

TEACHERS PERCEPTIONS ON ACADEMIC READING SKILLS

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Abstract: The following paper introduces teachers' perceptions on the term *academic reading*. It focuses not only on reading comprehension in general, but rather pinpoints the different aspects of reading i.e. surface and deep approach, active versus interactive reading, critical reading skills and the integrated skills approach. The assumption that lies behind the practical theory of teaching reading at academic level, is that students (in most cases) are not fully involved in the reading i.e. they are not focused, they do not link previous knowledge with the new, unknown knowledge; they do not analyze. The whole process of reading (as a receptive skill) however, involves many skills; skills that are taught and skills that are learnt. An issue that is worth mentioning regarding reading and academic reading is the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." Hence, the teaching of reading differs for different subjects, teachers and students. Reading for some is output based more than it is input based (referring by this to the written works (readings), and the comprehension of them, followed by their reproduction (the ability to correctly answer questions regarding the reading). Since reading is a process-product skill, we would like to assume that both features are dealt with (that students can fluently read and accurately respond) The paper therefore has focused on discovering problematic issues that are tied to the process of academic reading and has provided solutions that would better enhance academic reading in countries that teach English as a FL. Accordingly, the authors argue that an integrated skills approach to academic reading would facilitate the process and would foster a more effective teaching environment. The issue of regarding reading as a separate skill has become a problematic one for the fact that all other possible skills are neglected. Knowing that academic reading is a suffocating, slow process, combining a mixture of "integrated teaching" would presumably make it easier. Participants in the study are 7 professors of the English department at University of Tetova and 1 Emeritus, visiting professor from The United States, which provide insights and comments on the issue. The instrument used is a teacher questionnaire, which consists of 12 open-ended questions. It aims to gather different insights on the issue and elaborate on the same. Own experience on learning the language through academic reading and then teaching it to others will also be presented. The paper with all its implications, recommendations and insights intends to provide efficient information for readers on behalf of the teachers' sample of perceptions and on their used strategies. In an upcoming volume, student feedback will also be presented, with that, making a balance between our theories of teaching academic reading to that of the students' needs and interests and of course, student issues.

Keywords: academic reading, perceptions, integrated skills approach etc.

1. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ACADEMIC READING AND THE INTEGRATED SKILLS APPROACH

The following paper represents a small-scale research which has begun many years ago and is yet in process regarding the issue of academic reading and the integrated skills approach. The issue of academic reading and the integration of the skills is not new, however, as you will notice, it has in fact evolved into the technological era of developments and different annotations. It begins with the elaboration of previous studies and implications and draws the readers' attention to the importance that reading in association with the other skills has. When we refer to academic reading, we hereby take into consideration reading in different content areas and skills. The most relevant factors in distinguishing the level of foreign language acquisition are: knowing how to read printed text, understanding what is actually read and being able to put the retained information to use. The issue of reading in a FL is crucial to language acquisition and therefore should be implemented in every subject. Reading should not however be seen as "a skill by itself" and should be associated with the other skills. This association of reading with the other skills is known as *an integrated approach to reading*. The term academic reading refers to reading in different content subjects at university level and requires background knowledge, vocabulary acquisition, and a certain reading speed. It also requires a strategic approach that would facilitate the reading burden. The integrated skills approach refers to a different type of instruction. It means teaching academic reading through a combination of different skills to make it complete. The example of tapestry weaving, musical notes, a combination of different ingredients in cooking etc. are examples that make integrated skills approach comprehensible. Similar to different musical notes that compiled together produce wonderful music, the combination of different skills produces effective comprehension and interaction with the text.

