Reading in the Foreign Language Classroom: Students' Perception of the Interrelation among the Context, Reading Materials and Themselves as Readers

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This study was carried out in a private Colombian university in order to answer the following research questions: How do university students perceive the interrelation among the context, reading materials, and themselves as readers? How does an academic context shape students' self-perception as readers? and How does an academic context determine students' engagement in reading activities? Findings indicated that, although students were highly exposed to reading events in the academic context and that they had to understand and analyze a great diversity of texts, they continue perceiving themselves as "average readers" along the reflective process, due to the reduced opportunities the university gives them to select readings that they voluntarily would read.

Key words: Reading, academic context, self-perception, motivation and engagement

Este estudio se realizó en una universidad colombiana privada, con la intención de dar respuesta a las siguientes interrogantes: ¿Cómo los estudiantes universitarios perciben la interrelación entre el contexto, los materiales de lectura y de sí mismos como lectores? y ¿Cómo el contexto académico determina el compromiso del estudiante con las actividades de lectura? Los hallazgos indicaron que, aunque los estudiantes estaban altamente expuestos a eventos de lectura en la universidad, y que además tenían que comprender y analizar una gran diversidad de textos, éstos se continuaban percibiendo como "lectores promedio" a lo largo del proceso reflexivo, debido a las reducidas oportunidades que la universidad les da para seleccionar lecturas que ellos quieran leer por voluntad propia.

Palabras clave: Lectura, contexto académico, autopercepción, motivación, compromiso

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Introduction

All throughout our educational involvement we have observed that the practice of reading, as a way of learning and of entertainment, has been gradually disappearing within the classrooms. We have also noticed that students show an increasing helplessness towards reading, helplessness that can be attributed to many individual and social factors. However, as teachers, we rarely stop to think about what elements are promoting or putting obstacles in the way to reading; the necessity to form skillful, lifelong motivated readers is a challenge that educators have to face. Based on these reflections, and trying to enquire into this situation, we formulated the following research question: How do students perceive the interrelation among the context, reading materials and themselves as readers? From this formula and by means of research, we determined how a group of students from a private university located in Bogotá, Colombia, perceived such an interrelation, and the extent to which the academic context delineated this image. Likewise, it was intended to find out how students' self-perception as readers correlated with their engagement in reading activities. The reasons that led us to conduct this study are strongly linked to our beliefs that most students in this group found reading a disgusting activity, especially if it was related to an academic task, and to our perception that students tended to underestimate their abilities and capabilities.

In order to reach a better understanding regarding this situation, a group of fifteen students of an English teaching program, who decided to participate voluntarily in this research upon oral consent, provided their reflections about the way they perceived the interrelation among the academic context, reading materials and themselves as readers, about their development as readers both in the academy and at home, and about the way they saw themselves as readers. Although the main focus in this study was to determine students' perception of the academic context, reading materials and themselves as readers, there was also an intention to propose curricular changes, if needed and/or accepted, in the institution where this study took place.

Theoretical considerations

Traditionally, reading activities have been used as an element to evaluate fluency and improve pronunciation in the language learning classroom, ignoring their role as a communicative tool. This perspective led us to provide a definition for reading. As

stated above, the traditional reading practices have focused on using the written text as an element to develop linguistic skills; so, before stating our concept of reading, we consider it necessary to make a differentiation between what reading means as a linguistic skill and as a communicative tool. As a skill, we can see that reading is the decoding of signs and isolated linguistic aspects. As a communicative tool, it consists of a global analysis that comprises the communicative and linguistic aspects of the context in search and exchange of information.

This last perspective, as Goodman (1984) points out, is very important because it implies that a reader is the one who interacts with the written text trying to solve communication problems if we consider that reading embraces a series of cognitive, communicative and linguistic strategies working together for individuals to interact properly with others. In a few words, as a social practice, reading involves a transaction between the reader, the text and the context that develops the linguistic and cognitive features required in a specific social environment in order for the individual to fit in.

Many authors have gone deeper into what reading means, and they validate the concept that, as readers, teachers and researchers, we have built. For us, reading is the comprehension of a text in order to share it with others in a significant way; it is a process that needs to be internalized and then socialized with others in order to create meaning. From our personal and professional experience, we have observed that reading is an activity that does not have a particular meaning by itself if it is not performed with the intention of communicating with others, independently of the purposes for doing it and the context where the reading process takes place.

