

Challenges in Developing English As A Second Language (ESL) Learners' Reading Skills in Pakistan: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Teachers in Pakistan face numerous challenges in developing the reading skills of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners due to various factors. Despite their teaching efforts, students' reading comprehension skills remain at an unsatisfactory level. This paper presents a systematic literature review exploring the complexities of developing reading skills among second language learners in Pakistan. The review employs the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) technique, which provides standardized strategy for discovering, screening, and selecting relevant studies while assuring transparency and comprehensiveness in the review process. The study focusses on studies published between 2016 and 2024. The review reveals that one of the main challenges in enhancing ESL learners' reading comprehension skills is the teaching strategies employed by the teachers. Studies indicate that teachers often rely on translation-based instruction, which is considered ineffective. Another significant challenge is the low motivation among ESL learners. These insights highlight the need to equip Pakistani teachers with effective methods for teaching reading skills and to boost learners' motivation in second language learning, thereby fostering a stronger reading culture in schools.

1. Introduction

English, which is a second language in Pakistan, plays a significant role in the country. There are numerous English-medium schools operating across the country (Abbas & Iqbal, 2018). Given its significant, English is mandated as a required subject for students nationwide up to the graduation level (Mushtaque, Anwar, & Zaki, 2022). Not only that, the dominance of English in Pakistan is evident in its presence within key sectors of authority, including bureaucracy, the judiciary, and legislation (Abbas et al., 2019). According to Soomro et al. (2024), having a strong grasp of the English language enhances not only academic and career opportunities but also enables effective global communication and online interactions beyond the classroom. Hence, the use of English language in Pakistan serves as a highlight for a wider career opportunity.

Reading is among the most important English abilities. The development of proficient English language reading skills in secondary school is well regarded as an important component in academic performance and lifetime learning (Wulandari et al., 2024). As ESL learners proceed through secondary school, the complexity of academic texts rises, requiring strong reading comprehension abilities for successful learning (Hezam et al., 2022). Rahim et al., (2023) found that ESL learners at secondary schools must go beyond basic literacy skills and develop higher-order cognitive talents such as critical thinking and analysis while reading. Furthermore, the relevance of English language reading skills extends beyond the academic domain into potential job chances. According to Orellana et al. (2024), many professions demand individuals to have high reading comprehension skills in order to grasp and analyze complicated information. Secondary education is an important stage in educating ESL students with the language and cognitive capabilities they need to succeed in a number of industries. According to Yung et al. (2024), reading exercises the brain, which helps to improve vocabulary, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. In addition, the pressure of globalization has increased the demand for English proficiency in Pakistan, particularly in higher education (Aimen & Khadim, 2024). English is the primary language of instruction in universities, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), as well as business and economics (He, 2022). Thus, students who lack excellent English reading skills have a substantial disadvantage in higher education, reducing their capacity to connect with academic materials and fully participate in the learning process.

This study is motivated by the noticeable decline in English reading proficiency among ESL learners at secondary in Pakistan in recent years. In Pakistan, English is a compulsory subject at both junior and senior high schools, highlighting the importance of English (Maqsood et al., 2021). Although English education is taught to learners at an early age, poor reading abilities remain a major issue in Pakistan (Ahmed et al., 2020). The emphasis on English as a subject rather than a mode of communication has impacted the way in which teachers perceive teaching reading comprehension skills and design their teaching instruction (Saleem et al., 2020). This problem is especially serious in public schools, where classes are overcrowded (Mohsin, 2018). As a result, many ESL learners struggle to read and comprehend English texts, which affected their academic performance and future undertakings (Shafique et al., 2022). Similar studies that reported the negative impacts of teaching instructions related to teaching reading comprehension skills on ESL learners' development of reading comprehension abilities in studies Bouknify (2023) and Azis & Wilymafidini (2024). In addition, poor English reading skills is not necessarily due to low level of proficiency. This can be observed in Azis and Wilymafidini's (2024) study who found that ESL learners' reading skills were still unsatisfactory although they had good English language abilities. A significant body of research has reported that one of the factors that leads to this decline is the ineffective teaching strategies employed by the teachers in government schools (Khan et al., 2021). This is due to the fact that many teachers lack the necessary knowledge and required credentials, and their academic qualifications are not related to English language instruction to effectively teach reading (Rehman et al., 2020).

