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Recreational Reading of International Students in Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Recreational reading as a method of language learning has been a focus of investigation in second language education. This article considers recreational reading through the additional perspective of academic librarianship. Its purpose is to discover if recreational reading is a topic that lends itself to research through both perspectives. This study attempted to answer that question through a survey of international students at a mid-sized Canadian university. The survey also attempted to determine if international students use the university library to engage in recreational reading, and if so, to learn if they feel that doing so improves their language learning. Results indicate that students do make use of the university library to read recreationally, and that they do feel that this improves their language learning. The topic of recreational reading does therefore seem to be a worthwhile area for investigation in the realm of both second language education and academic librarianship.

INTRODUCTION

Recreational reading as a method to improve the language learning abilities of non-native speakers of English has generally been investigated through the literature of second language education (Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004). This article considers the topic of recreational reading through an additional perspective, that of academic librarianship, to discover if this area may fruitfully be investigated from both perspectives.

Recreational reading, also referred to as pleasure reading or extensive reading, involves language learners' self-choice of reading material. This freedom of choice is thought to motivate students to read according to their interests. By engaging in the reading of a large amount of material of their own choosing, it is assumed that students strengthen their language abilities. Recreational reading in a second language classroom generally excludes the use of formal comprehension testing, and thereby is thought to reduce the role of anxiety in second language reading. The practical issues involved in setting up a recreational reading program in the second language classroom revolve around whether or not graded or simplified readers should be used, what the role of the teacher should be, if follow-up tasks such as having students fill out comment sheets should be used, and how to set up an in-classroom library of recreational reading materials (Harmer, 2007, pp. 283-285).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Second language education literature concerning recreational reading focuses on its effectiveness as a pedagogical activity, distinct from the use of intensive reading which teaches the use of specific reading strategies (such as skimming and scanning). Proponents of recreational reading programs in second language classrooms advocate that by this learners can improve their vocabulary, reading abilities, reading comprehension, and general background knowledge. Krashen (2004), for example, a well known early proponent, claims that when students start reading for pleasure

Good things will happen. Their reading comprehension will improve, and they will find difficult, academic-style texts easier to read. Their writing style will improve, and they will be better able to write prose in a style that is acceptable to schools, business, and the scientific community. Their vocabulary will improve, and their spelling and control of grammar will improve. (p. x)

Another early proponent, Nuttall (1982), states that “an extensive reading programme... is the single most effective way of improving both vocabulary and reading skills in general” (p. 88). In more recent studies, Fernandez de Morgado (2009) confirms that “extensive reading does influence reading comprehension performance in important ways” (p. 41), and Pigada and Schmitt (2006) note that “extensive reading appears to lead to substantial vocabulary learning” (p. 21) although they caution that it also seems to depend on word type. Finally, Susser and Robb (1990), after a thorough review of the literature on EFL (English as a foreign language) extensive reading, conclude that, “extensive reading provides an excellent means of building schema. With this procedure, teachers can expect that their students will come to read English not only skilfully, but with pleasure as well” (p. 176).

In contrast to a second language classroom setting, the university library offers a very different environment in which to engage in recreational reading. Because the primary purpose of the university library is to provide informational resources and assistance in their access and use, and its purpose is not to teach language, the library may be considered an authentic language learning environment for non-native speakers. However, the academic library literature is sparse on recreational reading topics. One reason may be that recreational reading has been more often associated with public libraries than it has been with academic libraries. Recreational reading, from a university library perspective, often translates to discussions of popular materials only. These types of popular materials, such as bestsellers and popular fiction, tend to be stocked more in public libraries than in academic libraries because academic libraries concentrate more on purchasing material that supports the curricular needs of the university. Smith (2008) explains that “academic librarians understandably focus on supporting their colleges’ pedagogical and research missions, only incidentally providing other resources, such as popular reading” (p. 520).