Oxford (2001) gives a specific example of the classroom application of the integrated-skill approach: In a course on intermediate reading, the teacher probably gives all of the directions orally in English, thus causing students to use their listening ability to understand the assignment. In this course, students might discuss their readings, thus employing speaking and listening skills and certain associated skills, such as pronunciation, syntax, and social usage. Students might be asked to summarize or analyze reading in written form, thus activating their writing skills. In a real sense, then, some courses that are labeled according to specific skill might actually reflect in the integrated-skills approach after all (p. 3) A rhetorical question posed by Philapakos et. al. (2020) arises: “Does the path to better reading involve becoming a good writer? They argue that “The answer to these questions presents a paradox. One does not have to learn to write in order to learn to read, as learning how to write or type words in order to read them is not necessary. However, even so, writing and the teaching of writing contributes to students’ growth as readers.

Further, such an assumption “helps explain why the focus of many English and writing programs is primarily on grammar, sentences, and paragraphs, as opposed to the more effective, validated techniques shown in the research, such as challenging college-level assignments” (Barhoum, 2017, p. 805)

Richards & Rogers (2001) regarding the integrated skills approach conclude “they seek to bring together knowledge, language and thinking.” Accordingly, the word “integrate” is seen as an adjective, meaning combining or coordinating separate elements so as to provide a harmonious, interrelated whole: an integrated plot; an integrated course of study. However, it can be confusing or misleading to believe that a given strategy is associated with only one specific language skill. Many strategies, such as paying selective attention, self-evaluating, asking questions, analyzing, synthesizing, planning, and predicting, are applicable across skill areas (see Oxford, 1990). Is this relationship between reading and writing reciprocal? According to Alderson (2000), “It is widely accepted to draw a distinction between the process of reading, and the result of that reading, the product. The process is what we mean by reading i.e. the interaction between a reader and the text. During that process it would appear that many things are happening. The process is likely to be dynamic, variable and different for the same reader on the same text at a different time or with a different purpose in reading. It is even more likely then, that the process will be different for different readers on different texts at different times and with different purpose.” (Alderson, 2000, p.3)

On the issue of reading as interaction (and to how it applies to reading) according to Nuttall (2005) “the reader assumes that: he and the writer are using the same code (the same language); that the writer has a message; that the writer wants the reader to understand the message.” (2005, p.11) i.e. that both reader and writer comprehend each other just as in conversation. Accordingly, “reading is an interactive process- as conversation is- because both reader and writer depend on one another. The interaction is complicated by the fact that the writer is absent at the time of reading; so she gets no feedback and cannot know what parts of her text will cause misunderstanding.” (2005, p.11)

According to Tolstykh & Khumutova (2012), in order to integrate the language skills in ESL/EFL instruction, teachers should consider taking these steps:

1. They should learn more about the various ways to integrate language skills in the classroom (e.g., content-based, task-based, or a combination);
2. They should reflect on their current approach and evaluate the extent to which the skills are integrated;
3. They should choose instructional materials, textbooks, and technologies that promote the integration of listening, reading, speaking, and writing, as well as the associated skills of syntax, vocabulary, and so on. Even if a given course is labeled according to just one skill, one should remember that it is possible to integrate the other language skills through appropriate tasks;
4. They should teach language learning strategies and emphasize that a given strategy can often enhance performance in multiple skills. (2012, p. 42)

What is Integrated Reading nowadays? According to IGI Global, it is defined as:

1. Synthesizing and effectively cross-referencing and/or browsing information delivered in multiple media formats. ¹

In her article *Case Study: Integrated Approach to Reading Instruction*, Tustin, R. (2016) states “A 2016 Stanford study looked at the implementation of an integrated reading program at a community college. One component of the integrated reading program that was studied was teaching students to annotate text using technology. Annotation is an important skill in developing critical readers because it allows readers to look at texts as layers of complicated and nuanced meanings rather than just reading to answer a question. When writing annotations, students mark-up text by underlining important ideas or writing questions for themselves.

