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## ***To Read or not to Read: Does a Suitcase Full of Books do the Trick in the English Language Classroom?***

**Annika Kreft and Britta Viebrock**

### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the opportunities and challenges of implementing an extensive reading project in an English as a foreign language classroom in Germany. Studies such as PISA have shown that comparatively poor German and foreign language reading skills are still a prevalent issue in German society today. Consequently, the question of how these poor results can be improved is of utmost importance. Reading motivation is often described as the ‘driving force of reading’. Research has shown that if reading motivation and reading for pleasure are supported, interest in reading in a foreign language can be created, which may in turn have a positive impact on the other influential factors in reading and related skills. Dörnyei’s framework of L2 motivation sums up the current thinking on reading motivation. With its constituents ‘language’, ‘learner’, and ‘learning situation’, it shows the aspects to be taken into consideration when it comes to the improvement of motivation. Within this theoretical framework, an ER project was conducted at a grammar school (*Gymnasium*) in Frankfurt/Main, Germany. On the basis of the gathered data, gained from questionnaires, worksheets and the transcript of a focus group discussion, six main categories could be identified. They point to the development of a positive attitude towards reading among the students and the potential of graphic novels as a motivating factor. It was also confirmed that a successful application of reading strategies led to increased motivation. Generally, the project showed that reading is still an issue amongst many teenagers and that an ER project can affect learners, their motivation and related language skills in a positive way.

**Keywords:** extensive reading, reading motivation, young adult fiction, book choice criteria, teenage readers.

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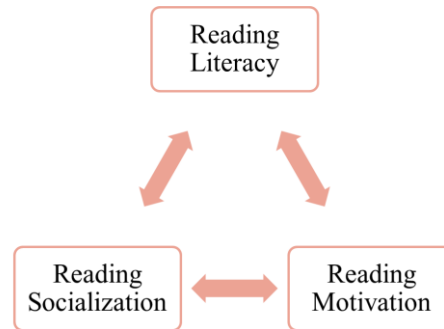
### Introduction

Over the last two decades, studies have shown relatively disappointing results related to reading literacy of German grammar school students both in their mother tongue (L1) German and foreign languages (L2) (Artelt et al., 2001; Nold, Rossa & Chatzivassiliadou, 2008). The first PISA study (*Programme for International Student Assessment*) completed in 2000 caused considerable consternation in Germany, particularly due to the poor reading literacy results of young Germans. Even though the OECD (2010) recently stated that the findings of PISA 2009 have shown some improvements in reading literacy – the ratio of students showing a weak reading performance decreased from 22,6% in 2000 to 18,5% in 2009 – the achievements of German adolescents were still slightly below the average international OECD results. Furthermore, the distinctive difference between female and male students on a number of tested criteria was shown to have a much wider spread than in other countries.

It is widely agreed that besides the need for certain reading skills and strategies, social and motivational aspects have an impact on the reading process in both the L1 and the L2 (Henseler & Surkamp, 2009, p. 4). Hence, the process of reading does not only depend on well-developed reading literacy, but also on reading socialisation<sup>i</sup> and reading motivation. Since these three components depend on and influence each other, their

relationship can be visualised as a triangle (Figure 1) in which all components are of equal importance.

**Figure 1: The 'triangle of reading'**



In this article, the focus of our research is on reading motivation, which Richter & Plath metaphorically describe as the 'energy source of reading' (2005, p. 5, our translation). We believe that it is the task of the school to contribute to all components of the triangle, but to promote reading motivation in particular. Reading English books is often referred to as a duty for class time only and an activity that is usually avoided during students' free time. Ideally, the promotion of reading motivation leads to the development of a positive attitude towards reading in general, resulting in 'reading for pleasure' (Krashen, 2004, p. x) and 'reading for its own reward' (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 8).

