A Survey of Grade 8 English First Additional Language Learners' Online Reading Preferences and Challenges

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Abstract: While well-resourced schools have the advantage of better equipping their learners for online learning, which includes online reading, the learners in rural and township schools are at a disadvantage, resulting in the academic exclusion of many learners. In 2020, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst to promote and accelerate the online reading process, which is currently emerging as the predominant reading behaviour among learners in South Africa and the rest of the world.
The aim of this paper is thus to investigate and understand the online reading preferences and challenges of Grade 8 English First Additional Language (EFAL) learners from three schools in an underdeveloped and under-resourced township located in the Gauteng province of South Africa.
The paper was quantitative in nature. A survey questionnaire was used to obtain data from the purposively selected research sample that consisted of 303 Grade 8 EFAL learners, and the data were analysed quantitatively.
The findings indicated that most of the learners access online texts through their mobile phones, owing to the absence of computers both at home and at school. Furthermore, the findings showed that most of the learners experienced challenges concerning online reading in English. Subsequently, almost half of the learners who participated in the study indicated that they needed assistance when they engaged in online reading in English for academic purposes.

Keywords: Online Reading, Online Reading Material Preferences, Online Reading Comprehension Challenges, EFAL Learners

Introduction

Technology has become a huge part of every sphere and sector of human life, even changing the manner in which learners practise reading. Today, reading is a technologically oriented process. Mhlanga and Moloi (2020, 2) opine that the age of technology represents the evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which consist of, among other things, the Internet, mobile devices, tablets and Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) tools. In other words, online platforms enable the practice of online reading inside and outside of the language-learning classroom.

Technology, according to Hall and Coles (2002), can be used to promote and support reading development and should be embraced as a reinvention of the education system. In support of this statement, Purcell-Gates (2007, 3) is of the view that literacy (with reading as one of its essential components) is rooted within the daily practices of human society, such as education. In other words, considering the insurgence of electronic media usage as an alternative online reading platform, we can, as predicted by Schwab (2020), presume that technology will increasingly impact all facets of our daily lives, including our reading practices. Furthermore, the growing interest by the younger generation in new types of screen texts demonstrates the adolescent's interest in electronic learning made available through 4IR tools.

Online learning (or online reading within the context of this study) refers to the use of a range of technologies such as the Internet, email, chat sites, WhatsApp groups, texting, as well as audio and video conferencing delivered over computer networks and phones to impart education (Dhull and Arora 2017). Similarly, researchers Bakia, Shear, Toyama, and Lasseter (2012) point out that the term online learning (of which online reading is a constituent) encompasses a variety of electronic programmes that use the Internet to provide instructional materials and facilitate interactions not only between educators and learners but also among

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learners. Consequently, the shift from traditional classroom education to online pedagogical platforms offered through digital technology means that technology has transformed the reading practices in the Grade 8 English First Additional Language (EFAL)[2] classroom.

Since the Internet is not bound to a specific location, it can be used to break down the socioeconomic division in the global community (Kajee and Balfour 2011, 185). Brun-Mercer (2019, 2) suggests that ICTs such as the Internet, 4IR tools, digital learning platforms and mobile applications are already integrated in learners' lives; hence, online reading has become a common daily practice of human society, inside and outside of the classroom. However, it appears many learners travel through primary and high school without ever using a computer. This could possibly be attributed to a lack of online facilities at home and at school, coupled with a lack of computer literacy skills. Butler-Adam (2018, 1) shares this sentiment and explains that one of the implications of technology in the education sector has to do with curricula, teaching, and learning. To put it differently, many learners, specifically those located in underdeveloped and under-resourced areas in South Africa, lack the necessary computer literacy skills to navigate electronic media, which could result in challenges with online reading. This is contradictory to the expectation that 21st-century learners are to be proficient online text readers.

Learning (and reading) through technology is referred to by Cole and Pullen (2010, 88) as "a range of information and communication media using digital technologies, including technologies for the creation and storage of text", and Davis (2016) notes it can include the use of 4IR tools such as artificial intelligence, ubiquitous linked sensors, virtual reality, energy capture, storage and transmission. For example, many learners can create and manipulate text on smart phones and engage in interactive online Google Classroom lessons. This means that learners are adapting to an online-based learning interaction to complete schoolwork.

