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DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT OF READING DIFFICULTIES AMONG SAUDI MALE EFL LEARNERS ENROLLED IN A READING AND VOCABULARY COURSE

AVALIAÇÃO DIAGNÓSTICA DAS DIFICULDADES DE LEITURA ENTRE APRENDIZES SAUDITAS DO SEXO MASCULINO DE INGLÊS COMO LÍNGUA ESTRANGEIRA (EFL) MATRICULADOS EM UM CURSO DE LEITURA E VOCABULÁRIO

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether four reading tasks could be used as tools to diagnose Saudi male EFL readers' difficulties. The study involved 37 intermediate-level students studying a Reading and Building Vocabulary course at a Saudi university. The participants completed four tasks that measured word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text reading comprehension. The results of the study showed that the students' performance varied across the four diagnostic tasks. Word recognition received the highest score (M = 78.64, SD = 11.42), followed by sentence comprehension (M = 70.18, SD = 13.07). Scores were lower in text reading comprehension (M = 66.32, SD = 14.85), while vocabulary knowledge received the lowest score (M = 61.47, SD = 15.26). The cut-off point of 25th percentile used in this study revealed that nine students were classified as weak readers. The results provide insightful value to the four diagnostic tasks. Rather than only showing general reading performance, the tasks helped distinguish weak readers and clarify the kinds of problems they faced. The findings suggest that intermediate reading courses should address more than one area of reading. Greater attention should be given to vocabulary development, sentence-level understanding, and overall text comprehension so that instruction can respond more closely to learners' individual difficulties.

Keywords: diagnostic assessment, reading difficulties, Saudi EFL learners, vocabulary knowledge, word recognition, sentence comprehension, reading comprehension.

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RESUMO

Este estudo investigou se quatro tarefas de leitura poderiam ser utilizadas como instrumentos para diagnosticar as dificuldades de leitores sauditas do sexo masculino que aprendem inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL). O estudo envolveu 37 estudantes de nível intermediário matriculados em um curso de Leitura e Desenvolvimento do Vocabulário em uma universidade saudita. Os participantes realizaram quatro tarefas que avaliaram o reconhecimento de palavras, o conhecimento de vocabulário, a compreensão de sentenças e a compreensão de textos escritos. Os resultados do estudo mostraram que o desempenho dos estudantes variou entre as quatro tarefas diagnósticas. O reconhecimento de palavras apresentou a maior pontuação (M = 78,64; DP = 11,42), seguido pela compreensão de sentenças (M = 70,18; DP = 13,07). As pontuações foram mais baixas na compreensão de textos (M = 66,32; DP = 14,85), enquanto o conhecimento de vocabulário apresentou a menor pontuação (M = 61,47; DP = 15,26). O ponto de corte correspondente ao 25º percentil, utilizado neste estudo, revelou que nove estudantes foram classificados como leitores com dificuldades. Os resultados demonstram a relevância das quatro tarefas diagnósticas. Em vez de apenas indicar o desempenho geral em leitura, as tarefas ajudaram a identificar os leitores com dificuldades e a esclarecer os tipos de problemas que eles enfrentavam. Os resultados sugerem que os cursos de leitura de nível intermediário devem abordar mais de uma dimensão da leitura. Maior atenção deve ser dada ao desenvolvimento do vocabulário, à compreensão no nível da sentença e à compreensão global de textos, de modo que o ensino possa responder de maneira mais adequada às dificuldades individuais dos aprendizes.

Palavras-chave: avaliação diagnóstica, dificuldades de leitura, aprendizes sauditas de inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL), conhecimento de vocabulário, reconhecimento de palavras, compreensão de sentenças, compreensão leitora.

1. Introduction

Reading is a core skill in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning because it gives learners access to approach language features. For EFL students, reading at university is not usually a passive activity. A reading lesson may begin before class, as students are expected to look over the material and think about the topic in advance. In class, they are usually asked to identify key ideas, talk about the content, respond to comprehension questions, and apply new words in suitable situations. Because of these different tasks, reading can be both valuable and challenging for many EFL students.

Reading problems are not always attributed to weakness of learners. The nature of reading requires several skills to be used at the same time. Although some students may have good vocabulary knowledge, they may find it difficult to follow the development of ideas across the text. Therefore, reading difficulty is better understood by looking at its main components, including word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text comprehension because,

according to Grabe and Stoller, 2011 and Grabe, 2022, reading involves both lower-level language processing and higher-level construction of meaning.

In the Saudi EFL context, previous research has shown that learners often face difficulties with vocabulary items, vocabulary knowledge, reading fluency, text meaning, pronunciation, comprehension, and limited independent reading practice (Alotaibi, 2022; Al Qunayeer, 2021; Ashraf, 2023). These findings are useful. However, rather than treating reading weakness as one general problem, classroom-based diagnostic work is needed to identify the specific sources of learners' reading difficulties and explain them more clearly.

