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Reading for academic purposes: the literacy practices of British, French and Spanish Law and Economics students as background for study abroad

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Study-abroad students, products of their own particular academic literacy culture, face the challenge of rapidly integrating into a foreign academic literacy community. This study identifies possible culturally dependent sources of literacy problems in Law and Economics students in Great Britain, France and Spain. Nearly 600 potential European study-abroad candidates (ERASMUS programme) and 169 of their university teachers from 17 universities in the three countries completed a questionnaire on first language (L1) reading practices. Results revealed distinct academic literacy profiles within disciplines across national cultures. Academic reading practices are seen to be more important overall in Britain, significantly less so in Spain, while France shows some characteristics of both British and Spanish approaches. Summarised results of a concurrent investigation into ERASMUS students' foreign language reading skills suggest the influence of L1 literacy traditions on foreign language reading, which points to pedagogical implications and directions for further study.

Recent years have seen a large increase in undergraduate students engaging in study abroad, requiring them to adapt to the literacy demands of another language and university culture. Cross-cultural research in the last decade has begun to address differences in approaches to study in various cultures, although findings have not so far had much effect on the work of language practitioners or administrators of university exchange programmes, and students are often left to their own devices in preparing to find their way in another literacy culture.

Involvement over a number of years in foreign language (FL) teaching and research (Taillefer, 1992; Taillefer & Pugh, 1997) and in administering the European study-abroad programme for higher education in a French university (ERASMUS, begun in 1987, currently involving nearly 100,000 students per year from 2,000 institutions in 30 countries) has given us some idea of the kind of reading and writing problems that are encountered by study-abroad students. For example, in Law and Economics, many French students attending universities in northern Europe report needing several months

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to adapt to the required reading load in English. Their tutors abroad have commented on difficulties in making students understand the meaning of plagiarism and the notion of interacting with teaching staff, but when study abroad lasts for only one semester, there is little time for adaptation and development. In the other direction, Norwegian students in France have reported frustration at university teachers' insistence on 'dictating' courses rather than recommending reading to accompany a course outline. Several British exchange-programme directors have reported to us assessing ERASMUS students differently from local students, giving greater weight to term papers than to final exams. Their feeling is that a single exam paper written in a limited time and in students' FL does not fairly reflect their understanding and critical thinking. This has also been found for exchange students in France, where little tradition exists for undergraduate personal research and academic writing such as term papers (Lahire, 1997). Consequently, foreign students have limited opportunity to practise reading and writing skills throughout the year, and find it hard to prepare for written final exams or to compensate for poor end of term marks. Progress made in oral skills is rarely taken into account. A final example of literacy problems is that of Spanish Law students, who, although their native legal system bears close resemblance to that of France, have expressed the need for specific readings on the French legal system (such texts are not generally proposed). Students of British common law may have greater problems.

As study abroad has become more common, literature has been published reflecting on the role of reading in higher education across national cultures. What transpires, as will be seen, are very different conceptions of reading for academic purposes and consequently, very different literacy practices as regards, for example, independent research, course expectations and assessment. At the base are what Richardson (1995) has described as two fundamentally distinct approaches to studying – a comprehending orientation, or deep approach, and a reproducing orientation, or surface approach. Although referring to an Anglo-Saxon framework, Richardson suggested that these different orientations exist across a wide spectrum of national cultures. Flowerdew and Miller (1995), basing their ethnographic observations on Hong Kong students and their British teachers, proposed a multi-dimensional framework in the context of the FL lecture course. They also suggested that their findings carry over to other academic activities and environments. Universal aspects of academic culture, for these authors, involve notions of societal values, role models, attitudes and expectations, patterns of behaviour and the role and nature of literacy and learning in society (for example, rote learning versus analysis). Johns (1997) spoke similarly of 'communities of practice' based on values, concepts, genres, lexis and practices that distinguish among national and academic communities. More recently, Ridgway (2003) has argued that while culturally specific literacies may differ at the level of skills and strategies – how readers cognitively process text – reading styles and attitudes – readers' state of mind as regards literacy – are also socioculturally programmed and also influence literate behaviour.

Specific evidence of cross-cultural differences in actual reading practices is offered by Parry (1996, see also Davis & Bistodeau, 1993; Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995) who showed how secondary school readers of a rich multi-lingual tradition in Nigeria tolerated linguistic ambiguity and thus translated little from FL to L1 for specific meanings in academic reading tasks, relying primarily on a top-down approach. Chinese university students, from a less linguistically complex background and schooled in an analytical, bottom-up approach to language, felt it necessary to translate meticulously. Newman, Trenchs-Parera and Pujol (2002) similarly underlined in a small-scale

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multi-case study how cultural variations in both genres and ways of interacting with them account for the wide variation found in academic literacy practices of students from different cultures, wherever their place of study. Both ‘mainstream’ American students and Latino immigrant students in a US university tended to read the bare minimum, and in a superficial manner, relying mostly on lectures for information. Catalan students in their native Spain, on the contrary, were sophisticated readers who depended on text for information, ‘mistrusting’ lectures (Newman, Trenchs-Parera & Pujol, 2002, p. 12). And whereas the latter resisted academic writing instruction (as our own French study-abroad students have been reported to do while in Britain), the former welcomed it. Mainstream American students believed in developing critical thinking and concepts rather than learning facts; Catalans valued learning content through socially recognised canonical readings; immigrant students in the USA depended heavily on teachers for guidance, not questioning their authority.