However, the migration to online reading, according to Dube (2020), has resulted in the academic exclusion of many learners. Thus, it is argued that, without access to electronic media, online reading becomes a pipedream. Furthermore, according to Mhlanga and Moloi (2020, 3), due to technological infrastructural challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, many public schools in South Africa, specifically those located in townships and rural areas, experienced many difficulties with teaching and learning. It thus appears that while well-resourced schools have the advantage of better equipping their learners for online learning (which includes online reading), the learners in rural and township schools are at a disadvantage. In other words, it is possible that the "reading crisis that is prevalent within the South African reading literacy landscape" (Olifant, Cekiso, and Rautenbach 2020, 1) might have been exacerbated by the compelled online reading insurgence.

Reading is crucial for academic success. Contextualised in today's remote learning era, online reading is vital for academic progress. Bohlmann and Pretorius (2002, 205) relate that reading (online or traditional material reading) is one of the most basic skills of learning. Although the importance of reading (whether traditional or online) is highlighted, Dube (2020, 2) postulates that online learning favours urban and privileged learners, expanding "the gap between the rich and the poor, instead of uniting the nation in the fight against COVID-19". It can be argued that although the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the process, online reading is emerging as the prevalent reading behaviour among learners in South Africa. However, within a pedagogical framework, it still favours privileged learners with easy access to online platforms. Informed by this background, the researchers of this paper opine that, among learners in South Africa, online reading is still in its genesis stage and more research needs to be done in this area, which led to the investigation presented in this paper.

[2] The First Additional Language category was introduced in the South African education system in 2011 when the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was presented as the new curriculum. EFAL is equivalent to English as a Second Language (ESL).

The Aim of the Study

Although South Africa is perceived to be one of the more technologically advanced countries on the African continent, researchers Merkofer and Murphy (2009) argue that, from a global perspective, the country reflects ICT skills shortages. These shortages are contextualised by the low literacy and numeracy levels of many South Africa learners. Furthermore, a lack of infrastructure coupled with a lack of access to socioeconomic amenities such as electricity, sanitation, health facilities, and quality education obstructs the country's ICT transformation trajectory (Merkofer and Murphy 2009). In addition, Kajee and Balfour (2011, 185) argue that the majority of the less-privileged learners in South Africa emanate from under-resourced and underdeveloped socioeconomic backgrounds, where access to digital technology is unevenly distributed or inaccessible. Therefore, learners who reside in townships or rural areas without access to infrastructure, Internet platforms and socioeconomic resources provide the focus of this article.

In light of this information, the purpose of this research study was to investigate the use of online reading practices by learners in underdeveloped and under-resourced areas. Specifically, the study sought to investigate and understand the preferences and challenges of Grade 8 EFAL learners in two schools in a Gauteng township, South Africa. The authors of this paper believe that prioritising preferences is important to make reading attractive and increase reading interest and quality. They also believe that profiling the reading preferences of learners would add learners' voices in the execution of reading lessons. In pursuit of this objective, the following questions informed the study:

- Which technological devices do Grade 8 EFAL learners use to access online reading facilities?
- What are the online reading preferences of Grade 8 EFAL learners?
- What reading comprehension challenges do Grade 8 EFAL learners experience during online reading?

Access to Online Reading Facilities

Researchers (Abadzi 2006; Dube 2020; Kajee and Balfour 2011; Kleifgen and Bond 2009) recognise that technology plays an import role in and can promote access to education. Additionally, access to technology affords the learner the opportunity to read on a wide variety of topics of interest with little effort, at any time. However, Kajee and Balfour (2011, 185) assert that it is only the minority of learners in South Africa who find themselves in the advantageous position of having endless access to multiple online learning platforms in their socioeconomic environments. To put it differently, at present, the majority of learners do not enjoy the benefits of using online reading because they do not have access to online platforms.

If there is anything that will promote online reading among learners, it is easy access to electronic media. Hopper (2005, 116) depicts technology as part of the new and developing literacies that present an easily accessible source of attractive and entertaining onscreen information. This statement is substantiated by Liu (2005) and Ramirez (2003), who are of the view that adolescents spend a lot of time reading electronic material. On the other hand, Liu (2005) argues that it is due to accessibility, the availability of choice, affordability and the ability to relate to text that encourages the young generation to spend so much time on a range of online platforms. It thus appears that an online reading behaviour is emerging among learners. However, if not all South African learners are in a position to access these online reading platforms, the socioeconomic "chasm between the haves and the have nots" (Dube 2020) will grow deeper.

