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### Difficulties of Understanding English Breaking News Headlines by Iraqi EFL Learners at the University Level

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صعوبات فهم الاخبار الانجليزية العاجلة للمتعلمين الجامعيين  
العراقيين للغة الانجليزية كلغة اجنبية

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#### Abstract

Understanding breaking news necessitates a special attention, since they are written with a special style. The study aims at identifying the difficulties faced by the Iraqi university EFL learners in comprehending English breaking news. The study included 10 fourth year students enrolled at the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar. Thus, a questionnaire as a research instrument, was sent online to the students. The questionnaire points were related to the identification of difficulties faced by the learners in comprehending English breaking news. The data of the study were (10) headlines selected purposively from Euronews website. The data were qualitatively analyzed based on quantifying the quality procedure. The findings showed that (54%) of the total number of the students stated that the headlines are difficult to understand, and (46%) considered them easy. Based on these findings, the study has concluded that students faced four main difficulties: neologism, difficult vocabulary, ellipsis, and passive voice when reading news headlines. Neologism has scored the highest percentage (32.4324%), while passive voice has been the lowest (5.4054%).

**Keywords:** ambiguity, breaking news, ellipsis, neologisms, passive voice, vocabulary

#### المستخلص

فهم الاخبار الانجليزية العاجلة يستلزم انتباه خاص كونها كتبت بأسلوب خاص. تهدف الدراسة الى تحديد الصعوبات التي يواجهها المتعلمين العراقيين للغة الانجليزية بوصفها لغة اجنبية في استيعاب الاخبار الانجليزية العاجلة. تضمنت الدراسة ١٠ طلاب لغة انجليزية في كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية/جامعة الانبار. ولغرض جمع البيانات فقد ارسلت استبانة الى الطلبة عبر الانترنت. يحدد الاستبيان الصعوبات التي تواجه الطلبة في فهم الاخبار الانجليزية العاجلة واشتملت بيانات الدراسة على ١٠ عناوين اخبارية عاجلة اختيرت من الموقع الاخباري يورنيوز. وتم تحليل البيانات نوعيا بناء على القيم الكمية في الاستبيان، وقد بينت النتائج ان ٥٤ % من العدد الكلي من الطلبة يعد العناوين صعبة الفهم، و ٤٦% يعدها سهلة الفهم. بناء على نتائج الدراسة، يواجه الطلبة اربع صعوبات اساسية عند قراءة الاخبار العاجلة: التعبير الجديد، والكلمة الصعبة، والحذف، والمبني للمجهول حيث سجل التعبير الجديد أعلى نسبة (٣٢,٤٣٢٤%) بينما المبني للمجهول اقل نسبة (٥,٤٠٥٤%).

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأخبار العاجلة، تعبير جديد، الحذف، الغموض، المبني للمجهول، المفردات الصعبة



## 1. Introduction

Mass media, according to Danesi (2009), is the “dominant, powerful media organizations, such as major newspapers and television networks”(p.182). They are designed not only for the purpose of communication, but also for providing audience with information through breaking news, which is regarded as a reliable source of information adopted by English channels and websites (e.g., Euronews, BBC, ... etc). Zelizer and Allan (2010) defined breaking news as “a type of news that is unfolding at the moment of -or very near to its presentation”(p.12). It is formulated in an attractive as well as condensed style termed as block language. According to Crystal (2003), such a language is characterized by “abbreviated structures”(p.55), which encapsulate the events of the story. This is in line with Azziz and Rasheed (2013) who focused on brevity in writing headlines.

Accordingly, encapsulating a story in a short number of words may lead EFL learners to experience many difficulties in their attempt to understand the headlines. These difficulties arise from the unusual structure of the headlines, which is characterized by certain features like ellipses and passive voice. A part from these difficulties, learners encounter difficulties in translating headlines due to vocabulary limitation, neologisms and abbreviations.

Understanding breaking news is regarded as one of the difficulties encountered by EFL, as headlines stand like an independent language by themselves. Actually, such a kind of language leads the readers to have a difficulty in understanding breaking news, since it has its own special grammar and vocabulary. This problem has already been diagnosed by Swan (2016), who stated that “English news headlines can be very difficult to understand”(p.292). In this regard, Hamza and Kadhim (2019) revealed that 50 learners at the second stage of the Department of English in Babylon University encountered difficulties in using a block language.

Headlines have been dealt with from various aspects. No one can cover all its aspects, since the subject of the headlines is broad. Therefore, some researchers like Ting (2011), Rosalina (2014) Al-Falahy (2017), Mohammed, N. (2019), Mohammed, A. (2019), Khudhayer (2019), and Hamza and Kadhim (2019) studied them variously. For example, Mohammed, N. (2019) evaluated the quality of the Kurdish translation of English breaking news. She adopted House's (2007) model in the analysis of data. She found that the socio-cultural and the linguistic structure were the main reasons that cause the disagreements between the Kurdish translations and the original breaking news. In addition, the reporting of the breaking news was submitted to the ideology of the ruling party that the agency belonged to. Ting (2011) investigated the difficulty that the third year trainees encountered with the forms and functions of passive voice in a brief news report.

Mental Theory was employed by Rosalina (2014) to investigate the readers' difficulties found in the headlines of the Jakarta Post newspaper. She found that students were unable to understand 80% of the headlines because of the existence of irregular structures, special vocabularies, short sentences, and journalism terms. Al-Falahy (2017) and Mohammed, A. (2019) traced the difficulties that M.A students and novice translators encountered when translating English news headlines into Arabic. Finally, three researchers attempted to examine the ability of EFL learners to use block language correctly. Khudhayer (2019) observed that learners encountered difficulties in using block language when they were asked to paraphrase the sentences of the test. Similarly, Hamza and Kadhim (2019) revealed that EFL learners encountered difficulties in mastering block language at the two levels, production and recognition.

