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Communication in English Reading Groups

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Communication in English Reading Groups



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Samenvatting

De Stichting Senia is een organisatie die leesgroepen in heel Nederland opgericht heeft en deze groepen ondersteunt. De service die Senia aan haar leden biedt bestaat o.a. het jaarlijks beschikbaar stellen van leeslijsten en discussiehandleidingen voor alle aanbevolen boeken. De leesgroepen van Senia die Engelse literatuur lezen en deze boeken ook bediscussiëren in het Engels zijn relatief jong. Daarom heeft Senia de Wetenschapswinkel Taal, Cultuur en Communicatie van de Rijksuniversiteit Groningen gevraagd om een onderzoek uit te voeren naar deze Engelse leesgroepen. Zijn de leden tevreden over de geboden service (leeslijsten en leeswijzers) en hoe ervaren ze de deelname aan en de kwaliteit van de groepsdiscussies?

Methode van onderzoek: Enquêtes en observaties

Dit onderzoek probeert op bovenstaande vragen een antwoord te geven. Daartoe is aan alle 64 leden van de Engelse leesgroepen een enquête verstuurd en de onderzoeker heeft tevens 3 discussies bijgewoond en opgenomen. Van de 64 enquêtes zijn er 27 geretourneerd aan de onderzoeker(42%). Deze vragenlijsten zijn ontworpen met de intentie om de persoonlijke ervaringen van de leden vast te leggen. De enquête bestaat uit 5 delen: persoonlijke gegevens, ervaringen met de leeswijzers, ervaringen met de boeken, inschatting van de eigen taalvaardigheid in het Engels en de mate waarin men zich vrij voelt om binnen de leesgroep te communiceren (Willingness to Communicate). Het bezoek aan de 3 leesgroepen is toegevoegd om extra informatie te verkrijgen over de Engelse taalvaardigheid van de leesgroepleden en hun gebruik en waardering van de leeswijzers.

Wie zijn de leden van de Engelse leesgroepen?

Om de service effectief af te kunnen stemmen op de leesgroepen, is het van belang om een beeld te hebben van wie de leden zijn. Daarom startte de enquête met vragen over persoonlijke gegevens. Aan het einde van deze sectie is aan de leden gevraagd wat hun motivatie was om zich aan te melden voor een Engelse leesgroep van Senia. Hieruit kunnen we deels afleiden welke verwachtingen de leden hebben van de leesgroepen.

De meeste ondervraagde leden van de Engelse leesgroepen zijn hogeropgeleide Nederlandstalige ouderen. Een aanzienlijke minderheid van deze leden werkt(e) in het onderwijs (37%). Een klein

deel van de leden is native speaker (15%). De grootste verschillen tussen de leden waren te vinden in de motivatie om aan een Engelse leesgroep deel te gaan nemen: 37% wil graag zijn/haar Engels verbeteren, 26% leest en bespreekt graag literatuur, 26% wil graag in contact komen met andere mensen en 11% geeft een andere reden.

Evaluatie van de leeswijzers

Een belangrijke dienst die Senia aan haar leden verleent, is het maken van leeswijzers voor de leden. Het onderzoek wijst uit dat de leden de leeswijzers gebruiken en er over het algemeen tevreden over zijn. Er zijn ook indicaties dat er nog wat dingen verbeterd kunnen worden. Het Engels dat gebruikt wordt is goed, maar bevat soms nog fouten. Sommige leden vinden het moeilijk de discussievragen te begrijpen en zullen zodoende dus niet volledig aan de discussie kunnen deelnemen. Ook geven veel leden (40%) aan dat de informatie in de leeswijzers nog wat uitgebreid kan worden, zodat er meer diepgang in de discussie bereikt kan worden. Uit de observaties bleek echter dat in deze gevallen lang niet alle informatie uit de leeswijzer werd benut in de discussie.

Aanbod van boeken

De leden van Senia hebben de mogelijkheid boeken te kiezen van een lijst die Senia aanbiedt. De leden zijn zeer tevreden met de boeken die ze tot nu toe gelezen hebben en ze geven aan dat de lijst voldoende hulp biedt om boeken te vinden. Er is nog wel een groep mensen die sommige boeken die ze gelezen hebben moeilijk vonden (20%) en er is ook een redelijk grote groep (30%) die makkelijkere boeken op de lijst zou willen hebben.

Verschillen in taalvaardigheid

In dit onderzoek werd er op verschillende manieren geprobeerd inzicht te krijgen in de Engelse taalvaardigheid van de leden. Deze taalvaardigheid kan namelijk een belangrijke factor zijn in het goed kunnen deelnemen aan de discussies en of leden zich daarbij op hun gemak voelen. In de enquête werd de leden gevraagd om zelf hun Engelse taalniveau aan te geven aan de hand van het ERK (Europees Referentie Kader) en daarnaast werden een aantal can do-statements voorgelegd. Daarnaast werd bij de observaties van de leesgroepen het taalgebruik geanalyseerd. Deze verschillende resultaten laten zien dat er een grote variatie is in het taalniveau van de leden.

Aan de ene kant zijn er vooral docenten en moedertaalsprekers met een hoge taalvaardigheid (C-niveau). Maar met name op het gebied van spreekvaardigheid heeft ongeveer een derde van de leden een lager taalvaardigheidsniveau. Deze leden achten zichzelf niet altijd in staat om actief deel te nemen aan discussies.

Willingness to Communicate

Naast taalniveau, is ook de persoonlijkheid en de sfeer in de groep van invloed op hoeveel mensen communiceren. Dit kan samengevat worden onder de term Willingness to Communicate (WTC). Het onderzoek wijst uit dat het merendeel van de leden zich wel wil mengen in de discussies. Vooral docenten en moedertaalsprekers hebben hoge WTC scores en mengen zich meer in de discussies. Het zijn vooral mensen met een lager taalniveau die misschien wat meer aanmoediging kunnen gebruiken om zo beter te kunnen participeren in de groepsdiscussies.

Aanbevelingen

- Extra controle op taalgebruik in leeswijzers om ergernissen en onduidelijkheden te voorkomen.
- Voldoende variatie in aanbod van boeken, met name in moeilijkheidsgraad
- Rekening houden met variatie in taalvaardigheidsniveau door leden de mogelijkheid te bieden om hun Engels te verbeteren binnen of buiten de leesgroep, bijvoorbeeld via een workshop.
- Aandacht besteden aan een positieve sfeer in de leesgroepen bijv. door de groepen bij de start te laten begeleiden door adviseurs. Deze kunnen de leden o.a. ondersteunen in hun groeps- en leerproces, bewustmaken van verschillen in taalniveaus en verwachtingen en het belang van positieve feedback.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The reading enthusiast seems to be a member of an endangered species, but groups still exist that strive to enrich their lives by reading literature. These reading groups became popular in the eighteenth century, and this tradition of sharing reading experiences still exists today. When people read, almost 90% likes to talk about their experiences with other people (Hartley, 2003). Are reading groups then defenders of an oral tradition or just a group of people that enjoy reading? Whatever the case, the people that join a reading group have different backgrounds and will have different reasons for joining a reading group.

The concept of a reading group is hard to define as there are many elements that influence the layout of reading groups. I shall provide a short insight into some different kinds of reading groups. The basic definition of a reading group is: a group that meets on a regular basis to discuss books (Hartley, 2003). This definition, however, only provides us with an idea of what reading groups generally do. Using this definition, it is rather easy to imagine a group of acquaintances meeting in one of the group members' house to discuss a book they read. These face-to-face groups are the traditional form of reading groups that follow the urge of a greater percentage of people that feels the need to share their reading experience with others (Hartley, 2003). A lot of differences remain between various groups. They could meet at different kinds of locations and the make-up of each group will be different too. Moreover, there reading groups that operate on their own without the help of an external organization like Senia, and that means that the structure of the discussions are subject to fluctuations caused by these variables.

The Senia Foundation provides supporting services to many reading groups for the elderly. We will be looking at the services that Senia provides to reading groups that read English novels and discuss these books in English. These services entail that Senia provides the reading groups with a selection of literature and a reader's guide. These guides are made by students of literature and other volunteers. Senia evolved from a project in 2003 that was aimed at adding more cultural activities for the members of ANBO (an organization for the elderly). After the project was completed, ANBO stopped supporting the reading groups. Luckily, some former employees decided to keep the project going. They got involved with Bureau Senia and from then on the number of reading groups is still increasing. Due to the growth of the project,

Bureau Senia became a foundation that supports reading groups in 2009. The English department was founded in 2011 and it supports a dozen reading groups at this time. (Senia, 2012)

As the English reading groups are relatively young, Senia has requested the University of Groningen to research ways to improve the services they provide to the English groups. The researcher communicated with the Senia director about the objectives of the project; the main goal of the project is to evaluate if proficiency in English affects the quality of the discussions. This goal is to be achieved by gathering information about several aspects of the services that Senia provides.

