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Pleasure Reading: The Gains of Student Teachers of English Obtained from a Reading Journey

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Abstract: It is an undeniable fact that reading books is beneficial in many ways. However, a great number of potential benefits are likely to be observed when these readings are realized primarily for pleasure. This article reveals some of these benefits which were identified through a qualitative case study conducted with the voluntary participation of 37 pre-service English language teachers studying at a state university in Türkiye. The study aimed to investigate the pre-service teachers' language- and culture-related gains as well as the gains regarding personal growth from a pleasure reading experience. Qualitative data were collected through written reports that students filled out after reading the books they chose based on their individual preferences. The content analysis of the reported answers revealed that pleasure reading was most beneficial for vocabulary development regarding students' language-related gains. On the other hand, they stated that their biggest culture-related gain was obtaining the ability to understand people living in a specific time period. The students also noted that the most significant contribution of their reading experience to their personal growth was to give them a new perspective.

Keywords: Reading, Pleasure Reading, Literature, English Language Teaching, Student Teachers

Introduction

According to the definition made by the National Literacy Trust (2016), reading for pleasure is the reading we do with our own will in order to reach the satisfaction that the act of reading will bring. In addition, readings that are started at the request of someone else and continued only because we are interested are also referred to as "reading for pleasure" (Clark and Rumbold, National Literacy Trust, 2006). Krashen (2004) calls the same concept "free-voluntary reading (FVR)" and defines it as the readings that we do only because we want to, and there is no reading comprehension question at the end of the chapters.

So, when people are willing to devote their leisure time to reading, does this make it more beneficial? Clark and Rumbold (2006) state that when people actually choose to read (rather than being required to do so), then they read for pleasure. They explain that reading for pleasure means selecting texts that suit individuals' own interests.

There is strong evidence that people reading for pleasure in their spare time is significantly beneficial. Clark and Rumbold (2006), when people read voluntarily rather than out of obligation, they are reading for pleasure. These readers read wherever and whenever they want, depending on their individual preferences and interests. In addition, Clark and Rumbold (2006) drew attention to the social and personal benefits of such reading and stated that those who read for pleasure have more knowledge and language proficiency. In another study conducted by Ross (1999), it was revealed that reading for pleasure is a must for some people.

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Literature Review

A) Pleasure Reading and Language Learning

Many studies claim that children and adults should be encouraged to read because it can significantly impact their future. As a result of their review of the research literature, Clark and Rumbold (2006) listed the many benefits of reading for pleasure:

- It improves reading comprehension and writing skills;
- increases grammar knowledge;
- increases vocabulary;
- helps to develop a positive attitude towards reading;
- helps to become a more confident reader;
- provides enjoyment during lifelong reading experiences;
- provides general knowledge in different fields;
- provides a better understanding of different cultures;
- facilitates inclusion in society and
- presents information about human nature.

Krashen (2021) points out that one of the most effective tools for learners' language education and personal growth is self-selected reading for pleasure, stating:

“This is a win-win-win-win situation: It's pleasant, and it works for language, knowledge, developing empathy, and a healthy suspicion of simple solutions. In this case, however, the simple solution is correct” (Krashen, 2021: 2). Concurrently, Krashen (1982) points out that reading for pleasure provides comprehensible input, which includes adequate exposure to the language, a stress-free learning atmosphere, and engaging content that leads to language acquisition. In the same way, Grabe (1991) and Paran (1996) argue that reading for pleasure enhances learners' general language competence through practising the automaticity of the words and decoding the symbols. Besides, reading for pleasure helps learners to practice the words in an indirect setting and reinforces previously learned language. It promotes vocabulary growth that helps improvement in language production.

B) Pleasure Reading and Pleasure Reading & Cultural and Personal Development

Most studies investigating the possible benefits of pleasure reading have revealed a strong connection between emotional and personal development. Studies have shown that pleasure reading improves empathic skills, and readers are better able to understand others' identities as well as their own.

Billington (2015) conducted a study in which 4000 adult pleasure readers from the UK expressed their opinions through online surveys. Participants were asked about their general mood, well-being, and daily social interactions. The findings of the study showed that pleasure reading resulted in an enhanced sense of community, social inclusion, and willingness to participate in social activities in participants.

Mar et al. (2006) conducted a study to investigate the effects of reading on the social skills of 94 university students in Canada. The results revealed that reading was strongly associated with social competence and, in particular, empathy. The findings showed that empathizing with the characters in the stories helped them empathize with real-life people.

