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# Reading at The University: Difficulty vs Fear

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**Abstract**

The act of reading is not a mere interaction between the reader and the text. It also involves the engagement between the reader and what he or she believes in. Readers find reading difficult because they have difficulties with the vocabulary of the target language used in the reading text. Next, some already have language barriers and understanding is hindered by language related issues such as sentence structure and or culture-related phrases. Readers fear reading because of top-down anxiety, bottom-up anxiety or even the classroom reading instructions. This study is done to investigate readers' perception of reading comprehension difficulties and also readers' fear of reading. Thirty respondents from social sciences faculty in a public university were randomly chosen for this study. The instrument used is a questionnaire. The survey has 3 sections. Section A is about demographic profile; section B is about perceived difficulties in reading comprehension and section C is about reading anxiety. This study has revealed that the difficulties in the reading comprehension were more worrying when it comes to reading. Readers did not blame their lack of vocabulary knowledge for their reading difficulty. They were not very confident when it comes to answering the reading comprehension questions. Learners were anxious when they were given texts they had no background knowledge of. This fear supersedes the other fear for bottom-up reading and classroom reading. Overall findings of the study bear interesting pedagogical implications in the teaching and learning of reading.

**Keywords:** Reading Comprehension, Top-Down Anxiety, Bottom-Up Anxiety, Reading Classroom, Difficulties.

**Introduction**

In the world of gadgets and online engagement, the definition of reading has extended to reading electronically. This is because the act of reading is not a mere interaction between the reader and the text. It also involves the engagement between the reader and what he or she believes in. Reading benefits the reader in many ways. One obvious benefit is the increase of vocabulary for the readers. Readers' self-esteem improved because they added to their

wealth of knowledge and be more confident to discuss what they have read about. Next, readers' critical and analytical thinking skills improved when/if they read about something they do not agree with and the information can trigger more discussions.
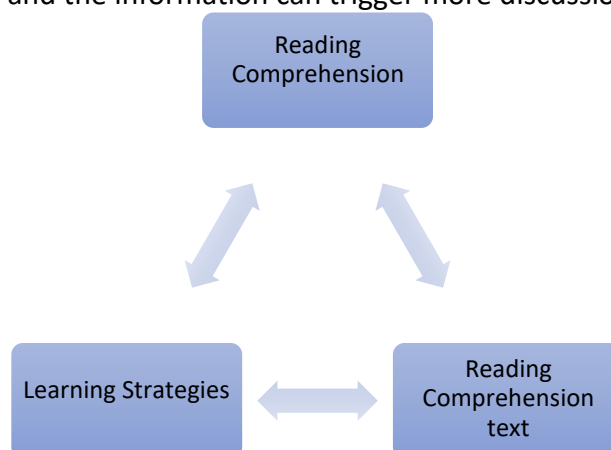


Figure 1-Comprehending Reading (source : Rahmat ,2018)

Nevertheless, reading can become a difficult task for some reasons. When readers have to read in a language other than their mother tongue; especially so if the learning elements of the language requires them to understand what they are reading. Figure 1 shows the model for comprehending reading. According to Rahmat (2018), there are three main elements in the model. When readers are given texts to read, the ability to comprehend and elicit meaning from the text is influenced by the text given, the activity designed by the instructor and also the readers' schemata. The schemata can be influenced by their socio-cultural context. When reading becomes difficult, readers may find the reading experience no longer positive.

**Research Objective**
  i.  To explores why learners perceive reading comprehension as difficult.
  ii.  To investigate what causes reading fear.

Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions;
  i. How do learners perceive reading comprehension difficulty?
  ii.  How do learners perceive reading fear?

**Literature Review**
**Introduction**
This section discusses reading comprehension difficulties, fear of reading, past studies, and conceptual framework.

**Reading Comprehension Difficulty and Reading Fear?**
There are many reasons why readers find reading comprehension difficult. According to Rahmat and Mohandas (2020), readers find reading difficult because they have difficulties with the vocabulary of the target language used in the reading text. Next, some already have language barriers and understanding is hindered by language related issues such as sentence structure and or culture-related phrases. In addition to that Rahmat (2019) found that the learner feels that reading comprehension is challenging. Challenges faced in reading comprehension can be caused by the perception of reading difficulties that the learners have made their mind to believe.

The fear of reading can stem from some factors. According to Rahmat et al (2020), fear of reading can be caused by top-down anxiety. When readers have top-down reading anxiety , they may lack background knowledge of the reading materials. Next, some have bottom-up reading anxiety. This refers to the readers' lack of ability to understand the linguistic functions of the text. For example, according to Altunkaya & Ates (2018), some readers have problems with pronunciation of the target language. They may have problems with the properties of the text, or even the vocabulary. Finally, some readers fear reading because of their perceived difficulties with the reading text. These perceived fears may or may not affect the readers' understanding of the text; yet the perceived fear exists.

