

Reading Difficulties of Secondary School EFL Learners in Timor-Leste

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Abstract

In government secondary schools in Timor-Leste, English as a subject receives less representation in the curriculum compared with neighboring countries and reflects the complex language policy of the country's constitution, which recognizes four languages. This paper reports the results of a study of the difficulties encountered by secondary school students when they read English texts. The research sought to identify the main obstacles to students' reading fluency as well as their causes. 200 students completed a questionnaire about their English reading experience and habits. Based on the questionnaire results, ten students were selected to participate in focus group discussions about their reading difficulties. Five students were assigned to a 'challenged' reader group, while five were assigned to a 'coping' reader group. The results indicate that many of the students have difficulty in reading English texts. Inadequate vocabulary knowledge and a lack of reading strategies were identified as the main contributors. Interestingly, the most serious difficulty reported was the pronunciation of the words of reading texts. This finding suggests that the many students are accustomed to reading texts aloud rather than silently and may not have progressed beyond a sub-vocalizing phase. The majority of the subjects appear to adopt a 'bottom up' approach to reading. Two factors appear to impact upon this unsatisfactory situation: (a) the absence of strategies-based reading instruction within the curriculum, and (b) lack of exposure to a variety of English texts.

Key words: second language reading; reading difficulties; secondary school

Introduction

In Timor-Leste, four languages are recognized 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 the light of the country's recent troubled relations with Indonesia and the desire 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 neighbors, in a region where an emphasis on English language learning is the norm. As in other parts of S.E. Asia, ambitious secondary school students wish to acquire competence in English reading because they believe that the ability to read English texts will benefit their future careers and study plans. However, the limited hours allocated to English instruction may not be sufficient to equip such students with adequate reading skills. This paper reports part of the results of a study of the reading difficulties encountered by students studying at upper secondary school level.

English in Timor-Leste

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 language is prevalent. As a result, questions remain about the future of languages in education in Timor-Leste. From time to time, for example, a case is made for moving to mother tongue-based education. Indeed, generational change may contribute to future developments in language policy, as the current Portuguese-speaking elite gradually retire from political life. The language situation in Timor-Leste, where one endogenous and three exogenous languages are recognized in the constitution that was adopted in

2002, is complex. The constitution 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: 24). Therefore, according to the constitution, Portuguese currently enjoys a higher status than English. This language policy 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 English is marginalized within the curriculum, pressure will be placed upon English teachers to deliver the small English part of the curriculum as effectively as possible. The current investigation of the acquisition of secondary students’ reading competence in English is potentially significant considering the country’s delicate and complex language policy. Indeed concerns about the need to address English standards in Timor Leste have been raised by organizations such as the World Bank (2012, 2013). Moreover, the need to improve students’ English reading skills has been alluded to in studies by Taylor-Leech (2009) and Macpherson (2011).

Reading and evolving definitions of literacy

It is interesting to note the importance that is now attached to reading competence in today's globalized world by organizations such as UNESCO, World Bank and OECD, which regularly refer to the results of standardized English reading tests when assessing a country's development. It is probably no exaggeration to say that these organizations regard literacy as the most important element of high quality education. The OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) focuses on students' ability to use their knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges, rather than the extent to which they have mastered a specific school curriculum. For example, the PISA definition of reading literacy goes beyond the notion of decoding information and literal comprehension towards more applied tasks. Reading literacy in PISA is defined as follows:

“Understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society (OECD, 2006).

For international organizations such as OECD, reading is part of nation-building and is the most important linguistic skill that needs to be developed by young learners, since the ability to read is a critical component of school success. For a relatively new country, such as Timor-Leste, the reading literacy of the school population may be central to the country's development.

Models of reading

It is widely recognized in the literature that reading is a complex process. Not surprisingly, there have been many attempts to describe and model what happens when humans read. However, within second language education, three models have been particularly influential: (a) the bottom-up reading model, (b) the top-down reading model, and (c) the interactive model. It is generally agreed that the interactive model provides the most complete account of reading because it includes the interaction of both

(i.e. the bottom-up and the top-down processes). In this respect, Richards and Nunan (1990:77) regard reading as “an integration of top-down processes that utilize background knowledge and schemata, as well as bottom-up processes that are primarily text or data driven.”

