

A Study of Perceived Reading Difficulties and Reading Strategies: The Case for Online Reading

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i5/17055> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i5/17055

Published Date: 19 May 2023

Abstract

Reading is never considered a simple activity that requires readers to only identify words written on a page or screen. It requires mental activities to comprehend their meaning and recognize relationships between words and ideas. There are many factors that may affect reading comprehension including readers' background knowledge on the text they read, vocabulary, motivation and text complexity. This study is conducted to explore learners' perception on their reading difficulties, their use of reading strategies and the relationship between them in the case of online reading. This quantitative research collected data from 275 random respondents from various faculties in a public university. The questionnaire has 4 sections that contain items on demographic profile, reading difficulties, global strategies, problem-solving strategies and support strategies. In general, the findings show that there is a high significant association between global reading strategies and readers problem-solving strategies as well as support strategies. However, the study found the perceived difficulties experienced by the learners have no significance to the reading strategies that they use. Nevertheless, the teaching of such strategies should be incorporated in the reading instruction.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, Perceived Reading Difficulties, Online Reading Strategies.

Introduction

Background of Study

Reading comprehension is a critical ability for academic success, especially for English learners in university who are required to comprehend textbooks, academic papers, and other reading materials across all courses. Merga and Roni (2018) emphasise this, stating that reading is an independent skill that promotes lifelong continued literacy engagement that enables people to obtain knowledge and comprehension, as well as build critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. However, in many cases learners show poor comprehension of a text because of various difficulties they face that include poor mastery over vocabulary, weak linguistics knowledge, poor inference skills and unknown reading strategies (Iqbal et. al., 2015). In Malaysia statistics show that Malaysians are not reading enough, especially the school students who are labelled as reluctant readers (Chandran & Shah 2019). Even though the Malaysian Education System requires school students to learn the target language for about 11 years, many students who entered the tertiary education show lack of mastery of the English Language. Therefore, identifying reasons behind this phenomenon is necessary and with the covid 19 pandemic transforming learning into an online experience, it is necessary to investigate the relationship between reading difficulties and reading strategies in the context of online reading.

Statement of Problem

Online reading is a reality today. The pandemic of covid 19 has transformed education into an online practice. Therefore, reading in the online setting is becoming more popular for most people, specifically for teachers and students nowadays. As a result, students today require not only the comprehension of traditional print texts, but also proficiency in online materials. According to Manalu (2019) the effectiveness of educational activities including reading relies on the students' perception. Therefore, different reading strategies are helpful in students' reading comprehension. In comparison with the abundant research conducted in the area of reading strategies in the print setting, Wen (2015) reported that relatively few studies investigated the online reading strategies in the online setting.

Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This study is done to explore perception of learners on their use of learning strategies. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

- How do perceived reading difficulties influence online reading?
- How do learners use of reading strategies influence online reading?
- Is there a relationship between perceived reading difficulties and online reading strategies?

Literature Review

Perceived Reading Difficulties

Perceived reading difficulties are the subjective experiences of English language learners who feel they have trouble reading a text. The sources of these problems may vary, not only because of their limitation of vocabulary or linguistics knowledge. However, such perception towards their weaknesses may not really imply their actual reading difficulties, and learners' impression does not always match their actual reading abilities. A study conducted by Jayanti (2016) found that there is no significant discrepancy between students' and teachers' perception of students' reading difficulties. Both learners and teachers agree to some point on the readers' difficulties in reading. However, some improvements are still necessary such as emphasising effective reading strategies during reading activities. According to Tomas et al

(2021) a suitable reading environment, teaching program and family support are among the reading difficulties that should be considered. Wharton-McDonald study (as cited in Moreau, 2014) agrees, stating that “despite a current emphasis on programs, materials, and assessment tools, it is the teacher – and the instruction she or he provides in the classroom – that matters most to the development of successful readers”. However, each student’s situation is unique, therefore the reading difficulties should be attended carefully.

Reading Strategies

Students at universities utilise a range of reading methods to comprehend and retain the content they are reading. Among the most prevalent reading techniques employed by university students are: skimming, which entails skimming a book to gain a basic understanding of its content, organisation, and important elements (Gulo, 2020); scanning, which involves searching a text for specific information or features, such as keywords, headers, and statistics (Late & Kumpulainen, 2022); critical reading, a reading skill that focuses on studying the text, assessing its arguments and evidence, and challenging assumptions or prejudices (Aghajani & Gholamrezapour, 2019); collaborative reading, which prioritizes discussing the topic with peers or a study group, exchanging opinions, and posing questions to increase comprehension and perspective (Adachi & Kashihara, 2019); and also reflective reading, which is a technique that relates personal experiences or past knowledge to the text and linking new information to old knowledge (Coiro, 2020). These are only five among many more reading strategies which have been adopted, adapted, integrated, and revolutionized by many researchers and educators worldwide (Valizadeh, 2021).

