



For those who don't know me, my name is Alex Davis. After an early career in social work, about 20 years ago I began postgrad study in SLT, went on to do my Masters & have been involved in international education ever since.

I taught at Waikato Uni in what is now Pathways College, was in a high school for a number of years, and at Wintec since 2011.



# Students and their reading Past, present and future connections

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My research - simply stated, I'm interested in students and I'm interested in their reading  
How much they read in the past  
How much they read now  
How that might change in the future

This report is preliminary - the study is underway, but not complete and there is a lot of analysis ahead. So I will just give a sample of early findings

The structure – I will start with some scene-setting (including of course some review of research findings), then in the second part describe the study and some of the early data

### *Some observations*

#### ***Reading***

- The motivation to read of many 'higher-level' students is often 'extrinsic' - because of course requirements rather than personal interest
- Many lack engagement or confidence in reading in English for personal pleasure or interest
- They seem unaware of the significance of reading in developing their language proficiency in general and 'academic' language specifically

#### ***Writing***

- They are often stronger orally than in their writing
- Their writing is narrowly focused, they have a good understanding of the argument essay, but not much beyond that
- They often struggle to develop & extend ideas, support claims and provide evidence
- They tend to incorporate a more informal 'oral' grammar and vocabulary and have limited access or understanding of the more formal, objective 'academic' style required

Some observations & reflections of students in our final level courses

"I never had much opportunity to study at high school in my country. I left school quite young to help my mother making jewellery. High school was not really encouraged for girls, though it is different now. When I came to NZ I learned to speak first, I didn't know how to write, I watched TV and stuff, and then I used my speaking English when I started to write. I know I still need to learn more about writing. I also don't read much; I don't really like reading that much. it's so difficult"

*Female student, who has been in NZ for 7 years*

This is a quotation from a student I taught. Her 'words' reflect the experience or viewpoint of many of our students - certainly not all, but a significant number.

I wanted to put this in because it is a common theme, but also a common 'story'. As much as anything, I am interested in students and their stories. Stories of language journeys, stories of journeys into reading.

Cummins (1984) - in his research on conversational and academic language, drew a distinction between two quite distinct aspects or components of language proficiency

- 'basic interpersonal communicative skills' (BICS)
- 'cognitive academic language proficiency' (CALP)

It takes **2 years** to achieve oral proficiency to converse 'easily' with native speaker classmates

It can take between **4-9 years** to acquire the academic proficiency needed for school success

(cited in Freeman & Freeman (2006) & Franken & McComish (2003))

BICS – 'conversations' (oral or written) on everyday topics

CALP – ability to comprehend, talk, read & write academic discourse

Academic language is different, not superior to conversation. 2 aspects of language proficiency.

Attempts to explain students lack of success with academic tasks & in cognitive tests when orally strong. Views cause as linguist not cognitive.

Students do not lack 'higher-order' thinking ability, simply lack academic literacy.

**Some definitions of 'academic' English/academic literacy**

“ .. more abstract, complex, and challenging language that will eventually permit [learners] to participate successfully in mainstream classroom instructions” (Goldenberg, 2000)

Ability of learners to “access academic texts and to understand and analyse what they read” (Freeman & Freeman, 2009)

“Reading and writing as social practices within different academic subjects, disciplines and communities” (Lea & Street, 2006).

So what exactly do I mean when I say 'academic' language - here are some definitions

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**Notion of 'Common Underlying Proficiency'**

The extent a student has proficiency in L1, that proficiency can be transferred to L2, provided:

- The student has reached a 'threshold' level
- There is adequate exposure to the target L2
- There is adequate motivation to learn
- There is explicit focus on the target language

Relationship between L1 reading proficiency, L2 language proficiency, and L2 reading performance

(Cummins as cited in Franken & McComish, 2003, Freeman & Freeman, 2009).