Wanting to delve deeper into the relationship between reading and empathy, Mar et al. (2009) conducted a more extensive study of 252 Canadian students, taking into account variables such as openness, fondness for reading, and gender. The authors determined a positive correlation between pleasure reading and empathy. They stated that these findings would destroy the belief that people who read a lot are socially awkward.

There is also strong evidence that pleasure reading has a positive effect on understanding one's own identity as well as the identities of others. In a study conducted by Moyer (2007) with the participation of 62 readers living in the US, the effects of pleasure reading were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Benefits that the readers often cited were increased ability to understand oneself and others, recognition of different cultures and societies, and learning about other historical periods. In addition, participants stated that they had advanced skills in understanding the culture, perspectives, social class and ethnicity of others.

A study conducted by Vasquez (2005) on 18 university students who attended weekly literature classes revealed that reading helped students to understand the ethnic identities of others and to form their own identities. Moreover, findings showed that literary discussions in the classroom also increase students' cultural and ethnic awareness.

In the literature review prepared by the Reading Agency (2015), previous studies on the benefits of reading for pleasure are summarized. The graphic below shows the overall outcomes of reading for pleasure.

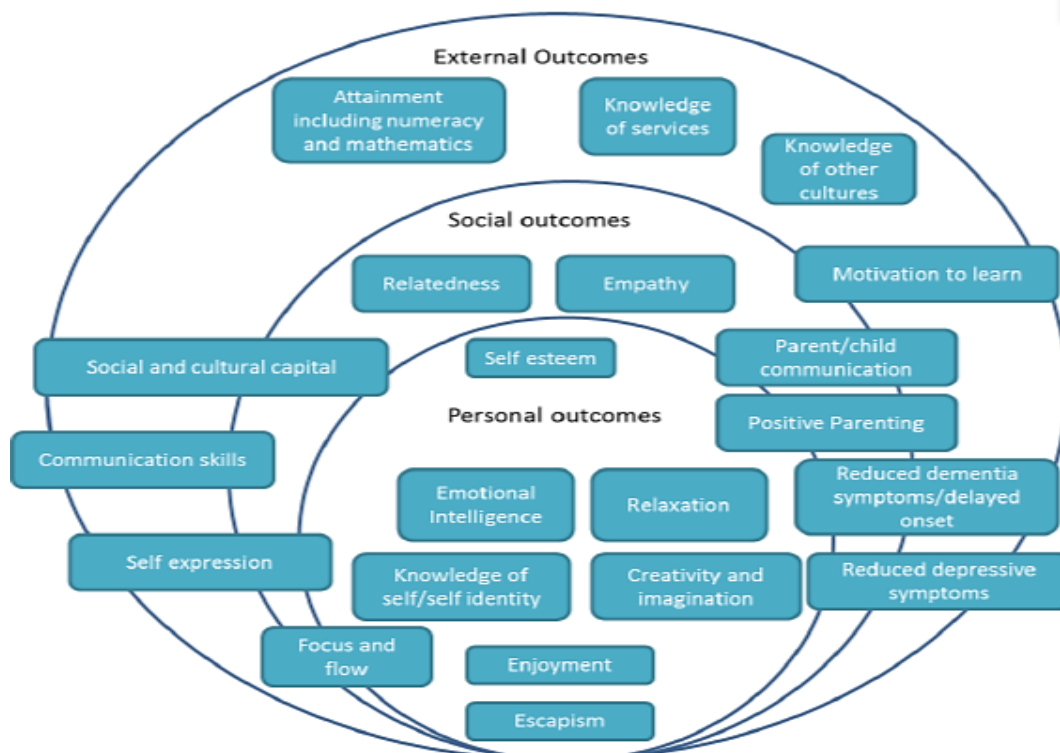


Figure 1. Overall outcomes map

Research Questions

The current study was conducted to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What potential gains, in terms of personal growth, were obtained by the ELT junior student teachers from pleasure reading experience?
2. What are the students' language-related gains?
3. What are the students' culture-related gains?

Please embed tables and figures in appropriate areas within the document and center them horizontally. Tables and figures should not exceed the given page margins. Provide captions (maximum length: 6 to 8 words) for each table or figure. Centre the caption above the table and below the figure. Please reference the table or figure in the text (Table1). Please do not use vertical lines in tables. For figures, GIF and JPEG (JPG) are the preferred formats.

