

Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka

Sebarajah, A.

Department of English Language Teaching, University of Vavuniya, Sri Lanka

Seba@vau.ac.lk

Abstract

The present research aimed at exploring the students' perceptions of reading comprehension and their English Language proficiency because the learners were passive in reading comprehension classes at the university. In this study, the Mixed Methods Approach (MMA) was employed to collect and analyse data. Fifty-two participants were randomly selected for the study. The data were collected using a student questionnaire comprising closed and open questions related to quantitative and qualitative data. The study brought to light that a lack of English language proficiency, schemata and reading comprehension techniques or strategies had negatively influenced the reading comprehension abilities of the undergraduates in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes.

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

Key terms: L2 reading, reading comprehension, English competency/proficiency.

1. Introduction

The current study aims to explore the undergraduates' perceptions and attitudes toward reading comprehension to improve their language competency at Swami Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. It is located in Kallady, Batticaloa district, Eastern province of Sri Lanka where English is taught as a second language to the undergraduates who read for Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA). In this situation, reading comprehension is the most important academic language skill (Grabe & Stoller, 2001) in the English Language Teaching (ELT) programme at the universities to improve the language skills of the undergraduates. However, it was

observed that the learners were neither interested nor motivated in reading classes at the institute. They avoided reading comprehension sessions, answering questions related to reading comprehension in examinations. As a result, they obtained low scores in reading comprehension questions in the examinations. Hence, the undergraduates had problems related to L2 reading and L2 academic reading. Readers who have problems in L2 reading are generally referred to as “low capacity L2 readers, less automatized L2 readers, or rather informally poor L2 readers”. These readers are poor in the manipulation of bottom-up text processing strategies in English. The readers may find difficulties in L2 academic reading which is one of the second language academic competencies (Paranthaman, 2021).

Based on these problems, the current research topic was raised to explore the undergraduates’ perceptions, attitudes and competency level of reading skills in English to improve English competency.

2. Background of the research

The current study was undertaken at Swami Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka, where English

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

is taught as an additional subject for two credits in the first and second semesters of the second year to the undergraduates who read for Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) in Music, dance, drama & Theater and Visual and Technological Art. The data collected for the present study indicates that 5.% of the undergraduates obtained a “B” pass, 11 % of the learners got a “C” pass and 68% of the students obtained an “S” pass in the General English examination in Ordinary Level (O/L). Further, 79% of the undergraduates failed the Advanced Level General (A/L) English Examination. (The General Certificate of Education (G.C.E) Ordinary Level (O/L) and Advanced Level (A/L) English results, 2015).

It was observed that the undergraduates preferred lecturers to teach Basic English in the ESL classes at the University. In this situation, it is felt that reading is the most important academic language skill in the English language teaching/learning process (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). It is the basis for language, educational and professional development. However, it was perceived that the undergraduates lack reading habits in English in the ESL classes or outside of the classes. Wijeratne (2015) stated that

university students are not interested in learning English as a second language. Therefore, many graduates face challenges in the job markets without English proficiency (World Bank, 2010). Employers have criticised in Sri Lanka the English proficiency of many graduates is not at a satisfactory level. The entrepreneurs were disappointed in the performance of the graduates in the job markets (Ratwatte, 2016; Wijewardene et al., 2014). As a result, the graduates may lose their job opportunities in the competitive world. In this view, Canagarajah (1999, as cited in Ratwatte, 2016, p. 104) mentioned that “English facilitates the securing of employment.” Ratwatte (2016) mentioned that lack of English proficiency is the main reason for unemployment among graduates in Sri Lanka.

Though the Sri Lankan government has implemented several policies and projects to promote the students’ standard of English at schools and universities, the English proficiency level of the students is not at the expected level (Mendis & Rambukwella, 2020; Ratwatte, 2016; Wijeratne, 2015). Further, many previous studies (Hettiarachchi, 2010; Karunaratne, 2008;

Perera, 2006; Perera et al., 2010; Perera, 2001; Wijesekera, 2012) stated that ELT in Sri Lanka has not been able to attain its intended objectives. They reemphasised that ELT in Sri Lanka is a failure. Wijesekera (2014) stated that all implementations based on the ELT curriculum were not successful in the country.

3. Statement of the research problem

Although reading is one of the most crucial skills for educational and professional achievement (Alderson & Urquhart, 1984; Hudson, 1982; Ratwatte, 2016), it was observed that the undergraduates at the university were not interested and active in reading activities in the ESL classes. They avoided reading comprehension sessions, and answering questions related to reading comprehension in assessments, mid-exams and semester examinations. They obtained low scores in reading comprehension questions in the examinations. Further, it was perceived that the undergraduates lack reading habits in English in the ESL or outside of the classes though English reading promotes language, professional and

educational developments that are expected in the job market locally and globally.

4. Significance of the study

This research is very important as it focuses on the perception, and attitudes of reading comprehension in English of the undergraduates who were very weak in reading. It was evidenced by their performance in reading comprehension activities in the classroom and overall results of their O/Level and A/Level English examinations. Although reading skills were essential for improving knowledge, skills, attitude and professional development, the researcher observed that the students were not interested in reading activities in the ESL classes. Therefore, this study may showcase the perception, attitudes and competency level of reading skills in English of undergraduates. From the findings, an ELT lecturer may facilitate ESL learners to improve their competency in English.

5. The purpose of the study

It was observed that the undergraduates at SVIAS, EUSL were neither interested nor active in reading classes. Hence, they perform at a low level in reading tests. After realizing the need, the study was conducted

to investigate the undergraduates' background, proficiency level in English, perceptions and attitudes toward reading skills in English to improve language competency.

