

## Research Article

# Peeling the Onion: Uncovering the Essence of EFL Teachers' Challenges in Online Evaluation of Reading Comprehension

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### ABSTRACT

The advent of technology is shifting the landscape of reading comprehension evaluation. Therefore, it is crucial to understand EFL teachers' challenges in the online evaluation of reading comprehension. In this regard, transcendental phenomenology was employed to explore the essence of EFL teachers' challenges. Data were collected from narratives and interviews with 12 EFL teachers and subsequently analyzed using Giorgi's (2009) five-step framework. The findings revealed that EFL teachers encounter three key challenges: expanded roles and responsibilities that contribute to their negative emotions; inadequate digital literacy caused by lack of sufficient training; and dealing with students' over-reliance on technological tools that hinder their cognitive comprehension processes. We concluded that online evaluation of reading comprehension yields two types of challenges for EFL teachers: overt and covert challenges. Overt challenges involve evident issues such as limited resources required for the online evaluation of reading comprehension, while covert challenges are profound but less obvious, such as dealing with students' disengagement. The implications of the study emphasize the critical need to focus on enhancing teachers' professional development for effective technology integration in language skills evaluation, specifically reading comprehension.



## Introduction

Rapid advancements in technology have proven promising in the field of second language (L2) evaluation for students, teachers, and administrators by introducing diverse possibilities for approaching evaluation. Digital tools, ranging from interactive learning platforms to adaptive testing software, have contributed to the flexibility of L2 evaluation by accommodating various needs and purposes of learners, which were missing in traditional methods of evaluation (Genç & Kirmizibayrak, 2024; Lee & Fanguy, 2022). However, these technological innovations are not without limitations.

Due to the importance of reading comprehension in fostering virtually all aspects of academic learning and lifelong literacy, exploring the challenges of its evaluation is regarded as a major step toward developing accurate, practical, and fair assessment tools (Meihami & Abdoli, 2024a, 2024b). The integration of technology into reading comprehension has yielded several opportunities for EFL teachers. For instance, digital evaluation tools can instantaneously collect and analyze students' responses and provide them with detailed feedback, leading to a more precise evaluation than any humanly feasible approach (Brüggemann et al., 2023). Moreover, the advent of adaptive testing software has enabled the customization of reading comprehension assessments to match each learner's performance, enhancing the personalization of evaluation tools in ways not possible with traditional paper-and-pencil tests. (Suárez-Álvarez et al., 2022).

However, EFL teachers' challenges caused by the integration of technology into reading comprehension evaluation are undeniable. One of the main concerns of EFL teachers in

this regard is the shift in their professional responsibilities from traditional assessors to facilitators and apprentices of complex digital evaluation systems, requiring them to constantly adapt to new technological tools and increase their workload (Eden, 2024). Furthermore, distant and computerized formats of evaluation can minimize students' focus, accurate demonstration of reading comprehension skills, and, more importantly, their motivation. In this case, dealing with student disengagement is regarded as a major challenge for EFL teachers (Rajan., 2024).

Despite the well-documented benefits of online evaluation of reading comprehension, teachers experience various context-specific challenges in their actual classrooms that have yet to be thoroughly understood and addressed (Chun; 2011; McCarthy & Yan, 2023). Investigating these challenges can help EFL teacher educators provide teachers with effective strategies to reduce their barriers toward online evaluation tools. Furthermore, teachers' deficiencies in digital literacy can only be identified and addressed by reviewing the challenges they encounter while working with technological tools (Gomez et al., 2022). Therefore, identifying EFL teachers' challenges in evaluating reading comprehension skills is a foundation for additional research on empowering teachers to overcome obstacles and improve the quality of online reading comprehension evaluation.

Researchers can go beyond surface-level challenges to unearth the essence of the problems faced by EFL teachers, which may remain hidden, and offer more constructive and foundational solutions to address the problems of online reading comprehension evaluation (Meihami & Abdoli, 2024a, 2024b). Thus, this study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach

(Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017) to investigate the essences of EFL teachers' experiences regarding the challenges in evaluating reading comprehension skills.

The following research question underpins the present study:

What are the root causes of the challenges EFL teachers encounter in the online evaluation of reading comprehension skills, as revealed through their lived experiences?

## Literature Review

### Challenges of Using Technology in Language Skills Evaluation

Online evaluation has introduced several challenges for EFL teachers. One significant issue is the limited resources necessary for effective online assessment, including user-friendly platforms, reliable internet connections, appropriate digital devices, and environments free from distractions.

