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French Science Students Reading in a Foreign Language: Constraint or Pleasure?

Nicole Décuré*

LAIRDIL - IUT A - Université Paul Sabatier, 115 route de Narbonne – 31077 Toulouse Cedex 4, France

Corresponding Author: Nicole Décuré, E-mail: nicdec@orange.fr

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ABSTRACT

French science students do not read much in English. Does this reflect their reading habits in their native language? A study in the form of online questionnaires was conducted at Toulouse university which compared their reading habits in French and in English. A further study examined the way one particular group of students conducted their prescribed reading task in English. Finally, a questionnaire was used to assess their reading in English after university. The results show that these students do a fair amount of reading in French and therefore can and should be encouraged to read in English. Extensive reading programmes proved useful at the incidental learning, fluency and enjoyment levels.

INTRODUCTION

Asking French science students to do any regular work in English is almost like asking for the moon. They will work punctually for an oral presentation (that will secure them a – good – mark), they may read through their notes (if they have taken any) before an exam. But devoting some time each week to English, apart from watching films and series or listening to songs seems beyond their ability. Yet we, their English teachers, are hopeless optimists. We believe that a foreign language has to be practised regularly, like sport or music, that exposure to the target language must be extensive (Cumming, 2009: 209-210), and we believe that we might convince our students to do so since we consider that reading is one of the ways to acquire and consolidate language. Maley goes as far as to claim that reading is "the single most effective way to improve language proficiency" (2005: 354).

The research described below aims at examining pre-conceived ideas about reading as applied to a particular context: science students learning English as a foreign language at a French university. How does reading in one's native language compare with reading in a foreign language? Do we need to include reading tasks in our syllabuses? Can extensive reading help develop language skills? Can reading be a motivating experience? Answers to these questions may help determine what course of action can be chosen as regards reading activities.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Jack C. Richards starts his introduction to *From Reader to Reading Teacher* with this statement: "The acquisition of reading skills in a second or foreign language is a priority for millions of learners around the world" (Aebersold & Field, 1997: ix). Why this is so, and whether it should be so, he does not say but it is fairly safe to assume that this is probably true since much – if not most – of the learning of foreign languages (as opposed to second languages) is done at school. Since school is based on reading and writing, when it comes to learning a foreign language, reading will undoubtedly take a large place. As being able to speak does not require being able to read, there have been attempts at teaching a foreign language, at the beginners' stage mostly, without resorting to reading and writing. But, in a school context, sooner or later, reading is introduced. Most classes around the world base their input of new language on texts of varying lengths.

At university level, extensive reading programmes have often been implemented to "enable students to read without

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help unfamiliar authentic texts, at appropriate speed, silently and with adequate understanding" (Nuttall, 1982: 21), "to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading" (Richards & Schmidt, 2002: 193-194). Furthermore, this reading competence should affect the other skills positively (Elley, 1991: 404), thus fostering incidental learning (Davis, 1995: 330; Ponniah, 2011; Robb & Kano, 2013; Iwahori, 2008, referring to Krashen's input and pleasure hypotheses).

In France today, excepting primary education and beginners' classes which have a strong oral component (listening, speaking, games), the typical English class is based on those "time-honored activities" (Aebersold & Field, 117) that consist in reading a text (in class or at home), so that the teacher can introduce and explain vocabulary and grammar, and then asking questions which the students answer (or not). In spite of Scarcella & Oxford's claim that "discussions and question-and-answer sessions after the reading stimulate high-level thinking, which in turn whets the students' appetite to learn more" (1992: 97), after quite a few years of this treatment (and failing to master the language) students come to hate this approach. They have told us so repeatedly. But we plod on because we believe intuitively that reading has a positive impact on language acquisition (Day & Bamford, 1998).