This concern is shared by Ali et al. (2022) and Ali and Ali (2018) who discovered that inadequate teacher training and a lack of emphasis on reading approaches in teacher education programs contributed to poor reading skills. Similarly, it is a lack of activity-based reading teaching, which is required for ESL learners to practice and improve their reading comprehension skills (Abbas & Anthony, 2024). Teachers in Pakistan's public schools are frequently unaware of efficient ways for teaching reading comprehension, compounding the issue (Ahmed et al., 2024). Khan et al., (2021) indicated that a shortage of subject specialist teachers is also a big concern. He further elaborated that specialized training is essential for effective teaching. According to Ali et al., (2022), the incorporation of social interaction and collaborative learning approaches can lead to effective teaching instruction. Proper pedagogical preparation and training are crucial for implementing effective teaching strategies. Rice et al., (2024) underlined the relevance of strong teacher preparation programs in providing teachers with the knowledge and abilities needed to effectively employ a variety of instructional styles. The lack of knowledge and preparation can lead to the implementation of ineffective teaching approaches and strategies. As a result, ESL learners are confined to passive learning situations and continue to lack the skills required to comprehend English texts (Ahmed et al., 2020). Rajput et al., (2020), who reported that teachers frequently employed dictation as their primary approach due to a lack of information about teaching strategies for developing ESL learners' reading comprehension skills. This can affect the development of ESL learners' reading comprehension skills. In a study by Teeveno, et al., (2020), it was found that ESL learners' reading comprehension remained unsatisfactory as a result of ineffective teaching practices. Additionally, the inadequate training and subject knowledge of these teachers significantly hinder students' English reading comprehension, resulting in poor overall performance among ESL learners (Shafique et al., 2022).

A number of studies, including those by Abro et al., (2021), Hassan and Dweik (2021), and Pierce (2018) have investigated issues related to low reading proficiency among ESL learners. One of the factors highlighted by Abro et al. (2021) is that teachers took reading skills for granted, causing ESL learners to struggle in developing their reading skills. Another factor is the teaching strategies employed by the teachers. In addition, it was found that ESL learners in public schools were not given sufficient time to develop their reading comprehension skills, preventing them from becoming efficient and independent readers (Pierce, 2018). Furthermore, education is

frequently focused on completing the syllabus and preparing ESL learners for board exams, leaving little room for the development of reading comprehension abilities (Yasin et al., 2024). In many circumstances, English is primarily employed in reference materials and textbooks rather than as a medium of instruction, restricting learners' possibilities to interact meaningfully with the language (Manan, 2019). This method has serious implications for ESL learners' reading proficiency, as they struggle with fundamental comprehension despite the early concentration on learning English (Ahmed et al., 2020). Public schools, particularly those in poor areas, confront overcrowded classrooms, teaching techniques that are not effective, and a lack of specialized attention, all of which impede reading skill development (Mohsin, 2018). As a result, teaching and learning lacks activity-based reading instruction that gives ESL learners a chance to practice their reading comprehension skills (Atai, Hashemi, & Nejadghanbar, 2018). In addition, teachers in Pakistani public schools are unaware of effective reading comprehension teaching strategies (Noreen & Asif, 2019).

Aziz et al. (2024) reported that many Pakistani schools operate with insufficient resources, such as unqualified teachers, and a lack of necessary English teaching materials. These shortcomings are exacerbated by socioeconomic restrictions that prevent ESL learners from developing proficient English language abilities. English is regarded as a doorway to higher education and white-collar employment in Pakistan (Aimen & Khadim, 2024); however those who lack significant English proficiency are frequently demoted to lower-paying positions and may face social stigma (Manan, 2024). This emphasizes the need of resolving educational deficiencies in English instruction, particularly in rural and underserved areas where trained teachers and teaching resources are most scarce (Khan et al., 2021).

Furthermore, traditional teaching techniques that emphasize rote memorization and grammar rules over communicative skills reduce the efficiency of ESL reading training (Warsi & Khursheed, 2022). These methods are still widely used in many schools, with teachers depending largely on textbooks and grammatical exercises rather than focusing on practical language skills (Moghal et al., 2019). Similarly, a lack of professional development opportunities for teachers in areas such as reading comprehension and academic language education adds to the continuation of poor teaching strategies (Tahira et al., 2020). Akhtar and Kayani (2024) researched teachers' perceptions on the Sindh Teaching License regulation and concluded that teachers' pessimism about the regulation, combined with limited resources and insufficient formal training, hinders their capacity to adopt good teaching techniques. Mohammad et al. (2018) reported that many Pakistani teachers are unqualified and lack the requisite pedagogical skills to help ESL learners improve their reading comprehension. The failure to implement reading strategies targeted at learners' needs and interests exacerbates the situation (Mohammad et al., 2018).

