



Undergraduate students' reading preference in the extensive reading program: Diary method

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Abstract

Although the Extensive Reading (ER) program has multiple benefits for language learners, the long nature of this program can make it daunting, especially for those with limited book selection. Thus, ensuring a book collection that fits the learners' preferences is crucial, not only to maintain their reading enjoyment during the program but also to save costs. This research then investigated learners' reading preferences during an ER program, particularly by looking at the reading genres that were frequently chosen by the learners. This research was conducted on 30 university students who took English as a mandatory course. The course used ER as part of the curriculum. This research recorded the learners' reading preferences through a reading log. This log must be filled in after reading a book or text. Overall, the research generated 373 entries. The results of this research indicated participants' high interest in books with the themes of drama (slice of life), tales, and comedy. The current research also discovered a preference difference between gender. In conclusion, this research believes ER practitioners must consider learners' preferences to provide suitable book

collections for students. Thus, the learners can read more comfortably and maintain their motivation.

Keywords: extensive reading; preference; reading logs

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Since its emergence in the late 1990s, the extensive reading program has theoretically and practically grown in popularity among academics. This program is considered an effective method to help learners master English as a second language (ESL) by providing a large volume of input to learners, which is difficult to do with the limited hours of English lessons in formal class settings.

Before we go further, it is necessary to note how scholars define the Extensive Reading (ER) Program. For instance, Day, et al. (2013) define extensive reading as an approach that encourages students to get used to and enjoy reading in English. The goal is to help these students find pleasure in reading so that they indirectly acquire the English language during the reading process. Renandya and Day (2020) add that this concept is often characterized by three main features: the amount of reading is large, the goal is to focus on seeking general knowledge (not just linguistic aspects), and the reading process is carried out quickly. This program is also touted as the best way to impart implicit knowledge to learners. As a matter of fact, such knowledge is most widely used in daily communication using a second language. Meanwhile, explicit skills (which are taught in class), usually only help students in analyzing the grammatical aspects of a sentence, for example, in determining whether a sentence is grammatically correct or not.

In 2002, the pioneers of the ER program Day and Bamford declared 10 principles that can be used as references so that this program can be implemented properly. The top two principles include the reading materials that are easy and available on a variety of topics. The next two principles allow the readers to freely choose the reading material they want to read and read as much as possible. In addition, in this principles, reading is done as a fun activity, to obtain information or add general knowledge, so the the reward of this program is reading itself. Typically, reading is usually done fast, rather than slow and done quietly and

individually. Teachers also play a vital role as they need to orient this program and guides students to implement it. In addition, the teacher acts as a role model.

If this program is implemented properly, it can provide benefits for various aspects of students' language, as documented by the following experts. Day, et al (2013), stated that this program provides opportunities for students to remain in contact with English outside the classroom. In addition, other experts argued that this program can also be useful for increasing vocabulary, grammar, reading speed, insight into various topics, motivation, and a positive attitude toward reading (Azizi, et al. 2020; Liu & Zhang, 2018; Renandya & Jacobs, 2016).

Even though it looks promising, not many institutions are really sure about implementing this program in their places. In Indonesia, for example, this program received relatively little attention (Renandya, Hidayati, & Ivone, 2021). There are several obstructive factors. According to Chang and Renandya (2017), one of them is the low interest of students to read in English. Renandya, Hidayati, and Ivone (2021) also emphasize that low motivation to read is one of the obstacles faced by practitioners of this program. In fact, according to them, motivation plays an important role in learning. Therefore, they argue that this program will be successful only if students have good motivation; and one of the ways to increase their motivation is by allowing them to choose topics or read books that really suit their interests. Nevertheless, this also has an impact on the large collection of books that must be prepared by a school or institution.

For this reason, this study intends to investigate book preferences among students who are pursuing undergraduate studies at the university level. By knowing their preferences, schools, and institutions can save budgets for reading materials procurement by buying more books that are student preferences and limiting those that are not of great interest. When schools or institutions have bought appropriate books, the students can read what they prefer and maintain their motivation in reading. Although the theory suggests that students are given freedom to choose books that they like, in practice, many students are hard to do so.

