

FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH NOVELS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION

For the past decades it has become ever more apparent that reading is 'a complex psychological guessing game' and that being a successful reader requires more than the ability to decode and understand the words written on a paper. What this 'psychological guessing game' consists of more specifically is a question addressed by a great number of theoretical and practical studies (see, for example, Brown et al. 1986; Cooper & Petrosky 1976; O'Malley & Chamot 1990). In the course of these studies, the division into pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading behaviours has become generally accepted, each with its own, particular set of strategies. This study sets out to investigate the first of these phases: pre-reading.

Throughout our teaching experience in English to undergraduate students we have noticed that our students find it very difficult to comply with the requirements for their courses in literature in English. Most of them do not read all the set books for the course, and quite a large number do their readings in Spanish, their L1, rather than English. This obviously constitutes a problem for the smooth running of the course, and leads us to ask ourselves why this is so. Why don't our students read the books? Just because of laziness? Or are there other reasons for not doing so? Perhaps they are not motivated enough, or perhaps they just cannot read quickly and efficiently enough to do all the readings in a limited period of time?

Questions like these led us to try and identify where exactly the difficulties lay for our students. It quickly became apparent that trying to analyse the complete reading process in its three different phases was impossible because of the sheer number of different strategies involved. Thus having to limit the scope of our study we decided to focus on pre-reading strategies, since we consider these fundamental in creating the necessary conditions for the reading to be a successful and rewarding experience.

THE STUDY

1. THE PURPOSES

The purpose in conducting the study was to find out the reasons for our students' problems with the set readings. Our hypothesis was that this difficulty was related to their lack of appropriate reading strategies. To prove whether this was true, in the analysis we looked for answers to the following research questions:

- a) The relation between reading set books and the students' academic performance.
- b) The relation between the number of books read by the students, their grades and self-assessment of their reading skills.
- c) The number of different strategies used by students, and whether there is a difference in the number of strategies used between good and weak students.
- d) The strategies most frequently used.
- e) The relation between the number of books read by the students (in either Spanish or English) and their use of strategies.

In the analysis we kept the results of the two courses participating in the study separate so as to be able to establish any differences in strategy use between higher and lower course students. It was assumed that after an extended period of training at university, students in higher courses would be more proficient in their strategy use. In the course of the study we analysed the data according to the different aspects mentioned above, which meant that different parts of the questionnaire were taken into account at each stage (see explanations below).

2. SETTING

The present study was conducted at the Universidad de Alcalá (Madrid) during the second semester of the academic year 1995/96. The subjects of the study were the students of the second (n= 56) and fourth year (n = 22). All the students had been learning English for at least seven years, and all of them had taken at least two courses in literature in English language, which meant that they had a minimum of two complete novels to read every year, apart from the theatre plays, poems, and excerpts from novels which also formed part of the compulsory readings of the courses.

The researchers who carried out this project were the language and literature teachers of these groups, so that no outside intervention was necessary. However, the researchers being the teachers meant that the students' willingness to please could have been greater (*halo effect*; see Brown, 1988: 33), which is a factor that was taken into account in the development of the questionnaire, as will become evident later.

3. METHOD

To analyse students' pre-reading behaviour, two tools were used. On the one hand, all students were asked to fill in a questionnaire (see Appendix I), while six of them were asked to produce a taped think-aloud account of what they did before starting to read one of the set books. The six students asked had been selected according to their academic performance. Thus, two good, two average and two weak students handed in their tapes. It is obvious that these recordings cannot be taken as representative of all the students, since the sampling was not random, but the main aim of using these recordings was not to gain generalisable insights from their analysis, but rather to have a means by which to identify any major irregularities in the data from the questionnaires.

3.1. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire, which had been piloted with another group of students from the same institution, and subsequently adapted, consisted of three sections. In the first, some personal information about the students was collected. This information, especially that related to the students' past academic performance was needed to assess their academic performance, which is relevant to research questions 1 - 3 described above.

