

## Perceptions of English Reading Attitude Among Students in Selected Public Upper Secondary Schools in Kicukiro and Rwamagana, Rwanda

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### ABSTRACT

*Reading plays a crucial role in Second Language education, for it provides exposure to the target language in and beyond educational settings. Studies have indicated that students' reading volume is closely associated with their reading attitude as the latter informs reading optimization for academic and recreational purposes. Informed by the theory of reasoned action (TRA), this survey aimed at exploring the perceptions of the English reading attitude of students. Based on the descriptive survey design and mixed-methods approach, an attitudinal questionnaire and interviews were used to collect data. The target population in this survey consisted of 921 students enrolled in 4 selected public upper secondary schools in Kicukiro and Rwamagana, Rwanda, academic year 2022-2023. Of these, a sample of 184 (91 males and 93 females) was randomly drawn to answer questionnaire items. Additionally, four teachers of English were selected for an interview. Purposive sampling was employed in this selection. While the data from returned questionnaires were processed using Excel and analysed through visualization, data from interviews were analysed using quick impressionist summary. The findings indicated that the English reading attitude of these students is fairly good. These findings may help ESL practitioners and stakeholders to improve students' English reading at this level of education to enhance English proficiency among educated Rwandans. This study concludes that these students risked turning themselves into alliterates, with repercussions on their English language proficiency and professional development. The study recommends that adequate steps be taken at the individual and institutional levels to enhance students' English reading attitude in a view of turning them into avid readers and lifelong learners.*

**Key words:** Behavioural Attitude, Reading Attitude, Second Language Acquisition

### I. INTRODUCTION

Reading and writing have a common historical background. Wolf and Stoodley (2008) trace the two skills back to a few thousands of years ago in Sumer, Egypt and Crete, where the still- mysterious beginnings of written language were found in Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs and the recently discovered pre-alphabet scripts. These early writing systems consisted of symbolic representations of objects in the material world. Then, reading consisted in observing and establishing a connection between these representations and the objects represented. In ancient societies, writing and reading were among prominent professions that initially consisted in encoding and decoding business transactions and later on became popular in royal courts as they served to consolidate, propagate and preserve power, influence and legacy of kings and emperors (Wolf & Stoodley, 2008).

As history progressed, reading continued to prove its significance on various grounds. Lone (2012) observed that reading has been the passion of all the greatest people of all time, stressing that reading contributes to personal development and social progress. In bolder terms, Satija (2002) asserted that reading turns a dumb person into a communicator and enables a lame to climb mountains of knowledge. Reading expands the reader's language abilities and opens the reader's mind to multiple worldviews. Borrowing the words of Proust, a French philosopher and novelist, Wolf and Stoodley (2009, p.28) described reading as an "intellectual sanctuary, where human beings have access to thousands of different realities they may never encounter or understand otherwise." Tural (cited in Yurdakal, 2019) holds the same view and states that reading enables us to become thinking and speaking community.

In the context of language acquisition, Iftanti (2012) argues that humans need to be taught how to read from an early age as the reading skill does not happen naturally. Anderson (2012) puts reading at the center of all other aspects of language learning because it facilitates the learning of grammar and vocabulary and helps develop other language skills. Ahmed (2016) opines that reading plays an important role in learning English and learning content taught in English. Chiang (2016) and Parmawati (2018) agree that reading is a viable solution to the problem of

limited exposure and enhances the acquisition of English skills among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL).

With the advent of modern technologies, reading habits among the youth has been a controversial topic in the literature. Baba and Affendi (2020) view modern technology as an important factor in the promotion of good reading habits since it contributed to the rise of new forms of media and these new forms brought by modern technologies have eased the creation, dissemination and access to reading materials. Iftanti (2012) confirms that internet improves students' reading habits because it allows them to have access to countless information materials, including e-books.

