UNIVERSITY OF TARTU

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC READING IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

MA thesis

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this MA thesis is to examine the academic reading of the BA students majoring in English Language and Literature at the University of Tartu for the purposes of determining the suitable instruction that would help the students' in achieving the learning outcomes of the programme. This study attempts to answer three research questions: 1) what reading strategies do the students use when doing academic reading, 2) what are the students' aims when reading these texts, and 3) what problems do the students have when working with these texts.

The first chapter of this thesis gives an overview of the cognitive processes behind reading comprehension, the aims and potential problems of academic reading, reading strategies as well as academic reading in a foreign language. The second half of the thesis focuses on gathering and analysing the data to answer the research questions. To study the academic reading of the BA students, research papers by Weir et al (2009) and Kikerpill (2017) were taken as the basis on which this survey was formulated. The students had to fill in a questionnaire where they had to mark their agreement with given statements on a Likert-scale. The results were then analysed and compared to the two previous studies.

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INTRODUCTION

A fundamental part of university studies that forms the basis of academic success is reading. Academic reading (also known as *reading for academic purposes*) is distinguished from simple leisure reading as it has different goals: to gain some form of information or to complete a task based on the text (Taraban et al 2004: 68). Academic texts themselves, which are most often used for academic reading, also differ from other genres of texts with their distinctive features, such as their use of academic vocabulary, specific discursive text markers, their argumentative structure and subject-orientation (as opposed to being focused on the reader or the author). In addition to linguistic and structural features, academic texts are notable since they exist in a metadiscourse with other texts – their pragmatic function is to contribute to or discuss existing scientific discourses (Valle 1991). All of this means that interacting with academic texts requires a deliberate awareness of their features and a practiced skillset of strategies that allows the reader to effectively navigate those features to fulfil their goals.

In order to be able to produce something in speech or writing, the person first needs to have a sufficient amount of input, which means that the acquisition of receptive skills (reading and listening) largely influences our overall language production. The distinction between receptive and productive skills is not clear-cut, since in order to use one, we often have to actively use the other skills as well (Baha 2017: 44; Harmer 2007: 265). It is thus of interest to researchers to find out how effectively university students are able to guide their own reading since the quality of the texts that they produce is dependent on how well they can reach the aims of their academic reading. The students starting their academic journeys at the university are especially in need of more explicit instruction as to how to approach the particularities of academic reading. To improve their comprehension and make their reading processes more effective, the teachers also need to be aware of the problems that students

can have. This will help them better select the reading materials as well as the teaching methods for their courses.

Good reading comprehension is a result of metacognitive processing, or the awareness and the strategic use of one's own cognitive processes, used to set goals, plan which strategies can be used to achieve them and monitor one's success (Taraban et al 2004: 67). According to Alexander and Jetton (2000: 295), the strategies that we use to construct meaning from texts are "procedural, purposeful, effortful, willful, essential, and facilitative in nature", meaning that students must consciously invoke these strategies while reading. The use of these strategies is especially important in the case of academic reading and the guidance of how they are best applied forms the basis of academic reading instruction.

Though the skill of applying reading strategies is, in theory, transferable from one language to another, as the principles stay mostly the same no matter the language used, it is still important to address the issues that may rise when doing academic reading in a foreign language. It is suggested that in addition to courses or activities that promote academic reading comprehension in the students' first language and helping the students advance their discursive skills in their specific fields of study (see Kikerpill 2017: 155), more attention should be paid to reading strategy instruction in foreign languages, especially in the English language as universities increasingly use academic reading materials in English (Yapp et al 2021: 2). The focus group of this study is the BA students of the Department of English Studies at the University of Tartu, who not only are expected to be able to use the English language as a *lingua franca* in their academic studies but who are also required to specialize in the use of academic English on a higher level of competence. For them, academic reading in English is not just a matter of general academic necessity but an explicit learning outcome in their curriculum.