1.1 Research Problem

The problem addressed in this study is clearly identifying the source of some intermediate-level Saudi EFL learners' difficulties in reading. Although in many reading courses, students' reading performance is assessed throughout the semester through quizzes, comprehension questions, or exam scores. These assessment tools can show the overall level of a student, but they may not clearly pinpoint the source of the weakness. The reading exams, for example, do not specify if the weakness is related to word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, or full-text comprehension.

for this reason, diagnostic assessment is useful because it provides in-depth information about learners' strengths and weaknesses. diagnosis in second and foreign language assessment is supported by other researchers. For example, Alderson, Brunfaut, and Harding (2015) believe that diagnosis help identify the difficulties that EFL learners. Similarly, Harding, Alderson, and Brunfaut (2015) emphasize reading instruction is enhanced by diagnostic assessment. However, fewer studies have applied diagnostic approach to Saudi EFL learners in an actual reading and vocabulary courses.

1.2 Research Significance

This study is significant because it attempts to understand EFL reading difficulties from a practical point of view. The study asses EFL reading learners beyond their academic scores; the study uses four separate diagnostic tasks to examine different reading components. the study is also significant because it offers help to identify whether learners need support with any of these diagnostic tasks: word recognition, vocabulary, sentence-level understanding, or text comprehension.

1.3 Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1 What reading difficulties are identified among Saudi male EFL learners enrolled in a Reading and Building Vocabulary course?
2 To what extent can word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text reading comprehension tasks identify weak readers?
3 Which diagnostic task shows the greatest variation among learners' reading performance?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Reading as a Multi-Level Process

EFL Reading comprehension implies using several connected skills. For example, in order to understand the meaning of the text, learners need to control basic tasks, such as vocabulary knowledge, word recognition, and sentence patterns. these basic tasks help learner perform deeper understanding of the text, such as linking ideas and building a clearer representation of the text. Grabe and Stoller, (2011) and Grabe, (2022), propose a distinction between levels of reading processes. They argue that basic tasks are necessary and they provide the

foundation for understanding the meaning, that allows readers to process and organize those meanings into a coherent overall understanding.

This distinction is important for research on reading difficulties. When learners receive low scores in reading, the score itself does not explain which reading process level is more problematic to learners. One learner may struggle because of limited vocabulary, while another may know the words but fail to develop the main idea of the passage. other learners may fail to interpret sentence relationships. some learners may just understand the surface meaning and fail to understand implied meaning. Alderson (2000) argues that reading assessment should include the structural components of the reading processes in order to diagnose the reading level rather than focusing one general score.

This view is supported by empirical evidence. For example, Kate Cain and Jane Oakhill (2006) found that learners with different reading skills often showed different reading comprehension because of weaknesses in higher-level processes, including inference making, comprehension monitoring, and linking between sentences Their findings demonstrate that a single comprehension score cannot reveal which specific reading process difficulty they are facing. In his conclusion, he highlighting the need for diagnostic assessment of reading levels and processes.

2.2 Vocabulary Knowledge and Reading Comprehension

Without enough vocabulary knowledge, learners may lose the meaning of key sentences and fail to follow the main idea of a passage. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge has repeatedly been identified as a major factor in reading comprehension. Earlier, Wilkins (1972) states, "Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." McCarthy (1990) confirms that no meaningful communication is possible without words. Schmitt (2000) and Nation (2001) emphasize the importance of vocabulary knowledge to reading comprehension because words carry much of the meaning learners need in order to understand written language.

These studies agree that vocabulary is central to language development and to reading comprehension, in particular. However, they view vocabulary from different perspectives. Some treat vocabulary as a predictor of language proficiency, while others link vocabulary to reading performance. The present study uses this literature to treating vocabulary knowledge as a separate diagnostic instrument. This allows to directly identify vocabulary weakness rather than using reading scores of exams.

2.3 Word Recognition and Lower-Level Reading Skills

Reading comprehension depends basically on word recognition. The challenge that EFL learners experience with identifying written forms and the less attention they bring to reading comprehension refers partially to weakness of word recognition. Grabe and Stoller (2011) believe that, although the importance of word recognition its effect is partial because it does not guarantee full comprehension, but it supports the reading process by enhancing lower-level processing, which is significant to further comprehension.

Yang's (2021) diagnostic study is useful for the present research because it shows how separate diagnostic instruments can reveal different sources of reading difficulty. In order to identify weak readers and locate individual reading problems, Yang examined low-level Chinese as second language learners through the use of three diagnostic tools: word reading, word segmentation, and text reading tasks. However, the language context differs from the present study. Word segmentation is especially important in Chinese because words are not separated by spaces in the same way as they are in English. Since Saudi EFL learners can already see word boundaries in English, vocabulary knowledge and sentence comprehension are more relevant diagnostic areas than word segmentation.

2.4 Sentence Comprehension as a Diagnostic Area

Sentence comprehension does not depend knowledge of words. It also requires text-level understanding including grammar, word order, reference, connectors, and logical order of structure. This explains why a learner may know the meanings of individual words but still misunderstand the sentence. This is demanding to EFL reading because sentence structures in English may differ from learners' first language structures.

Unlike vocabulary and general reading comprehension that are explicitly demonstrated in classroom discussions and assessment, overall sentence comprehension is and text coherence are neglected and often less visible. Many reading course activities focus on vocabulary and passage questions. Practices that focus on sentence-level and sentence processing help diagnose whether learners' reading problems are caused only by vocabulary limitations or also by difficulty processing meaning at the sentence level.

