

**ESTABLISHING READING COMPREHENSION  
ABILITY OF IRAQI EFL PRE-UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS**

**ZUBAIDA TARIQ NAJIM AL-JUBOORY**

**UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA**

**2017**

**ESTABLISHING READING COMPREHENSION  
ABILITY OF IRAQI EFL PRE-UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS**

by

**ZUBAIDA TARIQ NAJIM AL-JUBOORY**

**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of requirements  
for the degree of  
master of science**

**April 2017**

## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this work to all Iraqi martyrs; To my dearest family, my father Judge Al-Juboory Tariq and my mother Al-Daghstani Faiza for taking care of me since my childhood and whose good examples have taught me to work hard for the things that I aspire to achieve, may Allah bless their life, in addition, to my lovely sisters and my dearest brother whose continuous love and prayers have had profound impact on success in my life. I pray to almighty GOD to protect them and bless them forever.

This thesis work is also dedicated to my mother in law and father in law who have always loved me unconditionally, I am truly thankful for having you in my life, to the symbol of love and giving, my brothers and sisters in law, who encourage and support me.

My deep appreciation and gratitude goes to my husband who leads me through the valley of darkness with light of hope and support, to the source of happiness in my life, my daughters: Fatimatuzahraa, Minnatullah, and Jannah, whom I can't force myself to stop loving.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

In the name of Allah, the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful Alhamdulillah, all praises to Allah for the strengths and His blessing in completing this thesis. Special appreciation goes to my supervisor, Professor Shaik Abdul Malik Mohamed Ismail, for his supervision and constant support. His invaluable help of constructive comments and suggestions throughout the thesis works have contributed to the success of this research. My gratitude also goes out to Dean of the School of Educational Studies, Prof. Dr. Hairul Nizam Ismail as well as the staff in School of Educational Studies at USM. for their support and help towards my postgraduate affairs.

I would also express my sincere gratitude to everyone I might not be able to mention by names due to the excessive numbers. My prayers and my good wishes are always for them.

Finally, I thank and praise Allah, God the Almighty, who gave me the capability and perseverance to complete my study. Alhamdulillah.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iii
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES .....	xi
ABBREVIATIONS .....	xii
ABSTRAK .....	xiii
ABSTRACT .....	xv

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

1.0 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background of the study.....	2
1.2 Education system in Iraq .....	4
1.2.1 English language in Iraq .....	5
1.2.2 Assessing reading of English language in Iraq.....	6
1.3 Problem Statement .....	7
1.4 Objectives of the Study .....	10

1.5 Research questions.....	12
1.6 Rationale of the study .....	12
1.7 Significance of the study.....	13
1.8 Limitations of study.....	13
1.9 Definition of Terms .....	14
1.10 Summary .....	15
 <b>CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	
2.0 Introduction.....	17
2.1 Reading comprehension .....	17
2.2 Reading comprehension tests and assessments.....	23
2.3 Types of reading comprehension test questions .....	25
2.3.1 Cloze test .....	25
2.3.2 Open ended question test .....	26
2.3.3 Multiple choice test .....	26
2.3.4 Short-answer questioning test .....	28
2.3.5 True or false question test .....	28

2.3.6 Matching test .....	29
2.4 Identifying the students' reading skills and comprehension abilities .....	29
2.4.1 Iraqi English Language syllabus .....	29
2.4.2 Iraqi English Language textbooks .....	30
2.4.3 Bloom's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension .....	31
2.4.4 Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension.....	32
2.5 Score meaning .....	35
2.6 Benchmarking students' reading performance level .....	36
2.6.1 Performance standards of Reading .....	38
2.7 Conceptual framework .....	41
2.8 Summary .....	43
 <b>CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY</b>	
3.0 Introduction .....	44
3.1 Design of the research .....	44
3.2 Procedure of the research .....	47
3.3 Population and sample size (participants).....	47

