

A STUDY OF THE READING DIFFICULTIES OF SECOND-YEAR EFL LEARNERS AT PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL OF KAYRALA MANATUTO TIMOR -LESTE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research is to identify the difficulties experienced by secondary students in Timor-Leste when they read texts in English. The study also attempts to identify the causes of the students' reading difficulties. 200 students and two of their English teachers participated in the study. A questionnaire was used to gather information about the students' reading experience and habits. Based on the questionnaire results, ten students were selected to participate in focus group discussions about their reading difficulties. Five of the students were assigned to a 'challenged' reader focus group, while five were assigned to a 'coping' reader group. Two English teachers (the only two English teachers at the school) participated in semi-structured, in-depth, interviews about aspects of their students' reading difficulties. The teachers were also asked about their approaches to teaching reading, the types of materials used and the resources that were available to support reading at the school. The results show that many of the students find reading in English particularly difficult. Inadequate vocabulary knowledge and a lack of reading strategies are the main contributors. The single most serious difficulty reported by both students and teachers was the pronunciation of the words of the reading texts. This finding suggests that the students are accustomed to reading texts aloud rather than silently and may not have progressed beyond a sub-vocalizing phase. The teacher interviews confirmed that the majority of the students adopt a 'bottom up' approach to reading, in spite of the teachers' efforts to introduce 'top-down' reading strategies.

Keywords: Second language reading; reading difficulties; secondary school

INTRODUCTION

In Timor-Leste, four languages are recognised under the constitution and compete for space, both in the school curriculum and in society generally. While the adoption of Portuguese as the co-official language (along with local language, Tetun) is understandable in light of the country's recent troubled relations with Indonesia and with a wish to distinguish itself from English speaking-Australia to the south, it also suggests that Timor-Leste's language policy is different in nature from that of its neighbours in a region where an emphasis on English language learning is the norm. Amaral et al. (2009) point out that, while education policy tends to favour the Portuguese language, arguably at the expense of Tetun, there is a feeling among students and parents that English and Bahasa Indonesia may be of more practical use to the

school population. For this reason, and because many school teachers are not sufficiently fluent in Portuguese, English has remained the second language of choice and it is common for students to attend private English classes outside school. In public spaces, too, English is the prevalent language. As a result, and also because of a feeling that the current language policy is contributing to educational failure, questions remain about the future of languages in education in Timor-Leste. A case can be made, for example, for moving to mother tongue-based education leading to additive multilingualism. Amaral et al. (2009) also suggest that consideration needs to be given to the role of Portuguese in shaping a national identity for this relatively new state. Indeed, generational change may contribute to future developments in language policy, as the current Portuguese-speaking elite gradually retire from political life. Against such a background, it is no surprise that complexity characterises the language situation in Timor-Leste, where one endogenous and three exogenous languages are recognised in the constitution that was adopted in 2002. This declares that both Tetun and Portuguese should be official languages, that Tetun and other national languages “shall be valued and developed”, and that both English and Indonesian “shall be working languages within the civil service side by side with the official languages for as long as deemed necessary” (cited in Taylor-Leech, 2009, p. 24). The constitution makes it clear, therefore, that English has a lesser role to play in Timor-Leste than Portuguese. This makes Timor-Leste unusual in a region where “a major planning focus is on English language development” (Baldauf & Nguyen, 2012, p. 627).

According to Lo Bianco (2014), language policy in Timor-Leste is subject to the same pressures as language policy in other multilingual nations. Of the four themes identified and discussed by Lo Bianco (2014), three are clearly evident in Timor-Leste : (a) issues surrounding access, equity, and achievement in education, (b) native language literacy as an educational right, and (c) responses to emerging patterns and shifts of the global age. Since “global age” is generally associated with global English, it is entirely possible that English will achieve stronger recognition in the years to come. However, its current lesser role means that students will continue, in the meantime, to receive a relatively light diet of English within the official school curriculum. This situation presents challenges for the effective teaching of English in schools. If the curriculum space for English remains limited, pressure will be placed upon English teachers to deliver the curriculum as effectively as possible. The current investigation of the teaching and learning of English reading is particularly relevant considering the country’s delicate and complex official language policy.

It follows from the above analysis of the English curriculum that the specific preparation of students for the demands of the L2 reading requirement are substantial. Concerns

about the need to address English standards in Timor Leste have been raised by organisations such as the World Bank (2012, 2013). The need to improve students' English reading skills has been alluded to in studies by Taylor-Leech (2009) and Macpherson (2011). The present research attempts to address this particular weakness in the language education system of the country.

The school curriculum in Timor-Leste is approved by the National Agency for Academic Accreditation and Evaluation (ANAAA) created by Timor-Leste Decree Law 21/2010 on 1st December 2010. English is only compulsory at Junior High School level, which is the last three years of Basic Education: Key sections of Basic and Secondary Education are summarized in Tables 1 and 2 respectively.

Table 1 Key Features of Basic Education

Duration	9 years. (6 years of Primary and 3 years of Junior High School).
Features	universal; compulsory; tuition and teaching materials free.
Media of instruction (MOI)	Tetun and Portuguese.
Medium for teaching reading/writing	Portuguese.
English	Compulsory for 3 years only (Junior High School).
Hours of English p.w.	3 hours per week.

Table 2 Key Features of Secondary Education

Duration	3 years
Features	Attendance optional Two strands: (a) General Education (academic) (b) Vocational (professional, technical)
Pre-requisite	Successful completion of Basic Education
Age of students	15-17 years old
Media of instruction (MOI)	Tetun, Portuguese
Medium for teaching Reading/writing	Portuguese
English	Compulsory for General Education stream only
Hours of English p.w.	3 hours per week

As Tables 1.1 and 1.2 illustrate, the dominant language of instruction is Portuguese. English is only taught as a compulsory subject at Junior Secondary level (3 hours per week).

