

Investigating Reading Habits and Preferences of Student Teachers at Foreign Language Departments

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Abstract

This study investigates reading habits and general views on reading of the students attending teacher training departments. Since reading is one of the principal skills while teaching and learning a second or foreign language, it is assumed that the gathered data in this sample study will highlight educators to get a general profile about reading habits and preferences of students. The participants of the study are the students attending English Language Teaching and German Language Teaching Departments of the Faculty of Education at Trakya University, Turkey. For data collection, a questionnaire with 40 items was designed and administered on 187 students. The questionnaire investigated the students' general attitudes towards reading and their preferences of reading. The research findings revealed that the students from both departments had positive attitudes towards reading and were widely involved in reading activities. Another optimistic outcome was that the students read both in native and foreign languages.

Key words: *Reading habit, attitudes towards reading, reading preferences, foreign language education*

Introduction

Reading, which is a long-term habit starting with the very early ages, is the prominent gateway to the knowledge room. It can be assumed as a practice that assists individuals to gain creativeness and develops their critical thinking capacities. In this sense, reading habit is an important tool for the development of personalities and mental capacities of individuals. In addition to personal and mental developments, reading is an access to social, economic and civic life (Clark and Rumbold, 2006). Moreover, all reading patterns in terms of emotional response enhance emotional satisfaction of individuals (Sarland, 1991).

For continuous and regular progress in education process, learners need to be enhanced to gain reading habits so as to fulfil individual improvement. In a study carried out for promoting reading habits by Guthrie and his colleagues (2000), it has been stated that one of the major contributions to reading is motivation of learners for text comprehension. In the mentioned study, it was also reported that motivation increases reading amount and respectively increases both intrinsic and extrinsic reading amount. In this context, motivation can be acknowledged as an important factor for prompting reading habits, reading preferences and the nature of reading learners engage in (Baker and Wigfield, 1999; Guthrie, et al. 2000; Gambrel, 1996). In addition, by motivating learners for reading, educators can direct learners to gain awareness in their social interactions as well as self-esteem. In this perspective, positive attitudes are created by motivating individual habits and interests, and they are all inter-related and supportive items for boosting reading habits (Calkins, 2001). Thus, learners can also increase creative and free thinking abilities with tolerant perspective towards other people (Williams and Burden, 1997).

Reading is generally accepted as a way for reaching new information and assumed to be consistent with the comprehension capabilities of individuals (Özbay, 2006). In addition, the purpose of reading is also consistent with individual preferences. Even the purpose of reading the same text may vary in accordance with individual preferences. A reader can read merely for having pleasure, while another

one can read it for getting information (Ögeyik, 2008). Whatsoever the purpose is, reading is a factor affecting the initialization of the reading process and/or reading action.

Moreover, some common factors such as individuals' interests, culture, gender and occupation all determine their preferences of reading (Ayyıldız et al., 2006). Various studies carried out for determining reading habits of individuals report that a growing number of young people do not read for pleasure; boys enjoy reading less than girls (Clark & Foster, 2005); children from lower socio-economic backgrounds read less for enjoyment than children from more privileged social classes (Clark & Akerman, 2006). Additionally, some findings show that learners seldom go to libraries (Özbay, 2006; Phillip, 1990). As reported, reading habits of individuals may vary depending on various factors. In general sense, choosing reading texts may also depend on those factors. For instance, in education environments, learners as readers are generally directed for reading as a compulsory task and the materials for reading are chosen as the requirement of education process. On the other hand, in foreign language education environments, there exist other factors. In a study by Kiray (2002), it has been stated that foreign language learners do not like to read in the foreign language for having pleasure because of language problems such as lack fluency and vocabulary. This shows that reading a book written in a foreign language does not give pleasure to the learners due to lack of language knowledge. In this context, looking up dictionary for the unknown vocabulary items can be thought as a time consuming process. But, reading in the target language is one of the most effective facilitator in the language learning process because texts written in a foreign language are the signs of different cultures and enhances language development (Kuzu, 1999). 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. Depending on the mentioned research studies, it is possible to state that whatsoever the reason is, reading habits of individuals can be fostered through some arrangements. One of the effective arrangements is education through which learners can gain reading habits due to the fact that teaching and training are built on reading. Such an interaction between educational aims and reading habits can be seen as the requirement of education process. Therefore, this research study investigating reading habits of foreign language learners aims at determining learners' tendencies and attitudes towards reading. Under the heading of this general topic, the study has subcategories exploring reading preferences. The findings of the study are thought to be directive for determining reader profiles to conduct further research for finding pathways of creating efficient and competent readers.

Method

Survey method was used in the study for data collection.

Research questions

In the study, answers to the following questions were sought out:

- How are the reading habits of the students attending foreign language departments?
- What types of books or texts do they generally prefer reading?

Do they enjoy reading texts in foreign language?

Participants

The participants of the study are the second, third and fourth year students attending English Language Teaching and German Language Teaching Divisions at the Faculty of Education in Trakya University, Turkey. 187 students participated in the study. The participation was on a volunteer base. Since there were a few male students in both departments, gender differences were not examined in the study.

