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GRADUATE STUDENTS' VIEWS OF TOPIC ATTRIBUTES IN E-BOOKS

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ABSTRACT

Topic interest is one of the factors which influence the quality of reading comprehension in English as a foreign language (EFL) classes. English language teachers encounter a number of problems in teaching reading and by studying the impact of topic interest on reading comprehension they can benefit in terms of the selection of the reading materials. In this respect, it is assumed that when reading materials are chosen in accordance with the interests of the students, their reading comprehension will be fostered. There is a number of research on the issue conducted with elementary and secondary school students; however, there is a need for more research to determine adults' views of topic attributes. Therefore, it is imperative to determine how adults construct what makes a topic interesting for them on a digital reading mode. In order to serve this research purpose fifteen graduate students engaged in a graduate course called Advanced Reading in a teaching department participated in this study. They read online as an extracurricular activity via BookBub. The participants were administered self-reports to elicit their preferences for the topics of e-books they chose to read on BookBub. Thematic analysis of the textual data revealed the themes as topics of occupational development, personal development and popular themes. This study has implications for English teachers and academicians so that they can design their courses in the light of the findings of this study.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, students are surrounded by technology both in their daily lives and at school. All fields of education have undergone a massive change due to the influence and incorporation of technology. Hence, the field of English language teaching is no exception. By offering a plethora of resources technology has been a good means in English as a foreign language teaching in general and EFL reading in particular. For many reasons, EFL students find e-books more practical to read. Since e-books enable readers to read on their cell phones, iPads and on computers and since they offer a number of options with just a click on a button, they are preferred over printed texts by some readers. They are especially good for EFL learners since they can be read aloud providing an opportunity for EFL learners to practise intonation and pronunciation.

There are controversial research results concerning digital reading. While some studies suggest that students' reactions to digital reading are negative [1], [2], some research results indicate considerable improvement with regard to EFL learning [3]. Digital reading research has focused on students' attitudes towards e-reading [4], [5], preferences for e-books or printed materials [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11] and use of e-books [12], [13] and [14]. Chou [15] indicates that e-book reading research has been concerned with either attitudes of learners or use of e-books, which calls a need for empirical studies which bring in new perspectives into digital reading. In addition, as stated by Putro and Lee [16], little is known about reading interest in the online reading modes. Furthermore, as stated by Chou [15], most research on digital reading has been far from being longitudinal studies and adopted surveys instead. In this respect, this study fills a gap in the relevant literature by evaluating topic attributes of EFL learners on a digital reading mode during a fourteen weeks period. The current study was led by the following research question:

1. How do adult e-readers construct what makes a topic interesting for them in terms of EFL reading?

Literature review

Snow [17] contends that reading is the reader's meaning making process through his\her interaction with written text. Reading habits of future generations are prone to change due to the development of various online applications. An Amazon report revealed that more e-books than print books were purchased [18]. Digital forms of reading have been gradually taking the place of printed text materials [19]. While social media texts provide an interactive form of digital reading, e-books and PDF files form non-interactive forms [16]. Based on the research findings that undergraduate students spend 9 hours per week on the internet [20] and that 98% of Canadian youth allocates at least one hour or more on the Internet every day, Putro and Lee [16] pose that there is an increasing demand for digital reading.

To meet the literacy demands of the new digital age, integration of technology into educational settings is recommended by the National Council of Teachers of English [21]. Johnson, Adams and Cummings [22] argue that students read and write using new technologies both outside of school and at school to varying degrees. Vasinda and McLeod [23] have found that technology integration fosters reading fluency. As e-books have supportive functions, they can engage young learners and hence, evoke motivation and interest towards the text [24].

The relevant literature indicates controversial results concerning students' attitudes towards print and online reading modes. Rogers and Roncevic [2]and Lam, Lam, Lam and McNaught [25] for example, have found students' attitudes towards online reading negative. On the other hand, in a study carried out with

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undergraduate students Sun [26] has reported positive attitudes of participants towards extensive reading online. There are positive research results as far as tertiary level EFL learners' uses of e-books are concerned. Chen, Chen and Wey [3] have conducted a study with undergraduate EFL learners to investigate the effects of online reading on their English proficiency. The results of the study indicate that extensive online reading has the potential to improve EFL learners' English at the tertiary level.

