Returning to Reading: An Online Course in French offers a Snapshot of L2 Reading Habits and Trends

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ABSTRACT

With todays' students spending increasing amounts of time involved in online activities, there is a growing need to study their online reading habits. Indeed, it is not only students' out-of-class engagement with electronic media that calls for increased attention to the reading skill, in general, and online reading, in particular, but it is also the explosion in the number of hybrid and online courses at both the secondary and post-secondary levels that begs for examination. While communicative competence may still reign, it is time for the profession to turn at least some of our attention back to the importance of the reading skill and increase our research specifically devoted to understanding the process of online reading in the L2. The following pages speak to this need by contributing information on the creation of an online post-secondary French course devoted to developing L2 reading skills, as well as a qualitative study of the students' reading habits both in print and online in both English (the L1) and in French (the L2). Findings from this pre- and post-course survey coupled with results from other studies begin to flesh out a portrait of online L2 reading behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Reading as a foreign language skill has received varied levels of attention over the decades, shifting from being the primary focus of instruction, to an afterthought, to almost every stage in between. From its prominence during the days of the "reading method," which encouraged second language instruction to focus nearly exclusively on reading (Coleman, 1929), to its limited if not maligned role in highly communicative classrooms, the role of reading in instructed L2 learning continues to evolve. In our post–communicative language teaching environment, however, with many educators opting to place a clear priority on speaking and listening, coupled with the assumption by many that first language reading skills will easily and automatically transfer to the L2 environment, reading has again faded into the background. According to Garrett (2009), "years ago language programs often included a reading track" (p. 728). She goes on to state that she believes it may be time for us to reconsider the banishment of reading courses and tracks as they can "accommodate those language students who learn best

when they can establish an a priori sense of the overall structure of the material before being asked to speak" (p. 728).

Fortunately for those passionate about the importance of this most enduring of foreign language skills, the explosion of easily available online texts, ranging from works of literature to target-language blogs is renewing interest in the skill. Indeed, according to multiple researchers, as students become increasingly involved in online activities, such as gaming, social media, shopping, information gathering and, of course, online education opportunities, they increase their opportunities for online reading, while consequently spending less time with hardcopy print material (Abidin, Pourmohammadi, Varasingam & Lean, 2014; Bell & LeBlanc, 2000: Tan, Ng, & Saw, 2010). Accordingly, as students become "increasingly involved in online activities, there is a need to study their online reading habits" (Abidin et al., 2014, p. 165). It is not only students' out-of-class engagement with electronic media that calls for increased attention to the reading skill, in general, and online reading, in particular, but it is also the explosion in the number of hybrid and online courses at both the secondary and post-secondary levels that begs for attention. At the post-secondary level, the number of hybrid and online course offerings has increased steadily over the last decade (Gascoigne & Parnell, 2014) and a 2012 national survey found that over 31% of all post-secondary students in the US had reported taking one or more courses in an online environment (Allen et al., 2012). With much of the research comparing student learning outcomes in both traditional and online L2 environments finding little difference between to two, current trends in online offerings are likely to continue (Blake et al., 2008, Chenowith et al., 2006; Gascoigne & Parnell, 2013; Saunders, 2005; Scida & Saury, 2007).

It is not only time for the profession to turn at least some of our attention back to the importance of the reading skill, but increased research on the process of online reading in the L2 is imperative. The following pages speak to this need by contributing information on the creation of an online post-secondary French course devoted to developing L2 reading skills, as well as a qualitative study of the students' reading habits both in print and online in both English and in French.

BACKGROUND

While theoretical models of L2 reading comprehension received a good deal of attention from the profession from the 1970s to the 1990s, just as classroom attention to the reading skill has waned, so has L2 research and theory on the topic. Most models of L2 reading comprehension have fallen into one of three categories: bottom-up, top-down, and interactive. Bottom-up models have tended to view reading as a textual decoding activity. In bottom-up models, it is believed that the reader "comprehends by moving through the text in a linear fashion, decoding each word as it is encountered" (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 343), with little attention paid to what the reader brings to the text in terms of background knowledge or expectations about the text. Top-down models, on the other hand, place a priority on the reader and reader-based variables such as background knowledge, expectations, personal experience, and metacognition. The third group of reading comprehension models, interactive models, represent a blending of the two, with attention paid to both text-based and reader-based variables. For Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes (1991), in an interactive model readers "comprehend a text when they construct a mental representation for incoming pieces of information" (p. 22). Comprehension, therefore, is achieved from a relating of new information into that which is already stored in memory.

