



READING HABITS OF STUDENTS OF THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, ECUADOR, AND ITS EFFECTS ON THEIR PERFORMANCE IN READING IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

The study aims to assess the impact of students' reading habits in their first language (L1) on their English acquisition at the National University of Education. It found that students who do not frequently read in their first language negatively influence their second language reading habits, resulting in a lack of vocabulary acquisition and fundamental grammatical structure management. As English professors, we were concerned about the underperformance in reading abilities of our students. This was further evidenced by the poor scores of learners who took the B1 test, particularly in the reading section. As a result, we began investigating the reading habits of students and the possible factors that contribute to their low reading proficiency. In the study, we administered a survey and a diagnostic test to 70 students from level five and 29 students from level six. The results showed that an extensive number of students read scarcely. A considerable number of students did not read at all. Only a minority of the assessed students read routinely. We compared the results from the survey with the data collected by the diagnostic test. We observed that students who barely read in L1 did not reach a high-performance score in their diagnostic. Furthermore, we concluded that reading in their mother tongue influences their reading performance in the target language. Therefore, it is necessary to motivate students to enhance their reading skills in the first and second language to acquire the vocabulary and grammar knowledge needed to improve their level of English.

Keywords: reading, L1 reading habits, L2 reading performance, EFL

1. Introduction

It is well known that reading is the advantageously way to acquire a second language. Krashen (2013) states that reading facilitates the acquisition of the components of a

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second language, for instance, grammar and vocabulary knowledge. According to the survey applied by the National Institution of Statistics and Census in 2012, 73.5% of the participants read as opposed to 26.5 who did not read. The respondents from the first group indicated that they read to get information and to do academic assignments. The data from that survey shows that, nonetheless, people read; they do it when it is completely necessary. The study also provides information about the time people read. Most people commit an hour a day to reading. Another interesting fact about the study results is that most people read the newspaper instead of a book. In this study, we explore the effects of the reading habits in L2 on the performance in reading in the target language. It is fundamental to discover those effects to plan strategies that encourage students to read in their mother and target languages.

Naghdi-pour (2015) mentions that it is essential to promote graded reading material to enhance reading skills and expose students to frequent input, which will develop reading skills. In order to collect data, a survey and a diagnostic test were applied to a group of 99 EFL students. The participants took the diagnostic test on the online platform Commonlit. Commonlit is a free platform that supports literacy, critical thinking, and reading growth.

The current study aims to investigate the influence of L1 (Spanish) reading habits of students at the National University of Education on L2 (English) reading performance. The study attempted the following questions:

- 1) How are the reading habits of students in their native language (L1)?, and
- 2) To what extent do L1 reading habits affect L2 reading performance?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Natural Approach

The Natural Approach is "*a new philosophy of language teaching*" (as cited in Toprak, 2021). This philosophy is based on studies of Tracy Terrel and Stephen Krashen in non-academic situations. According to this approach, humans can develop skills and knowledge in a second language in two ways. One is by acquiring the language by using the language in familiar and natural contexts. The other way is by learning the language. It means knowing the rules and form of a language. The learner has a grammatical knowledge of the language (Krashen and Terrel, 1983). The Natural Approach emphasizes the exposure of the learner to input in the target language (Toprak, 2021). Terrel and Krashen stress the importance of vocabulary acquisition. A vast lexicon is necessary to express messages in the target language rather than the learner's grammatical knowledge.

2.2 Input Hypothesis

Regarding second language acquisition, the most distinguished theory is the one developed by Krashen (2003) and its hypotheses, being the Input hypothesis one of the most studied and applied in diverse contexts and populations around worldwide

(Krashen, 2021). The input hypothesis proposes that students learn a second language when the input is comprehensible and, to a certain degree, more advanced than the student's current level. (Freeman and Freeman, 2004). It is indisputable that learning a language depends on comprehensible input (Mason, 2018), and one effective way to achieve this is through reading (Nation, 2014). The learner must receive enough comprehensible input before producing the language. According to Krashen, there is a lapse of time where the learner will not produce the target language (Abukhattala, 2012).

According to Krashen (1983), this is called the silent period. This period varies from speaker to speaker. When this period is abruptly broken, it may cause the speaker to have a negative attitude toward language learning, which is supported by Patrick (2019). He affirms that forcing a learner to produce in L2 will produce a frustrating sensation, avoiding the effective acquisition of the language. He also states that it is significant to think about facilitating comprehensible input to the learners.

