

ICLEHI 2015 49

EFL Learners' Conceptions of Academic English Reading

Patteera Thienpermpool*

Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Silpakorn University,
Rachamakka Nai Road, Nakhon Pathom, Thailand

*thienpermpool@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Reading tends to be one of the essential skills for successful academic study in higher education. However, reading seems to be the most difficult skill for EFL learners, especially when it comes to the area of academic reading. In order to be able to train EFL learners the language and study skills for successful academic reading and develop academic reading instruction, it is crucial to understand their conceptions of academic English reading. This study then aimed to investigate: 1) how EFL learners conceived academic English reading; 2) what they encountered while reading academic texts and 3) what skills they needed as well as how teachers could help them with academic reading. The participants were 100 Thai undergraduates studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP). They were asked to complete a questionnaire in order to elicit their conceptions of academic reading, academic reading difficulties and help from teachers. The results were presented and discussed so as to provide fruitful implications for EAP reading instruction.

Keywords: Learners' Conceptions, Academic English Reading, English for Academic Purposes (EAP)

1. Introduction

Academic reading skills are considered crucial to learners' university success. However, they are hardly taught because most teachers generally assume that the learners have already acquired the skills (Hermida, 2009). Consequently, many learners especially university students are underprepared for the reading demands they are assigned in higher education (Dreyer and Nel, 2003). That is to say, they lack the academic reading skills and are unable to understand academic texts (Redmann, 2005). Furthermore, despite the instruction of academic reading skills, the chance of success might be low if the academic reading course is designed or developed without understanding of the learners.

In order to have a clearer understanding of learners' academic reading, it is important to learn their conceptions. There have been very few attempts to investigate conceptions, perceptions or perspectives on academic English reading. The studies are, for example, Hooley, Tysseling and Ray (2013) and Ohata and Fukao (2014). Hooley et al. (2013) investigated high school students' academic reading perceptions and their link to reading proficiency. They investigated academic reading perceptions in terms of class reading, teacher support, students' understanding, etc. However, the findings concern perceptions of high school reading which might not be as academic as university-level reading. Furthermore, Ohata and Fukao (2014) also examine conceptions of academic reading. Although the participants were college students, the main focus of their study tends to be on how such conceptions are constructed and developed.

This study was then aimed at investigating EFL learners' conceptions of academic reading in terms of how they conceived academic reading, what difficulties they had and what they needed at the university reading level in order to provide insights into academic English reading in an EFL context.

2. Research Questions

This study aimed to conduct a survey of EFL learners' conceptions of academic English reading. It then intended to answer the following questions:

- 2.1 How did the learners conceive academic English reading?
- 2.2 What did they think they have encountered while reading academic texts?
- 2.3 What kind of help with academic reading did they need from teachers?

3. Methodology

This section aims to present details of conducting the study and how the data were analyzed. It then provides information on the participants, instrument and data analysis.

3.1 Participants

The participants were 100 Thai undergraduates studying English for Academic Purposes in a public university in Thailand. They were randomly selected to take part in the study. Their age ranged from 18-22 years old. They had studied English as a foreign language for 14-18 years. They never had any learning experience outside the country.

3.2 Instrument

A questionnaire was distributed to the participants in the middle of the second semester of the academic year 2014. It consisted of two sections: 1) personal information and 2) conceptions of academic English reading, their reading strategies, academic reading difficulties and needs. It was designed based on some findings from Weir et al. (2012). It was translated into Thai - the participants' mother tongue. It consisted of 2 pages and 40 items. The participants were asked to read each statement and grade or rank it on a 5-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932).

3.3 Data Analysis

The quantitative data were tallied in order to get the frequency of responses. The data for research question number 1 were analyzed by percentage. The data for research question numbers 2 and 3 were analyzed by mean and standard deviation.

4. Results

This section shows the results of the present study related to the investigation of learners' conceptions of academic English reading. The results are presented in 3 parts based on the research questions.

4.1 How did the learners conceive academic English reading?

This section is divided into 3 parts in order to present how the learners conceived academic English reading sources, decision influences for their reading and characteristics of successful academic readers. Each part is shown in details below:

Table 1: EFL learners' conceptions of academic English reading sources

Reading sources	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
Coursebooks	-	12	49	35	4
Textbooks	8	32	44	13	3
Internet	1	17	56	20	6
Journals/articles	6	44	34	12	4
Reports	23	50	22	5	-
Newspapers	17	47	31	4	1
Magazines	14	27	47	11	1
Others: YouTube	-	-	3	4	-

The numbers in Table 1 and Table 2 show the frequency of responses out of 100 or percentage. Table 1 shows that most of the students conceived coursebooks (88%) and Internet (82%) as academic reading sources. Additionally, seven of them mentioned that they also did some academic reading through YouTube. Surprisingly, most of them (73%) did not consider reports as a source.