In 2015, Richard Day reviewed articles discussing the implementation of extensive reading (ER) programs around the world since 1998. He examined how the research subjects (teachers/lecturers) implemented the 10 principles of ER programs in their classes. The results varied, ranging from articles that applied almost all ER principles to articles that only mentioned ER in the title, while in practice none of the ER principles were found to be used, or what he called Fringed ER. In that study, the two principles most widely used were principles No. 3 and No. 2: students choose what books to read and the availability of a large variety of books. This principle was found in 38 and 35 articles out of a total of 44 reviewed. This shows that the freedom of students in choosing the books they like is one aspect that is most concerned about by ER users in the world. Therefore, practitioners are encouraged to provide a wide variety of reading books to ensure that students have many choices to read what they like.

Aydin and Ayranci (2018) refer to this as preference or taste. It is a tendency to choose one thing over another which could be caused by a level of urgency, comfort, pleasure, and so on. They emphasize the importance of preference in choosing books because this makes the reading process more interesting and of high quality. This is the same as what was stated by Maro, Gusdian, and Safitri (2020). According to them, encouraging students to read according to their reading preferences boosts their enthusiasm for reading. Ultimately, this made their reading process better, where they were said to have an easier time understanding what they were reading and more easily focused when reading what they enjoyed.

Reading preference is usually influenced by several factors such as family, education level, and age. Another factor that determines students' reading preferences is gender. For example, Maro, Gusdian, and Safitri (2020) found that female students were more interested in fantasy reading, while male students preferred the adventure genre. This is in line with the statement of Majid, Ng, and Ying (2017) who examined the reading preference of female students in Singapore. The result was the same, placing the fantasy genre at the top. Although it was not explicitly stated, the research by Sasalia and Sari (2020) could be mentioned as most of their participants were females. They found that romance and comedy (humour) were the most favorable genre for their participants. However, several studies found no fundamental differences between the preferences of female and male students, especially in choosing reading topics/genres (Aydin & Ayranci, 2018). The results of their research show that both of them like the theme of adventure (adventure).

There have been quite a number of previous studies that raised the topic of reading preference (Aydin & Ayranci, 2018; Majid, Ng, & Ying, 2017; Maro, Gusdian, & Safitri; 2020). However, on average they examined students' reading preferences in general reading contexts. There are still rare studies that look at students' reading preferences while participating in the ER program. In fact, this program provides a wide variety of books and there is a tendency for students to choose the books they like. When students' reading preferences can be identified, the organizers of this program can be more efficient in allocating the budget for purchasing the books students read. The organizers can concentrate on acquiring books that align with students' preferences and steer clear of those that are the least favored. Furthermore, knowing students' preferences helps teachers or organizers recommend appropriate books for students, for example, based on gender. As argued earlier, research suggests that gender tends to affect the selection of books. Thus, this factor is significant in helping teachers or organizers maintain reading motivation among their students.

One of the few that links the concepts of reading preference and ER was a study conducted by Ihejirika (2017). Ihejirika researched the reading preferences of 200 students participating in an ER program in Nigeria. Her research focused on what reading materials students chose when participating in this program.

She observed if there were differences between the preferences of male and female students. In the Indonesian context, Milal, Jannah, Sa'adah, and Fitria (2021) examined students' reading habits during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research found that female students enjoyed reading more than male students. In addition, they also observed differences in reading preferences among these groups of students.