Research Hypotheses

Senia wants to enable the reading groups to have more in-depth discussions. The organization is open to suggestions about new forms of talking about books. This survey will focus on gathering data about the appreciation of the services provided by Senia. I will also be mapping the English proficiency level of the English reading groups that are supported by Senia, because that will allow me to see if language proficiency influences the quality of the group discussions. However, proficiency would not be the only factor that influences the quality of a discussion. Therefore, the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC), which is variability in talking behavior that is rooted in the personality of a speaker, will be used to show personality is also a factor that influences the amount that a group member will speak during a meeting.

- The main focus of the study will be evaluating the services that Senia provides in connection to the use of English in the documentation they provide to their members and in the group discussions. At this time, the organization has little information available about the proficiency of the members of the English reading groups. This information is important for optimizing the quality of the services Senia provides. The proficiency of group members influences the way they participate in a discussion and should be considered by Senia when they are updating their services or when they consider providing new services to English reading groups.

The following points form the basis of the project in which I will try to discover information that could lead to improvements to the group discussions and to the services that Senia provides to its members.

- The choice of books is an important factor that influences the quality of the group discussions. It is not known if there is a specific correlation between the quality of the book and the quality of the discussion, but it is known that the choice of book influences the group discussion (Hartley, 2003). Additionally, members with a high proficiency will have an advantage over members with a low proficiency, because the members with a low proficiency will find it harder to read complex English books.
- The language used in the reader's guides should be correct and suitable for the reading group to avoid confusion about the meaning of sentences, which could influence the quality of the discussions in a negative way.
- Members with a lower proficiency will probably have a lower WTC, resulting in less interaction with other members in a discussion compared to members with a high proficiency level.

The report is divided into several chapters. The first chapter will provide a general background on the literature that I used and will also provide my assumptions about some basic demographics of the reading groups. Assumptions have to be made, because not a lot details about the members of the reading groups are known at this time. The second chapter will portray the methodology and the materials I used in my research. The third chapter will be where I show the quantitative data collected by distributing the questionnaires and the additional data that I have collected during my visits to the reading groups. Next, I will show the importance of the collected data in the discussion chapter. The last chapter will conclude the findings and provide some suggestions to Senia on how to optimize their services.

Chapter 2: Background

In this chapter I will provide framework on which I based the survey and my observations of the group meetings. It also features summaries of two previous studies of Dutch reading groups. The chapter will conclude with a section on the theoretical assumptions I made based on the background information.

Measuring Language Proficiency: ELP and CEF

The pilot project for the European Language Portfolio (ELP) was initiated in 1997 (Little and Perclovà, 2001). From the year 2001 on, it has been an influential model that governs how language proficiency is measured. The idea for CEF originated in 1991 at the conference of Transparency and Coherence in Language Learning in Europe. (Staatsen, 2004)

Today, the model is used as the basis for developing educational designs for primary and secondary schools. The CEF scale that is used by the ELP to measure language proficiency is becoming an increasingly popular tool to measure language proficiency. The CEF scale is designed to be used by people to assess their own language proficiency level and create their own language passport in which they can see how far they have advanced on the CEF proficiency scale.

This survey will adhere to the division of proficiency levels that are proposed by CEF. The proficiency levels focus on three main aspects of a language: understanding, speaking and writing. The category of *understanding* can be divided into reading and listening, and *speaking* can be split up into spoken production and spoken interaction (Pearson and Longman, 2007). As this survey is intended to assess the language level of the group members in the context of their group discussions, both spoken production and interaction, listening and reading are language skills that will be relevant to the survey. Reading will also be important because it entails that members with a high proficiency in this area will have an advantage over people that struggle reading the same book.

The CEP proficiency scale consists of three levels: the basic level (A1 and A2), the independent level (B1 and B2), and the proficient level (C1 and C2). When a speaker is at the basic level, the speaker can only express him/herself in basic situations where he/she expresses

familiar information. The independent speaker (B-level) is able to express him/herself on a wider variety of subjects without the receiving party having to undertake much of an effort to keep the conversation going. Lastly, at the proficient level the speaker is able to speak fluently with other native speakers, and at the top segment (C2) of this level the speaker is believed to be near-native speaker level. Naturally, native speakers reach C2 in most aspects of a language (Pearson and Longman, 2007).

Willingness to Communicate and Proficiency

It is commonly known that there are differences in how much different people speak. Proficiency is not the only factor that influences how much a person talks in a group discussion. Other factors include the natural predisposition towards speaking of a member, the proficiency level of the member, and on the other people in the group. That is, if a person is naturally shy, he or she will communicate less with other people in any given circumstance. Also, a person might not get on particularly well with some of the members in the group, and this will also lead to a lower amount of communication. However, a continuum exists between these two extremes, and people will find that, ultimately, their WTC is dependent on the context of their conversation.

The theory is based on the assumption that one can assess personality-based predisposition towards communication. McCroskey and Richmond (1985) made a tool to measure WTC, and they say that there are four different situations in which people communicate: public speaking, talking in meetings, talking in small groups and talking in dyads. They also claim that willingness to communicate is a trait-like predisposition, that is, WTC is rooted in the personality of the speaker. Since WTC is a trait, people with a high WTC will communicate more in each of the four situations. Also, they will communicate more to different personality types than people with a low WTC. McCroskey and Richmond do not deny that there are more factors that influence interpersonal communication, but they do argue that WTC is very important. Also, they found that people with a high WTC seem to be more successful in their social life than people with a Low WTC. (1985) Hartley also mentions that the atmosphere in a reading group is important in determining the success of a discussion. One can see how this is linked to WTC, because when a member with a low WTC does not feel comfortable in a group, he or she will certainly hesitate before offering an opinion during a discussion.

As mentioned before, being able to discuss properly is not only dependant on how proficient you are at the language that is used in the discussion. It is, however, still an important factor, because the members in the reading groups will have to speak English as their second language, and either having trouble finding the words or being very fluent in a language will influence WTC accordingly. The CEF framework also acknowledges that problems arise when we do not consider the influence of personalities in second language communication.

The taxonomic nature of the Framework inevitably means trying to handle the great complexity of human language by breaking language competence down into separate components. This confronts us with psychological and pedagogical problems of some depth. Communication calls upon the whole human being. The competences separated and classified below interact in complex ways in the development of each unique human personality. (CEF, 2001)

Hartley's four elements of a good discussion.

Jennifer Hartley has produced a very interesting survey that reports on reading groups in the UK. In the chapter regarding factors that make up a successful discussion reading groups Hartley (2003) proposes that four factors influence the quality of a discussion. She does not explicitly focus on language proficiency, because her study is on study groups that communicate in their native language, but in the Senia English reading groups proficiency is an important factor that influences communication. The four points presented by Hartley are to be used as the framework of this study. The researcher will also show that that proficiency and WTC are linked to Hartley's four arguments. Firstly, the books have a profound influence on the group discussion. This could be a positive influence when a book has themes that invite a vivid discussion. Hartley notes that groups found it important for a book to contain "a mystery, a conundrum, some ambiguity and its possible interpretations" (Hartley, 2003). Next, the members of the group find that the style of the author is not appealing. This is an individual preference that is different for every group, and it will influence each group differently. Thirdly, members can think that the book is too lengthy. Lastly, the members can find that a book does not offer the appropriate level of difficulty for a good discussion. One can easily see how language proficiency interacts with the afore mentioned factors that influence a discussion. If one of the members has a language level that is not sufficient to comfortably read a book that Senia selected, he or she will not be able to fully participate in the discussion which could lead to a stale discussion in the end.

The second element that influences group discussions is the range of opinion in the group (Hartley, 2003). Her results show that members of the group find that a discussion is successful if the group is reasonably evenly divided on aspects of the book. Heated discussions are remembered with great joy and serve to improve discussions (2003). A negative effect could be that members so thoroughly despise the book that they do not finish it, while other members really enjoy the book and are ready to discuss. The lack of opinion from the members that did not manage to finish to book will probably have a negative influence on the discussion. Again, proficiency is also connected to this point, because members with a high proficiency level will have more tools that can aid them in expressing their opinion in a discussion. Members with a lower level might not want to continue a discussion, because they feel that they cannot find the correct words to express or defend their standpoints.

Thirdly, Hartley states that the background of context or information which people bring to the book is important for enabling a good discussion. For example, when members of the reading group have personal experiences that link to the setting of the novel, then they could provide fresh standpoints to a discussion. Also, when the appointed member has gathered a lot information on the book and its context, the discussion will be better. Likewise, if the preparer has not done his or her homework the discussion will suffer. Hartley provides good reasons as to why the background of group members is important to provide them with fuel for a discussion. For this study, however, only the experience in speaking English is an important factor that could influence a discussion.

