University Students' and Teachers' Attitude Towards An EFL Reading Program

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Introduction

This study is part of a large research on Tunisian EFL students' and teachers' attitudes towards EFL reading and writing at the secondary and tertiary levels (see Maamouri Ghrib in press-a and b, 2002). It investigates university students' and their teachers' attitudes towards the reading program, the instructional materials, and the teaching approach as a whole. It deals with the learners' motivation for EFL reading, and is also interested in whether there is any gap between the students' and their teachers' assessment of problems.

Over the past few last decades, much emphasis has been put on learners' attitudes, motivation, beliefs, and perceptions of learning and teaching, especially within the field of second language acquisition (Cotterall, 1999; Gardner, 1983; Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993; Nunan, 1988; O'Neill, 1991; Wenden, 1999; Yang, 1999). Many researchers showed that attitudes and motivation played a major part in language learning; Gardner (1983) stressed the idea that learners' attitudes to the target language, to learning the target language, and to the whole language situation "determined the level of their motivation."

Riley (1996 cited in Cotterall, 1999, p. 495) contended that the learners' perceptions of learning and teaching "may directly influence or even determine . . . (a learner's) attitude or motivation or behaviour when learning the language in question." Riley, (1996 in Cotterall, 1999, p. 511) argued that "[w]hat *they* [learners] believe will influence their learning much, much more than what *we* believe, because it is their beliefs that hold sway over their motivations, attitudes and learning procedures. And obviously if there is a misfit between what learners believe and the beliefs embedded in the instructional structure in which they are enrolled, there is bound to be some degree of friction or dysfunction."

Horwitz (1988, p. 293) suggested that "knowledge of learner beliefs about language learning should 'increase teachers' understanding of how students approach the tasks required in language class . . . .'" Barkhuizen (1998, p. 102) also explained

that "once teachers are aware of their students" perceptions, they can, if necessary, plan and implement alternative behaviours and activities in their classes' thus showing the benefit that could be gained from the study of learners' beliefs and attitudes. This could, in fact, lead to more positive attitudes to teaching and learning. Gardner and MacIntyre (1993, p. 9) pointed out that "teachers, instructional aids, curricula, and the like clearly have an effect on what is learned and how students react to the experience . . . " hence stressing the importance of some of the major variables that have to be taken into account when discussing attitudes towards a language program.

Other researchers were concerned with what improved learner reading fluency, proficiency, attitudes, and motivation. Polak and Krashen (1988, p. 145), for example, spoke about the positive effects of voluntary reading contending that "besides spelling, there is good evidence that [it] leads to improvement in many areas of language, including reading ability, vocabulary, grammar, and writing style."

Mason and Krashen (1997, pp. 93, 99) also spoke about the impact of extensive reading on second language learners' attitudes and performance; they found that "many of the once reluctant students of EFL became eager readers in the first study, and that extensive readers outperformed traditional students in the second and third studies."

Day and Bamford (1998), reviewed a comprehensive body of research, all of which demonstrated the benefits that could be drawn from extensive reading. According to the reviewed studies, extensive reading not only improved students' reading skills and reading speed, but also ameliorated the learners' general language proficiency and developed positive attitudes toward reading and language learning. Day and Bamford contend that "if used appropriately, an extensive reading approach can considerably improve second language reading instruction and the chances that students will enjoy reading in the second language" (p. xiv).

To my knowledge, despite the growing body of literature concerning attitude and motivation in learning to read a foreign language, little research has been done on Tunisian students' attitudes towards, and motivation for, reading in English, and on EFL reading instruction in the Tunisian context. My aim in conducting this research was to find out what Tunisian EFL learners think about what they are taught in the reading class, how they are taught it, and whether they benefit from the reading skills and techniques they are introduced to in class. I also wanted to see whether there is any discrepancy between the teachers' and their students' perceptions of the reading issues. Such an understanding may help colleagues, administrators, and program developers review and even alter some of their teaching practices, and thus help improve and facilitate the learning and teaching of such an important skill.