Past Studies on Reading Difficulties

There have been many past studies on learners’ difficulties in English Language reading comprehension. A study by Kim (2021) investigated how nine Malaysian students attending Korean university reflected their L2 speaking fluency in advanced L2 reading and what difficulties they encountered in reading comprehension. The study employed qualitative research using in-depth and semi-structured interviews. The study revealed that the students’ speaking fluency did not play a significant role in reading at an advanced level and also the students faced difficulties in reading due to a lack of vocabulary knowledge, insufficient background knowledge and also interest. Next, Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) studied the reading comprehension difficulties among 100 EFL learners in University Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) and University Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) using quantitative methods. Cross tabulation was used to analyse data from the test and the findings indicated that the major difficulty faced by the Arab EFL learners is inability to recognize the types of text. The study concluded that the reading comprehension difficulties faced by Arab EFL learners in the selected institutions could affect their English language proficiency and academic performance.

Qarqez and Ab Rashid (2017) explored the reading comprehension difficulties faced by 200 students who studied English as Foreign Language (EFL) at Yarmouk University. Data were collected using questionnaires. The study found that the students face several problems in the reading process, such as ambiguous words, unfamiliar vocabulary, and limited available time to cognitively process the text. Abdul Samad et. al (2017) investigated the undergraduate students’ difficulties and their strategies in completing the TOEFL reading comprehension test. The data was obtained from the students’ worksheets of the TOEFL test and through questionnaires. Thirty students of the English Education Department of Syiah Kuala University, Indonesia took part in the study. The results showed five common reading

difficulties encountered by the students, among those are identifying implied and stated details and identifying main ideas.

Past Studies on the use Reading Strategies

Reading strategies are mental processes that facilitate the readers to comprehend reading text efficiently. These strategies can be divided into several categories, such as support strategies, global reading strategies and problem-solving strategies. Many studies have been done to investigate the use of reading strategies in reading comprehension. A study by Jusuh and Abdullah (2015) was done to investigate the level of reading strategies used during on-line reading in an academic setting and whether differences in the use of strategies among students from different academic disciplines exist. 102 students from different academic disciplines in a particular university in Malaysia were involved in this study. It was reported that there was no significant difference between the strategy used across disciplines. The finding also reported that was no preferred strategies among all students.

Another study is by Wen (2015) that examined 94 undergraduate and graduated English for Foreign Language (EFL) learners' perceived use of on-line reading strategies and whether the perceived strategy used are different in terms of proficiency levels and gender. The data was collected using The Online Survey of Reading Strategies (OSORS). The result showed that global strategies were used more by the EFL on-line readers in the on-line text to increase their comprehension. This study also showed that global and problem solving strategies are used more by high level learners than low level learners. Besides, the finding of this study also showed that there were no significant differences among males and females. Next, a study by Khusniyah (2019) investigated the students' English reading comprehension skills using on-line reading strategies that had used both of at school and home. This study employed exploratory qualitative case study where data was collected using observation, assignment of reading report, interview and test from 25 third semester students of Universitas Islam Negeri Mataram, Indonesia. The finding of this study reported that online reading strategy offered a positive impact on students' pattern in English reading comprehension learning both in school and at home.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 below shows the conceptual framework of the study. The framework of this study is based on the concept that in order for learners to reduce reading difficulties, they employ some strategies. According to Rahmat et al (2020), reading fear leads to perceived reading difficulties. This becomes a cycle because learners who have reading anxiety would perceive reading activities as difficult. According to Abeleh and Al-Sobh (2021), academic readers perceived reading as difficult due to the context of the text, the vocabulary used and even the language used by the writer. Many researchers suggest ways to help readers overcome their perceived reading difficulties. Amer et al (2010) suggest readers use (a) global strategies, (b) problem-solving strategies and (c) support strategies. Firstly, global strategies help readers read with a purpose in mind. They use their background knowledge to make sense of the text. Next, problem-solving strategies help readers read the text accurately and with understanding. They use information from the text and beyond the text to make sense of what they are reading. Finally, some readers resort to use other strategies to understand the text such as translating into their mother tongue/or to a language they know. Some depend on the diagrams and pictures. Some even depend on other texts to understand the text they are reading.

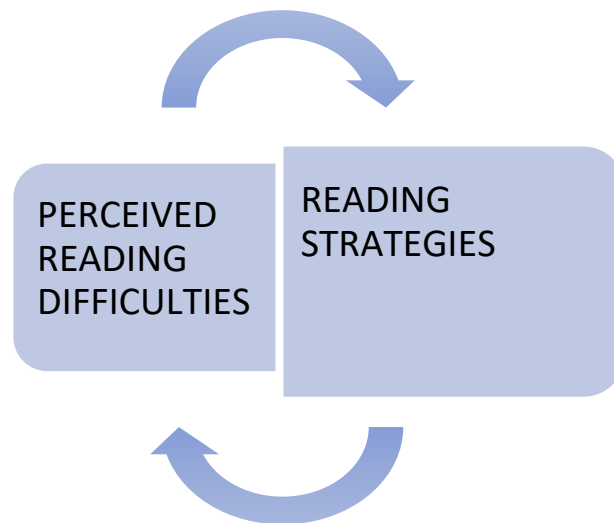


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework-
Reducing Reading Difficulties through Reading Strategies

Methodology

This quantitative study is done to explore motivation factors for learning among undergraduates. A purposive sample of 275 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is rooted from Abeeleh and Al-Sobh (2021) on reading comprehension problems and also Amer, AL Barwani, and Ibrahim (2010) on readers' on perceived use of online reading strategies to reveal the variables in table 1 below. The survey has 4 sections. Section A has items on demographic profile. Section B has 14 items on reading difficulties. Section C has 17 items on global strategies. Section D has 8 items on problem-solving strategies and section E has 9 items on support strategies.

