

Students' Preferences in Reading English Digital Materials vs Printed Materials

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ABSTRACT

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This research aims to explore the students' preferences in reading English materials on digital versus printed materials. This qualitative research method was conducted at a senior high school in Riau Province, Indonesia., This study involved in-depth interviews with five students to understand their reading habits, media choices, and the reasons behind these preferences. The research findings showed that although all students had experience reading using both media, the majority preferred printed materials because they were perceived as improving focus, reducing distractions, and facilitating comprehension. Printed media were also perceived as more comfortable, less likely to cause eye strain, and allowing students to take notes directly. Only one participant expressed a consistent preference for digital media for reasons of practicality and ease of access to online content. In conclusion, most of the students prefer printed to digital media in reading English materials.

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers should understand what their students' reading preferences of materials are because understanding students' reading preferences has important implications for teaching practices. Teachers can design differentiated instruction, where both digital and printed materials are available, and students can choose according to their needs and learning styles. This approach not only increases motivation but also supports the development of lifelong reading habits. By aligning reading materials with students' cognitive abilities, interests, and technological familiarity, teachers can create a more personalized and effective learning environment, (Coiro, 2011; Zhang & Duke, 2018). Furthermore, Bouchamma et al., (2013) also states that choosing reading materials that meet students' needs while taking into account their preferences is one of the most crucial steps in achieving successful learning outcomes

Shen (2006) defines reading preferences as the frequency, quantity, and preferences of students when selecting reading materials. There are various types of reading materials available in both print and digital formats, E-books, articles, novels, fiction and non-fiction books, and other electronic learning platforms are just a few of the many kinds of reading resources that are readily and quickly accessible without regard to time or location

Reading preferences are influenced by a combination of cognitive, emotional, and environmental factors According to Susanto (2013), there are two types of elements that might affect the process of selecting relevant reading material in order to maximize learning outcomes: internal and external factors.

The internal factors that affect students in selecting reading materials consist of students' interests, motivation, prior knowledge, and cognitive abilities. Those play a crucial role in determining what materials they choose to read (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). For example, a student who enjoys stories with adventure or science themes may consistently select materials in that genre, which aligns with personal curiosity and intrinsic motivation. Similarly, reading ability and familiarity with the language affect preferences, as students may avoid texts that are too difficult or select materials that match their skill level to maximize comprehension, (Susanto, 2013). Another critical factor is reading motivation, which interacts closely with preferences. Students are more likely to engage in reading when the material aligns with their interests and preferred format Guthrie & Wigfield (2000). Teachers can enhance motivation by providing choice-based reading activities, allowing students to select texts according to their preferences. When students feel autonomous and competent in selecting materials, their engagement, comprehension, and learning outcomes improve significantly.

External factors also strongly shape reading preferences. These include the availability and accessibility of reading materials, teacher guidance, classroom resources, and even peer influence, (Bouchamma et al, 2013). For instance, a student in a well-resourced classroom with both printed and digital materials may experiment with different formats, while a student with limited access to digital devices may prefer printed texts. Moreover, social influence from peers or family members can affect students' choices, particularly when reading is seen as a shared activity or cultural expectation.

A significant aspect of reading preferences in the current era is the choice between digital and printed media. Digital media are often preferred for their convenience, portability, and interactivity Linse (2005). Students can access a wide variety of texts via online, use built-in dictionaries or translation tools, and adjust the reading format according to their preferences, such as font size or background colour. These features are especially attractive to students who value speed, flexibility, and personalized learning experiences (Stockwell, 2013). However, digital reading can also introduce distractions and reduce deep focus, as notifications or multi-tasking may interfere with comprehension.

In contrast, printed materials are often associated with better focus, tactile engagement, and retention of information, (Mangen, Walgermo, & Brønnick (2013). Students who prefer printed materials highlight the ability to underline, annotate, and physically organize information, which can enhance cognitive processing and long-term memory. Printed texts also reduce visual strain and can foster a more serious and disciplined approach to reading, which is especially important for in-depth study or complex materials Zha et al. (2014).