3.4 Development of performance indicators to identify reading skills .....	48
--	----

3.8 Summary .....	48
-------------------	----

## CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

4.1 Research Question 1 .....	49
-------------------------------	----

4.1.1 Barrett's taxonomy of reading comprehension .....	49
---	----

4.1.2 Iraqi English Language curriculum and syllabus .....	51
--	----

4.1.3 Textbooks and examination papers .....	51
--	----

4.2 Development of a prototype standardized reading comprehension test	
--	--

Instrument .....	55
------------------	----

4.3 Validity of the prototype reading comprehension test .....	64
--	----

4.4 Reliability of the prototype reading comprehension test .....	65
---	----

4.5 Procedure of scoring .....	66
--------------------------------	----

4.6 Developing the cut scores .....	67
-------------------------------------	----

4.7 Developing a reading matrix .....	67
---------------------------------------	----

4.8 Selecting the Performance Levels .....	69
--	----

4.9 Administering the Prototype Reading Comprehension Test .....	69
--	----



4.10 Data analysis procedure .....	70
------------------------------------	----

4.11 Summary .....	70
--------------------	----

## **CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS**

5.0 Introduction .....	72
------------------------	----

5.1 Research Question 1 .....	72
-------------------------------	----

5.2 Research Question 2 .....	74
-------------------------------	----

5.2.1 Reading comprehension Performance Assessment .....	74
--	----

5.3 Research Question 3 .....	77
-------------------------------	----

5.4 Research Question 4 .....	79
-------------------------------	----

5.4.1 Performance Bands Results .....	80
---------------------------------------	----

5.4.2 Development of reading performance indicators .....	81
---	----

5.5 Results of reading comprehension ability bands .....	87
--	----

5.5.1 Primary Level .....	87
---------------------------	----

5.5.2 Intermediate Level .....	88
--------------------------------	----

5.5.3 High Level .....	89
------------------------	----

5.6 Benchmarking reading comprehension performance .....	90
--	----

5.7 Summary .....	91
-------------------	----

## **CHAPTER 6: RESEARCH DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

6.0 Introduction .....	93
------------------------	----

6.1 Research question 1: How can this study develop a reading comprehension test instrument? .....	95
---	----

6.2 Research question 2: How can the reading performance indicators of students' reading comprehension abilities be established? .....	97
---	----

6.3 Research question 3: How can the descriptors of the reading performance levels of Year 12 students be developed? .....	101
---	-----

6.4 Research question 4: What are the reading comprehension standards of Year 12 students? .....	102
---	-----

6.5 Relationship to Previous Research .....	104
---	-----

6.6 Recommendations for stakeholders .....	109
--	-----

6.7 Recommendations for Further Research .....	110
--	-----

6.8 Conclusion .....	111
----------------------	-----

REFERENCES .....	112
------------------	-----

APPENDICES	
------------	--

## LIST OF TABLES

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Table 2.1:</b> Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension	33
<b>Table 4.1:</b> Mean scores of students' reading comprehension performance	51
<b>Table 4.2:</b> Skills and sub-skills of Reading	53
<b>Table 4.3:</b> Extracted sub-skills of Reading Comprehension for Specified Reading Index	54
<b>Table 4.4:</b> Extracted Reading performance indicators for year 12 students	55
<b>Table 4.5:</b> Distribution of questions	57
<b>Table 4.6:</b> Number of Reading Comprehension Questions at Primary Level	58
<b>Table 4.7:</b> Distribution of Primary Level Reading Comprehension Questions	58
<b>Table 4.8:</b> Number of Reading Comprehension Questions at Intermediate Level	59
<b>Table 4.9:</b> Distribution of Intermediate Level Reading Comprehension Questions	60
<b>Table 4.10:</b> Number of Reading Comprehension Questions at High Level	61
<b>Table 4.11:</b> Distribution of High Level Reading Comprehension Questions	61

<b>Table 4.12:</b>	Reading comprehension sub-skills in the Iraqi EFL syllabuses	62
<b>Table 4.13:</b>	Matrix of performance standards	68
<b>Table 5.1:</b>	Prescribed reading comprehension performance indicators of Year 12 students	73
<b>Table 5.2:</b>	calculation of the pilot study raw scores	76
<b>Table 5.3:</b>	Developing scores for bands	77
<b>Table 5.4:</b>	Reading Performance Chart	77
<b>Table 5.5:</b>	The descriptors of performance standards	78
<b>Table 5.6:</b>	Frequency of students of reading performance bands in Year 12	79
<b>Table 5.7:</b>	Frequency and Percentage of performance bands	80
<b>Table 5.8:</b>	Mean and standard deviation of the students' total scores.	80
<b>Table 5.9:</b>	Literal Sub-skills at Primary Level	81
<b>Table 5.10:</b>	Reorganization Sub-skills at Primary Level	82
<b>Table 5.11:</b>	Inferential Sub-skills at Primary Level	82
<b>Table 5.12:</b>	Literal Sub-skills at Intermediate Level	83
<b>Table 5.13:</b>	Reorganization Sub-skills at Intermediate Level	84
<b>Table 5.14:</b>	Inferential Sub-skills at Intermediate Level	85
<b>Table 5.15:</b>	Literal Sub-skills at High Level	86
<b>Table 5.16:</b>	Reorganization Sub-skills at High Level	86
<b>Table 5.17</b>	Inferential Sub-skills at High Level	87

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
<b>Figure 2.1:</b> Conceptual Framework of the Study	42
<b>Figure 3.1:</b> The framework of the Study	46
<b>Figure 5.1:</b> The cut scores development	76
<b>Figure 5.2:</b> Frequency and percentage of the students in the performance bands	91

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>EFL:</b>	English as a Foreign Language
<b>EL:</b>	English Language
<b>RPIs:</b>	Reading Performance Indicators
<b>SRCT:</b>	Standardised Reading Comprehension Test

**MENENTUKAN TANDA ARAS KEBOLEHAN MEMBACA DAN  
KEFAHAMAN DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR EFL PRA-UNIVERSITI DI  
IRAQ**