Lastly, the congenial atmosphere of the group is also very important in determining the quality of the group discussion. Within this element, two sub-divisions exist that determine the quality of the discussion within the group. Firstly, a friendly atmosphere helps many of Hartley's participants in feeling safe enough to express themselves. Secondly, Trust is very important for reading groups, that is, the members need to take heed to avoid embarrassing confrontations within the group. These two factors are important because members with a high WTC will speak even if the atmosphere in the group is not optimal. Contrastively, shyer members with a low WTC will probably think twice before speaking in a group where they do not feel safe and this will compromise the quality of the discussion.

Previous research on Dutch reading groups

Two previous surveys into reading groups have been influenced my decisions on this project. Firstly, Marjolein van Herten has already completed a large scale survey into the makeup of Dutch reading groups. Secondly, Senia has commissioned a survey into the appreciation of the Dutch reading guides in 2009. Results of both researches will be discussed in this section.

Marjolein van Herten has already done a survey into the makeup of 212 Dutch reading groups in the winter of 2010. The project focused on ascertaining details about the reading groups. How big the different reading groups are and how many times do these groups meet? The report provided here is by no means a complete research report, but due to popular demand some results have already been provided while a more in-depth analysis is underway on the rest of the data. Van Herten is currently working on publishing a complete overview of her results.

This research has mapped the general demographics of Dutch reading groups; she has gathered this information from 212 Dutch reading groups. About 880 people participated in the project, and 50 of these participants were male. The results will be portrayed below.

- The difference in numbers between male and female members is very large: 2 groups consist of only male members while 166 groups consist of female members. The remaining groups have both male and female members.
- The average age of the participants is 65.
- The level of education differs between members. Members completed the following types of educational stages: 0.5% completed primary school, 15.2% completed LBO or VMBO/MAVO/MULO, 10.6% completed HAVO, VWO, MMS or HBS, 7.6% completed MBO, 38.1% completed HBO or attained a WO bachelors degree, and 26.9% completed, at least, a Master's degree.

The second research that needs to be mentioned is the project commissioned by Senia in 2009. This project focused specifically on evaluating the quality of the reader's guides that Senia provides for their reading groups. Questionnaires containing questions on the quality of the reader's guides were sent to 200 reading groups and I shall discuss data relevant to this project. This shall mainly concern the language used in the reader's guides.

Section 1 of the results discusses an apparent difference in quality between different reader's guides. First, the questionnaire contained a question that asked if the members found that there are any outstanding reader's guides. It resulted that 41% of the members reckon that there are indeed some remarkable reader's guides and that 59% of the members did not find any high grade guides. The special guides all seem to add extra information to the literature the group read in such a way that they could have a better discussion. Next, it was asked if any exceptionally bad guides also exist. 50% of the members deemed that such guides do indeed exist. These results are relevant due to the fact the quality of the reader's guides seems to vary a great deal.

Section 2 deals with readability of the guides. Overall, the members seem to be satisfied with the quality of the language used. There are some instances where the members are annoyed by spelling errors in the guides. Also, members found that the questions in the guides are written in a way that reminds them of questions that they would expect to find in an exam about the literature. This was seen as being negative.

In Section 7 it was asked if the questions in the guide are always clear. Due to the nature of the question it is hard to always answer with yes. Still, 44% answered that the questions are clear, 53% answered that the questions are not clear. And the remaining person could not answer the question. This is relevant information, because there are already instances where the questions are unclear in the Dutch reader's guides. In some cases, people found that they did not quite understand how to use the question in a discussion. In other cases, people could not agree on the exact meaning of the question due to poor formulation which caused confusion. These problems could be magnified when it comes to the English guides that are written and used by non-native speakers. In this case, poor syntax could lead to a lot of confusion.

Based on the results of the survey, the Senia Workgroup for the Dutch reading groups provided several recommendations to the authors of the reader's guide and to Senia as to how to improve the readers' guides. The document will be added to the appendices.

Recommendations to the authors of the guides:

- Senia should include more questions that enable a group discussion and should include less questions that ask about facts and events in the book.

- Referencing to particular pages should be discouraged, because different members will use different editions of a book. A general sketch of the situation or chapter number could aid members in finding the passage that is relevant to the question in the reader's guide.
- An editorial team should make sure that spelling mistakes are corrected for the final edition of the guide.
- Senia will experiment with providing answers to the questions in the reader's guide.

Theoretical Assumptions

Based on the literature mentioned in this chapter and the completed research projects, we can now make some assumptions about several elements in the project. Assumptions can be made concerning the participants, about the appreciation of the reader's guides, the choice of the books and about the participants' proficiency level and WTC.

First, the subjects that will participate in this survey make use of the services that Senia provides. According to Herten's (2010) research it can be expected that the average age of a group member will be between 50 and 65. Also, the members are expected to have, at least, finished secondary school, with a good possibility of having completed a form of higher education.

Secondly, as seen from the results of the previous research undertaken for Senia in 2009, several assumptions can be made about the appreciation reader's guides that the English groups use. Overall, the level of the language used in the reader's guides is deemed to be sufficient. Still, in all three of the aforementioned sections of the previous survey of 2009, close to half of the members have a negative opinion about the quality of the language used in the guides. It will be assumed that these problems will also exist within the English guides, because these are mostly written by non-native speaking students or volunteers.

Hartley (2003) notes that the choice of books influences the quality of the group discussion. This also is true for groups that discuss in their L2; the members might like or dislike a book and this will influence the discussion, but people might find a book difficult to read and choose to not say a lot during the discussion because of that.

We expect members to be proficient in English, because they have chosen to be part of an English reading group, and because most of the members will have followed a form of higher education. Consequently, it is assumed that the average member will be at the C1 CEF level of speaking and understanding. Because members with a good command of the English language will have an advantage, we expect these members to also have a high WTC within the context of group discussion. Alternatively, the members with a low level of proficiency will be expected to have a lower WTC.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Several steps had to be taken to ensure that the survey also is representative for the English reading groups. The study was divided into two parts; gathering quantitative information via a survey and observations of group discussions by the researcher.

Acquiring participants and constructing the survey

To acquire participants a letter containing information concerning the project and an option to participate was sent to each of the reading groups. The groups could opt for limited involvement, that is, only fill in the survey, or they could fully participate and agree to be visited by the researcher during one of their discussions. We made a survey that would take roughly 10 minutes to complete. We also mentioned this fact to the participants in an introductory note to make sure we motivated the members to participate in the survey.

The questionnaire can be divided up into five sections: personal information, reader's guide, books, language proficiency, and willingness to communicate. Although the sections are separated in the survey, they are connected to each other on several levels. For example, the type of book will influence the information that is provided in the reader's guide. Also, proficiency of the group members is connected to how they perceive the book, reader's guide and the members' WTC. Each of the sections contains a scale that the members can use to signal their thoughts about any of the subjects. Also, we provided a possibility for members at the end of each subsection where they can coin additional thoughts about the section.

The first section merely exists because we needed to gather some personal information on the members of the English reading groups for Senia. Therefore, this section was structured differently than the other parts of the survey. The statements in the second section about the reader's guides could be answered by the participants by choosing one option from a scale that ranges from 1 to 4, each representing a different kind of opinion: 1 strongly agree, 2 agree, 3 disagree and 4 strongly disagree. Notice that there is no value that represents a neutral standpoint on a matter. This approach was chosen, because we wanted the participants to take a positive or negative position. The same scale is also used in sections 3 and 4. This construction makes it relatively easy for the researcher to process the data since 1 and 2 will counted as agree (positive), and 3 and 4 will be counted as disagree (negative).

In section 4, question 17 asks for the members to assess their own proficiency level. We have added a scale based on the CEF levels for this question. The last section has a different scale that is taken directly from McCroskey and Richmond's (1985) research. The spectrum ranges from 1 to 5 with 1 representing *Never* and 5 representing *Always*.

Survey and research goals

Every section in the questionnaire was developed in such a way that Hartley's idea about good discussions could be employed. The section on personal information was made as short as possible. The section contains several multiple-choice questions that only ask very basic information that could prove to contain valuable data. Some of these questions were inspired by Hartley's (2003) notion that the members were given some space to fill in their motivation for joining an English reading group.

The language of the questions and statements in each section was kept at a simple level, because the proficiency level of the participants was unknown at this point. Also, keeping language simple greatly decreases the chance of the questions being perceived as ambiguous and confusing, which will improve the overall quality of the survey.

The second section is meant to investigate the how well the reader's guides were received by the members. It contains simple questions that directly ask about the appreciation of the structure and quality of the guides that the groups have used so far. The goal is to gather information that can enable the researcher to provide Senia with useful information about the members' opinion about the guides and to possibly enable advice on parts of the readers that could be improved. Also, some questions were added that ask about the way the language used in the reader's guide, because we think this could provide us with information that connects with the language proficiency level of the group members. This information could be used to ascertain if members think it is important for the guides to contain proper and clear language.

