Reading Preferences of Yemeni Undergraduate EFL Learners

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Abstract:

This study investigated the reading preferences of freshmen and sophomores female English students at the University of Science and Technology (UST), Sana'a, during the year 2010 - 2011. It tried to find out any significant differences between students regarding reading motives, reasons for not to read, things they read and what they prefer to read about. The researchers adapted a reading habits questionnaire; and after checking its validity and reliability, it was distributed to 100 students at the UST. The main findings revealed that there were significant differences between level one and level two students in all the categories of the questionnaire; the most frequent motive of level one students for reading was for education while level two students' first motive was pleasure. Watching TV was found to be the most common reason that hindered students of both levels from reading. It was therefore recommended that EFL reading teachers take into consideration students' reading preferences and show them how to select and read any reading material of their interest. This might contribute to developing the habit of reading for pleasure that would ultimately have a positive impact on their performance.

Keywords: Reading preferences, Reading comprehension, Reading habits, Reading workshop.

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الميول القرائية لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المرحلة الجامعية في اليمن

الملخص :

هدفت هـذه الدراسـة إلى التعرف على الميـول القرائية لـدى طالبات المسـتوى الأول والثاني في قسـم اللغة الانجليزيـة بجامعـة العلـوم والتكنولوجيـا – صنعـاء للعـام 2011-2010، ومـا إذا كانـت هنـاك فـروق ذات دلالـة بيـن طالبـات المستويـن في أربعة محاور وهـي دوافع القـراءة وموانع القراءة ومجـالات القراءة وموضوعاتهـا. قامـت الباحثتان بتطوير استبيان لتحديد ميول القراءة مكون من أربعة محاور وبعد التحقق مـن صـدق وثبات الأداة تم توزيع الأداة علـى 100 طالبة من المستويـن الأول والثـاني. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن هنـاك فروقـا ذات دلالـة بين طالبـات المستويـن في كل محـاور الاستبيان، كمـا أظهرت النتائـج أن الدافع الأكثر شيوعا للقراءة لطالبات المستوى الأول هو التعلم بينمـا كانت المتعة هي الدافع الأول لطالبات المستوى الثاني. بالنسـبة لموانع القراءة، أظهرت النتائج أن التلفاز أبرز موانع القراءة لطالبات المستويـن. في ضـوء هذه النتائج، توصـي الباحثتان مدرسـي مواد القراءة الاسـتيعابية في اللغة الانجليزيـة التعرف على الميول القرائيـة لطلابهم حتى يتمكنوا من انتقاء مواد قرائية تناسب اهتماماتهم، كما عليهم مساعدة طلابهم على كيفية انتقاء وقراءة الكتب التي تناسـب اهتماماتهم وتسـهم في تنمية مهارة القراءة للمتعة التي سـتنعكس إيجابا على تحصيلهم وأدائهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية : الميول القرائية، القراءة الاستيعابية، عادات القراءة، ورشة عمل القراءة.

Introduction:

Reading is a crucial life skill that leads to success in personal and professional life. Focusing on students› reading interests when developing EFL reading materials would result in better acquisition of reading skills and academic success. Chettri and Rout (2013) state that reading occupies a pivotal role in our lives; it opens the doors of the treasures of knowledge. Wallace (1992) defines reading as reacting to a written text as a piece of communication, and that means there is some message that the author wants to transfer to the reader who tries to understand. She also states three purposes for reading: reading for survival, reading for learning and reading for pleasure. Krashen (2002) argues that reading for pleasure is essential for helping students learn good reading skills. Furthermore, for EFL learners in particular reading is of great importance as Iftanti (2015) argues because they are engaged much in reading English literature and it is necessary for their academic success. Therefore, before teachers select reading materials, and in order to help students develop their ability in reading that would result in better academic performance, it is crucial that they identify their students› reading preferences.