The bottom-up model emphasizes the written or printed text and is also called ‘data- driven’ reading. The model stresses the ability to decode or put into sound what is seen in the text from which readers derive meaning in a linear manner. Moreover, the bottom-up model suggests that learning to read processes from learners learning orthographic symbols (i.e. the letters of the alphabet) to understanding the whole text (i.e. the meaning of the language). This model of reading focuses on decoding written language, i.e., the learner may decode words without understanding the entire text by contrast, top-down reading focuses on the reader’s background knowledge in the reading process in which meaning takes precedence over structure. In this context, Clarke et al. (1977) maintain that the reader brings information, ideas and attitudes from the text, in which this knowledge is accompanied with the capability to make linguistic predictions.

Broadly speaking, two types of reading are associated with L2 reading: (a) looking at a written text in order to understand its content (usually undertaken silently), and (b) reading a text aloud (with correct pronunciation of the words, but possibly without understanding the content). Alderson (1984), Clarke and Coady (1979) and Silberstein (1994) have proposed different definitions of L2 reading from different perspectives. To sum up, reading is conceptualized as an interactive cognitive process in which readers interact with the text using their prior knowledge, cultural background and appropriate strategies.

Insights from empirical studies of secondary school and young adult learners

Recent years have seen an increase in research based on secondary school L2 reading. The challenges involved in acquiring efficient L2 reading skills have been investigated by Hayikaleng et al. (2016), who examined Thai students' performance in lower and higher order thinking skills and concluded that English teachers need to attach greater importance to the teaching of reading skills. The benefits of L2 reading skills have also been investigated by Brevik and Hellekjaer (2018), who observed that upper secondary students may read better in L2 than L1, presumably on account of the specific training they received in L2 reading skills classes. The reasons that affect secondary students' reading comprehension were investigated by Alroud (2015), whose research concluded that the main weaknesses relate to aspects within the students' domain. The research evidence from studies of L2 reading by secondary students appear to confirm the wider body of L2 reading research conclusion that reading performance requires both a particular language competence threshold together with training in reading skills.

According to Saito et al. (1999), students who experience L2 reading difficulties may suffer from reading anxiety. In their study of first semester students at a university in USA, Saito and colleagues found that many students studying French, Japanese and Russian reported high levels of anxiety related to reading in a foreign language, particularly when the writing system was different from the students' L1. According to the study, which was based on a student self-report questionnaire, anxiety increased according to the perceived difficulty of the text?

Much of L2 reading research has focused on the value of providing explicit training in reading strategies. Studies of reading difficulties have recognized that individual differences exist among L2 learners, particularly concerning their use of reading strategies (Anderson, 1991). Anderson's study investigated the use of reading strategies by young adult L2 learners and found individual differences among learners both in their reading difficulties and the strategies used to overcome these. The research required the subjects to engage in two tasks: (a) a standardized reading

comprehension test, and (b) reading academic texts. It is assumed that subjects in the present research will demonstrate individual differences both in their reported reading difficulties and their selected reading strategies.

Research Objective

The study was conducted as part of a wider investigation of English reading in Timor-Leste (Da Costa, 2017). The objective of the part of the research reported here was 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 study attempts to answer the following research question: What are the problems second-year public secondary school students in Timor-Leste typically face when they read in English?

Method

The study employed two instruments, with a view to gathering from students insights into their reading experience and behavior. The design is illustrated in Fig. 1.

