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Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Sociocultural influences on reading

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This study looks at the developmental habit formation of first language (L1) reading of college learners: changes in social influences, motivation, and time spent reading. Based on the findings, theoretical approaches will be drawn on how to apply existing L1 reading influences and motivation to promoting a second language (L2) reading habit.

本研究では、大学生の母国語での読書習慣の発達の形成過程を社会的影響、動機付け、読書時間の変化と併せて比較調査する。研究結果に基づき、母国語での読書に影響を与える要素を利用し、第二言語での読書習慣形成を促進する方法を提案する。

**H**ow can teachers *catch and hold* the interests of learners (Dewey, 1975) for second language (L2) reading? What inducements can they offer and what can they say to convince learners to read? According to the results in a recent study (Yamashita, 2007), both cognitive and affective domains of first language (L1) reading transfer to L2 reading, particularly factors of intellectual value, practical value, and linguistic value. In other words, if learners already think and feel positively about reading in their L1, they will think and feel similarly about reading in their L2. Are interests in reading already established? If so, how were they developed? Answers to these questions can help teachers to transfer existing positive attitudes and engagement in L1 reading over to L2 reading.

To look at the development of cognitive and affective domains is to look at how identity is formed within the sociocultural context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). “Identity formation must be viewed as shaped by and shaping forms of action, involving a complex interplay among cultural tools employed in the action, and the sociocultural and institutional context of the action, and the purposes embedded in the action” (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 84). Thus values and behaviors are mediated through involvement with others in the social context, especially with people who are close, such as relatives and friends, namely significant others (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Teachers seeking to motivate learners can involve them in *engaged participation*, or a “meaningful participation in a [community of practice] where to-be-learned knowledge is valued and used” (Hickey, 2003; p. 411). Engaged participation focuses on getting and keeping learners active in learning; it is accomplished by mediating and maintaining actions through social practices (see Figure 1).

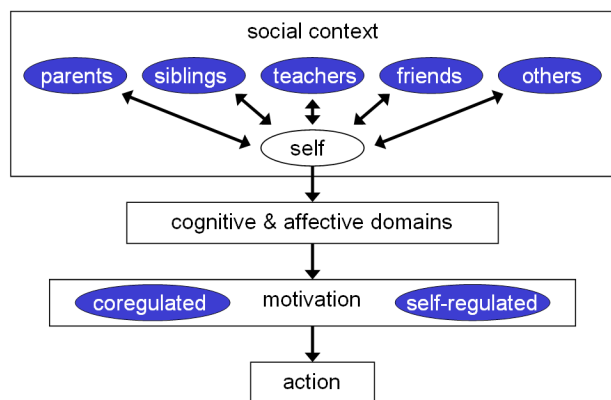


Figure 1: Sociocultural influences

This study sought the sociocultural influences on L1 reading of college learners throughout their developmental stages in life. Learners were asked whether they felt more motivated to read since entering college, and whether their time spent reading had changed, and if so, why. The purpose of this study was to provide an understanding of habit formation in L1 reading to promote habit formation of L2 reading.

## Methods

### Participants

There were 113 participants from eleven college majors in science: sophomores (56.64%), juniors (32.74%), seniors (9.73%), females (16.81%), males (83.19%), Chinese students (3.54%), Japanese students (96.46%).

### Instrument

In July 2006, an anonymous questionnaire written in Japanese was administered to classes at a private college of science in the Tokyo area. It comprised three 6-point Likert scale items, a box chart totaling 46 open boxes, and one open-ended question which asked the participants to explain why they spend more or less time reading these days. The heading indicated all questions pertained to L1 reading, and participants were verbally instructed the same in Japanese (see Appendix 1).

### Data analysis

For the Likert scale questions, the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and kurtosis were determined. From the box chart question, a total of 828 boxes were marked. From this raw data, percentages were calculated using a base of 113 participants. Answers to the open-ended question were emically categorized and then quantified. Two participants did not respond in this section, therefore a base of 111 participants was used to determine percentages.

## Results

The first graph displays interactions among the sociocultural influences on L1 reading development. As these learners matured, influences of parents and teachers decreased, the influences of friends, advertisements, and book reviews increased. Influences from book reviews further suggest that as these learners grew older they developed the agency to seek the tools from their social environment to make decisions about L1 reading (see Figure 2).