Table 1

Distribution of Items in the Survey

SECTION	STRATEGY	
B	Reading Difficulties	14
C	Global	17
D	Problem-Solving	8
E	Support	9
		48

Table 2
Reliability of Survey

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.910	48

Table 2 shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .910, thus, revealing a good reliability of the instrument chosen/used. Further analysis using SPSS is done to present findings to answer the research questions for this study.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

Q1 Gender

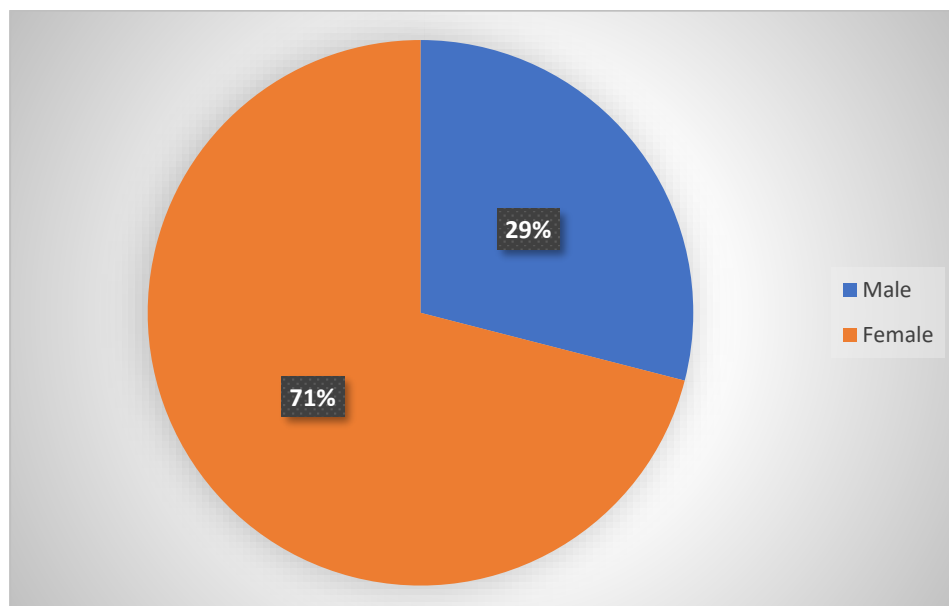


Figure 2- Percentage for Gender

Figure 2 illustrates the gender distribution of respondents. It is shown that 71% are female and the other 29% of the respondents are male.

Q2 Level of Study

1	Diploma	59%
2	Degree	41%

Figure 3- Percentage for Level of Study

Figure 3 shows the percentage for Level of study among the respondents. The table shows 59% are Diploma students and 41% are Degree students.

Q3 Cluster

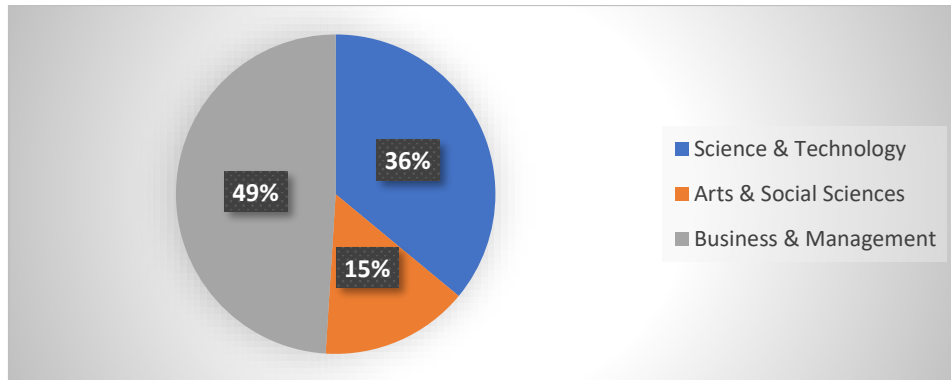


Figure 4- Percentage for Cluster

Figure 4 shows the cluster of respondents involved. It can be seen that approximately 49% are Business & Management students, 36% are Science & Technology students and the least are 15% of Art & Social science students.

