Extensive reading is good for you:
Why don't L2 readers of English do more of it?

by Gillian Claridge

Abstract

It is widely accepted that a high level of literacy is a predictor of economic and social success in this age of information, and it is clearly an advantage for students of English to be highly literate in the language. However, despite the clear benefits of literacy, there is evidence that extensive reading is not widely practised by language learners. This paper looks for the reasons behind this phenomenon. It draws both from the field of applied linguistics and that of reader-response theory to describe a study which investigated the reading attitudes of a group of tertiary students learning English in New Zealand. The findings indicate that learners' actual reading experiences may be at odds with their expectations, because they are attempting to read beyond their current level of reading proficiency.

Introduction

Whatever our views on the position of English in today's world, it is impossible to ignore its importance as means of communication; as the American linguist Joshua Aaron Fishman notes, '[i]n a world where econo-technical superiority is what counts, … English makes the world go round' (Fishman, 1992: 23). Of primary importance is the dominance of English on the Internet:

> the Internet reflects a largely English-dominated cyberculture, with some 70% of content provided in English only despite the fact that a majority of internet users – two thirds – today report speaking non-English native languages. (Rattle, 2010: 46)

The functions of the 'electronic medium', according to David Crystal, are neither exactly like speech nor exactly like writing. He identifies two of its main functions thus: 'to send electronic mail between private mailboxes, and to permit groups of people to engage in continuous discussion in chat rooms or by instant messaging' (Crystal, 2005: 153). In addition to these functions of communication, the 'world wide web' is increasingly used as a seemingly limitless source of information, from daily news to recipes to academic texts. All of these broad functions are clearly text-based and their use requires the ability to read and write.

It follows then, that in order for non-native speakers of English in this world of a primarily Anglophone cyberculture to be empowered, they need to be reasonably proficient in reading in English, and by 'reasonably proficient' it is not meant that they should just be able to deal with the basic decoding of letters and words. The important thing is to grasp the ideas behind the words. For this, fluency in reading is paramount. However, to achieve fluency, reading skills have to be practised, and that means reading a lot. In Paul Nation's terms, it means reading one or two graded readers a week, which should not be a hardship, because graded readers are presented to learners as 'pleasure' reading (Nation & Wang, 1999). If reading graded readers is good for you, and also a pleasure, it might be imagined that English language learners are queuing up to do it. But if you ask ESOL teachers round the world whether the majority of their students read for pleasure, you will probably get a resounding 'no' in reply (Bamford & Day 1998; Renandya 2007; Hill 2008; Grabe 2009; Macalister 2010). Macalister's study is subtitled: 'Why isn't everybody doing it?' In my doctoral study, I echoed his question: Why?

My study (Claridge, 2011) investigated the reading perceptions of learners, teachers and the publishers of graded readers. In this paper I report on one aspect of that study, the reading perceptions of a group of learners, and how these perceptions correlated with their actual reading patterns. I attempt to place these data not only within an applied linguistics context, but also within the wider framework of reader-response theory.

Reasons for reading

I began by first asking the question, 'Why do people read, be they native speakers or second language learners?' Two main reasons might be proposed: for information or for pleasure. Sometimes the two can overlap. Information is what most students read for, as they need to write essays, reports, dissertations and the like. But, as innumerable bookstores in airports and railway stations testify, there are millions of books on sale which are not going to be used for any other reason than the experience of reading: in other words, for pleasure.

Victor Nell, writing of native speakers, describes the 'ludic' or pleasure reader as one who may read 'at least a book a week for pleasure and relaxation'. He explains the experience of ludic reading as an altered state of consciousness, similar to dreaming, or states produced by alcohol or drugs. Anything, says Nell, can be used for pleasure reading, but the experience of being 'lost in a book, in absorption or entrancement, is most strongly associated with the reading of fiction and of narrative non-fiction'. He posits three antecedents of ludic reading: reading ability, positive expectations and correct book selection (Nell, 1988b: 7-8). Nell's study shows that his ludic readers, when reading for pleasure, are

exhibiting what he calls high arousal and total concentration, but they report that little or no effort is required on their part in order to achieve these states. If little effort and total concentration could be the experience of the non-native speaker when reading in English, might it not be more widely popular for this cohort?

