

# Academic Reading in Higher Education: A Need for Reading Strategies for Students at Universities

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## ABSTRACT

The importance of academic reading strategies in first year university students cannot be over-emphasized. First year university students often struggle with their studies because of lack of academic reading skills. This lack of academic reading skills creates a barrier for them in accessing information in academic texts, and therefore leads to a higher failure rate. The purpose of this paper was to investigate the academic reading strategies employed by first year students registered at two rural South African universities. The investigation will assist in informing the design of material in an English module for first year students, particularly students in the Science stream. The study adopted the explorative qualitative approach where participants were purposefully sampled as they were students registered for the first year English modules in both universities. The study aimed at profiling students' strategies used when reading through academic texts. The results of the test were analysed using the descriptive method focusing on the metacognitive strategies of reading. Findings of the study showed that metacognitive reading strategies are very important for students to access information in academic texts. The study recommends that students' metacognitive reading skills should be developed from the high school level for them to be able to succeed with their academic reading activities.

**Keywords:** academic reading, metacognitive reading strategies, English education, problem solving, academic reading texts.

## INTRODUCTION

Research in reading at tertiary institutions has demonstrated that most first year university students do not possess the adequate academic reading skills (Molotja, 2016; Oliveira, Lopes & Spear-Swerling, 2019). According to Scott and Saaiman (2016), effective reading is the most important avenue of effective learning, and the achievement of academic success requires successful reading. Reading is one of the important skills required for the development of human beings in terms of educational, social, political and religious spheres. This is derived from the fact that for every aspect of life, reading is the key player and therefore remains the core function. It is therefore important that students should be equipped with skills for their academic success (Kivunike, Ekenberg, Danielson & Tusubira, 2014; Scott & Saaiman, 2016; Meniado, 2016; Boakye, 2017).

There is a lack of reading culture in most black Southern African homes and schools (Lukhele, 2011; Molotja, 2016). Students admitted at universities are unable to access the wealth of information because of lack of reading strategies. The most common characteristic

of these students is their under-preparedness for academic studies (Ralenala, 2003). Jackson, Parkinson and Meyer (2006) highlight the problem South African universities are faced with regarding university students. This emanates from first entering students who enter higher education with the lack of a wide range of competencies, which is due to the disparities in secondary education provision (Strydom, Mentz & Kuh 2010). In addition, Van Schalkwyk (2008) describes these students as coming from a language background which can be considered as a deterrent to their studies as their socio-economic status, cultural background sometimes has a negative bearing on the success in their academic studies. This is due to their inability to interact in English (the language of teaching and learning) at the expected level. The above situation is also acknowledged by Butler (2006) and Zulu (2005) when they state that there is a decline in the academic literacy levels of students who get enrolled in first year at the University of Pretoria. Butler (2006) points out that this problem applies to students at all South African institutions.

In addition to the above argument, Chimbanga (2011) agrees with van Schalwyk (2008), who maintains that students' impoverished background is as a contributing factor in them being underprepared. They are often first generation entrants into higher education who lack generic skills that are deemed necessary for academic success. She (2008) further describes these students as coming from a lower income group, and to whom generally English is their L2 or even L3. These students have some reading abilities, but they lack the necessary academic reading competencies to efficiently adjust and cope with university studies (Boughey, 2009). The lack of academic reading competencies in students is also related to the nature of training that their teachers receive. In light of this, De Wet (2002) argues that the poor quality of teacher training manifests through poor teaching. He goes ahead to say that educators in traditional black schools often lack English proficiency that is necessary for effective teaching. In this regard, these teachers lack the English language knowledge and skills to support English language teaching and learning in general, and the sharpening and enhancement of reading skills across the entire curriculum in particular. The problem of teachers' lack of English Second Language literacy skills is therefore transferred to the students, resulting in students not being able to meet up with tertiary reading competences (Cliff & Hanslo, 2003). Stoller, Anderson, Grabe and Komiyama (2013) state that students need exposure to reading in the classroom in order for them to develop reading abilities, also express this problem. In addition, many parents are illiterate or have low levels of literacy and these acts as a barrier to promoting the reading habit. These were serious obstacles, which faced 3 learners at basic schools and higher education institutions. These challenges of reading habits and reading culture gave rise to our research problem.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

According to Lutz and Huitt (2004), human beings understand the world through interaction with their environment, and thus, knowledge is constructed by the individual. In the reading field, the social learning perspective within the social constructivist theory underscores the importance of social influences and social interaction on literacy teaching (Vygotsky, 1978). It is based on the influence of social learning theories that reading has to be scaffolded. Reading is a complex integration of the systems in the brain that recognize sounds, written

symbols, meanings, and sequences, and then connect with what the reader already knows (Flavell, 1979). This has to happen quickly and automatically.

