# Exploring Factors Affecting Reading Culture of First-Year Students At A Selected Institution of Higher Learning In South Africa

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**Abstract:** Prior research has shown that academic reading poses a significant challenge for university students. One of the primary explanations is the lack of a positive reading culture among university students. Several studies have demonstrated the positive and negative effects of various factors on reading cultures. Notably, some studies indicate that university students do not read books regularly, and their cultural surroundings discourage them from doing so, often due to inadequate libraries and a lack of role models. Therefore, the current study sought to diagnose the factors affecting the reading culture of students at a specific institution of higher learning. The study employed a qualitative research approach, with a phenomenological research design deemed relevant. A targeted sample of 65 respondents was selected to answer an open-ended questionnaire. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the collected data. The results revealed that university students' reading culture was influenced by factors such as limited English vocabulary, poor reading comprehension, lack of reading interest, and time constraints. These findings are expected to raise lecturers' awareness of the factors affecting their students' reading culture. This knowledge is crucial as it can inform the development of thoughtful interventions aimed at fostering a positive reading culture among students. Additionally, the study provides data that could enhance English lecturers' understanding of the challenges affecting their students' reading habits.

**Keywords:** Reading culture, University students, Academic reading, Reading comprehension, Higher education, EFL learners (English as a Foreign Language), Time constraints.

## 1. Introduction

Reading proficiency is a fundamental skill necessary for academic success in higher education (Anwar & Sailuddin, 2022). This skill plays a pivotal role in knowledge acquisition and the demonstration of learning, as highlighted by Pirttimaa, Takala, and Ladonlahti (2015), who emphasize that tertiary education relies heavily on reading to gain and articulate knowledge. Despite its importance, South Africa faces a persistent reading crisis that has garnered attention at both national and international levels (Biesman-Simons, 2021).

This crisis is evident in the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PIRLS), which monitors global trends in reading literacy at five-year intervals. South African learners have consistently underperformed. For example, in PIRLS 2006, grade 5 learners achieved the lowest scores among 45 participating countries, with an average well below the international benchmark of 500 points. A staggering 8 out of 10 South African grade 4 learners could not read for meaning. These poor results persisted in PIRLS 2016, with 78% of grade 4 learners unable to comprehend texts meaningfully. The latest PIRLS 2021 results reveal a further decline, with 81% of grade 4 learners failing to read for meaning in any language, placing South Africa last among all participating countries. This trend underscores the severity of the reading comprehension crisis and its potential to exacerbate existing educational inequalities if left unaddressed.

While much attention has been given to improving reading at the primary and secondary school levels, research suggests that the challenges are cumulative and extend into tertiary education. Pretorius and Machete (2004) argue that South African learners' reading skills are generally underdeveloped across all educational levels, a view supported by Baruthram (2017), who notes that students entering higher education often exhibit literacy levels far below what is desirable. This concern is particularly relevant in the context of universities, where reading serves as a critical tool for academic achievement. The South African Department of Basic Education has called for initiatives to cultivate a culture of reading in schools (Department of Basic Education, 2019b), but efforts in higher education remain limited.

At the university level, poor reading habits are a significant barrier to success. Makgahlela and Mulaudzi (2020) found that students at the University of Limpopo primarily read for academic purposes and rarely for pleasure, reflecting a lack of intrinsic motivation to engage with reading. Research from other African contexts,

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such as Nigeria (Akidi et al., 2019), similarly highlights the critical role of reading culture in academic success. Studies have consistently shown that students who cultivate a love for reading are more likely to succeed academically (Mustafa et al., 2021; Ramolula & Molebatsi, 2023; Ajidahun, 2015). Kaschula (2014) asserts that fostering a reading culture is essential for South Africa's future, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to instill this culture among university students.

In the current study, "reading culture" refers to a set of reading behaviors encompassing both the frequency and purpose of reading. There is a strong relationship between culture and habits, as Akidi et al. (2021) argue that culture is shaped by habitual behaviors. In this context, "culture" and "habit" are used interchangeably to reflect the broader patterns of reading engagement.

