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“Hard going
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 to reading among
 languages undergraduates
 worth it”

Angela Gallagher-Brett

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Hard going but worth it: a snapshot of attitudes to reading among languages undergraduates

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This report is based on the results of a questionnaire survey, which investigated attitudes to reading among languages undergraduates in seven UK universities. The research for the project was carried out by the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies based at the University of Southampton convenes a special interest group in literary and cultural studies, which provides advice on ways in which teaching and learning in these curriculum areas can be supported. Members of this group asked the Subject Centre to carry out a survey on the attitudes of languages undergraduates to reading a foreign language amid concern that students are unwilling to read. This project therefore set out to address the following issues:

- What is the pre-university foreign language reading experience of languages undergraduates?
- What are the attitudes of languages undergraduates to different types of foreign language reading, including literary genres?
- What are the attitudes of languages undergraduates to reading in their first language?
- What do languages undergraduates find difficult about reading in a foreign language?

The research methodology for the project consisted of a literature review followed by a questionnaire study in seven UK universities. Questionnaires were returned by 601 undergraduates studying Spanish, German, French, Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, Arabic and Russian.

Findings

- Students reported very diverse experiences of A level reading, ranging from simply using textbooks through to accessing a variety of different genres;
- Most students had positive attitudes to reading in both their first language and the foreign language but they were less enthusiastic about academic reading;
- Attitudes to reading in the target language varied according to genre with newspapers and magazines attracting the strongest support;
- Students evaluated the level of their reading and vocabulary more harshly than their overall linguistic competence;
- Reading in a foreign language was widely perceived to be difficult but, in some cases, this was seen as a positive challenge;
- Vocabulary was overwhelmingly cited as the main source of difficulty in reading foreign language texts;
- Students in their fourth and final year of study were more confident and had more positive attitudes to reading than first year students, although they did not aspire to read literary genres any more than first year students;
- Achieving success in a languages degree was mostly associated with sustained effort and the development of language skills, particularly reading;
- Students with prior knowledge of the target language were more confident in all year groups than ab initio students, although they were not found to have more positive attitudes except where they reported pre-university experience of literature;
- Male and female students expressed preferences for different types of reading in both the first language and the foreign language.

Conclusions and recommendations focus on the following issues:

- Improving transition from sixth form into higher education and attending to the learning experiences of year 1 students;
- Examining experiences of ab initio students throughout their degree programmes;
- Raising awareness of strategies for dealing with vocabulary difficulties, especially among year 1 students;
- Exploring ways of promoting more extensive reading, with particular regard to engaging instrumentally-oriented students.

“ I lived in Spain for a year prior to uni and joined the book club at the library. I managed to read a whole book in Spanish, my first. An amazing experience. Hard going but worth it.”

(year 1 Spanish undergraduate)

Chapter 1

RATIONALE AND AIMS

Research for this project was carried out by the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (LLAS) based at the University of Southampton. The Subject Centre convenes a special interest group in literary and cultural studies, which advises LLAS on ways in which teaching and learning in these curriculum areas can be supported. Members of this group, who represent a range of different languages, had expressed concern about the attitudes of undergraduates to reading in the target language (L2) and, in particular, to reading literary genres. It was perceived that many of today's students are unwilling to engage with literature in both their first language (L1) and L2 and that increasing numbers of undergraduates embark on degree programmes with little previous exposure to literary texts in L2. LLAS was asked by this group to conduct a baseline questionnaire study in order to obtain information on attitudes to and experiences of L2 reading.

Similar concerns about undergraduates' approaches to reading have been documented elsewhere. For example, the issue of falling enrolments on literature courses was raised as far back as 1992 by Davis, Gorell, Kline and Hsieh. They investigated L2 undergraduate attitudes to literature in the United States and pointed to insufficient research in this area. In the UK, commenting on the humanities in higher education generally, Bassnet (2002) argued that today's readers have shorter concentration spans than was the case in the past and that they are more accustomed to dealing with excerpts from texts than the texts themselves. Problems experienced in L1 reading among first year undergraduates have been the focus of several studies which have examined the transition into the university study of English Literature (e.g. Ballinger, 2002; Smith 2004; Green, 2005; Smith and Hopkins, 2005). These studies have highlighted difficulties resulting from the sheer range and quantity of reading expected in higher education contexts.

Given this background, it could also be the case that some language undergraduates in UK universities are reluctant and inexperienced L2 readers. This study therefore set out to obtain a snapshot of their reading and to address the following research questions:

- What is the pre-university L2 reading experience of languages undergraduates?
- What are the attitudes of languages undergraduates to different types of L2 reading, including literary genres?
- What are the attitudes of languages undergraduates to L1 reading?
- What do languages undergraduates find difficult about L2 reading?

Chapter 2

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this project consisted of the following phases:

- A review of relevant literature;
- A fieldwork phase which included designing, piloting and distributing a questionnaire which was completed by students in a number of UK universities;
- Analysis of data.

2.1 Literature review

In order to inform the design of a questionnaire, a range of literature in the fields of L2 reading, L1 reading motivation and transition into higher education (HE) was reviewed. This revealed that little previous research had focused specifically on motivation for L2 reading, although there is a substantial body of work relating to attitudes and motivation in language learning generally (Grabe, 2004). A model of the acquisition and development of L2 reading attitudes was, however, proposed by Day and Bamford (1998: 23). This model consisted of L1 reading attitudes, previous L2 reading experiences, attitudes towards the language, culture and people and the second language classroom environment.

The situation in L1 research is somewhat different as young people's motivation for reading has been the subject of considerable attention (e.g. Wigfield and Guthrie, 1995 and 1997; Sweet, Guthrie and Ng, 1998). Wigfield and Guthrie (1995) developed a motivation for L1 reading questionnaire in which it was suggested that reading motivation was composed of 11 dimensions: reading efficacy, challenge, curiosity, aesthetics, importance, compliance, recognition, grades, social, competition and reading work avoidance. This questionnaire was subsequently adapted for use among students of English in Japan by Mori (2002).

In the context of the current study, these 11 dimensions were all incorporated into the questionnaire as were attitudes to the language and previous experience of L2 reading.

In addition to the factors believed to influence reading motivation, a number of further issues were highlighted in the literature as significant in the development of students' L2 reading. These included knowledge of vocabulary; background or cultural knowledge; level of linguistic proficiency; knowledge of appropriate reading strategies; reading fluency and rate and exposure to intensive or extensive reading (Grabe and Stoller, 2002).

The LLAS literature and culture special interest group (SIG) additionally requested that information be obtained on students' attitudes to reading a range of genres, their attitudes to reading translations and their perceptions of the term 'literature'. Several items from work on transition into the university study of English Literature were also included in the questionnaire (Green, 2005).

2.2 Fieldwork

A pilot questionnaire was designed to include items identified in the literature review as appropriate for addressing the research questions. This questionnaire was completed by students of French and German in one university and was also sent to members of the SIG for their comments. It was subsequently evaluated and questions were revised and refined for the final questionnaire. This questionnaire (see Appendix 2) consisted of five sections as follows:

Section A: Factual questions on student characteristics;

Section B: Rating scale statements (with which respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale) to obtain information on attitudes to L1 reading;

Section C: Rating scale statements to obtain information on attitudes to L2 reading;

Sections D/E: Open statements/questions for students to record personal comments.

The data collection phase took place during the summer term of 2005. Colleagues in eight universities from across the UK were invited to participate in the project; seven universities agreed to do so and were provided with questionnaires for the relevant languages. The questionnaire was administered by the universities themselves and the returns, therefore, represent an opportunity sample. The Subject Centre requested that participating students should be following a degree programme with a language named in the title.

2.3 Analysis

Data on student characteristics and responses to rating scale statements (Sections A, B and C) were analysed using a statistical software package (Minitab) while information from the open questions (Sections D and E) was entered into a database. All responses to open questions were categorised according to their themes and allocated keyword codes. These were then counted numerically for the purposes of analysis. Codes were not predetermined but were allowed to emerge from the data and were agreed upon by two researchers.

An overview of the main findings of the questionnaire will be presented in the next section.

Chapter 3

FINDINGS

This section provides information obtained from the questionnaire on the characteristics of the respondents and their responses to both the rating scales and the open questions.

3.1 Characteristics of sample

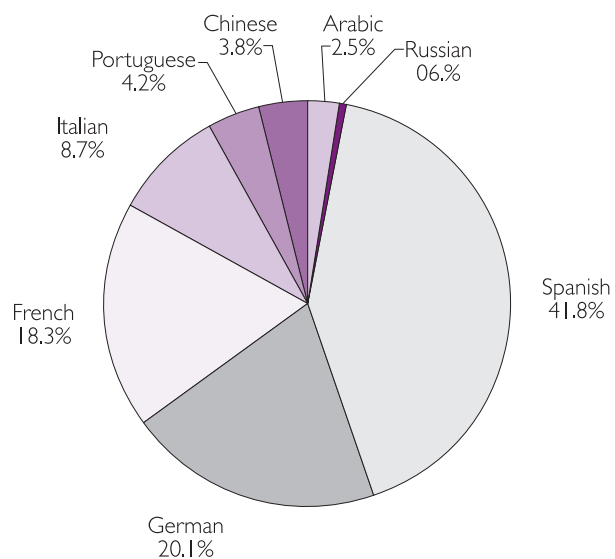
A total of 601 questionnaires were returned by seven universities from across the UK. This included four Russell Group universities (accounting for 60% of the questionnaires), two other pre-1992 universities (accounting for 19%) and one post-1992 university (accounting for 21%).

It is recognised that institutional variations may have influenced some of the data presented here but it is not within the scope of this study to compare the attitudes of students in different institutions.