This view is supported by Juffs and Harrington (2011), who showed that second-language readers may struggle with English sentence comprehension even when vocabulary is not the main problem. Their study suggests that reading difficulty can come from the way learners process grammar, word order, and syntactic relationships within a sentence. Therefore, sentence comprehension should be treated as an important part of EFL reading, because learners need to build meaning from the structure of the sentence, not only from the meanings of separate words.

2.5 Reading Difficulties in the Saudi EFL Context

Research in the Saudi EFL context has commonly reported that learners face challenges in reading comprehension due to limited vocabulary, limited exposure to English, weak fluency, difficulty understanding text meaning, and insufficient independent reading practice (Al-Nujaidi, 2003; Nezami, 2012; Alharbi, 2022; Alotaibi, 2022; Ashraf, 2023). Al Qunayeer (2021) signifies the importance of

developing vocabulary knowledge in Saudi EFL classrooms because learners experience problems with vocabulary breadth and depth, which negatively affect their comprehension.

These studies provide clear evidence about the weakness of vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. However, these studies are related to the issue, but they do not directly address it. They focus on general reading problems or on the relationship between vocabulary and language proficiency level. Understanding the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension does not provide a sufficient diagnostic assessment because learners may understand words but struggle with sentence relationships or passage organization. As a result, the support learners need should vary depending on the nature of comprehension weakness and difficulty.

2.6 Diagnostic Assessment in L2 Reading

In diagnostic assessment, the focus is on specific strengths and weaknesses, which is different from general achievement assessment that measures overall language achievement. This type of assessment helps teacher pedagogically provide specific instruction based on the diagnostic assessment. Alderson et al. (2015) argue that diagnostic assessment should provide detailed information about the nature of learners' language problems. Harding et al. (2015) also emphasize that diagnosis should be connected to learning and teaching, not only measurement.

In reading, the need for diagnostic assessment seems logical because low scores that different learners receive do not reflect same reading problems. two learners may receive similar low reading scores for different reasons. One may struggle mainly with vocabulary, another with sentence comprehension, and another with text-level integration. Yang (2021) demonstrated this diagnostic logic in Chinese L2 reading by using multiple instruments to identify weakness areas and related difficulties. The present study follows the same general principle but adapts the instruments to English EFL reading and to the Saudi university classroom context.

2.7 Research Gap

Previous research has shown that Saudi EFL learners face reading difficulties, especially in vocabulary and comprehension (Al Qunayeer, 2021; Alotaibi, 2022; Ashraf, 2023). Diagnostic assessment research has also shown that separate reading instruments can provide valuable insights on specifying learner weaknesses (Alderson et al., 2015; Harding et al., 2015; Yang, 2021). However, fewer studies have used a classroom-based diagnostic assessment approach to identify the specific sources of reading difficulty among Saudi male EFL learners enrolled in a natural context, namely a reading and vocabulary course.

The present study addresses this gap by examining the applicability of four diagnostic instruments: word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text reading comprehension tasks as diagnostic instruments. These instruments were chosen because they fit the course context of the study, as students were enrolled in the Reading and Building Vocabulary course and regularly prepare passages, study vocabulary, discuss texts, and complete reading quizzes. Reading comprehension, therefore is not treated in this study as one general skill. Instead, it is examined through several connected components. The study moves from basic processes to more complex reading processes. For example, word recognition is used to assess learners' ability to identify English words accurately. Vocabulary knowledge evaluates their understanding of target words from the course passages. Sentence comprehension assesses their ability to construct meaning from sentence structure. Text reading comprehension measures learners' understanding of complete passages. Together, these measures provide a detailed diagnosis of reading performance by assessing distinct but related reading skills.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Diagnostic Instruments

This design was selected because the study aimed to diagnose specific reading difficulties among Saudi male EFL learners and describe their performance across different reading components. The study was descriptive because it reported learners' performance on four diagnostic reading instruments: word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text reading comprehension. The first and second instruments represent lower-level linguistic processing. The third instrument, sentence comprehension represents sentence-level meaning processing and the fourth represents higher-level understanding of connected texts. The diagnostic structure of the study was informed by Yang's (2021) work on diagnostic reading assessment, but the instruments were adapted to suit an English EFL Saudi context.

All four instruments were scored out of 100 to allow comparison across tasks. The instruments were developed using reading passages and vocabulary items appropriate for intermediate-level EFL learners and connected to the content of the Reading and Building Vocabulary course.

Table 1 – Summary of the Diagnostic Instruments

Instrument	Reading component measured	Number of items	Task type	Score
Word recognition	Accurate recognition of English words	40	Oral word reading	100
Vocabulary knowledge	Meaning of target vocabulary	25	Multiple choice, matching, vocabulary in context	100
Sentence comprehension	Sentence meaning and structure	20	Multiple-choice sentence meaning	100
Text reading comprehension	Understanding connected passages	20	Passage comprehension questions	100

3.2 Participants

This study was conducted with a group of 37 Saudi male undergraduate students studying English as a foreign language at Qassim University. The students were taking a reading course offered by the English Department and were between

19 and 26 years old. Since they were in Level 2 of an eight-level English major program and had received about two years of formal English instruction, their proficiency level was identified as pre-intermediate.

