

READING HABITS AND PREFERENCES OF EFL POST GRADUATES: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract: In recent years, more emphasis has been given on the role of the learner in the language learning process considering that language learning is primarily a learner's oriented activity. Thus, learners' needs and interests should be taken into consideration for effective language learning and teaching to take place. One significant area where learners' preferences influence their learning can be seen in reading. In any academic or higher learning context, reading is perceived as the most prominent academic language skill for all second and foreign language learners. It is through reading that these learners learn new information and become able to synthesize, evaluate and interpret in order to learn more about their subject matter. Pursuing a postgraduate study requires extensive reading practices which will enable the learners to extend their literacy development. The present study examines the reading habits and preferences of a group of EFL graduate students. Data was collected through a questionnaire and analysed quantitatively. The findings will report on: i) the types of reading materials preferred ii) reasons for reading and iii) the preferred language for reading. To conclude, the paper will further discuss the implications of the findings in terms of instructional materials development within an EFL context.

Key words: EFL learners, reading habits, reading preferences, reading behaviour

Reading is one of the most important components of our language and it is an essential tool for lifelong learning for all learners. In order to face the 21st century, education has to prepare these learners to adapt to social and technological changes that are taking place at an unprecedented rate. Education under these circumstances depends largely on language competency. In this context, reading especially is a resource for continued education, for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, for gaining information through media, especially newspapers, books, radio, television, and the computers. Thus the achievement of quality basic education calls for the development of good reading habits of both young and adult learners.

Reading is a key to a wealth of experience that links people in a way far beyond distance or time. Reading provides experience to the individual so that he may expand his

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horizons, identify, extend and intensify his interest and gain deeper understanding of himself and other human being and of the world. Reading is important for students in general in order to cope with new knowledge in a changing world – that of the technological age. The ability to read is at the heart of self education and lifelong learning. Reading is a very important issue which is not only about enjoyment but a necessity; the basic tool of education (Mokatsi, 2005). Reading makes way for a better understanding of one's own experiences and it can be an exciting voyage to self discovery. It is the art of interpreting printed and written words, the most effective process of conscious learning which influences the extent and accuracy of information as well as the attitudes, morals, beliefs, judgement and action of readers (Panigrahi and Panda, 1996; Eyre, 2005)

The purpose of this study is to describe the reading habits of a group of EFL post graduate learners. Findings from this study will provide insights into the reading behaviors of these students as well as help raise awareness on the role of reading toward the achievement of academic success.

Related Studies

Reading habit refers to the behaviour which expresses the likeness of reading of individual types of reading and tastes of reading (Sangkaeo 1999). It is a pattern with which an individual organizes his or her reading. Similarly, Shen (2006), identifies reading habits, as how often, how much, and what students read. Researchers in the past decade have devoted efforts to examining learners' reading habits (e.g. Mokhtari, & Sheorey, 1994). With their endeavors, these researchers have discovered that reading habits are associated with students' gender, age, educational background, academic performance and professional growth.

A good reading habit is necessary for a healthy intellectual growth and plays a very crucial role in enabling a person to achieve practical efficiency. Furthermore, an individual's interests are determined to a considerable extent by the amount he will read and the intensity with which he will pursue his reading activity. By reading books, one gets confirmation or rejection of one's own ideas, which makes one think more critically about right and wrong in the society. Reading provides people with a sense of values, which enable them gradually to develop the greatest of all virtues, that is the ability to understand rather than condemn. Books can also be very comforting, especially at times when one doubts one's self and one's beliefs.

Reading interest or preferences seemed to be differed with different age levels. Mellon (1990) surveyed the leisure reading choices of rural teenagers and found that their reasons for leisure reading were for entertainment and for acquiring information. Magazines and newspapers were found to be the most preferred reading materials of teenagers. It has also been shown that informational reading was the main purpose for adult reading and their most popular books are: adventure, crime, social problems, novels, politics, and sports in ranking sequence. Platt (1986) reviewed several selected studies on reading preferences of adolescents, and concluded that adolescents do read extensively in books, periodicals, and newspapers. Graduate and undergraduate students' reading behaviors are slightly varied. Hall (1989) examines 285 freshmen at a large southern urban university. Over 70% of all students

avored reading magazines and newspapers most and novels least, and half of the students read the sports, entertainment and front-page sections of the newspaper regularly. In addition, graduate ESL students spent more time reading academic materials than did their undergraduate counterparts (Mokhtari & Sheorey, 1994).