At Toulouse science university, my colleagues massively use this approach, from year one to year five, basing their lessons for the first two years on texts of general interest (social and cultural themes) and from the third year on, on "specialised" texts (ESP). Without them, they feel lost, they do not know what to do and we must acknowledge that, with classes of 24 students and more, it is easier to base a lesson on text than to try to make students speak all the more so as reading is deemed the easiest by students, (see surveys conducted at that university by Blois et al., 2005; 2006) and therefore less necessary: speaking is the skill that represents the greatest difficulty for students and should be addressed first. But, even though class use of texts is a given, teachers at the higher education level are reluctant to impose extensive reading on their students because of constraints of time and syllabus (Macalister, 2008: 248-249).

We may question the belief that our students should practise reading. After leaving university, will they have to read in a foreign language? Students at the Institute of Technology (a two-year course) rate this need as fairly high, just after speaking. Obviously, those students who will become technicians in all branches of industry and research will do a fair amount of reading in English. But it is less likely for all the others enrolled in university courses who will not (at least for a third or half of them) find a job related to their studies for a lack of career opportunities in science (Béduwé et al., 2007).

The vast majority of our students are literate in French (be it their native language or their first L2) but only a minority can be termed so in English. They have read short texts (from ten lines to one page) in class with profuse and lengthy explanations of all sorts but would not dream of devoting any of their leisure time reading in English (they will more easily watch videos). Yet, reading in a foreign language is the skill that causes least anxiety, thus making it a task well suited for out-of-class practice (Brantmeier, 2005). Not only is it a well-known activity but there is little or no pressure to perform within a certain time frame as is the case with speaking and listening; it is easy to stop and go back a few words, to get help in case of difficulty (dictionary); it does not involve producing correct language as with writing. Anxiety will occur only if students are asked to perform either orally or in writing in post-reading tasks (*ibid*.).

Although reading does not cause anxiety, it is still felt as an effort as it does not come naturally (Kern, 1989). It takes six to eight times longer for an L2 learner to read a text than for a native. Frequent use of the dictionary makes reading a painstaking endeavour by impeding reader-text interaction, ending in frustration and discouragement (Crow, 1986: 242). With reading, there is no easy help as there is in films with images and subtitles, and the rare bilingual books are essentially classics, the reading of which is not only difficult for any reader but also rather boring for a young foreign audience whose cultural references in the foreign language are inadequate to deal with those texts. They do not read Rabelais or Simenon in French, why would they read Chaucer or Agatha Christie in English?

A few years ago, the group of teachers who teach third-year students decided to introduce some form of extensive reading in the syllabus so as to increase contact with English and hopefully improve our students' general competence and performance in the foreign language as well as "develop good reading habits and encourage a liking of reading" (Yamashita, 2004: 1). The idea was to give the students a collection of interesting texts (texts that should interest them) at the beginning of the term and ask them to work on them regularly. We were not naïve enough to think they would do so with no incentive: their efforts would be assessed in an end-of-term exam counting for 40% of the total mark. That way, it seemed we might have a better chance of success since cramming the day before the exam seemed impossible in those circumstances. So, we included in their curriculum the reading at home, over a period of twelve weeks, of a number of scientific texts in their own specialty. During the term, one session was devoted to elucidating the difficulties they had encountered. In my experience over several years, this has hardly ever been necessary as few obscure points remain.

Before we embarked on this experiment, we felt some doubt and asked ourselves: Is reading a "natural" activity for our students? Do they, in fact, read outside the class? We thought that if, as we feared, they did little reading, whether in French (L1) or English (L2), an extensive reading programme might be a hopeless venture. In order to get some answers, we launched an online questionnaire (see *Appzndix*). The aim was to find out if students read outside the class, what and in what quantities and to compare the findings in L1 and L2. This quantitative study will be discussed *infra*.

I conducted a separate research of a qualitative kind with my own students, at the end of each semester, in order to

find out how they did their reading, when, with what help and what difficulties. I also questioned them about what remained of this reading activity after they left university. This will be the object of Part II.