Reports on academic literacy practices of specific national cultures further document the challenges facing students who travel between academic cultures. While differences occur among Anglo-Saxon universities, the concept of ‘reading a subject’ remains fundamental (Taillefer & Pugh, 1997). In Spain, however, Bernárdez (1995) explained that since the teaching system relies on a heavy lecture schedule, it is not expected that students do much reading or individual work; they have little time to do so. In France, Lahire (1997) spoke of the ‘silent socialisation’ of university students, where undergraduate Law and Economics students have an average of 22 class hours per week and only do 15–17 hours of personal work. With Côté and Annezer (2000), he documented the ‘poor condition’ of French university libraries as regards opening hours (45–50 hours on average), staffing, number of volumes and seating capacity compared with British and Canadian facilities. Bourdieu, Charle and Lacroix (1997), representing a French educational think-tank, have gone so far as to claim under the heading ‘Universities against reading’ that students are not expected to do personal work, to read on their own, or to do anything other than attend classes (1997, p. 77). This less than central role of French university libraries has recently been confirmed in a study by the *Inspecteur général des bibliothèques*, who concluded that while they partially satisfy students’ needs, university libraries suffer from a very traditional image (library = books) and are not always well integrated into university culture despite major modernisation efforts over the last few years (Renoult, 2004).

Lastly, academic literacy across cultures is also influenced by the disciplines themselves. Marked differences in reading practices appear both within countries (in France, for example, see Fijalkow & Taillefer, 1997; Taillefer, 1995; Lahire, 1997, for survey evidence across ten disciplines) and across national boundaries, where differences may be accentuated. Flowerdew and Miller (1995) in the British-Hong Kong context gave many examples of variations in disciplinary culture centring on characteristic theories, concepts, norms, vocabulary and discourse structure. Valero-Garcés (1996) furthers Kaplan’s (1966) seminal work on contrastive rhetoric in expository prose across languages within a single discipline, exploring intercultural variations in meta-text in Spanish and English economics texts. In our own experience, British university teachers of Law involved in study-abroad programmes have contrasted the narrative and embedded style of typically 15-page UK law reports to the concise, dense, ‘dry’, one-to-three page French case reports. A French teacher of international accounting teaching in English to an international student body in France has related problems with vocabulary. Cognates such as ‘prudence’ do not share the same connotations across French, British

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English and American usage, as a result of different conceptual frameworks of accounting (personal communication).

Students who cross cultures to integrate into a new academic literacy community, then, must bear what Johns (1997) has described as the 'cost of affiliation'. This involves conscious comparison and contrast not only of language and genre, but also of societal values and assumptions, often over a short period of time. Raymond and Parks (2002) reported how Chinese MBA students in Canada paid the price of being unable to develop profitable learning strategies and resorting to mere survival strategies when dealing with demanding reading and writing requirements. Braine (2002), a native of Sri Lanka, summarised research on the question and related his own struggles to develop FL academic literacy. Newman, Trenchs-Parera and Pujol (2002) showed how a Latino immigrant student in the USA began to succeed academically once she realised that reading tasks requiring extraction of form and detail demanded a bottom-up approach, not her natural top-down treatment. Braine (2002), Raymond and Parks (2002) and Ridgway (2003) have all warned how foreign students' native conception of literacy may penalise them, and how important it is for faculties to be explicitly aware of their own and, ideally, of their foreign students' approaches to academic literacy.

Yet, so far there has been no large-scale empirical research in the European context exploring the nature of different academic literacies to establish a relation between exchange students' L1 approaches to literacy and the expectations of an FL context. The disciplinary aspect has also been largely neglected. Recent European research in the study-abroad context focusing on foreign language skills has centred primarily on listening and speaking (see Coleman, 1997, 1998; Forster-Vosicki, Fraser & Flischikowski, 2000, for the first SOCRATES Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages, Subgroup 8, concentrating on Language Studies for Students of Other Disciplines; Mackiewicz, 1995 for the SIGMA Project on Language Studies in Higher Education in Europe; Rosselle & Lentiez, 1999; Teichler & Maiworm, 1997). From the American perspective, Freed (1998) presented an overview of research into language proficiency in study abroad. She summarised the multi-dimensional work of Brecht, Davidson, Ginsberg, Robinson, Robin and Wheeling in the early 1990s, which reported that 'pre-mobility' FL reading and grammar proficiency were strong predictors of improvement in speaking, listening and reading once abroad. Lastly, recent research devoted entirely to the question of context-sensitive second language acquisition – at-home 'standard' FL classroom situations versus domestic immersion programmes versus study abroad (see *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, vol. 26 No. 2, 2004) – deals mainly with oral skills and communication strategies. Dewey (2004) alone discusses the development of reading comprehension and processes in immersion programmes and study abroad, reporting significant gains in self-assessment in the latter context but no differences in reading recall or vocabulary knowledge between the two contexts. Reading processes improved over time, on some levels in the study-abroad context and on others in immersion programmes.

