

Algerian EFL Students' Reading Habits in the Digital Age:

A Case of Second Year Master Students at Ibn Khaldoun University, Tiaret

عادات القراءة لدى الطلاب الجزائريين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في العصر الرقمي:

دراسة حالة طلاب سنة ثانية ما ستر بجامعة ابن خلدون تيارت

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ABSTRACT:

ملخص البحث

The aim of this study is to explore Algerian EFL students' academic reading habits and preferences in the digital age. To meet this endeavour, a questionnaire was administered to 45 EFL second year master students at Ibn Khaldoun University, Tiaret. Results revealed that despite students' reading habits are increasingly developed in the digital era, students still prefer reading their academic materials on paper for deep understanding and better learning.

Keywords: Academic reading habits; digital age; EFL students; preferences.

تروم هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف عادات القراءة الأكاديمية المفضلة لدى طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالجزائر في العصر الرقمي. ولتحقيق ذلك، تم توزيع استبيان الدراسة على 45 طالب ماستر سنة ثانية يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بجامعة ابن خلدون، تيارت؛ حيث كشفت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلبة لازالوا يفضلون النسخة الورقية للمواد الأكاديمية على الرغم من التطور المتزايد لعادات القراءة في العصر الرقمي، وذلك لتحصيل أكبر قدر من الاستيعاب والتعلم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عادات القراءة الأكاديمية; العصر الرقمي; طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية; تفضيلات.

1. Introduction

The advent of digital media and the proliferation of electronic texts have brought about significant changes in reading habits. University students are increasingly reading on their screens for both academic work and pleasure. However, little research has explored how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduate students read in their discipline areas in this digital era.

The purposes of this study are therefore twofold. First, this study aims to investigate the academic reading habits of EFL Second Year Master Students at Ibn Khaldoun University, Tiaret in the digital environment. The second purpose is to explore their preferences for paper or screen medium when reading academic materials. A questionnaire was administered to 45 students to solicit insightful data about their reading patterns. Understanding reading habits and preferences will enable teachers to devise new approaches that best help students improve their EFL reading abilities and prepare them to meet the new literacy demands of the 21st century.

2. Reading Habits in the Digital Age

Studies on reading habits among university students have gained much interest in recent years among university students due to the impact of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). In his study of 113 students' reading behaviours, Liu (2005) found that most of the participants (83%) spent more time reading electronic texts. This electronic reading is characterized by browsing, skimming, and keywords spotting, in addition to selective reading. Unlike traditional reading, screen reading encourages non-linear reading i.e jumping from one site to another for the sake of getting a vast amount of information in a very short time. This new trend of reading creates a kind of non- continuous reading that impedes students' focus and disrupts deep reading (Liu, 2005).

In a similar vein, Hillesund (2010) investigated the reading behaviours of expert readers on both screen and paper, findings indicated that online reading brings new modes of reading like browsing, skimming, and 'bouncing'. Hillesund (2010) further explained that despite Web offers unprecedented freedom for readers through a myriad of hypertexts to choose their reading path, it creates a kind of discontinuous and fragmented reading. By contrast, the paper medium is well-suited to practice sustained and continuous reading especially when reading scholarly papers (Hillesund, 2010).

Although previous studies have claimed that electronic reading hinders deep reading, a recent study of the reading habits in Morocco (Larhmaid, 2018) reveals that 98% of the participants reported increased attention and in-depth reading when reading electronic documents. Larhmaid (2018) has considered several explanations for this prolonged engagement in reading. She argues that subject disciplines like software and electronic engineering play a critical role in the mastery of the online reading skills that increase the frequent use of digital resources by undergraduate students. According to her, another plausible explanation is the students' familiarity with digital media that is regarded as the key factor in sustaining attention and increasing deep reading. Nevertheless, this study has overlooked the length of electronic documents read by students which may affect negatively in maintaining continuous reading in an environment known of its distraction (Wolf, 2018).

3. Reading Preferences While Reading Academic Texts

A growing body of studies has reported that students' preferences for the reading medium are determined by the reading purposes and length of texts. For instance, Mizrachi (2015) studied undergraduate students' reading preference in the academic context in California university, the

findings of this study indicated that most of the participants prefer reading their academic documents in print for better understanding and effective learning outcome.

