


Students' reading self-concepts at an institution of higher learning in South Africa

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Background: South Africa's reading problems are evident in tertiary education, particularly among students studying in a foreign language. Therefore, many reading researchers in South Africa have argued that poor reading skills among tertiary students are a direct result of poor reading skills at school. Some research has found that psychological factors such as test anxiety, self-concept, and attitude have a negative and significant impact on student academic performance.

Objectives: Therefore, the current study focuses on self-concept as it specifically explores university students' self-perceptions as readers.

Method: The study followed a qualitative research approach, and a case study design was deemed relevant for the study. A targeted sample of 65 respondents was selected to answer the open-ended questionnaire. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the collected data.

Results: The findings showed that university students defined themselves as readers in different ways and their reading self-concepts were based on their reading behaviour. The students specifically described themselves as readers who enjoy reading, analytic readers, or reluctant readers with poor and slow reading abilities displaying inconsistent reading habits; they admitted that they only read for academic purposes including tests and exams.

Conclusion: Students' reading self-concept has implications for reading instruction, student support, choice of reading material, reading motivation, and syllabus design.

Contribution: The findings of the study provide data that could create English lecturers' awareness of their students' reading self-concepts so that they could change their students' reading culture.

Keywords: reading; reading self-concept; higher education; critical reader; learning goals; reading material.

Introduction

An increasing number of students are entering universities in South Africa with inadequate reading skills, displaying unsatisfactory reading literacy levels. Subsequently, studies conducted, show that a growing percentage of students with insufficient reading skills enroll at universities (Baruthram 2012; 2017). This view supports a view held by Boakye (2011), who argues that South Africa's reading problems are clearly discernible in tertiary education, particularly among students learning in a foreign language. Boakye also reveals that several reading researchers in South Africa have argued that poor reading ability among tertiary students is a direct consequence of a poor reading ability at school level (Howie et al. 2017; Van Staden & Bosker 2014; Zimmerman 2014). This seems to be a common concern in other countries as well: De-la-Pena and Luque-Rojas (2021) state that research conducted in higher education shows that university students are at a literal or basic level of understanding and often have difficulty in drawing conclusions and recognising the macro structure of the written text.

Garcia-Martinez et al. (2022) believe that university students' performance is influenced by various factors, such as social, psychological, economic, environmental, and individual factors. According to the authors, these factors affect students' performance and differ among individuals and countries. Beharu (2018) claims that there is a significant link between psychological factors and students' academic performance. Moreover, Beharu believes that psychological factors such as stress, anxiety, poor performance, low self-confidence, and unrealistic fears can cause students to fail academically. In support of this view, Chikwendu (2021) found that psychological factors such as test anxiety, self-concept, and attitude have a negative and significant impact on students'

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academic performance. The current study focuses on self-concept, which embodies a psychological factor, as it pertains to university students' emotional state. This information is important because determining students' self-concept sheds light on their specific preferences. In addition, understanding students' self-concept can facilitate the creation, modification, and development of more effective curricula and educational programmes by lecturers (Schaffner 2020). According to Rahman (2021), there are three elements ascribed to self-concept, viz. self-perception, self-image, and self-esteem.

Self-concept is central to the reading process and forms an integral part of the current study focus. According to Conradi, Jang and McKenna (2014), regarding the reading process, the reading self-concept is the general self-perception of oneself as a reader. Katzir, Lesaux and Kim (2009) and Kasperski, Shany and Kstzir (2016) further explain that reading self-concept is related to reading motivation and reading achievement. The authors also believe that children with a positive reading self-concept perform better in reading comprehension than those with a negative reading self-concept. Chapman and Tunmer (2003) and Chamberlain (2012) in addition argue that children's reading ability develops in response to reading experiences, as many students judge their self-concept in terms of academic success or failure and perceived failure. Therefore, research that seeks to investigate South African university students' self-concept facilitating reading activities is significant given the reading challenges already mentioned.