Even earlier to Krashen (2002), Atwell (1987) confirmed the key role of pleasure reading in developing good reading skills. She proved the success of pleasure reading in turning reluctant readers into habitual readers. She tried what she called "the reading workshop" which is based on self- selection of reading materials and dialogue journals. Students` interests were focused on and given priority in deciding what to read in class.

Bernstein (1954, p. 40) views interest as a "a complex feeling or attitude derived from three sources: characteristics of the reader, including physical and emotional well-being at the time of reading, background of experience, favorite hobbies and occupations, and ability to understand the selection; factors inherent in the reading matter itself, including form, style, and organization of the writing; and the interaction of the reader and the material, including the extent to which the material stimulates the reader›s imagination, fulfills his needs, or arouses his emotions".

A great deal of research papers focus on important questions that are related to student motivation and reading habits (Krashen, 2002). These studies revealed that students with remarkable reading achievement are intrinsically motivated to read, and they read regularly. Krashen (2002), in one of his reviews on independent reading, postulated that there is a positive relationship between voluntary reading and the development of reading and writing skills. It is worth mentioning that this relationship was consistent in all reviewed studies even though they utilized different data collection techniques.

Recent studies are in line with Krashen`s (2002) review. Chen (2007) searched

extracurricular reading habits of college students in Taiwan, using data from two national surveys, one of first-year college students and the other of third-year students. These surveys indicated that there is no difference that can be attributed to gender with regard to the time spent on extracurricular reading. Second, there was no difference that can be attributed to the type of institution, public or private, in the time spent on extracurricular reading. In addition, students of humanities majors allocated more time for reading compared to students of natural sciences and education sciences. Finally, both surveys came up with three reading materials that were the most popular: bestsellers, magazines, and newspapers.

Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015) conducted a study on the reading habits and interests of Saudi EFL learners in the preparatory year program in three public universities. The study aimed at identifying certain habits and preferences of EFL learners. The researchers developed a questionnaire for collecting data. The subjects were 330 freshmen, male and female. Results revealed that students lacked interest and motivation toward reading for learning in both L1 and L2. However, they read more in social media.

Iftanti (2012) investigated the English reading habits of Indonesian students of EFL. The data were collected using a questionnaire that was distributed to 546 EFL college students in East Java. Results revealed that in spite of students› engagement in reading in English since elementary stage, most of them had poor reading habits. The researcher added that students had different purposes for reading in English like doing homework, pleasure, and developing their language skills. The study also revealed that the first motive for students to read in English was doing assignments.

Al-Nafisah and Al-Shorman (2011) investigated the English reading interests of Saudi EFL learners. The researchers focused four main objectives; identifying the difficulties hindering students› reading, people who helped them select what to read, factors that played a key role in the process of selecting reading materials, and the reasons that motivated them to read. To collect data, the researchers used a questionnaire which was distributed to 460 participants. The collected data was statistically analyzed and the results revealed that students had a variety of reading interests; the first on the list were stories, adventure books, books about religion, the internet, computer, technology advances and sports magazines among some others. However, they did not like to read on economics. The findings also showed that the hurdles that hindered students' readings included rare visits to the library, poor research skills, time limits, lack of reading materials and libraries, some negative beliefs, poor reading skills and family education. The results also revealed that the students read for many reasons such as improving their language, and academic achievements, and knowing the local, economic, cultural, scientific, and political developments.

In addition, the students relied on themselves, their teachers, and their friends with regard to selecting their reading materials.

Shafi and Loan (2010) conducted a study that aimed at investigating the reading habits of college students and their gender variability. The students, irrespective of their gender acquired reading habits mostly on their own and liked to read in English in the morning and at home. The results also revealed that male students read more for information while female students read more for education. It was also found that male students mostly read about religion, politics and literature whereas the majority of females prefer religion, science, technology and literature.

