Investigating EFL Saudi University Students' Reading and Online Habits and Interests

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1.Background

According to the British Council, the English language is used by approximately 1.75 billion people worldwide (Zeng, Ponce, & Li, 2023) and in 2020, the estimated number is two billion people speaking and learning it (Ibrahim et al., 2019). Many important fields use English, including civil aviation, warfare, space science, medicine, computer science, and tourism, and it is an essential aspect of the 2030 vision for the Kingdom. During the first half of the 20th century, Saudi Arabia began to teach English. Moreover, the Kingdom will teach English from the first grade of the school in 2021 (Khreisat, 2022; Salama, 2021), focusing on the English language and developing its curricula. In light of all these factors, Saudi students are encouraged to undertake English as a course of study.

The ultimate purpose of being literate is applying the ability to read, which is reading to learn (OECD, 2010a). Therefore, students should be able to comprehend and digest the massive amount of data they need to process based on their English language skills. There is no doubt that text plays a vital role in exposing students to such data. The ability to read needs to be developed to perceive and comprehend such a large amount of information. Of course, as with any skill, practising it dramatically enhances it. According to Mourtaga (2006), a lack of reading practice is one of the factors contributing to the reading difficulties of Arab EFL students.

However, not all students at this level follow a reading habit throughout their university studies. It is vital to consider the number of reading materials and the amount of time spent on the reading process when measuring the efficiency of reading habits and interests (Alderson, 1984). Moreover, reading enhances the ability of university students to participate in arguments, presentations and public speaking, as well as develop their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. It can enhance students' academic performance and thinking skills on all levels (Cox & Guthrie, 2001). Students generally seek academic excellence in various ways outside of university courses, and reading can assist them in reviewing, summarizing and understanding complex text structures (Filderman, Austin, Boucher, O'Donnell, & Swanson, 2022), as well as developing their verbal and argumentative skills. Reading is a fundamental skill for EFL students to comprehend materials related to teaching, literature, and linguistics. Cobb and Horst (1999) asserted that reading habits can motivate students to learn English through various life experiences. Reading interests are also essential to forming the student's personality (Chadijah, Syariatin, Rohmiyati, Utomo, & Rukmana, 2023). Despite all the benefits discussed above, reading habits and interests are not primary habits among Saudi university students (Al-Jarf, 2023; Chaudhary, 2020). A study by Miesen (2003) asserts that new generations are reading less than those who came before them because they have to choose between reading and other leisure activities, such as going to the movies or exercising (e.g., using social networks). Language proficiency among students is also negatively affected by society from a moderate to a high degree (Getie, 2020). The advancement of technology and the use of simultaneous interpretation have led some Saudis to believe that learning to read English is not crucial at this time. In addition to the above, there may be other reasons, such as a heavy load of compulsory courses, insufficient time use, and lack of parental guidance.

The significance of the study sprouts from its contribution to the scant research on the topic. There is little research on Saudi EFL students' reading habits at the tertiary level, nor Saudi EFL students' reading habits have been given much attention. This study aims to fill in the gap in the literature and serve as a point of comparison for future research on the English reading habits of Saudi EFL tertiary students in the Arab world who study English as a foreign language.

1.2. Research Questions and Objectives

This study explores university students' habits and interests in reading and possible factors inhibiting their engagement in such behaviour. Thus, the study attempts to answer the following questions.

1. What are the most common types of reading materials?
2. How much time do Saudi students spend on Reading and online activities?
3. What are the reasons beyond the lack of reading by these students?

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate the most common types of reading materials?
2. To explore how much time Saudi students spend on Reading and online activities.
3. To examine the reasons beyond the lack of reading by these students?

1.3. Materials and Method

Reading

There has been a consistent emphasis in literature about reading instruction for students on the importance of personal interests as indicators of positive attitudes toward reading (Abdul-Rab et al., 2022). The importance of reading has traditionally been viewed as the greatest among the four language skills (Koch, 1975). This has led to a significant amount of research on

various reading topics in the past few years. Many studies have been conducted on what people like, what they want, and what they do not like to read (Koch, 1975). For example, Hazaea and Almekhlafy (2022) analyzed how interest, introversion, and intellectualism influence academic achievement among students. A second area of research examined the influence of family and peer reading interests on student's reading habits. Students who were more introverted preferred literary materials, while those who were less introverted were more attracted to action types. Moreover, academic and literary materials were of interest to students who valued academic achievement. A broader range of reading interests can be found among students with reading parents, siblings, classmates, and friends (Al-Jarf, 2022).