THIRD YEAR STUDENTS' READING HABITS

Method

Participants and data collection

In spite of Candlin's warning that "research into the nature of the reading process is research into the unobservable" (Candlin, 1984: ix), contradicted by Littlewood's more optimistic advice to "study the learner" (1984: 1), a colleague[1] and I set up an on-line questionnaire about third-year students' reading habits. Through special authorisation, we collected the e-mail addresses of all 1306 students in the third year of their studies and sent them the questionnaire. We enlisted their English teachers' help to repeatedly encourage them to respond as we feared they might not bother otherwise. We also sent the students reminders by e-mail. It took nine months to collect the data. We received 339 answers (a 25% response rate). The average age of the respondents was 21.3 and there was almost an equal number of men (173) and women (166). They were in about thirty different courses (maths, physics, chemistry, biology, aeronautics, mechanics, etc.).

The questionnaire

We conceived a Google Docs questionnaire which was kept voluntarily short and simple (see *Appendix*). When we created it, we differentiated reading in French from reading in English, reading for academic purposes and reading as a leisure activity, reading online and on paper. We also looked at the differences between men and women. The data was treated with Excel and SphinxIQ.

Results

The most salient results are as follows.

Reading for academic purposes

For their studies, students do their reading on paper rather than on the Internet, in both languages, with a slight preference for the Internet in English (probably because of the easier access to English documents than on paper). Men read more on the Internet than women women (Table1)

This preference was already documented in 2003 when it was noticed that 77% of Chinese students at the University of Hong-Kong preferred paper (Bodomo et al., 2003). Ten years later in France, the preference was even more marked. But what is true today will not necessarily be true tomorrow as consumer habits and availability of material are rapidly changing. Access to electronic periodicals has radically improved our lives as researchers, so it must affect our students in some ways.

They do not read required texts for their studies as much as they should (Table 2).

More than a third never or rarely read required texts in French, probably because they are not given any to read. A quarter reads often (Table 3).

They read just a little less often required texts in English compared to French but the difference is not really significant. In both languages, women read more (Table 4).

The results for non-required reading (books and articles) are similar in French. In English fewer students read often but, in this case, men seem to read more (Table 5).

Table 1. Reading on paper vs. the internet

In French	**Women**	**Men**	**Average**
Paper	92%	81.5%	87%
Internet	7.8%	18.5%	13%
In English			
Paper	86.75%	72.8%	80%
Internet	13.25%	27.2%	20%

Table 2. Reading required French texts for academic purposes

Texts in French	**Women**	**Men**	**Average**	
Never	5%	12%	9%	36%
Rarely	23%	30,5%	27%	
Sometimes	43%	34%	38%	64%
Often	29%	23%	26%	

Table 3. Reading required English texts for academic purposes

Texts in English	**Women**	**Men**	**Average**	
Never	9%	9%	9%	40%
Rarely	27%	35%	31%	
Sometimes	41%	37%	39%	60%
Often	23%	19%	21%	

Table 4. Reading French books/articles for academic purposes

Books/articles in French	**Women**	**Men**	**Average**	
Never	6.5%	3.5%	5%	35.5%
Rarely	35.5%	25.5%	30.5%	
Sometimes	52%	49%	50.5%	64.5%
Often	6%	22%	14%	

Table 5. Reading English books/article for academic purposes

Books/articles in English	**Women**	**Men**	**Average**	
Never	28%	19	24%	70%
Rarely	47%	45	46%	
Sometimes	21%	25.5	23%	30%
Often	3.5%	10.5	7%	

Leisure reading

When it comes to extra-curricular reading for leisure, there is a huge difference between French and English. More than half of the respondents often read in French whereas this is the case for only one in ten in English. Students read more often for pleasure than for their studies: more than half often read. Women read more than men (Table 6).

When it comes to English, a minority reads and, in this case, men read a little more in English (Table 7).

Very few of the respondents (1%) never read anything in French, a quarter never read anything in English and two thirds read nothing or very little. They argue that there is no point in reading in English because they do not understand much, because English books are expensive, because it is too much effort (reading should be pleasant), because they prefer to watch series, because they do not have enough time, or because it does not cross their minds to do so.