Q4 Semester

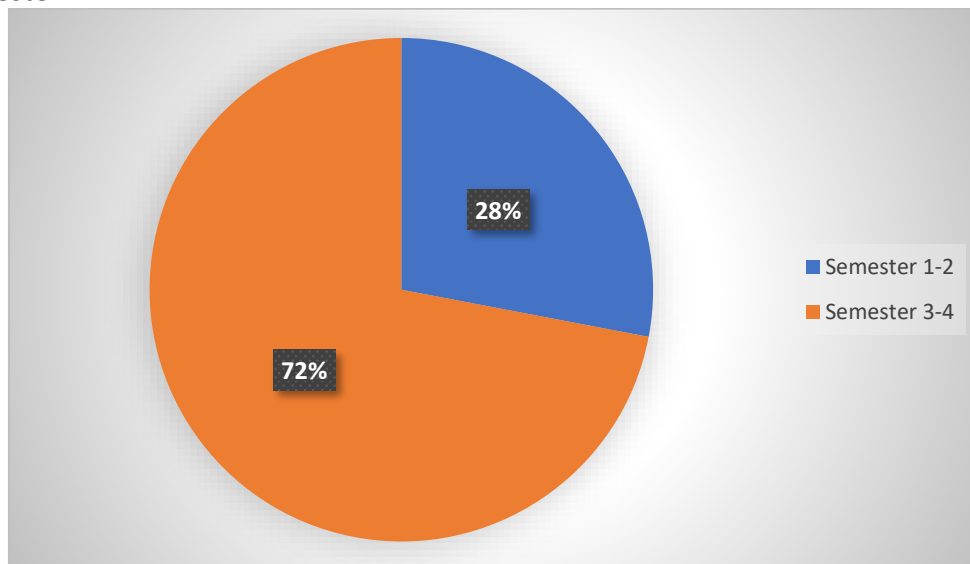


Figure 5- Percentage for Semester

In Figure 5, a large proportion of 72% are students from semester 3-4 and the remaining 28% students are from semester 1-2

Q5 Self Rating Reading in English Proficiency

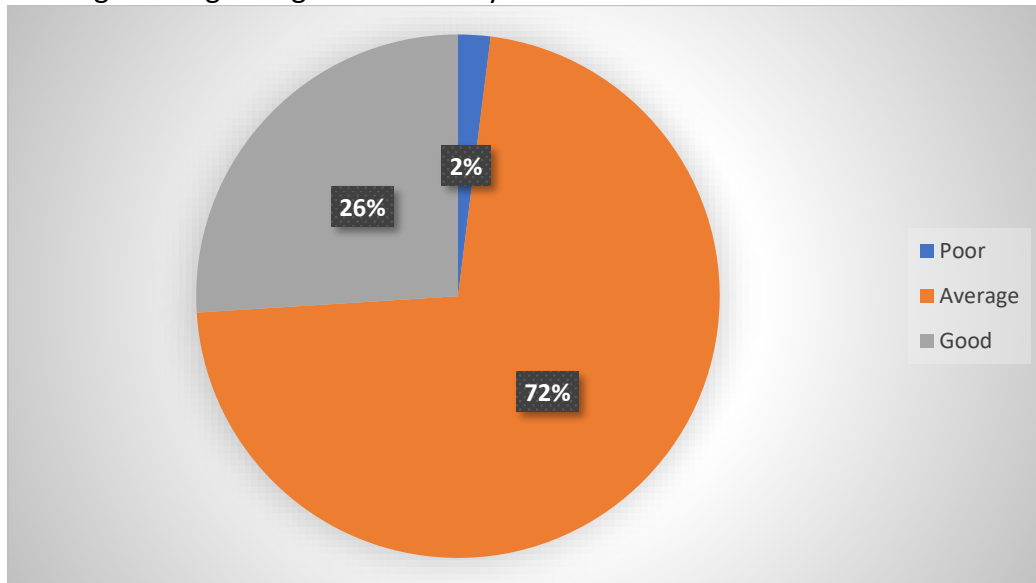


Figure 6- Percentage for English Proficiency

Figure 6 shows a large number of students around 72% have average language proficiency, 26% accounted good level of English proficiency and an insignificant amount of 2% have poor English proficiency.

Q6 How often do you read?

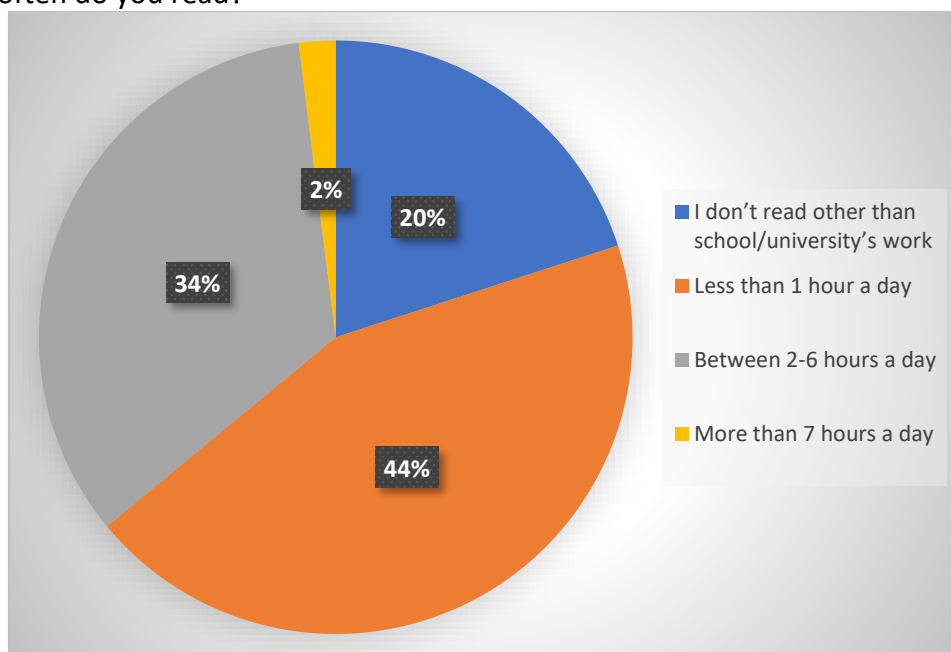


Figure 7- Percentage for Reading Frequency

Figure 7 presents the percentage of reading frequency. When asked ‘How often do you read?’ 44% of the respondents said that they read less than 1 hour a day while an insignificant 2% of them said they read more than 7 hours a day.