**ABSTRAK**

Membaca adalah kemahiran penting dalam memahami sesuatu teks dan seterusnya memahami pengalaman tulisan penulis. Adalah penting bagi setiap pelajar mempunyai kemahiran membaca dan kefahaman menghadapi cabaran akademik. Pelajar tahun 4 sekolah rendah sehingga tahun 12 (pra-universiti) didapati dapat membaca teks yang berbeza, tetapi sebenarnya kebanyakan mereka tidak memahami apa yang mereka baca. Selaras dengan keadaan akademik terkini, kefahaman membaca menjadi penting kepada pelajar kerana ia adalah langkah pertama menuju kejayaan akademik. Keupayaan membaca dan kefahaman pelajar perlu dinilai secara berkesan dari segi kemahiran yang perlu mereka kuasai mengikut tahap pendidikan mereka. Sistem penilaian dalam sistem pendidikan Iraq bergantung kepada sistem peperiksaan peringkat kementerian yang seragam serta dijalankan pada tiga peringkat iaitu; Peperiksaan Sekolah Rendah, Pertengahan Sekolah Menengah, dan Akhir Sekolah Menengah. Instrumen ujian dan sistem penggredan tidak menyediakan kepada guru maklumat khusus mengenai kebolehan membaca dan kefahaman pelajar, kekuatan atau kelemahan kemahiran membaca dan kefahaman pelajar. Oleh itu, adalah matlamat kajian ini adalah untuk mewujudkan satu ujian membaca kefahaman yang seragam berdasarkan kurikulum dan sukatan pelajaran EFL Iraq (2013-2014) dan *Barrett*

*Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension* (Day & Park, 2005); dalam usaha untuk mewujudkan satu penanda aras yang mengkategorikan kemahiran membaca dengan tepat serta perkara yang pelajar boleh atau tidak boleh lakukan dan seterusnya untuk mengenal pasti keupayaan membaca dan kefahaman pelajar secara individu. Kajian ini membangunkan prototaip instrumen ujian membaca dan kefahaman yang seragam dan sah serta boleh dipercayai. Justeru, 120 orang pelajar dari tahun 10 hingga tahun pertama universiti telah diberikan ujian tersebut dan gred mereka kemudiannya digunakan untuk menentukan *cut scores* dan tahap prestasi serta kebolehan bacaan pelajar pula boleh dirujuk kepada *Reading Matrix*. Instrumen ini kemudiannya diberikan kepada 200 pelajar tahun 12 di Iraq dan data yang diperolehi dianalisis dan ditanda aras untuk menetapkan petunjuk kebolehan membaca pelajar dengan merujuk kepada *Above Standard*, *Meet Standard*, *Below Standard* dan *Critical Standard*. Di samping itu, deskriptor komprehensif tentang kebolehan pelajar mengikut kategori prestasi yang berbeza juga dibangunkan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa 22.5% daripada pelajar tahun 12 berada pada tahap *Critical Standard*, 27% daripada mereka pada tahap *Below Standard*, 29.5% berada pada tahap *Meet Standard*, dan 21% berada pada tahap *Above Standard*.



# **ESTABLISHING READING COMPREHENSION ABILITY OF IRAQI EFL PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

## **ABSTRACT**

Reading comprehension skills is essential in understanding a written text and subsequently understanding the author's experiences represented in words. It is imperative for every student to possess reading comprehension skills to survive the academic endeavour. Students who studied English language from 4<sup>th</sup> Primary to year 12 (pre-university) appear to be able to read different texts, but in actuality most of them do not understand what they read. For the modern academic situation, reading comprehension becomes essential to students as it is the first step to academic success. Students' reading ability need to be assessed effectively in terms of the reading comprehension skills that they should master in accordance to their educational level. The standardized assessment system in Iraqi educational system relies on the Standardised Ministerial Examination System conducted at three different stages namely; Primary School Examination, Intermediate Stage Examination, and End of Secondary School Examination. The Ministerial test instrument and grading system do not provide teachers with specific information about students' reading comprehension ability, strengths or weaknesses in reading comprehension skills. Therefore, it is the aim of this study to establish a standardized reading comprehension test based on Iraqi EFL curriculum and syllabus (2013-2014) and Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension (Day & Park, 2005); in order to establish a benchmark categorizing

the precise reading skills of what students can or cannot do and subsequently to identify the individual student's precise reading comprehension ability. This study will develop a valid and reliable prototype standardized reading comprehension test instrument which was piloted on 120 students from year 10 to university first year. Their grades were then used to determine the cut scores and performance bands were generated and students' specific reading abilities can now be referred to a Reading Matrix. The instrument was then administered to 200 students of year 12 students in Iraq and data gathered was analysed and benchmarked to set the indicators of the students' reading abilities with reference to Above Standard, Meet Standard, Below Standard and Critical Standard and a comprehensive descriptor of the students' abilities at different performance categories were developed. The findings showed that 22.5% of the year 12 students were at Critical Standard, 27% of them were at Below Standard, 29.5% were at Meet Standard, and 21% were at Above Standard.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

Reading is important for students learning and is considered the mother of all study skills. The reading process involves the ability to recognize written or printed words, and draws a complete picture of the written text (Tizon, 2013). Reading is an important area of language teaching and is the most important academic skill. The most important issue in learning and teaching at all educational stages is reading capability process. Accordingly, any difficulty in understanding the reading skills will affect the progress in all study areas because its sub-skills contained many factors, according to the level of difficulty, such as skimming, scanning, and understanding (Elizabeth S. Pang, et. al., 2003).

