

**Investigating Iraqi EFL Intermediate  
School Students' Difficulties in Reading Literary Texts  
Inst.Dr. Liqa'a Habeb Al Obaydi  
University of Diyala  
Inst.Dr. Khansa'a H. AL- Bahadli  
Imam AL-Kadhim (A.S.) College**

**Abstract:**

The current study aims at identifying intermediate school students' difficulties in reading literary texts from teacher's viewpoints, and identifying and classifying intermediate school students' difficulties in reading literary texts from students' viewpoints. To achieve the aims, two samples were used, fifteen teachers and thirty students/forth preparatory, were used. The researchers constructed two types of questionnaires to determine the difficulties faced by intermediate school students from both teachers and students points of view. The items of the questionnaires have been collected on the basis of the related literature, interviews, the open ended questionnaire, the information found in the teacher's guide, previous studies which deal with teaching techniques and experts opinions. In the light of the results obtained, recommendations which are concerned with teachers and students are put forward.

**Keyword:** reading, literary texts.

**استقصاء الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلبة المرحلة الاعدادية العراقية  
من متحدثي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية في قراءة النصوص الادبية  
م.د. لقاء حبيب العبيدي م.د. خنساء حسن البهادلي  
جامعة ديالى كلية الامام الكاظم (عليه السلام)**

**المخلص:**

ترمي الدراسة الحالية الى تحديد الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلبة المرحلة الاعدادية في قراءة النصوص الادبية من وجهة نظر المدرسين، فضلا عن تحديد وتصنيف الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلبة المرحلة الاعدادية في قراءة النصوص الادبية من وجهة نظر الطلبة. لتحقيق الاهداف، تم استخدام عينتين، تتكون الاولى من خمسة عشر مدرسا والثانية تتكون من ثلاثين طالبا من مرحلة الرابع الاعدادي. قامت الباحثتان ببناء استبيانين لتحديد الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلبة المرحلة الاعدادية في قراءة النصوص الادبية من وجهة نظر الطلبة والمدرسين معا. وقد جمعت فقرات الاستبيانين اعتمادا على ادبيات المادة، المقابلات، الاستبيان المفتوح، المعلومات الموجودة في دليل المدرس، الدراسات السابقة، فضلا عن اراء المختصين. وفي ضوء النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها، تم وضع عدد من التوصيات التي تخص المدرسين والطلبة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** القراءة، النصوص الادبية.

## **Introduction:**

### **1.1 The problem and its Significance:**

Unlike speaking, reading is not something that every individual learns to do. An enormous amount of time, money, and efforts is spent teaching reading in elementary and secondary schools around the world. It is probably true to say that more time is spent teaching reading than any other skill (Nunan, 2001:249).

The term 'reading ability' is a broad term for which one single, absolute definition is probably not possible. Reading as stated by (Weaver, 2009: xiii) is both a psycholinguistic process (involving the mind actively processing the text) and a sociolinguistic one (with multiple social factors that can affect how one reads, how much one gleans from the reading, and more). Even word identification itself can be affected by these factors, because reading is as much or more a brain-to-text process as a text-to-brain process. The strategies one uses vary according to one's purpose, including whether one is reading for oneself only (still the purposes vary) or for somebody else, such as reading to answer comprehension questions, reading to perform for listeners (including the teacher and classmates), and much more. Of course these social factors may generate confidence, fear, anger, defiance, and/or other emotions it just depends (ibid).

As far as reading literature passages is concerned, the use of literature in language teaching is still not a common practice in secondary ELT classrooms. This is partly because of time constraints, and partly because some teachers still feel "that they are not equipped methodologically to use literary texts" (Paran, 1998:83). The reader uses the various perspectives offered him by the text in order to relate the patterns and the 'schematized views' to one another, he sets the work in motion, and this very process results ultimately in the awakening of responses within himself. Thus, reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character. (Wolfgang, 1974:275)

A literary text must therefore be "conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative" (ibid).

White (1982:415) provides a clear picture of the process of reading literary texts when he inferred that literary critics have come to focus on a fact that reading literature is not merely a process of observing and receiving but an activity of the mind and imagination a process that requires constant judgments and creation. Literature is inherently communal: one learns to read a particular text in part from other readers, and one helps others to read it. In this shared process readers maintain what might be called a

culture of reading, a set of understandings and conceptions by which the process can go.