From an international perspective, a Malaysia-based study with a specific focus on high school learners' access to online reading platforms was performed by researchers Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, and Jesmin (2011). Findings from this study reflected that of the 200 learners who participated, only 37.5% had access to computers with Internet at home. This means that the

majority of learners (62.5%) were unable to participate and learn collaboratively within an online community from home. This raises the question, if schools are closed and learners do not have access to online reading platforms at home, how will reading literacy in South Africa be improved? Within a national framework, Kajee and Balfour (2011, 188) conducted a study of students' access to online platforms, which indicated that 75% of students said that they did not have access to digital technology at school and 15 out of 16 students reported that they did not have access to computers at home. Furthermore, a qualitative research report compiled by Dube (2020, 10) consisting of ten Grade 10 learners communicates that one of the participants said it is difficult for them (i.e., the learners) to access online learning material due to network connectivity issues.

In South Africa, the quality of reading literacy learning, specifically with the online reading migration, is a major concern. Recent scholarly literature (Dube 2020; Mhlanga and Moloi 2020) has revealed that online reading among learners in South Africa remains a challenge that needs to be effectively addressed. Furthermore, concerning reading, the Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) (2006; 2011; 2016) reported that South African learners were found to be more than two grades behind their international counterparts. The researchers construe that the online reading migration could exacerbate the dearth of reading in South Africa.

Online Reading Preferences

Preference, as asserted by Aydin and Ayranci (2018, 129), refers to "selecting one thing over another" and accentuating the good and or important properties of the selected thing, which can be influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors such as reading attitude and reading motives, as well as external factors such as the availability of and access to reading facilities can influence reading preferences (Aydin and Ayranci 2018, 129). It appears that reading preferences directly influence the choice of reading material. In other words, the learners' online reading preferences determine which online reading platforms they frequent, as well as what type of on-screen reading material they access.

The act of reading, whether it be traditional print material or digital on-screen material (International Reading Association 2009), is a complex cognitive process cultivating the "development of meaning and information processing abilities" (Pretorius 2002, 95) that are required for learning in today's digital age. Printed materials are not the only reading material, argue Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jönsson (2006, 521), and therefore, technology presents the reader with an abundance of online text, such as e-books, online magazines and newspapers, and computer-based media. However, it appears that with the continuous evolution of digital technology and the impact of the 4IR, readers' preference has shifted to online reading material with the support of the Internet, mobile devices, tablets and 4IR tools.

Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, and Jesmin (2011, 7) conducted a survey among 200 learners from rural-area schools in Malaysia, which reflected learners' online reading preferences. The

results of this study indicated that 35% of the participating learners "rarely" read online schoolbooks (e-books), while 5% said that they "often" prefer to read online books.

Furthermore, 63% of learners stated that they "never" read online news, 56% communicated that they "never" read online magazines, and 53% said that they "never" read online novels. These statistics were a direct contradiction of the assumption that the current learner generation embraces online learning, with only 8% of learners stating that they "very often" read the online news, 6% indicating that they "very often" read online magazines, and 11% saying that they "very often" read online novels. These researchers concluded that although digital technology is an essential facet of our lives, for learners in rural Malaysian schools, online reading is not a popular learning platform (Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, and Jesmin 2011, 11).

Online Reading Comprehension Challenges

Although online reading is constructed on traditional print-based reading notions, online reading comprehension is not isomorphic to traditional print reading material. In other words, online reading, as pointed out by Boling (2008, 90), refers to "traditional (reading) skills being used in new environments", which could possibly create new challenges for the learner as an online reader. This statement is supported by Tsai and Tsai (2003), who asserts that online reading platforms can be a challenging environment in which learners need to exercise self-efficacy and resilience (Coiro 2014) and be responsible for their own learning (Dalton and Proctor 2008). Consequently, it seems as if the online reading landscape can be a daunting learning space for many of the EFAL learners. It is for this reason that learners can experience many challenges while practising online reading.