2.3 Comprehensive Input

Krashen, 1983 states that a speaker acquires a language rather than learns it. The learner acquires a language by receiving enough input in that target language. It is indispensable that the learner understands that input. Krashen insists on comprehension of the message delivered in the target language and that this message should be at one level beyond the speaker's. Patrick (2019) narrates his personal experience with comprehensible input. He affirms that he could remember dialogues in Spanish after finishing his Spanish class. He indicates that he was able to recall those dialogues because the input he had received from his teacher was comprehensive. Later, he adopted the comprehensible input to teach his Latin classes. The results supported Krashen's hypothesis. Therefore, Mason (2018) supports the idea that a speaker acquires a language from the input.

2.4 Reading Hypothesis

Mason (2019) claims that the reading hypothesis suggests students read large amounts of attractive and comprehensive reading. Krashen states that reading serves as the foundation for developing essential language skills, including reading proficiency, writing proficiency (specifically writing style), vocabulary acquisition, spelling proficiency, and grammatical competence (Krashen, 2015). According to Krashen, 1983, reading is a source of comprehensible input, and its contribution is fundamental for acquiring and proficient in a second language. Dlugoz (2000) mentions that considering reading difficult for learners of a foreign language has led educators to undervalue the importance of this skill in language acquisition. According to the pilot research presented by Dlugoz, two groups of kindergarten students were tested after ten months of following the same program with a slight difference. The control group revised the material learned in class by listening, whereas the test group did it by listening and reading. The results showed that the test group obtained better results than the control group.

2.5 L1 and L2 Relationships

Several theories have been proposed to support the relationship between L1 and L2. One of the most referenced hypotheses is Cummins' transfer hypothesis, which suggests that L1 literacy skills can be transferred to L2, and this hypothesis is pivotal to enhancing reading skills (Herrera & Murry, 2005). A considerable body of studies confirms that early reading abilities in one language can predict later literacy development in another language. For instance, a study developed by Mikulec and Vuić (2019) with Croatian university students evidenced that L1 reading comprehension tests positively correlated with L2 language proficiency and self-assessed reading abilities in the L2. Another research by Guo (2018) demonstrates that metacognitive knowledge, Chinese reading ability (L1), and English language (L2) proficiency contribute directly to L2 reading. In addition, the researcher suggests that to improve L2 reading skills, it is necessary to incorporate metacognitive instruction and L1 literacy resources. Similarly, Xin and Ismail (2016) state that past studies have evidenced that both L1 and L2 reading strategies are correlated even though those strategies contrast in different aspects, such as number, frequency, and proportion. According to Huguet (2014), the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, developed by Cummins, also suggests that L1 linguistic skills are transferable to L2 as long as learners are exposed to L2 and eager to learn it.

2.6 Reading Habits

Reading habits relate to the regularity of reading and reading favoritism, and those practices benefit learning and intellectual abilities (Br Marpaung, 2020). Similarly, Sundari (2013) asserts that L1 reading habits, skills, strategies, and attitudes influence L2 reading.

In Ecuador, the population needs to have appropriate reading habits. In 2012, the INEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos) applied a survey to people older than 16 years old. The sample was 3,960 families. The results showed that 3.5% of the participants read, whereas 26.5% did not. Among the participants who do not read, 56.8% affirmed that one of the reasons was lack of interest, while 31.7% sustain that it is the lack of time. Another relevant piece of data is that people mostly read the newspaper. Only 28% of the participants read books.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Participants

A quantitative approach was used in the current study, which employed two quantitative methods: a survey and a diagnostic test. Ninety-nine participants from the English Language Center at the National University of Education in Ecuador were involved in the present study. Of these participants, 70 students were in the fifth English level (A2 level), and 29 were in the sixth level (B1 level). All the participants were native Spanish speakers.

3.2 Research Instruments

In order to gather data about students' L1 reading habits and their impact on L2 reading performance, a survey and a diagnostic test were conducted. The survey was used to identify students' reading habits. On the one hand, the survey, created in Google Form, consisted of 12 multiple-choice questions and 3 open-ended questions written in students' L1 (Spanish). The questions were about reading preferences, reading frequency, preferred reading formats, and the influence of reading on improving English. On the other hand, a diagnostic English reading test was applied to the students through the use of the Commonlit platform, which evaluates students' general reading aptitude as well as their performance on key skills. Three readings with at least 20 multiple-choice questions were presented to the students. Most of the students took about 60 minutes to finish their evaluation. Questions assessed the ability of the students to identify the main ideas, vocabulary and language level, and the interaction of the ideas in the reading. At the end of the test, they received an overall score, which determined their reading performance level: very low, low, medium, and high. The diagnostic test applied to the participants is used to evaluate the reading skills of third-grade students in schools in the United States.

3.3 Research Procedure

In the present study, the survey and the diagnostic reading test were applied at the beginning of the semester (October 2022 - February 2023) in an online way. Firstly, students took the diagnostic test, and after some days, the survey was administered. It is worth mentioning that both instruments were taken by the students at their homes online.