Q7 Reading Preference

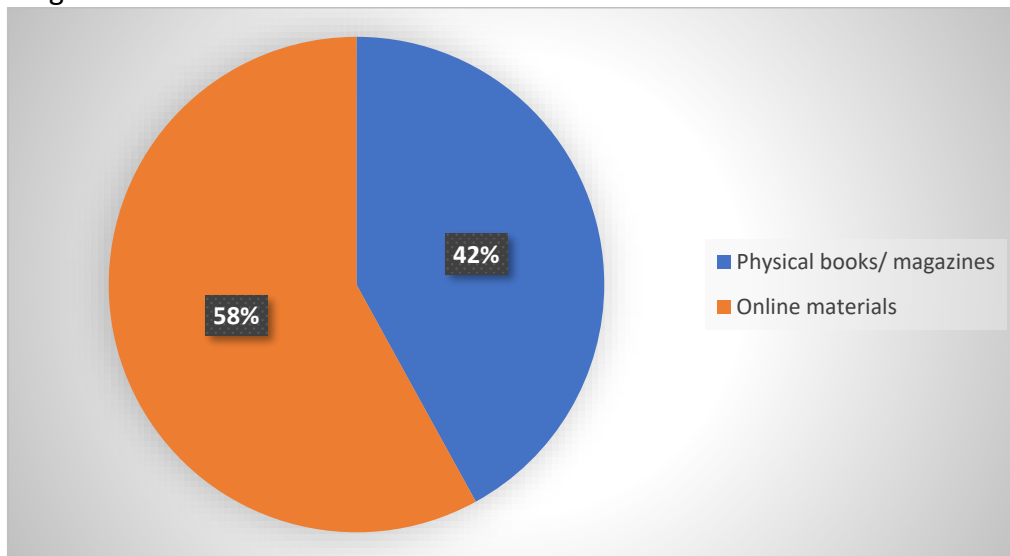


Figure 8- Percentage for Reading Preference

Figure 8 presents the students’ percentage for reading preference. 58% or 160 respondents chose online materials as their preferred reading texts while 45% or 115 respondents chose physical books or magazines as their preferred reading materials.

Q8 When I read,

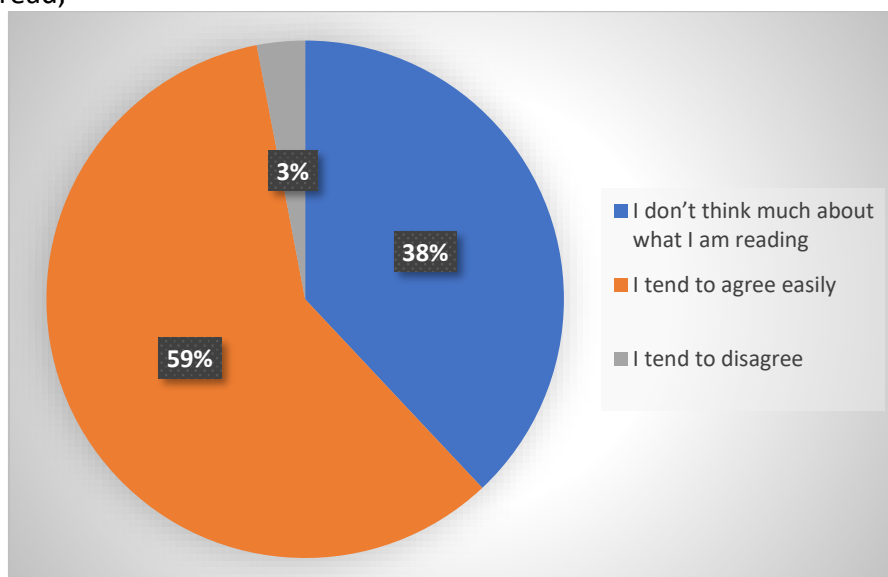


Figure 9- Percentage for While reading

Figure 9 presents the percentage for ‘what they think while reading’. Majority of the respondents (59%) stated that they tend to agree easily with whatever they read. About 38%

of them do not think much about what they are reading. However only 3% of the respondents, which is 8 students, said that they tend to disagree with what they read.

Findings for Perceived Reading Difficulties

This section presents data to answer research question 1 - How do perceived reading difficulties influence online reading?

