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TALKING STORY: EBOOKS TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS

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ABSTRACT:

This study developed a set of e-books to enhance reading comprehension skills among Form Four and Five students in one of the secondary schools in Sarawak, Malaysia. The set of ebooks entitled 'Talking Story' was designed using the 21st Century teaching and learning techniques, in which interactivity and animation were incorporated to attract students' interest and enhance their reading comprehension skills. The e-books aimed to instil the love of reading in students. A total of twenty-eight participants, eight males and twenty females, were selected using simple random cluster sampling by the English language coordinator of the school. Prior to collecting data, a need analysis was carried out to identify the features of a good e-book that will interest the students. Using a quantitative research approach, a set of questionnaires was distributed to the students after using the e-book and data was analysed descriptively. It was found that all the students strongly agreed using the Talking Story e-book enhanced their interest in reading and were more ready to attempt reading comprehension questions in their SPM English paper. The implication of the findings will encourage students and teachers to use interactive materials like Talking Story e-book in enhancing reading comprehension skills. Future studies are encouraged to develop ebook materials to improve reading comprehension skills.

Keywords: Talking Story, E-book, reading comprehension, twenty-first-century learning skills, Sarawak

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension and vocabulary are significantly related to each other. The lower the vocabulary is, the harder it is to understand any reading material. In English, notably, many have overlooked the advantages of reading and having a vast vocabulary. According to Yang and Wang (2022), students with good vocabulary have excellent comprehension skills. Studies have discovered that vocabulary knowledge is a crucial element in the learning process of successful students (Nik et al., 2010; Eugenia et al., 2021). As a result, their academic performance is affected due to their incapacity to read. Students need help understanding significant words, identifying the main idea in a passage, and comprehending passages (Edward et al., 2021).

In this 21st century, students' lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) are assessed in all subjects, and English is included. Thus, to remain globally competitive, students must acquire reading comprehension skills (Tyas et al., 2019). Besides, there are many digital reading materials to be evaluated before making decisions. In addition, the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) also test reading comprehension skills in LOTS and HOTS. So, students must acquire these essential skills to excel in SPM.

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An extensive vocabulary, which leads to better reading comprehension, could help students score in their SPM English test, especially on Paper 1, which tests reading and the use of English; this paper specifically tests the reading comprehension skills of the students. Most of the materials assessed in the SPM English test Paper 1 consist of short texts from books, magazines, advertisements, or poetry. This shows how important it is for students of Form four and five to improve their reading comprehension and widen their vocabulary. As stated in Young Growth Academy (2022), there are many more benefits of having vast vocabulary, one of which is increasing the ability to 'think outside of the box.' A comprehensive vocabulary could enable a person to express themselves adequately and explain their ideas in detail using a better idea and concept. This could help the students in the SPM English test and their future career success.

Although acquiring good reading comprehension skills is essential for Form four and five students, many have difficulty understanding and answering the LOTs and HOTs questions (Silalahi et al., 2022). Thus, this study develops an ebook titled 'Talking Story' to enhance reading comprehension skills among Form four and five students. This project will assist students in reading and eliciting comprehension skills for their SPM English paper.

1.1. Project Objective / Purpose

Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), or the Malaysian Certificate of Education, is the national examination that fifth-form secondary school students in Malaysia should take. It works as the leaving examination of the eleventh grade of schooling. Hence, SPM is the penultimate examination taken by secondary school students before furthering their studies in the foundation, Sijil Tinggi Persekolahan Malaysia (STPM), matriculation, or diploma. In addition, SPM is a critical national examination that provides the opportunity for Malaysian students to continue their studies to higher education or even for their careers. English is one of the main subjects which is optional to pass. However, it is compulsory when getting broader job prospects, especially in the global market. According to Azimah (2018), only 28 per cent of students achieve at least a credit benchmark to Cambridge 1119, specifically for reading and writing skills. She also stated that Malaysia had moved an iota from that point.

