is not a mandatory requirement for academic progress. This flexibility within the curriculum reflects a nuanced understanding of learning priorities at different stages of education (Maitlo, et al., 2023). While Pakistani students initially show promise in reading, scoring early or just above average in fluency, their performance in accurate comprehension paints a less optimistic picture. This disparity hints at potential flaws in current Pakistani EFL methods, raising concerns about their effectiveness in bolstering reading skills. To delve deeper, a study explored the reading experiences and habits of EFL students in secondary grades in Sindh. Their responses to an "reading" intervention formed the crux of the investigation. For EFL students, academic reading presents a unique challenge understood by the researchers that how we think and read languages are key areas of interest in cognitive research Maitlo, et al., (2023). It's not just about mastering the English language's mechanics, but also about bridging the gap between their background knowledge and the unfamiliar content often encountered in texts.

The design of this study emphasis on the related approaches like drawing on Krashen's 2004 conviction that reading fosters strong literacy encouraged the students to immerse themselves in a multitude of age-appropriate, easily digestible books without relying on dictionaries. Such reading, as defined by Drew and Sørheim (2009), transcends the confines of textbooks, inviting language learners to devour vast quantities of enjoyable material. Across the globe, research paints a promising picture for reading as a powerful tool to boost reading proficiency in EFL settings. Studies like Charboneau, (2020), innovative reading instruction and Drew's (2009) exploration of The Early Years Literacy Program (EYLP) with graded readers showcase impressive learning outcomes. Similarly, Hauer's et al., (2012) six-week ER program revealed positive shifts in students' attitudes towards reading English. However, this landscape lacks research from Pakistan, specifically in Sindh province, where studies explicitly focusing on reading interventions in EFL classrooms at the secondary level are absent. To address this gap, our study delves into the reading experiences of Pakistani students, shedding light on their general engagement with reading and their responses enhance English learning journey of EFL learners.

As according to the experiences of researcher the problem related to reading skills at secondary school level revealed a common challenge. Despite understanding the importance of English and facing test results, several students in each class consistently neglected their reading assignments. Excuses like "boring," forgotten books, sports commitments, or simply not caring highlighted the difficulty in fostering motivation, positive attitudes towards school and reading, and encouraging autonomous learning. This stark contrast between educational goals and student behavior sparked curiosity about their lack of engagement in reading experiences. Another concern was the label of "weak learner" often assigned to struggling readers at schools. This label seemed to imply that reading difficulties meant neglecting assigned texts. Additionally, weak learners appeared to favor their native language subject over English, suggesting potential limitations in the offered language choice. These observations triggered a deeper exploration of the factors influencing students' reading choices and learning motivations in this context. Research suggests huge gap among secondary students, potentially hindering their ability to meet reading English competencies Byberg, (2015). This study paves the deep learning path to explore and address problems of students' experiences in reading comprehension especially at secondary school level in Sindh Pakistan.

Terminology

Previous research has shown that Reading improves reading skills, fluency, and vocabulary in second language learners (Hashim & Balakrishnan, 2006; Krashen, 2004). This study hypothesizes that giving pupils choice in book selection will make reading more enjoyable, leading to positive opinions and attitudes towards it. Additionally, completing an entire book through extensive reading is expected to boost self-esteem and awareness of manageable reading materials, encouraging the use of reading for English improvement and enjoyment.

Clarifying Key Terminology

Some terms like "weak reader" and "reluctant reader" are used interchangeably in research, causing confusion. This study seeks to clarify their specific meanings. Weak readers may desire to read despite their difficulties, while reluctant readers actively avoid reading regardless of their abilities. While "weak reader" is common among teachers, it lacks a precise definition. Similar terms like "slow reader" and "struggling reader" are often used. Brown, D. (2009) describe struggling readers as students with lower than average reading fluency in their second language, possibly due to factors like poor first language literacy or weak L2 skills. Reluctant readers, despite varying abilities, prioritize avoiding reading. However, their neglect of reading assignments can eventually lead to weak reading skills due to missed learning opportunities. Ultimately, Elley (cited in Hashim &

Balakrishnan, 2006) asserts that limited exposure to written materials during early L2 development can contribute to both weak and reluctant reading in English learners. Negative opinions about reading (e.g., finding it boring) can manifest in avoiding reading behaviors and negatively impact overall reading motivation. Therefore, this study proposes a potentially negative cycle: a negative opinion of English reading as boring could lead to a negative attitude of avoiding reading books, ultimately resulting in low or nonexistent reading motivation.