Research on L2 reading has tended to support interactive and top-down models. Chen and Donin (1997), for example, demonstrated that activating a reader's background knowledge facilitates recall and retention. Barry and Lazarte (1995) found that greater L2 topic familiarity correlated positively with higher recall scores. And, Carrell and Wise (1998) found that increased levels of student interest in a text topic produced higher L2 text comprehension scores. Each of these studies, along with countless others, has looked at L2 learners interacting with printed text. We are increasingly in need of studies that examine the online L2 reading process and some have begun to do so.

A 2014 study by Abidin, Pourmohammadi, Varasingam and Lean examined the online reading habits of Malaysian students of English. In this large scale survey of online reading habits, 240 high school leaners of English participated. The authors set out to identify the online reading habits of the target student population, with specific attention paid to the preferred language used in online reading. They also examined the relationship between socioeconomic status and online reading habits, as well as gender differences in reading habits. The authors found that nearly 84% of the students went online everyday with activities including viewing photos, chatting, and reading and writing email messages. 73% of the students revealed that when they go online to read, it is done in English, as opposed to Malay or Chinese. No significant relationship was found between either gender or socioeconomic status and online reading habits. Finally, and not surprisingly, students revealed that they spend more time reading online for entertainment than they do for educational purposes.

Arnold (2009) set out to study the online reading habits and outcomes for native English speaking students engaging in extensive online reading in German. Arnold describes extensive reading as a "highly individualized approach where the instructor's main responsibility is to create the right conditions for reading" (p. 341). As opposed to intensive reading, which focuses on close study and in-depth comprehension, extensive reading encourages reading for pleasure which is its own reward. As part of a post-secondary German conversation course, the author encouraged students to engage in extensive online reading in German during seven 75-minute sessions over the course of a semester. Eight students completed the course and participated in the study. The author set out to determine: what students elected to read during the extensive reading sessions, how they read, what linguistic and affective benefits were experienced; and, if students were motivated to read for pleasure outside of class. Based on self-report data, written reading reports, and an end-of-semester questionnaire, Arnold found that students selected journalistic articles (74%) most often, followed by literary texts (13%). Students tended to stick with a text even if it was challenging, as opposed to switching to a new, possibly easier text. Students were varied on their reports of online dictionary use, with about half indicating frequent use. All students agreed that the ability to select their own texts was motivating, and all students reported gaining confidence in their L2 reading ability. Similarly, half of the students shared that the extensive online reading sessions had encouraged them to do more pleasure reading in German online. Arnold concludes that online texts in the L2 can promote pleasure reading, however additional investigation into reading behaviors, attitudes and skills during online L2 reading are needed.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT AND STUDY

The French curriculum at the University of Nebraska at Omaha has been fairly traditional in that upper-level offerings leading to the major included two levels of conversation, two levels

of grammar and writing, two introduction to literatures courses (Middle Ages to the 17th Century in one course, and 18th Century to present in the second), a French civilization course and a host of elective courses on topics such as business French, French and francophone cinema, a seminar on contemporary France, the structure of French, and 5-6 options devoted to various facets of literature.

Not unlike other institutions, we found that students entering the introduction to literature courses were struggling to read longer works, let alone analyze them. To this end, and in the words of Garrett (2009) we "reconsidered the banishment" of reading courses and developed an introduction to readings course in French. This course would be a prerequisite to the introduction to French literature courses and was designed to expose students to different genres and texts such as comics, news articles, song lyrics, poems, theater scenes and literary novellas. Course goals included reading practice, exposure to a variety of genres, vocabulary expansion, and increased confidence in L2 reading ability. Embracing interactive models of L2 reading comprehension, wherein both text-based and reader-based variables are valued components of the reading process, the following practices informed the course materials and design (see Appendix A for full syllabus and list of readings):

- topics were selected that were expected to be somewhat familiar to today's mid-western undergraduate student.
- texts that were easily available in English translation were avoided.
- texts accompanied by visual aids, images, or graphs were included.
- pre-reading activities designed to activate students' background knowledge on the topics were employed.
- vocabulary building activities were created.
- authentic unedited works were targeted.

