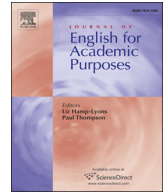


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Reading EAP: Investigating high proficiency L2 university students' strategy use through reading blogs



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the reading strategies used by academically novice, but high proficiency L2 students of English enrolled in a teacher education programme at a major Swedish university. Data were obtained from personal reading blogs kept by the students as they undertook course reading at home. An analysis revealed that students employed various reading strategies; however, there was limited evidence to suggest that students employed these strategies routinely. The most common strategy reported was connecting to short-term writing task. While students reported reflecting on their reading, they did not appear to amend unsuccessful strategy use, or re-use successful strategies. The study reveals the difficulties and limitations of high proficiency L2 students who lack experience of reading academic literature in English, and discusses pedagogical implications for reading blogs.

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1. Introduction

Reading is a central, high-stakes activity in any tertiary-level academic course; course literature often provides the basis for the content knowledge students require in order to complete written assignments, which are in turn used as the basis for assessment. The interdependent relationship between the development of reading and writing skills has now been established. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that good readers make good writers (e.g. Hirvela, 2004), and that students' writing problems are often rooted in the difficulties they experience when reading (Hirvela, 2004). Nonetheless, a scan of *JEAP*, for example, reveals that recent scholarship within EAP has tended to focus more on the productive rather than receptive skills.

From a course-design perspective, identifying the “target situation” (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987) and supporting students' development of academic reading skills entails an understanding of how successful readers read (e.g. Ashby & Rayner, 2006). To this end, research has provided an account of how texts are tackled by experienced academic readers, such as professional scholars who are acculturated into their disciplinary context (e.g. Bazerman, 1985). Grabe (2008, p. 220) describes such readers as “strategic” as they “automatically and routinely apply combinations of effective and appropriate strategies depending on reader goals, reading tasks, and strategic processing abilities”. Furthermore, the strategic reader is “aware of his or her comprehension effectiveness in relation to reading goals and applies sets of strategies appropriately to enhance comprehension of difficult texts”.

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In terms of methodological approaches to uncovering students' reading strategies, studies tend to fall into the following categories: large-scale quantitative surveys investigating trends in reading habits (e.g. Malcolm, 2009; Matsumoto, Nakayama, & Hiromori, 2013; Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine, Malmström, & Mežek, 2012), experimental studies (e.g. Martínez, 2002), questionnaire studies investigating reading strategies (e.g. Malcolm, 2009; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001) and qualitative studies using interviews and think-aloud protocols with small groups (e.g. Hirano, 2015; McCulloch, 2013). In accordance with Grabe (2008), results derived from these methods show that effective readers have a portfolio of strategies, categorized as top-down and bottom-up (e.g. Abbott, 2006), mining and writerly (Hirvela, 2004) and metacognitive and cognitive (e.g. Dhieb-Henia, 2003). These studies have greatly increased our knowledge of reading strategies in a variety of contexts. Nonetheless, in order to develop students' reading skills at the start of their university careers, more insight is needed into students' skill sets when they arrive at university ("the current situation" (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987)), and how they engage with academic texts within their own study contexts (McCulloch, 2013). Indeed, what happens outside the classroom, and in a "real life setting" has received considerably less attention (Malcolm, 2009, p. 640) in the EAP literature.

Thus, the focus of the present study is how inexperienced academic readers read when they begin their studies in tertiary education, at the start of socialization into their disciplines. Students' prior general and educational experience is a pertinent factor here (Bernhardt, 1991, 2005), and therefore investigations of readers from different linguistic, sociocultural (e.g. Parry, 1996) and educational backgrounds (e.g. Hirano, 2015) are needed. Recent studies into academic reading include investigations situated in, for example, Asia (Ohata & Fukao, 2014), Turkey (Nergis, 2013), North Africa (Dhieb-Henia, 2003; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004), and the Middle East (Malcolm, 2009) as well as in the US (e.g. Plakans, 2009). Students in Scandinavia have received less attention, as the reading research focus in this sociolinguistic context has been predominantly parallel language use (i.e. lectures in L1 accompanied by course literature in English) (e.g. Mežek, 2013a,b), rather than strategies students of English use to complete reading assignments per se. Nonetheless, these students present a particularly interesting case for EAP reading research, as their general English proficiency is comparatively high. Thus reading difficulties may stem from unfamiliarity with the discursive conventions of academic writing and domain-specific vocabulary, and a lack of prior content knowledge, rather than L2 deficits (Bernhardt, 2011).

We therefore investigate 26 first-semester students training to be English teachers at a Swedish university. Academic Reading and Writing 1 is the first course taken by these students, and is delivered via five two-hour seminars over a five-week period. While dealing with EAP material and skills, the course is a compulsory component in the teacher-education programme, and should not be understood as a preparatory language class. The overarching aim is to develop academic reading and writing skills, as well as content knowledge, which students will draw on in subsequent courses in the English department. The final assignment is a short argumentative essay on the topic of implicit and explicit vocabulary learning.

In order to support students in their construction of an academic argument, a need to ensure that students were reading the set literature more effectively was identified, and was the motivation behind our study. Through an analysis of student reading blogs, we investigate the strategies students report and the relationship between the strategy selected and text (see research questions 1 and 2 below). Our third research question asks what reading blogs can reveal in terms of students' reading practices:

RQ1. What reading-related strategies do novice, high proficiency academic readers report in their reading blogs?

RQ2. Do students adjust their reading according to text and task?

RQ3. What can reading blogs tell us about how students tackle academic reading?

The article is organised as follows. First, a brief overview of the educational background of the students is provided, followed by the theoretical framework and methodological approach adopted in the study. The results are then presented and discussed, supported by illustrative examples from the students' reading blogs. Last, pedagogical implications arising from the findings and future research directions are discussed.

2. Learning English in Swedish schools

Pupils in Sweden have extensive exposure to English and generally achieve a high proficiency in the language. As an illustration, two thirds of Swedish pupils in Year 9 achieved B2 (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) in reading comprehension in the ESLC 2011 survey (Skolverket, 2012). To qualify for tertiary-level education, pupils take two further obligatory English courses at upper-secondary level (English A and B¹), and can choose to study the advanced optional course (English C). Thus, on arrival at university, students prototypically have achieved a high standard of English, especially in terms of receptive skills (Berggren, 2015).

While the upper-secondary curriculum does not specify teaching methods, one of the aims for English is that students "deepen their ability to read, understand, and critically reflect on non-literary and factual texts within their own areas of interest and competency, or within the area of their programme" (Skolverket, n.d.) (our translation). A clear distinction is

¹ This information describes the Curriculum for non-compulsory school in Sweden which was issued in 1994. There is a new Curriculum since 2011, but the students who participated in our study followed the previous syllabus.

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