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BEYOND WORD RECOGNITION: RETHINKING READING INSTRUCTION THROUGH TEACHERS' VOICES

ALÉM DO RECONHECIMENTO DE PALAVRAS: REPENSANDO A INSTRUÇÃO DE LEITURA POR MEIO DA VOZ DOS PROFESSORES

MÁS ALLÁ DEL RECONOCIMIENTO DE PALABRAS: REPENSANDO LA ENSEÑANZA DE LA LECTURA A TRAVÉS DE LA VOZ DE LOS PROFESORES

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates teachers' perceptions of the skills-based approach to reading instruction, with a focus on phonics, grammar, and word recognition. While this method supports pronunciation and foundational literacy development, the findings suggest that excessive dependence on it can limit students' reading comprehension and foster passive learning habits. Based on survey responses from 52 teachers, the study identified a growing shift—especially among newer educators and those with formal training—toward incorporating comprehension-focused strategies. The results highlight the need for a more balanced instructional model that integrates foundational skills with meaning-driven approaches to strengthen both literacy outcomes and students' critical thinking abilities.

KEYWORDS: Reading Instruction. Education. EFL. Teacher Perception.

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RESUMO: *Este estudo investiga as percepções dos professores sobre a abordagem baseada em habilidades para o ensino de leitura, com foco em fonética, gramática e reconhecimento de palavras. Embora esse método apoie a pronúncia e o desenvolvimento da alfabetização fundamental, os resultados sugerem que a dependência excessiva dele pode limitar a compreensão de leitura dos alunos e promover hábitos de aprendizagem passiva. Com base nas respostas de 52 professores a uma pesquisa, o estudo identificou uma mudança crescente — especialmente entre educadores iniciantes e aqueles com treinamento formal — em direção à incorporação de estratégias focadas na compreensão. Os resultados destacam a necessidade de um modelo de ensino mais equilibrado que integre habilidades fundamentais com abordagens orientadas por significado para fortalecer tanto os resultados da alfabetização quanto as habilidades de pensamento crítico dos alunos.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Instrução de leitura. Educação. Inglês como língua estrangeira. Percepção do professor.*

RESUMEN: *Este estudio investiga las percepciones de los profesores sobre el enfoque basado en habilidades para la enseñanza de la lectura, centrándose en la fonética, la gramática y el reconocimiento de palabras. Aunque este método favorece la pronunciación y el desarrollo de la alfabetización básica, los resultados sugieren que una dependencia excesiva del mismo puede limitar la comprensión lectora de los alumnos y fomentar hábitos de aprendizaje pasivo. Basándose en las respuestas de 52 profesores a una encuesta, el estudio identificó un cambio creciente, especialmente entre los educadores noveles y aquellos con formación formal, hacia la incorporación de estrategias centradas en la comprensión. Los resultados destacan la necesidad de un modelo de enseñanza más equilibrado que integre las habilidades fundamentales con enfoques orientados al significado para fortalecer tanto los resultados de alfabetización como las habilidades de pensamiento crítico de los alumnos.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Enseñanza de la lectura. Educación. Inglés como lengua extranjera. Percepción del profesor.*

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INTRODUCTION

Reading instruction is shaped by pedagogical frameworks that dictate how students engage with texts. Among the predominant instructional approaches, the skills-based approach remains widely used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, emphasizing phonics, grammar, word recognition, and decoding skills over comprehension and meaning-making (Al-Seghayer, 2021; Al-Nooh, 2013; Al-Samadani, 2011).

While this approach aligns with behaviorist and structuralist theories of language learning, it has been criticized for reducing reading to a mechanical process that neglects higher-order cognitive skills, such as inferencing, critical analysis, and contextual interpretation (Al-Qahtani, 2016; Masadeh, 2015). As a result, EFL learners often develop proficiency in reading aloud and recognizing vocabulary but struggle with deep comprehension, textual analysis, and independent reading (Al-Rojaie, 2011; Al-Shumaimeri, 2011).