While much of the existing literature focuses on primary and secondary education (Olifant et al., 2019; Egong, 2014; Makena, 2022), limited attention has been given to the reading culture of university students in South Africa. Studies in other African countries, such as Nigeria, have explored this topic extensively (Akabuike, 2017; Odunayo, 2021; Department of Higher Education, 2019b). However, a gap exists in understanding the unique factors influencing South African university students' reading habits. To address this gap, the current study aims to explore the factors affecting the reading culture of students at a selected institution of higher learning.

This research is significant as it seeks to provide insights that can inform the design of interventions to cultivate a sustainable reading culture among university students. Understanding these factors is crucial for promoting academic success and addressing the broader literacy challenges facing South Africa. To achieve this objective, the study addresses the following research question:

- What are the factors affecting the reading culture of students at a selected institution of higher learning?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Reading Culture

Reading culture has been conceptualized in various ways by different scholars. It is commonly defined as an environment that respects, values, and promotes reading (Hawthorne, 2021; Makone, 2021). According to Malada (2023), a reading culture is the foundation of any successful civilization, as it fosters growth and prosperity. However, building a robust reading culture requires deliberate effort, commitment, and persistence, as noted by Hawthorne (2021), who emphasized that it should not be left to an individual's initiative alone. Specifically, research into African reading habits has highlighted a concerning trend of low reading proficiency across all age groups in various countries on the continent (Makone, 2021). Furthermore, Makone's findings revealed that non-educational materials, such as novels, newspapers, and magazines, are not commonly read, signaling a lack of diversity in reading practices.

Adding to this discourse, several studies have explored the factors that positively or negatively affect reading culture. On the one hand, studies such as those by Mustafa et al. (2021) have identified obstacles like insufficient funding, lack of library space, overcrowded classrooms, inexperienced teachers, and minimal parental support as significant contributors to poor reading habits. These are compounded by the pervasive influence of digital media, excessive screen time, and the absence of role models, all of which create a demotivating cultural environment for learners (Makone, 2021). On the other hand, researchers such as Loh et al. (2017) have demonstrated that fostering a positive reading culture is achievable through targeted interventions. For instance, deliberate selection and prominent display of books, engaging reading initiatives, creating inviting reading spaces, and cultivating a supportive atmosphere are instrumental in promoting reading habits.

Further supporting this perspective, Daniels and Steres (2011) identified engaging learning environments, prioritization of reading, and adult role modeling as critical factors in enhancing students' reading culture. Thus, while challenges persist, evidence suggests that tailored interventions can mitigate these barriers and encourage a sustainable reading culture.

### 2.2. University Students' Reading Culture

A significant body of research has focused on the reading habits of university students in different countries. Celik (2019), for example, examined library usage and reading habits among students at Tishk International University in Iraq. The findings revealed that while students frequently utilized libraries for academic purposes, they exhibited less interest in newspapers and non-academic reading materials. Students attributed this to limited availability of printed media and time constraints. Similarly, a study by Mustafa et al. (2021) in Iran found that university students paid minimal attention to reading books, largely due to discouraging cultural surroundings, inadequate libraries, and a lack of role models. Interestingly, this contrasts with Celik's (2019) findings, which highlighted students' strong interest in books over newspapers, indicating that context plays a significant role in shaping reading habits.

In Africa, studies have revealed additional factors influencing university students' reading culture. For instance, Akabuike (2017) found that Nigerian students' reading habits were hindered by poverty, home background, teaching methods, and distractions such as mobile phones and movies. Ajidahun (2015) corroborated these findings, identifying poorly stocked libraries, insufficient physical infrastructure, and unreliable electricity as key barriers to cultivating a reading culture in Nigerian higher education institutions.