CUP - What a learner knows in their first language transfers to English



**ELLs (English language learners) in US high schools:**

- Currently 10% of all students
- 25% by 2025
- 40% by 2040 (Kanno & Cromley)
- More than half the long-term English learners born in US, studying at high school, are identified as having 'limited English proficiency'.
- 50% receive no post-secondary education (Kanno & Cromley)

**NESB students in NZ primary & secondary schools**

- An increasingly diverse & multilingual group of students
- Only a small proportion are directly funded for extra ESOL provision at any point in time (31,589 students in 2013)
- Almost half of the funded NESB students (46%) are of Pasifika background, and most of them are attending primary schools
- Minority language students more than twice as likely as majority language students to be in bottom quarter of reading literacy performance  
Franken & McComish (2003)

*Recently arrived, well prepared/educated*

*Recently arrived, limited academic knowledge and literacy in L1*

*Long-time learners, conversationally strong, but lacking academic English*

Those with strong academic preparation before arrival best equipped to transfer their learning to English  
Important to distinguish between those with adequate schooling and those without – latter will need additional, long-term support.

“Illiteracy is not a permanent condition or characteristic”.

*Bigelow & Vilogradov, 2011, p. 120*

Literacy is best developed in “learner-centred, language rich environments that are both linguistically stimulating and intellectually challenging”.

*Hudelson, 1994, cited in Franken & McComish, 2003, p26*

“... extensive reading is the single most effective way to improve language proficiency”.

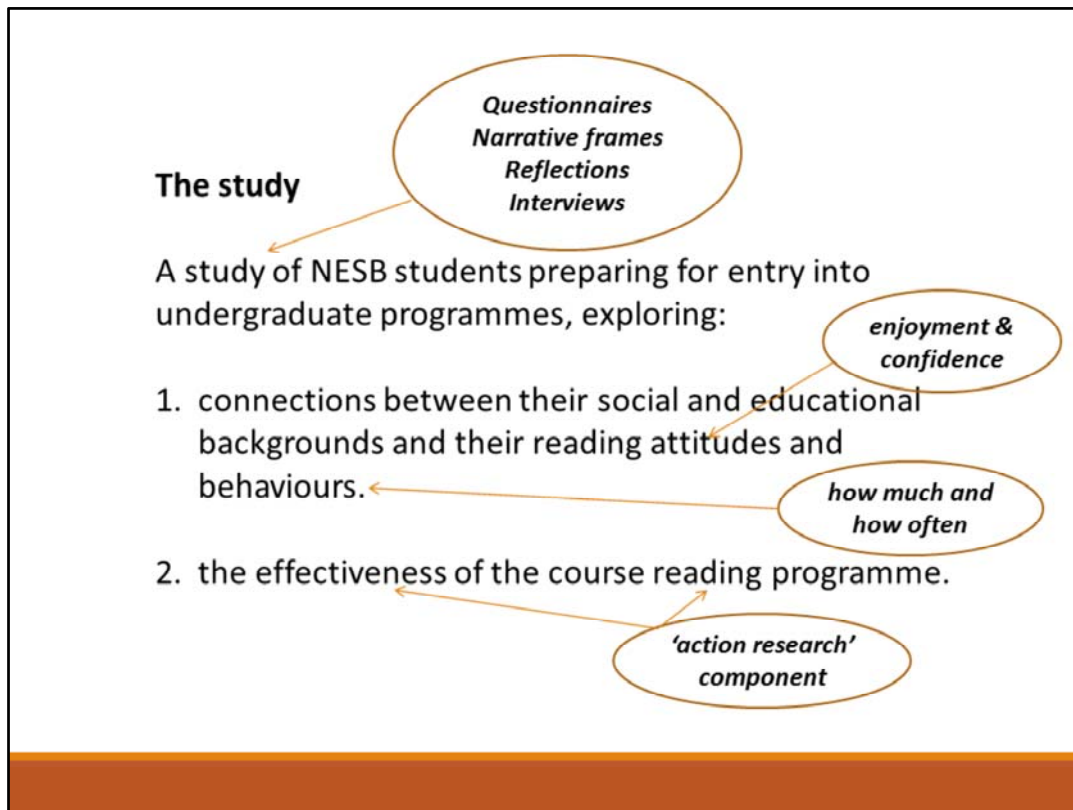
*Maley, 2005, p 354*

**Components of an effective reading programme (Mikulecky, 2011)**

1. Substantial; amounts of **extensive reading for pleasure**, with opportunities for talking about books with people who can model the literate skills required in English-language contexts.
2. Focused, interactive lessons on **specific reading skills**, with opportunities for students to explain their thinking, and direct instruction on applying the skills strategically to a variety of texts.
3. Decoding and **vocabulary learning** activities that include direct instruction in the phonemes of English and high frequency words, multiple opportunities for exposure to and manipulation of target words, and guidelines for individual vocabulary learning.
4. Training and repeated practice in **fluency development**: skimming, scanning, previewing, and reading rate development.