Of the many studies above, it is important to remember that the researchers have different focuses of references. For instance, some experts focused on student preferences to read through printed or electronic media (Alamri 2019; Milal, Jannah, Sa'adah, & Fitria 2021). Others assessed students' reading preferences by comparing first vs second languages (Majid, Ng, & Ying, 2017;) and the choice of genre of books they read (Ihejirika 2017; Maro, Gusdian, & Safitri 2020). In this study, the authors assessed reading preference from the aspect of the book genres. Indeed, Maro, Gusdian, & Safitri (2020) have investigated this topic and suggested reading materials (novels) and types (fiction) that are most preferred by students in their context. However, they collected the data using a self-report instrument, such as questionnaires. While this instrument offers convenience in data analysis, it also has some limitations. One of them is the possibility of students to provide answers based on what they think, not what they do. In other words, it is necessary to collect multiple data from a single person over a period of time in order to ensure the consistency of their responses. For this reason, this research employs a reading log as a tool to record the genre that students mostly read during the research. This part will be discussed in the methodological section.

Another issue from research on reading in the past is regarding the reading context. While previous research (Maro, Gusdian, & Safitri 2020) focuses on reading in general, the current research specifically explores the reading preferences of students who are participating in the ER program. As argued earlier, this program enables students to read a great deal of books allowing them to consistently pick books that they like. Thus, data from the student's activities during the ER program is beneficial to trace their reading preference. As previously stated, the aim is to help the practitioners plan to procure a collection of books for students. In addition, knowing reading preferences helps teachers and ER organizers to recommend proper books for their students and maintain the students' reading motivation. The results of this study are also expected to be a basis for stakeholders in providing reading that has been adjusted to the preferences that are often chosen by students so that the books provided do not go out of the zone which results in many books not being read because they are considered not in accordance with the preferences of the readers.

METHOD

This study was conducted as part of a larger research project. It used a diary method. This method was popular among second-language researchers due to

its ability to provide rich, detailed data on participant experiences (Galloway & Rose, 2014; Shelton-Strong & Mynard, 2021; Syed & Kuzborska, 2021). Unlike one-shot self-reports like interviews, this data was accumulated over an extended period of time allowing the researchers to keep data consistent from the participants.

This research involved 30 students as participants from the Sociology Education Study Program. The selection of these participants has considered the suitability aspect of the research objectives. Participants who joined this study were those taking general English courses. In addition to that, they participated in the ER program that required them to read tens of books. This assignment aimed to find their reading preferences while doing the reading assignment. In addition, this study also focused on the factors that influenced the selection of reading materials.

The assignment began by giving all participants certain target words. After completing the reading assignment within the predetermined target time, participants filled out a reading log for each book they had read. The reading log contained questions related to the selection of reading genres during the reading period. According to Rose (2020), scholars typically use 3 types of instruments: diaries, journals, and logs. Although they are often used interchangeably, each instrument has different formats and purposes. To maintain consistency, this research used the term “reading logs” because the questions in the reading logs were arranged strictly. Participants gave their responses by simply checking or ticking the options that were true for them.

Data in this research were analyzed quantitatively. The data were calculated to search for the percentage of genres in the ER program. It is important to note that these genres belong to 3 websites used by the participants. The highest percentage of the genre indicates that the genre is preferred by the participants, and vice versa. Besides examining the reading preference of the entire class, this research also identified preference differences between genders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will explain the major findings of the research that was conducted from October to November 2022. As mentioned earlier, the availability of large book collection is necessary to ensure students can choose books that suit their preferences or interests. Reading self-selected books can create a feeling of comfort when carrying out the reading process. The availability of books with appropriate themes can also affect one's reading interest. Through this study, researchers can identify favourable topics chosen by participants in completing reading assignments.

Books Genres

The ER program in this research generated a total of 373 book titles (entries) that were recorded in the student's reading logs. The entries captured various

different sub-genres. Overall, of the dozens of sub-genres, it can be seen that several genres were more favourable for the participants. For instance, stories about life (drama or slice of life) ranked first with a total of 29.76% or more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of the total participants. This was followed by books with a fairy tale theme (classic tales) by 16.62%. After that, books with a comedy theme were also widely chosen by the participants 11.80% of the total entries. Figure 1 below illustrates the genres that students frequently read in the ER program.