A central characteristic of EFL classrooms is their traditional reliance on segmented learning, where reading, writing, listening, and speaking are taught in isolation rather than through integrated instruction (Al-Seghayer, 2021; Al-Samadani, 2012). Reading lessons in schools commonly involve oral reading activities, followed by literal translation, comprehension checks, and word recognition exercises, with little emphasis on comprehension strategies or interactive engagement with texts (Al-Samadani, 2011; Bamanger & Gashan, 2014). Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual methods continue to dominate, leading to rote memorization and surface-level understanding rather than the development of critical literacy skills (Al-Nooh, 2013; Al-Qahtani, 2016). Furthermore, teachers' instructional choices are largely shaped by their own learning experiences, perpetuating outdated reading instruction models that focus on bottom-up processing rather than interactive and meaning-driven learning (Al-Samadani, 2011; Masadeh, 2015).

One major consequence of skills-based reading instruction is its limited effectiveness in developing students' functional literacy. Research has shown that EFL students often lack reading motivation, struggle with text comprehension, and exhibit poor inferential reasoning skills (Al-Subaie, 2014; Al-Seghayer, 2019). Additionally, curricular constraints, time limitations, and assessment-driven instruction further reinforce a test-oriented approach, where reading is evaluated based on correctness rather than comprehension depth (Al-Samadani, 2012; Al-Qahtani, 2016). These limitations highlight the need for pedagogical reforms that integrate meaning-based reading strategies, extensive reading programs, and teacher training initiatives aimed at shifting instructional focus from discrete skills to holistic comprehension development (Al-Samadani, 2011; Masadeh, 2015).

This study seeks to critically analyze the effectiveness of the skills-based approach in EFL reading instruction by addressing the following research questions:

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1. How do EFL teachers perceive the role of the skills-based approach in reading instruction?
2. What are the limitations of the skills-based approach, and how can it be supplemented with comprehension-based strategies?

By exploring these questions, the study aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on reading pedagogy, providing insights into how traditional skills-based instruction can be enhanced with evidence-based, interactive reading strategies that foster critical thinking, engagement, and independent reading proficiency (Al-Seghayer, 2021; Al-Qahtani, 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of the Skills-Based Approach

The skills-based approach in EFL instruction is historically rooted in behaviorist and structuralist theories of language learning, which emphasize the systematic acquisition of discrete linguistic components such as phonics, vocabulary, grammar, and syntax (Al-Seghayer, 2021; Al-Nooh, 2013). Bottom-up processing models of reading (Gough, 1972) posit that comprehension occurs sequentially, starting with letter recognition, phoneme decoding, word formation, and syntactic parsing before reaching meaning construction (Al-Samadani, 2011; Bamanger & Gashan, 2014). Consequently, many EFL curricula continue to emphasize word--level decoding and grammar instruction, expecting that mastery of these lower-level skills will lead to improved reading comprehension.

However, research increasingly recognizes that reading is more complex than a mere accumulation of discrete skills. The cognitive-constructivist approach (Goodman, 1997; Rumelhart, 1977) highlights the interactive nature of reading—emphasizing the interplay between a reader's prior knowledge and textual information (Al-Seghayer, 2019). Indeed, modern pedagogical perspectives advocate an integrated reading model that incorporates both bottom-up and top-down strategies (Al-Samadani, 2012), aligning with findings that successful reading involves skimming, scanning, predicting, inferring, and synthesizing (Alharbi, 2022). It is underscored that proficient reading requires knowledge of vocabulary, cultural/contextual familiarity, and active strategy use—all of which extend beyond simple phonics- and grammar--based routines.

Despite this growing body of evidence, the EFL context often lags in adopting these more holistic and interactive approaches, leaning instead toward teacher-centered models that prioritize memorization and translation (Al-Rojaie, 2011; Masadeh, 2015). As a result,

many EFL learners experience a gap between their phonetic and grammatical accuracy and their ability to engage meaningfully with texts (Alharbi, 2022).