### **Benefits of an 'extensive reading' programme'**

- Vocabulary and structure awareness
- Automaticity
- Increased background knowledge
- Improved comprehension
- Promotes confidence and motivation  
(Grabe, as cited in Day & Banford, 1998)
  
- Gains in reading, writing, listening, and oral proficiency, and vocabulary.  
(Review of research findings from Day & Banford, 1998)



Which bring us to this study, a study well underway but far from complete.

What are the connections between:

- Early reading experiences and literacy in first language
- parents' literacy and educational level and experiences of "success" in early education
- L1 literacy (reading & writing) and later academic success (secondary and tertiary)
- L1 and L2 literacy?

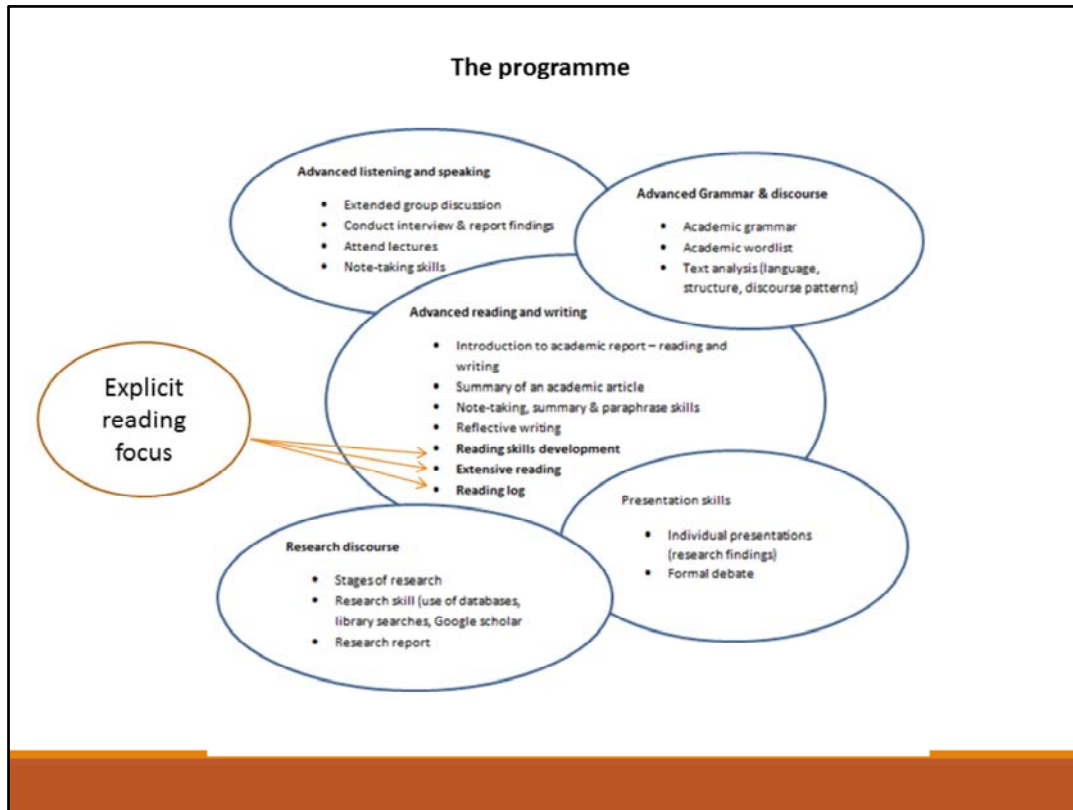
"Stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experience in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes".

(Polkinghorne, cited in Saldana, 2013, p.131.)

