

# Components of Pre- and Post-reading Interest in Graded Readers

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This study explored intermediate-level university students' ( $N = 89$ ) perceived interest in graded readers. Participants' reported overall interest, and lack thereof, was examined for an assigned set of six graded readers. Results confirmed that the selected books represented a wide variety of interest and boredom components, a finding that underscores the importance of assessing student interests in relation to ESL/EFL classroom activities. The study also found that the pre- and post-reading interest differed significantly for some books, and that prior knowledge likely was a contributing factor in some perceptions of interest, both favorable and negative, however.

This presentation described a study conducted to explore and compare perceived pre- and post-reading components of interest and lack of interest in graded readers among 89 students in an intermediate-level intensive English program at a private university in Japan. Although it has become axiomatic to say that extensive reading using graded readers is a good way to promote motivation for second language (L2) learning students, and the importance of using interesting materials is stressed by some reading researchers (e.g. Day & Bamford, 1998), no previous studies to our knowledge have specifically examined the motivational variable of *interest* as an aspect of reading graded readers. This paper provides an overview of *interest*, as conceived by the four-phase model of interest (Hidi & Renninger, 2006), a model whose antecedent research has spanned decades and is well-supported and accepted in the field of educational psychology. Since L2 learning studies are often not fully informed by potentially valuable research strands conducted in related fields, such as educational and cognitive psychology, it is hoped our study will encourage other researchers to explore these underutilized resources.

## Interest

A large body of research has demonstrated that interest triggers increases in attention, concentration, and perseverance, which in turn positively influence learning and recall (see Hidi, Renninger, & Krapp,

2004; Silvia, 2006 for reviews). Attentional increases related to interest are hypothesized to be relatively effortless compared to other attention triggers, such as importance (Hidi & Anderson, 1992). It is possible that readers instantaneously recognize and attend to interesting information, "freeing up cognitive resources in the process, and allowing for more rapid processing of information" (Hidi, 2001, p. 200). In light of this claim, interest can be considered a cousin to the focused state of consciousness called *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

## Situational and Individual Interest

Interest is categorized as *situational interest* (usually short-lived interest sparked in most people by qualities of an interesting text, activity or idea, and *individual interest* (a long-lasting predilection to reengage with an interesting object, marked by accumulating value and knowledge). Teachers have potential control over students' situational interest in classes because teachers usually provide materials for classroom activities. Among the categories of situational interest factors, research in first language (L1) use has described those that are specifically *emotional* (see Wade, 2001). These components include novelty and ambiguity (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002), concreteness and visual imagery (Sadoski, 2001), and unexpected or surprising information (Hidi & Baird, 1986).

It was conjectured by the authors that qualities evoking emotions might provide a suitable

foreground for the exploration of interest and L2 reading of graded readers. A list of eight components (exciting, unpredictable, romantic, heartwarming, mysterious, strange, humorous, and scary) believed to relate to emotiveness was compiled by examining a sample of graded texts. A ninth component, ease of understanding, was included under the assumption that it might be especially compelling for L2 readers.

The following questions were explored: (1) Do students' overall ratings of interest differ before and after reading? (2) What components of interest do students associate with specific graded readers before and after reading them? And do they differ? (3) What components of lack of interest do students associate with specific graded readers before and after reading them? And do they differ?

## Method

Participants read six graded readers over a 12-week period. The books were: *Anne of Green Gables* (Oxford – 700 headwords), *The Children of the New Forest* (Oxford – 700 headwords), *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (Oxford – 700 headwords), *Notting Hill* (Penguin – 1200 headwords), *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (Penguin – 600 headwords), and *The Year of Sharing* (Oxford – 700 headwords). Before and after reading the books, participants completed surveys examining their perceptions of overall interest, components of interest, and lack of interest.

## Results

Overall interest ratings were evaluated for pre- and post-reading differences using a Wilcoxon signed-ranks test and were found to be significantly different for two of the six books, *The Children of the New Forest* and *The Year of Sharing*. Counts for interest components pre- and post-reading were stable overall for the books, but less stable, in terms of increases (+) and decreases (-) post-reading for certain components, for *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* ("Mysterious" -22%, and "Scary" +110%), *The Children of the New Forest* ("Exciting" -29%, "Unpredictable" -51%, "Mysterious" -84%, and "Heartwarming" +150%), *Anne of Green Gables* ("Unpredictable" -64%, and "Heartwarming" +42%), and *The Year of Sharing* ("Heartwarming" +88%).

Comments written to describe lack of interest in the books were clustered into common themes. For example, the comment "I watched that movie once before, so I could predict the line of the story"

for *Pirates of the Caribbean* was categorized as "prior knowledge". On the pre-reading survey, students predicted six categories of lack of interest ("genre", "pictures or imagery", "mood", "general interest", "predictability", and "difficulty"). In the post-reading condition, most of the identifications of these surface-level categories fell, and participants identified several new text-based components for lack of interest in the stories, including "lack of realism", "prior knowledge", "predictability", "lack of clarity", and, most numerous, "lack of complex development".

## Discussion

Given that evaluations before and after reading for overall interest were largely consistent, it would seem that the approaches students used to predict that books were potentially interesting concurred well with their perceptions of interest after they actually read the books. On the other hand, the results also showed that some books are not always easily judged by their covers or surface level features. Moreover, decrease of overall interest might be related to students not having encountered expected interest components.

Results of this study indicate the complicated role prior knowledge seems to play in interest. On one hand, prior knowledge of a book's storyline, by way of exposure to the movie or awareness of the Japanese-language version of the same story, might contribute to students' ease of understanding. On the other hand, prior knowledge of a book's storyline might result in excessive predictability or a sense of a lack of development in simplified graded readers contributing to a lack of interest.

This study suggests the relationship between interest components and overall interest is not straightforward. Students' learning styles and preferences might influence their perceptions of, and responses to, interest components and overall interest in ways that are poorly understood at present. For example, in the case of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, "unpredictable" was endorsed as an interest component by a relatively high number of students, yet 25% of the written comments in the section on lack of interest identified the "surprise" ending as a source of lack of interest. More research is needed to understand how interest components interact with factors such as prior knowledge, predictability, expectation, text genre and difficulty, as well as

some learners' desire for challenge in an L2 reading experience.

## Conclusion

This study explored intermediate Japanese 2nd-year university EFL students' perceptions of overall interest and interest components in six graded readers, and whether these perceptions differed before and after reading. Overall interest differed significantly for two of the six graded readers and responses for some components of interest and lack thereof also changed substantially. Prior knowledge related with interest such that more-well known books were initially given higher interest ratings than less-well known books, but may not have been sustained in the case of a lack of realism, clarity, or development. In addition to the various implications for authors of graded materials and teachers using interest to improve motivation in their classrooms, the preliminary findings of this study suggest other areas for research exploration in terms of assigned readers versus choice and the contribution of collaborative learning and communicative output activities.

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