Research shows that to achieve their learning goals, students need to know about themselves and their ability to control their actions (Walidaini 2020). To this end, some researchers believe that self-concept affects how people think about themselves, how much encouragement they receive, and how they respond to problems (Chamberlain 2012; Habibian & Roslan 2014; Katzir, Kim & Dotan 2018). According to Habibian and Roslan (2014), self-concept depends on how people perceive their ability to learn when completing different tasks. When readers think they are capable of managing a situation, or when they know they can achieve it, their intrinsic level of motivation is high, and they tend to be more laborious. Walidaini (2020) maintains that some students doubt their own abilities, while others are more confident to engage in problem-solving. Walidaini elaborates that students who suffer from a low self-esteem with a low level of self-confidence find it difficult to succeed, while dauntless students usually succeed in their reading endeavours. Thus, students with a negative self-concept need to be motivated by their environment as it can be conducive to effective learning.

Similarly, Dornyei (2005) underscores the importance of a positive self-concept, since students who hold themselves in high regard and believe in their own abilities are predicted to be successful. Therefore, self-concept is one of the most critical affective factors since a person's success or failure largely depends on the level of self-concept. According to

Branden (2001), it is not a lack of ability but a lack of self-concept that is the most salient obstacle to success, as students' image and expectations of themselves can be damaging.

Most studies in the field of reading have focused on language and cognitive factors. Less is known about the affective aspects of reading among university students, such as reading self-concept (Katzir et al. 2018). Kasperski et al. (2016) believe that reading development involves interactive and dynamic processes among language, cognition, and affect. In the present study, I fill this gap in the literature by focusing on students' reading self-concept, determined by their own self-image. Therefore, the article aims to describe, understand, and explain higher education students' perceptions of themselves as readers by creating a space for them to voice their opinions. To achieve this goal, this article provides answers to the following research question:

How do university students enrolled in the Introduction to Language and Literature Studies module perceive their reading self-concept?

Literature review

Self-concept

Literature exists that discusses self-image, self-confidence, and self-esteem, which can provide insights for defining the concept of 'Self'. For example, Driss and Bouich (2021) hold that the self is at the centre of cognitive processes that link underlying motives to actions with the intent to achieve a specific goal. In addition, Cantor et al. (1986) note that the self is also viewed as the underlying functional trigger that prompts specific behavioural outcomes. The self is also defined as an integrated, dynamic, and emanating multidimensional joint that manifests itself in various forms, such as self-concept and self-esteem, and at different levels: socially and linguistically (Driss & Bouich 2021).

Morin and Racy (2021) explain that self-concept also consists of a combination of self-esteem and self-image. They mention that the characteristics of high self-esteem are a willingness to attempt novel endeavours in life, cope well under pressure, be emotionally stable and confident, and enjoy sharing ideas and experiences. They describe low self-esteem as feelings of worthlessness, reluctance to try new things, difficulty in new or challenging situations, lack of appreciation for one's own opinion, and sensitivity to the opinions of others. According to Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003), self-efficacy affects students' cognitive, motivational, and behavioural involvement while learning activities. Similarly, Habibian and Roslan (2014) believe that self-efficacy affects how people think about themselves, how much encouragement they receive, and how they respond to problems.

Reading self-concept

According to Smith and Jang (2022), one area that has long been documented as important to reading motivation is how

readers perceive themselves as readers, which is referred to as their self-concept. Several studies have been conducted that sought to explore the importance of the concept of reading (Katzir et al. 2018; Retelsdorf & Moller 2014; Sewasew & Koester 2019). Taken together, these studies suggest that self-concept of reading is important and that a more positive self-concept is associated with more leisure reading, greater engagement, and better reading achievement. Self-concept is influenced by the reader's beliefs about themselves. Chapman and Tunmer (1995:454) describe reading self-concept as having three subcomponents. They claim that readers' self-concept is influenced by their attitudes towards reading, whether they think they are accomplished readers, and whether they think reading tasks can be difficult. Moller and Schiefele (2004) and Moller and Trautwein (2009) explain that reading self-concept can be understood as the mental representations of oneself, including cognitive-evaluative aspects and beliefs about one's reading-related skills and reading comprehension in general. According to Artelt, Demmrich and Baumert (2001), and Moller and Schiefele (2004), reading self-concept has emerged as an important variable explaining interindividual differences in reading performance.

Conradi et al. (2014) define reading self-concept as the general self-perception of oneself as a reader which is related to reading motivation and reading achievement. The self-concept is said to have a major influence on individual behaviour and can therefore be used to understand and explain different behaviours. Moller and Trautwein (2009) explain that the reading self-concept can be understood as the mental representation of oneself, including cognitive-pedagogical aspects and beliefs about one's own reading-related abilities and reading comprehension in general. Although reading self-concept has been identified as an important predictor of reading literacy development, Dickhauser and Reinhard (2006) argues that it is unclear what factors contribute to and mediate this relationship, as no research has specifically focused on this area.