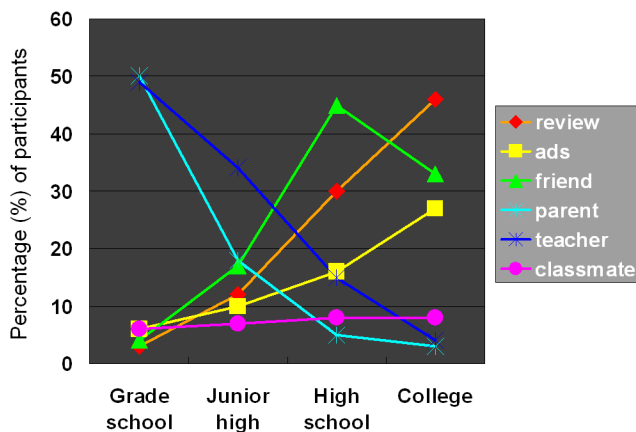


Figure 2: Change in influences to read in L1

All but absent were the influences of classmates, although influences of friends increased rapidly during adolescence. This shows that friends, rather than classmates, are the peers who learners most identify with. Affective

and physical proximity gives friends more influence than other classmates, and even small actions can have profound effects, as illustrated by one report, “My friend recommended an interesting book to me and I thought it was interesting, too. Since then, I started reading books such as novels.”

Along with friends, advertisements, and book reviews, influences on L1 reading that increased with age were reading for gaining knowledge, having fun, and killing time. Learners increasingly found interest and value in the activity of reading as they grew older (see Figure 3 and Table 1). Another interaction is seen in the second graph, that these learners internalized the values about reading from their parents and teachers.

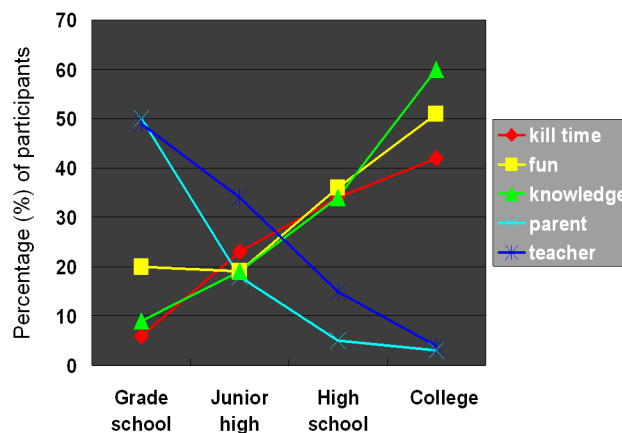


Figure 3: Change in motivation to read in L1

Table 1: Likert items (6 anchors strong agreement).

Question	Mean	SD	Skew*	Kurt*
I enjoy reading.	4.78	0.95	-0.68	1
I am more motivated to read now than during high school times.	4.17	1.41	-0.44	-0.52
I spend more time reading now than during high school times.	3.85	1.58	-0.27	-0.91

\*As values of skewness and kurtosis approach zero they indicate normal distribution.

Fifty-three percent of the participants reported an increase in time spent reading due to internal factors, particularly introjected and intrinsic motivation. Introjected motivation comes from an internalized value of social expectations, when motivation is regulated by the feeling that an action ought to be done. For example, the learner now accepts that reading is important for personal or academic growth because parents and teachers said so. One participant displayed this type of motivation by writing, “I have more free time now, and I thought *it’s a bad idea if I don’t read books at my age*. I also want to accumulate new knowledge.” Another participant wrote, “Because I strongly think *I must be able to understand what’s called common sense in society* such as current issues.” There lingers the sense that it is wrong *not* to read, an indication of internalized sociocultural values, also explained as introjected regulation by Deci & Ryan (2002).

Nineteen percent of the participants increased their reading from the joy of it alone, describing intrinsic motivation. One participant reported such an awakening, “After entering

college, I can have my own schedule. At junior high school and high school, I had to read from the order “Read!” but I don’t have anybody who orders me to read now. *I started looking for interesting books by myself.*” Another participant showed that it does not take a whole curriculum to catch and hold learner interest. This learner reported, “I started feeling that *I want to read more because I read one interesting book.*” It took just one good book.

The data show an overall increase in motivation as well as time spent reading; however, there were opposite cases. Thirty percent reported a decrease in time spent reading since high school. Reasons were mixed, but the determinants were external factors, primarily less free time. Nine percent of the participants reported cognitive and affective conditions that debilitated engagement in L1 reading, such as they do not find anything interesting enough to read or they had never enjoyed reading to begin with (see Tables 2 and 3).

Discussion

Positive L1 reading interests and engagement are largely present in these college learners, developed through the involvement with significant others and later internalized. Advertisements positively influenced reading habits, while friends did even more. Use of book reviews to select books show these learners developed into independent readers. Finally, these learners read now because they believe it is good for their personal and professional development and because they enjoy it.

