The Importance Of Academic Reading Strategies For First Year University Students

Tsebe Wilfred Molotja

School of Education, University of Limpopo, South Africa
Email: wilfred.molotja@ul.ac.za

Abstract: The importance of academic reading strategies in first year university students cannot be over-emphasized. First year university students often struggle with university studies because of lack of academic reading skills. This lack of academic reading skills in first year students creates a barrier for them in accessing information in academic texts, and therefore leads to a higher failure rate. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the academic reading strategies employed by first year English Education students at a South African university, which will then inform the design of material in an English module. The module aimed at imparting academic reading and writing skills to students who just graduated from high school and registered in the School of Education. Data were gathered from 100 students registered in the HACL011 module using the academic reading literacy test from the National Benchmarking Test (NBT). NBTs are valid and reliable because they have been used all over South Africa as assessment instruments for university entrance. The 100 students were conveniently sampled because of their availability and participation in class discussion. The study aimed at profiling students in terms of the strategies they use when reading through their 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, 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

I. Introduction

There is a global challenge that students admitted at universities do not have necessary academic reading skills for successful first year studies (Lian&Seepho 2012; Yuksel&Yyksel, 2012; Van Dyk& De Poel, 2013; Ghaith&Sanyoura, 2019). This is accessabated by the fact that students lack the cognitive skills needed for them to successfully comprehend academic texts. This lack of students’ academic reading (metacognitive reading) skills serves as an obstacle for them to access much needed information required for success in their academic studies. It is a globally acknowledged fact that metacognitive reading strategies are regarded as important in enabling students to gain access to difficult texts (Pammu, Amir &Maasum, 2014; Cekiso 2012; Ghaith&Sanyoura, 2019). Studies conducted on metacognitive reading strategies have also corroborated the same sentiments as echoed above (Widachee 2011; Mokhtari&Reichard, 2002; Parlindungan, 2012; Pammu, Amir &Maasum, 2014; Meniado, 2016; Ghaith&Sanyoura, 2019). In addition, studies conducted in South Africa reveal that students struggle to understand
academic texts (Cekiso, 2012, p. 2) and this has implications for reading texts in English. In this paper, metacognitive reading strategies are discussed and their importance investigated with respect to English language reading at university level.

II. Literature review

This section will focus on the literature and studies conducted relating to metacognitive reading. The researcher will first outline what academic reading entails and then focus on studies conducted. Literature review is important because it serves to back up the proposed study with relation to the study conducted.

2.1 Academic reading

Academic reading is defined by Sengupta (2002, p.2) as a complex, multi-level and different from other kinds of reading. It is a purposeful and critical reading of a range of lengthy academic texts. This form of reading has become complex to students as it requires certain skills which are not the same as in other ordinary reading settings. The process of academic reading serves as the basic for whatever learning taking place at universities (Nel&Nel, 2014; Meniado, 2016). Academic reading is a complex process which is aligned to specific skills in specific fields. It requires an understanding of the nature of knowledge in the specific discipline (Alexander 2005 as cited in Nel&Nel 2014). This means that students should have the skills to strategically read complex academic texts with a high level of understanding (Nel&Nel, 2014). Knowledge of the text structure of different scientific texts in specific disciplines will be important for students to succeed with their studies. Academic reading is described as “reading for in-depth comprehension which requires a special type of reading, demanding a different type of processing in terms of attention, information encoding and retrieval” (Nel&Nel 2014). Toum’A (2012) describes effective academic reading as involving several kinds of metacognitive knowledge. This includes knowledge of the criterion task and what needs to be studied, and knowledge of, how best to process the text for learning. Some of the skills students will require in scientific academic reading are:

- students need to be able to comprehend texts by actively constructing meaning
- integrating information from the text with information from their background knowledge
- be able to discern important information from the unimportant ones
- Select, organize and interpret information across disciplines.
- be able to synthesise and integrate information from multiple sources with different text types

The above skills demand that students should be strategic when engaging in academic reading activities for successful meaning making to take place.