Similarly, Appiah et al. (2023) conducted a study in Ghana, which revealed that excessive family responsibilities and unfavorable environments significantly limited students' reading practices. A comparable study in Tanzania by Wema (2018) showed that while students engaged in diverse reading activities during their leisure time, including reading books, magazines, and online articles, challenges such as overwhelming academic workloads, poor internet connectivity, and family obligations impeded consistent reading habits.

In South Asia, Naz et al. (2022) investigated the reading habits of university students in Pakistan, highlighting barriers such as demanding academic schedules, limited access to libraries, and the high cost of books. These findings align with global trends that demonstrate how socioeconomic and institutional factors influence students' reading behaviors.

## 2.3. Reading Culture in South African Higher Education

In the South African context, research has revealed similar challenges. Ramolula and Molebatsi (2023) explored the role of reading culture in students' academic performance, finding that poor reading habits significantly affect learning outcomes. This aligns with findings by Oyewole (2017), who argued that there is a direct correlation between academic performance and reading culture. Moreover, Mustafa et al. (2021) emphasized that a poor reading culture impacts not only academic success but also career prospects and social development.

Focusing specifically on first-year university students, Amaechi and Motalenyane (2023) investigated changes in reading habits over the academic year. The results indicated that while initial reading habits were poor, exposure to university resources and activities contributed to gradual improvement. This finding underscores the importance of institutional efforts in shaping reading culture. Despite these efforts, the literature indicates that substantial work remains to address the systemic and cultural barriers that continue to affect reading habits in higher education institutions.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, aligning with Bandari's (2022) explanation that qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, or audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. This approach allows researchers to gain deeper insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research. Given the focus of this study—understanding students' perspectives on the factors affecting their reading culture—the qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable.

Within the qualitative paradigm, a phenomenological research design was employed. The Dovetail Editorial Team (2023) highlights that phenomenology aims to explore the lived experiences and emotions of individuals as they relate to the phenomenon under investigation. This design enables researchers to deeply understand how participants perceive and experience the world around them. In this study, the phenomenological design allowed the researcher to capture and analyze the lived experiences of university students concerning their reading culture, thereby providing nuanced insights into the factors influencing their reading behaviors.

### 3.2. Data Collection Method

Data were collected using an open-ended questionnaire, a tool that allows participants to provide detailed responses in their own words, avoiding the constraints of predefined answer options. According to Dossetto (2023), open-ended questions enable researchers to delve deeper into respondents' perspectives, offering a more comprehensive understanding of their thoughts and experiences. These questions were chosen for their ability to elicit rich, personal narratives that highlight the factors influencing students' reading culture.

Between January and March 2024, the researcher developed a set of open-ended questions tailored to address the research objectives. Examples of the questions included:

- How does your level of English vocabulary affect your reading habits?

- To what extent does your reading proficiency level influence your reading habits?

- How does the prescribed reading material impact your reading habits?

- How does the availability (or lack) of time affect your reading habits?

The questionnaire design was informed by themes emerging from the literature review. The tool was reviewed by a colleague with expertise in qualitative research to ensure its validity and reliability. This review process ensured that the questions were aligned with the study objectives and capable of generating meaningful data.

To administer the questionnaire, a colleague from the institution where the study was conducted distributed it to respondents. The questionnaire included ample space for students to provide detailed answers, ranging from sentences to paragraphs. This format enabled respondents to elaborate on specifics, share their ideas, and provide insights into their unique experiences with reading culture.

### 3.3. Research Respondents

The study involved 65 first-year university students majoring in English at the selected university. Participants were enrolled in the "Introduction to the Study of Language and Literature" module, which introduces students to

the foundational concepts and terminology in literature and language studies. All 65 students registered for the module in 2024 were included in the study. The sample comprised 41 females and 24 males, with participants ranging in age from 19 to 34 years.

