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THE INFLUENCE OF LEARNERS' PERCEPTION OF READING DIFFICULTIES AND THEIR ONLINE READING STRATEGIES

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Abstract:

In recent years, the advent of digital technology has significantly transformed the landscape of reading, giving rise to a distinct set of skills and strategies required for effective comprehension in online environments. The transition to online reading has prompted the need for individuals to adapt and develop specific strategies to navigate digital texts successfully. This study is conducted to explore the influence of learners' perception of reading difficulties and their online reading strategies. This quantitative study collected data from 124 respondents from various faculties of a public university. The questionnaire has 4 sections that contain items on demographic profile, reading difficulties, global strategies, problem-solving strategies, and support strategies. Generally, the finding revealed that there is no correlation between learners' perception of reading difficulties and their online reading strategies. By understanding the influence of learners' perceptions of reading difficulties and their online reading strategies, educators and researchers can work together to optimise the use of digital technologies in education and improve learning outcomes for students.

Keywords:

Metacognitive Online Reading Strategies, Perceived Online Reading Difficulties, Online Reading Strategies

Introduction

Background of Study

Reading is a fundamental skill in language learning, and it is essential for language learners to develop effective reading strategies to comprehend and retain information. Many students who

reach tertiary education show a lack of mastery of the English language, although the Malaysian Education System requires school children to learn the target language for around 11 years. At tertiary level, reading comprehension becomes a critical ability for academic success where learners are required to understand course materials such as academic papers, textbooks, and other readings across all courses. Merga and Roni (2018), states that reading is an independent skill that encourages continuous literacy engagement throughout life, allowing learners to acquire and understand information as well as develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. However, several issues that students encounter such as inadequate vocabulary mastery, inadequate linguistics knowledge, inadequate inference abilities, and ignorance of reading strategy often result in students demonstrating poor understanding of reading materials (Iqbal et al., 2015). Moreover, according to statistics, not enough people in Malaysia read, particularly school children who are classified as reluctant readers (Chandran and Shah 2019).

In Malaysia, English as a Second Language (ESL) education is crucial for developing language skills in a diverse society. The country's varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds create a unique context for exploring how students perceive reading challenges and adapt their strategies online. Malaysian ESL learners navigate a rich linguistic landscape, including Bahasa Malaysia, English, and indigenous languages. Different exposure levels to English contribute to varied perceptions of reading difficulties. Understanding how these perceptions shape online strategies is vital, considering the diversity mirrored in learners' approaches to English literacy.

Technology integration in Malaysian schools, driven by initiatives like the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, has expanded online ESL resources. Yet, the effectiveness depends on learners' perceptions of their reading abilities. Investigating how Malaysian ESL learners view online reading challenges and adjust their strategies is crucial due to cultural nuances and diverse educational backgrounds. Recent studies highlight the importance of cultural factors in shaping learners' confidence (Chen and Wong, 2015). This research extends these insights to online reading, exploring how perceptions influence the selection of strategies.

Digital literacy is gaining importance in Malaysia, with initiatives like the National Digital Literacy Policy. Understanding how learners' digital literacy perceptions intersect with reading challenges is vital. Thus, by contextualising the study within Malaysia, researchers aim to uncover how learners' perceptions impact online reading strategies. The findings will guide educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers in tailoring ESL instruction to address Malaysian learners' specific needs in the digital age.

Statement of Problem

Since the prevalence of online reading has increased, particularly due to the shift from traditional classroom to online learning during the global COVID-19 pandemic, online reading has become more popular for both teachers and students. As a result, students now need to not only comprehend traditional print texts but also demonstrate proficiency in understanding online materials. Harputra et al. (2023) state that student's ability to read online text is not similar to reading traditional printed texts as online reading is more challenging and this has resulted in poor reading comprehension. Thus, students need to use a variety of reading strategies to boost their comprehension when they read online. There are many studies conducted to explore different online reading strategies used by the students including the one

by Yaghi (2021) that showed Saudi EFL students prefer to utilize support strategies to tackle the problems they might face while they engage with online materials. Rianto (2022) interpreted his finding that Indonesian EFL readers with higher reading comprehension levels tend to employ problem-solving strategies, while those with lower levels tend to use global and support strategies to achieve their reading objectives. Singh et al. (2023) found that ESL learners still lack an understanding of how to effectively utilize reading strategies to overcome their challenges with online reading as they are still struggling to apply the appropriate strategies to assist their reading comprehension.

Nevertheless, most of the studies only investigated the reading strategies employed or reading difficulties or reading problems of the learners. Very few studies have examined the relationship between the reading difficulties and reading strategies of ESL learners. Another gap in the study is most of the past studies are related to EFL learners in a foreign context. There are only a few studies that have been conducted on reading strategies and reading difficulties in the local context among ESL tertiary level students. Due to the scarcity of a study on the correlation of reading difficulties and reading strategies in the local context among ESL tertiary learners, this study is deemed necessary.

Objective of the Study and Research Questions

This study is done to explore the perception of learners on online reading. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;

- How do learners perceive their reading difficulties in online reading?
- How do learners perceive the use of reading strategies in online reading?
- Is there a relationship between reading difficulties and reading strategies?

Literature Review

This paper relies on existing studies on themes mainly on reading difficulties and online reading strategies.

Reading Difficulties

Academic reading texts pose distinct challenges, being lengthier and more dense than general reading, and containing complex sentences and difficult vocabularies. To read effectively, students need to apply their prior knowledge and possess sufficient vocabulary to aid in the reading process (Westwood, 2008). This requires active engagement and the application of deliberate reading strategies to unpack difficult texts. Hirano (2015) found that students experienced greater difficulty when reading academic texts such as textbooks and journal articles in English, which are commonly assigned in higher education. According to Hayati and Puspitaloka (2022), the reading difficulties were caused by internal and external factors; motivation and laziness in reading, and challenges to read sentences in English. Additionally, Tomas et al. (2021) stated that several external factors should be considered when addressing reading difficulties, including the reading environment, teaching programs, and family support. Furthermore, Abeeleh and Al-Sobh (2021) highlighted that students need to identify their problems first and find possible solutions to tackle their reading difficulties and also to improve their reading comprehension. Therefore, students with reading difficulties should be addressed with appropriate strategies to cater their individual needs.

Online Reading Strategies

Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) stated that when learners are aware of the different cognitive and metacognitive strategies they can use, they can choose the most appropriate strategies to comprehend and interpret the texts they are reading. There are three categories of reading strategies introduced by Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) including global, problem-solving and support strategies. Anderson (2003) who adapted The Survey of Reading Strategies (SORS) by Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001), has carried out a study to explore the online reading strategies using The Online Survey of Reading Strategies (OSORS) among EFL and ESL learners. This study revealed more than half of the respondents use problem-solving reading strategies while the least reading strategy used is support reading strategies. This study also confirms that the use of problem solving strategies has made the online reading strategies statistically different between EFL learners and ESL learners.