**Past Studies**
There are several past studies done to investigate difficulties in reading and also fear of reading.
The study by  Lesaux & Kieffer (2010) explored the nature of reading comprehension difficulties among early adolescence. 399 participants were chosen for the study. Among them  182 native speakers of English, and 262 students had  problems reading in English. These two populations were evenly distributed among three skill profiles of struggling readers. Findings showed that the majority of struggling readers were found to have developed basic fluency skills. The findings also demonstrate the need for middle schools to identify why students are having comprehension difficulties and to target instruction to meet their specific needs.
Next, Rika (2018) investigated factors that cause students' difficulties in comprehending narrative text. The respondents for  this  qualitative study are  8th grade students. Data collection is done by observation, interview and using a questionnaire. Findings revealed interesting information about reading difficulties. Firstly, the difficulties that students faced in comprehending narrative text are lack of familiarity with the subject matter. They also could not understand the  language feature on narrative text. They had limited vocabulary knowledge in comprehending narrative text.  Next,  another factor that caused students' difficulties in comprehending narrative text of the eighth grade was that the students were not familiar with the reading text. Finally, the difficulties stem from the  teachers' effort in solving the students' difficulties in comprehending narrative text.
The study by Taha and Yousif (2018) is done to investigate the problems encountered by students in their reading skills. The respondents were 120 students at secondary level. This quantitative research used a questionnaire as the instrument. Findings revealed that students' problems came from their lack of word recognition skills. They also found it difficult to derive meaning from what they read, besides also have problems with vocabulary and pronunciation.
Finally, the study by Jafarigohar & Behrooznia (2012) investigated the correlation between the construct of Foreign Language Reading Anxiety (FLRA) and reading comprehension skill among Iranian distance EFL learners with age and gender . The research was carried out with a group of 112 male and female junior and senior students studying English at Mashhad Payame Noor University. The instrument used was a  A33-item Likert-style Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale, a 28-item reading comprehension test, and a demographic questionnaire. Findings  indicated that there was a significant negative relationship between FLRA and reading comprehension. However, there was  no such relationship found between foreign language reading anxiety and age; and finally compared to males, females suffered more from anxiety.

## Conceptual Framework

When reading texts in a target language other than the mother tongue, the learners face difficulties and fear. There are factor adds on to the reading difficulties and also factors that can reduce the fear. This study is rooted from the reading comprehension difficulties by Rahmat et al (2018) for difficulties and Somro et al (2019) reading anxiety. The difficulties that readers face can be categorized by wither caused by the learners themselves or by the environment that surrounds them. The learner may have difficulty in understanding, or may lack focus in the reading. The learners may also found the text difficult because they are lazy to read themselves.

On the other side of the beam is the fear for reading, Some fear of reading can be seen as top top-down anxiety . This is caused learners' lack of background or schemata of the reading content or even the lack of general reading ability on the part of the learners. Next, the fear can be bottom-up. Some learners have problems with their grammar and vocabulary that hinders automatic understanding when they read. Finally, the fear may be caused by the classroom reading activities done by the instructors. Some teaching methods may add more anxiety to the learners who have low self-esteem in their reading skills.
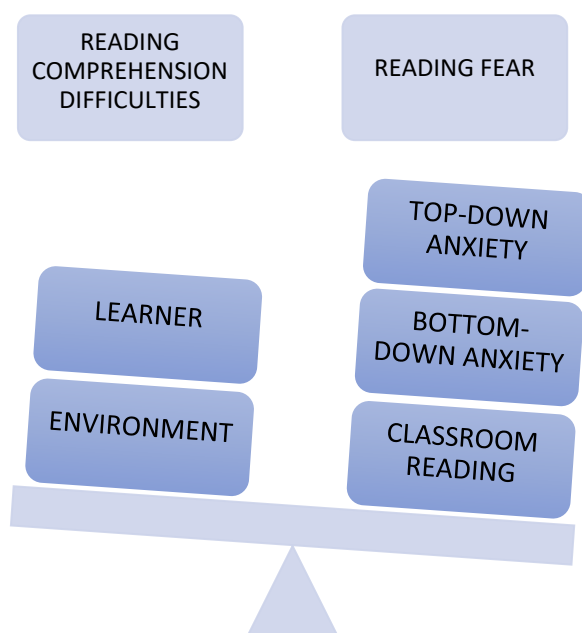


Figure 2- Conceptual Framework of the Study- Difficulties Vs Fear

## Methodology

This study uses quantitative design. 30 respondents from social sciences faculty in a public university were randomly chosen for this study.  The instrument (refer to table1)used is a questionnaire adapted from Rahmat et al (2018) for perceived reading difficulties and Somro et al (2019) for reading anxiety. with 3 sections. Section A is about demographic profile; section B is about perceived difficulties in reading comprehension and section C is about reading anxiety.