Smith (1997) presents a reading model that states that reading does not mean the development of linguistic skills. He argues that the written language must be meaningful and useful to the learner, so that he/she can take advantage of it.

The reading concepts presented by Goodman and Smith are framed within the psycholinguistic approach, in which, as quoted by Armas (1998), the sense of the text is in the mind of the reader and in the mind of the writer at the moment in which the text is rebuilt in a significant way. This makes the readers have an active role while reading, a role that consists of inferring meaning using their linguistic competence and previous experiences. However, it is evident that although Goodman and Smith tackle the social role of reading, they do not provide information on how the context may participate in reading events.

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Trying to justify our own definition for reading, we found in Rosenblatt (2002) a more involving concept that embraces the context as well as the reader's intention as key factor for reading engagement. In this sense, she asserts that reading is a process that involves a transaction between the reader and the text, a transaction that is influenced by the reader's purpose, previous knowledge, socio-cultural characteristics, linguistic control, attitude and conceptual schemes; elements that are as important as the characteristics of the text. Rosenblatt's concept includes two important aspects: the socio-cultural environment and students' attitude towards reading.

As teacher-researchers we firmly believe that students' motivation in relation to reading should not consist of judging the development of their linguistic skills, but to put them in contact with authentic texts which are meaningful and applicable to their realities. Freeman and Freeman (1992) point out that "critical to any lesson plan is the idea of learner centeredness. When lessons begin with students' interests and experiences, students are naturally more motivated to engage in learning. If they are not interested in learning something, their learning is apt to be short-term memorization at best". The question now is this: How can we make reading a motivating activity for our students?

The social and emotional aspects considered in Rosenblatt's concept and the idea of learner centeredness proposed by Freeman and Freeman seem to provide insights into this problem. There is a growing need to cope with students' interests and needs in order to make the educational practice more convenient, appropriate and purposeful. To support this, Stern (1983) says, "different language and language varieties are not only identified, but they are often associated with deep-rooted emotional responses in which thoughts, feelings, stereotypes, and prejudice about people, social, ethnic and religious groupings, and political entities are strongly associated with different languages and varieties of language" (p. 322). With this, it can be inferred that the taking into account of students' interests and needs directly influences their emotional responses when facing reading acts, and that the effects of this correlation can determine students' engagement in reading activities. The reluctance that students show towards reading, we believe, comes from their open manifestation that reading is used to fulfill an academic goal, not as a pleasurable activity; so the sense that these students have about reading as an scary obligation inside the classroom makes most of them reject this activity and, consequently, they end up with a total lack of motivation.

However, it would be irresponsible to confer all the responsibility of students' reading helplessness to the institutions, since there are many other internal and

external factors that may be influencing students' engagement in reading. In a study conducted by Cone (1994), in a high-school in El Cerrito, California, with participants from different socio-cultural backgrounds, she found that although schools play an important role in motivating students to engage in reading, other important factors as students' self-perception as readers and backgrounds highly outlined their attitudes towards reading.

The abovementioned study could determine that once students were exposed to reading events and once they found a purpose for doing it, their perception of themselves as readers improved as did their engagement in this activity. Not a single methodology was followed since the experimental nature of the study required changes according to the responses and data collected in each step of the process, and the results and conclusions obtained were that the uneasiness about students' reading progress was due to their unclear criteria to choose books, and their self-designation as readers and/or non-readers. As Cone (1994) asserts, it was not the freedom to choose books, not the independent reading assignments themselves, not the students' reflections on themselves that have brought about the change. It was the combination of all those things – choice, assignment, reflection – in a community of readers that brought about the change.

Up to this point, it can be evidenced how students' emotional responses can result in a high or low reading engagement. Most authors in this area concur when stating that reading engagement is proportional to students' motivation to read and that this motivation also plays a preponderant role in students' self-perception as readers.

Understanding the link that exists between motivation, reading engagement, students' perception of themselves as readers and about the context is of crucial importance. For a number of reasons, motivation is of considerable consequence in reading engagement and development. As stated by Gambrell (1996a), motivation generally makes the difference between learning what is "superficial and shallow" and learning what is "deep and internalized" and points out that learners who are motivated and spend more time reading are better readers. It has also been proved that nurturing reading motivation improves the educational prospects of learners, especially those who find learning to read difficult.