Next, the book section of the survey was inspired by Hartley, because she notes that books are one of the elements that influence a group discussion. Therefore, we have asked questions based on the questions that Hartley asked in her survey. We added some questions

about the difficulty of the books to possibly create a link between proficiency level and perceived difficulty level of certain books and how this influences a discussion.

The section about language proficiency is based on the CEF model. The goal of this section is to provide the researcher with information about the level of English of the individual participants. This information could be used to provide Senia with a general overview of the proficiency levels in the English reading groups. Also, the information could be used to gain an understanding of the ways that proficiency influences group discussions. Question 17 asks the members to assess their own language level. The format of the question is provided in table 1.

Beginner		Intermediate		Advanced	
(A1)1	(A2)2	(B1)3	(B2)4	(C1)5	(C2)6

Table 1: proficiency levels explained

The CEF proficiency levels were simplified to range from 1 to 6. The actual CEF classification of these levels is marked red in table 1. The rest of the questions are directly based on can-do statements, which are themselves linked to different proficiency levels. The can-do statements will enable the researcher to obtain more information about the proficiency level of the participants. Normally, these statements can simply be answered with yes or no. However, we chose to operate with the same scale as we did in the other sections, because this scale still contains a yes/no choice; 1 and 2(agree), and 3 and 4(disagree).

Statement	Proficiency level
18	B1 speaking
19	B2 speaking
20	C2 speaking
21	C1 speaking
22	C1 reading
23	C2 reading

Table 2: proficiency level linked to can-do statements in the questionnaire

We chose to only add 6 questions, because we feared the questionnaire would become too lengthy otherwise. Therefore, we chose not add all statements linked to levels B1 to B2. The

CEF levels of the statements in the survey are shown in table 2. Lastly, we changed the way the can-do statements were originally formulated, because we felt that those statements were too confusing.

The last section contains a few questions on the members' willingness to communicate. The main goal of this section is to gather information about how comfortable members feel during a discussion in English and if the way they feel influences how much they speak during a discussion. This information could then be linked to the proficiency level of the members, which could provide the researcher with useful information for Senia on how the members experience the discussions and could also lead to discoveries about possible ways to improve group discussions. The questions are measured by a slightly different scale that was taken from McCroskey and Richmond's previous paper on WTC. Unfortunately, this scale does contain a value of 3(Neutral), which makes analyzing data slightly more challenging, but we felt that the *never to always* spectrum provided a better chance for the members to express their opinion on this matter more than the 1 to 4 scale used in previous sections.

Obtaining results from the questionnaire

As previously stated, the scales that we provided in the questionnaire are meant to simplify the process of analyzing the data. The gathered data will be stored in an excel file which will be provided in the appendix section. Next, the researcher will construct tables for each section that will portray the overall results for each section. After obtaining the general results, I will link data from various sections to provide a more detailed account of the factors that influence a discussion. More detailed information on the tables will be provided at the beginning of the results section.

The visits to the reading groups

Three groups were visited and observed to gather additional information about the members of the reading groups. We planned to gather information about the actual proficiency level of the members and information about how proficiency is linked to their WTC in a real-life situation by taping their discussion, rather than just relying on the information that was provided in the survey. Also, the plan was to ask some members a few questions about the reader's guides and about the discussion. Instead of interviewing each member separately, I chose to ask general

questions to the group just before and just after their discussions. The whole meeting was recorded, and the audio files were used to assess the proficiency level of the group members. Provide additional data that can be used as an addition to the data that was gathered in the survey.

Chapter 4: Results

We sent the questionnaire to 64 subjects, and 27 people filled in the questionnaires; a return rate of 42%. Some questions were either not filled in correctly or not filled in at all. Therefore, the numbers in the result tables do not always total 27 for all the questions/statements. The survey will be added as an appendix. The overview of the results of each section of the questionnaire and then the results of each individual question will be provided. Results will be shown in both tables and percentages. Cells in all tables will be colored green to signal that these cells portray the highest scores on the statements/questions. Additionally, percentages will be added for the total of positive and negative answers. Not every group member that was visited actually filled in the questionnaire. Members that filled in the questionnaire will be referred to as subject 1 to 27 from now on. The members that were visited during their discussion will be referred to as subjects A to P. Some members will have participated in both events.

Personal information

The setup of table 3 is slightly different from the latter tables due to the way the data was processed. The values 1 to 3 generally depict a different reality for each of the questions in this section. Firstly, the participants could choose between the age of <50, 50-65 and 65+. These three choices are represented by 1 to 3 respectively. Next, the same process was used for the question about the participants' education. 1 to 3 represent High school, HBO and University with the addition of an extra space provided for other options. This option will be represented by 0 in table 3.

	0	1	2	3
Age		3 (<50)	9 (50-65)	15 (>65)
Education	1 (Other)	5 (High school)	10 (HBO)	11 (University)
Job/Career	16 (Other)	10 (Teacher)	1 (Librarian)	
Native	23 (Non-native)	4 (Native)		

Table 3: personal information

Thirdly, we had the participants choose between teacher and librarian/bookkeeper as a job. These two choices are represented by 1 and 2 respectively. The participants could also write down additional information about different jobs. This information will be used, but in this table it will

be classified as 0. Lastly, the members could choose between yes or no to signal if they are native speakers or not. These values will be represented by 1 for yes and 0 for no. Also, Cells that are of no relevance will be marked red in table 3.

Results show that 33% of the members are actually aged between 50 and 65 as we expected. 56% is 65+ and 11% is younger than 50. As we are dealing with a lot of elderly people, most of these people will already be retired. Secondly, 47% of the subjects have been to university and 41% have graduated from HBO. 19% stopped their education after high school and the last 4% did not go to high school. Thirdly, 59% of the subjects did not have either librarian or teacher as their profession. 37% of the subjects signaled that they were a teacher at some point. 4% ticked the librarian/bookkeeper box. Lastly, 85% of the participants are not native speakers. It seems that 37% of the subjects joined the English reading group to improve their English. This concerned both speaking and reading skills. 26% of the subjects said that they wanted to join a reading group to interact with other people. Another 26% of the subjects joined the group because they like reading and discussing literature. The remaining 11% provided an answer that did not fall into one of the earlier mentioned categories.

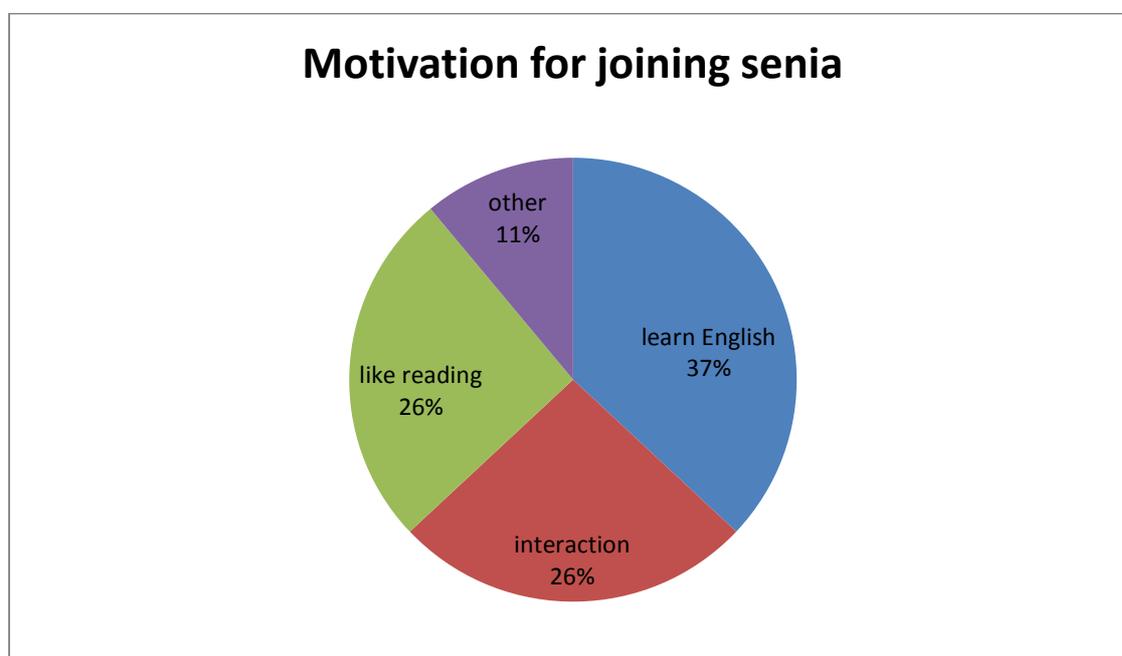


Figure 1: Motivation for joining Senia English reading groups

The population then mostly consists of highly educated Dutch-speaking people that have different reasons of joining the English reading groups. Less than half are teachers, and only a few are native speakers of English. Please consider figure 1 on page 24.