In the second section, students were asked to assess their own reading ability, which is important in relation with the first three research questions outlined above, while the next two questions, about the number of books read and about the language in which they were written, are relevant to variable number 5.

The final section of the questionnaire is probably the most complex one, and was certainly the most difficult to analyse. In it the student is asked to say which of the behaviours listed reflect what he/she does before starting to read. Because it was assumed that students would use more than one way to prepare for their reading, in this section they were asked to choose as many answers as they wanted.

The description of the behaviours was divided into three separate groups, each making reference to different times in the reading process. The first 38 activities correspond to the pre-reading proper, while the next sections describe what students do while reading the first pages, and after reading the first pages respectively. These lists of possible strategies contain some that can be classified as desirable and some that are non-desirable. In this distinction we have drawn heavily

upon studies in reading such as Cooper & Petrosky (1976) and O'Malley & Chamot (1990), as well as our own experience as both readers and teachers of reading.'

Under the desirable strategies we count all those that, in one way or other, reflect:

- a) Students' top-down processing by creating a set of expectations that have to be validated through the reading (D1 - D4; D6; D15; D23; F3).
- b) Students' planning of the reading task (D7; D26 - D28; D37; F6).
- c) Students' use of all available resources, i.e. the strategy of resourcing (D14; D18; D20; D21).
- d) Students' use of prediction (D30 - D34; D36; F1; F2).
- e) Students' monitoring and self-assessment strategies (E3; F4; F5).
- f) Among the non-desirable strategies we find:
- g) Students' reliance on outside help and information, which at the same time spoils the reading for them (D5; D8; D9; D12; D13; D17).
- h) D22 - To put off reading.
- i) D29 - To read the last page, since, again, this spoils the pleasure of reading.
- j) D35 - Start reading straight away, since the assumption underlying this study is that good preparation for the reading is vital if the whole process is to be successful and rewarding.
- k) E1 - Look up every word in the dictionary; this would be by far too time-consuming and would interfere with the understanding of the plot.
- l) E5 read the book out aloud, since this acts as a distractor, and, as has been demonstrated (see Doff p. 58, Lewis & Hill 1985, Parrot 1993: 188) takes attention away from the content of what is being read.

The strategies not mentioned in either of these lists are considered as neither clearly beneficial nor undesirable. These lists are relevant to the last three research questions.

The benefit of including both positive and negative strategies in the questionnaire was twofold. On the one hand, it was necessary to establish whether the academically successful students were really the better strategy users. If we had only included positive habits, we would have been able to find out whether good students used any of them, but we could not have established whether they also used negative strategies. On the other hand, the existence of 'false prompts' (i.e. non-desirable strategies) could contribute to prevent what Allan (1995) has called the 'instrument-effect' of questionnaires, i.e. that through its own structure the questionnaire suggests the respondent what the desired answer is. This, at the same time, tried to counter the danger of the students' wanting to please their teachers/researchers by answering what they think is expected of them.

3.2. THE THINKING ALOUD

For the think-aloud procedure, students were given the instructions to record what they did and thought the next time they started reading a new set book. To help them do so, they were given a list with prompts (see Appendix II) that were designed to remind them of possible things they could talk about. These prompts had the drawback of suggesting different topics to the students, thereby guiding their think-aloud process, possibly along lines which it normally would not follow. This procedure was chosen as the lesser evil: not guiding the think-aloud at all might have resulted in almost silent recordings with very few comments by the students. On the other hand, prompting students directly would have required setting up a situation in which one of the researchers had to be present. This would, again, have been an artificial situation, which would probably have yielded unrealistic data.

RESULTS

1 The relation between reading set books and students' academic performance.

¹ This classification is in itself debatable and is based on our own assumption that good readers, who want to study a text for purposes of literary criticism, will read every text twice: the first time to find out what the novel is about and to become familiar with its setting characters, etc. and on their second reading to do a more academic reading, i.e. taking into account what others have said about the novel, etc.