In enhancing reading skills, studies such as by Shuqin and Kamaruddin (2023) have raised the need for the implantation of cognitive, metacognitive, social or affective strategies. Dewey (1938) argues through his experiential learning theory that learning occurs through social interaction. In the context of developing reading skills, learners need to experience learning through social interaction. This includes providing learners with opportunities for collaborative discussions and peer interactions to help them analyze, interpret, and synthesize information effectively (Mishra, 2023).

This study explores the experience of the English language teachers at schools in Pakistan in developing ESL learners' reading comprehension skills. The study also provides insights into the complexity of developing ESL learners' reading comprehension skills.

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, focusing on the analysis and synthesis non-numerical data such as themes and patterns. For this study, the objective was to identify the challenges associated with developing reading skills among ESL learners in secondary schools in Pakistan. A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted using the four-step PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework. PRISMA ensures a transparent, replicable, and rigorous approach to identifying, screening, and synthesizing relevant studies. The methodology is outlined below:

2.1 Identification

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, Emerald, and ERIC to identify relevant studies. The search strategy utilized Boolean operators (AND, OR) to refine results, with Keywords aligned to the study's focus: "reading skills", "ESL learners", "secondary school", "challenges", and "Pakistan". For example, a structured search string used in Google Scholar was:

("Reading skills" OR "Reading proficiency") AND ("Second language learners" OR "ESL learners" OR "English as a Second Language" OR "Foreign language learners") AND ("secondary school" OR "high school" OR "middle school") AND ("Challenges" OR "Barriers" OR "Difficulties" OR "complexities") AND ("Pakistan").

The search also focused on articles that were published between 2018 and 2024, and the articles came from academic publications. Articles from book chapters, reports and media were excluded. Based on this search a total

of 163 articles were gathered. These articles included 112 from Google Scholar, 16 from Emerald and 35 from ERIC. This comprehensive approach helped ensure the retrieval of relevant and focused literature for the review.

2.2 Screening

After identification, an initial screening phase was conducted to remove duplicate records. Titles and abstracts of the remaining studies were reviewed to assess their relevance to the research objectives. Articles that passed this stage underwent full-text screening, guided by predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, to ensure that only the most pertinent studies were selected for further analysis. After removing duplicates, 150 documents remained. Through title and abstract screening, 97 papers were rejected because they were outside the scope of the research goal or lacked empirical in-depth.

2.3 Eligibility

Studies were included based on the following criteria:

- Peer-reviewed articles published between 2018 and 2024.
- Focus on secondary school ESL learners in Pakistan
- Direct relevance to challenges in reading skills development.

Studies were excluded if they:

- were not available in full text,
- not written in English,
- focused on non-ESL learners or other educational levels outside secondary school.

During this stage, 53 full-text publications were critically reviewed with 31 being removed because they were reviewed papers, conceptual debates or lacked contextual connection to ESL reading issues in Pakistan. Finally, 22 empirical qualitative research met the inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the final evaluation.

2.4 Inclusion

Following final selection, the data was synthesized through thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes, key challenges, and research gaps in existing literature. Findings were presented narratively, with tables and figures used where appropriate to enhance clarity. This process enabled a systematic examination of challenges faced by ESL learners in developing reading skills and highlighted areas requiring further research. The table below shows the summary of the implementation of PRISMA.

Table 1 *The summary of the implementation of PRISMA*

Stage	Description
Identification	163 records were found by searching the database: 112 on Google Scholar ERIC: 35; Emerald: 16
Screening	Following the elimination of duplicates (13), 150 titles and abstracts were reviewed. Following the review, 97 were excluded for being non-empirical or failing to fulfill topic relevance
Eligibility	53 full-text papers were examined for their comprehensive relevance and quality. 31 studies were removed because they were theoretical, reviews, or lacked contextual focus.
Inclusion	The final synthesis contained 22 qualitative empirical research that focused on ESL reading issues in Pakistani secondary schools from 2018 to 2024.

