



UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' READING EXPERIENCE: FROM TRADITIONAL TO DIGITAL SPACES

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Abstract:

This is an empirical study designed to shed some light on the reading experience of undergraduate students from analog to virtual spaces. Reading is not just a language skill; it is a life skill that continues to impact an individual beyond schooling. However, casual commentaries from teachers in higher education suggest that students generally fall behind in assigned reading tasks. This is perceived as a problem since academic success in tertiary education is inextricably tied to reading performance. The focus group consists of twenty-four participants selected from 200-level Education English students using snowball sampling. To gain deeper insight into undergraduate reading experience, the researcher adopted a dual approach – a questionnaire and a follow-up oral interview. The affect theory and thematic analytic framework were adopted for the data analyses. The concluding section recommends practicable ways students could be best supported in their reading journey extrinsically and through self-determination.

Keywords: undergraduates, comprehension, academic reading, grudging act, pleasure reading

1. Introduction

Reading is not just a language skill. It is a receptive skill as well as a literacy skill. Reading ability, therefore, is needed in formal language learning and in learning other subjects irrespective of discipline (Mustikasari, 2021). The essence of reading is comprehension. Comprehension is "*understanding and extracting meaning from spoken communication or materials read*" (Agbo, Kadiri & Ekwueme, 2019). Learning to read is likely the major activity undertaken by children in their first years of schooling (Shelly, 2012). For beginners, reading involves pronunciation and decoding or recognition of written words. A good reading ability at the foundation stage facilitates a smooth transition to secondary school. Likewise, students who struggle with reading in high school will encounter more

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reading difficulties at the tertiary level (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022). The ripple effect underscores the implication of a poor literacy background on students' reading ability. Ultimately, students' performance in reading is influenced by their previous reading experience vis-à-vis exposure to reading materials, association with people who read, and the perceived importance of reading (Boakye & Southey, 2009). A community that neither values nor promotes reading has poor reading habits and culture. Childhood is considered the best period for parents and teachers to assist learners in developing good reading habits through exposure to interesting and age-appropriate content within their language level.

Ozbay (in Naz, Iqbal, Khan & Shakeel, 2022) described reading as *"the process of the brain evaluating and making sense of signs and symbols perceived through the eyes."* Signs and symbols in this context may not be restricted to letters of the alphabet and punctuation marks. Technically, the definition rightly includes signs and symbols used in the sciences. Weller (2010) opines that reading is not simply a 'technical' skill. It is a knowledge acquisition technique.

Sanchez & Gavilanze (2017) define reading as a *"cognitive-receptive skill through which information is received and decoded in the brain"* for the message to be comprehended. Since the essence of reading is reception and comprehension of information, it is imperative that every student, particularly in higher education, should be versed in reading skills for academic success. Random research findings, however, indicate that reading remains a hurdle for learners across the three tiers of education. Reis (in Shelly 2012) deduced that 36% and 24% of US fourth and eighth graders, respectively, read below a basic level. The learners *"could not demonstrate an understanding of the literal meaning of text, identify main ideas, make inferences, or relate what they had read to personal experiences."* At the Junior Secondary School level, a Nigerian-based study by Agbo, Kadiri & Ekwueme (2019) was prompted by the abysmal performance of students in reading comprehension in internal and external examinations. Likewise, Pretorius and Machete (2024) observed that the reading skills of South African learners are underdeveloped across all educational levels. The above scenario is manifest in many nations.

2. Undergraduates and Reading

Several publications maintain that reading is a non-negotiable skill for academic success, especially in higher education, where students depend largely on reading to gain knowledge (Cekiso, 2024; Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022; Sarimanah & Soeharto, 2022). These sources equally express concern about variables that generally influence students' reading in their academic journey. The notable ones – text type, grudging reading, language ability, time poverty, economic constraint, digital technology and reading strategy – are reviewed below.