3.1.1 Languages

Undergraduates who participated in the survey were studying a variety of languages. Spanish, German and French accounted for approximately 80% of the data while other languages returned smaller numbers of questionnaires. The relatively high proportion of respondents from Spanish departments (over 40%) means that the project findings may be more directly applicable to Spanish than to other languages. Full figures can be seen in Chart 1.

Chart 1: Languages studied



3.1.2 Degree programmes

Respondents were following a diverse range of degree programmes. The largest group, approximately 25%, were studying combined honours programmes involving two languages. 16% were on single honours language degrees and a further 12% described their degree simply as 'Modern Languages'. As can be seen in Table 1, smaller numbers of students were following vocational language programmes, two languages in a major/minor combination, three languages, European Studies or, alternatively, a language combined with another discipline.

58.7% (353 respondents) were, therefore, studying just languages with no indication of a vocational element in the programme. 16% were following vocational programmes (i.e. a vocational languages degree or a language combined with economics, business or management). There were also a further 21 students (3.5%) who had no language in their degree title. Information on degree programmes is provided here because it could potentially have a bearing on learners' approaches to reading.

Degree programmes	%
Languages degree programmes	
Combined honours two languages	25.9
Single honours language	16.3
Modern Languages	12.0
Language major/language minor	3.7
Three languages	0.8
Languages vocational degree programmes	
Modern Languages (vocational programme including translating/interpreting)	9.1
Languages and/with related subjects	
Language and/with linguistics	3.3
European Studies	1.5
Language major/other discipline minor	
Language major with arts/humanities minor	1.3
Language major/business/economics/management minor	0.2
Languages and another discipline	
Combined honours language and arts/humanities	10.5
Combined honours language and economics/business/management	4.0
Other discipline major/language minor	
Arts/humanities major with language minor	3.3
Economics/business/management with language minor	3.0
Other	
No language in degree title	3.5
Miscellaneous and no response	1.6

No information is available on the types of reading courses in which respondents had participated on their degree programmes and whether they had studied any literature modules.

3.1.3 Year of study

All year groups were represented in the study, although there were relatively few returns from year 3 as these students were on residence abroad. However, several

institutions sent out the questionnaire electronically to year abroad students and some did respond. The high number of first year respondents means that the project findings are more likely to be representative of this year group. There was an uneven distribution of languages across the different year groups with year 1 being the only group in which all languages occurred. Spanish, German and French data were present in returns from years 2 and 4, as well as year 1. Table 2 shows the percentage of students from each year group who took part.

Year of study	%
Year 1	41.8
Year 2	22.1
Year 3	7.2
Year 4	28.6
No response	0.3

3.1.4 Gender

444 females (73.9%) and 157 males (26.1%) participated in the survey. As in the case nationally, there were considerable variations in the percentage of males and females across different languages. Spanish, Italian and Portuguese responses were marked by lower proportions of male students than German and Chinese. There were small differences in the percentage of males and females in each year group. In year 1, 70% of respondents were female and 30% were male. In year 4, 77% of respondents were female whereas 23% were male.

3.1.5 Students' L1

514 students (85.5%) reported that English was their first language. There were 25 other first languages but each of these only had a small number of students speaking it. There was also a small number of bilingual students.

3.1.6 Ab initio and experienced learners

443 learners (73.7%) reported having prior knowledge of the relevant L2 before coming to university. 150 students (24.9%) said they had no previous knowledge and the remaining small number of students did not disclose this information.

Ab initio students were distributed unevenly across languages. For example, most Italian and Portuguese respondents claimed to be ab initio, compared with approximately one quarter of Spanish respondents and very few French and German respondents.

3.2 Responses to rating scale statements

This section deals with findings from the rating scale items (sections B and C of the questionnaire), in which students were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement with statements on a five-point rating scale.

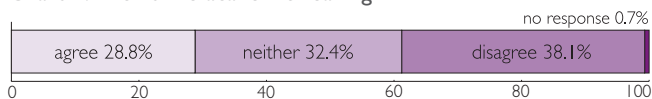
3.2.1 Attitudes to L1 reading

Students appeared to have largely positive attitudes to L1 reading. Responses suggested that students are keen readers of fiction in their first language. 502 participants (83.5%) agreed that they enjoy reading fiction. There was less enthusiasm for reading non-fiction, although this was still supported by a clear majority of students (65.4%). Most students also agreed that:

- Reading is important to them (79%)
- They like books that make them think (80%)
- They have favourite subjects they like to read about (71.7%)
- They can lose track of time if reading something interesting (84.4%)
- They read in order to learn new information (72.2%)

Attitudes to academic reading in L1 were found to be more ambiguous. The statement *I don't like academic reading* drew the following response:

Chart 2: I don't like academic reading



This suggests that academic reading is viewed in a sharply different way to reading for pleasure in L1.

A majority of students (66.2%) claimed to have had experience of talking to people about literature. Most also agreed (66.2%) that they like to talk to friends about what they are reading, suggesting that they may see reading as a social activity.

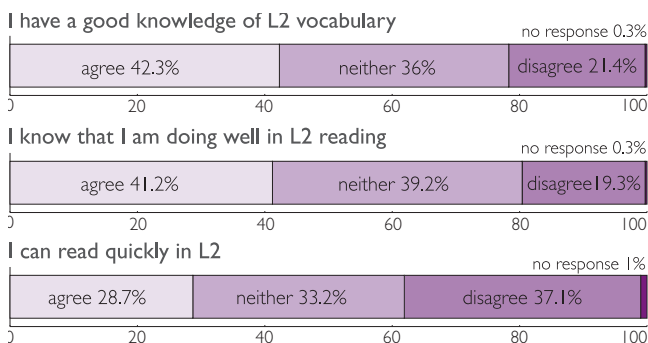
A small percentage of respondents (5-8%) expressed negative attitudes towards most or all of the L1 reading surveyed.

3.2.2 Students' perceptions of their L2 competence

Several questionnaire items required students to evaluate both their overall competence in the target language and their competence in L2 reading.

Approximately half of students (50.5%) agreed that they are good at the language in question. A similar number (51.2%) agreed that they have a good knowledge of target language culture. However, perceptions of reading competence, knowledge of vocabulary and rate of reading were evaluated slightly more negatively:

Chart 3



The relatively high proportions of neither agree nor disagree responses may suggest that students are either unsure of their level of competence or, alternatively, that they are unwilling to say.

3.2.3 Students' perceptions of their L2 reading frequency

A clear majority (61.9%) disagreed with the statement *I would not voluntarily read in L2 unless it was required for homework or an assignment*, indicating that many students may be willing to read independently. However, only 37.4% agreed that they often read in L2 outside class while 29.1% disagreed. There may be differences in the way participants reacted to the term 'often' but it is a potentially significant finding that almost 30% of the language students in the sample have openly admitted to not reading often in their own time. Almost half the sample (47.2%) also indicated that they do not get enough practice at reading in L2.

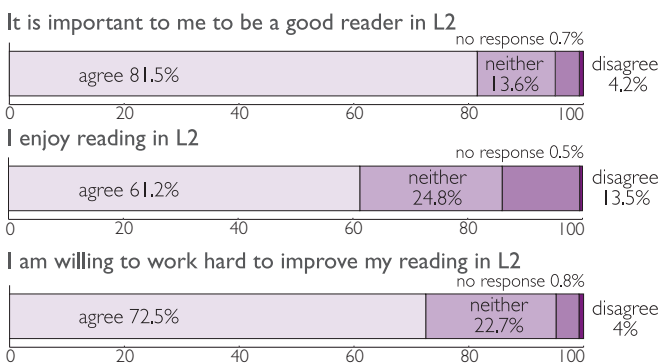
3.2.4 Purpose for reading in L2

Students were strongly supportive of the idea that reading in L2 is associated with benefits in terms of cultural knowledge and improving linguistic skills. 59.6% agreed that they read in L2 to learn new information about culture; 77.9% agreed that reading in L2 will make them a more knowledgeable person and almost all respondents (97.2%) agreed that reading in L2 is a good way to improve language skills. This item attracted the strongest support of all rating scale statements. Only three students disagreed with this and no-one disagreed strongly.

3.2.5 Attitudes to L2 reading

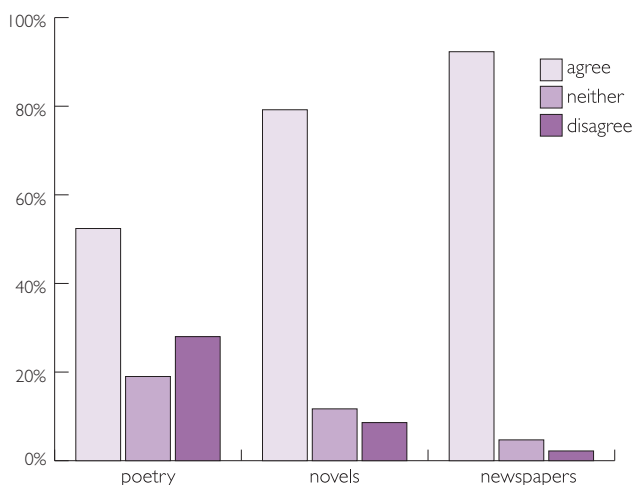
Respondents' attitudes to reading in L2 were, by and large, positive, although not as positive as L1 reading. Most agreed that it is important to them to be a good reader in L2; that they enjoy reading in L2 and that they are willing to work hard to improve their reading as follows:

Chart 4



Clear distinctions were found in attitudes to different types of L2 reading. Over half (59.6%) agreed that they are willing to read literature even if it is not compulsory while a relatively low proportion disagreed (14.3%). This willingness appeared to depend to a certain extent on the genre as a lower percentage of respondents agreed that they want to be able to read L2 poetry than novels. Neither of these genres appeared to be as attractive to students as newspapers and magazines.