The participants were drawn predominantly from Black township and rural schools in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province, reflecting the sociocultural and economic diversity of the region. The sociocultural backgrounds of students from rural areas differ significantly from those of their urban counterparts, as noted by Agumba et al. (2023). Rural students often face unique challenges, including low parental educational attainment, limited access to reading materials, and a lack of conducive environments for after-school reading (Cekiso et al., 2022). These disparities contribute to significant differences in reading experiences and habits between rural and urban students.

The selected university does not assess applicants' English proficiency upon admission, adhering to the Department of Higher Education's (2020) language policy framework. This policy seeks to improve the status and use of South Africa's indigenous languages, reducing barriers to access and success in higher education. Consequently, many students enter university with varying levels of English proficiency, which can influence their reading habits and academic performance.

## 4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that organizes data into meaningful patterns and themes. According to Suter (2012), thematic analysis involves coding qualitative data to identify recurring themes, enabling researchers to draw logical and meaningful conclusions. In this study, an inductive approach to thematic analysis was adopted. Thomas (2006) describes inductive analysis as a method that derives patterns and themes directly from the data, rather than applying preconceived categories.

The analysis began with a careful review of the raw data, followed by the development of initial codes based on recurring ideas and keywords in the participants' responses. These codes were then clustered into broader categories, which ultimately formed the study's main themes. This process ensured that the findings were grounded in the data, capturing the nuances of students' perspectives on reading culture. To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher ensured that each theme was supported by sufficient data and cross-checked the themes for consistency.

### 4.1. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the university's ethics committee. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and the measures taken to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality. A consent form was provided, which outlined these ethical considerations and required participants' voluntary agreement to participate. All data were securely stored and anonymized to protect the identities of the respondents, ensuring compliance with ethical research standards.

## 5. Findings

The findings are presented in this section according to the themes that emerged from the students' open-ended questionnaires. To support the author's narrative, verbatim excerpts are included. However, only the excerpts deemed most pertinent and representative of the factors influencing students' reading culture are presented. To maintain confidentiality, the respondents' identities have been concealed using the code "S," which stands for "student." Codes such as S1, S2, and S3 were employed to distinguish respondents. The themes that emerged from the data are interconnected but are addressed individually in the following subsections: **1. Limited English Vocabulary, 2. Poor Reading Comprehension, 3. Lack of Reading Interest, 4. Time Constraints.**
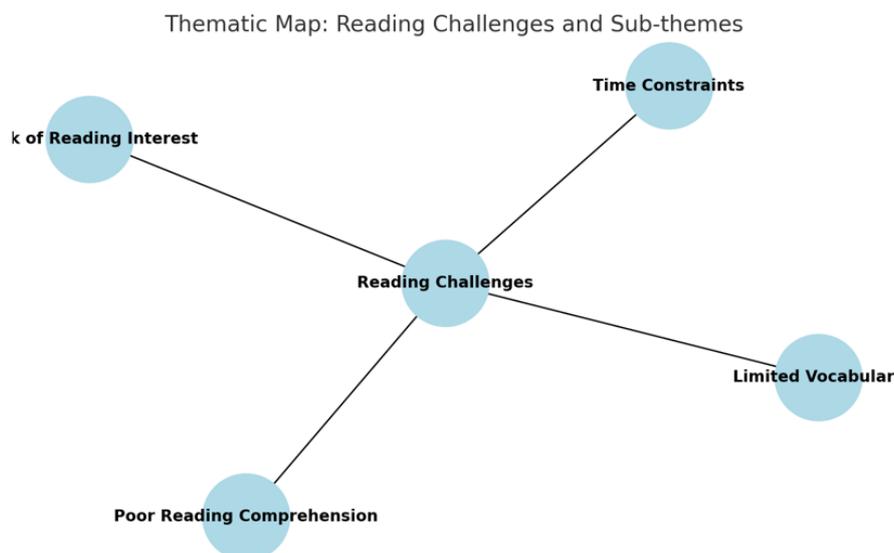


**Figure 1:** Thematic Map: Reading Challenges and Sub-themes

Figure 1 above shows how the overarching theme, "Reading Challenges," is connected to the sub-themes: "Limited Vocabulary," "Poor Reading Comprehension," "Lack of Reading Interest," and "Time Constraints."