Furthermore, Cambridge 1119 is an international standard examination for students. If a student obtains a grade A in Paper Two of SPM English, he might get only a B in Cambridge 1119. (Azimah, 2018). This project is also acquiring the teaching and learning skills of the twenty-first century. In the 21st century, education must meet the teaching and learning demands associated with cognitive talents. Students must acquire the 4C to excel in a global society: critical thinking, communication, cooperation, and creativity. Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) have been included in the educational system to generate students capable of competing on the international stage and who can think critically (Khairon et al., 2017). Bloom's Taxonomy separates thinking skills into lower-order thinking skills (LOTS) and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). To achieve higher-order thinking skills (HOTS), children must master lower- order thinking skills (LOTS), such as recalling (C1), comprehending (C2), and applying (C3) (C3). The ability to analyse (C4), assess (C5), and create (C6) are examples of higher-order cognitive skills (C6) (Intan et al., 2022). One of the project's objectives is to help students reach higher-order learning skills (HOTS).

Furthermore, passing the SPM English examination is a requirement for Malaysians who wish to continue their education or seek employment abroad. Therefore, English is a required language and subject according to university requirements. According to Pareeshti (2021), English facilitates communication and is widely utilised even for subject comprehension. She also stated that students need English because it broadens their minds, develops their emotional skills, and enhances their quality of life by providing employment

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opportunities. Moreover, most countries and universities require that applicants pass an English proficiency exam. There are ways that schools in Malaysia have provided to help their students to improve this particular skill, which as they provided rewards for those who read the most books. However, this initiative also cannot help the students improve their reading comprehension.

Therefore, this project aims to develop ebooks for students to improve their reading comprehension skills, particularly those from forms four and five. Talking Story is a set of ebooks created to improve students' reading comprehension and widen their vocabulary. This study created ebooks consisting of short stories for Form four and five students. These ebooks contain stories developed by researchers to attract students' interest in reading. The stories are written after the need analysis in terms of the genre and features in the ebook that will attract students to love reading. Some of the readers' preferences are considered to be included in the ebooks. This is crucial in attracting students to read and improving their reading comprehension. Therefore, the main aim of the project was to develop an ebook. From the ebook, it is important to investigate the effects of ebooks in enhancing reading comprehension among Form Four and Five students in one of the secondary schools in Sarawak, Malaysia.

1.2. Entrepreneurial Opportunities

This project has a good prospect for entrepreneurship as the product offers free access to materials, can be monetised with membership and have the potential to be used in other parts of Malaysia, especially for SPM candidates with a proper promotional strategy.

Firstly, the project utilises a free Canva platform as its ebook. There are many benefits to developing an ebook using Canva as a platform. One benefit is that it is a platform where users can create many media, such as presentation slides, logos, and posters, with advanced elements for free. In this case, this project utilised Canva as a platform to create and design the entire ebook. According to research by Rukma, Noor Eka, and Fahmi (2022), Canva is an excellent tool for developing creative writing and reading comprehension materials. Based on the initial research findings, students in creative writing courses had favourable opinions about Canva as a platform for creating ebooks. Hence, an ebook without licencing is free and could be one of the conveniences for the students to access the ebook.

Second, there are numerous ways to generate income from an ebook. For example, monetising the ebook with membership content generates profits. This method involves continuously delivering content to users in exchange for description fees. Indeed, user-provided ebook content must be valuable, functional, and exclusive to them. Additionally, it should be provided continuously to users in exchange for a membership fee. This is to guarantee the periodic continuation of ebook enhancements. The more perks and valuable items that can be provided, the more customers will be interested in paying for the ebook membership. Due to the lack of development costs, the ebook is expected to contain simple features. Therefore, in order to deliver more advanced features, more costs are required. Hence, the students are only required to pay RM1.99 per month. In the ebook, there are different types of payment methods that the students can use. The students can either pay using PayPal or any online banking method. This is to ensure the convenience of the payment process, particularly for the students.