Without these resources, the evaluation process becomes less effective, and teachers may struggle to assess students' language skills accurately. For instance, unstable internet connections or outdated devices can prevent students from completing tests on time, leading to unnecessary stress and unfair results. Similarly, non-intuitive assessment platforms can divert teachers' attention from teaching and evaluation to managing technical issues (Agtarap, 2024; Nurisma et al., 2025). Another challenge is the lack of adequate digital literacy, which can disrupt the flow of online evaluation for both EFL teachers and students due to the complexity of navigating technical aspects and insufficient training. Teachers who are not confident in using digital tools may struggle to design, administer, and grade online tests efficiently. Students, on the other hand, may find it difficult to understand instructions or submit their answers correctly,

which can affect their performance. This challenge emphasizes that digital literacy is not only about knowing how to use devices but also about understanding how to manage online assessments effectively. Without proper training, teachers may feel overwhelmed, and students may not be able to demonstrate their true abilities, leading to inaccurate evaluation results (Handayani et al., 2022; Wulyani et al., 2024). Moreover, academic dishonesty becomes a pressing concern in online testing environments, where monitoring students' behavior is more challenging. In online contexts, it is harder for teachers to observe students' actions, which can result in unfair advantages for some learners and unreliable test results. This issue underscores the need for secure assessment methods and strategies to encourage honesty and integrity in online learning environments. Teachers must find ways to prevent cheating while maintaining a supportive and encouraging testing atmosphere (Masrul & Erliana, 2023; Jalilzadeh et al., 2024).

Another challenge faced by EFL teachers is students' test anxiety, which can hinder their ability to perform well in online assessments. Test anxiety prevents students from demonstrating their full potential and complicates teachers' interpretation of results. Online assessments can intensify anxiety because students do not have immediate support from teachers and may feel uncertain about the digital format. Teachers must consider ways to reduce anxiety, such as providing clear instructions, practice opportunities, and supportive feedback, to help students perform better and demonstrate their actual skills (Alzubi & Nazim, 2025; Deng, 2025).

On the whole, EFL teachers face four main challenges in evaluating language skills in

online contexts. These include the limited resources required for effective and proper online evaluation for both teachers and students (Prasetya, 2021; Nurisma et al., 2025). Moreover, advances in evaluation technologies underscore the importance of digital literacy for both EFL teachers and students, which remains insufficient (Handayani et al., 2022). Difficulty in tracking students during online testing sessions can lead to academic dishonesty, cheating, and plagiarism (Masrul & Erliana, 2023). Furthermore, test anxiety—resulting in unreliable test results—is considered another major issue in EFL teachers' online evaluation of reading comprehension (Alzubi & Nazim, 2025).

### **EFL Teachers' Challenges of Online Evaluation of Reading Comprehension**

Shifts to online environments for evaluating reading comprehension skills have led to the emergence of various challenges for EFL teachers. One significant difficulty is capturing higher-order reading comprehension skills in the absence of real-time teacher-student interaction during online testing sessions. Tarchi (2015) proposed a hierarchy of higher-order reading comprehension skills, including working memory usage, inferencing, and integration of new information with prior knowledge. In testing situations, these skills mostly lend themselves to the authentic interaction of students with their teachers, as students can ask additional questions, reflect on the test items, and critically discuss their ambiguities (Hague, 2024). Online tests, however, prevent teachers from probing students' reasoning and reflective thinking (Sun et al., 2021). This limitation means that higher-order skills, such as making inferences

or connecting new information to prior knowledge, may remain largely unassessed.

Moreover, online evaluation demands different professional responsibilities on teachers. Teachers are required not only to create more varied and easy-to-use tasks to help learners accomplish them without technical difficulties, but also to measure complex reading skills through various digital tools. This shift transforms teachers into facilitators of the evaluation process for both themselves and the students. They must ensure that the tasks are not only pedagogically sound but also accessible and engaging, balancing instructional goals with the constraints of online platforms. Therefore, teachers must constantly adapt evaluation methods to fit digital formats, troubleshoot unexpected technical issues, and anticipate the diverse abilities of students to interact effectively with online tools. Additionally, EFL teachers must cope with student disengagement, as many students are demotivated to participate in online assessment and do not take them seriously (Kim & Kim., 2024). Reduced motivation can result in minimal effort, rushed answers, or even incomplete responses, which compromise the validity of the evaluation. Teachers may struggle to implement strategies that actively involve students, as online environments often limit opportunities for spontaneous interaction, discussion, and peer support. Another critical issue is the reduced visibility of students' cognitive processes during online testing, which limits teachers' ability to identify comprehension problems and provide timely interventions (Chen & Wu, 2015). Unlike in traditional classrooms, where teachers can observe hesitation, thought patterns, or engagement with the text, online assessments often only display final answers,