Research has shown that a positive self-concept is important to achieve good results at university (Schunk 2003). Bong and Skaalvik (2003) argue that instead of viewing an individual's self-concept as a constant overall perception, it may vary in different areas and over time.

Anjela, Erynsah and Suganda (2020) conducted a study whose aim was to determine whether there is an association between students' self-concept and their reading comprehension performance. The results showed that there was a significant association between students' self-concept and reading comprehension performance. A similar study was conducted by Augusto (2022) and the focus was on the self-concept of students in Grades 4-6 at Cebu Normal University-Integrated Laboratory School. The results showed that there is a correlation between self-concept and reading comprehension. Based on the findings of the study, Augusto concluded that the development of students' minds should

not only be the focus of instruction, but students' affective factors must also be considered.

Several studies have measured the general self-concept of poor readers. The results were inconsistent, with some studies finding evidence that poor readers have a poorer self-concept than typical readers (Alexander-Passe 2006) while others do not correspond with such differences (McArthur et al. 2016; Tam & Hawkins 2012). In a similar study, McArthur et al. (2020) conducted a study whose aim was to determine whether there was a statistical association between poor reading and poor self-concept. The results indicate a moderate association between poor reading ability and average self-concept. Based on the literature reviewed, several studies support the view that students with low self-concept are outperformed in academic tasks by those with a positive self-concept. Thus, lecturers should be aware of their students' reading self-concept to tailor their instruction methods accordingly.

Reading culture

A reading culture is described as a setting that promotes, values, respects, and encourages reading (Hawthorne 2021; Makone 2021). According to Hawthorne (2021), fostering a culture of reading should not fall under the purview of one person because it requires commitment, tenacity, and work. Speaking about the reading habits of Africans, Makone (2021) disclosed that reading habits are extremely low in all age groups throughout the various African countries. Makone's research revealed that non-educational materials, such as novels, newspapers, magazines, and other books, have very little readership in Africa. The body of research demonstrates that a variety of factors influence both good and bad reading cultures. For instance, insufficient resources and library space, packed classrooms, inexperienced teachers, and a lack of parental support (Makone 2021), excessive screen time (Zaheer et al. 2021), little to no emphasis on reading books, a demotivating cultural environment for students, a lack of role models, and a dearth of libraries (Mustafa et al. 2021). On the other hand, some research has shown that certain elements contribute to the development of a positive reading culture. According to Loh et al. (2017), developing a reading culture involves a variety of factors such as carefully choosing books for readers, making books visible, developing exciting reading programmes, designing spaces for readers, and creating an environment that encourages reading. Daniels and Steres (2011) obtained similar findings when they noted that establishing a reading priority, adult role modelling and support, and the development of engaging learning environments were the main elements in enhancing students' reading cultures.

Theoretical framework

Self-concept was used as a theoretical framework to underpin the current study. Self-concept, according to Neill (2005), is the general notion we have about our identities, including our physical, emotional, social, spiritual, and

other characteristics. Neill goes on to say that as we mature, our self-concept is shaped and controlled by the self-knowledge we possess. In line with this definition, Ackerman (2018) says that self-concept is our understanding of who we are and what we say to ourselves when we ask, 'Who am I?' Ackerman goes on to say that having a positive self-concept involves being aware of one's own inclinations, preferences, habits, interests, abilities, and weaknesses. Diehl and Hay (2011) distinguish self-concept differentiation from self-concept clarity. According to them, an individual's self-concept clarity is determined by how distinct, self-assured, and coherent their self-definitions are. They contend, on the other hand, that self-concept differentiation describes how a person's representation of themselves might change depending on the situation or social role. According to Cherry (2018), social interaction is a significant factor in shaping one's self-concept, but biological and environmental factors also play a role. Cherry goes on to say that self-concept is learned, not innate, and although our perception of ourselves is not always in line with reality, it is congruent when it is and incongruent when it is not. Cherry also mentioned the idea of self-concept maintenance, which holds that people of all ages actively shape their own self-concept rather than passively waiting for it to emerge. Since I thought it would help to understand the students' perceptions of their own reading practices, I decided that the self-concept theory was pertinent to the current investigation.

