

**Academic Reading Strategies used by
Leeds Metropolitan University Graduates:
A Case Study**

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Abstract

Academic reading is different from other forms of reading because it is complex and discipline-specific. It involves a measured, challenging, and multifaceted process in which students are dynamically engaged with a range of reading strategies. Academic reading improvement is possible, provided students work on it and there are no short cuts or remedies which will cure the reading problems. Reading improvement is hard work and a difficult task, but it is rewarding as well. This study examined the selection and use of academic reading strategies used by the undergraduate and postgraduate students studying at Leeds Metropolitan University, Headingley Campus, Leeds. A quantitative data study was carried out to investigate three aspects of academic reading strategies: (a) efficiency, (b) interacting with texts, and (c) critical reading strategies. The results of this survey suggest that the participants on balance have proficient reading skills, but a significant number of participants have ineffective reading strategies and bad reading habits. Recommendations and suggestions have been put forward to improve academic reading strategies and for further research.

Keywords: academic reading, critical aspects of academic reading, efficiency, reading strategies, text interaction

Introduction

Reading is a complex and critical skill and involves a dynamic interaction between the reader's contextual knowledge, the evidence gathered by means of the printed language, and the reading framework.

An effective student must be equipped with various reading strategies in order to understand a text efficiently and resolve the potential uncertainties. Success at university level is depended on the level of academic skills the students bring with them, which includes reading, writing, critical thinking, and oral presentations. The university faculty usually take these skills for granted, assuming that they have already been developed during their higher secondary education period (Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006).

Academic reading is different from other types of reading and the length and level of texts vary at various stages. These texts are challenging as they have philosophies which are expressed in a complex language and may include challenging words and sentences. Leki (2001) states, "Academic reading involves a wide and exhaustive reading of texts, which are subject explicit and include a thorough amalgamation of data from various resources" (p. 88). Applying academic reading strategies successfully largely depend on the awareness and flexibility of using these strategies. Shuyun and Munby (1996) believe that academic reading is a very thoughtful, serious, and multifaceted process. Taking this view into consideration, it may not be over ambitious to specify that the second language learners should be active in developing a wide range of reading strategies, which helps them overcome difficulties when they encounter comprehension issues.

It is usually noted, that students at tertiary level have to read content specific texts on regular basis and most of them are unaware of the reading strategies to be used and thus take a relatively longer time to read and understand the texts; therefore, the author deemed it very important to find out the approaches and strategies used by the university students and explore the incidences of the strategies used by them. Cheng (2009) verifies this notion and states that reading is an essential skill at the tertiary level for all learners to master and succeed in university tasks, tests, and assignments. The research question for this study is:

What reading approaches are used by university level students when interpreting academic reading materials?

Literature Review

Reading is a receptive skill for which the reader has to decode in order to construct the meaning of the text and the skill is extremely important for students as well as professionals. It is the process of constructing meaning from written texts (Anderson, 2011). It is a complex skill that requires readers to coordinate consistent sources of information to construct meanings from the text, for which the readers have to establish an interaction between the reader's contextual information, meaning from a printed text, and the reading framework.

Models of reading

Comprehending a text is an interactive process which is done by using three models of reading. The first is the traditional theory or bottom-up processing, which focuses on the printed form of a text; the second is the cognitive view or top-down processing, which enhances the role of background knowledge in addition to what appears on the printed page; and the third is the metacognitive or interactive view, which controls and manipulates the act of comprehending a text and emphasizes on the involvement of the reader's thinking about what he is doing while reading.

The bottom up model involves a series of steps the reader has to go through, which involves moving from one step to another, recognising the key features of every letter, word, and sentence and reaching the meaning of the text (Gough, 1985). This model focuses on the text as the merging of encoded messages to be interpreted and the aim is automatic word recognition and rapid reading rate. Clear instructions in phonics and spellings are essential and the students should not be word-bound in the bottom-up processing (Grabe, 1991). Some psychologists define this model as data driven and the data refers to letters and words which are written on the page.

The top-down model is useful when the readers want to make sense of the complete text in order to make a logical guess for the next step (Nuttall, 1996). Readers make sensible use of top-down model when

they try to see the complete purpose of the text or get a vague idea of the writer's arguments. Unlike bottom-up model, the top-down model is a view which presumes that the reader uses prior knowledge, experience, and beliefs while reading a text. This model is also defined as theory driven model as it deals with philosophies or perceptions embedded in the minds of the readers while reading. Smith (1985) argues that by using this model, a reader will come to know more about the text by searching for minimum information from the text. This means that the more the students know beforehand about the topic and text to be read, the less they need to use graphic information on that page. This type of reading is used to understand expectations and draw implications.