The relationship between ESL/EFL students and reading literary texts is tackled by many writers. The role of literature in ELT classrooms has varied depending on what learning theories and approaches have prevailed in language learning and “it has only been since the 1980s that this area has attracted more interest among EFL teachers”. Duff and Maley(1990:3) state that “there has been a remarkable revival of interest in literature as one of the resources available for language learning”. Literature has been generally used in ELT classrooms for the development of knowledge about language. Reading literature, however, also increases learners' awareness of language use since literary texts present language in discourse set in different social contexts (McKay, 1986: 191). Murcia (2001:188) clarifies that the ability to read requires that the reader draws information from a text combine it with information and expectations that the reader already has. This interaction of information is a common way to explain reading comprehension. She (ibid) adds that second language readers generally have weaker linguistic skills and a more limited vocabulary than do first language readers. They do not have an intuitive foundation in the structures of the second language and they lack the cultural knowledge that is sometimes assumed in texts. On the same context, Richard &Schmitt (2002:235) asserts that second language reader exhibit the full range of variation that can be found for first language reader (variation in training, age schooling, motivation, socioeconomic level, as well as individual cognition). At last, this simple previous survey supposed to justify the reasons for this study.

This study intends primarily to raise the question of what are the main difficulties that Iraqi intermediate school students may face in reading literary texts that exist in their textbooks as a literature focus from both teachers and students viewpoint.

## **1.2 Aims of the Study**

The study aims at:

1. Identifying intermediate school students' difficulties in reading literary texts from teachers viewpoints, and
2. Identifying and classifying intermediate school students' difficulties in reading literary texts from students' viewpoints.

### **1.3 Limits of the study:**

This study is limited to:

1. Reading literary texts in textbooks.
2. Iraqi intermediate school students.

### **1.4 Procedures:**

To achieve the aim of the present study, the following procedures will be adopted by the researchers to collect data:

1. Choosing a number of Iraqi intermediate school teachers (at random) to represent the first sample of the study.
1. Choosing a number of Iraqi intermediate school students (at random) to represent the other sample of the study.
2. Constructing two types of questionnaires to collect data under the supervision of a number of specialists who examine its validity.
3. Interpreting the results in the light of the aims by using the proper statistical means that suit the study.

## **2. Methodology:**

### **2.1 Population & Sample:**

The population refers to any set of items, individuals, etc. Which share some common and observable characteristics and from which a sample can be taken (Richards. et al, 1992:282). The population of this research comprises Iraqi teachers and fourth preparatory students, for the academic year (2012 – 2013).

Sampling as defined by Al- Samawi (2000:112) is selecting a number of individuals to represent the population. Berg (2004:34) states that the logic of using a sample of subjects is to make inferences about some larger population from a smaller one (a sample). Furthermore, Johnson (1997:123-124) adds that "the larger the sample, the more reliable your data will be".

The choice of the fourth preparatory school students is intentional since the students were expected to have literature focus in their English syllabus .Fifteen English language teachers and thirty students were chosen randomly to represent the main study sample of this study.

### **2.2 The Instrument of the study**

In order to fulfill the aim of the present study, two questionnaires were constructed by the researchers, as shown in table (1) and (2).

Two types of the questionnaires are used in this research, yes –no questionnaire and a rating scale one. Based on the teachers' questionnaire, the researchers constructed the second one (for students) which consists of more detailed difficulties.

The items of the questionnaires have been collected on the basis of the related literature, interviews, the open ended questionnaire, the

information found in the teacher's guide, previous studies which deal with teaching techniques and experts opinions since this questionnaire was exposed to jury of specialist in TEFL .Each member in the jury has been kindly requested to modify, change or odd what her she finds suitable to the checklist.