On the other hand, Karim and Hasan (2007) stated that the spread and popularity of digital media has significantly reduced interest in printed text. In 2006, Shen reported that there was a significant shift in students' reading habits, with internet-based reading (online news, emails, sales, movie reviews and fashion news) overtaking paper-based reading. On the downside, these new forms of media are home to contents that are far more appealing to users' interests than reading (Ahmed, 2016). In Indonesia, for instance, only one person in every 1000 people showed interest in reading while others spent their free time watching television and listening to radio (Nazhari et al., 2016). In Malaysia, Karim and Hasan (2007, p.290) noted that "the electronic media is challenging the reading habit in the society by shifting the attention to computer and television viewing." Priajana (2013) reported that students were spending their leisure time watching TV and videos, listening to music, playing electronic games, and interacting with their social network. In Nigeria, Olasehinde et al. (2015) lamented the gulf between the reading habits of previous and contemporary generations as society was transitioning to electronic media. For Rwandans, Kabagambe and Kanyika (2023) noted that illiteracy and spread of ICT and electronic gadgets are key factors of a poor reading culture.

To reconcile these views on the impact of technology on reading attitude, Jang and Henretty (2019) classified readers according to 4 attitudinal styles of reading attitudes: first, *recreational digital only readers* rarely read books or text of any kind voluntarily and, when they do, they limit themselves to digital materials related to their hobbies. They score low in grade-level reading and writing tests. Second, *engaged digital readers* love reading and do not discriminate the medium, and topics in their reading and are more actively engaged in reading digital texts. They score above grade-level in reading and writing tests. Third, *engaged print readers* prefer reading paper texts. They score high in grade-level reading and writing tests. Finally, *digital preferred readers* are readers whose literacy practices (reading and writing) predominantly occur on social media and do not involve relatively long texts. They do not usually read in their free time and score slightly below the grade level in reading and writing tests. Conradi et al. (2013) argue that understanding students' reading attitudes helps teachers to align instruction to the needs and preferences of individual students (young adults in particular), as they engage in various literacy practices in and outside school.

### **I.1 Statement of the Problem**

The culture of reading and reading habits in Africa have always been described by a widely accepted public opinion as being poor (Kwikiriza, 2000; Commeyras & Mazile, 2011). A number of studies (e.g. Olasehinde et al., 2015; Ruterana 2012 & 2014; Kwikiriza, 2000; Commeyras & Mazile, 2011) indicated that the reading habits of students in Africa are not satisfactory. Similar opinions and observations were reported among Rwandans (Ruterana, 2012 & 2014; Nizeyimana & Bazimaziki, 2020; and Kabagambe & Kanyika, 2023). As the country aspires to become a knowledge-based economy, it is of utmost importance to increase literacy, as a substitute to the word of mouth (Ruterana, 2012 & 2014; Otieno & Hesbon, 2021; Nizeyimana & Bazimaziki, 2020; Kabagambe & Kanyika, 2023) among its citizens, starting from those in schools. The first step to achieve this is to ensure that students develop a positive attitude towards reading. This study aimed at exploring the English reading attitudes of students in selected public upper secondary schools in Kicukiro and Rwamagana.

### **I.2 Research Objectives**

- i. To determine these students' cognitive and emotional attitudes towards English reading.
- ii. To explore these students' behavioural attitudes towards reading English.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Theoretical Review**

The theory of reasoned action (TRA) originated in 1967 as Fishbein's elaboration on Dulay's (1962) theory of propositional control, by incorporating the influence of social pressures (Al-Suqri & Al-Kharusi, 2015). It suggests that a person's behaviour is determined by their intention to perform the behaviour and that this intention is, in turn, a function of their attitude toward the behaviour and subjective norms (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In the view of St

Lawrence and Fortenberry (2013), TRA owes its fame to the emphasis it rests on intentions and its inclusion of social norms as contributory to the individual's attitude which, in turn, serves as predictors of behaviour.

Cunningham (2008) defines attitude as the quality of reacting consistently positively or negatively with respect to a particular object. Attitude encompasses a person's perceptions and predisposition towards a specific stimulus. Wenden (1994) classifies attitudes into three categories: cognitive attitude (beliefs and thoughts about objects), emotional attitude (feelings about objects), and behavioural attitude (behaviours or tendencies to take certain actions).

According to McKenna et al. (2012), reading attitudes are a set of emotions, thoughts, beliefs and intentions that drive and accompany the reading practice. Olasehinde et al. (2015) boldly state that attitude determines a person's level of achievement in all areas of life.