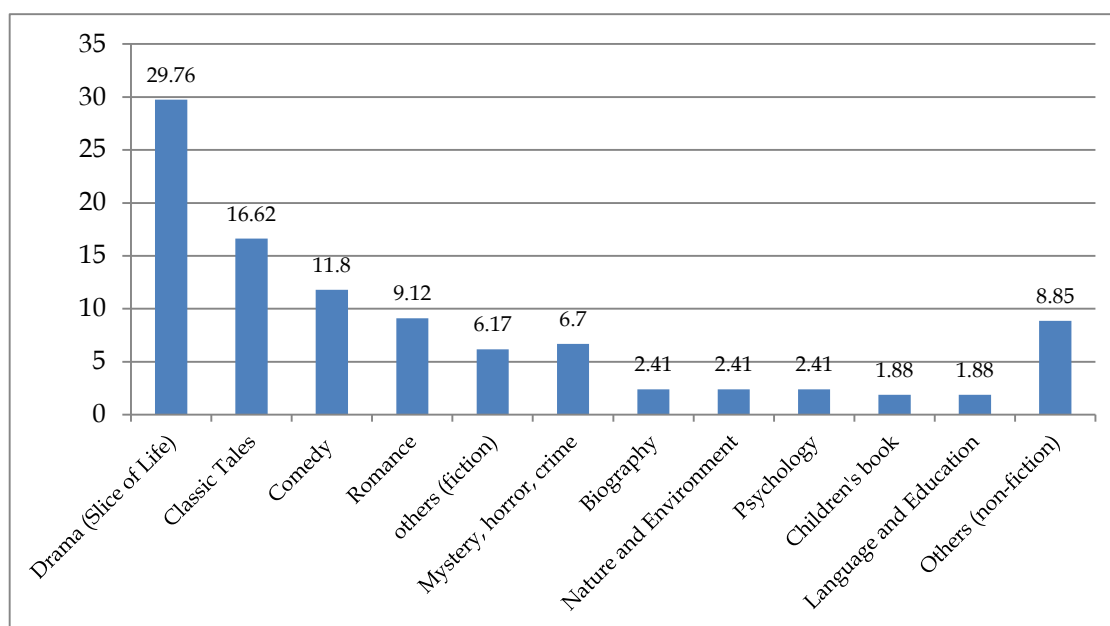


Figure 1. Students' Reading Preferences Based on Book Genre

In addition to the favorite genres mentioned above, genres that were not students' preferred were also identified. These were related to language and education with 1.88% of the total reading. It was then followed by the theme of children's books (1.88%), and psychology with a total of 2.41% overall.

From the figure above, it is clear that there is a significant difference between the genres that are most and least accessed by the participants. The preferred genres tended to be fictitious stories with interesting plots, such as drama, fairy tales, as well as comedy stories. This relates to one of the goals of reading: seeking pleasure. The participants generally chose books with stories that could have a direct effect on happiness. On the other hand, non-fiction themes such as education, language, and psychology were least chosen because they might contain more complex content than the others.

Book Genres Based on Gender

In this section, the research found that the reading log data created genre patterns between genders. Basically, both genders showed typical preferred genres, especially for the top-two genres. As presented in Figure 2, female

participants' most preferred genre was life stories (drama or slice of life) as much as 29.85%. This figure was followed by classic tales with 14.03% and comedy with 12.24%. Furthermore, the data findings concluded that stories with the themes of art and music, family, society, and politics occupied the last position as the least preferred genre with the same percentage of 0.30%.