Basically, reading materials are classified into two namely fiction and non-fiction. In scholarship, the preferred categories are academic and non-academic. As the names imply, one refers to educational publications or related reading materials typically

recommended by lecturers for educational purposes. This includes academic resources referenced by researchers, e.g. textbooks, academic journals, and research articles. Conversely, non-academic or pleasure reading forms the bulk of what people read for entertainment, relaxation, or personal interest, e.g. creative works, comics, newspapers and magazines. Although academic and non-academic reading are generally recognized, a third type, which is work-related and therefore tagged as career or professional reading, deserves mention, e.g. manuals, technical documents, industry reports, and professional journals. Occasionally, these three may overlap based on reading preference and purpose. For instance, a literature text studied by one individual as recommended in the curriculum may be read for relaxation by another. It is worthy of note that reading materials are available today in traditional print (hard copy) and virtual form (soft copy). Although academic reading is the norm in tertiary education, students are also expected to read extensively.

The purpose of extensive reading is to get learners to read a lot of books in the target language for pleasure or enjoyment, without the pressure of being tested (Sánchez & Gavilánez, 2017). The same source highlighted the following as the merits of extensive reading: learners felt motivated when choosing the book they liked; it influenced reader independence, reading speed and comprehension; and it is beneficial to ESL and EFL learners. Apart from educational materials, many studies show that non-educational materials like fiction, newspapers and magazines are not commonly read today (Makone, 2021 in Cekiso). Boakye & Southey (2009) noted that a number of students do not often read outside recommended academic texts. Biswas (2023) likewise observed that pleasure reading among a majority of undergraduates at Dhaka University is not good enough. However, apart from their academic materials, they tend to read mostly job-related guidebooks. Their career-oriented preference is attributed to their socio-economic condition and challenging life. The absence of non-educational materials in the private reading of undergraduates' signal lack of diversity in reading practice (Makone, 2021 in Cesiko).

On the other hand, Boakye & Southey (2009) noted that reading just favourite subjects reduces reading amount and limits background knowledge; hence the recommendation to raise students' awareness of the benefits of extensive reading. Mason & Warmington (2024) also suggested that reading instruction should include strategies for fostering engaged reading among students, especially in contexts where reading comprehension is poor.

There is a general notion that students often lack enthusiasm when reading academic materials in EFL (Dardjito, Rolls, Setiawan & Sumekto, 2023). The statement fits ESL students to a large extent because academic reading in higher education is inherently different from high school reading and pleasure reading. For the most part, students experience academic reading as a struggle, as a chore, and as pointless (Mason & Warmington, 2024). Unlike reading for pleasure, students perceive academic reading as 'work' (Mann in Mason & Warmington, 2024) and a major source of stress, boredom, undue pressure and anxiety (Kimberley & Thursby, 2020).

Anwar & Sailuddin (2022) put it thus:

"Academic reading texts are challenging as they are longer than general reading, the paragraphs are more dense, and contain complex sentences and difficult vocabularies. ...students encountered problems synthesizing information and producing academic pieces of writing. These difficulties are influenced by factors such as linguistics proficiency, motivation, self-regulation, academic background, self-efficacy and students' academic life adjustments."

Hence, the reading experience of students in higher education is logically tied to affect theory. The theory of affect explores how emotions and feelings shape human preferences and experiences. The emotional and psychological impact on students' wellbeing surfaces as resentment of academic reading activity. Consequently, Mason & Warmington (2024) view academic reading as a grudging act – an activity literally done grudgingly. Basically, *"grudging acts occur when a student's orientation towards a task lacks the positive disposition and the affect associated with doing something freely and wilfully."*

Grudging acts, according to Bottero's (2022) theory of social analysis, are activities we prefer not to do but perform nonetheless because we can neither wish it away nor outsource it. Simply put, many a student would skip academic reading if it were up to them. This is probably why some sources claim that many students read only to pass their examination (Akabuike & Asika, 2012). This researcher hypothesizes that reading only during examination periods is a defective fire brigade approach because there is insufficient time for proper digestion of reading content. A more problematic situation is created when reading is employed as a punitive measure at home or school, particularly for an offence that is unrelated to studying. It appears this scenario is yet to come under the spotlight of educational research. Using reading as punishment can have unintended negative consequences on individuals' motivation and attitude to reading.

Kadmos & Taylor (2023) observed that reading is central in the humanities. Aside from the volume of reading, which can be overwhelming, academic texts contain 'complex sentences' and 'difficult vocabularies.' Academic texts 'employ abstract and technical language', representing professional knowledge rather than everyday expressions. The challenge posed by these complex texts is heightened for students whose first language is not English. The difficulty is equally significant for both English major and non-English major students (Darjito, Roll, Setiawan & Sumekto 2023).