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Figure 1: The Talking Story ebook showcase

Figure 1 shows the showcase of the Talking Story ebook where students can pay for the membership. Furthermore, this ebook has the potential to be used in other parts of Malaysia, especially for SPM candidates, with a proper promotional strategy. One of the strategies is providing social media as a marketing tool. This project's marketing strategy is to have a social media platform because social media is simple to create and affordable, as this project did not use any cost. Social media is an overall strategy used in this era because it is a freewheeling fast-paced culture in which any posting that includes trending topics could go viral and be seen by a massive audience (Adobe, 2022). Indeed, using social media can help share information about this ebook with other parts of the country and is not limited to only in Sarawak. Among the social media that can be used to promote the ebook are Instagram, Facebook and website. Promoting the ebook will benefit many SPM students in Malaysia specifically and other students globally who intend to develop reading skills. For this project, the platform used for this strategy is Instagram. Instagram is a social media platform that students will likely use. This strategy could either expand the target audience range or grow the ebook.

Limitation

i. Time Frame

However, there are constraints to this project's development. The time limit is one of the constraints. More time is required to create the ebooks correctly in terms of planning and adding additional functionality. This project still has much room for improvement, one of which is the ebooks navigation, and another is the ebook's features. Therefore, this project presents an excellent entrepreneurial opportunity, particularly for educators and students of the 21st century. Since this project is an assignment for a course, there is a time constraint for its production, which is one reason the ebook is underdeveloped. The ebooks could be built more effectively if given the opportunity and time.

ii. Costing

Besides that, it is anticipated that the ebooks will offer minimal features owing to the lack of development costs. One of the limits of this project is its cost, as the ebooks were created using a free platform. The ebook was created at no expense, indicating that the materials and templates used were free and not particularly sophisticated.

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iii. Expertise

Aside from that, the ebook needs the expertise to design more engaging ebooks with better animations, features, and navigation. However, engaging specialists for specific ebook components will cost more time and resources. Expertise who are proficient in proofreaders, computer literacy, great math skills, and excellent problem-solving skills, among other skills, must be extremely expensive. However, this was impossible due to the project's short development and cost-free nature.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This project used a quantitative approach and investigated the problems faced by secondary school students using numerical data. A survey of 14 questions was created to assess their vocabulary and reading comprehension problems. The questions were arranged to align with the project's research objective. The overall objective of this research is to investigate the challenges faced by the students the most. Twenty-eight students from 2 classes managed to reply to the questions. With the help of an English teacher from the school, this research managed to reach the targetted audience. The quantitative data was compiled and analysed using Google Forms.

2.2 Participants

This study was conducted in Daro, Sarawak, Malaysia, in a secondary school's forms fourth and fifth. Twenty-eight pupils responded to the poll, 14 from form 4 and another 14 from form 5, with eight male and twenty female respondents (Refer to figures 1 and 2). These participants were selected based on their reading comprehension abilities. Daro District is a rural location, which means that the necessity of a second language is not emphasised in rural areas. They were not exposed to an English-speaking environment because they did not speak English at home and only used the language when necessary.
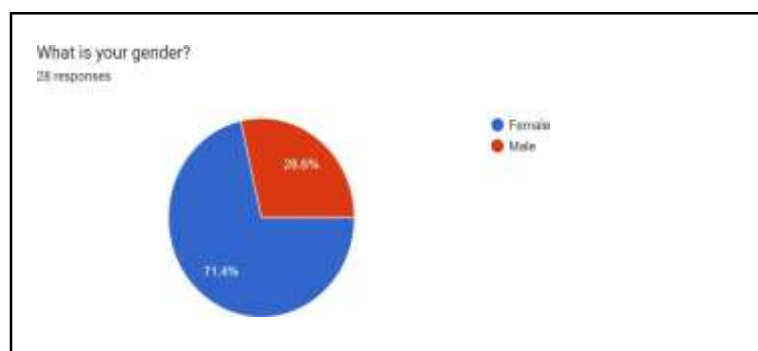

Figure 2: Gender of the participants

Figure 2 shows the gender of the participants. Notably, 71.4 per cent (n=20) of the participants are female, and another 28.6 per cent (n=8) are males.