Skills-Based Reading Instruction in EFL Classrooms

In many EFL classrooms, reading instruction remains heavily influenced by grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods (Al-Seghayer, 2021; Al-Nooh, 2013). Teachers often employ oral reading, word-by-word decoding, and translation exercises, frequently resorting to Arabic to clarify new vocabulary. While this approach can reinforce word recognition and grammatical accuracy, it may lead to superficial engagement with the text (Al-Shumaimeri, 2011; Masadeh, 2015). Alharbi (2022) adds that the overreliance on the mother tongue in EFL classrooms can lower students' motivation to practice English, as well as limit their exposure to authentic language input. Moreover, an emphasis on rote memorization persists, especially when students are required to memorize passages for exams. This environment often leaves learners with limited practice in advanced reading skills such as summarizing, interpreting tone, and making inferences (Al-Samadani, 2012; Al-Qahtani, 2016).

Research indicates that time constraints—45-minute periods, typically four times a week—and a textbook-driven curriculum contribute to a fragmented approach to reading (Al-Qahtani, 2016; Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015). Teachers often feel compelled to cover a set number of reading passages, vocabulary items, or grammatical structures within tight deadlines, leading to a focus on discrete skills at the expense of deeper comprehension tasks. Studies find that the secondary and primary curricula often do not adequately differentiate between intensive and extensive reading, nor do they consistently promote motivation or authentic reading experiences (Alharbi, 2022; Al-Subaie, 2014). Assessment practices, which often prioritize multiple-choice questions and recall-based testing, further reinforce surface-level reading skills. This exam-oriented culture leaves little room for interactive strategies—such as group discussions, reading journals, and project-based learning—that could foster critical engagement and better comprehension outcomes (Al-Samadani, 2011; Al-Subaie, 2014).

Teacher preparedness is another critical factor influencing the persistence of skills-based instruction. Many EFL teachers were themselves trained using traditional, teacher-centered methods, and they often lack awareness of evidence-based strategies that can enhance reading comprehension (Al-Samadani, 2011; Masadeh, 2015). Alharbi (2022) points out that ongoing professional development is frequently sporadic or insufficient, leaving teachers with few resources to implement interactive or student-centered pedagogies. This cycle of traditional training and teaching perpetuates a narrow instructional scope, focusing on decoding and grammar drills while overlooking skills like skimming, scanning, and predicting (Al-Nooh, 2013; Al-Qahtani, 2016).

One of the most frequently cited challenges facing EFL learners is the tendency to rely on word-for-word translation rather than contextual inference (Al-Nooh, 2013; Al-Qahtani, 2016). Students often struggle to construct meaning beyond sentence-level comprehension, which restricts their capacity for inference, critical thinking, and global understanding of texts (Al-Samadani, 2012). Other studies emphasize that a lack of sufficient background knowledge, limited cross-cultural familiarity, and minimal practice in active reading strategies exacerbate this over-reliance on decoding (Alharbi, 2022). So, a weak reading culture further hampers comprehension development.

According to Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015), only 9% of EFL students engage in extensive reading outside the classroom, reflecting a broader lack of motivation to read in English. It is noted that many learners do not read English books for pleasure or information, due in part to limited access to interesting and level-appropriate reading materials, as well as insufficient encouragement from teachers and parents. Without nurturing positive attitudes toward reading, learners rarely move beyond minimal textbook requirements (Alharbi, 2022; Alrafaj & Alshumaimeri, 2012).