The interactive model tries to make bottom-up and top-down models work together. This model states that the reading process is originated by framing suggestions about the gist and working out the meaning of letters and words. The model includes both perceptual and cognitive processes (Rumelhart, 1977). In other words, this process is an interaction between a set of a variety of orthographic, syntactic, lexical, and semantic information.

Defining academic reading

Sengupta (2002) defines academic reading as "Purposeful and critical reading of lengthy academic texts for studying specific major subject areas" (p. 3). According to Faizah (2004), academic reading is focused and is different from day to day reading. Levine, Ferenz, and Reves (2000) are of the opinion that the skill to read academic texts is regarded most crucial, which the university students need to undertake. Research on academic reading has examined a list of strategies used by the competent and the incompetent readers (Adomson, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Block, 1985; Yau, 2005). Some researchers examined the academic reading strategies used by mature students bearing in mind the hypothetical impact of the common strategies used by the students. Students have to come across reading material which is much advanced and they should have the skills to grasp the main thoughts, philosophies, themes, and opinions from the academic text. Academic reading strategies familiarize the students with new concepts

and allow them to think in a different way by helping them to be focused and identify what they want to accomplish from their reading. Academic reading is different from other forms of reading because it is complex and discipline-specific. It is carefully created from a number of sources and consciously requires looking into the authors' intentions and purposes. Academic reading is a measured, challenging and multifaceted process in which students are dynamically engaged with a range of reading strategies. Academic reading improvement is possible provided students work on it and there are no short cuts or remedies which will cure the reading problems. Reading improvement is hard work and a difficult task, but it is rewarding as well. Nevertheless, this process is only possible if the readers use a series of categories of analysis, some of which are specific to each academic discipline. Thus, working with a text and recreating its meaning entail both non discipline specific and specific strategies, which the expert reader incorporates intuitively while reading (Hermida, 2009); thus, "Making students skilful is a skill and a teacher needs to learn this skill" (Gull, 2014). Therefore, teachers in each discipline need to teach both the general analytical tools and the discipline-specific values and strategies that facilitate disciplinary reading and learning.

Investigating learners' use of reading strategies is important for researchers because the results can suggest and explain how readers interact with the text they read and use different reading strategies to understand the text. Reading strategies benefit learners to monitor their own reading, help them to decide whether comprehension is taking place and decide if they need to take further action for the lack of their comprehension. Researchers have often used skills and strategies simultaneously. According to Paris and Winograd (1983), "Strategies are deliberate movements which the students choose to attain positive aim and objectives" (p. 22). Reading strategies are often regarded as those activities designed to help students before, during and after they read. It is important to note that reading strategies like reading skills are not always successful and a definition of reading strategies does not entail only positive and useful actions. In this view of learning, deliberate reading strategies often become fluent

reading skills. Skills and strategies may serve the same goals and may result in the same behaviour.

Critical reading strategies

Critical reading is an interactive process that uses several levels of thoughts concurrently. Critical readers constantly ask questions about the texts they read to solve the unanswered questions based on the texts. Critical reading is a necessary skill as it assists the student to get a clear picture of what the author is trying to express in an effectual and well-organized manner. Such readers question what they read, accept or reject the writer's opinion, evaluate, and decide. Many definitions of critical readings have emerged, especially since the late 20th century because of its importance in the academic lives of the students. Reading critically means to read with a sceptical attitude and thinking of more than one angle on the issue. There are four divisions within it, that is, comprehension, interpretation, analysis and evaluation (Xue, 2013). Barnett (2008) believes that critical reading assists a student to understand an article by working through a series of stages to accomplish an opinion of what is being read. Combs (1992) used children's books to teach critical reading skills, defines critical reading as reasonable reflective thinking, focusing and deciding on what to believe and do. Critical reading strategies entail circling the main words and ideas, assigning a topic for each paragraph, and jotting down opinion notes and questions in the margin for future referencing. To analyze and comprehend the text holistically, the student has to develop personal reading strategies (Nasrollahi, Krishnasamy & Noor, 2015), which may include (a) pre-reading: preview the text, pay attention to print features and text structures; (b) while-reading: mark sections in the text, make connections between the text and reader's personal experience and knowledge, monitor comprehension of the text, summarize the key points after reading; (c) post-reading: relate the text to real life situations based on general discussion in the classroom.

