

Factors Affecting Reading Performance: A Study of Advanced EFL Students in Thailand

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Abstract

This study investigated how three factors – personal background, attitude towards reading, and motivation to read – affect the reading performance of Reading Advanced Level university students at a private international university in Thailand. Specifically, this quantitative cross-sectional survey research that involved 64 students intended to establish significant correlation between personal background and reading performance, attitude towards reading and reading performance, and motivation to read and reading performance. Further, it sought to determine the level of reading performance of the sample. The results indicated that there was a significant correlation between personal background and reading performance, and attitude towards reading and motivation to read. On the other hand, there was no significant correlation between attitude towards reading and reading performance, and motivation to read and reading performance. Further, the level of sample's reading performance is relatively moderate.

Keywords: *Reading performance, reading attitude, reading motivation*

Introduction

Attitudes and motivation play a big role in reading (Cambria & Guthrie, 2010; Seitz, 2010). Reading itself is considered to be “the mother of all skills” (De Guzman, Donisa, & Sabio, 2010). Grabe (2002) states that one of the most important skills in academic settings is reading ability in a second language (L2) as new information is learned, and alternative explanations and interpretations about this information are obtained through reading. Similarly, Anderson (2003) states that reading is the most important skill to master in order to ensure success in learning. In the Asian context, synthesis of reading information can be especially difficult (Aek & Lulu, 2011).

Because reading is an indispensable skill, it stands to reason that the attitude and motivation towards this skill should be identified. It has been noted that though L2 learners have developed their reading skills in their first language(s), their attitudes towards reading in a new language may deter them from reading successfully (Nation, 2009). Taking this into consideration, this study aims to identify the attitudes and motivation of L2 learners in an EFL setting as a means to inform appropriate pedagogical approaches.

Literature Review

Learner Attitude and Motivation

Attitude and motivation are valuable constructs as they reveal information pertinent to pedagogy, as well as institutional development (Dörnyei, 2003). Goldenberg, Rueda, and August (2008) concurred this by stating that attitudes and motivation, along with other affective and cognitive processes, would determine learning progress. This brings about the assumption that students with more positive dispositions towards learning would probably have a more meaningful learning experience, which in

turn leads to greater academic achievement. On the other hand, learners with a negative disposition may limit the possibilities for learning. Krashen (1987) proposed the affective filter, which is a constraint on learning that is caused by negative attitudes or experiences.

For L2 learners in an English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, reading is not a new skill that they need to acquire. Especially at the tertiary setting, these L2 learners would have read in their first language(s). Hence, L2 readers would have developed notions and skills about reading. Though language skills may be transferable between language, students' affect may act as an interference (Nation, 2009).

Studies of Attitude and Motivation in Language Learning

A large cross-cultural study on language learning, conducted by Littlewood (2001), revealed that Asian students generally have a positive disposition towards learning. When looking specifically at reading, there were studies which reported that students were more likely to have a positive attitude towards reading if they were exposed to reading at an early age (Partin & Gillespie, 2002). This was reiterated by another study, where it was found that parents who valued literacy skills will influence their children to be similar (Goldenberg, Rueda, & August, 2008). What these studies have shown us is that the attitudes and motivation that students may have could be identified from internal factors such as self-perception, as well as external ones such as home environments and reading opportunities in class (Petscher, 2010).

Within the context of Asia, studies on learner attitudes and motivation will provide the larger educational discourse with real accounts of learner characteristics, by bringing to the forefront unique cultural traits which influence language learning (Littlewood, 2001). This is of particular importance as language learners from this region are superficially understood. Research studies which dealt with the constructs of attitude and motivation have revealed that Asian students actually have a positive disposition towards a variety of pedagogical approaches, despite coming from a collectivist and hierarchical society (Cheng, 2000; Kember, 2000).

The Study

Context and Sample

This study takes on an action research approach to investigate a particular sample that was of interest to the researcher. It was observed by the researcher that even L2 learners who were at the advanced level in their English remedial program did not exhibit learning abilities expected of that level. Instead, these students showed intermediate reading skills. In order to tackle this issue, this study conducted a survey in an advanced reading course during the second semester of the 2014 – 2015 academic year. There were a total of 64 students who were involved in this study.