### **A Framework of L2 (Reading) Motivation**

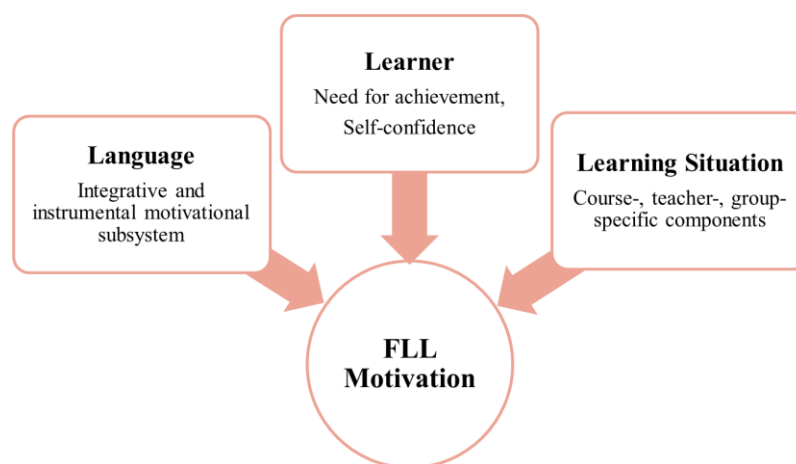
Numerous models have been developed to describe motivation (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994, 2001; Möller & Schiefele, 2004). For our project, Zoltán Dörnyei's (1994; 2001) framework of L2 motivation offers the most suitable model to synthesize the current state of research and support the analysis of our results. Even though Dörnyei refers to L2 motivation in general, his approach can be applied to the skill of reading, for reading motivation addresses the same constituents: language, the learner, and the learning situation (see Figure 2).

The language dimension focuses on components related to certain aspects of the second language, such as the community and culture of its speakers, as well as values,

attitudes, and benefits associated with it (Dörnyei, 1994). Dörnyei labels these two parts ‘the integrative motivational subsystem’ and ‘the instrumental motivational subsystem’ (p. 275). The first deals with aspects ‘integrated’ in a language, whereas the latter sees language as a ‘means to an end’. The learner dimension encompasses the individual characteristics each learner brings to the learning process, such as the need for achievement or self-confidence. Finally, the language learning situation involves three components (Dörnyei, 1994, pp. 277-8):

1. Course-specific motivational components that are related to the syllabus, teaching materials, teaching methods, and learning tasks.
2. Teacher-specific motivational component, which is associated with the teacher’s personality, behaviour, and teaching style.
3. Group-specific motivational components, which concern the group dynamics of the learner group, for example whether the group works in a goal-oriented fashion.

**Figure 2: Schematic representation of Dörnyei’s framework of L2 motivation (adapted from Dörnyei, 2001, p. 113)**



It is important to bear in mind that each of the three levels is powerful in its own right. Each change of a motivational component within one single level may affect the students’ overall performance. More importantly, there is a considerable amount of mutual influence between the three levels, which can be used to keep the overall motivation constantly high (Dörnyei, 2001, p.112). Extensive reading (ER) programmes appeal to

different motivational components. For this reason, they are considered to be a good way for a general improvement of reading motivation in the L2 English classroom.

### **Extensive Reading**

Extensive reading is characterised by three major aspects: choice of texts, time and self-determination. Hedge (2000, p. 202) describes ER as the reading of large quantities of longer texts, primarily for pleasure or interest, on a regular basis. The reading of, ideally, self-selected material should take place during class, but teachers should also encourage students to read at home individually as well. Numerous studies have shown the positive influences ER programmes have on learners. Most of these studies were conducted in Asian countries in primary and secondary classrooms, as well as at universities. Some popular studies in the 1980s and 1990s examined the effects of ER on L1 reading or L2 skills. In comparison, not many have focused on foreign language learning so far.

Mason and Krashen (1997) as well as Takase (2009) have conducted comparative studies at Japanese universities in which ER groups were contrasted with non-ER control groups with the help of reading logs, as well as comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar tests. Both studies were able to confirm a positive attitude toward reading, particularly among weaker students in the ER groups. However, Takase (2009, p. 557) points out that some guidance by the teachers is necessary within these projects, especially concerning book choice, something the students found most challenging.

Lai (1993) and Tanaka and Stapleton (2007) have examined the effects of ER programmes with learners in secondary school. Tanaka and Stapleton were able to show improvements in the teenagers' reading comprehension and reading speed, as well as their reading motivation. In addition, Lai (1993, p. 97) was able to confirm improvements in the learners' writing skills. He also supports Takase's (2009) claim for teacher guidance in order to help with vocabulary difficulties and to prevent fossilisation of written errors.