Another study done by McKown and Barnett (2007) states effective reading strategies can help students coordinate and use a set of key comprehension techniques before, during, and after reading, such as making connections, visualizing, inferring, questioning, and summarizing. A study by Chen (2015) intended to examine EFL learners' perceived use of online reading strategies has revealed that online readers of Taiwanese EFL learners utilize more global strategies to increase understanding, such as exploiting contextual clues and observing tables, figures, and pictures in the online text. Later, Par (2020) suggests that learners should utilize reading strategies to effectively improve their comprehension of a text when they encounter difficulties in their online reading. Singh et al. (2023) state that learners can opt for various reading strategies including skimming and scanning, predicting the content, guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words using contextual clues, and many others.

Past Studies on Online Reading Strategies

There are many past studies on the use of online reading strategies in learning English as a second or foreign language. One of the utmost findings on online reading strategies was done by Amer et al. (2010) who investigated the online reading strategies employed by undergraduates and student teachers at EFL University in Oman. The Survey of Online Reading Strategies (SORS) by Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001) was used in this study. This particular survey contains three categories of reading strategies namely global reading strategies, problem-solving strategies, and support reading strategies. The result showed that there was a statistically significant difference between fourth graders and first graders in terms of the use of global reading strategies. Fresh graduates were reported to use more support strategies than their seniors.

Jayanti (2016) then conducted a study involving 80 students of the English Department of a university in Indonesia to examine and compare students' and teachers' perception regarding students' reading difficulties. The similar questionnaire was also given to 4 lecturers who taught reading courses in the department. It was found that the perception of students' reading difficulties by teachers is in line with the students' own perception, indicating that there is no significant difference between these two groups' understanding of the challenges students face in reading.

Another interesting study concerning online reading strategies was conducted by Rianto (2022) to investigate the relationship between the use of Metacognitive Online Reading Strategy (MORS) and Online Reading Comprehension (ORC) performance of 602 Indonesian EFL

university students. A significant finding was established that metacognitive online reading strategies such as problem-solving and support reading strategies were highly used, while the global reading strategies were moderately used. It is also found that there is a significant correlation between the use of global reading strategy and the online reading comprehension. This served as predictors of the ORC. Meanwhile, support strategies were not significantly related to the students' reading comprehension performance.

Next, a recent study was carried out by Rahman et al. (2023) to investigate the perceived use of online reading strategies among undergraduate students. This study adopted a survey on reading difficulties (Abeeleh and Al-Sobh, 2021) and online reading strategies by Amer et al. (2010) and 232 undergraduates responded to this survey. This study found that it is more of a perception of the students that made them feel reading academic texts is difficult. Another interesting finding from this study is in terms of reading strategies applied by the learners where; i) they tend to re-focus their attention to gain better insight into the academic texts (global reading strategies), ii) they re-read the text to get a clearer understanding (problem-solving reading strategies) and iii) they depend on their translation ability (support reading strategies). Moreover, this study also found that there is a weak positive relationship between reading difficulties and all their online reading strategies. This has shown a similarity with the findings of the study by Amer et al. (2010) who also found that the use of online reading strategies such as global reading strategies, problem-solving strategies, and support strategies, boosts the learners' confidence no matter how hard the reading text is.

Mohsin et al. (2023) also looked into learners' perception on their reading difficulties and their use of reading strategies and the relationship between them in the case of online reading. This quantitative study involved 275 respondents from various faculties in a public university in Malaysia. It was found that there is a high significant association between global reading strategies and readers' problem-solving strategies as well as support strategies. However, the study also found the perceived difficulties experienced by the learner have no significance to the reading strategies that they use.

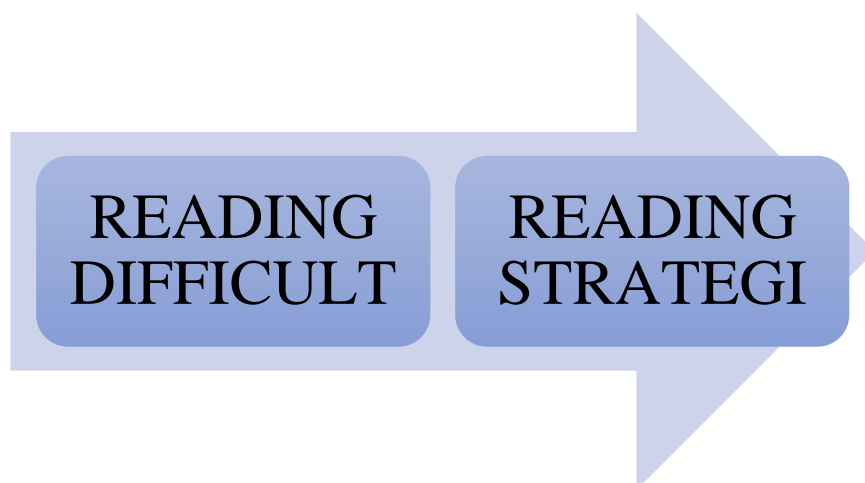
Since most of the past studies mentioned above show various findings on the relationship of learners' reading difficulties and their use of online reading strategies due to a variety of factors and learners' background, there is a need to carry out this study to find out the learner's perceived reading difficulties and their use of reading strategies in online reading in Malaysian academic setting. Furthermore, with the increasing use of online platforms for learning, it is crucial to understand the influence of learners' perceptions of reading difficulties and their online reading strategies. Hence, it is beneficial to explore the relationship between learners' perceptions of reading difficulties, their online reading strategies, and their overall reading outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study. This study is rooted from Abeeleh, et al (2021) for reading difficulties and Amer et al. (2010) for online reading strategies. The framework of this study is based on the concept that students apply certain reading strategies to overcome their reading difficulties. This is due to the reason reading difficulties can significantly impact learners' academic performance and overall literacy development. Abeeleh and Sobh (2021) found that academic readers perceived reading as challenging due to various factors such as the context of the text, the vocabulary used, and the language used by the writer.

However, many researchers have suggested various ways to help readers overcome their perceived reading difficulties. This includes the study by Amer et al. (2010) which suggests that learners use global strategies, problem-solving strategies and support strategies. Global strategies are used by readers to read with a purpose in mind and make sense of the text using their background knowledge. Problem-solving strategies help readers read the text accurately and with understanding by using information from the text and beyond the text. Some readers use other strategies to understand the text, such as translating into their mother tongue or a language they know, depending on diagrams and pictures, or even depending on other texts to understand the text they are reading.

A recent study by (Mohsin et al., 2023) explores learners' perception of their reading difficulties, their use of reading strategies, and the relationship between them in the context of online reading. The findings revealed a high significant association between global reading strategies and online reading. However, the study found that the perceived difficulties experienced by the learners have no significance to the use of reading strategies in the case of online reading. This research provides insights into the complex relationship between learners' perception of reading difficulties and their use of reading strategies, particularly in the context of online reading.



**Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study-
The Influence of Learners' Perception of Reading Difficulties and their Online Reading Strategies**

Methodology

This quantitative study is done to explore factors for reading difficulties and online reading strategies. A purposive sample of 124 participants responded to the survey. The instrument used is a 5 Likert-scale survey and is rooted from Abeeleh, et al (2021); Amer, et.al. (2010) to reveal the variables in Table 1 below. The survey has 4 sections. Section A has items on the demographic profile. Section B has 14 on reading difficulties. Section C has 17 items on global strategy. Section D has 8 items on problem-solving. Section E has 9 items on support strategies.

Table 1-Distribution of Items in 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
.916	48

Table 2 shows the reliability of the survey. The analysis shows a Cronbach alpha of .916, 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

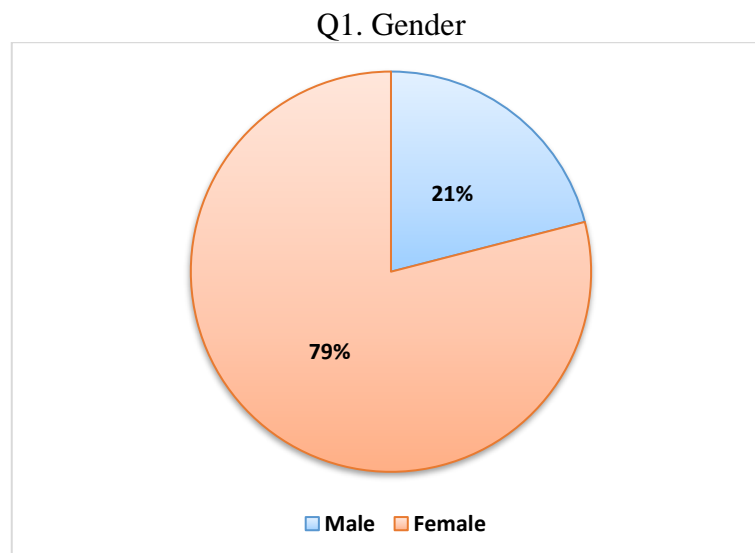
**Figure 2- Percentage for Gender**

Figure 2 illustrates the gender distribution of the respondents. It is shown that the percentage of males is 21%, while the percentage of females is 79%. This indicates that the majority of the population is female, with a significant difference in the ratio of males to females.

Q2 Level of Study

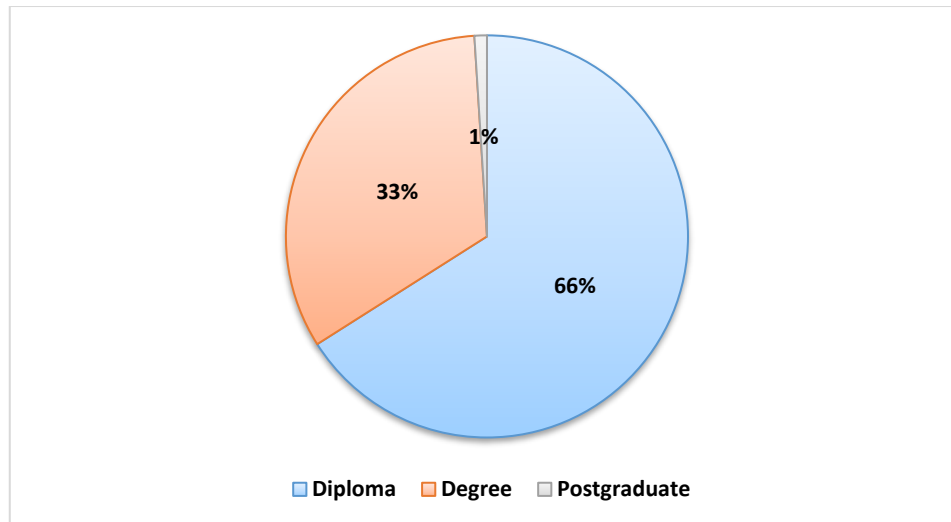
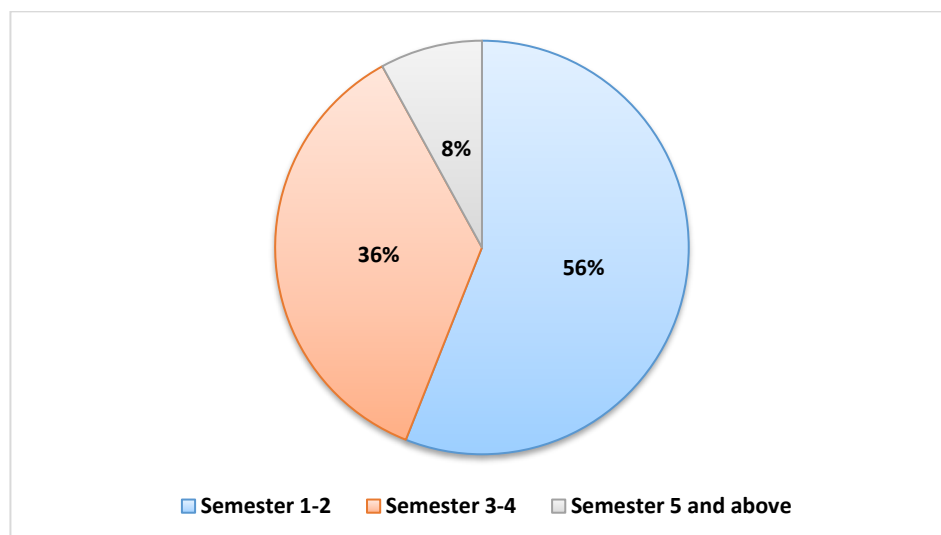
**Figure 3- Percentage for Age Group**

Figure 3 reveals the percentage for level of study among the respondents. The table shows 66% of the respondents are diploma students, 33% of them are degree students while only 1% of the respondents are postgraduate students. This data indicates that the majority of the population in the study has a diploma, followed by those with a degree, and a very small percentage with a postgraduate education.

Q3. Semester

**Figure 4- Semester**

In figure 4, a large population of the respondents are in Semester 1-2, which is 56%, followed by Semester 3-4 students which is 36% while only 8% of the respondents are in Semester 5 and above.

Q4. Self-Rating of Reading in English Proficiency

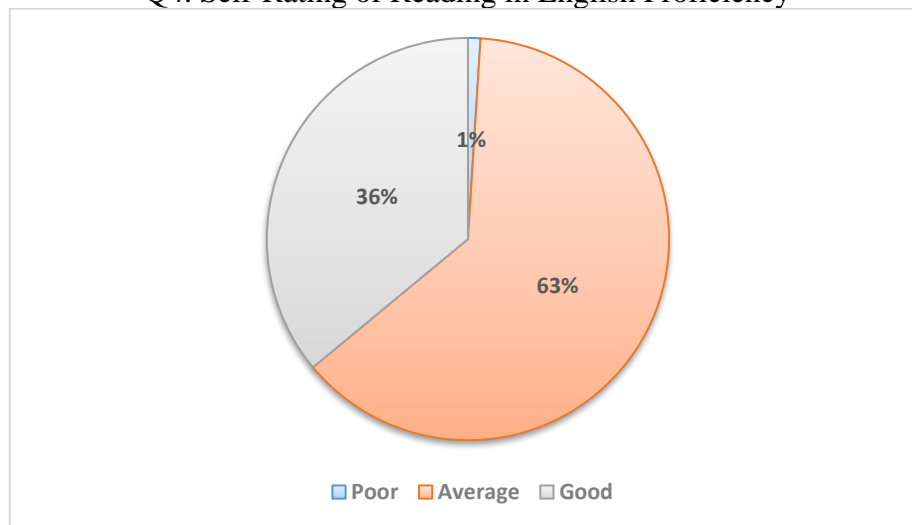
**Figure 5 - Percentage for Self-Rating of Reading in English Proficiency**

Figure 5 illustrates that a large number of respondents of 63% have average language proficiency, 36 % have a good level of English proficiency and an insignificant amount of 1% have poor English proficiency.