Method

Participants

Three hundred Tunisian university students participated in the study (first, second, and third year students: 100 from each level); 246 were female and 54 male. These figures reflect the real proportions of female and male students in the institution in which this study was conducted. The subjects' ages varied from 19 to 24; they were all speakers of Arabic, French, and English. All the students had English as a major subject in college, and had had four to five years of English as a foreign language (FL) for 2-3 hours a week in high school. Most of the 3rd year students in this study specialised in linguistics; only a few took literature as a major.

Thirteen out of sixteen reading teachers took part in the research; their teaching experience spanned 1-25 years (1-10 years for the 1st year teachers, and 1-25 for the rest). Three of the teachers were male and ten female; two of them were native speakers of English.

The Reading Program

Reading is a compulsory subject for all the English Maîtrise [1] students. The reading courses cover five semesters, each one of them is a one-hour weekly course that is normally scheduled with the writing course, and is somewhat integrated with it.

The approach used in teaching reading is "eclectic." Teachers try to establish a balance between a process-based and a product-based approach; they not only try to make students learn skills and techniques that would enable them to improve their reading abilities and pass their exams, but they also try to make them become aware of the reading process. They teach the learners various strategies/techniques such as: skimming, scanning, guessing meaning from context, understanding the organisation of a text, finding the thesis statement, deduction, and inference to make them read better and faster. They show the students not only how to proceed when reading academic texts, but they also make them pay attention to the way ideas are built up and organised, and texts structured.

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1. The English Maîtrise may be considered as the equivalent of the Bachelor of Arts. Studies last four years, the 1st and 2nd years are devoted essentially to reinforcing the language skills; the 3rd and 4th years are years of specialisation; i.e., students either major in linguistics, or in literature and culture studies.

The reading course over-all objectives are to make students :

a. practise reading by using strategies and skills

b. improve their reading fluency and proficiency; namely, speed and comprehension when reading academic texts

c. and develop critical reading and interpretation.

The instructional materials/hand-outs used for the 1st year are excerpts from various sources (authentic texts, tasks, and exercises taken from various books) that students are required to use in and outside the reading class; some of the texts, tasks, and exercises are former exams. The hand-outs for the 2nd and 3rd years come from the same book; the first part is for the 2nd year, and the second for the 3rd year. In addition to the book, there are extensive readings (magazine/ newspaper articles, critical essays, and excerpts from books) that 3rd year students are required to read at home and discuss in class.

Students are required to attend courses and do their reading assignments regularly (i.e., once a week); they are also required to sit for two final exams (one at the end of each semester), and two make-up exams for those who may need them at the end of the year.

As there is no continuous assessment, the students' evaluation is based only on the exam marks, which are taken into account when calculating the students' averages; i.e., when deciding whether to allow them to pass, or fail the reading-writing-grammar module (10/20 is the passing average).

Questionnaires

This study is based on Student and Teacher questionnaires as well as interviews during the academic year 2001-2002. The Student Questionnaire, which was in English, was administered to 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students (all volunteers). It was conducted during regular reading classes, and the teachers who were in charge of it were asked to help students with the questions whenever required. The respondents spent 40-50 minutes to fill it out. On the whole, it did not pose problems.

The questionnaire was constructed to inquire about the learners' motivation for reading in general, and EFL reading more specifically. It investigated their reading habits and objectives as well as attitudes towards reading, the reading program, the instructional materials/hand-outs, the reading skills and strategies, the reading texts, and topics, the reading course, and the teaching approach as a whole. The last questions were about what might improve reading and their reading course. The questionnaire comprised 25 yes-no, multiple choice, and open questions in all.

Twelve of the thirteen teachers answered the Teacher Questionnaire. They were asked about their teaching experience, and about the teaching approach as a whole. The teachers had to evaluate the reading program, instructional materials, texts, topics, the teaching approach they used in class, and the testing system they followed. The last questions were about whether they enjoyed teaching reading and about their suggestions for changes that would improve the reading course. There were 19 closed and open questions in all.