Chart 5: I want to be able to read... in L2



Students had also been asked to record their attitudes to reading translations rather than the original work. Responses to this item were somewhat ambivalent:

- 22.8% agreed that they will always read the translation instead of the original (if available)
- 31.8% neither agreed nor disagreed
- 44.9% disagreed

One questionnaire item specifically compared attitudes to speaking and reading, *I prefer speaking L2 to reading L2*. There was a higher level of support for speaking than reading but this was not conclusive. 42% agreed that they prefer speaking L2 to reading while 29% disagreed.

Attitudes to reading with other students were mixed. About half of respondents (50.7%) disagreed with the statement *I don't like reading in L2 with other students*.

3.2.6 Summary of key points from rating scale statements

- Most students expressed favourable opinions about L1 reading, although this did not extend to academic reading;
- Most students indicated that they like to talk to friends about reading;
- Many students were ambivalent about their L2 competence and judged the level of their reading and vocabulary more harshly than their overall competence;
- A majority of respondents claimed that they would read voluntarily in L2 but only a minority admitted to reading often outside class;
- Students agreed that reading in L2 brings linguistic, cultural and general knowledge benefits;
- Most students had positive attitudes to reading in L2 but preferred newspapers and magazines to other genres;
- Frequent use of translations was acknowledged by about one quarter of those surveyed.

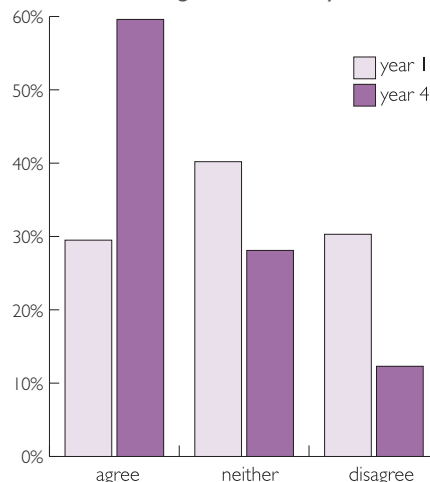
3.3 Analysis of results by year group, gender and prior experience of language learning

Responses to the rating scale statements were analysed further in order to determine whether differences could be identified on the basis of students' year of study, gender and prior experience of language learning. These findings are presented tentatively as it is acknowledged that other variables such as language, degree programme and institution may also have played a part.

3.3.1 Differences between students in years 1 and 4

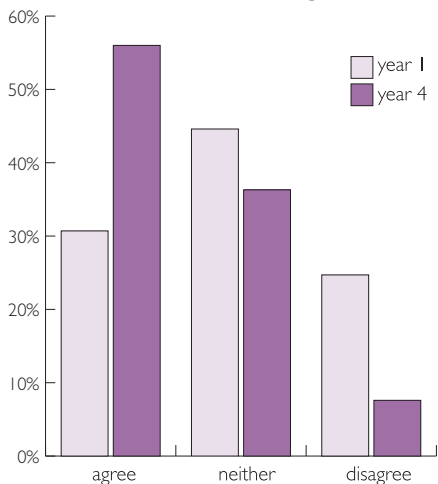
Significant differences were found between the responses of participants in years 1 and 4 to many items. Final year students appeared to be more confident than first year students. A higher proportion of year 4 students agreed that they are good at the language, have a good knowledge of culture and have a good vocabulary, e.g.

Chart 6: I have a good vocabulary in L2



Year 4 students were also more likely to agree that they are doing well in reading, can read quickly and that they often read outside class, for example:

Chart 7: I know that I am doing well in L2 reading

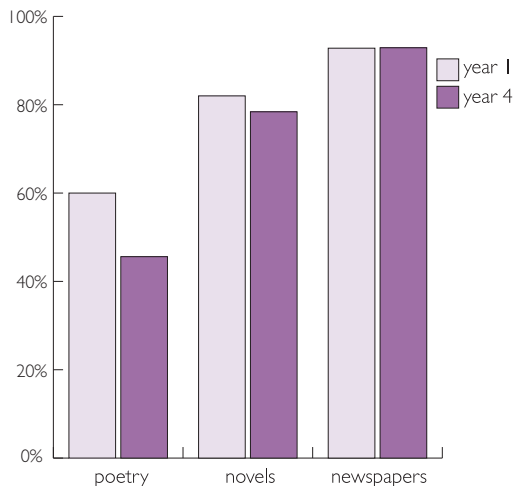


As far as the benefits associated with reading in L2 were concerned, there was little distinction between respondents in years 1 and 4 on reading to become more knowledgeable or to improve linguistic skills. However, a much larger proportion of year 4 students (70%) acknowledged reading for cultural information than year 1 students (52.2%).

First and final year respondents were also found to show differences in attitudes to reading in L2, although the distinctions were smaller than in perceptions of competence. Year 4 students were 8% more likely to acknowledge enjoyment of reading in L2; 12% more likely to claim that they are willing to read literature if not compulsory and 13% more likely to agree that they are willing to work hard to improve their reading. Year 1 students recorded a high incidence of uncertainty on the question of willingness to work hard to improve (almost 30%).

Despite the greater enjoyment of reading and apparent willingness to read literature among finalists in the survey, they were not found to have higher aspirations to read individual genres:

Chart 8: I want to be able to read... in L2

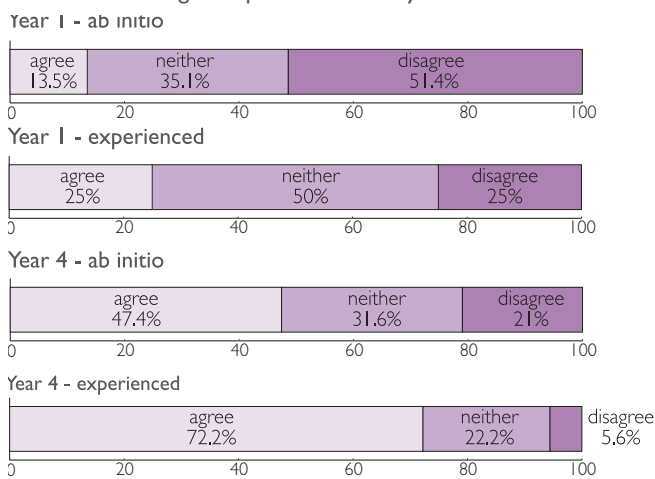


This does not align with attitudes to L1 fiction, which 88.2% of year 4 students claimed to enjoy compared with 81.2% of year 1 students. Year 1 students were also found to have slightly more positive opinions of academic reading in L1.

3.3.2 Differences between ab initio and experienced learners

Comparisons between respondents with and without prior knowledge of the language revealed that experienced learners were more confident in all year groups than ab initio students. They were more likely to agree that they are good at the language; that they have a good knowledge of culture and that they can read quickly. Differences were particularly pronounced on the question of vocabulary. Chart 9 shows the results for Spanish alone where approximately 25% of the 251 students were ab initio.

Chart 9: I have a good Spanish vocabulary



There were much smaller differences between beginners and experienced learners in attitudes to reading in L2. 54.5% of year 1 ab initio students agreed that they enjoy reading in L2 as opposed to 61.1% of experienced students. In year 4, however, 69.2% of the ab initio students agreed that they enjoy reading compared with 65.2% of experienced learners. Similarly, there were no significant gaps in attitudes to literary genres between ab initio and experienced students.

The relatively small percentage of ab initio responses in the total sample (24.9%) means that these findings need to be interpreted cautiously but the continuing lack of confidence in the final year of the degree programme could have implications for those languages with high proportions of ab initio learners.

3.3.3 Differences between male and female students

There was considerable divergence in the responses of male and female students. In L1 reading, a higher percentage of female students (88.2%) agreed that they enjoy reading fiction than males (72.9%). Male students seemed to be more positive about reading non-fiction, reading to learn new information and reading about favourite subjects. There were no differences in attitudes to academic reading. In L2, male respondents were slightly more optimistic that they are good at the language, that they have a good vocabulary and a good knowledge of culture. Both males and females recorded similar results in relation to doing well in L2 reading.

In line with the gender differences in L1 reading, a significantly larger proportion of male students agreed that they read in L2 to obtain cultural information and to become knowledgeable. Attitudes to reading in L2 were, however, more positive among female respondents (males expressed a greater preference for speaking):

Chart 10: I enjoy reading in L2

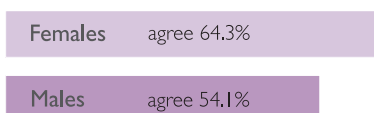


Chart 11: I am willing to read literature even if it is not compulsory

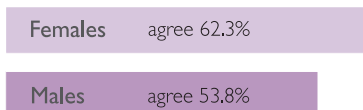


Chart 12: I want to be able to read L2 novels

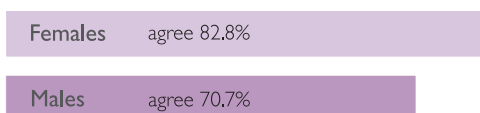
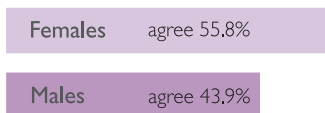


Chart 13: I want to be able to read L2 poetry



As there were 7% more males in the year 1 sample than in year 4, this makes the relatively positive approach of year 1 students to novels and poetry even more noteworthy.

3.3.4 Summary of key points on year of study, prior L2 experience and gender

- Year 4 students were more confident that they were doing well than year 1 students;
- Year 4 students had more positive attitudes to reading in L2 but did not aspire to read individual genres any more than year 1 students (and in the case of poetry aspired significantly less) despite there being a lower proportion of male students in year 4;
- Students with prior knowledge of the language were more confident in all year groups than ab initio students, although they were not found to have more positive attitudes;
- Males and females expressed preferences for different types of L1 and L2 reading.