Table 1

*Distribution of Items in Survey*

| SECTION | CONSTRUCT | CATEGORY | SUB-CATEGORY | NO OF ITEMS | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B | READING COMPREHENSION DIFFICULTIES | LEARNER | Difficulty in understanding | 2 | | 8 |
| | | | Lack of focus | 2 | | |
| | | | Laziness in Reading | 1 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | ENVIRONMENT | Uninteresting Content | 1 | | |
| | | | No aids in reading | 1 | | |
| | | | Problem in Vocabulary | 1 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| C | READING ANXETY | TOP-DOWN | Background and Cultural Knowledge | 3 | 7 | 27 |
| | | | General Reading Ability | 4 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | BOTTOM-UP | Vocabulary | 8 | 14 | |
| | | | Grammar | 6 | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | CLASSROOM READING | Teaching Method | | 6 | |
| | TOTAL NUMBER OF ITEMS | | | | | 35 |

Table 1

*Reliability Statistics*

| Cronbach's Alpha | N of Items |
|---|---|
| .937 | 35 |

The Cronbach alpha for the instrument was found to be 0.937 thus showing internal reliability (table. 2). Data collected is analysed using SPSS version 23 to reveal frequency of mean scores.
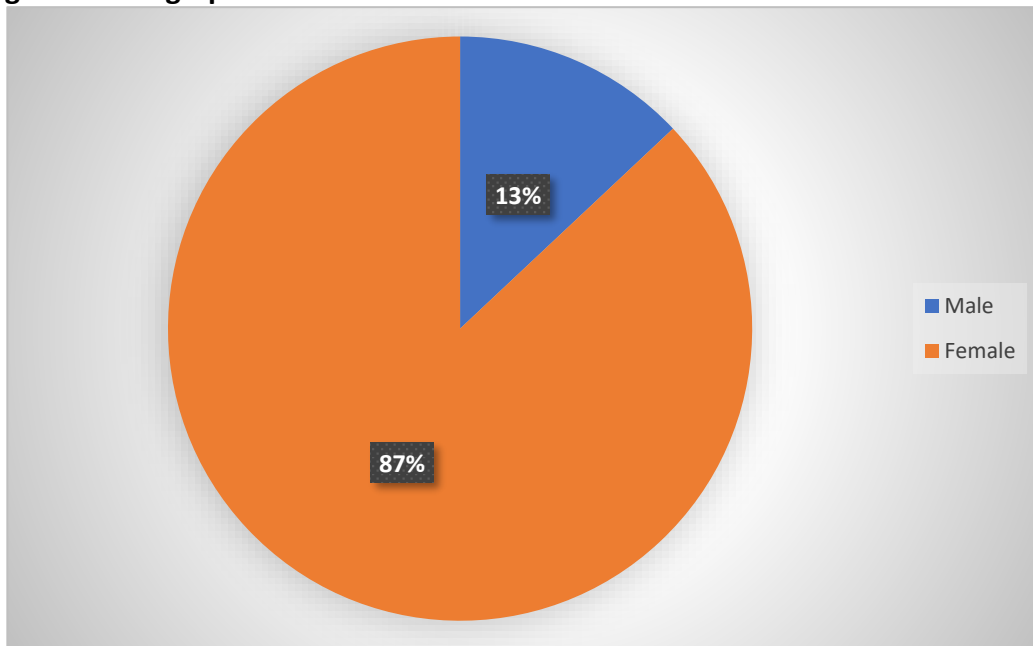
**Findings**
**Findings for Demographic Profile**



Figure 3- Percentage for Gender

Figure 3 presents the percentage for gender. 13 % of the respondents are male and 87% are female.

**Findings for Difficulty**

This section presents findings to answer research question 1: How do learners perceive reading comprehension difficulty?
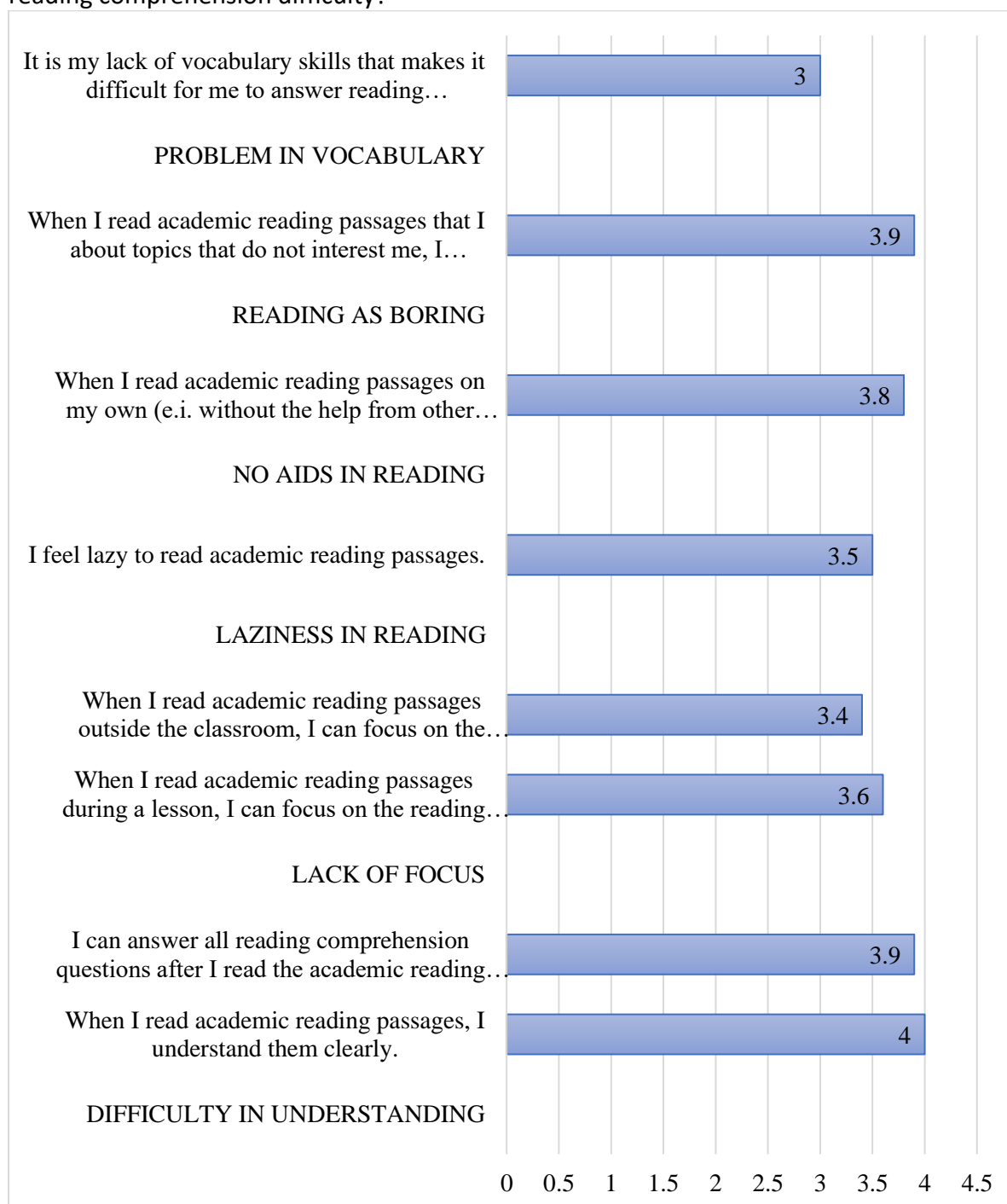


