FICTION READING ON HEAD AND HEART

BILYSON D. ALEJO¹, CONNIE LOU G. BALNAO² & LUISA B. AQUINO³

¹,² Bachelor of Science in Library and Information Science, School of Information and Computing Sciences, University of Saint Louis, Tuguegarao City, Cagayan, Philippines
³ Academic Dean, School of Information and Computing Sciences, University of Saint Louis, Tuguegarao City, Cagayan, Philippines

ABSTRACT

Inspired by Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive and affective development as the composition of our intellectual development, this study sought to determine the implications of fiction reading on one’s intellectual growth. The study employed Reading Comprehension Test adopted from Read Theory’s Intermediate Level Reading Comprehension and Big Five Inventory developed by Rammstedt & John (2007) to measure the domains involved of top 100 fiction readers. Positive effect of fiction reading was evident on two domains of an individual which guarantees a positive intellectual growth.

KEYWORDS: Fiction Reading, Cognitive Domain, Affective Domain, Intellectual Development

INTRODUCTION

Reading in general has been shown to be responsible for the acquisition of vocabulary and general knowledge (Mar, Djikic & Oatley, 2008). Smaragdi & Jonsson, (2006) stipulated concerns on the cognitive and affective realms that reading stimulates the imagination, creates images in the mind and gives the power of insight. These are attributed to fiction reading since it offers readers to acquire educational outcomes (Moyer, 2007) and to enter into simulations of social interactions which improves our emphatic & social abilities (Mar, Djikic & Oatley, 2008).

The study revolves on the cognitive and affective realms of individuals wherein this is identified by Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive and affective development as the composition of our intellectual development. According to Irvine (2002), Jean Piaget viewed cognitive development as a having three components: content, function and structure. Content is what one knows about. Function refers to the characteristics of intellectual activity –assimilation and accommodation. Structure or schemata explain the occurrences of particular behaviors. Accordingly, affect includes feelings, interests, desires, tendencies, values, and emotions in general.

Although narrative is entertaining, its function is not one of mere entertainment (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Reading of narrative fiction can have important consequences, whose quality and underlying mechanisms require closer study (Mar, Oatley & Peterson, 2009).

Fiction reading had been argued in terms of its implications on the individual: for better or for worse? In an online article by Gottschall (2012), he indited:

“The more deeply we are cast under a story’s spell, the more potent its influence. In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is designed to persuade through argument and evidence. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and this seems to make us rubbery and easy to shape. But perhaps the most impressive finding is just how fiction shapes us: mainly for the better, not for the worse. Fiction enhances our ability to understand other people; it promotes a deep
morality that cuts across religious and political creeds. More peculiarly, fiction’s happy endings seem to warp our sense of reality. They make us believe in a lie: that the world is more just than it actually is. But believing that lie has important effects for society and it may even help explain why humans tell stories in the first place.”

This study sought to answer the query on the possible effects of reading fiction on the cognitive and affective domains of an individual which make up their intellectual development.

Narrative fiction models life, comments on life, and helps us to understand life in terms of how human intentions bear upon it (Mar & Oatley, 2008). This study advances our understanding on the effects not of reading in general, but of reading fiction on the cognitive and affective domains of young adults. It takes account to three personages: the educators, librarians, and the individual.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The renowned extraordinary genius, Albert Einstein, once quoted, “If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.” The quote had inspired the venture of this research on understanding the valuable effects of fiction reading on one’s intellectual development.

The findings of Irvine (2002) showed that although there are many influences competing for children’s time, children are still enjoying children reading and enthusiastic when talking about books. However, Howard & Shan (2004) claimed that teens are reading, but reading appeared to decline with age. A study by Nippold, Duthie & Larsen (2005) indicated that interest in reading as a free-time activity declined. These studies were rebutted by a study conducted by Hopper (2005), there has been no significant decline in adolescent habits of reading fiction compared with previous studies.

Young readers are seen to have particular emotional and academic needs (Hopper, 2005). These emotional and academic needs are focused on our cognitive and affective realms. It is essential that we provide them with books that they will enjoy reading and that will meet their needs (Machet, 2003). According to Chen (2009), there are three basic functions of reading: enjoyment, utility, and escape; these prove to be an important factor when distinguishing who reads what. The utility function incorporates “reading to learn” from both moral and educational aspects. The enjoyment function depicts reading as enjoyable, interesting and exciting, while the escapist function relates to reading in order to relax and to prevent boredom. This is linked with the interests/needs of the readers.