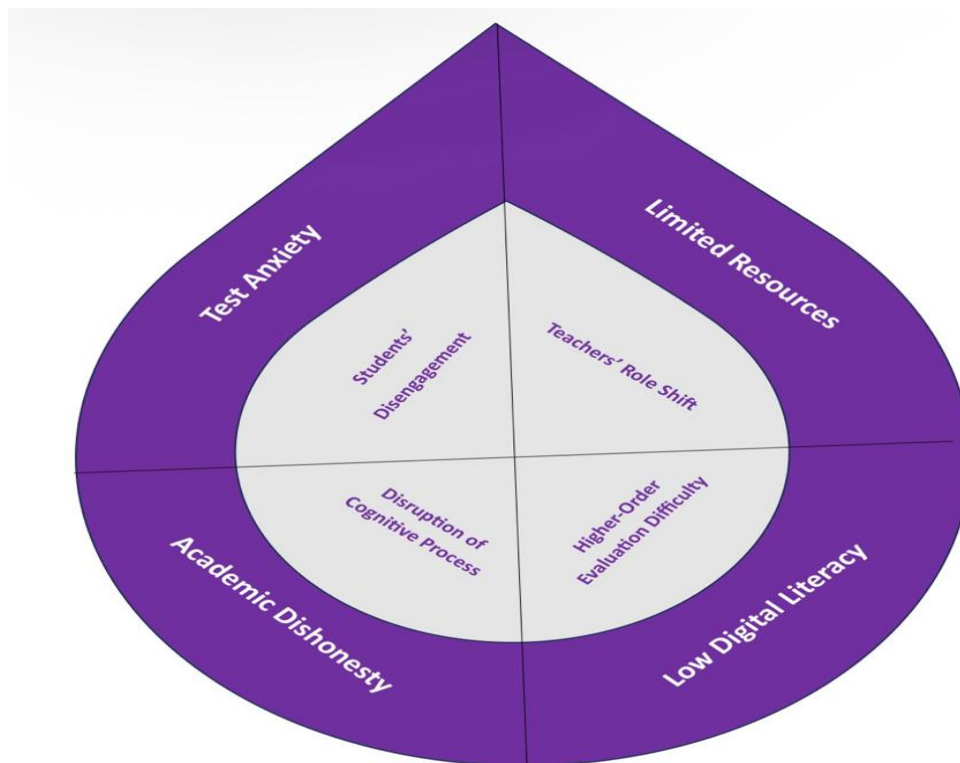
making it difficult for teachers to provide formative feedback or diagnose specific areas of weakness.

EFL teachers face multifaceted challenges in online reading comprehension evaluation. These challenges include failing to account for higher-order reading comprehension skills (Tarchi, 2015), shifts in EFL teachers' professional responsibilities (Sun et al., 2021), student disengagement (Kim & Kim., 2024), and reduced transparency of student cognitive processes in online testing (Chen & Wu, 2015).

### The Conceptual Framework of Study

In order to understand the multifaceted challenges EFL teachers face in the online evaluation of reading comprehension skills, a

dual-level framework was developed through a comprehensive review of related literature. In so doing, we addressed EFL teachers' key concerns in online evaluation in general to identify the root causes of their challenges. The outer layer explains teachers' overt challenges in online evaluation, including limited resources, low digital literacy among teachers and students, and test anxiety. The inner layer specifically investigates the covert challenges of online evaluation of reading comprehension skills, encompassing difficulty in capturing higher-order comprehension, shifts in teachers' professional responsibilities, students' disengagement with online evaluation, and reduced visibility of students' cognitive processes.