Based on researchers' observation at one of senior high schools, it was found that some of the school students read their materials from digital media. One of the most notable changes is the increasing use of gadgets, such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops, as media for reading English learning materials. Reading materials on gadgets refer to English reading materials accessed through digital devices, including e-books, PDF files, online articles. Some of the school students still read their materials from printed material. All students on school have their respective reasons in their own choice with digital media or printed material. Based on the phenomena above researchers were interested in conducting the research about the preferences in reading on digital vs printed English materials. This research aims to explore why the students preferred printed materials, and why the other students preferred digital materials in reading. This research is necessary to conduct because by knowing the students' reasons for their preferences in reading materials, printed vs digital, the teacher can facilitate the students in learning English whether he or she provides printed materials, or digital materials, or may be both for the purpose of the effective teaching and learning process. So, this research supports

one of the goals of Sustaining Development (SDGs). It is expected to achieve the quality of education in the future.

There are some previous studies that are relevant to the present research. The previous research is collected from trustworthy sources. The first research was from Marlin Marpaung (2019) with the title Reading English Text on Digital vs Reading English Text on Printed-Book: A Phenomenological Study. The second is from Johnston & Salaz (2019) with the title Exploring the Reasons Why University Students Prefer Print over Digital Texts: An Australian Perspective. This paper presents findings from an Australian survey that provides an analysis of the reasons why university students prefer to read print or digital course materials. The third was from Divya and Mohamed (2020) with the title Students' Preference of Reading Print and Digital Resources: A Study in Universities in Kerala, India.

Based on the previous research above, it can be concluded that the research focused on reading English texts in printed media versus digital media. The research was conducted mostly at university level, and less research conducted at school levels. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct this research at school.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach at one of state senior high schools in West Sumatra, Indonesia. This research was conducted from June-July 2025. The participants were five senior high school students chosen to provide in-depth insights into the students' preferences in reading materials; printed media versus digital media. One of the researchers as the informant of this study. Data were collected through structured interviews with students and cross-checked with interviews with English teachers to ensure data trustworthiness through triangulation. Data analysis followed the model of Miles and Huberman, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this research, there are two research questions. Firstly, why do the students prefer digital media of reading materials? Secondly, why do the students prefer printed media of reading materials?

In answering the first research question, the data from in-depth interviews with five students revealed that students who preferred reading English materials on digital

media did so mainly because of its convenience and accessibility. Digital media allowed students to access reading materials anytime and anywhere without the need to carry printed books. In addition, the availability of instant translation tools and online dictionaries helped students quickly understand unfamiliar vocabulary, making the reading process more efficient. Students also appreciated the wide range of English reading materials available on digital platforms, which increased their exposure to various texts. Although digital reading was sometimes associated with distractions and eye strain, students who valued practicality and quick access to information considered digital media an effective medium for reading English materials.

Only one Student preferred reading English materials on a digital, citing convenience and accessibility as the main reasons. She explained that digital platforms allow her to quickly look up unknown words. The main reason she gave for her preference toward digital-based reading was its practicality, as it allowed her to access a wide range of English materials anytime and anywhere without the need to carry physical books. She emphasized that the ability to quickly search for word meanings, navigate between sources, and adapt reading to her daily routine made digital media a more convenient and efficient option for her language learning. She also expressed her appreciation for the variety and flexibility that digital media offer, noting that online platforms provide access to a wide range of English materials from articles and e-books to videos and interactive content which helps keep her engaged and prevents boredom during the learning process. Additionally, she mentioned that digital resources allow her to choose content based on her interests and schedule, making the experience more personalized and enjoyable.

In answering the second research question, the data obtained from in-depth interviews with five students indicated that most students preferred reading English materials on printed media because it allowed them to focus more deeply while reading. Students reported that printed texts helped reduce distractions commonly experienced when using digital devices, enabling better concentration and comprehension.

In addition, reading printed materials was perceived as more comfortable for the eyes, especially during long reading sessions, and helped minimize eye strain. Students also emphasized that printed texts allowed them to underline, highlight, and make notes

directly on the pages, which supported better understanding and retention of information. Although printed materials were considered less practical due to their physical weight and limited accessibility, students viewed them as more effective for in-depth reading and learning English. Four of the five students expressed a clear preference for reading English materials from printed materials. They believe printed materials offer deeper focus, better comprehension, and more comfort for extended reading sessions.