Sampling and Procedure

This current case study was carried out with the participation of 37 volunteered student teachers of English (21 females and 16 males) enrolled in an English language teaching (ELT) department at a state university in Türkiye. The participants were recruited by using convenience sampling method. They were asked to choose an original English novel of their preference and read. What needs to be noted is that each participant must pick a different novel. In addition, the participants were asked to keep a vocabulary notebook and write down the words they did not know together with the sentences in which they were used and to construct original sentences

they would construct by using these words. Afterwards, they were asked to answer the questions in parallel with the research questions in the form of a written report.

Table 1. Number of participants

Gender	Number
Female	21
Male	16
Total	37

Research Instrument

After reading the book, students were asked to submit a written report in which they answered the following questions under three different headings:

1) Language and culture-related gains:

- a) Please write about your overall language-related gains from this reading experience.
- b) Please write what you have learned in terms of culture-related elements (cultural enrichment).

2) Personal growth:

- a) How did this reading experience affect your personal growth? Please explain your "before- and after-reading reflections" with regard to changes, if any, with respect to your perspectives, mindset and goals.

Data Analysis

Content-thematic analysis was used while analyzing the collected data. The codes used for data analysis were descriptive. During the coding process, some themes and categories related to the research questions were created based on the response patterns of the participants (Creswell, 2012). The students' written answers were examined several times before the coding process, and frequently repetitive words and expressions were identified. After the coding process was carried out, common themes were determined. The findings were presented under three headings in line with the research questions. In order to ensure anonymity when quoting students' writings, numbers were used instead of their names (Student 1, Student 2 etc.)

Results

The gains of students related to language, culture and their personal growth from their reading experiences are presented in Tables 2, 3 and 4, respectively. The number of references is shown in parentheses.

A) Language-related Gains of Students from their Reading Experiences

Table 2. Students' language-related gains (n=38)

Themes
Vocabulary development (22)
Recognition of new grammatical structures (15)
Familiarity with the actual use of the target language (12)
Improvement in reading skills (8)
Improvement in pronunciation skills (2)
Familiarity with the literary use of the target language (8)
Improvement in discourse competence (2)
Improvement in inferring skills (2)

When writing about language-related gains, the majority of students mentioned the positive effects of this particular reading experience on vocabulary development (22 references). In addition, 15 students argued that while reading, they recognized new grammatical structures. 12 students stated that while reading, they had the opportunity to be familiar with the real use of English. On the other hand, they also mentioned that reading

novels gave them a chance to see the literary use of L2 (8 references). Moreover, in many written reports, it has been stated that students' reading experiences contribute to the development of various language skills or areas. These are reading (8 references), pronunciation (2 references), discourse (2 references) and inferring (2 references).

Examples of excerpts on the language-related gains from the students' reading experiences:

I had the opportunity to learn words that I had never seen before. I also learned how these words are used in sentences. For example, I learned where and how to use the "whence" conjunction in a sentence. I also learned a lot of phrasal verbs in this reading adventure. (S17)

"The Catcher in the Rye" draws intense attention based on literary interest and linguistic importance. It shows the colloquial language that teenagers used at that time. I also learned numerous slang words and new different expressions. It enriched my vocabulary knowledge. (S37)

Starting to read this book has given me many benefits other than learning vocabulary from the book. I am a person who likes to read books in my native language. Thus, reading this English book was a good activity for me. As I read the book, I started to control how I should pronounce the words I did not know. I learned how different ways a language could be used in daily life and in a literary way, and I was exposed to natural language. I was also able to connect the culture and language (S4)

B) Culture-related Gains of Students from their Reading Experiences

When writing about culture-related gains, most students expressed that they had the opportunity to recognize people's perspectives in a specific time period (20 references). Thanks to this particular reading experience, they also learned about different cultures (12 references) and about different ideologies and philosophies (6 references). Last but not least, the students stated that they learned various historical facts regarding different societies (4 references).

Table 3. Students' culture-related gains (n=38)

Themes
Recognizing the perspectives of people living in a specific time period (20)
Building cross-cultural awareness (12)
Learning about different ideologies and philosophies (6)
Learned about historical facts regarding different societies (4)

Examples of excerpts on the culture-related gains from their reading experiences:

Before reading this book, I had no idea about the Victorian Era and its society at that time. Now, I also know how industrialization affected society at that time. On the other hand, I learned much about society's morals, beliefs, superstitions, world views, etc. Before reading the book, I did not know that there was a class system at that time in the UK. Every country has its class system, but at that time, it was brutal. After reading it, I learned about the class system in the UK. (S10)