## 5.1. Limited English Vocabulary

Respondents indicated that limited English vocabulary significantly affected their reading culture. This issue was linked to unfamiliar words that acted as barriers to understanding the texts, discouraging students from engaging with a wide range of reading materials. The limited vocabulary not only hindered comprehension but also diminished motivation and interest in reading. The findings suggest that some vocabulary used in university-level texts was above the comprehension level of the students studied. Responding to the question on vocabulary, S25 stated:

*"Most of us battle with the English vocabulary. We don't know enough vocabulary to understand a book or any written material. It is not easy to look up the meaning of words from the dictionary when you read. Sometimes I try to guess the meaning of words from the context, but in most cases, I realize that my guesses are wrong."*

Similarly, S44 mentioned:

*"In some texts, there are too many big words I do not understand. They are difficult for me because English is difficult for me. Reading a text that contains words you do not understand is frustrating. Maybe my background and exposure to the English language are what is giving me problems today."*

## 5.2. Poor Reading Comprehension

As previously noted, vocabulary serves as the foundation of comprehension, acting as a gatekeeper to understanding texts. Consequently, students with a limited vocabulary are less likely to comprehend what they read. Poor vocabulary negatively impacts the development of reading comprehension skills, as students struggle to define key terms within texts. Most respondents admitted they were unable to fully engage with the content due to difficulties in understanding. S4 explained:

*"Difficult words that are not easy to read become problematic. Some words in the text are difficult even to pronounce. Once you fail to pronounce it properly, it means that you will not comprehend it. This becomes a challenge when one encounters several such words in the text."*

Similarly, S1 revealed:

*"I sometimes struggle to understand the meaning of some formal English words, which leads to failing to understand the whole context."*

Echoing similar sentiments, S47 stated:

*"Because of the level of study that I am in, sometimes it is hard to understand what I am reading. It takes a lot of concentration to read every line and make perfect sense out of the idea the author is trying to convey."*

## 5.3. Lack of Reading Interest

Some respondents indicated that the prescribed reading material was uninteresting and unrelated to their social or cultural contexts. Students expressed difficulty in utilizing prior knowledge to connect with the content, which made understanding the text more challenging. This disconnection from the material was cited as a key factor in diminishing reading interest. S2 shared:

*"Having to read a whole book by yourself and getting bored with the story that is presented in the book. For example, most academic texts are old books focusing on the history or what used to happen in the past years, whereas a new book about what is happening now in our society—something we as students could relate to—would be more enjoyable."*

S14 echoed this view:

*"One challenge is not relating to the characters in most of my African literature. It often leads me to get lost in the literature. Another point where I get lost is the plot that is always foreign. It takes the excitement away in that from the beginning one can see that the events are distant."*

Similarly, S15 remarked:

*"When I do not know the content of what I am reading or when the diction is archaic and does not make sense to me, it means that the material is boring, and I get demotivated."*

## 5.4. Time Constraints

Respondents identified time constraints as another significant factor affecting their reading culture. They noted that the sheer volume of required reading for university studies, combined with other distractions such as television and mobile phones, limited the time available for reading. These distractions were cited as major impediments to developing a consistent reading habit. S10 explained:

*"The major challenge is television. I am a TV addict, and this affects my reading time. There are TV programmes I cannot afford to miss. The problem is that I cannot control myself when it comes to these programmes. I even sacrifice my reading time. When I try to avoid these programmes and focus on reading,*

*I always notice that as I read, I think about what might have happened in a particular soapy and end up not concentrating on what I am reading."*

S7 shared a similar sentiment:

*"Keeping my phone on sight while reading makes it impossible for me to finish a page without feeling the urge to check for a text message."*

Similarly, S11 revealed:

*"I do not finish most of my books because I always do not have enough time to finish. I enjoy breaking things down like making my puzzle. Sometimes this takes time, and I always end up not finishing the books."*
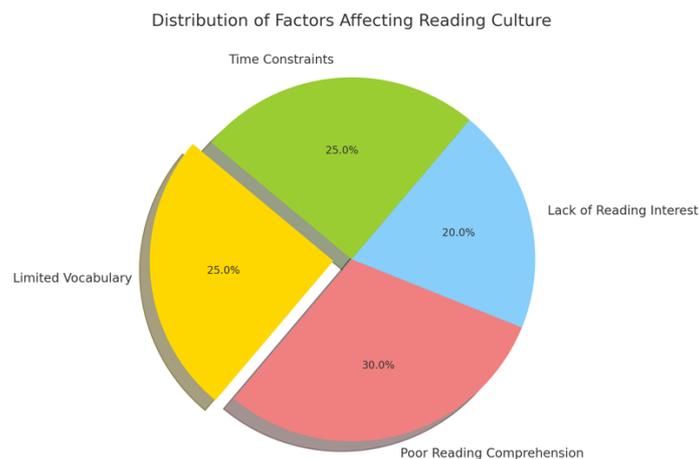


**Figure 2**: Distribution of Factors Affecting Reading Culture

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of factors affecting reading culture among university students.

## 6. Discussion

This study investigated the factors that affect the reading culture of university students. The findings revealed that limited English vocabulary, poor comprehension skills, lack of reading interest, and time constraints significantly influence students' reading culture.

The findings showed that limited vocabulary in English hindered students' ability to engage with a variety of reading materials. This aligns with Clarke et al. (2010), who assert that gains in vocabulary knowledge correlate with improvements in reading comprehension. Students struggled with unfamiliar words, leading to demotivation and a restricted range of reading material. This resonates with previous research by Dong et al. (2020), Chen et al. (2014), and Mohammed and Rashid (2017), who identified limited vocabulary as a critical factor in impeding reading comprehension.

Additionally, poor reading comprehension emerged as a factor affecting students' reading habits. Comprehension involves interpreting the meaning of words and connecting them to ideas, as noted by Brandon (2021). The findings align with de-la-Pena and Luque-Rojas (2021), who found that a significant number of university students operate at a surface level of reading comprehension. Students' limited comprehension skills prevent them from interacting deeply with texts, further hindering their academic success and reading culture.
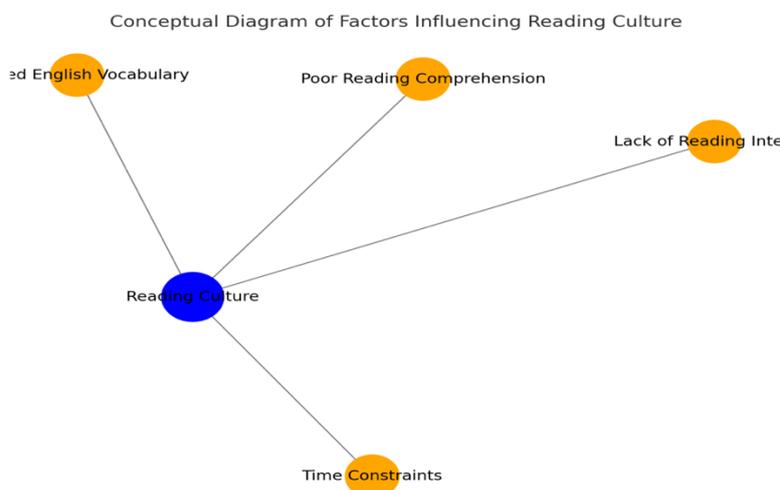


**Figure 3:** Conceptual Diagram of Factors Influencing Reading Culture

This diagram illustrates the relationships between identified factors (e.g., limited vocabulary, poor comprehension) and their collective impact on students' reading culture. It provides a conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of these issues.