A. 2nd YEAR

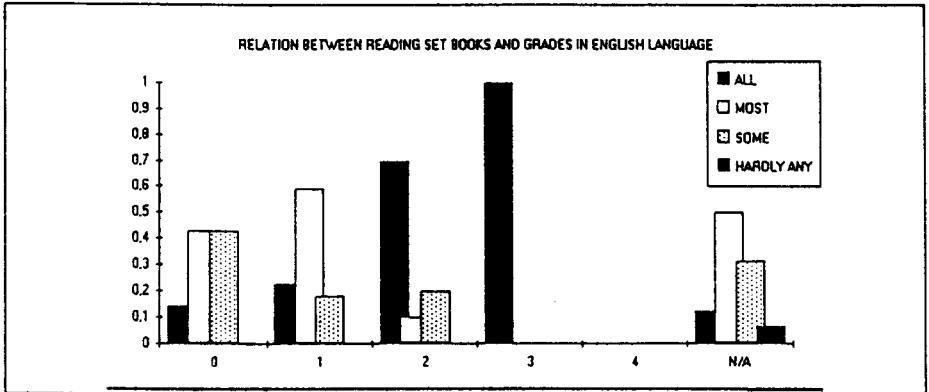


Figure 1

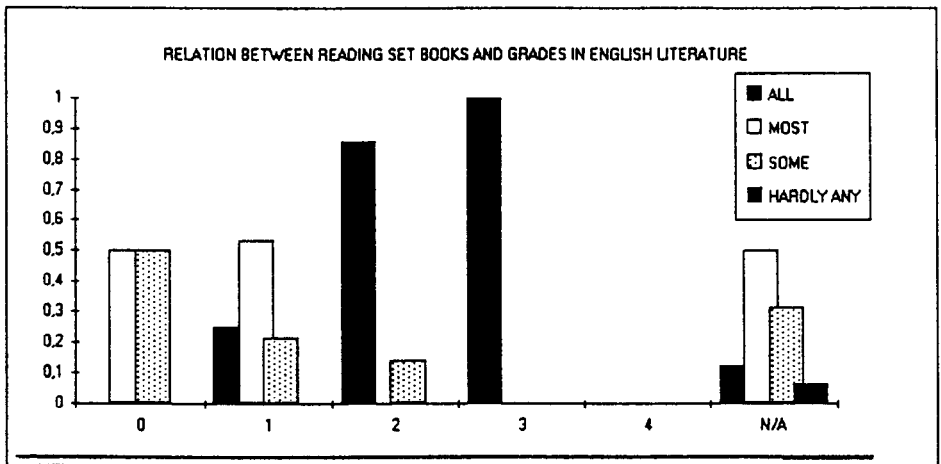


Figure 2

There exists a clear positive correlation between academic performance,² both in language and literature, and reading all the set books (see figures 1 and 2). The only exception to this is one student who, although he reads all the set books, fails the subject of English Language. At the same time, those students who read the set books, assess their reading ability in a positive way.

Incidentally, in the course of this analysis it became apparent that students' self-assessment of their reading ability was much more positive than the grades they had received in their exams. Although it is clear that exams value other skills apart from reading, this divergence still opens up questions about the factors that are valued in academic exams and about the reliability of students' self-assessment.

² The marks go from 0 - failed, to 4 - outstanding.