Not only was this course a new course for the department in terms of content and focus, it was also designed to be offered in an online format and was piloted during a five-week summer session. Using an online course management system, ten content folders were created: one devoted to each reading. In addition to the content folders, an additional folder providing reading strategies and tips was available. Each content folder contained the following components:

- information on the text and or author,
- pre-reading questions designed to activate background knowledge and interest,
- targeted vocabulary and grammar information,
- an ungraded practice quiz made up of true-false comprehension questions,
- the reading text,
- open-ended comprehension questions, and
- a link to an online discussion forum.

In order to assess the impact of the readings course, as well as gain insight into our students' reading habits in both English and French, a survey and study were designed and are described in the section below. To assess reading comprehension skills, students completed a free recall final exam, which involved students reading a new text (255 words in length) and recalling as many main points as possible (in French or English). Twenty-two of the 26 students received a grade of A or B on the free recall exam.

METHODOLOGY

In addition to offering the new course in an online format we sought to examine students' reading habits before, during, and after the course. Specifically, we targeted student reading

habits in English and in French, in print and online. After establishing a baseline of reading habits during the first days of the course, we surveyed students again immediately upon completion of the course (post-test) and again one semester later (delayed post-test) to see whether or not completion of the Introduction to Readings in French course may have influenced the amount of time students spend reading for pleasure in French, as well as reading online.

Participants

Twenty-six undergraduate students enrolled in the course. To register for the course, each student met the prerequisite, which was to have successfully completed the second-year, fourth-semester language course at our institution, or to have placed into the 3000-level as a result of our placement exam. The College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Nebraska at Omaha has a four-semester foreign language requirement. The Introduction to Reading course, therefore, is not required of the general student population. It is only required for majors and minors in French. All students enrolled in the course were either formally declared majors or minors in French, or where contemplating adding the major or minor at that time.

The Course

The course was a third-year, three-credit introduction to readings in French taught online during a five-week summer session by a native speaker of French with a PhD in French literature and over 30 years teaching experience. The general course design is outlined above and the full course syllabus appears in Appendix A.

The Survey

The survey was administered to students online (see Appendix B for full list of survey questions). It asked students how many hours per week they typically read for pleasure in English and in French both in print and online. It also asked students the same set of questions but asked them to now imagine their responses if they had more free time available to devote to reading. It also asked students to self-assess their general reading comprehension ability in both English and in French using a 10-point scale (1 weak, 10 strong). Finally, it asked students to rank all for language skills (speaking, reading, writing, and listening comprehension) in French from strongest to weakest, as well as to provide a 1-10 confidence rating for each skill. The same survey was administered to students on the first day of class, immediately upon completion of the class, and one semester later.

Results

Eighteen of the 26 students completed the pre- and the post-course surveys. Only two of the 26 completed the delayed post-test survey. Due to the paucity of delayed post-test returns, this data is not included in the analysis. Pre- and post-test results revealed that students reported increasing the number of hours they spent reading for pleasure in English in both print (from an average of 3.6 hours per week to an average of 4.9), and online (from an average of 2.7 hours per week to an average of 3.7 hours) from the beginning of the semester to the end. As for reading for pleasure in French, students reported decreasing the number of hours spent pleasure reading

in print (from an average of .83 hours per week to an average of .40 hours per week). However, they increased their level of online reading for pleasure in French from the pre- to the post-test from an average of .91 hours per week to 1.46 hours. When asked about how much reading for pleasure they were likely to do in English if they had more free time, students decreased an already high projection for print material from an average of 7.4 hours per week to 7.16 hours on the post-test. The change in the on-line projection for reading in English should they have more free time increased from an average of 4.7 hours per week on the pre-test to 5.16 hours on the post-test. When asked about how much reading for pleasure they were likely to do in French if they had more free time, students increased their projections for both print material (from 3 hours per week to 4.12 hours) and online material (from 3.2 hours to 3.71 hours).

