Electronic or Printed Books: ESL learners' Preferences at the University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir

Sabir Hussain Shah [1]
Muhammad Waleed Butt [2]
Muhammad Ajmal Khurshid [3]

Abstract

ESL learners have different preferences for reading materials. Some of the learners prefer to read printed material while others are comfortable with the electronic or digital books. The current study aims to find out the preferences of ESL learners regarding printed or electronic course material. It further attempts to investigate the reasons behind such preferences. The data for the study have been collected from 105 ESL learners using survey questionnaire and conducting semi-structured interviews of 15 ESL learners of the department of English, the University of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. The data have been analyzed using pie-charts, thematic analysis and categorization. The findings reveal that majority of the participants prefer to read printed books because of their convenience, durability, longevity, better understanding, tangible and enjoyable reading experience. Electronic books are preferred by a small number of learners for their portability, low cost, easy access and availability.

Keywords: Printed, Electronic, Preference, Longevity, Portability

1. Introduction

Being able to read is something inevitable for language learners. Efficient reading affects the academic success and enhances the performance of language learners a great deal. However, reading does not mean moving eyes on a text without making any sense of that text. It is a multifaceted process which involves word-recognition, comprehension, fluency and motivation. It is an interactive process between the reader and the text where readers construct meaning using their prior knowledge. The digital technology has revolutionized the world of reading. In the past,

[1]Lecturer, Department of English, University of AJ&K, Muzaffarabad
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Grand Asian University, Sialkot
[3]Assistant Professor, University of Engineering and Technology, Lahore

readers were supposed to read merely the printed books since they had no other option available. The advent of e-books and digital libraries has increased the choices for learners in the present era. This radical shift from printed to digital books has significant impact on ESL learners since reading facilitates their language learning greatly (Troung, 2010). Language teachers, instructors, educationists and policy makers need to have very clear idea of the preferences of ESL learners to facilitate effective language learning.   Reading digital and e-books has been a common practice among students across the globe. The availability and easy portability of these electronic devices have made the access of electronic texts easier for the readers (Alamri, 2019).

Bush and Cameron (2011) affirm that reading is an important skill for language learning. They further assert that the access to reading material can better predict the language proficiency of the language learners. There are counter arguments to the question whether readers' preference is printed or electronic books. Some claim that readers prefer electronic and digital books because of their flexibility and convenience. These digital books offer interactive features which enhance and improve the reading experience of learners. On the other hand, some claim that printed books are more beneficial since they provide a tangible experience to the learners. Apart from this, printed books render better retention and readers experience a sense of possession and ownership (Kumar et al., 2019).

The needs and preferences of ESL learners regarding the reading materials may be unique and worth-investigating. They need some additional support including glossaries, pronunciation guides, explanations and dictionaries. These features can be provided more easily by e-books as compared to printed books. Contrarily, printed books offer more dynamic experience providing better concentration and focus without distractions (Mangen et al., 2013).

Before Corona pandemic (2020), ESL learners in the state of Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) were rarely provided with electronic or digital course material. However, the post-Covid era has witnessed a revolutionary change in this regard. The learners are often provided with digital and electronic course materials. This practice is more common at university level where teachers find it convenient to provide digital material to the students. The present study aims to find out the ESL

learners' preferences regarding printed or electronic books at the department of English, the University of Azad Jammu & Kashmir. The understanding of the preferences and the needs of ESL learners can facilitate the teachers and the authorities in providing more effective support and resources to these learners. This may result into enhancing the language proficiency and competence of the learners.

1.2 Research Questions

The study is undertaken to answer the following research questions:

1. What type of textbooks (printed or electronic) do ESL students prefer to read at the department of English, the University of Azad Jammu & Kashmir?

2. What are the reasons behind the preferences of these learners?

2. Literature Review

Various studies have investigated the preferences of learners regarding their choices of electronic or printed books for reading their course materials. These studies have also tried to find out the reasons behind such a choice. Interestingly, majority of these studies exhibit that learners still prefer reading printed books. Collet (1999) analyzed the factors which influence learners' choice of reading from print or screen. After surveying 40 undergraduate learners, he concluded that learners preferred to read printed material as compared to reading from screen. The learners even got web pages printed to read them conveniently and use them later when the need arose. Armatus, Holt and Rice (2003) investigated learners' preferences for digital and printed material. The findings of the study exhibited that the learners preferred printed material for their ease of use.