Topic interest

Students' interests are greatly valued in the context of foreign language instruction. Interest is critical in terms of reading in foreign language contexts [27]. In order to explain the significance of interest, the compensatory model of EFL reading posed by Bernhardt [28] and [29] may help. Bernhardt [29] states that while half of the reader's performance is affected by literacy in mother-tongue and second language (L2) proficiency, the remaining other half variance in the reader's performance is influenced by interest as well as genre features, motivation, prior knowledge, strategies and engagement.

Interest research displays five reasons for the importance of students' interest [30]. One of the reasons is that interest fosters intrinsic motivation which in turn enhances cognition. Another reason is the fact that teachers make use of interest to bolster learning. Other reasons are identified as the ubiquitous nature of interests and face validity of interest research. The last reason is that interest research unveils the relationship between motivational research and cognition. The second, third and fourth reasons are relevant to this current research study.

Research shows that when students find what they read interesting, they put more cognitive effort into the reading process [31]. As argued by Tobias [30], topic interest triggers deeper comprehension and evokes emotional, personal and extensive network of relevant associations (p. 50). The cognitive aspect of reading such as how the reader thinks and affective aspects, such as the feelings of the reader about what is read are influenced by interest [32].

Theoretical underpinnings

This study is positioned within the Engagement Theory. The Engagement Theory of reading differentiates engaged and disengaged readers and seeks to help teachers find ways to make their students more engaged [33]. This theory poses that engaged readers possess high intrinsic motivation to read, use metacognitive strategies more in their meaning making process of the text and share their reading experiences with others more. Tracey and Morrow [34] argue that the Engagement Theory contains the main elements of Metacognitive Theory but differs from it by highlighting 'motivational, conceptual and social aspects of learning' (p. 65). Andersen and Guthrie [35] have identified 'student choice for both reading texts and responses' and 'the availability of a wide variety of text genres chosen to interest students' as two ways to increase reading engagement.

Book bub

BookBub is a free service working as an e-book discovery site which gives deals for e-books. In the subscription process subscribers are asked to click on the genres they are interested in so that the e-book discovery site can send them deals for books matching their interests via emails. BookBub is compatible with iPhone and iPad and requires İOS 9.2 or later. Before choosing BookBub amongst a number of options, the researcher went through blogs to see the comments of the subscribers of various e-book services. Despite the fact that different kinds of reading services offer alternative opportunities, BookBub is chosen because it is free, easy to use and emails special offers on a daily basis so that e-readers are updated by bringing various books into their attention. Readers are given the opportunity to customize the categories and genres during the sign up process so that the service emails recommendations accordingly. BookBub standardized the online reading experience as well as the e-book options among the participants.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A case study method was utilized in this study. Such a method was most appropriate for the purpose of this study which aimed to determine the topic interest attributes of graduate students on a digital reading mode. It was taken for granted that young generations were tech-savvy and thus would find reading on a digital mode more engaging. For this reason, BookBub was integrated into an Advanced Reading course for extracurricular reading to see how graduate students constructed what made a topic interesting for them.

Participants' demographics

All fifteen participants were graduate students enrolled in an MA program in a teaching program in a university in north Cyprus. They did not have any problems concerning English language proficiency. The participants participated in this study for extra course credit. Participant age ranged from 23 to 30 years. Nine of them were female and six were male. They were free to choose the platform for BookBub. Most of them (n=12) used their iPhones, few of them (n=2) their iPads and one of them her laptop. All participants

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had experienced reading on a digital mode before. The participants took place in this study with pseudonyms.

Data collection procedures

The qualitative data were collected through self-reports and reflective essays of the participants. Each week they were asked to keep a journal writing the titles of the e-books they chose amongst the e-books offered by BookBub and explaining the reasons for their choices. Additionally, each of them wrote a reflective essay about this e-reading experience at the end of the semester. On average, each student read eight e-books during a period of fourteen weeks.