Statements about the reader's guide

In table 4, one can see that the participants agree that the members are quite positive about the reader's guides. The members are happy with the current format of the readers guide and the language used in the guides. There is, however, a group of members (19.3%) that say that the questions in the reader's guide could be clearer. Next to the rest of the positive results, one can also see that more than 60% of the members would appreciate additions or changes to the current format of the reader's guides.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Total% Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total% Disagree
1: I use the reader's guide with every book that we read.	13	12	96.2%	0	1	3.8%
2: The reader's guide is useful for our group discussions.	8	15	88.5%	2	1	11.5%
3: The language in the reader's guide has a suitable level for me.	10	13	92%	2	0	8%
4: The questions in the reader's guide help us find subjects that we want to discuss.	5	16	80.7%	4	1	19.3%
5: The questions in the reader's guide are well-formulated, clear and easy to understand.	7	14	80.7%	2	3	19.3%
6: More information in the reader's guide would improve our discussions.	1	7	30.7%	15	3	69.3%
7: I would prefer a section with extra questions in the reader's guide that would enable our group to have a more in-depth discussion of books.	4	6	38.5%	12	4	61.5%

Table 4: results 1-7

Statements about books

The book section contains statements that find out opinions about the quality of the books that the members have read so far and about what kind of books the members would like to read in the future. In table 5, one can see that the larger part of the group members is satisfied with the book they have read. The results conflict somewhat when we asked the participants about books they would like to read in the future: around half of the members would like more well-known authors to be added to the booklist, and close to 50% would like new authors to be added to the booklist. Most of the members do not seem to experience difficulties understanding the books.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Total% agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total% disagree
8: The books we have read so far have provided us with enough material for discussion.	11	13	88.9%	1	2	11.1%
9: The group discussion is poor when the book is too long.	3	1	16%	15	6	84%
10: The discussions are always good when we read a book from a well-known author.	3	4	30.4%	12	4	69.6%
11: The level of English in some of the books on the reading list was difficult.	2	3	19.2%	11	10	80.8%
12: I would like more books by famous authors to be included on the list.	5	7	46.2%	11	3	53.8%
13: I would like more new authors to be included in the reading list.	4	11	57.7%	8	3	42.3%
14: I would like to have books on the reading list that read easily.	1	7	30.8%	10	8	69.2%
15: I would like difficult books to be included on the reading list.	2	6	32%	15	2	68%
16: I could use additional help from Senia when reading difficult books.	1	3	16%	9	12	84%

Table 5: results 8-16

There is, however, a group of members that feel that the books they read were difficult. Also, around 30% of the members would like easier books to be added to the list, and 32 of the members do not want any more difficult books to be added to the booklist.

Assessment proficiency level

The members were asked to assess their own language level. It was expected that most of the members have a C-level proficiency of English, and results show that this is indeed the case for the group members. There are, however, also some other members that assess their level lower than the expected C1-level. Results show that highest percentage of the subjects is in the advanced section of the proficiency scale. 58.3% are in the C-section (marked green) of the proficiency scale and 33.3% are at the highest C2-level. Also, 33 % are in the B-section and 8.3% are in the A-section.

Question	A1	A2	Tot% A	B1	B2	Tot% B	C1	C2	Tot% C
17	0	2	8.33%	4	4	33.33%	6	8	58.33%

Table 6: Self-assessment of the CEF-level of the members

Teachers are expected to have a higher proficiency because they have actually taught or are still teaching English. Scores that the members attained in the self-assessment are shown in table 7. Subject 11 did not answer question 17. However, the subject confirmed that he is capable of performing all the can-do statements in the questionnaire, therefore I will assume he is also at the advanced level. Out of the 10 teachers, 50% think they are advanced speakers (C-level) of English and the other 50% placed themselves at the intermediate B-level. This could be an indication that the participants might have underestimated their language skills. None of the teachers are at the beginner level of English.

Subject	Score	Subject	Score
6	4 (B2)	18	3 (B1)
9	5 (C1)	19	6 (C2)
11	*	20	4 (B2)
12	4 (B2)	22	5 (C1)
15	5 (C1)	26	4 (B2)

Table 7: Teachers' proficiency scores.

Can do-statements

The results in table 8 represent the can-do statements that participants feel they are able to perform. As can be seen in the table, the majority of the members feel comfortable enough to say that they are able to perform the C-statements. This percentage is considerably higher than the percentage of people that claimed that they were at the C-level in question 17. A group of people (around 30% again) that do not feel completely comfortable with the C-can-do statements.

Statements	Strongly agree	Agree	Total% agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total% disagree
18: I feel that my English is strong enough to give an articulated opinion. (B1 speaking)	11	12	88.5%	2	1	11.5%
19: I can express my point of view without too much difficulty when it is about topics I am familiar with. (B2 speaking)	11	15	96.2%	1	0	3.8%
20: I have no problems whatsoever with participating in an argument when people are speaking English. (C2 speaking)	9	9	69.2%	8	0	30.8%
21: I can clearly formulate my opinion on almost all topics. (C1 speaking)	6	10	64%	8	1	36%
22: I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. (C1 reading)	10	9	73.1%	6	1	26.9%
23: I can read with ease almost all forms of the written language, including complex texts such as manuals, specialized articles and literary works. (C2 reading)	10	10	76.9%	6	0	23.1%

Table 8: Results 18-23

Willingness to communicate

Overall, the group members are of opinion that they have a high WTC. In fact, table 9 shows positive results for a majority of the members for questions that concern the subject of participation in discussions. A part of around 30% of the members does not feel completely comfortable or relaxed when they have to speak English in a group setting. Also, a majority of

members do not find it necessary to voice their opinion during the meetings. It is assumed that the teachers have a high WTC.

Since native speakers will have a good command of the English language it is assumed that their WTC will also be higher. Results show that 100% of the native speakers in the subject group scored a 4 or higher on statement 24, 25 and 26.

Question	Never 1	Some times 2	Total% negative	Neutral 3	Total% Neutral	A lot 4	Always 5	Total% positive
24: actively participate in group discussions.	1	0	4%	4	16%	5	15	80%
25: I am very calm and relaxed when I am expressing my opinion during our group discussions.	2	3	20%	6	24%	7	7	56%
26: I feel comfortable speaking English during our group discussions	1	2	12%	5	20%	7	10	68%
27: I feel that the other group members need to know my opinion.	3	3	24%	11	44%	5	3	32%

Table 9: results 24-27

Summary of results questionnaire

Overall, a high percentage of the participants seem to be satisfied with the reader's guides. There is a percentage (19.2%) that says that the questions in the guides are not clearly formulated and easy to understand. Results show that participants like the assortment of books they are able to choose from and that they have good experiences with books they have read so far. There are group members (30.8%), however, that would like easier books to be added to the list. Also, a high percentage of the members choose that they could perform the can-do statements. One has to note, however, that for statements 20-23 close to 30% of the members said they cannot perform the can-do statement. A majority of the members also have high WTC scores, and teachers and native speakers got very high WTC scores. As stated before, it should not be

forgotten that there is a part of the group that do not feel comfortable or relaxed speaking in a group discussion.

Information gathered at meetings

While the survey is an invaluable method of gathering information about the groups, I chose to also visit three individual groups to get extra information concerning the language skills of the members, and to get more information about the appreciation of the reader's guides they used for the books they were discussing. The data that was gathered from these meetings is only valid for these three specific groups, therefore the results in this section should not be generalized.

Meeting 1. 2 April 2012

My visit to the first group was quite impressive. The group originally consisted of 12 members, but it seems that a lot of the members have quit the reading group. Now, due to reasons unknown to me, only 4 core members seem to actively come to the meetings. The atmosphere seems quite informal and relaxed. This meeting, only 3 members managed to show up for the meeting and one of these members did not even read the book. These members will be named subject A to C. Even if not many people were present, I managed to gather useful information about the reader's guide and on the connection between proficiency and WTC in a group discussion.

Subject A is a non-native speaker and has a proficiency level of A2 in English. Subject B is a native speaker of British English and has a C2-level of proficiency. Subject C is a native speaker of American English and also has C2-level of proficiency.

This reading group uses the reader's guide for every discussion where one of the members. Even though only a small number of members showed up, the opinions about the reader's guide for Brooklyn were very strongly felt by the group members. Subject B finds that the syntax in the reader's guide is so bad that it actually confuses people when they read it. Subject C agreed and said that the guide does not just contain spelling errors but that the English in the guide is just poor and this bothers her. Next to her dissatisfaction with the language in the guide, Subject C had several comments about the content of the guide. She found that the summaries in the guides that they read are poorly written and often contain mistakes or that the wrong things are highlighted in the summaries. "As if somebody has written it that has not read

the book”. Subject B also said that the theme section is very limited and that there is much more to be found in the book. Subject A also agrees that the sentence structure is poor in this particular reading guide. Because subject A is not a native speaker, she finds that these mistakes in the guide make it difficult for her to understand the guide properly.