This study differs from the previous studies in that it is a comprehensive study that examines the following difficulties (neologism, difficult vocabulary, ellipsis and passive voice)



that fourth year undergraduate students encounter in reading breaking news headlines. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, none of the researchers conducted such a study on the fourth year students joining the College of Education-University of Anbar; therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap. To this end, the current study attempts to answer the following question: What are the difficulties that Iraqi EFL learners encounter in understanding English breaking news?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Difficulties in Understanding News Headlines

EFL learners face many difficulties in understanding news headlines. What follows are the most common difficulties observed in the literature of past studies on breaking news headlines.

#### 2.1.1 Neologisms

Neologism is one of the processes of inventing new words which appeared in English in 1803 (Evans, 2009). Nasir (2008) stated that speech community accepted neologisms as parts of language, and Lehrer (2003) indicated that neologisms are used to name or describe certain concepts, object and ideas that are created through inventions in science and technology. Various scholars have defined neologisms in diverse ways. Haspelmath and Sims (2010) defined neologisms as "a new lexeme that is attested, but had not previously been observed in the language" (p.336). According to Newmark (1988), neologism is "newly coined lexical units or existing lexical units that acquire a new sense" (p.140).

The difficulty of understanding neologisms belongs to certain points like the absence of the recent vocabularies that are not recorded in dictionaries. In this vein, Choi (2006) asserted that neologisms are "new words and phrases that are used commonly in speech, but not included in dictionaries" (p.189). Another point is that students are not aware of the translation strategies that some neologisms require.

It is clear that people encounter unlimited number of neologisms in the headlines of news due to the frequent use done by politicians who intentionally imply them when talking about social as well as political issues. Actually, there is a hidden meaning behind using such neologisms in which (EFL) learners cannot reach it easily due to certain reasons like the linguistic and cultural differences that mediate between Arabic and English. In addition, they are unable to find the suitable equivalents in Arabic for such neologisms. In media, headline writers always rely on different word formation processes, such as (affixation, compounding, etc.) to coin new words as stated. In this regard, Leibold (1989) depicted neologisms as the "combination or modification of existing words, or the addition of modifying prefixes and suffixes to words to condense or simplify the message and accelerate delivery" (p.110), as in the following headline:

#### 1. "Will English remain an official EU language after Brexit?" (Euronews, 2021).

The difficulty of understanding the above headline lies in the existence of *Brexit*, which is completely a newly coined word referring to the act of leaving Britain from the European Union.

#### 2.1.2 Passive Voice

Leech (2006) defined passive voice as "a type of verb construction in which a form of be is followed by the -ed form (past participle) of the main verb" (p.80). This term is described by Leech and Jan (1994, as cited in Yousif and Al-Bahrani, 2007; & Al-Bahrani, 2008) as a "grammatical process which changes the positions of the elements in the sentence". It is a grammatical construction in which headline writers make use of it in order to put the most significant information at the beginning of the headline to attract readers' interest so as to read the whole story as in the following headline:

#### 2. "Germans kidnapped in Yemen" (Euronews, 2008)

According to Bever (1970), it is considered one of the obstacles that children encounter when speaking English. This is because of its complicated structure, which



sounds very strange or unfamiliar to the learners in their daily life. It has been suggested by Rich (2010) that this structure is required in the language of press to tell what happens rather than to tell who is responsible for doing something. Thus, headline writers also employ it when they want to hide the doer of the action as in the case of detaining someone by the British police in a negative situation. The real problem behind the comprehension of a passive headline is related to the subverting of the usual word order of the headline (Garner, 2009). Another actual problem belongs to the deletion of the auxiliary verb, leaving the past participle only (Swan, 2005), which causes a great burden to the readers who are unable to determine the tense of the sentence as in the above headline.

### 2.1.3 Vocabulary

It seems obvious that understanding a certain text necessitates knowing most of the words of that text. Thus, people comprehend what is mentioned in the text when understanding the majority of the words employed in the text. Hartmann and Stork (1976) defined vocabulary as “the stock of words which are at disposal of a speaker or writer” (p.250). With the passage of time, new vocabularies are invented and inserted in dictionaries due to the special needs of the speakers. One can learn new vocabularies through conversations and dialogues and dialogues.

Zepeda (1996, as cited in Al-Bazzaz, 2005) classified vocabularies into four kinds: listening vocabulary (i.e., the words one needs to know, so as to understand what he hears), speaking vocabulary (i.e., the words one uses when speaking), reading vocabulary (i.e., the words one needs to understand what he reads), writing vocabulary (i.e., the words one uses in writing).

Usually readers cannot understand some headlines due to their ignorance of some vocabularies. Because they are limited with certain space, headline writers use short words that sound unfamiliar to the readers. According to McCarthy, O'Dell and Shaw (2008), headline

writers “prefer words that are shorter and sound more dramatic than ordinary English words”(p.184). This is in line with Reah (2002), who asserted that they develop vocabularies that fulfill the requirements of the headlines through the use of shorter words. In the following headline, *Bans* is used instead of *forbids* to express prohibition. “US Bans Steel Imports” (Swan, 2016, p. 292).

### 2.1.4 Ambiguity

Ambiguity takes place when the same string of words has more than one possible interpretation for a given sentence (Bagas, 2014). It is a linguistic phenomenon where its pervasiveness extends to news headlines in language in order to disguise the intended meaning as well as to stimulate the readers to read the content of the news story (Bucaria, 2004). The headline can be confused and ambiguous due to the ellipsis of the grammatical words and auxiliary verbs as well as to the use of words that have multiple meanings. In this case, the disability of EFL learners to comprehend the headlines increases. From the standpoint of headlines writers, ambiguity, according to Khalifa (2018), is accepted only if it has a positive impact on the reader (i.e., it does not prohibit the reader and the listener’s understanding of the headlines.