The other theory relevant to the study is the Cognitive Development theory. The cognitive development theory is used to express different perspectives of the changing human stages, biologically and mentally. It is also effective in learning language; language skills can develop through stages. According to Brooks and Brooks (2000:14), the educator must understand students' mental or representations of the world in order to help them to learn and integrate new understandings. In order to apply a constructivist reading habits the process of adjusting mental models to be good adaptation of the language skills.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This research adopted a mixed method approach with a case study design (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Creswell, 2014). The researcher wanted to capture the academic reading strategies of students registered in the first year English module at a South African university.

### **Sampling**

The sample were selected through the non-probability criterion which is purposive sampling; because this the suitable sampling which allowed the researcher to select participants based on the characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. According to Muger (2013:2), non-probability sampling is a sampling technique where the samples are gathered in a process that does not give all the individuals in the population equal chances (equal probability) of being selected. Subjects in a non-probability sample are usually selected on the basis of their accessibility or by the purposive personal judgment of the researcher.

### **Research Questions**

- What are the reading strategies of students in English as a first additional language?
- How can students' reading skills be enhanced?
- What should be done to develop students' reading skills?

### **Findings**

The findings of the study are categorised according to the sets of questions asked as follows:

#### **Do you find it interesting when you are reading academic texts?**

The researcher found out that 15 of the participants' response was meaning that they were interested in reading academic texts, and 7 of the participants' responded by a No, indicating that they were not interested in reading academic texts. This gives a clear picture that student-educators differ in the pattern of reading habits. While some students have good reading habits, others tend to exhibit poor reading habits. 7 respondents had this to say:

*"Yes I get interested when I read academic texts"*

The respondents' indicated that they were interested when reading academic textbooks.

Other 15 respondents had this to say:

*"I am not interesting in reading academic text"*

The indication of the second respond of participants above agree with Lerner (2000:354), who argue that the causes of reading difficulties stem from a variety of issues, of which some are not easily diagnosed or understood by teachers. However, she suggests that effective instructions to remediate reading difficulties where they persisted should be given. Reading difficulties, such as lack of comprehension, can be easily identified in learners, but often teachers ignore its development.

### **Do you find reading magazines more interesting than newspapers?**

Out of the 22 respondents who were represented in this interview, 20 participants indicated that they were more interested in reading magazines than newspapers, and two participants were interesting in reading newspapers than magazines. This means that most of the students devote themselves in reading magazines for leisure and entertainments rather than text books. 20 respondents had this to say

*"I find reading magazines is more interesting than newspapers"*

2 of the respondents had this to say:

*"I find reading newspapers more interesting than magazines"*

The findings of the study is similar to the ones as said by Ogbodo (2010) who argue that students should be encouraged to read magazines instead of reading lecture notes and text books all the time. This is because students who read magazines at intervals learn to relax, cool their brain and avoid mental fatigue.

### **Do you think reading in groups is more helpful than reading individual?**

The participants 16 out of the 22 indicated that they found reading in a group more helpful than reading alone as an individual, and 6 of them preferred reading alone than in as group. They indicated that reading in a group is more enhancing and made them to be more enthusiastic and promote a healthy reading culture. Sixteen of the respondents had this to say:

*"I got helpful when I read in group more than in an individual"*

The participants were represented that they are more helpful when reading in group that in an individual.

On the other hand, six of the respondents had to say:

*"I got helpful when I read in an individual more than in group"*

This indicated that an individual reading can be more helpful to them. These means that most of the respondents were prefer reading in groups.

## **HOW CAN STUDENTS' READING SKILLS BE ENHANCED?**

The researchers found out that participants' responses on this question shows that in their perspective what could be done to enhanced reading skills in student-educators could be for the teachers to collect a variety of activities in the classrooms, give learners more time to read textbooks, spell the words correctly, daily reading, magazines and newspapers. To improve reading skills, teachers have to motivate their learners, involve their parents, who have to play a great role in the reading habits of their children at home. These different activities can assist the student to be better and confident in reading.

The respondents' asked above question they had to say:

*"By giving them more times to read"*

In this case respondents indicated that the teachers have to give them unlimited time to read perfectly.

