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An exploration of teaching reading practice and pedagogical knowledge in secondary schools

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This study investigates the pedagogical strategies employed by Saudi secondary school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in the teaching of reading. It explores teachers' instructional practices and underlying perceptions of reading pedagogy using qualitative methods, including interviews and classroom observations. It focuses on identifying opportunities for enhancing both classroom teaching and professional development programmes. Findings from nine EFL teachers in the Southwest Saudi Arabia reveal a consensus on the importance of reading instruction, alongside significant variation in pedagogical knowledge and implementation. The analysis reveals several critical dimensions, including linguistic knowledge encompassing phonetics and morphology, diverse teaching methodologies, reading comprehension strategies, assessment techniques, and approaches to student motivation. Particularly evident is the need to develop students' reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and fluency. The study shows that teachers place a strong emphasis on the foundational elements of literacy, such as phonology and reading fluency. Importantly, it reveals how effective pedagogical practices correlate with increased student engagement and satisfaction in reading activities. These findings have significant implications for the redesign of teacher training programmes and the development of more effective frameworks for teaching reading in EFL contexts.

KEYWORDS

reading comprehension, pedagogical practice of reading, EFL reading, qualitative study, secondary school

1 Introduction

Reading competence has emerged as a critical factor in second language acquisition, with substantial research over the past decade demonstrating its dual role in facilitating language development and supporting academic achievement across disciplines (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2023; Grabe, 2009). The demonstrated correlation between reading proficiency and overall academic achievement (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2023; Gebhard, 2006) underscores the urgent need to enhance reading instructional methods for contemporary learners (Roskos and Neuman, 2014). This need is particularly evident in EFL contexts where reading serves as both a learning objective and a medium for language acquisition.

The cognitive complexity of reading involves a dynamic interaction between reader and text, with strategic processes such as decoding and summarizing playing a significant role in comprehension (Grabe and Stoller, 2019; Kung, 2019). Despite four decades of scientific consensus on the importance of reading as a fundamental lifelong skill (Filderman et al., 2022; Romadlon, 2017; Smith et al., 2021), significant challenges remain in implementing effective

reading instruction, particularly in Arab educational contexts (Assulaimani, 2019). These challenges take on particular significance considering research showing that teachers' pedagogical knowledge and classroom practices fundamentally shape student outcomes (Borg, 2015).

The current study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining reading instruction in the Saudi EFL secondary education system. While global challenges in L2 reading instruction are well-documented, the specific nature of pedagogical practices and their effectiveness in Saudi classrooms remains underexplored (Alghonaim, 2020). This research focuses on rural secondary schools in southwestern Saudi Arabia, where English language teaching challenges may be particularly acute. The findings will contribute to ongoing efforts to improve reading outcomes in the Saudi EFL context, while providing insights that may prove valuable for similar educational settings internationally.

2 Research aim and questions

This study investigates the pedagogical practices and reading knowledge of EFL teachers in Saudi secondary schools. The following research questions guide this exploration.

1. What is pedagogical reading knowledge in secondary schools?
2. How do teachers teach reading in secondary schools?

3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework explores the theoretical concepts that underpin the practice and pedagogical knowledge of reading among English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher. The study of L2 learners' reading development is grounded in several theoretical perspectives that inform the understanding and teaching of reading. These perspectives include cognitive theories of reading, sociocultural theories, and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) frameworks. Each will be reviewed in turn.

3.1 Cognitive theories of reading

Cognitive theories, which focus on mental processes, such as decoding, comprehension, and integrating latest information with prior knowledge, are directly relevant to EFL teachers. These theories provide a framework for understanding how students process written text and highlight the importance of automaticity in reading skills. EFL teachers can use this knowledge to design instructional practices that enhance reading fluency and comprehension. For example, Grabe and Stoller (2019) point to the role of cognitive processes in making meaning from texts, which is critical for L2 learners in developing effective reading strategies. It is essential to focus on automaticity and comprehension strategies to improve reading fluency and language acquisition (Grabe, 2004; O'Brien et al., 2015b). In this study, cognitive theories informed the development of interview questions that explored teachers' perceptions of students' decoding strategies, comprehension processes, and reading fluency. However, cognitive theories have been critiqued for their limited attention to the

social and interactive dimensions of learning, which are crucial in language acquisition contexts (Reinders et al., 2022).

3.2 Sociocultural theories

Sociocultural theories, particularly Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), emphasize the role of social interaction and cultural context in learning. For EFL teachers, this theory underscores the importance of scaffolding and guided instruction in reading. Teachers can help students achieve higher reading comprehension and analysis levels by providing structured support and fostering collaborative learning environments. According to Kung (2019), effective scaffolding is crucial to boosting students' reading skills and integrating cultural and contextual knowledge into the learning process. The Sociocultural theory guided the design of observational protocols, focusing on collaborative reading activities, scaffolding strategies, and the integration of cultural contexts during instruction. Nevertheless, critics argue that sociocultural approaches can sometimes understate the importance of individual cognitive development in reading skills (Messenger, 2024).

3.3 Pedagogical content knowledge

The concept of PCK is central to understanding effective teaching practices in reading. PCK, as introduced by Shulman (1986), refers to the specialized knowledge teachers need to teach specific content effectively. The concept of PCK entails integrating knowledge about language structures and effective teaching practices. PCK helps teachers understand how to present reading material in accessible ways to L2 learners and which instructional strategies are most effective. As noted by Phelps et al. (2009), effective reading instruction requires teachers to combine their understanding of language with pedagogical strategies tailored to the needs of EFL students, thereby enhancing their comprehension and engagement. The PCK framework developed interview protocols and classroom observations, focusing on teachers' approaches to presenting reading materials and addressing L2 learners' needs. Nonetheless, fully operationalizing PCK across heterogeneous EFL classrooms presents significant challenges.

The research design of this study was informed by cognitive theories, sociocultural perspectives, and PCK frameworks. These perspectives guided the development of interview questions addressing individual and collaborative reading practices, structured classroom observations focused on scaffolding and instructional strategies and provided analytical lenses for interpreting how teachers foster EFL students' reading development. The integration of these complementary frameworks enabled a comprehensive examination of reading instruction within Saudi EFL contexts.