Alexander (2005), as cited in Nel and Nel (2014) views academic reading as a complex process which is aligned to specific skills in a specific field. It requires an understanding of the nature of knowledge in the specific discipline. This means that students should have the skills to strategically read complex academic texts with a high level of understanding (Nel&Nel 2014). The knowledge of the text structure of different texts in specific disciplines will be important for students to succeed with their studies. Academic reading is described as “reading for in-depth comprehension which requires a special type of reading, demanding a different type of processing in terms of attention, information encoding and retrieval” (Nel&Nel 2014) describe effective academic reading as involving several kinds of metacognitive knowledge. This includes
knowledge of the criterion task and what needs to be studied, and knowledge of, how best to process the text for learning. Some of the skills students will require in scientific academic reading are:

- students need to be able to comprehend texts by actively constructing meaning
- integrating information from the text with information from their background knowledge
- be able to discern important information from the unimportant ones
- Select, organize and interpret information across disciplines.
- be able to synthesise and integrate information from multiple sources with different text types

The above skills demand that students should be strategic when engaging on academic reading activities for the successful meaning making to take place.

Reading in content areas such as commerce has been neglected for a considerable period of time. Yet reading is considered one of the most important academic skills and is highly correlated with students’ achievement. Academic reading in science is an area which deserves much attention, if the turnaround strategy in improving the access to tertiary institutions is needed. Academic texts are usually characterized by expository and formal language. It is normally without cues which may help in the understanding of the text (Cummins, 1984). Content reading needs the facilitation of background knowledge.

Content reading is associated with the knowledge of the academic discourse. Hyland (2009) as cited in van Dyket al. (2013) views academic discourse as the way of thinking and using language which exists in the academy. The language is often scientific and requires prior knowledge of the subject matter.

2.2 Factors which influence the academic reading skills of students.

It is important to consider factors which influence the academic reading skills of students. Stanovich (1984) identified the factors influencing the reading of academic texts as the following:

- Knowledge of Text and Discourse Structures, Conventions and Functions
- Reading Strategies and Skills & Cognitive Style
- Affective Factors, Attitude & Motivation
- Decoding Ability and Efficiency
- Beliefs about the Role and Nature of Reading and Learning
- Background Knowledge/ Schema
- L1 Reading Ability
- (L1, L2 or FL) Language Proficiency

2.3 Metacognitive reading strategies

Meta-cognitive reading strategies, as part of academic reading skills, are defined by Flavell (1976) as one’s knowledge concerning one’s own cognitive processes and products. This means that students have to actively monitor their academic reading process and be cognitively involved in the processing of their reading. Metacognition skills therefore involve self-awareness and conscious monitoring and regulation comprehension (Namjoo&Marzban, 2013). In addition to the above, metacognitive strategies are defined by Magogwe (2013) as behaviours undertaken by the learners to plan, arrange, and evaluate their own learning. Such strategies include directed attention and self-evaluation, organization, setting goals and objectives, seeking practice
opportunities, and so forth. In addition to the above, Sheory and Mokhtari (2001) define metacognitive strategies for reading as “intentional, carefully planned techniques by which learners monitor or manage their reading”. These strategies are intentional and carefully because they rely on the readers’ cognition and self-control mechanism they exercise when reading (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002; Miller, 2017). Miller (2017) argues that student can become autonomous in their reading if they know the metacognitive reading strategies they use in their reading.

Alderson and Bachman (2000) state that there is a relationship between the metacognition and reading performance. They maintain that poor readers do not possess knowledge of strategies, and are often not aware of how or when to apply the knowledge they do have (Alderson & Bachman 2000). These students cannot infer meaning from surface-level information, have poorly developed knowledge about how the reading system works, and find it difficult to evaluate text for clarity, consistency and plausivity.

2.4 The importance of metacognitive reading strategies
The importance of the metacognitive strategies is that they help students to focus their attention, they activate students’ background knowledge, which is important for their learning (Paris & Jacobs 1984) as cited in Magogwe (2013). Yuksel and Yuksel (2013) view metacognitive reading strategies as good for proficient strategic reading since they argue that learners could consciously direct the reasoning process and use strategies effectively while reading and they can access and apply these strategies and reasoning to future reading tasks easily. Again, Ghaith and El-Sanyoura (2019) emphasise that metacognitive strategies are important for students for reading in different academic contexts. Pammu, Amir and Maasum (2014) view the metacognitive reading strategies as enabling students to access different texts. This means that they interrogate their reading using the skills acquired during their other reading.