Students' self-assessment of their reading ability in English rose from an average of 9 (out of 10) on the pre-test to an average of 9.5 on the post-test. In French, this assessment rose from 6.1 to 7.3. When ranking and rating all four language skills in French on the pre-test, students ranked reading as their strongest skill (6.9), following by writing (6.1), followed by listening (5.2), which was closely followed by speaking (5.1). Self-assessments of all four skills grew from the pre-test to the post-test, but maintained the original order (reading, followed by writing, followed by listening, followed by speaking). Average post-test assessments for the reading skill grew from 6.9 to 7.7, writing grew from 6.1 to 6.4, listening from 5.2 to 5.6, and speaking from 5.1 to 5.4.

Discussion and Limitations

In nearly every case (in English or French, in print or online), reported amounts of time spent reading per week grew from the first day of class to the end of the semester. In only two cases (actual amount of time reading for pleasure in French in print and reading for pleasure in English in print if they had more free time) did the reported number of hours per week decrease from pre-test to post-test. The only two decreases from pre-to post-test centered on print material. In every case, reading of online material increased from pre-to post-test. It is also important to note that the decrease in reading in print in French was the only case of a statistically significant change. All other changes, while interesting and at times seemingly large, did not reach significance. While a decrease in the amount of time that students spent reading for pleasure in French in print was not expected, nor an intended outcome, the corresponding increase in the amount of time that students spent reading online in French, was (from .91 hours to 1.46 hours per week).

Another interesting finding is that in nearly every case (both pre and post), students reported spending more time reading in print than online. An exception, however, was the question asking how much time students currently spend reading for pleasure (not for a course) in French. In this case, students reported spending more time reading online in French as compared to reading print material at both the beginning of the semester (.91 online versus .83 in print) and at the end of the semester (1.46 online versus .40 in print).

The L2 language skill in which students had the highest confidence ratings (both pre and post) was the reading skill. While not surprising, given the focus of the course, the largest increase in self-reported skill confidence from pre- to post-test also occurred for the reading skill. This finding is echoed in course evaluation feedback in which students freely shared comments such as, "I loved the variety and the quality of the readings in the course. As a result of having successfully comprehended these readings—some very challenging, I am much more likely to

read in French on my own in the future" and "I really do think my reading ability is much stronger now."

One of the largest limitations of the present investigation is the lack of delayed post-test survey returns. One possibility for increasing delayed post-test participation in the future will be to use students' preferred email account to administer the survey, as opposed to the university issued email that is associated with the course management system and which was used for communication during the course.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to flesh out a portrait of online L2 reading behavior, Abidin, Pourmohammadi, Varasingam and Lean (2014) found that 84% of high school ESL learners students went online every day to engage in activities such as viewing photos, chatting, and reading and writing email messages with 73% doing so in the target language. In terms of content interest, Arnold (2009) contributes to this nascent portrait by reporting that post-secondary students of German tend to prefer to read journalistic articles online (74%) followed by online literary texts (13%). Arnold also found that extensive online reading promotes pleasure reading in the target language. The current study adds information on how much time students typically read in both their L1 (English) and their L2 (French) in print and online, as well as what they expect they might do if they had more free time to devote to reading. While students report spending more time reading in print as compared to online when reading in English, they spend more time reading online as opposed to in print when reading in French.

We have barely scratched the surface of describing the L2 online reader in terms of his and her preferences, interests, and time devoted to the task. What is beginning to emerge, from the present study as well as Arnold (2009) however, is the finding that as students spend more time engaging in online reading as part of an L2 course their confidence level concerning L2 reading increases. This, coupled with the undeniable fact that students are accessing L2 material online both as part of courses and on their own (Abidin et al., 2014), underscores the need to better understand when, why, and how students engage in L2 reading online.