Wolf and Stoodley (2008) and Ruterana (2012) hold that a person's reading attitude stems from their family and social environment. Mathewson (2004) believes that the key factors contributing to students' reading attitude include external motivations such as incentives, goals, norms, and settings. In Lukhele's (2013) view, the reading attitude is also influenced by the person's socio-economic status, level and quality of education received, availability of and access to reading infrastructure and materials. Age has also been found to be a contributory factor to reading attitude among school-age children (Yurdakal, 2019). In the context of second language acquisition, Uslu (2020) argues that attitude to reading is transferable from L1 to L2. Ahmed (2016) made a different observation and reported that readers may sometimes prefer L1 to L2 when it comes to reading.

Generally, studies (e.g. by Sheikh & Loan, 2010; Priajana, 2013; Ahmed, 2016; Baba & Affendi, 2020) have indicated that students demonstrate a positive attitude toward reading as respondents in these studies reported themselves to have an understanding of the impact reading has on their academic performance and cognitive development. Under normal circumstances, a positive cognitive attitude to reading serves as a prerequisite for the establishment of good reading habits (Karim & Hasan, 2007; Cunningham, 2008; Olasehinde et al, 2015).

## **2.2 Empirical Review**

### **2.2.1. Cognitive and Emotional Attitude to Reading**

Learners' cognitive and emotional attitudes to reading are not a new topic in the academia. Abidin et al. (2011) found that 40% of Malaysian student respondents perceived reading as a necessity, and 66% of the respondents understood the impact reading had on their academic performance. Similarly, Sheikh and Loan (2010), Priajana (2013) and Baba and Affendi (2020) reported that their respondents believed that reading could contribute to their professional growth. As far as English reading is concerned, similar findings were reported among Indonesian students (Nazhari et al., 2016). On the other hand, Ahmed (2016) revealed that the emotional English reading attitude of students in Malaysian public universities was unsatisfactory as they preferred reading in Malay. With a focus on English reading in ESL contexts, Iftanti (2012) revealed that students who demonstrated positive attitudes to reading (1) were eager to read; (2) spent most of their time reading English text; (3) showed strong interest to read English regularly; (4) kept being motivated to read English despite the difficulties; (5) had strong willingness to go to the libraries and bookstores to find their own reading materials; (6) had positive beliefs about reading English; (7) made use of the internet as a resource to read English; and (8) claimed themselves to have good reading habits. Keskin (2013) found that the emotional dimension was the most contributory factor to the establishment of attitudes to an object.

### **2.2.2 Behavioural Attitude to English Reading**

Students' behavioural attitude towards reading has caught the attention of scholars across regions. In Malaysia, Karim and Hasan (2007) reported that gender and academic programs influenced students' reading behaviour, with female students reading more than their male counterparts. A survey conducted by Abidin et al. (2011) indicated that approximately 48% of respondents read in their free time. Ahmed (2016) observed that reading was excluded from prioritized recreational activities of many of his respondents. In 2020, Baba and Affendi revealed that ESL students exhibited a positive behavioural attitude towards academic and recreational reading. In Indonesia, Nazhari et al. (2016) found that most students did not have a good behavioural attitude to reading English, as only 12.83% of students read English in their spare time while most students read English for academic purposes. In Nigeria, Oriogu et al. (2017) reported that the majority of students read to pass exams, and only a minority of them read for leisure or intellectual curiosity. Olasehinde et al. (2015) attributed this poor behavioural reading attitude among today's Nigerian youth to social problems that include illiteracy, poverty, corruption, and lack of reading infrastructure and resources. In Rwanda, Ruterana (2012 & 2014), Otieno and Hesbon (2021), Nizeyimana and Bazimaziki (2020), and Kabagambe and Kanyika (2023) converged on the poor reading culture and habits among Rwandans of various age groups.

### III.METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Design and approach

The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of students' attitude towards English reading. A descriptive survey design was used. Dörnyei (2003) describes surveys as the most relevant kinds of studies involving factual information, behavioural information and attitudinal information. In this study, quantifiable and qualitative data were collected, hence the use of mixed-method approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

#### 3.2 Study Population and the Sample

The study population in this survey consisted of 921 students enrolled in selected public upper secondary schools in Kicukiro and Rwamagana for the academic year 2022- 2023. Of these, a sample of 182 (i.e. 20%) students (91 males & 93 females) were randomly chosen. In addition, 4 teachers of English were purposively selected as respondents.