The students entering the English Language and Literature BA programme at the University of Tartu are required to have a C1-C2 level of English as a foreign language (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), which includes being able to read and understand detailed, lengthy and complex texts, including texts concerning unfamiliar subjects and texts encountered in academic life, quickly scan them for relevant information, as well as identify both stated and implied opinions and attitudes (Council of Europe 2020). During the course of their studies, they are instructed to achieve a fluent command of the language in different communicative situations, particularly in the academic context. The current curriculum of the programme (2022) includes two learning outcomes directly related to academic reading: after graduating, the students are expected to be able to use their acquired skills for the analysis of different types of texts, including academic texts, and they are also expected to be able to produce academic texts themselves in the Anglo-American tradition. In addition to the outcomes related to reading, writing and general practical language proficiency, the aims focusing on the students' awareness of different disciplines, concepts, theories, and methodologies, as well as their skills of linguistic and cultural analysis, are all largely dependent on their academic reading. This is why this thesis will focus on the perceptions that the students have of their own academic reading to determine if there are any significant problems with their reading process compared to what is expected of them.

This study will target three issues: the strategies that the BA students at the department of English use when doing academic reading in the English language, their reading aims, and the problems they face during their reading process. Two studies have been used as a basis for this research. Weir et al (2009) explore the academic reading of under- and postgraduate students at the University of Bedfordshire during their first year of study to compare the results with the reading construct tested by the International English

Language Testing System (IELTS) reading module. Based on the research of Weir et al (2009), Kikerpill (2017) investigated the difficulties that the students at the University of Tartu have while reading Estonian texts for academic purposes (both native and non-native speakers). This thesis will use the methodology of those two studies to try to find answers to the following research questions regarding the English Language and Literature BA students at the University of Tartu (Year 1 to Year 3):

- What reading strategies do the students use when doing academic reading?

- What are the students' aims when reading these texts?

- What problems do the students have when working with these texts?

1 READING COMPREHENSION AND STRATEGIES IN ACADEMIC READING

The first chapter of this thesis is concerned with establishing a theoretical background to the empirical study, doing so by examining reading done in an academic setting. For this purpose, the chapter is divided into four subchapters, each with a focus relevant for the research questions. The first subchapter focuses on reading comprehension in general, examining the different processes happening while reading, forming a basis for the rest of the discussion. The second, third and fourth subchapters are concerned with aims, strategies, and problems in academic reading, introducing the blocks on which the survey of this study is built. The last subchapter looks at academic reading done in a foreign language to highlight some of the ways in which academic reading can be influenced by the reader's language level – relevant as the focus group of this study are non-native English users. All this information is later used as a framework through which the results of this study are interpreted.

1.1 Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension, in short, means the ability to engage with a text in a meaningful way, using cognitive and metacognitive processes to understand what is written and gain information (Yapp et al 2021: 2). This study adapts a process-oriented viewpoint, interpreting reading not as a sum total product made up of one skill that is *Reading*, but rather as a combination of the reader employing the use of different interdependent skills and strategies that create the process where meaning is construed from orthographic representations of language (see discussions on the componentiality of reading in Khalifa and Weir 2009: 35-40; Weir et al 2009: 103; Weir et al 2000; and Urquhart and Weir 1998). The procedure of reading includes the processing of information on a linguistic and semantic

level, the recognition of information as well as its storage and analysis. These different aspects of reading comprehension will be examined in this subchapter, using Khalifa and Weir's (2009) cognitive processing model for reading comprehension as a framework for the discussion. This particular model was chosen because it examines in detail the different processes happening during reading that are relevant to this thesis, it is applicable to academic reading in particular, and it also forms the foundation of the studies this research is based on.