3.4 Responses to open questions

Many students produced multiple responses in answer to these questions:

- I find the texts I am given to read in L2 are...
- I think that reading literature in L2 is...
- What makes a text in L2 difficult for you?
- If you are having difficulty understanding a text in L2, what do you do in order to understand it better?
- What was your experience of reading in L2 before you came to university? Please give as much detail as you can.
- What does the word literature mean to you?
- Why are you studying L2 at university?
- What abilities do you believe are necessary to succeed in the study of L2 at university?

Each response was categorised according to its theme and allocated a keyword code, which was agreed by two researchers. The number of responses per code were then counted in order to provide an indicator of frequency. Because of the detailed nature of many students' answers, some were allocated several different codes. The number of responses does not, therefore, equal the number of students. A few individual responses were very idiosyncratic and proved difficult to categorise. These were categorised as miscellaneous.

3.4.1 I find that the texts I am given to read in L2 are...

The responses to this item were assigned keyword codes which are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: I find that the texts I am given to read in L2 are...

Keyword code/theme	Number of times mentioned
Interesting	170
Difficult	149
Challenging	87
Manageable	55
Boring	52
Useful	44
generally useful	18
for language learning skills	17
for culture	5
for learning	4
Varied	39
OK	26
No response	24
Enjoyable	16
Easy	14
Informative	11
Not useful	11

There were a number of categories with fewer than ten responses. These included good, academic, rewarding, thought-provoking and outdated. There were also seven miscellaneous responses.

Interesting

Texts were most often described as interesting. While most participants wrote simply that texts were interesting, others specified that what they found interesting was the subject matter, the variety of topics and the insight into culture that was on offer, for example:

"on different and quite interesting, thought-provoking topics"
(y2 Spanish)

"often interesting in terms of cultural aspects"
(y4 Spanish)

"interesting enough to keep me reading them"
(y4 German).

Difficult

The 149 responses coded as difficult were of several types. Some learners clearly considered L2 reading material to be inaccessible and uninteresting, as follows:

"out of my depth and very hard"
(y1 Spanish)

"difficult to read and sometimes of little interest"
(y1 Portuguese)

"sad or morbid in content, difficult in language"
(y1 German).

Other students reported that texts were difficult because of vocabulary, grammar, their own lack of background knowledge or because it took so long to read them, for example:

"sometimes difficult, especially if they use old-fashioned French language" (y1 French)

"sometimes difficult, sometimes I have to read them a number of times before I understand them"
(y4 Spanish)

"difficult to understand as I don't know enough characters"
(y4 Chinese).

Many students viewed the difficulty (and challenge) posed by L2 texts in a more positive light and reported that this made reading the texts worthwhile:

"sometimes challenging but working my way through them and finishing makes it all worth it" (y2, Spanish)

"quite difficult but not completely unapproachable - these texts give you a sense of satisfaction when you complete them" (y2, French).

Manageable

Among the 55 respondents whose answers were categorised as manageable were those who wrote specifically that texts were manageable or achievable. Alternatively, students described the texts they are given to read as suitable for their level of ability as follows:

"at an appropriate level" (y4 Spanish)

"usually about the right level of difficulty" (y4 Spanish).

Boring

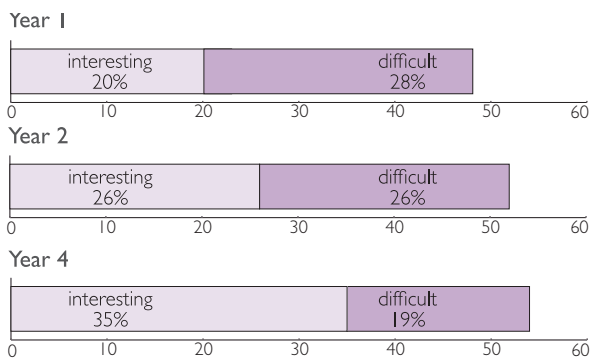
Some students reported that they found texts boring while others stressed that material was boring if it was not their choice of reading or that lack of linguistic competence resulted in loss of interest:

"some I find boring as they aren't typical books I would read" (y1 Italian)

"do not interest me because I don't know the language, let alone the story" (y1 German).

Analysis of the most frequent responses, interesting and difficult revealed that year 4 students were more likely to describe texts as interesting than year 1 students and less likely to describe texts as difficult. This evidence seems to reinforce the earlier findings from the rating scale statements, as follows:

Chart 14: The texts I am given to read in L2 are...



(These figures refer to the percentage of students in each year group who described texts as either interesting or difficult).

Female students were slightly more likely than male students to describe texts as interesting.

3.4.2 I think that reading literature in L2 is...

Responses to this item are listed in Table 4.

Keyword code/theme	Number of times mentioned
Useful	217
for language learning skills	123
for culture	46
generally useful	37
for learning	11
Difficult	145
Interesting	81
Enjoyable	57
Boring	40
Challenging	47
Important	35
No response	27
Rewarding	18
A good idea	12

Categories with fewer than 10 responses included OK, good, different and better than L1. There were three miscellaneous responses.

Useful

Reading literature was most commonly perceived to be useful, in particular for developing linguistic skills. Among skills mentioned was learning vocabulary, which was specifically cited 59 times. Literature was also seen as useful for providing an insight into culture and as a general aid to learning, e.g.

"a great way to build vocabulary and get a better grasp of grammar" (y4 Spanish)

"a way of understanding not only the language but also the people and culture" (y3 Arabic).

The perceived usefulness of literature contrasts somewhat with responses to the previous item on general L2 reading material where there were only 44 references to usefulness. In particular, the increased number of students citing the benefits of literature for developing language skills is noteworthy.

Difficult

Literature was also frequently described as difficult but this was at similar levels to findings for other L2 texts. Again, students reported general problems, issues with vocabulary and grammar or with understanding the content:

"near impossible" (y3 Chinese)

"significantly more difficult than reading literature in English" (y1 Spanish)

"can be difficult depending on the content and date of the literature" (y2 French).

As with other texts, a recurrent theme was the idea that literature is difficult or challenging but rewarding:

"difficult but worth the effort" (y2 French)

"hard work but fulfilling" (y2 Italian).

Interesting and enjoyable

Considerably fewer participants reported that L2 literature was interesting than had been the case with general L2 texts. However, there were still many enthusiastic references to reading literature with students claiming it was interesting or enjoyable (which was cited much more often than in the previous item) either for its own sake, because of the increased understanding of culture resulting from it or because it created a sense of achievement. Several students simply described it as 'fun'. Other examples included:

"interesting and I find the language more beautiful than English" (y1 French)

"interesting - it opens up another world of literature which often differs from our own" (y4 German)

"really enjoyable - you feel good you are able to read in a language other than English" (y1 Spanish).

As with texts in general, some respondents expressed very negative views about the genre:

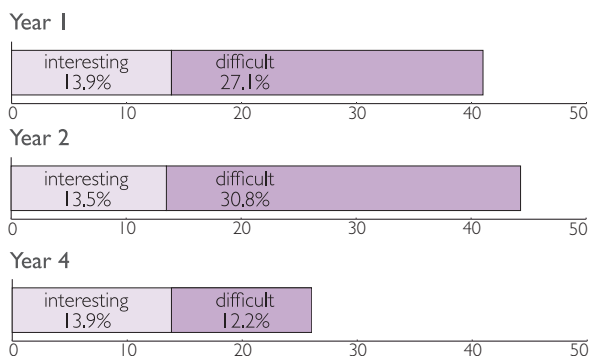
"a waste of time and resources" (y1 French)

"as boring as it is in English" (y4 Spanish)

"not for me" (y1 Russian).

Analysis of the most common responses by year group revealed that the differences between the year groups on the question of usefulness were small. Year 2 students were, however, most likely to view the prospect of reading L2 literature as useful whereas year 1 students were least likely to report this. Results for difficult and interesting can be seen below:

Chart 15



Similar proportions of respondents in each year group described literature in terms of difficulty as was the case with other L2 texts (although the figure here was a little higher for year 2 students). This indicates, perhaps encouragingly, that literature is not necessarily perceived to be more difficult than other L2 texts. However, a lower proportion of each year group reported that reading L2 literature was interesting and there were no differences on this issue between students in years 1 and 4. This appears to underline the evidence from the rating scale statements which suggested that although year 4 students were more favourably disposed to L2 reading generally, in some ways this did not extend to literary genres. Female students were slightly more likely than male students to describe reading literature as interesting and useful for language learning skills.

3.4.3 What makes a text in... difficult for you?

Keyword code/theme	Number of times mentioned
Vocabulary	409
Grammar	133
Subject matter	56
Sentence length/complexity	37
Outdated language	24
Style (of which 6 were literary style)	21
Idiom	17
Colloquialisms	16
No response	12
Language learning skills	10

Vocabulary

Students overwhelmingly cited vocabulary as a source of difficulty. In some instances, the type of vocabulary was specified as technical (20), topic-specific (10), regional (9), scientific (3), jargon (3), legal (2), cultural (2), academic (1) and literary (1). All the comments about regional

vocabulary came from students of Spanish referring to Latin American texts.

Several students also suggested that they had problems dealing with vocabulary that could not be guessed from context. Among many responses, there was a sense of frustration about vocabulary:

"lots of new vocabulary as it means I can't let the story or text flow so I lose concentration easily" (y1, Spanish)

"having to pause to look up individual words, which can make it slow and dull" (y4 German).

Grammar

Grammar was the next most common difficulty and was mentioned 133 times. It also included references to complicated structures and coping with different tenses and verb forms, e.g.

"verb forms especially irregular ones - can't look up in dictionary - don't know the infinitive" (y1 Italian)

"the language structure can sometimes make it difficult" (y3 Arabic).

Subject matter

The subject matter of the text was referred to 56 times. This mostly concerned topics with which students were unfamiliar:

"a theme or content I can't understand in English let alone German" (y1 German)

"not knowing the related subject matter so therefore not being able to make an educated guess to work out unknown words" (y2 French)

"heavy subject matter that requires a lot of thought/concentration on the topic as well as the language" (y1 German).