Interviews

Due to various constraints, only ten students volunteered for the interviews (four 1st year students, three 2nd year, and three 3rd year students (six females, and four males in all), and seven teachers were interviewed (1st year teachers, 2nd year and 3rd year teachers). Both students and teachers were asked more or less the same questions as in the questionnaires, but were also free to speak about their perceptions of reading issues and to provide suggestions for solutions. All the interviewees were quite talkative and cooperative, they all, especially students, appreciated being asked to present their own points of view.

Data Collection and Procedures

The students' and teachers' responses from the questionnaires and interviews, which were recorded, transcribed, and classified according to level (1st/2nd /3rd year student/teacher) and gender. Then they were grouped, classified and analysed in relation to the points under investigation. Some percentages and frequency counts were provided whenever needed, and whenever possible. Given the small number of participants in the interviews, no firm conclusions could be drawn from this source. However, quoting from them was done to support or complement questionnaire results.

Results

Table 1

Students' Responses to Whether They Liked
Reading In English

Responses/Level	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	Total	
	%	%	%	No.	%
very much	18	15	24	57	19
much	32	41	33	106	35
moderately	32	33	38	103	34
a little	17	7	5	29	10
not at all	_	4	_	4	1
NA*	1	_	_	1	.3
Total	100	100	100	100	100

*NA: no answer/vague/not clear/don't know

Table 2

Female & Male Students' Responses to Whether
They liked Reading in English

Responses/Gender	Female		Male	
	No.	%	No.	%
very much	43	17	14	26
much	91	37	15	28
moderately	88	36	15	28
a little	21	9	8	15
not at all	2	.8	2	4
NA	1	.4	_	_
Total	246	100	54	100

Table 3

Students' Objectives in Reading

Responses/ Level	1st year			2nd year			3rd year			Total		
	Scores	%	Rank	Scores	%	Rank	Scores	%	Rank	Scores	%	Rank
for pleasure	55	15	4	60	16	4	76	19	4	191	16	4
to gain information	88	23	2	87	23	2	84	21	3	259	22	2
to fulfil teacher's demands for the course	54	14	5	50	13	5	67	16	5	171	15	5
to pass tests and exams	81	21	3	79	21	3	89	22	1	249	21	3
to learn the language	97	26	1	98	26	1	87	21	2	282	24	1
Miscellaneous	3	.7	6	7	2	6	6	1	6	16	1	6
Total	378			381			409			1168		

Table 4

Students' Responses to Whether Reading is an Important Skill

Responses/level	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	Total	
	%	%	%	No.	%
Yes	87	76	82	245	82
No	3	7	1	11	4
NA	10	17	17	44	14
Total	100	100	100	300	100

Table 5

Students' Responses to the Question of Whether the Reading Course
Prepared them for Other Courses

Responses/Level	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	Total	
	%	%	%	No.	%
Yes	93	80	77	250	83
No	5	19	21	45	15
NA	2	1	2	5	2
Total	100	100	100	300	100

Table 6

Students' Attitudes Towards the Reading Program

Level/Responses	Positive Responses		Negative Responses		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	
1st year	77	57	58	43	135
2nd year	45	35	82	65	127
3rd year	50	35	92	65	142
Total	172	43	232	57	404

Table 7

Students' Attitudes Towards the Instructional Materials

Level/ Responses	Postive Responses		Negative Responses		+/- Responses		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
1st year	104	89	12	10	1	.8	117
2nd year	78	64	41	34	2	.2	121
3rd year	101	75	33	25	—	—	134
Total	283	76	86	23	3	.8	372

Table 8

Students' Responses to the Question of Whether the Reading
Strategies Taught Were Helpful or Not

Responses/ Level	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	Total	
	%	%	%	No.	%
Yes	89	90	90	269	90
No	4	8	6	18	6
NA	7	2	4	13	4
Total	100	100	100	300	100