Flippo (2001) states that highly motivated readers are able to generate their own reading opportunities, meaning that they want to read and choose to read for a variety of personal reasons, among which we can find curiosity, involvement, social

interchange, and emotional satisfaction, which makes evident the fact that both cognitive and affective factors influence students' self-perception as readers and their engagement in reading activities. A common complaint of the students is that the demands of the academic setting usually impose what to read on them, so that their participation in tasks such as the selection of reading materials is practically inexistent, which does not make them feel motivated towards reading.

Because of its subjective nature, motivation is difficult to define, and its construct has multiple conceptualizations. Wittrock, cited by Gambrell (1996a), defines motivation as "the process of initiating, sustaining, and directing activity" (p. 123). Likewise, Maher, cited by Gambrell (1996b), refers to motivation as "the tendency to return to and continue working on a task, emphasizing the importance of sustained engagement with the task" (p. 19). In this sense, reading motivation can be understood as an engagement in reading activities across time, and in many different contexts, that is self-conducted and purposeful.

The current theories of motivation generally concur when stating that the self-concept that students have as learners and their learning goals play a determinant role in motivation. Motivation, as cited in Gambrell (1996b), is strongly influenced by one's expectation of success or failure at a task, as well as the value or relative attractiveness the individual places on the task. Consequently, we can infer that reading motivation is reinforced when students believe that they are capable and competent; so, the academic setting should provide the necessary tools to develop students' positive self-perceptions and expectations within environments and contexts that make them realize the purposes and pleasures of reading.

Supporting these ideas, Gambrell (1996a) circumscribes reading motivation within three key concepts: challenge, choice and collaboration. Challenge refers to the carrying out of tasks independently, completing them to perform and share, and evaluating task performance. Challenging tasks consist of providing students with opportunities to face tasks at a level that they can be successful at, and then moving to more demanding ones in terms of quantity and conceptual difficulty. When students fulfill a challenging task, their self-perceived concept and intrinsic motivation are enhanced.

Choice and collaboration consist of selecting literacy activities in which to participate, and in working socially and collaboratively with peers, respectively. When students are given opportunities to make choices about their learning, their self-perceived control increases, meaning that they feel some control over their own

learning, promoting involvement, commitment and engagement in reading. Furthermore, and considering that learning is facilitated by social interaction, collaboration promotes the achievement of goals and a higher level of cognition as well as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In a few words, instruction that provides opportunities for challenge, choice and collaboration creates motivated, active and engaged readers.

Data gathering and analysis

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the instruments applied to the target population were: a questionnaire comprising eleven open-ended questions (see Appendix 1), seven reflective journals (see sample in Appendix 2) and a final interview (see Appendix 3). The objective of each instrument was to collect information about students' perception of the interrelation between the academic context, reading materials and themselves as readers in order to determine their engagement in reading activities. The criterion followed for the coding and analyzing of the information gathered was, in the case of questionnaires, to read the answers of each individual question in order to document general and outstanding information. Journals underwent a similar process. Each set of journals was separated and then read in order to highlight relevant information. Then, each journal was read individually in order to reach a more detailed analysis of the data provided. It is important to note that the topics to reflect upon in the journals emerged from the information collected in the questionnaires that required further explanation or from the journals themselves; that is to say, some journals led to the topics of subsequent journals. Journals were kept weekly for a period of seven weeks.

In the interview, participants talked about the perspectives gained after the reflections they made in both the questionnaire and the journals; each interview was tape recorded and then transcribed. Once transcribed, each interview was read individually and outstanding information was highlighted; after this process, a general analysis was carried out and then data categories were established.

The kind of information collected was mainly concentrated on students' reflections about their self perception as readers within the academic context, their engagement in reading events and the decisions that they made in the selection of reading materials, as required to answer the research questions that led the study. These research questions were as follows: *How do university students perceive the academic context, reading materials and themselves as readers?* and it was subdivided into the following

two secondary questions: *How does an academic context shape students' self perception as readers?* and *How does an academic context determine students' engagement in reading activities?*

Once analyzed, the information resulting from each instrument was organized into two general categories. These categories were *Reading practices shaped by an individual perspective* and *Reading practices determined by contextual factors*. In order to fit data properly within these categories, each one of them was divided into subcategories. This way, the first category involved, *Reading engagement as a matter of personal interests* and *Readers' perception of themselves as readers*, contained information about the reasons that motivated students to engage in reading activities and the way participants saw themselves as readers, the reasons for this perspective and how it affected their reading engagement. Likewise, the second category was divided into the following subcategories: *The Context: shaping students' reading engagement*; *Choices: creating reading opportunities*; and *Reading as an exchange activity*, gathering information about the way the academic context has enabled the participants' engagement in reading activities, about the spaces students created to tackle reading events, and how reading was considered a social and communicative act.