Researchers' findings of reading habits varied on academic performance. Caverly and Peterson (2000) noted that research on the effect of technology on reading achievements demonstrated mixed results. On the one hand, Sheorey and Mokhtari (1994) indicated that there is no significant difference between high and low- proficient readers with regard to amount of time spent reading academic or nonacademic materials. On the other hand, Gallik (1999) posed that there is a significant and positive relationship between students' cumulative grade-point average and time spent reading for pleasure during vacations.

Further, Mokhtari and Sheorey (1994) explored the reading behavior patterns of 158 ESL students and found that university ESL students' levels of education and English proficiency were associated with their reading behavior patterns. Subjects in high English proficiency group spent more time reading academic materials than subjects in low English proficient group. On the contrary, Hafner, Palmer, and Tullos (1986) examined the differences in reading interests of good and poor 9th-grade readers and found no differences between good and poor readers in number of magazines or books read. The present study tries to pursue the following questions: 1)What types of reading materials are preferred by the EFL post graduate students? 2) What reasons are given by the EFL post graduate learners? and 3)What is the preferred language for reading of the EFL postgraduate learners?

METHODOLOGY

The respondents for this preliminary study were 52 postgraduate students at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). There were 19 female and 33 male respondents of ages that ranged between 20 - 45 years old (Table 1). These students were enrolled in an English Proficiency program, which is a required course offered by the School of Language Studies and Linguistics.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

1. Gender	-	33 Males 19 females
2. Range of age	-	20 – 45 years
3. Program of Study	-	19 PhD 3 MPhil 30 MA

The respondents were also required to rate themselves in terms of the four language skills (Table 2). Comparison of the findings revealed that a majority indicated that they were

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good in all the language skills. However, it was quite alarming that some learners considered themselves poor, especially in writing. This finding could indicate that these learners would need additional assistance practice with their writing skill. Most importantly, educators would need to identify which areas in writing are problematic and to then provide sufficient practice to enable these learners to write better.

Table 2: Self Assessment of language Skill

SKILL	EXCELLENT	GOOD	POOR
SPEAKING	1	37	14
READING	3	43	6
WRITING	4	33	15
LISTENING	4	37	-

The questionnaire used for this study was the Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory (MARSİ) (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002), which was designed for measuring adolescent and adult students' awareness and use of reading strategies while reading academic or school-related materials. The questionnaire was divided into two parts: i) demographic questions pertaining to the reading habits and preferences of the EFL learners ii) the statements reflecting the metacognitive strategies. This study focuses on the information in the first part of the questionnaire. The researcher distributed the questionnaire to the students in class. While the subjects answered the questionnaire, the researcher remained in the classroom to respond to any queries the subjects may have had in regards to the questionnaire. Upon completion, the researcher collected all answered questionnaires. Data of the study was analyzed using descriptive statistics where frequency counts were tabulated and converted to percentages.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 3 presents information on the time spent on reading per day by the EFL learners.

Table 3: Time spent per day on Reading

READING TIME	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Less than one hour	14	27
1 – 2 hours	20	38
2 – 4 hours	12	23
More than 4 hours	6	12

Reading frequency is an imperative aspect related to reading. When students read frequently, they expand their vocabulary and world knowledge while simultaneously enhancing their reading skills and strategies. On the other hand, if they do not practice their

reading, then the ability of refining their skills and strategies is lost (Brown, 2008). Furthermore, reading frequency and reading attitude are closely linked as students who have a positive attitude toward reading would read more often and vice versa.

Unfortunately, the measure of reading frequency in many studies focused on the amount of time spent on reading. Research on investigating the number or length of the books read has been minimal and inconclusive. Thus, more research can be conducted to fill in the gaps as to identify an accurate correlation between reading frequency and reading achievement.

1. Types of reading materials preferred

The reading materials preferred by the EFL learners (Table 4) were internet materials (46), emails (44), textbooks (42), dictionary (40), novels/storybooks (36), journals (35), newspapers (34), magazines (33), reports (30), and instruction materials (29).

Table 4: Types of reading materials preferred by EFL learners

TYPE OF READING MATERIAL	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
INTERNET MATERIALS	46	88
E-MAILS	44	85
TEXT BOOKS	42	81
DICTIONARY	40	77
NOVELS/STORY BOOKS	36	69
JOURNALS	35	67
NEWSPAPERS	34	65
MAGAZINES	33	63
REPORT	30	58
INSTRUCTION MATERIAL	29	56

In an academic context, it would be expected that the learners would focus more on their course or text books. However, the data revealed that the textbook was the third type of reading material preferred by the learners. This evidence could imply that learners now have a wide range of materials to select to read as they have access to a wide variety of reading materials, either in printed or digital form. According to Calkins (1996), learners who do a varied amount of voluntary reading demonstrate positive attitudes toward reading and that these readers are considered the best readers.