Although reading difficulty is a significant experience amongst undergraduates whose L1 is not English (Mason & Warmington, 2024), one of the most important skills required of ESL and EFL undergraduates is the ability to comprehend academic texts (Nergis, 2012). Guthrie et al. (in Boakye & Southey, 2009) defined text comprehension as a learner's capacity 'to construct new knowledge or information from written texts.' Abstract language, novel concepts, unfamiliar culture, and the use of technicalities and grammatical metaphor are major constructs that contribute to complexities in academic texts (Darjito, Rolls, Setiawan & Sumekto 2023). The National Reading Panel (2000 in Agbo, Kadiri & Ekwueme 2019) concurred that 'reading comprehension is a complex, cognitive process that cannot be understood without a clear description of the role that vocabulary development and vocabulary instruction play in the understanding of what

has been read.' In the case of literature, Ghazali, Setia, Muthusamy & Jusoff (2009) stated that a mismatch between selected texts and students' language ability hampers text comprehension. Text comprehension also requires active engagement with the text, i.e. an intentional focus on a text in order to obtain meaning.

According to Guthrie et al. (in Boakye & Southey 2009: 9), engaged reading occurs when the three dimensions of reading – the cognitive (conceptual application), social (community of literacy) and motivational (enjoyment and involvement) are coordinated. Using this framework, it could be argued that engaged readers, unlike disengaged readers, neither avoid reading nor give up in the face of reading difficulties. According to the above source, here is what they do: *"Engaged readers discuss ideas and interpretation of texts with peers, have a high interest in reading, transfer interest to a variety of genres, obtain valued learning outcomes, select appropriate strategies to obtain conceptual understanding, and have intrinsic motivation."*

Students with low motivation read less, while highly motivated students spend more time reading, and frequent reading increases conceptual understanding of texts, which in turn contributes to reading achievement. This underscores the correlation between reading and academic performance. Students' attitude towards text can impact their reading performance if their motive for learning is instrumental. Instrumental motive includes second language learning for practical purposes, for instance, learning a language to get a better job or to pass examinations (Ghazali et al., 2009). Lone (2011) adds that daily and systematic reading *"sharpens the mind, refines emotions, increases taste and provides insights for one's life among other advantages"*. The cumulative effect yields maximum dividends later in life as students demonstrate reader autonomy through extensive reading.

As mentioned earlier, studies on reading in academic settings report that students have problems extracting meaning from texts. Yet lecturers assume that students can always cope with course readings independently. Hence, they focus on the disciplinary content without paying due attention to reading support for students (Dardjito, Roll, Setiawan, & Sumekto, 2023: 1290).

Teachers may be conversant with the steps for teaching reading comprehension only in theory because it is common practice for English language lessons on reading comprehension to commence without guided pre-reading activities. A study reported that learners were not familiarized with the pre-questioning activity in reading comprehension lessons (Sebarajah, 2023). Furthermore, 90% of the respondents in the same study needed to learn reading strategies and techniques to improve reading comprehension. And Cesiko (2024) suggested that lecturers can apply the following measures in students' interest: *"design activities that focus on teaching students how to summarize texts, identify main ideas, ask critical questions, and break down complex materials into manageable sections."* Strategies such as enhancing vocabulary, implementing reading comprehension techniques, incorporating culturally relevant materials, and teaching effective time management are critical.

Against this backdrop, Mason & Warmington (2024) contended that academic reading still receives limited pedagogical attention despite widespread acknowledgement that it is essential for academic success in tertiary education.

Although technology has made it possible for students to source and read more information online than offline (Chauhan & Lal in Naz, 2022), researchers are divided on their perception of the impact of ICT on students' reading habits. Naz et al. (2022) averred that people can easily assess needed information on the internet but surprisingly blame diminishing reading habits on the widespread use of technological devices. Not a few scholars blame technology (See Akanda et al., 2013; Soroya & Amen in Naz, 2022). The negative commentaries have an undertone of traditional suspicion of partially understood ideas and inventions such as newer technologies and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

On the other hand, Sarimanah et al. (2022) argued that the role of technology in the transfer of data and knowledge increases students' reading ability in learning through effective use of tablets or smartphone devices. Indeed, people engage in diverse online activities today. At this juncture, it is worthy of note that there are thriving online jobs, online journals, e-learning, e-libraries, e-books, audiobooks, online study, webinars, virtual presentations, plus computer games to reckon with. Therefore, it is erroneous to presume that people use online platforms mainly for entertainment or social networking. Another interesting angle to the impact of ICT on reading skills is related to students' economic background. Technology is not cheap, especially in developing countries including Nigeria. Hence, the technological advantage is mainly open to lecturers and students who can afford access to digital facilities. The implication is that students' financial status would indirectly improve their reading performance.