On Fiction Reading

Clark & Rumbold (2006) gave three definitions for pleasure reading. First, it refers to reading that we do to of our own free will anticipating satisfaction that we will get from the act of reading. It also refers to reading that having begun at someone else’s request we continue because we are interested in it. It typically involves materials that reflect our own choice, at a time and place that suits us. On the definition of leisure reading adopted by Hassell & Rodge (2007), it refers to the reading students choose to do on their own, as opposed to reading that is assigned to them. They also defined it as voluntary reading, spare time reading, reading outside school, and self-selected reading; leisure reading involves personal choice, choosing what wants to read.

Undeniably, leisure reading and pleasure reading are of synonymous concepts which emphasize on reader’s choice and satisfaction of recreational need. Fiction reading falls under these categories. It has also been considered in a study by Chen (2009) that an individual who sees relaxation and enjoyment as the main functions of reading tend to read more books in narrative form. As these categories emphasize on choice, Pachtman & Wilson (2006) stated the element of
choice was important for most students because they had interests they wished to pursue. They also affirmed that the opportunity to choose fostered a sense of ownership which translated into students reading and enjoying more books.

According to Clark, Osborne and Akerman (2008), majority of young people believed that readers enjoy fiction books and that they are influenced by adults in their school. This was also supported by Clark & Rumbold’s (2006) comparative study where only 5% of pupils did not read fiction. Since fiction reading has been a prevalent leisure/pleasure reading habit, the most popular fiction genre were mysteries (Howard & Shan, 2004). On another study by Creel (2007), two main genres participants reported reading for fun are realistic fiction (32%) and fantasy (21%). In contrast, Hassell & Lutz (2006); Hassell & Rodge (2007); and Nippold, Duthie & Larsen (2005) discovered that many students expressed leisure reading interest in periodicals, specifically magazines and newspapers.

On the Cognitive Aspect of Fiction Reading

Most authors of fiction narratives offer texts of varying degrees of reading challenge (Hopper, 2005). She stated: it demanded high-level reading skills, and also include intertextual references, and allow complex engagement with narrative, at several levels of challenge. According to Fox, Dinsmore & Alexander (2010), higher reading ability, experience, knowledge, or interest tends to co-occur with engagement that is more geared toward a global level of understanding, more effective, and more flexible, leading to more accurate and complete mental representations. In a study conducted by Janit, Hammock & Richardson (2011), storied narratives are a valid, efficacious instructional genre, at times more beneficial to students than expository texts.

This is supported by the evidence that students who read the narrative text achieved higher quiz scores and exemplified greater free recall than those who read the textbook in an examination. It is valuable to know that educational outcomes can be derived from employing narrative texts in student’s learning. However, reading instruction should match the attitude and interests of the adolescent students in the classrooms (Croston, 2005). Moyer (2007) realized fiction reading was much easier and much more fun than traditional types of learning. Regarding the specific types of things subjects learned through fiction (educational outcomes), responses were divided into eleven types of responses: people and relationships; other countries, cultures, history; enriches life, livelier mind, engages and sparks imagination; faith and religion; personal problems and therapy; news and current events; different perspectives, challenges assumptions, makes you think in a different way; makes you want to learn more, leads to other reading (sometimes nonfiction); incidental information acquisition; vocabulary; becoming a better reader or writer; and just generally increasing chances of success in life (Moyer, 2007).

Kaniuka (2010) found that students who experience academic success possess more positive attitudes toward reading and higher levels of reading related to self-esteem. Children that have a lot of reading skills read a lot, and vice versa (Van Ours, 2008).

On the Affective Aspect of Fiction Reading

Literature can be conceptualized as a cognitive and emotional simulation (Djikic et al, 2009). Our engagement with fictional narratives is interesting not just for the prominent place these stories appear to have in our lives, but also because the experience we undergo while engaging with them is unique (Mar, Oatley & Peterson, 2009). Exposure to narrative fiction was positively associated with empathic ability, whereas exposure to expository non-fiction was negatively associated with empathy (Mar, Djikic & Oatley, 2008). This is further explored by Djikic, et al. (2009) where exposure to an artistically recognized short story would cause significantly greater changes in one’s self-reported traits than exposure to the documentary story of the same content. As we read fiction narratives we are entering and committing
ourselves into the story. We are naturally more inclined to feel transported by fiction, may read more and thus become better at understanding others (Mar, Oatley & Peterson, 2009). This is supported by Mar, et al. (2006) where readers of fiction tend to have better abilities of empathy and theory of mind. They expressed that reader experiences thoughts and emotions predicated on the fictional context. They also stipulated the processing of narratives shares some similarities with the processing of our real social environment. Fictional literature not only allows us to simulate ideas and situations, it can enter our emotional system and prompt it toward the experience of emotions that we might otherwise rarely acknowledge (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