Vocabulary deficits are consistently identified as a major challenge (Afzal, 2019; Alharbi, 2022). Because EFL learners may acquire as few as 500–700 English words after several years of study (Al-Nujaidi, 2003), they often lack the linguistic foundation needed for comprehension, especially when encountering unfamiliar texts. Equally important is the concept of schema or prior knowledge (Al-Shumaimeri, 2006). Students reading texts on unfamiliar topics struggle significantly more to comprehend, highlighting the importance of both language proficiency and topic familiarity. A further obstacle to effective reading is the high level of anxiety some learners face, particularly when asked to read aloud (Alharbi, 2022). Teacher-centered classrooms, where individual performance is scrutinized, can exacerbate student anxiety and discourage risk-taking in reading tasks. Additionally, large class sizes and external distractions limit opportunities for one-on-one feedback or small-group activities (Alshumaimeri, 2019). This situation often results in a cycle of low confidence and minimal improvement in reading skills.

A growing body of evidence advocates for an interactive reading model that combines bottom-up and top-down processes to balance decoding skills with higher-level comprehension (Al-Nooh, 2013; Al-Samadani, 2011). Research recommends explicit metacognitive strategy instruction—such as summarizing, predicting, questioning, and monitoring comprehension—as a means of empowering students to become active, reflective readers. Integrating these strategies within classroom instruction can help learners move beyond word-level decoding and build more robust textual understanding (Alharbi, 2022; Al-Subaie, 2014; Al-Qahtani, 2016).

Diversifying reading materials and instructional methods is crucial for promoting engagement. Including authentic texts—such as articles, novels, and digital media—familiarizes

learners with real-world language use and boosts motivation (Alharbi, 2022; Masadeh, 2015). In addition, technology-driven approaches such as online reading platforms can cater to different learning styles and encourage extensive reading (Alshumaimeri & Almasri, 2012). Teachers should also consider allowing students to select reading materials based on personal interests, thereby fostering a sense of autonomy and sustained motivation (Clary, 1991).

Numerous studies highlight the need for comprehensive professional development programs to equip teachers with effective, comprehension-based instructional techniques (Al-Seghayer, 2019; Masadeh, 2015). Workshops and in-service training that focus on interactive teaching strategies, metacognitive instruction, and the use of technology in reading can help break the cycle of traditional methods (Alharbi, 2022).

Collaboration among teachers—through peer observation, co-planning, and sharing best practices—can further enhance instructional quality and consistency (Al-Samadani, 2011). Moreover, encouraging parents to participate in their children's reading progress can extend learning beyond the classroom and improve overall reading habits (Alharbi, 2022). Parent involvement might include providing suitable reading materials at home, discussing books or articles in English, and modeling positive reading behaviors.

Creating Supportive Environments underscores the importance of creating supportive and distraction-free environments that foster reading fluency and comprehension (Alarfaj & Alshumaimeri, 2012; Stahl & Kuhn, 2002). Arranging classroom spaces that minimize noise, offering comfortable reading areas, and providing extra-curricular reading clubs or activities can significantly bolster reading outcomes (Alharbi, 2022). Flexible grouping, such as small reading circles or one-on-one tutoring, also supports learners who struggle with reading anxiety or who need more targeted interventions. In conclusion, the skills-based approach dominates EFL reading instruction, shaped by long-standing structuralist and behaviorist influences. While it can effectively build decoding and grammatical accuracy, a narrow focus on discrete skills often results in superficial comprehension and minimal exposure to the broader, integrative processes of reading.

This research was developed to examine the skills-based approach in EFL reading instruction and how teachers perceive it. While the skills-based method provides structured phonics and grammar instruction, it has been widely criticized for limiting students' ability to engage with texts meaningfully. Many learners struggle to move beyond word-level decoding and translation, resulting in poor comprehension and lack of motivation to read independently. Given these challenges, this study explores the teachers' current reliance and view on skills-based instruction By examining the teachers' beliefs, this research highlights the need for teacher training, curriculum development, and classroom strategies that foster both linguistic accuracy and critical comprehension skills among EFL learners.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative survey-based approach to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions of the skills-based approach to reading instruction. The primary objective was to assess the extent to which teachers rely on skills-based instruction, their beliefs about its effectiveness, and the challenges associated with its implementation in EFL classrooms. The study followed a cross-sectional design, gathering data at a single point in time from a sample of university instructors actively engaged in teaching English. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how teachers perceive the role of skills-based reading instruction and how it aligns with students' reading development.