4 Literature review

Developing reading skills is widely acknowledged as an essential aspect of fostering second language acquisition (SLA)

among language learners. However, reading in SLA research is often considered challenging due to the cognitive demands it imposes. This challenge is further complicated by the linguistic differences between learners' first language (L1) and second language (L2), as well as other factors, such as teaching methods. A review of existing literature on this topic reveals a considerable body of work, highlighting the need to establish relevance and complicating the process of conducting a comprehensive research review in this key area of language teaching and learning. The literature outlines two conceptualizations of reading and examines the importance of developing learners' reading skills. It provides a narrative overview that explores various aspects of EFL teachers' practices and pedagogical knowledge of reading, as well as the methods used to teach reading in English in Saudi Arabia.

4.1 Importance of reading skills for L2 learners

In SLA, proficient reading skills are universally recognized as essential for academic success and overall language development (Gebhard, 2006; Grabe, 2004). In the context of Saudi public secondary schools, where English is taught as a foreign language, developing reading skills is even more critical. Effective reading is foundational for students' academic achievement and ability to engage with diverse subjects. Understanding the importance of reading skills can provide a backdrop for examining how reading instruction is approached in these schools and how it affects student learning outcomes (Ferris and Hedgcock, 2023; Roskos and Neuman, 2014).

4.2 Challenges in teaching reading in L2 contexts

Teaching reading in L2 contexts, including Saudi Arabia, presents several challenges. Assulaimani (2019) highlights that despite efforts to improve reading instruction, obstacles, such as inadequately trained teachers, insufficient resources, and cultural attitudes, persist. These challenges are particularly relevant in Saudi public secondary schools, where traditional teaching methods may not align with the complex cognitive demands of effective reading instruction. Understanding these barriers helps frame the investigation into how such challenges are being addressed and the effectiveness of current strategies (Mangen and Van der Weel, 2016).

4.3 Cognitive processes in reading

Reading involves complex cognitive processes, such as decoding and inferencing, which are crucial for comprehension (Grabe and Stoller, 2019; O'Brien et al., 2015a). Developing these cognitive skills is essential for L2 learners in Saudi schools to improve reading fluency and comprehension. This linkage emphasizes the need to explore how reading instruction in these schools supports the development of cognitive processes and whether current practices effectively address learners' needs.

4.4 Role of teachers in reading instruction

Teachers are critical in facilitating reading development among L2 learners (Dixon and Oakhill, 2024). In Saudi public secondary schools, the effectiveness of reading instruction depends significantly on teachers' knowledge and pedagogical practices. As Phelps et al. (2009) note, teachers must integrate content knowledge with pedagogical strategies to enhance reading comprehension. This highlights the importance of examining how teachers in these schools apply their PCK and its impact on students' reading development.

4.5 Pedagogical content knowledge in reading instruction

Integrating PCK into reading instruction is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of teaching (Borg, 2015; Phelps et al., 2020). For Saudi EFL teachers, developing PCK involves not only understanding reading content but also how to teach it effectively to diverse learners. Exploring how PCK is applied in Saudi public secondary schools can reveal whether teachers use their knowledge to design effective reading lessons and meet students' needs.

4.6 Research on reading instruction in L2 contexts

Research into effective reading instruction practices provides insights into how various strategies can be directed to enhance reading development (Kung, 2019). In Saudi schools, effective practices need to be identified and the factors influencing reading development understood. Through investigative existing research and its application within the Saudi context, this study aimed to assess how well these practices are implemented and their impact on student progress.

Several strategies, including scaffolding, differentiated instruction, and the use of technology, can enhance reading instruction for L2 learners (Assulaimani, 2019; Kung, 2019; Roskos and Neuman, 2014). Applying these approaches effectively to Saudi public secondary schools could address some of the identified challenges and improve reading outcomes. This study explores how these strategies are currently used, their effectiveness, and how they can be optimized to better support reading instruction in Saudi contexts.

Previously, several studies (Alqahtani, 2015; Alrawili et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2015a; Al-Mohanna, 2024) have investigated reading instruction in public schools in Saudi Arabia. All these studies highlighted the importance of various instructional strategies, such as differentiated instruction and focus on instructional strategies, implementation challenges, teachers' perceptions and practices, and their impact on student outcomes. Meanwhile, the current study focuses on teaching reading practices and pedagogical knowledge, encompassing a broader range of educational theories and practices that extend beyond the instructional strategies highlighted in the previous studies. It covers theoretical foundations and comprehensive instructional methods enabling effective reading instruction.

Considering the literature examined previously, most studies have found not focusing on teaching reading practice and pedagogical knowledge. It is interesting to note that most studies have been conducted in East Asia, Europe, and America. Few studies explore the critical aspects of reading instruction and pedagogical knowledge, specifically focusing on Saudi public secondary schools. This study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how reading practices and teacher knowledge affect student learning by exploring the importance of reading skills, the challenges faced, the cognitive processes involved, and the role of teachers and PCK.

4.7 Critical analysis of the literature

The literature on second language (L2) reading instruction provides valuable insights into its challenges and complexities. While studies highlight the importance of reading for academic success and language development (Grabe, 2004; Gebhard, 2006), few provide a detailed analysis of pedagogical strategies specific to Saudi Arabia. Most existing research (e.g., Assulaimani, 2019; Mangen and Van der Weel, 2016) focuses on challenges such as inadequate teacher training and limited resources, but rarely explores how these issues are addressed within the Saudi education system. In particular, the influence of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge on reading instruction is often overlooked. Although some research examines PCK in EFL classrooms (Borg, 2015; Phelps et al., 2020), it remains underexplored in the Saudi context. The ability to integrate content knowledge with effective pedagogy is essential for reading development, yet studies rarely examine how Saudi teachers apply such integration. For example, while Phelps et al. (2020) highlight the importance of integrating content and pedagogy, their findings are not fully contextualized in Saudi public schools, where different teaching methods and cultural factors may influence classroom practices.

Similarly, although strategies such as differentiated instruction and scaffolding are frequently discussed (e.g., Alqahtani, 2015; Alrawili et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2015a), little is known about their long-term impact on student outcomes. Few studies explore the practical implementation of these methods in Saudi secondary schools. Furthermore, while the cognitive processes involved in reading are well-documented (Grabe and Stoller, 2019), their application in real classrooms remains largely theoretical, with minimal research into how teachers develop these processes in students.

Teacher professional development is another area that needs to be explored in more depth. Although studies acknowledge its importance (Roskos and Neuman, 2014; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2023), findings are often generalized to global contexts, neglecting the specific training needs of Saudi EFL teachers. There remains a critical gap in tailoring professional development programmes to meet the contextual demands of Saudi public schools.