Category 1: Reading practices shaped by an individual perspective: Findings

This category involves all the information that students provided about the reasons that motivated them to engage in reading activities and the way participants saw themselves as readers, the reasons for this perspective and how it affected their reading engagement. Summarizing student's information to this point, in general terms, it can be said that students' motivation mainly relied on the acquisition of new knowledge; complement the knowledge acquired in the university, and improve vocabulary and spelling. So, academic instruction and being up-to-date were the main motivational factors addressed by the participants. Likewise, and although the participants indicated that the university demands them to read, and that these demands had motivated them to read a number of diverse texts, most of them perceived themselves as average readers, considering that they only read what they were interested in or what the university asked them to read. This self-image gradually changed along the process that they underwent in this study. Notwithstanding the fact that most of the students continued perceiving themselves as average readers, they recognized that they read on an almost daily basis, that they understood what they read, and that they liked reading.

Those who saw themselves as good readers attributed this self-image to their ability to choose books of their interest, make of reading an everyday, pleasurable activity, understand what they read and read any kind of topic.

Subcategory 1a: Reading engagement: A matter of personal interests

Determining the reasons that motivated students to engage in reading events, it can be said that the main motivational factors for these students were the need to be professionally up-to-date and the wish to learn about different topics. This finding lets us catch a glimpse of the fact that inner motivation to engage in reading activities is outlined by student's interests and needs, which are simultaneously determined by the context in which these students interact. Examples:

- "I read because it is a way to acquire new knowledge, to distract my mind. In some other occasions I also read for an academic obligation, but I like it anyway".
- "I read because I find it interesting, because I make sense of some writings; besides, if I like them I think that I will be motivated to continue reading".
- "Mainly the wish to learn something new. I am also motivated to read about sociology and human behavior".

Without exception, all the participants manifested that, because of the demands of the university and more specifically the demands of the syllabus, their reading engagement had improved considerably. An important element to highlight is that these demands, quoted as obligations, have awakened a taste for reading either for being up-to-date in their field or being even with the academic requirements. Examples:

- "When I was not in the university my reading was minimal. Now I read and I read a lot to complement what I have learned in class".
- "It (the university) has contributed for making of reading a more conscious and continuous activity".

The second most important aspect related to reading engagement was "being in the mood to read", meaning that it should be a voluntary activity carried out in an appropriate time, place and environment. Two participants affirmed that the ability to analyze some up-to-date topics in their profession and everyday socio-cultural interaction was the main motivational source. Examples:

- "I think that my motivation to read is generally generated by a specific topic in my classes, or a topic that calls my attention at any moment and at any cultural and social level".
- "My motivation to read depends specifically on the time I have and the mood I am in, because if I have time and I am not stressed with obligations I enjoy reading and have the desire to read".

Subcategory 1b: Readers' perception of themselves as readers

Almost all the participants defined "reader" as the person who had the ability to understand, analyze, interpret and transmit what he/she reads, taking what is beneficial to his/her knowledge. Other characteristics quoted were that a reader is the one who reads on a frequent basis, that enjoys the activity and is open to read a variety of contents. The concept of "reader" arose, in most of the cases, from the academic and family experiences. First, because students were faced with reading in the academic setting, and second, because there is a reading model (usually the mother or father) within the family circle. Examples:

- "Is the person who understands, deduces, analyzes and relates what he or she reads"
- "It is to understand, analyze and interpret what is being read"
- "…from school and home, because in the school we initiate the habit of reading and at home my father loves reading".

Notwithstanding the concepts provided by students, there was a general tendency to consider themselves average readers, making a parallel between "being a good reader" and "the number of books read in a determined period of time". Furthermore, and in most of the cases, the concept of a good reader was clearly defined; students considered a reader the person who has the ability to understand, analyze, interpret and transmit what he/she reads, what is consistent with what they have to do when dealing with readings, but not the way they see themselves as readers.

- "I consider myself average, I should organize my time better"
- "Good. I like reading and I try to take advantage of my time reading, interpreting messages and applying the positive things in those reading to my life"

- "I am not a good reader because my readings are made to fulfill an academic or labor compromise, not more".