B. 4th YEAR

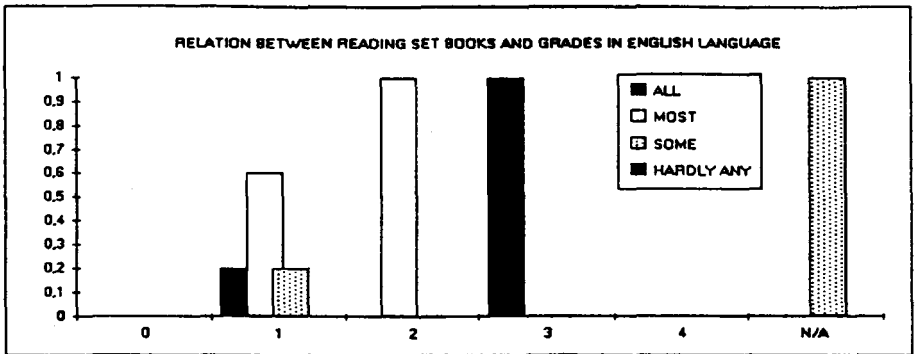


Figure 3

Although the students who receive the grade 1 in English language show different kinds of reading habits (see figure 3), the correlation between academic performance and reading the set books is clearer for the more successful students. This could be taken to indicate that reading the set books is beneficial for students' proficiency in English language.

As far as the students' grades in literature are concerned, there exists no clear correlation between them and the students' reading behaviour. The opposite was observed in the case of the second year students, which could be accounted for by the fact that in fourth year literature courses assessment focuses more on academic aspects, so that just reading the set books is no guarantee for good grades.

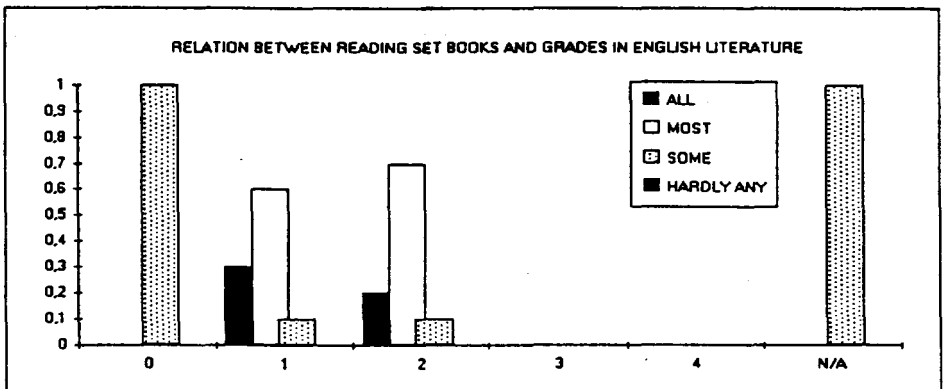


Figure 4

2 The relation between the number of books read by students and their academic performance and self-assessment of their reading skill.

A. 2nd YEAR

There exists a positive correlation between the number of books read and the grades achieved in the courses in both English Language and English Literature (see figures 3 and 4). The same is true for the relation between self-assessment and number of books read, although in this case the correlation is not progressive, since the students who assess their reading ability with a '3' read more than those who choose statement 4.