### Table (1) Teachers' questionnaire

1. Do you think that students face difficulties in reading literature passages? **Yes** or **No**

2. Please answer the following:

Items	yes	no
1. Do you think that historical and cultural factors effect on students reading of literature spots?		
2. Do you think that the time allotted to reading literature spots is not enough?		
3. Do you think that the difficulty in reading literature in part stems from the truth that many teachers today are not considering reading as pleasurable activity		
4. Do you think that many teachers do not pay enough attention to reading process, they consider it as neglected process		
5. Do you think that difficulty sometimes stems from rhyiming		
6. Do you think that students face difficulty in automaticity (quick and automatic recognition of words in a connected text)		
7. Do you think that difficulty happen because words slide together or get blurry when reading		
8. Do you think that difficulty stems from using literary devices in texts		
9. Do you think that difficulty may stem from prosody (expressive and meaningful interpretation of text)		
10. Do you think that students have difficulty in spelling and pronunciation, so guesses the meaning of words in context, causing a misunderstanding of the content		

3. Can you add another type of problems you, as an English language teacher, may face with your students?

1. ....

2. ....

3. ....

### Table (2) Students' questionnaire

	Items	I agree	I partially agree	I disagree
1	The difficulty in part stems from the historical and cultural factors			
2	Difficulty in automaticity (quick and automatic recognition of words in a connected text)			
3	The difficulty in part stems from the			

	truth that many teachers today are not considering reading as pleasurable activity			
4	It is hard to pay attention when reading			
5	Homework reading takes too long			
6	Problems in pronouncing new and complex literary words			
7	Difficulty rhyming			
8	Confuses basic words when reading			
9	Have problems in understanding and spelling abstract words, especially those about time and place			
10	Difficulty in remembering content just read in a story			
11	Lacks a sufficient vocabulary of memorized written words			
12	Has difficulty in spelling and pronunciation so guesses the meaning of words in context, causing a misunderstanding of the content			
13	Memorizes the overall appearance and sound of the words, but cannot see the individual letters within the words, which causes to mix up letters or losing the meanings			
14	Difficulty giving directions or explanations, little detail provided			
15	Words slide together or get blurry when reading			
16	Difficulty in prosody (expressive and meaningful interpretation of text)			
17	Difficulty in accuracy (decoding texts)			
18	It is hard to understand the literary devices used in texts			
19	It is hard to understand what the writer has meant			
20	The difficulty in part stems from the interaction between the reader and the text			
21	The teachers do not pay enough attention to reading process, they consider it as neglected process			
22	The difficulty may stem partly because of the time allotted to reading process is so little			

### 2.4 Face Validity:

Face validity is the best type of validity in the case of self-rating (Nunnally, 1972:353). It is secured if the list of items appears to be measuring what is intended to be measure (Ebel, 1972:78).

After constructing the questionnaires items, they were submitted to the jury to assess its validity. \*Jury members were selected on the basis of their specialization and experience in the field of education, psychology, and EFLT. Each member of the jury was requested to point out his/her remarks and suggestions about the suitability of questionnaires items. Accordingly, some items have been modified and others excluded. The majority of jury members have verified the validity of the questionnaires items.

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\*The jury of experts was:

- Amthal Mohammed, Ph.D University of Diyala, College of Education.
- Arwa Abd Al- Karim , Ph.D University of Diyala, College of Education.
- Fatima Raheem, Ph.D University of Measan, College of Education
- Gazwan Adnan, Ph.D. University of Diyala, College of Education.
- Zainab Abbas, Ph.D. University of Diyala, College of Education.

\* **The statistical methods have been suggested by:**

Latifa Majed (Ph.D.) College of Education, University of Diyala

### 2.5 Pilot Administration

A pilot study was required to find out exactly whether the questionnaire is well constructed or not. Ten teachers have been chosen to test the first questionnaire and twenty students from different schools for the pilot administration. The pilot sample is excluded from the total sample of the study. Results of the pilot administration can be a good indicator for making any necessary modifications in the final version of the questionnaire and to determine the effectiveness of the items in the light of the subject's responses.

### 2.6 Final Administration of the Questionnaires

In order to investigate the aims of the study:

1. Identifying intermediate school students' difficulties in reading literary texts from teachers viewpoints, and
2. Identifying and classifying intermediate school students' difficulties in reading literary texts from students' viewpoints

The Final versions of the questionnaires were distributed to the participants at the end of February, 2015.