**Figure 1**  
*Dual-Layer Conceptual Framework*

## Methodology

### Research Design

We utilized a transcendental phenomenological design to delve into EFL teachers' lived experiences concerning the challenges they encounter in the online evaluation of reading comprehension skills. This design enables researchers to describe the essence of participants' experiences without the influence of the researcher's biases (Moustakas, 1994). Since the primary aim of this study was to uncover the authentic and shared meanings within EFL teachers' experiences with online reading comprehension assessments, we selected this design to provide a focused exploration of their challenges from their own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, by employing transcendental phenomenology, we increased the intentionality behind participants' responses, yielding rich, reflective data as their consciousness was raised regarding the purpose of the study (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). This process facilitated the transition from purifying the meaning gained from participants' challenges reflected in their consciousness to an eidetic reduction of their realities during the online evaluation of reading comprehension skills (Van Manen, 2014). Drawing on imaginative variation, the study elicited primary structural descriptions of the challenges by activating participants' autobiographical memories related to online evaluation practices through explaining the phenomena under study (Smith et al., 2009). These narratives were subsequently analyzed to extract essential themes reflecting the covert and overt challenges of the online assessment of reading comprehension.

Throughout data collection and analysis, the researchers exercised phenomenological reduction by bracketing preconceptions to

ensure that findings reflected participants' actual experiences (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The final essence of the phenomenon was synthesized through the five-step framework proposed by Giorgi (2009), which allowed the analysis of the fundamental meaning of EFL teachers' challenges regarding online reading comprehension evaluation.

### Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilized in this study to select EFL teachers who were required to test students' reading comprehension skills online and had directly experienced the challenges. These teachers were MA and PhD students and simultaneously worked in different institutes with varying levels of teaching experience. The reason for selecting purposeful sampling was to specifically target those EFL teachers who were involved in online reading comprehension evaluation and were aware of the challenges. Moreover, the variety in the selection of participants contributed to the generalizability of the study (Langdrige, 2007) and provided a deeper understanding of the essence of the challenges EFL teachers encountered while evaluating reading comprehension online. Table 1 presents the background characteristics of the participants.

**Table 1**

*The Background Characteristics of Participants*

Teacher	Educational Degree	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Teaching and Evaluation Experience in Online Contexts
T-1	PhD	17	4
T-2	PhD	13	3
T-3	PhD	10	5
T-4	MA	15	2

Teacher	Educational Degree	Years of Teaching Experience	Years of Teaching and Evaluation Experience in Online Contexts
T-5	MA	13	5
T-6	MA	12	3
T-7	MA	12	1
T-8	MA	9	3
T-9	MA	7	5
T-10	MA	7	4
T-11	MA	6	2
T-12	MA	3	4

### Data Sources

Autobiographical narratives are integral to exploring participants' professional experiences that reflect the realities of their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In the present study, autobiographical narratives were used to capture EFL teachers' experiences with the challenges of evaluating students' reading comprehension in online contexts. Narratives are particularly valuable because they provide insights into how teachers construct meaning from their daily practices (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). We raised participants' consciousness of the purpose of the study and subsequently elaborated on the components of Riessman's (2008) narrative model, including an overview of the central phenomenon, a detailed description of the challenges, an exploration of experiences, a reflective evaluation of those experiences, a presentation of the outcomes, and concluding remarks.

Semi-structured interviews provided a more interactive and detailed account of EFL teachers' experiences, with the flexibility to follow up on emerging ideas (Cohen et al., 2018). Prior to the interviews, a set of general questions about the challenges of online reading comprehension evaluation was designed, which diversified during the interviews as additional questions emerged regarding different aspects of EFL teachers'

experiences. Each interview lasted 15–20 minutes, was recorded, and transcribed with participants' consent. These transcripts were then probed and analyzed to develop a more precise understanding of participants' experiences.

### Data Analysis

Giorgi's (2009) five-step phenomenological framework was applied to analyze the data collected from EFL teachers on the challenges of online evaluation of reading comprehension. Teachers' accounts were repeatedly read and reviewed, familiarizing us with the data. Second, guided by the conceptual framework of the study, we segmented the text into meaning units (MUs), which are considered context-bound constituents rather than isolated elements. Thus, segmentation facilitated the coding process with special emphasis on the criticality of context. In the third stage, we utilized the Code Map and Code Matrix Browser of MAXQDA 24 to develop focal meanings (FMs) by establishing connections between MUs based on the relevant literature. In the fourth stage, the FMs were synthesized to check whether they accurately reflected the provided data. Therefore, this stage, synthesizing the situated structural descriptions (SSDs), contributed to the trustworthiness of the collected data. Ultimately, we synthesized the general structural description (GSD) by revisiting the previous stages, providing us with a comprehensive understanding of the challenges encountered by EFL teachers in the online evaluation of reading comprehension. The Code Map generated by MAXQDA 24 was helpful as it connected and decontextualized the SSDs, deepening our understanding of the phenomenon under

study. Needless to say, we engaged in bracketing and phenomenological reduction throughout the analysis in order to minimize the influence of our preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