4. Results

This section develops a descriptive analysis of the results found in the survey and the diagnostic test applied in this study. The quantitative data has been registered and represented in tables.

The following tables describe the results of the survey. Since the survey contains questions with different answer options, the questions were classified according to the similarity of the answers.

Table 1: Results of the survey about students' reading habits

Question	Yes	No
Do you like reading?	77.8%	22.2%
Do you go to bookstores to buy books?	24.7%	75.3%
Do you have a library at home?	25.9%	74.1%
Do you think you read a lot?	8.6%	91.4%
Do you think that the university encourages students to read?	78.8%	21.3%

Table 1 depicts the percentages of students' reading habits. According to this, roughly three-quarters of the sample relish reading, and just under a quarter dislike it; however, it is interesting to note that only a minority of the students read. Also, the majority of respondents expressed that they neither buy books nor possess a library at their homes. On the other hand, a significant percentage of the sample consider that the University motivates them to read.

Table 2: Results of the survey about students' reading habits

Question	Yes	No	Maybe
Do you believe that people who read more are more educated?	30.9%	12.3%	56.8%
Do you think that reading will improve your English level?	71.6%	0.00%	28.4%

Data in Table 2 indicates that more than half of the students hesitate that reading can help people become more literate than people who do not read. As can be observed, a significant majority agree that reading enhances the English level, but approximately a quarter of students disagree.

Table 3: Frequency of reading

Question	Yes	No	Not quite often
Do you read frequently in your free time?	9.9%	17.3%	72.8%

The results, in Table 3, indicate that almost three-quarters of the students do not read regularly, whereas less than a quarter do not read. It is also noticeable that a tiny fraction of the sample reads regularly.

Table 4: Reading format preferences

Question	Printed books	Digital books	Others
Which do you prefer reading	65.4%	23.5%	11.1%

As can be seen, more than half of our respondents, 65.4%, lean towards printed books. The percentage of students who prefer digital books is just under a quarter, and a small proportion of students read other formats of books.

Table 5: Reading preferences

Question	Books	Magazines	Internet documents	Post in social networks	Nothing
What do you read more?	38.3%	12.3%	17.3%	27.2%	4.9%

At first glance, the percentage of students who preferred reading books is relatively low, less than half. There is also roughly one-quarter of students who enjoy reading posts on social networks, and just over a quarter of students read magazines or different documents on the internet.

Table 6: Reading hours

Question	1 hour	2 hours	3 hours	4 hours	5 hours
How many hours do you read in a week?	40.7%	35.8%	13.6%	6.2%	3.7%

Table 6 shows data about the hours students spend reading in a week. 76.5% of the students read an average of 1 and 2 hours per week, and 23.5% read between 3 and 5 hours per week.

Table 7: Number of books read in a year

Question	1	2	3	4	5	6 or more
How many books do you read in a year?	27.2%	25.9%	32.1%	7.4%	6.2%	1.2%

Table 7 shows that 85.2% of the students read between 1 and 3 books per year, and 14.8% read between 4 and 6 books per year.

The following tables present the data generated by the students in the open-ended questions, which were analyzed by using the qualitative data analysis software, QDA Miner.

Table 8: Reasons to read

Category	%
Academic purposes	68.5%
Pleasure	25.9%
Health	5.6%

It can be seen in Table 8 that the majority of the respondents expressed that educational motives were the main reasons to read. Students manifested that they must read to do homework, acquire knowledge, comprehend different topics, study, or improve their spelling. A quarter of the students stated that they read for enjoyment, and a tiny fraction of the students indicated that reading helps them reduce their anxiety or stress.

Table 9: Reasons people do not like reading

Category	%
No reading habits	41.2%
Obligation	41.1%
No reading strategies	1.5%
Lack of motivation	4.4%
Lack of time	11.8%

41.2% of the students stated that people do not read because reading habit was not promoted during children’s development process. Therefore, it is not part of their routine. Similarly, 41.1% of the students asserted that people do not enjoy reading since at schools they were obliged to read, and most of the time, those readings were uninteresting, long, and difficult to understand. Another reason, provided by a small minority of students (11.8%), was that lack of time was another reason. Also, an insignificant minority said that lack of encouragement toward reading, and lack of reading strategies were other reasons for not practicing it.

Table 10: Ecuadorians read enough

Category	Yes	No	Maybe
Do you think Ecuadorians read enough?	6%	89.6%	4.5%

Table 11: Reasons why Ecuadorians do not read enough

Category	%
No reading culture	40.9%
Technology influence	27.2%
Not important	20.5%
No time	11.4%

According to Tables 10 and 11, as a general trend, well over three-quarters of the students consider that Ecuadorians do not read sufficiently. Being the absence of a reading culture one of the most important reasons with 40.9%. It is also noticeable that roughly one-quarter of the students regard that reading has been replaced by advanced technology such as cellphones, the internet, and social networks. In addition, just under a quarter of the sample manifested that Ecuadorians consider reading irrelevant. The results of the Diagnostic Test are presented below.