Data collection and analysis

A questionnaire with 40 items developed by the researchers was used for data collection. The items were designed for evaluating reading habits, general attitudes towards reading, and reading preferences of the students. Each item has two choices –yes or no-. The questionnaire was completed by

the students for 15 minutes. Of 40 items, 10 items search for general attitudes towards reading, 13 items pertain to the participants' reading preferences, 10 items seek out the effects of reading, and 7 items investigate the negative aspects of reading. The order of the positive and negative expressions was arranged carefully so as not to affect the subjects' objectiveness. During the application process, the written instructions were also explained verbally. The statistical analysis of the data was computed through SPSS 11.0 software program. Each item was evaluated on the base of frequency and percentile values.

Findings

The questionnaire was analysed and displayed in four tables separately.

Table 1. General attitudes towards reading

	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
I like reading in my leisure time.	138	73,8	49	26,2
I like borrowing books from the library for reading.	92	49,2	95	50,8
I like reading only the best sellers.	16	8,6	171	91,4
Formal features of a book (thickness, font size, illustrations, etc.) affect my preference for reading it or not.	90	48,1	97	51,9
I follow up book reviews after reading.	87	46,5	100	53,5
I usually find the book I will read from the library	51	27,3	136	72,7
I usually buy the book I will read.	109	58,3	78	41,7
I initially learn about the book I will read if my friends read it.	119	63,6	68	36,4
I think reading is an indispensable part of life	184	98,4	3	1,6
I read a text in the internet due to its low cost.	79	42,2	108	57,8

In Table 1, the findings of the students' general attitudes towards reading activity are displayed. As seen, most of the students (73,8%) like reading and consider it as an indispensable part of life (98,4%). While nearly half of the students (49,2%) borrow books from library, %58,3 buy books for reading. But most of those who borrow books from library (72,7%) cannot find available books they are looking for. In addition, more than half of the students (63,6%) learn about the book before reading it. Nearly half of the students prefer reading texts through the internet (42,2%) and follow up book reviews (46,5%). 48,1% students choose a book for reading by taking formal features of the book, and 91,4% do not prefer reading only best sellers.

Table 2. Reading preferences of students

	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
I like reading literary works of Turkish authors.	157	84,0	30	16,0
I like reading literary works of foreign authors.	159	85,0	28	15,0
I like reading books in foreign language.	127	67,9	60	32,1
I like reading academic/scientific books	63	33,7	124	66,3
I like reading newspapers.	178	95,2	9	4,8
I like reading on-line texts.	117	62,6	70	37,4
I read academic articles because I learn about new studies in my field	124	66,3	63	33,7
I follow at least one monthly/weekly culture, art and/or literature magazine.	54	28,9	133	71,1
I prefer watching a movie of a literary book rather than reading it.	47	25,1	140	74,9
My favorite literary text is novel or short story	170	90,9	17	9,1
My favorite literary text is poetry	53	28,3	134	71,7
I like reading drama texts	46	24,6	141	75,4
I like reading books on all topics	186	99,5	1	,5

Reading preferences of students are displayed in Table 2. Nearly most of the students like reading the books of both Turkish authors and foreign authors (84,0% and 85,0% respectively). And 67,9% like reading books in foreign language. Nearly all of them like reading books on all topics (99,5%). Among those, 33,7% like reading academic/scientific books, while 66,3% prefer reading academic articles. A large part of the students (95,2%) are newspaper readers and 62,6% are on-line readers. They mostly (71,1%) do not follow any types of magazine. They (90,9%) love reading novels or short stories as literary genres and do not prefer watching a movie of a literary book rather than reading it (74,9%). But most of them do not prefer reading poems and drama texts (75,4% and 71,7% respectively).

Table 3. Effects of reading on students' performances

	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
I read for learning.	168	89,8	19	10,2
I read for pleasure.	119	63,6	68	36,4
Reading makes us gain the habit of fast reasoning.	183	97,9	4	2,1
Reading is a channel for gaining real world knowledge	164	87,7	23	12,3
I think 'reading' positively affects my success during the exams times	175	93,6	12	6,4
Reading enables me to express my feelings.	183	97,9	4	2,1
Reading develops multiple reasoning	185	98,9	2	1,1
Reading enhances our mental capacity	185	98,9	2	1,1
Reading develops our imaginary world	184	98,4	3	1,6
Reading opens the door of the unknown world	185	98,9	2	1,1

The students, in general sense, consider reading as effective in many aspects of life in the sense that reading facilitates world knowledge (98,9%), fosters learning (89,8%), gives aesthetic pleasure (63,6%) and enables them to express feelings (97,9%). Moreover, it is thought to be a tool that enhances fast reasoning (97,9), multiple reasoning (98,9%), mental capacity (98,9%) and develops imaginary world (98,4%) as well as real world (87,7%). In addition, most of the students (93,6%) think that reading on many aspects has positive effects on their performances in the exams.