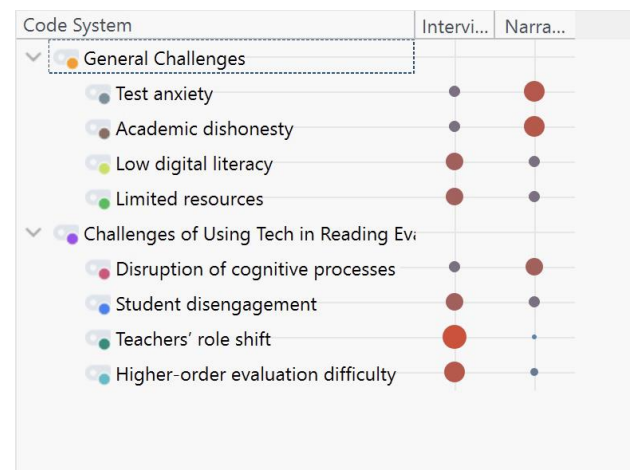
### Rigor of Qualitative Study

Rigor in this qualitative study was ensured by addressing credibility, transferability, and dependability (Ary et al., 2014). Structural corroboration, achieved by drawing on two complementary data sources—autobiographical narratives and semi-structured interviews—fostered the credibility of the study. Member checking was also effective in this regard by inviting participants to review and confirm whether our interpretations accurately reflected their reported experiences of evaluating students' reading comprehension online. Concerning transferability, descriptive adequacy was provided by offering a rich and detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis processes, along with an account of teachers' challenges. This transparency enables other researchers to assess the relevance of the findings to their own contexts. Dependability was addressed through inter-coder agreement. We invited a colleague with expertise in qualitative analysis to analyze a portion of the data while following the same analytic procedures. This check on the consistency of the coding was calculated by MAXQDA 24 and indicated an inter-coder agreement of 85%, which is considered acceptable in qualitative research (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

### Findings

In order to understand the essence of EFL teachers' challenges in the online evaluation of reading comprehension, we adopted Giorgi's (2009) five-step framework. To follow the first

two steps of Giorgi's framework, a Code Matrix Browser (CMB) was generated using MAXQDA 24 to help us familiarize ourselves with the data and identify meaning units (MUs). The results of the CMB in Figure 2 show that all priori codes of the conceptual framework (Figure 1) were present in the data.

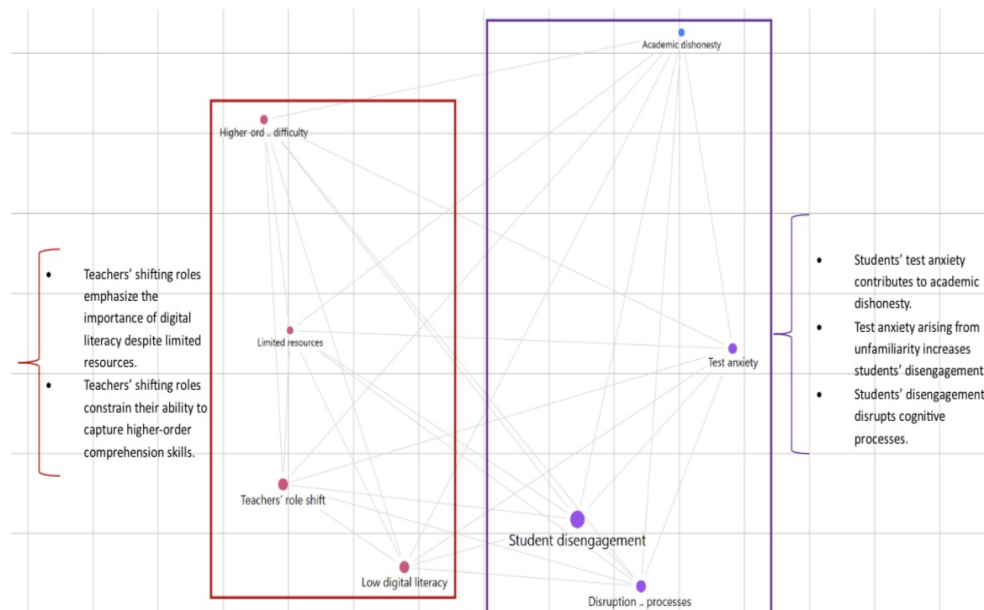


**Figure 2**  
*Code Matrix Browser*

We then utilized the Code Map (CM) to follow the remaining steps of Giorgi's framework. Thus, the Code Map facilitated linking MUs together to identify focal meanings (FMs) related to EFL teachers' key challenges in the online evaluation of reading comprehension. Figure 3 shows that three FMs were identified within a single zone, highlighting the significance of test anxiety in causing academic dishonesty and student disengagement due to students' unfamiliarity with online evaluation of reading comprehension. Moreover, it shows that student disengagement leads to the disruption of cognitive processes during online evaluation of reading comprehension. In another zone, two FMs emerged, highlighting the need for updated digital literacy due to shifting teacher roles and the constraints that adopting these new roles places on evaluating higher-order reading skills.