Data analysis

The self-reports were coded line by line to determine the factors which make e-books interesting for them. The codes were compared and the codes which represented similar factors were placed under certain categories. Later the categories were re-examined for patterns and themes. Similarly, the reflective essays were thematically analyzed. The textual data elicited from the reflective essays were coded and categorized to reveal the themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preference for print or e-books

Although it was not the purpose of this study to determine participants' preferences, the analysis of the qualitative data gathered from the reflective essays revealed that most participants (n=14) preferred e-books over print. Judging by the frequency of occurrence the mostly cited reason was found to be accessibility (n=17), followed by cost savings (n=15), ubiquitous access (n=14), convenience (n=8) and ease of use (n=2). It was found that print books were not within reach most of the time in north Cyprus. Ali, Kaan and Aisha, for example, reported that despite the huge library on the campus, there was not a good enough collection of physical books on their major but the library offered online sources for free so that they were in a way directed to online sources. Sevil and Berk stated that it was not easy to find print books in north Cyprus. As Sevil reported 'There are only few bookstores on the island and they do not usually have source books on their shelves. Such books are brought upon order. We have to order the books that we need but it takes them at least four weeks to bring the books'. Berk noted, 'I buy print books only when the teachers insist that we buy print books. In that case I tell my friends who are going to Turkey to bring the book but it takes time of course'. Meryem told, 'E-books are easier both to reach and to obtain here (north Cyprus)'. Ahmet said, 'Even getting a print book via Amazon is problematic. In order to place an order one has to have a post office box in the Greek side. Even though one has it, it takes twenty days to arrive'. Mehmet reported, 'Print books slow me down. When I read print books I still need a computer to look up the meaning of unknown words using online dictionaries, such as Tureng so e-books are better for me'. Melissa stated, 'Especially when I read literature, I need the help of a study guide like SparkNotes. So, rather than carrying the print book I read the e-book because I use the online sources anyway. Why would I read the print version?' Aylin told, 'I read online because of the supportive functions of e-books'. This finding echoed Maynard and McKnight's [24] result that owing to the supportive functions, e-books were found to be more engaging and motivating. Overall, it was found that the participants were highly positive towards the digital reading mode, which corroborated Sun [26] but failed to go in line with that of Rogers and Roncevic [2] and Lam et al. [25].

All participants complained that print books were very expensive. Ali said, 'We are students and we do not have much money to spend on books. If I need to buy all the books that I have to buy in print versions, I have to spend at least 1-2 thousand Turkish Liras on books in a year'. Meryem reported, 'Using the online services of the library I can download whatever I want for free.' This finding was consistent that of previous research that e-texts were favoured for their costs [36].Ubiquitous access to e-books was another reason for e-book preference. As most participants reported, e-books were within their reach all the time. Melissa, Ahmet and Meryem said, 'We have free Wi-Fi in all restaurants and cafes in north Cyprus. This makes e-books available all the time.' Mehmet told, 'E-books are so handy they can be read anywhere'. Suzi told, 'Even during the breaks I can read my e-book.' Esra pointed out, 'One can forget print books at home but e-books are always with you.' Around half of the participants acknowledged convenience for their e-book preference. Kayra said, 'I do not like carrying books. They are heavy. E-books are practical because I can read them on my cell phone.' Essy told, 'E-books are very well suited for the needs of students.' Ease of use was raised by two participants. As reported by Cansu 'The ease of use is the main thing about e-books. They make my life super easy.' Ahmet said, 'I was not into online texts first. But in north Cyprus most students use them. At first it was difficult for me but once I got used to read them it became very easy'. Only Arda preferred print books because he said he wanted to have a library of his own.

Topic interest attributes
Analysis of textual data gathered from self-reports revealed the most common theme amongst the participants was occupational development followed by personal development and popular themes see [Table 1].