Hamer and Mcgrath (2010) investigated reading preferences of undergraduate students. They used convenience sampling to collect data. The finding of their study showed that 72 % of the participants preferred to read from printed books because they found it easier to remember information using printed material. On the other hand, only 7 % participants preferred reading digitally or from screen. Edmondson and Ward (2017) investigated the learners' attitudes and preferences regarding printed and electronic books in the United States by surveying 223 university students. The findings revealed that 78.5 % students preferred

to read printed books; whereas, 11.9 % students chose to read electronic material as these materials were easily portable. The findings of Chen et al. (2019) suggest that younger and higher proficiency level learners prefer to read electronic books because of their ease of use. On the other hand, older and lower proficiency level learners prefer to read printed material since they are used to it. Reading from printed material is more convenient and enjoyable for such learners.

Hashirmoto (2017) asserts that learning styles of learners also contribute to the choice of their preferred reading material. Learners having visual learning style prefer to read printed material since it suits them a lot. Contrary to them, the preference of learners having auditory learning style is electronic and digital material as such material suits their learning style. Pesut and Zizkovic (2016) conclude that 82% respondents of their study prefer to read printed course material. These leaners find it comfortable and convenient to read in print. They find it hard to read when they are exposed to read digitally as this is exhausting for them.

However, numerous studies have contrary findings suggesting that readers prefer to read from digital or electronic books. In one such study, Singer and Alexander (2017) find that learners prefer to read electronic course material rather than the printed one. This preference is stronger where the texts are shorter and the readers read for information or in their leisure time. On the other hand, these learners prefer to read printed material when the texts are longer and they require processing and recalling of more detailed information. This finding has been supported by Wang and Bai (2016) who suggest that learners prefer to read electronically when there is leisure reading. However, the learners' preference is printed material for academic reading.

No study has been conducted so far to find out the preferences of ESL learners regarding printed and electronic course material in Azad Jammu & Kashmir. The current study is an attempt to unfold such preferences of ESL learners with a view to giving an insight to teachers, academicians and concerned authorities to provide the material accordingly to cater for the needs of these learners.

3. Methodology
A mixed method approach has been employed to find out ESL learners' preferences regarding electronic and printed material. The study

has combined both quantitative and qualitative data for this purpose. The mixed–method approach is used since it allows for deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

3.1 Participants

The students of department of English, University of Azad Jammu & Kashmir constitute the population of the present study. 150 of these students are the participants out of which 81.5 % are female and 18.5% are male students. The distribution of male and female students is not equal since the department has comparatively fewer male students. The age of the participants ranges from 17 to 22 years, and they are in the different years of their study at the department.

3.2 Data Collection

The data were collected using a survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The survey questionnaire consists of multiple-choice questions and has three sections: A, B and C. Section A consists of demographic information of the participants. Section B contains six statements dealing with the *Preferences and Usage*, and Section C contains seven statements related to *Reading Habits*. The questionnaire was piloted to ensure its reliability and validity. The piloting also enabled the researcher to make necessary changes in the questionnaire to avoid any sort of ambiguity. For semi-structured interviews, 15 participants were conveniently selected with a view to getting more in-depth insight into their preferences and choices. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded accordingly for different themes.

3.3 Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using Pie Graphs, whereas, the qualitative data was analyzed employing thematic analysis, coding and categorization.
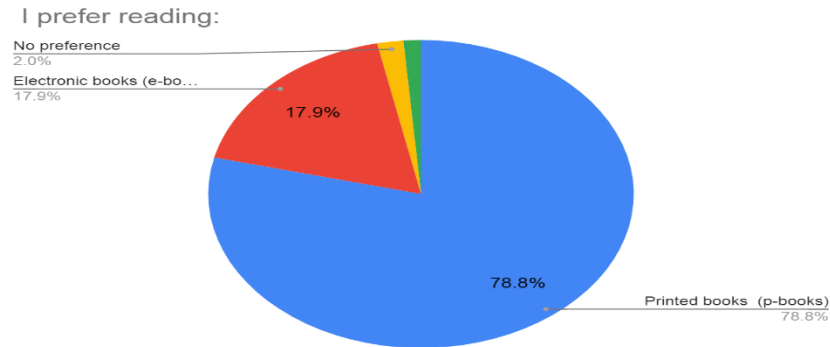
3.4 Ethical Considerations