Online pedagogical platforms offered through digital technology can contribute to the complexities of the reading act for the online reader. For example, reading is an active process, and as such, the online reader also needs to be actively involved in the questioning, inferencing and predicting of events in a text (Coiro and Dobler 2007). Furthermore, scanning and skimming a text is different on an online platform because the learner makes predictions on partially obscured information by navigating hyperlinks across web pages while speedily reading information (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack 2004). Also, when reading online, learners make intertextual links (Hartman 1995) across and within texts to assemble ideas, exercise recall, summarise, evaluate and synthesise textual information using the top-down or bottom-up strategies (Leu et al. 2008). Moreover, in an online environment, the learner needs to concurrently activate prior knowledge schemata and, according to DeSchryver and Spiro (2008, 9), develop "schemas-of-the-moment".

The interaction between the learner, the text, and the act of reading in an online environment is fluid, interactive and dynamic (McEneaney 2006), compared to traditional print material in which the text is stable and confined to the paper on which it is printed. For this reason, research by Hirsh (1999) and Leu et al. (2008) indicates that learners are challenged in evaluating online information on the constructs of reliability, credibility, quality and authority. In addition, when reading on an online platform, learners struggle to detect hidden author agendas and are oblivious to the reliability, credibility and authority of the on-screen text.

The migration from traditional classroom reading to online reading environments exposes learners to Internet-based facilities, such as social networking, chat rooms, texting, emailing, gaming sites, music sites, movie sites and the downloading and uploading of videos.

Although online reading platforms give learners the opportunity to practise reading inside and outside of school (Alvermann 2008), learners experience several online reading challenges.

Theoretical Framework

Socio-cultural theory of literacy serves as a framework for this study. Barton and Hamilton (2000, 7) point out that "in the simplest sense, literacy practices (which includes the practice of reading), are what people do with literacy". It thus appears that literacy (specifically reading literacy) is a practice that people engage with on a daily basis, both intentionally and unintentionally. Reading occurs in diverse communities, whether in a traditional social environment such as a classroom or an Internet-based social environment. Reading is a social act that we practise. Concurringly, Perry (2012, 62) explains that literacy is an act of engagement, something that people apply in their real-word environments, such as how people informally practice reading literacy, particularly in out-of-school environments. To further emphasise the relevance of the socio-cultural literacy perspective, Lewis, Enciso, and Moje (2007, 3) say that "Few other theories have shed so much light on the education of people whose language, literacy, and very being have traditionally been marginalised or disenfranchised in schools and societies". Furthermore, Pretorius (2002) observes that the act of reading occurs within a socio-cultural context that assists in conferring meaning to the text and to reading practices and values. In other words, reading is a form of human behaviour, and

different cultures may attach different values and functions to the act of reading. For that reason, Pretorius (2002, 170–171) suggests that the socio-cultural context should be considered in any discussion of reading. To align with Pretorius's recommendation and achieve the aim of this paper, which is to understand the online reading preferences and challenges of Grade 8 EFAL learners in a township school within the socio-cultural environment of the classroom, the socio-cultural theory provided a theoretical framework for this investigation.

Methodology

Approach and Design

This study followed a quantitative approach guided by a non-experimental descriptive design. White (2005, 98) asserts that descriptive research is useful in exploring education-related matters with a focus on, among other things, "opinions, preferences and practices" through the use of questionnaires. Descriptive quantitative designs produce statistics that, as postulated by Creswell (2014, 3), present information in response to a set of questions in a database in an explanatory way, to determine and indicate patterns, as well as the spread of data, such as the mean and the standard deviation. Inferential statistics, on the other hand, enable the researcher to make inferences—that is, predictions about a population based on the sample population (McMillan and Schumacher 2014, 3). Dovetailing with this explanation, descriptive statistical analyses were used for this study to describe the findings extracted from the questionnaire.

Participants and Sampling

303 Grade 8 EFAL respondents from three high schools located in a township in South Africa participated and completed the survey questionnaire. Creswell (2014, 11) notes that a sample "is a subgroup of the target population" that is studied in order to make generalisations about the target population. For this study, the sample of 303 learners was purposively sampled in that: (a) they are all in the same grade; (b) they all use English as a first additional language, and (c) all three schools are located within the same socioeconomic cluster and are similar in size. Among the respondents, 182 (60.3%) were male and 121 (39.7%) were female. The sampled learners were selected in accordance with the criteria that they use English as a first additional language and, due to the COVID-19 restrictions, engage in online reading practices on a daily basis.

