

# Gender differences in the reading habits of secondary school students of Osun State public schools

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## ABSTRACT

The research evaluated among secondary school students the time spent in reading and the reading materials preferred. The purpose for which they read was also identified. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted which focused on public secondary schools of Osun State, Southwest, Nigeria. A multistage random sampling technique was used to select 1101 senior secondary school students from 12 public schools covering the 6 educational zones of Osun State. A 20 item Reading Habit Scale was used. The questionnaire was administered with the aid of a research assistant and retrieved immediately from the volunteers after completion. One thousand and seventy-nine copies of the questionnaire were analyzed, 43% of the respondents were boys while 57% were girls. Only 18.6% of the respondents were daily long-time readers (>1 to 6 hours per day) which comprised 17% of the boys and 20% of the girls. Boys more than girls read past questions and solutions while girls more than boys read textbooks and subject teachers note. Boys (98%) more than girls (97%) indicated they read in order to get better grades in tests and examinations. Conversely, girls more than the boys read for a better understanding of topics taught by the teacher and for pleasure (84:76%). A statistically significant gender difference exists with respect to "reading for pleasure" ( $\chi=8.92$ ,  $p=0.003$ ). Most of the students have poor reading habits with respect to daily reading time. Girls were more daily long-time readers and also read for pleasure.

**Keywords:** Gender difference, reading habits, reading time, reading materials, reading purpose.

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## INTRODUCTION

Reading develops into a habit when it is done repeatedly and consistently for some time. Busari (2016) and Bana (2020) described reading habit as a practice of reading regularly, the cultivation of an attitude, and possession of skills that make reading a pleasurable, regular and constant activity.

The matter of reading habit is a much-discussed subject and this will continue as its development remains a vital factor that builds a solid footing for prominence in life and in making students become lifelong readers. Parents desire that their children do well in school. Also, teachers' best encouragement and expectation are to see students perform excellently in school and future endeavors. Academic success to a large extent depends on students' possession of an impressive reading habit as studies established a strong relationship between

reading habit and academic performance. Developing a reading habit is vital to the future of students not just academically but in everyday life. Reading habits undoubtedly can increase attention span. It allows students to focus better and read for longer periods. Students' reading habits largely depend on various background variables such as race, gender and prior literacy activities. Tor-Akwer and Chorun (2014) noted that student likings change as they grow older with both boys and girls developing different reading patterns and habits. These authors further affirmed that girls enjoy reading greater than boys.

Thus far, there is a concern about students' reading habits in Nigeria as recent studies have indicated a persistent decline in the reading habits of secondary school students in the country (Oribabor, 2014; Ukoha,

2015; Otache, 2020). This concern necessitates our research on the reading habits of secondary school students. In Osun State, one of the States in Nigeria; a mobile learning tablet called "Opon Imo" (in Yoruba language) was introduced and distributed to secondary school students in a bid to improve their reading habits by making reading materials accessible in electronic format. This effort was adjudged a not too effective strategy by a study published in 2020 (Adeyemi, 2020)

Considering the account of studies from other parts of the world, poor reading habit is unarguably a global phenomenon in the educational system (Ameyaw and Anto, 2018; Ruterana, 2014). This is not without its accompanying negative effects on students' academic and social life. There is a need for more information about the best way to motivate students to develop good reading habits in the face of changing reading preferences. Therefore, among other factors found to influence reading habits, this study centered on the evaluation of gender variations in reading habits of secondary school students in Osun State, Nigeria.