Convenience sampling was used to select the participants, as they were accessible to the researcher and were enrolled in a course closely related to the study's focus. They were also appropriate for the study because they shared a similar academic and learning background. All participants studied in the same department, had completed the same intensive English qualifying course, were at the same academic level, and were taking the same reading course.

Table 2 – Participant Demographic Information

Variable	Description
Number of participants	37
Gender	Male
Nationality	Saudi
First language	Arabic
Target language	English
Educational level	Undergraduate
English level	Intermediate
Course	Reading and Building Vocabulary
Age range	19-26 years

3.3 Course Context

The study was conducted in a Reading and Building Vocabulary course. The course aimed to develop students' reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge through repeated engagement with reading passages. Before class, students answered general questions about each assigned passage through Blackboard. They submitted their answers one or two days before class and brought a copy of their answers for class discussion. Students also completed weekly vocabulary quizzes throughout the 14-week term. The quizzes were based on selected words from the reading passages.

3.4 Instruments

Word recognition task consisted of 40 selected words. The words included high-frequency academic words and passage-specific vocabulary. Students read the

words aloud individually. Each correct response received one point. Minor pronunciation differences that did not affect recognition were accepted. Vocabulary Knowledge Task consisted of 25 items, including multiple-choice meaning questions, matching items, and vocabulary-in-context questions. The vocabulary items were selected from words students had studied as part of the weekly course vocabulary preparation. Each correct answer received one point. Sentence Comprehension Task consisted of 20 sentences adapted from the reading passages or written in a similar style related to the context of the passage. Items focused on reference, logical connectors, cause-and-effect relationships, contrast, and grammatical meaning. Each correct answer received one point. Text Reading Comprehension Task consisted of two reading passages appropriate for intermediate-level EFL learners. Each passage was followed by comprehension questions testing main ideas, supporting details, vocabulary in context, reference, inference, and overall understanding. The task included 20 questions and each question received one point."

3.5 Instrument Development and Validity

Establishing content validity was important because diagnostic assessment should provide useful information about specific learner difficulties (Alderson et al., 2015; Harding et al., 2015). The researcher developed the instruments in three stages. First, the course reading passages were reviewed to identify vocabulary items, sentence structures, and comprehension skills that matched the course objectives. Second, items were written for each diagnostic task. Third, the instruments were reviewed by two EFL instructors who were teaching a similar course of reading. The reviewers examined the clarity of instructions, instrument appropriateness and difficulty level.

3.6 Reliability

Internal consistency reliability was calculated for the three written diagnostic tasks. Cronbach's alpha values were used to estimate reliability. The vocabulary knowledge task showed acceptable reliability (α = .82), the sentence comprehension task showed acceptable reliability (α = .79), and the text reading comprehension task showed good reliability (α = .85).

Scoring reliability of the word recognition task was checked through a second-rater scoring. The second EFL instructor independently scored 25% of the recorded responses. Inter-rater agreement indicated a high level of scoring consistency (94%). Any scoring differences were discussed and resolved based on the scoring criteria.

Table 3 – Reliability of the Diagnostic Instruments

Instrument	Reliability method	Reliability value
Word recognition	Inter-rater agreement	94%
Vocabulary knowledge	Cronbach's alpha	.82
Sentence comprehension	Cronbach's alpha	.79
Text reading comprehension	Cronbach's alpha	.85

3.7 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was carried out during the academic term and after students received regular instruction. The four diagnostic tasks were administered during two sessions in order to minimize fatigue. During the first session, students completed the vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text reading comprehension tasks. This session required approximately 60 minutes to complete. Because the word recognition task needed more time and steps, it was administered individually in the second session, during which each student read a list of words aloud while their responses were audio-recorded for subsequent scoring. The individual oral assessment took approximately 4–6 minutes per student.

Table 4 – Data Collection Procedure

Session	Task	Mode	Approximate time
Session 1	Vocabulary knowledge	Written/in class	15 minutes
Session 1	Sentence comprehension	Written/in class	15 minutes
Session 1	Text reading comprehension	Written/in class	30 minutes
Session 2	Word recognition	Oral/individual	4-6 minutes per student

3.8 Scoring and Data Analysis

All four tasks were scored out of 100. Each item in the four tasks was scored as correct or incorrect. Partial marks were not given. In the word recognition task, a score was given for words read correctly, whereas misread, avoided, or unclear words were marked as incorrect. This scoring method was used with all students.

To identify weak readers, the study used the 25th percentile cut-off point based on students' overall diagnostic reading score. The overall diagnostic score was calculated by averaging the four task scores for each participant. Students whose overall diagnostic score fell at or below the 25th percentile were classified as weak readers. This procedure was adapted from Yang's (2021) diagnostic approach.