In present-day Timor-Leste, children commonly describe Portuguese as “too hard” and take every opportunity to practice their English. Teachers conducting Portuguese classes using Tetun as the medium of instruction readily switch into English whenever a foreign visitor visits the class. Parents schooled in Indonesian regularly point out that Portuguese is far less useful as a trading language than Bahasa, and not as “international” as English, given the imminent arrival of the Internet in Timor-Leste and educational and employment opportunities offered in

nearby Australia. School directors and teachers have complained that they resented attending mandatory professional development workshops in Portuguese after school hours. However, the practice of mixing languages in a multilingual country such as Timor-Leste should not, in itself, be taken as criticism of official language policy. In a small-scale study of university English language classes, only one of the four observed teachers used English solely (Quinn, 2013). The others also used Tetun, Bahasa Indonesia, and Portuguese to varying degrees. This code-switching on the part of teachers further illuminates a common classroom practice, in which teachers present content in Portuguese, and then explain it in Tetun. Further insight into the ways in which official language policy is put into practice in the classroom is provided by Macpherson's (2011, p. 188) descriptions of field visits conducted in Timor-Leste during 2009. It is apparent that the dominant medium of instruction, Portuguese, is becoming increasingly unpopular, while the desire to learn English is growing. Concerns about the implications of English standards for international communication have also been raised in research by the World Bank (2012; 2013) and Taylor-Leech (2009). Concerns related to literacy rates are discussed in Section D.

Recent data published by the World Bank (2014) about literacy rates in Timor-Leste are of particular relevance to the current research. In the World Bank's international country profiles, learning is measured largely through literacy rates. Literacy is regarded as a foundational skill that is a pre-requisite for proceeding to higher levels of learning; it also serves as an indicator of national performance on learning assessments. According to the World Bank 2014 National Education Profile, Timor-Leste ranks at the 46 percentile in terms of access to education (measured by enrolment rates in primary education) and at the 24 percentile in learning. A comparison of youth and adult literacy rates shows that the literacy rate in Timor-Leste is 80% among the youth population, which is lower than the average youth literacy rate in other lower middle income countries. However, as Fig. 1 illustrates, the literacy rate of Timor-Leste has demonstrated remarkable improvement during the first decade of the 21st century. Yet, in spite of the impressive improvements made in the adult literacy rate in recent years, only 60% of the overall adult population is literate. Although the youth literacy rate is 80%, this figure is low in comparison with other lower middle income countries. The above literacy profile indicates that addressing both the adult and youth literacy rates are national priorities. The focus of the present research on the English reading ability of Timor-Leste secondary school students is entirely justified by the available data about literacy trends in Timor-Leste.

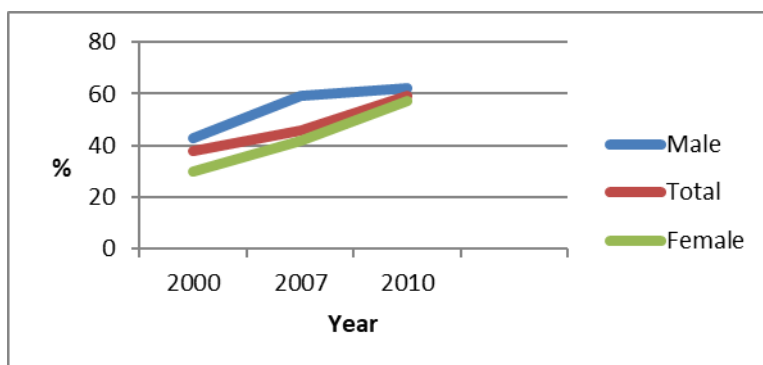


Figure 1 Literacy rate among Timor-Leste population aged 15 and older

(Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics)

A World Bank (2012) report describes Timor-Leste's recent development in the following terms: "In May 2002, Timor-Leste (formerly known as East Timor) became the world's youngest nation. Conflict had exacted a heavy toll on the country and its people families, homes, businesses and infrastructure were hit hard. Despite the many challenges, Timor-Leste has made remarkable progress over the last decade." Of particular relevance to the present research, the report notes that the country rehabilitated 535 schools. It is also worth noting that nearly 70% of all buildings, homes and schools were destroyed during the conflict.

According to the World Bank (2004), the majority of Timor-Leste teachers felt that the lack of textbooks was a major problem for all schools. Other perceived problems include: "the use of Portuguese, inadequate teacher training, confusing directives from the Ministry of Education, an irrelevant curriculum, a lack of transport for teachers, a lack of discretionary resources, and a lack of contact with the district education office." (p.44). the teachers surveyed in the World Bank (2004) study regarded inadequate materials as the main reason for low student achievement. The next most frequently cited reason was a lack of family support, and the third was language. The proposed research includes interviews with local English teachers. These will aim to establish whether English teachers' awareness of students' reading difficulties in Timor-Leste in 2018 still reflect the 2004 perceptions of the main problems as a lack of suitable reading materials, irrelevant curriculum and inadequate teacher training.

Acquiring efficient L2 reading skills has been shown to have a beneficial impact upon L1 reading, as reported in research by Amisdorf (2016), so literacy standards in Timor-Leste may improve through the teaching of L2 reading skills. The extent to which L2 reading is related to reading skills and/or language competence has been widely discussed in the literature (e.g. Alderson, 1984). Research by Bernhardt and Kamil (1995) has confirmed that both L2

language competence and a command of reading skills can affect L2 reading performance. Based on their research with language learners in Korea, Lee and Schallert (2012) examined the relationship between L1/L2 reading skills and L2 competence and were able to confirm that learners with a relatively high level of English competence were more likely to benefit from training in L2 reading skills than students with poorer English competence.

As Dubin (1982:125) points out, the task of reading is a complex skill that contains a number of psychological, physical and social elements. Therefore, reading is considered as the most difficult language skill, which involves the interaction of multiple cognitive, meta-cognitive, linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects. Reading is not a passive activity, but rather an active one. In fact, reading requires the learner's mental input to comprehend written messages. In highlighting the importance of reading comprehension, Rivers (1981:147) stated that "reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity, but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's which are knowledge of the language". Reading is composed of two parts; the written form, and the meaning of the conveyed message. In this regard, Ur (1996:138) defines reading as follows: "Reading means reading and understanding. A foreign language learner who says, 'I read the words but I do not know what they mean' is not, therefore, reading in this sense. He or she is merely decoding or translating written symbols into corresponding sounds."