Methodology

Research approach

The interpretivist paradigm was used in this article. According to Guba and Lincoln (2005), this paradigm aims to understand and interpret the subjects' thoughts as well as the meaning they are making of the context by getting inside their heads. It was decided that this design was pertinent to revealing the students' reading self-concepts. The study employed a qualitative research methodology in accordance with the interpretivist research paradigm. Crossman (2020) defines qualitative research as collecting and working with non-numerical data and attempting to interpret the meaning of that data. According to Crossman, the qualitative research method allows researchers to examine the meanings that people ascribe to their behaviour, actions, and interactions with others. This research approach was deemed relevant as it addresses the how and why questions of research and allows for a deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena, and contexts. In line with the qualitative research approach, a case study design was used. Cherry (2022) defines a case study as an in-depth investigation of a person, group, or event. The author goes on to explain that in a case study, nearly every aspect of the subject's life and history is analysed to identify patterns and causes. Therefore, the case study design was deemed appropriate as it allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the students' reading self-concepts.

Research participants

In this study, 65 respondents were specifically purposively selected based on whether they were first-year students majoring in English at the chosen university. The number of respondents used ($N = 65$) was the total number of students registered for the module in 2023. Purposive sampling, according to Creswell (2014), entails choosing participants because you think they could add something to your analysis. Specifically, the respondents were selected from a group of students who took the module 'Introduction to Language and Literature Studies'. The purpose of this module is to provide students with an introduction to literature and linguistics and the basic terminology of both fields of study. The ages of the students ranged from 19 to 34 years and the sample consisted of 41 women and 24 men.

Data collection method

An open-ended questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to collect data. While many surveys are designed to generate quantitative data, some are designed with open-ended questions that allow qualitative data to be generated and analysed. Dossetto (2023) defines open-ended questions as questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no but require respondents to elaborate on their points. According to Dossetto, open-ended questions help the researcher to see things from the respondent's perspective because the researcher gets the feedback in the respondent's own words instead of standard answers. In addition, Weller et al. (2018) are of the view that open-ended questions allow researchers to understand the ideas, feelings, and opinions of their respondents because they explain their personal experiences. Open-ended questions were deemed relevant to the current study as they allowed respondents to provide longer answers, go into detail, express their thoughts, and express their opinions about themselves as readers. Using an open-ended questionnaire instead of interviews allowed respondents to explain themselves more freely and provided more nuance in their responses, which are written exactly as they think (Weller et al. 2018). I formulated open-ended questions to match the research questions. To ensure the validity and reliability of the open-ended questionnaire, the authors sought the opinion of a departmental colleague with expertise in qualitative research regarding the instrument's ability to measure the intended concept. Examples of the open-ended questions are:

- Do you like to read?
- What inspires you to read?
- Is reading with comprehension hard for you?
- What motivates and demotivates you to read?
- How often do you read academic texts?
- How often do you read for pleasure?
- How could you describe yourself as a reader in one word or one sentence?
- What limiting beliefs do you hold about yourself as a reader?
- Do other students in class read better than you?

The open-ended questionnaire was administered on my behalf by one of the professors in the department when the students were free. This exercise was done between September and November 2023.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis. According to Suter (2012), thematic analysis is a popular technique for qualitative data analysis that uses a coding system to arrange information so that researchers can make logical and significant inferences from the data. To analyse data, I reviewed the raw responses and began the process of coding using inductive codes generated by the data. According to Thomas (2006), inductive analysis refers to approaches that primarily use detailed reading of raw data to derive concepts, themes, and a model through interpretations made from the raw data. In the current study, I identified response categories. A response category is a set of replies that can be grouped because they are part of the same theme. In other words, similar segments were put together. To achieve this goal, keywords or phrases were used for easy identification of categorical segments. I identified segments that contain meaningful units and created a label (i.e., a code). Throughout this process, patterns in the data began to take shape, forming the themes through the process of clustering initial codes. The themes reflected trends and patterns in data. Finally, I checked if themes had enough data to support them.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the University of Fort Hare's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) on 03 November 2023 with the clearance number REC-270710-028-RA Level 01. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and they were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were asked to complete a consent form, which assured respondents' anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were instructed to respect their anonymity by only disclosing their ages and gender on the questionnaire rather than their names. This action reduces researchers adhered to ethical standards such as responsibility, openness, honesty, justice, respect, privacy, dignity and integrity to reduce risks of harm. Extra care and caution were applied working with vulnerable populations.