#### 3.3 Instruments

Quantitative data were collected from student respondents through the administration of a written, Likert-type questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed in reference to those ones used by other researchers in the field, namely Iftanti (2012) and Ahmed (2016). It consisted of a total of 9 items aimed at extracting information to suit the objectives of the study. An interview guide was also used to collect qualitative data from selected teachers of English.

#### 3.4 Data Presentation and Analysis

Quantitative data from returned questionnaires were processed using MS Excel 2013 and presented in tabular (frequency and percentages) and graphic modes. Heat maps were also applied to render tabulated information easier for analysis and interpretation.

On the other hand, qualitative data from semi-structured interviews were collected through note-taking and processed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) and quick impressionist summary (Jagongo & Kinyua, 2013) as the interviewees did not consent to the recording of the interviews. Triangulation was done to address inconsistencies in the data.

### IV.FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

#### 4.1 Students' Cognitive and Emotional Attitude towards English Reading

The findings on students' cognitive & emotional attitudes to English reading are as follows:

**Table 1**

*Students' Cognitive and Emotional Attitude towards English Reading*

	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		TOTAL	
	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	$\Sigma f$	$\Sigma \%$
Reading English is interesting	3	2	0	0	86	47	95	52	184	100
Reading English can improve my English	0	0	3	2	48	26	133	72	184	100
Reading English can improve my knowledge	0	0	0	0	42	23	142	77	184	100
Reading can help me get better grades in school	2	1	11	6	59	32	112	61	184	100
I don't like reading English	92	50	49	27	16	9	27	15	184	100
Reading English cannot improve my English	113	61	47	26	17	9	7	4	184	100
Reading English cannot improve my knowledge	119	65	43	23	18	10	4	2	184	100
Reading English cannot help me to get better grades in school	113	61	29	16	12	7	30	16	184	100

These findings from quantitative data indicate that our respondents consistently (23% agree and 77% strongly agree) believed that they could improve their knowledge through reading English, none of the respondents viewed English reading as a waste of time. Instead, it was a shared belief among respondents that reading texts in English carried a lot of significance in the process of knowledge building. They believed that reading textbooks, the overwhelming majority of which were in English, was an indispensable means to increase their knowledge. In addition to that, 99% (47% agree and 52% strongly agree) of them viewed English reading as an interesting activity. It