4.8 Contribution of this study

This study aims to address these gaps by focusing on the interplay between teachers' pedagogical knowledge, instructional

strategies, and reading outcomes in Saudi public secondary schools. In contrast to previous studies, which have mainly focused on general strategies and challenges, this study examines the role of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in shaping reading instructional practices. By exploring how teachers' understandings of content and pedagogy influence their teaching practices, the study will provide valuable insights into how PCK can be used to improve reading outcomes in the Saudi EFL context. In addition, this study will provide a more comprehensive analysis of the cognitive processes involved in reading by examining how reading skills such as decoding, inference, and comprehension are taught in Saudi schools. By analyzing the effectiveness of current teaching strategies such as scaffolding and differentiated instruction in the Saudi context, the study aims to contribute to the development of more contextually relevant and effective methods of reading instruction. Finally, the study will provide actionable recommendations for professional development programmes specifically tailored to the needs of Saudi EFL teachers, enabling them to better address the cognitive and instructional challenges of teaching reading in second language contexts.

5 Methodology

This qualitative study was conducted in secondary schools in southwestern Saudi Arabia between November 2022 and January 2023. It employs an exploratory design to investigate two primary objectives: (1) to examine EFL teachers' pedagogical knowledge of reading instruction, and (2) to document their actual classroom practices in teaching reading skills. Adopting an interpretive paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), the study seeks to understand teachers' lived experiences and professional practices within their educational contexts. This approach is consistent with Wellington's (2000) assertion that meaningful educational research requires immersion in school settings to capture authentic participant perspectives. As Morcom (2014) highlights, qualitative methodology enables researchers to "understand the world of the participants by placing the researcher, with all his or her values and assumptions, in that world" (p. 21). This is a particularly valuable approach when studying complex educational phenomena.

The first author served as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, engaging directly with participants to elicit their understandings of reading pedagogy and observe their classroom practices. This researcher's positionality allowed for an in-depth interpretation of teachers' perspectives while acknowledging the inevitable influence of researcher subjectivity (Bell, 1993). Through this approach, the study aims to generate rich, contextualized insights rather than generalized truths, reflecting an interpretive commitment to multiple realities in educational settings.

6 Method

This study conducted semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The data was analyzed inductively to extract qualitative pedagogical knowledge of teaching reading and the reality of teaching reading practices in secondary schools.

7 Participants

Nine Saudi male EFL teachers with 8–18 years of teaching experience working in secondary schools in the southwest of Saudi Arabia during the second semester of the academic year 2023/2024 participated in this study. The focus on male teachers limits the generalizability of the findings to female or co-educational settings. This decision was made due to the availability of participants in the selected schools. The teachers work full-time to teach English in eight southwest Saudi Arabia schools. They work in rural schools with low and mid-class economic status. The Southwest society is conservative and monocultural. The population typically belongs to specific tribes that share the same religion, language, ethnicity, and traditions. It is worth noting that the data of this study were not based on a diversity of participants ethnically and socioeconomically due to the nature of society in the southwest of the country.

A convenience sample was adopted to recruit teachers based on their availability (Marshall, 1996). However, this approach is limited in terms of the diversity of the sample and may introduce biases due to the homogeneity of participants, as they all work in similar rural, socioeconomically homogeneous settings. According to Yates et al. (2012), the suitability of selecting participants in qualitative research has to be taken into “the appropriateness to the purpose of the research...and they experience of the phenomenon being explored” (p. 103). All English teachers have bachelor’s degrees (BA) in teaching English from Saudi universities. Table 1 shows the participants’ pseudonyms, qualifications, and their experience.

TABLE 1 Details of participants.

No.	Teachers’ pseudonym	Qualifications	Experience
1	Ahmed	BA, Applied Linguistics	8
2	Bander	BA, English Literature	11
3	Careem	BA, Teaching English	13
4	Faisal	BA, English literature	14
5	Gamal	BA, Applied Linguistics	16
6	Hazim	BA English Literature	14
7	Jalal	BA Teaching English	9
8	Khalid	BA Teaching English	10
9	Mohanad	BA, Teaching English	18

8 Data collections

Interviews and classroom observations were used to collect data. The semi-structured interviews aimed to elicit teachers’ pedagogical knowledge of reading before observing their teaching. In line with the study questions and the ideas from the literature review about teachers’ pedagogical knowledge of reading, the semi-structured interview protocol was developed to cover two dimensions: teachers’ pedagogical knowledge of reading and their reading teaching practices. The protocol was piloted with a small sample of teachers to ensure its clarity and effectiveness. Based on the feedback, minor revisions were made to the questions to refine them and ensure their relevance to the research focus.

1) English teachers’ pedagogical reading knowledge

- How do you teach reading in secondary school?
- What do you think you need to know to teach reading perfectly?
- What do you think of the skills your students need to learn reading?

2) English teachers’ pedagogical teaching practices

- How do you teach vocabulary?
- How do you teach word recognition in your classroom?
- How do you teach reading comprehension?
- How do you teach reading fluency to secondary students?
- How do you assess your way of teaching reading using the teaching strategies mentioned?

The design of the interview protocol was intended to provide us with a frame of reference in the study. The first author recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim. Nine interviews were conducted with nine teachers individually, with an average length of 40 min.

The classroom observations were conducted after the interviews. Each teacher was observed during a reading lesson of 45 min. The observations focused on reading comprehension activities with classes of 20–25 students. Notes were taken during the lesson using an observation protocol (Appendix A), and the lessons were audio recorded to ensure accurate data collection, as video recording is prohibited in Saudi public schools. All nine observations were audio recorded and transcribed because video recording lessons in Saudi public schools is prohibited. The observation lasted 45 min. An observation protocol was formulated and followed to create a record of each lesson (Appendix A).

9 Data coding and analysis

The data analysis was guided by thematic analysis, using NVivo 11 software. The data were analyzed inductively by identifying categories and themes. The five stages of qualitative data analysis outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were followed: immersion, categorization, reduction, triangulation, and interpretation.