 Javid (2011) investigated the effect of pleasure reading on reading speed and comprehension. He studied 74 Saudi medical university students at Taif University. The study aimed at identifying the effect of pleasure reading on reading speed and comprehension as well as on students› attitudes toward reading. The students› reading speed and comprehension were evaluated using graded readers before and after the study. The results showed that the students› reading speed and comprehension of the experimental group were significantly higher than the control group. In addition, the questionnaire results showed that pleasure reading had a remarkable effect on their practices and most of the subjects mentioned that they planned to read in their free time.

Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2014) conducted a study to identify the effect of reading habits on the academic achievement. The study confirmed that reading habits had a positive influence on the academic performance of the participating students. It also confirmed that students engaged in the study were not interested in reading books, magazines and journals among others.

Students' reading habits and preferences were also investigated by Ögeyik and Akyay (2009). The sample consisted of student teachers at foreign language departments. The findings revealed that the participating students had positive attitudes toward reading, and were engaged in varied reading activities. Almost all of them prefered reading on different topics and 90.9% of them liked reading novels or short stories.

To sum up, studies of Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2014) and Javid (2011) confirm the idea that pleasure reading has a positive effect on academic achievement in general and on reading comprehension in particular. Throughout this short review,it was found that stories and adventure books are highly favored by EFL learners. Some studies like Iftanti (2012) showed that EFL learners read in English for many purposes, the first of which is learning. Therefore, this study will investigate this issue in the hope that it will achieve results that will be relevant to the development of teaching and learning of reading skills.

Research Problem:

A great deal of research indicates the positive effect of pleasure reading and students' reading habits on reading achievement. Hassell and Rodge (2007), Chen (2007), Ögeyik and Akyay (2009), Shafi and Loan (2010), Javid (2011), Owusu and Larson (2014) – among many others investigated school and university students' reading interests and habits, and some consider them as key factors to develop students' reading comprehension. Krashen (2004) –in his book (the power of reading: insights from research)– reviewed a number of research findings and states that pleasure reading plays an important role in developing reading comprehension. EFL undergraduate programs in Yemen generally offer 3–4 reading courses for their students. Nonetheless, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no studies were reported to find out adult reading habits in the Yemeni context that are considered the right beginning for designing these courses. The absence of such studies makes it difficult for teachers to teach reading, as students find themselves read passages that are not interesting. In addition, students are not given a choice to select what to read. It is worth mentioning that there is a great deal of research that proves that pleasure reading results in better reading comprehension performance; yet these findings are not considered when selecting reading materials. Therefore, this study is an attempt to investigate reading preferences among EFL female students at the University of Science and Technology (UST), Sana'a.

Aims of the Study:

This study aims at investigating the reading preferences of level one and level two EFL students at the University of Science and Technology in the academic year 2010–2011. The study attempts to achieve the following objectives:

1. Identifying level one and level two students reading preferences.

2. Finding out significant differences between the students of the two levels.

Questions of the Study:

There are two main questions for the study as follows:

1. What are the reading preferences of level one and level two students?

2. What are the differences between level one and level two students in reading preferences?

Research Design:

This is a descriptive study that surveyed EFL female students at the UST in order to identify their reading preferences. In addition, the researchers wanted

to find out whether the level variable had any significant effect on these preferences or not.

Participants of the Study:

The participants of the study were 100 female levels one and two EFL students of the UST at the girls' branch during the academic year 2010–2011. Participants were 47 from level one and 53 from level two. The researchers included more than 50% of each level. Being the teachers of some reading skills courses at the UST, the researchers wanted to identify their students' reading preferences to be considered in course materials selection.

Data Collection Technique:

Data were collected using an adapted questionnaire. The questionnaire was originally developed by Hassell and Rodge (2007) to identify pleasure reading habits for native adolescents. In order to adjust the tool to fit university EFL learners, the researchers needed to adapt it.

Validity and Reliability:

The researchers presented the adapted questionnaire to three validators. Validators added some items such as "reading news on Yemen Times and Yemen Observer". Then, the reliability of the tool was calculated and was found 0.91 which was considered good to conduct the study.