6. The research methodology

The Mixed Method Approach (MMA) was mainly adopted using qualitative and quantitative research methodology in the present study to analyse the undergraduates' English language proficiency, perception and attitudes on reading comprehension as they were passive in reading comprehension. "Mixed methods approach applies to research that combines alternative approaches within a single research project. Conventional paradigms of research by deliberately combining methods drew from different traditions with different underlying assumptions" (Denscombe, 2007 p. 107).

The data were collected using student Questionnaires-Google form. The questionnaires were given to 52 students in the institute to collect the data for the study. The sample of the study was randomly selected from eighty-three students.

7. Limitation of the study

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

The data collection of the student questionnaires was online, so the data and findings of the study could be affected. Hence, the generalizability of the findings is limited.

The context of the present study was two ESL classes from SVIAS, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. 52 Second-Year undergraduates from the Bachelor of Fine Art participated as the sample for the study. All the participants were female in the study. The study did not include participants from other universities in Sri Lanka, and it only involved Tamil L1 speakers, so the generalizability of the findings is limited.

8. Research tool

8.1 Student questionnaire

The student questionnaire was a research instrument consisting of thirty-three closed questions (for quantity data) and an open-ended question (for quality data) to collect data from the respondents for the study. This questionnaire included four parts. The first part indicated the background information of the students. The second part dealt with the students' perceptions and attitudes on reading comprehension. The third part was about the learners' preferences in learning to improve

reading comprehension while the fourth section focused on the students' understanding of schemata on reading comprehension. The quantitative data from the questionnaire were collected and analysed via online Google form.

8.1.1 Validity and reliability of the student questionnaire

Validity: Face validity was established by two experts to use the questionnaire in the study. Face validity is a subjective test of a construct. It evaluates the appearance of the questionnaire in terms of feasibility, readability, consistency of style and formatting, and clarity of the language used (Taherdoost, 2016). In addition, to examine the validity of the questionnaire, the questionnaire was piloted with a sample of twenty students at the same institution for two different periods. Based on the pilot study the questionnaire was validated by the two experts in the field. The face validity, scale was used with different categorical options. Those

options were objectively structured and positively categorized under the thematic category. Then the collected data was

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

analysed using Cohen's Kappa Index (CKI) in determining the face validity of the instrument. The analysis revealed the Kappa of 0.60 for inter-rater agreement.

Reliability: To examine the reliability of the student questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was used using SPSS software to assess the internal consistency of a questionnaire (or

survey) that was made up of multiple Likert-type scales and items. The analysis is illustrated as follows.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
.719	33

Table 1 illustrates the reliability statistics of the student questionnaire. The statistic reveals the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient ($\alpha = .719$) which was greater than $\alpha = .7$, which shows the questionnaire is reliable.

be analysed. According to that, the following questions were used in the study.

Q1. What is the learner's current proficiency level in English?

Q2. What are the learners' perceptions and attitudes of reading comprehension?

9. The research questions

The learners are in passive reading classes. Thus, the learners' English language proficiency, perception and attitudes were to

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

10. Data Analysis

10.1 Investigating the learners'

background

Analysing the participants' background is a very important part to evaluate the participants' attitudes, perceptions, English language competency and problems with reading comprehension to investigate the impact of the CLM on pre-reading schema building to improve reading comprehension of the learners. The ages of both experimental and control groups were examined. Generally, learners were between twenty-two to twenty-three years old. The ages of the respondents were not much different in the study. All the participants were female students. They have been following the Bachelor of Fine Art in Music, Dance and Drama & Theater at the institution. In this context, the participants' emotions,

preferences, motivations and study rates might be similar for every participant. The analysis of the background of the respondents showed that all the participants were from the same socio-cultural background.

Further, 87 % of participants responded that they have been learning English as a second language since grade one in primary school.

Therefore, it was found that they have been studying English as a second language for more than eighteen years. This analysis revealed that though the participants have been learning the language for many years, their proficiency level in the English language was at a low level. It was evidenced by their Ordinary and Advanced level (GCE/O/L & A/L) results presented in Figure 4.2 in the study.