Finally, Elley and Mangubhai (1981) and Elley, et al. (1996) have conducted studies on ER programmes among primary school children in the Fiji Islands and Singapore. In both studies, the participants were assigned to groups that used different teaching methods

each such as ER as opposed to the *Tate Oral Program*<sup>ii</sup>. Language tests showed better achievements in the overall performance by children belonging to the ER group.

On a national level in Germany, ER has been researched, but not as extensively. For more than three decades, the researcher Liesel Hermes has been arguing in favour of ER and early individual reading. She and others point out that particularly in middle school (for students aged 10 – 16), ER programmes are almost non-existent (Hermes, 2009, p. 21; Appel, 2009, p. 63). A study by Biebricher (2008; 2009) deals with the effects of ER on two 9<sup>th</sup> grade groups in a *Realschule*,<sup>iii</sup> with students engaging in extensive reading during one English lesson a week over a period of four months, choosing books from a classroom library and keeping a reading log. Prior to the actual reading, the classes answered a questionnaire and underwent tests on reading fluency and linguistic knowledge. The latter was also completed by a control group. After the project, a final questionnaire and a reading test focusing on a fictional text were administered. These showed a) an increase in the participants' motivation, particularly during the first weeks of ER, and b) remarkably better results in reading fluency among the participants in contrast to the control group (Biebricher, 2009, p. 99).

In conclusion, the studies emphasize the advantages that ER may have in contrast to other teaching methods. The rather 'informal' atmosphere within these projects, with no pre-set quantities of books to read, or related tests or exams, helped to develop a positive attitude and support intrinsic motivation in these students – evident in the weaker students in particular. As motivational, social, and cognitive aspects have a mutual relationship when it comes to reading, the effect spread to related skills. Krashen (2004, p. 23) states:

Reading is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion, however: Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers.

Hence, ER programmes do not only affect reading but also related skills, and may positively influence participants' reading motivation, if the material is adapted to the learners' needs and an appropriate institutional context is provided.

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### **An Extensive Reading Project: Background Information and Planning**

Against this background, an ER project was carried out in a grammar school (*Gymnasium*) in Frankfurt/Main, Germany in 2012 (see Kreft, 2012). The project aimed at determining how a particular group of students and their motivation towards reading is affected by extensive reading and self-determination in relation to book choice and reading speed. Furthermore, it examined whether a suitcase of 48 English books featured in the project (three copies of 16 pre-selected books), was considered suitable by the teenagers and whether these books stimulated them to read and finish a book on their own.

The ER took place every Monday in the last 30 minutes of the 6<sup>th</sup> lesson (12:30 to 1:00 pm) and over a period of three months. The participants were a group of 31 students, 13-14 year-old 8<sup>th</sup> graders, made up of 14 girls and 17 boys. They were in their 6<sup>th</sup> year of learning English.

When it comes to the reading of longer texts, one of the most important aims is to experience a sense of achievement which may lead to a 'virtuous circle' encouraging further reading of longer texts (Hermes, 2010, p. 47). Taking into consideration that the students were at the adolescent age at which the 'reading crisis' takes place (Garbe, 2010, p. 204), book selection was particularly important. On the basis of different criteria specified in research literature (Hesse, 2009; Henseler & Surkamp, 2007; Nünning & Surkamp, 2006; Day & Bamford, 1998), 16 books were selected. All could be considered young adult fiction (YAF), which deals with topics presumably relevant for adolescents. Due to its narrative style, YAF offers opportunities for the learners to experience empathy, to identify with the protagonists, and to engage in a change of perspective. In addition, authentic texts help to develop syntactic and semantic knowledge about the target language and, while reading, students are afforded the opportunity to use reading strategies, such as identifying unknown vocabulary. The use of authentic texts encourages the use of such skills in comparison to the mere reading of normal text book units (Hermes, 2009). Thus, by reading YAF, learners can informally assess their English language skills and are possibly motivated to read more books (Hesse, 2009).