Findings

In this section, the findings are presented according to the themes that emerged from the analysis of the open-ended questionnaires. The open-ended questionnaires were coded as S1, S2, S3 etc. and in this context represents 'student'. The following themes were established:

- Readers who enjoy reading
- Readers with slow and poor reading ability
- Critical and analytic readers
- Inconsistent readers
- Readers who read only for tests and examinations

In the following section, the themes are presented one by one.

Readers who enjoy reading

According to research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2011, students who regularly engage in reading activities and find it enjoyable can improve their reading abilities through practice. In the current study some students claimed that they enjoyed reading. This view was supported by a variety of texts that these students allegedly read. The students of this subject considered themselves to be disciplined readers as they maintained that they always make time to read. Some of the students who claimed to enjoy reading indicated that in addition to focusing on the prescribed material, they also read non-prescribed material to expand their vocabulary and explore other genres. Furthermore, they indicated that they read for entertainment and had reading preferences. Some students who claimed to enjoy reading showed that they always had a goal in reading. Some of these students stated that they read books every day, others stated that they were fast readers and therefore read a lot of texts in a short time, and they saw the high reading speed as a sign of reading motivation. These students are likely to perform well academically as they seem to have the reading skills necessary for tertiary education:

'I enjoy reading books and other related material. I go beyond the prescribed material because I have a passion for reading. I enjoy reading for entertainment and I have my reading preferences.' (S23, female, 19-years-old, first-year student)

'I have always enjoyed reading because there are so many different things one can gain from reading books. Books can entertain one or educate one. I like adventure and mystery books. I spend most of my time reading.' (S1, male, 22-years-old, first-year student)

'I am an avid reader who enjoys fiction, poetry, and novels from the Elizabethan era. I read for purpose and put reading into context. The more I understand about the history of the book and the life of the author, the more interested I am in his/her work. In modern literature I enjoy pieces that empower youth and women in particular.' (S46, male, 26-years-old, first-year student)

'I view myself as a fast reader. I read every day, and my reading speed helps me read a lot of books within a short space of time. Reading fast also motivates me to read. I read material from social media and the prescribed texts.' (S4, male, 20-years-old, first-year student)

Based on the verbatim quotes above, it is important to note that learners who enjoy reading acquire better reading skills than those who are reluctant to read. Students indicated that they make reading an integral part of their lives and are therefore likely to improve their reading skills through exposure to different reading materials. Encouraging the reading of various materials, such as magazines, newspapers, and non-fiction books, can help students make reading a habit. It is also worth mentioning that, as noted by the students, reading large quantity of material is seen as a mental exercise that trains the brain and prepares it to

manage all types of critical and innovative thinking. Students who enjoy reading have an augmented chance to succeed academically since they are expected to read a huge bulk of reading material at university. It means that those who view reading as a habit, stand a good chance of finding the university reading demand manageable.

Students with slow and poor reading ability

There is a group of students who considered themselves slow and poor readers. These students reported that their slow reading pace prevented them from reading or developing an interest in reading. They found it difficult to finish the texts they were reading and were even reluctant to share what they were reading with other students. Due to their slow reading pace, they could not read a wide variety of texts. Some students in this category described reading as boring and dull. There were students who were not clear about their position on reading because they had no interest in reading. These students indicated that they typically had no reading goal. It was clear that these readers had lost confidence in themselves:

'I am a very poor reader, and I find reading boring. To me reading is not exciting at all. What frustrates me is that sometimes I find it difficult to understand the content of the text. Sometimes I understand better when I am listening to someone reading orally. Maybe the language used in the prescribed texts is too difficult for me.' (S8, female, 34-years-old, first-year student)

'I do not enjoy reading, it frustrates me. It is painful to observe other students reflecting on what they have read. It becomes worse when the lecturer assigns group work because I find myself having nothing to contribute and this embarrasses me. At the same time, the fear of being ridiculed holds me back and I end up having no contribution or sometimes a minimal contribution.' (S17, male, 19-years-old, first-year student)