## Objectives

The objectives of the study include:

- i. To determine the time spent in reading by boys and girls who are secondary school students in Osun State, Nigeria.
- ii. To find out the reading materials preferred.
- iii. To identify the purpose of reading by these students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Reading habits of students

The reading habits of students can be viewed in terms of materials they read, the frequency of their reading, and the purpose for which they read. This was demonstrated by Rosli et al. (2017) who assessed the reading habit among other measures including the materials students read. Generally, what students read is decided to a large extent by their interests and the content of the materials. Some students may choose to read magazines because it carries the latest business and political news which keep them updated with the recent events, while others' interests are in fictions with good actions and conflicts and some prefer fantasy and adventure. Without any preference, students may select books just by their appearance or those probably introduced to them by their friends. Everyone likes different things and this accounts for the reason some materials are preferred over others. However, Hughes-Hassell et al. (2009) emphasized that students read relatable stories and those materials that give a view of their social environments, background and

perception about them. This probably explains why students read books that naturally reflect their circumstances and experiences. Students may choose to read books for pleasure, humour and edutainment otherwise known as education through fun. Edutainment blended with a sense of humour may influence students' reading preferences. Hussain and Parveen (2011) stressed that students appeared to tend to idealise personalities and characters. Therefore, they may desire to read autobiographies, magazines, poetry which may be romantic and classical in either local or national languages, tragic, comedy, or drama.

A few students in Nigerian public secondary schools may have access to newspapers and magazines at home because these materials are scarcely available in schools, particularly for students. This is the more reason why accessibility to different reading materials affects secondary school students' preference for reading materials. Furthermore, the greater part of hours spent in the school is dedicated to the reading of only the school-recommended textbooks and notes given by subject teachers in preparation for examinations; this shows a positive relationship between reading habit and academic performance which has been confirmed in the literature. For instance, Enekwechi and Ezeanya (2021) found reading habit as the most significant contributor to passing examinations or tests and self-improvement, personal growth and development. Bashir and Matto (2012) and Owusu-Acheaw (2014) also affirmed that reading habit improves academic performance. In the actual sense, students are mostly encouraged or compelled to study their textbooks, do homework or assignments and prepare for examinations in order to obtain higher grades. Studies have also revealed that the common reason students read is to pass the end of the term, session, or public examinations and not for the reason of individual advancement, pleasure or to be educated (Busari, 2016; Valencia, 2014). However, students who read for mere passing examinations do not demonstrate a good reading habit. It shows that such students will hardly read when examinations are over or no examination is in view. Although reading is essential in order to do well in both internal and external examinations, it is also expected of students to read for personal development. For this purpose, students are required to read more than the notes given by their subject teachers and school-recommended textbooks.

Whether students read for good grades, fun or widen their knowledge, reading materials are not limited to print books. Reading resources come in different formats (print, electronic, audio). Some readers prefer print materials while others are interested in electronic materials. Oyewusi and Ayanlola (2014) revealed that private secondary school students were convinced that reading on mobile phones assisted them in developing reading habits and aided their performance in reading. In most instances, it is the information needed that matters

and not the format. The fact remains that secondary school students are no longer restricted to reading only print materials since the scope of reading materials has broadened to include internet resources. The way students read and the materials being read are in one way or the other affected. Generally, there is a global movement towards digitization; the Internet has become a “sea” of reading materials, where students now dive in to get information. The Internet particularly plays a central role in providing access to information resources. It is a no gainsay that sources of information and other opportunities available via the Internet are increasing at an alarming rate. Availability of these sources of information increases the use of the internet for learning and research development with a good influence on education.

### **Gender and reading habit**

Studies have reported that girls have better reading habits than boys. For instance, Khairuddin (2013) found that female students had a higher interest in reading than male students. Mahbubul and Saifur (2021) found that females read books more than males nevertheless, there was not much difference in the type of book being read. Similarly, other researchers (Chen, 2008; Uusen and Mürsepp, 2012; Merga, 2014) found that girls are likely to read frequently than boys especially in reading for pleasure. Ullah and Ullah (2019) established that girls' better performance than boys academically is a fact across the globe. However, Arifin et al. (2018) and Merga and Moon (2016) believe that school behavior and school performance differences between boys and girls are strongly shaped by socialization. In other words, in considering the factors that could increase reading habits, it is necessary to look at factors such as students' choice of reading materials, student curiosity, social connections among students and access to a different text, and reading environment as these factors are controlled by socialization.