The books selected for this project belonged to different sub-genres such as fantasy (Almond, 2009), science fiction (Horowitz, 2000), horror (Gaiman, 2008), adventure

(Paulsen, 1999), conflict (Strasser, 2000), historical (Hesse, 1993), or crime novels (Blyton, 2006). Three graphic novels were also provided (Gaiman, 2008; Vaughan & Alphona, 2009; Yang, 2006). The topics were broad and related to the students' lives (dealing with romantic encounters, growing up, school problems and/or bullying). Containing both female and male protagonists, they offered opportunities for identification for both sexes (Hesse, 2009; Nünning & Surkamp, 2006). They were also relevant to students' needs and preferences, as they came in different lengths as well as levels of difficulty.

### **Implementation of the Project**

The study was divided into four phases. Before the students started to read the selected books, they were introduced to the procedures of the project and book samples were provided. In addition, two questionnaires were administered: the first dealt with reading and its value in the learners' lives in general; the second focused on the quantity and reasons for reading (or non-reading) English books in the learners' spare time.

The second phase involved reading the books. With the help of four different worksheets, the students documented their reading process. According to Hermes (2009 p. 21), the more reminiscent of textbooks the reading comprehension tasks are, the less appealing they are to the students. Thus, the worksheets did not contain comprehension questions but tasks that helped to reflect on and document the students' individual reading process, similar to a portfolio. One such worksheet was completed prior to reading a book – this required information about reasons for selection and expectations concerning the plot. At the end of every reading period and after the completion of the book, a further worksheet aided learners in reflecting on any content or linguistic difficulties they had encountered. An optional worksheet was completed if a student decided, after having consulted the teacher or project manager, to stop reading a book. These documents also served as pre-, while-, and post-reading activities.

The third and last phase of the reading itself consisted of another questionnaire focusing on the evaluation of the books. Finally, a focus group was created, made up of two girls and three boys, in order to review the strengths and weaknesses of the project (Bortz & Döring, 2006, p. 319; Reinders, 2005, p. 152). The students were selected



according to their answers (for example, concerning reading frequency in their free time) gained from the questionnaires and worksheets. Among the participants of the focus group, there were two students who did not read outside school, two students who occasionally read texts in their L1 and one student who read in her L1 and L2 on a regular basis.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

A qualitative approach providing insights into personal impressions and opinions of the individual (Bortz & Döring, 2006, p. 307) was used for the analysis of this project. As has been described, three different types of data collection methods were used: questionnaires, worksheets, and a focus-group discussion. As the first contained mostly open questions, this questionnaire was regarded as a qualitative instrument (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 101, 107). All materials for data collection were provided in German because it was assumed the students would feel more confident writing in their native language. As a consequence, it was also hoped that more in-depth reflections would be given.

During analysis of the questionnaires and worksheets, similar answers were grouped together into categories and coded. The data from a transcription of the focus-group discussion was also classified into categories (Mayring, 2010; Biebricher, 2008), which followed the components of the L2 motivation framework (Dörnyei, 1994; 2001) and therefore covered the aspects of language, learner, and learning situation. The results from the questionnaires and the worksheets were then triangulated with the transcription to see if the categories matched.

### **Main Findings**

A number of findings were drawn from the data, and we have chosen to discuss what we feel are the six most important ones.

#### **A positive attitude towards reading**

Based on the analysis of the data gained from the worksheets, the final questionnaire and the group discussion, together with our classroom observations, it was clear that the students developed a positive attitude towards reading in the foreign language. Their first contact with English books took place without any burdening pressure. There were no

tests, restrictions or targets concerning the topic or the number of books the students had to read. The relaxed atmosphere, combined with the relative autonomy of this project, dissipated the obligatory, school-like character often associated with reading English books. During the project, reading was seen as an 'escape' from the ordinary school day that helped the learners to calm down: 'After five hours of school, we were able to relax while reading, [...] we had a short break in between which we could use to calm down [before afternoon school started]' (Sf1).<sup>iv</sup> In the best-case scenario, the reading experience led to a state of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), enabling learners to forget everything around them because of the reading.