Several respondents also claimed that lack of interest in the topic made a text difficult for them to understand:

"if the subject matter does not keep my interest long enough to gain a solid understanding" (y4 German)

"if the novel or subject matter is boring" (y4 Spanish).

Sentence length

There were 37 references to sentence length, two thirds of which came from students of German:

"when the sentences are long and complicated and you have to break them down" (y4 German).

Inadequate linguistic skills were raised as an issue by ten students, almost all of whom were year 1 ab initio, for example;

"I am a beginner. I cannot read Italian full stop."

3.4.4 If you are having difficulty understanding a text in L2, what do you do in order to understand it better?

Students produced a range of strategies for dealing with difficulties with reading:

Table 6: If you are having difficulty understanding a text in L2, what do you do in order to understand it better?

Keyword code/theme	Number of times mentioned
Dictionary	427
Re-read	102
Ask others	75
Translation	43
Break up	37
Research	23
Gist	20
Translate	20
Context	16
Synopsis	15
Grammar reference	12
Read slowly	12
Internet	11
No response	9

Using a dictionary

Looking up vocabulary in the dictionary was the principal strategy for all year groups. Several students claimed to use Google rather than a dictionary. There also appeared to be differences in respondents' approaches to using dictionaries. For example, 20 students reported that they looked up key words:

"try and look up what are the key words that affect my understanding. I don't find it helpful or productive to look up every word I don't know" (y1 Spanish).

Whereas others emphasized looking up all unknown vocabulary:

"look up all the words and then look puzzled" (y1 Spanish).

There were also instances in which using a dictionary was more of a last resort:

"re-read several times and eventually look in dictionary" (y4 Portuguese).

Other strategies

Re-reading the text was in fact the next most commonly cited strategy. This was reported proportionately more frequently by year 4 students than by year 1 students.

Re-reading was followed in frequency by asking others, which was mentioned 75 times. Of these there were 23 references to asking teachers; 19 references to asking peers and 12 to asking native speakers. Final year students were far less likely to report use of this strategy than students in year 1 and to a lesser extent, year 2. For 17 students (13 of whom were first years) asking for help was the only strategy they reported.

Using a translation was referred to proportionately far more by year 1 than the other year groups. There were distinctions in the ways in which translations were used. Some students suggested that it was a last resort:

"if desperate parallel read a translation" (y1 Italian).

Several others indicated that they would read the translation alongside the original, while others wrote that their first step was to read an English version of the text.

There were 37 incidences of students reporting that they break up the text when faced with difficulty. There were two main approaches to this, either breaking it up and treating it a section at a time or, alternatively, breaking up sentences:

"I break down the sentence into smaller segments" (y1 French)

"Break up sentences, find the subject, verb and object in each one" (y4 German).

A number of additional strategies were also referred to. These included translating the text; researching the subject; trying to understand the gist and using context. These actions involve low numbers of students so it is therefore not possible to generalize from the sample. However, three-quarters of the comments about translating came from students in year 1, while more than half the references to context came from year 4 students. A few students also stated that they took notes, guessed, persevered and read aloud.

3.4.5 What was your experience of reading in L2 before you came to university?

Students provided the following responses about their reading prior to university:

Table 7: What was your experience of reading in L2 before you came to university?

Keyword code/theme	Number of times mentioned
Literature	198
A-level	143
Newspapers and magazines	139
None	124
Not much	87
Books	52
Texts	52
Textbooks	29
Abroad (in target country)	24
GCSE	22
Internet	20
No response	17

Literature

Exposure to literature in the target language was the most frequently mentioned pre-university experience of reading and was cited by almost one third of respondents. It included general references to literature and set texts as well as to specific genres such as novels, plays, and, to a lesser extent, short stories and poetry. For example:

"At A level we read two set texts which I really enjoyed and I read Bonjour Tristesse in my own time" (y1 French)

"I studied Spanish literature at A level so I think I had quite a bit of experience" (y2 Spanish)

"At A level I was taught through the reading of literature, in particular Lorca's plays. This was very rewarding" (y4 Spanish).

There were also other instances where students suggested that the study of literature at A level had been beneficial:

"I tried to read internet newspapers as much as possible. I found books difficult to get into. However, when I had finished one it was a very rewarding experience. The books that I studied in class for A level weren't all that interesting but with hindsight they were necessary to get a better grasp of the language" (y1 Spanish).

Some respondents specifically related that they had not studied literature at all or did not study it because it was too difficult:

"Did not study literature at A level. I found it too much work looking up all the vocab - too long winded. Maybe Harry Potter would have interested me" (y4 Spanish)

"I didn't really have any experience! At A level all I read was articles from textbooks. I wasn't given access to German literature" (y2 German)

"I had very little experience of reading literary prose - it always seemed too frightening. I had read mainly newspaper and magazine articles and internet sites" (y2 Spanish).

A level

A level reading was mentioned by almost 25% of respondents but students provided vastly differing descriptions of what this had involved. Many reported a broad and diverse experience while others clearly felt that A level reading had been minimal:

"I did little if any reading in German. At A level we did not do any literature which I felt disadvantaged me in my first year of uni" (y4 German)

"I had read many German news articles as part of A level work and a number of books on WW2 such as Anne Frank und Die Weiße Rose" (y4 German)

"read online newspapers. I subscribed to an Italian version of Elle magazine. I studied Volevo I Pantaloni and selected Canti from Dante's Inferno for AS and A level" (y1 Italian)

"I hardly did any. Literature was not studied at my school 6th form" (y2 Spanish).

Several participants commented on the way that their reading had been supported by their teachers at A level:

"I read articles from magazines and newspapers at A level and also studied literature - Como Agua Para Chocolate - but we went through it a lot more slowly so I had a more thorough understanding" (y1 Spanish)

"We read short articles in textbooks and from the internet and we'd read them through as a class with our teacher asking questions to check we understood. She also gave us vocab" (y1 German).

Newspapers and magazines

Prior experience of newspapers and magazines was referred to 139 times. This type of reading involved a range of different activities such as reading articles in class, reading online newspapers, subscribing to magazines and reading while in the country.

"reading mags on holiday in Spain" (y1 Spanish)

"spent gap year in Brazil so read newspapers, fliers, posters etc" (y4 Portuguese)

"I had read some teenage literature but mostly read magazines such as Stern, der Spiegel and so on. I would often buy women's magazines in German when I was in the 6th form e.g. Cosmopolitan" (y1 German).

Independent reading

There were other references to independent pre-university reading (27 in total):

"Portuguese GCSE + A level entailed reading both literary and non-literary texts with varying levels of difficulty. Had also read two novels in Portuguese voluntarily" (y4 Portuguese)

"I studied French literature throughout my years at school but specifically at GCSE and A level. It was very interesting and encouraged me to read French literature in my own time" (y1 French).

Other reading experiences

The 124 students who claimed to have no previous reading experience were all students who stated that they had not learnt the relevant L2 before university. However, some ab initio students commented on reading they had done in the target country:

"very little other than graffiti on walls in Gaza" (y1 Arabic)

"had read road signs and limited articles in newspapers" (y1 Portuguese).

Reading abroad was also declared by learners with prior L2 knowledge and seemed to vary between those who engaged in incidental reading and those students who had obviously made a specific effort to seek out opportunities to read.

A few students provided other categories of response such as menus, signs and songs.

There was an indication that pre-university experience of L2 literature may be connected with positive attitudes to the idea of reading L2 literature. Of the 198 respondents who mentioned having studied literature before, 149 (75.2%) expressed a positive attitude to literature in completing the sentence *I think that reading literature in L2 is...* while 37 (18.7%) were negative in their opinions. This compares with 78 (62.9%) of the 124 ab initio students who recorded favourable views and 34 (27.4%) who were unfavourable.

It should be noted that this question required students to record their experiences retrospectively and that the passage of time may have influenced their perceptions.

3.4.6 What does the word literature mean to you?

Students' personal interpretations of the word 'literature' were very varied and can be viewed in Table 8.

Table 8: What does the word 'literature' mean to you?

Keyword code/theme	Number of times mentioned
Novels	133
Books	125
Writing	108
Fiction	102
Poetry	57
No response	54
Reading	51
Texts	49
Culture	23
Boredom	18
Academic texts	14
Art	12
Study	11
Short stories	10
Outdated texts	10

Literature as novels, books, fiction and poetry

Commonly literature was described in a traditional way as encompassing novels, books, fiction, poetry and, to a lesser extent, short stories. In some instances, literature was associated with critical acclaim and with particular influential authors such as Shakespeare, Dickens, Goethe and Cervantes. The following are examples of responses:

"interesting book that is enjoyable to read" (y4 German)

"books, decent ones, not trashy" (y2 Spanish)

"books that one has to study such as Shakespeare - not necessarily interesting" (y1 French)

"the work of authors that convey a profound meaning" (y4 Chinese).

For several students, the term literature was inevitably associated with academic study:

"books studied in universities" (y4 Spanish)

"books, essays, work, no sleep" (y1 Italian).

For others, literature conveyed works of a certain age or era:

"stories written before I was born" (y2 Spanish)

"books or writing from the 19th century which are difficult to understand" (y3 French).

Literature as reading, writing, culture and art

Literature was also interpreted in a much broader sense by many participants as reading, writing, culture and art:

"anything written" (y4 Spanish)

"the study of the human condition in written form" (y4 Spanish)

"Literature is writing that captures a society of a country in a certain time scale. It gives great insight into a country's culture" (y1 Italian)

"To me literature is a form of art that one can learn from and take morals from and when well-written can be very stimulating" (y1 Italian).

A few students included newspapers and magazines in their description or, indeed, anything published and specifically rejected the idea of a literary canon:

"reading books, not necessarily on the lines of Goethe, Shakespeare etc. like many think" (y1 Spanish).