Moley et al. (2011) argues that students regardless of their gender are likely going to read more and read regularly when they are supplied with books of their interest. Also, Protacio (2012) noted that to encourage students to read, their interests and needs must be met in terms of topic and types of reading material. Exposing students to a more assortment of materials on different topics and subjects is a better way to get them to be more inspired to read. It is imperative, therefore, to consider factors that are prominent in determining whether a student would love to read or not irrespective of gender. Manuel and Carter (2015) identified differences in the manner in which boys and girls spend their leisure time. These authors discovered that boys preferred to read for school success while girls would prefer to read for pleasure and entertainment during their

leisure hours. Similarly, Kendall (2008) and McGeown et al. (2015) found that girls surpass boys in reading engagements with magazines or comics. On the other hand, boys enjoyed reading non-fiction while girls enjoyed reading fiction books (McGeown et al., 2015).

### **METHODOLOGY**

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted which focused on public secondary schools drawn from three Federal Senatorial Districts of Osun State, Southwest, Nigeria. The population was limited to senior secondary school II (SSS11) students in the selected schools.

#### **Sampling techniques and sample**

This study adopted the multistage sampling procedure to choose the sample. At the first stage, the state was stratified along with the existing three senatorial districts with each district having two educational zones. Thereafter, one educational zone was randomly selected from each of the three senatorial districts. Thus, Osogbo, Ife and Ede educational zones were selected for the study. At the third stage, a simple random sampling technique was used to select 50% of the Local Government Areas (LGA) in the selected educational zones. In selecting the secondary schools at the fourth stage, a simple random technique was used to select 30% of the public secondary schools located in the selected LGAs areas giving a total of 12 public secondary schools. At the fifth stage, a proportionate sampling technique was used to select 20% of the enrolment of students in senior secondary school II (SSSII) in each of the selected secondary schools. Total enrolment was obtained from the Department of Planning, Research and Statistics, Ministry of Education, Osogbo (2016). Finally, a sample of 1101 senior secondary school students was selected from the 12 public secondary schools for the study.

#### **Research instrument**

The Reading Habit Scale was employed in this study. It comprises three sections with items of statements structured towards measuring the frequency of reading in terms of hours spent on reading daily in the first section, materials read in the second section and purpose of reading in the third section. For frequency of reading, respondents were asked to pick among the options: 'less than 1 hour every day,' '1 hour every day,' '2-4 hours every day,' and 'above 6 hours every day.' A 4 - point Likert scale of 'Daily', 'Weekly', 'Monthly', and 'Never read' was employed to measure the frequency of material used by the respondents in the second section. To

measure the purpose for which the respondents read, a scale of items using a 4-point Likert scale of 'Very True', 'True', 'Almost True' and 'Never True' was used in the third section. The questionnaire was pre-tested. The result of the pre-test indicated that the majority 17(56.7%) of the respondents spend less than 1 hour every day. The scale used to measure materials respondents read has a reliability coefficient of 0.73

The questionnaire was administered with the aid of a research assistant and retrieved immediately from the volunteers after completion.

### Ethical issue

Through the State permanent secretary, an application was written to the Director, Research and statistics, Osun State Ministry of Education for the secondary school enrolment data. Also, a letter of introduction to the school principals was obtained from the Permanent secretary authorising data collection.

### RESULTS

One thousand and seventy-nine students' data were adequate for analysis and interpretation. 43% of them were males while 57% were females. Table 1 shows the duration of daily reading by the public secondary school

students. 81.4% of the students were daily short-time readers (DSTR) of 0 to 1 hr/day. The DSTR comprised 83% of the boys and 80% of the girls. 18.6% of the selected students were daily long-time readers (DLTR) of >1 to 6 hr/day. The daily long-time readers comprised 17% of the boys and 20% of the girls. The result shows that the majority of the students were daily short-time readers and the daily long-time readers consist of more girls than boys. No statistically significant gender difference regarding the daily reading time ( $x = 1.033$ ,  $p = 0.309$ ).