The participants included 52 EFL teachers from two universities. The demographic profile of the participants revealed that 70% were male and 30% were female, with the majority (41%) falling within the 31–40-year age range, followed by 30% aged 41–50 years. Teaching experience varied among the respondents, with 50% having 10–15 years of experience, 25% having 5–10 years of experience, and the remaining 25% possessing more than 15 years of teaching experience. Additionally, 50% of teachers reported attending 1–3 professional development workshops related to reading instruction, while 20% had attended 4–6 workshops. The selection criteria ensured that the study targeted experienced EFL instructors who actively employ reading instruction in their classrooms.

The research instrument consisted of a 23-item structured questionnaire, designed to measure teachers' instructional approaches. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The questionnaire was developed based on existing models of reading instruction and adapted to fit the EFL context.

Data analysis was conducted using R statistical software, applying a combination of descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (mean scores, standard deviations, and response distributions) provided an overview of teachers' instructional preferences, while inferential statistical tests (including bootstrap resampling and ANOVA) examined differences in reading instruction adoption across teacher demographics. The reliability of responses was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha, measuring internal consistency across survey sections.

RESULTS

The analysis revealed that 63% of teachers agreed that their reading instruction follows a skills-based model, emphasizing word decoding, phonics, grammar, and translation. Furthermore, 25% of teachers strongly agreed that the skills-based approach is essential for beginner learners, as it provides structured support for reading accuracy and linguistic

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proficiency. However, 32% of teachers expressed disagreement with exclusive reliance on the skills-based model, citing concerns that it restricts students' ability to develop comprehension and critical reading skills.

Teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of skills-based instruction were mixed. The majority of respondents (70%) agreed that this approach effectively reinforces pronunciation and decoding skills, while 65% found it particularly beneficial for students with lower proficiency levels. Additionally, 58% supported its role in teaching grammatical structures, arguing that explicit grammar instruction aids students in understanding text organization. However, 60% of teachers believed that the skills-based approach limits comprehension development, as students focus excessively on individual words rather than grasping overall text meaning. Furthermore, 55% reported that skills-based instruction promotes passive learning, as students often engage in memorization rather than analytical reading.

The statistical analysis further supported these findings. Bootstrap resampling indicated that teachers who attended professional development workshops were significantly less likely to favor the skills-based approach compared to those with minimal training. ANOVA results revealed a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) in teaching preferences based on experience, showing that teachers with 10 or more years of experience tended to favor the skills-based model, whereas newer teachers (<5 years of experience) were more inclined to use a blend of metacognitive and whole-language strategies.

The reliability analysis using Cronbach's Alpha confirmed the internal consistency of survey responses (0.809). This suggests that teachers consistently identified key features of the skills-based approach, even if it was not their preferred method. Overall, the findings indicate that while the skills-based approach continues to be a dominant instructional method in EFL classrooms, teachers increasingly acknowledge its limitations and the need for alternative models that integrate comprehension-based strategies. The data further suggest that professional development plays a crucial role in shaping instructional choices, with trained teachers demonstrating a preference for interactive and strategy-based reading instruction over phonics-heavy approaches.

The results of this study confirm that EFL teachers still rely heavily on the skills-based approach, particularly for phonics, word recognition, and grammar-focused reading instruction. However, teachers are increasingly incorporating comprehension-based strategies to address the limitations of this method. The findings suggest that teachers' instructional choices are influenced by experience and professional development, with newer instructors demonstrating a preference for metacognitive and whole-language approaches.