Q5. Reading Frequency in Free Time

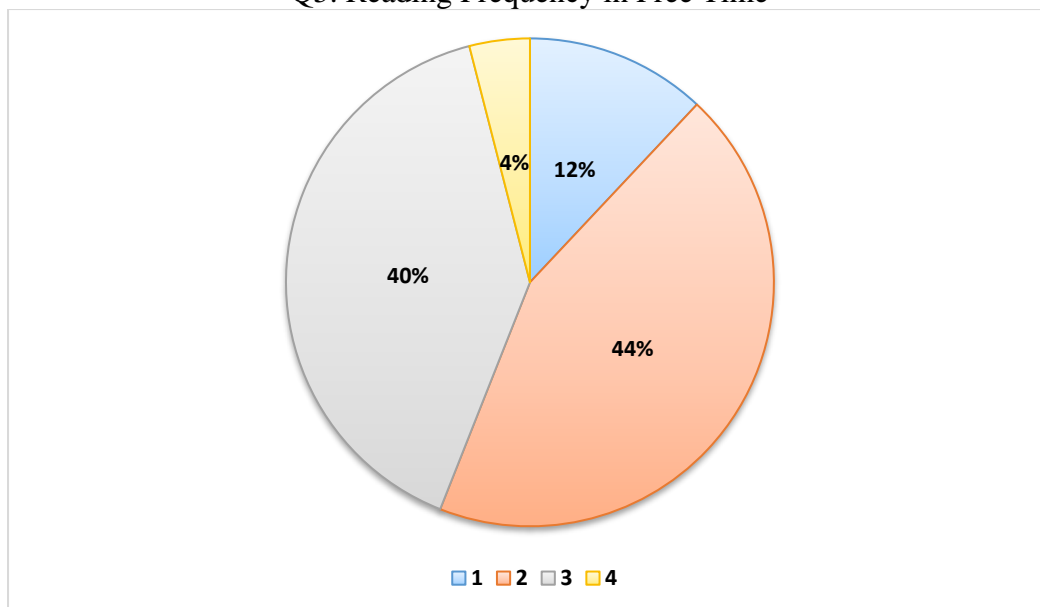
**Figure 6 - Percentage for Reading Frequency in Free Time**

Figure 6 presents the percentage of reading frequency among the respondents during their free time. When asked ‘How often do you read?’ 44% of the respondents said that they read less than 1 hour a day. Meanwhile, an insignificant 4% of the respondents said that they read more than 7 hours a day.

Q6. Using Internet Frequency in Free Time

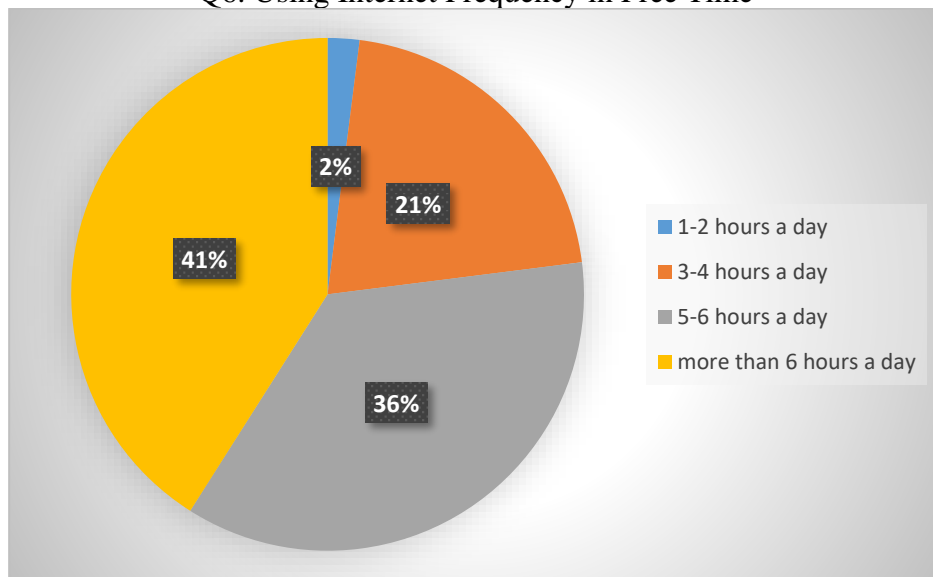
**Figure 7 - Percentage for Using Internet Frequency in Free Time**

Figure 7 indicates the use of internet frequency in free time among the respondents. 36% of the respondents said that they spend 5 to 6 hours a day on the Internet, showing a high Internet usage or dependency among the respondents. On the other hand, an insignificant 2% of the respondents mentioned that they only use the Internet for 1 to 2 hours daily.

Q7. Preferred Reading Materials

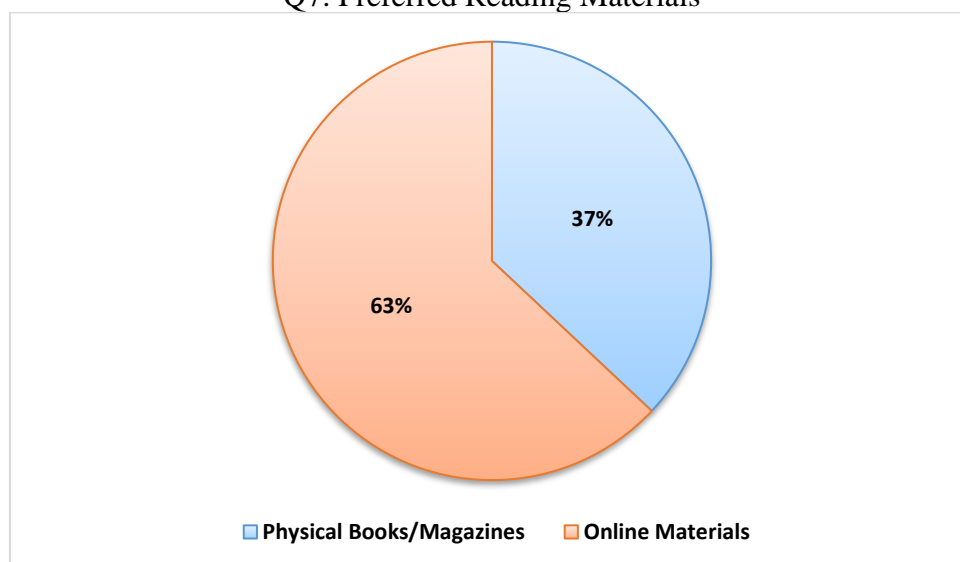
**Figure 8 - Percentage for Preferred Reading Materials**

Figure 8 highlights the students' percentage for preferred reading materials. 63% of the respondents chose online materials as their preferred reading texts while only 37% chose physical books or magazines as their preferred reading materials.