Methodology

A survey methodology was used to gather data for this study by administering Reading Academically questionnaire published by the

University of Southampton (2009). The rationale of this study was to gather data on the approaches used by university level learners on the Reading Academic Materials course and collect data and incidences of the numerous reading strategies. The statistics of the research was gathered from the students studying at The Leeds Metropolitan University in the academic year 2013-2014.

Research tool

The questionnaire was adapted and modified from the Reading Academically questionnaire published by the University of Southampton (2009). Selection of statements for the present study was done from Section 2 of the questionnaire on Reflecting on your Reading Style which had three sub-sections: (a) need to improve your efficiency reading strategy, (b) need to improve your interacting with text reading strategy, and (c) need to improve your critical reading strategy. The questionnaire had open ended statements and also there were questions where the participants answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = I strongly agree; 2 = I agree; 3 = I disagree; 4 = I strongly disagree; 5 = I don't know). The participants were directed to tick the answer that best corresponded to their level of understanding for each affirmation.

The questionnaire had 24 statements and it was ensured that they tallied with the objectives of the research. The sections of the questionnaire were classified into 'Efficiency Reading Strategies', 'Interacting with Text Reading Strategies', and 'Critical Reading Skills Strategies'. Each strategy had eight statements. After finalising the questionnaire a pilot study was carried out with five students to improve the standard of the statements. The rationale for pilot survey was to check the accuracy of instructions as understood by the participants of the pilot study. The pilot survey helped attain better information to confirm if the survey was effective in fulfilling the study. The questionnaire was amended and improved in the light of the problems faced by the participants in answering the responses.

Participants

The questionnaire was administered to nine male and 21 female students, totalling to 30 participants in all. The participants were under-graduate and post-graduate students from Leeds Metropolitan University, Headingley Campus and they varied in age, gender, and their reading habits. The main objective to choose this group of students for the research study was to emphasize only on the students studying at this campus and in addition, the author being a student at this campus site found it convenient and suitable to access the participants without any difficulty.

Ethical consideration

Research ethics was strictly followed as per the University's policy, which included approval of the proposal by the University Research Committee and getting consent from the participants and ensuring anonymity. Students were given a choice of withdrawal from the project at any point in time, and the option of sharing the data with students before submitting the thesis was also present. The questionnaire analysis was kept anonymous, confidential and saved in a password protected folder on the computer. Lastly, agreeing and complying with the university's policy and procedure, project conformation, and uploading the consent form and questionnaire was carried out.

Data analysis

This study aimed to capture a snapshot of the given situation. SPSS version 17 which is a comprehensive system for investigating the statistics was used for data analysis. This system can create and formulate tabulated reports, figures, plots of distribution and trends, descriptive analysis, statistical analysis, and other interactive and non-interactive analysis. The limitation of the study was the small sample size which made it difficult to find significant relationship from the data collected, as statistical tests normally require a larger sample size to ensure significant results.

Findings

The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first sought demographic information of the participants and the second section had Reading Academically questionnaire consisting of 24 statements.

Demographic survey

The demographic section of the survey showed that for gender, there were 30% male and 70% female participants. The age survey result ranged from 16 to 59 years old. The survey participants studying hours per day varied from 1 – 6 hours. 56.7% participants were under-graduates and 43.3% were post graduates.

Efficiency reading strategies

Table 1 shows the overall results of Efficiency Reading Strategies. 75% was taken as a strategy being widely used (or not) by all participants.

Table 1. Efficiency reading strategies

	Statement	Agree Total	Disagree Total
1	I read word by word.	40.0%	60.0%
2	I repeat the words silently to myself when I read.	50.0%	50.0%
3	I have to read and re-read sections.	70.0%	30.0%
4	I rarely read advanced texts and journal articles.	23.3%	76.7%
5	I change the speed of my reading according to the purpose.	96.6%	3.4%
6	I read a chapter or journal article from start to end.	46.7%	53.3%
7	It takes me a long time to do the necessary reading for my course.	56.6%	43.4%
8	I find some books or articles difficult to understand.	76.7%	23.3%

* 75% criteria has been taken to indicate widespread strategy used or not used.