Figure 4 - Mean for Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Figure 4 presents the mean for reading comprehension difficulty. High mean scores were recorded for "When I read academic reading passages, I understand them clearly" (mean=4), "I can answer all reading comprehension questions after I read the academic reading passage." (mean=3.9), "and When I read academic reading passages that I about topics that do not interest me, I become bored" (mean=3.9). The lowest mean is for "It is my

lack of vocabulary skills that makes it difficult for me to answer reading comprehension exercises" (mean=3).

**Findings for Fear of Reading**

This section presents findings to answer research question 2: How do learners perceive reading fear?  In the context of this study, fear of reading is categorised into (a) top-down anxiety, (b)bottom-up, and (c) classroom reading.
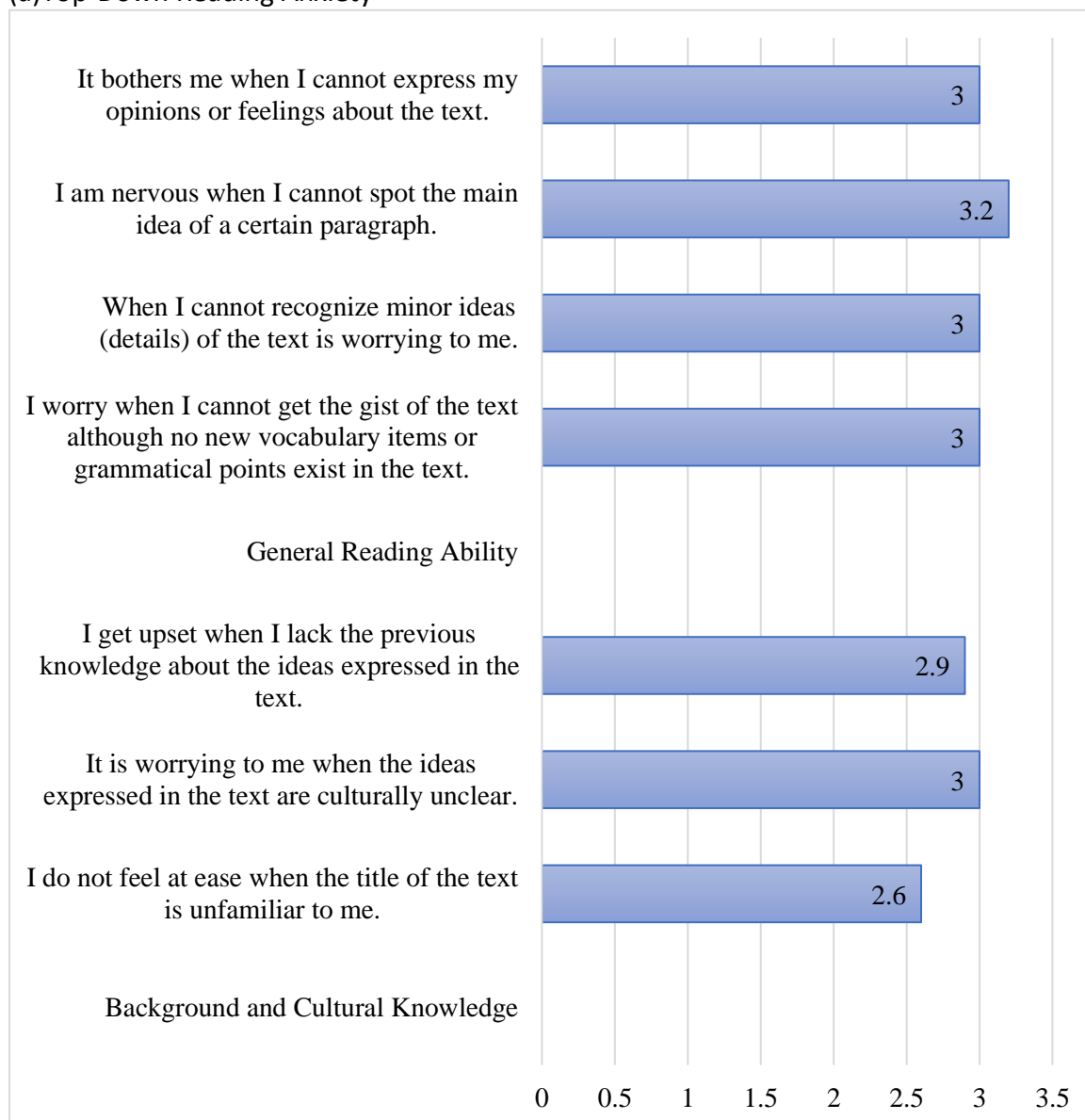
(a)Top-Down Reading Anxiety