The findings from this study indicated that the first type of material preferred by the students was internet materials. As Hagood (2003) expounds, reading researchers and educators need to redirect their focus on media and online materials as these are central aspects of literacy research. If online literacy is taking over the traditional literacy world, then educators, writers, researchers and software programmers would need to engage with each other to develop online materials which can accommodate the students' reading behaviours and habits. A study conducted by Shen (2006) revealed that 42% of his college students spend an average of more than 3 hours online whereas 57% spend 1 to 2 hours online every day. This

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is evidence that computers and the internet have become part and parcel of college students' lives where not only is it used for academic purposes but as a social networking tool.

An interesting finding from this data revealed that 36 of the post graduate learners enjoy reading story books and novels. This finding expresses a positive association attitude toward reading of enjoyment with printed text establish a positive attitude toward reading where despite the academic demands placed upon graduate learners, they still make the time to read fiction type materials. This type of recreational reading or reading of fiction is an indicator of reading achievement (Ogle *et al*, 2003) and can be seen as a motivating factor toward building their love for books and reading in general (Dent & Yanotta, 2005). Reading these types of materials can benefit the readers in many ways: learn about other places or times, stimulate their imagination, and gain insights into human nature, able to follow their specific hobby or interests as well as acts as a form of escapism from 'unpleasant' realities (Tella & Akande, 2007). In addition, reading these types of materials increases reading ability as students apply more reading skills and strategies often.

2. Reason for reading

Table 5: Reasons for reading

REASONS FOR READING	TYPES OF MATERIAL	Language preference
STUDY	Dictionary (34) Textbook (34) Journal (25) Instructional material (22) Internet material (21) Report (20) Novel/story books (16)	English
PLEASURE	Magazine (19) Email (18) Newspaper (17) Novel (16)	First language

In terms of reasons for reading, this study identified two reasons cited for reading: pleasure and study. The type of materials used for study includes dictionary, textbook, instructional material, internet material, report and story/novels. This finding could imply that the materials associated with academic work would be regarded as important for study. Whereas those cited for pleasure reading include magazines, emails, newspapers and novels. These types of reading material do not require much processing as the others

cited for study. Thus, learners are more relaxed and feel comfortable reading these materials in a leisurely manner.

3. Preferred language to read

It was interesting to discover that the reading materials the EFL learners read for pleasure were consequently read in the first language. On the other hand, those identified as materials read for study would be read in English. One possible explanation for this occurrence could be based on lack of fluency and vocabulary. According to Sanacore (2002) foreign language learners do not like to read in the foreign language because it does not give them pleasure to the learners due to lack of language knowledge. For example, when reading for pleasure, looking up the dictionary for the unknown vocabulary items can be thought as time consuming and would eventually hamper their flow of reading. However, Clark & Ruble (2006) asserts that reading in the target language can be the most effective facilitator in the language learning process because texts written in a foreign language enhances language development as well as introduces different cultures and contexts. By reading such texts, learners may have a chance to make acquaintance with the culture of the target language, which is apprehended as a constructive factor in second language learning.

CONCLUSION

Overall findings of the study reveal that the EFL post graduate learners read different types of reading materials, have different reasons for reading as well as demonstrated language preference in reading. The results of this study are consistent with findings from other studies (Shen, 2006, Hagood, 2003) that indicated students' primary preference for reading online materials.

An interesting finding was the preference of these learners to read fiction type materials. Such results may indicate that these students are motivated towards reading. As Guthrie (1999) pointed out motivation enhances reading preferences of readers. In addition, reading literary materials fosters students' language development and is assumed to be a channel for learning about other cultures. Therefore, students should be motivated and encouraged to read different text types in foreign language as part of both compulsory and elective courses. Through such experiences, students gain aesthetic pleasure and knowledge about the real world. Such positive effects of reading are also acknowledged as efficient on their academic success and performances in the exams.

To conclude, fostering reading habits among students is no easy task. Further investigation of reading habits of EFL or ESL learners can raise educators' awareness about the reading tendencies of these learners. Thus, if problems are identified and understood, then possible solutions can be provided to find solutions in the effort to leading learners to search, understand and get information through reading.

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