Data Collection Instrument and Data Analysis

Data for this study were collected through a three-section survey questionnaire, consisting of 27 four-point Likert scale-measured statement questions, that was anonymously administered to the research respondents. The four-point intensity scale that was used to simplify the data analysis process consisted of (1) Never; (2) Hardly ever; (3) Most of the time, and (4) Always. The first section of the questionnaire, with statement questions 1 to 5, ascertained which environment-based technological devices learners use to access online resources. The second section of the questionnaire, consisting of statement questions 6 to 12, was used to ascertain learners' online reading preferences, whereas the third section, which consisted of statement questions 13 to 27, ascertained the challenges that they experience when engaging in online reading. The data obtained from the questionnaire were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) data analysis program.

Findings and Discussion

Access to Online Reading Facilities

In order to add credibility and reliability to the findings of the study, the questionnaire respondents were asked to indicate whether they have access to online facilities. Of the 303 participating learners, only 4.3% indicated that they do not have access to online reading facilities. With the majority (95.7%) of respondents having access to online reading facilities, the study findings can be considered as a true reflection of the online reading preferences and challenges experienced by the participating learners

Table 1: Learners' Online Reading Facility Access

Access to Online Reading Facilities	*Never*	*Hardly Ever*	*Most of the Time*	*Always*
Item	*%*	*%*	*%*	*%*
I use my smart phone for online English reading.	7.9	8.9	50.2	33.0
I use my computer at home for online English reading.	81.5	7.9	6.6	4.0
I use a computer at my friend's house for online English reading.	57.9	20.5	19.2	2.3
I use a computer at an Internet café for online English reading.	56.8	14.9	20.5	7.9
I use a computer at school for online English reading.	81.5	6.3	8.3	4.0

Keys: N = 303 learners % = percentages score Source: Olifant et al.

Table 1 provides information about which environment-based technological devices learners use to access online reading facilities. Of the sample group N=303 (100%), 83.2% (50.2% + 33.0%) of learners showed that they use their smart phones to access online English reading facilities most of the time to always. Only 8.9% responded that they hardly ever use their smart phones to access online English reading facilities, and a miniscule 7.9% said that they never do so.

Concerning the item, "I use my computer at home for online English reading", 81% of learners showed that they never access online reading facilities in this socio-cultural environment, whereas a measly 4% of learners do have access to online reading facilities at home. This information agrees with the research conducted by Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, and Jesmin (2011), who found that most learners (62.5%) do not have access to computers with Internet at home. Furthermore, exactly the same number of learners (i.e., 81%) also indicated that they never use a computer at school to access online English reading facilities. These statistics support the findings that emanated from a study conducted by Kajee and Balfour (2011, 188) in which 75% of the learners stated that they do not have access to online reading facilities at school and 15 out of 16 reported that they did not have access to computers at home.

The data recorded in Table 1 further disclose that of the 303 learners (N=303) who participated in the study, 20.5% said that they hardly ever access online reading facilities at a friend's house, and 19.2% said that they do so most of the time.

The data also revealed that more than half of the learners (56.8%) said they never access online reading facilities at an Internet café, and only 7.9% reported that they always visit an Internet café to access online reading facilities. It could be argued that most learners do not access online reading facilities at an Internet café because it is costly; as Dube (2020) points out, not all learners have access to online reading due to socioeconomic factors such as unaffordability.

Table 2 reflects that the statement question "I use my smart phone for online English reading" produced the highest mean score of 3.08, followed by a mean score of 1.80 for "I use an Internet café for online English reading". A mean value of 1.66 represented the learners who said that they use a computer at a friend's house to engage in online reading. Accessing a computer at school and at home elicited the two lowest mean scores of 1.35 and 1.33 respectively, again emphasising the lack of Internet-based technological devices at school and at home. The standard deviation values reflect that the values were clustered closely around the mean value.

Table 2: Average of Learners' Access to Online Reading Facilities

	N	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*
I use my smart phone for online English reading.	303	1	4	3.08	0.855
I use a computer at an Internet café for online English reading.	303	1	4	1.80	1.025
I use a computer at my friend's house for online English reading.	302	1	4	1.66	0.866
I use a computer at school for online English reading.	303	1	4	1.35	0.794
I use my computer at home for online English reading.	303	1	4	1.33	0.770

Source: Olifant et al.

