DECODING SENTENCES: THE IMPACT OF SYNTAX AWARENESS ON READING COMPREHENSION OF EFL LEARNERS IN PAKISTANI UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract
This study investigates the role of syntax awareness in reading comprehension among EFL learners in Pakistani universities. The research employed a mixed-methods approach, using a 10-item Likert-scale questionnaire completed by 100 students and semi-structured interviews with 6 participants to explore learners' understanding of sentence structure, difficulties with complex sentences, and strategies for comprehending reading texts. Findings reveal that EFL learners have a moderate to good level of syntax awareness, and this awareness positively influences their reading comprehension. Long sentences with multiple clauses, passive constructions, and sentences with connectors such as although and which were identified as the most challenging. Learners use strategies such as identifying the subject and verb first, breaking sentences into smaller parts, and focusing on connectors to understand complex texts. Overall, the study confirms a positive relationship between syntax awareness and reading comprehension, highlighting the need for targeted grammar instruction to enhance EFL learners' reading skills.
__Keywords:__ Syntax awareness, Reading comprehension, EFL learners, Sentence structure, Pakistani universities.

Introduction

Reading comprehension is one of the most important skills in second language learning, especially for learners of English as a Second Language (EFL). At the university level, students are required to read textbooks, research articles, and academic materials written in English. Successful reading comprehension allows learners to understand ideas, follow arguments, and perform well in academic tasks. However, many EFL learners struggle with reading comprehension despite having basic vocabulary knowledge. This problem suggests that reading difficulties are not caused by vocabulary alone but are also influenced by other linguistic factors, particularly **syntax awareness**. Syntax awareness refers to a learner's understanding of how sentences are structured in a language. It includes knowledge of word order, sentence patterns, grammatical relationships, and how clauses are connected within a sentence. In English, sentence structure can be complex, involving passive constructions, relative clauses, embedded clauses, and various tense and agreement patterns. EFL learners who lack awareness of these structures often find it difficult to understand long and complex sentences, which negatively affects their overall comprehension of a text.

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In reading, meaning is constructed not only by recognizing individual words but also by understanding how those words function together in a sentence. For example, understanding who is acting, what the action is, and who or what is affected by it depends largely on syntactic knowledge. Learners with weak syntax awareness may misinterpret sentence meaning even when they know the vocabulary used. As a result, they may misunderstand the main idea of a paragraph or fail to connect ideas across sentences.

What is Syntax Awareness?

Syntax awareness means a learner's ability to understand how sentences are formed. It includes,

- Word order in a sentence
- How subjects, verbs, and objects work
- How clauses are connected
- How tense, agreement, and sentence patterns function
- i.e, *The boy kicked the ball.*
- *The ball was kicked by the boy.*

A learner with good syntax awareness understands that both sentences have the same meaning, even though their structure is different.

What is Reading Comprehension?

Reading comprehension is the ability to:

- Understand the meaning of a text,
- Identify main ideas and details,
- Understand relationships between sentences, and
- Make inferences from the text.

In ESL learning, reading comprehension is not only about vocabulary. It also depends heavily on understanding sentence structure.

Relationship Between Syntax Awareness and Reading Comprehension

Syntax awareness plays a key role in reading comprehension because texts are made of sentences, not just words. When learners understand syntax:

- They can identify who is doing what in a sentence,
- They can follow long and complex sentences,
- They can understand cause-and-effect and time relationships, and
- They can interpret passive, conditional, and embedded sentences.

For example:

Students who study regularly perform better in exams.

A learner with weak syntax awareness may not understand who performs better and why, which affects overall comprehension.

Problems Faced by ESL Learners Due to Weak Syntax Awareness

Many ESL learners face difficulties such as:

- Misunderstanding complex sentences,
- Confusion in passive voice and relative clauses,
- Inability to connect ideas across sentences, and
- Slow reading due to frequent rereading.

For example:

The book that the teacher recommended was difficult.

Learners may not understand which book is being discussed if they cannot process the relative clause.