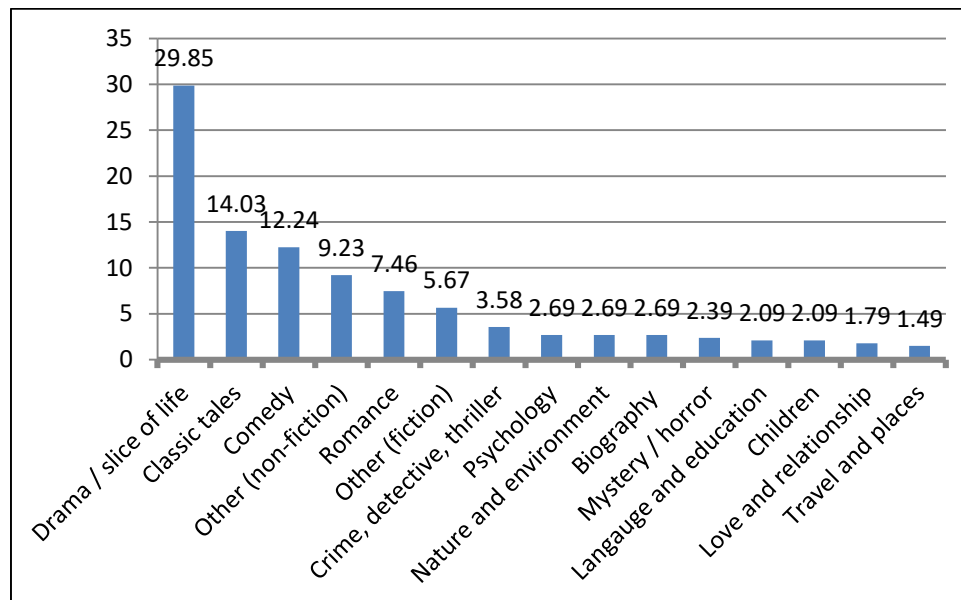


Figure 2. Reading Preferences of Female Students

Because most of participants in this research were female students, the results of this gender nearly reflected the results of the whole sample. The top-three preferred genres, for example, were taken by the slice of life, followed by the classic tales and comedy. It can also be inferred that fiction genres are prevailing among the participants. Interestingly, these genres were also favorable in the male students.

If female students preferred to read genres like slice of life, fairy tales, and comedy, male students showed similar genres but with a different order. Figure 3 presents the most preferred reading genre by male participants. In this figure, fairy tales led with 38.46% of the total 39 entries. It was then followed by life stories (drama or slice of life) with 17.95%. However, the third rank was different. While the female students loved comedy, male students also preferred the horror or mystery genre with 10.26%. Meanwhile, the least favorite book genres were books on business economics with 2.56%, adventure books with 5.13%, and romance books with 7.69%.