Dube (2020) opines that many learners in less privileged areas find themselves excluded from schooling due to the inaccessibility of online resources. Considering that the learners who participated in this study are from schools situated in a township in South Africa and are faced with socioeconomic challenges, Dube's statement was confirmed by the findings from this study, which revealed that there are no computers available in the homes where most of the learners reside. In addition, most schools do not have computers that these learners can use to access and engage in online reading. Considering the online reading challenges of learners in South African rural areas, and that learning now occurs both inside and outside of the classroom, this study supports Dube's (2020) view that online learning favours privileged learners, "widening the gap between the poor and the rich, instead of [bridging the gap and] uniting the nation in the fight against COVID-19".

Online Reading Preferences

The migration from traditional classroom reading to online reading environments resulted in a shift in learners' online reading preferences. The online environment presents learners with an array of reading material to choose from. Learners can thus select a genre of online reading

material that they prefer to read. Below is the discussion on the learners' online reading preferences in English material.

Table 3: Learners' Online Reading Preferences

I prefer to read this English material:	*Never*	*Hardly Ever*	*Most of the Time*	*Always*
Item	*%*	*%*	*%*	*%*
Online schoolbooks	57.9	17.8	18.4	5.9
Online magazines	55.4	21.1	20.8	2.6
Online news	19.9	17.6	36.9	25.6
Online novels/stories	18.5	13.2	42.9	25.4
Online movie reviews	8.6	11.0	36.5	43.9
Online chat messages	1.7	2.0	7.3	89.1
Online Instagram post	29.0	8.6	18.2	44.2

Keys: N = 303 learners % = percentage score Source: Olifant et al.

The data in Table 3 reflect that 17.8% of respondents said that they hardly ever prefer to read online English schoolbooks and 18.4% prefer to do so most of the time. However, only 57.9% (N=176) indicated that they never prefer to read online English schoolbooks. Learners' aversion to online English books is further evidenced by the fact that 55.4% of the respondents reported that they never prefer to read online English magazines, which only 2.6% of respondents indicated that they always prefer to do. It appears that the respondents do not prefer to engage in the online reading of English schoolbooks and magazines.

Regarding reading online English news and online English novels, a quarter of the respondents, that is 25.6% and 25.4% respectively, communicated that they always engage with these types of reading material. However, it needs to be noted that almost half of the respondents, that is 42.9%, conveyed that they, in fact, read online English novels most of the time. These statistics contradict the data which show that more than half of the learners never prefer to read online English online schoolbooks and magazines, yet they prefer to read online English novels most of the time. Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, and Jesmin (2011, 11) support this finding in their study with the conclusion that, in high school, learners do not engage in online reading for information-gaining purposes.

Considering the statement "I prefer to read online movie reviews", 43.9% of learners (N=303) were of the opinion that they always prefer to read online English movie reviews, as opposed to the mere 8.6% of respondents who never prefer to engage in this digital activity. Since Instagram is an online social networking platform that mostly focuses on the sharing of photos and videos and not on textual data (Bashari & Fazl-Ersi, 2020), one could assume that most of the learners would prefer to access this online platform, yet this was not the case. Less than half of the respondents (i.e., 44.2%) signalled that they always prefer to read online Instagram post, whereas 29% of the respondents said that they never read Instagram posts. However, 89% of the respondents indicated that they prefer to read online text messages. Online text chat is machine-mediated written talk that can support multiple participants to engage in multiple simultaneous exchanges within a single discussion (O'Neill and Martin 2003). The data reveal that, apart from a meagre 1.7% who said that they prefer never to read online chat messages, the vast majority of respondents prefer to engage in this act. This translated into the possibility that the most learners may prefer never to read knowledge-expanding online material such as schoolbooks, but they rather prefer to engage in an informal online reading activities such as chatting.

Since it appears that learners prefer the online chatting facility, Marttunen and Laurinen (2007) suggest that online chatting should be viewed as an online facility that promotes activities and collaborative knowledge building by enabling learners to develop ideas around a contemporary societal topic relating to course content. Furthermore, this study would like to support the view espoused by Mtshali, Maistry and Govender (2015) that, due to the prominence of online chatting in the life of the South African Grade 8 learner, online chat facilities should be considered to serve as knowledge repositories.