The ability to read and comprehend what one reads is crucial to success in our educational system. For academic success, for English language learning, or to expand students' knowledge of language, cultures and the world, reading comprehension has always played a central role in the curricula of the schools in this study. Reading comprehension, therefore, is not the product of word recognition skills, grammar or world experience as separate entities, but is considered a highly interactive process between the reader and the text, one that enables the construction of meaning by making inferences and interpretations. The importance of teaching reading strategies has been widely recognized as it may be one of the most effective and practical means of helping students to overcome their reading difficulties. Since language comprehension and production do not take place in discrete units in real life, linguistic skills cannot be developed in isolation; therefore, their integration is required in language learning contexts if the aim is to produce efficient users of a language. Linguistic skills have "complex relationships of mutual support," as Peregoy and Boyle (1997, p.102) claim.

Communicative approaches to language teaching, i.e. approaches that aim at developing "communicative competence" (Hymes, 1972) among students, include process-based methodologies, such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Task-Based

Language Teaching (TBLT). Both CLIL and TBLT, advocate an integrated skills approach. This implies teaching practices that integrate the four main linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in meaningful and purposeful interaction as it usually occurs in the real world to achieve the goal of communicative competence (Chamot, 2009; Harmer, 2007; Richards, 2006; Nunan, 1989).

One study by Savić,(2015) is of particular relevance, since its main purpose was to examine the reading difficulties of ESL learners. This PhD research, which was conducted over several years and included objective measurement of subjects' reading ability, inspired the Student Questionnaire and Teacher Interview Questions of the present study. Savić's research studied the reading problems faced by young L2 learners, including basic word recognition and reading aloud. It is hoped that the present research, with its focus on the reading difficulties of older (adolescent) learners will fill a gap in the reading difficulty literature.

The objective of this research is to investigate the reading challenges that second-year secondary school learners face, to identify the related reading problems and try to understand the reasons behind students' difficulties in performing reading tasks. The main objectives of the current research are:

- a) To identify the main reading difficulties encountered by secondary school EFL learners in Timor-Leste.
- b) To investigate English teachers' perception of their students' reading difficulties and the underlying causes.

METHOD

The study involves gathering data in three phases, as shown in Fig. 2.

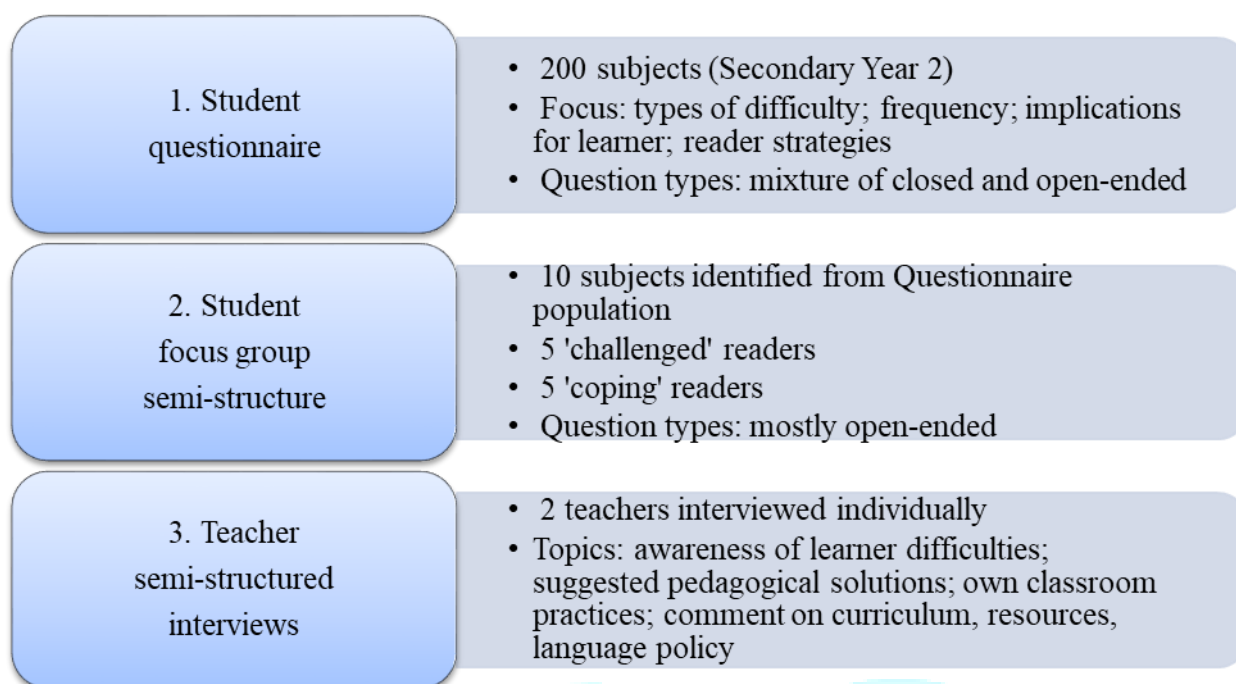


Figure 2 Design of the Study

The selection of the ten students to participate in the focus groups was based on the responses to Question 10 of the Student Questionnaire (“What are the difficulties that you often face when you read? Do you agree with the following statements?”). The five students with the highest scores on this question were selected for the “Challenged Reader” focus group and the five students with the lowest scores on Question 10 were selected for the “Coping Readers” focus group. It was assumed that students who reported many reading difficulties in the Questionnaire would be able to elaborate on these in the context of a focus group consisting of students who reported similar challenges. Conversely, the composition of the other focus group, consisting only of students who regarded themselves as competent readers, assumes that such learners are more likely to elaborate upon their successful reading habits in a small group of similar readers.

The target population of the study involved upper-secondary second-year students from a secondary school in Timor- Leste. The participants were 200 students and two English teachers. For the questionnaire study, the population was large and representative (n=200) and included all of the second-year students. Two experienced, local English teachers kindly were agreed to participate in the in-depth semi-structured interview. It is worth nothing that there are only two English teachers teaching in this secondary school so a larger teacher sample was not possible.

The age of the students varied between fifteen to eighteen years-old. Such learners have an experience of learning Portuguese for ten years, being the first foreign language introduced in the first year of primary school, and English for five years, being the second foreign language introduced in the first year of junior high school.