Data Analysis:

Data were analyzed using percentages and McNemar Test to find out any statistically significant differences between the students' reading habits. This test is considered the most appropriate as it is used in comparing groups.

Findings:

Survey Analysis:

Table (1): Demographic distribution of the research participants

Demographics		No.	%
Level	Level one	47	47%
	Level two	53	53%
	Total	**100**	**100%**

The table above shows that more than half of the participants belong to level two with 53% compared to 47% of level one students at the girls' branch at

the University of Science and Technology in the academic year 2010–2011.

The first research question was about finding any significant differences in the motives for reading between students of level 1 and level 2. To answer this question, data were analyzed using McNemar Test. Results are shown in the following table.

Table (2): Level one and level two students' motives for reading

No.	If you read, why do you like to read? Check all that apply	Level one	Level two	Total	McNemar Test	
		%	%	%	Sig.	
1	To learn something/it's educational	64	72	68	0.036	*
2	For fun	51	79	66	0.041	*
3	It's exciting	47	55	51	0.883	
4	It's relaxing	40	38	39	0.070	
5	For brain stimulation	32	40	36	0.019	*
6	As a time filler	30	38	34	0.008	*
7	For motivation	23	38	31	0.001	*
8	Because I'm bored	17	32	25	0.000	*
9	I get attached to characters	28	19	23	0.000	*
10	For escape	23	21	22	0.000	*

Results revealed that there are statistically significant differences in eight motives of reading between level one and level two English students. The first motive for reading for level one students is learning, while number one motive for level two students was pleasure. This implies that novice English learners find foreign language reading quite intimidating at the beginning; then in later years when their language gets better, they start to enjoy reading and develop reading habits for pleasure. The second motive for level one students was pleasure; and one could understand that some freshmen students have good English language or they have the habit of pleasure reading in their mother tongue and this transfers to the foreign language. They passed the phase of language fear and they started to enjoy reading in the foreign language. As for level two students, the second motive for reading was for learning, which means although they enjoy reading for pleasure, they use it as a way for learning as well.

Table (2) shows that out of the ten motives listed above, there were significant differences between level one and level two students in eight of them. These differences in motives affect tremendously their performance in learning.

Though students share reading for the same three motives which are learning, fun and excitement, the percentage of level two students is higher. These three first motives are similar to Hassell and Rodge's (2007) study where the majority of the students indicated that they read in their spare time for three main reasons: fun, relaxation and to learn new things.

The second research question was about finding any significant differences in the reasons of not to read between level one and level two students. The question was answered using McNemar Test. Results are shown in the following table.

Table (3): Reasons of EFL students for not to read

No.	If you don't read, why not? Check all that apply	Level one	Level two	Total	McNemar Test	
		%	%	%	Sig.	
1	Rather watch TV	55	68	62	0.222	
2	Can't find a good book	51	49	50	0.780	
3	Like other activities more	47	45	46	0.401	
4	Rather spend time with friends	32	53	43	0.154	
5	Too busy/no time	32	49	41	0.088	
6	Can't get into stories	32	36	34	0.009	*
7	Rather surf the Web	28	38	33	0.005	*
8	Reading is boring/not fun	23	32	28	0.000	*
9	Rather play video games	13	34	24	0.000	*
10	Reading makes me tired	23	25	24	0.000	*
11	Too much assignments	19	26	23	0.000	*
12	Trouble concentrating/not good at reading	15	21	18	0.000	*

Results revealed that out of the twelve reasons mentioned above, there were statistically significant differences between level one and level two students in the last seven ones. It is worth mentioning that these differences were found among the least frequent reasons for both levels. Watching TV was the reason for not to read for both levels, the second one for level one was their inability to find a good book, and this may be understood given that they are still at the beginning of foreign language learning, not knowing well-known authors and famous works. On the other hand, the second reasons for level two students were being too busy or having no time to read and they preferred to spend more time with friends.