There is no doubt that reading has many advantages that cannot be denied. According to Khreisat and Sarjit (2014), these advantages can be divided into linguistic and non-linguistic categories. As a linguistic skill, reading is important in improving a person's vocabulary, grammar, and writing abilities. Reading has been demonstrated to affect linguistic attainment in various studies (Lewis and Samuels, 2002; Topping et al., 2007, 2008). More excellent vocabulary is not a result of increased education but instead an increased reading (Nagy, 1988). According to Udu (2021), students have different reading interests and different information needs. A significant gender difference was found in the findings. Magazines, newspapers, and books about history, literature, and adventure were more popular among males, while cookery, literature, and history books were more common among females. Letters, poetry, and pamphlets were the most popular items among respondents. Babbitt-Bray et al. (2004) assert that when college students read for pleasure, their vocabulary grows, and a feeling of cultural literacy develops. To foster the optimum level of reading motivation, students must be provided with materials that appeal to their interests (Alsuhaibani, 2019, 2021).

The benefits of reading extend beyond language development, such as personal and professional development. Those who read are more likely to accomplish their personal and professional goals, such as their educational and career goals and are better able to reflect upon themselves and their lives (OECD, 2010b). University students in Saudi Arabia were examined in Al-Jarf (2022) study to determine the genres of books they prefer to read. Findings showed that al Jarf venture, horror mysteries, academics, humour, sports, and movies were the areas of interest. The reading interests of participants had substantially changed over the course of 10 years when compared with those of studies conducted 10 years earlier. University students in Saudi Arabia were examined in (Al-Jarf, 2022) study to determine the genres of books they prefer to read. Findings showed that adventure, horror mysteries, academics, humour, sports, and movies were the areas of interest. The reading interests of participants had substantially changed over the course of 10 years when compared with those of studies conducted 10 years earlier. According to Richardson and Eccles (2007), the benefits of reading extend beyond academic achievement and impact how adolescents perceive themselves and the world. Reading for pleasure plays an essential role in academic success, social involvement, and the development of personal values and identity (Howard, 2011). A majority of studies on building reading programs recommend that readers should be able to select reading materials that are personally interesting to them as a means of shaping their own literacy development (Alenezi, 2021). According to research, students' own interests can inspire engagement with reading, and many researchers recommend allowing students to select reading materials from within the curriculum that interest them as much as possible (Alghonaim, 2021).

As a follow-up investigation to the effects of prior knowledge on reading comprehension, Alsowat (2022) examined topic interest's effects on reading comprehension. In this study, two of the five passages used were statistically significant predictors of topic interest. As far as reading comprehension is concerned, boys were more influenced by their reading interests than girls (Udu, 2021). ELSAYED (2023) examined the reading habits and interests of teenagers.

He found that 66 percent of respondents read magazines, 59% read newspaper articles, and 48 percent read cereal box backs. A study conducted among teenagers found that they read as a form of pleasure, to satisfy their personal needs, and for the sake of education (Sharma, 2022). Alharbi (2022) investigated University students reading interests, sources of reading materials, and attitudes toward reading. In her study, she found that books/magazines were the top reading interests among students. The library is the primary source of reading materials for these students. A positive attitude towards reading was observed in the pupils. Furthermore, students were perceived to be hindered in their literacy development due to a lack of incentives and excessive academic work (Kadwa & Alshenqeeti, 2020).