**Table 2: I spend more time reading these days because ...**

Locus	Facilitating conditions	Count	Participant %
External	more free time	29	25.66
	longer commute	15	13.27
	more access	3	2.65
	more money	2	1.77
Internal	joy	21	18.58
	personal growth	11	9.73
	academic growth	11	9.73
	specific interest	9	7.96
	more autonomy	3	2.65
	other	5	4.42
External facilitating		49	43.36
Internal facilitating		60	53.10
Total facilitating		109	69.87

Note: participant counts and percentages do not always add up because mixed responses were coded in multiple factors.

By college age, the practices and values which comprise active L1 reading are already established. Since cognitive and affective domains of L1 reading transfer to L2 reading (Yamashita, 2007), these learners now only need a sociocultural context to support this transfer. Three ways teachers and others can get and keep learners engaged in L2 reading are: creating communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), encouraging friendships, and diversifying L2 reading practices.

**Table 3: I spend less time reading these days because ...**

Locus	Debilitating conditions	Count	Participant %
External	less free time	30	26.55
	less commute	2	1.77
	less access	4	3.54
	less money	1	0.88
	never been a joy	2	1.77
Internal	watching TV / movies	2	1.77
	academic growth	1	0.88
	nothing is interesting	3	2.65
	more autonomy	1	0.88
	other	1	0.88
	External debilitating	37	32.74
Internal debilitating		10	8.85
Total debilitating		47	30.13

Note: participant counts and percentages do not always add up because mixed responses were coded in multiple factors.

### Creating communities of practice

A community of practice actively involves learners through engaged participation of “reflect[ing] upon and appropriat[ing] the cultural meanings and practices within that community . . . [and] provid[ing] contexts and support for the social construction of motivation” (Pressick-Kilborn & Walker, 2002; p. 170). For reading, this can mean sustained silent reading (Day & Bamford, 1998) in the classroom, going to libraries and bookstores, sharing and

exchanging reading materials, experiences, resources, tips, recommendations—all accomplished together. Therefore task based activities suit the practice as they engage everyone in class and promote enjoyed readings with reading circles (Furr, 2007), newsletters, posters, shared journals, presentations, and reading reviews (Bamford & Day, 2004).

Book reviews followed by a book exchange lead directly to more reading and keep certain titles popular throughout the semester, and experiencing the same stories when read at home develops shared experiences beyond the classroom. Similarly, shared reflections about finding a favorite book during any period in life further mediate value and interest in reading. Reflections in journals or presentations should include when and where the book was found, who else was involved, why it was liked, and how it was influential.

Lifting constraints and allowing latitude enriches the practices of the community and generates more meaningfulness about the activities. Activities do not need to be relegated to L2 reading materials nor to L2-only production. Simply connecting learners to each other by sharing their interests strengthens identity formation and group cohesion, invaluable resources for better learning and health of the community.

### *Encouraging friendships*

Findings in this study showed peer influence differs depending on who the peer is. Classmates have far less influence over reading than friends. I argue that by making friends, learners will get more input about reading and will be more receptive to it. Murphey (1998) argued even further,

that friendship formation provides investment in the course, positive identity formation and self-esteem beneficial if not necessary for learning, meaningfulness for L2 interaction and in successfully doing so the added benefit of identity formation as an L2 user. Murphey suggested teachers use strategies for learners to memorize everyone's names, encourage numerous changes of partners and interactions with different people, and give plenty of time during the interactions to form friendships.

It is hard to conceive of an environment where learners are expected to share reading materials, personal responses to readings, and reflections on reading experiences without an established level of friendship. Those without even one classroom friend may become completely disconnected from the class. Friendships connect people to each other and to the activities in practice. One participant in this study claimed reading time decreased "because there's no book which piques my interest." All he really needs is a friend to recommend a book. Another's reason was "nobody around me reads and I can't borrow books from anybody."

A major benefit of a community of practice is that it prevents learners from becoming isolated. In studying the problem of college drop-outs in the United States, Raley (2007) reported on a meta-analysis, "Whether a person stays in college can depend on how well she socially integrates into the college community" (p. 76). At a time in Japan when the decline in birthrate has caused difficulties in filling classroom seats, each teacher in each class can contribute to the financial health of the college simply by encouraging friendships. Murphey (1998) said from his own experience, seeing friends was one of his main reasons for going to school.

### ***Diversifying L2 reading practices***

Many sociocultural contexts, resources, and practices in L1 reading are not mirrored in L2 reading. Limited visions for L2 reading abound. I will suggest areas where L2 reading teachers, librarians, material sellers, and other practitioners can take L2 reading beyond graded readers (GR), beyond the classroom, and beyond the school.