DISCUSSION

This study shows that many EFL teachers continue to favor a skills-based approach to reading instruction, even though there is an increasing movement toward comprehension--focused methods. Participants reported that activities like phonics and grammar drills help low-proficiency learners establish fundamental reading skills, confirming findings by researchers such as Mohammed (2016) and Afzal (2019). These discrete-skill exercises can indeed be valuable for students at the early stages of English acquisition, providing clear-cut targets and immediate feedback.

However, teachers also noted the risk of learners becoming overly reliant on decoding at the expense of broader text comprehension. Nezami (2012) and Al-Qahtani (2016) similarly point out that an exclusive focus on word-by-word strategies can limit students' exposure to higher-order skills, such as inferring, predicting, and summarizing. Consequently, many respondents in this study expressed the need to balance foundational literacy exercises with tasks that cultivate deeper cognitive engagement.

A recurring theme in the data is the importance of weaving together basic reading skills and advanced comprehension strategies. While participants saw value in the structured nature of skills-based instruction—particularly for learners with limited English exposure—they emphasized that students also need explicit practice in prediction, inference, summarization, and other meaning-focused techniques (Alsowat, 2017; Altalhab, 2019).

Such strategies not only reinforce fluency but also allow students to engage with texts at a conceptual level, making reading more meaningful and less mechanical (Al-Roomy & Alhawsawi, 2019). Alharbi (2019) concurs, cautioning that teacher-centered classrooms reliant on memorization and translation can lead to passive learners who lack motivation and struggle to tackle authentic English materials on their own. By combining drills on phonics or grammar with open-ended activities—like discussing themes, analyzing characters, or connecting a text to real-life situations—teachers can help students move beyond surface-level reading.

Many respondents in this study mentioned that learners often see reading assignments as purely academic exercises, rather than as skills applicable to everyday life (Alharbi, 2019; Ashraf, 2018). By integrating classroom texts with real-world contexts—such as local news, social media posts, or culturally relevant short stories—teachers can showcase the practical value of reading. Some participants described asking students to read articles about community events or cultural celebrations and then discussing them in small groups. This practice can foster a sense of relevance, as learners recognize that English reading is not limited to textbooks and exams. Involving parents and community organizations (for example, libraries or cultural centers) can extend this connection beyond the classroom, creating "reading-friendly" networks that support literacy development (Alharbi, 2022). When students discuss what they

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read with family members or see English-language signage in their neighborhood, they start viewing reading as a lifelong skill rather than an isolated school task.

Professional development emerged as a crucial factor in encouraging teachers to adopt more comprehension-based approaches. Those who attended reading strategy workshops or participated in professional learning communities reported greater confidence in applying metacognitive techniques—such as student-led questioning, reflective discussion, and post--reading summaries (Alarfaj & Alshumaimeri, 2012; Al Nooh, 2013). By contrast, teachers with minimal in-service training tended to rely more heavily on traditional phonics- or grammar--driven methods. Additionally, the findings suggest that educators with fewer than five years of experience often showed higher openness to learner-centered approaches, in line with the trend noted by Ashraf (2018) and Alshumaimeri (2011).

These newer teachers, exposed to recent shifts in EFL teacher education programs, were more inclined to value interactive reading tasks and contextualized learning. Meanwhile, teachers with more than ten years of experience sometimes struggled to depart from gram-mar-translation routines ingrained during earlier stages of their career. Professional develop-ment opportunities that focus on integrating comprehension strategies within existing curri-cula can help bridge this gap, ensuring that both new and veteran teachers feel equipped to adopt a balanced reading approach.

Many participants in this study emphasized the role of learner autonomy in promo-ting motivation. According to Clary (1991) and Al-Nafisah (2011), letting students choose rea-ding materials that match their interests or proficiency level can reduce anxiety and stimulate curiosity. For instance, teachers could offer a range of graded readers, magazines, or online articles and let students select topics they find personally relevant.