2. RELATED STUDIES

Al-Nafisah and Al-Shorman (2011) investigate Saudi EFL college students' reading habits and interests. As a result of the questionnaire, 460 respondents were analyzed, which revealed that they have a wide variety of reading habits. According to Al-Qahtani (2016), the study's results were based on the analysis of data collected from 90 Saudi EFL middle school students, eight EFL teachers, and six supervisors. In the study, Al-Qahtani (2016) examined the lack of reading habits exhibited by students with poor reading abilities due to various factors, such as poor teaching skills, less focus on comprehension, and a lack of motivation to read. In Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015) study, 330 EFL students at Saudi universities were interviewed regarding their reading habits and interests. The study results indicate that students in the mentioned stage spent most of their time on social networks rather than reading. In terms of motivation and interest in academic reading, it is the result of a lack of motivation. Yildiz (2020) investigated the effect of students' reading habits on their academic success. He analyzed a sample of 44 students from a language preparatory school with 110 students. The data analysis shows that students are eager to read extracurricular materials in their free time, which supports their academic performance. Similarly conducted studies in the Arab world are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Studies conducted on students' reading habits and interests in the Arabic world

Study	Sample/ Participants	Tool/ method	Findings/ results
Al-nafisah and Al-Shorman (2011)	460 Saudi EFL students from 12 teachers colleges	Survey methodology	This study illustrates that Saudi EFL students possess rich reading habits and that they rely on themselves and their teachers when it comes to selecting reading material
Al-Qahtani (2016)	90 Saudi EFL middle school students, 8 EFL teachers and 6 supervisors	Questionnaire and interview/ qualitative and quantitative methods	Several deficiencies were identified in the study, including poor teaching techniques, a lack of attention to comprehension, a lack of motivation,

			and unfamiliar reading topics.
Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015)	330 male and female Saudi students on the university PYP with mixed EL proficiency	Qualitative and quantitative method/ Questionnaires and surveys	Study findings indicate some issues related to reading habits, including lack of motivation and interest. Two-thirds of the students in the study spend 3-6 hours each day on social media.
Yildiz (2020)	44 EFL Iraqi students of Tishk International University's language preparatory school	Quantitative method/ questionnaire	Researchers examined the impact of reading habits on students' academic performance. It is concluded that students read books during their academic year as an extracurricular activity.

3. METHODOLOGY

To collect data for the study, we used the quantitative research method, which was primarily based on questionnaires. The online electronic questionnaire used in this study was adapted from previous literature. (Al-Qahtani, 2016; Al-Nafisah & Al-Shorman, 2011).

3.1. Research Instrument

Students at Saudi EFL university will be surveyed using an online self-administered questionnaire adapted from previous literature (Al-Qahtani, 2016; Al-Nafisah & Al-Shorman, 2011). Several items are included in the survey, including a demographic section. Student age and study level are asked in the first section. The second section contains questions about EFL Saudi University students' reading habits and interests. Responses were rated using a Likert scale.

3.2. The participants and Sampling

The study is based on the responses of Saudi EFL students in the College of Science and Arts in Tabarjal, Jouf University. We selected the sample using the convenience sampling method referred to as purposive sampling. Table 2 provides demographic information about the respondents.

4. RESULTS

4.1.Demographic Information

In Table 2, it can be seen that there are 158 respondents to the questionnaire, including 71 males who represent approximately 45% of all respondents, and 87 females which represent about 55% of the sample. In addition, the respondents from the first year of the questionnaire represent 40.3% of the participants, the respondents from the second year represent 21.5%, the respondents from the third year represent 22.2%, and the respondents from the fourth year represent 31% of the participants.

There is a slight margin of difference between the number of female students participating in the survey and the number of male students. Typically, this occurs because most targeted majors have a skewed gender distribution towards females.

Table 2. Gender and Year level distribution

| | | Gender | | | | | |
| | | Male | | Female | | total | |
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Year Level	1st Year	21	13.3%	19	12.0%	40	25.3%
	2nd Year	14	8.9%	20	12.7%	34	21.5%
	3rd Year	17	10.8%	18	11.4%	35	22.2%
	4th Year	19	12.0%	30	19.0%	49	31.0%
	Subtotal	71	44.9%	87	55.1%	158	100.0%

Table 3 shows the distribution of the study sample according to their major. It can be noticed that most students are art related to discipline, comprising 79.7% of the sample.