Narrative enquiry explores how "participant transformation progresses through time" and its conclusions may well lead to "evocative closure and provocative questions rather than fixed answers".

(Saldana, 2013, p. 134).

In other words, in research stories tell their own story, they describe ongoing links and connections, whether tenuous or strong, implicit or explicit, positive or negative, in the context of life journey. The connections are unlikely to be able to be expressed in any direct correlations, but as Saldana notes, narrative enquiry is perfectly legitimate even when its conclusions lead to "evocative closure and provocative questions rather than fixed answers" (p. 134).



So what is the programme?

### **The participants**

30 students studying in 2 classes, at the same level.

A very diverse group, in terms of their:

- reasons for being in NZ
- age range
- ethnicity & languages
- educational backgrounds & levels
- length of time in NZ
- future study plans

And who are the participants?

- **Reasons** (migrant, refugee, fee-payers)
- **age** - from late teens to 60s
- **ethnicity & languages**- 10 nationalities
- **educational background & level** - one year schooling to doctorate level
- **length of time in NZ** - several weeks to 9 years
- **reasons for being in NZ** - fee-payers, migrants, refugees
- **future study plans** - certificate level to bachelor level, engineering courses to nursing degrees But all wanting to study further and seeking to improve their level of English



### Collecting the data:

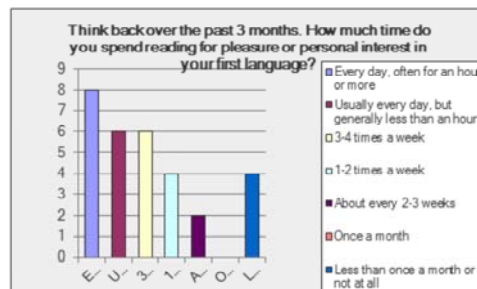
1. Questionnaires
2. 'Narrative frames'
3. Reflective journals
4. Interviews

Now I'll move to the data collection. I have 4 primary methods:

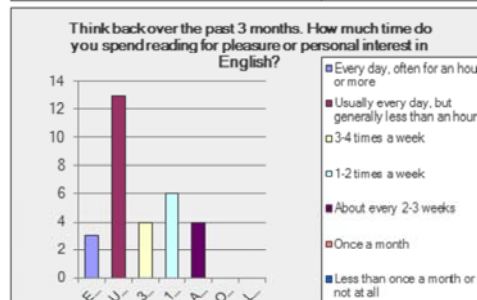
The first, questionnaires are mainly aimed at getting data on student habits and attitudes. The initial response was gathered at the beginning of the course. Students were asked to reflect back on the previous 3 months and consider how much time they had spent reading - in their L1, in English for pleasure and interest, and also in English for study purposes. They will be resurveyed at the end to see how this has changed.

### Time spent reading – pleasure or personal interest

First language



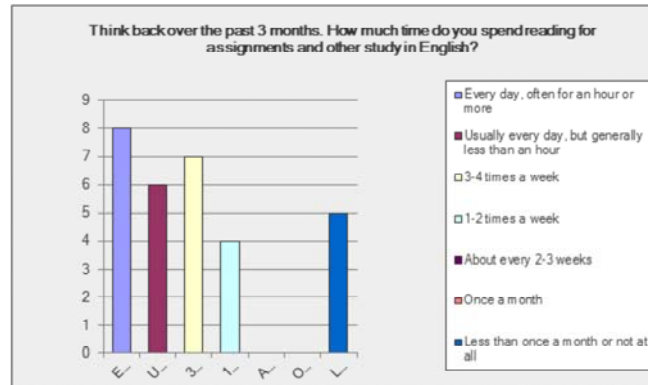
English



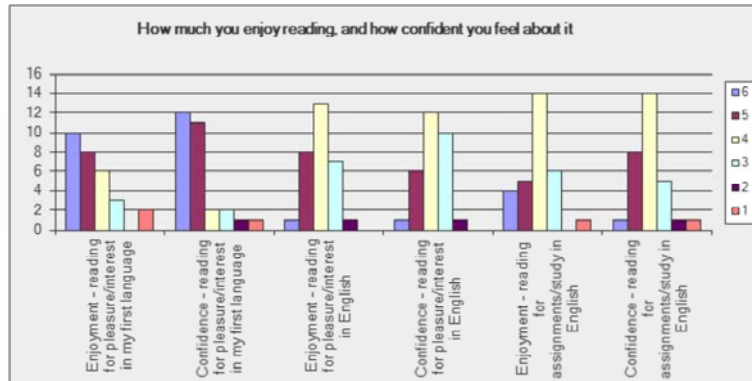
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### Time spent reading – assignments