Furthermore, Kadmos & Taylor (2023) drew attention to the plight of precarious students who fail to complete or even start assigned readings because they are juggling schooling and work for survival. The inherent *"time constraint leaves no choice but to draw on the strategic reading practices students adopt, such as skimming and scanning, and googling definitions or YouTube videos of key concepts rather than seeking out more complex explanations."* Skimming means reading quickly to get a glimpse of the main idea and purpose of a text before doing a thorough reading of the same text. This is related to what Brown (in Anwar & Sailuddin 2022) referred to as using ICT as a shortcut to learning in place of in-depth reading. They also proffered a practicable solution to poverty of time: *"replace a social activity with an hour of reading."* No doubt, reading experience can be influenced by the reading medium. For instance, students reported finding it difficult to read from a soft copy because it causes vision problems and exhaustion. And some find the cost of data and subscriptions for reading e-books online expensive (Naz et al., 2022).

3. The Study

Overall, the positive aspects of undergraduate students' reading experience are knowledge expansion via access to information, exposure to new ideas and diverse perspectives; development of critical thinking and analytical skills through engagement

with complex texts; and enhanced comprehension and retention of content by regular reading. In addition to the above benefits of reading, it is common practice to assign reading tasks to students at the undergraduate level to help them prepare for class discussions and engage with course materials. This study was inspired by casual yet worrisome commentaries by teachers and educators concerning contemporary undergraduate students and their reading.

Granted that academic success in tertiary education is inextricably tied to reading performance, this study sought to find answers to three research questions which centre on undergraduate reading experience:

- How frequently do undergraduate students read?
- What are the reading preferences of undergraduate students?
- To what extent do undergraduate students comprehend what they read?

The focus group is made up of twenty-four participants selected using snowball sampling from 200-level Education English students in the researcher's undergraduate class. The researcher adopted a dual approach –a researcher-structured questionnaire with 14 items on a 4-likert scale, and a follow-up oral interview designed to gain deeper insight into participants' responses. The interview questions were open-ended because the researcher sought detailed explanation, clarification, and justification of the information derived from the first instrument. Sample interview questions used include:

- A high percentage of students pay more attention to pleasure reading than academic reading. Why?
- What specific challenges do you encounter in your academic reading?
- How would you like to be supported in your reading and why?

The questionnaire was administered simultaneously, and the average time for completion was five minutes, while the oral interview was done in three sessions at the participants' convenience. The sessions were recorded on an Android device with the proviso that participants' identities shall not be disclosed. The recordings were transcribed using a combination of audio to text app (free version) and manual transcription.

4. Findings

The researcher deemed it necessary to establish from the outset that the participants have access to reading materials in either soft or hard copy or both. This decision was informed by the need to exclude non-availability of reading materials as a variable that might affect the research findings, as shown in Table I. The items in Table I also reflect the researcher's recognition and inclusion of reading in both traditional and digital modes.

Table I: Summary of accessibility of reading materials in percentage

s/n	Questions	Al	So	%	Ra	Ne	%
1	I have easy access to ICT (digital devices and data) for online reading.	2	7	9 37.5%	8	7	15 62.5%
2	I have easy access to books (hard copies) and printed materials for reading.	12	7	19 79.2%	2	3	5 20.8%
3	I use ICT, e.g. phone, tablet, computer for my academic reading.	7	10	17 71%	4	3	7 29%
4	I use ICT, e.g. phone, tablet, computer for pleasure reading.	9	8	17 71%	6	1	7 29%

Keys: Al = Always, So = Sometimes, Ra = Rarely, Ne = Never.

Only 9 (37.5%) participants have easy access to digital devices and data for online reading, while the greater majority of 15 (62.5%) do not. The data reveals that most of the respondents, 19 (79.2%), have easy access to traditional hard copy materials for reading. Yet an equal number, 17 (71%), use digital devices for both academic and pleasure reading. During the interview sessions, the participants confirmed that they indeed do more pleasure reading online. Even though their course books are largely hard copies, they rely heavily on online reading for assignments and research.