Alharbi (2022) highlights that personal goal-setting—such as maintaining reading logs or aiming for a specific number of pages each week—reinforces a sense of ownership and self--direction. Students who track their progress also become more aware of their growth, which can further boost motivation and persistence. When learners see that reading is not just ano-ther classroom chore but a skill they can tailor to their own interests, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward the English language overall.

Incorporating digital tools can significantly expand reading options and foster greater engagement in literacy practices (Alshumaimeri & Almasri, 2012; Alharbi, 2019). Teachers in the present study described using e-libraries, online forums, and language-learning apps to su-pplement textbook-based instruction. Such resources often accommodate different learning styles and proficiency levels, a feature that becomes invaluable in large, diverse classrooms. Digital platforms also make reading more interactive—students can post questions online, answer quizzes that provide immediate feedback, or work collaboratively on shared vocabu-lary lists. This interactivity tends to encourage critical thinking and deeper comprehension

(Altalhab, 2019), because learners engage with texts in a more active, problem-solving manner. Moreover, the flexibility of digital formats allows students to access readings anywhere and anytime, which can be particularly helpful for those who struggle to complete assignments in a single classroom session.

EFL classrooms frequently contain a high number of students with varying levels of English proficiency (Alshumaimeri, 2019). Many teachers in this study observed that one-size-fits-all, teacher-centered approaches can make it difficult to meet each learner's needs. In response, teachers recommended small-group rotations, often referred to as reading stations, where students rotate through tasks such as vocabulary exercises, silent reading, or targeted comprehension questions.

Nezami (2012) and Alarfaj and Alshumaimeri (2012) both emphasize that this rotation model allows teachers to provide targeted feedback, monitor student progress closely, and address individual gaps. Peer tutoring also emerged as a popular strategy, with stronger readers supporting classmates who need additional assistance. This not only helps struggling learners but also reinforces the skills of more advanced students, creating a cooperative atmosphere rather than a competitive one.

Several teachers pointed out that a limited use of Arabic can be beneficial for clarifying especially difficult words or cultural references, particularly when dealing with beginner-level students. Brief L1 support can save time and prevent learners from getting stuck on complex passages, as long as it does not overshadow the goal of building English proficiency (Alharbi, 2022). Some respondents described using bilingual glossaries, quick translations of key terms, or short explanations of culture-specific items to help students maintain reading flow. The critical factor is ensuring that Arabic is employed as a strategic tool rather than a crutch, preserving English exposure as the primary mode of instruction.

Reading anxiety was another central concern for study participants. Teachers mentioned that students, particularly those with lower proficiency, often fear making mistakes in front of peers, which can discourage active participation. A gradual release of responsibility model is recommended (Alharbi, 2022). Under this approach, the teacher initially demonstrates reading strategies through think-aloud protocols, then transitions to guided group work, and eventually moves to independent activities. Encouraging a positive "error culture" also helps. Rather than penalizing or criticizing mistakes, teachers can frame them as natural parts of the learning process. This approach can gradually boost students' confidence, diminish anxiety, and foster a willingness to engage with challenging texts.

The data highlighted the importance of sustained, curriculum-aligned teacher training. Workshops and professional development sessions often introduce new strategies, but participants stressed that follow-up support—such as peer coaching, lesson observations, or reflective group discussions—is essential for lasting change (Alharbi, 2019; Al Nooh, 2013). For

instance, teachers may learn about summarizing or questioning techniques in a workshop but struggle to implement them consistently if they return to schools with large class sizes or limited resources. Regular collaboration, guided by an institutional framework that encourages experimentation and shared problem-solving, can help teachers adapt these new methods to real-world classroom challenges. Over time, this ongoing support can shift teaching culture away from rigid skills-based routines to more holistic, learner-centered instruction.