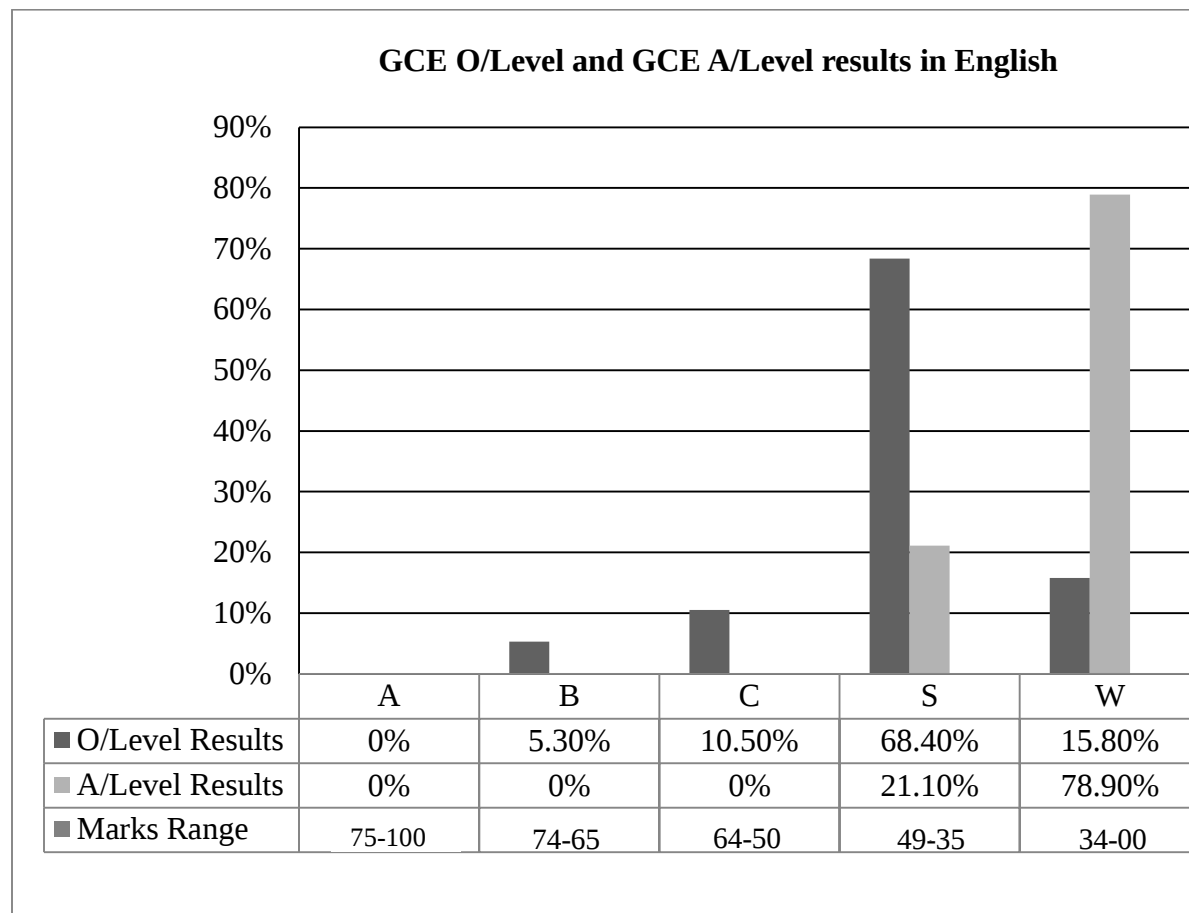


Figure 1: GCE O/Level and GCE A/Level results of the respondents

Figure 1 indicates the percentages of performance of the students at the GCE Ordinary Level (O/L) and GCE Advanced Level (A/L) English exams. The examinations are conducted by the Department of Examinations of the Ministry of Education for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) qualification in Sri Lanka.

The chart points out that none of the respondents got an 'A- grade pass in the GCE O/Level or GCE A/Level English examination. Most of the participants got 'W' (Weak) results in the GCE A/Level General English examinations though the learners obtained 'S-grade passes in their GCE O/Level English examination. The analysis of the GCE O/Level and GCE A/Level results revealed that 94.7 % of the participants'

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

English language proficiency is at a low level. The data analysis reemphasizes that almost 94% of students sat for the A/L English examination in 2018, but 60% of the candidates failed, and 26% achieved the lowest pass grade of satisfactory (Department of Examination, 2018)

10.2 The Perceptions of competency level and reading skill in English

The chart below points out the participants' perception of their competency level in English. Accordingly, the respondents themselves assessed and found their competency levels were at a low level that was indicated by the learners. Most of them were average level. It is 63%, and 32 % of the learners were at a poor level. This indicates that most of the participants' competency levels were at a low level.