Q8. Reading Engagement (When i read,)

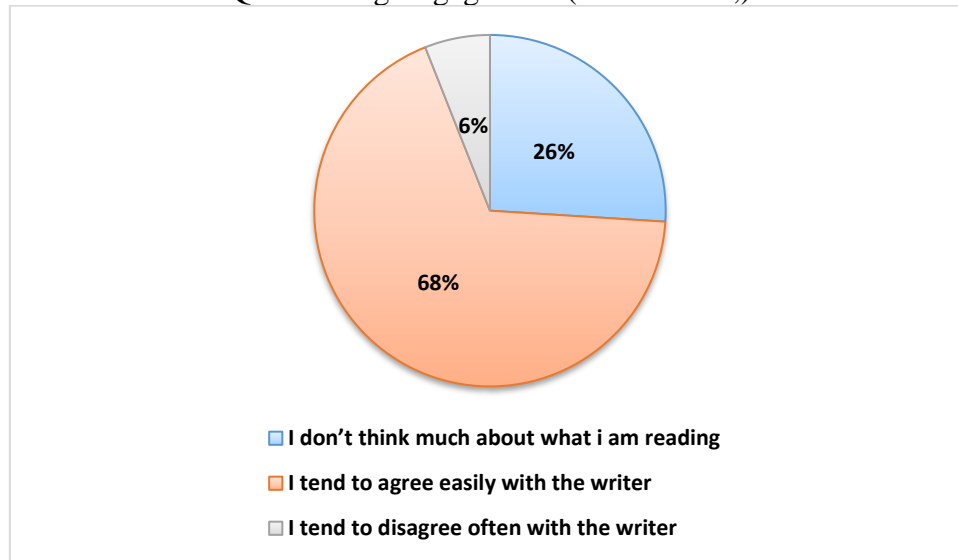
**Figure 9 - Percentage for Reading Engagement**

Figure 9 illustrates the percentage for 'what the respondents think while reading.' 68% of the respondents mentioned that they tend to agree easily with whatever they read. Meanwhile, about 26% of them do not think much about what they read and 6 % of the respondents stated that they tend to disagree with what they read.

Q9. Online Reading Enjoyment

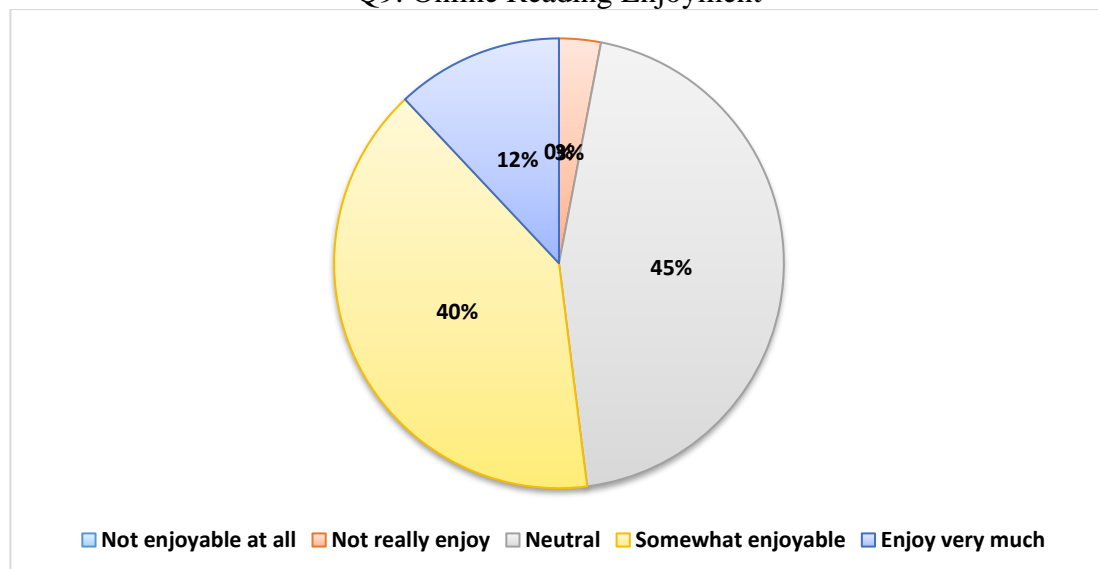
**Figure 10 - Percentage for Online Reading Enjoyment**

Figure 10 presents the result of online reading enjoyment among the respondents. 45% of them stated that they feel neutral with the reading materials that they read online. However, 40 % of the respondents agreed that the online reading materials are somewhat enjoyable.

Q10. Time Reading Online Reading Materials for English Course

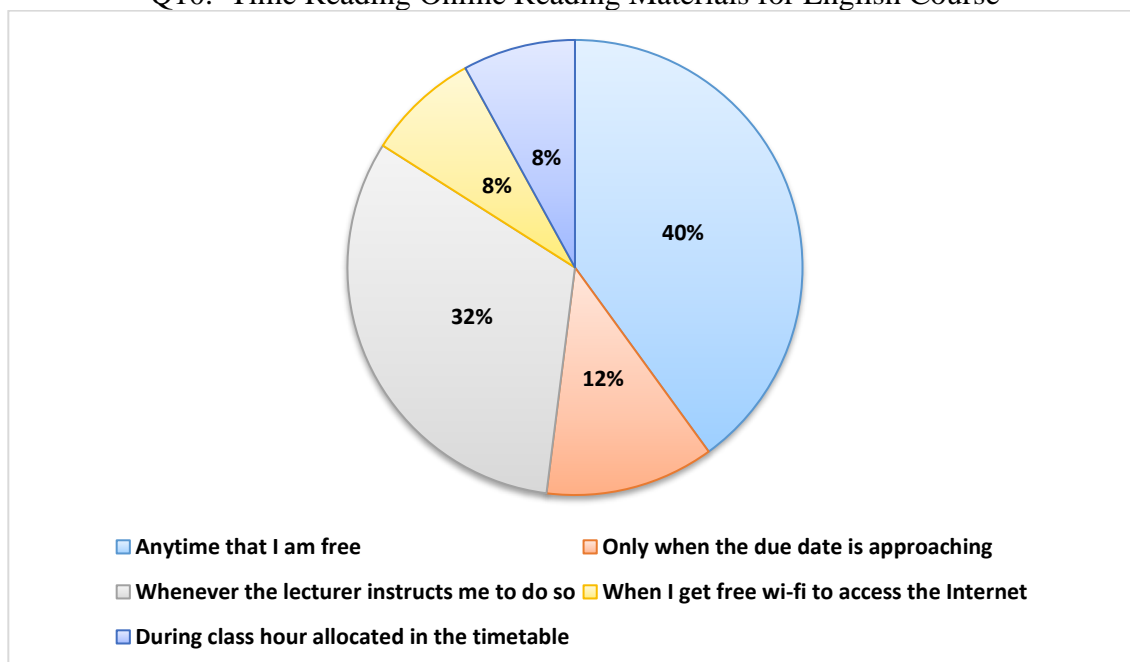
**Figure 11- Percentage for Time Reading Online Reading Materials for English Course**

Figure 11 indicates the percentage for time spent reading online materials for English course. Significantly, 40 % of the respondents stated that they would allocate their time to read online reading materials for English course whenever they are free. Unfortunately, 8 % of the respondents only did so when they had free wi-fi to access the Internet and another 8% of them did so during class hours allocated in the timetable.