Table 2 shows the materials the students preferred to read. Textbooks (94.8%) and notes given by subject teachers (94.8% were the most preferred materials read by the students while the least read is electronic and online materials (36.1%). The most preferred materials read by the students were observed to be predominantly used by the girls. Boys more than girls read the followings materials: past questions and solutions (92:91%), handbook (78:76%), Magazines (69:63%) and dictionary (83:75%). Statistical significant gender differences exist regarding the reading of Magazine ( $X=4.675$ ,  $P=0.031$ ) and Dictionary ( $X=7.89$ ,  $P=0.005$ ). Girls more than boys read textbooks (96:94%), newspapers (27:23%), subject teachers note (96:93%), novels (88:85%) and electronic materials (37:34%). A statistically significant gender difference was observed with regards to reading subject teachers' notes ( $X=6.112$ ,  $P=0.013$ ).

**Table 1.** Duration of daily reading by the students.

	Duration of reading	Boys (n=464)	Girls (n=615)	Total (%) (1079)	
Daily short reading time (DSRT)	0 – 1 hour every day	384 (83%)	494 (80%)	878 (81.4)	
Daily long reading time (DLRT)	>1 - 6 hours every day	80 (17%)	121 (20%)	201 (18.6%)	$X=1.033$ $P=0.309$

**Table 2.** Reading materials public secondary school students in schools in Osun state prefer to read.

S/N	Materials students read		Boys n=464 (%)	Girls n=615 (%)	Total Students (1079) (%)	(X, P)
1	Textbooks	Read	435 (94)	588 (96)	1023 (94.8)	$X=1.859$ , $P=0.173$
		Not read	29 (6)	27 (4)	56 (5.2)	
2	Newspapers	Read	105 (23)	165 (27)	270 (25)	$X=2.487$ , $P=0.115$
		Not read	359 (77)	450 (73)	809 (75)	
3	Notes given by subject teachers	Read	431 (93)	592 (96)	1023 (94.8)	$X=6.112$ , $P=0.013$
		Not read	33 (7)	23 (3)	56 (5.2)	
4	Past questions and solutions	Read	428 (92)	559 (91)	987 (91.6)	$X=0.615$ , $P=0.433$
		Not read	36 (7)	56 (9)	92 (8.5)	

Table 2. Continues.

5	Handbook/manual	Read	363 (78)	469 (76)	832 (77.1)	X=0.583, P=0.445
		Not read	101 (22)	146 (24)	247 (22.8)	
6	Magazines	Read	322 (69)	388 (63)	710 (65.8)	X=4.675, P=0.031
		Not read	142 (31)	227 (34)	369 (34.2)	
7	Dictionary, Biography, encyclopedia (reference materials)	Read	383 (83)	464 (75)	847 (78.5)	X=7.89, P=0.005
		Not read	81 (17)	151 (25)	232 (21.5)	
8	Novel (story and drama books)	Read	396 (85)	544 (88)	940 (87.1)	X=2.28, P=0.131
		Not read	68 (15)	71 (12)	139 (12.9)	
9	Electronic devices and online materials	Read	157 (34)	233 (37)	390 (36.1)	X=1.879, P=0.17
		Not read	307 (66)	382 (62)	689 (63.9)	

Table 3 shows the purposes for which students read. "I read for better understanding of topics taught by the teacher" (98.1%) was the predominant purpose for reading by the students. The least indicated purpose of reading is "reading for pleasure" (80.4%). The boys (98%) more than girls (97%) indicated that they read to get better grades in tests and examinations. Conversely,

the girls more than the boys read for the following reasons: to improve my vocabulary (97:95%); to enhance mental capability (93:92%); for better understanding of topics taught by the teacher (98:97%); do assignments and projects (97:96%) and for pleasure (84:76%). A statistically significant gender difference exists with respect to "reading for pleasure" ( $x = 8.92, p = 0.003$ ).