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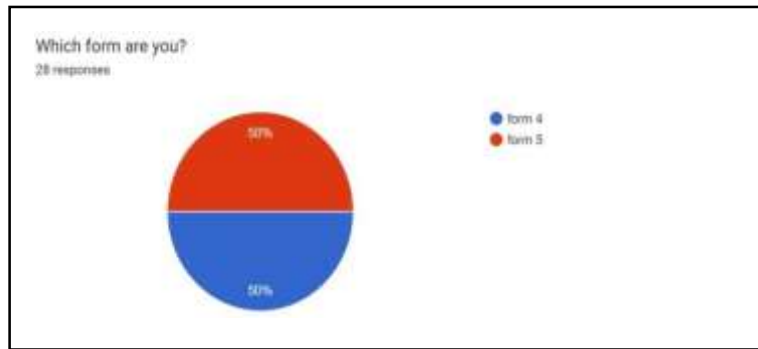13-14 March 2023 · Noble Resort Hotel, Melaka

Figure 3: Level of the students

Figure 3 presents the level of the participants involved in the need analysis. It was noted that 50 per cent (n=14) of the participants are from form 4, and another 50 per cent (n=14) of the participants are from form 5.

2.3 The procedure of planning and scheduling

This project's planning and scheduling procedures continued based on the acquired data. A Gantt chart was utilised to plan and schedule operations and milestones. When planning and scheduling a project, a Gantt chart is helpful since it helps identify how long a project should take, which resources are required, and in what order tasks must be completed. Moreover, it facilitates the management of job dependencies (MindTools, 2022). Using the Gantt chart to coordinate the project's planning and scheduling, the project's progress was streamlined. Using the Gantt chart below as a guide, the project has been planned and scheduled for October through January.
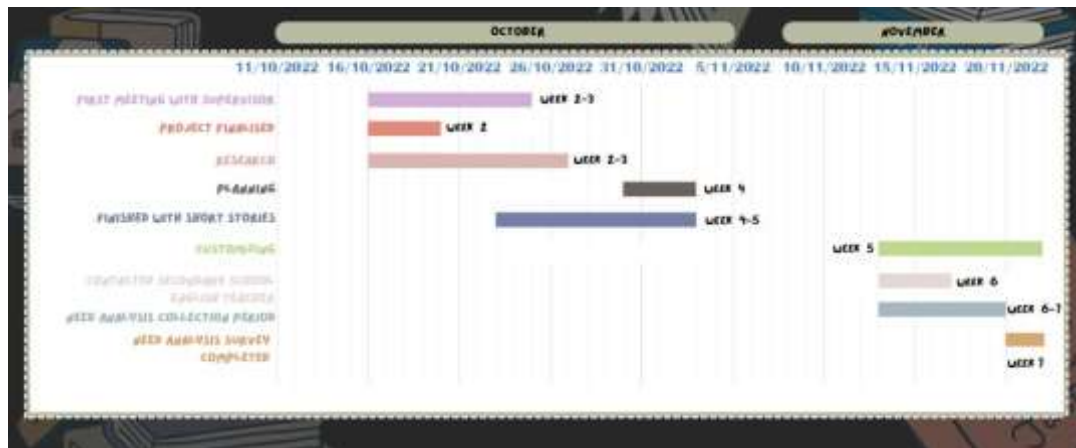