The 22 studies provided rich, context-specific insights into the challenges that ESL learners experience when acquiring reading abilities, particularly in Pakistani secondary schools with limited resources and policies.

3. Findings

The findings of this study show that the challenges in developing English reading skills among secondary school ESL learners in Pakistan are related to teacher and student factors. In the context of the teacher, previous studies

highlight the issue of qualification and pedagogical knowledge influence teachers' teaching strategies preferences. As for the student factor, the challenges are related to learning motivation and dependence on mother tongue. In addition, the lack of resources for teaching reading skills is also highlighted in the review.

3.1 Teachers' Qualifications and Training

With regard to the decline of English reading skills among Pakistani students, one of the main issues is the lack of knowledge in teaching reading, affecting students' ability to understand English texts (Khan et al., 2022). This issue is commonly associated with the absence of credentials. In government schools, many English teachers lack the necessary credentials to teach English effectively (Ali & Ali, 2018). These teachers have degrees in subjects other than English, such as Islamic Studies, Science, Social Studies, and Pakistan Studies (Ahmad & Lanfeng, 2024). Thus, they are not properly trained to teach English (Aziz et al., 2024). In guiding them to teach English, they depend solely on the local teacher guides for English subject. However, depending on the local teacher guides are not sufficient for teachers who do not have English education background. In their study, Perveen and Farrukh (2018) found that insufficient teacher training and credentials result in ineffective reading instruction, leading to the decline in teacher quality in Pakistan, impacting on students' reading skills.

According to Zia-ur-Rehman (2022), there is no clear instruction in any national policy regarding the qualification degree for English teachers teaching in secondary schools. The author further indicated that secondary school teachers in Pakistan, particularly in Sindh, are only required to hold a bachelor's or master's degree in education, or a master's or bachelor's degree in arts or science with no emphasis on having English language major. This means that teachers without English language teaching certifications can also teach English. This raises the issue of English language competence among these teachers. With the limited English language competence, teachers face challenges in teaching English, particularly in terms of teaching reading comprehension skills (Yasmin et al., 2018).

The issue of qualification and English teachers' competency in English is discussed in Hafeez, and Ashraf's (2021) study, who examined the causes of English failures in Pakistani schools. In their study, 64 principals from public high schools were recruited as their participants. According to the report, 86% of respondents said that English teachers in Pakistan lacked the necessary qualifications to teach English. This finding is alarming as the absence of relevant qualifications among teachers contributes towards ineffective reading instruction as they lack knowledge in teaching reading skills (Shah et al., 2023).

In addressing the issue of teachers' qualifications, providing professional development training is important. Specialized training in ESL education is required for teachers to implement successful teaching strategies. A study by Xiaolong (2024) emphasizes the relevance of professional growth and specialized training in improving teaching strategies and learner outcomes. Nonetheless, studies such as Bosch et al. (2024) and Nurhayati et al. (2023) found that professional development training conducted in Pakistan had less impact on teachers' abilities to develop ESL learners' reading comprehension. This is because these professional development programs do not focus on training teachers to teach reading abilities (Khan et al., 2021). Mohsin (2018) reported that professional development programs for teachers are generally wide in scope, addressing general pedagogical methods without digging into the complexities of teaching reading skills. As a result, teachers continue to struggle in developing ESL learners' reading skills, resorting to inefficient strategies such as word memorization rather than more sophisticated strategies (Zhang, 2023).

The lack of training is also reported in Warsi and Khurshed's (2022) study. The authors indicated that the ESL teachers in their study were not equipped with skill-based language training. Sultana and Imran (2024) indicated that the lack of skill-based training for teachers is a significant barrier to increasing ESL learners' reading skills. With the lack of specialized training, teachers' teaching instruction can be affected, hindering the development of reading comprehension skills of their ESL learners (Sanaullah et al., 2023).

3.2 Pedagogical Knowledge in English Language Instruction

The discussion in Section 3.1 has raised the issue of English language competence among the teachers. The limited English language competence, topped up with limited professional development training can lead to the implementation of ineffective teaching strategies, affecting the development of reading comprehension skills of the ESL learners.