B. 4th YEAR

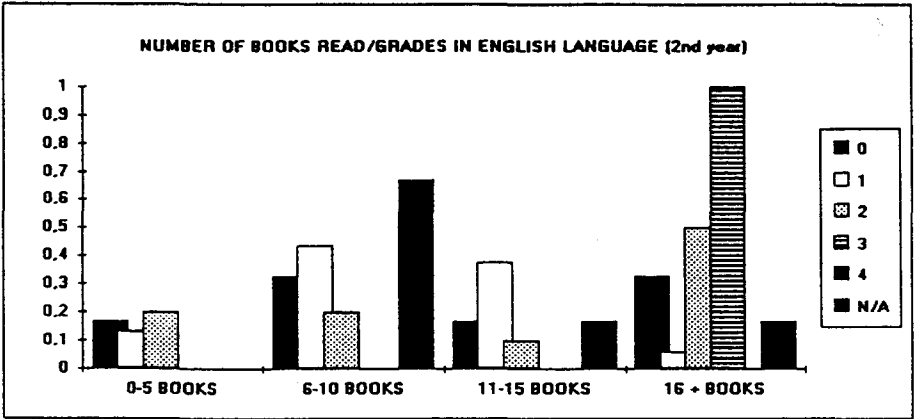


Figure 5

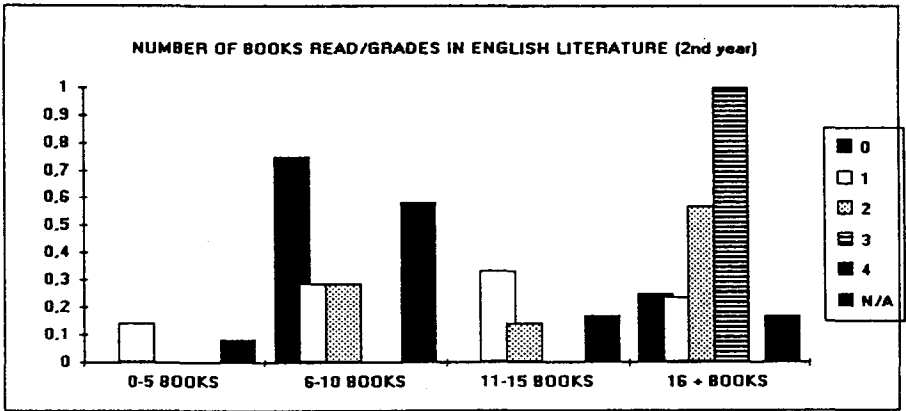


Figure 6

In this group there seems to be a clear correlation between number of books read and both academic performance and personal assessment of reading ability (see figures 5 and 6).

3 The number of different strategies used by students.

A. 2nd YEAR

Average number of strategies used: 11.8.

B. 4th YEAR

Average number of strategies used: 12.5

There is a slight difference in strategy use between the two groups, with the higher course using a greater number of strategies, as could be expected since we are here dealing with students who have more experience as readers. However, the difference is small enough as not to be taken as significant.

4 The strategies most and least frequently used in relation to total numbers of students, and in relation with good and weak students.

A. 2nd YEAR

The strategies most frequently used, i.e. by more than 50% of the whole group are the following:

- D3 - I think about which genre the book belongs to - 59.2%
- D14 - I read the blurb on the back of the book to find out about it - 70%
- D19 - I read the prologue/introduction to find out about it - 71.4%
- D21 - I read the titles of the chapter if they are given - 75.2%

The strategies that are used least are the following:

- D8 - I borrow the notes on the book from somebody who has already done the subject - 10.7%
- D11 - I ask the teacher a question about the book - 3.6%
- D16 - I read reviews of the book to find out about it - 7.1%
- D33 - I try to anticipate the kind of language I will find in the book - 5.4%

B. 4th YEAR

The strategies that are used most frequently are the following:

- D3 - I think about which genre the book belongs to - 68.1%
- D4 - I think about the time and place the story is set in - 68.1%
- D14 - I read the blurb on the back of the book to find out about it - 68.1%
- D19 - I read the prologue/introduction to the book to find out about it - 81.8%

The following are the least used strategies:

- D11 - I ask the teacher a question about the book - 4.5%
- D16 - I read reviews of the book to find out about it - 9%
- D33 - I try to anticipate the kind of language I will find in the book - 9%
- D36 - I write down a list of questions to answer about the book - 4.5%

Generally speaking, students in both years use more or less the same type of strategies. Furthermore, it seems as though there are still a number of students in both years who use negative strategies for reading. Although it is a minority of students who do so, the number is still too large, especially in the second year.

If we relate the strategies most frequently used with the students' academic performance, we get the following picture:

A. 2nd YEAR

Student grade: 0 (fail)

- D3 - I think about which genre the book belongs to - 50%
- D7 - I think about the best way to start reading the book - 50%
- D13 - I watch the film if there is one - 50%
- D23 - I think about my feelings about the topic of the book - 50%
- D24 - I think about the length of the book - 50%

Student grade: 1 (pass)