Initially, two research members participated in reading and producing transcripts of the interviews and classroom observations. This allowed for deep immersion in the data, ensuring thorough understanding before coding. After immersion, open coding was performed. The team collaboratively created a list of initial codes based on teachers’ statements and observations. For instance, the code “*phonics confusion*” was created from multiple mentions of difficulties students faced with phonics in reading. This code was later categorized under the broader theme of “linguistic knowledge” because it related to teachers’ understanding of the challenges students face when learning reading skills. Following open coding, both research team members met to discuss their initial interpretations. They refined codes and reframed them based on their shared understanding of the data. Codes were assigned collaboratively and grouped into larger categories, ensuring the categorization process was a joint effort to build a more accurate interpretation of the data. The next stage focused on grouping these categories into broader themes. The team analyzed interlinks between categories to ensure the relationships among them

were logically coherent. For example, categories like “linguistic knowledge” and “teaching strategies” were integrated into a larger theme about teachers’ pedagogical approaches to reading. A third researcher reviewed the emerging themes across all transcripts to ensure the validity and reliability of the coding process. This final review ensured that the categories and themes were consistent and grounded in the participants’ responses. The final themes were confirmed by ensuring that the codes and categories remained stable and consistent across different data sources (e.g., interviews and observations). These were the final themes presented in section 12.

10 Trustworthiness and quality criteria

We applied Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) model to ensure the trustworthiness of our analysis. Below are the four key pillars of quality in qualitative research, with their definitions and applied examples in Table 2. Data saturation

TABLE 2 Quality criteria of qualitative analysis.

Concept	Meaning	Way of ensuring trustworthiness
Credibility	It is equivalent to internal validity, which aims to ensure believable findings.	We used multiple methods of data collection, including interviews and classroom observations, to ensure that our findings were comprehensive. In addition, we conducted content checks by sharing coded data with participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. We also avoided generalizing findings beyond the context of the study.
Transferability	It is equivalent to external validity. To what extent can generalize findings in other situations and participants.	We ensured that all participants came from the same socio-cultural context, thus ensuring that the findings are specific to the context of Saudi EFL teaching. By collecting in-depth data through interviews and classroom observations with each participant, we ensured rich data for analysis.
Dependability	It is equivalent to reliability. It is equivalent to reliability. To what extent similar findings will be obtained if the study is repeated with the same procedures?	The use of triangulation between interviews and classroom observations helped to verify the consistency of the findings. In addition, we provided detailed descriptions of the cultural and educational context in which the study was conducted, allowing future researchers to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings.
Confirmability	It is equivalent to objectivity. It tends to save findings from researcher bias.	To minimize researcher bias, two researchers engaged in the coding process. Each member of the research team independently coded the data and later compared the results. This ensured inter-coder agreement, where we reached a consensus on coding and categorization, thereby strengthening the objectivity of our findings.

was reached when no new themes emerged from the last few interviews and observations, indicating that the data sufficiently represented the teachers’ pedagogical knowledge and teaching practices.

11 Ethical considerations

This article carefully followed the ethical guidelines of the BERA principles [British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018]. Regarding anonymity and confidentiality for teachers, all have been given pseudonym names in publications, interviews, and observation transcriptions because it is important “to ensure they should not be threatened” (Wiersma and Jurs, 2005, p. 189). A consent form was obtained from all teachers in this study. We also informed them they could withdraw from the study at any stage.

12 Findings

From the data analysis, we organized findings into two main themes which linked directly to the study questions that the study sought to address. The nine major codes were shown with their definitions and numbers of responses coded as seen in Table 3. The findings pertaining to pedagogical knowledge of teaching reading are presented first, and then, findings regarding teaching reading practices are presented second.

12.1 Teachers’ pedagogical subject knowledge of reading for EFL students

This theme refers to English teachers’ abilities to deliver effective teaching and learning of reading for EFL learners. It also enables teachers to think of what they want to teach and how they teach. The teachers’ interviews explored the key teachers’ ideas on pedagogical reading knowledge in EFL secondary schools. The theme draws on the four codes identified: linguistic knowledge, teaching methods, reading comprehension, and assessment. These codes are discussed below.

12.1.1 Linguistic knowledge

Teachers unanimously emphasize the centrality of linguistic knowledge, such as phonics and decoding, to reading instruction, although many face challenges in its implementation. Six out of nine teachers indicated that they had taken a teaching module on linguistic knowledge during their undergraduate studies. In their responses, they explicitly described what they meant by linguistic knowledge. It is decoding, phonology, morphology, and fluency. This code, linguistic knowledge, received the highest number of responses from the teachers. Teachers in the interviews described it as having to do with:

TABLE 3 Description of themes, definitions, and numbers of responses to each theme.

Theme	Codes	Definition	Number of responses	Examples
Teachers' pedagogical subject knowledge of reading	Linguistic knowledge	This refers to the knowledge of letters and sounds that teachers need to instruct students reading.	58	A teacher explains the difference between the sounds of “b” and “p” to beginner readers.
	Teaching methods of reading	This refers to teachers' approaches to teaching reading	40	A teacher uses phonics instruction to help students decode unfamiliar words.
	Reading comprehension	This refers to teachers' comments about how they process reading texts, making students understand their meaning and kinking meaning with their knowledge.	36	A teacher asks students to predict what will happen next in a story to check their understanding.
	Assessment of reading	This refers to teachers' comments on how they evaluate students on reading.	29	A teacher uses a reading checklist to assess students' ability to summarize a text.
Pedagogical practices in EFL classrooms	Prior knowledge	This refers to teachers' comments and practices on the role of prior knowledge in reading	28	A teacher activates students' knowledge about future of work before reading a story about <i>Artificial intelligence</i> text.
	Reading-oriented objectives in textbooks	It refers to teachers' comments which express their pedagogical practices in implementing the syllabus and covering its objective.	23	A teacher plans a lesson to meet the textbook objective of “identifying the main idea of a paragraph.”
	Motivating learners	It refers to attempting teachers' practices in engaging students in classroom reading tasks.	19	A teacher uses a reading game where students earn points for finding details in the text.

Most of my lesson time was spent in explaining vocabulary, and pronunciation, and sometimes teaching students how they produce sounds for letters (Hazim).

It is important for me to start with teaching phonics and explaining consonants and vowels letters before asking students read texts (Bander).

I always share with students a tape record for reading text to teach them how they recognise sounds (Jalal).

It is essential to hear sounds and realise how they relate to letters and spelling (Gamal).

One of the most experienced teachers, Careem, reported a need for the students to “*master phonics in primary and intermediate schools. I always face many problems in pronouncing words at secondary schools, which effect students' reading confidence in reading.*” In this comment the teacher emphasized the importance of language knowledge in reading and therefore the need for language skills in reading, speaking, and understanding meaning.