Taking studies done in cognitive psychology as a basis, Khalifa and Weir (2009: 40-61) formulated a model to describe the cognitive reading process of first language readers that can also be seen as the goal towards which non-native language users strive. The visualisation of the model can be seen in Figure 1. The middle column of the model shows the various processes that the reader goes through when given visual input in the form of a text; the right-hand column indicates the necessary knowledge bases for comprehension; and the left-hand column specifies the metacognitive activities needed to guide the reading process. When reading, the reader sets a goal, chooses an appropriate reading type, and monitors their goal-achievement, remediating if necessary. The core cognitive processes shift from decoding the text through word recognition, lexical access, and parsing (that require knowledge of the form and meaning of vocabulary items, and syntax) to creating meaning through semantic propositions, inferencing, and building mental models (that require general and topic knowledge). Finally, structural knowledge is used to create an understanding of how the ideas in the text connect to each other as well as to synthesise and relate the received information to information received from other sources. These processes are further discussed in the following paragraphs.
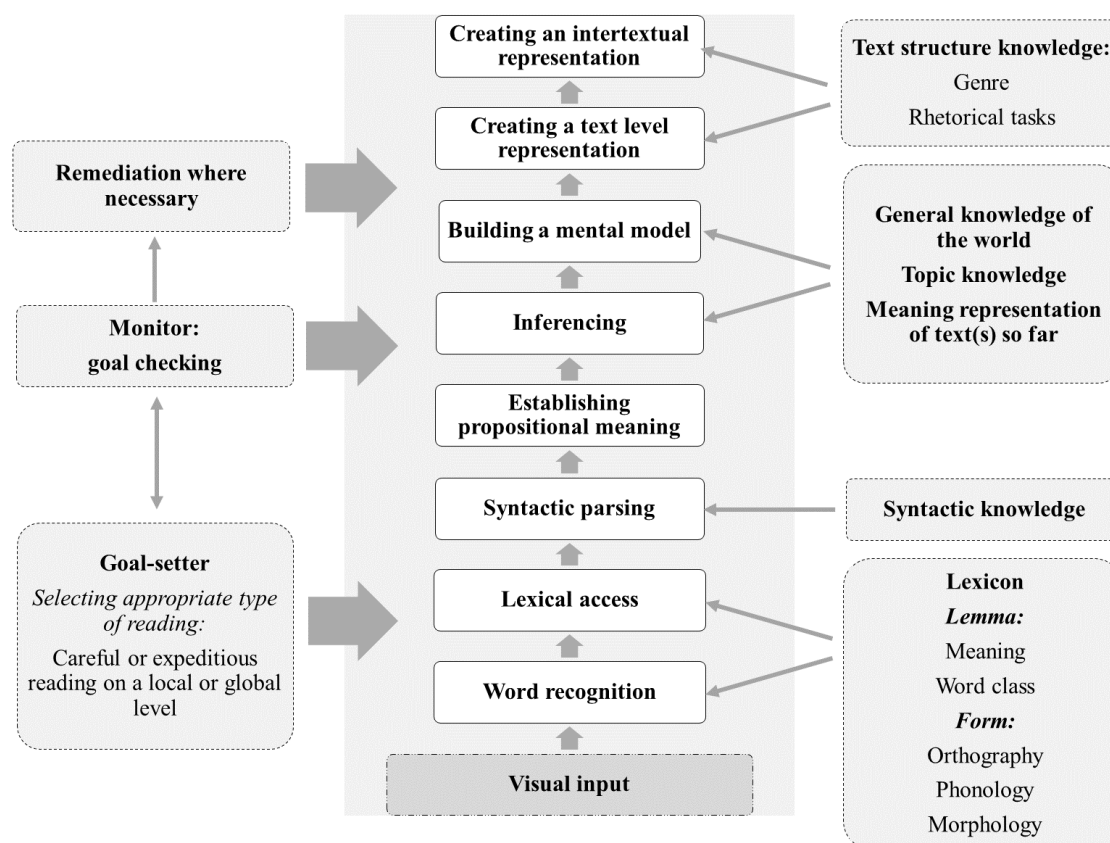
Figure 1: Khalifa and Weir's (2009) cognitive processing model for reading comprehension

A large part of reading is related to the knowledge of basic linguistic features of the language that the text is written in. In fact, the core part of the general reading process is made up of the fast, accurate and automatic word recognition of a sizeable body of vocabulary (Grabe 2009: 23; Adams 1994: 3). It is suggested that in terms of vocabulary, a reader needs to know 98-99% of the lexical items in a written discourse to be able to sufficiently comprehend it (Schmitt 2008: 330). Because of this, the importance of vocabulary size is often focused on when discussing the improvement of reading comprehension.