Reading Difficulties

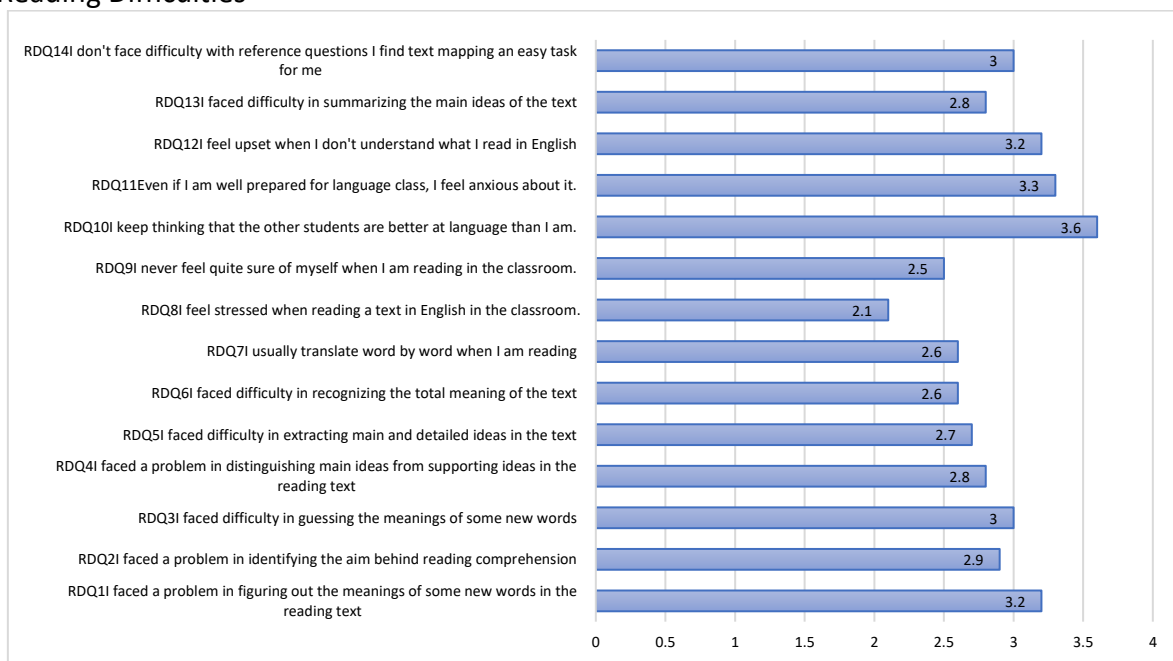


Figure 10: Mean for Reading Difficulties

Based on Figure 10 above, the highest mean shown is 3.6 for statement which queried on the students' personal thought that other students are better at language than themselves. The lowest mean, on the other hand, implies whether they are stressed or not when it comes to reading an English text in the classroom. The mean score of 2.1 actually interprets that they do not feel as stressed when they are reading English texts in classrooms.

Findings for Online Reading Strategies

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How does learners use of reading strategies influence online reading?