Theories Related to Reading Skills Development

Theories always justify understanding a text demands bridging the gap between existing knowledge and new information. Scholars like Hedge opinion (2000); Lichtman, K., & VanPatten, B. (2021), and Vygotsky (1978) emphasize this connection. Hedge clarified that exposure to language slightly above a child's current grasp fosters language development and rule understanding. Harmer (1991) echoes this, advocating for input slightly beyond students' production level but still comprehensible. This aligns with Krashen's input theory and Vygotsky ZPD, both advocating for building upon existing knowledge to reach new learning. Lundberg & Linnakyla further support this by seeing the reader as an active builder of meaning through integrating existing and new knowledge. There are more, various approaches to reading instruction regarding reading instruction in schools employs diverse approaches due to the multifaceted nature of reading. (Day & Bamford, 2012; Grabe, 2014) Teaching methods and reading strategies vary extensively to cater to this complexity and support learners in becoming proficient readers.

Reading Experience Development

Some view it as a cultural journey, a way to join a tapestry of stories and traditions. Others emphasize its practicality, deeming it a fundamental skill in today's world. Within education, its study dominates research, though this may capture its purpose more than its essence Al-Gharabally, M. (2015); Lashari, et al., (2023). These diverse perspectives contribute to the challenge of pinpointing a singular definition. A universal label risks oversimplification, failing to encompass the multifaceted nature of reading and its varied interpretations. It offers a cognitive lens, defining reading as "constructing meaning from written messages." it expand this, seeing it as a continuous process of "decoding" and "encoding" that begins long before formal schooling. Decoding involves translating symbols into sounds (reading), while encoding is the reverse, transforming sounds into written forms. Thus, word recognition, decoding, encoding, and vocabulary growth all play crucial roles in becoming a proficient reader. Early exposure through bedtime stories, rhymes, and prayers further nurtures this development Soomro, et al., (2024). Though parents read the words from the bedtime storybook, their delivery often involves simplifications, pauses, and expressive inflections that are absent in the written text itself. These non-verbal cues, along with facial and bodily expressions, add another layer of meaning and engagement to the storytelling experience Ahmad, et al., (2023).

Reading Strategies

Reading isn't just about sounding out words and deciphering sentences. It's a complex process that involves different skills and strategies depending on your purpose and the type of text. Here's a breakdown of some key reading strategies:

Skimming: Imagine skimming a stone across a pond. This technique involves quickly glancing over the text to grasp the main gist. You look at headings, titles, and introductory sentences, ignoring most details. Use skimming for getting a quick overview or deciding if reading the whole text is necessary.

Scanning: Unlike skimming, scanning is like searching for a specific treasure in the ocean. You have a particular detail or information in mind and your eyes dart across the text, focusing only on keywords and relevant phrases. Use scanning for finding specific facts or figures quickly.

Intensive Reading: This is deep-dive reading, where you analyze every sentence, dissect the arguments, and ponder the nuances. You take notes, highlight key points, and make connections to your existing knowledge. Use intensive reading for studying textbooks, researching academic topics, or analyzing complex literature.

Extensive Reading: Think of extensive reading as a leisurely swim in a pool of language. You immerse yourself in enjoyable texts, like novels, magazines, or blogs, reading for pleasure and general understanding. Don't get bogged down by unfamiliar words; focus on enjoying the story and getting the overall message. Extensive reading helps build vocabulary, fluency, and a love for reading in general.

Approaches to Reading skills

Top-down approach: This strategy starts with the big picture – your prior knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. You use context clues and your schema to predict meaning and interpret the text. This aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, where comprehensible input is key to language acquisition Amin, et al., (2023).