Students' performance on the diagnostic tasks was examined using descriptive statistical analyses. For each task, the mean, standard deviation, minimum score, maximum score, and score range were calculated. The analysis also included the number and percentage of weak readers. In addition, each student's diagnostic record was reviewed to identify the reading components in which the student experienced the greatest difficulty.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the nature of the diagnostic tasks. They were explicitly informed that the so called "diagnostic tasks" are just names for the pedagogical assessments in order to feel familiar. Students were informed that taking part in the study would not affect their course grades. They were also told that the data would be used only for research purposes. To protect confidentiality, students' names were not included in the

analysis; instead, pseudonyms were used, and the results were reported as group results rather than individual scores.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the four diagnostic reading instruments: word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, a**nd text reading comprehension.** Descriptive statistics are first presented, followed by the identification of weak readers and the diagnostic profiles of those learners.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of the Diagnostic Reading Tasks

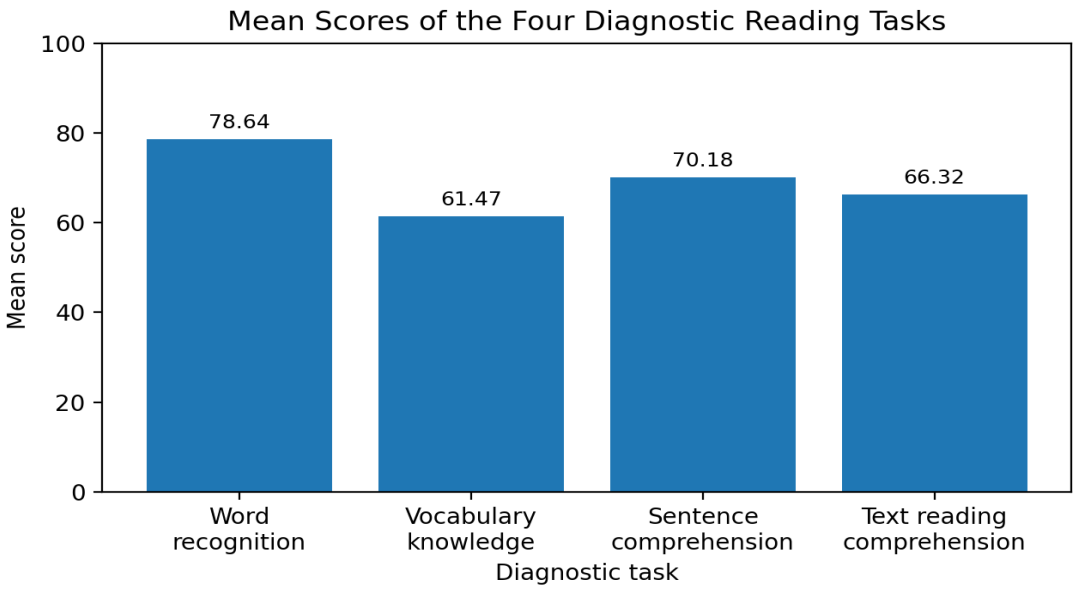
Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics for the four diagnostic reading tasks. All task scores were converted into percentages out of 100.

Table 5 – Descriptive Statistics for the Four Diagnostic Reading Tasks

Diagnostic task	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Word recognition	37	52.50	97.50	78.64	11.42
Vocabulary knowledge	37	32.00	92.00	61.47	15.26
Sentence comprehension	37	40.00	95.00	70.18	13.07
Text reading comprehension	37	35.00	95.00	66.32	14.85
Overall diagnostic score	37	43.38	94.88	69.15	12.08

The overall diagnostic reading score had a mean of 69.15 (SD = 12.08). Word recognition task scored the highest mean score among all the diagnostic tasks (M = 78.64, SD = 11.42). This was followed by sentence comprehension (M = 70.18, SD = 13.07) and text reading comprehension (M = 66.32, SD = 14.85). Vocabulary knowledge scored the lowest mean score (M = 61.47, SD = 15.26) among all the diagnostic tasks.

Figure 1 – Mean Scores of the Four Diagnostic Reading Tasks



4.2 Identification of Weak Readers

A cut-off point was established to identify weak readers based on if their overall diagnostic reading score. First, each learner's overall diagnostic reading score was obtained by averaging their scores across the four diagnostic tasks. The 25th percentile was then selected as the classification point. The 25th percentile score was 59.00. Accordingly, learners with an overall diagnostic score of 59.00 or lower were identified as weak readers.

Table 6 – Weak-Reader Classification Based on the 25th Percentile Cut-Off

Classification	Cut-off criterion	Number of learners	Percentage
Weak readers	Overall score <= 59.00	9	24.32%
Non-weak readers	Overall score > 59.00	28	75.68%
Total	-	37	100%

Table 6 shows that nine learners (24.32%) were classified as weak readers. The remaining 28 learners of the sample (75.68%) scored above the 25th percentile cut-off point. The result was based on each learner's overall diagnostic reading score.

4.3 Performance of Weak Readers across the Diagnostic Tasks

Table 7 presents the mean scores of the weak readers and non-weak readers across the four diagnostic tasks.