This equation of recreational reading materials with popular reading collections may explain why the academic library literature suggests that recreational reading material may best be thought of as another category of collection type. Rathe and Blankenship (2006), for example, claim that there is a role for the inclusion of recreational reading materials in an academic library because these materials bring people into the library, generate good public relations for the library, and serve as a bridge to the larger collection (p. 82). Smith (2008) likewise sees the role of recreational reading materials in academic libraries as serving not only the role of collection promotion but also as a springboard for providing readers’ advisory services whereby academic

librarians could offer suggestions to students about what types of material they might enjoy reading for pleasure. In a more far-ranging study, three Australian researchers, Delin, Delin and Cram (1995), investigated the recreational reading preferences of undergraduates in comparison to community members and discovered that “there were differences between the community and student samples in reading preferences, notably in relation to reading fine arts, general knowledge, occult, societal analysis and fantasy, historical, science fiction and mystery novels” (p. 128).

Investigative work has been done in both the library literature and the second language education literature on recreational reading, but their treatment of the topic differs markedly. Second language education looks at recreational reading as a pedagogical activity to promote language learning; library literature looks at recreational reading in terms of provision of services or usage of material type. This article is therefore an initial, exploratory attempt to see if the topic of recreational reading could be fruitfully considered from both perspectives simultaneously.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this exploratory study was an anonymous online survey. The purpose of the survey was to find out if international students engaged in recreational reading, if the university library played a role in the supply or use of their recreational reading materials, and if the international students who did engage in recreational reading through the university library felt that they were involved in language learning as they did so. Recreational reading was described in the letter of invitation as “any reading that you do that is not assigned to you as class work. It is reading that you do outside of class because you want to.”

The online survey was distributed via an email invitation. It was sent to all matriculated international students. The survey consisted of 10 discrete question sets, one of which solicited background demographic information, and the others related to recreational reading topics. The demographic questions asked participants to identify their age, gender, native language, years of English study if a non-native speaker of English, the program of study in which they were enrolled, the degree they were working on, and their length of time to date at the University. These questions sought to discover who was answering the survey, and what their academic disciplines were.

The main questions on the survey sought to ascertain whether or not the participants engaged in recreational reading, and if so, how. Question formats included yes/no questions, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended *wh*-questions. The participants were asked directly if they read for pleasure, and if so, why, and if not, why not. For those who read for pleasure, further questions probed the manner in which they read for pleasure. They were asked why they engaged in pleasure reading, in what language(s) they read for pleasure, what types of materials they read for pleasure, how often they read for pleasure, if they believed that pleasure reading improved their language skills, where they read for pleasure, if they used the university library for pleasure reading, and how they would rate the materials found there for this purpose. The survey allowed participants to choose more than one answer for many of the questions in order to obtain a fuller picture of their reasons. Each question additionally was accompanied by an open-ended comment box that allowed participants to more fully explain or describe.

Setting

This study took place at a mid-sized Canadian university in southern Ontario. The total student enrolment at the University is approximately 17,000 students, 1300 of whom are graduate students. At the time of this 2009 study, the University enrolled a total of 954 international students, 677 of whom were undergraduates and 277 of whom were graduate students. In terms of country of origin, 70% of the students came from Asia, 10% from Europe, 5% from Africa, 5% from North America, 7% from Central and South America and the Caribbean, 2% from Oceania, and 1% were designated as coming from another area not listed.

The University library through which the survey was conducted is an English-dominant library. It contains over 1.5 million items in its collection and offers access to thousands more items through 400 online databases and 400,000 electronic books, and occupies all seven floors of a thirteen-story building.

Procedure

The survey instrument described above was sent out to all international students through a listserv maintained by the Office of International Students on campus. Although the invitation (sent out in November, 2009) came from the principal investigator through a staff member in that office, the subject line of the email invitation read “Optional Library Survey,” and it was made clear that no student was under any obligation to participate. Within two weeks, 59 replies were received, and the results discussed below are based on those responses.

Participants

The respondents to the survey ranged from students working on “no degree” (these may have been exchange students) to graduate students, including both Master’s and Ph.D. students. Since the survey went out to all matriculated international students, those international students in the pre-university intensive English language program would not have been contacted. In terms of personal information that they were willing to disclose, the respondents’ ages ranged from 17- to 41-years old, with a mean age of 24. The survey respondents were almost evenly divided by gender: 33 were women and 26 were men. Their most common native language was either Mandarin or Cantonese, both grouped together here under Chinese (23), followed by English (11, presumably students from the United States, Australia, New Zealand or other native English speaking countries). The other half spoke a variety of native languages: Arabic (6), German (5), French (3), Russian (2) and one speaker each of Bengali, Danish, Dutch, Creole English, Punjabi, Swedish, Vietnamese, Turkish and Hindi. Table 1 presents a visual representation of the participants’ demographic information.