Grabe (2009: 23) highlights the fact that for word recognition during reading, a reader must be able to "activate links between the graphic form and phonological information" in addition to going through complex semantic, morphological, and syntactic processing. Understanding graphic forms does not mean that a reader focuses on individual

letters when reading, but rather that they detect patterns from units that already exist in their memory (Adams 1994: 108, 129). Though some consideration is given to phonology in the development of reading comprehension[1], the goal for the reader is to be able to sight read. *Sight reading* is the term used for the ability to recognise the meaning of words very quickly, without completely processing them orthographically and phonologically (Grabe 2009: 24). A reader may be able to read a word out loud based on their orthographic and phonological knowledge but may not have created the necessary mental links to be able to discern its meaning (Grabe 2009: 26). In the case of the rapid process of fluent sight reading, however, it is important for the reader to be familiar with the meaning of the words in their different contexts to make the word recognition process as automated as possible – the retrieval of a lexical item from the reader's existing knowledge base with its form and meaning, i.e. lexical access, should be instantaneous. This, of course, is only possible if the reader has had enough opportunities to acquire the form, meaning, grammar and collocations of the vocabulary (see *Lexicon* in the bottom right of the reading model in Figure 1).

While dealing with word recognition and lexical access, the reader is simultaneously occupied with parsing the text for its syntactic information; meaning that the reader analyses the words, phrases, and sentences in the text by dissecting them into meaningful units. The information received from this process (e.g. tense, modality, clause elements, discourse markers, etc.) is used to create the semantic propositions necessary for the comprehension

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[1] For example, Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg's research (2014) defines the underlying components of reading comprehension to be general language comprehension, decoding, and phonological awareness – by this categorisation, an influential part in reading comprehension is played by the reader's ability to read the text out loud. Studies focusing specifically on second language acquisition, however, show that oral skills do not entirely predicate general reading comprehension in terms of word recognition (Durgunoglu et al 1993) and that the relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension is not significant enough in a smaller sample size to indicate a strong correlation (Prakash and Kurian 2019). Nevertheless, students show more ease with word recognition and oral skills when the orthographic script of a language is more transparent and regular (i.e. the connection between pronunciation and the written forms of words is easily detected), even when they might not be as proficient in the language overall (Geva and Siegel 2000; Gholamain and Geva 1999). The role of phonology in orthographic processing and general reading comprehension is an interesting consideration; though, due to the focus of this study, it will not be further explored.

of the text: the reader uses their lexical, grammatical, and contextual knowledge to create a clause-level understanding of what is actually meant by these combinations of words (Grabe 2009: 30; Khalifa and Weir 2009: 50). The text itself, however, does not often provide all the information necessary to understand it: it may feature references to other texts, events, social phenomena, or other details that the reader is expected to know to comprehend the text; it may also use figurative language or allusions, or simply leave unsaid the things that the reader is supposed to figure out for themselves. A reader is thus constantly engaged with making inferences – that is creatively filling in the gaps that the text leaves by adding information, using their already existing knowledge (accessed from long-term memory) to build a coherent understanding of what is written (Khalifa and Weir 2009: 50). All this information is stored in the reader's working memory, where it is analysed while reading (Grabe 2009: 34).