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APPENDIX A
Course Syllabus

FREN 3060
Readings in French
Summer 2015
Session

Prerequisites:

FREN 2120 or 4 years of high school French or permission from the instructor.

Goals:

In this upper level class, you will learn to read a variety of French texts. You will expand your vocabulary knowledge and improve your reading fluency and comprehension level. You will be exposed to different genres and texts such as comics, news articles, song lyrics, poems, theater scenes and literary novellas. By the end of the class, you will be more confident in your reading abilities and be able to analyze a text in terms of its writing strategies and techniques. This class is a prerequisite to upper level literary classes.

This is an online summer class, which will be intensive because of its short duration. You will have to read 10 texts and do pre and post readings assignments. Each reading will have its own Blackboard folder, (on the left of the screen), where this work will be done. The pre-reading (preparation à la lecture) activities are there to help you with the reading, including a vocabulary list with words pronunciation. Thus, it is essential that you do the work in order to understand the reading. Post-reading exercises will help you with the comprehension questions. Each final reading assessment will take the form of answering comprehension questions in French to be posted on Blackboard.

Assignments:

You need to go into the Questions de comprehension folder and click directly on the red Questions de comprehension to access the assignment page, where you will submit your work. You can either write your answers directly through Blackboard or write them into Word and upload it to Blackboard. Please make sure that you know the due dates for these assignments. (They are posted in this document and in Blackboard).

Grading:

Each text will have comprehension questions to answer in French. You will be graded based on a percentage of correct answers. For example: you have 8 correct answers out of 10 questions: your grade will be: 80% for this reading.

NO LATE ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE ACCEPTED. If you are late, your grade will be zero for this assignment.

The class grade will essentially be based on the average of these 10 grades (one per reading). There will also be a final, which will count for 5% of the final grade.

There will also be opportunities to receive extra-credit points by participating significantly to discussion boards. Each forum will have specific due dates and there will be worth 1 point each.

Course Grade:

Average of Comprehension questions   95%

Final   5%

Extra-credit maximum 10 points

Grading Scale:

A+ = 97-100
A = 90-96
B+ = 87-89
B = 80-86
C+ = 77-79
C = 70-76
D+ = 67-69
D = 60-66
F = Under 60.

Online Translators:

The use of online translators for your comprehension questions answers is a serious academic offense within the context of language classes. Faculty members do not accept work completed with the aid of online translators and will give a grade of F for the course if there is evidence that an online translator has been used. The case will also be reported to the Office of Academic and Student Affairs. Students who use online translators more than once are subject to severe disciplinary action.

Schedule by Week:

June 1-7: *Persepolis* et *Les hommes invisibles.*

June 8-14: *Fidélité à l'Afrique, Ma lettre au Président* et "Une France trop tolérante avec le racisme".

June 15-21: "Lettre à ma fille, au lendemain du 11 janvier 2015" et scène d'une pièce d'Anouilh.

June 21-27: *Le pavillon de la Croix-Rousse* et *La planète des singes.*

June 28-July 2: *L'hôte.*

July 2: Final Exam

APPENDIX B
Reading Survey (Pre and Post)

1. How many hours per week do you typically read for pleasure in ENGLISH?
   A. In print
   B. On-line

2. How many hours per week do you typically read for pleasure in FRENCH?
   A. In print
   B. On-line

3. If you had more free time, how many hours per week would you likely read for pleasure in ENGLISH?
   A. In print
   B. On-line

4. If you had more free time, how many hours per week would you read for pleasure in FRENCH?
   A. In print
   B. On-line

5. On a scale of 1-10 (1= poor, 10+excellent) how would you rate your reading comprehension ability:
   A. In French
   B. In English

6. Considering your language skills in FRENCH, please rank the following skills from what you consider to be your strongest to your weakest (Speaking, Reading, Writing, Listening). Next, please rate each skill on a scale of 1-10 (1=weak, 10=strong).

                                                              Rating
My strongest French skill is   _____   _____
My second strongest French skill is _____   _____
My third strongest French skill is _____   _____
My weakest French skill is _____   _____

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