Reading is necessary in acquiring knowledge as stated by Ozdemir (2009) because the educational materials are generally depending on understanding what is read. Reading comprehensively is important because it plays a central role in the students' education life. Al-Khateeb (2010) explained that reading comprehension is the real core in the reading process and it is a comprehensive process around which all other processes are centered. Comprehension is the peak of reading skills and the basis for all reading processes.

In fact, learners of English language do not need to speak English all the time, and in most cases they only need to read for the purpose of success in their lessons. Students need to read different types of texts with good comprehension (Eskey, 1988). Reading is an FL primary aim because EFL students generally read to get information or they need to read for the purpose of study (Richards and Renandya,

2002). It was claimed that EL reading is mainly for understanding and to comprehend a written text Grabe (1995). EFL teachers should exert efforts to help their students to understand the texts well and to read with good comprehension. Through reading, readers interact with a text attempting to understand what the text mean and subsequently making use of their knowledge in semantic and linguistic (Alyousef, 2006). Mastering the skills of reading can assist learners to perform better in all language areas. Since, reading skills should be used in all learning subjects (Tesi di Laurea, 2013). Assessing reading comprehension ability of EFL students is a disputable factor in language testing. As comprehension is a significant skill in learning a foreign language. Therefore, the EFL teachers or stakeholders must evaluate students' reading ability. They determine and analyze different types of methods to assess students' reading comprehension.

Apparently, assessment tools used by teachers cannot evaluate the students' specific reading ability. The tasks given after reading a certain passage have an effect on the way of assessing the comprehension ability of learners. Thus, determining a proper method to evaluate EFL learners' reading ability is crucial in teaching and testing a language (Hamidur Rahman, Md., 2009).

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

The ability to read is fundamental to language proficiency. The development of English language curriculum and educational issues in Iraq has resulted in the necessity to assess the reading comprehension of students. Therefore, the current study aims to establish the standards of reading ability for Iraqi EFL pre-university students as determined by the English language curriculum and syllabus. Assessment of reading comprehension using the present public assessment tool in Iraq cannot indicate the true reading ability of students for a specific skill.

Therefore, this study aims to develop a suitable test of reading comprehension measuring the EFL pre-university students' ability in reading.

Identifying the strengths and weaknesses of students' reading ability in specific skills may facilitate the improvement of their reading ability. At the moment there is no certain procedure measures the reading standards of EFL Iraqi students. The portfolio performance assessment of the students at the end of each stage, namely: (primary, secondary, and preparatory stages) can only indicate which student can perform better than others. However, this process cannot provide analytical information on the specific skills that students can do or do not possess.

The present study aims to establish the reading comprehension ability of pre-university students.

This study allows the administration of a developed reading comprehension test and gathering of scores for analysis. The test scores determine the students' different levels. Thereafter, the analysis performed can provide the necessary information to establish a benchmark for the EFL reading abilities of pre-university students in Iraq. This procedure identifies students as "below basic," "basic," "proficient," or "advanced" levels of reading ability. Thereafter, teachers can be equipped with early assistance by applying a proper reading materials and suitable methodologies (Wasburn-Moses, 2006).

The current study is conducted in Iraqi secondary schools. The importance of this study is that it makes sense of reading scores and offer detailed information about the reading ability and students' performance. This study provides teachers, instructors, and researchers with a detailed reading management system that can set actual standards of the reading ability of students that show the differences of student levels although they obtained the same scores in the reading test. The

respondents of the test are pre-university students in the last year of their preparatory stage, and eventually leading to the university. Thus so far, there are inadequate studies conducted in Iraq about reading comprehension ability therefore it is hopeful that this study will shed light about Iraqi students' reading comprehension ability. The current study is expected to facilitate the establishment of reading standards for students and subsequently provide a pathway to develop an English language curriculum framework for Iraq.

## **1.2 Education System in Iraq**

Iraqi education follows a system that includes primary education and secondary education (intermediate and preparatory stages), and higher education. The Ministry of Education in Iraq is directing and mainly supervising the Primary and Secondary Education on one hand. On the other hand, the universities are under the supervision of the Higher Education Ministry. Curriculum and syllabus of the Iraqi schools are identified and determined only by the Ministry of Education.

The instruction and regulation are controlled by those ministries. They are responsible of appointing teachers, determination of curricula and textbooks, teachers' training, and all issues that are related to the public examination. The ministry of education gives a great degree of importance to the Baccalaureate Examinations, and the success of pupils depend completely on the results of those examinations at the end of primary, intermediate, and preparatory stages.