I suggest that Nell's antecedents for pleasure reading could also apply to second language learner readers, with the proviso that, depending on their level of English proficiency, they will require simpler texts that are within their ability to read without effort. In other words, there must be a relationship between ability and correct book selection. Equally, positive expectations will not be fulfilled if the choice of reading matter is incorrect. It is clear that Nell's antecedents for ludic reading are interdependent. The relation between these antecedents is also illustrated clearly in the reader-response theory proposed by the literary researcher Louise Rosenblatt.

Rosenblatt's reader-response theory

Rosenblatt's 'transactional theory of reader response' (1938, 1986) puts forward the notion that the way in which we read, and therefore our response to any text, is dependent upon our purpose for reading. A reader does not respond directly to the text, which is unchanging, but to her personal 'evocation' of the text, which she has 'transacted' as a result of her purpose, and which may change as the purpose changes. When a reader picks up a book with the idea that the intended reading will be pleasurable, where she is primarily interested in the experience, or process, of reading, and where there will be no accountability in the form of an essay or test connected with it, Rosenblatt describes her stance as being at the 'aesthetic' end of the reading response continuum. However, when the purpose is to obtain information from the text, and the reader is primarily interested in the product of the reading, the stance is towards the 'efferent' end. In either case, I would suggest that if the reading experience is to be satisfactory, the reader's expectations, embodied in whatever purpose, need to be fulfilled.

Problem of choice for the L2 reader

Within the framework of Rosenblatt's theory, the reader can normally be said to make an informed choice of stance. If her purpose is relaxation, a native speaker reader probably would not choose an academic text or an instruction manual. But there may be a fundamental problem for the low proficiency second language learner reader. Because of her level of English, she is not in a position to make the best choice. Day & Bamford (2002) cite ten principles for extensive reading, and one of these is choice: the reader should be allowed to select her own pleasure reading. In response to this precept, there may be a wide array of enticing-looking graded readers on the school or class library

shelves. However, the first of Nell's antecedents for reading is 'ability', and another of Day & Bamford's principles is that the reading should be 'easy'. Because the second language reader's *ability* may be limited, and because she may believe that in order to learn, she ought to read above her level of language ability, she may not find it easy to recognise what is *easy*. She may choose above her level, and her aesthetic stance will then change to a more efferent one. This means that her initial purpose of pleasure reading has been subverted.

The root of this subversion lies in the perception of 'easy'. What is easy? Being able to read a text does not necessarily mean that it is easy to do so. A learner may be told her level is lower intermediate, as demonstrated by her achievement of a certain score in a TOEIC or IELTS examination. She will therefore choose a graded reader at the lower intermediate level: for a reader of Cambridge English Readers, a knowledge of between 800 and 1300 headwords might be expected. But if she is only at the bottom end of the lower intermediate proficiency band, she may know the headwords from 0-800, but may not yet have encountered all of those in the 800-1300 band and so, for her, there will be a significant percentage of unknown words in the text. This will seriously hinder her ability to read the text fluently, with complete understanding.

Hypothesis and research questions

In short, in answer to the original question of 'Why don't L2 learners read much?' it was hypothesised that learners sometimes try to read above, rather than below, their language proficiency level, and this may be one of the reasons for low motivation in reading. To test the hypothesis, the following questions were asked:

1 How much reading – and what type of reading – did a group of L2 students do over a period of five academic terms?
2 What was their general attitude towards reading?
3 What factors made these students enjoy reading?
4 What factors prevented them from enjoying reading?
5 Were they reading books that were above their language proficiency levels?

Background of respondents

As part of my doctoral study, I followed the reading progress of 39 learners of English in a tertiary college in New Zealand over a period of two years, through a survey of learners' reading perceptions, their library records and their TOEIC scores. The students' first year was spent on a foundation English course, during which they had 25 hours of English language teaching a week for 38 weeks of the year. During the first two terms, class time was allocated for extensive reading, but in the third

term this was changed in favour of TOEIC preparation classes. In the fourth and fifth terms, the learners, depending on their language proficiency levels, had moved either to a Diploma or Degree program. In both of these courses they were required to study content papers, and only had four hours a week dedicated to English language teaching.