These findings invalidate Yamashita's hypothesis that "It is likely that the attitudes towards reading which L2 learners bring into the programme influence their performance or engagement in extensive reading (2004: 1). About half of those who never or rarely read in English read often in French, which tends to show that, contrary to what Yamashita or Day & Bamford, 1998: 23) may think, there is not necessarily a transfer in reading habits from L1 to L2.

In French, fiction is the most popular form of reading on paper: 78% of the students read novels and 30% short stories. The percentages drop to 40% in English for novels and 16% for short stories but still quite high for science students and far more than for other forms of reading (the press or specialised articles/books). Students sometimes (41%) or often (34%) read the press in French, probably because of the availability of the free press at bus stops and metro stations (Table 8).

The same discrepancy between the two languages is found about reading on the Internet (Table 9).

It must be noticed that forum/chatroom activities are not practised by a majority, possibly, in the case of English, because too much writing is involved.

This enquiry dispelled some of our misgivings: students do read, mostly for pleasure and mostly in French; print remains the favourite support for reading. It also confirmed our preconceived idea that reading in English does not come to them naturally and that an extensive reading programme might help them overcome, to a certain extent, this fear of reading in a foreign language.

Table 6. Reading in French for leisure

Reading in French for leisure	**Women**	**Men**	**Average**	
Never	1%	1.5%	1%	14%
Rarely	10.5%	15.5%	13%	
Sometimes	26%	42%	34%	86%
Often	61%	43%	52%	

Table 7. Reading in English for leisure

Reading in English for leisure	**Women**	**Men**	**Average**	
Never	32%	17%	24,5%	64%
Rarely	37%	42%	39.5%	
Sometimes	22%	29.5%	26,5%	36%
Often	8%	11.5%	9,5%	

Table 8. Types of reading on paper

	French	**English**
Newspapers/magazines	75%	17%
Specialised press	57%	29%
Novels	78%	40%
Short stories	30%	16%

Table 9. Types of reading on the internet

	French	**English**
News	71%	19%
General information	73%	22%
Forums, chats, etc.	38%	11%

MATHS STUDENTS READING SHORT STORIES

In my own third year classes, I had maths students training to become maths teachers. If they pass their exams, they will integrate a teacher training college and never have to study English again. Their levels range from very weak to fluent, with the vast majority at an intermediate level (A+ or B-). They are good-natured, easy-going, open-minded, imaginative even, a delight to teach. The term is short and they have an average of 25 hours of classes each week. There is little time to work after classes and English is not a priority although it is the subject in which they have the best class average and which helps them compensate for under average marks in algebra or analysis, two notoriously difficult subjects.

As I was totally free to decide on the contents of the texts for the task of extensive at-home reading, I chose to give my students short stories and not maths texts to read, for several reasons. First, I do not see the point of asking students to read texts on mathematics when they are never going to do so in their professional life. Secondly, in English classes, they prefer to do something different from maths. Thirdly, these people, who are going to be teachers in secondary schools, need to broaden their horizons, and the cultural content of short stories is undeniable. Furthermore, Aebersold and Field explain that "fiction can serve two important functions in the L2/EFL classroom: to teach language and to introduce or reinforce human (social, cultural, political, emotional, economic, etc.) themes and issues in the classroom" (1997: 47). I also believe that reading (and learning) must be a pleasure. Ray Williams made this the first of his "top ten" principles: "In the absence of interesting texts, very little is possible" (1986: 42). His second principle is equally important: reading should be done for its own sake rather

than as a pretext for other tasks. If we want our students to improve their English through reading, it might be a good idea to give them something enjoyable to read in the hope that they will continue to read on their own, thereby improving their English by themselves and not worrying about writing or speaking about it (Day & Bamford, 2002:136). They already listen to songs and watch films and series in English for pleasure, reaching through these means the famous autonomy we are intent on their achieving. As Christine Nuttall puts it in a nutshell: "Reading is like an infectious disease: it is caught, not taught" (Nuttall, 1982:192).