Table 3. Purposes for which senior secondary students in public secondary schools in Osun State read.

S/N	Purpose of reading		Boys N = 464 (%)	Girls N = 615 (%)	Total (%)	
1	I read to get better grades in tests and examinations	Agreed	454 (98)	599 (97)	1053 (97.6)	X=0.224, P=0.636
		Disagreed	10 (0.2)	16 (0.3)	26 (2.4)	
2	I read to improve my vocabulary	Agreed	443 (95)	596 (97)	1039 (96.3)	X=1.529, P=0.216
		Disagreed	21 (5)	19 (3)	40 (3.7)	
3	I read to enhance my mental capability	Agreed	426 (92)	570 (93)	996 (92.3)	X=0.284, P=0.594
		Disagreed	38 (8)	45 (7)	83 (7.7)	
4	I read for a better understanding of topics taught by the teacher	Agreed	452 (97)	606 (98)	1058 (98.1)	X=1.747, P=0.186
		Disagreed	12 (3)	9 (2)	21 (1.9)	
5	I read to do my assignments and projects	Agreed	445 (96)	594 (97)	1039 (96.3)	X=0.343, P=0.558
		Disagreed	19 (4)	21 (3)	40 (3.7)	
6	I read for pleasure	Agreed	354 (76)	514 (84)	868 (80.4)	X=8.92, P=0.003
		Disagreed	110 (24)	101 (16)	211 (19.6)	

## DISCUSSION

It has been well discussed by researchers that the ability to read is essential for successful communication, to

solve practical problems of daily life and a necessity for the growth and well-being of an individual. Noor (2011) submitted that reading habit develops in readers the ability to manage new ideas in the technically changing

and evolving environment. Unfortunately, the students that participated in this study had poor reading habits with respect to reading time. They generally had daily short reading time.

Studies in Nigeria had previously found daily short reading time (DSRT) among secondary school students (Busari, 2016; Joseph, 2020; Danladi and Yohanna, 2018). This calls for serious concern among educationists. The global decline in daily reading time could probably be explained by the unfettered access by these students to a wide variety of extra-curricular activities in and out of school hours. There is strong competition at the moment between books and recent innovative, attractive and engaging gadgets, like TV, Computer and Video games and the Internet that are capturing the time and attention of children and students, making them lose interest in reading for pleasure. The time these students should use to read their books, learn and do the assignments given to them in school is used in online browsing, watching TV, films and playing video and computer games all to the detriment of recreational reading (Majid and Tan, 2007).

Respondents in this study from Nigeria were unarguably exposed to the same environmental condition described by Amadi (2015) where the majority of the students in the published study indicated that lack of a conducive home environment is one of the main factors that hindered their reading activities. A constant power supply is a major necessity for learning in the home. This researcher (Amadi, 2015) recognized erratic power supply as a major problem in the education of students from rural homes in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria. In this study, girls read longer than boys who are similar to a study in Estonia (Uusen and Mürsepp, 2012). In support of findings of this nature, an expert affirmed that at a young age, girls can sit still for much longer periods than boys (Louann, 2006). Regarding the materials preferred; Girls read textbooks, subject teachers' notes and electronic materials more than boys. A statistically significant gender difference was observed with respect to the reading of the subject teacher's note. This shows that girls are more likely to get serious and be thorough with school work and assignments more than boys. A less than the optimal course was found to be taken by boys with respect to school work in that boys read past questions and solutions, handbooks, and dictionaries more than girls. This portrays a more careless approach to their school subjects with intense concern for passing exams for school success (Manuel and Carter, 2015). Of note is the fact that the girls read novels more than boys. Researchers (Simpson, 1996; OECD, 2011) have shown severally that girls read fiction while boys read non-fiction. On the other hand, Merga (2017) challenged this notion on the basis that whether in fiction or nonfiction reading, girls do read better. Boys might prefer magazines as it is in this study, this does not mean they read magazines thoroughly and better than girls. Girls