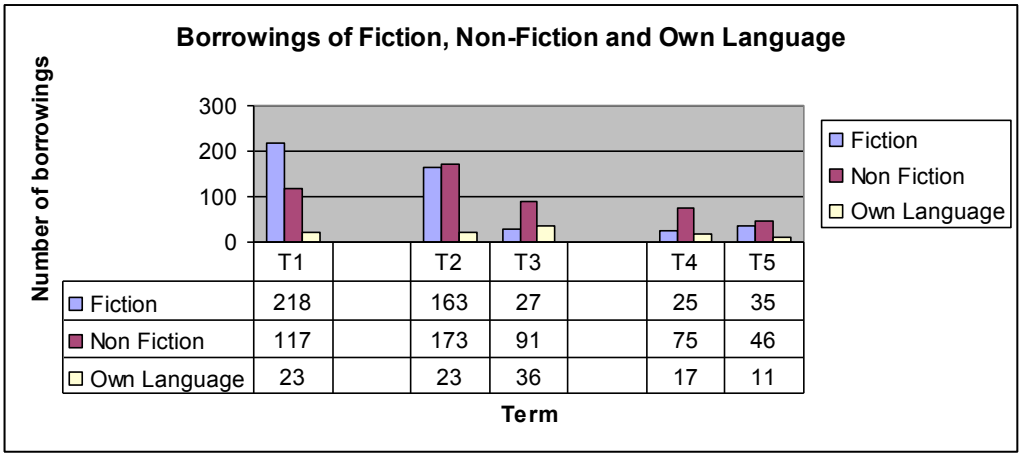
Methodology and results

The research questions are itemised, and the methodology for answering each is given below. As there is more than one methodology, in the interests of clarity the results are presented after each item. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants.

Question 1

How much reading – and what type of reading – did a group of L2 students do over a period of five academic terms?

Learners' library records were analysed to see how many books the 39 students had borrowed each term, over five terms, categorised as fiction or non-fiction. The results are presented in the chart below (Figure 1).



	T1		T2	T3		T4	T5
Fiction	218		163	27		25	35
Non Fiction	117		173	91		75	46
Own Language	23		23	36		17	11

Figure 1 – Library borrowing of 39 learners over 5 terms

It can be seen that the borrowings decrease substantially after the first two terms, and that the ratio of fiction to non-fiction also alters.

Question 2

What was the learners' general attitude towards reading?

A survey was administered to the 39 students. This took the form of 18 questions all beginning: 'How do you feel about …?' Answers were given by circling one of four points on a Likert scale (1 = *least positive attitude*, 4 = *most positive attitude*). Questions were asked first about reading in the student's

own language, then in English, then in college. It was therefore possible to obtain a maximum of 24 points in each category for the most positive attitude, and 6 for the least. The survey was conducted when the students arrived at the institution, and at the end of their second academic year. The averages of the raw scores are presented in the chart below (Figure 2).

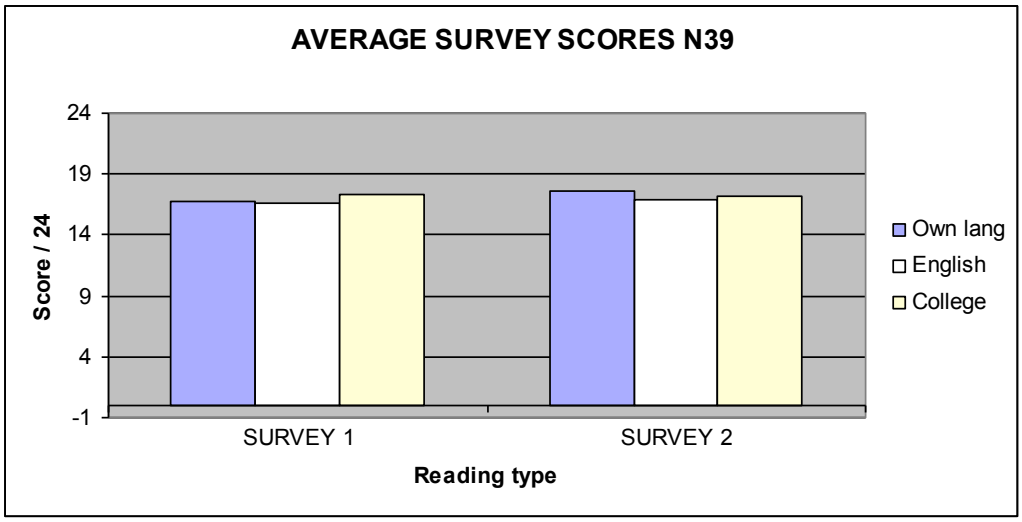


Figure 2 – Average scores from each survey by category

The average scores varied minimally across the categories and did not change much over the five terms.

Questions 3 and 4

What factors made these students enjoy reading?