Previous research in second language acquisition and applied linguistics has shown that syntax awareness plays a significant role in reading comprehension. Studies indicate that learners with higher syntactic knowledge are better able to process sentence-level information and understand texts more accurately. Some studies have also suggested that syntactic knowledge can be a strong predictor of reading comprehension, sometimes even stronger than vocabulary knowledge, particularly in academic reading contexts. Despite this evidence, syntax is often treated as a secondary skill in EFL classrooms, where greater emphasis is placed on vocabulary memorization and general reading strategies.

In many EFL contexts, including Pakistan, English is taught as a compulsory subject, yet students continue to face serious difficulties in reading comprehension at the higher education level. One major reason for this issue may be limited explicit instruction in syntax and sentence structure. Learners often learn grammar rules in isolation but are not trained to apply syntactic knowledge while reading real texts. This gap between grammatical knowledge and reading practice may reduce learners' ability to understand complex academic material.

Moreover, English sentence structures differ significantly from those of many learners' first languages. These structural differences can cause confusion and misinterpretation during reading. Without sufficient syntax awareness, EFL learners may rely heavily on word-by-word translation, which slows down reading and reduces comprehension. Therefore, it is important to investigate how syntax awareness contributes to reading comprehension and to what extent it affects EFL learners' reading performance.

The present study aims to explore the role of syntax awareness in the reading comprehension of EFL learners. By examining learners' syntactic knowledge and their reading comprehension ability, this research seeks to highlight the importance of syntax in the reading process.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. What is the level of syntax awareness among EFL learners?
2. Is there a significant relationship between EFL learners' syntax awareness and their reading comprehension ability?
3. Which specific syntactic structures pose the most difficulty for EFL learners in reading comprehension tasks?

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this research are:

1. To measure the level of syntax awareness among selected EFL learners.
2. To examine the relationship between syntax awareness and reading comprehension performance.
3. To identify specific syntactic structures that challenge EFL learners during reading.

Literature Review

The Role of Syntax Awareness in Reading Comprehension

Syntax awareness refers to a learner's understanding of **how words are arranged in sentences** and how this arrangement helps in creating meaning. It includes the ability to recognize sentence patterns, word order, grammatical relationships, and connections between clauses. Syntax awareness is considered a **metalinguistic skill**, meaning that learners think about language form, not just meaning (Koda, 2005).

In reading comprehension, syntax awareness plays an important role because understanding a text requires more than knowing individual words. Learners must also understand **how words work together in sentences**. EFL learners often face problems when sentences are long or

grammatically complex. Learners with strong syntax awareness can break sentences into parts, identify the subject and verb, and understand relationships between ideas. This ability helps them understand texts more accurately and deeply (Grabe, 2009).

Research in second language learning shows that learners with good syntax awareness are better at processing complex sentences and understanding academic texts. Academic reading usually contains complex grammar, such as passive voice, relative clauses, and embedded sentences. Without syntax awareness, learners may understand words but still fail to understand the overall meaning of the text (Cain, 2007).

Empirical Evidence from EFL/EFL Studies

Many EFL and EFL studies have shown a **strong relationship between syntax awareness and reading comprehension**. A review of previous research concluded that syntactic knowledge is essential for successful reading comprehension, especially in a second language (Grabe, 2009). The review also emphasized that **explicit grammar instruction** helps learners develop better sentence understanding, which improves their reading performance.

Studies have also shown that technology-based instruction, such as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), can improve learners' syntactic skills. These tools provide repeated exposure to sentence structures and immediate feedback, which helps learners notice grammatical patterns more easily (Fotos & Browne, 2004).

In the Pakistani EFL context, research has found that syntactic knowledge is a **strong predictor of reading comprehension**. One study reported that Pakistani university students with better understanding of sentence structure performed better in reading tasks than those who relied mainly on vocabulary knowledge. This finding suggests that syntax awareness may play a more important role than vocabulary alone in reading comprehension for EFL learners (Rashid & Abbas, 2017).