We could also observe that students focused on their belief that good reading habits are proportional to the number of books read in a determined period of time. The majority of the students stated that their reading habits were reduced because they only read what was necessary and mandatory; the few students who accepted having good reading habits justified their answers pointing out that they were used to reading frequently and reading a variety of topics, whether or not related to their academic performance. Examples:

- "Just a few because I only read what is demanded by the university".
- "I read four books a year or more".
- "I really like reading, even when it is not an academic demand. However, thanks to the university I have to read an average of one book per month"

Reflections on how students perceived themselves as readers inside and outside the academic context launched three main considerations: First, some students considered themselves good readers in the university because they could understand what they read, socialize the contents, and fulfill the academic goals proposed, but they considered themselves average readers outside the academic setting because they did not have enough time to read other things than those demanded by the university. Second, some students considered themselves to be average readers in the university since they did not have other options than the texts selected by their teachers, but good readers outside the academic setting, stating that outside they read more conscientiously and had the opportunity to analyze and understand texts with freedom of imagination and projection, while in the university understanding is tied to the thinking and reasoning of authors. A third group of students perceived themselves as average readers both inside and outside the academic setting, and supported their point of view stating that they only read what was strictly necessary in order to perform well on an academic task. Very few participants considered themselves bad readers because they only read what is demanded of them. Examples:

- "I perceive myself as a good reader both inside and outside the university; I like reading on vacation and I specially try to understand and make of my own the ideas that seem interesting or beneficial to me". (J7-15)

- "Inside the university I am from average to good, because it is where I read the most and because it is necessary for some subjects. Outside I am from average to bad because I do not have time to read due to my job". (J7-4)
- "I do not consider myself to be a good reader, but average; because sometimes I have to read books and read them again because if not I have like gaps, so I have to read several times in order to give sense to what I read. The academic environment has influenced a lot because it gives us they demand us, the university, the reading of texts that are interesting or, if not, I look for other resources". (I-4)

Category 2: Reading practices determined by contextual factors: Findings

Most of the participants attributed the process of becoming a reader to the school and university and, to a lesser extent, to the family reading background. For all participants, the context had a direct influence on both reading habits and motivation to read, and although the students stated that the university obliged them to read, that obligation had awakened the need to continue reading in order to be professionally up-to-date. Likewise, students mentioned that they only read what was imposed by the university and only a few of them, specially those who perceived themselves as good readers, created opportunities to choose and read books other than those academically imposed.

For some students, reading served as an exchange of information with other people, and in this exchange relied their need to get involved in reading events. This exchange of information was viewed from two different perspectives: on the one hand, the interaction with people from other cultures and, on the other hand, the interaction among peers. Likewise, this possible exchange of information served as a motivational factor for students to embrace reading.

Subcategory 2a: The context: Shaping students' reading engagement

All the participants agreed that reading was of utmost importance in their university program and that, by means of it, they had the opportunity to improve personally and professionally. Reading allowed them to have a better development of their ability to analyze and synthesize, brought them up-to-date to face the surrounding reality and contexts, and gave them the opportunity to research in a

formal way. Most of the participants indicated that readers "become readers" and attributed the process of becoming a reader to the school and the university and, to a lesser extent, to the family reading background.

In a few cases, there was a belief in an innate predisposition to reading, considering that many people develop a taste for reading even when they do not have the appropriate educational, cultural and family background. Examples:

- "I think that readers become readers most of the time, because I personally did have neither habits nor expectations about reading, only after having read so many books in the university I ended up enjoying reading".
- "According to my experience, I think that readers become readers; they are 'not born' readers. The educational process that a person goes through from his/her childhood on is the engine that generates this habit. If the individual has the appropriate environment it would be possible for him/her to become a potential reader".

The reasons that made these students read were varied, but in all cases the needs for academic instruction and for being up-to-date were the major goals.

- "Personally, I did have neither habits nor expectations about reading; it was after reading so many books at school and here in the university that I started liking it".
- "As a teacher I have observed that, when my students' parents are readers and have a great variety of literature at home, children seem to be more motivated towards reading".
- "Lately I have improved as a reader due to certain obligatory class readings".
- "I have always liked reading, above all and maybe because of an aunt that used to read a lot (unintelligible). So, for all that. Later at school they asked us to read literature books and all that, I mean, I was happy".

Participants' needs to fit in their academic context have made most of them develop a taste for reading because this activity represented a valuable tool to be up-to-date, interact with others and gain new knowledge. Examples:

- "The university influences a lot, not in all the subjects but in some of them I do not think my family has an influence. More than everything I believe that it is the profession that we choose what makes us get involved into reading".