I did notice that the two native speakers communicated quite easily with each other. Sometimes this meant that Subject A was left out of the conversation, because she did not quite understand what the other two were talking about. One can already see why it is important to have a good command of the English language in a discussion. Subject A did try mixing in with some of the points, but she could not quite express her opinion well enough for the others to mix in the discussion. Subject B had no problem whatsoever in clearly expressing her opinion. She did talk with Subject C a lot when the subject of the conversation deviated somewhat from the reader’s guide. Subject C was quite present during the discussion even though she did not actually read the book. She was very eloquent and opinionated about things and asked questions to the other members that would, in turn, provide an opportunity for the other members to talk a bit more about the subject at hand.

The discussion was very structured, but the opinions of the members did not vary a great deal. Subject A would read aloud the question from the guide and then the group would start the discussion. They seemed to share the same opinion on many of the questions from the reading guide. The members found that the book was an easy read. The lower proficiency level of subject A proved to not hinder her global understanding of the plot of the book.

Meeting 2. 27 April 2012

The second meeting was very different from the first. The group was to discuss *The Secret Scripture* by Sebastian Barry. Firstly, the group was much bigger than the first one. At this meeting, 8 members were present. These members will be assigned the tag of subject D to K. Secondly; the age of the members was more in line with the assumptions since most of the members are aged between 50 and 75. One native speaker and two teachers were present at the meeting. A lot of information about the difference between the levels of English of the different subjects was gathered from this audio recording. Due to the size of the group, the proficiency levels of the group members will be portrayed in table 10.

Subject	CEF-level
D	<i>C2 Native</i>
E	<i>C1 Teacher</i>
F	B1
G	B1
H	A2
I	B1
J	<i>C2 Teacher</i>
K	B1

Table 10: Proficiency levels in group 2

This group was formed in 2011 and has since discussed 6 novels. When the members were not discussing the book, the language exchange would be in Dutch. The atmosphere seems congenial and pleasant. Subject E was chosen to lead the discussion. This entails that all members are first allowed to voice their general opinion on the book. With the exception of minor detours, this part of the discussion was well structured. Next, the subjects took turns in using the questions to talk about certain topics they wanted to discuss. The group always uses the questions in the reading guide. During this discussion, the members did not use all the questions that were provided. Nevertheless, the discussion was very enjoyable and lasted close to two hours.

I asked the members why they joined an English reading group. Obviously the motivation of each member varied, but 5 out of 8 members said that they joined a group to “rub up my English” or to improve their use of English in some way or another. The native speaker wants to meet other native speakers with whom she can talk about literature.

Subject D, E and J communicate among themselves quite a lot and seem to have a high WTC. Several times, other members did not respond to topics that strayed away from the discussion about the events that happened in the book. At these times D, E and J would mainly communicate to the other members with a high proficiency. Also, the members with *A or B* levels of proficiency would switch to their first language at times when they would need to express their opinion on the book. Subject F seemed uncertain about her language skills and

when she had to explain what she thought about the book and she asked if her explanation was good enough. The members with a high proficiency do help the members with the lower proficiency when they cannot express a certain word. Again, member F, G, H, I and K would express uncertainty about an expression or the meaning of a word and the group would collectively help each other out with the teachers and the native speaker spearheading the process.

The book was well received by most of the members. They enjoyed the poetic language that the author uses throughout the story. However, subject K expressed that she thought the language in the book to be very difficult, and that she had to resort to consulting a dictionary on several occasions. She did say that she could still follow the plot despite these difficulties. Subject G expressed that she had some difficulty understanding certain events in the book, because she did not possess the background knowledge needed to fully appreciate these references. Afterwards, the group discussed these events in the group and tries to inform the members that do not know about this. During this explanation Subject F and I switched to Dutch. Immediately after this switch, the members continued discussing in Dutch and they decided to take a small break from the discussion. Subject G expressed that she felt “handicapped” because she could not express herself on multiple occasions because her English was not good enough.

Meeting 3. 10 May 2012

The last meeting I visited took place in a library in Amsterdam. The meeting was attended by 6 members. Again, several original members had stopped attending the meetings during the course of the year. The members that were present at this meeting will be provided with the identifiers L to Q. The members discussed *Morvern Callar* by Alan Warner. The age of the members in this group falls within the boundaries of the assumptions that were made. Again, this group uses the reader’s guide for every book they read, but they also go beyond the boundaries of the guide many times during the discussion. First, the members voice their general opinion about the book before the discussion begins. After that, members come up with topics to discuss at random based on events or themes in the book they thought were interesting. The members first discuss the books they are going to be reading after the summer break. The atmosphere is pleasant and members seem reasonably at ease in the environment of this group.

The flow of communication between the various members is relatively more even compared to the other groups. Still, subject P stands out in her use of English and the frequency she chooses to participate in the discussion. It is important to mention that subject P studied a lot of reviews and articles about the book beforehand.

The members disagreed about the quality of the book; subject N found the book totally unworthy of reading because the characters in the book are morally deprived. The author chose to add dialogue written as if it was spoken directly by the characters in their Scottish vernacular. Subject M and P experienced some difficulties with this kind of language. Subject P mentioned that none of the members found that they had difficulties following the plot of the story despite minor the minor difficulties mentioned earlier.

Subject	CEF-level
L	C1
M	B1
N	B2
O	B2
P	C1
Q	B1

Table 11: Proficiency levels in group 3

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this chapter, I compare the thoughts I had about the subject group beforehand to the results that the survey provided. General results generated by the survey are analyzed and compared to the theoretical assumptions. This is done for each of the four sections: reader's guide, books, proficiency, and WTC. Data gathered from observing the reading groups is used as a source of additional information.

The Participants

I made certain assumptions concerning the age, education and careers of the participants, and their motivation to join the English reading groups. Members differ from these expectations. Additionally, the question as to why people join these English reading groups yielded interesting results. We see that 37% of the members want to improve their English by joining a reading group, and another part (26%) values the social aspect of being in a reading group the most. In essence, these results are not positive or negative, but they do show that the members that do join have different motivations for doing so; the reading groups are not one unit, but can be seen as a collection of individuals with different goals.

The data shows that the largest segment of members falls within the 65+ age group, which is older than I expected. It does, however, make sense since this is the age group that Senia focuses on. A substantial group of the participants are, or were, teachers, but it is problematic that I did not specify what kind of teacher I mean. Obviously, the specific type of teacher I had in mind was a teacher of English, but few of the teachers specified what subject they teach. It was interesting to find out that many of the group members were indeed highly-educated and that they were mostly Dutch non-native speakers of English. This could account for the large percentage of the subject group that joined the English groups to improve their English.

The Reader's Guides

The first question in the reader's guide section of the questionnaire was concerned with ascertaining if members actually use the reader's guide. 96% of the members answered that they use the guide for every discussion. This is a very high percentage indeed and it was confirmed by the observations. In each of the three meetings that were observed, the vast majority of the

members read the reader's guide to prepare for the meeting. Also, each of the three groups used the questions that were provided in the discussion section of the guide. The next statement focused on uncovering the opinion about the usefulness of the reader's guides. 85% of the participants answered that they think the reader's guide are indeed useful. These results seem to show that the members are satisfied with the quality of the guides. During the meetings, however, a few of the members complained about the structure of the reader's guides.

The hypothesis proposed that in order for Senia to optimize group discussions, the reader's guide should contain appropriate and correct language. It was stated earlier that language is an important factor that determines the quality of the discussion. The language in the reader's guides is deemed clear and well-formulated (80.7%) and the members think that the questions help them in finding topics to discuss (80.7%). The members were given some additional space to voice their opinion about the guide and from looking at these comments one can discover that do not appreciate spelling mistakes and unclear language in the guides. The comments suggest there is some dissatisfaction about spelling mistakes and about ambiguous sentences. The information from the observations confirms that there are a few problems with the language in the guides that the groups used at the meetings. The survey done in 2009 also lead to the recommendation that the guides should be edited to filter out spelling mistakes. Senia has confirmed that this is being done for the Dutch reader's guides. Some of the mistakes that I found in the small number of English reading guides that I looked at suggest that this same process could be improved for those guides

Participants of the survey think that no new information needs to be added to the reader's guides (60 %). However, close to 40% of the members would like some additional information to be added to the guides that could help them get a more in-depth discussion. I did, however, not specify exactly what kind of information I meant. During the visits I observed that most discussions were basic in their nature, focusing on plot and character development most of the time. The reader's guides I have seen, however, provide more than enough for the members to engage in profound discussions. It is not a strange notion that two hours is not enough to discuss everything. Additionally, limitations in proficiency of some of the group members will make it harder for them to express their opinion on more difficult topics. . Additionally, if the language

in the reader's guides is unclear then members will find it hard to venture into anything else than basic ways of discussing a novel.