### Reading enjoyment and confidence



They were also surveyed about their attitudes – their confidence and enjoyment in reading

DEAL: Pre-course Reading Questionnaire

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_  
Your questionnaire will not be shown to anyone

**Thinking about your English reading skills**

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions. Please answer honestly. No-one else will see your answers. The purpose is to help you develop in your reading skills, and improve your success and enjoyment of reading.

Think about how well you use the following reading skills. The word 'text' means any written and printed material such as a book, article, magazine, web-page etc. Tick one answer  in Column 1 and one answer in Column 2.

1. **Identifying genre** - knowing different types / styles of text to predict what they are about and understand them better

Column 1

tick one

- I can do this well
- I am ok at this / I'm getting better at it
- I find this difficult but I try and do it
- I find this too difficult or I don't understand this skill

Column 2

tick one

- I often do this
- I sometimes do this
- I seldom do this
- I don't do this

2. **Previewing and predicting** - overviewing a text very quickly to guess what it is about before reading more carefully

tick one

- I can do this well
- I am ok at this / I'm getting better at it
- I find this difficult but I try and do it
- I find this too difficult or I don't understand this skill

tick one

- I often do this
- I sometimes do this
- I seldom do this
- I don't do this

I also wanted to get an idea of how well they understood the range of reading skills used by competent readers. I used a taxonomy of skills drawn from Mikulecky

- and I didn't shy away from technical terms (eg understanding genre, scanning, paraphrasing There were 16 questions which checked the confidence they had in using these 16 skills and how often / whether they use them. They will be re-surveyed again at the end of the course.

**Collecting the data:**

**Narrative frames**

The 2nd method I am using is narrative frames. Students complete a prompt - some do it well, some minimally. These will be used to build each learner's profile or story, but can also be drawn together for themes. Here are a sample ...

My earliest memories of someone reading to me are when ..

My earliest memories of reading by myself are when ..

When I was young, reading was important/not important because..

When I was young, reading was easy/difficult because..

When I was at primary/elementary school, I enjoyed/didn't enjoy reading because ..

When I was at high school, I enjoyed/didn't enjoy reading because ..

When I think about reading in English now, I feel ..

I think my strengths in reading now are ...

I think my weaknesses in reading now are ...

When I think about reading in English in the future, I feel ...

## **Narrative frames**

### **My earliest memories of someone reading to me are when ..**

- 1.** I was 3.
- 2.** I was a kid. My mother read a story before I went to sleep every night
- 3.** I was a child. My mom was reading a story to me. It was a fantastic story



**My earliest memories of reading by myself are when ..**

1. I was a kid.
2. I was a child. I read the story book with pictures and a few words
3. I was 3 years old, I tried my best to memorize the Chinese classical poetries
4. I was at primary. I did not like reading and always asked teacher why I have to read