The present study offers further empirical research identifying possible culturally dependent sources of literacy problems. It was felt that comparing students' and their teachers' conceptions and practices of academic literacy within specific disciplines and across particular countries would bring to light different interpretations of a common term. Our aim in doing so is to contribute to lessening the 'cost of affiliation' by encouraging reciprocal awareness. The particular context of study concerns ERASMUS exchanges in Law and Economics between a French university and several of its partner

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universities in Great Britain and Spain. Large numbers are involved in the ERASMUS programme, since the three countries each welcome between 25,000 and 35,000 European exchange students per year (Mobility Flows, 2002–2003, http://www3.socleoyouth.be). Specifically, research questions address a range of approaches to and practices of academic literacy: Why do students read? What do they read? How much time should be devoted to reading? When do they read? What problems do they have with academic reading? What about library use? What relation is seen between reading and passing courses? What does 'reading for academic purposes' mean? Would significant differences appear in background L1 academic literacy traditions which might lighten or load the travelling 'baggage' of exchange students in these disciplines from these countries?

Method

Subjects

As the inspiration for the study was of a very practical nature – addressing literacy problems of host students and our own outgoing students – the survey was purposefully limited to Toulouse as the only French institution and to several of our long-standing ERASMUS partners: eight in Britain, eight in Spain equally divided by discipline. Thus, while no pretence was made of obtaining a representative sampling for each country, the statistical design did aim for a reasonable reflection, by discipline, of the pool of possible ERASMUS candidates in each institution and their teachers, with a total of 200 students and 50 teachers from each country. In universities with very small numbers, it was decided to survey at least five people. British students were all enrolled in double-major Law or Economics and French; French and Spanish students were either simply Law or Economics majors. Nearly 600 second, third and fourth-year university students across both disciplines responded to the reading practices questionnaire; 169 of their teachers completed a parallel version reflecting their practices, perceptions and expectations regarding students' reading. Table 1 summarises the number of participants by status (students, university teachers), by discipline and by national group.

Instruments

The questionnaire on L1 reading practices evolved from one focusing on bibliography used with French students and their teachers of History, French, Sociology and Psychology (Fijalkow & Taillefer, 1997; Taillefer, 1995). Parallel versions for students and their teachers in the present study (available from the author on request) centred on

Table 1. Number of questionnaire respondents by status, discipline and nationality.

		Discipline					
		Law			Economics		
	Subjects Total	GB	FR	SP	GB	FR	SP
Students	599	29	132	26	131	53	228
University teachers	169	35	32	22	29	15	36

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the formers' perceptions and actual literacy practices and on the latters' perceptions and expectations. Aside from demographic data, closed-question rubrics on the student version included motivations for reading, specific practices and problems (including library use); an open question explored the perception of what reading for academic purposes means. The version for teachers included closed questions on motivation, perception of students' reading practice, expectations of students' reading, library use and the same open question. Both students' and teachers' versions were administered in respondents' L1 (English, French, Spanish and Catalan).

Procedures

Several versions of pre-questionnaires were tested on students and colleagues from all three countries. Final versions were administered in France between January and March 1999. They were distributed to university teachers by mail and completed by students in seminar groups in order to vary the courses to which the questionnaire pertained. The sample was deemed representative of the local French university population of students and their teachers in both disciplines, with a return rate of 85.5% for teachers and 94% for students.

For the international part of the survey, e-mail contact was first made in the fall of 1998 with partner universities, followed up by a meeting in December of that year. Student and teacher questionnaires were sent out by mail in the spring and fall of 1999. Follow-up visits were then made to each of the foreign partners in 2000 to tour campus libraries and to discuss results and questions of academic literacy. Exchange of information continued actively through 2002. This level of personal involvement paid off, as the return rate on foreign questionnaires was very satisfactory: 76.5% for teachers, 63% for students.

Analysis

Closed qualitative questions were treated with SPSS. Data were sorted, and χ^2 was used to test for significant differences within disciplines across countries for nominal variables. A factor analysis was also run to see whether particularly strong tendencies would emerge. Alpha level was 0.05 and $df = 2$. Answers to the open question were categorised by recurrent key words.

Results

Key results of the questionnaire are presented as percentages for each research question in table form, with exact significance levels. (Complete figures are available from the author.)

Why do students read?

By discipline and across cultures, Table 2 shows that the majority of Law students regarded reading as useful to further develop course material rather than to simply assimilate it. In Economics, however, Spanish and British students appeared less positively inspired than the French, reading mainly to assimilate. A significant proportion of British students, nevertheless, did say that reading served to introduce new subject matter. French and British Law teachers expected more of their students than did their

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Table 2. Why do students read (percentages by discipline and nationality)?