Table 4: Average of Online Reading Preferences

	N	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*
Online chat messages	302	1	4	3.84	0.525
Online movie reviews	301	1	4	3.16	0.934
Online Instagram posts	303	1	4	2.78	1.283
Online novels/stories	303	1	4	2.75	1.033
Online news	301	1	4	2.68	1.064
Online schoolbooks	303	1	4	1.72	0.963
Online magazines	303	1	4	1.71	0.886

Source: Olifant et al.

The data in Table 4 constitute a recording of learners' online reading preferences, in descending order, based on the questionnaire analysis. Most learners prefer to read online chat messages with a mean score of 3.84 (SD=0.5), followed by reading online movie reviews with an average score of 3.16 (SD=0.934). Respondents rated the online reading of Instagram posts (M=2.78, SD=1.28) in third position, with online novel being ranked fourth with a mean score of 2.95 and a spread of values around the mean with a standard deviation value of 1.033. Reading online schoolbooks generated a preference mean score of 1.72, with the lowest average number of learners indicating that they prefer to read online magazines, as reflected by the lowest mean value of 1.71. For online schoolbooks and online magazines, the members of the group differ from the mean value for the group with the standard deviation values of 0.96 and 0.88 respectively. All online reading preferences' standard deviation values were lower than the mean values, showing data closely clustered around the mean, translating into reliable data.

Online Reading Comprehension Challenges as Established by Cronbach's Alpha

Although the migration to online reading environments may present learners with an array of reading material, it also poses some challenges. The online reading comprehension process is fluid, offering multiple versions of a text, compared to paper-confined and stable print text. Consequently, it appears that the challenges that learners encounter in reading comprehension of traditional print material are different from those which they encounter when they read online. The following is a discussion of the learners' online reading comprehension challenges.

Table 5: Average of Online Reading Challenges

	N	*Minimum*	*Maximum*	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*
When I read English online, there are many words that I cannot understand.	303	1	4	2.09	0.922
I find it difficult to quickly read through long and difficult texts, locating relevant information.	302	1	4	2.07	0.885
I feel anxious when I complete an online English comprehension test.	300	1	4	2.00	0.981
I find it difficult to recognise paraphrasing in a text.	298	1	4	1.92	0.998
I find it difficult to explain the meaning of words or sentences from the context of the text.	302	1	4	1.90	0.979
I find it difficult to describe supporting details in a text.	303	1	4	1.88	0.880
I find it difficult to understand the relationships within sentences in a text.	303	1	4	1.77	0.891
I find it difficult to describe the main ideas in a text.	303	1	4	1.76	0.916
I feel that I need help, when I do online English reading.	303	1	4	1.76	0.989
I feel that other learners can read better than I do online.	298	1	4	1.76	0.993
It is difficult to complete an online English comprehension test.	301	1	4	1.74	0.919
I find it difficult to understand the relationships between sentences in a text.	302	1	4	1.67	0.910
I find it difficult to explain specific information from a text.	302	1	4	1.66	0.850
I find it difficult to read and understand the title of the text.	303	1	4	1.37	0.729
I find online English reading difficult.	303	1	4	1.35	0.737
I find it difficult to tell you about an English text that I have read online.	303	1	4	1.32	0.718

Source: Olifant et al.

The data in Table 5 report on the online reading challenges that learners experience, as reflected by the questionnaire analysis. A challenge that most learners experience concerning online reading is that there were many words that they could not understand. This challenge produced a mean score of 2.09 (SD=0.92). “I find it difficult to quickly read through long and difficult texts, locating relevant information” is the online reading challenge that scored the second highest average score of 2.07 (SD=0.88), followed by “I feel anxious when I complete an online English comprehension test”, which learners rated the third highest with a mean score of 2.00 and a standard deviation value of 0.98.

Respondents indicated finding it difficult to recognise paraphrasing in a text (M=1.92, SD=0.99) as the fourth highest-ranking challenge that they experienced when they read online, followed by finding it difficult to explain the meaning of words or sentences from the context of the text in fifth position, with a mean score of 1.90 and a spread of values around the mean with

a standard deviation value of 0.97. This means that, even within the context of a sentence, learners struggled to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Another reading dynamic that learners indicated as challenging when they engaged with text online was completing an English comprehension test (M=1.74, SD=0.91), and they felt that they needed help when engaging with text online (M=1.76, SD=0.98). This might be because learners are required to practise reading in a new environment that is more fluid and interactive than that of the traditional print material they are familiar with.