The consent was duly sought from the participants of the present study, and their rights were protected throughout the study. Sincere efforts were made to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

4. Results and Discussions

The major aim of the current study is to investigate ESL learners' preferences regarding printed or electronic course materials along with the

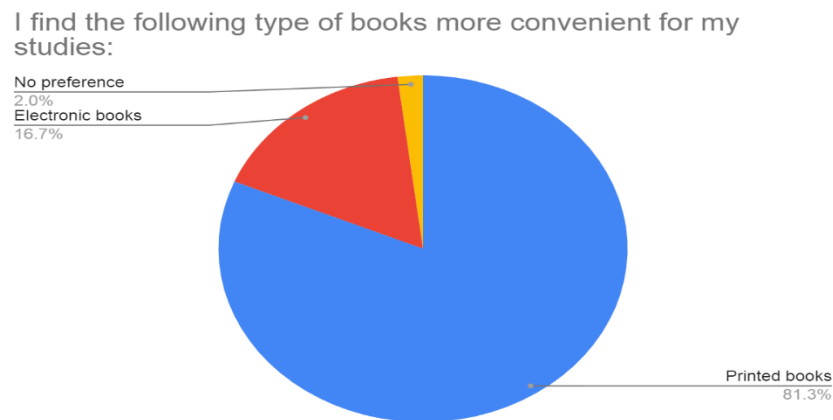reasons behind such preferences. This section presents the results and findings.

In the first statement of the survey questionnaire, the ESL learners' preferences regarding printed and electronic course material have been sought. The following figure shows their responses in this regard:

Fig. 5.1: Preference for Printed or Electronic Books

The figure (5.1) shows that 78.8 % students prefer to read printed books. Their choice for reading course material is always the printed books. On the other hand, 17.9 % students claim that their preference is electronic books; whereas, 2 % of the students show no preference at all. However, 1.3 % ESL learners have not responded to this statement and have remained indifferent Thus, it is vividly evident that majority of ESL learners prefer to read from printed books rather than the electronic books.
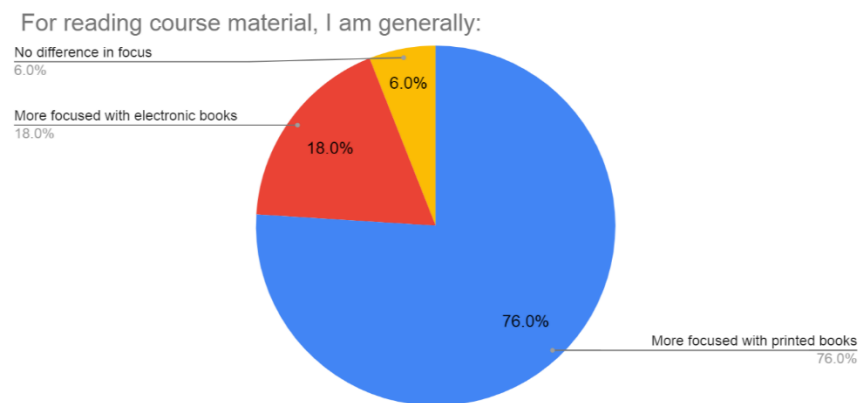
In the second question, the learners have been asked which kind of material they find more convenient while reading. Figure (5.2) below shows the learners' responses:

I find the following type of books more convenient for my studies:

No preference
2.0%
Electronic books
16.7%

Printed books
81.3%

Fig. 5.2: Comparison of Convenience of Printed and Electronic Books
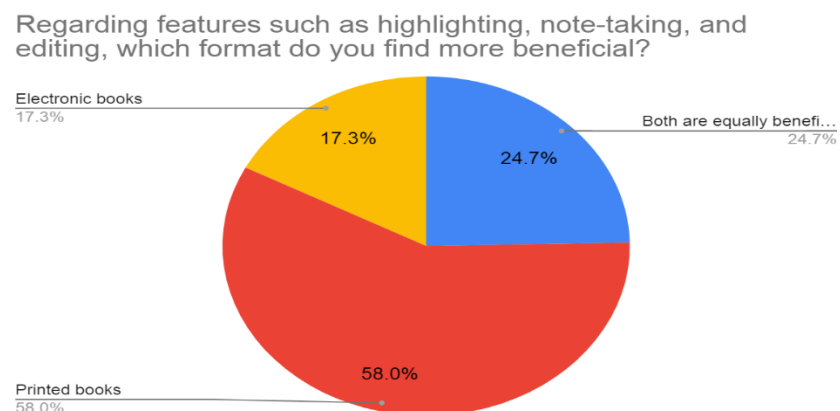
The data reveal that 81.3 % of the respondents find printed books more convenient for reading, and 16.7 % respondents favor electronic books for their convenience. Thus, majority of the ESL learners studying at the department of English are more comfortable with printed reading material. Contrary to them, 16.7 % ESL learners are more convenient while reading electronic material. However, 2% respondents find both types of reading materials equally convenient since they show no preference at all.

In response to the question whether learners are more focused with printed or electronic books, 76 % respondents affirm that they are more focused when they read printed books. They do not find themselves distracted when they are exposed to the printed material. On the other hand, 18 % of the respondents claim that they are more focused with electronic books. Reading electronic and digital course material makes them more focused. Only 6% respondents are of the opinion that it makes no difference to them whether they read printed books or electronic books. They are equally focused with both types of course materials given to them. Figure 5.3 below sums up the responses of the learners regarding their focus:

Fig. 5.3: Difference in Focus between Printed and Electronic Books

In another question, the ESL learners were asked which format (printed or electronic) they find more beneficial in terms of certain features like highlighting, note-taking and editing. Figure (5.4) depicts learners' responses in this regard:
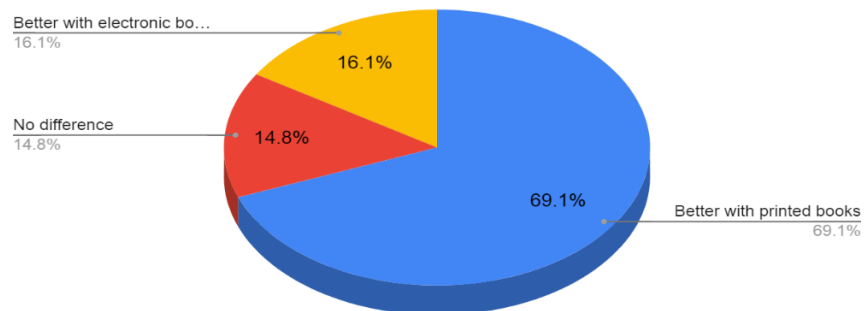

Fig. 5.4: Difference between Printed and Electronic Books in Certain Features

The data reveal that 58 % respondents find printed books more beneficial in terms of features like highlighting, note-taking and editing. Contrary to them, 17.3 % learners claim that they find electronic books more beneficial regarding all these features. However, for 24.7% both printed and electronic books are equally beneficial. They are of the opinion that both the formats are easier and beneficial for them. Hence, majority of the respondents favor printed books and find them more beneficial.