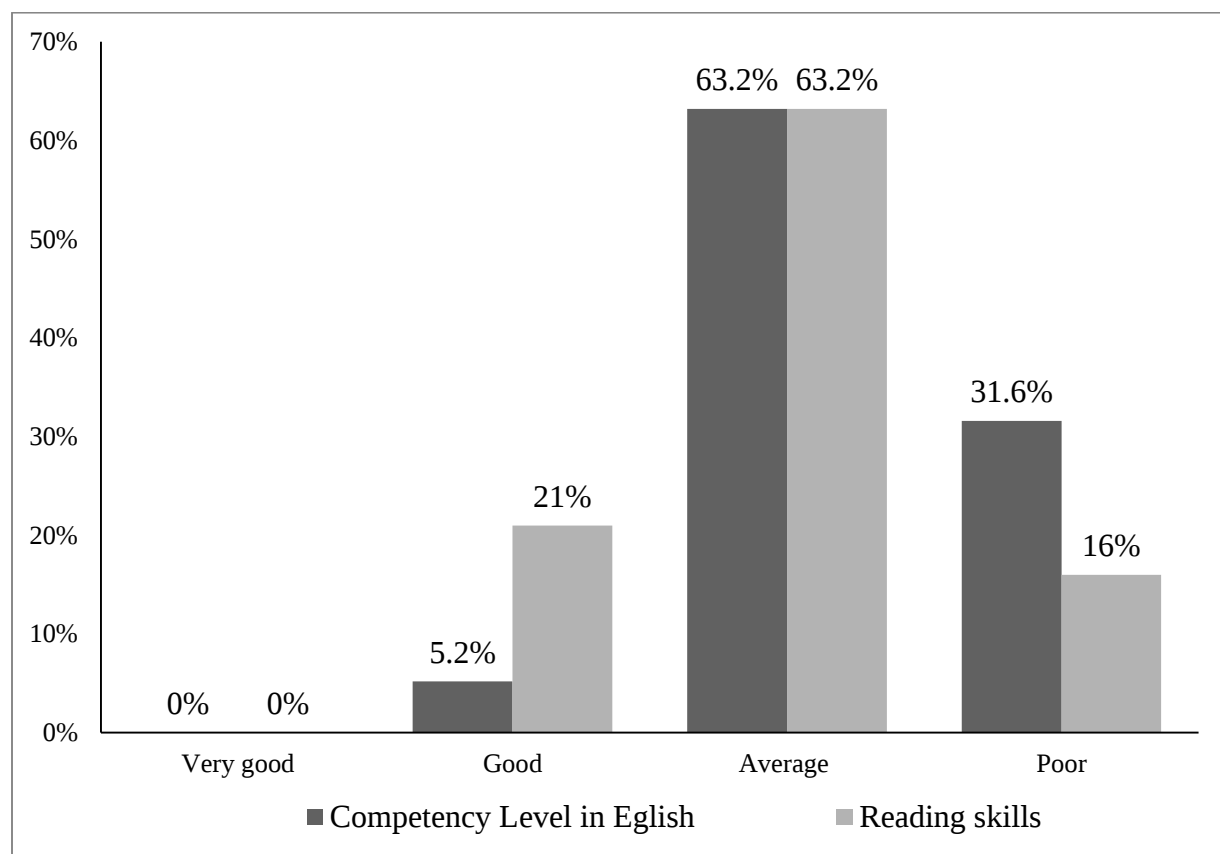


Figure 2: Competency level and reading skills of participants

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

The analysis revealed that most of the students were at an average level in reading long English texts quickly and easily to get an overall idea of the text. In this view, only 21% of the respondents were good at reading a text to grasp the overall idea of the reading

passage quickly and easily. The other 79 % of the learners felt difficulties in reading comprehension. Therefore, it was found that the students' standards in the English language were at a limited proficiency level.

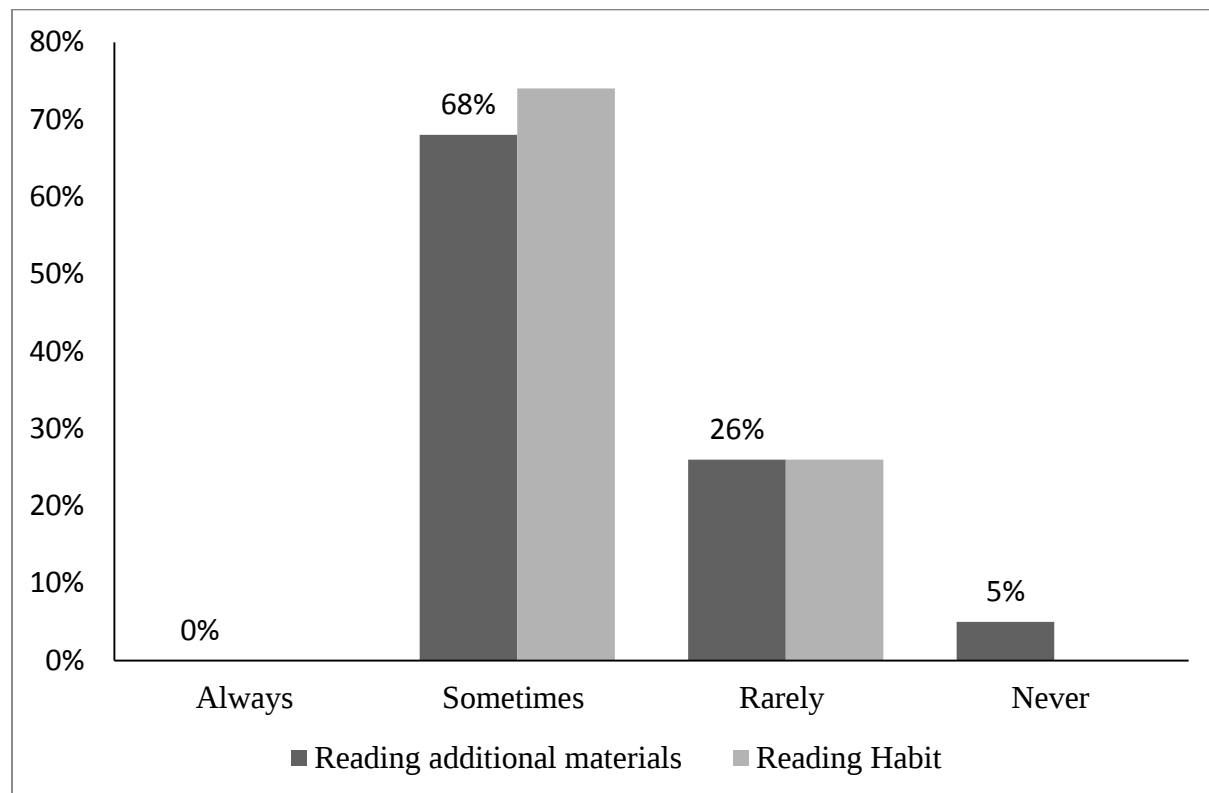


Figure 3: Reading in English

Figure 3 indicates that approximately 70% of the students sometimes spent their time reading English materials outside of the ESL classes. The chart expresses that though many students have reading habits, they do not always read in English. Anderson et al.,

(1977, p. 369) state "Every act of comprehension involves one's knowledge of the world as well". According to the Schema theory, every act of comprehension is based on one's knowledge of the world (Anderson et al., 1977). Thus, readers develop a logical

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

interpretation of a text through the interactive process of connecting written information with the knowledge that a reader brings to a reading passage (Grabe, 1988). However, this analysis reveals that the participants would not be motivated in the ESL classes to refer to additional reading sources outside of the classroom to improve/build their content/cultural/world knowledge (content schemata). They were not interested in reading English materials. The data analysis reemphasizes that university students are not interested in learning English as a second

language (Wijeratne, 2015). This may lead to low language proficiency in English. In this situation, "language is the major problem in second language reading comprehension" (Eskey, 1988, p. 97).

Table 2: The data from the student questionnaire

The data collected from the following questions of the student questionnaire are displayed in the following table based on the scales (yes/no-answer) of the questions.