When building a mental model of the text, the reader is continually evaluating which information is currently important, moving from the smallest components to larger units of comprehension and using a broader understanding to help with the discernment of details (Khalifa and Weir 2009: 51-52). Not everything in the text is relevant, though, which is why the reader also monitors their goal-fulfilment and prioritises certain information over others. While creating a text level representation in their heads, the reader uses their understanding of discourse structures and the propositions that they have prioritised to determine the overall meaning of the text, its structure and the parts that are relevant for their goals (Khalifa and Weir 2009: 52-53). This is primarily the information that makes its way to the reader's long-term memory, where it is connected to already existing units of information. The ability to integrate the newly received information with previously existing knowledge – especially synthesising, organising, and connecting different texts into a coherent whole – in the creation of an intertextual representation can be said to be the basis for the competent and

meaningful production of language, particularly the production of advanced-level academic writing.

Even when nothing observable is happening while reading, there are all these active cognitive processes taking place in the language user's head on both a lower level (word recognition, syntactic parsing, the formation of semantic propositions) and a higher level (inferencing, building mental models, creating text level and intertextual representations). Reading is not only a "bottom-up" process where meaning is created starting from the smallest units (orthographic representations of sounds) and building up to meaningful propositions; instead, when reading, people often use their pre-existing linguistic and contextual knowledge to aid them in making inferences "top-down" (Field 1999). The linear hierarchy of higher-level (top) and lower-level (bottom) processes can be said to be solely metaphorical, not reflecting the order in which they are actually used, nor their importance. A less experienced reader, for example, may put more emphasis on decoding information, while a reader with more awareness of text structures, topic and general knowledge of the world may use this to fill in the gaps of their linguistic knowledge that would otherwise impede their understanding. Therefore, while we can see that reading is made up of different cognitive processes, their inter-reliability makes it important that a reader is able to engage in both lower- and higher-level processes equally quickly and efficiently.

Having mapped out an overall understanding of what the process of reading is like and what the potential stages where issues with reading comprehension may appear are, the following subchapters will discuss the three central topics of the research questions of this study: reading aims, strategies, and problems.

1.2 Reading aims

When considering the suitable instruction that would help readers with their comprehension and the development of effective reading practices, one has to take into consideration the aims that a self-regulated reader uses for monitoring and effectivating their reading. As Grabe (2009: 19) points out, there is no general set of guidelines that would fit everyone's needs as all instruction should be constructed according to both the aims of the individual learner as well as the environment in which they are doing their reading, be it university or workplace. This means that the first step in helping students to improve their reading comprehension is to find out why they are reading in the first place. The lack of awareness of the goals can be a problem among both the readers themselves as well as the instructors, which can create difficulties in directing the process of academic reading.

One general classification of reading aims is based on the overall approach that the reader has when starting their reading task: *reading for general information* (also known as skimming, or reading that focuses on global comprehension), *reading for specific information* (also known as scanning, or reading that focuses on selective comprehension), and *reading for detailed comprehension* (Harmer 2007: 283; Kikerpill 2017: 138). Sometimes reading for creative or leisure purposes is also highlighted as a separate category, though this is less relevant when discussing academic reading. Taraban's research (2004: 68) is formed on the basis that there is a distinct set of goals for academic reading as there are usually specific tasks that need to be filled, which also require the use of specific strategies that one does not usually use in the case of, for example, leisure reading.

> College students are responsible for a variety of assignments, from answering questions at the end of a chapter to writing summaries of course topics. The successful completion of these tasks depends on reading, but reading is not the end-goal of these tasks. Students devote considerable effort to collecting information and organizing it in a form that can be accessed later, as well as taking actions to remember information from the text in order to succeed in class and on tests. (Taraban et al 2004: 68)

The key words are collection, organisation, and retention (of information). Grabe (2009: 8) proposes a simple categorisation of six general purposes of academic reading: in addition to

skimming, scanning, and understanding general information, a student may also read to learn, to "integrate information", or to "evaluate, critique, and use information". In all cases, the emphasis is on the information gained from reading the text (be it factual, structural, etc.), not on affect (e.g. satisfaction or enjoyment gained from reading).