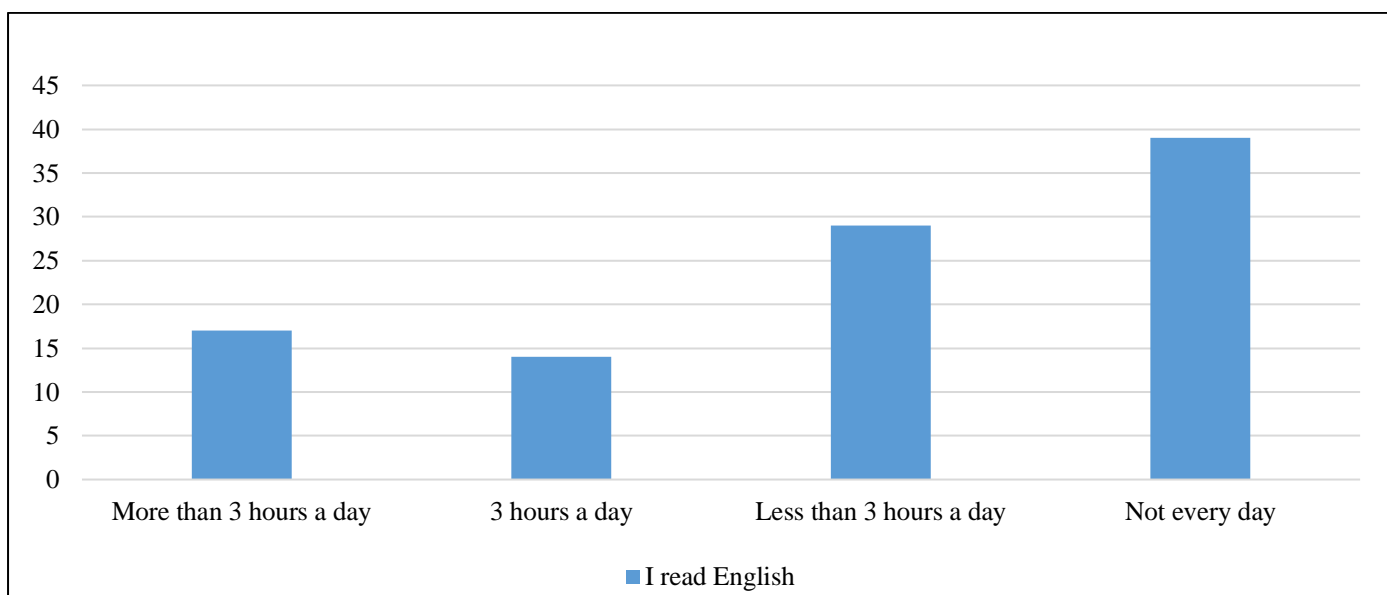


should be noted that these respondents were already familiar with English as they had been receiving instruction in it since primary. So, they had acquired a certain level of reading proficiency in English and did not find it challenging since, at the exception of specific subjects such as Kinyarwanda and French, the textbooks these respondents had exposure to were all in English. Only as a few as one percent of them reported themselves to have either a neutral or negative feeling about reading in English. As far as language skills development was concerned, 98% (26% agree and 72% strongly agree) of the respondents understood that they could improve their English skills and proficiency through reading. As ESL students with little exposure to English outside the school setting, respondents considered English reading as a good companion in their journey to skills and proficiency development in English. As members of an endoglossic community where Kinyarwanda mediates most, if not all, communication and interactions, they viewed reading as an important platform to meet English beyond classroom walls and, perhaps, the school compound. Only few of them had a different opinion from that. Likewise, 93% (32% agree and 61% strongly agree) of the respondents believed that English reading could influence their academic performance. Being the language of instruction, improved skills in it meant that respondents could gain a deeper understanding of learning content, explanations and instructions for learning activities both in and outside school, which finally helped them to score better at graded work such as presentations, tests and written examinations. All of this indicated that the English reading attitude of our population was positive. The findings from qualitative data, however, painted a different picture.

In contrast with self-reported information, reports from one-on-one interviews with teachers indicated teachers’ skepticism on students’ perceptions of the value of reading in general. In a description of these students’ cognitive and emotional attitudes to reading, for instance, N (2023) said, “They [students] don’t like reading. For sure they do not know the importance of reading.” To the interviewee, had these students known the benefits associated with reading, they would take advantage of their free time and engage themselves in reading the abundant textbooks in school libraries; a good number of them would borrow textbooks and other reading materials and read them both in school and at home, which was not the case. Apart from recreational reading, teachers equally expressed concern that students’ engagement in academic reading was of little magnitude. “Even if you tell them that the reading is going to be graded, many of them don’t read,” G (2003) reported. This indicated that these students did not engage themselves in reading even for academic purposes. Such a description obviously subjects students’ self-reported cognitive and emotional attitudes to suspicion.

#### 4.2 Students’ Behavioural Attitude towards English Reading

Quantitatively, the amount of daily time dedicated to English reading was used as an indicator of students’ behavioural attitude towards English reading. The findings are presented below:



**Figure 1**  
*Students’ Behavioural Attitude towards English Reading*

As illustrated in Figure 1, only 60% of the respondents reported themselves to be regular readers of English. That is, they read English every day. Of these, 17% reported themselves to read English for more than 3 hours every

day; 14% reported themselves to spend three hours reading English every day; and 29% reported themselves to spend less than 3 hours reading English every day. Bearing in mind that these students spend at least 7 hours at school where the language of instruction is English, I deduce that self-reported data are in relation to free time reading. On the other hand, the figure above also shows that approximately 40% of respondents reported themselves to be non-regular readers of English.