	Law					Economics				
	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p
Students										
Further develop course	58.6	69.8	57.7	2.3	ns	40.2	63.5	40.2	10.2	0.0061
Assimilate course	41.4	30.2	38.5	1.7	ns	47.3	30.8	58.8	10.7	0.0048
Introduce new matter	0	0	3.8	5.9	0.0500	12.5	5.7	1.0	21.9	<0.0001
Teachers										
Further develop course	58.8	80.7	30.0	13.0	0.0015	51.7	40.0	50.0	0.6	ns
Assimilate course	26.5	19.3	55.0	7.7	0.0210	41.4	60.0	47.1	1.4	ns
Introduce new matter	14.7	0	15.0	5.1	ns	6.9	0	2.9	1.4	ns

Spanish colleagues, significantly favouring reading for development rather than mere assimilation; no significant difference appeared among Economics teachers.

What do students read?

Table 3 shows that British and Spanish Law students overwhelmingly and significantly reported that they had a required textbook in their home country, and that they (along with those French students who have one) used it. In Economics, the trend was even more marked, with the very low French response, and the Spanish students in a median position compared with the British who again reported depending widely on a textbook. Students seemed to reflect their teachers' requirements in both disciplines across countries: very few of the French teachers required textbooks compared to their Spanish or British colleagues. Curiously, just under half of the British Law teachers and only a third in Economics reported requiring textbooks. This may be the result either of teachers having interpreted the question in a wider sense than students, requiring a textbook but emphasising other sources, or simply individual variations in the sample (there were, in fact, more British Law teachers than students).

On the question of having and using a bibliography, despite significant differences among countries, the great majority of all students in both disciplines replied that they

Table 3. What do students read (percentages by discipline and nationality)?

	Law					Economics				
	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p
Students										
Required textbook?	82.8	20.8	69.2	52.2	<0.0001	95.4	1.9	31.1	187.5	<0.0001
If so, do you use it?	87.5	96.3	100	3.3	ns	83.1	100	84.5	0.3	ns
Bibliography?	82.1	98.5	95.8	14.8	0.0006	93.0	92.2	83.9	7.6	0.0229
If so, do you use it?	100	90.0	69.6	10.8	0.0045	75.0	44.4	49.7	22.6	<0.0001
Outside bibliography?	54.5	70.7	44.4	6.2	0.045	31.7	50.0	24.1	11.6	0.0031
Class notes only	38.1	2.3	23.5	33.9	<0.0001	35.4	39.6	59.4	16.8	0.0002
Teachers										
Required textbook?	48.6	6.2	54.5	19.8	<0.0001	35.7	6.7	30.6	4.3	ns
Bibliography?	97.1	100	90.0	3.3	ns	100	100	97.2	1.2	ns

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had one, a finding which is confirmed by nearly all their teachers, who said that they provided one. For the French, this strengthens Lahire's (1997) observation that 79% of Law and Economics students indeed have bibliographies. Among Law students, however, significantly fewer Spanish reported actually using their bibliography. Economics students on the whole said that they made far less use of their bibliography, particularly the French and the Spanish.

As for reading outside the bibliography, French students in both disciplines responded most positively, and significantly differently from their European counterparts, perhaps because, as we have seen, they rarely have a required textbook.

Among students who reported reading only their class notes, once again the French Law students turned overwhelmingly and significantly to other sources. Their counterparts in Economics, however, resembled the British students, whereas the Spanish relied to a great extent on this sole source of reading.

How much time should be devoted to reading?

This question related to the number of hours of class per week. As seen in Table 4, the great majority of British Law and Economics students had less than 15 hours in their home environment. Their Latin counterparts, however, ranged mostly from 15–25 hours per week, with just over a third of Spanish Law students having more than 26 hours of class per week.

With their students spending significantly less time in class, British teachers in both disciplines expected the most independent reading per class (three to five hours per week). French Law teachers were more demanding than their Spanish colleagues, both confirming Bernárdez's (1995) aforementioned observation of the key role of the lecture system in Spain, and tempering Bourdieu, Charle and Laxcroix's claim (1997) that French students are only expected to attend classes: if nearly three-quarters of French Law teachers expected from two to three hours reading per week, just over half of their Spanish colleagues did so. In Economics, however, French and Spanish teachers mostly shared the expectation of two to three hours reading per week.

Table 4. How much time should be devoted to reading (percentages by discipline and nationality)?

	Law					Economics				
	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	*p*	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	*p*
Students										
Class hours/week:										
< 15	89.3	0	15.4	141.9	< 0.0001	84.0	0	16.4	200.1	< 0.0001
15–25	10.7	96.0	50.0	109.2	< 0.0001	16.0	92.0	72.1	186.6	< 0.0001
26+	0	4.0	34.6	32.6	< 0.0001	0	8.0	11.5	16.8	0.0002
Teachers										
Expected reading/class:										
0–2 hours/week	0	15.6	36.4	14.4	0.0008	3.6	33.3	28.6	7.9	0.0184
2–3 hours/week	38.2	71.9	54.5	8.1	0.0172	46.4	66.7	62.8	2.1	ns
3–5 hours/week	61.8	12.5	9.1	26.4	< 0.0001	50.0	0	8.6	20.3	< 0.0001
Perception of reading:										
too little	17.1	21.9	57.1	11.4	0.0034	42.9	33.3	41.7	0.3	ns
a limited amount	57.2	56.2	38.1	2.2	ns	50.0	53.4	52.8	0.01	ns
sufficient	25.7	21.9	4.8	3.9	ns	7.1	13.3	5.5	1.0	ns

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Just over half of both French and British Law teachers felt that students actually did read 'a limited amount', with the rest nearly equally split between 'too little' and 'sufficient'. The majority of their Spanish colleagues, however, clearly felt that their students read too little. The picture in Economics did not differ across countries: just over half of all teachers felt that students did read a limited amount, but a third to two-fifths judged that there was too little reading.