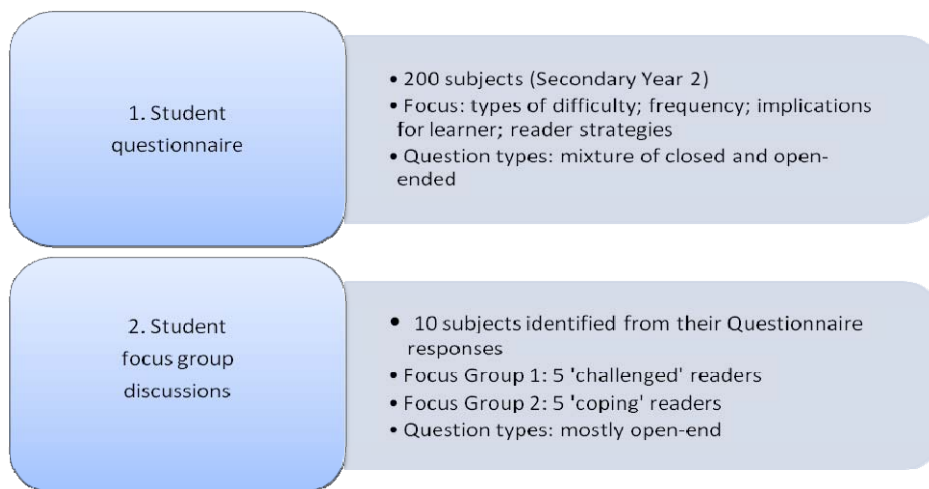


Figure 1: Design of the study

The selection of the ten students to participate in the focus groups was based on the responses to the following question 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. The focus groups were intended to probe more deeply into the students’ responses to the questionnaire.

Participants

The participants consisted of upper-secondary second-year students from a secondary school in Timor-Leste. For the questionnaire study, the population was large and representative (n=200) and included all of the second-year students

Table 1: Details of the 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

As shown in Table 1, 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.

The age of the students varied between fifteen to eighteen years-old. The subjects had learned Portuguese for ten years, as the first foreign language introduced in the first year of primary school, and English for five years, as 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.

Research Instruments

(a) Student Questionnaire

A questionnaire inspired by Savić’s (2015) research of the L2 reading difficulties experienced by students in Serbia was developed. 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. The results of the following questions are reported in this paper:

QNR1: In which language do you prefer to read?

QNR2: When you read a text and you do not understand something, what do you?

QNR3: What are the difficulties that you often face when you read?

QNR4: What are the causes behind these difficulties?

Other questions in the original questionnaire generated data covering a range of reading-related topics (interest level; reading habits; familiarity with genres; time spent on reading; availability of reading materials; self-

assessment of own reading ability). The results are reported in Da Costa (2017).

(b) Focus Group Discussions

Each group discussion was based on the same set of six questions (Table 2).

Table 2: Focus Group Questions

<i>No.</i>	<i>Main Question</i>	<i>Follow-up Question(s)</i>
1	Tell me what you've been reading during the past week.	In which languages were you reading? How much of your reading was in English?
2	What kinds of texts do you read in English?	
3	Which texts do you find most difficult?	Why do you think these texts are difficult?
4	What exactly do you find difficult when you read these texts?	
5	What do you do when you encounter a difficulty when you're reading?	
6	What advice would you give to younger students who want to read well in English?	

Data Analysis

The transcriptions and recordings of the focus group discussions were analysed to identify key underlying themes. This analysis of the focus group data involved the collaboration of two English teachers from the same school 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.

Result

Student Questionnaire

The responses to QNRI, “In which language do you prefer to read?” are displayed in Fig. 2