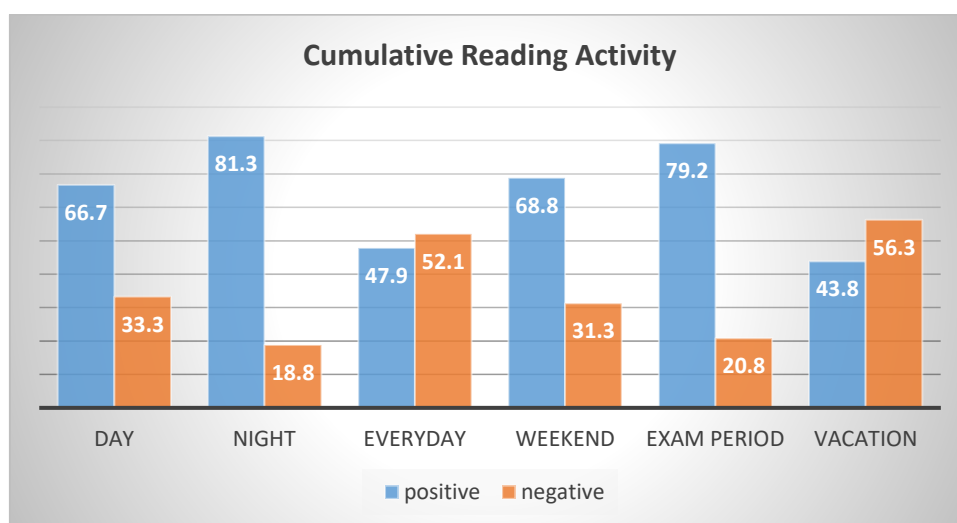


Figure I: Frequency of participants' engagement with reading

67% of the participants engage in reading activity during the day, compared with 33% who do not. 81% of the students read mostly at night, while 19% rarely do. Apparently, their peak reading time is at night followed by examination period, when 79% engage in reading, compared with 21% who rarely read during examination period. 69% read on weekends, while 31% of the participants rarely read on weekends. Only 44% of participants read on vacation compared to 56% who hardly do. This shows that students' engagement with reading dwindles when they are on vacation. The above percentages, however, do not mean that all the participants read on a daily basis. Only 48% always or sometimes read every day, while 52% rarely or never read daily.

Figure I is significant because it underscores the fact that undergraduate students actually engage in reading. The result debunks perceived misconceptions that 'students nowadays do not read.' Having established that undergraduate students actually read, an equally important question is: what do they read? The content or purpose of their reading is depicted in Figure II.