- "When I read I like complementing what I am reading, especially if it is for an academic requirement".
- "When I entered the university, my process was a little slow; but nowadays I can say that my process as a reader has increased that in a certain way, that imposition has help me to love reading and see reading as a necessity".

Subcategory 2b: Choices: Creating reading opportunities

Students' choices in relation to reading relied almost exclusively on the place where the reading events took place. Reading done in the classroom concentrated exclusively on the books and/or handouts recommended or imposed by the teachers, and something similar occurred in the library, where students were made to read only texts to research for homework. In the cafeteria or social areas, reading choices were more flexible, as these areas were destined for reading newspapers and magazines; however, some students quoted that the noise interference and inappropriateness of these areas in terms of people concentration, made reading difficult. Other areas for reading were work place and home, but similarly to the previous areas, choices for reading were mainly addressed to homework and academic duties; nevertheless, these places also allowed students to select readings of their own interest. Examples:

- "In the classroom I read books and handouts related to the subject".
- "Cafeteria: Newspapers, fast readings. There is too much noise interference".
- "In the library: Reference books, thesis and researches".

Students' decisions about reading depended on what they considered appropriate to read in a particular place; that is to say, the classroom is exclusively for readings imposed by the teacher, the library for research, and home for self-selected readings, but mainly for homework. Examples:

- "I sometimes read something different in the classroom, but generally readings are imposed"
- "At home, I generally read books to do homework,"
- "In the library I have different options and I can change genre".

Some students considered texts imposed by the university as good and enriching, taking into account the professional benefits that they could bring, independent of the fact that some of those readings were difficult to tackle. The rest of the

participants considered the texts as boring because of their extremely theoretical, philosophical and scientific nature.

- "I do not like some like those of philosophy; but I have tried to understand them. The rest is appropriate".
- "Somehow difficult to understand".
- "They are texts that required a greater compromise and dedication"
- "I read them in my house or in the library, underlying the most important ideas and complementing with dictionaries. When a text catches my attention I write down the underlined ideas in order to analyze them".

All of the students quoted that their self-selected readings made them feel more enthusiasm for reading and to continue reading because they were interesting and of diverse topics. These findings also indicate that the perception students have about themselves as readers inside and outside the academic setting is linked to their possibility of choosing the texts to be read. Examples:

- "Sometimes I feel lazy about reading, although I admit that there are topics that passionate me and that I like reading about, for example topics about the universe, ufo's, to summarize, the topic has to persuade me a lot in order to read it with pleasure".
- "In the classroom I read about class-related topics, as well as in the library. In the bus or in the way to my job, I read my texts".
- "I am studying to be a licentiate, because is something that caught my attention, and if it caught my attention is because I like it; so, the books that I choose are related to my duties, because I like them; besides, I have to read them for the university".

In all cases, students manifested their passive participation when deciding on the texts to be read in the academic setting; so they adopted a conformist attitude considering the fact that, in the university, the selection of readings was almost exclusively a teacher's job.

- "When I have to decide on the texts to be read, I take into account that they match my interests and that support in any way my academic formation".
- "My role when deciding about what I am going to read is a conformist role; I assume what the university demands me to read because I have to. Outside the

university I assume an inquiring, researching role … the decisions to read outside the university influences the way I want to do it".

- "I assume a role of 'I have to', not always, of course; but there are texts that I like and for that reasons it is why I read them with interest, because of my own will…".

Subcategory 2c: Reading as an exchange activity

Students' considerations of the exchange of information with other people as a main purpose for reading made it possible to establish of the importance of their socio-cultural context in their engagement to reading and their role as reading promoters. Examples:

- "I read because I find it interesting, because I can make sense of several texts. Besides, if I like them, I think that I would be motivated to continue reading and look for other texts of the same or a different genre. I read to look for answers about something that intrigues me, to meet unknown places, to know stories about love, suspense, intrigue, etc.".
- "I read because I like it, also because of a necessity. I read to learn, to acquire new knowledge, to be informed about what is happening in our country or around the world".
- "Reading allows the exchange of information with people from other cultures".
- "I read to learn and by means of reading I can transmit what I have read to other people from other cultures when I read any kind of literature, for that reason, it serves to make friends".
- "In my career it is very important the reading of consultation texts in order to widen up my concepts and participate actively in the development of the different classes".