Furthermore, the extensive reading project led to an increased appreciation and anticipation of English lessons among some of the participants:

Many [students] were probably looking forward to it [the reading project], especially on Sunday evenings with the long school day ahead, I'm sure some of the students thought 'we don't have to do two English lessons, but a reading project for one hour instead'. And then they were relieved because it is more fun to read than to sit in school and have tests. And in this reading project, we were not forced to finish reading a book immediately. (Sm2)

### **Sense of achievement and strategy use**

The questionnaires showed that some students were less confident in reading and choosing English literature. Even if they liked reading a book in an L2, they were often not sure which one would be suitable for them in relation to context and language. As a consequence of previously experienced comprehension problems, some of the students preferred reading German books in order to prevent failure. During the ER project, these students learned that a successful application of reading strategies led to a successful performance, which in turn increased motivation. Strategies, which for the purpose of this paper will be classified according to the taxonomy of O'Malley and Uhl Chamot (1995), generally aim at learning facilitation and are used intentionally by the learners. On the basis of the data gathered, it became apparent that several students were surprised about how much they were able to understand by applying reading strategies. One student described her experience of understanding in the following way, 'Maybe you do not

understand two or three words, but after a while you are able to understand the whole content' (Sf2). The most prominent strategy the students applied while reading was inferencing by using available information from the context or the pictures (in the case of the graphic novels) to guess the meaning of unknown words or to fill in information that was missing (O'Malley & Uhl Chamot, 1995, p. 120). They also transferred previous linguistic knowledge of English as well as other foreign languages in order to achieve understanding. Occasionally, to solve word problems participants asked their fellow students or the teacher for clarification, co-operated with their peers or used the dictionary.

### **Reading expectations**

It became clear that reading a book is connected with certain expectations and values that readers have towards the plot and themselves (Philipp, 2011, pp. 26-29; Biebricher, 2008, p. 51; Möller & Schiefele, 2004, pp. 103-106). In the questionnaires and group discussion, most of the participants acknowledged their hope for reaching the state of a *flow* while reading (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), which goes along with a constant urge to read and a confirmation of their own linguistic skills. In order to meet the expectations of a satisfying reading experience, the students applied certain criteria when selecting a book. Repeatedly, students stated that the books had to maintain suspense and should evoke fun, 'One should have fun while reading – if you don't have fun, you should not even start reading a book' (Sm3). Furthermore, the opportunity to identify with a topic and/or protagonist should be provided. During the analysis of the pre-reading worksheet and the focus-group discussion, it turned out that the visual impression the readers had of the cover, title, and size of the book, as well as their previous knowledge about an author influenced their book selection. Both dimensions can be held responsible for some participants' decision to not start reading a book. One of the students stated:

And if we look at the book *Skellig* [...], written by David Almond – first of all, I think, in contrast to Anthony Horowitz who is known by many people of my age, nobody knows David Almond, and the picture on the cover did not arouse my interest in reading the book [...]. (Sm2)

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### **Graphic novels as a motivating factor**

There were three graphic novels in the suitcase (Gaiman, 2008; Vaughan & Alphona, 2009; Yang, 2006). These books belonged to the three most frequently read books across the entire sample. The graphic novels were especially popular as they were a text medium the students were unfamiliar with. In the final questionnaire, the boys particularly stated that they would have liked more graphic novels in the sample. The majority of the students had equated graphic novels, or 'comic books' as they called them, with younger children's literature and were hence positively surprised by their age-appropriate topics:

I noticed that I also like comics which I didn't use to read such as *Donald Duck* [...]. I have never read them because I found them boring, but if a comic belongs to the horror genre then it gets interesting for me. (Sf1)