The school, Public Secondary School of Kayrala Manatuto, is located in a rural part of Timor-Leste and attracts students from the surrounding area. Tuition is free-of-charge, so the school is accessible to students of all socio-economic backgrounds. Upper Secondary education (Grades 10 to 12) culminates in the “Diploma Ensino Secundario” (Diploma of Secondary Education), after which many of the students apply for university admission. The size of an EFL class is around 40 students.

Since there were two hundred (200) students studying in the second year, all of the students participated in the questionnaire survey, allowing full representation of the second-year population. The researcher conducted the survey at the school over the period of one month. Timor-Leste was selected as the location of the research because of the importance of the English reading within the school curriculum and the interest in addressing English reading standards on the part of the government and the wider society. The researcher wants to use the available 200 students as a sample and the two available English teachers (Questionnaire Sample n=200) for the semi-structured Teacher interview (n=2).

The three instruments, Student Questionnaire, Student Focus Group and Teacher Structured Interview were inspired by instruments used by Savić (2015) in her investigation of the L2 reading difficulties experienced by students in Serbia. Savić’s research of student reading difficulties was conducted over several years as part of her PhD studies. The student questionnaire and teacher interview questions were adapted for use in the current research. Since Savić’s research focused on young L2 learners, some of the questionnaire and interview items were amended to suit the adolescent student population of the present study.

Questionnaires are regarded as an efficient and effective method to collect data in such a way that the informants feel relaxed, confident and answer the questions without control or influence of third parties. In this way, the secondary school students in the present study can be expected to give honest and sincere answers and have the opportunity to express their ideas at ease, using their mother tongue.

While the questionnaires generated data covering a wide range of topics (interest level; reading habits; familiarity with genres; time spent on reading; availability of reading materials; the difficulties encountered while reading; reactions to the difficulties; self-assessment of own reading ability), the student focus group discussions were intended to probe more deeply into

the subjects' experience and views and provide elaboration of ideas indicated in the responses to the Questionnaire.

The semi-structured Teacher Interviews were intended to allow the researcher to probe deeply into the teachers' awareness of students' reading processes and the related difficulties. Each interview was planned to last for about one hour.

The researcher had obtained permission from the school authorities to conduct the research at the school. The authorities had informed the principal and the teachers about the purpose of the study and the arrangements for data collection. The researcher conducted the research by administering the questionnaires and collecting them from the respondents on the same day as they were completed. Because of the large number of students involved, the questionnaires were administered on separate days with the help of English teachers and collected the same day.

The participants of the focus groups were identified after the results of Question 10 of the Questionnaire were finalized. The researcher collaborated with the two teachers in scheduling the two focus group discussions and informing the participants about the arrangements. The researcher chaired each of the focus groups. The discussions were recorded and the researcher also took notes during the meetings. Each focus group discussion lasted about one hour.

The individual interviews with the two teachers were scheduled after the focus group discussions with the students. Each interview lasted about one hour and was video recorded. The entire data collection period lasted for one month.

The questionnaires were checked for completeness and consistency before processing the responses. The quantitative data were tabulated and analysed using descriptive statistics, namely frequencies and percentages, while the (qualitative) responses to the open-ended questions were coded and grouped together under themes. The coded data from the questionnaire were categorized on the basis of similarities of information provided by the respondents and the scores obtained under the respective question. This quantitative data were used to compile the taxonomy of reading difficulties and their relative frequency. The reporting of the data is generally presented according to the research questions which guide the study. Both tables and figures are employed in the display of the questionnaire data.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions and recordings were analyzed to identify key underlying themes. This analysis of the Focus Group data involved the collaboration of the two English teachers who acted as competent independent judges. They reviewed the qualitative data together with the researcher with a view to identify the key themes

and their frequency. The analysis of the data obtained from the Teacher Interviews involved the collaboration of the school principal, who served as an independent judge in the identification and confirmation of the main ideas from the interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

Section A Basic demographic

Details of the students who completed the questionnaire are shown in Table 4.1.

Table 3 Student Participants

Demography	No.	%
Age group		
15-16	36	18
17-18	164	82
Gender		
Male	84	42
Female	116	58
Major program		
Natural science	50	25
Social science	150	75

Table 3 shown, 200 students completed the questionnaire, the majority of whom were aged between 17 and 18. There is a reasonable balance between male (42%) and female (58%) participants, with 75% of the students majoring in social science and 25% majoring in natural science.

Section B: Reading Preferences

This section reports the results of seven questions (Questions 1 to 7) that relate to aspects of students' relationship with reading in English. The results of Question 1 ("What is your favourite language skill?") are reported in Table 4.

Table 4 Students' Preferred Language Skill

Preferred skill	No.	%
Speaking	140	70
Reading	28	14
Listening	27	13.5
Writing	5	2.5
Total	200	100

When students were asked about their preferences concerning their favourite skill, a variety of answers was given. Indeed, 70% of the learners reported that their favourite skill was

speaking, while only 14% indicated a preference for reading. As for the listening skill, 13.5% of the students selected it as favourite skill. The least favourite of the four skills was writing, with only 2.5% of learners reporting it as favourite. The results of Question 1 suggest that only a minority of the students (14%) appear to enjoy reading in English. The purpose behind this question was to gain some understanding of learners' preference for reading in English, because the popularity of reading among students may also be an indication of learners' motivation towards reading. The results of Question 2 ("In which language do you prefer to read?") are shown in Fig. 3.

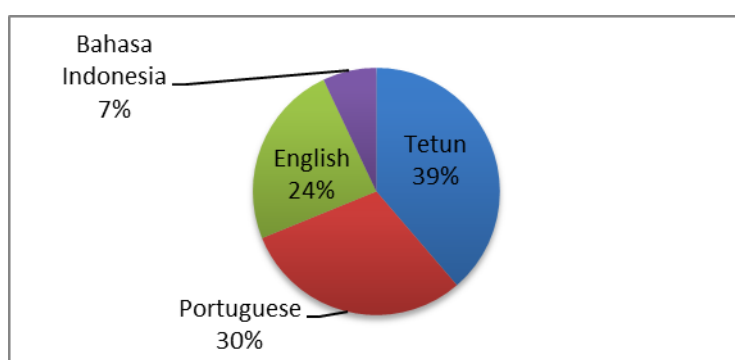


Figure 3 Students' Preferred Language for Reading

As the pie chart shows, only about one quarter of the students reported that they prefer to read in English. The students' mother tongue, Tetun, is the preferred reading language of 39% of the respondents. Since Tetun is the students' national language, they obviously understand it better than any other language. In addition, Tetun is used everywhere in Timor-Leste society, so local nationals feel comfortable expressing themselves and their thoughts using the Tetun language. By contrast, the foreign languages used in Timor-Leste are often perceived as difficult to learn by the local population. Yet, the students' first foreign language, Portuguese, was selected as the preferred reading language by 30% of the participants. The status of Portuguese as medium of instruction in Timor-Leste schools may explain why so many of the students indicated that they preferred to read in Portuguese. After all, much of their reading experience had taken place through the medium of Portuguese. The results of Question 3 ("What kind of materials do you like to read?") are shown in Fig. 4.