The metacognitive reading skills are important in:

- Clarifying the purposes of reading, that is, understanding both the explicit and implicit task demands,
- Identifying the important aspects of a message
- Focusing attention on the major content rather than trivia
- Monitoring ongoing activities to determine whether comprehension is occurring
- Engaging in self-questioning to determine whether goals are being achieved, and taking corrective action when failures in comprehension are detected. (Carrel, 1998, p.5). In addition to the importance of metacognitive reading strategies (Pammu et al., 2014).

In addition to the above areas where metagoctiive reading strategies can be employed, Ghaith and El-Sanyoura (2019) found that the majority of students rely on the problem-solving skills for their reading. These skills are said to be an indicator of high order mobility (the usage of high in comprehension reading).

2.5 Studies conducted on Academic reading/ metacognitive reading strategies.
The following studies conducted show the importance of academic reading skills in the students’ university education. Foster (1996)’ study which focused on the students’ linguistic and educational background is important towards this study because it relates to the students ‘background needed for designing academic reading modules.
Rose, Chivise, McKnight and Smith (2003) also conducted a study on scaffolding academic reading. The results of the study indicated that academic reading skills are important towards academic reading. Sen (2009) is also related to the above studies because it shows the importance of the metacognitive reading strategies. Students were put through a programme which developed their metacognitive reading strategies and the others were put through a traditional teaching programme.

The more relevant study was conducted by Yuksel and Yuksel (2013), who wanted to find out about the students’ awareness of the metacognitive reading strategies. The results of the study indicated that the readers’ metacognitive awareness is positively related with their academic success.

Evens (2002) supports view that the metacognitive reading skills support success in academic achievement. What she proposes is that metacognitive reading strategies should be taught to all students entering tertiary education (Evens, 2002). Once students are able to read and comprehend successfully, they will have developed the basic cognitive abilities to learn from all types of written texts and from lectures (Evens, 2002). Kummin and Rahman (2010) also show the relationship between metacognitive reading strategies and achievement in English language by stating that this has been for a longtime.

Ismail and Tawaiseh (2014) conducted a study on the effectiveness of a metacognitive reading strategies program for improving low achieving EFL readers. Their study recommended that readers should be aware of what is involved in the reading process and what is necessary to read effectively. They also acknowledge that successful readers are those who engage in a high level of metacognition or those who monitor their own thinking during the process of reading. Students need to be engaged in activities which will develop their higher order thinking strategies.

III. Research question

The study aimed at finding responses to the following question:
- What are the academic reading strategies used by first year English Education students in academic reading for them to succeed with their academic studies at tertiary institutions?
- What intervention strategies are there to improve students’ academic reading skills?

IV. Methodology

The methodology applied in conducting this study is the mixed method. It was through the mixed method that students’ profiles on their metacognitive reading strategies were analyzed. About 100 students were randomly sampled for this test. Students’ academic reading profiles were analyzed using the National Benchmarking Test on academic reading strategies.

V. Validity and reliability

The NBT is valid and reliable because it has been used throughout the country and is regarded as the model of English language testing (Davidson & Pollock, 2011). Davidson and Pollock (2011) argues that it is reliable because it has a wide bank of test items which are never repeatable. The NBT scores are said to be trusted and accepted in more than 18 Universities in the South Africa. What is important for this study is that their test items test universal academic reading skills
which are inferencing, discourse analysis, cohesion, grammar/syntax, metaphorical expressions, vocabulary, communicative function and knowledge of text genre.

The NBT in South Africa is a recognized instrument to assess students’ readiness in higher institutions studying. Weideman (2006) argues that the NBT aims to give information on students’ competencies when entering the higher education system (NBT, 2006). The usage of the NBT is relevant because it is nationally recognized (Merrifield, 2007). Dooey and Oliver (2002) study on the validity of NBT on academic performance found that there is a higher correlation between the test results and academic performance. Yen and Kuzuma (2009) also view the NBT as having the higher validity rate. The use of NBT is supported by the fact it has a reliability value of 6.0, which means that students have satisfactorily command of English. The reliable nature of the NBT on academic reading competencies validate its use in this study.