Before I started the book, I looked at the pictures of the place where the events took place and read them as if they were re-enacting the events there. I compared the city in the 1900s with the present state of Oakland. While reading the literary work, I learned a lot about the period; I witnessed the struggle of the artists of the period more closely, and I saw the point of view of the bourgeois section of the people. As a result, it has been a great cultural gain for me. (S15)

In this book, I learned about the place of women in social and academic life as a cultural element of that period. I learned that a woman always starts life behind and must make extra efforts for similar conditions. [Virginia] Woolf, for example, explained this with the example of Judith Shakespeare. She emphasized that if Shakespeare had a sister as talented as himself, she would never have seen the same value. (S16)

C) Students' Gains regarding their Personal Growth

The majority of the students who listed the gains regarding their personal growth mentioned that their current perspectives towards a certain aspect of their lives have changed or that they have gained a brand-new perspective thanks to the books they read (19 references). In addition, 11 students mentioned how this reading experience has led them to self-reflect on their own lives and make new decisions to live better. 6 students stated that their reading motivation has increased and that they would read more in the future.

Table 4. Students' gains regarding their personal growth (n=38)

Themes
Gaining a new perspective (19)
Fostering self-reflection about one's own life (11)
Increase in reading motivation (6)
Improvement in empathetic skills (6)
Improvement in imagination (2)

Examples of excerpts on the students' gains regarding their personal growth:

Robinson Crusoe left a lot of impact on me in a way how I want to live my life. Even though I carry Robinson Crusoe's characteristics, I was also scared to get out of my way because I was afraid that I would hurt my loved one's feelings by making them feel like I did not respect their opinion. I was also a people pleaser. As I was reading this book, I realized that despite many obstacles, Robinson Crusoe was free, doing what he wanted, and exploring himself. I was amazed by that, and without realizing it, I started to come out of my shell and live my life how I wanted to live it. (S7)

"The Art of War" helped me become a planned and provident person. While reading, I learned to have a different view on matters and always consider a different perspective towards events around me. The book taught me what makes a great leader and the hardship of being a leader in dire situations. I realized what it meant to be a soldier and a civilian in that era when wars were being waged. This book showed me that a lot has happened on this earth and will be happening whether I realize it. Being aware of myself and my challenges will help me throughout my life. Adapting to situations, even if I am uncomfortable, will help me develop. (S9)

I did not have the habit of reading books in English. I had some prejudices about this situation. After this book, my prejudices were broken. I noticed that If I found a book that was suitable for me, it would be fun for me. (S12)

Discussion and Implications

This study explored the potential gains of ELT pre-service teachers' from a pleasure reading experience with an emphasis on their language and cultural development as well as their personal growth. As a pleasure reading activity, students were asked to read an original English novel of their choice and fill out a written report describing the mentioned gains from a reading experience. Although not generalizable, the findings of this study support the evidence in previous studies regarding the benefits of pleasure reading. Exploring the benefits of pleasure reading for students will contribute to the dissemination of at least a reevaluation of the importance of this concept by teachers and policymakers at all levels of education, from primary to university.

Regarding the first research question (what are the potential gains, in terms of personal growth, obtained by the ELT junior student teachers from this particular pleasure reading experience?), students stated that the experience of pleasure reading contributed to their personal growth in various ways. These benefits include gaining a new perspective, fostering self-reflection about their own life, increasing reading motivation, improvement in empathetic skills as well as imagination.

Concerning the second research question (what are the students' language-related gains?), students indicated that through this particular pleasure reading experience, they improved their vocabulary and learned new grammatical structures. Moreover, students stated that they became familiar with both the daily and literary use of English. They also noted that they had the opportunity to develop their discourse competence as well as many different language skills, namely reading, pronunciation, and inferencing.

Regarding the third research question (what are the students' culture-related gains?), the students stated that thanks to the novels they read, they got to know the perspectives of people living in a specific time period and gained intercultural awareness by comparing their own cultures with other cultures. In addition, students stated that they learned different ideologies and philosophies described in their books and learned some historical facts that are important for different societies.

Regarding the limitations of the study, due to the limited number of volunteer students participating in the study, it is difficult to obtain generalizable results. Another limitation of the study is that only descriptive analysis was made, and quantitative data were not collected. It is also recommended to use questionnaires and structured interviews in future studies.

Follow-up studies may also be carried out to determine the long-term benefits of pleasure reading. Students or teachers can establish reading clubs at schools to encourage reading more than one book, and it can be investigated whether the number of books read affects the results.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the authors.

Acknowledgements or Notes

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