Conclusions

The following conclusions are the result of the data analysis carried out and stem from the students' reflections on their development as readers. It is important to quote that after data were analyzed, the research questions proposed were answered.

Taking into account these questions, it can be concluded that the perception that students have about their academic context, reading materials and themselves as readers was widely linked to their educational formation, considering that taste and engagement for reading were mainly attributed to schooling.

Although all participants recognized that the academic context had imposed reading and the texts to be read, they also recognized that this imposition had fostered a commitment to reading. As a consequence, the main motivational factors for reading in this population were a better academic performance, as well as gaining knowledge on some career-related topics. However, although reading was focused on achieving an academic goal, students sometimes created their own opportunities to read texts and topics different from those imposed in the university, specially those students who perceived themselves as good readers.

As found in the data analysis, it is important to highlight that students' decisions for reading depended on what they considered appropriate to read in a particular situation and that, most of the time, it was the teacher who decided what to read and when to do it. Likewise, despite their extensive required readings, there was a general tendency of students to perceive themselves as "average readers" and they supported this appreciation on the reduced number of topics and texts read, stating that they only read what was strictly necessary to interact in class or in their job settings.

As the researchers in this study, we could perceive that there was a strong tendency for these students to underestimate themselves either as learners or as professionals, basing their appreciations on their weaknesses but not on their strengths. Through the reflective process they carried out about their development as readers, they could realize that, because of the academic demands, they had to read a lot and understand and analyze texts on a frequent basis, and that they had developed a need to continue reading, which brought them closer to the concept of reader that they had provided in the questionnaires. However, and notwithstanding the fact that they recognized how involved with reading events they were, the tendency at the end of the process was still to considerer themselves as average readers.

The way the academic context shaped students' self-perception as readers became clearer now. Students did not always see academic texts as reading. Their perception of reading was basically modeled by the texts that they could personally select, no matter if the content was related to their career, over those imposed in the university. The finding that these students perceived themselves as average readers is strongly related to the fact that they did not have, as they pointed out, enough time to

read texts other than those academically imposed. However, as mentioned above, the high exposure to reading events that the participants have gone through in their academic formation has fomented in them a better and greater commitment to reading.

As can be evidenced, there is a strong connection between reading commitment and students' motivation. A good educational practice consists of preparing subjects that will enable students to analyze problems and to face them in a convenient way, and the teaching of a foreign language is not out of this reality. As an isolated element, reading can never enable learners to acquire a foreign language; we should better consider it as an excellent start to allow the understanding of more specific aspects of the language, such as political, social and cultural ones, not only for analysis but for linguistic competence.

These considerations make us reflect on the fact that curricula must be designed by following the demands of today's society, giving space to future adaptations as these demands change and evolve. Likewise, the adaptations that curricula may undergo must be explored and determined by means of research, since they may not be generalized and applied equally to all members of a society. Generalizations and standarizations, as opposed to mainstream beliefs, can lead to an unequal understanding of the varied communities interacting in our society, so, what can be benefitial for one group may be detrimental to another one. This comment is illustrated by Nieto (2002), who says that "learning emerges from the social, cultural and political spaces in which it takes place and through the interactions and relationships that occur between learners and teachers".

Lastly, we intend to exhort other teachers to have more efficient and effective educational practice and encourage them to see reading as an important tool to develop social, cultural and political awareness, to make an appropriate selection of reading material and motivate students to read and continue reading.

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Appendix 1:
Model of the questionnaire used in this study

La presente encuesta tiene como objetivo determinar la influencia que el medio académico ha tenido y tiene sobre su desempeño lector, de su autopercepción como lector y de su participación en actos de lectura. Los datos aquí suministrados serán utilizados exclusivamente con propósitos investigativos y gozarán de total confidencialidad.

Gracias por su valiosa colaboración.

1.- ¿Qué es para usted ser lector?
Es la persona que entiende, deduce, capta y relaciona lo que lee

2.- En su caso, ¿De dónde proviene ese concepto?
Del colegio, o de los libros que leo acerca de español, ortografía, etc., literatura.

3.- ¿Cuáles son sus hábitos de lectura?
Mis hábitos realmente son muy pocos, sinceramente leo cuando lo necesito o me interesa el texto.

4.- ¿Qué lo motiva a leer?
El contenido, como esté de interesante, que no sea aburrido desde el principio, que tenga esa intriga para seguir leyendo.

5.- ¿Cómo se considera usted como lector? ¿Por qué?
Regular, algunos textos o libros que leo me gustan o los entiendo, pero otros que no me llaman ni la atención, no es mi hobby.