Table 1 shows the result of Efficiency Reading Strategy. The analysis suggests that most participants used strategy number 5 ‘I change the speed of my reading according to the purpose’, which is a successful reading strategy. 75% of the participants used strategy 3 and 8 ‘I have to read and re-read sections’ and ‘I find some books or articles difficult to understand’. The result suggests that the participants were efficient readers, but did not have good reading skills in some areas. Strategies 2 and 6 were used by 50% of the participants. The data when analyzed with gender suggest that strategy 7 and 8 were used by male participants as they were less in number than female participants. The data when analyzed with age suggest that strategy 1, 3, 5, 7 and 8 were mostly used by age group 20–29 years old. The analysis with hours of study per day suggested that most of the participants studied 1–2 hours per day, some studied 3–4 hours per day and only a few studied 5–6 hours per day. Analysis with academic level suggested that mostly under-graduate level students used strategy 1, 2, 3, 5 and 8.

The overall statistics of the first section of the actual questionnaire suggests that the participants had effective reading skills. It further suggests that the students read complex academic texts, but a surprising number do not have good reading skills in some areas. Strategies 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 and 8 are ineffective reading strategies and about 76.7% participants use these ineffective strategies for reading. The results of this survey further suggest that the participants on balance have proficient reading skills, but a significant number of participants had ineffective reading strategies and had bad reading habits. Efficient readers have different attitude, so they simply read material which is applicable. Proficient reading approaches are closely linked. Efficient reading strategies enable learners to have a distinct principle so that they can simply read material which is applicable. Baker and Brown (1984) argue that effective readers use strategic skills. This indicates that they have a purpose for reading and adjust their reading to each purpose and for each reading task. Strategic readers use a variety of strategies and skills as they construct meaning. Inefficient readers do not approach or try to comprehend the text in the same way as efficient readers. Paris and Winograd (1990) believe that “Inefficient readers

are young, less experienced teenagers and adult readers with an inadequate metacognitive knowledge of reading” (p. 40).

Table 2. Interacting with text reading strategy

Statement	Agree Total	Disagree Total
1 When reading I know exactly what information I am looking for.	93.4%	6.6%
2 I select important and/or relevant information for my purpose.	96.7%	3.3%
3 I pick out key words and/or information.	96.6%	3.4%
4 I change my style of reading depending on the nature of the task.	93.3%	6.7%
5 I take in the information and know what to do with it.	73.4%	26.6%
6 I regularly note my own understanding of the texts while I am reading.	73.3%	26.7%
7 I know how to improve my reading comprehension.	76.6%	23.4%
8 I try to guess what is coming next.	46.7%	53.3%

* 75% has been taken as criteria to indicate widespread strategy used or not used

Table 2 shows the results of Interacting with Text Strategies. The results suggest that 73.3% to 96.7% participants used most of the strategies. Only strategy 8 ‘I try to guess what is coming next’ shows that 46.7% participants used this strategy. Analysis with gender, age, hours of study per day, and level of education did not highlight any major findings. The results of ‘Interacting with text strategy’ suggest that the participants have effective reading skills. The results of this survey suggest that the participants on balance have proficient reading skills, but significant number of participants had ineffective reading strategies and had bad reading habits. Interacting with text reading strategies allow participants to use their previous reading skills when they interact with the text. According to Tierney and Readence (2000) “Interaction with text builds up student interaction and interpretation of the text” (p. 97). These strategies are aimed to increases students’

prior opinion, examine their reading skill, stress on views collected from reading the text, and motivate critical thinking when reading a text.

Table 3. Critical reading skills strategy

Statement	Agree Total	Disagree Total
1 I think about what I am reading and question what the author has written.	63.3%	36.7%
2 I try to evaluate the view of the author.	70.0%	30.0%
3 I challenge the ideas while reading.	56.7%	43.3%
4 I am able to differentiate the kinds of views used in reading.	86.6%	13.4%
5 I am able to combine the main information and make link with what the author and others say.	90.0%	10.0%
6 I make judgments about how the text is argued.	66.7%	33.3%
7 I evaluate how the information can be better or supported differently.	63.3%	36.7%
8 I spot statements which have not been well argued.	70.0%	30.0%

* 75% has been taken as criteria to indicate widespread strategy used or not used.