Furthermore, literature has documented that the sensory dimensions and the physicality of paper play a pivotal role in choosing hardcopy materials over the screen (Jabr, 2013; Wolf, 2018; Mangen, Walgermo, & Brønnick, 2013;). Undoubtedly, touching the paper offers a sense of ownership for the reader to be immersed and involved in the reading process, it is the virtue that Rose (2011) extols when he states “to comprehend something fully is to take ownership of it and to own a text, I must hold it in my hand” (p. 519).

Baron et al. (2017), through their investigation of the attitudes and practices of 429 university students regarding reading in hardcopy versus screen, found that nearly 92% of students concentrate better when reading their academic materials in print as one of the participants put it “reading in hardcopy makes me focus more on what I am reading” (Baron, Calixte, & Havewala, 2017, p. 599). Unlike print, screen reading encourages multitasking across multiple sources of information. Shifting and switching from one link to another would probably disrupt the reader's focus and diminish his attention while reading (Wolf, 2018).

Although digital reading has some limitations, its advantages in students' life cannot be ignored. For instance, digital devices enable students to download and store a large number of electronic documents. In addition, these devices make it easier for students to carry these documents wherever they go (Baron, 2015; Rose, 2011; Mizrachi, Salaz, Kurbanoglu, & Boustany, 2018). More importantly, handheld devices with internet connection allow students to get instant access to a wide range of information that help them expand their knowledge and improve their understanding.

4. Methodology

Previous studies attempted to explore students' reading behaviours in the digital age. What remains to be explored, however, is how EFL students engage in reading their academic materials. Therefore, this study aims to explore EFL Second Year Master students' reading habits and preferences at Ibn Khaldoun University, Tiaret.

4.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

The two main research questions which underpin this study are:

1. What are the reading habits of EFL second master students at Ibn Khaldoun university in the digital age?
2. Which reading medium (paper or screen) do EFL second-year master students prefer when reading academic texts?

To address the above questions, the researcher hypothesized that:

1. EFL second master students spend more time on electronic reading using a variety of digital resources.
2. Students tend to prefer the screen medium to read their academic texts.

4.2 Data Collection

For the purpose of the study, a questionnaire was used in collecting data. The sample of this study was randomly selected during the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020; it consists of 50 EFL second-year master students at Ibn Khaldoun University. Participants were asked to fill

out the questionnaire based on their reading patterns. Only 45 participants (5 males and 40 females) completed the questionnaire. Their age ranges from 20 to 24 years old.

A pilot study was conducted with 30 students to pre-test the survey questions. After the pilot study, some questions were developed and refined. The final draft of the questionnaire involved the following sections:

A- A set of questions about reading habits in terms of time spent on reading courses on the screen where participants have to choose among multiple-choice items; types of digital devices used by them (e.g.: computer desktop, laptop, mobile phone, and tablet); sources to get the reading courses (university library, Websites, and friends).

B- As for reading medium preferences, participants responded to multiple-choice items that include, paper, screen, or no preference.

C- To get deep insights about students' learning engagement when reading on both paper and screen platforms, a five Likert- scale was added. It included the following items:

1. Remembering more information and understanding deeply when reading in hardcopy;
2. Enjoying and concentrating when reading online;

D-At the end of the questionnaire, open-ended questions were added to get more comments and further explanations about students' reading medium preferences.

4.3 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 22.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Reading Habits

In the digital age, students tend to spend much time reading on screen. They are exposed to the sheer volume of information that increases their consumption of electronic documents. As can be seen in Table 1, the majority (84,4%) of participants spend a considerable amount of time (from one hour to three hours a day) reading their courses on-screen, whereas only 10,8% of participants report that they read over 4 hours on their screens (see Table 1). As expected, EFL graduate students tend to spend more time reading on their screens due to their rigorous academic programme. These students are required to write their theses; therefore, it is conceivable that they read extensively and spend a large amount of time reading on their digital screen to meet this requirement.