Books

It is important to be able to provide a reading list that can cater to the reading habits and language proficiency levels of all members. The results attained from the survey tell us that members are satisfied with the books they have read so far, that is, 89% of the members think that the books that they have read so far have provided the groups with enough material to discuss. This is confirmed by the observations; the groups I visited experienced no trouble in their discussion that was caused by the contents of the book they read.

Hartley says the book that people read is one of the factors that influences a discussion (2003). She provides some examples where long and heavy books discouraged members of a reading group from finishing the book, which is not good for a discussion. Although she mostly provides anecdotal evidence in her chapter about how reading groups talk, the notion she presents will sound familiar to anybody that has given up on a long and heavy read before. This concept can be translated to the timeframe of six weeks (on average) that Senia members have to prepare for a meeting. Next to their social and professional lives, members might not have a lot of time available to intensively read and book; let alone study it in great detail. The results of the survey show that members (84%) think that a long read would not influence the discussion negatively. During my visits to the groups I did notice that there was a big difference in how well the members prepared for a meeting. Most of the members came well-prepared, but I noticed that there were always people that did not prepare anything, or people that did not even finish the book. Again, this might be connected to a busy lifestyle, but it suggests that people do not only come to these meetings to discuss books, but that there is also a social factor to these meetings. The results of motivation to join groups does confirm this as a large group of the participants answered that they join this group to interact with other people.

The survey shows that members do not think that books by well-known authors guarantee a good discussion (85%). Also, a slight majority (53%) of the members does not want more books written by well-known authors added to future reading lists. Neither do members want relatively unknown writers to be added to the reading list. Members did not have a lot of time to

answer additional questions during the meetings; therefore, the exact preference of the members on this subject is unknown. Also, the concept of what a well-known writer entails exactly was not specified in the survey. One member could think of a best-selling author and another member could think about a canonical author. Therefore, the statements could have been confusing to the members, producing unreliable results.

The survey shows that a large majority of the participants (80.8%) do not think that the level of English in the books is hard. This result is to be expected since members of Senia that join an English reading group are most likely 65+ or around that age, and they are expected to have some experience reading English novels. Additionally, the results show that a rather large part (around 30%) of the subject group would like easier books to be added to the list, and that a group of a similar size does not want more difficult books to be added to the list. One can see this as a signal that there is a considerable part of the members of English reading groups that find it hard to read some of the books on the list.

The results of this survey show that members are satisfied with the reading list at this point, and that they do not require Senia to help them with reading books. Senia already has a policy of adding ten new titles to the list every year, which will allow for members to have a comprehensive list from which they can choose the books they read. Difficult language might handicap members with a lower proficiency from fully participating in an in-depth discussion about complicated topics. Since active help to individual members is not a viable option, the main way to improve reading experience and the discussions is to make sure that Senia takes into consideration different levels of proficiency when constructing the reading list for English reading groups.

Language Proficiency

One of the objectives of the study was to map the language levels of the members of English reading groups and to see if members with a high proficiency communicate more during a discussion than members with a low proficiency. Question 17 in the survey was constructed to gain information about the members' language level. 58.3% of the members reckon that they are at the C-level of proficiency, 33.3% thinks that they are at the B-level and 8.3% was at the A-level. Still, one has to consider that members might have been enthusiastic in assessing their own

skills in the survey. The data that I gathered during the observations divided somewhat differently: 50% of the members fell within the within the B segment of the CEF scale, 43.8% was at the C-level and the remaining 6.2% was at the A-level of proficiency. The percentage of members that is highly proficient in English during the meetings is lower than the percentage of subjects that claimed to be highly proficient in the survey. Not only do these results show that the assumption that participants would be at the C1-proficiency level, but they also show a great variance in proficiency level within individual reading groups. Basically, there are more members at the B-level than I would have earlier anticipated. Moreover, there is a small segment of Senia members that is not very proficient in English, and these members would probably appreciate some extra help.

Question 17 does contain a weakness: when answering the question, members would probably also have thought that their reading proficiency is part of the proficiency level that they had to assess and this could account for the higher proficiency scores in the survey compared to data gathered from observations. This leads to a general result in which speaking and reading are merged. However, when one considers the average age of a group member and takes in account the probability for the subjects to be experienced readers of English literature, it is not a strange thought that these people might be better at reading English than they are at speaking the language. During the visits, however, I was only able to measure the CEF speaking level of the members.

The can-do statements were made to further gauge the speaking and reading skills of the subjects. The results show that 94% of the subjects think that they can perform the statements from the B2-level and 88% for the B1-level of the CEF scale compared to lower percentages (69% for C1 and 62% for C2) that felt they could perform the can-do statements from the C section. This shows that the more difficult the statement, the lower the percentage that can perform the statement. Also, a higher percentage of the subjects felt they are at a C-level of reading compared to the amount of members that thought they are at the C-level of speaking English. Again, this is a result that is not unexpected due to the fact that the subjects read English more than they actually communicate in English.

Next, it is shown that teachers and native speakers have a higher proficiency level than other non-native group members. During the observations of the second group the two teachers

of English participated actively during the discussion. Subject E, the first teacher, was appointed the leader of that discussion. She had to help some of the other members with expressing themselves when they got the chance to voice their opinion about the book. The other teacher, subject J, was a new addition to the group. Even so, she was well-prepared for the discussion and spoke more English than the other Dutch members with a lower proficiency. Teachers are exposed to speaking and reading English on a more regular basis compared to Dutch members that do not have to speak English during their social and professional lives. Therefore, it is not strange that the members classified as teachers spoke more often during a discussion compared to Dutch members with a lower proficiency level.

Overall, the results show that proficiency levels vary greatly within reading groups, members are better at reading English than they are at speaking the language, and teachers and native speakers have high proficiency levels.

Willingness to Communicate

The hypothesis states that people with a low proficiency level will experience anxiety when they have to speak in English which will decrease their WTC in a group setting. The results of this section are interesting, because most members agreed that they actively participate and they are comfortable when expressing their opinion in English. This suggests that most of the people that join the group discussions have a desire to discuss novels with other people. This is confirmed by the motivation part in the questionnaire where 26% of the members said that they want to interact with other people.

Another segment of the participants (26%) said that they join the reading group because they like reading. Since experience in a certain activity can increase WTC (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998), the subjects that have a lot of experience in reading and discussing literature will have a higher WTC during group meetings. Still, over 30% feel that they are not entirely comfortable when speaking English in a group. During the meeting of group 3, several members admitted that they feel uncomfortable when speaking English. These members, especially members G and H, struggled considerably when trying to participate in the discussion. These two members had the lowest proficiency level of the group. It seems then that a lower

proficiency level has a negative influence on the amount the members speak during a group discussion.

The hypothesis stated that WTC is connected to proficiency and the results of the study confirm this. Both the teachers and the native speakers attained high scores in the WTC and proficiency sections of the questionnaire. It is clear that these people do not need extra help with their language skills or with their WTC. Other people with low and intermediate proficiency and with a low WTC might need some encouragement and help to improve their participation in group discussions and to improve the discussions in general. Hartley (2003) has rightly mentioned that the atmosphere in a reading group is an important factor that can determine the successfulness of a group discussion. This concept is linked to WTC because people need a safe environment in order to communicate, especially when they have to communicate in their second language. Brown (2007, 73) says that language learners are used to an environment that encourages correctness, right answers and withholding “guesses” until one is sure to be correct. Even though it was observed that the environment was reasonably pleasant during the meetings that were visited, results show that members with a lower proficiency do not participate in discussions as much as members with a higher proficiency. It seems that the idea of having to be correct still is still present in the minds of the subjects. One can choose to help create an environment that encourages the members with a lower proficiency to actively participate in discussions. Brown says that language learners’ attempts to communicate should be responded to with positive affirmation (2007, 74). During my visits, I have already observed instances when members with a lower proficiency level made mistakes, and in these situations the other members provided positive feedback and helped the member finding the word they were having trouble. The atmosphere, therefore, seems to be a factor that is important, but that it is a factor that Senia cannot influence a great deal. Senia can, however, make the members realize that a good atmosphere in the group is a prerequisite for having a good discussion, especially when the discussion is in a foreign language.

Chapter 6: Recommendations

Overall, the members seem to be happy with the services that Senia provides. This project has yielded results that suggest that minor aspects of the services could still be improved. Firstly, the members seem happy with the reading guides, but Senia needs to make sure that the language in these guides is flawless, because that will ensure that this service does not negatively influence the discussion. Secondly, while the booklist already seems to be in good order, Senia has to consider that members with a lower proficiency level might want some more accessible books added to the list. Thirdly, the majority of the members are at the intermediate level or above in both speaking and reading English. Within the groups I observed, however, there is a great deal of variance between the actual levels of English that the members display. As a large part of the reading group members would like to improve their English, Senia may want to consider providing the possibility for the members to learn English inside and outside of the group discussions .