In his study, Mahboob (2020) found that the teachers in their study were not able to design teaching instruction that can help students' development in English reading comprehension skills. Teevno et al., (2020), found teachers' lack of pedagogical knowledge affected students' performance in English reading comprehension. In developing ESL learners' reading comprehension skills, building ESL learners' vocabulary is vital. Thus, teachers need to have sufficient vocabulary knowledge. Nonetheless, this is not the case in a study conducted by Luo et al. (2019). In their study, the researchers found that the ESL teachers had limited competency in English vocabulary, and thus, avoid teaching vocabulary to their ESL learners. The insufficient attention to teaching vocabulary can be found in Ayu Safitri (2022), Rahim et al. (2020) and Kusumastui (2021)'s studies. In his study,

Othman (2024) found that ESL learners struggled with word recognition and vocabulary acquisition. Thus, with less support by the teachers due to their lack of competence in English, ESL learners' vocabulary acquisition can be affected, hindering the development of reading comprehension skills.

Undeniably, professional development training plays a pivotal role, particularly in providing training to those who do not have English education background. However, there are questions that arise in relation to the effectiveness of the training. Studies have shown that the professional development training is not only limited (Shakil, 2020) but also ineffective (Nurkamto et al., 2021). Despite having professional development training, Nurkamto et al., (2021) found that such training was ineffective in preparing the ESL teachers for teaching vocabulary. Shakil (2020) has raised the importance of skill-based language training in teaching vocabulary, but such training is lacking, leading to only ESL teachers' inability to adequately guide ESL learners in developing essential reading strategies.

The limited competency of the ESL teachers in teaching English vocabulary has great impacts on the development of ESL learners' reading skills. Many ESL learners were not able to develop their English vocabulary, making it difficult for them to understand texts due to unfamiliar words (Bhatti et al., 2019). Inadequate vocabulary training, coupled with poor pronunciation skills, results in difficulties in processing written texts efficiently (Muneer et al., 2024). Research has also shown that ESL learners in public secondary schools struggle to read English at a high level of proficiency due to teachers' inability to utilize modern pedagogical techniques (Younas et al., 2019). Abualzain (2020) examined vocabulary instruction and its impact on reading comprehension. The researcher found that ESL learners' inability to develop reading comprehension skills was due to low vocabulary knowledge. In another study, Dawna (2023) investigated vocabulary instruction and its role in developing ESL learners' reading comprehension skills. The finding indicated that teachers lacked pedagogical knowledge about vocabulary instruction. Resultantly, ESL learners were unable to understand the meaning of words in reading comprehension. Both Abualzain (2020) and Dawna (2023) emphasize the need for strong vocabulary instruction in developing reading comprehension skills. The need for strong vocabulary instruction is also highlighted in Wulan and Nugrahani (2023). In their study, the researchers indicated that peer interaction can help students expand their vocabulary, but only if teachers can properly implement them.

The issue of strong vocabulary instruction remains a great challenge for teachers due to lack of expertise in developing such instruction (Ayu Safitri, 2022). Luo et al. (2019) evaluated ESL learners' reading strategies and found English vocabulary as a significant obstacle. In their study, Hezam et al. (2022) found that many ESL learners have challenges such as restricted vocabulary and difficulty with word recognition, which greatly impairs their comprehension of literature. Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the lack of expertise can be due to the lack of specialized training that focuses on managing the teaching of specific language skills, in this case reading comprehension skills. This finding is similar to that of Wakil ur Rahim et al.'s (2023) study who reported that ESL learners struggle to understand fundamental texts due to a lack of vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, studies such as Kusumastui (2021) and Nurkamato et al. (2021), have indicated that ESL learners' vocabulary knowledge is frequently insufficient after graduating high school.

3.3 Preferences for Teaching Reading Skills

The lack of professional development training, particularly in terms of language skill-based training, and limited pedagogical knowledge have caused teachers to resort to using strategies that are convenient for them to teach. The lack of expertise among English teachers can lead to ineffective teaching methodologies for English (Khan et al., 2021). This can be found in several studies such as Hussain et al. (2023), Kazi et al. (2022) and Shah (2022). In a study by Hussain et al. (2023), for example, it was found that teachers preferred to use dictation strategy to teach reading skills to secondary school ESL learners.