6.- ¿De qué manera las clases de la universidad han cambiado sus hábitos de lectura?
De muchas maneras, en el sentido que me exige más, y he aprendido mucho, me ayuda como persona.

7.- ¿Qué tipos de lectura realiza en las siguientes áreas?
 – Salón de clase: Textos mandados por el profesor o libros
 – Biblioteca: Investigo trabajos o tareas en libros o internet
 – Cafetería: No puedo leer por el ruido
 – Áreas sociales: No he tenido la oportunidad de leer en la U., pero en el trabajo sí.
 – Otras: Libros que me llamen la atención

8.-   ¿Le permiten estos lugares decidir sobre el tipo de lectura que realiza?
       Algunos si y otros no, los que si porque son de un ambiente acorde al
       momento y los que no porque son menos acordes.

9.-   ¿Qué función cumple la lectura dentro de su carrera?
       Es algo importante y fundamental ya que si no lees no tienes de donde
       crear para poder orientar.

10.-   ¿Cómo describiría los textos que tiene que leer en la universidad? ¿Cómo
       los lee?
       Los que he leído son de pedagogía o relacionado a lo de valores, parte
       humana. Los leo cansada cuando llego del trabajo.

11.-   ¿Cómo describiría los textos que usted voluntariamente lee?
       Realmente hace tiempo no leo un libro por mi cuenta, pero me gustan de
       suspenso, amor, de acción y sobre todo que me dejen una enseñanza.

Appendix 2:

Sample of the first journal

Algunos piensan que los lectores "nacen" y otros piensan que los lectores se "hacen". Analizando su propia experiencia como lector, ¿Cuál es su opinión al respecto?

Pienso que los lectores se hacen en la mayoría de las veces, pues personalmente no tenía muchos hábitos ni expectativas por la lectura, sino que después de tantos libros que me colocaban en el colegio y aquí en la universidad, le fui cogiendo agrado.

Después de empezar a leer de a pocos y lecturas interesantes, se va despertando una pasión por la lectura de diferentes clases, ya no se hace obligatorio ni aburrido realizarla, sino que se entiende fácilmente y es agradable en la mayoría de los casos.

Pienso que son muy pocos los lectores que nacen, y estos nacen dependiendo de su nivel de cultura, de la educación que se le infunde desde su infancia, de los hábitos que vaya adquiriendo desde temprana edad, pero de una u otra ésta se va haciendo y/o perfeccionando con el tiempo.

Appendix 3:
Transcription of one of the interviews

La verdad desde muy niña siempre me gustó leer; pero mis papás me inculcaron eso mucho en mí, o sea, me motivaron mucho con respecto a los libros, o sea, a los libros de muñequitos; bueno, cualquier cosita era uno feliz y yo leía, leía y leía. En la escuela también fue muy bueno en esa parte de los profesores, me hacían leer muchísimo y, pues, me gustaba creo que nunca fue nada impuesto y pues de todas maneras mis papás no han sido pues ¡los lectores! (ininteligible) pero siempre me gustó sobre todo tal vez por una tía que leía muchísimo (ininteligible) pues por todo eso. Ya después en el colegio nos ponían a leer libros de literatura y todo eso, o sea que yo era feliz.

En la universidad pues ha cambiado un poco, tal vez no mi hábito de lectura sino el modo de escoger los libros y todo eso porque, a veces, le ponen a uno a leer tantas cosas pues no tiene uno tiempo como para decir: "¡Ay! Esto me gusta y esto lo leo y esto no", no puede uno como escoger, pero igual pues por los mismos hábitos que uno lleva cuando a uno le gusta leer cualquier cosa (ininteligible) pero de todas maneras uno las entiende pues (ininteligible) pero pues si, siempre me ha gustado leer y aún me gusta.

En vacaciones no he leído un libro y no lo hago pero es por lo mismo de lo académico está uno saturado de todo el libro de todo tipo de folletos que le ponen a uno a leer (ininteligible). Yo soy una buena lectora, o sea, me gusta mucho y por lo mismo de practicar la lectura y todo eso pues como que se me hace más fácil y más natural leer algo y entender más fácil pues yo creo que para empezar, el gusto por la lectura y que lo entienda ¿no? porque uno puede leer muchas cosas y no tomarlas en buen sentido, en este caso yo soy un buen lector.

Note: Several samples taken from students were translated by the authors of this paper.