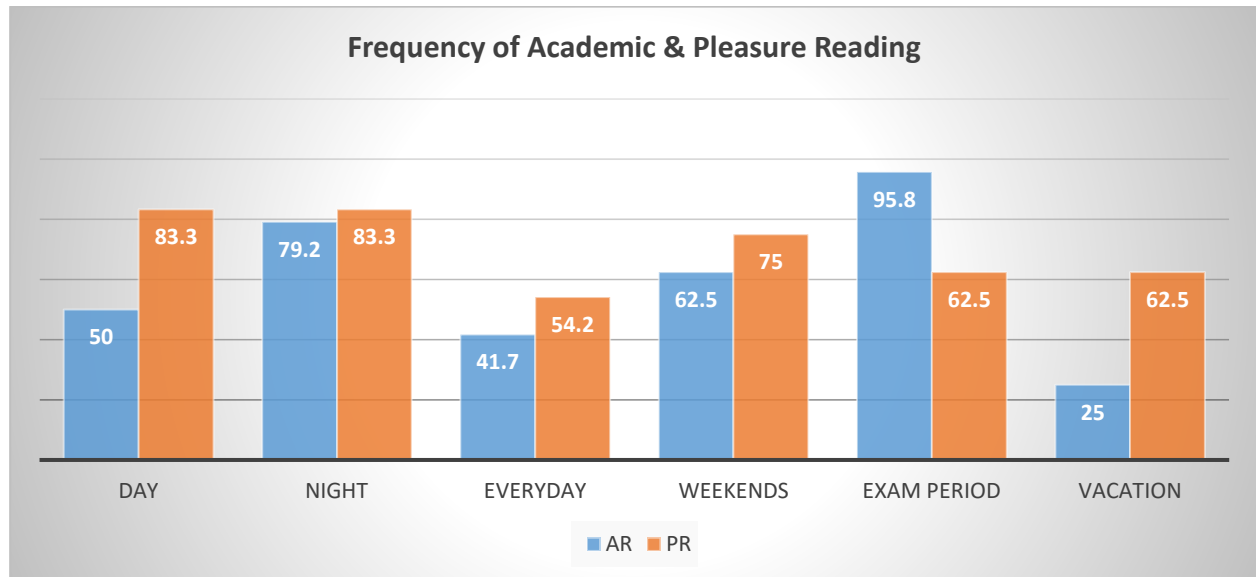


Figure II: Frequency of participants' engagement with academic and pleasure reading

At different times (day, night, daily, weekends and vacation) majority of the participants consistently engage in pleasure reading more than academic reading, except during examinations. Albeit academic reading peaks during exams (95.8%), the data equally reveals that a significant percentage (62.5%) also indulge in pleasure reading at this crucial time.

Furthermore, responses to the items in Table II confirm that the number of participants who like to read non-academic texts (83%) is greater than the number of participants who like to read academic texts (75%). Similarly, the percentage of respondents (67%) who find it easy to create time for pleasure reading is higher than the percentage (37.5%) that finds it easy to create time for academic reading. It can be surmised that, regardless of the importance of academic reading, students do more pleasure reading because they enjoy the latter more on account of ease of comprehension, based on the fact that 83% find reading materials other than academic content easy to understand. The percentage is higher than 62.5%, representing those who find it easy to understand academic materials and journals.

Table II: Summary of participants' reading preferences and comprehension in percentage

s/n	Questions	Al	So	%	Ra	Ne	%
5	I find it easy to create time for academic reading.	1	8	9 37.5%	12	3	15 62.5%
6	I find it easy to create time for pleasure reading.	5	11	16 67%	7	1	8 33%
7	I like to read newspapers, magazines, novels, comics and related materials for pleasure and information.	11	9	20 83%	2	2	4 17%
8	I like to read my course books and relevant academic texts.	4	14	18 75%	5	1	6 25%
9	I like to read in the library.	0	9	9 37.5%	7	8	15 62.5%
10	I cover reading tasks assigned by my lecturers.	5	9	14 58%	8	2	10 42%
11	I find academic texts and journals easy to understand.	2	13	15 62.5%	5	4	9 37.5%
12	I find fiction and non-fiction outside academic texts easy to understand.	13	7	20 83%	4	0	4 17%

Keys: Al = Always, So = Sometimes, Ra = Rarely, Ne = Never.

Comprehension is the central goal of reading. Some barriers to comprehension experienced by the students emanate from complex vocabulary or 'hard words' in a participant's parlance. Most claimed they find academic reading boring and challenging on account of professional lexicons and abstract terminologies that even dictionaries do not explain satisfactorily. Using a phone dictionary in this context shows a measure of effort by the students, but this device also introduced some distractions as well. Many participants could relate to the individual who explained that they read a piece of writing "...over and over again for it to enter my head." And another made this observation:

"I find it easy to understand both fiction and non-fiction except Shakespearean books."

Here are a couple of responses from the follow-up interview to the question: Do you find it easier to make out time for pleasure reading than for academic reading?

"Yes, because pleasure reading sometimes happens, do I say, unconsciously. I might be with my phone and just scrolling and see something interesting. It gets my attention, and I start reading it, sometimes novels. But academic reading, I have to map out time for it."

It can be argued that students do not intentionally create time for pleasure reading. In a fast-paced world, the ability to read on the go is a plus, particularly for extensive reading. Unfortunately, academic reading does not fit into this scenario. For some individuals, it requires "more effort and concentration than pleasure reading' therefore, 'you need to have your own time, your own space where you won't be distracted."

The participant quoted above unwittingly captured the distractive nature of cell phones, a widely used digital device. The contentious question is: where should the blame go – To the tool or its user?

"...like Things Fall Apart, I did not finish reading the book. I googled the summary and the plot and characterization and everything. But sitting down to open the book, I could not do it because I don't like reading. I prefer watching movies, so I downloaded the film and watched it and understood it."