To promote an environment in which group members will feel safe to express themselves in English, Senia might consider appointing advisors who go to groups to help them get started. The advisor would then aid in creating a safe environment by making the members aware of the fact that, probably, not everybody in a group has a high proficiency level. The advisor could then help them structure the discussion in a way that is most appropriate for a group, taking into account the proficiency levels of the group members. It is then not unlikely that a teacher or a native speaker would have to play a leading role in making sure that the discussion remains structured, and in doing so providing an enjoyable and good discussion to all members. Lastly, WTC is a concept that is rather hard to grasp, but the survey shows that it is connected to proficiency. In general, high proficiency will lead to higher WTC. There are, however, many other factors that influence WTC. A person might be naturally shy and choose not to communicate because of that. I suggest that Senia makes sure that members feel as comfortable as possible during a group discussion. This can be achieved by raising awareness that there are people that find it difficult to communicate in these settings and by then working together in creating a pleasant atmosphere. Senia should facilitate a way for the members to contact an advisor should they feel the need to do so, but, preferably, the members themselves will be able to create a positive learning environment. One could argue that this solution is rather naïve in its

nature, because the members generally do not like to be in any situation that is similar to being in a classroom. The members are adults that are experienced in reading English books and they probably do not want to be patronized. Indeed, I do advise that a lot of precaution is taken to not make members feel uncomfortable during a visit of the advisor. Additionally, if members feel that their English their English could be improved they should have a possibility to individually contact Senia. They could then ask for additional information that will help them to improve their English in a way that is best suited for them. Information could be provided by a contact person or could be made available on Senia's website. Additionally, adding workshops which aim to improve English communication skills, could be a great incentive from Senia that shows that the institution is aware of differences in proficiency.

Summary

- Adding additional information to the reader's guides to allow members with a high proficiency level and a thorough understanding of literature to have more in-depth discussions is possible. However, there is a lot of information in the reader's guides as it is and the biggest part of the members is not highly proficient in English. Senia could try to optimize the information that is in the guides at the moment.
- The survey done in 2009 also led to the recommendation that the guides should be edited to filter out spelling mistakes. Senia has confirmed that this is being done for the Dutch reader's guides. Some of the mistakes that I found in the small number of English reading guides that I inspected suggests that this same process could be improved for those guides.
- Difficult language might handicap members with a lower proficiency from fully participating in an in-depth discussion about complicated topics. Since active help to individual members is not a viable option, one way to improve reading experience and the discussions is to make sure that Senia takes into consideration different levels of proficiency when constructing the reading list for English reading groups. Another option would be to form groups in which the members have similar proficiency levels.
- There is a small segment of Senia members that is not very proficient in English, and these members would probably appreciate some extra help.

- The atmosphere seems to be a factor that is important, but that it is a factor that Senia cannot influence a great deal. Senia can, however, make the members realize that a good atmosphere in the group is a prerequisite for having a good discussion, especially when the discussion is in a foreign language.
- Senia might want to consider appointing an advisor or contact person that can help English groups get started. This can increase awareness that not every member will be at a native speaker's level of English. Also, promoting structure in a meeting will be helpful for the members that struggle with their English.

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Appendix 1: The survey.

Senia survey

Senia has asked me to design a survey that will help the organization improve the experience of reading and discussing books. Could you please help us. The survey contains a total of 27 statements. It will take approximately 10 minutes to complete the survey.

Thank you very much for your participation!

Dardo Zijlstra, Master Student English Language and Literature, University of Groningen.

Personal information

Name:

Age:

- <50
- 50-65
- 65

Education:

- High school
- HBO
- University

Something else:

Job/career:

- Teacher
- Librarian

Something else:

--

Native speaker of English:

- Yes
- No

What motivated you to join an English reading group?

The reader's guide

Using the scale below, please circle the number that most accurately describes your opinion.

Scale:

1: Strongly agree

2: Agree

3: Disagree

4: Strongly disagree

The books

8: The books we have read so far have provided us with enough material for discussion.

1 2 3 4

9: The group discussion is poor when the book is too long.

1 2 3 4

10: The discussions are always good when we read a book from a well-known author.

1 2 3 4

11: The level of English in some of the books on the reading list was difficult.

1 2 3 4

12: I would like more books by famous authors to be included on the list.

1 2 3 4

13: I would like more new authors to be included in the reading list.

1 2 3 4

14: I would like to have books on the reading list that read easily.

1 2 3 4

15: I would like difficult books to be included on the reading list.

1 2 3 4

16: I could use additional help from Senia when reading difficult books.

1 2 3 4

Please write down any additional comments about the books below.

22: I can understand long and complex factual and literary texts, appreciating distinctions of style. 1 2 3 4

23: I can read with ease almost all forms of the written language, including complex texts such as manuals, specialized articles and literary works. 1 2 3 4

Group interaction

24: I actively participate in group discussions.

Never 1 2 3 4 5 *Always*

25: I am very calm and relaxed when I am expressing my opinion during our group discussions.

Never 1 2 3 4 5 *Always*

26: I feel comfortable speaking English during our group discussions

Never 1 2 3 4 5 *Always*

27: I feel that the other group members need to know my opinion.

Never 1 2 3 4 5 *Always*

Please feel free to provide us with more suggestions you feel would improve the group discussions.

Thank you for your input. I would like to observe the interaction in a reading group and hope that your group would be willing for me to sit in on one of your meetings. If you have no objection, could you please e-mail me at d.zijlstra.6@student.rug.nl.

Appendix 2: Conclusions and evaluations Senia Survey. (Dutch)

Conclusies evaluatie leeswijzers Senia Literair

Leesseizoen 2009-2010

1. Leesgroepen onderscheiden goede en slechte leeswijzers, en hebben daar argumenten voor.
2. Vragen die je laten nadenken over de essentie van het boek blijken belangrijk. Opzoekvragen en detailvragen zijn niet geliefd bij de deelnemers. Veel leesgroepen hebben een afkeer van 'schoolse' vragen.
3. De leesbaarheid van de vragen is goed. Soms zijn de vragen 'te moeilijk' geformuleerd en weten deelnemers niet in welke richting ze het antwoord moeten zoeken.
4. De meeste deelnemers van leesgroepen bestuderen de analyse en informatie over het boek en de schrijver en over de recensies thuis, soms vormen ze onderdeel van de discussie.
5. Er is een behoorlijke groep deelnemers die ook de antwoorden op de vragen wil weten. Andere groepen (de meerderheid) heeft geen behoefte aan antwoorden.
6. De meerderheid van de leesgroepen behandelt alle vragen. Een flink aantal maakt zelf een selectie uit de vragen. Een kleine groep gebruikt de vragen überhaupt niet.
7. De meeste leesgroepen vinden dat het aantal vragen in de leeswijzers precies goed is. De schoolse vragen kunnen beter achterwege blijven.
8. De vragen zijn niet altijd duidelijk, vindt de meerderheid van de groepen.
9. Door de vragen dring je dieper door in het boek, is de algemene mening, maar dat gebeurt ook door de onderlinge discussies.
10. De meerderheid van de mensen die de vragenlijst ingevuld hebben, vindt dat er wel suggestieve vragen in de leeswijzer zitten.
11. Er zijn veel opmerkingen over taalfouten in leeswijzers.



Aanbevelingen voor de samenstellers van leeswijzers

1. In de gesprekshandleiding meer open discussievragen opnemen en minder schoolse vragen en opzoekvragen. Een discussievraag kan ook het thema van het boek zelf betreffen (bijvoorbeeld nav 'Duel' van Joost Zwagerman, vragen over 'wat kunst is'.)
2. Oppassen met verwijzing naar de pagina's:
 - a. Het is lastig als er verschillende edities van het boek in omloop zijn.
 - b. Sommige mensen vinden het wel prettig om precies te weten waar iets staat. Een korte schets van de situatie kan helpen om het fragment aan te duiden, of noem het hoofdstuknummer.
3. Door een goede eindredactie horen taal-en typefouten in de leeswijzers tot het verleden.
4. We gaan experimenteren met het beschikbaar stellen van antwoorden op de vragen.

We willen graag dat er (zo mogelijk) suggesties gedaan worden voor andere te lezen titels van dezelfde auteur.

Voor de Senia-organisatie

Voortaan worden de concept-leeswijzers door een redactiecommissie van twee personen 'mee-gelezen'. De commissie let erop dat resultaten van deze evaluatie in de samenstelling verwerkt worden. Leden van deze commissie maken deel uit van de Werkgroep Literatuur van Senia. Ze wisselen onderling hun bevindingen uit.

Bij de set leeswijzers die de groepen jaarlijks ontvangen, voegen we voortaan een notitie met suggesties hoe de leeswijzers te gebruiken.

Colofon

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