Questions from the student Questionnaire	Yes	No
Q6: Do you feel that reading and understanding English is easy for you?	42%	58%
Q17: Do you prefer that reading texts should be based on your familiar culture or content?	84%	16%
Q18: Do you agree that you can read and comprehend an English text successfully if you are fluent in English?	79%	21%
Q19: Do you agree that you can read and comprehend an English text successfully if you are fluent in content / cultural knowledge?	84%	16%
Q20: Do you prefer to read different styles of writing in English?	63%	37%

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

Q21: Do you like to learn reading strategies and techniques to improve your reading comprehension?	90%	10%
Q22: Do you use your prior knowledge to comprehend new texts while you read in English?	74%	26%
Q23: Do you agree that your prior knowledge helps you to read and comprehend an English text?	90%	10%
Q27: Can you read and understand an English text that is not related to your culture/content?	33%	67%
Q28: Can you read and understand a Tamil text related to your culture/content?	90%	10%
Q29: Can you read and understand a Tamil text not related to your culture/content?	74%	26%

According to Table 2, 58% of the respondents felt difficulties in reading and understanding an English text. The analysis pointed out that most of the students were struggling with reading comprehension in ESL classes. Hence, it was found that though the participants have been learning English as a second language for many years, they still face challenges in reading comprehension.

10.3 Perception of prior knowledge

Table 2 points out that most of the participants use their prior knowledge when

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

they comprehend a reading text in English. 74% of the learners recall their background knowledge to understand new information. The data analysis revealed that the respondents realised the importance of background knowledge in reading comprehension. The majority of the respondents agree that prior- knowledge/ background knowledge influences reading comprehension. Rumelhalt (1980) explains that readers use background knowledge to comprehend and learn from text. Carrell

(1981), Hudson (1982) and Rumelhart (1980) agreed on the important role of background knowledge in reading comprehension. Though the participants realise the importance of background knowledge, they have been passive in pre-reading schema building to improve reading comprehension in the Traditional Lecture Method (TLM). The respondents mention that they use prior knowledge when they are involved in reading comprehension in English. They recall their linguistic knowledge of their mother tongue, linguistic knowledge of the second language, cultural/content knowledge, formal knowledge and reading techniques. Also, 53% of learners use the mentioned prior knowledge in reading comprehension in the English language, and 44% of the participants employ some specific prior knowledge. The analysis revealed that some learners used their schemata for reading comprehension. They were passive in reading sessions in the TLM. Coady (1979, as cited in Xu, 2016) stated that background knowledge has been ignored the most in ESL reading classes where ESL learners find reading comprehension a difficult task and try to avoid reading classes.

10.4 Perception of content schemata

Table 4.1 indicates that most of the respondents state that it is difficult to read and understand an English text that is not related to their content or culture. An (2013) stated that If a reader is short of some information

related to the reading material, then there will not be an interaction between the content of the reading text and his/her prior knowledge. As a result, the reader cannot comprehend the passage perfectly. In this sense, 67% of the participants recognize the importance of content in reading comprehension. Effective pre-reading activities may help ESL learners to activate their content schemata. Therefore, an ESL class teacher should design pre-activities that promote the social interaction of learners to build a content schema for reading comprehension (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

Most of the respondents prefer that reading texts should be based on their familiar culture or content. 84 % of the participants wish to read English texts which contain known contents. Richard et al. (2000, as cited in An, 2013, p. 131) define culture as "the total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behaviour,

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

social habits of the members of a particular society" (p.117). The cultural aspects are included in the content schemata. Based on the analysis, it was found that selecting reading materials for the ESL curriculum should be based on the learners' content knowledge. The schema theory on reading comprehension also agrees that content schemata influence reading comprehension. 84% of the participants agree that content/cultural knowledge plays a major role in comprehending an English passage. This concept was defined as 'Content schemata' in the schema theory of reading. Thus, this analysis emphasises that linguistic schemata and content schemata highly influence reading comprehension in ESL classes. On the other hand, the respondents highly agree that they can read and understand a Tamil reading text related to their content or culture.

It is 90% of the total number of participants. 74% of the participants can read and understand a Tamil reading text that is not related to their content or culture. It is found that linguistic schemata play a major role in reading comprehension rather than content schemata in L1 reading comprehension. This

could be applicable to L2 reading comprehension as Eskey (1988) stated that linguistic schema plays a major role in reading comprehension. It is the basis of reading and a requirement of formal and content schema.

10.5 Preference for improving content knowledge and activating schemata

The responses to the 11th question reveal that all the participants believe that reading various literature, watching TV programmes and reading newspapers can develop world knowledge that is specified as "Content Schemata" in the schema theory of reading comprehension. It is the scope of the text's content, and it is the theme of the text, including general and background knowledge such as the knowledge of a society/world (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). This analysis emphasises that various sources must be included and recommended in the ESL curriculum for improving content knowledge to enhance reading comprehension. 53% of the learners make questions to activate schemata to comprehend an English text and 32% of the respondents rarely raise questions when they read and comprehend an English passage.

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

This result points out that the participants did not realise the benefit of making questions before reading a text. It was found that the learners were not engaged or familiarised with the pre-questioning activity.

10.6 Perception of linguistic knowledge

Urquhart and Weir (1998) stated that the teaching of English reading is successful when teachers lead students to master linguistic features of the English language in an ESL class. To support the researchers' statement, Table 2-Q 18 reveals that 79% of the respondents point out that they can read and comprehend an English text successfully if they are fluent in English knowledge. The learners express their need to master English knowledge (grammar, phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics). The analysis revealed that grammar knowledge is the basic requirement of learners to improve reading comprehension in the target language. In addition, 63.2% of the learners realise the importance of reading different writings like expository, narrative, descriptive and informative writings. The

majority of the participants prefer different reading texts. It was identified that selecting various styles of writings in the ESL curriculum is an important aspect of improving linguistic knowledge in reading comprehension.

10.7 Perception of reading strategies and techniques

According to the percentage shown in Table 2 – Question 21, 90% of the respondents wish to learn reading strategies and techniques to improve reading comprehension. It was found that most of the students needed to learn reading strategies and techniques. The need was also emphasised in the open-ended question of the student questionnaire. Therefore, it was found that most of the students preferred to learn reading strategies to improve reading comprehension.