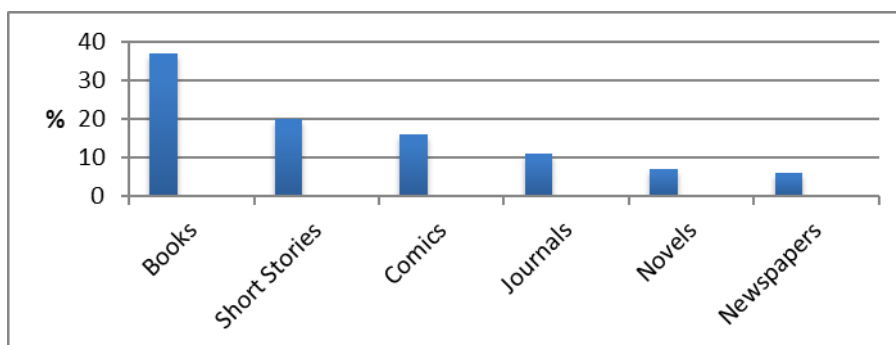


Figure 4 Students' Preferred Reading Materials

When asked about materials, most of the participants (36.5%) indicated that they preferred reading books, while about 20% preferred short stories. The pattern of preferences was otherwise as follows: 16% preferred to read comics, 11% preferred reading journals, 7% preferred reading novels, 5.5% preferred newspapers and 5% choose to read magazines. The purpose behind asking this question was to identify the kinds of materials the target students are interested in reading and to find out whether genre was a factor that influenced their choice of reading texts. The results of Question 4 ("Do you like reading in English?") are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Enjoyment of Reading in English

	No.	%
Yes	163	81.5
No	37	18.5
Total	200	100

Question 4 required the participants to opt for a simple "yes" or "no". The response was unequivocal, with over 81.5% of the respondents indicating that they enjoyed reading in English. This question aims to establish whether the English language is regarded as important to the participants.

The question also invited participants to add reasons for their choice of "yes" or "no". Some respondents mentioned that they prefer reading in English, since it helps them to have access to the Internet and point out that English is used in almost all domains nowadays, so they have an incentive to learn it. Others mentioned that they enjoy reading in English since they regard it as a global language which enriches their general knowledge. Some respondents added that reading in English helps them to be aware of English-speaking cultures and western cultures generally and that it allows them to communicate with people all around the world. Some of the participants who stated that they do not enjoy reading in English explained that it was difficult to relate enjoyment of reading in English to their teacher's role. It was apparent

that some participants actually attributed their dislike of learning English mainly to their English teacher.

The results of Question 5 (“How do you feel when you read book in English?”) are displayed in Figure 5.

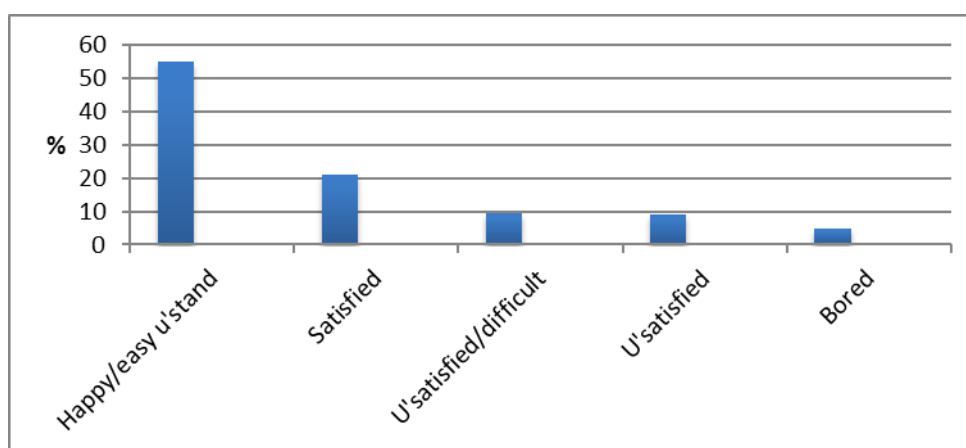


Figure 5 Students’ feelings when they read in English

This main purpose of this question was to understand the relationship between the ease/difficulty of a text and students’ feelings when reading. The results suggest that when a text is easy to understand, students can experience feelings of happiness when reading it. On the other hand, when a text is difficult to understand, students can experience unhappy feelings. According to the results, 55% of the participants feel happy because the book is easy to understand, while 9.5% reported that they feel unhappy because a text is difficult to understand. 21% simply reported feelings of satisfaction when they read book in English. Only a small number of participants reported feeling unsatisfied (9%) or bored (5%) when they read in English.

The results of Question 6 (“When do you usually read in English?”) are shown in Table 6.

Table 6 In-class/out-of-class Reading Time

	No.	%
In my free time	96	48
In my English class	104	52
Total	200	100

This question aimed to establish the extent to which students read English outside the English classroom. According to the results, 52% of the students usually read English in their

English class, while 48% report that they usually read English in their free time. This pattern of results suggests that about half of the students rely on reading practice in their English classes, while half of the students read more English texts outside the English classroom. Since the students have only three hours of English per week, those students who rely mostly on their English classes for reading practice can only undertake limited amounts of English reading per week.

The results of Question 7 (“Do you choose reading materials that is not too difficult?”) are shown in Table 7.