A similar way of looking at the purposes of reading is described by Khalifa and Weir's (2009) model of reading types, which, in turn, has its roots in Urquhart and Weir's (1998) matrix of reading types (Table 1). The latter differentiates between expeditious and careful reading which happen on two levels: global and local. *Expeditious reading* is when the reader's aim is to work with the text quickly and efficiently, inferring its main idea (global level) or finding specific information (local level). It can be a non-linear process and not all the information from the text is obtained; rather, the reader must be very selective as to what to process when reading. *Careful reading* is a time-consuming linear process where the reader attempts to gather all the information from the text. On the local level this means understanding the vocabulary and grammar of the sentences, and on the global level it means comprehending both the explicit meaning of the text and making inferences.

Table 1: Urquhart and Weir's (1998) matrix of reading types

	Global level	**Local level**
Expeditious reading	Skimming the text for the main idea	Scanning the text for specific information
Careful reading	Comprehending the main idea, its justification and understanding the cohesion and coherence of the text	Comprehending the ideas on a smaller level, understanding the lexis and syntax

Weir et al (2009: 120), using the model of reading types by Khalifa and Weir (2009) as well as additional research, formulated the rubric of *"The following purposes for reading are important on my course"* for the questionnaire in their study looking at the academic reading of university students. They listed four different aims of academic reading based on the categorisation of strategic, global, and expeditious reading (see Table 2). This follows a

similar focus on gaining information through reading as highlighted by Grabe (2009) and Taraban (2004), differentiating between reading for specific and general information, integrating information, and the careful reading on a global level, i.e. understanding the coherence and cohesion of the text. The same four-way categorisation is suggested and further discussed by Enright et al (2000).

Table 2: Purposes of academic reading (Weir et al 2009: 120)

1.	Searching texts to find information for assignments and exams
2.	Basic comprehension of main ideas
3.	Understand meaning of text as a whole; how main ideas and details relate to each other and author's purpose
4.	Integrating information from different texts for use in assignments, exams

Both "Basic comprehension of main ideas" and "Understand meaning of text as a whole" focus on the general meaning of the text. The specification in the latter ("how main ideas and details relate to each other and author's purpose") gives the hint that the understanding of the structural cohesion and the coherence of ideas is what is meant by understanding the "text as a whole". Basic comprehension, contrastively, "does not necessarily require an integrated understanding of how the supporting ideas and factual details of the text form a coherent whole" (Enright et al 2000: 5). Creating a "text level representation", according to Khalifa and Weir's model (2009), requires some knowledge about text structure, genre, and rhetorical tasks (e.g. whether the text is narrative or argumentative) – this means that the focus is on how the text is constructed, and how (and whether) it fulfils its purpose. From a student's point of view, this also often means learning about how to construct and produce academic texts by using the text they are reading as an example.

In addition to that, it is important to make the distinction between simply searching for information for assignments/exams and integrating information from different texts as clear as possible. "Searching texts to find information for assignments and exams", or

"search reading" as described by Enright et al (2000: 4), is concerned with the specific information that can be parsed from the text itself while the reader is engaged with monitoring their goal-achievement, i.e. whether they have managed to find the necessary information to fulfil their given assignment. Meanwhile, "Integrating information from different texts for use in assignments, exams" places more emphasis on the reader's own ability to synthesise, analyse and combine information into their own line of argumentation – the focus is shifting towards the higher-level processes of building a mental model and creating an intertextual organised representation across texts, using the reader's general knowledge of the world and topic knowledge.

According to Weir et al (2009: 101), careful reading alone is not sufficient for university students. To be an efficient reader, a student needs to be able to focus on expeditious reading aims to work through texts faster and not spend too much time on the parts of texts that do not help them in achieving their aims. At the same time, the goal of academic reading should be to move away from finding information for assignments and careful reading; instead, more attention should be paid to higher-level processes like understanding how ideas in texts are connected and how to integrate information between different texts (Enright et al 2000: 6). To leave more processing capacity for that, the reading itself needs to be made as efficient as possible and that can be done using suitable reading strategies.