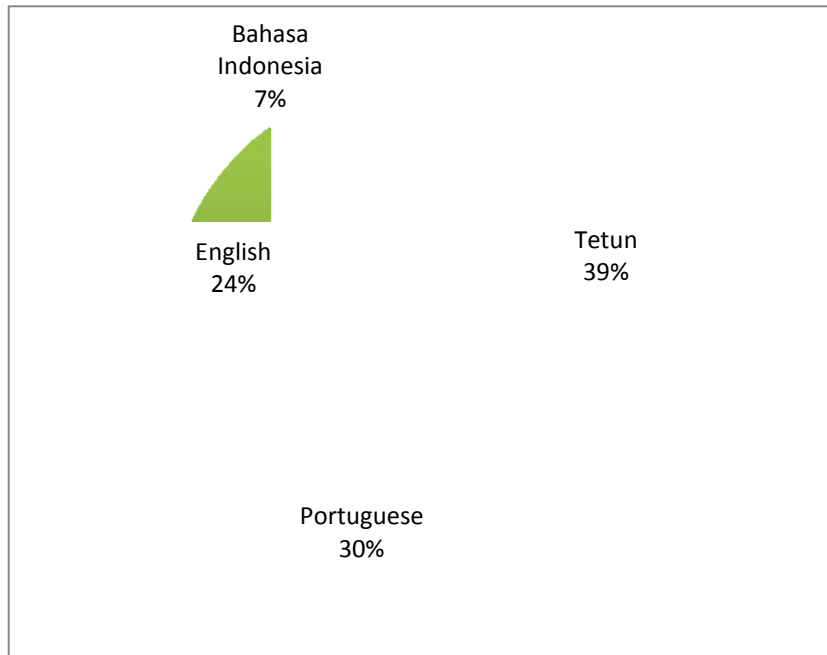


Figure 2: Students' preferred language for reading

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. 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 many respondents preferred to read in Portuguese. After all, much of their reading experience had taken place through the medium of Portuguese.

Reading difficulties

Three questions asked the participants to report on the difficulties they experience when they read English texts. The results of QNR2, "When you read a text and you do not understand something, what do you do?" are displayed in Fig. 3.

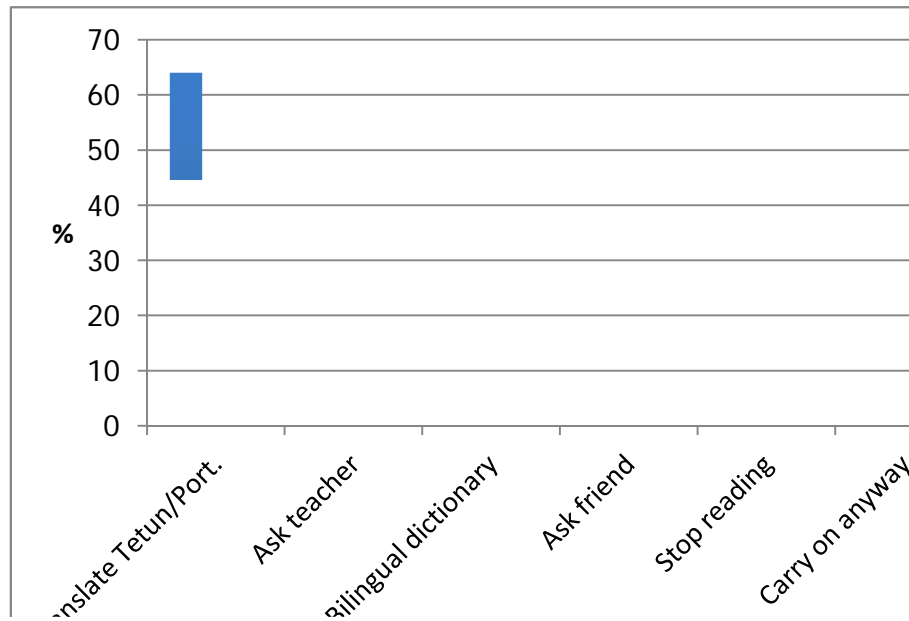


Figure 3: Learners' reading strategies when encountering difficulties in a text

64% of the subjects stated 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 QNR3, “What are the difficulties that you often face when you read?” are shown in Table 3 and Fig. 4.

Table 3: Students’ self-reported reading difficulties

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

A visual representation of the above data is provided in Fig. 4, which conflates the categories “strongly agree” and “agree” into a single “agree” column and “strongly disagree” and “disagree” into a single “disagree” column.