On Fiction Reading Influences

On what prompts our subjects to read fiction, children want to read fiction books depends on their preferences, the costs of reading and restrictions on their time use (Van Ours, 2008). Children responded best to peer recommendations for books (Irvine, 2002). She found out that children are able to articulate their preferences with an emotional and narrative response, rather than an evaluative response. In consonance to the latter study, adolescents choose books that their peers have enjoyed, and which validate reading as a peer group cultural experience (Hopper, 2005).

Studies show that young adults are indeed reading, and found fiction reading as an answer to the recreational satisfaction of the target audience. However, there had been little understanding on its effects on the cognitive and affective realms of an individual. The studies pointed on single factors of each domain, and little had been known about its general implication on the cognitive and affective domains. The domains must go together for the advancement of one’s intellectual development. With these previous studies conducted, we sought to determine the implications of fiction reading of high school students on their cognitive domain which is focused on their level of comprehension and vocabulary, and affective domain which is aimed on their personality.

METHOD

This experiment tests the intellectual development of an individual particularly on his reading comprehension and dynamic of emotion representations in cumulative contexts. The study employs two sets of tests which are the adopted reading comprehension test and the Big Five Inventory focused on the selected top one-hundred (100) high school students who are fiction readers which were generated through the library circulation statistics. Purposive sampling was used in the study due to the criteria that the sample must be fiction readers.

INSTRUMENTS

Library Circulation Statistics

The circulation statistics shall identify the top one-hundred (100) high school students who are fiction readers which shall be the focused group of the study.

Reading Comprehension Test

Reading comprehension determines the level of understanding of a text/idea. This understanding emanates from the interaction between the language that is indited and how they generate enlightenment outside the text/idea. The story used in this study was adopted from the Read Theory’s Intermediate Level Reading Comprehension. The 10-item test mirrors the way in which standardized test questions are formulated and presented.

The vocabulary questions included in the assessment test the top 250 SAT words. This implies an improvement in one’s reading comprehension skills and vocabulary. The score’s interpretation for this instrument is: 4.99 and below means Low; 5.00 to 7.99 means average; 8.00 and above means high.
Personality was measured using the Big Five Inventory—a well-validated 44-item measure of personality based on the Big Five model—extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness. It uses short descriptive phrases prototypical of each of the Big Five dimensions. In these items, individuals are asked whether they see themselves as someone who, for example, “is reserved,” or “tends to find fault with others,” and the responses are scored on 5-item Likert scale (1¼strongly disagree, 5¼strongly agree). However, a brief version of the Big Five Personality Inventory shall be used in this study adopted from Rammstedt & John (2007). The average score’s interpretation for each constituent trait: 2.00 and below means Low; 3.00 to 3.99 means average; 4.00 and above means high. Below is the interpretation of the BFI adopted from the website of Paul Trapnell Personality Psychology (www.paultrapnell.com):