Some respondents acknowledged that literature is wide-ranging but also admitted that they found it hard to see it that way, for example:

"literature is broad but tends to make me think boring English GCSE" (y3 French).

Attitudes to literature

It was clear that literature evoked strong feelings, both positive and negative among many respondents. Some very hostile views were expressed as follows:

"torture" (y4 French)

"horrid novels" (y1 German)

"boredom, monotony, supposed intellectuals trying to express themselves" (y2 French).

But equally, other participants were very enthusiastic:

"it is a gateway to a whole world of knowledge" (y1 French)

"it is something mentally stimulating and enjoyable. It can also be very informative" (y1 German)

"freedom, escape from today's world" (y1 Spanish).

3.4.7 Why are you studying languages at university?

Most students reported several different reasons for studying languages at university:

Table 9: Why are you studying languages at university?

Keyword code/theme	Number of times mentioned
Enjoyment	268
Employability	82
Language learning skills	76
Interest	74
Culture	64
Fluency	51
Mobility/travel	45
Desire for L2	36
Learning	25
Importance	23
Speaking	22
Communication	21
Usefulness	21
Ability	19
Country	17
No response	17
Skills	11
Miscellaneous	11
Heritage	10

Enjoyment

Enjoyment was cited far more frequently than any other reason and was followed by employability, language learning skills, interest and culture. Typical comments included the following examples:

"because I have a passion for Spanish and an interest in Spanish culture" (y1 Spanish)

"love the language" (y1 French).

The categories are not mutually exclusive. Some of the students who wrote that they found languages enjoyable also claimed that it would bring about an employability benefit, for example:

"I enjoy it. I think it will improve my chances of having a good job later" (y1 German).

In many cases, enjoying or loving the language was linked to wanting to do well and gain fluency in it.

Other reasons for studying languages

Extrinsic concerns about the usefulness of languages for employability and skills development were not nearly so significant as enjoyment and interest for these students. There were, however, participants whose attitudes seemed to be very instrumental, e.g.

"Being fluent in another language is very useful. Many businesses seek foreign language speakers" (y1 French).

The numbers of students with a solely utilitarian rationale were very low. There were 13 respondents whose sole reason for studying was employability.

It should also perhaps be noted that the speaking and communication aspects of languages were cited more often than literature or reading although the number of respondents involved is small. Three students gave literature as one of their reasons for studying languages. These were all first year Italian students:

"Italy has so much to offer. Italian literature and theatre offers such a variety of ideas"

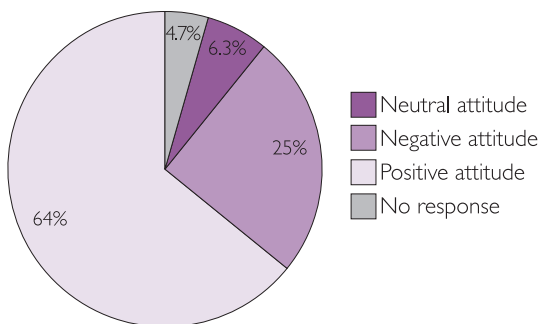
"I love their literature."

Other reasons with fewer than 10 responses included challenge, friendship, personal development and reading.

Enjoyment of languages and attitudes to literature

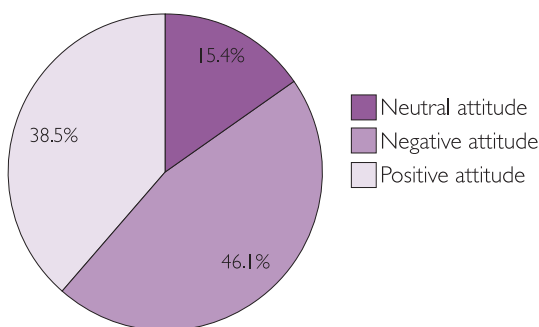
There were 64 students who described enjoyment as their sole reason for studying languages. Analysis of their responses to the item, *I think reading literature in L2 is...* showed the following results:

Chart 16: I think reading literature in L2 is...



Similar analysis of the 13 students who wrote that employability was their only reason for studying languages was as follows:

Chart 17: I think reading literature in L2 is...



These figures are too small to draw firm conclusions but there is a suggestion that the students with a purely instrumental motivation for doing languages, i.e. for future employment, may be less inclined towards literature than those who have an intrinsic enjoyment of the subject.

3.4.8 What qualities do you believe are necessary to succeed in the study of languages at university?

As with other items, most students provided multiple responses in identifying the following abilities as necessary for success:

Table 10: What qualities do you believe are necessary to succeed in the study of languages at university?	
Keyword code/theme	Number of times mentioned
Effort	127
Reading	79
Commitment	68
Motivation	62
Speaking	57
Aptitude	56
Grammar	54
Vocabulary	48
Independent study	46
Interest	41
Perseverance	39
Determination	37
No response	37
Confidence	35
Patience	34
Culture	31
Memory	25
Enthusiasm	22
Writing	22
Listening	21
Communication	14
Enjoyment	13
Travel (including residence abroad)	13
Language learning skills	12
Time	12
Contact with native speakers	11
Open mind	11
Practice	10
Proficiency	10
Time management	10

Effort and sustaining effort

Although enjoyment was the main reason for studying languages, when it came to the conditions for success, enjoyment, interest and enthusiasm were seen as less important than other attributes. Effort and other similar qualities (connected with the ability to sustain effort) such as commitment, motivation, perseverance and determination all featured strongly and indicate a sense of personal responsibility for success among respondents, as do the references to independent study and patience, for example:

"determination and hard work ultimately" (y1 Italian)

"to keep working at it and not give up when you do not understand" (y1 French).

Some respondents made the effort required to succeed in languages sound very arduous:

"hard work and more time than there is available" (y1 German)

"As an ex-beginner, I would suggest never leaving your house, unless it is to attend lectures and basically forget about sleeping or eating properly until summer comes around" (y4 Spanish).

Others specified that effort or commitment should be applied to particular activities or developing skills:

"commitment to learning grammar and new vocab" (y1 Spanish).

Language skills

Individual language skills also had a prominent role in students' responses. These included reading, speaking, acquiring grammar, learning vocabulary, writing, listening etc. In terms of the number of times it was mentioned, reading topped this list. Some students simply listed reading along with listening, speaking and writing. Several others commented that a love of reading was important but most references to reading were related to the amount of reading and were linked to independent study:

"the ability to read around what you are studying to gain a complete overview of the topic and also a deeper understanding" (y2 German)

"extra reading outside classes" (y4 Spanish).

3.4.9 Summary of key points from open questions

- L2 reading material was most frequently reported to be interesting and difficult;
- The idea of reading L2 literature was most frequently reported to be useful and difficult;
- Vocabulary was overwhelmingly cited as the main source of difficulty encountered in reading L2 texts and using a dictionary was suggested as the most widely-used strategy for dealing with this;
- Literature was the most frequently reported pre-university experience of L2 reading;
- Students reported very diverse experiences of A level reading, ranging from simply using textbooks through to accessing a range of different genres;
- Students were studying languages for reasons of enjoyment far more often than any other factor;
- Achieving success in a language degree was mostly associated with sustained effort and the development of language skills, particularly reading.

Chapter 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 General

The sample size for this study was 601 questionnaires from seven UK universities of different types. Most respondents were native speakers of English who were studying Spanish, German or French although other languages were also included. Respondents were following a range of different degree programmes but the majority were on single or combined honours languages programmes. The sample included students in all year groups but the relatively high proportion of year 1 students could have influenced findings, particularly in relation to the difficulty experienced with L2 reading. It is acknowledged that institutional variation as well as the types of reading experiences undergone at university could also have had a bearing on students' attitudes to reading. However, the purpose of this study was simply to provide a snapshot of attitudes at a given moment in time, not to compare institutions. It is emphasised that all evidence is concerned with students' perceptions and not their actual performances. Conclusions and recommendations are discussed in relation to the research questions which underpinned the study and are offered tentatively. All of these require more extensive research. It is also recognised that many universities already implement programmes designed to enhance students' performances in and experiences of L2 reading.

4.2 Students' pre-university experiences of L2 reading

Students reported diverse experiences of L2 reading before university. These ranged from those with no previous experience to those who had been exposed to a variety of genres and who had read independently. This is not unexpected given that almost one quarter of the sample were beginners with no prior knowledge of the target language. Perhaps of more significance were the differences between students with the relevant languages A level. Students who have had previous access to a variety of genres and experience of independent reading are likely to have been better prepared for university than those who reported just reading from textbooks. All this means that teachers in HE may need to be cautious in making assumptions about students' prior reading even on the basis of a traditional qualification.

The topic-based nature of languages A levels has been criticised for encouraging "*a view of the text as a functional source of information*" which does not make students ready for the university study of literature (Holmes and Platten: 2005, 211). Similarly, in the context of students with A level English embarking on English degree programmes, many problems have been found to exist because of the amount of reading expected in HE (Ballinger, 2002; Smith, 2004 and Green, 2005). Smith and Hopkins (2005) reported that A level English students were unused to reading outside class and that they underestimated the quantity of independent reading required in HE. They recommended that transition could be eased through improvements to the curriculum for year 1 students. In languages this could be even more critical because fewer languages undergraduates may be coming from a background of any literature at A level. In the teaching of reading in year 1 languages programmes, it is therefore recommended that students should be prepared for the difficulties that they are likely to encounter with reading. Evidence from this study

indicates that they can find encouragement that reading seems to become progressively easier over the course of the degree.

In addition, increased dialogue between A level and HE teachers would help to improve knowledge of practice in both sectors. At university-level, this will facilitate the development of the year 1 curriculum and enable learners to be more effectively supported. While A level teachers are dealing with many priorities, some of which do not concern students' future higher education needs, they still need to be aware of the reading demands of degrees in the humanities generally so that they can encourage students to read as much as possible as early as possible.