The learners were also asked whether the content is understood better with printed or electronic books. The following figure represents the ESL learners' responses:
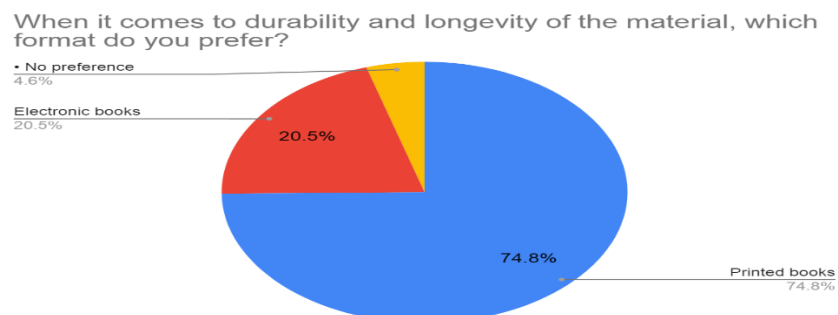
The content is understood:

Better with electronic bo...
16.1%

16.1%

No difference
14.8%

14.8%

69.1%

Better with printed books
69.1%

Fig. 5.5: Comparison of Understanding in Printed and Electronic Books

As depicted in the figure 5.5, 69.1 % ESL learners affirm that they understand the content better when they read that material in print. However, 16.1 % learners assert that the content is understood better with electronic and digital books. For 14.8 % learners, it makes no difference to them whether they read in print or digitally. Their understanding of the content is not affected with any of these formats.
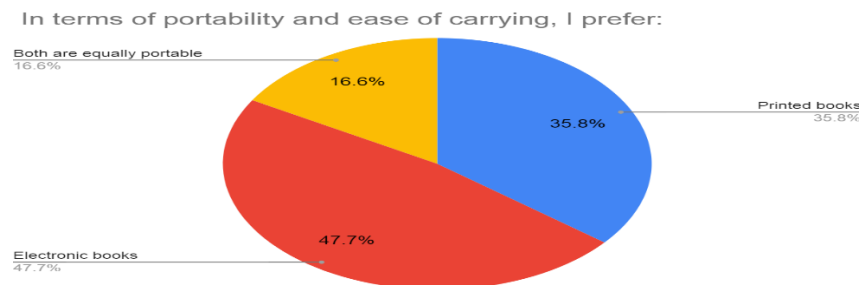
In response to the question whether the learners prefer printed or electronic format when it comes to durability and longevity, the learners' preferences have been shown in the following figure:

When it comes to durability and longevity of the material, which format do you prefer?

· No preference
4.6%

Electronic books
20.5%

20.5%

74.8%

Printed books
74.8%

Fig. 5.6: Preference for Printed or Electronic format

The figure (5.6) reveals that a vast majority of ESL learners (74.8 %) prefer to use printed books because they are durable and long-lasting. They can be used in future time also. Nevertheless, 20.6 % learners consider electronic books more durable and long-lasting. 4. 6 % ESL learners, however, show no preference at all. It is again evident from the data that ESL learners prefer to read printed textbooks rather than electronic ones.
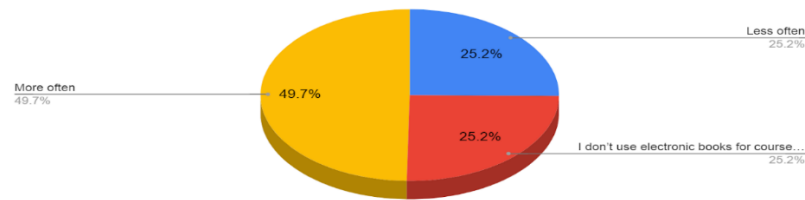
When asked about their preferred format in terms of portability and ease of carrying, the learners have responded differently. Majority of the learners (47.7 %) prefer to use printed books because they are portable and easy to carry with them. They can put books in their bags and start reading wherever they are. Even they can read the printed books while they are traveling. In contrast, 35.8 % ESL learners' preference is digital and electronic books in terms of portability and ease of carrying. They can even download these books in their cellphones and use them when the need arises. However, 16.6 % learners consider both types of books and course material equally portable and easy to carry. Figure (5.7) below represents ESL learners' responses:

In terms of portability and ease of carrying, I prefer:

Both are equally portable
16.6%

16.6%

Printed books
35.8%

35.8%

47.7%

Electronic books
47.7%

Fig. 5.7: Portability of Printed and Electronic Books

In the third section of the questionnaire, the learners were asked how often they used electronic books for their course material. The responses of the learners have been shown in the following figure:

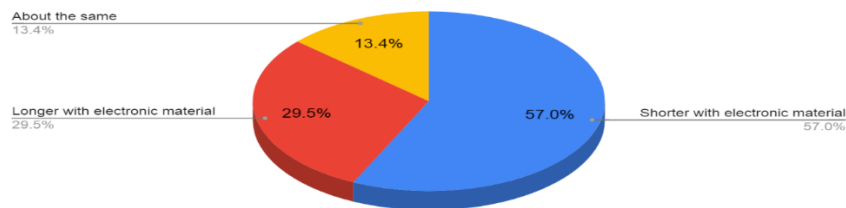How often do you use electronic books for reading course material?