### 2.7 Overall Performance

### 2.7.1 Results Related to the First Aim

According to data in table 1, the responses of teachers were investigated according to three dimensions as shown in table (1). The mean score of the teachers responses clarify the following:

1. All subjects of the teachers sample agree that their students face difficulties in reading literature passages exist in their textbooks. All of them answer (yes).
2. Teachers responses for the second dimension are in table (3) below:

**Table (3)**

Items	yes	No	Weighted Mean
1	10	5	67%
2	7	8	47%
3	14	1	94%
4	10	5	67%
5	12	3	80%
6	7	8	47%
7	11	4	74%
8	11	4	74%
9	12	3	80%
10	12	3	80%

3. In the third dimension, Teachers were agreed on the following problems:
  1. There is no enough time to exercise more on reading.
  2. Some students consider literature a complex matter so they become demotivated toward reading it.
  3. Literary texts are less attractive among the students.

### 2.7.1 Results Related to the Second Aim

The responses of the subjects were investigated by using the mean score. The students were asked to give their views on the items according to scale of three dimensions, as shown in table (4).

**Table (4) Weighted Mean of the Questionnaire item**

Item (No)	I Agree	I partially agree	I disagree	Weighted Mean
1	18	5	7	60%
2	7	14	9	24%
3	9	8	13	30%
4	10	5	15	34%
5	16	7	7	54%
6	13	8	9	44%
7	11	10	9	37%
8	11	10	9	37%
9	11	8	11	37%
10	5	14	11	17%
11	6	13	11	20%
12	9	3	18	30%
13	8	11	11	27%
14	13	10	7	44%

15	7	10	13	24%
16	9	11	10	30%
17	6	12	12	20%
18	7	9	14	24%
19	12	8	10	40%
20	8	14	8	27%
21	4	7	19	14%
22	8	17	5	27%

### 3. Conclusions:

Conclusions remarks can be clearly pointed out as follows:

1. Iraqi EFL intermediate students face difficulties in reading literary text.
2. According to results, all teachers(the sample) agree on the existence of difficulty in students' ability of reading literary texts that exists in their textbooks.
3. According to teachers' viewpoints, item number (3) which refers to (Do you think that the difficulty in reading literature in part stems from the truth that many teachers today are not considering reading as pleasurable activity) gains the most positive attitudes from teachers . It got a weighted mean 94%.
4. According to students' viewpoints, item number (1) which refers to (The difficulty in part stems from the historical and cultural factors) gains the most positive attitudes from students. It got a weighted mean 60%.
5. According to data in table 1, a significant number of respondents agreed that EFL students face spelling and pronunciation problems to a great extent. Due to this result, usually students end up with miss-pronounced words resulting in irrelevant meaning of the context.
6. According to data collected from teachers, students usually fail in getting the general idea through the process of skimming and scanning in an adequate manner as the argumentative materials and stories and poems are less attractive among the students.
7. The students fail to deal with reading literary passages as a fun activity so that they exhibit very less interest in additional reading materials as they seem unmotivated and uninspired.
8. The students fail to achieve the aims of reading process owing to disinterest in pre-reading activities and self-study at home. They are unable to complete the task within the stipulated time due to slow speed in skimming and scanning process.

### 4. Recommendations:

In the light of the findings achieved and the conclusions derived, the researchers recommend the following:

1. Additional reading habits must be inculcated by giving adequate number of periods in a semester to be used in library.

2. Language skills like listening and speaking with correct pronunciation and accent should be improved under intensive supervision of the facilitator.
3. Some extra reading materials, journals and newspapers of their choice should be provided for improving comprehension skill.
4. Quizzes, puzzles and word games should be organized to improve their vocabulary and word-power.
5. Long training course for teachers is necessary. They should be aware of the aims of the course, the approach on which it is designed and the use of techniques required.
6. Schools should be supported with teaching aids that are needed to facilitate the reading process.
7. The teacher must not follow a rigid scheme in dealing with learners since the reading process must be as fun and stress-free as possible.
8. The teacher must not ignore the teacher's guide which contains step-by-step instructions for each lesson.

### **4.3 Suggestions for Further Research**

1. A similar research is needed to investigate testing system of the new syllabus.
2. A similar research is needed to identify the problems faced by English teachers of English in teaching the new syllabuses.

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