EFL teachers believed that “... cheating and plagiarism are strengthened as students’ anxiety increases ...” (Narrative, T-7). Additionally, “... stress and lack of enthusiasm towards online testing hinder students’ attention to schema activation and related cognitive strategies ...” (Narrative, T-2). Furthermore, they believed that “... being a

technical technician is different from what [teachers] were trained for” (Interview, T-10). Adopting these new roles “limits [teachers’] focus on designing tests that can evaluate various aspects of comprehension skills” (Narrative, T-8).



**Figure 3**  
*Findings on Teachers' Challenges and FMs*

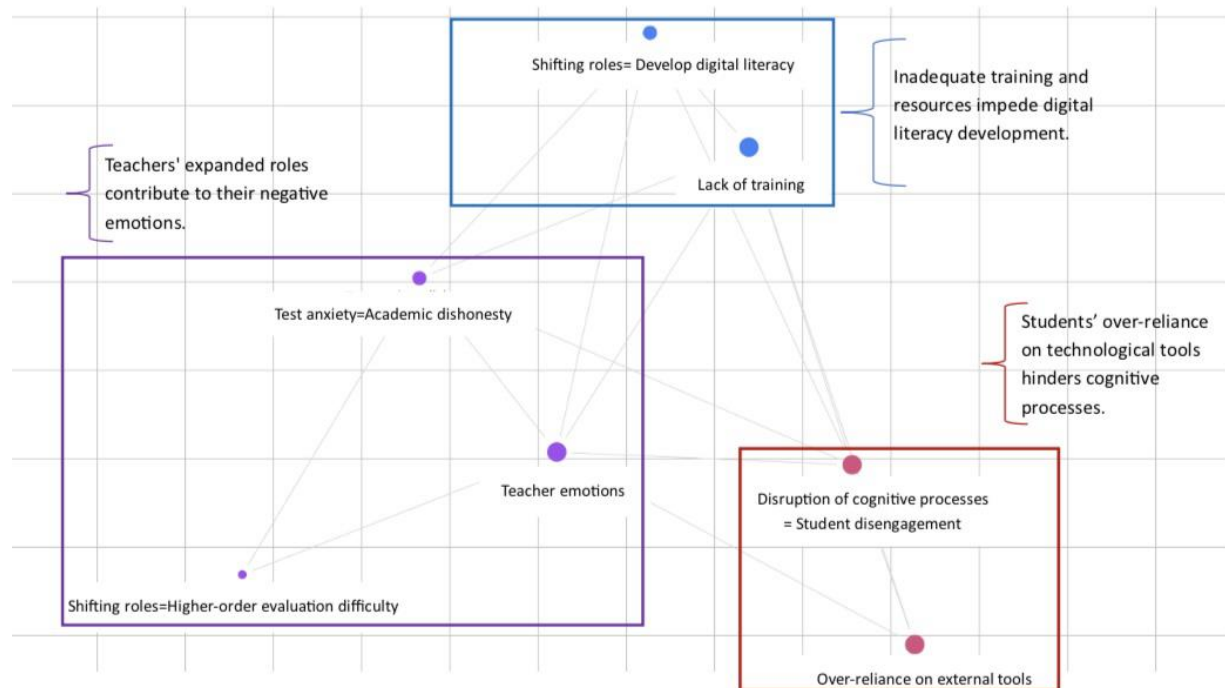
The code map illustrated in Figure 3 offered valuable insights into the challenges EFL teachers face when evaluating reading comprehension online. However, to address steps four and five of Giorgi's (2009) framework, we drew on the FMs identified earlier and examined the participants' contexts both individually and holistically. To that end, an inductive reanalysis of the data was conducted to capture the essence of EFL teachers' challenges with the online evaluation of reading comprehension. Figure 4 presents the results of this analysis.