In the JOURNAL of DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION, Saxon et al. (2016) provide the following conclusive comments provided by teacher participants involved in a study on the integration of reading and writing skills: “the participants elaborated with the following comments: *Students read a passage, annotate the text, answer

*comprehension questions, and then write an essay based on ideas in the passage. * Students use one topic for both reading and writing, and then really engage with that topic in a meaningful way. *Article reviews are required with a summary and response. *Reading and writing assignments are linked thematically. * Students are always writing about the reading that they do”.... comment continues*

Indeed, research on recent national efforts to integrate reading and writing classes suggests an “integrative approach.” Such integration is characterized by “a lack of emphasis on discrete literacy skills in favor of more complex and contextualized literacy tasks aligned with the types of assignments students could expect to see in college-level courses” (Bickerstaff & Raufman, 2017, p. 14) and “alignment between and among remedial and subsequent college-level courses is crucial to student . . . success” (Goldwasser, Martin, & Harris, 2017, p. 12).

Accordingly, not only is the integrated skills approach very important as it facilitates the reading burden and provides interaction with the text, it improves writing skills and as so, is also a means by which multi-tasking is made possible, nowadays with the additional use of media and technology in the post-Covid-19 teaching.

2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study therefore aims at elaborating an integrated approach to academic reading and providing implications for future use. The research questions are as follow:

1. Will critical reading skills help students to surpass difficulties in analyzing academic texts?
2. What other steps are relevant for successful reading comprehension, and how can the teachers use them?
3. Is the integrated skills approach more effective in teaching reading at University level?

3. STUDY HYPOTHESIS

The integrated skills approach helps students better comprehend and interact with texts.

Procedure

Teachers questionnaire

A teacher questionnaire (see Appendix) was used in order to gather different teachers’ assumptions and personal theories regarding academic reading skills. The number of teacher participants was 8 (with that 7 home teachers and 1 foreign visiting professor). The study was designed for teachers of literature and teachers of reading skills, out of which 4 were literature teachers and 3 reading skills teachers. The visiting professor is author of many books on reading and academic reading (see Richardson, S. Judy) and has expertise in teaching as well. (Note: The teacher questionnaire is developed by the authors).

4. TEACHER RESPONSES

The teacher participants in this study are of different backgrounds, with different teaching experiences and of course, different expertise. The common ground for all is the language, namely, all are teachers of English language and literature, some teaching literature and some teaching the skills. The target group are students from year 1-4 of the English department that provide these teachers with the experience and the theory of teaching academic reading. Most perceptions, as you will notice below, stand on the same grounds i.e. teachers’ beliefs and perceptions on the issue of academic reading slightly differs.

The following is the summary of the teacher responses, participants in the study.

- Teachers experience in teaching differed- from 3, 5, 7, 10 to 50 years of teaching! Throughout this variety of experience, of course, teachers encountered many changes and obstacles in teaching reading, some of which are mentioned below.
- Their overall assumption to reading was that students rarely read nowadays. This in fact, is an issue of the new generation (post Millennials or generation Z). Due to the emerging of technology, this group of learners rarely reads or interacts with different texts, as they are all ready-made information on the Internet. Previously students lacked such opportunities to find large amounts of information with a simple CLICK. Now, we are one click away from any information we need-so, why read?
- They believed that students read things on the Internet, comic books, newspapers etc. (surface approach) but deep approach was neglected. As you may notice, the approach to reading in this case is not serious i.e. students are not involved in large amount of readings.
- Most strategies used by teachers were metacognition, problem-solving, informal small group case studies etc. They argued that with the development of technology, teachers who were teaching academic reading (or any of the skills) found themselves caught in a web of fun, joyful activities, in which, learners would partake in only as such.
- Regarding the internet and its’ influence, some believed it was good, others bad (having too much ready-to get information and not allowing students to explore, read and analyze for themselves) The issue of

academic dishonesty, irrelevant information or unrealistic information and non-serious sources made it difficult to rely on in many occasions.