- D2 - I think about what I know about the book in question - 52%
- D3 - I think about which genre the book belongs to - 55.5%
- D10 - I talk to classmates to find out if the book is interesting or not - 52%
- D14 - I read the blurb on the back of the book - 70.4%
- D19 - I read the prologue/introduction to the book to find out about it - 74%
- D20 - I look at the list of contents and see how the book is divided - 59.5%
- D21 - I read the titles of the chapters if they are given - 70.4%
- D23 - I think about my feelings about the topic of the book - 59.5%
- D26 - I work out a plan or timetable for reading the book - 52%
- D30 - I try to predict what the book will be about (characters/setting) from the title - 52%
- D37 - I think about how I'm going to deal with the information in the book - 52%

Student grade: 2 (good)

- D2 - I think about what I know about the book in question - 50%
- D3 - I think about which genre the book belongs to - 87.7%
- D4 - I think about the time and place the story is set in - 62.5%
- D9 - I talk to classmates to find out what the book is about - 62.5%
- D10 - I talk to classmates to find out if the book is interesting or not - 75%
- D14 - I read the blurb on the back of the book - 62.5%
- D18 - I look at the quotation below the title (if there is one) - 62.5%
- D19 - I read the prologue/introduction to the book to find out about it - 87.7%
- D21 - I read the titles of the chapters if they are given - 87.7%
- D24 - I think about the length of the book - 50%
- D31 - I try to predict what the book will be about from the cover - 50%
- D32 - I try to think about what kind of plot the book will have - 62.5%
- D34 - I try to anticipate the level of difficulty of the book - 75%
- D35 - I start reading straight away - 62.5%
- D37 - I think about how I'm going to deal with the information in the book - 50%

Student grade: 3 (very good)

There is only one student with this grade, so that the data corresponding to his/her choices cannot be taken to be representative.

B. 4th YEAR

Student grade: 1 (pass)

- D3 - I think about which genre the book belongs to - 60.2%
- D4 - I think about the time and place the story is set in - 66.6%
- D14 - I read the blurb on the back of the book - 60.2%
- D18 - I look at the quotation below the title (if there is one) - 53.3%
- D19 - I read the prologue/introduction to the book to find out about it - 73.5%
- D20 - I look at the list of contents to see how the book is divided - 66.6%
- D23 - I think about my feelings about the topic of the book - 60.2%
- D32 - I try to think about what kind of plot the book will have - 53.3%

Student grade: 2 (good)

- D2 - I think about what I know about the book in question - 71.4%
- D3 - I think about which genre the book belongs to - 71.4%
- D4 - I think about the time and place the story is set in - 57.1%
- D14 - I read the blurb on the back of the book - 71.4%
- D19 - I read the prologue/introduction to the book to find out about it - 86.2%
- D21 - I read the titles of the chapters if they are given - 71.4%
- D26 - I work out a plan or timetable for reading the book - 57.1%
- D32 - I try to think about what kind of plot the book will have - 57.1%

As can be seen from these lists, the more successful students are the ones that use a larger number of different strategies. This is especially noticeable in the 2nd year group, which is surprising, since the more experienced readers would be expected to use a greater variety of strategies. However, since the strategies used by the 4th year students are more consistent between the groups, we could take this as an indication of the fact that, in higher years, students have already chosen those strategies they think are most useful, and that, in this sense, they can be considered more 'mature' readers. This would, at the same time, imply that these are also the strategies whose use is favoured by the teaching system.

The most successful students are the ones who use the more desirable strategies, the students who receive the mark '2' (good) being the ones who most use most the strategies that contribute to establishing a frame of reference and using top-down processing.

As far as the non-desirable strategies are concerned, their use is especially remarkable as regards reading the book out aloud (three 2nd year and four 4th year students), looking up all the words in the dictionary (seven 2nd year and two fourth year students), and reading the last page (seven 2nd year and three 4th year students). Although this reflects the behaviour of a minority, as was mentioned above, it nevertheless constitutes a worrying fact, especially since the first two of

these strategies are clearly not productive, and one could expect that using them would go against any learners' intuition.

5 The relation between the number of books read by the students (in either English or Spanish) and their use of strategies.