10.8 Preference for learning in English

The chart below explains that the respondents believe linguistic knowledge is the fundamental aspect that should be mastered at the initial stage to improve reading comprehension.

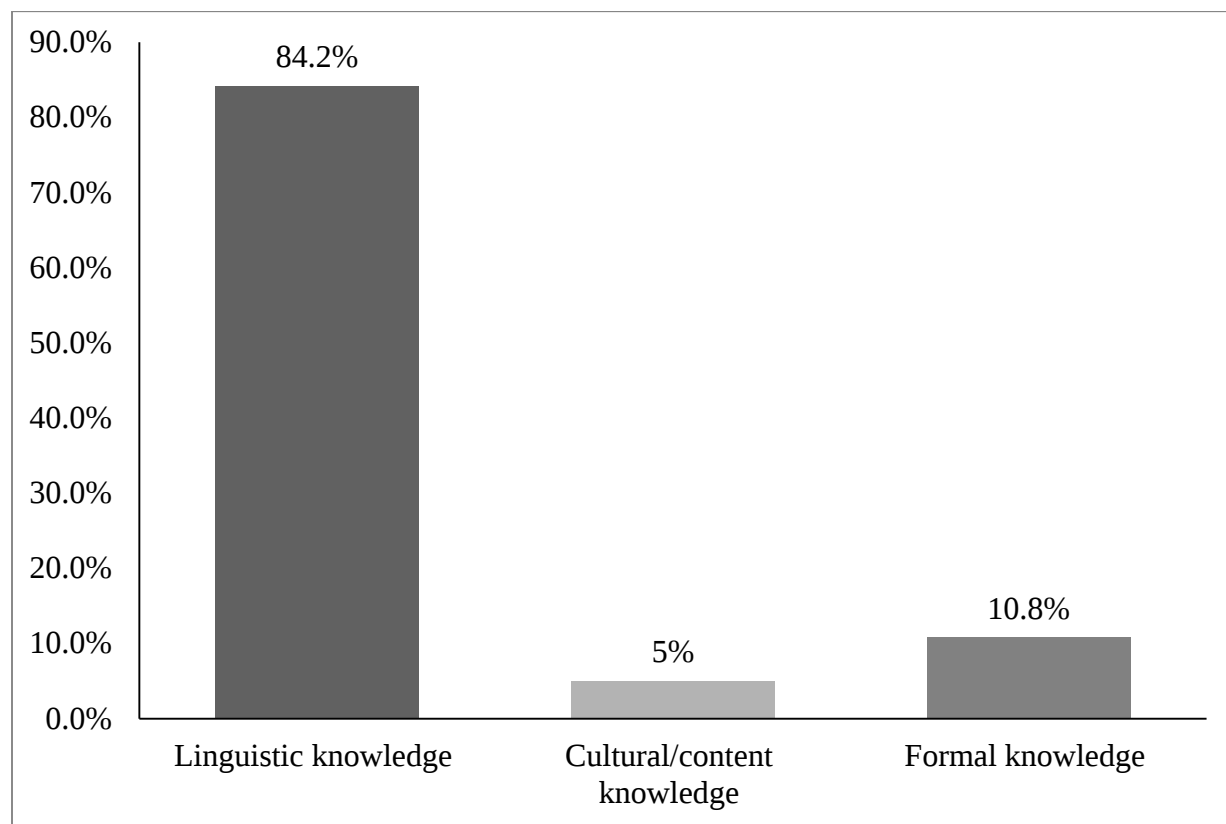


Figure 4: Preference in Learning English

Figure 4 shows that 84% of learners prefer to learn linguistics. Though cultural/content knowledge and formal knowledge influence reading comprehension based on the schema theory on reading comprehension, ESL learners' first preference is to improve linguistic knowledge for reading comprehension. In this sense, Eskey (1988) stated that linguistic schema plays a major role in reading comprehension. It is the basis of reading and a requirement of formal and content schema. This analysis points out that

the learners have not mastered the grammar yet though they have been learning English for more than eighteen years. The findings incorporate the O/Level and A/Level results indicating the low competency level in English of the participants. It is detailed in Figure 1.

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

10.9 Preference to learn features of language to improve reading comprehension

The bar chart below clearly explains that most of the participants want to learn the

linguistic features of the English language. The linguistic features were explained in their mother tongue in the questionnaire. Thus, the respondents were able to respond to the question.