Apart from diction, translation is another strategy that teachers prefer. Kazi et al. (2022) found that many teachers relied on teaching methods, such as lecture-based instruction, where the entire text was translated into Urdu or a local language. Another study by Shah (2022) also reported the use of grammar translation as a preferred strategy for teaching reading comprehension skills. This strategy increases dependency on translation and hinders language acquisition (Coleman, 2018). One of the factors for the use of translation can be related to teachers' competency in English. Kanwal (2022) reported that many teachers are not fluent in English, and thus, they resorted to their native language when teaching English.

Another strategy employed in teaching reading comprehension skills is memorization strategy. In their study, Amir et al. (2020) reported that teachers adopted a memorization strategy to prepare ESL learners for examinations. This finding is also found in Aziz et al. (2024) where teachers tend to avoid dealing with critical reading abilities like comprehension, inference, and analysis. Thus, they are not able to develop ESL learners' reading abilities as well as promote vocabulary growth and critical thinking skills.

The strategies discussed above have limits and may not significantly improve ESL learners' reading comprehension or language proficiency. Shuqin and Kamaruddin (2023), and Zhao (2024) have raised the need for the incorporation of cognitive, metacognitive, social or affective strategies. The techniques which include self-

monitoring and self-questioning, supported by technology and visual aids, have been found effective in improving reading comprehension (Shahnaz et al., 2024). Research on metacognitive procedures demonstrates a knowledge gap among teachers about certain reading strategies. Noor et al. (2023) indicate that metacognitive techniques can improve reading comprehension, but teachers need to be properly trained to implement these strategies. Apart from that, the use of read-aloud strategy can influence students' reading attitudes (Kazi et al., 2022). However, teachers' lack of training in such approaches was a significant hindrance to their successful application.

Dixon and Oakhil (2024) point out that teachers frequently ignore strategies like predicting while reading, which could dramatically boost ESL learners' interest and comprehension. This can be found in Sultana and Imran's (2024) who reported that teachers with low professional knowledge preferred concrete techniques such as teaching vocabulary over strategies that improve students' metacognitive abilities. This finding is in line with Istiqomah et al., (2023) who conducted a study to investigate the use of cognitive strategies in developing ESL learners' reading comprehension skills. The study reported that strategies such as inferring meaning, summarizing, and using context clues were underutilized due to teachers' insufficient training and overcrowded classrooms. Based on the discussion above, it can be concluded that the lack of training leads to the employment of ineffective strategies. This conclusion supports the findings in Khalifa (2020) and Solikhah (2018) who reported the limited usage of metacognitive strategies in teaching reading comprehension skills.

The notion of learning through social interaction results in positive outcomes in developing reading skills (Raach, 2024; Ulfa et al., 2022; Syaifullah et al., 2021; Rahim, 2020). Collaborative learning, which is an approach to learning through social interaction, promotes critical thinking and allows students to gain points of view from other people (Mofield, 2020). However, a study reported that teachers frequently struggle to manage and facilitate group work, indicating their inability to manage collaborative learning approach (Gonzalez et al., 2020). As a result, this approach is often underutilized in the classroom (Elashhab, 2018; Alenizi, 2019; Mishra, 2023). The effectiveness of this approach is greatly dependent on group dynamics and students' ability to work well together (Mofield, 2020). It needs to be carefully structured and monitored by the teacher to ensure that all learners are engaged and learn well (Mundelsee & Jutkowski, 2021). However, teachers' lack of expertise in implementing social-based teaching strategies, along with the lack of qualification, contribute to ineffectiveness of reading comprehension instruction (Khan et al., 2021).

Mohammed and Amponsah (2018) indicated that teachers' lack of knowledge in developing effective reading instruction methodologies contributes significantly to ESL learners' low reading ability. Ineffective teaching strategies, low group cohesion, and unequal participation can all reduce the potential benefits of social learning (Zaman & Asghar, 2019). Many teachers also lack awareness of effective teaching strategies that support the development of reading comprehension skills (Noreen & Asif, 2019). For example, skills such as making inferences improve reading comprehension for ESL learners (Pillaga et al., 2023). However, previous studies such as by Sharif et al. (2023) show that teachers avoid teaching ESL learners to make inferences due to a lack of awareness or training in adopting this strategy.

