

WHEN STUDENTS CAN READ BUT CANNOT UNDERSTAND: A PSYCHOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF DECODING–COMPREHENSION DISSOCIATION IN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the phenomenon of decoding–comprehension dissociation among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, where students are able to read English texts aloud fluently but fail to understand the overall meaning of the text. Grounded in psycholinguistic theories of reading, this research employed a qualitative descriptive design involving ten second-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias. Data were collected through classroom observation of oral reading activities and follow-up interviews focusing on students' comprehension and reading awareness. The findings reveal that although students demonstrated adequate decoding skills and reading fluency, their comprehension remained fragmented and limited to surface-level information. Students struggled to integrate ideas across sentences and paragraphs and relied heavily on bottom-up processing. The study concludes that reading fluency does not guarantee comprehension and highlights the need for EFL reading instruction that emphasizes meaning construction, strategic reading, and cognitive engagement. These findings contribute to both theoretical understanding and pedagogical practices in EFL reading instruction.
Keywords: *Decoding–Comprehension Dissociation, EFL Reading, Reading Comprehension, Psycholinguistics, Reading Fluency.*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because it is important for students' academic achievements. (Bodén et al., 2023) explains that reading is more than just recognizing words; it is an active process where the reader interacts with the text to build meaning. In academic settings, good reading skills are necessary for understanding scientific materials, following instructions, and using English-language reference materials.

But in EFL classrooms, students often face a problem where they can read smoothly but still don't understand what they are reading. (Nordström et al., 2025), in their "Simple View of Reading," say that reading comprehension comes from the connection between decoding words and understanding language. If either of these parts is weak, even if a reader can say the words correctly, they may still struggle to understand the text.

From a psycholinguistic angle, reading involves complex thinking processes. (Gani et al., 2025), in his Construction–Integration Model, describes reading comprehension as happening when readers connect new information from the text with what they already know. If this connection doesn't happen, readers may only grasp the text on a surface level without forming a full understanding of its meaning.

(Nursalim et al., 2025) pointed out that not having enough vocabulary and language knowledge can trap EFL readers in a type of bottom-up processing. They focus too much on recognizing words and how they sound, while ignoring the deeper meaning. This often creates a difference between being able to read smoothly and actually understanding the content.

(Swart & Muijselaar, 2017) suggests that how well we understand words is important for reading well. People who don't have strong word knowledge may be able to read the words correctly, but they struggle to get the meaning. This supports the idea that reading skills like decoding and understanding can be separate, especially for English as a Foreign Language learners.

Another important factor is working memory. (Cognitivas et al., 2025) says that working memory helps us hold and use information as we read. If someone's working memory isn't strong, they might find it hard to connect ideas from different parts of a text, even if they can read the words correctly.

(Kandisa et al., 2025) points out that knowing a lot of words is key to understanding what we read. People with limited vocabulary may focus only on saying words right without understanding what they mean in context. This often happens with EFL learners who practice reading aloud more than understanding the actual content.

Besides vocabulary, background knowledge also helps in reading. (Siha, 2025.), using Schema Theory, explain that readers use what they already know to make sense of new information. If someone doesn't have the right background knowledge, they may find it hard to understand the text, even if they can read the words.

In foreign language learning, (A. M. Mohamed et al., 2025) highlights the need to balance two reading processes: bottom-up, which is about recognizing words, and top-down, which is about using context and prior knowledge to understand meaning. If one process is too strong and the other is weak, readers might get stuck on words and miss the overall meaning. This again shows that decoding and comprehension can be disconnected.

Putting all these ideas together, it's clear that the issue of decoding without comprehension is complex, involving language, thinking, and how we process language. This study aims to look at this issue from a psycholinguistic angle. The results should help in creating better reading teaching methods that focus not just on reading smoothly, but also on understanding the real meaning of what is read.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to look closely at and explain the situation where students can read words correctly but still don't fully understand what they're reading. The participants were ten students in their second semester studying English Education at Universitas Nias. A qualitative descriptive design was chosen because it allows for a deep, natural, and realistic look at how students process written material, especially when reading aloud and thinking about the text in real learning settings.