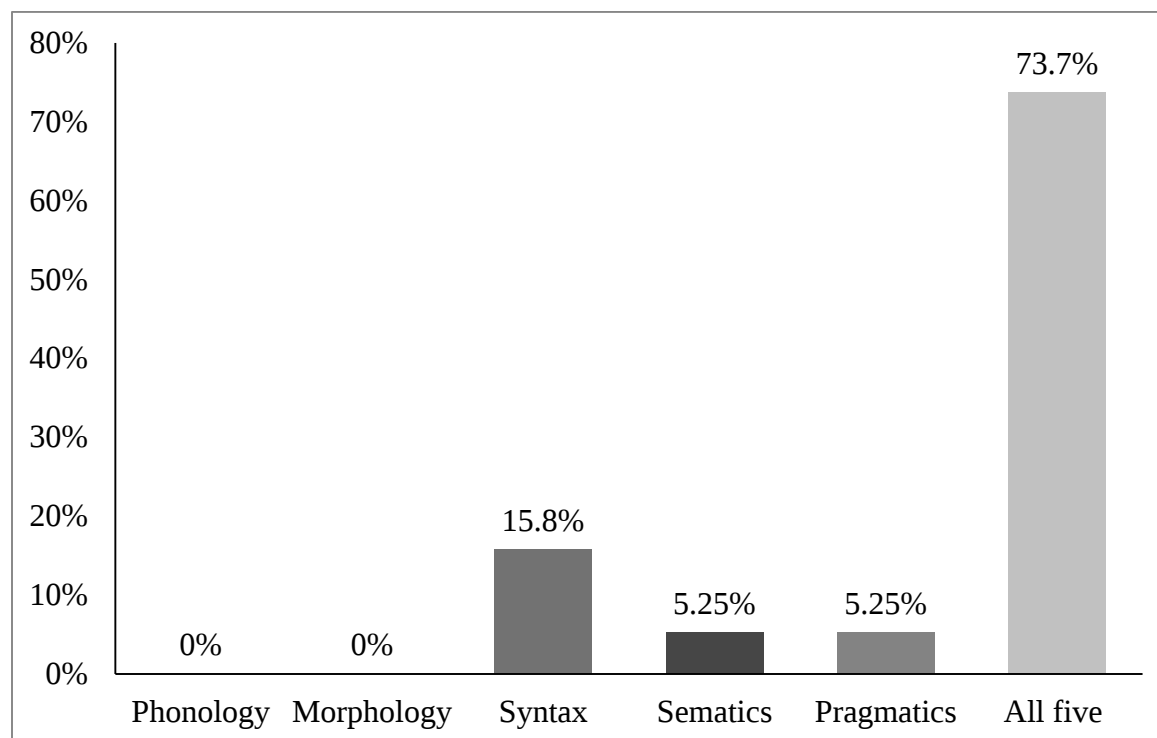


Figure 5: Preferences on Learning Linguistic Features of English Language

According to Figure 5, most of the participants need to learn all linguistic features of the English language to improve reading comprehension. Eskey (1988) stated that linguistic schema is the fundamental and key aspect of reading comprehension. This

analysis also shows that the majority of the learners are at a low level of linguistic competence in the English language as they prefer to learn all the elements of the language. The analysis reveals that the learners realized the importance of language

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

knowledge in improving reading comprehension in the ESL class.

10.10 Perception of analysing and evaluating a reading text

Harmer (2001) emphasises that a reader practises a kind of clue to comprehend what the writer is indicating or suggesting. A reader can reflect beyond the literal meaning of words. Chastain (1988, as cited in Razi, 2004) points out that reading is an active cognitive system for understanding the text through working on written material. However, in the responses to Q28 of the questionnaire, some of the respondents analyse and evaluate a reading text to comprehend it. Although analysing and evaluating a reading passage is an important task in the academic activities of undergraduates at universities, a few learners apply the skills. Therefore, it was found that comprehension became a difficult task in reading English passages in ESL classes.

10.11 Qualitative data analysis of the student questionnaire

The data analysis of the open-ended question of the student questionnaire was done to explore the learners' perceptions, attitudes

and problems in reading comprehension strategies in the ESL class.

10.12 Perception of reading comprehension strategies or techniques

The qualitative data collected from an open-ended question of the students' questionnaire revealed that the learners used very limited strategies or techniques for reading comprehension in the ESL class. Reading comprehension occurs in two ways of the hierarchy, from the bottom up to the top and the top down to the bottom. Specific data from a text activates bottom-up processing while top-down processing starts with general to confirm these predictions. This process occurs simultaneously to enhance the notion of interaction between bottom-up and top-down processes in comprehension (Carrell and Eiserhold, 1983). Skimming and scanning strategies are used in the process respectively. However, many learners used one or two techniques when they were involved in reading compression. The techniques that were used by the learners are categorised as follows:

- a. Using a dictionary for finding the meaning of unknown words

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

- b. Finding the main idea or key points of paragraphs
- c. Focusing on morphological patterns
- d. Understanding the structure of the grammar in the text
- e. Scanning
- f. Translating
- g. Taking short notes and making questions

11. Discussion

The analysis of the data collected from the students' questionnaire revealed the learners' perceptions, preferences and problems in reading comprehension in the ESL. According to the data analysis, most of the learners' perception of their competency level in the English language was at a low level. Though the students have been learning English from primary to secondary education for several years at Sri Lankan schools, their English proficiency was not at an expected level when they entered the university (Perera, Rajendran, Neranjan, Dissanayaka & Karunarachchi, 2010). This was also evidenced by their GCE O/Level results, GCE A/Level results, and the data analysis of the classroom observation and the focus group discussions of the study. The undergraduates learnt English as a second

language from primary classes in schools for more than eighteen years, but they did not perform at an expected level in reading comprehension in higher education at the University of Sri Lanka. This same issue is stated by Wijeratne (2015) mentions that university students are not interested in learning English as a second language. Hence, the ELT field should be upgraded at the university level in Sri Lanka to reach the expected standard among the graduates in the country.

The data analysis of GCE O/Level and GCE A/Level results pointed out that most of the learners entered university with low competency in the English language. In this context, the learners should be trained in ESL classes at the universities to be effective communicators in English to create great job opportunities in the national and international job markets as Ratwatted (2016) finds that the primary reason for unemployment is the lack of good communication skills among the educated learners in the 21st century in Sri Lanka. In this point of view, Canagarajah (1999, as cited in Ratwatte, 2016, p.104) indicated that "English facilitates the securing of employment". However, the

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

background analysis of the participants in the study revealed that the learners could offer the English course as an additional subject for two credits in the Second-Year 1st and 2nd Semesters of four years Bachelor's degree programme of Fine Arts at the university. Hence, the finding of the study suggests incorporating the English course in the all-academic years to fulfil the requirements to achieve the goals of higher education in the country.

12. Conclusion

The current study revealed that the ESL learners' perceptions, and attitudes on reading comprehension in English and language proficiency were not at an expected level in reading comprehension. Therefore, teaching methodology, teaching materials, curriculum and ESL classrooms could be upgraded to fulfil the needs of the undergraduates.