Generally, an expression is ambiguous when it has more than one possible interpretation, as in:-

**3. “Iraqi head seeks arms”** (Khalifa, 2018, p.53).

In this headline, there is a semantic ambiguity which occurs due to the use of both words *head* and *arms*, as each of which functions as a noun and has more than one meaning. The word *head* means either a boss or an anatomical head of a body, whereas the word *arms* can mean either body parts or weapons.

### 2.1.5 Ellipsis

Various linguists and grammarians define ellipsis differently. Greenbaum (1996) defined ellipsis as “the omission of part of the structure of a sentence”(p.99). According to Brennan





(1973), ellipsis is “the omission of one or more words that are understood in the context, but required to make the sentence or utterance grammatically correct”(p.275). Ellipsis is viewed by Palmer (2003) as the “omission of one or more words in a sentence, which would be needed to express the sense completely”(p.13). Finally, ellipsis is defined by Hudson (2000) as “the omission of the major constituents of sentences”(p.475).

Some linguists like Al-Janaby & Abed (2011), Reah (2002), Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvik (1985) and Praskova (2009) explained that omission is one of the main features of newspaper headlines, which is widely employed in journalism. It is clear that the ellipsis of an element in the news headlines may occur initially and medially. Initial ellipsis, like subjectless headlines, takes place when the subject is not significant, or is known for everyone. Chin and Tsou (2000) revealed that such a type of headlines denotes to crimes and accidents where the doer of the action is less important than the action. Regarding medial ellipsis, it is a distinctive feature of the language of news headlines in English, and its occurrence is more frequent than initial ellipsis. Praskova (2009) explained that medial ellipsis takes place due to the “omission of the operator”(p.15), and headlines writers rely very heavily on it in order to shorten the headlines, and make them more condensed. This phenomenon causes confusion and leads researchers like Yoshimi (2001) to trace “the absence of a form of the verb be”(p.236) in 73 headlines taken from Reuters newswire articles. Quirk et al. (1985) indicated that there are two kinds of ellipsis, structural ellipsis and situational ellipsis, which one may find in the language of press.

#### **2.1.6 Structural Ellipsis**

Quirk et al. (1985) indicated that structural ellipsis takes place when certain grammatical elements such as pronouns, demonstratives, operators, articles, determiners and prepositions in a block language are omitted. They also inform the reader that the structural ellipsis

usually takes place in a block language that implies, for instance, notices and headlines. Younus (2019) stated that headlines are “written with compressed forms of grammar because of the limited space in newspapers”(p.20), as in the following headline:

#### **4. “Two bodies <are>after shooting”**

##### **2.1.7 Situational Ellipsis**

Situational ellipsis is that kind of ellipsis that depends on the situational context. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan (1999) defined situational ellipsis as “the dropping of words with contextually low information value, when these begin at the beginning of a turn or a clause”(p.1104). Downing and Locke (2006) explained that situational ellipsis is the “organizing factor in block language, which includes newspaper headlines, telegrams and other announcements”(p.244). When ellipsis occurs at the beginning of a headline, situational ellipsis appears due to the elision of the subject and operator as in the subsequent headline:

#### **5. “<They are>proud to carry the flag of Kosovo”(Praskova, 2009, p.37).**

Both structural and situational ellipsis may occur in the same headline as in the following headline:

#### **6. “40 <girls/men/boys> <were>killed in Iraq hotel fire” (Euronews, 2021)**

### **3. Methodology of the Study**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The present study is qualitative; it involves using a quantifying qualitative procedure to describe the qualitative data. The data collection is a single-method procedure, namely, a quasi-structured questionnaire with a purposeful sampling of ten English breaking news. The questionnaire is used to collect the quantitative data that will be analyzed using the manual descriptive statistics.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants of the current study are (10) EFL learners, enrolled at the fourth stage of morning studies in the Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Anbar during the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021. The rationale for



choosing fourth year students is that they are supposed to acquire broad educational knowledge in English, and they are also able to express their own ideas in good English.

### **3.3 Questionnaire**

A questionnaire has been designed based on the objectives of the study to examine the participants' difficulties in understanding online English breaking news headlines at the syntactic and lexical levels. It has been sent online on 28/2/2021 to participants via students' Google Meet. It is concerned with the difficulties faced by students in understanding breaking news. It contains ten headlines. Participants were asked, first, to identify whether the headline was easy or difficult to understand (henceforth DtU). Second, if a headline is easy to understand (henceforth EtU), then, participants need to write down the meanings of the headlines. Otherwise, they choose the type(s) of difficulty encountered among a set of the following options: difficult vocabulary, neologisms, ellipsis, ambiguity, and passive voice.

### **3.4 Criteria for Data Collection**

Data gathering was conducted through a quasi-structured questionnaire constructed in accordance with the objective of the study. The study includes (10) English breaking news headlines taken from Euronews broadcasting, a well-known online website, from 2008 to 2020. This website has been selected purposefully for the following reasons: first, it is regarded as an international news website in the world, which presents news without bias. Second, it has an archive that enables the researchers to download headlines as well as their articles. Third, none of the previous studies has investigated the difficulties of understanding English breaking news in this website yet. It is visited at least three times a day during that period. After browsing the website well, the researchers need to extract

the breaking news headlines that are considered difficult. The data have been gathered from (10) participants using a questionnaire; no dictionary is allowed to be used.

### **3.5 Procedures for Data Collection**

Procedures for data collection passed through many stages. First, the researchers were required to browse the website and read the headlines accurately. Then, the criteria for selecting the headlines were followed to be applied to choose the required number of headlines. Second, the researchers applied the questionnaire, which included both open-ended and closed-ended items. Third, to describe the questionnaire, the researchers communicated with the participants via Google Meet. Fourth, the questionnaire link was sent online to students. Finally, the programmer received the answers, collected them, and sent them to the researchers via excel sheet.