The study is based on three related theories about reading. The first is the Simple View of Reading, introduced by (Silinskas et al., 2024). This idea says that reading comprehension comes from two main parts: the ability to decode words and the ability to understand language. This theory points out that just being able to read words correctly doesn't mean a person understands the whole message. Someone might read the words right but still not get the meaning if their understanding of language isn't strong enough.

The second theory is Schema Theory, developed by (Silinskas et al., 2024). It suggests that reading comprehension is affected by how much background knowledge a person has. Schema, or existing knowledge, helps readers connect new information from a text with what they already know. If someone doesn't have enough related knowledge, they might struggle to understand the text, even if they can read the words smoothly. The third theory is the Interactive Model of Reading, proposed by (Kandisa et al., 2025).

This model explains that reading is a mix of bottom-up and top-down processes. Bottom-up involves recognizing letters, words, and sentence structures, while top-down

includes predicting meaning, understanding context, and using prior knowledge. This model shows that reading isn't a straight line but a complex process that uses both kinds of thinking. Together, these three theories help explain why students might read words correctly but still not fully understand the text.

Data were gathered by observing classes during reading sessions. Students were asked to read aloud a text called "The Environment" from the learning website *Lingua.com*. After they completed the reading, they took part in a short interview about how well they understood the text, what thoughts they had while reading, and how they recognized the meaning of the words and sentences. During this process, the researcher directly noted several things, such as how accurately they pronounced words, how smoothly they read, any trouble they had with understanding key ideas or specific details, and the methods they used when facing new words or difficult sentences.

This method allowed the researcher to spot the issue of decoding and comprehension not matching in real time, without writing everything down or using complicated coding systems. The information collected shows how students actually performed while reading in class at Universitas Nias. Using these observations, the researcher found out how well students could read words correctly without fully understanding the overall meaning of the text, which fits with known reading theories.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study found that students could read English texts with fairly good fluency, but their understanding of the text was not complete. This suggests that being able to read aloud does not always mean they understand the message of the text, which is a point that has been made in earlier reading research (Miranda, 2022).

Text Meaning Comprehension

Students could generally understand the main topic of the text and some clearly stated details. Most of them identified key issues like global warming and its effects on the environment. However, this ability did not lead to a deeper understanding of the whole text. When asked to summarize or explain how ideas are connected, students struggled. This suggests that their comprehension was limited to the surface level, focusing on what was directly stated rather than making sense of the overall meaning. This is similar to what (Wolfe et al., 2024) discussed, where language learners create only a basic understanding of a text and don't fully grasp the context or deeper meaning.

Reading Process

When it came to reading, students focused mostly on pronouncing words correctly and recognizing vocabulary. They paid more attention to reading accurately than to understanding the meaning at the same time. When they met unfamiliar academic words or complex sentences, they tried to figure out the meaning from the surrounding text. However, this method often led to a partial or unclear understanding.

This shows that students used mostly bottom-up processing in reading, which involves focusing on individual words and sentences. They didn't use top-down processing much, like using prior knowledge or making predictions about the text. This is in line with (Nadea, 2021), who say that not combining bottom-up and top-down strategies can make reading comprehension difficult.

Reading Awareness

Students also understood their own reading weaknesses. They realized that reading words accurately doesn't mean they truly understand the text. They could tell the difference between reading a word correctly and explaining the main idea or the reasons behind events in the text.

This shows an early level of metacognitive awareness in reading. As (Molokopeeva, 2023) mention, knowing about one's own reading process is important for improving reading strategies. Yet, in this study, this awareness wasn't matched with the ability to control and improve their reading techniques on their own.

Interpretation of Findings

Overall, the results clearly show that there is a separation between decoding and comprehension. Students had good decoding skills but struggled to understand the deeper meaning of the text. This matches the Simple View of Reading (Silinskas et al., 2024) which says that reading comprehension comes from both decoding and understanding language, not just decoding alone.