Bottom-up approach: This is a more analytical approach, starting with the smallest units of language, like sounds and letters, and building up to larger structures like words, phrases, and sentences. This is especially helpful for mastering the mechanics of reading and pronunciation.

Remember, the best reading strategy depends on your purpose and the type of text. A skilled reader can adapt and use a combination of these approaches to navigate different reading situations effectively Cheema, et al., (2023).

The L1 and L2 language Relationship

This study focuses on reading experiences in English as a foreign language. To understand this experience, we must consider both first and second language acquisition. Krashen, S. (1992) proposes that second language learners develop competence in two ways: acquisition and learning. Acquisition is a subconscious process, mirroring how children learn their first language. It thrives on comprehensible input and leads to internalized knowledge. In contrast, learning is a conscious process focusing on knowledge about language. It involves analyzing rules and grammar, resulting in explicit knowledge.

L1 vs. L2 learning processes: Understanding what we read is a complex process, and it appears even more intricate when learning a second language (L2). Researchers have observed distinct differences between comprehending our native tongue and grappling with an additional language.

L1 vs. L2 Learning learning Complexity: Khaki, N. (2014) highlight the vast spectrum of learner experiences within both L1 and L2 acquisition. Drew and Sørheim (2004) echo this sentiment, emphasizing the inherent complexity of L2 acquisition compared to L1 learning. They pinpoint the influence of numerous variables, including: Social factors: How a language is perceived, the level of exposure and interaction with the target language. Individual factors: Personality, intelligence, motivation, self-confidence, and personal beliefs Soomro, A. R. (2023).

Interlanguage Gap Related to Reading Experience

Hedge (2000) introduces the concept of Interlanguage, the dynamic process where learners transition through various stages of language development. Drew (2009), noted the significant influence of L1 on this process. Interlanguage was first explored in the 1960s as researchers delved into understanding the reasons behind learner errors. These errors fall into several categories as: Interlingual transfer: Errors arising from applying L1 rules or patterns to the L2 (e.g., "I goed to the store"). Intralingual transfer: Overgeneralization of L2 rules (e.g., "I goed to all the stores"). Developmental errors: Natural mistakes inherent in the learning process (e.g., "I go-ed to the store"). Further, he explains that learners leverage their L1 knowledge to gradually build their L2 proficiency, one step at a time. Jeevan, et al., (2023) further emphasize the importance of considering L1 experiences in L2 learning the English language plays an important role everywhere in the world.. Learners' diverse L1 backgrounds and cultural contexts significantly impact their L2 acquisition journey. Understanding these distinctions between L1 and L2 comprehension is crucial for developing effective language learning strategies. By acknowledging the complexities and influences at play, educators can better cater to the unique needs of L2 learners and support their successful navigation of the fascinating world of additional languages.

Reading Development in EFL

Beyond individual and social factors, mastering reading in English as a foreign language (EFL) involves a complex interplay of cognitive processes, language transfer, and Interlanguage development Al-Gharabally, M. (2015). Early exposure is crucial for EFL learners to internalize common words and phrases for both oral and written communication. Linguists recognize the implications of language transfer and Interlanguage development in second language acquisition, particularly due to significant differences between languages in their phonology, orthography, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Grabe, 2009). Pang,et al., (2003) further highlights the distinct nature of L2 reading compared to L1 reading, citing differences in memory storage and processing. This suggests that Pakistani EFL learners leverage their native languages to construct their understanding of English. Learning to read in English goes beyond the basic decoding skills involved in acquiring L1 literacy. Social and individual factors, absent in the L1 learning process, significantly influence how EFL learners develop reading proficiency.