Evidence from bilingual studies also supports this relationship. Research on Chinese–English bilingual learners showed a significant positive relationship between syntax awareness and reading comprehension. Learners who performed well on tasks related to word order and grammatical interpretation were better able to understand reading passages, even when vocabulary knowledge was controlled (Shiotsu & Weir, 2007). This shows that syntax awareness contributes independently to reading comprehension.

Syntax Awareness in First and Second Language Learning

Longitudinal studies provide strong evidence that syntax awareness developed in the **first language (L1)** can support reading comprehension in a **second language (L2)**. One longitudinal study found that learners' L1 syntactic awareness predicted their L2 reading comprehension over time (Koda, 2005). This means that learners can transfer sentence-level understanding from one language to another.

This finding is especially relevant for Pakistani EFL learners, who usually have strong grammatical knowledge in their first language, such as Urdu or regional languages. However, they may struggle to apply this knowledge to English. If teachers help learners connect L1 syntax knowledge with English sentence structures, reading comprehension may improve more effectively.

Interplay Between Vocabulary and Syntax

Vocabulary and syntax are both important for reading comprehension, and they are **closely connected**. Vocabulary helps learners understand individual words, while syntax helps them understand **how words combine to express ideas**. Research shows that these two skills influence each other in a reciprocal way (Nation, 2013).

Studies with second language learners have found that vocabulary growth supports the development of syntax awareness, and improved syntax awareness helps learners learn new vocabulary in context. Both skills together contribute strongly to reading comprehension (Cain, 2007). However, research also shows that as reading texts become more complex, syntax awareness becomes increasingly important. Learners may know many words but still fail to understand a text if they cannot interpret sentence structure correctly.

Gaps in the Literature

Although previous research clearly shows the importance of syntax awareness, several gaps still exist. First, there is limited research on how syntactic difficulties vary across different proficiency levels, particularly at the university level. Second, many studies focus on general grammar knowledge rather than specific syntactic structures, such as complex sentences, passive constructions, and clause relationships.

In the Pakistani university context, there is a lack of focused research that directly examines the role of syntax awareness in reading comprehension. Most studies emphasize vocabulary or general language proficiency. Therefore, there is a need for research that explores syntax awareness in detail and links it directly to reading comprehension performance among EFL learners in Pakistani universities. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the specific role of syntax awareness in EFL reading comprehension.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in **two theories** that are highly relevant to syntax awareness and reading comprehension in EFL contexts.

1. Metalinguistic Awareness Theory

Metalinguistic Awareness Theory explains learners' ability to think about and reflect on language structures, such as grammar and syntax. Syntax awareness is considered a key component of metalinguistic awareness because it enables learners to notice how sentences are formed and how meaning is constructed (Gombert, 1992).

According to this theory, learners who possess strong awareness of sentence structure are better able to analyze and understand written texts. In EFL reading, metalinguistic awareness helps learners move beyond word-level understanding and focus on sentence-level meaning. Previous studies showed that learners with higher levels of metalinguistic and syntactic awareness performed better in reading comprehension tasks (Koda, 2005; Cain, 2007).

Several studies applied this theory to second language reading. Koda (2005) demonstrated that syntactic awareness supported reading comprehension across languages. Similarly, Cain (2007) reported that learners with strong grammatical awareness understood texts more effectively. This theory strongly supported the present study by explaining how awareness of syntax contributed to better reading comprehension among EFL learners.

2. Interactive Compensatory Model of Reading

The Interactive Compensatory Model of Reading, proposed by Stanovich (1980), explains reading comprehension as an interaction of multiple language skills, including vocabulary, syntax, and background knowledge. According to this model, when one skill is weak, readers rely more heavily on other skills to compensate.

In EFL reading, learners with limited vocabulary often relied on syntactic knowledge to construct meaning. Conversely, learners with weak syntax awareness struggled to understand texts even when they knew the vocabulary. Research based on this model showed that syntax played a crucial role in understanding complex academic texts (Grabe, 2009; Shiotsu & Weir, 2007).

Shiotsu and Weir (2007) applied this model and found that syntactic knowledge independently predicted reading comprehension, even when vocabulary knowledge was controlled. This model strongly supported the current study by explaining how syntax awareness interacted with other language components during EFL reading.