Table 3. Distribution according to major

		N	%
Major	English, Arabic, Islamic studies, kindergarten, education	126	79.7%
	Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics)	16	10.1%
	Administrative sciences (administration, human resources, accounting, etc.)	14	8.9%
	Engineering and Computer Science (e.g., Computer Engineering, Computer Science	2	1.3%

4.2.Frequency of Reading

In this part of the study, you will find data and information about students' reading habits regarding specific reading materials. Table 4 reports the frequency of reading magazines, textbooks, novels, newspapers and online articles.

Table 4. Frequency of readings

Reading	N	%	Frequency Level
Magazines	76	48.18	Rarely
Textbooks	134	84.62	Often

Novels	114	72.39	Rarely
Newspapers	91	57.38	Rarely
Online articles	129	81.84	Often

The results in Table 4 indicate that students participating in the questionnaire spent most of their free time reading textbooks or online articles. Furthermore, they seem to hardly read magazines, Novels and newspapers.

According to their reading habits, textbooks and online articles are their most frequent sources of information. Moreover, the responses to the questionnaire indicate that most students select demanding answers, such as never reading magazines and newspapers.

In Table 5, we can observe that an overwhelming majority of the 64 students who participated in the study, representing 40.9% of the whole group, spent over 6 hours of daily online activities. The study's results indicate that students participating in the study exaggerate their internet use for various reasons.

As opposed to this, only 3.9% spend less than one hour a day online, which is a relatively low usage rate. Furthermore, 20.1% of the students spent between one and three hours on the internet. While a noticeable percentage of students engaged in internet activities for 3 to 6 hours daily, this indicates that they are also overusing the internet.

Table 5. Hours spent on online activities

Hours	0-1 hours	1-3 hours	3-6 hours	+6 hours
N.	8	31	55	64
%	3.9	20.1	35.1	40.9

Contents of Online Reading

In this section of the questionnaire, participants responded to inquiries about the contents of online reading, including articles, online magazines, movie reviews, horoscopes, Social media, online news, Emails, e-books, sports, nutrition, health and novels.

Table 6. Contents of online reading

Reading	N	%	Frequency Level
Articles	104	65.85	Sometimes
Online magazines	99	62.71	Rarely
Movie reviews	122	76.99	Sometimes
Horoscopes	75	47.69	Rarely
Social media(e.g., twitter, snapchat)	132	83.77	Often
Online news	130	82.56	Sometimes
Emails	129	81.35	Often
e-books	112	70.94	Rarely
Sports	123	77.72	Sometimes
Nutrition	117	74.33	Sometimes
Health	128	80.81	Rarely
Novels	109	68.76	Sometimes

Table 7 illustrates the most common reasons for not reading among EFL Saudi university students.

Table 7. Means and Percentages of Agreement with reasons impeding the students' reading.

No.	Item	M	S.D	Agree N	Agree %	Disagree N	Disagree %	Level
1	I cannot choose suitable reading materials	3.33	1.08	75	65%	41	35%	Medium
2	I think reading is a waste of time*	3.59	1.15	34	25.8%	98	74.%	High
3	Nobody encourages me to read	3.13	1.29	64	53%	56	47%	Medium
4	I do not have enough money to buy reading materials	2.91	1.27	58	48%	64	52%	Medium
5	Nobody cares about my reading interests	3.66	1.09	100	79%	26	21%	High
6	My department provides me with reading materials that cannot be read quickly and enjoyably	3.04	1.2	57	50%	58	50%	Medium
7	I feel l have better things to do than reading	3.13	1.08	68	57%	51	43%	Medium
8	I am not interested in reading	3.35	1.27	82	66%	42	34%	Medium
9	Nobody helps me choose suitable reading materials	2.87	1.23	52	43%	68	57%	Medium
10	I think reading is boring	3.42	1.05	82	72%	32	28%	Medium
11	I do not have time to read	3.61	1.14	95	77.2%	28	22.8%	High
12	Nobody in my family is interested in reading	3.46	1.1	86	74%	31	26%	Medium
13	People make fun of me when I read a lot	3.29	1.19	84	63%	50	37%	Medium
14	It takes me a long time to read	3.77	1.11	107	81%	25	19%	High
15	The reading materials I am interested in are not available	3.74	1.21	109	76%	35	24%	High
16	I am not able to get books quickly when I decide to read	3.6	1.13	28	21.9%	100	78.10%	High
17	I rarely visit the library	3.04	1.18	61	51%	58	49%	Medium
18	There is no local library where I live	3.05	1.15	59	48.8%	62	51.20%	Moderate
19	Reading does not help me improve my language	3.61	0.9	16	12.8%	109	87.20%	High
20	Reading does not relate to other language skills (speaking, listening and writing)	2.35	1.18	31	23%	102	77%	Low
21	Improving other skills (speaking, listening and writing) is more important than reading	3.28	1.25	76	60%	51	40%	Medium
22	Reading is an activity forced upon me by my teacher	3.35	1.26	83	64%	46	36%	Medium
23	Reading does not allow me to learn about myself and the world	3.54	1.12	27	22%	96	78%	High