Another significant finding was the lack of interest in reading, which students attributed to irrelevant or unengaging reading materials. Students noted that prescribed texts often lacked a connection to their social or cultural experiences, making it difficult to relate to the content. This aligns with Puspitawati et al. (2022), who argue that accessible and engaging reading materials are crucial in fostering reading interest. Similarly, Toker and Aminou (2019) found that Nigerian university students identified a lack of interest as a barrier to developing a reading culture, emphasizing the need for culturally relevant materials.

Time constraints were also identified as a major factor affecting reading culture. Respondents cited competing priorities, such as academic responsibilities, television, and social media, as significant distractions. This finding supports Naz et al. (2022), who found that a lack of time and busy academic schedules impede students' reading habits. Similarly, Wong et al. (2022) observed that students who dedicate time to reading benefit academically, highlighting the need for effective time management strategies.



**Figure 4:** Sankey Diagram: Factors Influencing Reading Culture

This Sankey Figure 4 visually represents the flow of factors influencing reading culture, including limited vocabulary, poor comprehension, and lack of interest. Each factor is shown as a flow connecting to the primary issue, emphasizing the connections and proportional impacts.

## 7. Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for fostering a positive reading culture among university students. Firstly, addressing the issue of limited vocabulary requires targeted interventions from lecturers. Strategies such as promoting extensive reading programs are essential to help students expand their vocabulary. Encouraging students to read a diverse range of materials, including academic texts and leisure reading, can enhance their ability to understand different writing styles and vocabularies. Vocabulary-building workshops, where students are trained to use context clues and dictionary skills effectively, could also aid in reducing the barriers posed by unfamiliar words.

Secondly, poor reading comprehension, as identified in this study, highlights the need for deliberate integration of comprehension strategies into the university curriculum. Lecturers could design activities that focus on teaching students how to summarize texts, identify main ideas, ask critical questions, and break down complex materials into manageable sections. These strategies would not only improve comprehension but also instil confidence in students, encouraging them to engage with more challenging texts. As comprehension is a gateway to meaningful reading, universities should also consider incorporating reading comprehension training as part of their orientation programs for first-year students.

Thirdly, the lack of interest in reading underlines the importance of providing culturally and socially relevant materials that resonate with students' experiences. Lecturers should strive to balance academic rigour with relatable content by selecting texts that reflect diverse cultural and social realities. Additionally, incorporating interactive and engaging classroom activities, such as group discussions, creative projects, and role-playing based on reading materials, could further enhance students' interest in reading. Universities should also consider establishing book clubs or reading circles to create a community-driven reading environment that fosters peer-to-peer encouragement and participation.

Finally, time constraints, which emerged as a significant factor, suggest a need for interventions that focus on time management skills. Educators should teach students how to balance academic responsibilities, personal commitments, and leisure activities effectively. Providing workshops on scheduling, prioritization, and goal setting could help students allocate sufficient time for reading. Furthermore, leveraging digital tools such as e-books, audiobooks, and mobile-assisted learning platforms could enable students to integrate reading into their daily routines, even during short breaks or commutes. By addressing these factors comprehensively, institutions can help create an environment that supports the development of a sustainable and productive reading culture among students.

## 8. Conclusion

This study has successfully identified the factors affecting university students' reading culture, namely limited English vocabulary, poor reading comprehension, lack of interest in reading, and time constraints. These findings emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to fostering a positive reading culture.

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from educators, students, and institutions. Strategies such as enhancing vocabulary, implementing reading comprehension techniques, incorporating culturally relevant materials, and teaching effective time management are critical. By addressing these factors, universities can cultivate a reading culture that not only improves academic performance but also contributes to lifelong learning. Further research could explore the long-term impact of these interventions and the role of digital tools in fostering a sustainable reading culture.

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**Authors' contribution statements:** Madoda Cekiso contributed in Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Visualization, Project Administration, Software, Validation, Data Curation, Resources, and Writing – Review & Editing

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