Findings for Reading Difficulties

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do learners perceive their reading difficulties in online reading?

Reading Difficulties

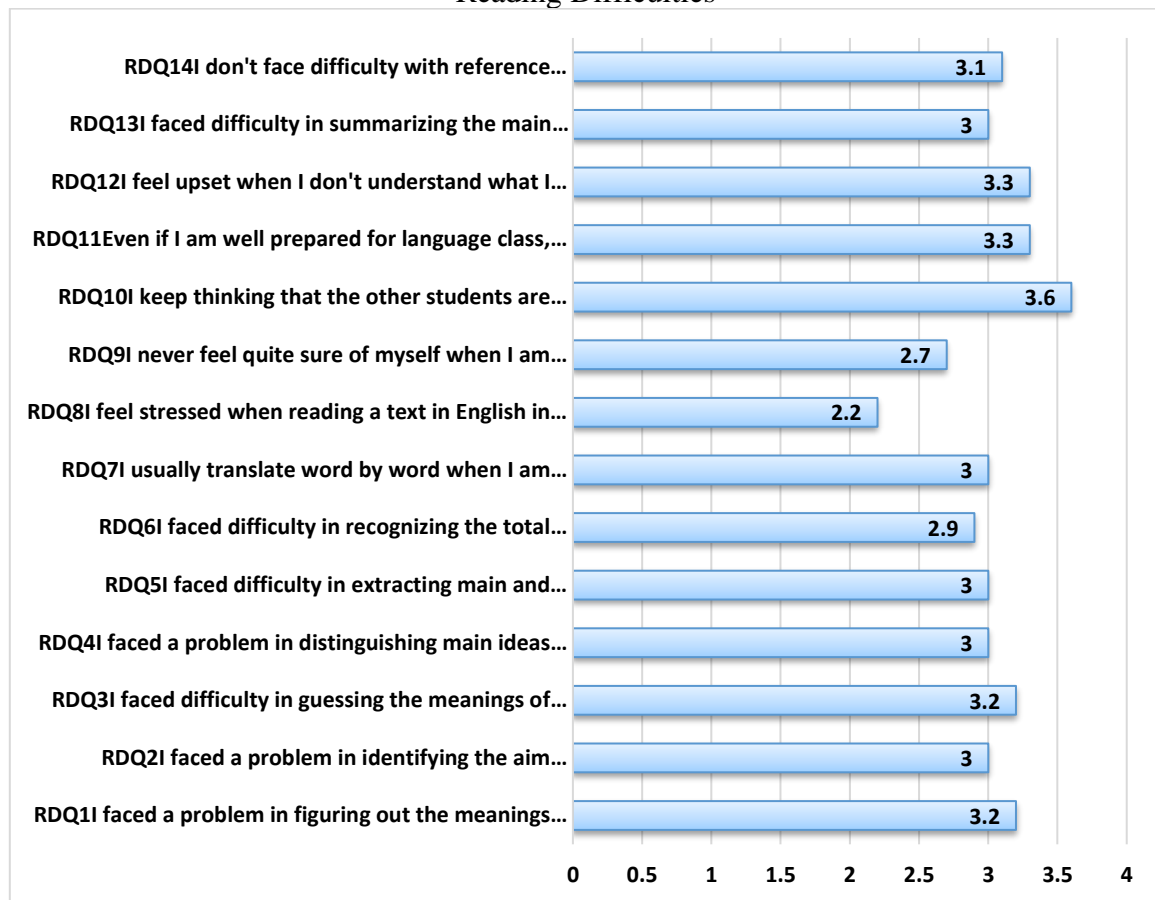


Figure 12 -Mean for Reading Difficulties

Based on Figure 12, the highest mean score for reading difficulties is 3.6, which is RDQ10. The respondents said they keep thinking that the other students are better at language than they are. This is followed by RDQ11 and RDQ12 where they share a similar mean score of 3.3. Here the respondents responded that they still feel anxious about the reading text even though they are well-prepared for language class (RDQ11), and they also feel upset when they do not understand what they read in English. The lowest mean score of all reading difficulties items is 2.2, in which the respondents claimed they feel stress when reading a text in English in the classroom (RDQ8).

Findings for Reading Strategies

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How do learners perceive the use of reading strategies in online reading? Global, problem-solving and support strategies