Table 1: BFI Interpretation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>High</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXTR</strong></td>
<td>Reserved, socially quiet, introverted, prefer to be alone most of the time, or with just a few close friends</td>
<td>Moderate in energy and enthusiasm, enjoy others company, but also desire a degree of privacy</td>
<td>High-spirited, active, outgoing, extraverted, sociable, prefer to be around people most of the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>AGRE</strong></td>
<td>Headstrong, skeptical, critical, competitive, proud; Tend to express anger directly.</td>
<td>Usually warm, trusting, and agreeable, but can be stubborn and competitive at times</td>
<td>Eager be cooperative and avoid conflict, tender, soft-hearted, sympathetic, selfless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONS</strong></td>
<td>Typically don’t plan carefully; usually a bit disorganized; often not well-prepared; not especially reliable</td>
<td>Generally organized and dependable but can relax and let things go; can efficiently work, but can put work aside</td>
<td>High standards and high level of focus on achieving goals; conscientious, reliable, and well-organized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NEUR</strong></td>
<td>Readily experience negative emotions (anxiety, sadness, anger), reactive to stress; sensitive, prone to mood dips and swings</td>
<td>Typically calm and handle stress well, but occasionally have your share of negative moods (anxiety, sadness, anger); emotional upsets rarely last very long</td>
<td>Emotionally relaxed, stable, calm, and secure; typically remain relaxed even when under stress; seldom, if ever, feel anxious or nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OPEN</strong></td>
<td>Prefer being practical, concrete, down-to-earth; prefer to have conservative values</td>
<td>Prefer a balance between old values and new ones; practical but fairly open to change</td>
<td>Imaginative, reflective, abstract, creative; many interests; very liberal, seek variety and change</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Of the top 100 fiction readers, majority were females than males which is greatly supported by the studies of Machet (2003); Hopper (2005); Hassell & Lutz (2006); Hassell & Rodge (2007); Moyer (2007); and Van Ours (2008). Second year students are the majority of the top fiction readers. On the frequency of fiction reading, majority of the respondents read books twice a month. These readers have been identified to be moderate readers by Moyer (2007). Frequent readers follow as defined by Moyer (2007) to be readers of one to three books a week.

Cognitive Domain of a Fiction Reader

Reading plays a critical role in the development in any academic domain; thus, competence in reading is key to competence in other human endeavors (Fox, Dinsmore & Alexander, 2010). The average score of the fiction readers on their reading comprehension test yielded to a 7.32 average which is on an average level. On this note, fiction reading is supposed to enhance the communication potential by developing our language and vocabulary, by affecting the ability of
logical reasoning, the capacity of expressing oneself and by affecting the level of comprehension and understanding (Smaragdi & Jonsson, 2006). Indeed, fiction readers experience this valuable effect on their cognitive domain.

**Affective Domain of a Fiction Reader**

The Big Five Inventory consists of five constituent traits which form one’s personality. The summarized version of the BFI used in the study is a two-item abbreviated BFI-10 scale which generally represent the full BFI 44-item inventory. With regard to the observed relation between fiction exposure and empathy, a number of Big Five traits could theoretically account for this association in accordance to the study of Mar, Oatley, & Peterson (2009).

Atkinson, et al. (2000) expressed the following Big Five traits with their corresponding sense. Extraversion (outgoing/energetic vs. solitary/reserved) denotes energy, positive emotions, surgency, assertiveness, sociability and the tendency to seek stimulation in the company of others, and talkativeness. Agreeableness (friendly/compassionate vs. cold/unkind) of an individual has a tendency to be compassionate and cooperative rather than suspicious and antagonistic towards others. A person’s conscientiousness (efficient/organized vs. easy-going/careless) has a tendency to show self-discipline, act dutifully, and aim for achievement; planned rather than spontaneous behavior; organized, and dependable. The openness to experience (inventive/curious vs. consistent/cautious) of an individual has appreciation for art, emotion, adventure, unusual ideas, curiosity, and variety of experience. Openness reflects the degree of intellectual curiosity, creativity and a preference for novelty and variety.

As seen in table 2, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness fall on a high result with the average of 4.01, 4.3, 4 and 4.1 respectively which implies a positive interpretation in concurrence to table 1. However, neuroticism (sensitive/nervous vs. secure/confident) of the individual which denotes his/her tendency to experience unpleasant emotions easily, such as anger, anxiety, depression, or vulnerability (Atkinson, et al., 2000) has been realized to be on average level with the average score of 3.975. This trait of a fiction reader showed to be the lowest among the constituent traits. Neuroticism also refers to the degree of emotional stability.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BFI Constituent Traits</th>
<th>Average 1</th>
<th>Average 2</th>
<th>Combined Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Extraversion and agreeableness achieved a high result which is in parallel to Mar and Oatley (2008) statement that fiction narratives offer simulation of social experience in two distinct ways. Firstly, consumers of literary stories experience thoughts and emotions congruent with the events represented by these narratives. The second way in which literary narratives are related to simulation is that stories model an abstract the human social world.