Fig. 5.8: Frequency of the Use of Printed and Electronic Material

The data reveal that 49.7 % students claim that they have to use electronic course material more often since some of the teachers provide them the course material only in digital form. On the other hand, 25.2% are of the opinion that they use the electronic course material less often. Similarly, the same number of students do not use electronic books at all. Whenever any teacher provides them electronic course material, they get it printed and prefer to read that one since they are more comfortable with the printed material.

In another question, the learners were asked whether their duration of reading is greater with printed or electronic books. 57 % of the respondent claim that they read for more amount of time when they read printed books. They consider themselves more focused and they are not distracted when they read printed books. This prolongs their reading sessions and they can read for a longer time at a stretch. Contrarily, 29.5 % learners opine that their reading sessions are comparatively longer with the electronic books. Interestingly, 13.4% of the learners affirm that printed or electronic format does not affect their duration of reading. It makes no difference to them whether they read in print or electronically since their reading sessions remain uninfluenced by these formats. The following figure reflects the responses of the learners in this regard:

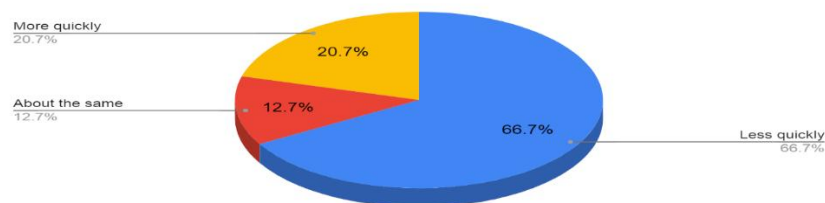When using electronic material, what is the duration of your reading sessions compared to printed material?

About the same 13.4% — 13.4%
Longer with electronic material 29.5% — 29.5%
Shorter with electronic material 57.0% — 57.0%

Fig. 5.9: Comparison of Reading Sessions Using Printed and Electronic Books

Thus, it is obvious from the figure that majority of students prefer to read printed books since reading them prolongs their reading sessions as compared to the electronic books.

In response to the question how frequently they read electronic books as compared to printed books, the learners' responses have been shown in the following figure:

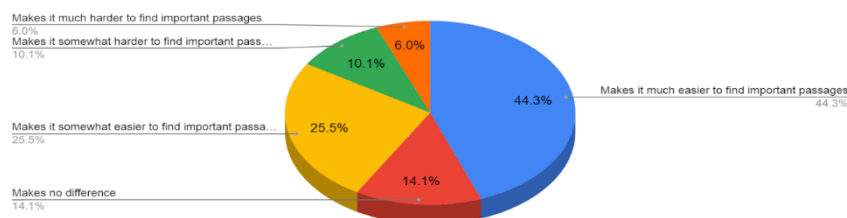How quickly do you read electronic material compared to printed material?

More quickly 20.7% — 20.7%
About the same 12.7% — 12.7%
Less quickly 66.7% — 66.7%

Fig. 5.10: Comparison of Reading Speed Using Printed and Electronic Material

As depicted in the figure, a vast majority of students (66.7%) state that their reading speed is greatly affected when they are exposed to electronic books. They read electronic or digital material less quickly as compared to the printed books. This retardation in reading speed badly affects their comprehension and learning. However, 20.7 % learners are of the view that they read electronic books more quickly as compared to printed ones. Electronic books seem to enhance their reading speed. In contrast, 12.7 % learners consider both the formats equal since they can read printed and the electronic books with the same speed. Thus, the

majority of the students prefer to read printed material as it does not affect their reading speed. They read printed books more quickly and speedily as compared to electronic books.