I welcome the rising interest in GR. However, teachers should stay open to including variety, such as authentic materials for scholastic purposes, song lyrics, magazines, Internet sites, newspapers. For example, a great L2 reading resource exists in what I call easy newspapers (EN): *Asahi Weekly*, *The Japan Times Junior*, *The Japan Times Weekly*, *Mainichi Weekly*, and *Shukan ST*. They are written in easy English, and display glosses of difficult vocabulary and phrases in the margins. Unlike any GR, a single EN issue packs enough variety to satisfy everyone's interest in class. Moreover, the topics are up-to-date and connected with the immediate environments learners live in daily. These newspapers provide fresh perspectives on current issues, human interest stories, culture, entertainment, and practical ideas for improving English. One yearly subscription to any of these newspapers holds more topics of interest than a large graded reader collection. These newspapers also have their own websites, some with sound files to listen to selected articles.

L2 reading practices need to move beyond the classroom. Countless learners are unaware of the existence and joy of GR and EN. For learners who visit my office I keep current issues of EN in a stand on my desk. I invite them to page through the latest issues and they get immersed in an article.

Once hooked, I hand them a list of bookstores that have GR and EN as I do in all my classes. With the names and Internet homepage addresses of these bookstores in hand, anyone can easily get to these places. Advertisements work, this study showed. GR are heavily promoted to teachers at conferences, but they are not promoted enough directly to the learners. Each year I see thousands of ads targeted at young adults, ads for music, fashion, study guides, etc., yet I have never seen a single poster promoting GR. Marketers could expand the territory for advertising these and L2 reading materials.

Institutions other than schools could be promoting L2 reading. Smaller bookstores do not stock GR or the EN, and even in larger bookstores it is difficult for me to find them because of poor location and lack of attractive displays. GR are placed separately from other L2 study materials, limiting exposure to target customers. Moreover, GR are relegated to out-of-the-way dark corners. They are virtually hidden from learners, often near the section for teacher resources. GR sections could be moved to more heavily trafficked areas. Also, their thin dark spines lined side by side expose nothing of their interesting covers designed for the very purpose of attracting attention. Face-outs and displays on end tables alone would make a huge difference. Libraries could be hosting book review contests and granting GR book awards, as the Extensive Reading Foundation ([www.erfoundation.org](http://www.erfoundation.org)) does online. A growing online community is used by teachers of extensive reading (Bradford-Watts & O'Brien, 2007), but rarely by learners. Communities of L2 reading practice for learners could also expand beyond the schools into a greater online presence.

## Conclusion

Teachers can better adjust the focus of their encouragement to read when they know the developmental processes that lead to reading. Throughout the lives of these college learners, sociocultural influences have contributed to the habit formation of reading. Early on, parents and teachers told these learners that reading is good, and this value became developmentally internalized as introjected motivation. As these learners grew, so did their intrinsic motivation to read along with the influences on reading from their friends but not from other peers. The sources these learners most seek for selecting books to read are book reviews. These developments show how learners have become independent L1 readers.

Attitudes about L1 reading transfer to L2 reading (Yamashita, 2007). As their cognitive and affective domains are already developed positively toward L1 reading, these learners are ready for L2 reading. Three ways described in this paper for building a supportive sociocultural context for this transfer were creating communities of practice, encouraging friendships, and diversifying L2 reading practices.

The adage that people learn to read by reading corresponds to the view that the sociocultural context promotes reading by reading. If the surrounding community does not value or practice the activity, neither will the learners. Learners will engage L2 reading when the community engages it and when learners find their participation meaningful.

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## Appendix 1

### Questionnaire

#### Reading in your native language

To encourage college students to read in English, I want to investigate college students' native language reading habits—what, when, where, and why they read. Your help is appreciated. Please mark your answer with a circle in the box.

#### 1. I enjoy reading

I strongly agree.	I agree.	I agree a little.	I disagree a little.	I disagree.	I strongly disagree.

#### 2. I am more motivated to read now than during high school times.

I strongly agree.	I agree.	I agree a little.	I disagree a little.	I disagree.	I strongly disagree.

3. Why did you read before, and why do you read now?

	Grade school	Junior high school	High school	College
My parents recommended that reading is good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My classmates recommended that reading is good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My teachers recommended that reading is good	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I saw ads about books or materials	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I saw a good review about books or materials	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My friends recommended that something was interesting to read	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To kill time	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Out of necessity to gain knowledge	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's fun to read books	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. I spend more time reading now than during high school times.

I strongly agree.	I agree.	I agree a little.	I disagree a little.	I disagree.	I strongly disagree.

5. Why do you spend more or less time reading now than during high school times?

Thank you