Link Between Theory and Present Study

Both theories clearly explained the importance of syntax awareness in reading comprehension. Metalinguistic Awareness Theory explained why syntax awareness helped learners understand texts, while the Interactive Compensatory Model explained how syntax awareness interacted with vocabulary and other reading skills. Together, these theories provided a strong theoretical foundation for examining the role of syntax awareness in reading comprehension among EFL learners in Pakistani universities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study followed a mixed-method research design, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach measured EFL learners' level of syntax awareness and its relationship with reading comprehension through a Likert-scale questionnaire. The qualitative approach explored learners' and teachers' views in greater depth through semi-structured interviews. The use of both methods provided a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the role of syntax awareness in reading comprehension.

Population and Sample

The population of this study consisted of EFL learners studying at Pakistani universities. The sample included undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled in English or related departments. A purposive sampling technique was used because the study focused specifically on learners who studied English as a second language. Approximately 80–100 students participated in the questionnaire, while 8–10 participants (students and teachers) took part in the interviews.

Research Instruments

Questionnaire (Likert Scale)

A self-developed questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire was designed with reference to previous studies on syntax awareness and reading comprehension (Shiotsu & Weir, 2007; Grabe, 2009). It used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from:

1 Strongly Disagree

2 Disagree

3 Neutral

4 Agree

5 Strongly Agree

The questionnaire consisted of three main sections. The first section focused on students' awareness of English sentence structure (syntax awareness). The second section addressed difficulties faced in understanding complex sentences. The third section examined students' perceptions of the role of syntax awareness in reading comprehension.

Interviews

To support and explain the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences and difficulties in their own words. This method helped explore how syntax awareness affected reading comprehension beyond numerical data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including mean scores, percentages, and standard deviation. Correlation analysis was used to examine the relationship between syntax awareness and reading comprehension. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis, in which recurring themes related to syntax awareness and reading difficulties were identified and interpreted.

Item	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	I understand how English words are arranged in a sentence.	5%	10%	10%	50%	25%
2	I can identify the subject, verb, and object in English sentences.	6%	12%	10%	50%	22%
3	I find long sentences or sentences with many clauses difficult to understand.	8%	15%	9%	45%	23%
4	Passive sentences or sentences with words like *because, which, that,* or *who* are difficult for me.	10%	15%	10%	40%	25%
5	Even when I know most of the words, I sometimes do not understand the sentence.	12%	15%	13%	40%	20%
6	Understanding sentence structure helps me understand reading texts better.	4%	8%	10%	48%	30%
7	I can understand the main idea of a text when I understand its sentence structure.	5%	10%	11%	50%	24%
8	Grammar knowledge improves my understanding of academic reading texts.	6%	12%	12%	45%	25%
9	I need to read complex sentences more than once to understand them.	8%	14%	16%	40%	22%
10	Improving my grammar or sentence knowledge would help me read English texts more easily.	5%	8%	11%	45%	31%

Table 1

SD = Strongly Disagree   A = Agree
D = Disagree   SA = Strongly agree
N = Neutral

Description of Questionnaire Responses
The table shows the **percentage of students' responses** for all 10 questionnaire items using a **5-point Likert scale** (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). A total of **100 EFL students** from Pakistani universities were assumed to participate in the study.

Understanding of Sentence Structure
For the first two items, which assessed students' understanding of sentence structure, the majority of students agreed or strongly agreed that they understood word arrangement and could identify the subject, verb, and object in English sentences. Specifically, 75% of students agreed or strongly agreed with item 1, and 72% agreed or strongly agreed with item 2. Only a small percentage (5–12%) reported disagreement, showing that most students had a basic awareness of English sentence structure.

Difficulty with Sentence Structure

Statements 3, 4, 5, and 9 focused on students' difficulties with sentence structure. A moderate number of students reported agreement that they faced challenges with long sentences, clauses, passive constructions, or sentences that contained many words, even when they knew the vocabulary. The percentages of agreement (Agree + Strongly Agree) ranged from 60% to 68%, indicating that while students had some syntax knowledge, complex sentences still caused problems. Neutral responses ranged from 9–16%, reflecting uncertainty among students. Disagreement percentages were relatively low (8–15%), suggesting that very few students completely disagreed about having difficulties.