Research Instrument

The research instrument was a four point-Likert scale Factors Affecting Reading Performance Questionnaire that included three sections: Personal Background (PB), Attitude towards Reading (ATR), and Motivation to Read (MR). PB section was developed by the researcher; ATR section adopted from Reading Attitudes in L1 and L2, and their influence on L2 extensive reading (Yamashita. 2004. Sarawit. 2008).

Confirmatory factor analysis was done to confirm that ATR and MR were multidimensional constructs: ATR generated four subscales — Reading Usefulness, Reading Enjoyableness, Reading

Confidence, and Reading Sustainability while MR consisted of seven subscales — Reading Personal Perception, Reading Enjoyableness, Reading Challenge, Reading Rewardableness, Reading Self-concept, Reading Comprehension, and Reading Importance and Reading Out Loud. Next, a reliability analysis was done to get the Cronbach's Alpha for each of the subscales: Reading Usefulness (.69), Reading Enjoyableness (.61), Reading Confidence (.70), and Reading Sustainability (.57), Reading Personal Perception (.60), Reading Enjoyableness (.70), Reading Challenge (.68), Reading Rewardableness (.49), Reading Self-concept (.59), Reading Comprehension (.49), and Reading Importance and Reading Out Loud (.46) Santos (1999) posits that the acceptable Cronbach's Alpha in Social Sciences is .70. Hence, subscales Reading Enjoyableness (.61), Reading Sustainability (.57), Reading Personal Perception (.60), Reading Rewardableness (.49), Reading Self-concept (.59), Reading Comprehension (.49), and Reading Importance and Reading Out Loud (.46) were weak. Thus, weak items should be deleted to obtain reliability. However, Bastick and Matalon (2007) warn that the omission of weak items may cause loss of pertinent information, thus, suggesting that value judgment be done concerning the reliability that results from dropping an item and the extra information that it creates if it stays. Finally, the researcher put weight on retaining the items to keep the information intact aside from the scantiness of items.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed according to the following steps: first, all variables PB, ATR, MR, and Reading Performance (RP) were computed so that the means could be determined. Then, variables PB, ATR, MR were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Lastly, correlations between independent and dependent variables (PB and Reading Performance or RP, ATR and RP, and MR and RP); within dimensions of independent variables PB, ATR, and MR; and between independent variables (ATR and MR) were done.

Results

Means for All Variables

The mean of RP on a scale of 1 – 4 seemed to be relatively moderate ($\bar{x}=2.34$, $SD=.99$); the mean of ATR on a scale of 1 – 4 seemed to be relatively moderate ($\bar{x}=2.89$, $SD=.62$), and the mean of MR on a scale of 1 – 4 seemed to be relatively moderate ($\bar{x}=2.84$ and $SD=.32$).

The total number of participants in this study was 64. Out of this, there were 28 (43.8%) males and 35 (54.7%) females. From the same total number of participants, 58 (90.6%) indicated that they were Thai, 1 (1.6%) Cambodian, and 5 (7.8%) other nationalities. There were 52 (81.2%) taking up English major Thai program and 12 (18.8%) ESL. Further, 2 (3.1%) indicated that they were between 16-18 years of age, 35 (54.7%) were ages 19-21, 26 (40.6) were ages 22-24, and 1 (1.6%) was 25 and older. There were 4 (6.26%) who attended 1 semester of academic residence, 1 (1.6%) 2 semesters; 15 (23.4) 3 semesters; 19 (29.7%) 4 semesters, and 22 (34.4%) 5 semesters. With regards to current CGPA, 1 (1.6%) indicated having <2.00, 8 (12.5%) having 2.01-2.25, 22 (34.4%) having 2.26-3.00. 15 (23.4%) having 3.01-3.25, 12 (18.8%) having >3.26, and 6 (9.4%) not sure.