Table 7 – Mean Scores of Weak Readers and Non-Weak Readers

Diagnostic task	Weak readers M	Weak readers SD	Non-weak readers M	Non-weak readers SD
Word recognition	64.72	7.81	83.11	8.64
Vocabulary knowledge	42.67	7.55	67.50	11.46
Sentence comprehension	53.89	8.20	75.42	9.65
Text reading comprehension	49.44	8.46	71.75	10.88
Overall diagnostic score	52.68	4.78	74.45	8.16

The weak readers and non-weak readers had the highest mean score in word recognition (M = 64.72, SD = 7.81) and (M = 83.11, SD = 8.64) respectively. The weak readers had the lowest mean score in Vocabulary knowledge (M = 42.67, SD = 7.55). Whereas the non-weak readers had the lowest mean score in vocabulary knowledge (M = 67.50, SD = 11.46).

4.4 Diagnostic Profiles of Weak Readers

Table 8 shows the individual diagnostic files of the nine weak readers. Each learner's scores on the four diagnostic tasks are reported.

Table 8 – Individual Diagnostic Profiles of Weak Readers

Learner code	Word recognition	Vocabulary knowledge	Sentence comprehension	Text reading comprehension	Overall score
S03	67.50	44.00	55.00	50.00	54.13
S07	62.50	40.00	50.00	45.00	49.38
S11	70.00	48.00	60.00	55.00	58.25
S15	57.50	36.00	45.00	40.00	44.63
S18	65.00	44.00	55.00	50.00	53.50
S21	72.50	52.00	65.00	45.00	58.63
S26	60.00	40.00	50.00	45.00	48.75
S31	67.50	44.00	55.00	55.00	55.38
S35	60.00	36.00	50.00	50.00	49.00

Weak readers did not perform the same across the four diagnostic tasks. In vocabulary knowledge, they scored between 36.00 and 52.00. In sentence comprehension, they scored between 45.00 to 65.00. In text reading

comprehension, they scored between 40.00 to 55.00. In word recognition, they scored between 57.50 to 72.50.

4.5 Frequency of Difficulty across the Diagnostic Tasks

This study used the score of 60 to identify learners experiencing difficulty in each diagnostic task. Table 9 presents the number and percentage of learners who scored below 60 in each diagnostic area.

Table 9 – Frequency of Learners Scoring Below 60 in Each Diagnostic Task

Diagnostic task	Number below 60	Percentage
Word recognition	4	10.81%
Vocabulary knowledge	17	45.95%
Sentence comprehension	10	27.03%
Text reading comprehension	13	35.14%

Vocabulary knowledge received the highest percentage of scoring below 60 with (45.95%), corresponding to 17 learners of the sample. Text reading comprehension followed (35.14%) corresponding to 13 learners. Sentence comprehension had the percentage of scoring below 60 with (27.03%) corresponding to 10 learners. Word recognition received the lowest number of learners below 60, with four learners representing 10.81%.

4.6 Summary of Results by Research Question

Research Question 1 examined the reading difficulties among the participants. The main difficulty appeared in vocabulary knowledge. After that, difficulties were found in text reading comprehension, sentence comprehension, and word recognition.

Research Question 2 asked to what extent the four diagnostic tasks could identify weak readers. Using the 25th percentile cut-off point, nine learners were classified as weak readers. Their overall diagnostic scores ranged from 44.63 to 58.63.

Research Question 3 asked which diagnostic task showed the greatest variation among learners' reading performance. Vocabulary knowledge showed the highest standard deviation (SD = 15.26), followed by text reading comprehension (SD = 14.85), sentence comprehension (SD = 13.07), and word recognition (SD = 11.42).

5. Discussion

5.1 Diagnostic Value of the Four Reading Tasks

Although previous studies examining the reading problems experienced by EFL learners were insightful, they mainly reported reading levels and weaknesses but did not make connections between areas of difficulty and the sources of these difficulties. However, the results of the present study, within its limited context at a Saudi university, showed that EFL learners' reading difficulties can be identified and pinpointed through the use of four diagnostic instruments.

One contribution of this study is that it shows how reading difficulties among EFL learners may vary from one reading area to another. The results showed that the tasks did not produce the same patterns of performance. In other words, performing well in one area did not necessarily indicate good performance in another area. This was clear from the differences in students' scores across the four diagnostic tasks. Students performed highest in word recognition, while lower scores were recorded in vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text reading comprehension.

This finding supports the view that reading comprehension is a multi-level process. Grabe and Stoller (2011) argue that reading involves both lower-level linguistic processing and higher-level comprehension processes, in which the first process serves as a preliminary stage for the second. The present findings are consistent with this view because learners' performance differed across the four reading components. A single reading comprehension score would not have shown

these differences clearly. Therefore, the use of diagnostic tasks helped describe learners' reading abilities in more detail.

The effectiveness of using separate diagnostic tasks also agrees with Alderson et al. (2015), who argue that learners' specific strengths and weaknesses should be identified through the use of diagnostic assessment. They iterated that assigning general scores does not specify the reading problems. In this study, the use of four separate instruments made it possible to identify not only weak readers, but also the particular areas in which those learners experienced difficulty.

5.2 Vocabulary Knowledge as the Main Area of Difficulty

Vocabulary knowledge received the weakest score among the four tasks because it recorded the lowest mean score and the highest number of learners scoring below 60. This result is expected in an EFL reading context because understanding texts depends strongly on vocabulary knowledge, especially if learners fail to understand key words. Learners may recognize the written words but still struggle to understand sentences and passages if they do not know what those words mean.