Table 1:
Time Spent Reading Courses on Screen

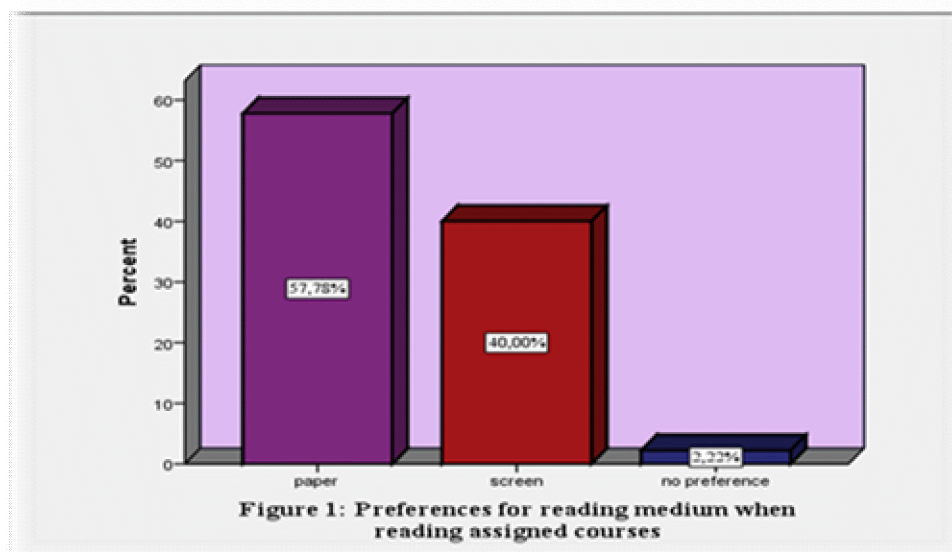
Hours	Frequency	Percent
0 hour	2	4,4 %
1-3 hours	38	84,4 %
4-6 hours	3	6,4 %
Over 6 hours	2	4,4 %
Total	45	100 %

The programme of university graduate students prompts them to use multiple sources to satisfy their reading needs. The findings of this study show that different sources are used by participants to get their reading courses. Websites are increasingly used by the respondents (75,6%), followed by university library with (15,6%). The wide use of the website can be explained by the availability of information that the Internet offers at any time in any place. There is no doubt that Web sites afford students with limitless online sources to satisfy their reading desires. They serve as a contributor means for the language learner to be engaged in direct contact with authentic materials: Web sites include a hybrid of hyperlinks that include texts, images, and videos of native speakers, this advantage creates an environment conducive to learning the target language.

In an information age, students use various digital devices to enhance their reading practices. The results of this questionnaire show that most of the participants use their mobile phones to read their courses (55,6%) followed by laptop (31,1%), desktop computer (08,9%), and iPad/tablet (04,4%). Mobile phones are the most familiar devices for many students that serve as a feasible tool for effective learning. It is important to note that students can use tremendous applications of mobile phone to enhance their learning; for instance, social media like Facebook and WhatsApp are useful spaces to share relevant reading materials among students to encourage their reading practices. Besides, this small device facilitates the storage and organisation of a vast number of documents in the form of a digital library that enables students to boost their reading habits anywhere and anytime. More importantly, the mobile phone has a substantial effect on language learning. Through the use of its electronic dictionaries, English learners can improve their vocabulary and pronunciation, which in turn contributes to the development of reading comprehension and English proficiency.

5.2 Reading Medium Preferences

The choice of reading medium differs among students according to reading purposes. As Figure (1) below illustrates 57,78% of participants prefer to read their assigned courses on paper, whereas 40% choose the screen medium and only 02,22% indicate no preferences. These results disconfirm the hypothesis of the study that stated students' preference for screen medium in the digital age.



The advantage of paper medium over screen is due to the nature of academic reading. This kind of reading requires careful attention and prolonged engagement in reading to fully understand and synthesize the information presented in the text. As one of the participants notes "Reading on paper is more helpful for me because I feel concentrated in reading my courses and go deeply with the content". Furthermore, the sensory features of paper, such as touch and smell play a critical role in the choice of the medium. As one of the participants opines "I like the smell of the papers, the covers of books, and I enjoy turning pages that make sounds". Other participant stresses the importance of touch in the reading process when he states "I am a tactile person, so I have to touch the material I am reading, it gets me more involved in the reading process and understand better than reading on-screen". However, screen reading has many advantages that should not be overlooked such as accessibility, interactivity, low cost, and convenience. Comments by students reveal these positive aspects:

"Sometimes it is hard to get hardcopy books but online reading helps me to get them easily",

"I can read fast on screen, I can gain time, I can share the reading material easily with my friends",

In short, both paper and screen medium have their advantages and limitations that lead students to choose one format over the other. But the question raises here is whether these platforms have the same impact on cognitive skills. The next section will attempt to answer this question.

5.3 Remembering and Understanding Information in Hardcopy

Various research studies have found that paper is the optimal medium for students to remember more information in the text and understand their reading materials. (Mizrachi, Salaz, Kurbanoglu, & Boustany, 2018; Baron, Calixte, & Havewala, 2017; Jabr, 2013). Tables 2 illustrates that 66,6% of participants strongly agree or agree that they remember more information in hardcopy, and table 3 shows that 73,4% strongly agree or agree that they prefer to read hardcopy documents for deep understanding.