VI. Participants

Participants were students enrolled for a bachelor degree in education at a South African University. 100 English Education students were purposefully sampled for this study. The participants came from previously disadvantaged backgrounds which the researcher considered to be appropriate for the study. They were fresh from high schools without any exposure to university learning and studying.

VII. Data collection and analysis

Qualitative data were collected using an NBT academic literacy test. The data from the test were analyzed using the descriptive method and the SPSS. The descriptive method was used because it gave the researcher an in-depth analysis of the students’ profiles. The NBT test on academic literacy was used in finding out about students’ awareness of the academic reading skills.

VIII. Data analysis

The data from the NBT was descriptively analyzed using the SPSS data analysis tool. Students’ academic reading competencies were analyzed and their profiles presented in the subsequent sections.

IX. Interpretation of Data

Data were interpreted based on the academic reading competencies, as contained in the local NBT. These competencies are metacognitive ones, hence the purpose of the study.
X. Results and discussion

Table 1. Academic reading domains as per the Academic Literacy test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>p25</th>
<th>p50</th>
<th>p75</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicative function</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>35.25</td>
<td>16.22</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>25.00</td>
<td>37.50</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>75.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discourse</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>28.14</td>
<td>15.79</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>71.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>48.83</td>
<td>19.43</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar/Syntax</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>32.50</td>
<td>18.86</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>66.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inference</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>34.93</td>
<td>14.14</td>
<td>7.14</td>
<td>21.43</td>
<td>35.71</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>71.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaphorical expression</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>36.55</td>
<td>14.45</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>27.27</td>
<td>36.36</td>
<td>45.45</td>
<td>72.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Genre</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>32.14</td>
<td>19.83</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>28.57</td>
<td>42.86</td>
<td>85.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>52.67</td>
<td>17.36</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>41.67</td>
<td>50.00</td>
<td>66.67</td>
<td>83.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 1 Graphic presentation of Academic reading domains

XI. Discussion

From the test administered, it is evident that students are better when coming to their vocabulary development with a performance of 52.7%. Students’ performance in questions relating to discourse analysis, text genre and grammar skills is below average, with 28% for discourse analysis and 32% for both text genre and grammar skills. These are the critical areas for students’ reading skills. This implies that the focus should be on developing students’ cohesion, discourse, and syntax and vocabulary skills for them to be able to read academically. The researcher is basing this on the results that students’ average performance is 28.14% for discourse, 32.55% for syntax, 34.9% for inference skills and 32% for text genre skills. The
results dictate that focus should be on developing an intervention strategy to address the grammar/syntax skills and the text genre skills. The development or enhancement of the above metacognitive reading skills is crucial for students’ academic success.

XII. Recommendations

From the findings of this study, it is evident that students admitted at universities do not possess required academic reading skills needed in their first year. These skills should be developed while they are still in their secondary schools, for the transition into universities to be a smooth sailing one. Metacognitive reading strategies should be taught to first year university studies for them to be able to succeed with their studies. The researcher would also like to recommend that further research be conducted on the development of course which would address students’ metacognitive reading skills. The development of metacognitive reading skills should be made compulsory in the first year English Language Teaching. An adoption of Reading Strategies Inventory (Mokhtari & Reichard, 2002) be made for all first year students, in identifying their academic reading profiles, for lecturers to be able to design appropriate learning materials. Material for developing students’ comprehension skills may be sourced from various modules offered in the first year at universities.

XIII. Conclusion

The results of the study inform the researcher that it is important to develop and enhance students’ academic reading skills, for them to be able to succeed with their academic studies at institutions of higher learning. The researcher would like to recommend that students’ academic reading abilities be determined right at the beginning of an academic programme, for the relevant intervention strategy to be developed and implemented. Further research may be conducted in the development of an intervention strategy to address the identified profiles of students. Furthermore, the researcher would like to recommend that the intervention strategy be aligned to the South African context, as the study failed to achieve this.

References