- Teachers believed students lacked motivation, but argued that the teacher was a key factor in motivation i.e. if the teacher found interesting tasks it would stimulate the students. Again, this assumption is true in the modern context of teaching, however, this choice of materials depends a whole lot on many different factors.
- They helped students deal with unknown words by associating synonyms, relating meaning to context, pre-reading vocabulary, translation etc.
- They also agreed that finding good reading materials and course books in North Macedonia was difficult and that they had to base their instruction on the required department plan more than on students' needs. (Teachers could not always find suitable material nor could they always be flexible, regarding the plan). The issue of teacher-free curriculum is one that is not new. In some regions and in some institutions, the plan and curricula rely on others and not only the teachers themselves. The choice of texts and the manner of teaching are not always an issue of free-choice. For most, this was the issue here as well.

Due to the fact that Prof. Richardson had the most experience and expertise in the field of literacy, her sample responses are provided below. (Table 1)

Table 1. Teacher response sample

How long have you been teaching literature and/or reading skills? Since 1965: 50 years (high school English; English Foreign Language; university level)
What is your personal assumption towards reading in general- do students read nowadays? It depends on the description of <i>reading</i> : most students read on the Internet what they like to read (videos, games, YouTube, etc.); maybe ½ of students I have taught read books—but the books must be interesting and students have a reason that they are reading; the majority of students do not do deep reading (reading to think, explore, and study in depth) because they have not been taught how to do this.
Has your assumption changed during your experience with students over the years? If yes, why and how? For the first 25 years of my experience, students did not use the Internet so much (it was not really available) so their pleasure reading was comic books, magazines = the same, though, as above: students read but not mainly for any deep meaning.
Do you use different strategies with students? If yes, please name them. You may want to rephrase this question—it is a very leading question! Perhaps: what types of strategies and/or activities do you use to teach literacy skills? Even better, create a checklist of the most famous strategies and ask that the teacher check those used, then add a comment. My answer: I have written 2 books about the types of strategies & activities that should be used to teach literacy!
Do you think that the Internet and computers have a bad influence on reading skills? Why? Not really, because students often read on the Internet for what they want to know. The negative influence is that the Internet provides an environment for multi-tasking, which is not usually induce to deep reading and distracts the reader from concentrating on one thought at a time. It is up to teachers to create reading assignments on the Internet that will engage students in reading for meaning.
Do students have the motivation to read? This is a very broad question. Generally speaking, students will have motivation to read when they know what they want to know and how to find that information. Then they will read it.
How do you help students with unknown words? Please see chapter 7 in <i>Reading To Learn in the Content Areas</i> !! It is too much for me to cite in this questionnaire. But, if you create a checklist that would make answering this question easier for others. Mostly, I: pre-teach critical words; encourage use of context and morpheme analysis; rereading to place words contextually and to then write concept cards about vocabulary words.
Do you advise students to base meaning upon context? This is the best way.
Is it difficult for teachers to find suitable reading materials? Not if they understand what the reading levels mean and how to match students to appropriate text. Then they can go to the Internet and find books that are scored according to the Lexile formula. What can be difficult in a small country like Macedonia is locating these books for students to have.
What do you base your reading materials on: the foreseen academic plan, the syllabus or upon students needs and interests? I base reading materials first on the topic of my teaching then combined with students' needs and reading levels. All instruction should be differentiated and there are plenty of ways to do that, even if the text is too difficult the teacher can modify or augment it.
Do you think that topics of interest are better accepted by students? Of course, but topics that might not seem to be of interest can become so when teachers use techniques and strategies to create interest.
Is reading literature, texts and passages an overall difficult skill? If so, why? This type of reading is studious and deep. So the teacher must guide students in this type of reading. So, yes-deep reading vs. surface reading is more challenging.

5. OBTAINED RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESIS

At the beginning, we set the basis of the study, namely we provided the reader with the research questions and hypothesis regarding the issue of the integrated skills approach to reading. As so, with the help of the gathered information on the perceptions that teachers had, the following was concluded:

Regarding the first R.Q. *“Will critical reading skills help students to surpass difficulties in analyzing academic texts?”* teachers agreed that critical reading skills and interaction with text indeed helped students overcome different issues of text analysis.