### **What do you think could be done to encourage students to read more?**

Nine of the respondents out of 22 indicated that it is best way of reading is to give students reading activities to practice on. Seven of them said students were interesting textbooks and 6 of them said it gives them motivations to read. The activities are more useful to the learners to adapt to their reading culture and to improve their community and environment. Reading interest come when the students have background about the previous level on the higher schools with story books and fiction not only academic books. Sometime institutions let students to read only a limited number of books of issues, of which some are not easily diagnosed or understood by teachers. However, she suggests that effective instructions to remediate reading difficulties where they persisted should be given. Reading difficulties, such as lack of comprehension, can be easily identified in learners, but often teachers ignore its development.

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### **HOW CAN STUDENTS’ READING SKILLS BE ENHANCED?**

To get answers to the above main question, there are 5 sub-questions below should be asked to participants:

#### **What are the enhancements strategies of reading skills of student-educators?**

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which will eventually lead them to developing a good reading habit. The respondents had to say:

*“By giving the students reading activity to practice, textbooks and motivation”*

This indicate that the participants need an encourage them to enhance their reading habits, motivating them by interesting stories and activities. This indication can be related with Strauss (2008:26) motivation can thus be significant even when there is little chance of contact with the target language community. This is desire to understand or gets to know English speakers in one’s own country or abroad.

### **How can you improve reading skills?**

There were twenty-two participants who have been interviewed; students can improve their reading skills by developing a structure, which could be formed with their peers and also by using strategies, which could include the stages of activation, attribution, interrogation, visualisation, deduction, summarisation, and synthesisation. From this point of view, students are expected to develop a positive attitude towards reading in order to think and read critically. The respondents had to say:

*“By using different strategies of reading and following reading steps”*

According to findings above, the respondents indicated that reading habits will assist them when their strategies and steps of reading being using during lessons. These strategies of reading can be related with Shokrpour and Fotovatian (2007:3) w,hat learners can get help from is employing some more effective reading strategies which enable them to have a global look at a text and use some textual features to help them in comprehending a text.

### **What challenges do you have while you are reading books or textbooks?**

The participants when asked the above question they respond in different ways. Some said the challenges in pronunciation, vocabulary, lack of interest in textbooks using certain difficult words, get tired without having finished the texts to be read and forgetfulness. Very few of them said have no challenges when reading textbook. Most were faced with such challenges in reading because they did not develop reading

culture and habit from home due to lack of interest in their school work from their parents at home. The respondents had to say:

*“I get difficulties to pronounce of the word correctly”*

This reveals that most of respondents’ face difficulties to pronounce the word they have lack of interesting in textbooks. This finding agree with Lerner (2000), who acknowledges that reversals are a common tendency with beginner readers, which usually indicates lack of experience with letters and words. Although reversal is common, teachers must establish whether reversal is developmental or indicates disabilities interfering with reading progress. Also within the context of reading difficulties, Nzima (2005:10) identifies reading difficulties

by the student's teacher who found that the student was experiencing difficulty with reading accuracy, speed or comprehension.

### **How can student-Educators' promote the use of English as a First**

#### **Additional Language?**

The participants, when asked this question responded in different ways where some indicated that knowledge of the vocabulary and understanding of key words is the most important aspect of gaining interest in a language, which in term will promote its usage. To promote the use of English as a First Additional Language; teacher has to avoid code switching while teaching their students. Most of the participants were interest in reading vocabulary and understanding the key words of language. As agreeing, Mehigan (2009,p.183-196) suggests that "learning, as a language based activity, is fundamentally and profoundly dependent on vocabulary knowledge – knowledge of words and word meanings".

### **What should be done to influence students in developing a good reading habits?**

#### **How many times do you read and write every day?**

In answering this question, the participants responded in this way: Two said that they could read several times a day. One indicated he/she could read four times a day.

These strategies will encourage the students to enhance their reading habits.

Respondents had say with different views in reading:

*"I read seven days per week"*

*"I read fourth days per week"*

*"I read three days per week"*

### **Discussion**

From the findings above, it is evident developing students' reading skill is pertinent towards their academic success. It is clear that students have to be exposed to a wide range of reading, either reading for pleasure or for academic purposes. Respondents have indicated that they do not engage much in the reading of the academic texts. Students should, therefore, be introduced to texts which will enhance their academic reading skills. Developing good reading habits is also important for students to enhance their academic reading skills. Students should be exposed to speaking in English in order to be fluent in the English language.

### **CONCLUSION**

The article focussed on the reading strategies employed by English First Additional Language student- educators at a South African University and ways to develop these reading skills and empower them to access information hidden in academic texts. The findings of the study are that students-educators lack necessary reading skills expected from them at their level at



tertiary institutions. The study recommends that students' reading skills should be identified immediately when they register at universities and the relevant material should be developed to address their level of preparedness and to equip them with the most important reading skills. The study also recommends that further studies be conducted to come up with strategies which can best be employed to address the situation.

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