read with more surmising approaches required to understand fiction which is not necessarily needed to understand nonfiction but boys are careless about so many things (Topping, 2015). The use of electronic devices and online materials was very low despite the distribution of learning "Tablet" to students in secondary school terminal classes in the state where this study was conducted. Exoticness could be accountable for the low use of electronic learning devices among boys and girls in the state. Darko-Adjei (2019) suggested a proper orientation for students on the use of electronic learning devices for maximum use.

Concerning the purpose of reading, it was evident that boys topped girls only in "reading to get better grades in tests and examinations" while girls excelled in other factors. This will also possibly corroborate the assertion that boys were less thorough than girls with their classwork and assignments. It is no surprise that they were found to "read past questions and solutions" for "getting better grades in tests and examinations". Girls read for pleasure more than boys with a statistically significant difference. Studies have shown severally that girls read for pleasure while boys read to get information. Crivilare (2017) and Nwoma (2017) among several others have shown that girls read for pleasure more than boys. In Uusen and Mürsepp (2012), boys did not read books other than school books. That could be attested to in their purpose for reading which to pass an examination. Girls are generally perceived to read more than boys all over the world; researchers explained that gender differences are mostly a result of socialization and not genetics. For example, boys tend to be more vulnerable to peer pressure than girls. This could discourage them from activities like reading that are perceived to be "old-fashioned" (Wong, 2018).

## Conclusions

It can be concluded that the students have poor reading habits with respect to time given to reading as a majority of them have daily short reading time (SRT) of zero to 1 hour. Among the students that have long reading time (>1 to 6 hr/day), girls were prevalent. Generally, the students preferred to read textbooks and notes given by their subject teachers. The least materials preferred are electronic and online materials. Boys read more materials like handbooks, dictionaries and past questions and solutions. Girls read textbooks and subject teachers note more than boys. This shows that girls are more likely to be thorough and take seriously school work and assignments more than boys. The main purpose of reading by these students is for a better understanding of topics taught by the teachers which are attested to by the fact that they preferred to read notes given by teachers and their textbooks. The least purpose of reading is "reading for pleasure" which must be checked to prevent

the unpalatable future outcomes of lack of personal development and broadened horizons. Girls predominantly read for pleasure more than boys.

To lengthen the students reading stretch vis-à-vis improving their reading habit, the period for reading should be apportioned in the school timetable by school authorities. Reading is not a natural gift. It is vigorously learnt before the habit of it can be developed. Therefore, parents should be considerably involved in the reading activities of children. Giving emotional encouragement is not enough to improve students' reading habits. Apart from providing children with needed materials that will encourage reading, parents who can read should do so for them to be seen as role models. A conducive and book-rich environment should be provided both in the school and at home. Students should be given access to reading material beyond teachers' notes and recommended textbooks in their various school subjects. Special efforts are required by all the stakeholders to minimize the shortcomings in the reading habit of boys as observed in this study. Schools and governments at all levels should consider gender differences in students' reading habits in the planning and execution of educational programs and activities.

Of note is the fact that gender disparity in reading habits exists as revealed by this study, but beyond this, the reading habit of the students was low regardless of gender. It would be advisable if a general approach to the improvement of reading habits of both boys and girls is pursued. Consequentially, future studies will focus on understanding other complex factors related to students' reading such as students' curiosity, social connections among students, access to a different text, and reading environment. To a variable extent, these factors tend to influence students' reading habits. Also, nationwide researches on the reading habits of students are required in order to make regional and intercountry comparisons.

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