Flipped learning, for instance, endorses the inclusion of videos in pre-class activities (See Njemanze 2025). The merits are significant to different types of learners due to its audio-visual characteristics. However, substitution of textual study with videos in the humanities raises ethical questions about the use of digital technology as a shortcut to learning. Earlier studies like Siddiquah & Salim (2017) have made sad commentaries about the misuse of ICT by students. Though tangential to this study, unchecked use of book summary apps might be a red flag that requires caution. In the long term, over-reliance on AI summaries by undergraduates might prove inimical to academic pursuit. Further research in this regard may foreshadow what lies ahead.

Hunger and tiny fonts in hard copy materials were identified as part of the problems that impede concentration, but noise received worthy mention as a notable source of distraction.

"I don't like reading in the morning or afternoon. I feel like at night everywhere is so calm so I can actually understand what I am reading. For me, I prefer reading [sic] afternoon."

Only 9 (37.5%) participants sometimes read in the library. The remaining 15 (62.5%) rarely or never do. When asked about it, many concurred with this speaker:

"In my own experience, I have tried the library on several occasions; it doesn't work for me. Whenever I get in there, it's as if there's a spirit there. I will just sleep off."

Many participants concurred that the library is typically too quiet for their liking. It comes as no surprise because there are indeed people who like to read with white noise or soft music in the background. This is outside the scope of this study; hence, suffice it to say that some individuals actually dislike reading in absolute silence, while others cannot be bothered.

"I read in any environment whether noisy or calm... It's just that if I want to read, if I am in the mood or in the state to read, then I read and understand perfectly."

The interview session brought to the fore the impact of time and financial constraints on undergraduate students' reading experience.

"I'll say for me the time we close from school, me as a married woman I go to shop then from shop to the house making dinner, by the time I'm done I'm weak. I enjoy reading, but once I carry the book, I will sleep off."

"I don't always have time; like, if we are done now (with the oral interview), I'll go to my mummy's shop. Then on Saturdays I do go to work, then on Sundays I do go to my place to make my hair. I don't have time."

At this level, the additional weight of financial burden which some students carry invariably tells on their reading experience.

"I find reading boring and time-wasting. Reading for me is foreign. I prefer just listening and being taught rather than reading, so I don't read every day. I read for a reason, for example, just for an exam."

Hear another:

"If they assign it (reading task) to us even though it's five minutes, I will sit down and read it even if I'm not enjoying it. Just for the lecturers' sake, I'll do it."

The above statements confirm Akabuiké & Asika's (2012) stance that many students read only during examinations. In other words, self-motivation is minimal. Reading in this context is done grudgingly in consonance with Bottero's (2022) theory of grudging act. There is no intrinsic love for learning or scholarship. Perhaps the most troubling aspect is a participant's admission of non-compliance with regards to carrying out assigned reading tasks unless there is negative reinforcement.

"I read only if there is punishment attached. I don't want to be punished."

Interestingly, this researcher used the phrase 'reading as punishment' earlier in the paper, but in a different context.

The participants in general complained about stress. This refers to the underlying physical, emotional, and mental state of an individual that affect their reading skills in no small measure.

"I noticed that most times after school I have a headache due to lack of rest."

"I do not always have the time to read assigned tasks because of too many activities."

"I do have time on weekends. Sometimes I read; sometimes I plan to read, but I procrastinate."

Stress can manifest as headaches, tension, feelings of frustration or overwhelm, difficulty concentrating on the text and avoidance of serious reading tasks or procrastination. Causes of reading anxiety include learning difficulties, past negative reading experiences, fear of not understanding the reading material, and pressure to perform to expectations.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

An in-depth analysis of the data points to motivation, time management, application of technology, comprehension of complex registers, distractions and mental wellbeing as salient factors that impact undergraduate students' reading experience. In a bid to elicit participants' views on the way forward, the concluding questions at the oral interview sessions called for introspection. This was prompted by the need for students to own their reading experience. Consequently, the following recommendations, to a large extent, were filtered from the interaction.