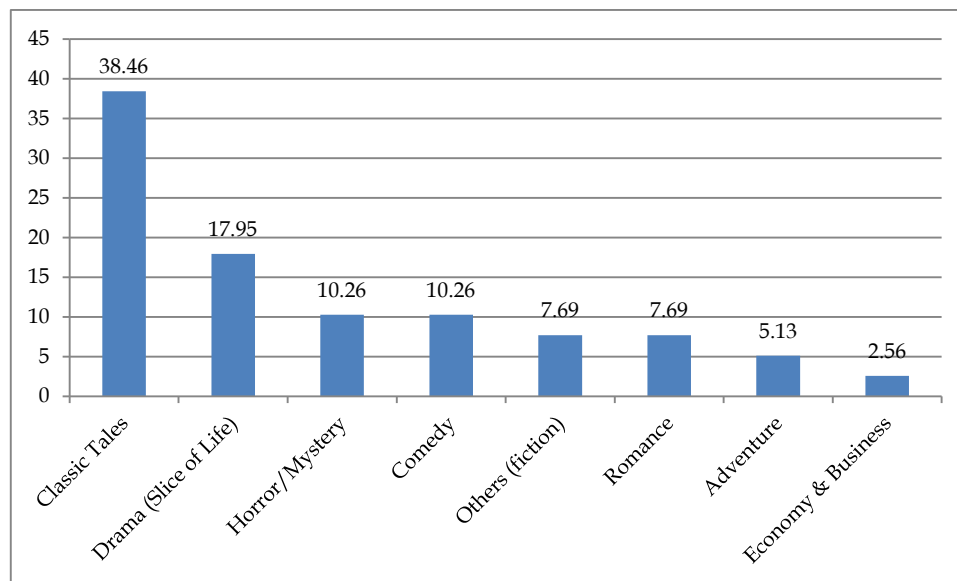


Figure 3. Reading Preferences of Male Students

Besides the most preferred genres, this figures also presents the least favorite ones. Like female students, males students also considered non-fiction books as least favorites. The content of this genre mighte affect students' preferences as such books usually contain serious topics. In fact, based on the participants' responses, they seem to like book with lighter topics, such as fairy tales and comedy, that are more entertaining.

Discussion

This section describes the relationship between the research results and the theory provided in the previous section. In addition, this section will also provide an in-depth discussion of readers' preferences in completing reading targets. During the reading process, participants use the ER method, in which participants can freely determine the topic or theme of the reading. From this, a pattern can be obtained that leads to a preference for the chosen reading topic. This is in line with what was stated by Aydin and Ayranci (2018) about preference, namely the tendency to choose something over others caused by the level of urgency, convenience, or other things.

Of the hundreds of entries included in reading logs, the genre of drama or life stories became a very popular story among readers, both males and females. This is supported by several factors, like the education level and age of the readers. Strikingly, Rodiatun and Harpain (2020) reported similar findings where romance (drama) was ranked the most preferred genre in their research. One of the possible reasons why such a genre outperforms the others might be due to its relevance to daily needs. In addition, reading materials in this projects are mainly taken from graded readers. According to Waring (2003), many of reading materials in ER (graded readers) are based on fictional stories. Typically, this genre offers a wide variety of stories, compared with the non-fiction ones. It not

surprising that stories like slice of life or drama can be the most frequent genres accessed by the students.

Furthermore, the genres that were mostly chosen were fairy tales or narrative stories. Like the slice of life, fairy tales normally have a large number of reading titles that can be accessed by the students. Thus, it is more likely to get this genre open more frequently. This finding also confirms earlier finding reported by Maro, Gusdian, and Safitri (2020) who found that fiction genre (such as slice of life and fairy tales) as the most preferred genre among their participants. Possibly, this type of reading can be an alternative entertainment for the reader after consuming a great deal of formal reading, such as course books and journal articles outside this program. Interestingly, Maro, Gusdian, and Safitri (2020) also emphasized that fiction reading (fairy tales) is still considered relevant to all levels of education and age.

Finally, many readers choose comedy-themed reading materials. These research findings supported those reported by Maro, Gusdian, and Safitri (2020), in which novels or fiction stories were prevalent among their students. This research provided support for their research findings which were collected from a one-time self-report questionnaire. As findings in the current research were generated from reading logs, the data were taken from repeated actions resulting in more consistent results. What makes this finding interesting is that comedy genre seems popular among readers in the Indonesian context, because the popularity of this genre is also revealed in other Indonesian-context research (Rodiatun & Harpain, 2020; Sasalia & Sari, 2020). As this genre often brings laughter, it is usually used as a means to relieve stress or increase the reader's mood (Rodiatun & Harpain, 2020). For ER program, this genre can be useful to gain the beginner readers' attention and avoid boredom at the early stage of their reading process.

Interestingly, findings of the current research are against the results of previous studies. One of the prominent one is the study of Chen (2007). Chen found in her research that the most frequently chosen reading materials were non-fiction genres, such as those in newspapers and magazines. Meanwhile, novels were considered the least favorite genres. Unfortunately, Chen did not provide sufficient possible discussion regarding the order of the reading selection among his participants. However, if we return to the notion of "preference", then there are many things that determine the selection of reading material, and often the most influential are age, gender, and environment. Another reason might related to the context of their reading, in which Chen's research used general reading context. Thus, Chen's participants were likely to select books that were related to their academic advancement. Differently, participants in this research took the ER program where the fiction genre was available in much greater numbers than non-fiction. Therefore, the difference of focus between this two research affect the selection of books among the participants.