Table 3 shows the analysis of Critical Reading Strategies. The analysis shows that participants 90% to 56.7% participants used all the strategies. All the other strategies were reasonably used. The results of critical reading strategy indicate that participants have effective reading skills, but significant number of participants had ineffective reading strategies and had bad reading habits. The results of this survey suggest that the participants on balance have proficient reading skills, but significant number of participants had ineffective reading strategies and had bad reading habits. Critical readers implicate presenting a reasoned argument which estimates and measures what they have read. Richards and Schmidt (2002) state critical reading as “Reading

in which the learner responds critically to what they are reading by connecting the gist of the reading material to particular criteria, principles, approaches or philosophies” (p. 134).

Discussion

The findings of this study were consistent with the previous studies conducted by Clark, Osborne and Akerman (2008); Norton (2000); and Sheorey (1999). The main rationale of this study was to analyse and validate the perceptions of academic reading strategies in the students of Leeds Metropolitan University. This study further examined other variables like reading efficiency, interacting with text, and critical reading strategies.

Academic reading is very important for university students and they need to have effective reading skills to grasp academic texts proficiently. Researchers have concentrated on all features of reading such as reading ability, reading nervousness, reading difficulties, reading approaches, and so on. According to Alsamadani (2009) “There is no major association amongst the students’ understanding level and how they use these reading approaches.” Alderson (1984) states that “Academic reading is viewed as the most required skill for university students as their incompetence to reading texts may slow down and delay academic and professional growth of those academic courses which need more evidence from the text” (p. 133).

Taking into account the first research question: ‘What reading approaches are used by university level students when interpreting academic reading materials’, the statistics acquired from this research suggest that the students are receptive to most of the reading strategies listed in the questionnaire. The result suggests that certain reading strategies are used more than others and these reading strategies differ from student to student. The quantitative statistics suggest that university level students identify some strategies as more significant than others. Students make it significant to maintain concentration while reading and when they start reading they want to finish it fully instead of splitting it into small chunks. The results also suggest that students perceive a variety of reading approaches prior, while and after

reading academic texts and significant number of the participants had bad reading habits.

Effective strategies are the measures which the readers practice to make the reading atmosphere favourable (Teoh, 1996). Affective reading strategies are strategies which readers use to spotlight awareness, retain attentiveness, cope with implementation, establish, maintain and manage motivation, and time efficiently (Weinstein & Meyer, 1991). Oxford (1990) opines that self-reinforcement and constructive discussions are instances of such strategies. The analysis of the strategies also indicate that students' perceptions towards effective reading strategies varied. Students perceived some reading approaches more effective than the others. It can be stated that all students identified some academic reading strategies more significant than others and had some dissimilarities towards effective reading strategies by gender, age, hours of study per day, and academic level.

Academic reading was important for each student. The students were not familiar with all reading strategies assessed in this study. A small number of participants were uncertain whether the reading strategies would be useful or not. In other words, some students had little or no practice with the reading strategies. The data also reflect that students did not have proficient reading strategies. Most importantly, the participants of the study were aware of the significance of having a rationale in mind before reading.

Recommendations and way forward

The outcomes of this research can be useful for both the tutors and students to acquire the reading strategies that suit them independently. This study shows that the university students have various approaches to reading and these differ from person to person. Although they are familiar with almost all the reading strategies, yet they do not follow them. The suggestions of this study can be useful for students who want to reconsider their set perceptions of reading strategies. Guidance in this respect can assist students become more effective readers. Accordingly some further recommendations can be made such as:

1. Teachers must know how to teach reading strategies taking certain variables into consideration such as age, gender, hours of study, and academic level.

2. It would be useful to assess which reading strategies students use when reading texts of different lengths, difficulties, and topics.

3. A study should be undertaken to highlight the relation between participants' use of reading strategies and years of studying English.

4. It would be useful to carry out the same research further with a larger group of students studying at different universities in UK or other countries and compare their results.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the perceptions of university students towards academic reading strategies. The students were basically aware of the reading strategies provided in the study, but used some reading strategies more than the others. The results of this survey suggest that the participants on balance have proficient reading skills. Mastering academic reading skills takes time and practice and the learners have to have patience and faith in their ability to master the skills. A small number of participants were uncertain whether reading strategies would be useful or not. In other words some students have little or no practice with the reading strategies. Consequently, learners need to be familiarised with a range of reading strategies and must practice them frequently in order to make them their own strategies. The constraint of the data gathered from the questionnaire was due to the fact that the sample size was too small and restricted to those students who were enrolled in academic skills course and it was difficult to find significant relationships from the data, as statistical tests normally require a larger sample size to ensure significant results. Recommendations and suggestions have been put forward to improve academic reading strategies and for further research.

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