Figure 4: Gantt chart of planning and scheduling

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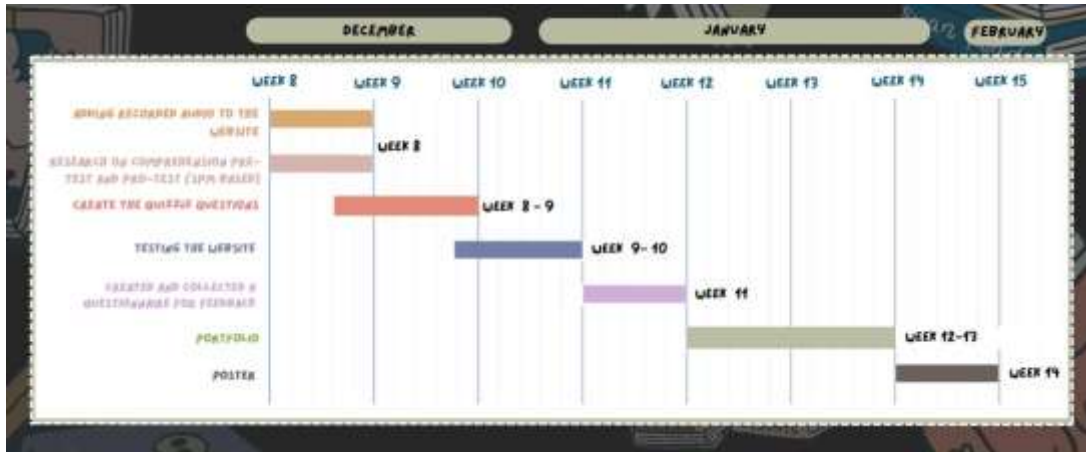13-14 March 2023 • Noble Resort Hotel, Melaka

Figure 5: Gantt chart of planning and scheduling

Figure 4 presents the progress of the first seven weeks of the semester, and figure 5 shows the progress of the last seven weeks. This project was able to make progress every week due to the procedure of planning and scheduling. The planning and scheduling include research, planning, completing the short tales based on the data gathered from the need analysis, customising the ebook, adding features such as audio and background music to the ebooks and developing quiz questions. It also detailed when to test the ebooks before distributing them to the students. It was necessary to fix several aspects of the ebooks, including their navigation and conveniences. The following figures represent the completed appearance of the ebook:

Figure 6: Preview of ebook home page

Figure 6 presents the preview of the ebook home page where users can select the buttons to move to other pages such as the short stories, Quizizz, Contact Us page, and Message from the author page.

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Figure 7: Preview of the short stories menu page

Figure 7 shows the preview of the short stories menu page, where students can select the short stories they intend to read. Presently, the short stories are Hinako the Warrior, Memories of flowers, Maniacal, Manipulative, Psychotic, Significant Other and One last ride.
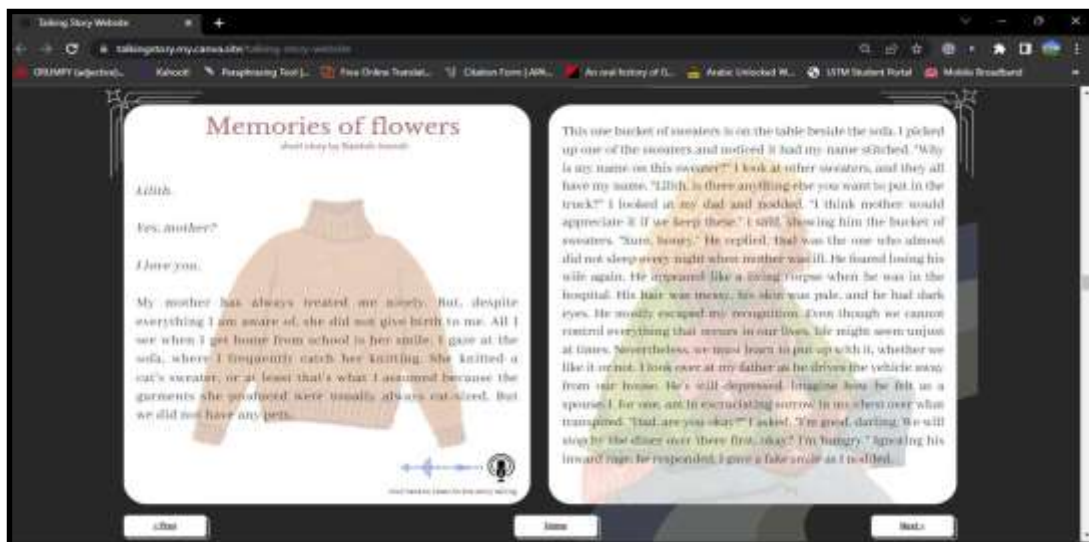

Figure 8: Preview of one of the short stories

Figure 8 shows a preview of one of the short stories available in the ebook. The short stories contain features such as illustrations and audio to captivate the students into reading the stories.