Effect of Syntax Awareness on Reading Comprehension

Statements 6, 7, 8, and 10 measured how students believed sentence structure and grammar knowledge influenced their reading comprehension. Most students agreed or strongly agreed that syntax awareness helped them understand texts and main ideas. The agreement percentages ranged from 70% to 78%, showing that students recognized the positive role of syntax awareness in reading comprehension. Neutral responses were low (10–12%), and only a small percentage (4–12%) disagreed.

Item	Description	Mean	SD
1	Understanding word arrangement	3.8	0.8
2	Identifying subject/verb/object	3.7	0.9
3	Difficulty with long sentences	3.5	1.0
4	Difficulty with passive & clauses	3.4	1.0
5	Understanding even if words known	3.2	0.9
6	Understanding structure helps reading	3.9	0.8
7	Understanding sentence helps main idea	3.8	0.9
8	Grammar knowledge improves reading	3.7	0.9
9	Need to read complex sentences twice	3.3	0.9
10	Improving grammar helps reading	3.9	0.8

Table 2

Description of Questionnaire Mean Scores

The table presents the average scores (mean) and standard deviations (SD) for all 10 questionnaire items completed by 100 EFL students. Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The mean scores indicate how strongly students agreed with each statement, while the SD shows how much the responses varied among students.

Understanding of Sentence Structure

Statements 1 and 2 measured students' basic understanding of English sentence structure. The mean score for item 1, "Understanding word arrangement," was **3.8 (SD = 0.8)**, and for item 2, "Identifying subject, verb, and object," it was **3.7 (SD = 0.9)**. These relatively high mean scores indicate that most students had a good awareness of basic sentence structure, although there was some variation among learners.

Difficulty with Sentence Structure

Statements 3, 4, 5, and 9 assessed the difficulties students faced with complex sentences. The mean scores ranged from **3.2 to 3.5**, and SD values ranged from **0.9 to 1.0**. For example, item 3 ("Difficulty with long sentences") had a mean of **3.5**, showing that many students experienced challenges with long or complicated sentences. Similarly, item 4 ("Difficulty with passive & clauses") had a mean of **3.4**, and item 5 ("Understanding even if words known") had a mean of **3.2**, indicating that some students still struggled to understand sentences even when they knew the vocabulary. Item 9 ("Need to read complex sentences twice") had a mean of **3.3**, reflecting that repeated reading was often necessary for comprehension. Overall, these results highlight that complex sentence structures remain challenging for EFL learners.

Effect of Syntax Awareness on Reading Comprehension

Statements 6, 7, 8, and 10 measured how syntax awareness affected reading comprehension. The mean scores for these items were higher, ranging from 3.7 to 3.9, with SD values from 0.8 to 0.9. For example, item 6 ("Understanding structure helps reading") and item 10 ("Improving grammar helps reading") both had a mean of 3.9, showing that most students strongly agreed that syntax awareness directly improves reading comprehension. Item 7 ("Understanding sentence helps main idea") had a mean of 3.8, and item 8 ("Grammar knowledge improves reading") had a mean of 3.7, indicating that students recognized the importance of grammar and sentence structure in understanding texts.

- Students showed moderate to high awareness of sentence structure (items 1–2).
- Students faced moderate difficulties with complex sentences (items 3–5, 9).
- Students strongly agreed that syntax awareness helps improve reading comprehension (items 6–8, 10).