3.4 ESL Learners' Motivation and Language Anxiety

ESL learners' motivation to develop reading comprehension skills can also be influenced by their classroom experiences and the strategies teachers employ (Moneba & Lovitos, 2024). Teachers' unwillingness to use the affective strategies (strategies that take learners emotions into consideration) can affect ESL learners' motivation. In their study, Ahamed et al. (2020) reported that teachers commonly employed strategies that led to passive learning. Such strategies lead to poor engagement, affecting ESL learners' reading comprehension abilities (Kamil & Perrodin, 2023). Akram et al. (2020) indicated that poor engagement can cause ESL learners to lose interest in English language. This finding is similar to the study conducted by Marzulina et al. (2021) and Hussain et al. (2023) who found that many ESL learners exhibited low motivation when learning English (Hussain et al., 2023). According to Ruscandi (2023), motivation and engagement are associated with effective reading comprehension strategies. These strategies involve creating a positive reading environment, cultivating a love of reading, and addressing ESL learners' fears and self-efficacy toward reading.

Teachers' lack of enthusiasm can influence the ways in which they frame their teaching. This is reported in Saeed (2023) who found that teachers who lacked enthusiasm to teach reading were not able to create an engaging and interactive learning environment. The lack of enthusiasm can affect ESL learners' motivation leading to poor reading habit among ESL learners, hindering the development of reading skills (Phala, 2022). Hassan and Dweik's (2021) highlighted that teachers' lack of enthusiasm led to frustration in language learning. This finding is consistent with Mohammed and Amponsah's (2018) and Tantihachai et al.'s (2023) study who reported that low instructor motivation led to language anxiety. Addressing ESL learners' language anxiety and frustration are crucial in developing learners' reading abilities. This is emphasized in Huo (2020) who indicated that good teaching strategies encouraged students to reflect on their thinking processes, minimizing anxiety and frustration while Nanda and Azmy (2020) highlighted the importance of continual assistance and training. This can help teachers build the skills and knowledge required to effectively incorporate affective methods into their education.

Insufficient training can result in failure to address ESL learners' emotional and motivational needs, limiting the effectiveness of affective strategies in improving reading comprehension.

With the lack of trainings, sufficient support such as the availability of appropriate teaching materials and subject specialist teachers can assist English language teachers in managing their teaching. Nonetheless, these supports are not readily available to support the teachers (Rofi'i, Nurhidayat, & Firharmawan, 2023; Masood, 2020; Mohsin, 2018;). As a result, teaching focuses on completing the syllabus and preparing students for board examinations rather than fostering reading comprehension skills (Saleem et al., 2020). This exam-oriented approach further limits learners' engagement with extensive reading programs that could enhance their vocabulary and fluency (Munir et al., 2024). A study by Mohsin (2018) found that the lack of supporting materials was a significant barrier to teaching reading. This finding is also reported in a study by Desta et al. (2020) who identified insufficient training, limited access to materials, and unsuitable educational degrees as the key barriers to effective teaching. Similarly, Samhudi (2023) and Sultana and Imran (2024) stated that a lack of supportive reading materials is a significant barrier to enhancing ESL learners' reading comprehension skills.

4. Conclusion

This systematic literature review has identified several critical challenges hindering the development of reading comprehension skills among ESL learners in Pakistani secondary schools. Key issues include a lack of formal qualifications among English teachers, inadequate skill-based language training, limited vocabulary knowledge, reliance on ineffective instructional strategies, low student motivation, and a shortage of both appropriate teaching materials and subject specialists.

These problems have far-reaching implications for teaching techniques. When teachers lack adequate training and rely on translation-heavy or teacher-centered techniques, learners miss out on opportunities to participate in meaningful, engaging, and context-rich reading experiences. Furthermore, the lack of interactive strategies exacerbates learners' apathy in reading, harming both language acquisition and academic achievement.

To address these concerns, there is an urgent need to engage in professional development programs that provide teachers with evidence-based techniques for teaching reading skills. Incorporating learner-centered pedagogies, integrating technology, and creating a print-rich atmosphere can all help to improve language education. Furthermore, developing personalized instructional resources based on learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds may improve engagement and comprehension.

To create a more supportive environment for ESL learners and promote a reading culture in Pakistani schools, future research should focus on longitudinal studies that evaluate the effectiveness of various reading interventions in ESL contexts within Pakistan. It is also necessary to investigate the role of school leadership, community involvement, and policy-level support in improving reading instruction.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

Author Contribution

All authors confirm contributions to the paper. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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