Table 7 Reading Materials

	No.	%
Yes	99	49.5
No	101	50.5
Total	200	100

Question 7 required the participants to opt for a simple “yes” or “no”. The response was unequivocal, with over 49.5% of the respondents indicating that they choose materials that are not too difficult. This question aims to establish whether the English language is regarded as important to the participants.

The question also invited participants to add reasons for their choice of “yes” or “no”. Some respondents mentioned that they prefer reading Materials, since it helps them to have access to the Internet and point out that English is used in almost all domains nowadays, so they have an incentive to learn it.

Table 8 Students’ Reading Purpose

	No.	%
Improve general knowledge	92	46
Improve vocabulary knowledge	39	19.5
Help with education	37	18.5
Prepare for examination	13	6.5
Know more about sport and hobbies	10	5
Read for pleasure	9	4.5
Total	200	100

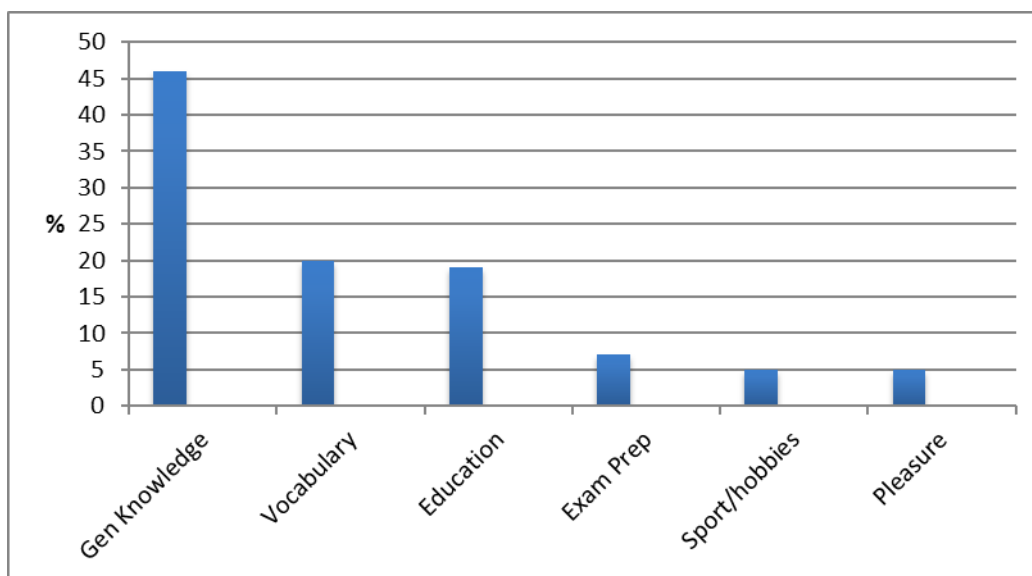


Figure 6 Students' Reading Purpose

As the results indicate, most of the learners (46%) indicated that their main purpose in reading is to improve their general knowledge. A further 19.5% state that their objective from reading is to improve their vocabulary knowledge, while 18.5% state that their objective from reading is to help with their education. Other stated purposes are preparation for examinations (6.5%), knowing more about sports and hobbies (5%) and reading for pleasure (5%). The purpose behind asking this question was to know whether students associate English reading with academic and career success. The results suggest that this is indeed the case.

Section C: Reading difficulties

Three questions (Questions 9) ask the participants to report on the difficulties they experience when they read English texts. The results of Question 8 ("When you read the text and you do not understand something, what do you?") are displayed in Fig. 7.

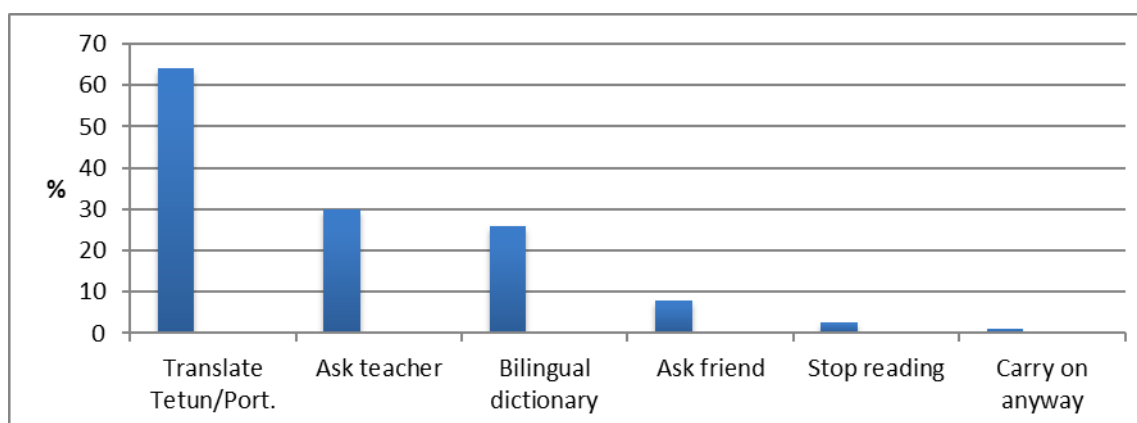


Figure 7 Learners' Reading Strategies when Encountering Difficulties in a Text

64% of the subjects state that when they read and do not understand, they try to translate into their national or official language, Tetun or Portuguese. 30% of the respondents reported that they ask their teacher for help, while 26% of the participants said they used a bilingual dictionary. 8% of the participants reported that they ask somebody else for help (e.g. friends or relatives), while 2.5% of the participants admitted that they stop reading altogether when they do not understand the text. 1% of the participants simply carry on reading without understanding parts of the text.

The results of Question 10: ("What are the difficulties that you often face when you read?") are shown in Table 9.

Table 9 Students' Self-Reported Reading Difficulties

Do you agree with the following statements?		No. (%)					
	Statement	5 Strongly agree	4 Agree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly disagree	Total
1	I cannot pronounce some of the words.	13 6.5%	113 56.5%	13 6.5%	59 29.5%	2 1 %	200 100%
2	I do not understand some of the words.	11 5.5%	81 40.5%	5 2.5%	95 47.5%	8 4.0%	200 100%
3	There are too many complicated sentences.	17 8.5%	86 43%	10 5%	84 42%	3 1.5%	200 100%
4	Some texts are too long.	19 9.5%	101 50.5%	5 2.5%	74 37%	1 0.5%	200 100%

5	I do not understand what the text is about.	26	81	6	85	2	200
		13%	40.5%	3%	42.5%	1%	100%

Based on the responses, 56.5% the students agree that they cannot pronounce some of the words when they read, while 40.5% the students agree that they do not understand some of the words when they read. 43% of the students agree that there are too many complicated sentences in the texts which they read, while 50.5% of the students agree that some of their reading texts are too long and 40.5% agree that when they read they often do not understand the meaning of the text.