Table 2: EFL learners' conceptions of decision influences for academic English reading

Decision influences	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
Lecturers	4	5	37	41	13
Peers	7	14	60	16	3
Own interests	4	17	32	31	16
Libraries	10	37	40	12	1
Internet	4	11	35	40	10
Others:	-	-	-	-	-

Table 2 reveals that lecturers (91%) and Internet (85%) tended to influence learners' decision to choose what to read for academic purposes. On the other hand, most of the students hardly conceived libraries as a decision influence for academic reading.

Table 3: EFL learners' conceptions of characteristics of successful academic readers

Characteristics of successful readers	Mean	S.D.	Rank
Reading with understanding	4.18	0.76	3
Knowing a lot of vocabulary	4.31	0.68	1
Wide reading	3.97	0.82	5
Regular reading	4.10	0.80	4
Voluntary reading	4.24	0.82	2
Reading and remembering	3.87	0.88	6
Reading and translating texts into L1	3.86	0.80	7
Understanding the meaning of every single words in texts	3.66	1.04	8
Reading texts aloud	3.23	0.98	9
Others: -	-	-	-

It can be concluded from Table 3 that the learners tended to conceive vocabulary ($\bar{x} = 4.31$, $SD = 0.68$) as the most important characteristics of successful academic readers. It is unsurprisingly that reading and translating texts into L1 ($\bar{x} = 3.86$, $SD = 0.80$), understanding the meaning of every single words ($\bar{x} = 3.66$, $SD = 1.04$) and reading texts aloud ($\bar{x} = 3.23$, $SD = 0.98$) were considered less important.

4.2 What did they think they have encountered while reading academic texts?

Table 4: EFL learners' conceptions of their academic reading difficulties

Academic reading difficulties	Mean	SD	Rank
I do not understand the content.	4.13	0.75	4
I do not know meanings of academic words.	4.31	0.69	1
I do not know meanings of technical words	4.29	0.80	2
I cannot understand meanings of unknown words from affixes.	3.81	0.68	9
Words have different meanings in different contexts.	4.10	0.80	5
I look up unknown words in a dictionary so many times but I cannot remember the meaning of the words.	4.06	0.76	7
The sentence structures in academic texts are complicated.	4.04	0.79	8
The academic texts are very long.	4.27	0.91	3
The academic texts are not interesting.	4.07	0.91	6
I do not know why I need to read academic texts.	3.60	1.07	10

I do not have time to read academic texts.	3.50	0.98	11
Others: -	-	-	-

It can be seen from Table 4 that the learners thought that academic words ($\bar{x} = 4.31$, $SD = 0.69$) and technical words ($\bar{x} = 4.29$, $SD = 0.80$) seemed to be the most serious difficulty in academic reading. Moreover, the length of texts ($\bar{x} = 4.27$, $SD = 0.91$) and difficulty of content ($\bar{x} = 4.13$, $SD = 0.75$) were also likely to hinder the learners' academic reading.

4.3 What kind of help with academic reading did they need from teachers?

Table 5: EFL learners' conceptions of help with academic reading from teachers

Help from teachers	Mean	SD	Rank
Understanding learner differences	4.32	0.69	4
Selection of texts that are suitable for learners' reading proficiency	4.28	0.78	5
Eliciting learners' background knowledge before reading	4.23	0.68	6
Teaching new words in texts	4.35	0.63	3
Teaching academic words	4.37	0.66	1

Table 5 (cont.): EFL learners' conceptions of help with academic reading from teachers

Help from teachers	Mean	SD	Rank
Discussing texts	4.08	0.79	7
Translating texts into L1	3.97	1.00	9
Training reading strategies	4.36	0.69	2
Assigning external reading	3.99	0.78	8
Others: -	-	-	-

Table 5 shows that the learners would like EFL teachers to teach academic words ($\bar{x} = 4.37$, $SD = 0.66$). They also wanted the teachers to train reading strategies ($\bar{x} = 4.36$, $SD = 0.69$) and teach new words in texts ($\bar{x} = 4.35$, $SD = 0.63$). Although they claimed that they needed help with academic and technical words, translating texts into L1 ($\bar{x} = 3.97$, $SD = 1.00$) was not regarded as necessary as others.