Table 2:
Remembering More Information When Reading in Hardcopy

Value	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	4	8,9 %
Disagree	6	13,3 %
Neither agree nor disagree	5	11,1 %
Agree	20	44,4 %
Strongly agree	10	22,2 %
Total	45	100 %

Table 3:
Hardcopy Preference for Deep Understanding

Value	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	2	4,4 %
Disagree	7	15,6 %
Neither agree nor disagree	3	6,7 %
Agree	16	35,6 %
Strongly agree	17	37,8 %
Total	45	100 %

Unlike digital texts, the paper offers a good spatial mental representation of the whole text that helps the reader to localize and remember more information (Jabr, 2013). In other words, readers of long texts on paper can see the entire passage with its different angles and from top to bottom on one single page. On the contrary, screen readers have to scroll down to move to the next part of the text. Scrolling up and down the page disrupts the continuity of reading which in turn affects retention and understanding of the information conveyed in a text. For this reason, various research studies have found that having a good spatial representation of the text enhances cognitive abilities and supports reading comprehension (Baron, 2015; Mizrachi, Salaz, Kurbanoglu, & Boustany, 2018; Støle, Mangen, & Schwippert, 2020).

5.4 Less Enjoyment and lack of Concentration When Reading Online

An interesting finding from this study reveals that 53,3% of participants strongly disagree or disagree that they enjoy more when reading online. This result is inconsistent with other studies that showed that paper reading is boring when reading for both academic purposes and pleasure (Baron, Calixte, & Havewala, 2017). The question raises here is: why did students in this study find online reading less enjoyable despite this kind of reading provides endless resources, which are absent in the print environment?

The answer, from the participants' comments, reveals that distraction is the major issue that students confront when reading online. Here are some selected comments:

"I lose my focus when I read on screen, I find myself on YouTube or Facebook connecting with friends and watching videos."

"The sound of messages and emails attracts my attention to check and consequently I get easily distracted from reading"

Furthermore, most of the participants' comments indicate that the primary disadvantage of screen reading is eyestrain. The light of digital devices impedes students from concentration when reading long materials as one participant states "I don't like reading on screen because it's tiring for eyes when reading for a long time and sometimes lead to less concentration". Other participant mentions that digital reading causes health problems as he puts it "screen reading hurts my eyes and causes headache and neckache".

6. Conclusion

This study was conducted in an attempt to enhance our understanding of the reading habits and preferences of EFL graduate students in the digital environment. The researcher aims to provide useful information and recommendations that may help university authority and teachers to develop the students' reading practices.

Overall findings of this study reveal that Algerian EFL Second Year Master students spend more time reading their academic materials on screen. This group is expected to read more due to their engagement in the academic process that requires them to read. The findings of this study should assist the university authority, especially the library to create a reading space equipped with the necessary digital devices to encourage students to develop a good reading habit. Undoubtedly, a good reading habit is a healthy behaviour that contributes significantly to academic success and professional development.

Furthermore, results show that students predominantly used their mobile phones to facilitate their reading practices and English language learning. Using a mobile phone with its tremendous applications align with social media provide students with lifelong opportunities to develop their reading patterns and practise their English language communication. Therefore, teachers are

required to integrate mobile devices into their teaching to motivate students to take charge of developing their reading habits and become active participants in the teaching and learning process. Indeed, involving students in the reading process as 'digital natives', who have more experience with technology, will be a promising step toward a new paradigm of learning which will result in effective learning outcomes.

An interesting finding of this study is less enjoyment and lack of concentration on the part of the participants when reading their academic materials online. This finding may come to surprise since several studies have found that online reading offers endless resources that make reading enjoyable and help students to meet their reading needs. Notwithstanding these advantages, this study has revealed that the inherent problem of online reading is distraction; confronting students with too much information disrupts their focus on one reading task and creates a kind of superficial reading that lacks concentration: the major cognitive faculty which plays a key role in reading comprehension.

The aforementioned disadvantages of digital reading explain the preference of students to read their academic materials on paper to concentrate well in the digital era. Students' preference for paper as a medium for deep reading implied that paper is unlikely to disappear in the digital environment. Future research should focus on increasing the sustained attention of reading in the digital environment.

The knowledge acquired through this study should assist teachers to revisit their teaching practices and adopt new approaches to match their students' needs and interests. By doing so, students will acquire effective reading skills that enable them to meet the requirements of the digital world.

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