Public baccalaureate examination determines the entrance for stages of universities and institutes. The Primary School years are from 6 to 12 years old, while the intermediate School years are from 13 to 15 years old, whereas the preparatory school is from 16 to 18 years old. According to the government education, students at government schools do not pay fees of study and books. The government also

provides free kindergartens for children under the age of six.

### **1.2.1 English Language in Iraq**

English in Iraq is studied as a foreign language, and most of the Iraqi syllabus of the schools and universities are borrowed from the British syllabus with several adaptations to fit with the Iraqi culture and context. Substantial changes have taken place in foreign language teaching methodology. However, most Iraqi teachers lack interest in these recent changes. They still follow traditional approaches and methods (i.e., chalk and talk); the teacher is the only speaker and the students only listen to the teacher whether they enjoy it or otherwise (Ubeid, 2013). Traditional approaches influence teaching English in Iraq, which are based on emphasizing the role of grammar and memorizing vocabulary in learning English. Unfortunately, such a belief would burden the learners since they would invest most of their time memorizing lists of vocabulary and grammar rules instead of engaging themselves into serious communicative activities in English.

At schools, students learn reading, writing, and the basic grammatical rules of speaking and they learn more advanced English in middle and high schools, including more sophisticated grammar and pronunciation. They also read longer and more difficult passages, such as short stories and novels. The teachers of English language in Iraq are non-native. Most of them are hired by the Ministry of Education have bachelor's degrees in English literature or English education. In spite of their language proficiency, most teachers are not prepared to teach English to different ages and levels. For instance, the teachers who graduated from the School of Education are allowed to teach different ages, but there are no training programs in second language acquisition pedagogy and teaching methodology. This is different compared to some states in the United States, where teachers who work

with ESOL students are often required to take TESOL classes in order to teach ESOL learners in their classrooms.

Iraqi teachers may have difficulty in creating their lesson plans because they lack the education and experience in using different instructional approaches with their students depending on their age. Gambrell, Malloy, and Mazzoni (2007) state that “Teachers are ultimately the instructional designers who implement best practices in relevant, meaningful ways for their particular community of learners”. Since the Iraqi Ministry of Education provides the curriculum, English teachers have no control over the materials they use or the teaching approach they utilized. They depend on the textbook and syllabus that they have been given for guidance. Furthermore, they do not have the opportunity to choose additional resources in teaching English because their syllabus and lesson plans are limited by the set Ministry of Education schedule (Kareem, 2009). Thus, the textbooks selected by the Iraqi Ministry of Education are essential for those teachers who use the textbook as a day to day guide; that is both the ends and a means to instruction (Posner, 1992).

### **1.2.2 Assessing Reading of English Language in Iraq**

At the end of the year of study, the English language assessment of pre-university students in Iraq is conducted. In fact, this is the only assessment that identifies the reading abilities of students. This assessment generally includes questions that test the reading ability of learners. Baccalaureate tests (i.e., national and standardized examinations) are administered to the students at this stage. The grading system used is based on a 100 percent scale. The minimum passing grade is 50 percent.



Marks that year 12 students obtain in the public examination are the only sources of information the EL teachers have to assess the students' reading ability. Marking is highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of each student. Assessment for reading should be a formative assessment that enhances their learning (Earl, 2003). However, the reading ability of students is undecided when it comes to the marking and assessment procedures of the English language in Iraq. Marking involves scores given to students to decide their failure or success in an English language lessons. The levels of student achievements at the end of pre-university stage are decided using summative assessment, which does not provide teachers with any feedback related to the progress in reading ability of their students. A summative assessment is conducted to determine the students' knowledge at a particular time (Catherine Garrison, 2012). Iraq's public baccalaureate examination is a standardized assessment which is considered as one kind of summative state assessments.

Although, information provided from this assessment is beneficial, but it can only assist in estimating particular aspect of students' learning. Generally, summative assessments are used to facilitate evaluating learners and effectiveness of school programs and curriculums (Garrison et. al., 2010).

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

Researchers should concentrate on evaluating learning progress of the EFL Iraqi students, especially, after the apparent changes of EFL framework and curriculum in Iraq and the development of the education system. Proficient reading is crucial for language success because language learning instruction is based on reading (Mikulecky, 2008).

Early researchers in Iraq tend to assess the suitability of the new curriculum of English language learning as in a study of Biarayee (2007) submitted to the Council of the College of Languages, University of Salahaddin. He analyzed the “sunrise” program for Stage 7 and showed its positive and negative points. The researchers gave importance to the study of teachers’ attitudes toward the new curriculum as in a study conducted by Sharif (2013) at Near East University. He investigated the attitudes of teachers toward the new English curriculum in Iraq. However, there is no research conducted has given importance to the assessment of reading comprehension ability of Iraqi EFL students.