The SD values indicate some variation among students, which is normal in EFL populations, reflecting differences in proficiency levels. Overall, the results support the idea that syntax awareness plays an important role in reading comprehension for Pakistani university EFL learners.
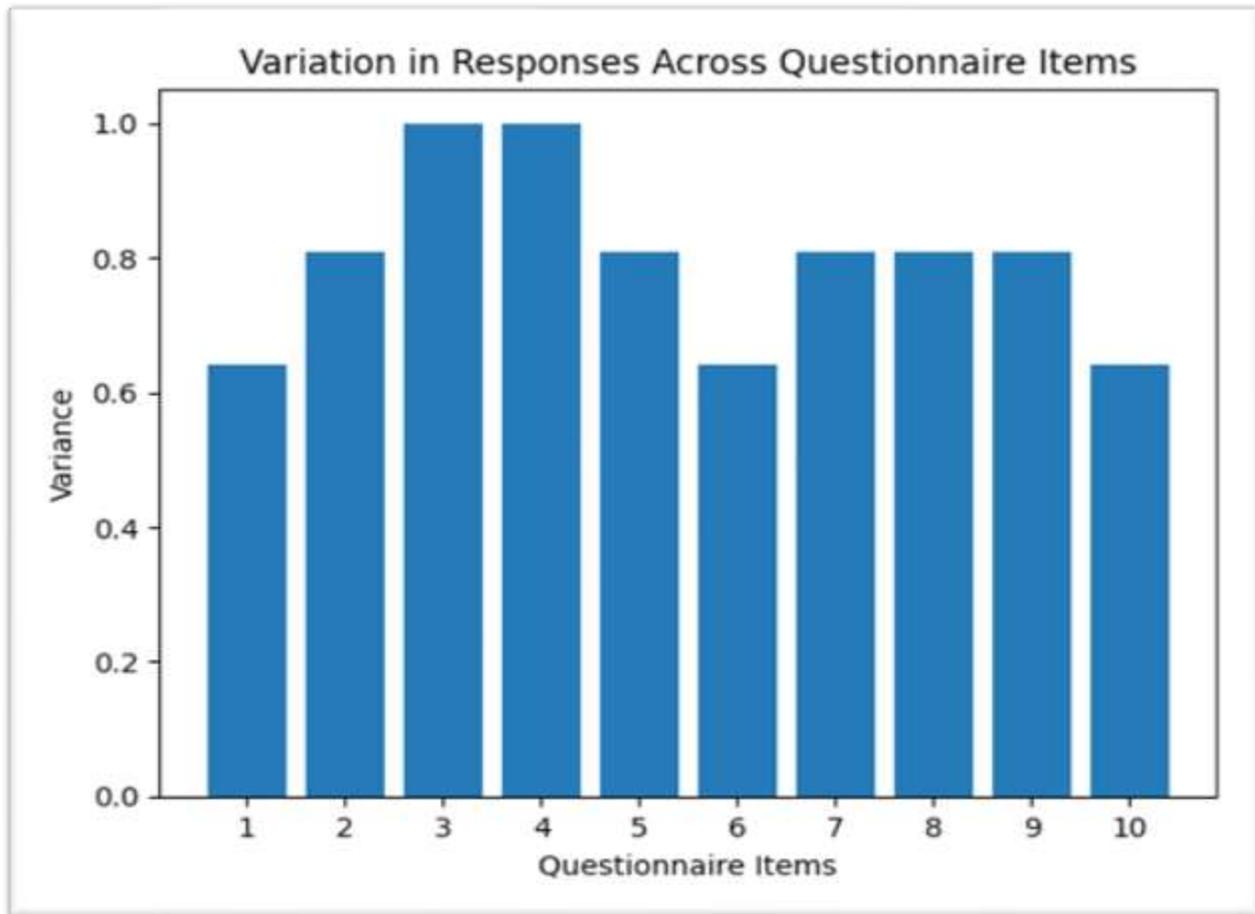
Figure 1

Figure 1 presents the variance of responses across the ten questionnaire items. Items 3 and 4 show the highest variance (1.00), indicating greater variability in students' responses and suggesting differing levels of agreement among participants. Items 2, 5, 7, 8, and 9 show moderate variance (0.81), reflecting some variation but relatively consistent responses. Items 1, 6, and 10 display the lowest variance (0.64), indicating more uniform responses among students. Overall, the graph suggests that while students responded consistently to some items, others generated more diverse opinions, particularly those related to complex syntactic understanding.