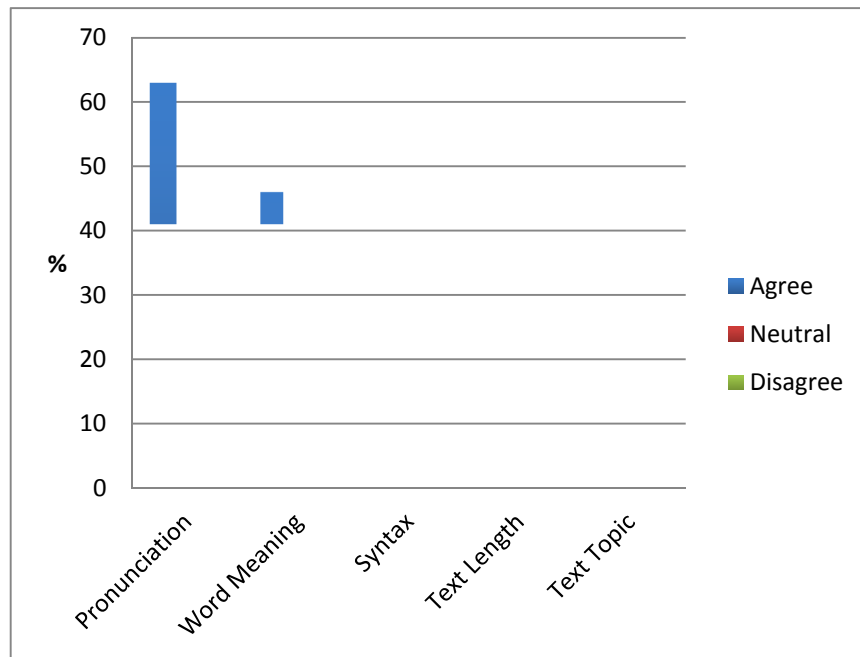


Figure 4: Students 'self-reported reading difficulties

Based on the responses, 63% of the students agree that they cannot pronounce some of the words when they read, while 46% the students agree that they do not understand some of the words when they read. 52% of the students agree that there are too many complicated sentences in the texts which they read, while 60% of the students agree that some of their reading texts are too long and 54% agree that when they read they often do not understand the meaning of the text.

The results of QNR4 "What are the causes behind these difficulties?" are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: 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 limited English vocabulary.	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%)

A visual representation of the above data is provided in Figure 5, which conflates the categories “strongly agree” and “agree” into a single “agree” column and “strongly disagree” and “disagree” into a single “disagree” column.

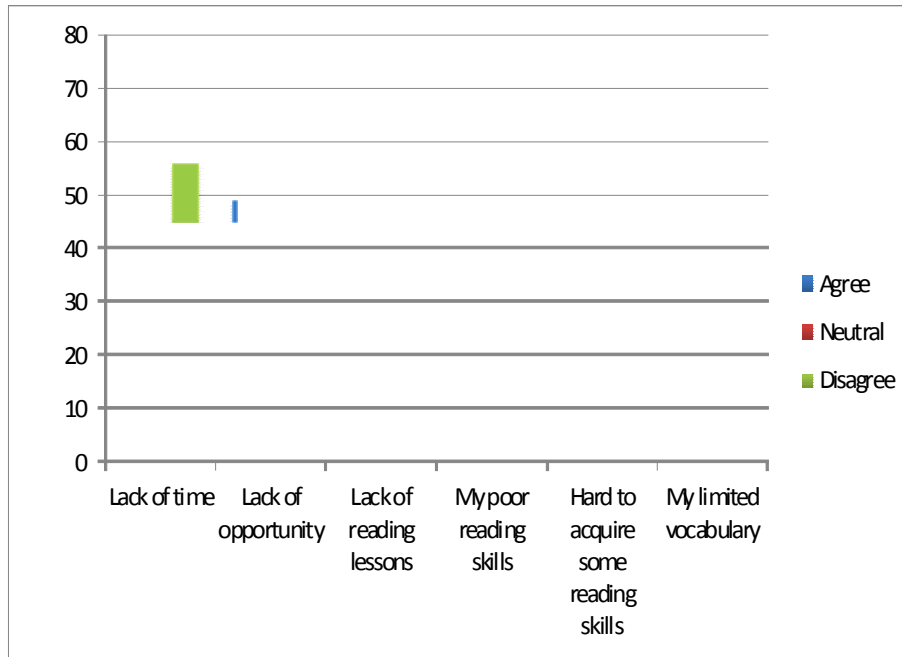


Figure 5: Self-perceived causes of reading difficulties

The majority of the respondents agreed that their limited English vocabulary was a cause of their reading difficulties. The majority also agreed that some reading skills were difficult to acquire and that their own reading skills were poor.