4.3 Attitudes to L1 reading

Attitudes to L1 reading were generally very favourable. Most students expressed enjoyment of both fiction and non-fiction and acknowledged a range of purposes for reading. They also indicated that they like to talk to others about their reading. Evidence from L1 reading research has strongly indicated that interest in reading can increase both the amount of reading undertaken and improve reading comprehension (Wigfield, 1997; Schallert and Reed, 1997). It has also been argued that positive attitudes to reading in L1 are likely to be transferred to L2 (Day and Bamford, 1998). These findings would, therefore, seem to indicate that the majority of students embark on L2 reading from a strong position.

This positive approach was not found to extend to L1 academic reading which was viewed with dislike or ambivalence by the majority of respondents. This raises some concerns as a large quantity of academic reading is a basic requirement of university language programmes. It is argued (Mann, 2000: 213) that academic reading should not be viewed in the same way as other reading because of its public nature:

"When students engage in reading for academic purposes they are no longer engaging in a private activity undertaken for its own sake, but in an activity whose evaluated outcomes will - crucially - tell them something about themselves, and, in particular, about themselves as students."

Smith and Hopkins (2005) proposed that the change from reading for pleasure to reading academically was one of the principal challenges facing students as they entered HE and was one of the issues requiring more effective management of transition. However perhaps surprisingly, in this study year 1 students seemed to be more positive about academic reading than year 4 students. The reasons for this are unclear, although the time at which the data were collected (summer term) may have had a bearing on the opinions of students facing final year exams.

A minority of respondents were negative about all the L1 reading surveyed and some of them made very adverse comments about literature. There appear, therefore, to be students on language programmes who innately dislike all reading. It is difficult to know what recommendations could be made to improve this situation, although it should be stressed that this involves a relatively small number of students.

4.4 Attitudes to L2 reading

Whilst L2 reading was not viewed as enthusiastically as most forms of L1 reading, a majority of students still had positive attitudes to it and believed that it led to linguistic, cultural and general knowledge benefits. In particular, reading literature in L2 was associated with the development of language skills.

These findings seem encouraging and are broadly in line with evidence from previous studies which also reported positive attitudes to literature among language undergraduates in the United States (Davis, Gorell, Kline and Hsieh, 1992) and, more recently, among French undergraduates in the UK (Jacobs, Rodgers and Watkins, 2002).

However, there was also some contradictory evidence indicating a possible gap between students' apparent willingness to engage with a variety of L2 reading and their actual behaviour as only just over one third of those surveyed admitted to reading often outside class. This may explain why there is a perception among teachers that students are unwilling to read (which is the rationale for this study). Concern about students' motivation for reading was also raised recently in a report on undergraduates' writing skills (Murray and Kirton, 2006: 9) in which it was claimed that today's young people are less interested in reading than was the case in the past. The idea that young people used to read more was also explored by Bassnet (2002: 9) who argued that young readers in the 1950s were more able to concentrate on lengthy texts than is the case today:

"Students read fewer texts or read fragments of texts because they are no longer trained to read for prolonged periods. Designing a degree programme in literary studies today also involves taking this factor into consideration."

Students' relative comfort with fragmented texts may explain why newspapers and magazines attracted such strong support from the respondents in this study. Additionally in L2 contexts, articles from journalistic texts may appear more manageable than longer literary options for students who are grappling with vocabulary and other problems. Newspaper and magazine texts are likely to cover a wide range of topics and to reflect diverse aspects of

target language culture. As such they could potentially appeal to more students' individual interests. Davis, Gorell, Kline and Hsieh (1992: 325) also suggested that it can be difficult for undergraduates to extract cultural content from literary texts because it is "*frequently burlesqued or deformed*" (citing Purcell, 1988). This is less the case with other genres.

Some UK institutions have responded to students' lack of familiarity with long texts by adapting the content and style of their literature courses. For example, the Contemporary France module offered by the University of Reading introduces students to literature by means of guided reading of carefully selected short stories. Other modules attempt to draw on the strengths of today's students, notably their visual literacy (Bassnet, 2002). The University of Sheffield teaches literature through film because students are more comfortable with this medium. More information on both these courses is available at: www.llas.ac.uk/events/llaseventarchiveitem.aspx?resourceid=2358

Previous research has shown that positive attitudes to literature are often associated with students having opportunities to voice their opinions (Davis, Gorell, Kline and Hsieh, 1992). This is also encouraged in literature teaching at the University of Leeds as is collaborative learning with peers (Holmes and Platten, 2005). Collaborative learning has been shown to produce benefits in both achievement and motivation (Dörnyei, 1997). The respondents in this survey also confirmed that there was a social aspect of reading for them in acknowledging that they like talking to friends about their reading. Imaginative ways of promoting students' engagement with reading should continue to be explored in this way.

There was a suggestion in the data that open-mindedness towards L2 literary study may be linked to students' motivational orientations generally. Those studying languages purely for enjoyment were more likely to express positive opinions about L2 literature than those learning solely for reasons of employability. The numbers of students involved are too small to generalise but attitudes to reading may, in part, depend on whether a student is motivated by intrinsic interest in a language for its own sake or extrinsic interest in a language for its perceived usefulness. The implications of this would suggest that encouraging reading among the more instrumentally-oriented students may need to be approached differently.

4.4.1 Attitudes and gender

Males and females in the study appeared to have different preferences in both L1 and L2 reading. Male students were more inclined to enjoy non-fiction and reading for information. Females were better disposed towards fiction

and enjoyed reading more in L2. More positive attitudes to reading among females have been well-documented in L1 research, particularly among younger age groups (Wigfield and Guthrie, 1995; Clarke and Foster, 2005) as have the preferences of males for non-fiction (Millard, 1997). In L2 contexts, girls have been found to be far more interested in reading than boys (e.g. Barton, 2002). L2 skills preferences were previously investigated at A level (Maubach and Morgan, 2001) where boys chose speaking as their favourite activity and girls chose reading. Males in this sample of undergraduates were also found to prefer speaking. Given the unequal distribution of male and female students across different languages in UK universities, this has different implications depending on the language in question but teachers do need to be aware of gender differences in attitudes to reading.

4.4.2 Attitudes and year of study

Year 4 students claimed to enjoy reading more than year 1 students. They were also more likely to describe L2 reading material as interesting and much more likely to acknowledge reading in their own time. However, they were not found to have more positive attitudes to individual L2 literary genres, despite their greater enjoyment of reading L1 fiction. In the case of poetry, they were considerably more negative than year 1 students. This could correlate with findings from Davis, Gorell, Kline and Hsieh (1992), who reported that students with better knowledge of target language culture were more negative about recommending L2 literature courses. As a possible explanation for this, they suggested that it could be to do with the way that culture is presented in literature. They also proposed that students who have been abroad may be disappointed when their wide knowledge of culture with a "*small 'c'*" does not help them to tackle culture with a "*big 'C'*", i.e. literature (p. 325). This could also be true of the year 4 students here who were more confident than other year groups about their knowledge of culture.

Alternatively, the opinions of year 4 students may reflect experiences of literature at university, although this is speculation. Phipps and Gonzalez (2004: 132) argued that the teaching of L2 literature often "*rests on the foundation of a consecrated canon*" and criticised this as a narrow view which can deter students. Instead, they suggested that literature could be harnessed as a means of developing critical awareness.

4.4.3 Students making the case for literature

Many students were enthusiastic about the study of L2 literature. In addition to this, one of the widespread perceptions of literature was its usefulness, in particular for the development of linguistic skills such as learning

vocabulary. This could suggest a functional and instrumental approach on the part of these students, which may not correspond with teachers' opinions of the role of literary study within the curriculum. But support for the students' views comes from Meara (2005: 76-77) who proposed that the diminished role for literature at A level had resulted in students having small L2 vocabularies. He stressed the importance of literature as a form of extensive reading in building vocabulary:

"this is perhaps the single most compelling reason for preserving a hefty literature component in HE language courses"

There is widespread support for extensive reading programmes where students are encouraged to choose large quantities of reading material at an accessible level and which are believed to benefit both comprehension and attitudes (Elley, 1991; Grabe and Stoller, 2002; Walter, 2003). There was also some indication in this study that students with pre-university experience of literature had more positive attitudes to it. This would need further investigation because other factors may be involved here but it could suggest that there is a case for early exposure to literature as a means of harnessing motivation. This is also proposed in a study of transition into HE Modern Languages (Claussen, 2004). This again highlights the need for dialogue between A level and HE teachers. Universities can also offer students opportunities to access literature in their outreach work with schools such as the Master Classes offered by the University of Leeds (Holmes and Platten, 2005).

4.5 Students' levels of confidence and difficulties with L2 reading

4.5.1 Confidence

Many students were ambivalent about their linguistic proficiency and evaluated their reading and vocabulary more negatively than their general competence. They also frequently described L2 reading as difficult although year 4 students were far more confident than year 1 students that they were doing well in reading, had a good knowledge of culture and a good vocabulary. Although this is not a longitudinal study involving the same students, it still provides a picture of growing confidence in competence over the course of the degree, which is re-assuring. However, lack of confidence was clearly a problem for the majority of year 1 students and, for many ab initio students, this seemed to continue into year 4.

Research with beginning level university learners of French, Japanese and Russian (Saito, Horwitz and Garza, 1999) identified the existence of reading anxiety, which partly depended on the target language in question and was said

to be linked to activities such as reading out loud and having to cope with unfamiliar cultural material. These authors proposed that teachers could prepare beginning level learners for the possibility of reading anxiety and also urged that they should be cautious about asking such learners to read out loud. Advanced level university language learners were not reported to suffer particularly from reading anxiety (Brantmeier, 2005: 74) but were found to feel nervous at the thought of literature courses and were also said to be:

"more anxious about reading out loud and answering oral questions about what they read than they are about the actual act of reading itself."