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Figure 9: Preview of the quiz menu page

Figure 9 presents the preview of the quiz menu page, where students can select a quiz based on the short stories they have read. There are levels for each quiz; the more quizzes are taken, the higher the students will achieve.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Research/Need Analysis

This study attempts to determine how many students in forms 4 and 5 struggle with readingcomprehension and vocabulary.
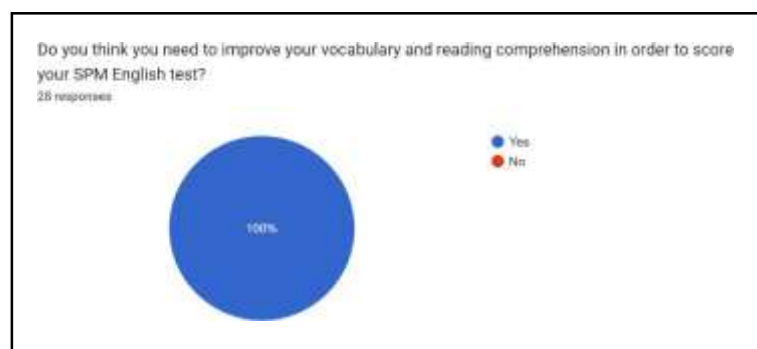

Figure 10: Students' opinion on their vocabulary and reading comprehension skills

Figure 10 demonstrates that 100 per cent of students concur that they must enhance their vocabulary and reading comprehension to perform well on their SPM English exam. This demonstrates that students must first enhance their vocabulary and reading comprehension.
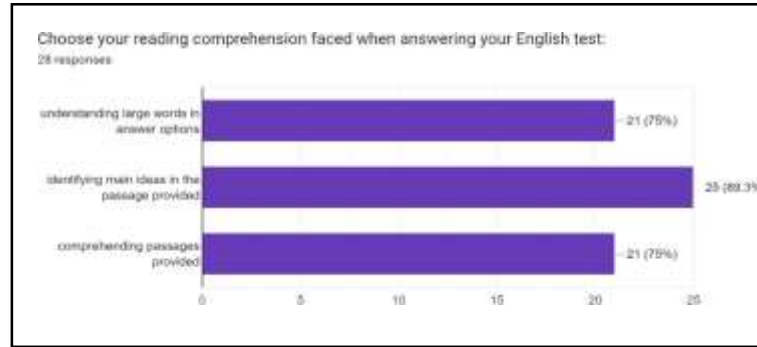
Figure 11: Students' reading comprehension problems

Figure 11 demonstrates that 89.3 per cent of students require assistance in recognising the main ideas in the passage supplied on their English exam. This indicates that they have difficulties with reading comprehension. One of the reasons for being unable to identify main ideas is low vocabulary mastery (Puput, 2020). As a result of their reading comprehension, students need assistance identifying the main ideas. In addition, 75 per cent of students require assistance with comprehending significant terms in the response alternatives and passages presented on the test. This is due to the demand for increased vocabulary among students. This demonstrates that a lack of vocabulary could significantly impact their English exam score. According to Hannah (2010), a limited vocabulary might hinder language proficiency and reading comprehension.
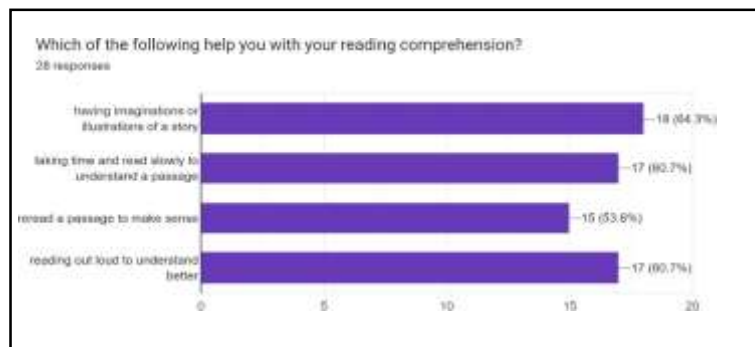