They also indited the abstraction performed by fictional stories demands that readers and others project themselves into the represented events. Mar, et al. (2006); Mar, Oatley and Peterson (2009) and Mar, Djikic, & Oatley (2008) also found fiction exposure predicted performance on an empathy task and measures of social ability. Individuals who are very emphatic, and skilled at making social inferences, simply enjoy reading fiction more and are more likely to engage in this activity as described by Mar, et al. (2006).
Openness, which also received a high remark, proved to be essential for narrative comprehension in congruence to the study of Mar, Oatley & Peterson (2009), allowing individuals to vividly render the surroundings and situations being presented to them in literary fiction. Fiction narratives present virtual worlds of human interaction which is in accordance to Mar, et al. (2006). They found that comprehending characters in a narrative fiction appears to parallel the comprehension of peers in the actual world. They also affirmed that narratives are fundamentally social in nature in that almost all stories concern relationships between people; understanding stories thus entails an understanding of people, and how their goals, beliefs and emotions interact with their behaviors. One’s openness to experience derived from the simulation of narrative fiction offers unique implications such as empathetic growth and persuasive transmission of social knowledge communicated through vicarious experience cited by Mar & Oatley (2008).

A person’s conscientiousness is molded through his/her engagement to fiction literature that imparts him/her a greater understanding of emotions and of their breadth and quality, and emotional cues implicitly communicated by the author (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Hakemulder (2000) stated fictional narratives promoted moral development, improved empathy, and changed norms, values, and self-concepts. In support, Mar, Djikic & Oatley (2008) proved readers can adopt the morals implicitly represented in a literary text, and this way be seen as improving themselves.

With an average result for one’s neurotism, an individual is typically calm and handles stress well but occasionally have the tendency to share of negative moods based on table 1. Mar, Oatley & Peterson (2009) also supports our finding where neurotism receives the lowest average among the constituent trait. Fictional narratives offer a form of cognitive simulation of the social world with absorbing emotional consequences for the reader as mentioned by Mar & Oatley (2008). On this note, self-esteem and self-efficacy which represent the same core construct – neurotism (Mar, Oatley & Peterson, 2009) – has been greatly influenced by what we read. Mar and colleagues (2006) added, fiction readers experience thoughts and emotions predicated on the fictional context and have lasting real-world consequences. Indeed, individuals respond to the thoughts and representations scribed on a narrative which influence their emotional stability. In support, Djikic, Oatley & Peterson (2006) apprised that people who read literary fiction respond in kind to what could be the artist’s own process of transformation through emotional change, encoded symbolically within the art. By projecting ourselves into fictional stories and the minds of fictional characters, we open ourselves up to greater possibilities for who we may become (Mar, Djikic & Oatley, 2008).

**Table 3: Association between Cognitive and Affective Domain**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Descriptive Value</th>
<th>Pearson r</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>7.32</td>
<td>Average Cognitive Level</td>
<td>.137</td>
<td>.174</td>
<td>Not significant at .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>40.69</td>
<td>High Affective Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, as seen in table 3 fiction readers experience valuable effect of narrative fiction both on their cognitive and affective domains. However, fiction literature greatly influences one’s affective domain than the cognitive domain.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Literature can be conceptualized as a cognitive and emotional simulation (Djikic, et al., 2009). In view of the implications of fiction literature to an individual, fiction reading provides a valuable effect on one’s intellectual development which consists of cognitive and affective domains. It is worthy to consider that activity of thinking are two sides: the affective and cognitive (Fox, Dinsmore & Alexander, 2010). This study found fiction readers to have overall
positive rating both on their personality which makes up their affective domain and cognitive domain which is expressed in their level of comprehension and vocabulary. It is also significant to recognize that fiction reading greatly influences one’s affective domain for it is directly linked to fiction narrative’s main function as identified by Mar & Oatley (2008): abstraction and simulation of social experience; thus, shaping one’s heart. On the other side, fiction literature has a valuable, complementary role to the cognitive development of an individual for it does not absolutely affect one’s gray matter evident on the results.

This firmly establishes the foundation of our verdict that fiction readers have undertaken development on their cognitive and affective domain which contributes to their intellectual growth as agreed by Irvine (2002).

Implications for Further Research

Future research must conduct the study both on readers and non-readers of fiction literature to be apprised of the possibility of the existence of dichotomy between the two kinds of readers. The reading comprehension test employed in the study might have affected its findings. Since only an intermediate level of reading comprehension test was used in the study, it is indispensable to consider employing three sets of test with three levels –easy, intermediate, and difficult –to determine on what tests readers would achieve low and high results and on what level of literature they find their cognitive competence.

REFERENCES