Nation's (2001) supports this finding. He argues that vocabulary knowledge is central to language use and text comprehension. It also agrees with Al Qunayeer (2021), who found that vocabulary knowledge was problematic to Saudi EFL readers. Similarly, Ashraf (2023) and Alotaibi (2022) reported that limited vocabulary represents a major reading challenge faced by Saudi EFL learners. The present study adds to these findings by showing that vocabulary weakness can be detected clearly through a separate diagnostic vocabulary task. Pedagogically, this suggests that focusing more on vocabulary instruction may help enhance EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge.

The result is also important because although the participants in this study received weekly vocabulary quizzes, they still appeared to score the lowest in this diagnostic area. One possible explanation is that quizzes may show learners' current level, but they do not always help build deeper vocabulary knowledge for reading.

Learners may memorize word meanings for a short time to pass a quiz, but still find it difficult to understand and use those words when reading sentences and passages.

5.3 Word Recognition and Lower-Level Reading Performance

Students' results reveal that recognizing English words was easier for them than understanding English meaning. They performed best when they were required to read or identify words, but their performance was lower when they had to explain word meanings, understand sentences, or comprehend a full text. In other words, many students could read the words correctly, yet they were not always able to turn that reading into real understanding.

This finding shows the difference between word recognition and reading comprehension. Grabe and Stoller (2011) explain that lower-level processing is not sufficient for comprehension. They add that comprehension requires vocabulary knowledge, syntactic processing, and meaning integration. Therefore, learners may perform reasonably well in word recognition while still experiencing problems in deeper reading comprehension.

It is worth mentioning that the result partly differs from Yang's (2021) study on low-level Chinese L2 learners. In Yang's study, word-level processing was a major difficulty because learners had to deal with Chinese characters and word segmentation. In the present study, Saudi EFL learners were reading English, which uses spaces between words and an alphabetic writing system. Therefore, word recognition was less problematic than vocabulary knowledge and comprehension. This difference supports the decision to adapt Yang's diagnostic model rather than copy the same instruments directly.

5.4 Sentence and Text Comprehension Difficulties

The results also showed that several learners struggled with sentence comprehension and text reading comprehension. The study revealed that learners where in a dilemma. Although their sentence comprehension scores were better

than their vocabulary knowledge scores, but lower than word recognition scores. Text reading comprehension also had a relatively low mean score and a high standard deviation. These findings suggest that some learners might know some words but struggled to process them when they appeared together in sentences, i.e., when several words must be integrated and interpreted together to create meaning.

Sentence comprehension is important to the overall understanding of the text because it connects word-level knowledge with text-level comprehension. If learners misunderstand elements of word-level knowledge, such as sentence structure, references, inference connectors, vocabulary in context, and logical development of the text, their comprehension of the passage may be affected. This explains why sentence comprehension is a useful diagnostic instrument in EFL reading assessment. It can show whether learners' problems are caused by vocabulary limitation or by difficulty understanding sentences. Grabe's (2022) believes that several elements integrate to make the meaning of the text, which is consistent with the finding of the study concerning sentence comprehension. In this sense, comprehension depends on how well these elements are connected and understood together, rather than on isolated language knowledge alone.

5.5 Identification of Weak Readers

The individual diagnostic profiles showed that weak readers did not have identical problems. Some had relatively better word recognition but weak vocabulary and comprehension scores, while others showed weakness across vocabulary, sentence comprehension, and text comprehension. Using the 25th percentile cut-off point, nine learners were classified as weak readers. This classification helped identify students whose overall diagnostic reading performance was lower than that of their classmates.

The individual diagnostic profiles provided more detailed information than the overall scores because they showed the specific area of difficulty that each learner had. While the overall score was useful for identifying levels of readers, it did not fully explain the nature of their difficulties. This supports the value of

diagnostic assessment in reading instruction. As Harding et al. (2015) emphasize, diagnostic assessment should offer useful information for teaching and learning. In this study, such information can help teachers provide more focused and targeted support.

5.6 Comparison with Previous Studies

The present study adds a diagnostic perspective to previous Saudi EFL research by examining vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text reading comprehension. This makes it possible to identify more specific areas of reading difficulty rather than treating reading comprehension as one general problem. The findings are consistent with Al Qunayeer (2021), who emphasized the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading performance. They also align with the studies by Ashraf (2023) and Alotaibi (2022), who reported that Saudi EFL learners face reading comprehension challenges at the levels of vocabulary and meaning.

The findings of the present study indicate that diagnostic instruments can offer more precise information about learners' reading difficulties and, therefore, can support classroom instruction. Although a general reading test may show that a learner has weak reading ability, it does not necessarily identify the underlying cause of the problem. By examining vocabulary knowledge, sentence-level processing, and text-level comprehension separately, this study provides a more detailed understanding of reading difficulties than studies that primarily rely on overall reading comprehension measures.

This study adapted Yang's (2021) diagnostic logic by identifying weak readers according to their performance distribution using the 25th percentile cut-off. While Yang used this approach in a different context, the present study applied it to a Saudi EFL reading course with instruments that were more suitable for English reading. This indicates that using the distribution of students' performance to identify weak readers can be applied in different contexts, provided that the diagnostic tasks are adjusted to fit the target language and learners' needs.