Additionally, the lack of comprehension seems connected to not having enough background knowledge about the topic, as described in Schema Theory (Küfi, 2023). Students who didn't have much knowledge about the subject focused only on the obvious parts of the text. So, the findings suggest that to improve reading, teaching should focus not just on fluency, but also on language understanding, activating prior knowledge, and using strategies that help students read more reflectively and connect ideas together.

DISCUSSION

The study's results show that students' reading skills are mainly based on shallow interaction with text, where reading is seen more as a task of reading words correctly rather than as a way to understand meaning. Even though students can read aloud smoothly, their understanding of the text hasn't grown into a full grasp of what is being said. Reading is mostly thought of as the ability to say words clearly, not as a thinking process that involves understanding, linking ideas, and reflecting on what is read. This matches past research in EFL that says too much focus on reading correctly and fluently can stop students from developing deeper understanding (S. M. Mohamed, 2016) Their understanding of the text is broken up, meaning they can't connect ideas from one sentence to another or from one paragraph to the next. This results in them only recognizing key words, not understanding the full message. As a result, students struggle to explain what the text is about or to retell its content clearly, suggesting that higher-level skills like connecting ideas and putting information together have not yet fully developed

Another key problem is that students are not very aware of their own limits when it comes to understanding text. They can tell the difference between reading words and understanding meaning, but this awareness doesn't help them change how they read on their own. This shows that knowing about reading isn't enough without proper training in strategies, as research on thinking about reading (metacognition) has shown (Satriani, 2021). Without help in learning and using reading strategies, students tend to keep using the same basic reading patterns, even if they know they aren't working well. Therefore, reading lessons in EFL settings should focus more on helping students understand the meaning of texts through guided reading, thinking about what they read, and structured practice in comprehension. This approach is needed to help students take control of their reading, so they see reading not just as a mechanical act, but as a meaningful and thoughtful way of understanding.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that many EFL learners experience a clear separation between being able to read aloud smoothly and actually understanding the meaning of what they read. Students may read English texts with good fluency but still struggle to fully grasp the meaning. The study shows that just having strong pronunciation and word recognition skills doesn't automatically mean someone can understand a text well. Reading is often seen as a

mechanical task instead of an active mental process that involves putting ideas together, using prior knowledge, and building a clear understanding. This supports the idea that effective reading comprehension comes from the interaction between decoding skills, understanding language, and thinking processes, not just decoding alone.

The study also found that while students are aware that reading aloud doesn't always mean understanding the meaning, they haven't yet developed strategies to improve this. This suggests that awareness alone isn't enough students need clear guidance and support to turn awareness into effective reading strategies. So, reading instruction in EFL settings should focus more on helping students understand texts deeply, use reading strategies, and engage with texts meaningfully. By addressing the gap between decoding and comprehension through instruction that teaches strategies, EFL learners can develop reading as a thoughtful and meaningful skill that helps them succeed academically.

Recommendations

Based on the study, it's suggested that reading instruction in EFL settings should not just focus on reading aloud fluently and accurately, but also on building a deep understanding of the meaning. Teachers should include activities that help students link ideas across paragraphs, practice reflective reading, and use higher-level questions to improve comprehension. This approach is likely to help students develop reading as an active and meaningful mental process.

Additionally, future research should explore the decoding comprehension gap with more participants and different levels of language ability. Studies could also use experimental or mixed-method approaches to look into how specific teaching strategies affect the relationship between decoding and comprehension. This could lead to better theoretical and practical insights for teaching reading in EFL contexts.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the English Education Study Program at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Nias, for their academic support and resources during this study. They also wish to acknowledge the lecturers and colleagues who provided helpful feedback, suggestions, and guidance throughout the writing and editing of this article.

The authors are also grateful to the students who participated in this study. Their willingness to take part and their openness during data collection were essential in completing this research successfully. All individuals and organizations that contributed, either directly or indirectly, through moral or technical support, are deeply appreciated for their valuable contributions to this study.

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