The results of Question 11 (“What are the causes behind these difficulties?”) are presented in Table 9.

Table 9 Self-Perceived Causes of Reading Difficulties

Do you agree with the following statements?		No. (%)					Total
No.	Statement	5 Strongly agree	4 Agree	3 Neither agree nor disagree	2 Disagree	1 Strongly disagree	
1	I don't have enough time to improve my English reading.	0	85	2	100	13	200
		0	42.5%	1%	50%	6.5%	100%
2	I don't have enough opportunities to read in English.	13	85	1	100	1	200
		6.5%	42.5%	0.5%	50%	0.5%	100%
3.	The school reading sessions are too short.	13	85	1	100	1	200
		6.5%	42.5%	0.5%	50%	0.5%	100%
4	My reading skills are not well developed.	12	116	4	68	0	200
		6%	58%	2%	34%	0	100%
5	Some reading skills are difficult to acquire.	16	116	2	66	0	200
		8%	58%	1%	33%	0	100%
6	My English vocabulary is limited.	13	123	1	62	1	200
		6.5%	61.5%	0.5%	31%	0.5%	100%
7	My English grammar is poor.	11	116	4	68	1	200
		5.5%	58%	2%	34%	0.5%	100%

From the result reported in table 9 the following information is worth highlighting

- 50% disagree with the statement that they don't have enough time to improve their English reading and 42.5% agree with the statement
- 50% disagree with the statement that they don't have enough opportunities to read in English and 42.5% agree with the statement.
- 42.5% agree with the statement that the school reading session is too short and 50% disagree with the statements.
- 58% agree with the statement that their reading skills are not well developed and 34% disagree with the statements.
- 58% agree with the statement that some reading skills are difficult to acquire and 33% disagree with statement.
- 61.5% agree with the statement that their English vocabulary is limited and 31% disagree with the statement.
- 58% agree with the statement that their English grammar is poor and 34 % disagree with the statement.

Section D. Self-reflection about English Competence

This part of the questionnaire consists asks the participants to provide a self-reflection of their English competence in relation to the four main language skills, speaking, reading, listening and writing. The results of Question 12 ("How good are you at the following English skills?") are shown in Table 4.9.

Table 10 Participants' Self-Assessment of English Competence

No.	English Skill	No. (%)					Total
		Very good	Good	Fair	Poor	Very poor	
1	Speaking	5	4	3	2	1	
		34	47	58	43	18	200
		17%	23.5%	29%	21.5%	9%	100%
2	Listening	31	44	39	60	26	200
		15.5%	22%	19.5%	30%	13%	100%
3	Writing	31	49	43	40	37	200
		15.5%	24.5%	21.5%	20%	18.5%	100%
4	Reading	19	58	37	30	56	200
		9.5%	29%	18.5%	15%	28%	100%

Discussions

The purpose of the study is to identify the main difficulties that Timor-Leste secondary school students encounter when reading in English and to try to understand the causes of these difficulties. This chapter presents a discussion of the results reported in Chapter IV, as well as

the main conclusions and recommendations of the research. The discussion is organized in relation to the two research questions, which are reiterated below:

- 1) What are the problems second-year public secondary school students in Kayrala Manatuto Timor-Leste typically face when they read in English?
- 2) How do the English teachers of Timor-Leste public secondary school of Kayrala Manatuto perceive the reading problems experienced by their students and their underlying causes?

The data which provide answers to the first research question are mainly found in the results of the Student Questionnaire and Student Focus Groups. However, the Teacher Interview data also cast some light on students' reading problems from the perspective of an English teacher. Answers to the second research question are provided by the responses to the questions in the Teacher Interview. The results are also used to compile taxonomy of the students' reading difficulties. Following the discussion of the results, the chapter offers some practical suggestions for addressing the problems identified by the research and speculates about future directions for the development of English language teaching in Timor-Leste.

Identification of reading difficulties (Research Question No. 1)

The results of the Student Questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion suggest that most of the students approach reading in a bottom-up manner and exemplify the bottom-up model of reading discussed in the Literature Review (Chapter II). In other words, their approach to reading appears to be word-based rather than text-based. The participants in the study report that they read texts word-by-word and do not appear to have developed a wide range of reading strategies. Little evidence was found of 'top-down' reading, where readers read texts in a strategic manner, for example, by predicting what a text may be about and using it to find particular information (e.g. Carrell and Esterhold, 1983; Carrell et al., 1988). The results suggest that the a lack of vocabulary and a limited range of reading skills are major contributors to the students' reading difficulties. As reported in Chapter IV, 63% of the students selected 'strongly agree/agree' when asked whether the pronunciation of words represented a source of reading difficulty. 46% selected 'strongly agree/agree' when asked whether lack of understanding of word meaning was a source of difficulty. 51% also selected 'strongly agree/agree' in response to a statement about syntactic complexity representing a source of difficulty.

The students who completed the Questionnaire were also asked to provide a self-assessment of their English competence on the four language skills: speaking, listening, writing and reading (Table 4.8). The results suggest some polarization within the participants of the present research. For example, when asked to self-assess themselves on English reading skills,

almost 40% considered themselves to be “good”: or “very good” readers, while 43% assess themselves as “poor” or “very poor” readers. A similar polarized pattern was also apparent in the responses of the other language skills. To some extent, this pattern is explained by the fact that the student population consists of a mixture of Natural Science and Social Science majors. It is recognized that the Natural Science majors are generally considered to be academically superior to the students of Social Science. This polarization of the results in the Student Questionnaire may be attributed to the specialisms (natural science, social science) of the student participants. Based on the results of the Student Questionnaire and Focus Group discussions, taxonomy of reading difficulties was compiled (Table 11).