First and foremost, undergraduate students' wellbeing matters. The performance of even the brightest can be diminished by hunger – a basic need for food. Major factors that touch on their wellbeing and approach to reading include funds, food, electricity (power supply), rest, and encouragement. The presence and absence of any or a combination of these elements affects everyone at varying degrees, from on-campus to off-campus students, whether single, married or working. The home is the primary place of socialization; therefore, the family has a key role to play in providing physiological, financial, emotional and psychological support to students. This will go a long way in minimizing reading and performance anxiety propelled by self-efficacy and undue pressure on undergraduates to succeed in their academics. A personal laptop, for example, is a necessity for an undergraduate in a digital age regardless of cost.

Institutional support could be delivered by staff to students via mentoring and a humane approach to teaching. A learner-centric approach entails adopting teaching methods and strategies that enhance students' performance. For instance, reading tasks should never be assigned as a punitive measure or merely to keep students busy because it can be counterproductive. It is advisable to provide a clear rationale for reading tasks. Lack of alignment between academic reading content and real-world applications is a demotivating factor because students perceive such reading activity as a waste of time, unlike instrumental reading. Hence observable disconnect between course content and job demands necessitates regular review of the undergraduate curriculum by concerned bodies.

Stress – a recurrent phrase in the interview – encompasses a feeling of overwhelm triggered by intensive workload and high grade expectations placed on students. The time frame for completion of reading tasks should be reasonable because the same students are most likely to have ample reading tasks in every other component of their coursework. Muhammed (2024) and Azimova (2020), among others, associated suicidal behaviour among youths in the school context with *"perceived academic performance."*

Apparently, unchecked reading performance anxiety has negative effects on students' mental health.

In view of the fact that comprehension is the essence of academic reading, inclusion of glossaries by writers of academic materials might prove helpful to undergraduate readers. Materials writers can check for unnecessarily complex language by using these test questions: (1) Who is my target audience? (2) Can my target audience comprehend my output? Truth be told, any reading material that an academic honestly admits is tough would prove twice as difficult for an undergraduate student to digest. Little wonder captions like 'XYZ for Dummies' are employed by content creators to present complex information without sounding like lecturing. The researcher constructed dialogue between Philip and the Ethiopian Official based on a biblical story (Acts 9: 26-34), underscores the obligation of ELT practitioners to students in the context of reading.

Philip: *"Do you understand what you are reading?"*

The official: *"How can I understand unless someone explains it to me?"*

Acknowledgement of reading difficulties posed by the use of specialized language in academic texts underscores the need for pre-reading activities to demystify the subject matter of assigned reading texts so that students can relate to the content. Scaffolding via clarification of vague concepts, registers, and terminologies will promote students' motivation and engagement with academic reading, especially since standard dictionaries which students normally consult do not always explicate professional jargon as clearly as everyday vocabulary.

Educators can also take advantage of students' affinity for technology by flipping their classes. Outside lecture hours, students can watch recommended videos on a wide range of topics repeatedly until they grasp the gist. Note that the use of digital technology in this context is to facilitate learning. It should not displace academic reading, the pathway to in-depth knowledge. With proper support, undergraduate students are likely to appreciate the downsides of overreliance on AI summaries vis-à-vis actual text study.

It behooves every student to do an introspection to discover their learning styles. Each should tailor their reading practice to what works best for them, such as engaging in individual or collaborative reading. What works for A may not work for B. Therefore, he who concentrates best in a quiet space such as a library should go for it. Use of e-books might also require exploring a conducive physical space for reading. Hence, institutional support by way of provision of adequate study facilities in a conducive environment is important.

Where possible, it is a good idea to put in place a reward system that encourages students to step up their academic reading. This is a common form of extrinsic motivation for both young and adult learners. However, the development of self-awareness and self-regulation is essential for proper time management and controlling distractions associated with the use of technological devices. With self-awareness and clear personal goals come intrinsic motivation to complete assigned reading tasks rather than reading just 'to please the lecturer.' Postponement of reading tasks till examination period creates

needless tension. Conversely, a planned reading programme or personalized reading strategy maximizes comprehension, retention, and application of knowledge.

In addition, students' love for pleasure reading is a commendable practice that needs to be sustained without relegating academic reading to the background. With proper support and guidance, particularly from teachers, pleasure reading could actually serve as a springboard for developing extensive reading habits, academic reading skills and, by extension, self-study skills and lifelong learning. Another advantage is that the more they read, the more they appreciate the difference between the art of creative writing and the structured format of scientific or academic writing.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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