Although the teachers recognized the importance of phonics teaching, several, including Faisal and Mohanad, admitted that they faced challenges and needed to revise their knowledge to explain the distinctions between letters and sounds effectively. More experienced teachers, *Faisal, and Mohanad* reported a need to revise their knowledge to explain the differences between letters and sounds. The following extracts illustrate this:

Teaching phonics is challenging for me. Last week, students asked about the different T sounds in little, star, and talk. At home, I learned that the T sound varies depending on its position

and surrounding sounds (Mohanad).

I spend time practicing difficult vocabulary before teaching them to students. Once, a student asked me why we pronounce “C” in “cry” as “K” and “c” in “city” (Faisal).

Another teacher, *Ahmed*, who has 8 years of experience, overcame his weak awareness of teaching phonics by joining a session on the edX platform. The teacher accepted his need for training and looked for online training to meet his needs:

I couldn't face my students without fully understanding phonics, so I enrolled in an online phonics program on edX (Ahmed).

The data regarding teachers' interviews shows that teachers unanimously concentrate on the role of linguistics knowledge in teaching reading for EFL learners. However, they mentioned a few issues in teaching linguistic knowledge. It was evident that all teachers studied English as a second language, and they did not have English in their early years of schooling because the decision to teach English in the early years of schools in Saudi Arabia was launched in 2021 ([Ministry of Education, 2023](#)). Thus, some teachers considered teaching linguistics knowledge not an easy task.

12.1.2 Teaching methods of reading

This code received the second most comments from teachers. The teachers believed teaching methods were a way of motivating students and involving them in reading in classrooms. All teachers emphasized the importance of having training courses on how to teach English

to EFL students, and they had many training courses in teaching strategies because it is essential for their professional development.

Most of the teachers' responses centered on three aspects of teachers' knowledge of reading strategies: the metacognitive process, a process of what a reader does, and why a reader does read. Despite reporting these three aspects in teachers' responses, they did not assemble in one response. The teachers differentiated between teaching methods of reading and other teaching strategies for language skills. Some teachers stressed displaying their knowledge of teaching reading to students because it helps them succeed. One teacher, Faisal, reported that it is crucial for reading teachers to *"have knowledge of how to integrate reading activities in their teaching vary their methods of teaching reading."* This extract points to the role of the teaching approach in facilitating the reading process.

One teacher talked about the role of teaching methods in promoting students to participate in reading activities by saying, *"students cantered strategies such as silent reading, and reading in pairs, help students to break their fear of reading."* In contrast, three other teachers believed that individual reading allowed them to detect students' problems and help overcome them. Other teachers highlighted the critical role of modeling reading in developing students' pronunciation. For example, Jalal said, *"mostly, I ask students to listen to the recording passage by native readers before asking them to read individually."* Hazim reported the effective pedagogical approaches in English as *"a window of engaging with culture and the world through texts."* Generally, in this view, the teacher highlighted the role of the interactive model in fostering active communication in teaching reading. Focusing on communication competence and promoting an environment for communication enable students to express themselves confidently, enhance their linguistic accuracy, and encourage student engagement.

Teachers mentioned various methods such as silent reading, pair work, and prediction but rarely used metacognitive strategies such as summarizing or evaluating texts as observed in classrooms.

The lesson observations promoted what teachers mentioned in their interviews regarding the teaching strategies. However, in the lesson observation, one teacher tried to functionalize a critical pedagogy in teaching reading in very few educational situations. This attempt was illustrated in the below extract:

Teacher: do you think this topic fits with people's interest in the 21st century?

By asking this question, the teacher tried to persuade students to critique the textbook's content, which the Ministry of Education designed. The teacher sent a message to policymakers that students have to interact actively with their learning and solve their problems instead of repeating and memorizing information. Despite the teacher's attempt to encourage students to take a particular role in the discussion, silence was spread in the classroom. Criticism seemed unfamiliar to the students, who were not confident in expressing their views.

12.1.3 Reading comprehension

The code, *reading comprehension*, received the third most comments in the teachers' interviews. The participants agreed with the importance of comprehension and linguistic knowledge in developing students' reading levels. The teachers have expressed the importance of comprehension because it helps students grasp the meaning of texts. Teachers linked comprehension to vocabulary and decoding, although observations revealed minimal focus on inferential skills, such as *prediction and analysis*.

Although the teachers have stressed the importance of teaching comprehension skills in reading, they believe decoding and gaining vocabulary were to be acquired in early learning stages, not at secondary schools. Despite that, they thought every English teacher must have specific teaching comprehension and decoding knowledge. Four participants thought that reading without engaging with meaning is empty. The following extracts show their views:

It is important for students to have a stock of vocabulary to get meaning (Ahmed).

I think reading without comprehension is like a bag without goods (Jalal).

One teacher, Bander, described secondary students' struggles with comprehension, vocabulary, and decoding, noting that *"students stare at texts because they are unable to engage with them"* (Bander interview).

Almost two-thirds of the teachers mentioned other elements that play a crucial role in comprehension, such as *"practicing reading books at home," "selecting age-suitable texts,"* and *"assessing comprehension by asking after reading questions."* Some teachers emphasized the role of practicing reading and repeated reading in enhancing students' reading fluency. Mohaned described his method of improving reading fluency as seen in the below extract:

"I always ask students to read and record their reading many times and bring their records as assignments."

It was evident that teachers tried to enhance comprehension, fluency in reading, and pronunciation by using various comprehension strategies, such as independent and guided practice in individual and collaborative work. This was an apparent approach in teachers' practices, as seen in the following extract:

"I start any reading text by asking them to answer literal questions and find some specific information. So, they must get used to reading rapidly!" (Khalid).

Another teacher explained the size of reading difficulties: students lack comprehension, vocabulary, and decoding in secondary schools. He stated that *"students are staring at texts because they are not able to engage with them."* In this situation, many expressions were reiterated, such as *"ensuring students understanding," "explaining difficult vocabulary," "role of punctuation in meaning," "strategies before reading,"* and *"reading*

fluency” to push students to engage in reading. The teachers examined students’ comprehension through various techniques such as questions technique or discussions or by thinking aloud. The teachers seemed to have a content knowledge of reading comprehension and pedagogical knowledge of teaching comprehension. Although teachers discussed the importance of direct instruction in comprehension during interviews, classroom observations revealed limited implementation of these strategies. For example, Carrem, who described scanning strategies in his interview, used worksheets as a comprehension strategy. In addition, Ahmed, who explained four strategies for teaching comprehension, used inferential methods that were not mentioned in his interview.