Table 4. Negative views of students about reading

	Yes		No	
	f	%	f	%
I don't like reading	33	17,6	154	84,4
I find reading as a boring activity	23	12,3	164	87,7
I do not have time for reading	74	39,6	113	60,4
Due to my heavy workload, I do not have spare time for reading on any other topic	91	48,7	96	51,3
I do not read because I think the books are too expensive.	12	6,4	175	93,6
I do not read because I am of the opinion that reading is just a waste of time.	1	0,5	186	99,5
I find reading as an unnecessary activity	3	1,6	184	98,4

When the students' negative attitudes towards reading are examined, it is seen that only 17,6% do not like reading and 12,3% find it boring. But less than half of the students cannot read much due to heavy workload and lack of time (48,7% and 39,6% respectively). Only 0,5% students think reading is a waste of time and 1,6% appraise it as an unnecessary activity. A small amount of students (6,4%) state that they do not read due to high costs of books.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall findings of the study reveal that the students attending English and German Language Teaching Departments at Trakya University have reading habits and positive attitudes towards reading activities. In addition, they are conscious readers. Because they investigate about the books before they buy books and do not have a general tendency for reading only best sellers. This means, the students can choose their favourite books whenever they need information on the topic they are interested in. But they have some problems while searching for the desired book in libraries. Such findings are consistent with the former studies by Özbay (2006) and Phillip (1990). However, the problem lies behind this outcome is that they cannot access to all the books they are looking for, instead, they purchase for books. If they get the opportunity of finding the desired books, they may read more. They sometimes prefer reading through the internet or following up book reviews. Such opportunities can be thought as effective means for fostering reading habits. In most of the cases, the formal features of books may not be assumed as efficient as in readers reading preferences, but in this study it is seen that nearly half of the students take those features into account while choosing a book to read.

In the study, the students' reading preferences were also investigated for determining the reader profiles among the participant students. An interesting point in this respect appeared that most of the students prefer reading the books of Turkish and foreign authors and they mostly like reading in foreign language which is not in line with the former study by Kiray (2002). They prefer reading on all topics mainly on academic issues. Such a result may emerge due to the fact that those students are motivated towards reading on any topic relevant to their fields. As pointed out by Baker and Wigfield (1999), Guthrie, et al. (1999) and Gambrel, (1996), motivation enhances reading preferences of readers. Since literature courses are included into the curriculum in those departments, the students like reading literary texts but mostly novel and short story. Such a conclusion can be an outcome of motivation as well. However, they do not like reading poetry and drama as much as novel and short story. This can be resulted from the fact that since poetry is more complex than the other genres, understanding poetry may require more individual interest than getting educated.

In the questionnaire the students declared their ideas about the efficiency of reading. The students find reading resourceful in all aspects of life, particularly by referring to individuals' emotional satisfaction and fast reasoning. Such an outcome is in line with what Clark and Rumbold (2006) and Sarland (1991) have mentioned about the efficiency of all reading patterns in terms of emotional response. As well as emotional satisfaction, the students attain 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.

In the survey, most the students did not explain any negative attitudes towards reading. Despite their optimistic views on reading, nearly half of the students cannot read much due to heavy workload. In foreign language teacher training departments, the students are required to be involved in academic studies actively and are loaded with presentation tasks as a requirement of teaching profession. Therefore, they may not have sufficient time to read for pleasure. Instead, they mostly read academic books or articles. Such an outcome cannot be acknowledged as negative with respect to reading habits.

The general evaluation of the survey affirms that the participants have reading habits both in mother and foreign languages. Such positive attitudes may be due to their motivation for reading a lot for their academic activities. In the light of this survey study, some suggestions can be pointed out. First, students need to be motivated through reading activities both in school and out of school. If they are always motivated for reading, it may become a habitual task for them. In order to take their attention to read on different topics, some extracurricular activities can be introduced into the course schedule. This can lead to strong positive feelings about reading and create an encouraging circle in which poor readers become good readers. In order to struggle with purchasing troubles of students for books, one of the main hindrances of reading, education institutions can provide libraries where students can easily access to the books on various topics. Another crucial point for fostering reading habits of students is to provide the internet access in those institutions so as to raise awareness about reading hyper-texts through the internet. Further, investigating reading habits of student through surveys in certain intervals may be a functional effort for obtaining data about reading tendencies of students. Thus, if problems are identified, the necessary attempts can be provided for finding solutions to the problems. Because becoming a lifetime reader is predicated on developing a love of reading (Sanacore, 2002),

having learners to gain learning habits should be one of the main objectives of education policies from the very beginning to the end. Courses for developing reading skills at schools should have also the purpose of leading learners for searching, understanding and getting information through reading. One more suggestion can be offered for foreign language teaching environments. On the whole, reading in foreign language 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. Moreover, it can be suggested that being dependent on certain reading areas may hinder one's gaining a multi-perspective type of view, so students should be motivated to engage in reading in various areas for transferring information among the disciplines without approaching reading process ideologically in an obsessive way, but in an objective way.

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