Table 1. Demographic Background of Participants

Average Age	Low 17	High 41	Mean 24
Gender	Male 26	Female 33	
Native Language	Chinese English Arabic German French Russian Bengali Creole English Danish Dutch Hindi Punjabi Swedish Turkish Vietnamese	23 11 6 5 3 2 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1	
Years of English Study	Low 2.5	High 16	Mean 10
Program of Study	Business Education Biology Computer Science Political Science General Youth Studies Geography Applied Linguistics Psychology English Tourism Health Sciences Communications Geography Chemistry	26 9 2 3 2 1 1 1 4 4 1 1 1 1 1 1 1	
Degree Working On	B.A. B.S. M.Ed. M.B.A. M.S. M.A. Ph.D. no degree	23 3 7 9 3 4 1 5	
Length of Time at University	Low 3 months	High 7 years	Mean 2 years

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that international students do seem to engage in recreational reading (see Figure 1). The percentages do not add up to 100% for each question because participants were allowed to choose more than one answer for a number of the questions. A full 79.7% of respondents, however, indicated that they do engage in recreational reading. Of the 20.3% who indicated that they do not read recreationally, the main reason was lack of time (64.3%), followed by lack of material (42.9%) and lack of interest (7.1%). Almost half of the participants who do engage in recreational reading (45.3%) indicated that they read daily for pleasure, followed by 41.5% who read weekly for pleasure, and 13.2% who read monthly for pleasure.

For those participants who read recreationally, 81.1% indicated that they did so to learn new information, followed by 64.2% to relax, and 11.3% to fill up free time. It would be interesting to explore in a future study why learning new information as a reason for engaging in recreational reading commanded a stronger allegiance than did that of relaxing. It would also be interesting to discover why international students might see these as two overlapping categories instead of two discretely different categories. Perhaps the setting of a university library as opposed to a different type of library setting and the participants' occupations as students could have accounted for these results.

In terms of language information, the majority (53.6%) of participants indicated that they read for pleasure in English, followed by 42.9% who read in both English and their native language, 19.6% who read in their native language, and 1.8% who read in neither. When asked if they thought that reading recreationally improved their language skills, an extremely large majority, 91.1%, thought so, followed by 8.9% who were not sure. Interestingly, no participants (0%) felt that recreational reading did not improve their language skills.

In terms of library information, the largest number of participants (73.3%) said that their most frequently used material type for pleasure reading was books. Books as a material type were followed by online formats such as web pages and blogs (64.9%), magazines (50.6%), and newspapers (38.6%). Here, again, we can see that respondents chose more than one category to answer this question, indicating that while they may prefer books, they do not limit all of their recreational reading to this one material type. Another library question asked them where they found their recreational reading materials, and the most common response was online (70.2%), followed by purchasing material at a bookstore (54.4%), borrowing material from the library (43.9%) and borrowing material from other people (29.8%). Again, it can be seen that participants answered this question with multiple responses, which could also show that they rely on a myriad of resources. A final library question then asked how they would rate library material for recreational reading purposes, to which 37% said they do not use library material. The remaining 63% who do use library material for recreational reading divided their responses, ranking library material for this purpose between ratings of fair (35.2%), good (16.7%) and poor (11.1%).

Figure 1. Survey Results

1. Do you read for pleasure?		
- Yes	79.7%	47
- No	20.3%	12
2. If you do not read for pleasure, why not? (Choose all that apply.)		
- No time	64.3%	9
- No interest	7.1%	1
- Lack of material	42.9%	6
3. Why do you read for pleasure? (Choose all that apply.)		
- To relax	64.2%	34
- To learn new information	81.1%	43
- To fill up free time	24.5%	13
4. In what language(s) do you read for pleasure? (Choose all that apply.)		
- English	53.6%	30
- My native language, if other than English	19.6%	11
- Both	42.9%	24
- Neither	1.8%	1
5. What types of material do you read for pleasure? (Choose all that apply.)		
- Books	73.7%	42
- Magazine or journal articles	59.6%	34
- Newspapers	38.6%	22
- Web pages, blogs, or other online information	64.9%	37
6. How often do you read for pleasure?		
- Daily	45.3%	24
- Weekly	41.5%	22
- Monthly	13.2%	7
7. Do you think that pleasure reading improves your language skills?		
- Yes	91.1%	51
- No	0.0%	0
- Not sure	8.9%	5
8. Where do you find your pleasure reading material? (Choose all that apply.)		
- I borrow material from other people	29.8%	17
- I use library materials	43.9%	25
- I buy reading materials from a bookstore or other store	54.4%	31
- I do my pleasure reading online	70.2%	40
9. If you use the university library to find your pleasure reading material, how would you rate the material you find there for your reading needs?		
- Poor, inadequate	11.1%	6
- Fair, sufficient	35.2%	19
- Good, more than sufficient	16.7%	9
- I do not use library material.	37.0%	20