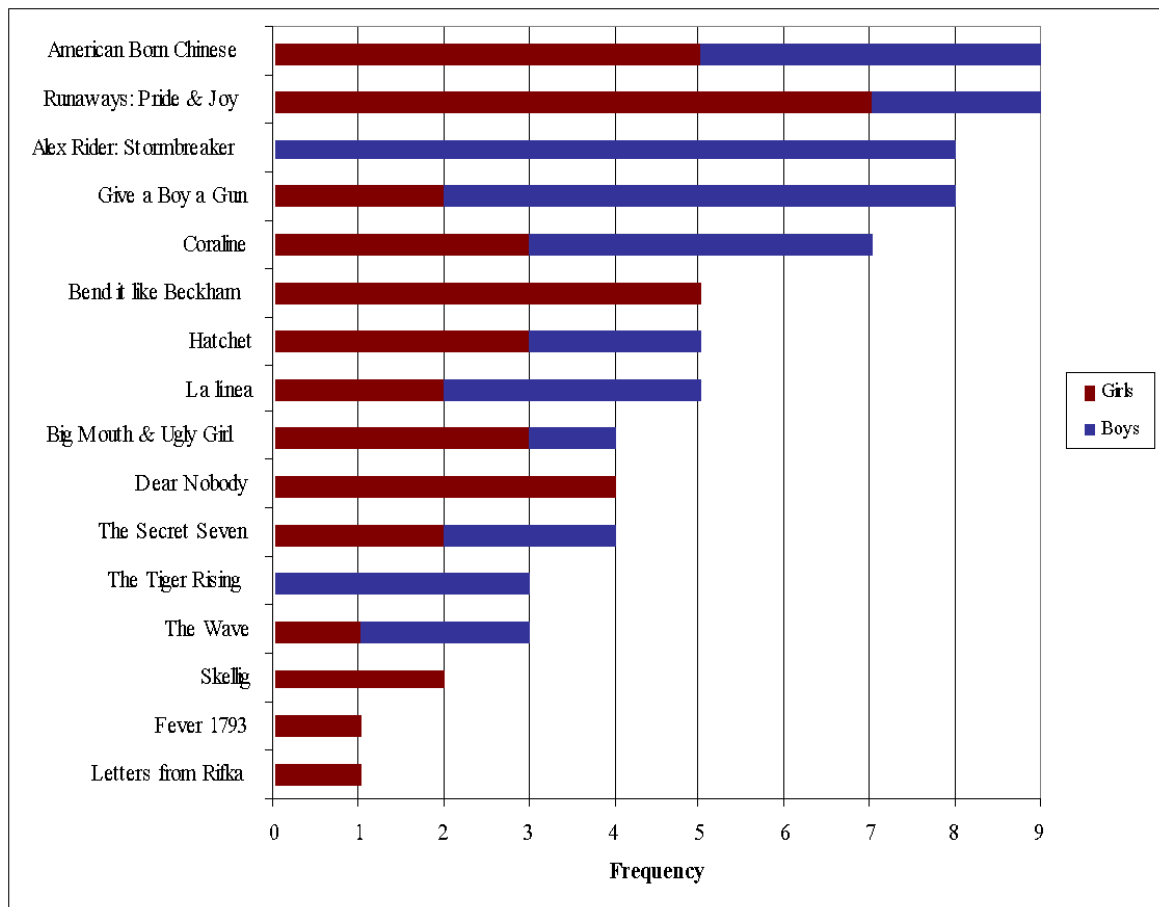
Generally, the students appreciated the illustrations and hoped to understand the plot better through the visual support. Sometimes the illustrations provided did not satisfy the hoped-for expectations and the students found it hard to cope with a graphic novel because they were not able to properly understand the content. In this case, the student had to exchange her/his book for another. This happened to S<sub>m1</sub> who had to return the book *Coraline* (Gaiman, 2008) due to a lack of topical interest and certain comprehension difficulties, and instead successfully read *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006). Schwarz (2006, p. 59) points out that reading and understanding graphic novels assumes a sufficient knowledge of visual elements as well as literary understanding, topical interest, and – especially important in case of foreign language learning – linguistic skills are also necessary. If those skills have not been completely developed yet, problems in understanding may occur which cannot always be compensated for by the illustrations.

### **Gender aspect and selection criteria**

In one of the pre-project questionnaires, eight of the 17 boys stated that they had not read English books outside school. In all, there was a gender-specific difference concerning reading (in the L2) in this class: boys read half the amount of books that girls stated they had read.

Reflecting on the students' selection of books in the ER project, there were similarities concerning stories with horror or humorous elements, but otherwise mostly differences between the sexes. Figure 3 shows the number of boys or girls who chose to read a particular book.