A. 2nd YEAR

Of the students who read more than 16 books every year there is only one who does not use any of the strategies classified as being non-desirable. All the other students use negative strategies, especially those related to collecting knowledge about the contents of the book before starting to read (i.e. they watch the film, read the prologue, read articles about the book, etc.). Moreover, one of these students looks up all the unknown words in the dictionary. At the same time, these are supposed to be the good readers and the ones who get higher grades in their university courses. This raises the question about the reading habits our teaching fosters. It seems that rather than benefiting creative reading we look for analytical and objective knowledge about the readings.

All the students that read few books use strategies of the same type as the good readers, i.e. look for information about the book before starting to read it, thus reinforcing the impression that the teaching they have received seems to value this 'objective' knowledge. Furthermore, all of them 'think about the length of the book' (strategy D24), which is probably not very beneficial for their motivation, but, on the other hand, is not surprising since we are dealing here with students who don't read much. Apart from this, there are two students (out of a total of 5) who 'read the book aloud' (strategy E5), which is definitely a negative strategy.

B. 4th YEAR

All the students in the fourth year read more than five books a year, which means that in this case we can only analyse the strategies used by the 'avid' readers. Again, the picture is mixed. Out of a total of eleven students, five think about the length of the book, four start reading straight away, most of them seven look for critical information about the book before starting to read, two students read out aloud, while one student looks at the last page and another one looks up all the words in the dictionary. The number of non-desirable strategies used by these 'good readers' is surprising, and even more so because it is higher than for the second year students.

CONCLUSION

At this point we are now able to answer our initial question. The fact that our students do not read the novels required for their courses in literature seems to be related with their use of negative reading strategies. Although all the students use some good reading strategies (e.g. strategies that promote prediction), almost all of them also show behaviours that would seem to impair effective reading of literature. This is in itself interesting since it not only helps us to understand our students' difficulties, but at the same time has important implications for both teaching English and teaching literature.

The first comment one needs to make about these results is that they would seem to suggest that good reading habits, which are normally taken for granted in undergraduate students, are often not acquired spontaneously but need to be taught. Furthermore, this study has revealed that, for some reason, the instruction students have received so far in the English language at primary and secondary school (from the age of twelve onwards) has not prepared students to read, or at least not how to read extended texts.

The question that arises is why the teaching of reading at secondary school level does not seem to have been successful. Answering it would be outside the scope of this paper, but it might be mooted that key features of the methodology employed at secondary schools could be deemed not only unhelpful but almost counterproductive: an almost exclusive focus on short texts

(newspaper articles, extracts from longer texts, etc.); the use of detailed comprehension questions, an intensive focus on language within texts; few tasks that focus on meaning and ask students to react to and interpret texts; insufficient work on extensive reading and reading for pleasure. Many of these features are a direct washback effect of the Spanish university entrance exam. If extensive reading requires a specific set of skills and strategies, it would seem reasonable to assume that these cannot be developed through the intensive, bottom-up approaches to reading currently employed.

On the other hand it can be observed that, although all the students use non-desirable strategies when reading, some of them achieve good marks in their literature courses. This opens up questions about the type of teaching and the requirements of the courses in literature in English: one could conclude that reading the set books and doing so successfully is not a condition for getting good grades, since, both the good and the bad students use positive as well as negative strategies. This could lead us to question our initial classification of 'desirable' and 'non-desirable' strategies.

However, we are more inclined to think that we are dealing here with a problem of mismatch between two sets of factors: firstly, a mismatch between the perceptions of students and teachers about what is important for reading a text; and secondly, a mismatch between teachers' underlying assumptions about the requirements of a successful reading and what is asked for in the assessment of students' performance. This, again, would seem to call for a revision of the aims and assessment procedures of the courses in literature, since what seems to be valued is knowledge about the text rather than the ability to read, understand and interpret the text.