The results, as displayed in Figs. 4 and 5, suggest that some polarity exists among the participants, with both “agree” and “disagree” options selected by many students, while very few opted for “neutral”. This pattern is largely explained by the distribution of participants across two major programs of study. 75% of the students major in Social Science while 25% major in Natural Science (Table 1). The students who reported the fewest difficulties with L2 reading were generally those who major in Natural Science.

Focus Group Discussions

Two focus group discussions were conducted, with a view to probing more deeply into students' reading difficulties. The discussions were chaired by the researcher, who also recorded them on audio and video. Each discussion was based on the same six questions. The questions are reproduced below together with the summarized responses. The recordings were then transcribed and analyzed for recurring "idea units", using the methodology proposed by McNeill (2009). The main ideas that emerged from the discussions are presented below. These are arranged according to the six questions that served as prompts.

Group I: 'Challenged' readers

Question I (Tell me what you've been reading during the past week.)

Responses:

- a. The participants reported their English reading had been restricted to English text books during the previous week.
- b. They confirmed that they generally read English texts two or more times.
- c. They explained that they prefer to read story books in LI because they said LI is easier and more suitable for reading for pleasure. They enjoy reading when they do not have to worry about the pronunciation of words or the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary.
- d. They stated that they do not like to read in English. They just try reading in English once a week when they have English class.

Question 2 (What kind of texts do you read in English?)

Responses:

- a. The participants reported their reading in English was limited to the texts of their school textbooks.
- b. They confirmed that they even prefer comic books written in their LI rather than in English.

Question 3 (Which texts do you find most difficult?)

Responses:

- a. The participants agreed that the most difficult topics to understand were diversity and natural disasters (in their English textbooks).
- b. They reported that these texts were difficult because of the number of new words they contained.
- c. They also confirmed that it was difficult for them to infer the meaning of the new words from the context.

Question 4 (What exactly do you find difficult when you read these texts?)

Responses:

- a. The participants confirmed that the difficult vocabulary was the main obstacle to their understanding of the texts.
- b. Furthermore, they agreed that many of the words were not easy to pronounce, so they experienced difficulties with de-coding the language of the text.
- c. They confirmed that not knowing the meaning of many of the words in a text discouraged them from trying to read texts in English.
- d. They also agreed that texts were difficult when they were about places and countries that were not familiar to them.

Question 5 (What do you do when you encounter a difficulty when you're reading?)

Responses:

- a. The participants explained that when they encountered unfamiliar words in a text they wanted to understand, they tried asking friends, their teacher or relatives who know and understand English.
- b. Some of the participants admitted that, if they do not know some of the words in the text, they simply stop reading altogether.
- c. The group agreed that texts with too many unknown words were the most difficult part of their English courses and were a serious discouragement as far as learning English was concerned.

Question 6 (What advice would you give to younger students who want to read well in English?)

Responses:

- a. The group agreed that students should not be afraid to ask for help from teachers and others.
- b. They also recommended that students should not feel shy about using English and should not feel embarrassed about making mistakes.
- c. They agreed that it was important to know how to use the dictionary (either bilingual Tetun-English or monolingual English) when you meet unknown words.
- d. The group also agreed that students need to be able to read well in LI. LI texts contain few vocabulary obstacles, so most texts are easy to understand and can be read quickly.

Group 2: 'Coping' readers

Question 1 ("Tell me what you've been reading during the past week.")