The learners have varied responses when they were asked about the search function in electronic books. In response to this question, 44.3 % consider that the search function in electronic books makes it much easier for them to find and locate the important passages and information. They can use this function whenever they are in the need of any important passage or information in the text. 25.5 % of the learners, however, are of the opinion that finding important passages in electronic books is somewhat easier for them because of the search function in electronic books. Similarly, 14.1 % claim that the search function of electronic books does not make any difference. They can search important passages from the printed books with the same ease. !0. 1 % learners affirm that it is somewhat harder to find important passages in electronic books. In the similar way, 6 % learners are of the view that it is much harder to find the important passages and information from electronic books. This may be the result of their inability to use and handle electronic and digital material. They may not be good at using the electronic gadgets. The following figure wraps up all this discussion:
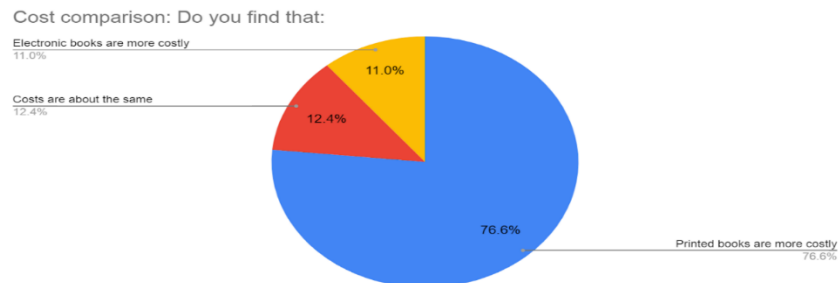

The search function in electronic books:

Makes it much harder to find important passages
6.0%
Makes it somewhat harder to find important pass…
10.1%

Makes it somewhat easier to find important passa…
25.5%

Makes no difference
14.1%

Makes it much easier to find important passages
44.3%

6.0%
10.1%
25.5%
14.1%
44.3%

Fig. 5.11: The Search Function of Electronic Books

As it is evident from the figure, the choice of majority of students is electronic books when they consider the search function available in electronic books.
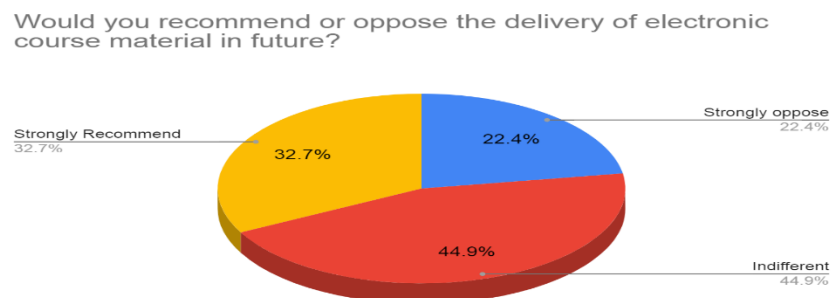
When asked about the cost comparison between the printed and electronic books, majority of the respondents claimed that printed books are more costly. The figure (5.12) reflects the responses of the learners:

Fig. 5.12: Cost Comparison of Printed and Electronic Books

The figure depicts that 76.6 % students find printed books more costly since they have to spend more money on buying such books as compared to electronic books which they often get free of cost. However, 12.4 % opine that costs are almost the same and it makes no difference whether the books are printed or electronic they need money to buy them. 11 % of the learners consider electronic books more costly and expensive. They may be thinking of those books which are paid ones and are not available free of cost online. Thus, majority of the learners prefer electronic books when it comes to their cost.

In the last survey question, the ESL learners were asked whether they would oppose or recommend the delivery of electronic course material in future. Their responses are shown in the following figure:

Fig. 5.13: Recommendation for Printed or Electronic Books

As depicted in the figure, 32.7 % learners affirm that they will prefer to recommend the delivery of electronic course material in future. This may be the result of heavy money they have to spend on buying

printed books. Contrarily, 22.4% learners opine that they will strongly oppose the delivery of electronic course material in future. Their response may be the result of their inability to cope with the digital and electronic material. However, 44.9 % learner remain indifferent and neither recommend nor oppose the delivery of electronic course material in future. These respondents may be capable of using both the formats skillfully and with equal ease and comfort.