'I am a slow reader, and I take time to finish the amount of reading tasks assigned by lecturers. I feel discouraged by reading activities since I feel exposed. I have tried to use a dictionary from time to time hoping that it was going to facilitate understanding but I felt that it delays my reading speed as I sometimes end up focusing more on the dictionary than on the text.' (S21, female, 20-years-old, first-year student)

The verbatim quotes above indicate that there were students who struggled with the reading process. One of the factors is their slow reading pace. Some of the students relied on the dictionary, which also slows down their reading speed. Perhaps teachers should advise students to guess the meaning of the words from the context. Students who have trouble decoding words are likely to avoid reading. Likewise, those who find reading boring and frustrating may not engage fully or give up easily. A lack of motivation to read can be attributed to various factors. For example, if the language of the text is too difficult or the context of the text is too distant from the student's life experiences, students might find such content boring and therefore become hesitant readers because the difficulties they experience while reading discourage them from wanting to read.

Critical and analytic readers

These students described themselves as quick readers who understood most of what they read. They reported reading material from a variety of media, including printed copies, online reading material, and reading from social media. Being fast readers did not prevent them from reading the prescribed material. Some readers in this category described themselves as open-minded readers who were always willing to understand other perspectives. These students indicated that they always had a reading goal and periodically checked their comprehension as they read. To achieve this goal, some students mentioned rereading as a strategy to monitor their reading comprehension. Some students in this category indicated that when they read prescribed texts, they conducted research about the content of the text and thus wanted to read beyond the text:

'I consider myself an open-minded reader who is always willing to understand other perspectives. I always try to compare the author's perspective with mine to challenge my thinking. I'm always eager to learn new things about the world of print, even if it challenges existing beliefs.' (S17, male, 19-years-old, first-year student)

'I enjoy literary work as it affords me the opportunity to analyse the relationship between different characters and to take a decision on the behaviour of some characters. I can summarise by saying that I am always curious hence I always search for new knowledge.' (S20, female, 26-years-old, first-year student)

The above verbatim student quotes show that some students exhibited characteristics typical of university students. It is worth noting that an open-minded reader engages in critical reading, which means that a reader applies certain strategies in the reading process. The students named certain reading strategies that made it easier for them to understand the text. The ability to reflect on the content of the text is one of the strategies that helped students to better understand the text. This means that some of the students were able to interact with the text by reading beyond the content of the text. This enabled the students to critically evaluate the text. One of the most important things cited by students is reading speed. Reading speed is related to reading comprehension. Therefore, students who read quickly are more likely to understand the text better than students who read slowly.

Inconsistent readers

A group of students self-identified as inconsistent readers. These students indicated that they were aware of university-level reading requirements but had no reading pattern. They did not read as often as they should. Some of them even stated that their reading interest during their school days was far greater than their current reading interest at university. Some students attributed this challenge to very short memories and poor concentration. These students did not seem to make time for reading and appeared to be engaged in activities other than reading books:

'I am aware of the reading demands at university-level, but my reading habit is not consistent. Sometimes I develop interest in reading especially when I enjoy the text I am reading. But there are moments where I feel like I do not know where to start. When such moments come, I just look at the book without grasping anything and I just decide to throw it away and engage myself in other activities. I think one has to be in good mood to grasp what one is reading.' (S1, male, 22-years-old, first-year student)

'I used to be a good reader who had passion for reading during high school days. I am not sure whether smartphones contributed to reducing the reading interest. Although I have switched from hard copies to online reading, I feel my reading is inconsistent. Sometimes I lack concentration and end up doing other activities.' (S43, female, 22-years-old, first-year student)

'Sometimes when I read, something comes up that enjoys priority over reading. Under such moments, I abandon reading and focus on other issues. The problem is that I always feel that there will be another convenient moment for reading. I am always hopeful that I will make time. Sometimes this does not happen, and I find myself in trouble of compromising my studies.' (S3, female, 20-years-old, first-year student)

The excerpts above show that student reading is unpredictable. The underlying issues of inconsistency are important. For some students, everyday university life is characterised by frustration, stress, and depression. Reading inconsistencies are likely to impact these students' academic performance negatively, as they are unlikely to achieve the success they deserve. It is also worth noting that interest in reading correlates with spiritual mood, mental state, and reading material. Therefore, it is important that lecturers attempt to diagnose the causes of reading inconsistency. Having this information is likely to assist lecturers find out what motivates the students to read.