When do students read?

A key cross-cultural question is that of whether students in their home environment read before and/or after lectures. Table 5 first shows that, with the exception of British Law students, all groups read more after class than before. By discipline, the Law students differed strongly among themselves on reading before class. Spanish students seemed to catch up by reading more after class, although not significantly so. In Economics, the British and the French students reported, significantly, reading twice as much before class as the Spanish, who also read significantly less than the other nationalities after class.

Law students reflected their teachers' expectations concerning reading before class, with British Law teachers standing out significantly from the other two nationalities and, in Economics, from their French colleagues. All of the Law teachers strongly expected that their students did, at least, read after class; significantly, the French Economics teachers were statistically the least demanding.

What problems do students have with academic reading?

The difficulties expressed varied across countries and disciplines, with few significant differences (Table 6), but lack of time was seen as the key problem. We have seen above

Table 5. When do students read (percentages by discipline and nationality)?

	Law					Economics				
	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p
Students										
Before class	84.6	35.9	11.5	31.4	<0.0001	20.7	20.8	9.0	10.8	0.0044
After class	64.3	66.4	81.0	2.3	ns	66.7	51.0	37.4	26.5	<0.0001
Teachers										
Before class	94.3	62.5	57.1	12.7	0.0017	60.0	20.0	38.9	6.4	0.0399
After class	94.3	96.8	80.9	4.6	ns	100	73.3	86.1	7.5	0.0235

Table 6. Students' problems with academic reading (percentages by discipline and nationality).

	Law					Economics				
	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p
Lack of time	36.8	12.9	34.6	0.002	ns	20.0	45.3	50.4	30.1	<0.0001
Not in library	16.5	3.8	11.5	0.5	ns	11.5	5.7	3.5	10.9	0.0043
Materials too expensive	6.2	12.1	7.7	2.5	ns	9.1	15.1	9.6	4.3	ns
Complexity of text	2.2	7.6	7.7	2.6	ns	12.3	11.3	8.8	3.6	ns
Aspect unappealing	12.5	9.1	7.7	1.9	ns	19.8	19.9	9.2	12.6	0.0018
Do not like to read	0	1.0	3.8	9.1	0.0106	0	11.3	6.1	5.1	ns

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that the Spanish students had the most hours of class, and that the British had the fewest. A possible explanation for the British response may be that, given the cost of higher education in Great Britain, many students have jobs, but this question was not explored. Other key problems concerned the unappealing aspect of texts and the non-availability of materials in the library. Few students replied that they did not like to read.

As for use of the university library, British students in both disciplines were the most critical of their university libraries' collections, significantly so in Economics (Table 7). The French were least satisfied with opening hours, again significantly so for Economics students. This is not surprising since, as mentioned above, university libraries are generally open about 50 hours per week. Among the British and Spanish partner universities in this study, the average runs to twice that (personal communication). Lastly, the university library was similarly seen by all students as both a centre for research and a quiet place to work.

About two thirds of these students' Law teachers felt that their university library was well stocked. The British Economics teachers, however, were more critical than their colleagues. Most critical of opening hours were French Law teachers. British and, to a lesser extent, French Law teachers saw the university library primarily as a research centre for their students rather than a place to work. Economics teachers across countries, however, did not differ significantly among themselves, even if they tended to see the library more as a place to work. The three-quarters of Spanish teachers in both disciplines who saw the library as a place to study rather than as a research centre, however, may perhaps be seen as further confirmation of the less-active reading profile of Spanish students.

Did teachers report interacting with their libraries, ordering materials to buy? Overwhelmingly and significantly so for both the British and the Spanish in both disciplines. Only about three-quarters of the French replied that they ordered books, etc., despite agreeing with other colleagues that their library was fairly well stocked. Is there a tradition to expect students to purchase reading materials, as a complement to the library? About two-thirds of British teachers in both disciplines together responded affirmatively, significantly differently from their Latin colleagues.

Table 7. On the university library (percentages by discipline and nationality).