The findings from qualitative data also revealed the non-reading status of these students' behavioural attitude towards reading in general. "Sometimes they don't even read when it is required of them," N (2023) disclosed. K (2023) lamented, "Are books not rotting in the library?" From personal observation over the course of five years of experience as an English language teacher in different upper secondary schools, G expressed a similar conviction and gave other facts:

*Reading is normally a common practice for students in good schools because there is too much competition among students there. In schools like this one of ours, only those [students] whose parents and/or older siblings have been in formal education like reading. Again, those who are specializing in languages or other combinations where English is a major subject read more because they understand the impact reading has on their academic performance.*

Through concept-checking questioning, it was discovered that the interviewee used the phrases 'schools like this one' and 'good schools' to refer to day-schools and boarding schools, respectively. Thus, the quotation above shows that some students, depending on the school they attend, developed a positive behavioural attitude towards reading, and the main reason for this was peer pressure. In schools where such pressure was nonexistent, students' behavioural attitude to reading faded away. All the selected schools in this study were day-schools, so it would be surprising to find a positive behavioural attitude to English reading among students. The interviewer touched on students' family background as a contributor to their behavioural attitude towards reading. This means that home environment needs to be a literacy friendly environment for a student to develop a positive behavioural attitude towards reading. Again, the subject of specialization may be either a hindrance or contributor to the development of a good behavioural attitude towards reading. If, for example a student is majoring in language subjects, their behavioural attitude to reading will be better than their counterparts who are majoring in science subjects.

### 4.3 Discussion

First, our investigation on students' attitude toward English reading sought to uncover their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings about English reading (McKenna et al., 2012). The analysis of quantitative data from the returned questionnaires indicated that our respondents demonstrated positive emotional and cognitive attitudes toward English reading as they viewed it as an interesting activity capable of influencing academic performance and professional development. These findings are in agreement with the results from earlier studies by Sheikh and Loan (2010), Priajana (2013), Ahmed (2016), and Baba and Affendi (2020). Qualitative data raised skepticism on this topic, though. The reason for this could be the predictability, under normal circumstances, of a positive correlation between the variables of emotion and cognition and actions.

Second, our attention was drawn to their behavioral attitude toward English reading. The findings in this study pointed to the alarming status of the behavioral English reading attitude of these students as indicated by their little and irregular involvement in reading activities. From this, we deduce that having a positive cognitive and emotional attitude is not a necessary and sufficient condition for having a positive behavioral attitude, as suggested by Karim and Hasan (2007), Cunningham (2008), and Olasehinde et al. (2015). Certainly, a number of factors do contribute to the behavioral reading attitude of students: social environment (Wolf & Stoodley, 2008; Ruterana, 2012; Guthrie and Greaney, 1991; Uslu, 2020), area of specialization (Karim & Hasan, 2007), incentives (Ruterana, 2012; MathFewson, 2004; Lukhele, 2013), and, according to Baba and Affendi (2020), the influence from parents, availability of libraries in the community, role-modeling teachers, and the schoolwork that is closely related to library reading. The findings in this study agree with the findings by Ruterana (2012 & 2014), Otieno and Hesbon (2021), Nizeyimana and Bazimaziki (2020), and Kabagambe and Kanyika (2023). It is important to note that poor behavioral attitude towards extensive and recreational reading was not a characteristic solely restricted to our study population. Similar observations were reported in Nigeria (Olasehinde et al., 2015; Oriogu et al., 2017), Indonesia (Nazhari et al., 2016), and Malaysia (Ahmed, 2016; Karim & Hasan, 2007). Unlike our study population, however, students in Nigeria reported to face a problem of reading books and facilities (Olasehinde et al., 2015). Therefore, our population's poor behavioral attitude toward English reading could be attributed to the poor history of reading and writing in Africa (Kwikiriza, 2000; Ruterana, 2012).

## V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 Conclusions

Reading has been described as a critical tool for knowledge and language skills development. Attitudes to reading serve as the foundation for reading habits and a reading culture. The key finding in this study was that the English reading attitude of these students was not impressive. The irony is that this situation contrasted with the study population's familiarity with English, their basic reading skills in English, and the availability of English reading resources and facilities in the schools. This study concludes that there was a high risk, for these students, of turning themselves into alliterates, with repercussions on their English language proficiency and professional development.

### 5.2 Recommendations

Our population's attitude towards English reading was not good enough for the establishment of good reading habits. Teachers (of all subjects) could strengthen students' attitude to reading English by providing tasks and activities that would help students to read extensively. Schools could also introduce English reading-oriented programs as part of co-curricular activities to turn students into regular readers of English.

The findings in this study add value to the existing awareness on the English reading attitudes of students in public upper secondary schools. Teachers of English and ESL stakeholders should let this awareness serve as the basis on which to decide on the type, quality and quantity of support that best addresses the gap in students' English language skills development.

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