Table 9

Students' Responses to the Question of Whether they Attended
Reading Classes Regularly

Responses/ Level	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	Total	
	%	%	%	No.	%
Yes	79	52	66	197	66
No	21	45	32	98	33
NA		3	2	5	1
Total	100	100	100	300	100

Table 10

Students' Attitudes Towards the Teaching Approach

Level/ Responses	Postive Responses No.	%	Negative Responses No.	%	+/- Responses No.	%	Total
1st year	67	70	29	30	–	–	96
2nd year	34	28	87	71	2	2	123
3rd year	48	41	67	57	2	2	117
Total	149	44	183	54	4	1	336

Table 11

Female & Male Students' Attitudes Towards the Teaching Approach

Gender/ Responses	Postive Responses No.	%	Negative Responses No.	%	+/- Responses No.	%	Total No.
Female	130	48	140	51	3	1	273
Male	19	30	43	68	1	2	63
Total	149	44	183	54	4	1	336

Table 12

Students' Attitudes Towards the Way They Were Tested

Level/ Responses	Postive Responses No.	%	Negative Responses No.	%	+/- Responses No.	%	Total
1st year	30	45	35	53	1	2	66
2nd year	6	6	99	94	–	–	105
3rd year	13	16	68	82	2	2	83
Total	49	19	202	80	3	1	254

Analysis

Motivation for Reading

Student motivation for EFL reading was higher than for reading in general; 54% claimed that they liked reading in English "much" or "very much" (Tables 1 and 2). Learners also reported in interviews that they liked reading short stories mainly. This could be linked to the short length, or to the fact that the short story is a very popular form of literary fiction in the Arabic-speaking world.

When asked in the interview which language they read most in, 1st year students placed Arabic first before French and English; a rather normal classification that matches the introduction of these languages in the school curriculum, and that may well go with their level of proficiency. The 2nd and 3rd year students claimed that English was the language they read most. Responses also indicated, however, that 73% of the students devoted less than ten hours a week to reading in English, and 48% said that they read less than 30 pages a week. Students' main objective in reading in English was "to learn the language" (see Table 3).

Attitudes towards Reading

Eighty-two percent of the respondents claimed that reading was an important skill (see Table 4) and had positive attitudes generally. The respondents, whatever their level and gender, believed that reading improved writing first and foremost, and some added that it improved one's language proficiency in general, increased fluency, broadened one's horizons and world view, and developed one's imagination, critical thinking and argumentation.

Attitudes towards the Reading Course

Most (83%) of the students said that the reading course prepared them for other courses, especially the literature and civilisation courses (see Table 5). Most all the teachers (11/12) who answered the questionnaire concurred. Eight said that they enjoyed teaching it although two of them admitted that they "got a bit bored with the same old texts," and of teaching the same tasks in the second semester. A few stated that they did not enjoy teaching the course because they were often disappointed by their students' lack of interest in reading, and lack of work in the course. This was confirmed by five of the interviewed teachers, who reported that the reading course was 'uninteresting' for students; they pointed out that the problem with this course was that like any skills course; students did not like to practice ~~ ~   ~ assignments,

which they did not find "challenging"; One teacher said that students were rather "passive", and that "they just recorded the information they received from the teacher."

Attitudes towards the Reading Program

Comments upon the reading program (see Table 6) were rather negative, (57% of the total), particularly among the second and third year students. Although they considered the program "interesting," they thought that it was "long" and "hard." The 1st year teachers' comments about the program were also rather negative. They considered the 1st semester better because they had "revamped it", but that the second semester was "not very satisfying. In contrast, the 2nd and 3rd year teachers" comments were positive on the whole.

Attitudes towards the Instructional Materials/Hand-outs and Texts

The students' comments upon the instructional materials/hand-outs used in the reading class were positive, representing 76% of the total count of the answers (see Table 7). The students qualified them as mainly "useful' and "interesting". Nevertheless, a few comments were negative such as: "not interesting", "not useful", "boring" etc. Only 54% of the respondents considered that the hand-outs "answered their needs." In contrast again, the teachers' comments upon the hand-outs were mostly positive; most of them (10/12) claimed that they met the students' and their own requirements.