	Law					Economics				
	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p
Students										
Well stocked	50.0	67.2	65.4	2.9	ns	59.4	77.4	77.7	14.9	0.0006
Satisfactory hours	86.2	69.5	84.6	5.2	ns	77.9	67.3	88.6	19.5	<0.0001
A place: to do research	63.0	58.3	57.6	0.6	ns	61.1	58.0	54.9	1.3	ns
. . . to work	37.0	41.7	42.4			38.9	42.0	45.1		
Teachers										
Well stocked	62.9	74.2	68.6	1.0	ns	69.0	93.3	91.4	6.7	0.0352
Satisfactory hours (for students)	81.8	57.7	85.0	5.9	0.0500	77.8	88.0	90.9	2.2	ns
A place: to do research	87.9	67.7	22.7	27.9	<0.0001	46.2	40.0	23.5	2.6	ns
. . . to work	12.1	32.3	77.3			53.8	60.0	76.5		
Order materials?	97.1	78.1	100	10.3	0.0059	96.6	73.3	93.3	7.4	0.0251
Students buy materials?	68.6	28.1	40.9	13.3	0.0013	58.6	20.0	22.2	10.4	0.0055

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What relation is seen between reading and passing courses?

Table 8 clearly shows that both British Law and Economics students saw the strongest relation between reading for academic purposes and passing courses. Little difference appeared among their teachers, with the exception of seeing a 'complementary relation' in Law, most likely the reflection of the British teachers' view of the 'strong' role reading plays in passing courses. Law teachers, on the whole, tended to see a stronger relation than did their students.

The nature of assessment is obviously linked to passing courses, and variations in assessment methods constitute another key cross-cultural consideration, as seen in Table 9. Teachers' and students' descriptions of assessments concurred within disciplines and across countries. The British had the widest range of assessment formats, followed by the Spanish and then the French. Once again, our data support Lahire's (1997) observations of the French academic culture with its relatively 'restricted' range of assessment methods. For all countries and both disciplines, closed-book unseen examinations dominated. French Law students also reported sitting many orals, whereas the British favoured essays and term papers, and for just under half of these double-major Law and French students, oral exams. Oral presentations also represented nearly a third of assessment formats for the British sample. Similarly, about a third of the Spanish Law students – albeit single majors – replied sitting orals in the Latin legal tradition, as well as multiple-choice tests. In Economics, the picture was similarly varied. Just over half of both British and Spanish students reported taking multiple-choice tests. British students prepared essays and term papers, but also, as double-major Economics and French

Table 8. What relation is seen between reading and passing courses (percentages by discipline and nationality)?

	Law					Economics				
	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p
Students										
Strong	50.0	22.7	15.4	10.7	0.0048	27.3	17.0	5.0	35.1	<0.0001
Complementary	35.7	63.7	65.4	7.9	0.0193	57.9	45.3	60.8	4.2	ns
Weak	14.3	13.6	19.2	1.5	ns	14.8	37.7	34.2	21.8	<0.0001
Teachers										
Strong	69.2	40.6	42.9	5.4	ns	24.1	6.7	22.8	2.2	ns
Complementary	23.1	59.4	47.6	7.8	0.0204	58.7	73.3	68.6	1.2	ns
Weak	7.7	0	9.5	2.9	ns	17.2	20.0	8.6	1.6	ns

Table 9. Nature of assessment (percentages by discipline and nationality).

	Law					Economics				
	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p	GB	FR	SP	χ^2	p
Closed-book unseen exams	89.7	100	73.1	195.6	<0.0001	87.8	100	72.8	421.5	<0.0001
Essays, term papers	82.8	0	7.7	59.7	<0.0001	60.3	3.8	20.2	57.5	<0.0001
Orals	44.8	90.9	30.8	137.0	<0.0001	21.4	35.8	2.2	83.7	<0.0001
Oral presentations	31.0	0	3.8	39.1	<0.0001	24.4	3.8	8.8	21.6	<0.0001
Multiple-choice tests	10.3	0	34.6	44.2	<0.0001	62.6	9.4	53.5	44.3	<0.0001

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students, prepared for orals in different formats. A third of French students also reported being assessed by oral exams.

Factor analysis

Since the survey touched on many discrete questions, a factor analysis was run to see whether particular clusters of variables would reveal representative cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary profiles. Aside from nationality and discipline, only 'pertinent' variables were selected for the analysis: actual reading practices and representations of academic reading with high χ^2 values (having and using a textbook and a bibliography, reading before and after class, relation seen between reading and passing courses). Three distinct axes resulted, underscoring interpretations of percentages and explaining 45% of the total variance. Effects of both nationality and discipline were intertwined and underscored. In this sample, across countries, Law students reflected a closer relation to reading than did their counterparts in Economics. British students – even though 82% in Economics – were identified by both having and using a textbook and using their bibliography, by reading both before and after class and by the perception that reading was indispensable to study and thus strongly related to passing courses. The French sample, 64% of whom were Law students, occupied a median position. Reading was seen as a fruitful endeavour (reading before class strongly related to passing courses), but the absence of required textbooks, for example, was apparent in both disciplines. French Economics students more closely resembled their Spanish counterparts. The entire Spanish sample read the least, rarely read after class and made relatively little use of their bibliographies (particularly in Economics). As a group they saw the weakest relation between reading and passing courses.

What does 'reading for academic purposes' mean?