12.1.4 Assessment of reading

The code, *Assessment of Reading*, refers to teachers’ practices to diagnose students’ reading ability and determine their strengths and weaknesses. A substantial set of teachers’ responses referred to the importance of evaluating students in reading. However, the teachers’ perspectives in this code are divided on how reading assessment has been implemented. Some views went with using formal exams, which are required in the subjects. One teacher reported that *“it is necessary to examine students” reading in both midterm and final exams and recording their scores.*”

Assessment combined formal (exams, worksheets) and informal (oral reading, recordings) methods, but classroom observations showed limited integration during instruction. For example, Hazim, with 14 years of experience, said he uses *“reading worksheets to diagnose strengths and weaknesses,”* while another teacher mentioned using *“written tests.”* Faisal explained he assesses students by recording their reading at home, which *“encourages practice and participation,”* adding that it helps students *“enhance their reading through repetition and pronunciation.”*

Similarly, Ahmed, who has 8 years of experience, emphasized the importance of combining oral and written assessments, noting that *“individual pronunciation checks must be complemented with formal written exams.”* Hazim also reported using a mix of strategies, including *“asking comprehension questions, having students read aloud, and giving quizzes during lessons.”*

Overall, the teachers agreed to determine students’ reading problems. They realized the importance of helping them enhance their progress in reading individually. However, teachers’ classroom practices did not reflect assessment methods as a part of their teaching, except that they asked students to read texts loudly and pose comprehension questions.

12.2 Pedagogical practice in EFL classrooms

This theme refers to exploring teachers’ knowledge of pedagogical practices in teaching reading, which they claimed in their interviews, through their practices in classrooms. Three codes emerged and are discussed below.

12.2.1 Prior knowledge

Teachers stressed in their interviews the role of students’ prior knowledge of reading and learning. They believed that it is crucial in reading because it helps readers develop their levels. For example, the teacher, *Ahmed*, did not hesitate to say that *“prior knowledge carries culture, attitudes, feelings. It is not just a sort of information.”* This means that understanding of texts is formed when connecting texts’ ideas with students’ background of knowledge. Another teacher pointed out one because that contributes to the weakness of students in reading:

“When students have limited prior knowledge of a topic, they do not engage actively in discussions” (Ahmed)

Furthermore, some comments tried to link prior knowledge to retaining information or engaging in their interests. For example, expressions like *“they do great in games, sport, cars, Olympics, fashions topics,”* but students are less active in *“literature and history”* topics.

Teachers often activated prior knowledge through questions or pre-reading activities. For instance, they asked students to recall previous lessons and vocabulary, such as in Faisal’s class when he prompted students to remember the topic from their last lesson. As seen in the extract below:

Who is the best football player?

Who did have Ballon d’Or in 2022?

Who travelled to Qatar to watch the World Cup 2022?

Tell me when the football game started.

It was evident in classroom observations that all teachers tried activating prior knowledge by retrieving previous lessons by asking students a general question, *“tell me what we had last reading lesson.”* Then, they asked students to memorize some previous vocabulary. The below extract exemplifies the point:

Jalal: we had a reading lesson last time, tell me what was about?

S1: It was about the value of money and friendship.

Jalal: what lesson you have learned from the lesson?

The teacher, *Jalal*, who has 9 years of experience, asked students before starting a new lesson to recall the information about what they had. He also went deeply by asking them to write the same vocabulary they had in the previous lesson.

Some teachers were aware of the role of activating prior knowledge before reading because they can overcome the weakness of some students and fill the gap of lack of knowledge through this strategy. For example, a student asked the teacher, *“what does Ballon mean?”* Another student volunteered to answer his colleague’s question. This example shows us the extent of activating prior knowledge in diagnosing strengths and weaknesses of students’ information. Despite the importance of previous knowledge, it

is considered a linguistic challenge for students in the study context. It was mentioned in the previous theme clearly in lack of vocabulary, decoding, and fluency. On the other hand, teachers cannot choose reading texts for their students even if they know students' interests. However, they substituted that by activating students' background knowledge and providing extra information about textbook topics.

12.2.2 Reading-oriented objectives in textbooks

One of the pedagogical practices that underpinned the teaching of reading in Saudi EFL classrooms was the coverage of syllabus objectives within a set time limit. Teachers' pedagogical practices were primarily guided by the objectives outlined in textbooks, often at the expense of deeper engagement with reading. Many teachers expressed concern that reading was not given enough time in the curriculum.

Teachers expressed that while they accepted the limited number of texts in the syllabus, reading often took a back seat to teaching grammar and extracting literal information from texts. Their pedagogical practice focused primarily on covering syllabus objectives, answering exercises and reading texts aloud. Observations showed that some teachers extended reading time by dividing tasks into pre-reading and reading activities. For example, Hazim had students read texts at home and identify new vocabulary before engaging in the lesson in class, as the following excerpt from his observation shows.

T: Did you find new vocabulary with its meaning?

S1: Yes, I have 11 words, I don't know what they mean.

T: let us know what did you have?

S1: (the student read his list of vocabulary, and he struggled to pronounce them).

Despite the teacher asking students about the new vocabulary in the text, he opened discussions among students by asking the class to answer what their colleague raised. With this technique, the teacher tried to activate students' knowledge and motivate them to read individually. The second task was requesting students to read texts silently and loudly, not to answer questions, but to practice reading. Teachers' interview comments have supported the shortage of time practicing reading in classrooms. Many comments indicated that teachers tried to teach reading based on texts' objectives and textbook drills. Teachers did not have more time to let all students read lessons.

12.2.3 Motivating learners

Teachers sought to engage students in reading tasks using different teaching strategies before, during, and after reading texts. It was observed that all teachers gave students 5 min at the beginning of the lesson to read texts silently. Then, they started asking them questions. The extract below is an example from Faisal's class.

T: (Asked students open page 26), How can you describe the frame of reading text? Ahmed.

Ahmed: It is a desktop screen.

T. Well done, what else can you say, Class?

Thamer: It is web screen.

T. Of course, today, we are going to read about how can you find a job. Please, read for five minutes silently, and underline difficult vocabulary.

T. (He starts writing five questions on the whiteboard while student finishing silent reading. when student finished reading, he asked them about their difficult vocabulary and he added them to a list of new vocabulary on the board, and asked students about them, what does ... mean? When students did not respond to the question, he explains the meaning of words. The teacher after that asked students the five questions. He asked class to read one by one read the text loudly).