What factors prevented them from enjoying reading?

To answer questions 3 and 4, the following sub-questions were asked at the conclusion of the Likert scale survey:

- When you choose a particular book, what makes you choose it?
- When you enjoy reading a book, what do you enjoy about it?
- When you don't enjoy reading a book, what don't you enjoy about it?

The 39 participants could answer the questions in their native language, in which case it was translated, or in English. The comments were analysed by scanning for key words, which were rated in order of frequency of appearance.

An impression of the results is represented in the 'Cloud view' text analysis reproduced on the following page (Figure 3).

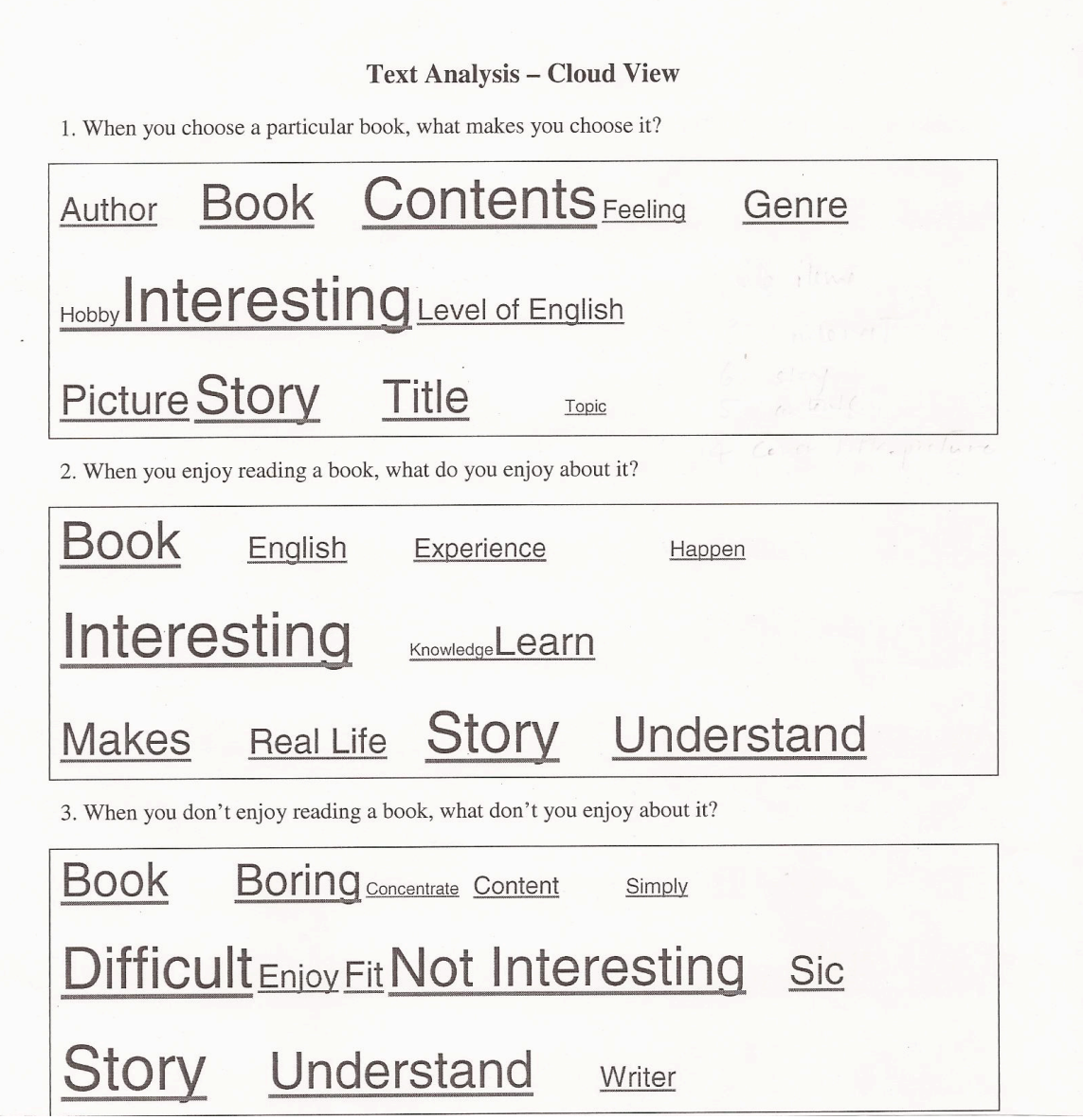


Figure 3 – Cloud view of text analysis of the answers to survey questions
(Survey 1, 2007)

Analysis of the data indicates that interest and content were the most important factors for the students in choosing and enjoying a text, but what rendered a text less enjoyable were factors such as difficulty, disinterest and non-comprehension.