Eighty percent of students and teachers replied to the open question exploring representations of reading at university. Among students, 83% made clearly positive comments, 11% rather mixed replies and 6% negative answers. By nationality, British and French students tended towards more positive remarks, while Spanish students were the least enthusiastic about the value of reading.

Sample positive comments included (identified by nationality): 'Class is the foundation, but reading is the walls' (GB), 'A First rather than 2.1' (GB), 'Mind-broadening' (FR), 'Reading is learning to think' (SP). More nuanced remarks expressed contradiction: 'Reading is recommended, but not practical' (GB), 'A constraint which takes time, but is necessary and pays off' (FR), 'Inevitable and boring, but useful' (SP). Lastly, and fortunately rare: 'Of very little use if not required' (FR), 'Boring and a nuisance' (SP).

Teachers, of course, all insisted on the importance of reading, but were more or less hopeful. Among the most enthusiastic: 'Reading is the essence of university education . . . and a prerequisite for studying in England' (GB), 'Reading and writing essays develop critical skills' (GB), 'Working autonomously is a very important part of a student's training' (SP). Many comments were double-edged, particularly from French teachers: 'Indispensable, but alas in contradiction with legislation on photocopying and the sacrosanct ''cult'' of the lecture course' (FR), 'Reading means learning to structure knowledge through comparison and not by mimicry' (FR), 'Traditionally students ''read for a degree'', but this is becoming less and less practical' (GB). Other teachers were

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more negative, or resigned: 'Students' reading is difficult to organise and require on a concrete level' (FR), 'Reading shows more interest on students' part than what is strictly necessary' (SP).

As qualitative follow-up to the formal questionnaire, a second open question was put to study-abroad students by e-mail in 2001–2002, asking them to comment on whether or how their reading practices had changed while at their host university. Nearly seventy students responded, both foreigners in France and French students abroad; their reflections (available from the author on request) clearly supported the questionnaire data.

Discussion

In answer to our research questions, then, data from students and teachers across three different European countries – Great Britain, France and Spain – within specific disciplines have profiled statistically distinct academic literacy cultures, each one influencing why students read (or not), what, how much and when they read and what relation they see between reading and passing courses. Between disciplines, regardless of country, Law bears a closer relation to reading than does Economics. Among countries, literacy practices in Britain, where they are seen as an integral part of studies – such as reading before lectures, requiring four to five hours' weekly reading per course, writing essays and expecting well stocked libraries – exemplify Richardson's (1995) description of a 'comprehending' approach to studying. Spanish literacy practices, in contrast – for example, the least amount of reported reading before class, the least use of bibliography by Law students and the greatest dependence on class notes alone by Economics students, the least expectation to read on the part of teachers – more closely fit Richardson's description of a 'reproducing' approach. The French profile, however, reflects aspects of both comprehending and reproducing models. On the one hand, as in Spain, textbooks are not often used, assessment is limited to written and to a lesser extent oral exams, passing courses is weakly related to reading and the lowest percentage of teachers order materials for the library. On the other hand, perhaps in a compensatory mode, students say that they read more to further develop courses than to merely assimilate them, read significantly more than anyone else outside their bibliography, and Law students rely least of all on class notes only.

Although it has been possible thus to identify distinct approaches to academic literacy, certain limitations make it difficult to generalise findings. First, ideal conditions are difficult to achieve in survey and questionnaire research of this type. Concrete considerations like variations in academic calendars in the different countries and postal strikes slowed down international data collection and lowered response rate. Second, despite extensive pre-testing of both students' and teachers' versions of the questionnaire, a degree of ambiguity remained as to what students actually understood by 'reading'. Third, the specific context of Law and Economics studies must be kept in mind; findings cannot necessarily be extrapolated to other disciplines.

L1 literacy practices and FL reading for academic purposes: evidence of influence

Nevertheless, the significant differences observed in L1 academic literacy practices across these three countries enable us to pose the question in the ERASMUS context that Raymond and Parks (2002), Braine (2002), Newman, Trenchs-Parera and Pujol (2002)

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and Ridgway (2003) have raised: is there evidence that students' background penalises – or helps – them in study abroad? The absence of complete three-way data from British, French and Spanish study-abroad students (GB ↔ FR, FR ↔ SP, SP ↔ GB) precludes our offering a full answer; when the present study was undertaken, no equivalent criterion-referenced language or reading tests existed *across* languages (such instruments are now available, based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, 2001: http://www.dialang.org, http://www.bulats.org).

However, some insight is provided by results from a study carried out by the author concurrently with the present one (Taillefer, forthcoming). It tested both English and French foreign language competency, reading comprehension of academic expository text and reading strategies in 177 Law and Economics ERASMUS students from five countries. Among them were sufficiently large groups from the three countries in question: 37 French subjects were beginning study abroad in Britain and northern European countries where English was the language of instruction; 57 British and Irish students and 32 Spanish students were undertaking a year abroad in France. The parallel versions of tests in English and French had been previously developed by the author (Taillefer, 1992; Taillefer, 1996; Taillefer & Pugh, 1998), respecting accepted criteria for validity and reliability (Bachman, 1990). They consisted of a bilingual cloze test measuring 'local comprehension at the microlinguistic level' (Urquhart & Weir, 1998), two immediate written recalls in students' respective L1s measuring reading comprehension and a self-report questionnaire reflecting text-processing strategies. A control group of 12 expert student FL readers had also been previously identified for norm-referencing purposes, as Bernhardt and Kamil (1995) have suggested.