At the beginning of the autumn semester, I gave each of these students three texts of varying difficulty and length (from 400 to 3,300 words) according to their level: they had to be able to manage the job and not get discouraged and, even worse, disgusted beforehand. The texts were accompanied by exercises to help them work on comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and even expression. I advised them strongly to work a little on the stories and exercises every week. Before the end of term, we examined the remaining problems together. Some students had not started reading yet. Others had no questions (the reading was easy or they did whatever was necessary to understand the stories). Very few had problems, usually vocabulary that they had not found in a dictionary or the general meaning of the story (if it was a story with an unexpected twist at the end).

To analyse the way the students work, I asked them a series of questions in their end-of-term exam paper. How did they work? Did they follow my advice and work regularly or did they do it at the last minute, as they are prone to do, cramming before the exam? Which method(s) did they use to tackle the texts? The results presented here have a relative value: the declarations made by the students do not necessarily reflect the whole truth since they may have omitted some details or embellished reality. Also, they may have been incapable of expressing exactly what they wanted to say in English, or they may have been very imprecise as to time frames, or simply may not have bothered. But they sound truthful enough, often admitting they worked at the last minute or that they disliked some texts for instance, and thus the 91 testimonies collected provide an overall picture that is fairly reliable.

On average, they wrote 97 words. Some were very precise in their comments:

> "I think that if I didn't do (hadn't done) the exercises given with 'No witchcraft for sale' I wouldn't have understood the story in such short time as well as if I had worked through the semester".
>
> "These exercises are, to me, a way to check whether the student has understood the texts, if he has understood words he didn't know before reading them…"

When students can produce such sentences, you are almost ashamed to put a little red ink on their papers.

It is sometimes rather difficult to see when exactly the students worked. Their use of expressions of time is imprecise, erroneous sometimes… or simply missing. The most striking example of how one wrong word can confuse the reader is in a paper in which the student uses "before" instead of "after" and then the whole argument becomes nonsense: "I began to read the stories before the holidays because during my holidays I was sick!" This is called prescience, premonition, what have you. When she adds that she hates to "do something at the last time" [meaning "minute"] and therefore finds it stressful, we come to understand what really happened, exam stress most likely, although this is a good student, who writes English with ease and creativity if not accurately. She explains how she worked in 337 words, a record in length for this task. When we get to the end of the explanation, we come to realise that perhaps she has a problem with time, period, and that it might have nothing to do with English since she writes about wishing to return to the future (and not to the past) so as to be able to read the stories several times.

It was a pleasant surprise to find out that half the students worked throughout the semester, either starting reading as soon as they were given the texts or during the short mid-term holidays. A third started during the Christmas holidays and a fifth just before the exam. The latter are either very fluent students who experience no difficulty with reading matters or a few very bad ones who could not make a long-term effort. One student explicitly stated that working at the last minute was her way of doing things because she needed the pressure. 40% declared doing some sort of revision before the exam but it is probably more, they just did not feel the need to mention it as it is an obvious fact of students' way of working. As to the exercises, about half of them declared doing some or all of the proposed work.

The benefits which they felt derived from this kind of work (reading and doing exercises) were, unsurprisingly, learning vocabulary (44%) and understanding the texts (28%), a common belief among students and researchers alike (Crow, 1986: 242, 248): vocabulary is acquired, incidentally, through extensive exposure, when readers focus on meaning and not on words (Ponniah, 2011: 135). In this case, the aim of the study was not to measure progress but to create and assess motivation as there can be no progress without it. In this respect, it seems that the reading task was a success: students felt that it was a pleasant way to work, especially as it left them free to organise their time as they saw fit. Some felt the need to translate the texts (six translated all the texts and another six all the unknown words) or to write summaries of the stories, activities they were not asked to do but that they probably had done at school and found useful for their learning, and/or reassuring and comforting. Many of them (75%) mention using a dictionary. The usual procedure was to read the texts without a dictionary first and then to resort to one (and sometimes to a friend) to find the words they did not know. Harbord (1992: 350) calls translation a "learner-preferred strategy" − although many teachers frown on it − and this is certainly borne out by this study.