Reference

Alderson, C. (1984). Reading in a foreign language: A reading problem or a language problem. In Alderson, C & Urquhart, A. H. (Eds.), *Reading in foreign language* (pp. 114-141). London: Longman.

An, S. (2013). Schema Theory in Reading. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3 (1), 130-134. doi:10.4304/tpls.3.1.130-134

Anderson, R. C. Reynolds, R.E., & Schallert, D.L. (1977). Frameworks for comprehending discourse. *American Educational Research Journal*, 14(4), 369-381. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1162336>

Carrell, P. L., & Eisterhold, J. C. (1983). Schema Theory and ESL Reading Pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17(4), 553-573. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/15457249> Carr, E., & Ogle

Carrell, P. L. (1981). Culture-specific Schemata in L2 Comprehension, *Selected Papers from the Ninth Illinois TESOL/BE Annual Convention, the First Midwest TESOL Conference*, ed. by R. Orem & J. Haskell, Illinois TESOL/BE, Chicago, pp. 123-132.

Denscombe, M. (2007). *The Good Research Guide for small-scale social research projects* (3rd ed.). Open University Press, McGraw-Hill Education McGraw-Hill House, England SL6 2QL.

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

Department of Examinations. (2018). *G.C.E. (O.L) Examinations 2018: Evaluation Report*. Sri Lanka. Retrieved from [https://www.doenets.lk/images/resources/EVRE/G.C.E.%20\(O-L\)%20Evaluation%20Report-English_1600346465725.pdf](https://www.doenets.lk/images/resources/EVRE/G.C.E.%20(O-L)%20Evaluation%20Report-English_1600346465725.pdf)

Eskey, D.E. (1988). Holding in the Bottom: An Interactive Approach to the Language Problems of Second Language Readers, in Carrell, P.L., Devine, J. and Eskey, D.E. (eds) (1988) *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading*. Cambridge: CUP.

Grabe, W. (1988). Reassessing the term 'interactive'. In P. L. Carrell, J. Devine, and D. E. Eskey (Eds.), *Interactive approaches to second language reading* (pp. 143-149). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. (2001). Reading for academic purposes: Guidelines for the ESL/EFL teacher. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Methods in Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (pp. 187-204). Boston: Heinle&Heinle.

Harmer, J. (2001). *The practice of English language teaching*. Essex: Pearson Education.

Hettiarachchi, S. (2010) *ESL Teacher Motivation in Sri Lankan Public Schools*. (Master's thesis, Eastern Michigan University). Retrieved from <https://commons.emich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1315&context=theses>

Hudson, T. (1982). The effects of induced schemata on the 'short-circuit' in L2 reading: non-decoding factors in L2 reading performance. *Language Learning*, 32(1), 1-32.

Karunaratne, I.M. (2008) *Teaching English in Urban Sri Lanka: The Case of Four Government Schools in Colombo*. (Research & Publications). Sri Lanka: University of Colombo. Retrieved from http://archive.cmb.ac.lk:8080/research/bitstream/70130/1096/1/IM%20Karunaratne_Teaching%20English.pdf

Mendis, D., & Rambukwella, H. (2020). *The Routledge handbook of world Englishes*. Routledge.

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

Perera, M., Rajendran, S., Neranjan, S., Dissanayaka, D. & Karunarachchi, N. (2010). *Coping with student heterogeneity in the English Language Classrooms: A collaborative action research*. Conducted for the National Education Commission. Retrieved from <http://nec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/problemsin-teachingenglish-full-report.pdf>

Paranthaman, V. (2021). *What is Raiding'?*. Sri Lanka: GMT Publication.

Ratwatte, H.V. (2016). Employment as a reason to achieve fluency in English? The beliefs of Secondary School learners and undergraduate students of 21st century Sri Lanka. *VISTAS Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, (10)9, 102-143

Razi, S. (2004). *The effects of cultural schema and reading activities on reading comprehension*. Proceedings of the First International Online Conference on Second and Foreign Language Teaching and Research. https://www.academia.edu/2962369/The_effects_of_cultural_schema_and_reading_activities_on_reading_comprehension

Rumelhart, D. E. (1980). Schemata: The building block of cognition. In R.J. Spiro, B.C. Bruce, & W.F. Brewer (Eds.), *Theoretical issues in reading comprehension*. Urquhart, A.H., & Weir, C.J. (1998). *Reading in a second language: Process, product, and practice*. London: New York: Longman.

Wijeratne. W. H. P. (2015). *A Study of Second Language Identity and Motivation among Undergraduates in Sri Lankan Universities*. (Master's thesis, The Graduate Faculty of St. Cloud State University). Retrieved from https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/engl_etds/21

World Bank. (2010). *World Bank Provides Support to Local Infrastructure Higher Education Tourism-Development Sri Lanka*. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Washington. Retrieved from <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2010/05/13/world-bank-provides-support-local-infrastructure-higher-education-tourism-development-sri-lanka>

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.

Wijesekera, H.D. (2012). Dreams Deferred: English Language Teaching in Sri Lanka. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7 (8), 16-26. Retrieved from http://repository.ou.ac.lk/bitstream/handle/9404/1493/Article_2_Wijesekera16_26.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Xu, K. (2016) The Strategies of Fostering Students' Cross-Cultural Awareness in Secondary School English Teaching. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(6) 161-170. doi: [10.4236/jss.2016.46018](https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2016.46018).

Citation: Sebarajah, A. (2023). Investigating the Perceptions of Reading Comprehension in English of the Undergraduates of Swamy Vipulanandha Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University, Sri Lanka. *The Journal of Aesthetic Studies*, 3(1), pp 11 – 27.