Global Strategies

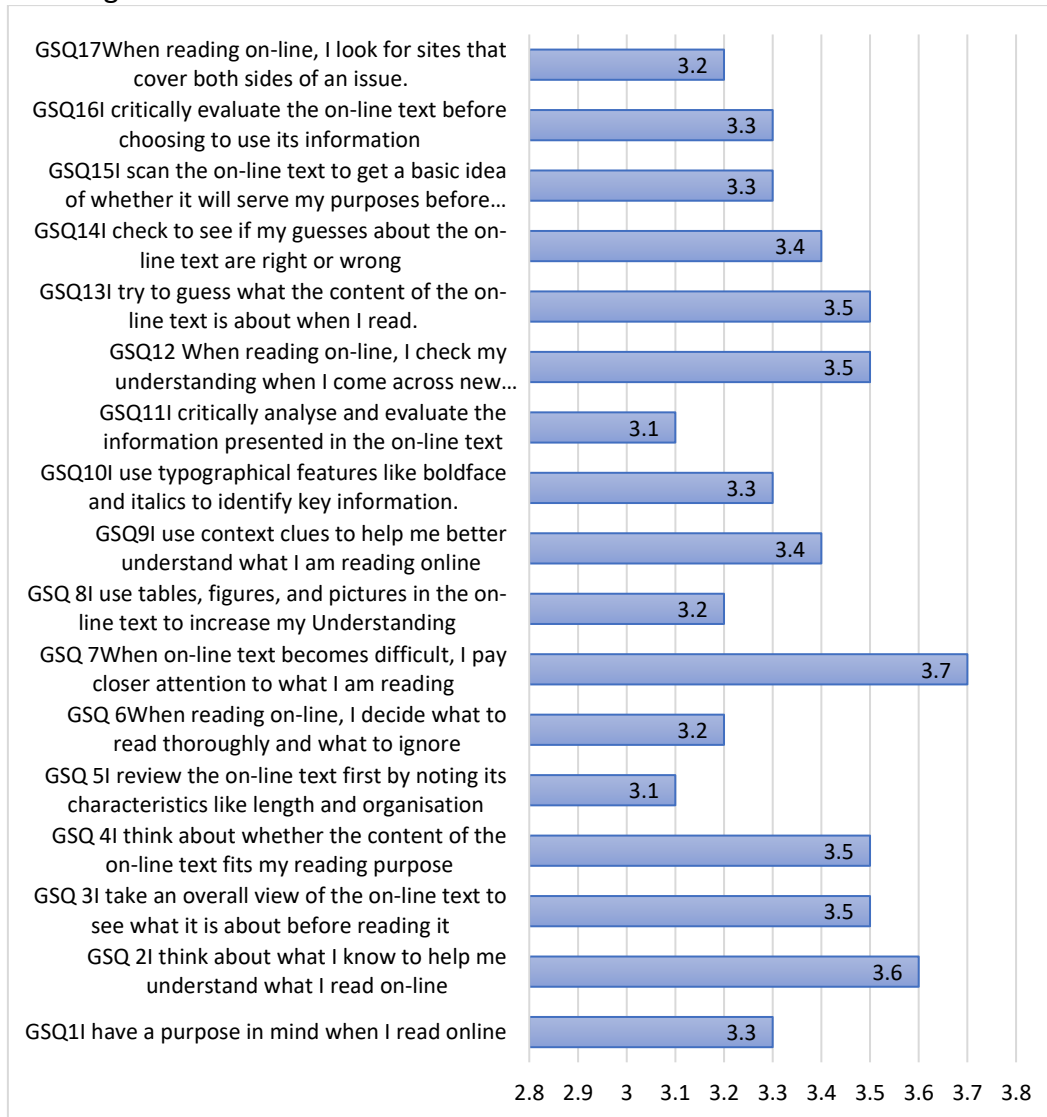


Figure 11: Mean for Global Strategies

Figure 11 above shows that the respondents sometimes use all the global strategies listed. The highest mean is 3.7 that says the students pay closer attention to what they are reading when the online text becomes difficult. Whereas the lowest mean, which is 3.1, says that the students sometimes review on-line text first by noting its characteristics like length and organisation as well as critically analyse and evaluate the information presented in the on-line text.

Problem-Solving Strategies

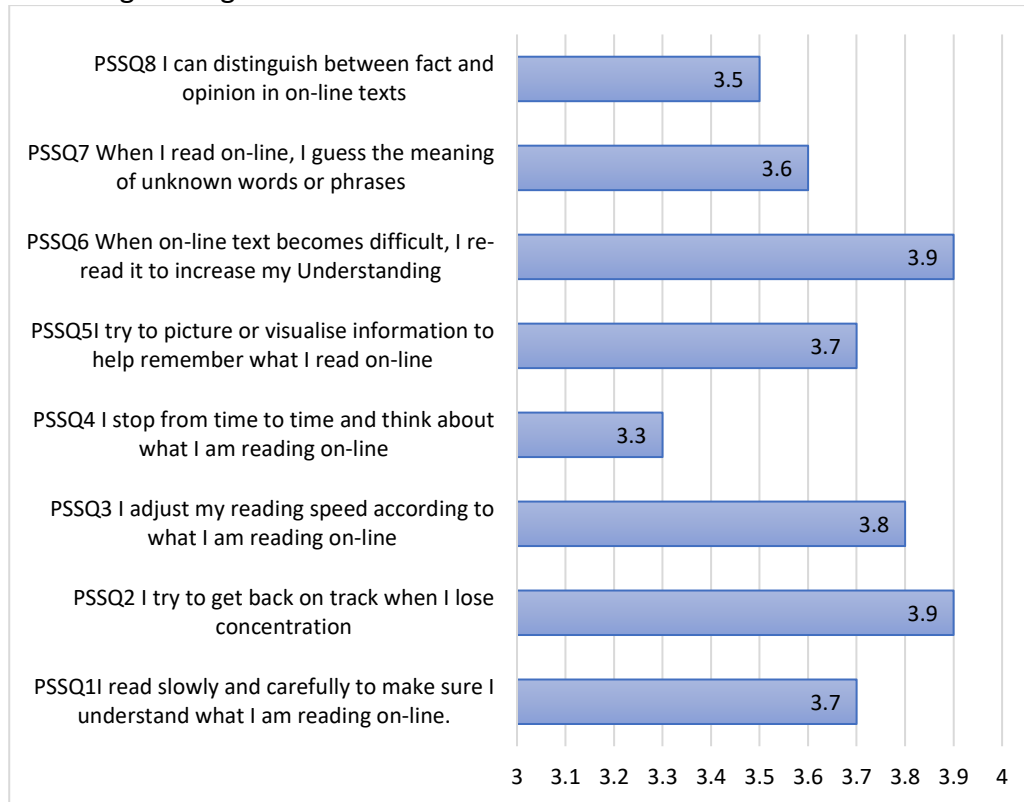


Figure 12: Mean for Solving Strategies

In Figure 12, the highest mean score for problem solving strategies is 3.9. The respondents often try to get back on track when they lose concentration and also re-read the online text to increase their understanding when the text gets difficult. However, the lowest score is 3.3 that says respondents stop from time to time and think about what they are reading. Overall, the respondents often use all support strategies when they read online.