Figure 12: Students' ways of comprehending

Figure 12 demonstrates that most students require visuals and creativity to improve their reading comprehension. Some studies concurred with the assertion that the use of illustration is quite helpful for comprehending the context of a tale. Mary (2022) claimed that illustration might assist readers in visualising the context of a story and assist them in understanding some words without needing a dictionary.

This study tries to determine whether or not students need to enhance their reading comprehension to improve twenty-first-century learning skills. It was discovered that most students need to increase their vocabulary to improve their reading comprehension. They are most likely to need help identifying the main ideas, understanding unfamiliar words used, and comprehending passages provided. This information helps enhance the ebook in terms of its usefulness and its intended purpose.

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3.2 Outcomes/Feedback

Moreover, according to the findings conducted, the ebook was constructed appropriately. After conducting a feedback survey regarding the ebook and the short stories, the ebook's outcomes can be evaluated. Google Forms were used to conduct the survey, containing closed- and open-ended questions. Eight questionnaires have been developed for the feedback survey.
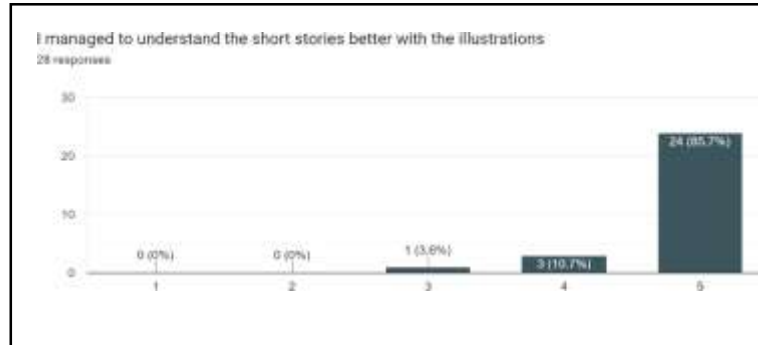

Figure 13: Students' perception of illustrations

Figure 13 demonstrates that 85.7 per cent (n=24) of the students agreed that having visuals with the short stories enhanced their comprehension. Therefore, Mary's claim that illustration benefits readers is accurate. The ebook featured graphics for the short stories to help students comprehend the context of the stories.
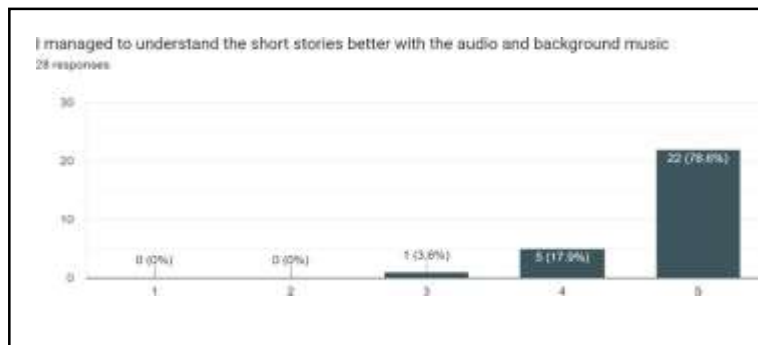