Readers who only read for tests and examinations

Some students labelled themselves as readers who only read for tests and examinations. They indicated that they did not like reading but were forced by the circumstances to read. Their reading activity was limited to the prescribed material, and they became serious about reading only when there was a test scheduled or close to examinations. They revealed that their reading habits were associated only with being a university student who attends classes and is expected by the lecturers and parents to show progress. So, their reading interest was limited to making progress to the next level. They cared very little about reading for knowledge:

'I do not like reading, but I am only forced by circumstances such as writing a test or examinations. Being a student who attends classes means that I must write tests and exams so that I progress to the next level. When I am looking at myself as a reader, I would have to say that I often read materials that I must read rather than materials I enjoy. I often read materials I would not have chosen myself.' (S6, male, 19-years-old, first-year student)

'I am not very much into reading. However, I only read seriously when a test or examination date is near. Otherwise, if there is no test or the exams are too far, I do not read. Reading the material

that is not prescribed is another story because I do not have time for it. To be frank, my reading is limited to the prescribed texts.' (S17, male, 19-years-old, first-year student)

'I read simply because I have no choice. When it is time for tests and exams, I read but when the test is over, I do not read. What I enjoy daily is listening to the lecturers as they teach, and I always write notes. When it is time to write a test or exams, I just revise my notes.' (S12, female, 27-years-old, first-year student)

The verbatim quotes above serve as unmistakable evidence that these students are not passionate about reading and rely on cramming for tests and exams. This is a risky situation, since information acquired through cramming has no permanent connection to knowledge. These students are unlikely to develop a deep understanding of the information. As university students, they are not expected to rely on the lecturer's notes, which in most cases are a summary of the text. Therefore, if students rely on the lecturers' notes, it is likely that when writing tests, students will find themselves in a situation where they need to produce a summary of a summary. This situation can lead to poor academic performance because the information students absorb is stored in their short-term memory.

Discussion of findings

The study's objective was to evaluate students' perceptions of their own reading practices. The results of the study showed that the students had different views regarding their reading self-concepts. A group of students indicated that they enjoyed reading and therefore read a wide range of reading materials and read frequently. This finding suggests that the students had reading motivation. The results of earlier research, which discovered a statistically significant correlation between motivation and self-concept, support this assertion (Grum, Lebaric & Kolene 2004; Lawrence & Vinala 2013; Sikhwari 2014). According to Bagazi (2022:334), reading motivation is the desire and enjoyment of a person to read consistently, which is influenced by the person's tenacity, challenge, love of discovery, and self-efficacy. According to Wigfield and Guthrie (1997), a student's motivation to read depends on a variety of internal and external factors in their specific situation. Therefore, it is crucial that lecturers ascertain what factors encourage this particular group of students to enjoy reading. With this knowledge, lecturers should be better able to create thoughtful interventions for students who struggle with reading. This is in light of the previously discussed connection between motivation and self-concept. The idea of using the factors that motivate learners who enjoy reading to support those who do not enjoy reading is inspired by the Report of the National Reading Panel (2000). This report concluded that strategies employed by good readers can be explicitly taught to improve reading comprehension. The discovery that certain students find reading enjoyable is in line with Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (2009), which demonstrates a strong correlation between achievement and reading pleasure. According to PISA, students who have a strong interest in reading are also likely to be good readers.

The results also showed that some students demonstrated slow and poor reading ability. Students who demonstrate poor reading ability find reading frustrating, boring, and difficult, and rarely prepare to read. In many cases, they find it difficult to read and decode words, and they try to avoid reading. This result is consistent with the theory of self-concept, which served as the theoretical foundation for the current study. This theory states that the students in this group had a negative self-perception of their reading habits. The theory of self-concept also postulates that students' perceptions of themselves are dynamic and subject to change depending on a range of circumstances, including their age, experiences, and social roles.

This theory, which is based on the theory of self-concept, offers lecturers a good chance to impart techniques for developing a positive self-concept. These include, but are not limited to, giving students the tools they need to control their thoughts, behaviours, and emotions; encouraging a positive self-image; instructing them on how to set reasonable goals; and helping them learn to value who they are. The finding that some students demonstrated slow and poor reading ability is consistent with the study by Mustafa et al. (2021), who aimed to examine the poor reading culture of English first-language learners. The results of the study showed that reading books at universities in Kurdistan has not become a habit and students have paid little or no attention to reading books. McArthur et al. (2021) conducted a similar study in which the goal was to ascertain whether there was a statistically significant correlation between low reading proficiency and low self-esteem. The study's findings indicated that there is probably a moderate correlation between average self-concept and poor reading. But according to Alexander-Passe (2006), there has been mixed evidence regarding the relationship between poor reading and low self-concept; some studies have found that poor readers have lower self-concepts than typical readers.