Comments concerning the texts were mixed. Learners, generally speaking, judged them "interesting," but "difficult." Some students stressed the fact that they were "not well selected," and rather long. Students were in general agreement that what they did not like most about the reading course were texts.

As far as 1st year teachers are concerned, their remarks about the texts were rather negative; some described them as "easy", "not interesting", and "not as varied as they should be". On the other hand, the 2nd and 3rd year teachers' comments were positive on the whole.

Attitudes towards the Topics

Most (63%) of the students' comments were positive concerning the topics dealt with in the reading class. The learners, whatever their level or gender, judged the topics "motivating," "challenging," but "difficult." Interestingly, however, the 1st and 2nd year teachers' remarks about the topics were rather negative, depicting them as "not really inter   " "not motivating," "boring," "not varied," etc.

Attitudes towards the Reading Skills/ Strategies

When asked about whether they used reading strategies or not when reading in English, 53% answered positively. The students, whatever their level or gender, contended that the reading strategies/skills they used most were: scanning, skimming, summarising, outlining and paraphrasing. Moreover, 90% recognised that these strategies were helpful and that they improved their reading skill (see Table 8). Students also claimed that strategy learning was what they liked most about the reading course.

Nevertheless, some students expressed their skepticism by saying that these skills helped them read "faster", but not "better". They argued that when the texts were difficult, the strategies did not help much, they rather became "a waste of time", and a few declared that they did not need to be taught such skills, saying that they knew how to read, and that they did not need to learn how to do it; what they really needed, they said, was to read "good stuff".

The teachers reported that when teaching reading, they focused upon skimming, scanning, guessing meaning from context, understanding the organisation of a text, finding out the thesis statement, and inference. According to them, these skills/ strategies were very helpful. They claimed that the most useful were: vocabulary deduction, guessing meaning from context, skimming, scanning and inference. However, they did not believe that their students knew how to use these strategies when reading many texts in English. One teacher said that he did not think they applied the various strategies on texts outside the course, or in exams.

Attendance Rate

Table 9 indicates that 66% of the students attend reading classes regularly. However, "regular attendance" did not necessarily mean the same for students and teachers. In fact, for a good number of students, 3-4 absences per semester and per subject, was considered "normal." This may result partially from the fact that in this system absences are not taken into consideration in the computation of students' averages. Stated reasons included:

1. The course was "not useful," "boring," "tiring" or "unnecessary."

2. The reading course came after a two-hour writing class.

3. Some did not have time for all the courses, so they dropped those they considered less useful/ important.

4. Attendance was not compulsory, so students felt free to attend or not.

5. Three students mentioned that they did not need the teacher, and that reading was a personal task; One of the interviewees said: "I'd rather work on my own, I can choose my texts and my writers".

Regarding teachers' responses, it should be noted that in spite of the fact that a good number of students claimed that they attended reading classes regularly, most teachers (i.e., 8/12) complained about low attendance, especially in the second semester (in the case of the 1st year students mainly).

The most likely causes according to them included those mentioned by students, but also included possible course difficulty, and students' perception that reading was easy and that their reading proficiency already good enough.

Attitudes towards Teaching and Assessment

When asked about the way they were taught reading, only first year students responded positively, (see Table 10). It is interesting to note that this is one of the few areas where there was a marked difference between male and female students. The male students were far more negative about instruction (Table 11). In addition, the students complained about the way they were tested; 80% of their comments were negative (Table 12). In interviews, students said that exams were much "longer" and "harder" than expected and that they did not reveal their reading abilities. In fact, only half said that exams tested their abilities.

In contrast, eight out of the twelve teachers who answered the questionnaire reported that they were satisfied with the way they taught and assessed reading; those who were not, admitted that they neglected the reading course because they felt that the learners needed to be helped with writing more than reading.