The third research question was about finding any significant differences in what they like to read. The question was answered using McNemar Test. Results are shown in the following table.

Table (4): What level one and level two students like to read

No.	Materials Check all that apply	Level one	Level two	Total	McNemar Test	
		%	%	%	Sig.	
1	Magazines	57	77	68	0.024	*
2	Adventure stories	60	58	59	0.480	
3	Fashion/beauty books	60	57	58	0.576	
4	Books on the internet use and new technologies	40	53	47	0.451	
5	detective books	28	42	35	0.014	*
6	Comics	32	36	34	0.009	*
7	Puzzles	26	40	33	0.004	*
8	Music	26	34	30	0.001	*
9	News in Yemen Times or Yemen observer	30	28	29	0.001	*
10	Science books	19	30	25	0.000	*
11	Books on sports	9	23	16	0.000	*
12	The latest video games	9	13	11	0.000	*

Table (4) shows significant differences between level one and level two students in nine out of the things they like to read. The most common things to read for level one students were adventure stories and fashion/beauty books while for level two students the most common thing was magazines, following that adventure stories and fashion/beauty books. It is worth mentioning that level two students like to read detective books, comics, puzzles, science books more than level one students. So, generally speaking, level two students have more varieties for reading than level one students do. Magazines were the students' first choice and this is similar to the results of the study done by Hassell and Rodge's (2007).

The fourth research question was about finding any significant differences in what they like to read about. The question was answered using McNemar Test. Results are shown in the following table.

Table (5): The things level one and level two students like to read about

No.	Topics Check all that apply	Level one	Level two	Total	McNemar Test	
		%	%	%	Sig.	
1	People my age who have done some cool or amazing things	49	58	54	0.311	
2	Plants / trees	28	49	39	0.038	*
3	Fantasy characters	34	40	37	0.029	*
4	People/characters a lot different from me	38	34	36	0.027	*
5	People/characters my age who are wrestling with tough issues	34	36	35	0.015	*
6	Singers	38	30	34	0.014	*
7	Animals	26	38	32	0.004	*
8	Celebrities	26	38	32	0.002	*
9	Historical figures	32	30	31	0.003	*
10	Planets and spaceships	21	34	28	0.000	*
11	Sport figures	11	17	14	0.000	*

Table (5) shows that the thing that both levels one and two students most liked to read about was this: "people their age who have done cool or amazing things". However, there are significant differences in all the other things listed above, more specifically, level two students read about plants, fantasy characters, animals, celebrities, space and sport figures more than level one students, while level one students liked to read about singers or people different from them more than level two students did.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

Based on the findings of this study the following conclusions can be made:

1. The first motive for reading by level one students was reading for learning purposes, whereas level two students primarily read for the purpose of pleasure.

2. Watching TV was reported to hinder students from reading. Inability to find the right reading material was another reason that hindered students from keeping on reading.

3. It was noted that level one students liked to read adventure stories and fashion/beauty books, while level two students' priority of reading was magazines, followed adventure stories and fashion/beauty books. In

addition, level two students liked to read detective books, comics, puzzles, science books more than level one students.

Furthermore, in the light of the findings of the study, the following recommendations can also be proposed:

1. Teachers are encouraged to select reading materials that match their students' preferences. Teachers need to talk with their students to know their reading preferences, particularly in the present digital age where students can have access to unlimited valuable resources to meet their needs.

2. Teachers are recommended to guide their students as how to search for books in the library or elsewhere.

3. EFL English students of different levels should not be given similar materials; level differences need to be considered and accounted for in material development or selection.

Suggestions for Further Research:

To achieve well-designed effective materials for the courses of reading comprehension, further research is needed to explore EFL learners' reading habits and interests in different universities, public and private. Furthermore, factors like gender and parents' education may be included in the investigation so as to see if they have any significant effects on the learners' reading habits or interest.

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