**When I was young, reading was important/not important because..**

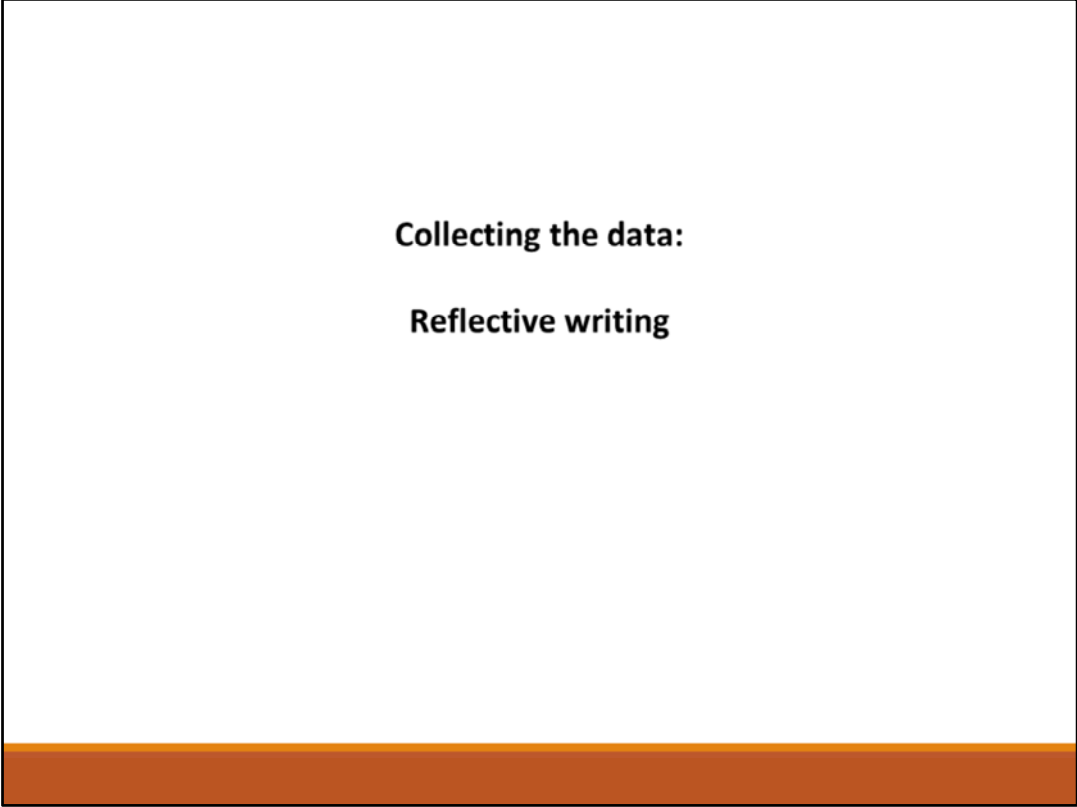
1. (*important*) reading gives me knowledge and wisdom
2. (*not important*) I used to be taken to the school library to choose books for home reading, but I had no interest
3. (*not important*) I always watch TV more than read the books

**When I was young, reading was easy/difficult because..**

1. (*easy*) I like reading. I read many books
2. (*difficult*) I didn't find it interesting, it was a big task for me to do
3. (*easy*) I love it and if I don't understand something I can question everybody around me about it

**When I think about reading in English now, I feel ..**

1. It is a little difficult for me because my vocabulary is not very good
2. I feel bored because I do not know what the book about. A lot of vocabulary that I do not know, I find it difficult in reading in English. Therefore I do not like reading in English
3. I have missed so much and wasted so many good years. I have begun to love reading. I often feel like doing nothing but reading anything that interests me.



**Collecting the data:**

**Reflective writing**

The 3rd method is reflective writing. It is an important part of the course, many of their future programmes will require them to reflect, and so this is a skill we give a good deal of attention to.

The students reflect via 'Moodle, as well as in structured writing.

Here is a sample, written by a fee-paying student from China

### **Reflective writing: example**

When I was a child, my parents told me “reading should accompany with you during your whole life”. In that time, I am confused why I should keep reading because I think I can using the time more skilfully rather than reading. However my opinion changed when I grown up. Also I committed my parents saying – reading is an interesting thing and I should insist keep going reading through my life.

When I was a child, my mother always told me fairy stories before I go to bed. It’s my first experience reading, even though it was restate by my mother. Children’s books always have lots of pictures, as well as some vivid simple words, because it can help you understand the story. I will never forget my mother’s “previously-sleeping’ story” because she help me built a big interest in reading.

When I grow to be a teenager, be honestly, I don't think reading is an interesting thing for me during that time. Conversely, sometimes reading became a burden for me. The reason is through my school time I have lots of home work after class, I feel tired every day... I should squeeze time to read, but I don't want to do it.

However when I graduated from high school, enter the university I enjoyed reading every day. The book style I interested most is the fiction, because it is the author's imagination, didn't relate to the reality. I am addicted to it, and I don't want to eat or anything else, just wan to read the book as soon as possible, my friends said, "I am crazy". Fortunately I built a good reading habit during my university time.