In addition to the raw numbers reported above, this survey also offered participants an opportunity to write further comments following every question. Comments received ranged from general comments to more specific comments on language learning or library issues. Data from these comments are listed in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Comments Following Survey Questions

CATEGORY	COMMENTS
General	<i>I use these materials to access a variety of information that we cannot learn from our major, and because our life is not only to be satisfied with a job.</i>
Language related	<i>I read for pleasure to increase my knowledge base and to improve my skills.</i> <i>I think this helps me learn English, but obviously this is accumulation.</i> <i>Pleasure reading helps me with learning English.</i> <i>I prefer to read original English versions because the translation may give a different meaning.</i>
Library related	<i>The library has so many sources to read so it is not necessary for me to get them from somewhere else.</i> <i>I have little time for novels and do most of my pleasure reading online.</i> <i>This library has many classic novels.</i>

What might the reported findings above mean? Both numeric and narrative responses seem to suggest that the recreational reading engaged in by international students does have a library component to it. Although the university library does not serve as the only purveyor of recreational reading material, its role in doing so is apparently still visible to international students. By acknowledging the use of library materials as one avenue for finding recreational reading, the international students underscore the important role of the library. It is also interesting to note that most of the students who did use the library as a supplier of recreation material also rated the collection as fair or sufficient. What makes this interesting is that they were being asked about a university library whose main purpose is to supply academic material appropriate to the curriculum. The popular reading collection of this particular university library is very small and represents only a tiny portion of the hundreds of fiction books available on the upper floors of the building in the literature collections. This may mean that the comments made by the international students were of a general nature about all of the material in the collection, any part of which could be used for recreational purposes. The material selected for recreational reading, then, could be the result of a personal student decision as to what to read, rather than a library decision as to how to identify a particular subset of the collection.

This survey may also suggest that the role of the library could be broader than simply a service provider. A university library may also potentially serve as a site for out-of-classroom language learning. The literature of second language education provides strong evidence that not

all language learning takes place in language classrooms (Lamb & Reinders, 2008). The academic library literature is also beginning to consider the idea of the library as a place for learning to happen (Bennett, 2006). This current study looks at the university library in this same light: as a potential place where second language learning through recreational reading may occur. Is the university library merely a geographic location in which this learning takes place, or does the presence of the library in either physical or virtual terms play a role in stimulating this learning? That is a question for future research, but the answers to these questions may change perceptions of what a university library is, can, or should be. Answers to these questions may also broaden our perceptions of how, why and where second language learning takes place in non-classroom settings.

Limitations

Because of the exploratory nature of this investigation, the online survey only posed very broad and general questions. The answers on the survey also only conveyed what the respondents claimed to have done. Additionally, the small number of responses cannot be said to represent the full target group of international students, and can only offer a glimpse of what they may think about recreational reading. Future research is needed to go beyond the exploratory phase suggested in this study to determine more closely how and why second language learning can or does take place in the university library.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study investigated if recreational reading could potentially be studied as a research topic from both a second language education and an academic library perspective. It did this by attempting to discover if international students engaged in recreational reading in a university library, and if they believed that language learning may have resulted from it. The conclusions of the survey suggest that international students do seem to engage in recreational reading and that the university library may play a role in serving this function. Furthermore, a university library may potentially serve as an excellent venue for the further study of second language learning that takes place outside of a classroom setting. It appears at this initial stage that the phenomenon of recreational reading may indeed be fruitfully investigated from both a second language education perspective as well as an academic library perspective. Future studies may want to explore this potential connection between second language education and academic librarianship more deeply.

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