### **3.6 Data Analysis**

The data utilized to achieve the objective of the study have been collected by means of the questionnaire, the tool of the study. The answers of the ten participants to the questionnaire have been later collected and analyzed qualitatively using a quantifying qualitative procedure. The participants were required to read 10 breaking news headlines, and decide upon the easiness and difficulty in understanding the meaning of these headlines, using two alternatives EtU and DtU. Then, the participants were asked to tick the type(s) of difficulty included in DtU. Accordingly, the participants' answers need to be collected and tabulated into two forms of tables. Table (1) shows the percentages of the participants' answers to the items EtU, and DtU. On the other hand, table (2) shows the percentages of the types of difficulties included in DtU.



Table 1  
*Percentages of Participants' Answers to EtU and DtU*

No of Headline	EtU	Percentage	DtU	Percentage
1	3	30	7	70
2	4	40	6	60
3	3	30	7	70
4	6	60	4	40
5	5	50	5	50
6	5	50	5	50
7	3	30	7	70
8	4	40	6	60
9	8	80	2	20
10	5	50	5	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>		<b>54</b>	

As can be seen in table 1, the researchers calculated the percentages of EtU and DtU by dividing the total number of everyone by the

total number of (Headlines Sum X Participants Sum). Then, the result was multiplied by 100% as indicated in the following equation:

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{Total number of easy headline}}{\text{Total number of (H.S. X P.S)}} * 100\%$$

Where H.S. represents the headlines sum, whereas P.S. represents participants' sum

is the easiest one. In addition, H2 and H8 occupied the second position of difficulty. Further, H5, H6, and H10 occupied the third order of difficulty, whereas H4 took the fourth order of difficulty, and H9 occupied the fifth order of difficulty.

$$10 * 10 = 100$$

$$\frac{46}{100} * 100\% = 46\%$$

$$\frac{54}{100} * 100\% = 54\%$$

Thus, the highest frequency of DtU and EtU is 54% and 46%, respectively. When checking table 1, one notices that H1, H3, and H7 are the most difficult headlines, whereas H9

Table 2  
*The Distributions of Difficulties in Braking News Headlines*

No.	Type of difficulty proposed	Frequency	Percentage %	Total	Type of difficulty appeared	Level of Difficulty	Frequency	Percentage %
				37				
1	Neologism	12	32.4324		5	Neologism & Difficult Vocabulary	4	10.8108
2	Difficult Vocabulary	11	29.7297		6	Passive Voice & Ellipsis		
3	Ellipsis	7	18.9189					
4	Passive Voice	2	5.4054				1	2.7027
	Total							
			100%					



The values obtained from Table 2 were calculated according to the following equation:

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{Number of Occurrences of Difficulty}}{\text{Total number of Difficulty}} * 100\%$$

The table above shows the types of difficulties and their frequencies. The total number of these frequencies is (37). The study has found that *neologism* is the most common difficulty in headlines with (12) frequencies, which forms a percentage of (32.4324%). Second in top comes *difficult vocabulary* with (11) frequencies, which forms a percentage of (29.7297%). The third difficulty is *ellipsis*; it appears (7) times, with a percentage of (18.9189%), whereas *neologism and difficult vocabulary* appear (4) times with a percentage of (10.8108%). *Passive voice* appears (2) times with a percentage of (5.4054%), whereas (*passive voice and ellipsis* appear only once with a percentage of (2.7027%).

**Headline 1-Affordable Care Act: Biden defends Obama care as US Supreme Court considers its merits 10/11/2020**

The headline describes the insistence of the new American President Joe Biden to protect the healthcare law, known as Obamacare, legislated by the administration of Barack Obama, a USA president (2009-2017). Although the president Trump tried to thwart the law that supplied health insurance to millions of Americans, Biden asked the Supreme Court of USA to take the merits of the Affordable Care Act into consideration. Such a law was enacted in 2010 and presented health coverage for the low-income people, who suffered, for example, from diabetes and heart diseases. The type of difficulty noticed was *neologism and difficult vocabulary*. The following table summarizes students' responses to the headline:

Table 3

*Frequency of Participants' Answers to H 1*

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps.	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	3			30
Difficult	7	Neologism	2	20
		Neologism& Difficult Vocabulary	1	10
		Difficult Vocabulary	1	10
		Wrong Answers	3	30
Total	10			100

A number of (3) participants with (30%) selected the item EtU, while the number of those who chose DtU item was (7)=(70%). The table shows that *neologism* obtained the highest score, whereas both (*neologism & difficult vocabulary*) and *difficult vocabulary* obtained the same lowest score. Regarding DtU, three types of reasons with different percentages made the headline difficult. The number of those who attributed the cause to (*neologism and difficult vocabulary*), and *difficult vocabulary* was equal, (1 for each), whereas *neologism* was chosen by

(2) participants. Finally, the findings displayed that the wrong answers committed were (3)=(30%).

**Headline 2-Sacred selfie? Muslim cleric hits out over new Hajj trend at Mecca 3/10/2014**

In this headline, Islamic scholars criticize the phenomenon of selfie in Mecca during hajj, the fifth pillar of Islam and the largest gatherings of Muslims in the world. In a website entitled "Merriam-Webster" (n.d.), selfie is defined as "an image that includes oneself (often with





another person or as part of a group), and is taken by oneself using a digital camera especially for posting on social networks”. In a website entitled “ARAB NEWS” (2014), Islamic scholars like Abdul Razzaq Al-Badr condemns the behavior of

pilgrims, who take photos in many holy places like mikqaat, Tawaf, Arafat, and the location of stoning the devil. In this headline, the kind of difficulty noticed was neologism and difficult vocabulary.