Figure 5- Mean for Top-Down Reading Anxiety

Figure 5 presents for top-down reading anxiety. The highest mean (3.2 ) is for "I am nervous when I cannot spot the main idea of a certain paragraph". The lowest mean (2.6) is for "I do not feel at ease when the title of the text is unfamiliar to me".
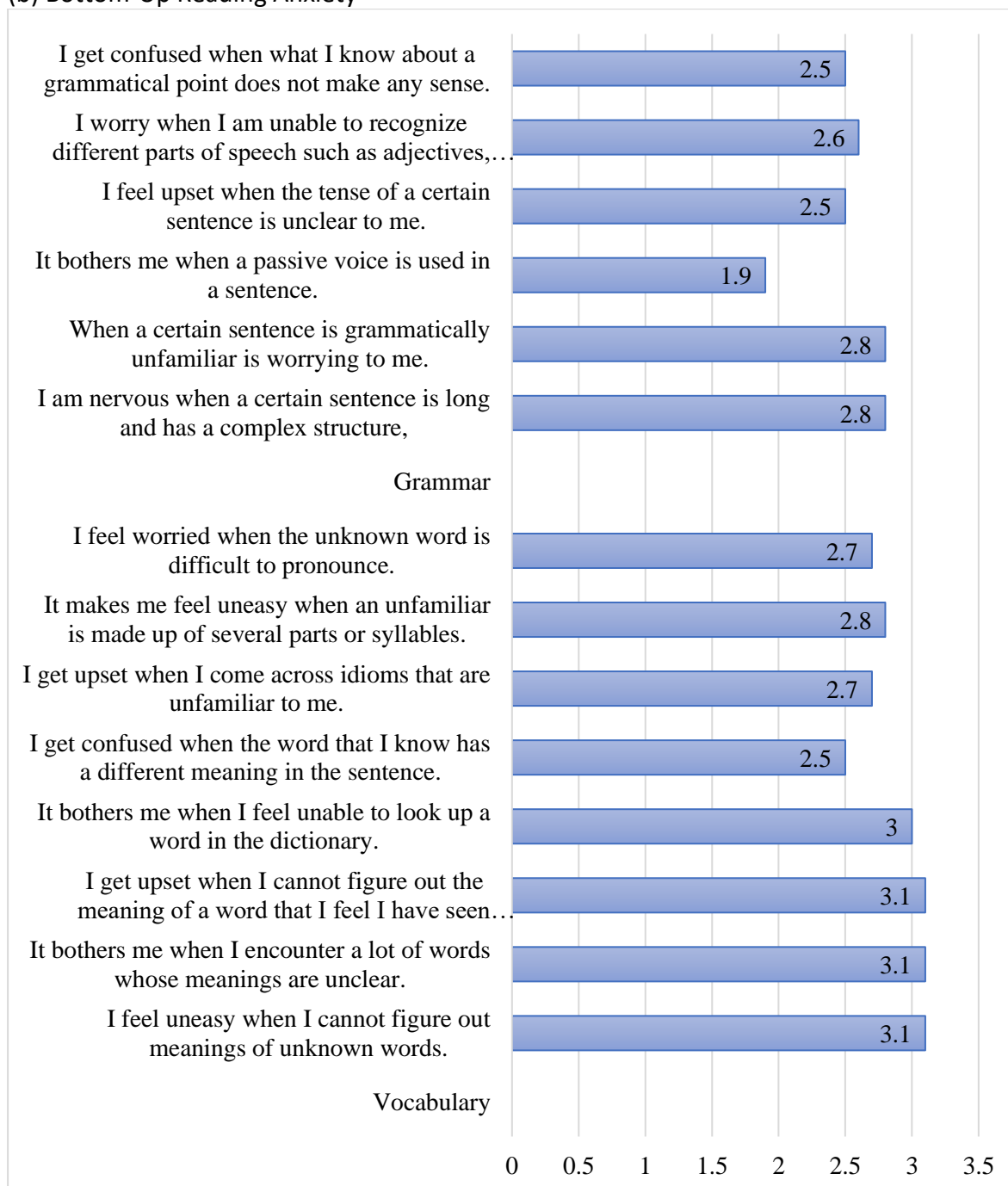
(b) Bottom-Up Reading Anxiety