The results also revealed that some students regarded themselves as critical and analytical readers.

Although thinking is a natural process, the Foundation for Critical Thinking (2019) asserts that thinking can frequently be biased, distorted, partial, ignorant, and even prejudiced in the absence of structured support and intervention. As a result, lecturers must be aware of the need to help students develop positive self-concept in their classes. Nonetheless, Sezer (2008) contend that despite critical thinking's significance in higher education, many instructors frequently feel unprepared to teach it. Critical reading enables readers to critically read and analyse a text, breaking it down into its component parts, evaluating its component parts, and assessing its strengths and weaknesses. The literature reveals that lecturers might use various approaches to facilitate critical thinking. Golden (2023) suggest general, immersion, infusion as well as mixed approaches. The discovery that certain students identified as critical readers corroborates the findings of an investigation conducted by Al Roomy (2022).

The study set out to find out how critical reading abilities could help students become more proficient readers. The findings demonstrated that the students' perception of reading is as an active, dynamic process that encouraged the use of higher-order thinking abilities and enabled them to approach the reading materials by drawing on their prior knowledge.

The results also showed that some readers self-identified as inconsistent readers. Because of the lack of a reading schedule, their reading activity was inconsistent, and they did not read regularly. Mustafa et al. (2021) found similar results. They found that the students were not used to setting aside enough time to read each day and that they preferred to spend their time engaging in activities other than reading. Lecturers may assign readings that adhere to a set timetable to help students manage their reading time to accommodate this particular group of students and improve their reading self-concept. This group of students' reading self-concept is probably going to change because of this activity.

Finally, the results showed that some readers only read for tests and exams. This group of students believed that the purpose of reading is to reproduce the information they get from prescribed material in tests and exams. Therefore, their reading activity was limited to the prescribed material only, and their level of knowledge acquisition was also determined by the prescribed reading material. Lecturers could assign readings that require students to occasionally share and report on the content they read to help this group of students develop a better reading self-concept. This tactic is probably going to cause the students' mindsets to shift, making them stop reading for exams alone. Their reading self-concept is probably going to be positively impacted by improving their reading culture. This finding is consistent with the results of a study by Liswaniso and Mumanga (2019) which aimed to examine the reading habits of students in teacher education programmes at the Katima Mulilo campus of the University of Namibia. The results of the study showed that the university students had poor reading habits and only read for study purposes.

This study had some intriguing results, but it also had some limitations that should be noted. Because the study only used one instrument, triangulating the data was not possible. The researcher was unable to observe nonverbal behaviour or ask follow-up questions due to the open-ended nature of the instrument used. Nonetheless, the current study was able to shed light on the reading self-concepts of the university students who were sampled.

Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to describe, understand, and explain the reading self-concept of university students by providing them with a space to express their reading self-concepts. The results of the study revealed that students described their reading self-concepts in different ways. There are students whose perceptions of themselves as readers

have a positive self-concept, and these students' reading self-concept matches the reading requirements expected of university students. For such students there is hope that they will be academically successful as they have the necessary reading skills and confidence required for university. Unfortunately, there are also other groups of students whose reading self-concept left no hope of academic success. These students had a negative self-concept that could likely serve as a hurdle to their academic success.

Because the goal of the current study was to provide a platform for students to express their reading choices, behaviour, and beliefs about reading, it is important for lecturers to be aware of their students' reading self-concept. This is because self-concept could be negative or positive. For those students who happen to have a negative reading self-concept, lecturers should use that information to find ways to instil a positive reading culture in their students. Studies have indicated that specific factors play a role in fostering a culture of positive reading. According to Loh et al. (2017) and Daniels and Steres (2011), these factors include making books visible, designing spaces for readers, developing exciting reading programmes, picking books carefully for readers, creating an environment that encourages reading, setting reading as a priority, having adult role models and support, and creating engaging learning environments.

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