5.7 Pedagogical Implications

EFL reading instruction can benefit from using diagnostic tasks to identify the specific causes of EFL learners' reading difficulties. A low comprehension score does not always reflect the same problem for every learner. For example, one learner may struggle because of weak vocabulary knowledge, while another may know the words but have difficulty understanding sentence relationships or the organization of a passage. Therefore, teachers should not rely only on general reading comprehension scores when evaluating students' reading ability.

Since vocabulary knowledge was the weakest area in the study, students may need more opportunities to practice target words in meaningful contexts. Teachers can support this by using various activities that ask students to use new words in sentences, infer meanings from context, recognize word families, and connect vocabulary to the overall meaning of a passage. In this way, vocabulary instruction should move beyond memorizing word meanings only for quizzes.

Before learners can fully understand a text, they need to understand how meaning is organized within sentences. This can be supported through more clearly in reading instruction focusing on sentence structure, reference words, connectors, cause-and-effect relationships, contrast, and complex sentences. These activities can help learners understand how meaning is built within sentences before they move to full text comprehension.

Finally, delayed post-reading quizzes and Blackboard pre-reading activities can be geared towards diagnostic purposes. If a teacher knows that students are weak in vocabulary knowledge or sentence comprehension, pre-reading questions and post-reading quizzes can be designed to target these areas more directly. In this way, diagnostic assessment can be used to strengthened the existing outcomes of the Reading and Building Vocabulary course.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of the Study

The present study investigated reading difficulties among Saudi male EFL learners enrolled in a Reading and Building Vocabulary course at a Saudi university. The study used a quantitative diagnostic descriptive design employing four diagnostic reading instruments to examine learners' performance. These instruments include word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text reading comprehension. The participants were 37 intermediate-level Saudi male undergraduate EFL learners.

The study assumed that reading difficulty cannot be adequately explained by a single overall comprehension score. Rather, reading needs to be examined through different components because l earners may understand some aspects of a text while still facing problems with word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence meaning, or full text comprehension. For this reason, the study employed diagnostic instrument tasks to identify weaker readers and determine the most common areas of reading difficulty.

6.2 Main Findings

The findings suggest that students' reading difficulties were not the same across all diagnostic areas. Word recognition tasks received highest scores and vocabulary knowledge tasks received lowest scores. Sentence comprehension and text reading comprehension scores were lower than word recognition scores but higher than vocabulary knowledge scores.

The findings also showed that vocabulary knowledge had the highest number of learners scoring below 60 compared with the other reading components, followed by text reading comprehension, sentence comprehension, and word recognition. Similarly, their diagnostic profiles showed that weakness in reading was not the same for all learners. Some showed a clear gap between stronger word

recognition and weaker vocabulary knowledge and comprehension, whereas others struggled across several reading components. Furthermore, Based on the 25th percentile cut-off point, nine learners were classified as weak readers.

6.3 Conclusion

The study concludes that word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, sentence comprehension, and text reading comprehension tasks can serve as useful diagnostic instruments for identifying reading difficulties among Saudi male EFL learners. The findings support the use of diagnostic assessment in reading courses because it provides a deeper analysis of EFL readers' performance than a general evaluation of reading scores. By examining different reading components separately, teachers can better understand the nature of learners' reading problems and pedagogically provide more targeted support.

The study also concludes that EFL learners' major difficulty represents in vocabulary knowledge. In the context of this study, learners completed regular vocabulary quizzes and other reading-related activities, but their vocabulary knowledge scores were lower than their scores on the other diagnostic tasks. This points to the need for efficient vocabulary instruction that deeply targets vocabulary development and use of words in context.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations. First, the sample size was limited to 37 students, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Second, all participants were Saudi male undergraduate learners from one Saudi university, so the findings may not represent female learners, learners from other universities, or learners at different proficiency levels. Third, the study focused on four diagnostic instruments only. Other reading-related factors, such as reading fluency, motivation, background knowledge, reading strategies, and anxiety, were not examined.

Another limitation is that the study was conducted within one Reading and Building Vocabulary course at a Saudi university. Therefore its findings may have been influenced by the course's particular materials, teaching practices, and assessment procedures used in this course.

6.5 Recommendations

The findings suggest that EFL reading instruction should be guided by a more detailed understanding of learners' reading difficulties. Rather than depending only on general reading comprehension scores, teachers should use diagnostic assessment to identify the specific areas in which students need support. This diagnostic information can then be used to plan targeted remediation, so that learners who struggle with vocabulary receive support in word meanings, word families, and contextual word use, while those who face difficulties with sentence or text comprehension receive instruction focused on sentence structure, connectors, reference words, idea relationships, main ideas, supporting details, and inference-making. In this way, reading instruction can become more focused, responsive, and connected to learners' actual needs.

6.6 Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies could examine whether targeted instruction based on diagnostic assessment improves learners' reading performance over time. To provide a broader understanding of reading difficulties, researchers could also include other diagnostic areas, such as fluency, inferencing, strategy use, and background knowledge. In addition, future research may involve larger and more diverse groups of learners from different Saudi universities, including both male and female learners at different proficiency levels.

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