Table 4

*Frequency of Participants' Answers to H 2*

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps.	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	4			40
Difficult	6	Neologism	1	10
		Difficult Vocabulary	2	20
		Wrong Answers	3	30
Total	35			100

The number of participants, who replied with EtU by paraphrasing the headline, was (4) = (40%), while the number of those, who replied with DtU, was (6) = (60%). The table shows that the highest score of the kind of difficulty was *difficult vocabulary*, and the lowest was *neologism*. Moreover, the participants encountered two kinds of difficulties: *neologism* and *difficult vocabulary*. They were selected by (1) and (2) participants, respectively. However, findings have shown that the wrong answers committed were (3)=( 30%).

coin after the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. The leaving decision represents a turning point in the history of Britain; therefore, a new fifty pence coin is minted to mark the day of leaving UK officially from the UN. Thus, the government decided to circulate ten million coins gradually carrying the banner “Peace, prosperity and friendship with all nations” (Euronews, 2020). Four types of difficulties: neologism, difficult vocabulary, passive voice, and ellipsis were noticed in this headline. Students’ responses to this headline were summarized in table 5:

**Headline 3-New Brexit coin unveiled as Britain prepares to leave EU 27/1/2020**

The theme of the headline refers to the intention of the British government to mint a new

Table 5

*Frequency of Participants' Answers to H 3*

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	3			30
Difficult	7	Neologism	1	10
		Neologism & Difficult Vocabulary	1	10
		Passive Voice	1	10
		Ellipsis	1	10
		Wrong Answers	3	30
Total	10			100

In this headline, (3) participants with (30%) chose EtU, whereas (7) participants with (70%) selected DtU. Thus, the participants’ answers revealed four kinds of difficulty with similar percentages. The table shows that *neologism*, (*neologism & difficult vocabulary*),

*passive voice*, and *ellipsis* had the same score; each participant selected one of these difficulties. Finally, the findings showed that the wrong answers committed were (3)=( 30%).



**Headline 4-Merkel and Macron agree on eurozone budget 19/06/2018**

The headline depicts the joint press conference that was held between France and Germany at Meseberg Castle in 2018. The meeting revealed the agreement of the German Chancellor Merkel and her French counterpart President Macron to create a common budget for the Eurozone. They believed that such a budget supports the alliance of the Eurozone, including Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Belgium,

Luxembourg, Cyprus, Ireland, Estonia, Greece, Finland, Latvia, Malta, Spain, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovakia, Portugal and Slovenia. Both leaders declared that the budget not only strengthens investment, but also promotes economic convergence within the members of the alliance. In this headline, the types of difficulty noticed were neologism and difficult vocabulary. Table 6 summarizes students' responses to the headline:

Table 6

*Frequency of Participants' Answers to H4*

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps.	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	6			60
Difficult	4	Neologism	2	20
		Neologism & Difficult Vocabulary	1	10
		Difficult Vocabulary	1	10
Total	10			100

did not mention the meaning of the headline, while the number of those who ticked DtU with (40%), was (4). The table showed that *neologism* was placed in the first position and (*neologism and difficult vocabulary*), and *difficult vocabulary* were placed in the second position. They have been chosen by (2), (1), (1) participants, respectively. The findings showed that there are no wrong answers.

**Headline 5-Telemedicine for rural areas 3/2/2016**

The headline is related to the development of the medical services in one of the France's villages, namely, Cluny. It is worth

mentioning that the healthcare professionals adopt a new system, that is, telemedicine to help the sick people. For instance, such a cabin not only presents many services like take x-rays, check functions of the heart and test blood pressure, but also enables patients who live in remote areas to communicate with doctors. In a website entitled "Healthline" (healthline, 2021), telemedicine "is the exchange of medical information from one site to another through electronic communications". Thus, the patients can talk to consultants through a screen directly.

In this headline, the kinds of difficulty noticed were neologism, difficult vocabulary, and ellipsis.

Table 7

*Frequency of Participants' Answers to H 5*

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps.	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	5			50
Difficult	5	Neologism	2	20
		Difficult Vocabulary	1	10
		Ellipsis	1	10
		Wrong Answers	1	10
Total	10			100

The number of the participants who selected the first item EtU was (5)=(50%), and the number of those who chose the second item DtU was (5) =

(50%), too. Table 7 shows that *neologism* obtained the highest score, whereas both *difficult vocabulary & ellipsis* obtained the same lowest



score. Regarding DtU, three types of reasons with different percentages made the headline difficult. The number of those who attributed the cause to *difficult vocabulary* and *ellipsis* was equal, (1 for each), whereas *neologism* was chosen by (2) participants. Finally, the findings displayed that the wrong answer committed was (1)=( 10%).

**Headline 6-Toxic smog triggers restrictions on cars in India’s capital 04/11/2019**

The headline’s context is in New Delhi, the capital of India, and its attempt to impose

restrictions on some private means of transportation. The government adopted this procedure intentionally to decrease pollution resulting from toxic smog. To protect the environment, drivers are forced to follow the odd-even scheme plates. Thus, this system restricts the number of vehicles on the roads. As a result, about 1.2 million vehicles are out of the roads every day and then diseases would decrease. The neologism and difficult vocabulary were the kinds of difficulty in this headline. The table below revealed the students’ answers to the headline:

Table 8  
*Frequency of Participants’ Answers to H6*

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps.	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	5			50
Difficult	5			
		Neologism	1	10
		Difficult Vocabulary	2	20
		Ellipsis	1	10
		Wrong Answers	1	10
Total	10			100

The number of the participants who chose the first item EtU was (5)=(50%), and the number of those who selected the second item DtU was (5) = (50%), too. Table 8 shows that *difficult vocabulary* obtained the highest score, whereas both *neologism and ellipsis* obtained the same lowest score. Concerning DtU, three kinds of reasons with different percentages made the headline difficult. The number of those who ascribed the cause to *neologism* and *ellipsis* was equal, (1 for each), whereas *difficult vocabulary* was chosen by (2) participants. Finally, the findings displayed that the wrong answer committed was (1)=( 10%).