Responses:

- a. The participants explained that they had been reading mostly English textbooks during the previous week.
- b. The group confirmed that when they read in English language, they generally read the text at least two times.

Question 2 (“What kind of texts do you read in English?”)

Responses:

- a. The participants reported that they read some English texts as part of their courses in Geography, History and Computer Science. Although these courses are taught in Portuguese, the teachers use some English texts depending on the topic.
- b. The participants reported that they read life-style and biodiversity texts in the English text book.

Question 3 (Which texts do you find most difficult?)

Responses:

- a. The participants confirmed that the texts that they find most difficult relate to diversity and natural disasters. They indicated that lack of interest in the topics probably explains why they find some texts difficult.
- b. The group confirmed that the greatest obstacle to reading in English was texts with a high proportion of unfamiliar vocabulary.

Question 4 (What exactly do you find difficult when you read these texts?)

Coping with many unknown words was judged to be the greatest challenge during reading.

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- a. The participants also reported difficulty with English words which have the same pronunciation but different spelling (i.e. homophones).
 - b. The group also agreed that texts whose topics were removed from the students' lives, e.g. located in distant countries, were difficult to understand because they were not familiar with the topic and its context.

Question 5 (What do you do when you encounter a difficulty when you're reading?)

Responses:

- a. The group members reported that when they encounter difficult words, they try to ask to their friends, their teacher or their relatives who knows and understand English.
- b. These participants also agreed that guessing the meaning of a new word from the context could be a valuable reading strategy.

Question 6 (What advice would you give to younger students who want to read well in English?)

- a. Learn how to use a dictionary (Tetun-English bilingual or English monolingual) so that you can get information by yourself when you do not understand the meaning of words.
- b. Try to memorize vocabulary and get more practice in English reading.
- c. The younger students should study English in their free time and attend English courses outside school to develop their English skills.
- d. Try to develop regular reading habits.

Based on the results of the Student Questionnaire and Focus Group discussions, taxonomy of reading difficulties was compiled (Table 5).

Table 5: Taxonomy of reading difficulties (as reported by students)

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).

Discussion

The results suggest that the majority of the student’s approach reading in a bottom-up manner and exemplify the bottom-up model of reading. 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 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 also suggest that a lack of vocabulary and limited range of reading skills are major contributors to the students’ reading difficulties. It is worth noting that recommended vocabulary thresholds for reading have been revised upwards. Nation (2006) and Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovski (2010) recommend that L2 learners need to know 95% of a text’s vocabulary. Another implication of the research is that students need to be able to cope with some unfamiliar lexis in reading texts. In this respect, Nagy et.al, (1994, p. 46) maintain that “skilled readers depend not just on knowing a large number of words, but also on being able to deal effectively with new ones.”

To some extent, the pattern of results reported above 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 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 of the participants.

The Natural Science majors' experience of reading English texts in some of their content subjects appeared to have provided them with much needed reading practice and enabled them to acquire some academic reading skills and discipline-related vocabulary. By contrast, their counterparts in Social Science had to rely entirely on their English subject classes for training in English reading. Unfortunately, many such students struggled to move beyond a word-based bottom-up approach to reading, in which they continued to pronounce written words rather than process them silently.

Conclusion

To a large extent, the results are consistent with those of Savic (2015). However, 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 continue to pronounce the words of reading texts silently while reading. However, as reading fluency develops, 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 as a classroom activity. Although reading aloud is a popular classroom activity with young learners (e.g. Savic 2015), it is less widely used at secondary school level, where students are expected to develop reading fluency.

The insights into the reading difficulties of secondary school students gained in the present study suggest that further research of the teaching of English in Timor-Leste would be worthwhile. In particular, an investigation of how the English school curriculum is organized might shed light on the relative attention that is meant to be paid to language, skills and learning strategies. For example, it is not immediately clear at what stage reading difficulties emerged during the course of the students' experience of Primary, Junior High School and Senior High School education. The coherence of the curriculum and the attainment targets expected of students' in different levels of education might benefit from re-examination.

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