In this study, findings regarding differences in the selection of reading types were also obtained from existing gender differences. Female readers prefer to read texts with themes of life stories, fairy tales, and comedies. This is the same as the general theme that emerged because the participants were dominated by women. This finding is in line with those reported by Majid, Ng, and Ying (2017). For her participants, fiction stories such as adventure, detective, and comedies were the most frequently chosen books. Interestingly, she did not put any genre related to drama or slice of life making her research findings slightly different from the current research. In this research, stories about life were at the top, but such genres did not exist in Majid et al.'s research. As a result, it is difficult to compare if this genre receives similar appreciation in her context. This finding also confirmed those reported by Sasalia and Sari (2020) whose research was dominated by female participants. Most of the participants commented that they read novel regularly, especially in the romance (slice of life) genre. According to their participants this genre was not only entertaining but also could help them improve their English language skills.

For male readers, on the other hand, fairy tales, slice of life, and finally horror genres were reported as the most accessed books. This research also suggested that male readers did not like economic, adventure, and romance themes. This is in contrast to several previous findings which often state that male readers will be more interested in reading books with adventure and science themes. In fact, male readers are also interested in narrative stories like fairy tales and slice of life (Summers, 2013). Therefore, Chen (2007) is correct in stating that gender has a significant effect on the choice of reading genre.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Convenience in the reading process is influenced by many factors, one of which is the availability of reading materials according to preferences. By reading the right book, the reader will enjoy the reading process although the main motivation remains completing assignments. Appropriate books are also believed to increase students' interest in reading and make them feel that reading is not burdensome. The ER program is considered to be a new alternative to improve understanding in learning English, of course with appropriate reading material.

The reading process experienced by the participants with more than hundreds of book titles can be viewed from a new perspective. In this research, one genre is most chosen overall, for female and male readers, i.e. drama or slice of life. This theme is considered popular among the participants because it has various book titles and the storyline is felt to be in line with the circumstances around them. The second most chosen genre is fairy tales or narratives. From time to time, the theme of fairy tales or narrative fiction has always occupied a

corner in the heart of each generation. It is often found that even though the story is very familiar, we usually will continue to feel curious and want to re-read childhood stories. This is what makes narrative stories timeless, especially with the updates in the story plots that are made. Furthermore, the most widely read stories are stories with comedy or entertainment themes. This research also highlights differences in book selections between male and female readers. Despite no difference between the top two genres, the difference emerges in their choices. Female readers tend to choose comedy genres, while horrors are prevalent among male readers. There are times when readers want to take a break from all activities and start reading, in this case, they will choose books with lighter themes to simply seek entertainment or add new knowledge, but not with serious goals. Therefore, books with light themes such as life stories, fairy tales, and comedies are the themes most frequently sought after by readers.

Recommendations

In this case, practitioners should be able to pay more attention to issues that are often overlooked, such as adjusting the supply of reading books with relevant themes and the preferences often chosen by readers. These findings are expected to help ER organizers (teachers or librarians) find suitable books before purchasing new book collections for their library. We recommend that ER organizers, for example, buy books in fiction genres. Stories related to life (drama/slice of life) and fairy tales are reported to be accessed more frequently in this research context. This preference might apply to students in the other sites because these genres typically offer engaging conflict that might trigger the readers to keep reading the stories. On the other hand, the procurement of science or knowledge books can be minimized as these books are less read by the students. Thus, the ER program can be maximized and participants feel more comfortable because they are supported by books that suit their interests

Although this research offers critical findings, it still has some limitations. First, this research involved students with low English-level skills, which means their level might probably affect the genre that they chose. Further research can address this gap by inviting students with mixed levels of English languages. By so doing, preference differences between low and high-level students can be identified. In addition, those who are interested in researching the same topic can involve participants from different places with distinct cultural backgrounds. This aspect is not addressed in this research, making it a worthwhile topic to discuss in future research projects.

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