**Headline 7-Supermarket shelves empty as French butter shortage hits 24/10/2017**

The headline portrays the shortage of butter amount in France. It is one of the dairy products used in preparing French food. Therefore, biscuit-makers and bakers regard it as an important ingredient in making croissants, cake and pastries. For example, the owners of backers explain that everything is made with butter in our products. Of eight kilograms of dough, we mix three kilos of butter with some flour, milk, sugar and eggs to make croissants. In fact, the main reason behind a butter shortage is the reduction of milk production according to the notice of supermarkets: “we are unable to supply and sell you butter due to a shortage of raw materials used to produce this product”. This headline includes ellipsis and difficult vocabulary. Students’ responses to this headline were shown in the following Table 9:



Table 9  
*Frequency of Participants' Answers to H 7*

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps.	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	3			30
Difficult	7			
		Ellipsis	3	30
		Difficult Vocabulary	1	10
		Wrong Answers	3	30
Total	10			100

The number of participants who regarded the headline EtU was (3) =(30%), while the number of those who regarded it DtU was (7)=(70%). The table shows that *ellipsis* has the highest score, whereas *difficult vocabulary* has the lowest. For DtU, the number of the participants who ascribes the cause to the *difficult vocabulary* reason, was (1), whereas the number of those that relates the cause to *ellipsis* was (3). With reference to the answers of the two items, (2) participants were unable to explain the headline correctly. Nonetheless, table 9 shows that the wrong answers committed were (3)=(30%).

**Headline 8-HSBC to move 1,000 staff from London to Paris after Brexit 18/01/2017**

The context of the headline was when Stuart Gulliver, the chief executive of the largest banking in the world termed Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), revealed the future planning of the bank. The global bank has 3900 offices distributed in sixty five countries around the world. In an attempt to preserve a continuous access point to the market of EU, it is going to redeploy 1000 staff from London to Paris after the withdrawal of the UK from the EU. In this headline, the types of difficulty noticed were *ellipsis*, *difficult vocabulary*, and *neologism*. Students' responses to the headline were summarized in table 10:

Table 10  
*Frequency of Participants' Answers to H8*

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	4			40
Difficult	6			
		Neologism	1	10
		Neologism & Difficult Vocabulary	1	10
		Difficult Vocabulary	2	20
		Ellipsis	1	10
		Wrong Answers	1	10
Total	10			100

The percentage of (4) participants who chose EtU was (40%), whereas (60%) was the percentage of the (6) participants who chose DtU. Table 10 shows that the *difficult vocabulary* has the highest frequency, whereas neologism, (*neologism and difficult vocabulary*), and *ellipsis* score the lowest frequency. The number of participants that assigned the cause to *difficult vocabulary* was (2) and the number of those who

pinpointed the cause to the combination of (*neologism and difficult vocabulary*) was (1), while *ellipsis* and *neologism* have the rate (10%) with (1) frequency each. Finally, the findings displayed that the wrong answer committed was (1)=(10%).





**Headline 9-One dead, five hospitalized in shooting at a Phoenix motel 13/1/2019**

The headline describes the scene of the murder that occurred at one of the motels in Arizona, one of the largest states in the US. It happened when a group of adults (four males and females) got into an argument with two adults (male and female) arrived suddenly in the second floor of the motel. The police stated that the

accident began when one of the two adults pulled his gun out and started shooting. As a result, five were injured and taken to the hospital, one of attackers escaped and the other was killed. In this headline, the types of difficulty noticed were passive voice and (passive voice & ellipsis). Table 11 summarizes students' responses to the headline

**Table 11**  
**Frequency of Participants' Answers to H9**

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps.	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	8			80
Difficult	2			
		Passive Voice	1	10
		Passive Voice & Ellipsis	1	10
Total	10			100

The number of participants, whose reply was EtU, was (8)=(80%), while the number of those, who chose DtU, was (2) = (20%). Table 11 shows that the ratio of the passive voice equalizes that of (*passive voice & ellipsis*). The participants who were unable to explain the meaning of the headline were (3). Moreover, the participants encountered two kinds of difficulties: *passive voice*, and *passive voice and ellipsis*; they were selected by (1) participant. The findings showed that there are no wrong answers.

The headline reveals the intention of the French government to put an end to the phenomenon of pollution resulting from spreading cigarette butts on the streets, beaches and sea. It informs the representatives of tobacco companies that cigarette butts are responsible for the pollution of the environment due to the chemical substances they contain. For example, every year, heavy smokers in Paris throw 350 tons of cigarette butts; therefore, hundreds of liters of water can be contaminated. Thus, the government decided to take 68 euro as a fine for smokers caught throwing one butt on the road. The neologism and the difficult vocabulary were the kinds of difficulties noticed in this headline. Table 12 below reveals the students' responses to the headline:

**Table 12**  
**Frequency of Participants' Answers to H10**

Level of Ans.	No. of Ps	Difficulty Type	Freq.	%
Easy	5			50
Difficult	5			
		Neologism	2	20
		Difficult Vocabulary	1	10
		Wrong Answers	2	20
Total	10			100

One can notice that the number of participants who selected EtU was (5)=(50%);

however, three of them misunderstood the headline, and the number of those who selected DtU was also (5)=(50%). Table 12 shows that



*neologism* occupied the first position, whereas the *difficult vocabulary* occupied the second position. Thus, the number of those who ascribed the cause to *neologism* and *difficult vocabulary* was (2) and (1), respectively. In addition, the findings showed that the wrong answers committed were (2)=( 20%).

understanding the breaking news, table 13 summarizes the frequency distribution of the participants' answers to the questionnaire.