5. DISCUSSION

During their free time, students were most likely to read textbooks and articles online, indicating they read for educational purposes rather than for leisure. This corroborates the findings of Al-Nafisah and Al-Shorman (2011). They assert that students usually read material related to their field of study. This may explain why the reading interests are affected by the courses the students have studied.

Online reading content that Saudi EFL students engage in commonly includes social media (e.g., Twitter, Snapchat) and email. These findings are consistent with Khreisat and Sarjit (2014). They found that Arab EFL tertiary students most preferred recreational reading are emails, chats, and Facebook. It has been reported that students spend more than 6 hours per week online, and they report that social media is the most frequently read content online. A clear indication that most of the time allocated to online activities is spent browsing social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, and YouTube. This is also apparent in the number of studies that utilized social media to improve the language of students (Aloraini & Cardoso, 2022; Alotaibi, 2023; Mercado & Shin, 2023; Yadav, 2021). The study results are also consistent with those of Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015), who found that their respondents spent an average of three to five hours per day on social networks.

The results of previous studies that examined the same topic, including Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015), Al-Qahtani (2016), and Al-Nafisah and Al-Shorman (2011), indicate that EFL students do not pay much attention to reading non-university books, which is in line with the findings of the recent study.

Study participants who speak English as a foreign language agreed with statements such as "It takes me a long time to read" and "I do not have time to read". It appears that students give up reading because they cannot read quickly or because they lack the aptitude to read. A second reason for not participating in online leisure activities is due to a lack of time which appears to be devoted to other leisure activities. Based on the results, most students spend more than six hours engaging in online activities each week. There is evidence that students prefer to spend their time engaging in online activities (i.e., using social media platforms) to reading unless the purpose of the reading is academic. Van Schooten and de Glopper (2002) and Liu, Hu, and Bi (2023) argue that reading competes with other leisure activities such as watching TV or using social media platforms (TikTok or Instagram, etc.).

There is an awareness among students that reading is beneficial in their lives and that reading enhances their language abilities. However, this belief competes with other leisure activities, mostly online, and thus, attenuates their reading time (Liu et al., 2023; Mokhtari, Reichard, & Gardner, 2009; Suárez-Fernández & Boto-García, 2022). Liu et al. (2023) assert that the utilisation of social media platforms tends to exert a more pronounced influence on recreational reading habits as opposed to academic reading practices. They also add that social media addiction impairs reading concentration and depth of comprehension, which is considered a primary cause of their poor reading habits.

6. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate the reading habits and preferences of Saudi university students studying English as a foreign language. This study examined reading and online habits, interests, factors affecting those habits, and factors influencing them. To accomplish this, the participants in the study filled out a self-designed questionnaire in which they explored their reading habits and interests. Students' reading activities are primarily derived from online materials, which are the study's key findings. In the questionnaire, most students indicated that they spend a significant amount of time online on their computers or mobile devices.

According to the study, educators and policymakers should consider several recommendations. First, the findings indicate that reading time is relatively low and internet time is rather high. An emphasis should be placed on providing more reading resources at the institution and organizing book clubs or volunteer programmes during the holidays. To promote reading, policymakers and educators are encouraged to use social media.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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