Figure 6- Mean for Bottom-Up Reading Anxiety

Figure 6 presents the mean for bottom-up reading anxiety. The highest mean of 3.1 are for "feel uneasy when I cannot figure out meanings of unknown words.", "It bothers me when I encounter a lot of words whose meanings are unclear.", and "I get upset when I cannot figure out the meaning of a word that I feel I have seen before." The lowest mean (1.9) is for "It bothers me when a passive voice is used in a sentence".
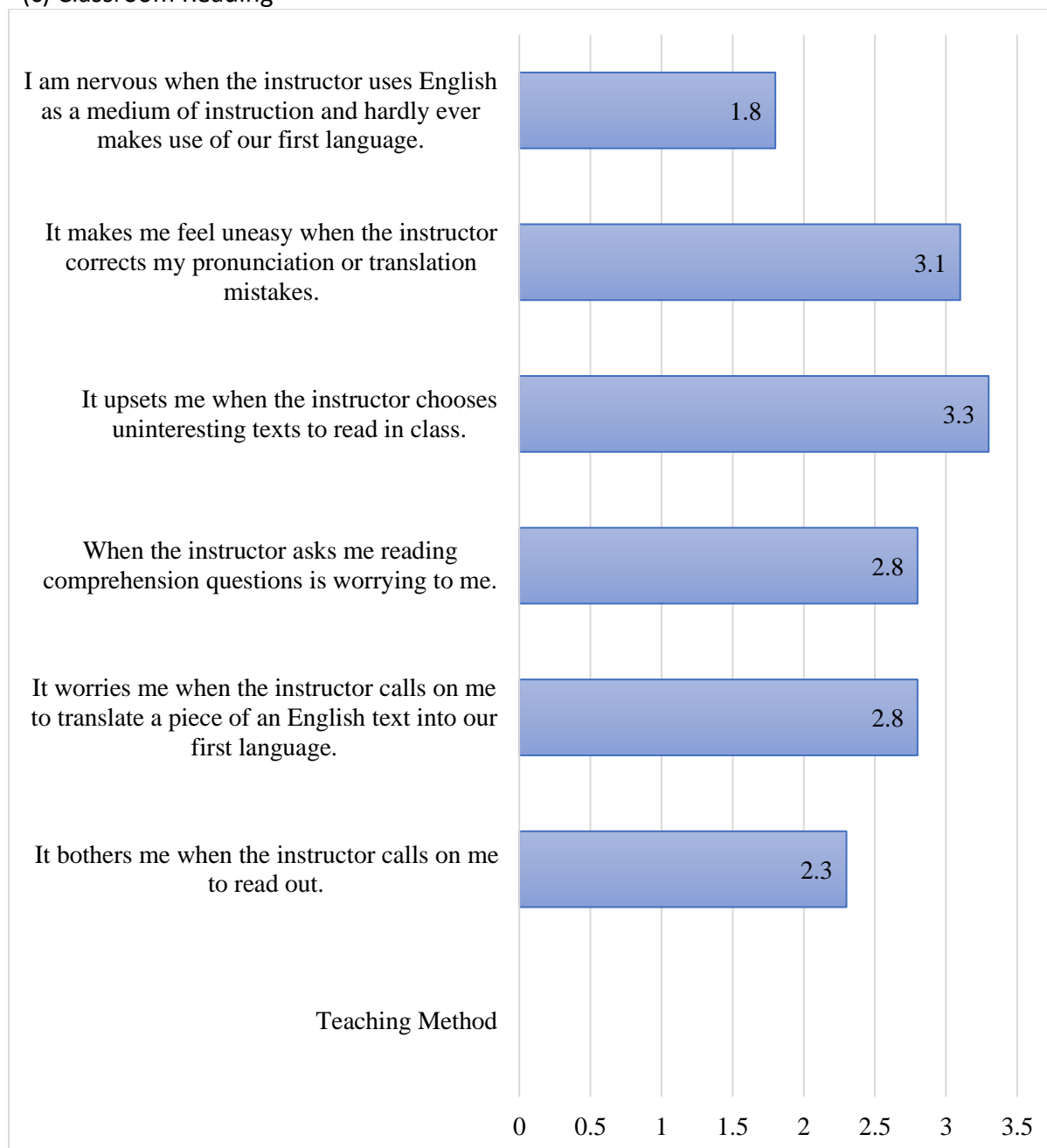
(c) Classroom Reading



Figure 7- Mean for Classroom Reading

Figure 7 shows the mean for classroom reading. The highest mean (3.3) is for "It upsets me when the instructor chooses uninteresting texts to read in class.". The lowest mean (1.8) is for "I am nervous when the instructor uses English as a medium of instruction and hardly ever makes use of our first language.".