The teacher gave students adequate time to scan the text before asking them questions and made it feasible for them to identify unfamiliar vocabulary. Despite determining students for some vocabulary from the text, the teacher identified a list of new vocabulary on the board to facilitate understanding.

Another teacher, Careem, indicated that "group reading encourage students to participate in discussions because students make an active interaction while reading collaboratively." It is evident in this comment that social interaction among students while reading in groups may be considered a source of motivation. Students seemed to feel more confident in discussions with their peers and when they were far from anxious about assessment. It was observed in Hazem's class that despite engaging students in silent, loud reading and model reading after listening to the recorder reading, some students struggled in reading some vocabulary such as combustion, disappointment, aerial, and burial. This is evidence of the lack of decoding, as mentioned by teachers earlier in this article. Due to large class sizes (36–45 students) and limited class time, teachers often struggled to provide adequate reading practice for all students, with activities typically lasting no more than 20 min.

During classroom observations, most teachers used group reading and question-and-answer strategies to encourage participation, although some students struggled with certain vocabulary. However, the implementation of silent reading time was not consistent across classrooms.

13 Discussion

The article intends to explore pedagogical knowledge and practices among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who provide instruction in reading in public secondary schools in Saudi Arabia. This approach helped identify the pedagogical knowledge and practices and how EFL teachers applied them

in teaching reading, building on the quantitative results of the questionnaire and exploring the participants' perceptions and beliefs.

The discussion of the findings is based on the theoretical framework derived from the qualitative analyses, articulating the link between pedagogical practice and pedagogical knowledge of reading from EFL teachers' perspectives. The data analysis provides a comprehensive view of teachers' pedagogical subject knowledge and practices in teaching reading to EFL students. The thematic analysis in this study, conducted using NVivo 11 and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) five-stage outline, offers insights into key areas, such as linguistic knowledge, teaching methods, reading comprehension, assessment, prior knowledge, and the implementation of reading-oriented objectives in textbooks. This discussion critically examines the findings and evaluates their implications for teaching reading in EFL contexts. This discussion also draws on socio-cultural theory, particularly Vygotsky's concepts of mediation and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), to interpret how teachers' practices are influenced by their social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

13.1 Linguistic knowledge

The intention was to explore EFL teachers' pedagogical knowledge of reading and identify their teaching practices. Based on the interviews and lesson observations with nine teachers representing a proportionate cultural, socioeconomic, and contextual background, we could ascertain the level of pedagogical reading knowledge in secondary schools. We also effectively established how the teachers teach reading to their EFL students. Despite our exploration, more studies are needed to validate our findings in EFL contexts.

The findings regarding teachers' pedagogical reading knowledge indicate that they are skilled at teaching reading in their classrooms. However, their practices are not always represented. In their interviews, teachers stated the importance of varying reading teaching methods. The lesson observations supported their beliefs, using silent, aloud, individual, and peer reading approaches.

Despite teachers' beliefs regarding the importance of blending silent and aloud reading for comprehension, the teachers typically focus on understanding new vocabulary, decoding, and correctly pronouncing words when reading. This focus suggests that teachers prioritize surface-level linguistic skills over deeper comprehension. From a sociocultural perspective, reading development should involve scaffolded interactions that mediate meaning, helping students bridge the gap between decoding text and constructing meaning collaboratively. Thus, teachers monitored these skills more highly while reading more than comprehension. This task took time away from teachers because they aimed to ensure all students participated in reading and correcting their pronunciation. This result aligns with findings reported previously in this context (Alqahtani, 2015; Alrawili et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2015a; Al-Mohanna, 2024).

Possible differences between those studies and the current study may be attributed to varying contextual features, teacher training protocols, school resources, student demographics, research methods, and the specific focus of each study. Understanding these differences is crucial for interpreting the results and establishing their implications for improving reading instruction in EFL contexts. Further research addressing these factors is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of effective teaching practices and pedagogical knowledge in diverse educational settings.

Linguistic knowledge is the foundation of successful reading, and its importance is well-documented. Teachers' emphasis on phonics, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency aligns with research highlighting the need for a solid linguistic foundation to support the development of reading skills (Snow et al., 1998). However, some teachers encounter challenges, particularly when teaching phonics, suggesting a gap in their initial training and professional development. This gap is concerning given the recent policy changes in Saudi Arabia, which introduced English at earlier educational stages.

13.2 Teaching methods

The diverse teaching methods employed by teachers, such as silent reading, reading in pairs and individual assessments, demonstrate awareness of the requirement for varied instructional strategies. This is essential when catering to different learning styles and promoting active engagement in reading activities (Grabe, 2009). However, the inconsistencies when applying these methods suggest a disconnect between teachers' knowledge and their practical implementation in the classroom. From a sociocultural viewpoint, these inconsistencies may reflect a lack of external mediation and contextual support for implementing diverse methods effectively. Institutional pressures, rigid curricular expectations, and limited collaborative professional learning opportunities may limit teachers' ability to apply their knowledge fully.

The findings from the interview and observation reveal the importance of student-centered strategies, highlighting the potential benefits of a range of approaches responsible for reducing students' fear of reading. This result supports Grabe's (2009) and Alqahtani's (2015) findings. However, the reliance on traditional assessments and lack of systematic integration of these methods indicate the need to introduce more structured training programmes. Even though this finding is consistent with the current study, some factors vary across the two studies, like the number of participants.

A further factor considered was professional development, which focuses on equipping teachers with the requisite practical skills to implement diverse reading strategies effectively. This contrasts with O'Brien et al. (2015a), Al-Mohanna (2024), and Alshehri (2025), whose findings emphasized the role of technology in traditional performance assessment, the systematic integration of instructional methods, and continuing professional development. This might be because this study evaluated the

diversity of teaching methods and the need for more structured training programs.

13.3 Reading comprehension

The literature review shows that reading comprehension is universally acknowledged as a critical component of reading instruction (Duke and Pearson, 2002). The present study's findings suggest comprehension strategies, such as home reading assignments and selecting age-appropriate texts, align with best practices in literacy education. However, the disconnect between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices indicates a need for more explicit instruction in the form of comprehension strategies. This finding highlights a sociocultural gap: without structured mediation and professional scaffolding, teachers may find it difficult to translate abstract beliefs about comprehension into concrete classroom practices.

Interestingly, this study's findings compared reading without comprehension to "a bag without goods," underscoring the importance of ensuring students grasp the meaning of texts and the need for a broader, cohesive approach to developing reading lessons. Professional development should include training on integrating comprehension strategies into routine instruction and regularly implementing formative assessment methods.