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Table 1: Frequency distribution of topic attributes in the selection of e-books

Themes	Number of participants	%
Occupational development	15	100
Personal development	9	60
Popular themes	3	20
Total	15	100

It was found that the reading interests of graduate students were more or less similar. The fact that all participants went for e-books that would help them in their profession was the mostly employed topic attribute. It was an unexpected finding due to the fact that this reading activity on a digital mode was an extracurricular activity. As the e-book choice was not determined by the instructor and it was left to the participants, it was expected that the participants would read for pleasure more. The underlying reasons for decisions being informed by perceived relatedness to their occupation were explained in the self-reports. Aylin, for example, stated that 'I am in north Cyprus to study and thus I do my best to be a good teacher in the future.' Mehmet said, 'I feel guilty when I read something non-academic or irrelevant to my major. I believe everything I read must be related to my major.' Ahmet complained that 'I am busy all the time doing assignments and so I feel that I have to read more academic books.' Ali told 'I believe I have to follow and keep up with the innovations concerning teaching.' Melissa wrote 'To be employed in a good school I have to be a very good teacher. That is why I am doing my MA. For this reason, I chose e-books that help me be a good English language teacher.' Berk highlights the importance of interest, 'I only find books that are related to my job interesting and I believe reading books for pleasure is a waste of time.' Sevil brought a new perspective by saying 'Reading is not a part of our culture. We read for academic purposes only. So, I choose to read the e-books that are relevant to my field of study.' Aisha told, 'I like reading novels in my free time during summer. Apart from that I read academic books that help me get better in my job.' Kaan wrote, 'When I graduated, I could not find a good teaching job. For this reason, I am doing my MA. During this time I have to improve myself and read more academic books'. Essy and Cansu's decisions were informed by similar reasons to those of Kaan. Essy said, 'I am unemployed. I cannot waste my time. So I have chosen the books to read according to my educational needs as a teacher.' Arda reported 'When I read academic books I am more motivated because I know that it pays off.' Kayra told, 'I choose to read academic books because they give me ideas that I can use while doing homework and practising micro teaching.' Esra said, 'I like reading books related to teaching because I know that in the future I will use the ideas in them.' Suzi reported, 'Of course I chose books about my job because they help me understand my future students and teach accordingly. They also give new ideas.'

Personal development was shown to be the second source of interest in e-books. Aylin wrote how she constructed what made a book interesting by writing 'I find books that teach me something interesting, such as how to communicate with people effectively. I do not like reading for fun'. Ali reported 'I like books that enable me to improve myself as a person.' Melissa said, 'I will be a teacher and I have to be wise enough to help my students'. Berk and Kaan told that they always had good teachers who helped them with their personal problems as well. They took such teachers as examples and thus their second choice was for books on personal development. Arda told, 'I sometimes read books on human relations so that I can build better relationships with people.' Kayra wrote, 'When I have time I like reading how to books, such as how to cope with stress or how to be a happier person. They inspire me.' Esra stated, 'Books which help me discover my own powers, such as The Secret appeal to me.' Suzi said, 'I am interested in self-improvement books.'

Popular themes were the third source of interest which was raised by Ali, Arda and Suzi. Ali wrote he found books on death interesting because of the mysterious nature of death. He said, 'Mysterious things, such as death and UFOs attract my attention.' Arda told, 'From time to time some topics become popular. When Donald Trump won the elections, I read a book on Trump, for example. I do not have time for such books most of the time but I like reading them.' Suzi wrote 'I do not usually read best sellers but when The Da Vinci Code was published, it became very popular. Everyone was talking about it. Thus I read it. If it is a very popular book, I try to read it.'

CONCLUSION

Technology integration into education has not only changed traditional ways of teaching but also the ways students learn. Digital reading offers a new way of reading and graduate students prefer reading e-books over print, a finding affirmed by this study. When analyzed how participants construct what makes a topic interesting for them, it is found that usefulness has taken precedence over any other attributes. To illustrate, e-books that deal with occupational development followed by personal development were deemed interesting. The fact that all participants were grownups and had concerns regarding their future employment played a major role in employing such attributes. This study is a case study conducted with adult graduate students. For this reason, the results cannot be generalized. Further research preferably with large numbers of participants is needed to endorse these results.

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