Support Strategies

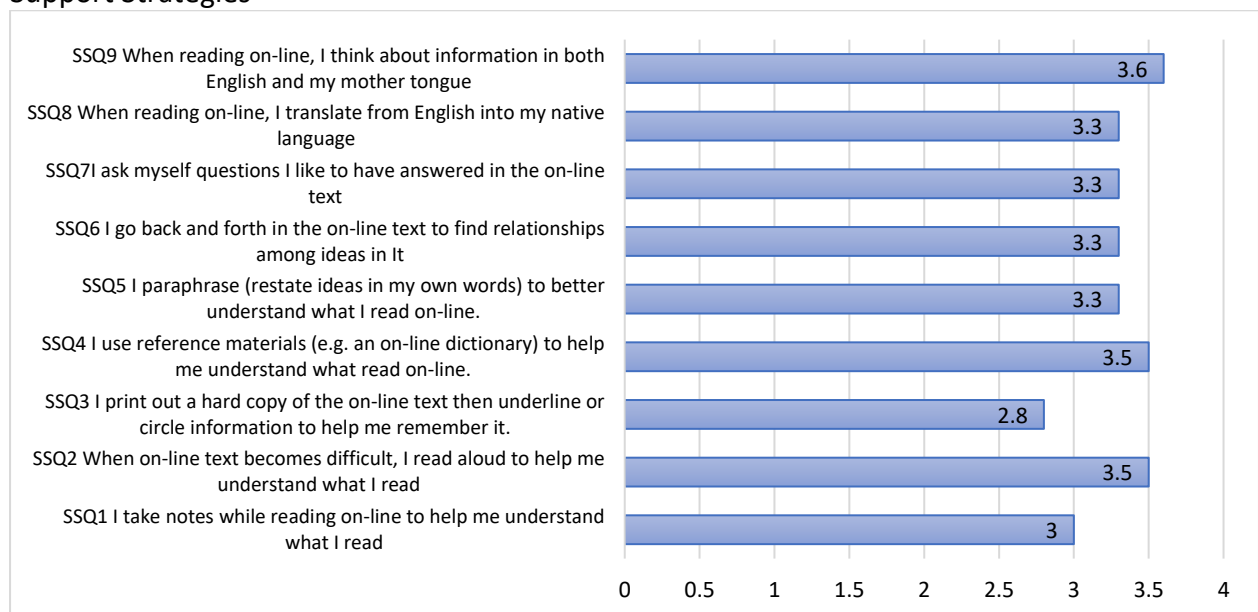


Figure 13: Mean for Support Strategies

Figure 13 above shows that the students had employed some forms of strategies to assist them in reading tasks. The highest mean score is 3.6 that reflects the students' thoughts – whether they are thinking in English or their first language when they read online. The lowest mean score is 2.8 which asks whether the students had printed a hard copy of the on-line text before they underlined or circled any necessary information.

Findings for Perceived Reading Difficulties and Online Reading Strategies

This section presents data to answer research question 3- Is there a relationship between perceived reading difficulties and online reading strategies? To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between perceived reading difficulties and the three types of reading strategies; global, problem solving and support, data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in table 3, 4 and 5 below.

Table 3

Correlation between Reading Difficulties and Reading Strategies

		TOTAREAING DIFF	TOTALALLRE ADINGSTRAT EGIES
TOTAREAINGDIFF	Pearson Correlation	1	.065
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.279
	N	275	275
TOTALALLREADINGSTR ATEGIES	Pearson Correlation	.065	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.279	
	N	275	275

Table 3 shows there is no association between reading difficulties and reading strategies.

Table 4

Correlation between Global Reading Strategies and Problem-solving Reading Strategies

		TOTALGLOB AL	TOTALPROBL EM
TOTALGLOBAL	Pearson Correlation	1	.610**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	275	275
TOTALPROBLEM	Pearson Correlation	.610**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	275	275

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 shows there is an association between global reading strategies and problem-solving strategies. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between global reading strategies and problem-solving strategies ($r=.610^{**}$) and ($p=.000$). According to Jackson (2015), coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate

positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between global reading strategies and problem-solving strategies.

Table 5

Correlation between Global Reading Strategies and Support Strategies

Correlations

		TOTALGLOB AL	TOTALSUPPO RT
TOTALGLOBAL	Pearson Correlation	1	.604**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	275	275
TOTALSUPPORT	Pearson Correlation	.604**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	275	275

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5 shows there is an association between global reading strategies and support strategies. Correlation analysis shows that there is a high significant association between global reading strategies and support strategies ($r=.604^{**}$) and ($p=.000$). According to Jackson (2015), coefficient is significant at the 0.05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. Weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. This means that there is also a strong positive relationship between global reading strategies and support strategies.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussions

In conclusion, the study found that there is no relationship between learners' perceived reading difficulties and reading strategies when they read online text. The difficulties that the learners face when reading do not determine the strategies that they use. This might be due to the students' various backgrounds, which comprised students from a variety of faculties with varying reading and language ability. The study also found that learners use various reading strategies; global, problem solving and support strategies when they do online reading. Similar findings were also reported by (Amer et al., 2010; Jusoh and Abdullah, 2015; Taki and Soleimani, 2012; Chen, 2015). The main strategies use by the learners include, paying closer attention to what they read online (global strategy), rereading the text to increase understanding and getting back on track whenever they get distracted (problem solving strategies) and think about the information they read in English and mother tongue (support strategy). The findings also show that there is a high significant association between global reading strategies and readers problem-solving strategies as well as support strategies

Pedagogical Implications

Regardless of the difficulties faced by learners, the teaching of reading strategies should take place explicitly in the reading classroom as they are proven to help readers to understand the text better (Li & Wang, 2010; Hulya, 2013; Zare & Othman, 2013; Par, 2020). Instructors should also motivate learners to encourage them to read and have the right mindset and clear purpose of reading to control their fear. It is also essential that teachers determine their students' linguistic abilities in order to teach them the suitable reading strategies. Future research should look into effective reading strategies of competent and weak readers in addressing their difficulties in reading the online text.

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