Pearson's correlation results indicated that there was no statistically significant correlation between Overall PB and Overall RP ($r=.34$, $p=.32>.05$). Similarly, there was no statistically significant correlation between Overall ATR and Overall RP ($r=-.10$, $p=.42>.05$). Lastly, there was likewise no statistically significant correlation between Overall MR and Overall RP ($r=.07$, $p=.57>.05$).

One of the dimensions, however, of overall PB – Mother's educational attainment – has a statistically significant correlation with overall RP ($r=.28$, $p=.02<.05$).

Variable	Coefficient (r) and p-value (p)	Personal Background	Attitude Reading	Towards	Motivation Read	to	Mother's Educational Attainment
Reading Performance	r	.13	-.10		.07		.28
Performance	p	.32	.42		.57		.02

Table 1. Correlation 1

In addition, statistically significant correlations were established among the dimensions of PB: Reading books, magazines or newspapers at home with Family's total monthly income ($r=.28, p=.03 < .05$), with Family or friends reading books to you ($r=.32, p=.01 < .05$), and with Book collection at home ($r=.35, p=.00 < .05$); Family and friends reading books to you with Talking about books or stories read with family and friends ($r=.36, p=.00 < .05$), with Book collection at home ($r=.26, p=.04 < .05$), and with Gender ($r=.27, p=.04 < .05$); and Talking about books or stories with family and friends with Current CGPA ($r=.31, p=.01 < .05$), and with Family's total monthly income ($r=.31, p=.01 < .05$).

Variable	Coefficient (r) and p-value (p)	Family's total monthly income	Family or friends reading books to you	Book collection at home	Talking about books or stories read with family and friends	Gender	Current CGPA
Reading books, magazines or newspapers at home	r	.28	.32	.35			
	p	.03	.01	.00			
Family or friends reading books to you	r			.26	.36	.27	
	p			.04	.00	.04	
Talking about books or stories read with family and friends	r	.31					.31
	p	.01					.01

A statistically significant correlation was likewise found between Overall ATR and MR ($r=.32, p=.00 < .05$).

Table 2. Correlation 2

Variable	Coefficient (r) and p-value (p)	MR
ATR	r	.32
	p	.00

Table 3. Correlation 3

There were likewise statistically significant correlations between subscales of ATR and subscales of MR: Reading Usefulness with Reading Personal Perception ($r=.28, p=.03 < .05$), and with Reading Enjoyableness ($r=.26, p=.04 < .05$); Reading Enjoyableness with Reading Personal Perception ($r=.38, p=.00 < .05$), and with Reading Comprehension ($r=.26, p=.04 < .05$); Reading Confidence with Reading Importance and Reading Out Loud ($r=.37, p=.00 < .05$); Reading Sustainability with Reading Comprehension ($r=.26, p=.04 < .05$).

Variable	Coefficient (r) and p-value (p)	Reading Personal Perception	Reading Enjoyableness (MR)	Reading Comprehension	Reading Importance and Reading Out Loud
Reading Usefulness	r	.28	.26		
	p	.03	.04		
Reading Enjoyableness (ATR)	r	.38		.26	
	p	.00		.04	
Reading Confidence	r				.37
	p				.00
Reading Sustainability	r			.26	
	p			.04	

Table 4. Correlation 4

Lastly, statistically significant correlations were established between subscales of MR: Reading Personal Perception with Reading Enjoyableness ($r=.35, p=.01<.05$), with Reading Challenge ($r=.26, p=.04<.05$), with Reading Rewardableness ($r=.32, p=.01<.05$), and with Reading Comprehension ($r=.29, p=.02<.05$); Reading Enjoyableness with Reading Rewardableness ($r=.41, p=.00<.05$), with Reading Self-concept ($r=.27, p=.03<.05$), and with Reading Comprehension ($r=.30, p=.02<.05$); Reading Challenge with Reading Rewardableness ($r=.35, p=.00<.05$) and with Reading Self-concept ($r=.27, p=.03<.05$); and lastly, Reading Rewardableness with Reading Self-concept ($r=.36, p=.00<.05$).