Based on Figure 4, EFL teachers' challenges in the online evaluation of reading comprehension encompass teachers'

expanded roles and responsibilities contributing to their negative emotions, inadequate training and resources undermining digital literacy development, and students' over-reliance on technological tools, which hinders their cognitive processes. EFL teachers believed that “... taking charge of technology-driven problems, such as students' unfamiliarity and cheating, is like peeling an onion so multifaceted that it never ends...” (Narrative, T-12), which leads to “... fatigue and negative emotions, especially when they leave no room for [teachers] to think about designing a good reading comprehension test, which is [their] actual responsibility...” (Narrative, T-4). Moreover, EFL teachers are

required to develop their digital literacy, which is “... not supported by the institutes, as they mostly do not offer effective professional development programs...” (Interview, T-10). Furthermore, it was revealed that “... students’ lack of interest in taking online tests was characterized by their unwillingness to think

and focus deeply...” (Narrative, T-1). More critically, “... students tended to use technological tools to ease the responding process, without questioning or revising the AI-generated answers...” (Interview, T-4).



**Figure 4**

*The Essence of Teachers’ Challenges in Online Evaluation of Reading Comprehension*

## Discussion

### Teachers’ Expanded Roles and Responsibilities Contribute to Negative Emotions

Teachers’ expanded roles and responsibilities contribute significantly to negative emotions in the context of online reading comprehension evaluation. Research findings suggest that teachers’ shifting roles and increased responsibility for managing technology-driven issues are key challenges they may face in evaluating reading comprehension online. Reading comprehension evaluation is inherently demanding (Khalifa & Weir, 2009), and the shift to online contexts exacerbates these

challenges due to factors such as students’ unfamiliarity with digital tools and platforms and the heightened risk of academic dishonesty (King et al., 2009; Tsai et al., 2020). Therefore, additional burdens on teachers during online reading comprehension evaluation must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the difference in teachers’ responsibilities between traditional and online assessment contexts is significant. In paper-pencil assessments, teachers are primarily responsible for designing reliable and standardized tests that assess higher-order comprehension skills such as inference-making, integrating information, and critical evaluation (Bachman, 1990). However, in

online assessments, teachers must not only design such tests—which is already challenging—but also contend with students' mental issues such as test anxiety and cheating behaviors. Furthermore, evaluating higher-order reading comprehension skills online is complicated by reduced teacher supervision and student distractions arising from limited familiarity with digital test formats, which hinder students' ability to demonstrate these advanced skills (Junco, 2012; Poon, 2013). Additionally, heightened test anxiety in online contexts negatively affects student performance and must be managed by EFL teachers. Taking on these extra responsibilities diverts valuable time from test design and contributes to teachers' fatigue and negative emotions.

Secondly, managing the emotional dimension of online reading comprehension evaluation constitutes a major challenge for teachers. Constant adaptation to evolving educational technologies can induce stress, frustration, and emotional exhaustion among EFL teachers (MacIntyre et al., 2020; Talidong & Toquero, 2020). The findings revealed that teachers' focus on controlling academic dishonesty and mitigating students' test anxiety adds to their already demanding workload. These challenges—often faced without adequate training, institutional support, or compensation—can reduce overall job satisfaction and increase negative emotions (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2017; Kyriacou, 2001). Consequently, teachers need to employ various emotion regulation strategies to maintain mental health while managing technology-related difficulties in online evaluation contexts.

Overall, the findings suggest that online evaluation of reading comprehension is complicated not only by the inherent

difficulties of assessing higher-order skills but also by the emotional burden arising from teachers' expanded roles. To alleviate the dual challenges of designing comprehensive tests and addressing peripheral issues such as cheating and test anxiety, support systems are essential to ease EFL teachers' challenges in online reading comprehension evaluation (Russell & Murphy-Judy, 2021).

### **Digital Literacy: Essential yet Overlooked by Inadequate Training**

The findings of the current study revealed that a notable challenge for EFL teachers in the online evaluation of reading comprehension is their need to develop and continuously update their digital literacy skills despite a pervasive lack of formal training and insufficient access to resources. The rapid advancement of technology has introduced innovative methods for reading comprehension evaluation, including digital cognitive diagnostic assessments, gamified quizzes, AI-driven analytics, and personalized feedback systems that require teachers to not only acquire new technical skills but also adapt pedagogically to integrate these tools effectively (Redecker, 2017; Zheng et al., 2020). In this context, teachers must establish a clear one-to-one correspondence between their evolving technology-driven roles and the digital competencies necessary to perform these roles successfully.