Figure 14: Students' perception of the audio and background music

Figure 14 presents that 78.6 per cent (n=22) of the students strongly agreed that they could understand the short stories better with the audio and background music. This feature was intended to keep students captivated by the stories.
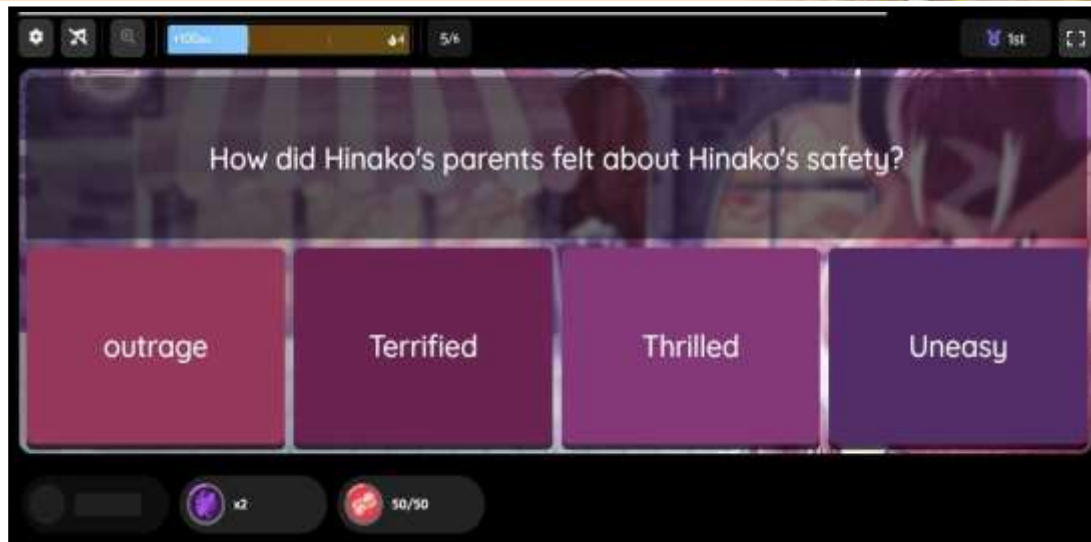
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Figure 15: Preview of the Quizziz

Figure 15 shows the preview of one of the questions provided on the Quizizz based on one of the short stories in the ebook.
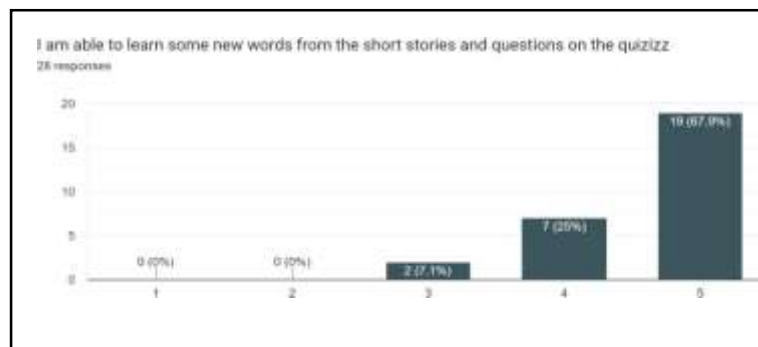

Figure 16: Students' perception of the Quizizz application

In addition, the ebook featured reading comprehension quizzes for readers. The quiz is administered using an ebook called Quizizz. The questions were based on the first SPM English examination paper. This is to help students recognise the format of the actual examination. Figure 16 demonstrates that 67.9 per cent (n=19) of respondents strongly agreed that quizzes on the ebook enhance reading comprehension.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude, this ebook can help students to improve their reading comprehension and widen their vocabulary. Although there is more to improve regarding the ebook, with the membershippayments, the ebook will be improved from time to time. There will be more perks for the membership, such as interesting short stories with illustrations offered, better quality audio and background music, and more questions provided in the Quizizz. Moreover, the constant improvement of the ebook will help the students improve their reading comprehension to scoreon their SPM English test and to reach higher-order learning skills (HOTS). Hence, it will helpincrease the chance of the students to further their studies to higher education, such as taking adiploma or degree. Optimistically, this will also increase job opportunities within and outside the country.

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