Thus, limited importance is given to the students’ ability to perform in EFL lessons and reading comprehension in the education system in Iraq (Jasim, 2007). The researcher determined that, although English is taught for eight years, most pre-university students can hardly read, and the reading skills of Iraqi are generally students weak.

Determining EFL reading abilities is important for both teachers and students because documented data are needed to specify the latter’s reading performance levels and provide information to teachers showing the students’ strength and weakness in reading skills. These actions would assist teachers to consider that the test marks students obtained in the English language examination are insufficient to determine the latter’s reading proficiency levels. Iraqi teachers are unable to determine the students’ level of reading ability depending on grades obtained from examination papers (Sharif, 2012).

Hence, providing teachers with a system that determines the students’ reading ability and development is of immense importance. The current study allows teachers to benchmark students’ reading ability level against their EFLsyllabus and

curriculum. Less information is provided to specify the standards of reading ability for students at pre-university stage (Year 12). All schools only have marks from public examination assessment at the end of study year. Teachers are not provided with guidelines for assisting students who need further assistance. Teachers cannot determine what reading skills of their students and what they are strong or weak in, thereby; presenting difficulty for them to determine the students' reading proficiency.

The Iraqi system of examination, particularly the public ministerial examination, needs reform. Planning is important to prepare a relevant curriculum. Thus, the curriculum should be planned according to what students need to learn. The Iraqi EL public examination evaluates all the language skills but no specific assessment is found to assess their reading ability (Sharif, 2012). The marks obtained summarized all the tested skills in a single paper. However, such results do not assist in specifying the reading standards. However, grades that the teachers have could not identify the learners' ability (Kubiszyn and Borich, 2003). Only ambiguous results of the students' performance in EL are reported, but such result is still unable to identify what the students reading standards (Brown, 2004).

The English Language ability of Iraqi students is assessed using pencil and paper test. The main objective of the most of the Iraqi students is to pass their examinations. Teachers are responsible to allow students take the examination. Thus, teaching in Iraq generally geared toward the passing as the main objective. (Abdullah Shabaz Sharif, 2012).

Students in the Arab world and Iraq in particular encounter numerous problems with their studies because of their low English proficiency; they cannot understand

texts written in English. Form six is the last form before the university, but the students in Iraq exert continuous effort to master the English language by completing the curriculum in the sixth year; a few students complain that they experience many difficulties in achieving this objective (Hameed et. al., 2015).

Iraq has several academic works related to EFL reading but lacks research in benchmarking students' reading abilities. Many complaints about the weakness of Iraq students in reading comprehension are highlighted by parents and teachers. The level of students' reading performance is affected by many factors, and no proper method is taken to enhance to a satisfactory level (Zeid. H. Safy, 2011).

The analysis of the examination papers shows that the English language paper merely tests four language skills. The specific sub-skills of reading have no detailed scores. The test is summative and lacks reference to a set of criteria. Additional information can be obtained via the benchmark of the students' reading standards. Thus, schools and the department of education can determine how different student sub-groups performed; thereafter, they can target and plan reading programs or remedial classes in an appropriate manner (Abdul Rashid et. al., 2010).

Iraqi teachers are dissatisfied with the achievement test results of their EFL students, as well as their comprehension. The educational system in Iraq adopted several English language assessment materials, none of which succeeded in achieving the desired English proficiency level (Hanah, 2008).

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

The current study aims to establish a benchmark for reading standard for pre-university students in Iraq. This study develops a reading comprehension test instrument for the assessment of RC and reading ability of the year 12 pre-

university students in Iraqi schools. Moreover, the current research aims to establish reading performance indicators with detailed descriptors of reading ability to obtain optimal information to reading comprehension performance. The present study aims to benchmark the reading comprehension standards of EFL students against the indicators of their reading performance. Benchmarking the students' reading ability is beneficial because teachers can identify the specific skills of reading that students can or cannot achieve, as well as to compare them with the reading skills specified in the skill specification of the English language syllabus.

Furthermore, the EFL Iraqi teachers and education supervisors can determine their students' weakness and strength in different reading sub-skills. Specifying weaknesses enables teachers to take immediate measures to develop lacking areas or skills (Blair, 1982). Teachers become aware of their students, whether they are at "critical standard," "basic standard," "meet standard," or "above standard" levels, by benchmarking EFL student's reading standards against the curriculum and syllabus on English language. This process enables the education sector to obtain accurate information on the extent the English language framework system of the pre-university level can achieve its aim. The aforementioned process can also provide information whether society is able to develop the EFL students' reading abilities at the final stage before moving to the next stage, that is, university learning.

This study mainly aims to establish EFL the reading ability standards of pre-university students in Iraq. Establishing standards should be achieved by comparing the standards of students' performance that can be obtained after applying the test instrument against the reading EFL curriculum and syllabus at the pre-university stage.

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To develop a reading comprehension test instrument.
  - a. To use different sources to specify the reading skills to be identified to construct the test.
2. To establish the reading performance standards of the reading comprehension abilities of students.
  - a. To develop the cut scores of the bands.
3. To develop the descriptors of the reading performance levels of Year 12 students.
4. To benchmark the reading comprehension standards of Year 12 students.