5. Discussion

Although this paper has presented a limited-scale study of EFL learners' conceptions of academic English reading, the results provide some fruitful implications for EAP instruction in an EFL setting. These implications are discussed below.

Table 1 and Table 2 reveals that Internet and YouTube were prominently employed by the learners while paper-based academic texts like reports and libraries providing collections of paper-based sources were considered less important. This implies that the learners tend to rely on technology more than traditional reading materials. This might be because surfing the net is less sophisticated and less time-consuming than searches of the online catalog and library databases (Lippincott, 2015). It might be caused by the increase of digital literacy among EFL learners or increased accessibility of ICT equipment and services.

Most of the learners claimed that they thought vocabulary especially academic words were important and worth teaching because vocabulary plays an important role in reading (Nation, 2001). This has been supported by many previous studies such as Qian (2002) and Stahl (2003) showing the relationship between reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge.

One of the controversial issues in reading instruction is whether reading aloud enhances or prevents reading comprehension. The finding from Table 3 reveals that most of the participants from the present study might not think that reading texts aloud was a characteristic of successful readers. This might be because low ability readers tend to have higher comprehension in reading aloud while more successful readers have better comprehension in silent reading (Miller and Smith, 1985).

The other issue of reading instruction that is worth discussing is translating texts into L1. Some EFL teachers are likely to believe that if the students do not understand the texts especially content, it is a good idea to translate the text into the first language because L1 can dismiss the misunderstanding in the process of learning another language (Qing-xue and Jin-fang, 2007). However the research finding from Table 5 seems to oppose the teachers' belief. This is interesting for further research to do a deeper investigation in order to examine this mismatch between the teachers' belief and learners' conceptions of translation.

6. Conclusion

Academic reading plays a key role in academic achievement because it makes a contribution to other subjects. There have been some attempts to produce in-house and commercial materials in order to develop academic reading instruction. However, materials might not be applicable to students in all contexts. The present study then aimed to investigate learners' conceptions of academic English reading so as to provide teachers with better understanding of academic reading.

References

- Dreyer, C. and Nel, C. (2003). Teaching reading strategies and reading comprehension within a technology-enhanced learning environment. *System*, 31, 349-365.
- Eroglu, N. A. (2005). *Academic reading expectations in English for first-year students at Hacettepe University*, Unpublished thesis, Bilkent University.
- Hermida, J. (2009). Strategies to promote a deep approach to reading, *Newsletter of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 51, 2.
- Hooley, D. S., Tysseling, L. A. and Ray, B. (2013). Trapped in a cycle of low expectations: An exploration of high school seniors' perspectives about academic reading, *The High School Journal*, 96 (4), 321-338.
- Likert, R. (1932). A technique for the measurement of attitudes, *Archives of Psychology*, 140, 1-55.
- Lippincott, J. K. (2015). *Net generation students and libraries*. Retrieved March 5, 2015, from <http://www.educause.edu/research-and-publications/books/educating-net-generation/net-generation-students-and-libraries>
- Miller, S. D. and Smith, D. E. (1985). Differences in literal and inferential comprehension after reading orally and silently. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77, 341-348.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ohata, K. and Fukao, A. (2014). L2 learners' conceptions of academic reading and themselves as academic readers, *System*, 42, 81-92.
- Qian, D. (2002). Investigating the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic reading performance: An assessment perspective. *Language Learning*, 52, 513-536.
- Qing-xue, L. and Jin-fang, S. (2007). An analysis of language teaching approaches and methods – Effectiveness and weakness, *US-China Education Review*, 4 (1), 69-71.
- Redmann, J. (2005). An interactive reading journal for all levels of the foreign language curriculum, *Foreign Language Annals*, 38 (4), 484-492.
- Stahl, S. (2003). Vocabulary and readability: How knowing word meanings affects comprehension, *Topics in Language Disorders*, 23, 241-247.
- Weir, C. J., Hawkey, R., Green, A., Unaldi, A. and Devi, S. (2012). The relationship between the academic reading construct as measured by IELTS and the reading experiences of students in the first year of study at a British university, In Taylor, L. and Weir, C. J. *Studies in language testing 34: IELTS collected papers 2 Research in reading and listening assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.