The Role of Motivation in L2 Learning and Reading

Comprehension is a multifaceted dance, demanding knowledge of word meanings (lexical features), sentence structure (syntax), and even sound patterns (phonology). Grabe (2009) paints this journey as a gradual progression from cognitive learning to automatic understanding, fueled by time, effort, and, crucially, motivation. Motivation acts as the engine driving reading competence. Studies like Schiefele et al., (2012) have identified a clear link between joyful reading and reading skills. However, this engine can sputter. Nuttall, J. (2016) highlights disconnect between recognizing the long-term benefits of a foreign language and lacking daily use, resulting in low motivation. Limited access to diverse reading materials can also act as a roadblock. Nuttall advocates for actively promoting reading and fostering a desire to read, seeing "enjoyment as the key." Yet, low self-efficacy, a belief in one's own reading ability, can also act as a barrier. Overcoming this hurdle requires addressing both internal and external factors like reading material availability and fostering a positive reading environment. In essence, the path to reading proficiency is paved with understanding language intricacies, but fueled by the engine of motivation. Addressing both the practical (books) and psychological (self-efficacy) aspects is crucial for guiding learners on this rewarding journey.

Material and Methods

The methodology employed in this study encompasses research design, research population and sample, research instrument, and the procedure for data collection and

analysis. The entirety of the procedures conducted by the researchers in this investigation is referred to as research design Ahmad, et al., (2023); Lashari, et al., (2023). The current research adopts a quantitative approach, employing four open-ended questions regarding experiences in reading skills of EFL secondary school students. The researcher meets sixty students face to face at campus. The study specifically delves into identifying issues in reading to students. "The population is defined as a set of individuals, data, or items from which a statistical sample is taken" (Younus et al, 2023). The study's population consists of EFL secondary students from a reputable government school in the district of Khairpur, Sindh. To uphold ethical considerations, the name of the institution is not disclosed. The researchers randomly selected sixty students, thirty male and thirty female students and scrutinized them for readings kills. The reason to select this sampling was to secure valid data and avoid hindrances in data collection. The collected data was analyzed in 4-graphs.

Results and Discussion

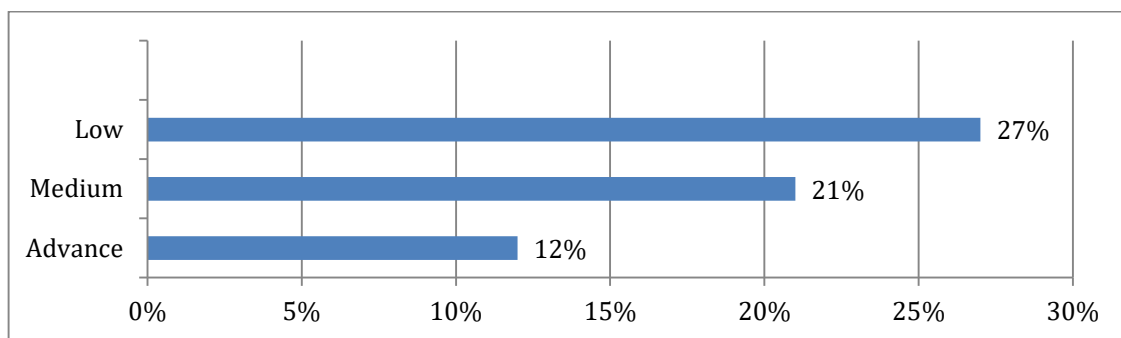


Figure: 1 Can you share experience of your level of reading comprehension?

While the presented data provides valuable insights into EFL learners' perspectives on their reading experiences, it also reveals a somewhat ambiguous picture. Notably, 27% of students self-report low reading skills, while 21% identify as having medium-level proficiency. Interestingly, 12% acknowledge potential for advanced comprehension, suggesting a range of abilities within the student population. This highlights the need for improved reading experiences at the secondary level, with a particular emphasis on strengthening students' reading skills across all levels.