Results showed that while target language proficiency did not distinguish among national groups or between disciplines as measured at the beginning of study abroad, both FL reading comprehension and positive use of reading strategies did so among countries (respectively, $F = 5.9$, $p = 0.0036$; $F = 2.6$, $p = 0.0422$). Strategy use also correlated strongly with reading comprehension ($r = 0.68$). The British had statistically better scores for comprehension than the Spanish, with the French in the middle; British and French students scored significantly higher than the Spanish (and Law better than Economics) on effective strategy use. Specific strategic moves which differentiated among groups were: correcting or changing an idea while reading – for example, only 59% of the Spanish students made use of this approach to reading, compared to 88% of the British and 85% of the French – trying to push ahead when blocked, trying specially to remember parts of the text, noticing the title, re-reading parts of the text, trying to guess the meaning of a word or expression, translating and pronouncing problematic words or expressions.

Such differences in FL reading performance, then, do suggest a certain influence of L1 literacy practices on FL reading. The Spanish students in these studies had the comparatively least developed literacy practices and tested as the weakest readers. The British, on the other hand, the best FL readers, were most likely helped by their strong academic literacy tradition as reflected by the questionnaire. The median position of the French students as FL readers may well be the reflection of the mixed profile shown by the French sample on the literacy practices questionnaire.

One result of the reading performance study in this sample of 126 students that appeared superficially incongruous, but which in fact further supports the influence of L1 literacy practices in the FL context, is the very poor final average of the British students in both disciplines in France. Just over half of them failed, whereas the French and Spanish samples included, respectively, only one and two failures. Questionnaire data

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showed the British as seeing the strongest relation between reading and passing courses, but we have also seen that at the French university in question, marks are most often based on a single three-hour written final exam in French, and in some cases on orals. British students accustomed to independent research and essays thus appear to have been carrying inappropriately loaded 'baggage'. Indeed, stepwise multiple regression analysis showed that reading comprehension and positive strategy use were not significant predictors of final marks.

Conclusion

Two pedagogical implications can be drawn from this study, which should help to lessen the cost of affiliation of foreign exchange students challenged by integrating into a new academic literacy community. First, as Flowerdew and Miller (1995), Johns (1997), Braine (2002), Newman, Trenchs-Parera and Pujol (2002), Raymond and Parks (2002) and Ridgway (2003) have all argued, students, faculty and study-abroad advisors need to understand explicitly particular differences between any two culturally distinct academic literacies. As we have seen, these may occur on many levels including: basic approach to studying, assessment, student and teacher role models, attitudes and expectations, disciplinary concepts, genres, discourse and lexis and reading strategies themselves.

In the specific contexts studied here, we would suggest that, for example, students from Latin countries realise the importance of academic literacy in Anglo-Saxon cultures geared to a 'comprehending' orientation to study. This means consciously working on language, reading and writing skills both before departure and while abroad, taking advantage of English-as-a-foreign-language programmes where offered.

Students from northern Europe need to understand that, conversely, the Latin cultures with a more 'reproductive' approach almost appear to take academic reading and writing skills for granted, particularly in assessment. At least in France, university-level programmes for French-as-a-foreign-language are not widely developed, and study-abroad students have limited opportunities formally to improve language skills. On the role of reading itself, one French university teacher in the study commented: 'The question of reading for academic purposes is rarely raised as such', while another added, 'In Law studies, the problem is not that of reading or not, but of *what* one reads and *how* one understands it. Thus the object of this study is a false problem'.

The second conclusion, a corollary to the first, is that foreign exchange students must be helped in acquiring coping strategies, and often, very quickly. Newman, Trenchs-Parera and Pujol (2002) specifically pleaded for programmes enabling students to discover for themselves what they need and how to go about getting it. Ridgway (2003) insisted on the importance of diagnosing individual literacy problems and encouraging critical reading. In the context of higher education, such personalised help will come through wider development of university-level language centres. Such structures make it possible to cater to individual needs of both outgoing and incoming students in light of their pre-mobility levels of FL literacy and the requirements of the host university, be it reading strategies, written academic discourse, note-taking skills and so on.

A supporting role will hopefully also be played by the European Language Portfolio. This well-researched instrument, based on the Council of Europe's *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001), favours thoughtful self-assessment of language competencies, setting objectives and monitoring their attainment. Widely used

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in northern Europe, it is becoming more familiar in the south. The author, with others, is involved in promoting its use under the auspices of the European Confederation of Language Centres in Higher Education.

Gaining better understanding of different academic literacies and helping students to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills requires further research. Small-scale case studies of particular cultural matches are necessary, as well as larger inquiries such as the present one. Their number and scope must be increased to include more national cultures, institutions and disciplines. Academic literacy is a complex field, and headway will best be made by combining different types of empirical research.

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