**Figure 3: Book choice by boys and girls**



The girls in this class were generally open to many different genres, but tended to avoid action and violence. The majority of boys preferred action and adventure stories, which offered opportunities for identification with male archetypes such as magicians or protagonists with supernatural forces (Brozo, 2002, p. 14). This is emphasised by the popularity of *Alex Rider: Stormbreaker* (Horowitz, 2000) amongst the boys in the class. During the focus-group discussion, Sm1 summarised the differences concerning book choice as follows: ‘The boys look at the weapons; the girls pay attention to the protagonists’ backgrounds’.

The book suggestions for improving the suitcase sample given by the learners again mirrored gender-dependent differences, as girls preferred romance novels while boys liked action or fantasy stories with predominantly male protagonists. As mentioned above, the gender-specific difference concerning reading among the boys and girls in the class was pointed out during the focus-group discussion. During the project, and evident in the final questionnaire, it became clear that boys can read in the L2 for pleasure. Therefore, a teachers' task is to support this potential by providing materials that meet boys' interests.

### **Impact on the social life inside and outside the classroom**

Results from the pre-project questionnaire showed that the learners came from families in which reading played an important role. However, English books were associated with the educational context and therefore played a minor role in their leisure time. One of the questions in this questionnaire focused on the number of English books the participants had read to the end outside an institutional context. In total, 21 students, (seven girls and fourteen boys) stated they had read fewer than two English books in their free time. 12 out of these 21 students (four girls and eight boys) answered they had read 'no books', which means that one-third of the whole class had not read an English book outside school. This again emphasizes the urgency to provide access to literature and specific reading suggestions for students.

As peer groups are highly important during adolescence, the girls and boys were sensitive to the behaviour of the other students in their class. A book that friends liked also prompted interest in individuals. Some of the novels were included in topics of conversation, inside and outside the classroom, with peers and family members, 'Everyone first read in class, afterwards we talked about it. It was nice to be able to talk about books rather than homework or other school stuff'. (Sf1) As reading did not take on the role of a duty, but was offered for pleasure and included a variety of books which these teenagers obviously liked to talk about in school and in their free time, the ER project is reminiscent of the virtuous circle of reading socialisation (Garbe, 2010; Philipp, 2011, p. 197). According to Philipp, the opportunity to communicate with peers finally helps to 'let reading be present in the students' social life and therefore gives importance to it' (2011, p. 130, our translation).

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## Conclusion

While it is not possible to generalise the results of the case study described here – with only 31 participants the project does not meet any criteria for statistical significance – they do support earlier research findings. Even though some of the participants may not continue to read English books in their free time, the institutional contact with L2 literature in an unstructured setting seemed to be positive and led to a sense of achievement amongst the students. The graphic novels (Gaiman, 2008; Vaughan & Alphona, 2009; Yang, 2006) were particularly popular among the teenagers and supported the willingness to read of both sexes. In addition, those books offering a male archetype (such as Horowitz, 2000), attracted the interest and fostered the reading motivation of male learners. Those students who previously preferred to read books in their L1 hopefully will have become a bit more curious about reading in the L2.

What is even more important is the fact that reading is still an issue amongst many teenagers, especially during the ‘reading crisis’. But it appears that access to appropriate books and a pleasant atmosphere to get students to read can contribute to resolving this. An ER programme such as the one described above can help to create a positive attitude towards reading and therefore be the first step for further development of cognitive, social and motivational aspects of reading literacy.

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<sup>i</sup> Reading socialisation includes all social and individual processes in life that help develop certain skills and motivation to read the printed or digital version of fictional and non-fictional texts (Philipp, 2011).

<sup>ii</sup> Elley et al. (1996, p. 3) describe the Tate Oral Program in the following way: ‘[T]his program required pupils to learn the structures of English orally first, and then consolidate them in reading books which were carefully controlled with respect to their vocabulary and structures’.

<sup>iii</sup> *Realschule* is the middle tier in the tripartite German secondary-school system, leading to, but no further than, the school-leaving certificate *Mittlere Reife* (equivalent to the British GSCE). The *Gymnasium* is the higher tier.

<sup>iv</sup> The learner quotations have been translated into English by the authors of this article. The original transcripts can be found in Kreft (2012). ‘Sf’ refers to female student and ‘Sm’ to male student.

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