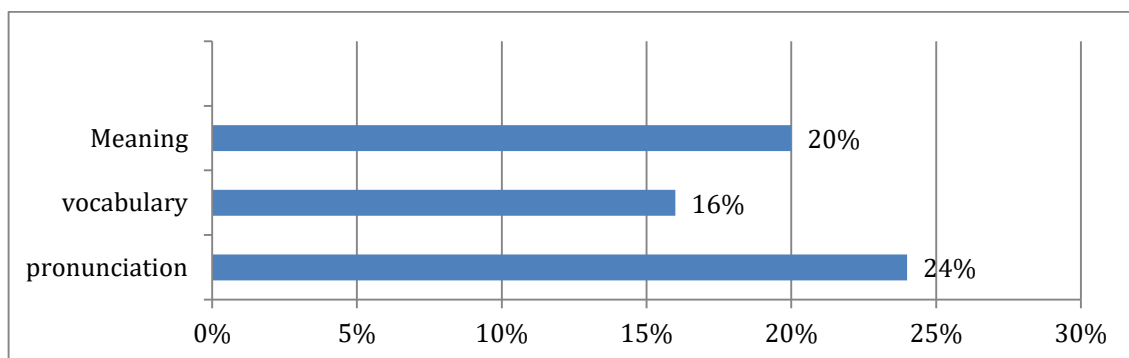


Figure: 2 Can you explain what kind of "hurdles" or challenges you face while reading?

The presented data, though illuminating student perspectives on their EFL reading experiences, leaves some crucial questions unanswered. While it's encouraging that 16% of students acknowledge strong vocabulary skills, the 20% who struggle with understanding the meaning of what they read paint a concerning picture. Additionally, the 24% who identify pronunciation as a barrier to comprehension suggest that secondary-level reading instruction might need a multifaceted approach. These findings point to the need for a

deeper investigation into the specific challenges students face when navigating EFL reading materials.

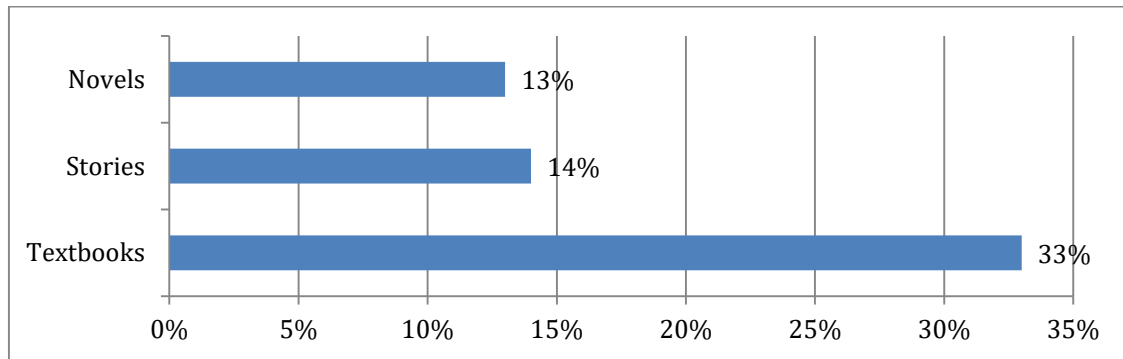


Figure: 3 What are some areas you're curious about and eager to read more about?

While the presented data offers insights into student perceptions of EFL reading experiences, it also reveals a seemingly divergent set of interests. Although 33% of students prioritize reading textbooks, a notable 13% demonstrate interest in novels and another 14% gravitate towards stories. This suggests that secondary-level reading experiences need to be diversified and cater to a wider range of preferences. By fostering engagement with various materials, particularly those that spark students' intrinsic interest in novels and narratives, we can potentially enhance their overall reading skills and foster a more positive relationship with reading in English.

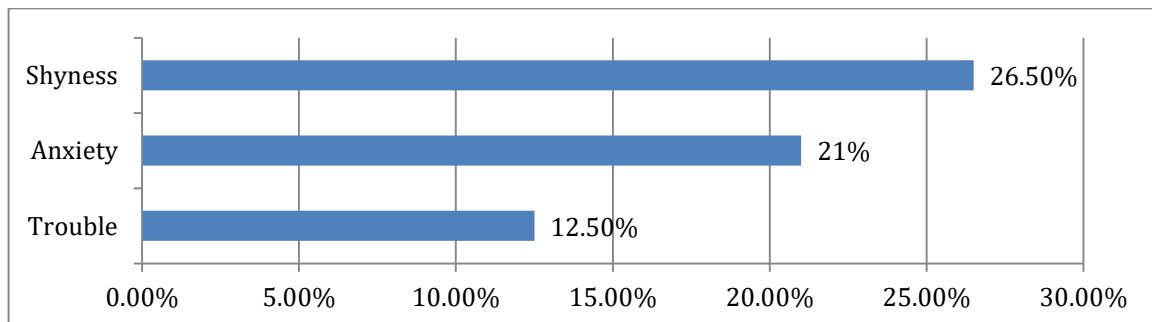


Figure: 4 What are common challenges students face during reading comprehension?