Table 11 Taxonomy of Reading Difficulties

1.	Difficulty in pronouncing the words in the text.
2.	High proportion of unfamiliar vocabulary in the text.
3.	Lack of certainty about the precise meaning of the text lexis (“ambiguous” words).
4.	Text length: Students are discouraged by having to read long texts.
5.	Text topic: Topics which do not relate to the students’ lives and experience present additional difficulties (e.g. lack of motivation to read these texts).

To a large extent, these results are consistent with those of Savic (2015). The important role of pronunciation in reading, as reported by the students, may surprise scholars who assume that reading is generally regarded as a silent activity. The extent to which the words of a text are phonologically encoded during the L2 reading process is not entirely clear. However, it is widely acknowledged that younger learners ‘sub-vocalize’ words while they are still learning to develop reading fluency. Indeed many adult L2 learners pronounce the words of reading texts silently while reading. However, as readers develop fluency in reading, the amount of sub-vocalizing reduces. One of the reasons for the importance of pronunciation to students in the present research may relate to the popularity of reading aloud in the English classroom. Although reading aloud is adopted as a classroom activity with young learners (e.g. Savic 2015), it is less widely adopted at secondary school level, where students are expected to develop reading fluency. The popularity of reading aloud in the English classroom may have contributed to the students’ over-reliance on knowing the pronunciation of the words of a reading text.

The analysis of Student Questionnaire, Focus Group Discussion and Teacher Interview also reveals that the learners do not have the habit of reading. Although the response to Question 4 of the Student Questionnaire states that 81% of the students enjoy reading, it is apparent that they do not read in English for pleasure and that most of their English reading is

related to the texts in the school textbooks. According to the response to Question 1, only 14% of the students rate reading as their preferred language skill. Indeed, as the responses indicate, the nature of the reading text appears to have some impact upon on learners' reading performance. The findings also show that text length and the learners' own language level can affect students' reading achievements. This point can be observed in the answers to questions about the students' own selection of reading materials to. Moreover, the student participants have added texts of their own choice which they would like to read, including easy-to-read stories in English.

During their hour-long in-depth structured interview, each of the two teachers were asked to comment the students' reading difficulties. As the demographic information about the teachers shows (Table 4.9), both are qualified with a B.Ed degree. One of the teachers (Teacher B) has also completed a two-year teacher training diploma in Japan. However, both have less than three years' experience of teaching English and both have spent less than two years at the school. Their recent professional training may have equipped them with an understanding of contemporary theories and practices in language education, which allow them to comment on the students who may have been taught English using a traditional approach.

Both teachers agree that the students 'main reading difficulties relate to pronunciation and the not knowing the meaning of many words in the reading texts. However, they admit that their teaching task is challenging, largely as a result of the students' lack of reading habit and the limited resources available to them when teaching reading, particularly suitable reading materials. One of the teachers (Teacher A) explained that he attempts to make the texts more accessible by adding accompanying illustrations to give the students visual clues to the texts' meaning. Teacher B also addressed the reading materials problem by using a range of short texts on a variety of topics. In this way, he hoped to address the difficulties presented by long texts on topics the students did not understand. He also made an effort to find texts that are easier for the students to understand because of simpler vocabulary content.

Both teachers recognized that the students had not acquired a range of reading skills or strategies and explained that they provided practice in reading skills. While Teacher A promoted dictionary skills so that students could solve unknown vocabulary problems by themselves, Teacher B actually promotes top-down strategies, for example, by training students how to locate information in a text and making them aware of a text's structure. Teacher B also teaches students how to develop their vocabulary knowledge in a systematic way, by teaching lexical relations such as synonym and antonyms, collocations, etc. He also makes an effort to promote out-of-class reading, for example, through a reading club. Both teachers agreed that the current

arrangement of giving students only three hours of English per week was not adequate to allow them to progress to high levels of competence. In fact, they both hoped that the education policy would be changed to allow English to have a more prominent place in the curriculum. The present research has benefitted from the fresh perspective of these relatively young, but well qualified English teachers, particularly their insights into students' reading difficulties.

How do the English teachers of Timor-Leste public secondary school of Kayrala Manatuto, Timor-Leste perceive the reading problems experienced by their students and their underlying causes the suggestions may be more reading outside the classroom, selecting more appropriate texts depending on the learners' level, encouraging reading for pleasure. The results of teachers' interview confirm in addition to that they suggest other ways to improve learners' reading habit such as: motivating students to develop the reading habit through reading short stories, and to guide their reading. To summarize the teachers' perceptions of the underlying causes of the difficulties, they identified lack of appropriate teaching materials, limited curriculum time for the English subject and a general lack of resources for reading as contributors. They also noted that students had not received much training in reading skills and strategies (Chamot, 2009; Cohen and Macaro, 2007).

As Chapter 1 explains, Timor-Leste's language situation is unique in a number of respects, largely due to the colonial past, which accounts for Portuguese being an official language and medium of instruction. It is apparent from the results of the student questionnaire and focus group discussions that there is a strong desire among students to learn English, together with frustration that their opportunities to learn the language are limited to three hours per week in the secondary school curriculum. In the minds of the students, English is a language of opportunity and is associated with job opportunities and the country's future. It may not be entirely surprising that many of the secondary school students who were subjects of the present research display the characteristics of 'bottom-up' readers. The fact that few have acquired to confidence to approach reading texts in a confident 'top-down' manner is largely explained by the students' educational experience. Many of the students have not progressed beyond the word-based approach which is associated in the research literature with young learners. Some optimistic glimpses into the educational future were provided by the two young teachers who participated in the Teacher Interview and confirmed that their task was particularly challenging because of the limited time available to English instruction in the curriculum and the lack of suitable reading materials in their school.

CONCLUSION

The present research provides a meaningful case study that was conducted qualitatively and quantitatively using three research tools (questionnaire, focus group discussion, in-depth structured interview). In fact, the results show that second year secondary school learners cannot read fluently, because they face a number of difficulties in reading comprehension. The results reveal that the students' EFL teachers related the learners' reading comprehension achievement mainly to their lack of reading habit; learners do not often read due to the globalization age and restricted use of ICT. Some suggestions regarding the teaching of reading in schools and the creation of a more conducive educational environment for the teaching and learning of English are presented in this concluding chapter.

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