One student highlighted the negative aspects of digital based reading, particularly emphasizing the frequent distractions and physical discomfort it causes. She explained that notifications from messaging apps and social media often interrupt his concentration while reading on a smartphone or laptop, making it difficult to stay focused. In addition, she noted that prolonged exposure to digital light tends to cause eye strain and discomfort, sometimes even leading to headaches or fatigue.

Other students emphasized the advantage of printed formats in minimizing distractions, noting that physical books create a more focused and undisturbed reading environment. Unlike digital devices, which are often accompanied by constant notifications or the temptation to multitask, printed materials allow her to concentrate fully on the content without external interruptions. She explained that this distraction-free experience enhances her comprehension and makes studying more effective and enjoyable:

The last student explained that printed texts significantly aid in understanding complex material, as the physical format allows for easier navigation, clearer structure, and the ability to engage more actively with the content. She noted that the fixed layout of printed pages helps her remember the position of important information, while the opportunity to annotate directly such as underlining key points or writing notes in the margins further supports his comprehension and retention.

Most students, specifically four students demonstrated a strong preference for reading English materials through printed materials. They highlighted several benefits of printed media, including improved concentration, deeper comprehension, and greater comfort during prolonged reading sessions. Distractions from notifications, digital fatigue, and difficulties in maintaining focus were commonly cited as drawbacks of digital reading. Additionally, printed texts were appreciated for their stable layout, ease

of navigation, and the ability to annotate directly, which helped students better understand and retain complex material. These findings suggest that printed materials offer a more focused and effective reading experience for the majority of students.

The findings of the first research question are in line with Creswell's (2014) view that qualitative research emphasizes participants' personal experiences and meanings in understanding a phenomenon. In this study, students' experiences indicate that digital media function not only as reading tools but also as learning support systems that assist comprehension and motivation. Furthermore, the availability of diverse reading sources on digital platforms allows students to choose materials based on their interests, which can enhance engagement and active involvement in reading activities, (Zhang & Duke, 2018). In addition, the use of digital reading tools such as online dictionaries and translation applications supports learner autonomy by enabling students to solve language problems independently. Stockwell (2013) argues that technology-assisted language learning provides immediate linguistic support that can facilitate comprehension and encourage students to engage more actively with English texts. Although students acknowledged potential drawbacks such as distractions and screen fatigue, digital media remain a preferred option for students who prioritize efficiency, accessibility, and instant support in reading English materials.

On the other hand, the findings of the second research question support previous research suggesting that printed reading materials contribute to deeper cognitive processing and improved comprehension. Zha et al. (2014) found that the tactile interaction with printed texts, such as turning pages and physically engaging with the material, helps readers build stronger mental representations of the content. In this study, students' experiences indicate that printed media promote a more serious and disciplined learning atmosphere, which enhances their ability to understand English texts. Furthermore, students emphasized the importance of being able to underline, highlight, and write notes directly on printed materials. This physical annotation process helped them remember key points and organize information more effectively. According to Mangen, Walgermo, and Brønnick (2013), physical interaction with printed texts supports memory retention and reading comprehension by strengthening the connection between cognitive and motor processes. Although printed materials were considered less

practical due to their physical weight and limited accessibility, students continued to view them as the most effective medium for in-depth reading and learning English

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it shows that only one student prefers digital reading materials. Her reasons centered on convenience, the ability to instantly access translations, and the diversity of available content, including online articles, e-books, and media-based materials. While digital media offer flexibility and accessibility, most students considered it a situational tool rather than a preferred method for academic reading. On the other hand, the majority of the students preferred printed materials because they were perceived as improving focus, reducing distractions, and facilitating comprehension. The findings revealed that although all students had experienced both formats, the majority showed a strong preference for printed materials. Printed media were also perceived as more comfortable, less likely to cause eye strain, and allowing students to take notes or mark material directly.

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