Finally, several respondents argued that moving away from purely multiple-choice tests is key to evaluating deeper comprehension (Alarfaj & Alshumaimeri, 2012). While skills-based quizzes can measure word recognition or grammar knowledge, they often fail to assess students' abilities to interpret or analyze texts. Incorporating varied and authentic assessments—such as open-ended questions, group projects, reading journals, or presentations—that allow students to demonstrate understanding in more dynamic ways (Alharbi, 2022). Such formative assessments can also inform teachers about specific areas where students struggle, enabling more targeted intervention. By emphasizing interpretative and analytical skills, these assessment methods align with the push toward meaning-based and critical reading practices.

Implications for Curriculum

All these findings point to the need for curricula that effectively integrate phonics and grammar with authentic reading experiences, strategic use of L1, and consistent development of comprehension skills (Alharbi, 2019). Materials should be culturally relevant, reflect students' interests, and provide ample opportunities for collaborative or technology-enhanced activities. At the same time, teacher training must address real challenges like limited resources, large classes, and time constraints, ensuring that new strategies are both feasible and aligned with assessment practices (Al Nooh, 2013; Alarfaj & Alshumaimeri, 2012). This holistic framework can help EFL students become more motivated, confident readers capable of applying their skills to both academic tasks and real-world contexts.

Future research might investigate how hybrid reading models—combining decoding, metacognition, technology, and real-world tasks—impact student outcomes over extended periods. Classroom observations would be valuable for detailing how teachers balance strategic L1 use, address reading anxiety, and monitor progress through formative assessments (Alshumaimeri, 2019). Additionally, examining shifts in student motivation, self-efficacy, and reading fluency across different teaching methods could guide policymakers and educators in refining EFL curricula. Ultimately, by recognizing the limitations of a purely skills-based approach and incorporating a range of instructional and assessment strategies, EFL classrooms can nurture more independent, engaged, and successful English readers.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide significant insights into the prevalence, effectiveness, and limitations of the skills-based approach in EFL classrooms. While a majority of teachers (63%) continue to rely on skills-based instruction, there is growing recognition of its shortcomings in fostering deep reading comprehension. The strengths of this approach, particularly in phonics development, word recognition, and grammar instruction, make it beneficial for beginner and low-proficiency learners. However, its overemphasis on isolated language components has been identified as a barrier to higher-order reading skills, limiting students' ability to infer meaning, synthesize information, and develop independent reading strategies.

A key finding of this study is the influence of teaching experience and professional development on instructional choices. Teachers with more than 10 years of experience exhibited higher reliance on the skills-based approach, suggesting that traditional pedagogical training has reinforced phonics-heavy instruction. In contrast, newer teachers (<5 years of experience) and those who attended professional development workshops demonstrated a greater inclination toward comprehension-based strategies. These findings suggest that ongoing teacher training and exposure to contemporary reading instruction models play a critical role in shifting instructional preferences toward more interactive, strategy-driven approaches.

Given these insights, it is imperative that EFL curricula adopt a more balanced approach to reading instruction. While the skills-based approach remains valuable, it should be integrated with comprehension-building techniques to ensure that students develop both foundational accuracy and higher-order cognitive skills. Curriculum designers and policymakers should consider hybrid instructional models that combine structured phonics instruction with comprehension strategies, interactive reading tasks, and contextual learning experiences.

Additionally, teacher training programs should emphasize metacognitive and whole-language approaches, equipping educators with the necessary tools to support students in becoming autonomous, critical readers. Future research should further explore the long-term impact of various instructional models on student literacy outcomes, particularly through longitudinal studies tracking students' reading proficiency development. Investigating student perceptions of reading instruction and the effectiveness of hybrid reading approaches could provide valuable insights for refining pedagogical strategies.

In conclusion, while the skills-based approach has long been a dominant model in EFL education, the shifting instructional landscape necessitates a more comprehensive, integrated approach. By moving beyond phonics and grammar-focused instruction and incorporating

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meaning-driven and strategic reading techniques, EFL educators can foster stronger literacy skills and overall language proficiency, better preparing students for academic and professional success in an increasingly globalized world.

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