The presented data sheds light on the complex web of anxieties surrounding EFL reading experiences. Over a quarter (26.5%) of students reported feeling shy when reading aloud in class, indicating a performance-based anxiety. Additionally, 21% identified concerns with comprehension itself, suggesting cognitive anxieties hindering their understanding. Interestingly, 12.5% also expressed anxieties related to making mistakes, revealing a perfectionist-driven apprehension of reading publicly. These diverse anxieties paint a clear picture of the need for improved secondary-level reading experiences that address students' emotional and cognitive well-being. By building a supportive and encouraging environment, alongside effective comprehension strategies, we can help students overcome these anxieties and foster a more positive and successful relationship with EFL reading.

Discussion

A crucial gap exists in the English language education system of Sindh, particularly in government schools, where English reading skills of EFL learners are consistently neglected. This oversight significantly hinders their academic development at secondary levels. The study participants, through their responses to four different questions, revealed

their negative experiences with reading instruction. Lichtman and VanPatten (2021) point out that the teaching-learning process lacks practical application of English, often favoring theoretical knowledge over real-world use. This disconnect leads to a dearth of meaningful activities in EFL classrooms that could effectively build reading skills. While the global importance of English is acknowledged, resource limitations often lead to the education system disregarding this crucial aspect (Charboneau, 2020). A potential solution lies in collaborative efforts between the government and educational institutions to implement stricter policies mandating the use of English within school premises. The study's findings clearly demonstrate that institutions do not actively encourage positive reading experiences for EFL learners. This lack of motivation hinders their potential to learn and grow through reading materials, as highlighted in previous studies on low reading skills among EFL learners (Brown, 2009).

Conclusion

The primary objective of the study was to enhance our comprehension of the perceptions of a group of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in secondary school regarding their experiences with reading in English. Additionally, the study sought to gain insights into the learners' perspectives on reading skills as an alternative or supplementary method for acquiring a second language. This prompts an intriguing inquiry into the reasons behind the low results despite English courses being part of the curriculum. The findings indicate that a majority of the learners expressed positive attitudes toward using Extensive Reading (ER) as a technique in learning English as a foreign language. Furthermore, they conveyed that reading English books had the potential to improve their proficiency in the language. The prevalent view among the learners was that reading primarily involved engaging with books. However, my overall impression, in relation to the research question, is that the learners entered the study with limited positive encounters with reading in English and did not prioritize reading books as they did not find it particularly stimulating. One plausible explanation for this may be attributed to technological advancements. It also appears that while the learners recognize their past experiences with reading, they do not perceive the benefits as immediately useful.

This study is based on a limited-scale research that cannot be generalized to encompass the broader spectrum of EFL learners' reading experiences in secondary education. To provide more comprehensive insights into the general situation of secondary EFL learners' attitudes toward reading in English, further studies are necessary, and the scope of the research needs expansion. Consequently, there is a growing imperative to elucidate the experiences of Pakistani EFL learners regarding reading in English as a foreign language. A deeper understanding of learners' experiences and how past reading encounters influence their opinions, attitudes, and motivation toward reading in English is crucial. If subsequent research in a Pakistani secondary school indicates that engaging in extensive reading without attached tasks can motivate EFL learners, enhance their writing and reading skills, and foster learning, appropriate measures should be implemented in the use of extensive reading in a Pakistani EFL classroom. In our globalized society, acquiring the skill of reading English is increasingly essential. EFL education holds untapped potential to empower young learners to actively participate in such a society. There is an urgent need to further explore how approaches like extensive reading can serve as an enabling factor for learners who may otherwise feel excluded in a context where proficient English and high levels of reading fluency are more crucial than ever.

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