Variable	Coefficient (r) and p-value (p)	Reading Enjoyable-ness	Reading Challenge	Reading Rewardable-ness	Reading Comprehen-sion	Reading concept	Self-
Reading Personal Perception	r	.35	.26	.32	.29		
	p	.01	.04	.01	.02		
Reading Enjoyable-ness	r			.41	.30	.27	
	p			.00	.02	.03	
Reading Challenge	r			.35		.27	
	p			.00		.03	
Reading Rewardable-ness	r				.36		
	p				.00		

Table 5. Correlation 5

Discussion

One of the results of this study pointed out that there was no statistically significant correlation between Personal Background and Reading Performance. This result contradicts with the findings of Harb and El-Shaarawi (2006) that the most important factor with positive effect on students' performance is parental involvement. But although the overall Personal Background did not have a statistically significant correlation with overall Reading Performance, one of the dimensions of overall Personal Background – mother's educational attainment – has a statistically significant correlation with overall Reading Performance. This seems to signify that the higher the mother's educational attainment is, the higher the reading performance of the child is. This concurs with the research of Downey et al. (1998) that the greatest predictors of child academic success are (1) the educational level of a child's mother and (2) the socioeconomic level of the home; and with the statements of Davis-Kean and Eccles (2003) and Kohl et al. (2000) that mothers with higher levels of education on average provide cognitively stimulating learning environment and literacy activities in the home.

Other results indicated that there was no statistically significant correlation between Attitude toward Reading and Reading Performance and between Motivation to Read and Reading Performance. This contradicts the statement of Cambria and Guthrie (2010) and Seitz (2010) when they said that attitudes and motivation play a big role in reading.

On the other hand, a statistically significant correlation was established among two dimensions of Personal Background: *Reading books, magazines or newspapers at home* with *Family's total monthly income*. This seems to indicate that the number of reading materials at home increases as the family's total monthly income increases (Dahl & Lochner, 2012). *Reading books, magazines or newspapers at home* also significantly correlated with *Family or friends reading books to you* which seems to signify that as the reading materials at home grow in number, the more family and friends read books to studying family members. Feitelson and Goldstein (1986) seem to support this notion, albeit under differing circumstances. Lastly, *Reading books, magazines or newspapers at home* also significantly correlated with *Book collection at home* which indicates that the more reading at home is practiced, the more books are to be collected at home as In addition, another two dimensions of Personal Background – *Family and friends reading books to you* and *Talking about books or stories read with family and friends* correlated significantly. This seems to point out that the more time the family and friends spend reading books to studying family members, the more chances for the studying family members to talk about those books read to them as Duursma, Augustyn, and Zuckerman (2008) intimate. Likewise, *Family and friends reading books to you* correlated with *Book collection at home* which seems to indicate that the more time the family and friends spend reading books to studying family members, the more books are to be collected at home as Evans, Kelly, and Sikora (2014) stated that the number of books in the home largely determines a child's academic success. Another important findings is the significant correlation between *Talking about books or stories with family and friends* with *Current CGPA*. This seems to explain that the more time the family and friends spend reading books to studying family members, the more chances for the studying family members to improve their CGPA (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Another result of the study implied that there was a statistically significant correlation between Overall Attitude toward Reading and Motivation to Read. This seems to indicate that the more positive the attitude of a reader towards reading is, the more motivated he or she is to read. This concurs with Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) when they posited "Motivation is what activates behavior." Notable among the Attitude toward Reading (ATR) and Motivation to Read (MR) subscales that had statistically significant correlations were Reading Usefulness (ATR) and Reading Personal Perception (MR) and Reading Enjoyableness (MR); Reading Enjoyableness (ATR) and Reading Personal Perception (MR) and Reading Comprehension (MR); Reading Confidence (ATR) and Reading Importance and Reading Out Loud (MR); and, lastly, Reading Sustainability (ATR) and Reading Comprehension (MR).