Question 5

Were the learners reading books that were above their language proficiency levels?

In order to answer this question, the books recorded in the learners' library records were analysed for level. The framework used to do this was the Common European Framework (CEFR) level allocated to the books by the publishers. Data are shown in Table 1 on the following page.

CEFR levels	Total score scale range	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1
TOEIC reading	5-495	60	115	275	385	455

Table 1 – CEFR levels interpreted as TOEIC scores

The proficiency scores of three of the respondents were compared with the texts they were reading in the terms after the test results, with the following results:

> Student 24: Out of 81 borrowings, 73 are above her level and two are the same level.
> Student 22: Out of 32 borrowings, 23 are above her level, eight are the same and one is below.
> Student 21: Out of 28 borrowings, six are above her level, two are the same and 20 are below.

Reports on the interviews conducted with these three students

Student 24 – Sally
Sally's proficiency level started at A2 and dropped to A1 in Term 2. Her choices nearly always came from the Junior Non Fiction shelf, which is roughly at level B2 in the CEFR. She borrowed a large number of books, but according to her interviews with me, she rarely finished them. Sally's reading attitude score decreased from 52 in Term 1 to 47 in Term 5.

Student 22 – Annie
Annie's proficiency level started at A1 and went up to A2, but her few book choices were nearly always above her proficiency level. Her reading attitude score fell from 36 to 35.

Student 21 – Suzie
Suzie's proficiency level was A2 in Term 1. She usually selected books at or around A1 level, and only rarely tried books at levels A2 or B2. Her reading attitude score increased from 51 in Term 1 to 69 in Term 5.

Discussion

From the survey, it seems that the average attitude of the 39 learners tended to be fairly neutral towards reading. They were not against reading *per se*. Reasons for the decline in their reading over the two years may be that after the first two terms they were not required to do extensive reading in class, there were other calls on their time, such as doing assignments, and also that the texts they tried to read were too hard.

Case study results indicate that Suzie, who was experienced in reading in her native language, chose below or at her level and, as her fluency increased, she was able to progress smoothly from level A1 to A2. Like all learners in the group, she more or less gave up extensive reading after Term 2, when she was no longer required to do it in class. However, during Terms 1 and 2 she read and discussed a large number of books with me and, at the end of the two-year period, her attitude score had risen from 51/72 to 69/72.

In contrast, the other two students read almost exclusively above their levels and did not show an increase in positive attitude to reading. Sally began with an attitude score of 52 which dropped to 47 after two years. After her initial enthusiasm for reading in Term 1, she told me that, in her perception, reading did not really help her English. She thought learning lists of words was more useful. She had great difficulty in understanding the texts she chose, and was therefore only able to read from an efferent stance, and never for enjoyment. She did not appear to have any strategy for choosing books other than the topic. Thus her original purpose of reading for pleasure was subverted, and reading for her was never anything other than hard work.

Annie also usually read above her level. She had one of the lowest reading attitude scores of the group. In Survey 1 she scored 36 out of a total of 72 and after two years she scored 35. She began with a negative attitude towards reading and her choices reinforced her impression that it was difficult as they were very random and almost always too difficult.

Conclusion

From the tentative evidence of the library records and case studies described above, learners who appear to be reading above their level do not seem to derive pleasure from the process of reading. This may in part stem from early reading habits in their home languages. Their approach to pleasure reading, in the framework of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response, means that their initial stance is inappropriate for the choice of book: they tend to read, not for 'aesthetic' reasons, but for 'efferent' reasons; in other words, because they believe they have to do it. Although it may help their English, it is not reading for enjoyment, and therefore negates their stated purpose. It is unlikely to develop fluency or to encourage a life long habit of reading.

The sharp drop in library borrowings after Term 2 shown in this study also indicates that L2 readers generally are unlikely to read very much if extensive reading is not required as part of the syllabus. It is therefore recommended that time should be allocated for extensive reading in class in order to develop fluency.

Author's note

When the results of the library borrowings have been properly analysed, I hope to submit further findings on this topic.

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