### **1.5 Research Questions**

1. How can this study develop a reading comprehension test instrument?
  - a. What sources can be used to specify the reading comprehension skills to construct the test?
2. How can the reading performance standards of students' reading comprehension abilities be established?
  - a. How can the cut scores of the bands be developed?
3. How can the descriptors of the reading performance levels of Year 12 students be developed?
4. What are the reading comprehension standards of Year 12 students?

### **1.6 Rationale of Study**

The rationale of the current study is based on the benchmarking of the reading comprehension levels of performance and abilities Iraqi pre-university students. This process provides English language teachers and the Ministry of Education with

guides about the EFL learning progress of students and the suitable instructions and curricula that they have been provided with.

### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

Reading comprehension is the basis of effective reading and very important in the education and everyday life of the students. This study is useful in the evaluation of the students' abilities in the reading comprehension skills and sub-skills; it is also beneficial for that it provides teachers with specific reading ability guides used to analyze the RC skills of the Iraqi students. However, the current study attempts to identify the reliability at the coming stage of education (i.e., the university level) of students. Therefore, developing a benchmark of reading ability of the pre-university stage students in Iraq against their English language curriculum and syllabus may serve as the basis of the Iraqi Ministry of Education as it designs a curriculum that will benefit students in future.

### **1.8 Limitations of Study**

The current study is limited to benchmarking the reading comprehension abilities and standards of Year 12 Iraqi students of pre-university stage. The selection of the year 12 pre-university stage for this study was primarily because the researcher, as a former teacher, found that there was a serious problems with the students at this stage as they were suffering from lack of reading comprehension ability and also for the awareness of the importance of EFL for the students of this stage because they need to attend various universities on the next stage. The assessment was limited only to the Iraqi government secondary schools in Baghdad. The study was conducted based on the accessibility to some secondary schools in certain areas in Baghdad. Considering the critical situation of Iraq, the researcher encountered some difficulties in accessing schools and moving freely from one place to another. The

analysis of the Iraqi EFL education materials is limited to Iraq's southern and middle provinces.

### **1.9 Definitions of Terms**

Terms used in this research are as follows:

#### **Reading Comprehension**

This research defines the reading comprehension as the understanding of the text meaning using different cognitive skills and their sub-skills. It infers how well a student comprehends different types of written texts.

#### **Reading Ability**

This study defines the reading ability as the benchmark of student's reading comprehension skills. It refers that the skills of year 12 students are high, and they can understand the written texts of various types and different levels of difficulty.

#### **Reading performance Standards**

It is the level of performance that the students are expected to reach in a certain level. However, in this study, reading performance standards refer to the students' reading performance in the standardized reading comprehension test.

#### **Benchmarking Reading Comprehension Standards**

A benchmark in this study, refers to what students are expected to achieve at a certain level. In the present study, benchmarking reading comprehension abilities of EFL students is evaluated by comparing their reading performance standards. The benchmarks here in the current study clarify the content standards that students have



achieved. It reveals what students know or can do. These standards indicate their reading abilities and provide descriptors for the different levels of students' reading comprehension ability to gauge what they can or cannot do.

### **Prescribed Reading Performance Indicators**

Reading Performance Indicators refers to the detailed descriptions of the specific EFL reading skills that the students need to master at pre-university level. In the current study, the reading performance indicators were sourced from the relevant primary, secondary and 1<sup>st</sup> academic year English Language Syllabus in line with the Barrett's Taxonomy of Reading Comprehension, and with analysing textbooks and past year examination papers.

### **Reading Comprehension Skills**

They are the skills the students acquire to master to be able to understand the meaning of a written text. In this study, reading comprehension skills refer to the skills that the year 12 students need to master so that they can understand what they read.

### **Descriptors of Reading Ability**

In this study, descriptors are the indicators that show a detailed description of the students' reading abilities in different skills and sub-skills in each band. For this study, descriptors are developed based on the students' reading performance on the standardized reading comprehension test.

## **1.10 Summary**

The first chapter begins with introducing reading as an important skill for learning. Moreover, this chapter includes a presentation of the background of the study and an introduction of the education system, English language, and assessment of EFL

reading in the Iraqi education system. This chapter also discusses the problems, objectives, and research questions of the study. Finally, a presentation to the rationale, significance, and limitations of this study were explained. The literature review related to this study is presented in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter reviews the studies related to the current study and discusses the conceptual framework and related theories. Issues that are related to the development of reading skills and specifications of learners are also reviewed. The discussion of the main concerns of this study is included, such as reading comprehension, reading comprehension tests and assessments, types of reading comprehension test questions, validity of reading comprehension instrument, classification of reading comprehension questions according to the reading comprehension skills, and benchmarking the reading comprehension levels of learners.