**Conclusion**
**Summary of Findings and Discussion**
**Reading Comprehension Difficulties**

In summary, readers did not blame their lack of vocabulary knowledge for their reading difficulty. They were not very confident when it comes to answering the reading comprehension questions. They were also not very sure about the reading topic they were

given. The findings in this study is in accordance with those by Rika (2018); Taha and Yousif (2018) who found that readers were concerned when they were not sure of the topic in the reading text or even the words used by the authors.
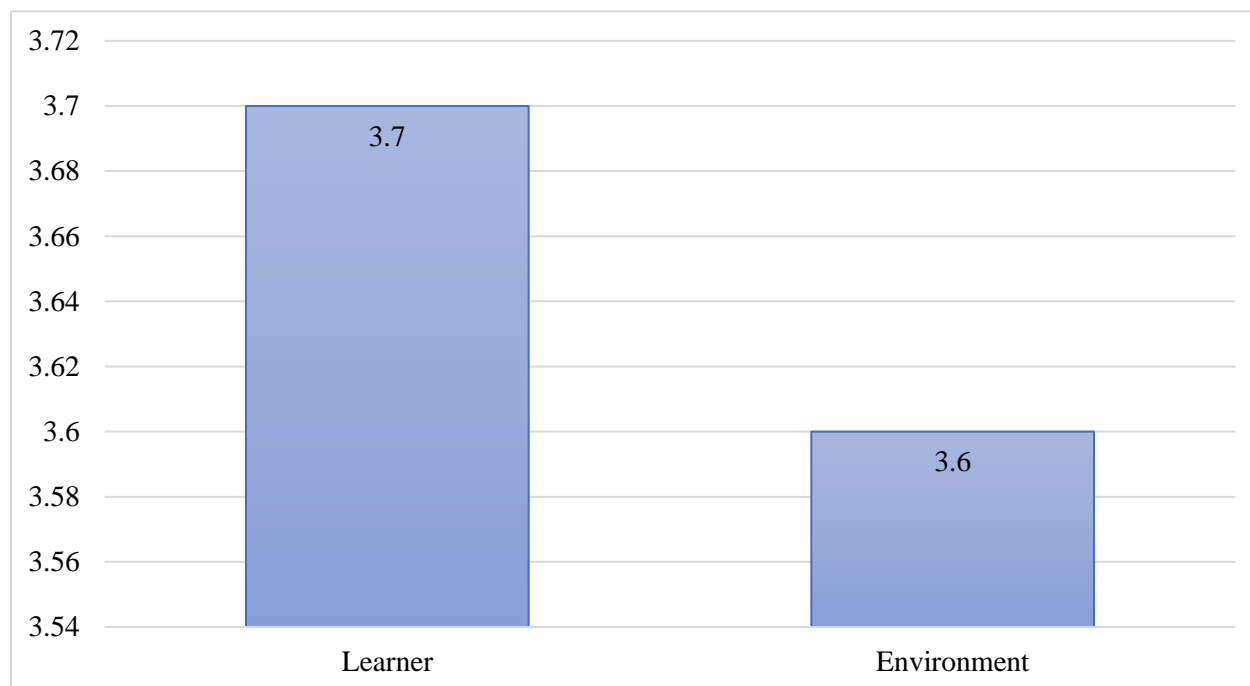


Figure 8- Comparison within Reading Difficulties

Figure 8 shows the overall mean for Reading Difficulties. Respondents in this study reported higher overall mean score for learner. This means the difficulties came for the learners' lack of reading comprehension abilities rather than the environment.

**Reading Fear**
Next, the summary for reading fear reveal that readers feared unfamiliarity. They are anxious if they are not familiar with the choice of words and also sentencing used by the authors. Similar findings were also reported by Rika (2018); Taha and Yousif (2018) and also Lesaux & Kieffer (2010) who found that fluency in ready also referred to being familiar with the writing pattern in the reading texts.
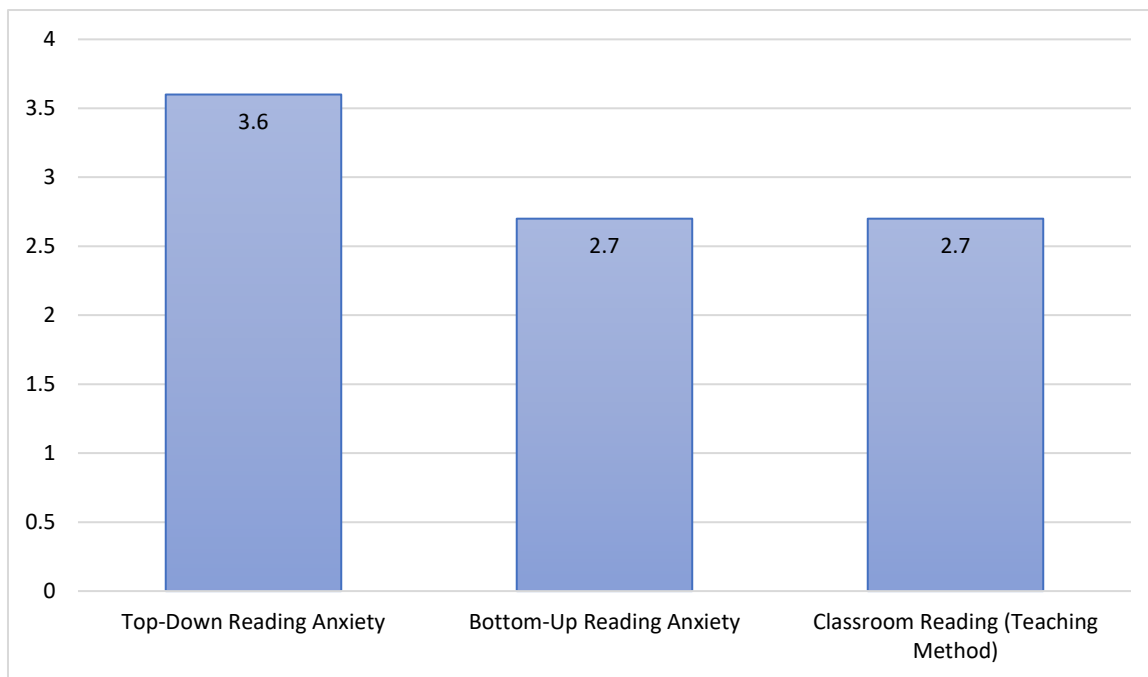
Figure 9- Total Mean for Reading Fear