Furthermore, Block and Parris' (2008) study supports the finding that teachers' stated beliefs and their teaching practices often differ. They argue that although teachers acknowledge the importance of comprehension, they do not always know how to effectively incorporate comprehension strategies into their instruction. This highlights the need for professional development focusing on practical, real-world approaches to teaching comprehension. The use of home reading assignments and age-appropriate text selection, as mentioned in this study, is also supported in other studies. For example, Allington (2012) indicated the importance of providing engaging, appropriate reading-level texts to promote student engagement and enhance comprehension. Similarly, the National Reading Panel (2000) determined that providing students various texts and reading opportunities at home could significantly improve their reading comprehension.

13.4 Prior knowledge

The role of prior knowledge in reading instruction is well-supported by research, stressing its importance for comprehension and engagement (Schema Theory; Anderson and Pearson, 1984). Teachers' efforts to activate prior knowledge through pre-reading activities and discussions reflect their understanding of this principle. However, students' limited prior knowledge often requires specially crafted and targeted strategies to build and activate background knowledge. It is evident that, from the combined findings of the interviews and observations, the cultural, attitudinal, and informational aspects of prior knowledge indicate a complex interplay of factors that influence reading comprehension. From a sociocultural perspective, activating prior

knowledge is not simply recalling information; it is a dynamic, socially mediated process where teachers help students connect their lived experiences and cultural backgrounds to new texts, enriching comprehension.

Similarly, a study by McKeown et al. (2009) suggested that pre-reading activities that stimulate prior knowledge can significantly improve comprehension. Their study found that students who discussed their existing knowledge before reading a text performed better on comprehension tasks than students who did not. Indeed, the current study's findings also indicated that classroom practices effectively linking latest information to students' existing knowledge can enhance engagement and understanding. We therefore argue that the participants preferred engaging students in reading tasks using different teaching strategies before, during, and after reading texts. This might enhance pedagogical precision and help teachers focus on particular aspects of texts, make social interaction more manageable, and increase their learning productivity and practice of formal and informal English writing styles. Professional development should also focus on equipping teachers with strategies to activate and develop prior knowledge, particularly in culturally diverse classrooms.

13.5 Reading-oriented objectives in textbooks

According to Allington (2012), an excessive emphasis on achieving textbook objectives can limit the depth and quality of any reading instruction. He suggests that designing a flexible and adaptable curriculum to students' needs and interests can result in more meaningful and effective lessons. This argument is supported by the findings obtained for the current study, with objectives and textbook constraints identified as a common concern by teachers. Covering textbook objectives frequently restricted reading activities' time and depth. This issue highlights the need for a more flexible and comprehensive approach to curriculum design, allowing for deeper engagement with reading materials. A sociocultural interpretation suggests that curriculum design should be flexible and context-sensitive, enabling teachers to deliver learning according to students' needs rather than rigid textbook-driven objectives.

Teachers' desire for more comprehensive reading practices suggests a need for curriculum reform, prioritizing the development of reading skills over rigid adherence to meeting textbook objectives. Involving teachers in the curriculum design process and giving them the autonomy to adapt and supplement materials could also enhance the effectiveness of reading instruction. Professional development should also assist teachers with balancing the demands of the syllabus with the need for comprehensive reading instruction.

Similarly, a study by Au (2011) determined that standardized curricula frequently do not meet students' diverse needs, leading to a superficial treatment of content rather than intensive discussion. Moreover, the findings in the current study reflect a desire for more inclusive reading strategies, aligning with work by Darling-Hammond (2006), emphasizing the importance of teacher

involvement in curriculum development. Her study found that when teachers are included in the curriculum design process, they are more likely to implement instructional practices that promote a deeper understanding and engagement with reading materials. However, we assume different contexts and educational policies might impact textbook objectives. On the other hand, a study by Schmidt and Prawat (2006) offers a contrasting perspective. They found that while flexible curricula can improve education quality, they risk producing inconsistent educational outcomes. They further argue that for all students to have quality education, a balance must be struck between flexibility and adherence to standardized goals.

Through a sociocultural lens, effective curriculum design must transcend rigid, textbook-driven objectives, embracing instead a flexible, contextualized, and responsive model. This approach allows teachers to mediate and adapt reading activities in ways that honor students' evolving needs, cultural backgrounds, and lived experiences.

14 Study limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it relied on a small, convenience sample of nine teachers, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. Second, the study included only male participants, which limits the applicability of the findings to male-dominated educational contexts and reduces their relevance to co-educational or female-only settings. Third, the use of self-reported data collected through interviews and observations may introduce bias or concerns about the representativeness of the data. As the first author conducted both the interviews and the classroom observations, potential interviewer and observer biases could arise. To mitigate these risks, reflexive practices were implemented, and regular discussions were held with co-researchers. In addition, a comparative coding process between the primary and secondary researchers was used to ensure consistency and reliability in data interpretation, thereby strengthening the credibility and neutrality of the findings.

15 Conclusion

The findings revealed that while teachers recognized the importance of integrating reading into the curriculum, there were notable differences in their pedagogical knowledge and instructional practices. Key strengths and challenges emerged across several domains, including linguistic knowledge, teaching methods, reading comprehension strategies, assessment techniques, and student motivation. Despite holding positive beliefs about reading instruction, many teachers struggled to apply theoretical knowledge consistently in classroom setting, highlighting gaps in professional development. This study

contributes to EFL teaching by providing a detailed examination of reading instruction in Saudi secondary schools. For educators and teacher trainers, it highlights the need to improve pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), particularly in the areas of strategy-based instruction and assessment literacy. Based on the findings, it is recommended that policy makers prioritize the development and implementation of targeted professional development programmes aimed at improving reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition and fluency.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Ethics Committee at the University of Bisha. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MA: Methodology, Writing – original draft. SA: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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Appendix A

TABLE A1 Classroom observation protocol.

Teacher		No. of students	
Lesson title			
Data		Day	
Time	Start	End	
Descripting environmental learning			
.....			
.....			
.....			
.....			
Done	Items		
	Activating prior knowledge of students		
	Engaging students in reading texts		
	Engaging students in understanding of meaning		
	Giving students an adequate time for reading and discussions		
	Engaging students to develop their word recognitions		
	Engaging students to develop fluency in reading		
	Engaging students to develop awareness of phonics		
	Modeling and sharing comprehension strategies to help students' comprehension texts		
Note		
		
		
		
		