Having presented the findings related to the types of difficulties faced by EFL learners in

Table 13  
*Total Frequencies of Difficulties*

No of Headlines	Level of Answers	Number of participants	Percentage %	Type of Difficulty					Wrong Answers
				Neologism	Neologism & Difficult Vocabulary	Difficult Vocabulary	Passive Voice	Passive Voice & Ellipsis	
1	Easy	3	30						
	Difficult	7	70	20	10	10			30
2	Easy	4	40	2	1	1			3
	Difficult	6	60	10		20			30
3	Easy	3	30	1		2			3
	Difficult	7	70	10		10	10	10	30
4	Easy	6	60	1	1	1		1	3
	Difficult	4	40	20	10	10			
5	Easy	5	50	2	1	1			
	Difficult	5	50	20		10		10	10
6	Easy	5	50	2		1		1	1
	Difficult	5	50	10		20		10	10
7	Easy	3	30	1		2		1	1
	Difficult	7	70			10		30	30
8	Easy	4	40	1		1		3	3
	Difficult	6	60	10	10	20		10	10
9	Easy	8	80	1	1	2		1	1
	Difficult	2	20				10	10	
10	Easy	5	50				1	1	
	Difficult	5	50	20		10			20
				2		1			2



Table 14  
*Summarizes the Students' Wrong Answers*

No of Headline	No of Wrong Answers
1.	3
2.	3
3.	3
4.	0
5.	1
6.	1
7.	3
8.	1
9.	0
10.	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>

Table 14 illustrates that H4 and H9 are the easiest ones, since the percentage of wrong answers was (0%), whereas other headlines like H1, H2, H3 and H7 are the most difficult headlines which scored (3) wrong answers for each. Thus, they occupied the first order of difficulty. Table 13 reveals that some participants, who encountered difficulties in understanding the four headlines, attributed the cause of difficulty to *neologism*, *difficult vocabulary*, *passive voice*, and *ellipsis*. This is perhaps because they did not master *passive voice* and *ellipsis* at the university study in addition to their limited *vocabulary*. H10 occupied the second order of difficulty among other difficulties. Like the difficult headlines, the students attributed the cause of difficulty to the existence of *neologism* and *difficult vocabulary*. However, it scored (2) wrong answers. Moreover, H5, H6 and H8 occupied the third order of difficulty. Each headline scored (1) wrong answer. This is in line with Christianto (n.d) who stated that grammar and vocabulary employed in a block language represents a problem for learners of English.

### 3.7 Discussion of Findings

As far as the types of difficulties related to the objective of the study are concerned, table 1 reveals that DtU was of 54% percentage, that is, it represents the highest, and EtU was the lowest. DtU involved many new difficulties in addition to the proposed difficulties. This may suggest that students were unable to identify the

type of difficulty already indicated in the questionnaire. This might be due to the weak competence the students had, or to the less exposure to language (Al-Mofti, 2021).

Four of the difficulties suggested in the questionnaire have been chosen with different rates and degrees. For instance, neologism constitutes (32.4324%) of the total number of the difficulties. It has a high frequency of occurrence, since it has a noticeable percentage of occurrence compared with the other difficulties. The highest score for neologism might be due to the fact that most students are less exposed to outside resources as well as mass media; therefore, they consider some headlines DtU. They attributed the cause of difficulty to the presence of newly coined vocabularies like "Obamacare", as in "Affordable Care Act: Biden defends Obamacare as US Supreme Court considers its merits". With respect to the inability of the students to recognize the new words, it can be stated that students pay less attention to the news on the websites and newspapers; a matter that plays an important role in spreading neologisms. This is in accordance with Mohamed's (2020) view that "newspapers are considered as one of the creators and mediums which have a significant role in spreading neologisms by using new formation of words in their headlines"(p.180).

The second prevailing difficulty was the difficult vocabulary, which constitutes (29.7297%) of the total number of difficulties. This might be due to the fact that students were



less exposed to outside resources (e.g., newspapers, websites, etc.), which provide them with various vocabularies. This is supported by Tuncer (2019) who stated that “newspapers help us to understand easily what we read day by day. Also if we read newspaper very often, we improve our vocabulary. We learn new words every day and we understand what we read faster” (p.67). Because they pay attention to their college curriculum only, students’ vocabularies are limited. Therefore, they are always confused when encountering some new vocabularies in the headlines. Al-Bazzaz (2005) indicated that without knowing what most vocabularies mean, readers cannot understand what they are reading. Al-Kufaishi (1988) also added that unfamiliar vocabulary impedes reading comprehension especially for EFL learners. This is in line with Eskey (1975) who asserted that the “student who cannot understand a passage of English usually ascribes his difficulty to the fact that he does not know the vocabularies”(p.112). Thus, the majority of the participants, who could not understand headlines, attribute the difficulty cause to the existence of the following vocabularies: Obamacare, Brexit, Eurozone, Telemedicine, budget, merits, smog, HSBC, coin, toxic, hospitalized, butt, stub out, triggers. Such a finding is in line with that of McCarthy, O’Dell and Shaw (2008) and Swan (2016), who stated that headline writers use vocabularies that are not common in ordinary language. In this regard, Khalil (2020) also observed the inability of the second year students to translate unfamiliar vocabularies in news business texts.

Another predominant difficulty which occupies the third position of occurrence was ellipsis. Ellipsis is widely used in headlines for the purpose of brevity. It constitutes (18.9189%) of the total number of difficulties. Němečková (2011) stated that “in English headlines, it is permitted to violate deliberately grammatical rules which contribute not only to a headline’s brevity, but also to its attractiveness”(p.18). Because they are restricted with certain spaces, writers of headlines omit function words like

determiners (*this, some*), articles (*a, an, the*, titles *Sir, Mrs, Lord*), relative pronouns (*which, who*), verbs to be (*is, are, were*), and some verbs like (*have*) (Clark, 2007). This is in accordance with Turner’s view (as cited in Khodabandeh, 2007), that “determiners and the verb to be are almost universally omitted in headlines”. Therefore, students described some headlines as incomplete sentences, which are DtU. For example, they may consider the headline: “*One dead, five hospitalized in shooting at a Phoenix motel*” difficult because they were unable to recover the elliptical elements. It can be seen from the headline above that the verb “to be” as well as the conjunction “and” are omitted. Such a technique confuses students and hinders understanding. This is in line with that of Clark (2007) who stated that “ellipsis is the source of one of the greatest difficulties in understanding headlines”(p.44).