However, many teachers are inadequately prepared due to limited professional development opportunities specifically tailored to digital literacy and online evaluation techniques (Phulpoto et al., 2024). This gap decreases their confidence and effectiveness in managing online reading comprehension evaluation, leaving EFL teachers vulnerable and disconnected from the technological

burdens placed upon them (Ertmer & Ottenbreit-Leftwich, 2010). The lack of sufficient training not only lowers their ability to design and implement standard online evaluations but also restricts their capacity to address technical issues and support students who are similarly adapting to new digital formats. Moreover, teachers' insufficient technological proficiency often results in increased stress and demotivation, contributing to job dissatisfaction and burnout (Brown et al., 2021). This emotional strain contributes to the challenges of balancing traditional pedagogical responsibilities with the demands of continuously evolving technological environments. Since teachers' performance strongly influences student engagement and learning outcomes, it is critical for teachers to actively seek every opportunity concerning professional development. Engaging in training programs, experimenting with emerging online evaluation systems, and collaborating with peers can help build the necessary confidence and competence in digital tool usage (Brown et al., 2021). Furthermore, institutional support plays a crucial role in empowering teachers to overcome these challenges. Schools and educational organizations need to prioritize ongoing training programs and allocate resources that specifically target skill development in the under-focused area of online evaluation of reading comprehension.

### **Over-Reliance on Technological Tools Hinders Students' Cognitive Processes**

The findings of the current study indicated that a central challenge in online reading comprehension evaluation is the disruption of students' cognitive processes, often leading to their disengagement. There are a number of cognitive strategies used by students in reading

comprehension, including decoding written symbols, processing written structure, activating schema, and making inferences (Ronconiet al., 2024; Cain, 2009). However, these cognitive strategies can be disrupted by the integration of technology in reading comprehension evaluation.

Online reading comprehension tests can be advantageous as they provide flexibility in timing and location, adaptive assessments, interactive multimedia support, and immediate detailed feedback (Caccia et al., 2019; Peras, 2023; Tsai et al., 2020). Nevertheless, over-reliance on technological tools can hinder students' cognitive engagement during exam sessions, which is one of the major challenges EFL teachers face when evaluating reading comprehension skills online (Kendeou & O'Brien, 2014; Chang et al., 2023).

Students' frequent use of digital tools for basic reading tasks may cause a lower attention span, reduced brain activity in regions responsible for deep reading, overloaded working memory, diminished capacity for reflective reading, and disengagement from accomplishing comprehension tasks without technological aid (Ronconi et al., 2024; Salmerón et al., 2023). Consequently, technology—while expected to assist reading comprehension—can impair this process if not accompanied by careful guidance and supervision. Therefore, EFL teachers are required to accept extra responsibilities to address these challenges by emphasizing the effectiveness of using technological tools as support rather than replacements, using regular online assessments to track student progress, and designing tasks that reinforce higher-order thinking and promote student engagement (McCarthy & Yan, 2023).

## Conclusion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to uncover the essence of the challenges EFL teachers face in the online evaluation of reading comprehension skills. The findings showed that these challenges arise from teachers' expanded roles, which contribute to negative emotions; insufficient training in digital literacy despite its critical importance; and an over-reliance on technological tools that impair students' cognitive engagement during evaluations. Hence, we identified overt and covert challenges encountered by EFL teachers in the online evaluation of reading comprehension. The overt challenges are associated with evident factors such as limited technological resources, low digital literacy among teachers and students, and heightened test anxiety. In contrast, covert challenges include deeper but less visible issues, such as difficulties in evaluating higher-order reading comprehension skills, teachers' shifting responsibilities, student disengagement in online evaluation, and the diminished visibility of students' cognitive activities. For instance, a covert challenge such as teachers' self-regulation of negative emotions arising from new evaluation methods is the result of overt issues, namely ineffective use of digital tools or inadequate technological resources. Since these covert challenges form the foundation of overt challenges, addressing them is of significant importance.

The study bears key implications for teacher educators and policy-makers. Teacher educators should conduct professional development programs that enhance EFL teachers' digital literacy while introducing technology-driven evaluation methods for language skills, specifically reading comprehension skills, which are deemed crucial in students' academic and professional

development. Moreover, policy-makers should make efforts to address the challenges of EFL teachers in the online evaluation of reading comprehension, as these challenges are often overlooked. However, they should prioritize resolving covert challenges, as these directly influence the emergence of overt challenges.

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