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READING SET BOOKS

Please, answer the following questions about reading SET BOOKS (fiction) for your English courses. THIS INFORMATION IS STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL AND ANONYMITY WILL BE GUARANTEED

Personal information:

AGE: SEX:
 I AM IN THE YEAR OF ENGLISH PHILOLOGY.
 NUMBER OF YEARS STUDYING ENGLISH LANGUAGE:
 RECENT GRADES:
 - English Language I:
 - English Language II:
 - Introduction to English literature:
 - Nineteenth-century English literature:
 Other related subjects:

To indicate your answers write the information and circle the asterisks like this: *

Answer choosing only one option for each question.

What texts can you read?

- A1 * I can read all the texts I come across at university with no difficulty
 A2 * I can read most texts with little difficulty
 A3 * I can read a lot of the texts though I have some difficulties
 A4 * I can read some of the texts though I have quite a few difficulties
 A5 * I have difficulties with most of the texts

Do you read the set novels on your literature courses?

- B1 * all of them
 B2 * most of them
 B3 * some of them
 B4 * hardly any of them

How many novels do you read every year? (in English or Spanish)

C1 (0-5); C2 (6 - 10); C3 (11- 15); C4 (15 +)

HOW I READ:

In the following questions circle as many asterisks as you think necessary.

What I do before starting to read:

- D1 * I think about what I know about the writer
 D2 * I think about what I know about the book in question
 D3 * I think about which genre the book belongs to
 D4 * I think about the time and place the story is set in.
 D5 * I look at a study guide in English or Spanish
 D6 * I recall previous experiences of reading books
 D7 * I think about the best way to start reading the book
 D8 * I borrow the notes on the book from someone who has already done the subject
 D9 * I talk to classmates to find out what the book is about
 D10 * I talk to classmates to find out if the book is interesting or not
 D11 * I ask the teacher a question about the book
 D12 * I buy the Spanish version
 D13 * I watch the film if there is one
 D14 * I read the blurb on the back of the book to find out about it
 D15 * I read the bio-data about the author
 D16 * I read reviews of the book to find out about it
 D17 * I read articles about the book to find out about it
 D18 * I look at the quotation below the title (if there is one)
 D19 * I read the prologue/introduction to the book to find out about it
 D20 * I look at the list of contents and see how the book is divided
 D21 * I read the titles of the chapters if they are given
 D22 * I put off reading it because it's so long
 D23 * I think about my feelings about the topic of the book
 D24 * I think about the length of the book
 D25 * I plan a reward for myself when I have finished reading the book
 D26 * I work out a plan or timetable for reading the book (eg- times)
 D27 * I plan where I am going to read the book
 D28 * I decide whether I am going to use a dictionary, which I am going to use and how I am going to use it
 D29 * I read the last page
 D30 * I try to predict what the book will be about (characters/setting) from the title
 D31 * I try to predict what the book will be about from the cover
 D32 * I try to think about what kind of plot the book will have
 D33 * I try to anticipate the kind of language I will find in the book
 D34 * I try to anticipate the level of difficulty of the book
 D35 * I start reading straight away
 D36 * I write down a list of questions to answer about the book

- D37 * I think about how I'm going to deal with the information in the book: taking notes in my file / using tables or diagrams / writing notes on a computer / taking notes on cards / underlining things in the book
D38 * Other (specify)

My first encounters with the book:

- E1 * I look up every word I don't know in the dictionary
E2 * I read the first three or four pages carefully and try to understand it very well
E3 * I make sure that I have got the idea of the first four pages
E4 * I read the rest of the book more quickly
E5 * I read the book aloud
E6 * Other (specify)

After the first three or four pages:

- F1 * I check some of my predictions: about the topic of the book / genre of the book/characters / kind of plot
F2 * I make new predictions about: setting/characters/plot/genre
F3 * I think about my first reactions to the book
F4 * I evaluate the level of difficulty of the text
F5 * I evaluate my own reading performance
F6 * I think about how I am going to read the rest of it
F7 * I talk to somebody about the book
F8 * Other (specify)

APPENDIX II

PROMPTS FOR REPORTING WHAT YOU ARE DOING

Place
Conditions
Book
What are you doing?