Although writers of headlines try to save space, such a procedure perplexes students as in the case with passive voice, the last proposed difficulty. This difficulty constitutes (5.4054%) of the total number of the difficulties. Students could not distinguish active and passive easily. This may be due to the fact that they still face a difficulty in mastering passive structures. This interpretation correlates with Ting (2011) who concluded that EFL students regard the passive voice as one of the most difficult structures in English to be learnt. She found that the majority of the participants did not master the structure of the passive voice. Therefore, they do not notice the use of passive voice in the headlines. In addition, they were unable to correctly identify whether the underlined verbs in the headline below were written in passive voice or not.

7. “**She was arrested Monday and charged with attempted kidnapping and other counts**” (Ting, 2011)

Another point which increases the difficulty is the fractured grammar, which is represented by the absence of the “verb to be”, as in the headline (9). Thus, students were confused and unable to determine whether the structure of





the headline is in the past or passive form. This opinion is supported by Jalilifar (2010), who described the language of the headline as “elliptical and compressed” and “often the fractured grammar and idiosyncratic vocabulary of English headlines will challenge the understanding even of native speakers”(p.50). Headline writers’ technique of ellipsis is in accordance with Hemingway’s style of writing.

#### 4. Conclusions

To answer the research question, *What are the difficulties that Iraqi EFL learners encounter in understanding English breaking news?*, the study has revealed that:

1. the difficulties and their frequencies encountered by EFL learners in reading breaking news headlines were various.
2. Neologism is the most frequent difficulty; it constitutes (32.4324%) of all the five difficulties mentioned.
3. After neologism, difficult vocabulary, ellipsis, and passive voice are found to be among the most frequently difficulties occurred with (29.7297%), (18.9189%), and (5.4054%), respectively.
4. Breaking news headlines were DtU because of the combination of more than one difficulty like (*neologism & difficult vocabulary*) (10.8108%), and (*passive voice & ellipsis*) (2.7027%).
5. The number of the occurrence of difficulties reveals the students’ limited ability to comprehend headlines. *Neologism*, for example, has the greatest number of occurrences than the other difficulties due to its various types in the headlines.
6. *Difficult Vocabulary* is greater than the other difficulties, since it carries the meaning of the headline. This might be due to the fact that students’ university textbooks provide insufficient vocabularies that do not correspond to continuous changes.
7. *Ellipsis* occupies the third position; it is purposefully used by headline writers not only to save space, but also to create suspense. This phenomenon confuses the students and

obstructs their comprehension because writers of headlines want to place the most important incident at the beginning of the headline.

8. Another difficulty is the passive voice. It is preferable by headline writers although it is problematic for readers. The source of difficulty emerges not only from the reverse of the structure, but also due to the omission of the auxiliary verb.

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#### Appendix A

**Part one: difficulties of understanding breaking news:**  
Read the following breaking news headlines and state the extent of easiness of your understanding their meaning by using one of the following alternatives for each item:

1. Tick the space in front of (**easy to understand**) if you do not encounter any difficulty in understanding them. Then, reflect your understanding on the blank given.
2. If you find a headline that is difficult to understand, tick (**difficult to understand**), and then tick the type of difficulty you face in understanding the breaking news headlines as listed therein:

#### Easy to understand

The headline means-----  
-----  
-----  
-----  
-----

#### Difficult to understand

(Tick one or more than one reasons of the following that suit you.)

- 1-The neologism the headline contains.
- 2-The passive form used in the headline.
- 3-The ambiguity (structural and semantic) found in the headline.
- 4-The difficult vocabulary the headline has (underline the difficult vocabulary).
- 5-Ellipsis of an element in the news headline.

#### Appendix B

#### English Breaking News Headlines used in the Questionnaire

- 1-Affordable Care Act: Biden defends Obamacare as US Supreme Court considers its merits 10/11/2020  
<https://www.euronews.com/2020/11/10/affordable-care-act-biden-defends-obamacare-as-us-supreme-court-considers-its-merits>
- 2-Sacred selfie? Muslim cleric hits out over new Hajj trend at Mecca 3/10/2014  
<https://www.euronews.com/2014/10/03/sacred-selfie-clerics-anger-over-new-hajj-trend-at-mecca>
- 3-New Brexit coin unveiled as Britain prepares to leave EU 27/1/2020  
<https://www.euronews.com/2020/01/26/new-brexit-coin-unveiled-as-britain-prepares-to-leave-eu>
- 4-Merkel and Macron agree on eurozone budget 19/06/2018  
<https://www.euronews.com/2018/06/19/watch-live-macron-and-merkel-address-the-press-after-eu-reform-talks>
- 5-Telemedicine for rural areas 3/2/2016  
<https://www.euronews.com/2016/02/03/telemedicine-for-rural-areas>
- 6-Toxic smog triggers restrictions on cars in India's capital 04/11/2019  
<https://www.euronews.com/2019/11/04/india-s-capital-new-delhi-restricts-cars-resident-choke-toxic-n1075921>
- 7-Supermarket shelves empty as French butter shortage hits 24/10/2017  
<https://www.euronews.com/2017/10/24/supermarket-shelves-empty-as-french-butter-shortage-hits>
- 8-HSBC to move 1,000 staff from London to Paris after Brexit 18/01/2017  
<https://www.euronews.com/2017/01/18/hsbc-to-move-1000-staff-from-london-to-paris-after-brexit>
- 9-One dead, five hospitalized in shooting at a Phoenix motel 13/1/2019  
<https://www.euronews.com/2019/01/13/one-dead-five-hospitalized-shooting-outside-phoenix-motel-n958206>
- 10-France orders tobacco industry: stub out cigarette butt pollution 9/12/2019  
<https://www.euronews.com/2018/06/14/france-orders-tobacco-industry-stub-out-cigarette-butt-pollution>