Most (8/12) claimed that the exams reflected what had been taught in class (skills development and strategy use) and reflected students' abilities, but that students lacked practice in speed reading and in all the reading skills and strategies. They put the blame on students' shoulders contending that many of them did not attend classes regularly and hence could not benefit from the reading techniques/skills introduced in class. Nine out of twelve teachers reported that most students did not do their assignments, and that they did not read much even though they claimed the opposite. They added that many of the learners considered that they knew how to read, and consequently, were not convinced of the usefulness of the reading course.

Teachers and students, on the whole, were most at odds with each other on the issues of instruction and assessment. The data here points to a major area where there are differences of opinion which need addressing.

Students' and Teachers' Suggestions

The following are among suggestions made by students and teachers to improve reading and the reading course:

- Reading a lot (this was the claim of 78% of the students; and all the teachers)
- Inciting students to use reading strategies
- Selecting "good texts" (good academic texts from various sources) and "interesting and varied topics"
- Involving students in program preparation
- Having a "competent", "dynamic", "motivating", "encouraging" teacher
- Separating the reading course from the writing course
- Increasing the number of hours per week for reading (1.5/2 hours per week)
- Having a more appropriate schedule for the course
- Having more practice in class; more exercises, and more challenging tasks
- Reinforcing co-ordination between reading and content-based courses teachers, and establishing bridges between the reading course and content courses (e.g., literature, civilisation/culture studies, and linguistics courses)
- Integrating the various skills (grammar, reading, writing, oral expression)
- Having a better evaluation system (i.e., establishing criteria for both text selection and testing; reconsidering the choice of exam texts and questions; choosing shorter and less difficult texts similar to those dealt with in class—texts that would assess both comprehension, strategy use and degree of assimilation of the various skills).

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

Our efforts yielded a number of interesting findings and areas where further discussion between administrators, teachers, and students could bring about better communication, cooperation and needed improvements. Most of the students said that they were conscious of the importance of EFL reading, and of the usefulness of reading and the reading course, and 54% of them actually indicated that they enjoyed reading in English. These findings are generally encouraging. What should also be noted here is that there was a slight increase in motivation for EFL reading across levels, despite decreasing attitudes among the 2nd and 3rd year students about the reading program. Efforts should to be taken to capitalize on initial positive attitudes and motivation. This could involve several of the suggestions mentioned above:

including students in course preparation, doing more reading (i.e., extensive reading), experimenting further with content-based materials and methods, modeling strategy use, and altering the nature of the assessment procedures. Both teachers and students stressed the fact that the teacher still had an important role to play in inciting learners to read and in showing them how to do it.

Consequently, instructors need to put a great deal of thought into: developing programs which will foster their students' interest, selecting reading materials that are well within their students' linguistic competence (in terms of vocabulary, grammar, content, topic, length, etc.),and choosing materials and tasks that are appealing to their students. They could also ask their students to collect and choose some of the reading material in order to enhance their motivation, and incite them to read what they want to read, not just what they are required to read. This option has actually become much easier to accomplish since the advent of the internet.

As classroom reading is not sufficient (even with 2 hours per week), it must be complemented by extensive reading outside the classroom (e.g., collections of short stories (since they expressed their preference for this literary genre)), while making sure, in motivating ways, that reading is actually taking place. Reading for pleasure would help improve the learners' reading fluency and proficiency, and would certainly have a positive impact on their attitudes towards EFL reading.

To sum up, our research has given us a good foundation upon which to address the attitudes and motivations of our students. We have also gained a better understanding of the differences in perspective of our teachers and students. Such a foundation will go a long ways towards future program improvement, teacher in-servicing efforts, and student morale, all of which are important variables in learning. While program directors and teachers may not always have the resources to conduct such a detailed and wide-ranging study such as ours, the principle of becoming more aware of our learners, becoming more learner-centered, is obtainable to some degree by us all.

Acknowledgments

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