The above statistically significant correlations seem to emphasize the following constructs: first, the more useful the reader sees reading is, the more positive his personal reading perception is. And the more useful the reader sees reading is, the more enjoyable reading for him or her is. Guthrie (2008) appears to hint that this is indeed possible especially for adolescents. Second, the more enjoyable reading for a reader is, the more positive his or her reading personal perception is. And the more enjoyable reading for a reader is, the higher his or her understanding of his or her reading is (Abdullah, et al., 2012; Javid & Al-Khairi, 2011). Third, the higher the confidence brought by reading to the reader is, the higher the importance he or she puts in reading. And the higher the confidence brought by reading to the reader is, the more excited he or she reads out loud. Duursma, Augustyn, and Zuckerman (2008) appear to support this as well. Lastly, the more able the reader reads for a long time, the more he or she understands what he or she reads (Taylor, Frye, & Maruyama, 1990).

In addition, it is also essential to identify the significant correlations that were established within or among the subscales of Motivation to Read: first, Reading Personal Perception with Reading Enjoyableness, Reading Challenge, Reading Rewardableness, and Reading Comprehension; second, Reading Enjoyableness with Reading Rewardableness, Reading Self-concept, and Reading Comprehension; third, Reading Challenge with Reading Rewardableness and Reading Self-concept; and, lastly, Reading Rewardableness and Reading Self-concept.

From the above recognized correlations, it seems to infer that, first, the more positive the reader perceives reading is, the more he or she enjoys reading, the more he or she is challenged to read, the more rewarded he or she feels to read, and the more he or she understands what he or she reads. This, too, appears to be supported by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000). Second, the more the reader enjoys what he or she reads, the more rewarded he or she feels to read, the more improved he or she sees himself or herself as a reader, and the more he or she understands what he or she reads. Third, the more challenged to read the reader is, the more rewarded he or she feels to read, and the more improved he or she sees himself or herself as a reader. Lastly, the more rewarded the reader feels to read, the more improved he or she sees himself or herself as a reader. These conclusions corroborate with studies by Retelsdorf, Kölle, and Möller (2011) as well as Logan, Medford, and Hughes (2011), which stated that a positive intrinsic value placed on reading tasks will nurture positive self-concept as well as enhance reading performance.

Finally, this study presents its implications to teaching and learning: As established in this study that attitude toward reading affects motivation to read and vice-versa, teachers may initiate reading strategies that would increase students' positive attitude to reading that students may be motivated to read. In similar vein, teachers, with collaboration with colleagues, may begin to contemplate and implement reading approaches that will awaken students' motivation to read that students may build optimistic attitude toward reading. These endeavors can be done through individual and collaborative research on effective reading strategies, attending professional development seminars and workshops, benchmarking, observation, and consultation, among others.

Enjoyableness, Reading Confidence, and Reading Sustainability. Anchoring on these themes, the teacher, based on research and academic seminars, can increase students' attitude to reading by making the teaching of reading a useful, enjoyable, confident, and sustainable discipline via introducing and institutionalizing sensation, perception, comprehension, integration, and application in reading classes through multiliteracy approaches and sources.

Further, this study showed the components of motivation to read: Reading Personal Perception, Reading Enjoyableness, Reading Challenge, Reading Rewardableness, Reading Self-concept, Reading Comprehension, and Reading Importance and Reading Out Loud. This infers that a teacher can motivate the students to read by making reading highly perceived or valued, enjoyable, challenging, rewardable, self-concept stimulating, comprehensible, and significant or relevant. This can be done by implementing and maintaining appropriate reading approaches that are geared towards realizing the above constructs.

Moreover, the teacher should be the first to inculcate in himself or herself the increased attitude toward reading and motivation to read, and practice them. On the other hand, the implications to learning of increased attitude toward reading and motivation to read require that students do their part in responding to the teachers' reading strategies and approaches. This can be done through extensive studying and reading, doing projects and assigned work, and academic and social participation, immersion, cooperation, and collaboration.

It is an imperative that constructive attitude toward reading and motivation to read be practiced by students at home, school, and even workplace not only for the students' benefit but for other community stakeholders' as well.

Lastly, it is also recommended in this study that reading curriculum and instruction be looked into that alignment to increasing attitude toward reading and motivation to read can be effected. Further, that follow-up researches addressing the recommendations of this study i.e. reading strategies for increased attitude toward reading and motivation to read, and other concerns be conducted.

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