Regarding the second R.Q. *“What other steps are relevant for successful reading comprehension, and how can the teachers use them? Many different strategies were used by the teachers, however, they struggled with the free-choice of materials and sometimes had difficulties in keeping the students motivated (teachers teaching Old literature for e.g. had such issues) due to the old, out dated terminology.*

Regarding the third R.Q. *“Is the integrated skills approach more effective in teaching reading at University level?” All teachers agreed that they found this approach most effective due to the different skills that were practiced when using it.*

Regarding the stated hypothesis: *The integrated skills approach helps students better comprehend and interact with texts*, it is more than evident that this approach indeed helps learners interact with the text, either in group or pair work, through role-play activities, essay writing, debates and conversations etc.

6. CONCLUSION

The individual reader will never understand the reading process to a full extent. Not even researchers nor teachers will. The complexity regarding reading comprehension has been an issue that has been studied and observed, but more than assumptions, hypothesis or theory, nothing has been fully concluded. Reading is not easy to define because it is different for every individual. It is like the issue of speech and toddler. A baby might choose to speak before he/she walks and vice versa. Similarly, an individual reader might choose to base personal experience with text, might link what he/she knows and either grasp the meaning or misunderstand it, may base unknown vocabulary on the context or upon personal opinion etc. Different strategies are used by different readers, different approaches to text etc. As Vygotsky (1986) emphasizes: “(I)t is the functional use of the word, or any other signs, as means of focusing one’s attention, selecting distinctive features and analyzing and synthesizing them, that plays a central role in concept formation.” (1986, p. 106) As so, reading is a very complex process. “An integrated approach allows learners to explore, gather, process, refine and present information about topics they want to investigate without the constraints imposed by traditional subject barriers” (Pigdon and Woolley, 1992). An integrated approach allows students to engage in purposeful, relevant learning. More specifically it allows for learners to enjoy academic reading for the fact that they are no longer focused only on reading and comprehending, i.e. comprehension of text becomes more natural and less frustrating. Teachers that apply the integrated skills approach in academic reading wisely choose and interrelate texts with different skills, by applying different strategies and approaches and normally by designing different tasks and activities. Accordingly, (as stated by Kuehner & Hurley, 2019) “with developmental educational reform sweeping the nation, now is the time to implement meaningful change—to revise remedial pedagogy into integrated reading-writing courses that engage students with relevant, meaningful, academically challenging curriculum.”

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Perhaps every attempt that is made in the field of science and research has its limitations; there might be inconsistencies, incomplete questions and a broad formulation of questions (which need re-formulation). Limitations differ in accordance with the circumstances, instruments, participants, hypotheses and research questions. This study had its limitations such as: the instrument might have been insufficient, the number of participants might have been insufficient, the number of teachers’ responses might have been fewer than expected etc. However, the study also introduced different approaches to reading such as critical reading, text analysis, integrated skills approach etc. with the aim of developing teachers’ awareness regarding deep reading, critical reading and analysis and all the elements of effective reading comprehension. As stated previously, a continuation of this study based on students’ perceptions and experience will follow in an upcoming edition, with this, making a balance between teachers and students’ perceptions and the overall conclusions of both.

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Appendix

Teachers' questionnaire
1. How long have you been teaching literature and/or reading skills?
2. What is your personal assumption towards reading in general- do students read nowadays?
3. Has your assumption changed during your experience with students over the years? If yes, why and how?
4. Do you use different strategies with students? If yes, please name them.
5. Do you think that the Internet and computers have a bad influence on reading skills? Why?
6. Do students have the required motivation to read?
7. How do you help students with unknown words?
8. Do you advise students to base meaning upon context?
9. Is it difficult for teachers to find suitable reading materials?
10. What do you base your reading materials on: the foreseen academic plan, the syllabus or upon students needs and interests?
11. Do you think that topics of interest are better accepted by students?
12. Is reading literature, texts and passages an overall difficult skill? If so, why?