Figure 9 shows the total mean for reading fear. The highest mean is for top-down reading anxiety. This means learners were anxious when they were given texts they had no background knowledge of. This fear supersedes the other fear for bottom-up reading and classroom reading.
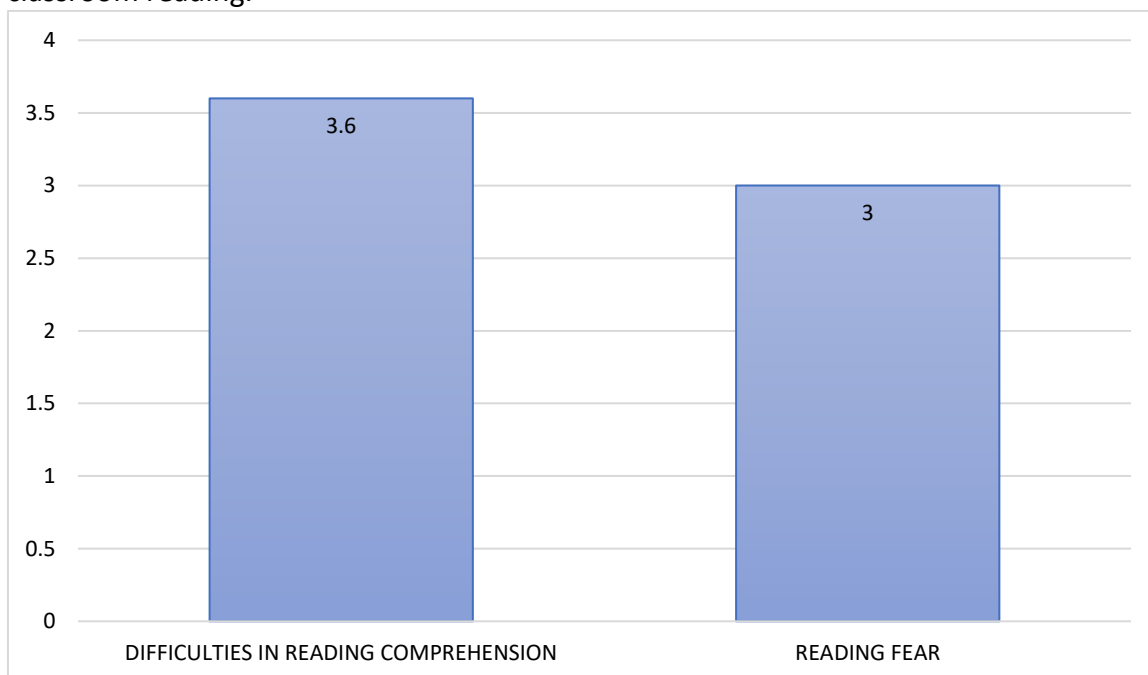


Figure 10- Difficult Vs Fear

Figure 10 reveals the total mean score for the comparison of reading difficulties and reading fear. In the context of this study, learners were more worried about their difficulties than they did of their reading fear.

The contextual framework of this study presented a query of reading difficulty versus reading fear. A summary of the findings depicts that learners were more concerned with the difficulties when they perform reading comprehension exercises. Interestingly, in the context of this study, findings revealed that in the order of total mean scores, learners faced difficulties when they had to use top-down strategies, then bottom-up and lastly; they found minimal difficulties with the reading teacher's methods of teaching. This findings of this study has added an interesting body of knowledge to the teaching of reading comprehension. This body of knowledge revealed that the use of appropriate teaching approaches (top-down and bottom-up approaches) are more relevant in reading instruction to ESL and EFL learners.

**Pedagogical Implications**

This study has revealed that the difficulties in the reading comprehension were more worrying when it comes to reading. Reading instructors should spend more time teaching readings strategies in reading comprehension classes so learners have less difficulties. According to Rahmat et. al (2022), the teaching of strategies are needed to overcome reading comprehension difficulties. Classroom activities should allow for discussions of reading passages with peers. Future research could explore the use of different reading comprehension strategies and how learners perceive their different uses.

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