Global Strategies

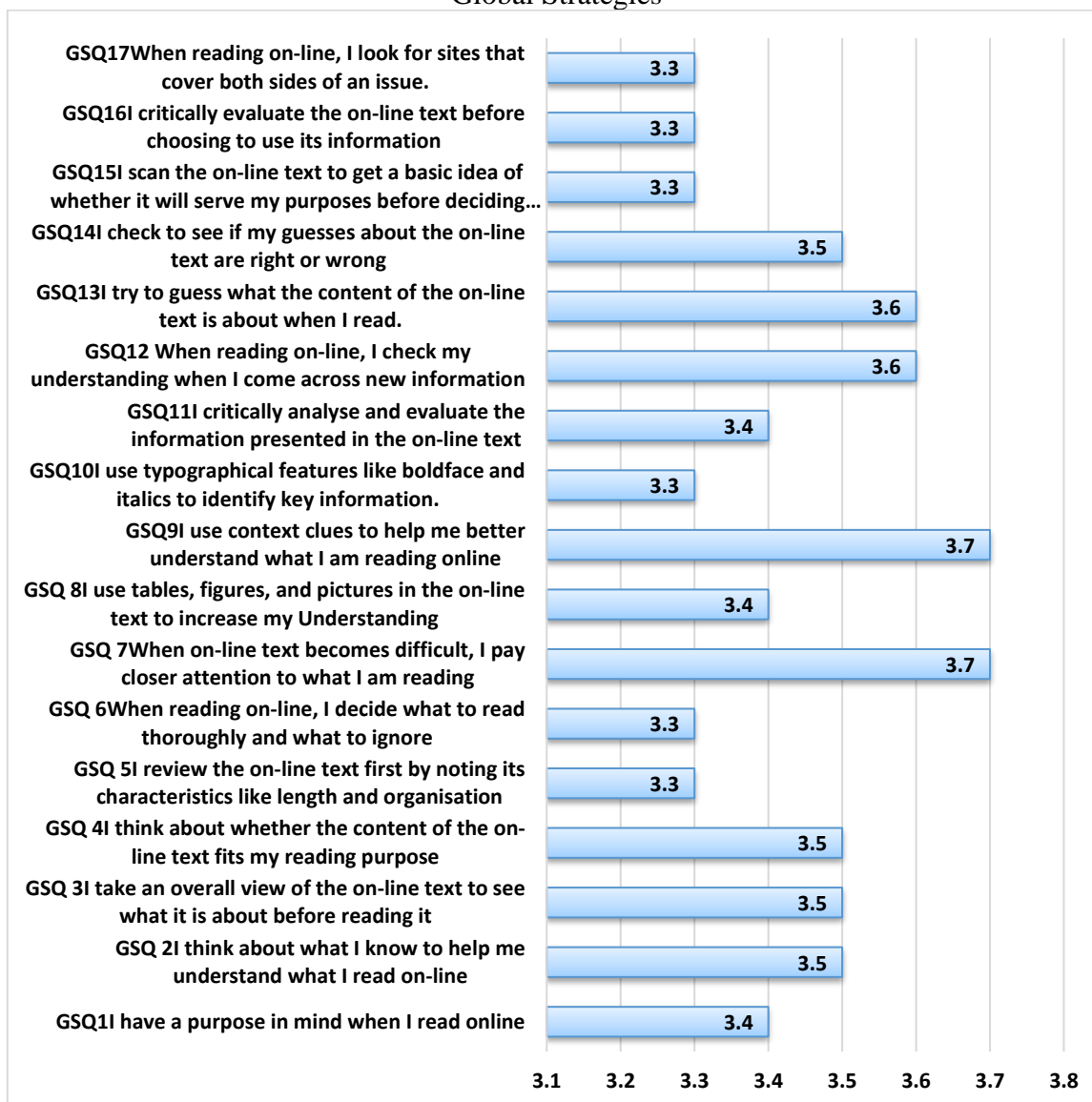


Figure 13 -Mean for Global Strategies

Based on the data above, it shows that the highest mean score for global strategies is 3.7. It belongs to two items which share a similar mean score; item GSQ7 and GSQ9. The respondents said they pay closer attention to what they are reading when on-line text becomes difficult (GSQ7), and they use context clues to help them better understand what they read online (GSQ9). The average mean score for this category is 3.5, in which there are 4 items stating the same score. They are i) GSQ3 - the respondents take an overall view of the on-line test to get the general idea before reading it, ii) GSQ2 - the respondents think about their background knowledge to help understand the online text, iii) GSQ4 - they think about whether the content of the online etxt fits their reading purpose, and iv) GSQ14 - they check to see if their guesses about the online text are right or wrong. Meanwhile, the lowest mean score of global strategies is 3.3, stated by 6 items; GSQ5, GSQ6, GSQ10, GSQ15, GSQ16 and GSQ17.

Problem-Solving Strategies

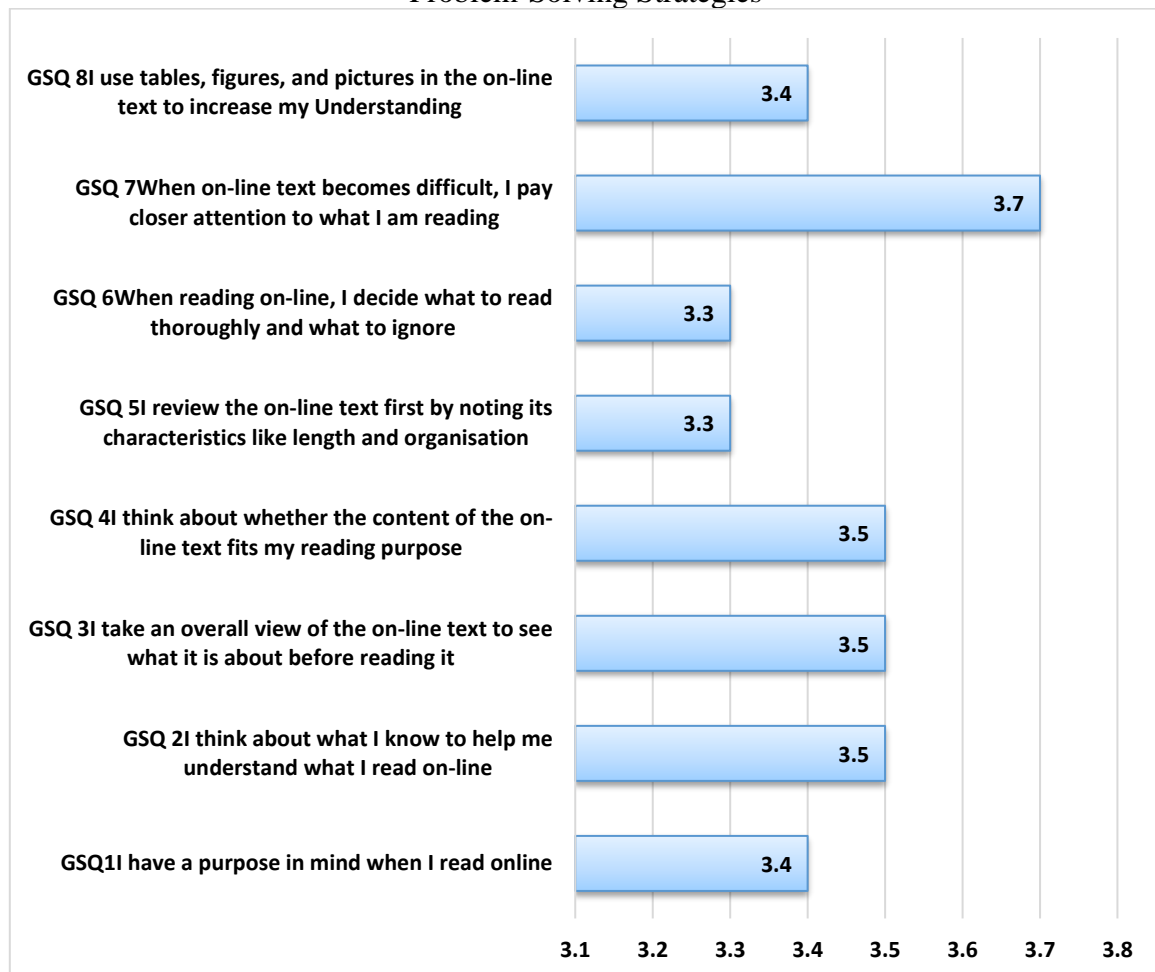


Figure 14 -Mean for Problem-Solving Strategies

Based on Figure 14 above, the highest mean score of 4.1 is indicated in item PSSQ6; the respondents re-read the text to increase their understanding when the online text becomes difficult. The average mean score is 3.8, recorded by 4 different items which are PSSQ1 (the respondents read slowly and carefully to understand what they are reading), PSSQ3 (the respondents adjust their reading speed according to what they are reading online), PSSQ5 (the respondents try to picture or visualise information to help remember what they read online) and PSSQ7 (the respondents guess the meaning of unknown words or phrases). Meanwhile, the lowest mean score of 3.5, is portrayed by item PSSQ4 and PSSQ8 where the respondents stop from time to time and think about what they are reading online (PSSQ4); and, the respondents said they can distinguish between fact and opinion in online texts (PSSQ8).