"I find it difficult to explain specific information from a text" generated a challenge mean score of 1.66 (SD=0.85), with the second lowest average number of learners (M=1.35, SD=0.73). "I find it difficult to tell you about an English text that I have read online" is the challenge that generated the lowest average score of 1.32 (SD=0.71). As with the online reading preferences, all the online reading challenge standard deviation values were lower than the recorded mean values, which indicates that the data can be considered as reliable, since they are closely clustered around the mean.

The challenges that learners experienced during online reading were viewed in their entirety to determine the Cronbach's alpha. The Cronbach's alpha was used to measure the reliability of the Likert scale items that reflected the online reading comprehension challenges experienced by learners. For the collected data to be accepted as accurate and objective, the internal consistency or reliability of the items on the Likert scale needs to be established. The Cronbach's alpha thus measures the strength of internal consistency of the items on the Likert scale. For this study, the Cronbach's alpha (0.854, as indicated in Table 6) was used to offer evidence of reliability of the 15 items in collectively assessing "The online reading comprehension challenges", implicitly treated as a unitary construct.

For responses to the online reading comprehension challenges, 283 of the possible 303 (N=303) cases were included in the analysis. Learners who did not complete a data set were excluded. The closer the Cronbach's alpha coefficient is to 1.0; the greater the internal consistency of the items in the scale. George and Mallery (2003, 231) provide the following rules of thumb: "_ > .9 = Excellent, _ > .8 = Good, _ > .7 = Acceptable, _ > .6 = Questionable, _ > .5 = Poor, and _ < .5 = Unacceptable".

Table 6: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha	*Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardised Items*	*Number of Items*
0.854	0.857	15

Source: Olifant et al.

Regarding the 15 items that established the online reading challenges that learners experience while engaging in online reading comprehension, a Cronbach's alpha of 0.854, which represents a "good correlation between items" was generated, indicating a high level of internal consistency. In other words, the questionnaire used to determine the learners' online reading comprehension challenges was reliable.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to survey the accessibility, preferences and challenges relating to online reading of Grade 8 EFAL learners in a South African township. To this end, the findings revealed that the online reading of schoolbooks, news items and magazines was not the learners' preferred form of reading. Instead, the learners chose to use their Internet-based

devices to read about movie reviews and participate in online chatting. Based on this finding, the authors concluded that the learners preferred using online reading more for social networking than academic reading. Therefore, it is clear that any access to online reading devices the learners had was not utilised for academic purposes.

The findings further revealed that the learners were experiencing online reading challenges related to vocabulary, reading quickly through long and difficult texts, locating relevant

information and completing English comprehension tests. The authors are of the view that all these challenges are linked to the lack of reading strategies that the learners are supposed to be familiar with during traditional reading of hard texts. Had they been exposed to these reading strategies during traditional reading, they would be able to transfer such strategies to online reading.

Lastly, in order to improve the status of reading in socioeconomically and culturally diverse South Africa, it is important that we understand, acquire and implement practices and strategies that are likely to improve and support learners' online reading practices.

Implications

The advancement of technology, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitates access to online reading facilities by every learner in every school. The South African government needs to address the challenges that learners, teachers, schooling institutions and parents or caregivers experience in adapting to online reading. For example, the government should expand network coverage and improve on the maintenance of information and communication technology infrastructure to make it possible for every South African learner in every school to access online reading platforms. In addition, the migration from the traditional classroom to the online classroom requires teachers to demonstrate flexibility and innovation concerning the implementation of online reading access and participation of learners. For example, the findings indicated that many learners have smart phones that they use for online learning. Teachers can collaborate with parents to establish small groups of learners who can work together on online reading activities, which could indirectly promote a "read with a friend" programme. Reading with a friend who might be socioeconomically able to access resources and academically competitive can be influential in getting learners to engage frequently in online reading. Such an initiative could possibly ensure that more learners have access to online reading facilities. Moreover, the inclusion of parents and caregivers in the online reading of learners could motivate learners to develop a positive online reading attitude, which could increase learners' sustained focus during reading lessons and indirectly reduce the challenges they experience during online reading.

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