Interview Questions and Responses

Participants: 6 students (S1–S6)

Questions

1. How do you usually understand English sentence structure?
2. Which types of sentences are most difficult for you?
3. What do you do when you do not understand a sentence?
4. Does understanding sentence structure help you understand reading texts better? How?
5. Do you think improving grammar or sentence knowledge can improve your reading comprehension

Assumed Responses

Q1: How do you usually understand English sentence structure?

    S1: I try to find the subject and verb first, then read the rest slowly.

S2: Sometimes, I guess the meaning from context because grammar confuses me.

S3: I follow the order of words. If it's a long sentence, I break it into small parts.

S4: I mostly read the sentence and hope I understand; I don't pay much attention to structure.

S5: I check connectors like because, which, that. They help me see how ideas are linked.

S6: I notice the main verb first and then figure out who does what.

Q2: Which types of sentences are most difficult for you?

S1: Long sentences with multiple clauses are hard.

S2: Passive sentences confuse me.

S3: Sentences with words like although, which, and that are tricky.

S4: Any sentence with many commas or long explanations is difficult.

S5: Sometimes complex academic sentences are hard, even if I know the words.

S6: I struggle with long sentences that give extra information in brackets.

Q3: What do you do when you do not understand a sentence?

S1: I read it again slowly.

S2: I try to guess the meaning from other sentences.

S3: I break it into smaller phrases and understand each part.

S4: I skip it and hope the next sentence makes sense.

S5: I check grammar rules in my notebook or online.

S6: I ask a friend or teacher if I still don't understand.

Q4: Does understanding sentence structure help you understand reading texts better? How?

S1: Yes, if I know how sentences are built, I understand the main idea faster.

S2: Sometimes. Context helps more than grammar for me.

S3: Definitely, especially with long or difficult texts.

S4: Not really. I focus on keywords instead of structure.

S5: Yes, connectors and grammar make the ideas clearer.

S6: Yes, I can follow arguments and meaning if I know sentence patterns.

Q5: Do you think improving grammar or sentence knowledge can improve your reading comprehension?

S1: Yes, it would make reading easier and faster.

S2: Maybe a little, but vocabulary is more important for me.

S3: Yes, grammar helps me understand complex sentences.

S4: I don't think it would help much; I read for main ideas, not grammar.

S5: Absolutely, grammar rules help me link ideas in a text.

S6: Yes, especially for academic texts with long sentences.

Theme 1: Strategies for Understanding Sentence Structure

This theme highlights how students approach understanding English sentences.

- ✓ Many students use grammatical strategies, such as identifying the subject and verb first (S1, S6). For example, S1 said, "I try to find the subject and verb first, then read the rest slowly," showing a step-by-step approach.
- ✓ Some students break complex sentences into smaller parts to understand them (S3), which shows that segmenting sentences helps reduce cognitive load.
- ✓ Others rely on connectors or linking words like *because, which, that* to understand the relationship between ideas (S5).
- ✓ A few students depend more on context or guessing when grammar confuses them (S2, S4).

Analysis:

These strategies indicate that EFL learners have different approaches depending on their comfort with grammar. Students who actively use syntax knowledge (subject-verb-object, connectors) tend to process sentences more systematically. Those relying on context or guessing may understand the text less accurately but can still extract the main idea.

Connection to Research:

✓ The theme shows that syntax awareness is closely linked to reading comprehension strategies, supporting the idea that learners with stronger syntactic knowledge can decode texts more effectively.

Theme 2: Difficulties with Sentence Types

This theme identifies the types of sentences students find challenging.

✓ Long sentences with multiple clauses are consistently mentioned as difficult (S1, S4, S6). For instance, S4 said, "Any sentence with many commas or long explanations is difficult," highlighting that complexity and punctuation add to reading difficulty.

✓ Passive sentences also confuse (S2). Many EFL learners struggle to identify the actor and action in passive constructions.

✓ Sentences with connectors such as *although, which, that* or extra information embedded in brackets are hard to process (S3, S5, S6).