As with academic reading in L1, it could be the public and evaluated aspects of L2 reading that may cause problems with confidence.

The persistent lack of confidence of ab initio students raises some concerns but, it should be stressed that this does not relate to actual performance. In a study of German degree outcomes, Baumann (1999) found that there was little difference in final degree grades between ab initio and A level students. Similarly, in research on ab initio provision at Scottish universities, Bowker and Stuart (2005) reported that departmental staff judged ab initio courses to be successful. The evidence from this study suggests that ab initio students may not share staff confidence in programme outcomes. Given that this kind of provision offers a means of widening participation in language study, the learning experience of ab initio students on degree programmes should be researched further. Additionally, universities need to be aware that a continuing lack of confidence among these students will need to be addressed.

4.5.2 Specific difficulties with L2 reading

Students identified a range of difficulties with L2 reading. These are almost inevitable for many students in the early stages of their degree programmes, given that inadequate knowledge of the target language has been shown to prevent the transfer of reading abilities from L1 until a threshold of linguistic proficiency has been reached (Grabe and Stoller, 2002).

For these students, vocabulary of different kinds was by far the single biggest issue. Many of them drew attention to the problems caused by continually having to look words up which interrupted reading, slowed the pace of reading and resulted in them losing the thread of what they were reading. Previous studies have highlighted the importance of vocabulary. Vocabulary and reading have been described as mutually dependent (Nation, 2001). Research in the Netherlands has found that L2 students need at least 10,000 head words to be able to cope with university-level texts

(Hazenburg and Hulstijn, 1996 cited in Grabe and Stoller, 2002). Nation (2001) also cited research (Hirsh and Nation, 1992) which indicated that for a text to be enjoyed, readers should be familiar with 98-99% of the vocabulary. Problems with vocabulary are, therefore, likely to have implications for students' attitudes to reading. The teaching of vocabulary in the UK has been criticised by Meara (2005: 76) as *"based on the assumption that students will somehow just pick up the vocabulary that they need."*

The data collected in this study would seem to suggest that strategies are required to help students deal with vocabulary.

Other difficulties which were also referred to often included grammar and the subject matter of the text. The importance of knowledge of grammar for reading was emphasised by Grabe and Stoller (2002) while inadequate background knowledge has been said to interfere with comprehension (Walter, 2003).

Difficulties and challenges encountered with L2 reading were by no means all viewed in a negative way by respondents. The idea that reading is difficult but worthy of persistence was a recurrent theme in the qualitative data. Along with this, the ability to sustain effort was perceived to be a necessary condition for success on a languages degree. Persisting with effort has been identified as a key component of motivation (Williams and Burden, 1997). Similarly, in self-efficacy theory, Bandura (1997: 80) emphasises the significance of setbacks in teaching that persistent effort is usually necessary for success:

"Difficulties provide opportunities to learn how to turn failure into success by honing one's capabilities to exercise control over events."

It could be argued that the importance of persistence should be more explicitly emphasised to students, especially in year 1.

4.5.3 Strategies for dealing with difficulties

A range of strategies for dealing with difficulties was referred to by respondents with dictionary use by far the most common. Other techniques for dealing with vocabulary were not widely reported here. Guessing the meaning of words from context was mentioned by a small number of learners (proportionately more in year 4) and has been included among strategies used by skilled readers (Hosenfeld, 1984; Nation, 2001; Grabe and Stoller, 2002) although Walter (2003) argued that good readers do not need to guess. The effectiveness of learning lists of vocabulary has been highlighted in the literature (Meara, 2005) as has focusing students' attention on high-frequency words (Nation, 2001).

Other strategies used by students here included re-reading the text, asking others, using a translation, breaking up the text, researching the subject matter, working out the gist and translating the text. The use of these seemed to vary according to the students' year of study. Translating, which was used more often by year 1 students, has been shown to help with reading comprehension among weaker readers (Kern, 1994 cited in Grabe and Stoller, 2002). Re-reading, which was used more often by year 4 students, has been found to be a technique used by successful readers (Grabe and Stoller, 2002). This evidence, whilst not conclusive, could be said to contribute to a picture of increasing competence over the course of the degree programme. Walter (2003) stated that a key distinction between good and poor readers is the ability to choose the most effective strategy for the problem at hand and emphasised raising learners' awareness of strategies. Cohen (1998) indicated that such awareness could be raised through tailored lectures and discussions or strategy workshops. He also suggested general study-skills courses, peer tutoring, video-taped mini courses and strategy-based instruction but stressed that learners' needs have to be identified before strategy training is embarked upon.

4.6 Final word

In summary, it is hoped that this study has helped to enhance understanding of undergraduates' attitudes to and experiences of L2 reading. As a result of the study a number of challenges have been raised which, it is suggested, should be the focus of attention:

- Improving transition from sixth form into higher education and attending to the learning experiences of year 1 students;
- Examining experiences of ab initio students throughout their degree programmes;
- Raising awareness of strategies for dealing with vocabulary difficulties, especially among year 1 students;
- Exploring ways of promoting more extensive reading, with particular regard to engaging instrumentally-oriented students.

Finally, it should be stressed again that the majority of students who took part in this survey expressed positive attitudes to L2 reading and regarded it as an activity in which it is important to succeed. The last word on reading goes to a year 1 Spanish student:

"fantastic - learning about different cultures through their literature is great"

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Research team

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The project was led by Angela Gallagher-Brett. Other team members were John Canning, Alison Dickens and Becky Jennings.

Questionnaire

Subject Centre Reading Project (Spanish)

The Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies is conducting research on language students' experiences of reading. We would be grateful for your help and would like to thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your answers will be treated in confidence. There are no right or wrong answers. Please answer all the questions.

Section A: Please answer the questions

1	What is your first languages (mother tongue)?	
2	Are you male or female?	
3	What is the title of your degree programme?	
4	In which year of study are you?	
5	Had you previously studied Spanish before coming to university?	

Section B: Below are some beliefs that people have about reading. The statements refer to reading generally, in your first language. Read each statement and decide if you:

- a = strongly agree
- b = agree
- c = neither agree nor disagree
- d = disagree
- e = strongly disagree.

There are no right or wrong answers. We are simply interested in your personal opinion

		<i>strongly agree</i>				<i>strongly disagree</i>
6	I enjoy reading fiction	a	b	c	d	e
7	I enjoy reading non-fiction	a	b	c	d	e
8	Reading is important to me	a	b	c	d	e
9	I don't like academic reading	a	b	c	d	e
10	I like books that make me think	a	b	c	d	e
11	I have favourite subjects that I like to read about	a	b	c	d	e
12	I read to learn new information	a	b	c	d	e
13	If I am reading something interesting, I sometimes lose track of time	a	b	c	d	e
14	I like to talk to friends about what I'm reading	a	b	c	d	e
15	I only read because I have to	a	b	c	d	e
16	I have had experience of talking to people about literature	a	b	c	d	e

Section C: The following statements are beliefs about learning and reading Spanish. Read each statement and decide if you:

a = strongly agree

b = agree

c = neither agree nor disagree

d = disagree

e = strongly disagree

There are no right or wrong answers. We are simply interested in your personal opinion

strongly agree

strongly disagree

17	I am good at Spanish	a	b	c	d	e
18	I have a good Spanish vocabulary	a	b	c	d	e
19	I have a good knowledge of Spanish-speaking cultures	a	b	c	d	e
20	I know that I'm doing well in reading in Spanish	a	b	c	d	e
21	I enjoy reading in Spanish	a	b	c	d	e
22	It's important to me to be a good reader in Spanish	a	b	c	d	e
23	I am confident in my independent ability to read a Spanish text I am approaching for the first time	a	b	c	d	e
24	I can read quickly in Spanish	a	b	c	d	e
25	I want to be able to read Spanish novels	a	b	c	d	e
26	I want to be able to read Spanish poetry	a	b	c	d	e
27	I want to be able to read Spanish newspapers and magazines	a	b	c	d	e
28	I read in Spanish to learn new information about Spanish-speaking cultures	a	b	c	d	e
29	Reading in Spanish will make me a more knowledgeable person	a	b	c	d	e
30	I think reading in Spanish is a good way to improve my language skills	a	b	c	d	e
31	I am willing to read literature in Spanish even if it's not compulsory	a	b	c	d	e
32	If translations of the Spanish work are available, I will always read them instead of the original	a	b	c	d	e
33	I don't like it when we get a lot of difficult reading in Spanish	a	b	c	d	e
34	I often read in Spanish outside class	a	b	c	d	e
35	I find it difficult to read in Spanish because I don't know enough about the culture	a	b	c	d	e
36	I would not voluntarily read in Spanish unless it was required for homework or an assignment	a	b	c	d	e
37	I like to look up words that I don't know	a	b	c	d	e
38	I am willing to work hard to improve my reading in Spanish	a	b	c	d	e
39	I don't get enough practice at reading in Spanish	a	b	c	d	e
40	I like to do better than other students in reading Spanish	a	b	c	d	e
41	I don't like reading in Spanish with other students	a	b	c	d	e
42	I prefer speaking Spanish to reading Spanish	a	b	c	d	e

Section D: Please complete the sentences

43 I find that the texts I am given to read in Spanish are...

44 I think that reading literature in Spanish is...

Section E: Please answer the questions

45 What makes a text in Spanish difficult for you?

46 If you are having difficulty understanding a text in Spanish, what do you do in order to understand it better?

47 What was your experience of reading in Spanish before you came to university?
Please give as much detail as you can.

48 What does the word 'literature' mean to you?

49 Why are you studying Spanish at university?

50 What abilities do you believe are necessary to succeed in the study of Spanish at university?

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire

Hard going but worth it: a snapshot of attitudes to reading among languages undergraduates

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This report is based on the results of a questionnaire survey, which investigated attitudes to reading among languages undergraduates in seven UK universities. The research for the project was carried out by the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies.

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