The current section has presented and discussed the findings of the data obtained from the survey questionnaire. The next section discusses the findings of semi-structured interviews with 15 participants conveniently selected.

5.1 Analysis of Semi-structured Interviews

The data from semi-structured interviews reveal that ESL learners prefer printed books because they can understand and learn easily using such books. Moreover, printed books are easy to use since they offer easy way for note-taking and highlighting the important texts. Printed books are also preferred because they are convenient to use and handle. Portability and relaxation for eyes also make printed books the preferred choice for the ESL learners. The learners also prefer printed books because the information they gain from printed books stays for a long time in their mind.

Printed books also offer a tangible, distraction-free, and aesthetically pleasing reading experience, appealing to those who value tradition, collectability, and comfort. Durability and longevity of printed books also make them the choice of the learners. Printed books, according to some students, save time and help pupil to stay away from cellphones so that they may remain focused while reading and distraction can be avoided. The learners with weak eyesight also prefer to read printed books.

Some readers cannot read for a long time on screen because their eyes are sensitive to screen. They genuinely feel the essence of reading while reading printed material. Conversely, those who prefer to read electronic books enlist certain reasons behind using these books.

Electronic books are portable and lightweight, making it easy to carry around. Instead of carrying multiple bulky books, an e-Book reader

can hold thousands of e-Books. It saves a lot of space- in one's home and bag. Electronic books enable a reader to look up the unfamiliar words in online dictionaries conveniently. Moreover, ESL learners prefer electronic books because they are less costly and in most case are free. Besides, most of the electronic books are easily accessible. Electronic books are preferred because they are easy to handle, take a short time to understand, and can be read anywhere. Electronic books can be easily downloaded and read on a variety of electronic devices. They can be read at any time.

The ESL learners were also asked to comment or give some suggestions regarding the choice of printed and electronic material. The respondents have suggested that teachers and the management should provide printed textbooks as much as possible. Electronic books should be used as a last resort. The participants also urge the government to reduce the prices of books so that students may afford to buy them easily. The management should provide free access to electronic books for every student.

5. Conclusion

The main focus of the present study was to find the ESL learners' preferences regarding electronic and printed books. It also focused on digging deep into finding the reasons behind learners' preferences of printed and electronic course material. The data were collected using survey questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. 150 participants participated in survey and 15 participants were conveniently selected for semi-structured interviews. The analysis of the data reveals that 81.3 % learners prefer to read printed books and love to have printed course material, whereas only 17.9 % learners prefer to read electronic course material.

The survey data reveal that printed books are preferred because of their convenience, durability, longevity, provision of more focused reading, highlighting and note-taking as they provide space for side notes. Moreover, printed books enhance reading speed and better understanding of the content. The semi-structured interviews also yield the similar results. The participants affirm that printed books provide better understanding of the text and are easy to use. Printed books also offer a tangible, distraction-free, and aesthetically pleasing reading experience, appealing to those who value tradition, collectability, and comfort. They save time and help students stay away from electronic devices which have

become sources of distraction and waste of precious time. They also provide tangible, distraction free, enjoyable and aesthetically pleasing reading experience.

In contrast, electronic books are preferred because of their easy access, portability, low cost, and search functions. Moreover, unlike printed books they do not need huge space. They can be downloaded and carried to different places quite easily. These electronic books do not need any specific time and place and can be read anywhere and anytime.

5.1 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study are expected to benefit teachers, students, administration and the authorities since this study gives these stakeholders an insight into the preferences of ESL learners regarding printed and electronic books. Students can get insight about the use, advantages and disadvantages of both these textbook formats. Teachers, management and authorities may get an understanding of learners' perspectives and provide the course material according to the needs and requirements of the learners. This, in turn, may enhance reading comprehension and learning of students. Since the current study is limited to the students of English department only, future researches can embark on finding such preferences at the university level in Azad Jammu & Kashmir.

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