Talking to the English reading, I do think it can help me improving my English intellectual. However it is not as easy as reading with my first language. When I read a new book, the first problem is lots of unfamiliar words. Sometimes you can guess the meaning of new words, however most of time I lose my patience if I see too much new words in the book .... However when I changed my reading method, just find an interesting book to read, I feel better than before. And after the reading I write my comment in the (reading log). When I look back, it was a interesting time.



Before I start to read books or newspapers (in English) to do the reading log, reading makes me have a headache. I do not like reading, such as read the English book, newspapers, magazines, or even sometimes the long academic article which tutor gives me. When I try to read, I read slowly, and (it is) easy to stop reading. I felt I did not have enough vocabulary and good reading skills to make a good understanding. I was so upset and angry when I cannot learn something new from reading.

However when I just keep doing the reading log, I find my reading habit is changing. I start to read books longer and longer and it is easier it get a good understanding of the book than before. Every night before I go to sleep, I will feel I have a very important thing did not finish without reading. Sometimes, I just read a book short time, but it can give me enjoyment. I think maybe this is the habit changing. Now I am happy, enjoy and active to read. I read faster, longer, and more. My reading habit is totally different than before.

**Collecting the data:**

**Interviews**

The final method is interview

## **Interviews**

- A selection of students - balance of fee-payers, migrant, refugee (minimum of 5 from each 'group').
- Interviews focus on early experiences of reading within context of family, social, economic, & educational backgrounds.
- Each interview recorded
- The interview notes turned into the student 'story' (maximum of 1000 words).
- The story then sent to interviewee to be checked for accuracy.
- In due course will be analysed for themes.

### Interview example

- 'Mary' aged in her 30's from Burma
- Came to NZ 2 years ago under 'humanitarian programme'
- Lived in small rural village
- Parents uneducated, father killed when she was 5.
- Mother was determined her children would have an education (most didn't for economic reasons)
- Mother purchased children's books; sent her children to village school
- Mary could read and write before she went to school – taught by her older brother
- Mother relocated family to city to ensure children could continue education
- Mary placed in top stream
- She enjoyed reading in Burmese and read widely, and especially liked reading about Burma's history and people.
- Excelled throughout schooling, eventually entered university to study science & maths

Here is an example, in note form, of a refugee student from Burma

- Forced to relocate to Thailand for economic/political reasons
- Lived there for 5 years, worked in a factory, lived in a refugee camp
- Met her husband, married, had a child in camp
- Came to NZ in 2012, hopes to resume studies in Science
- Now Mary reads both in Burmese (every day, often for an hour or more) and English (usually every day).
- She purchased a number of school journals from a second hand shop, and she likes reading the newspaper.
- She reads graded readers ("The Rainmaker", "The Thornbirds") and recently she came across "Wuthering Heights" in a second-hand bookshop. She plans to read this in the summer vacation.
- Her mother is also in NZ, & studying in 'Easy English' class at Wintec

So in summary, we have the situation in NZ of students from 3 broad categories of background, in our primary, secondary schools, in our language centres, many with aspirations to study at tertiary level, but with specific language needs.

My project is to explore connections between these students' L1 and L 2 literacy, and more specifically to look at connections between their early and later reading experiences, their L1 & L2 reading experiences, and how these experiences may have impacted upon their academic literacy. I also want to see whether the reading programme I am teaching on is making a difference.

I'm using a range of data collection methods,

questionnaires, narrative frames, reflective writing, interviews. Some of the data will be able to be quantified.

Much of it though will become 'story', like this, written as narrative.

To be honest I enjoy this part much more than the statistics & number crunching.



It has been a great privilege to begin to explore the stories of a group of students from very different backgrounds and experiences, men and women who have come far from their original home, culture and language, seeking to acquire the language and skills which will help them as they seek to fulfil their goals and secure their future.

Their stories are so interesting, very different, each quite unique, but all linked with one common theme - 'reading'.

Thank you for coming and listening to my presentation on 'Students and their Reading'.

Do you have any questions?





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