Support Strategies

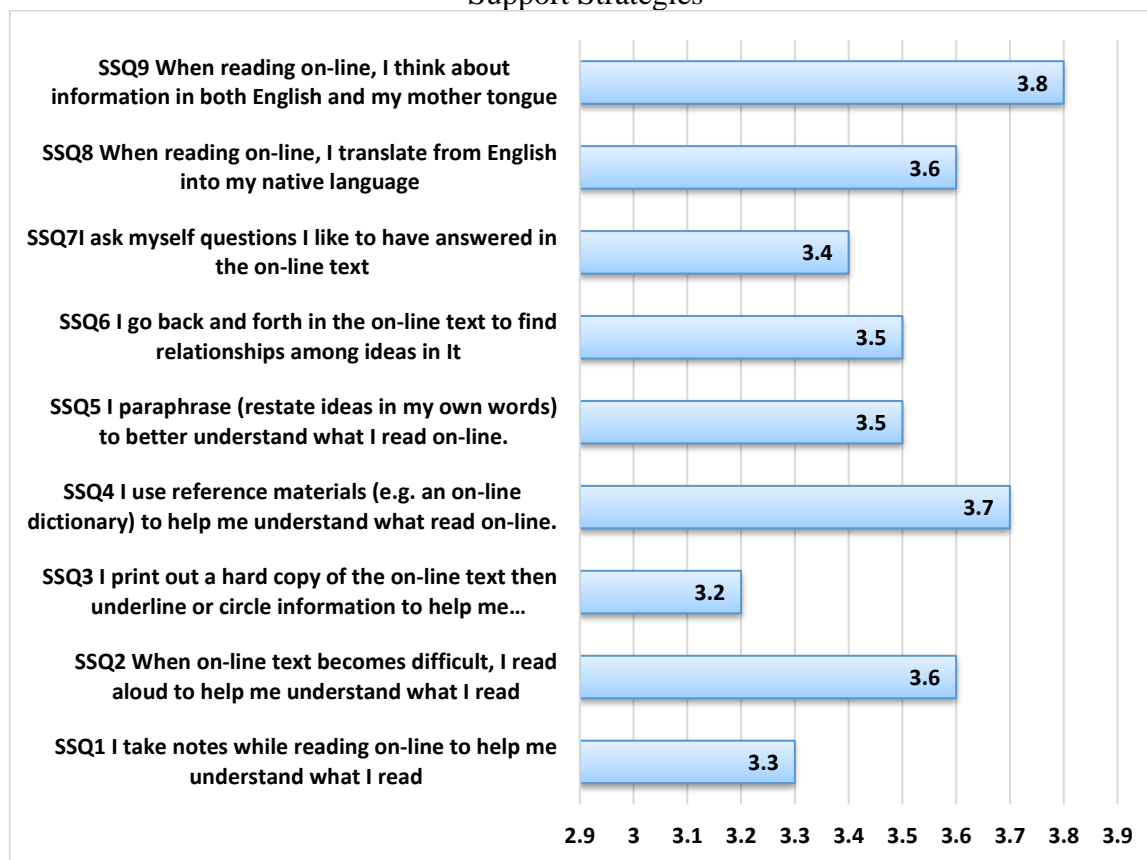


Figure 15 -Mean For Support Strategies

Figure 15 shows the data on mean score for support strategies and highlights the item SSQ9; the respondents think about information in both English and their mother tongue when they read online, as the most popular support reading strategy with the mean score of 3.8. The average mean score for support strategies is 3.5, for item SSQ5 - the respondents paraphrase (restate ideas on their own words) to better understand what they read online, and the item SSQ6 - the respondents go back and forth in the online text to find relationships among the ideas in it. Furthermore, the least popular support strategy is item SSQ3 which states the lowest data of 3.2, where the respondents print out a hard copy of the online text then underline or circle information to help them remember it.

Findings For Relationship Between Reading Difficulties And Reading Strategies

This section presents data to answer research question 3- Is there a relationship between reading difficulties and reading strategies? To determine if there is a significant association in the mean scores between reading difficulties and reading strategies data is analysed using SPSS for correlations. Results are presented separately in table 3 below.

Table 3- Correlation Between Reading Difficulties And Reading Strategies.

Correlations		READINGDIFFICULTIES	ALLREADINGSTRATEGIES
READINGDIFFICULTIES	Pearson Correlation	1	.018
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.845
	N	124	124
ALLREADINGSTRATEGIES	Pearson Correlation	.018	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.845	
	N	124	124

Table 3 shows there is no significant association between reading difficulties and reading strategies since correlation analysis shows the value of the coefficient is only ($r=.018$), less than 0.1. According to Jackson (2015), the coefficient is significant at the .05 level and positive correlation is measured on a 0.1 to 1.0 scale. A weak positive correlation would be in the range of 0.1 to 0.3, a moderate positive correlation from 0.3 to 0.5, and a strong positive correlation from 0.5 to 1.0. Thus, it can be concluded that there is no significant relationship between reading difficulties and the reading strategies used by the learners.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussions

In summary, the research indicates that there is no significant correlation between students' perceived difficulties in reading and the strategies they employ when engaging with online text. The challenges encountered during reading do not dictate the selection of strategies employed. This lack of association may be attributed to the diverse backgrounds of the students, encompassing various faculties and a range of reading and language abilities. The study further reveals that learners employ a variety of reading strategies, including global approaches, problem-solving techniques, and supportive methods, when navigating online texts. These findings align with those of previous studies conducted by Amer et al. (2010), and Chen and Wong (2015). Similarly, Mohsin et al.(2023) also found that the perceived difficulties experienced by the learners have no significance to the use of reading strategies in the case of online reading. Key strategies utilised by learners involve attentively processing online content by using context clues (global strategy), revisiting text to enhance comprehension and refocusing when distracted (problem-solving strategies), and contemplating information in both English and their native language (support strategy). These findings contribute valuable insights into the dynamic and varied ways in which learners navigate the complexities of online reading.

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

The influence of learners' perception of reading difficulties and their online reading strategies has several pedagogical implications and suggestions for future research. First and foremost, educators have to be conscious of the difficulties that students have when reading on the internet and make sure they receive enough practice and technique instruction to overcome these difficulties. Secondly, educators should make students aware of the usage of strategies and offer them the resources they need to comprehend digital texts. Thirdly, educators should consciously modify the resources they employ in the classroom to support online learning and

provide students the abilities they need to read successfully online. Next, by purposefully talking about reading behaviours on digital devices, instructors may consciously address reading behaviours with students and equip them with necessary life skills. Finally, future research should explore the relationship between reading difficulties and reading strategies and its pedagogical implications in the teaching and learning of reading.

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