Table 12: Performance level reached by the students according to their results

Performance level			
Very low	Low	Medium	High
1,22%	7,32%	56,09%	35,37%

The table above shows the level reached by the students in their diagnostic tests. The test was scored out of 100%. At first glance, only 35.37% accomplished to get a high level. These participants obtained more than 70 percentiles in their examinations. The participants that achieved from 31 to 69 percentile were placed in the medium level. In the case of the students that obtained less than 30 percentiles reached the low level. Finally, participants who obtained less than 10 percentiles were placed in the low level.

Table 13: Overall scores obtained by each one of the groups

Overall score			
5P1	5P2	5P3	6P3
67%	67%	52%	59%

The table shows the results reached by each one of the groups. It is interesting to compare their scores and notice that level 6 has gotten the lowest score.

Table 14: Overall performance in each aspect of the test

Overall performance			
Evidence	Central idea	Interaction of ideas	Language and vocabulary
62,25%	63,5%	63,5%	64,25%

Finally, the table shows the results obtained in each skill. Most of the participants in the test demonstrated acceptable knowledge of language and vocabulary, whereas 62,25% of the students faced difficulties at the moment to support their answers with evidence.

4.2 Discussion

In this section, the findings from all the collected data will discuss the research questions of this study. According to the survey results, there is not a good reading habit among students, since they read by obligation and only for academic reasons, which is called reading with an instrumental perspective, that is to say, students read-only to obtain information and they do not see reading as an enjoyment (Ministerio de Cultura. del Ecuador, 2017). This opinion is supported by Br Marpaung (2020), who expressed that reading habit has to do with the frequency of reading and most importantly with reading preferences. Analyzing the results from the survey, most of the participants said they like reading; however, they manifested that they read insufficiently and devote only 1 or 2 hours a week to this activity. Therefore, as we can see, this result answers the first research question of how students' L1 reading habits are. To answer the second research question, to what extent L1 reading habits affect L2 reading performance, results from the research instruments were compared.

Table 15: L1 reading habits and L2 reading performance

Factors	Category	%
L1 Reading habits	Frequency of reading	75% do not read regularly
	Reading for pleasure	25% of the students
L2 Reading proficiency	-----	56,09%

Students' reading habits are weak and according to the diagnostic test, students achieved a medium level. However, it is worth mentioning that the L2 readings were readings for third-level graders, which imply simple sentences and vocabulary. On the other hand, the Council of Europe (2018) manifests that according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), A2 students can comprehend texts that

are short and related to familiar topics but so too is reading about jobs, basic letters, brochures, and short newspaper articles about events. Concerning reading subskills, A2 learners can identify specific and main ideas. On the other hand, B1 students are able to read factual texts, and comprehend readings such as letters, brochures, short official documents, and newspaper articles. B1 students can understand factual language, general argumentation, instructions, and locate specific ideas.

As we can see, these results agree with Sundari (2013), who asserts that L2 reading performance is influenced by L1 reading habits.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to qualitatively explore the reading habits and their relation to the L2 proficiency level of the EFL learners at the National University of Education. First, their reading habits were explored using a survey. The findings showed that students at UNAE only read occasionally. They read because it is required for academic assignments. A diagnostic test was applied to identify the level of reading in L2. The results showed that most of the participants reached a medium level. It is essential to mention that the diagnostic test corresponds to a third-grade level in the United States.

The correlation between the L1 reading habits and L2 reading performance is unquestionable. Furthermore, the moderate interest in reading in L1 influences how they read a text in L2, which is supported by Sundari, 2013 who indicates that L1 reading habits and skills, strategies, and attitudes influence L2 reading. Nevertheless, we also conclude that the study demonstrates other implications. Students who do not read frequently in both languages will need more vocabulary and grammar knowledge to facilitate the use of L1 or L2. Consequently, EFL students need help communicating in L2.

5.1 Limitations

The sample size of the study was 39 female students who were non-randomly selected; thus, the results may not be generalized to the population. Another area for improvement was the diagnostic test; since students took them from their homes, there was no control over it. It was impossible to see if students used any website or dictionary to comprehend the texts and if they developed the test responsibly.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Tania Anabel Cajamarca Alvear graduated from the University of Cuenca with a bachelor's degree in Science Education and a master's in Curriculum and Instruction from Kansas State University. She has 16 years of experience as an English instructor. Tania has worked at a variety of private and public institutions. She has also taught at various

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