#### **2.1 Reading Comprehension**

Reading has no specific definition. The definitions of reading have changed substantially over the last 50 years; the reading process in child development has increased (Resnick et al. 2010). Reading is a thinking process that includes the comprehension of explicit and implicit meanings (Stauffer, 1969; Walker, 1974).

The main objective of reading is to comprehend the ideas in a material. Reading would be empty and meaningless without comprehension (Casper et al., 1998).

Reading is a conscious and unconscious thinking process.

Readers apply many strategies to reconstruct the intended meaning of authors. Readers do this by comparing information in the text to their background knowledge and prior experience (Mikulecky, 2008). Comprehension is a complex process that has been explained in many ways. Reading comprehension is defined by the Research and Development and Reading Study Group as “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction with written language”

(RAND, 2003). A common definition may be that comprehension is meaning construction with interaction to text. Reading comprehension involves the integration of the ability decoding, vocabulary and prior knowledge of a certain topic, and relevant strategies to understand a text (Pressley & Block, 2002; Kintsch & Kintsch, 2005).

Reading comprehension is constructing meaning from text making use of an extensive variety of skills and knowledge (Scott, 2007). The Educational Progress Reading Framework Committee (NAEP) defined reading comprehension a complex process that comprise comprehending different texts and understanding and interpreting the text meaning. Inferring how well a person comprehends is the real problem in measuring reading and language comprehension (RAND, 2002).

Reading comprehension is constantly one of the important skills that is crucial to second or foreign language learning among EFL learners. EFL Iraqi students may need to read to “access the wealth of information” but they rarely need to communicate in English in their everyday lives. The ability to read properly is as is more important than oral skills (Eskey, 2005). Reader constantly interacts with the text attempting to understand its meaning (Alyousef, 2006).

The Reading comprehension is the primary objective of language learning. The teachers should exert effort to help their students to read with full comprehension (Grabe, 1995). Most studies are concerned with the improvement of teaching methods; therefore, teachers may need several beneficial techniques to evaluate their own teaching practice (Devine, 1993; Koda, 1994).

Investigation of foreign language acquisition has progressively caught the attention of investigators in the area of foreign language. A study on anxiety variable that affects the Iraqi students’ acquisition of particular language skills, reading specifically have

been investigated in particular with Iraqi students. The study aimed to investigate the influence of anxiety variable towards reading comprehension of Iraqi high school learners. It also sought to examine the gender differences towards reading language anxiety.

Quantitative approach was applied in this research, which involved 20 Iraqi students of a high school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The study concluded that Iraqi learners need to be exposed to the four skills of English language generally and the reading skill in particular. This exposure makes them aware of the four skills (Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking) that need to be acquired and also to decrease the rate of anxiety variable in addition to its influence on their performance. (Ahmed, A. S. et. al., 2016).

Teaching methods of EFL has its influence on language acquisition. Interactive environment is very important in the learning process where teacher and learners are open to each other to interact. The goal that needs to be achieved is to create an educative environment able to improve and shape the teaching learning process (Hussain & Safdar, 2008). In this study, Abu Sharbain (2009) found that ninth- grade teachers faced several problems in performing their mission in light of the communicative approach in teaching speaking in Gaza Strip, such as general weakness in the level of the teachers' performance, the use of Arabic language during an English language class, and the unsafe environment. As a result, his study showed a high percentage of the respondents use Arabic in their English classes. Using native language affects English language learning causing lack of fluency, hence, the majority of the EFL students feel that they need more training (Fakhri, and Jdetawy, 2011; Abu Mraheel 2004). The students need more practice to elevate their proficiency in English. Further studies by Souriyavongsa, Abidin, and Lai Mei (2000),

claimed that using traditional methods of teaching English makes the majority of teachers pay more attention to teaching grammar at the expense of other skills. Hence, this focus on grammar may be related to the teachers' little experience and lack of sufficient knowledge on teaching methods. The traditional method of teaching leads to a clear weakness in English learning due to teachers' insufficient knowledge in teaching methods. (Abu Sharbain, 2009).

Going back to the Iraqi EFL teaching perspective in the literature, and focusing the light on EFL reading, the researcher observed that there is an effect of teaching reading comprehension strategies on Iraqi EFL learners' reading comprehension performance and on the development of their reading comprehension strategies use. Forty students were enrolled in an experimental study has been conducted by Fatima A. A. Jafar (2016), where an experimental group received instruction on reading comprehension strategies, while the control group taught reading by the use of the conventional way of teaching reading comprehension. The findings of that study indicate that the experimental group subjects' performance in reading comprehension has been found to be better than that of the control group subjects on the reading comprehension post-test and that the experimental group subjects show statistically significant increases in the use of reading strategies on the post-administration of the reading comprehension strategies survey. This experimental study recommended that reading comprehension strategies should be an integral part of reading instruction courses at the college level.

Local literature also gives importance to study the EFL student perspective. A study conducted in the English Department at the College of Education-of Babylon University in Iraq tried to evaluate the performance of the grammatical and lexical abilities of Iraqi EFL undergraduates in writing précis for reading comprehension