As to the type of stories that the students prefer, it is difficult to say because there was a great variety of texts depending on levels and groups. Nevertheless, one emerges above all the others as a favourite (19 times against 7 or 8 times for the next favourites), Isaac Asimov's "True Love". Considering that he was a master story-teller, writing in fairly simple

English with an art for creating atmosphere, this is hardly surprising. But it is also the most disliked (13 times) because many people do not like science fiction or love stories. For all the other stories, there is little difference between most and least liked.

I have also tried to find out if students go on reading after they leave the university and if this extensive reading programme had an incentive effect. I sent a questionnaire to my former maths students and obtained 24 answers. Reading was the second activity (78%) they practised in English after listening (91%), writing being the least practised (39%). More than half read English on the Internet (57%), almost half read the press (48%), more than a third (39%) read scientific articles and/or books. 22% read novels and only 9% read short stories (not necessarily the same people). One person read some poetry but nobody read essays or plays. Five read nothing. A quarter of the students declared that reading short stories had encouraged/incited them to read in English.

The results are not spectacular. We have not made readers of them all although it is always difficult to assess the influence we have exercised on our students in the long term.

CONCLUSION

What conclusions can we draw from these experiences? The general survey that we conducted showed that our science students read more in French, their native language, than we expected, even if we know that they probably tried to embellish reality a little in their declarations. We also confirmed what we suspected: they do not read as much in English, far from it, thereby depriving themselves of a means to improve their language skills. Secondly, it seems that extensive reading is well suited to this particular public of science students because it gives them a certain amount of freedom to organise themselves in their busy schedule and therefore the study validates the need for inclusion of such a programme. Thirdly, they find it interesting (there are almost no rejections of the task) and they feel that they have learned something: incidental learning has taken place. Fluency development has also taken place: some students have enjoyed this work and a few have been "converted" to reading in English, proving Krashen and his input hypothesis right:

> "When [second language learners] read for pleasure, they can continue to improve in their second language without classes, without teachers, without study and even without people to converse with" (1993: 84).

The study has not addressed one crucial question: the tastes of the students. My colleagues imposed texts about science, I imposed short stories of a literary nature. But what do students really prefer reading? Wouldn't motivation be greater and efficiency higher if students were to choose the nature of the texts they are given to read? The question of choice still has to be explored.

ENDNOTE

1. Elisabeth Crosnier, associate professor at Toulouse University.

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APPENDIX

Students' questionnaire: READING

The purpose of this survey is to know your reading habits in order to better adapt the content of next term's English syllabus. Please take a few minutes to complete the form below as completely as possible.

Diploma prepared

Sex
Woman - Man
Age
19 - 20 - 21 - 22 - 23 – older than 23

READING FOR YOUR STUDIES

Reading in French

Which reading medium do you prefer?
Paper - Internet
Do you read required texts?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
Do you read scientific articles and/or books?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often

Reading in English

Which reading medium do you prefer?
Paper - Internet
Do you read required texts?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
Do you read scientific articles and/or books?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often

READING AS A LEISURE ACTIVITY

Do you read in French as a leisure activity?
No, never - Yes, but rarely - Yes, from time to time - Yes, often
Do you read in English as a leisure activity?
No, never - Yes, but rarely - Yes, from time to time - Yes, often
If you never read in French, why ?
If you never read in English, why ?

Reading in French on paper

Do you read newspapers or news magazines ?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
Do you read specialised magazines and/or books?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
What type of books do you read ?
Novels - Poetry - Plays – Short stories – Essays - Other:

Reading in English on paper

Do you read newspapers or news magazines ?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
Do you read specialised magazines and/or books?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
What type of books do you read ?
Novels - Poetry - Plays – Short stories – Essays - Other:

INTERNET

In French

Do you read the news ?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
Do you read general information ?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
Do you participate in forums, chats, etc.?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often

In English

Do you read the news ?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
Do you read general information ?
Never - Rarely - From time to time - Often
Do you participate in forums, chats, etc.?
Never - Rarely - From time to time – Often