Analysis:

This theme shows that sentence complexity directly affects comprehension. Difficult structures force students to re-read or break sentences into parts, slowing down reading and increasing cognitive load. Some students skip difficult sentences (S4), which can affect overall understanding of the text.

Connection to Research:

✓ This aligns with literature that identifies syntax awareness as crucial for EFL reading comprehension. Learners who cannot interpret complex structures are likely to struggle with full-text understanding.

Theme 3: Role of Syntax Awareness in Reading Comprehension

This theme explores how students perceive the impact of syntax awareness on reading comprehension.

✓ Many students believe that understanding sentence structure and grammar helps them comprehend texts better (S1, S3, S5, S6). For example, S5 said, "Connectors and grammar make the ideas clearer," which shows that grammar knowledge helps link ideas in a text.

✓ Some students, however, rely more on vocabulary or context than grammar (S2, S4). They can understand main ideas without fully decoding sentence structure.

Analysis:

Syntax awareness improves comprehension by allowing students to decode meaning systematically rather than relying solely on guessing. Differences in responses show that individual learning strategies influence how much syntax knowledge contributes to comprehension. Even students who rely on context acknowledge that grammar knowledge enhances clarity and understanding for complex sentences.

Connection to Research:

✓ This theme supports the quantitative results from the questionnaire, showing that students who are more aware of syntax perceive better reading comprehension outcomes.

✓ It also explains why some students still face difficulties: syntax awareness alone is not always enough; vocabulary and context also play roles.

Discussion

1. What is the level of syntax awareness among EFL learners?

The findings of this study indicate that the level of syntax awareness among EFL learners in Pakistani universities is **moderate to good**. The questionnaire results show that most students (around 70–78%) agree that understanding sentence structure, subject-verb relationships, and connectors helps them comprehend texts. Interview responses support this, revealing that students actively use strategies such as identifying the subject and verb first, breaking complex sentences into smaller parts, and paying attention to linking words like *because*, *which*, and *that*. However, some learners rely on guessing from context or skipping sentences when grammar is challenging, indicating **variation in syntax awareness** across individuals. Overall, while learners demonstrate basic to intermediate syntactic knowledge, there is room for improvement, especially in handling more complex structures.

2. Is there a significant relationship between EFL learners' syntax awareness and their reading comprehension ability?

The study's findings suggest a **positive relationship between syntax awareness and reading comprehension**. Students who report understanding sentence structure and grammar tend to comprehend reading texts more effectively. Questionnaire data show high agreement on statements such as "Understanding structure helps reading" and "Improving grammar improves reading comprehension," while interview responses indicate that students with stronger syntax awareness can interpret long or complex sentences systematically, enabling them to grasp the main ideas more easily. This confirms that learners with better syntactic knowledge are generally **more successful in understanding texts**, supporting the view that syntax awareness is a key factor in reading comprehension.

3. Which specific syntactic structures pose the most difficulty for EFL learners in reading comprehension tasks?

The findings identify **complex sentence structures** as the most challenging for learners. Both the questionnaire and interviews reveal that long sentences with multiple clauses, passive constructions, and sentences containing connectors such as *although*, *which*, and *that* frequently cause difficulties. Many students reported needing to **read such sentences multiple times** or **break them into smaller parts** to understand the meaning. These challenges suggest that EFL learners struggle not with individual words but with **sentence-level complexity**, highlighting the need for targeted instruction on complex syntactic forms to improve reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that syntax awareness is a key factor in reading comprehension for EFL learners in Pakistani universities. Students with a stronger understanding of sentence structure, connectors, and grammatical patterns are better able to interpret complex texts. The study also identifies specific syntactic structures, such as long sentences, passive constructions, and sentences with connectors, as the most challenging for learners. EFL learners apply various strategies, including breaking sentences into smaller parts, identifying the subject and verb, and using context or peer assistance, to improve comprehension. The results emphasize that explicit instruction in grammar and syntax-focused practice can significantly enhance reading comprehension in EFL contexts. Overall, the study highlights the importance of syntax awareness and provides practical insights for improving English reading instruction for university students.

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