1.3 Reading strategies

Successful reading comprehension is a result of metacognitive processing, or the awareness and the strategic use of one's own cognitive processes (Taraban et al 2004; Livingston 2003: 4). Metacognitive processes are used for setting goals, directing our progress, and making our actions more efficient by utilising different strategies (Kikerpill

2017: 137). One type of these processes is collectively known as *reading strategies* – the conscious and deliberate steps we take to optimise our reading; as opposed to subconscious and automatised processes that are known as *skills* (see Cohen and Upton 2006: 3; Weir et al 2000: 19). It is possible for reading strategies to become automated skills through repeated practice (Afflerbach et al 2008: 368; Yapp et al 2021: 3); though, since the two types of processes do not exist in a hierarchy, we cannot argue that the goal of strategies is to entirely become skills in the development of efficient reading. Reading skills in their subconscious state are fast and reflexive mechanisms that require less processing power in the working memory and are thus necessary for fluent and efficient reading. The use of conscious strategies, on the other hand, requires more time and effort; however, because they necessitate deliberate control and awareness of one's actions, they are often characteristic to flexible and goal-oriented readers who are able to monitor and correct their own reading process (Afflerbach et al 2008: 368). In the case of academic reading, purposefully used strategies are just as important as well-developed reading skills.

Grabe (2009: 15) describes strategic reading as a process that uses the reader's ability to predict, organise, summarise text content, highlight the most important information as well as to check comprehension and gaps in understanding, and finally, to confirm if the comprehension matches the set goals of the reading task. Alexander and Judy (1988: 376) characterise strategies as "goal-directed procedures that are planfully or intentionally evoked either prior to, during, or after the performance of a task" that "aid in the regulation, execution, or evaluation of that task". To Taraban (2004: 68), a "metacognitive reader" can plan the reading task, monitor their comprehension and use different strategies to fulfil their goals while reading. Based on these descriptions we can see that it is generally acknowledged that reading strategies are not only something that are used *during* reading, but also *before* and *after*.

Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) (as referenced in Cohen and Upton 2006: 4-5) reviewed 38 research studies and compiled a list of over 150 reading strategies, which they then grouped together into three broad categories:

- planning and identifying strategies used to determine the meaning of the text that include activities like goal-setting, activating prior knowledge on the topic, looking for features in the text that would help them understand it, and selectively reading parts of it;

- monitoring strategies that include checking comprehension, predicting, and re-reading, as well as identifying the parts of the text that carry the main message, inferring or looking up meaning of unknown elements;

- evaluating strategies which the readers use to reflect on or respond to the text.

As an example of a categorisation of strategies based on those three phases (before, during, and after), we can refer to Klapwijk and van der Walt (2011: 28), whose aim was to provide guidance to teachers for explicit reading strategy instruction in the classroom (see Table 3 for their categorisation of reading strategies). According to them, the phase of *during reading* contains the least amount of reading strategies, as more emphasis is put on the actions preceding and following the actual reading portion of the assignment. This kind of distribution of strategies is likely used due to the fact that while *monitoring* their reading process, a reader needs to make sure they have understood what is written and, if they realise that they have not comprehended the text, they will stop and deploy additional strategies, such as re-reading difficult sections or looking up unknown words (Klapwijk and van der Walt 2011: 26). These additional strategies, however, are not explicitly mentioned in their categorisation and would need further elaboration.

Table 3: Klapwijk and van der Walt's (2011:28) categorisation of reading strategies

Reading phase	Reading strategy
Before reading	Identify Text Type
	Identify Purpose for Reading
	Activating Prior Knowledge
	Predicting
During reading	Monitoring
After reading	Clarifying
	Questioning
	Summarisation

It is important to recognise that there is not just one definitive way of categorising reading strategies – the labelling of different strategies is dependent on the purpose of the categorisation. Because of this, it is necessary that we refer to prior studies with a similar goal to this thesis that have already compiled a list of reading strategies. Weir et al (2009) developed a list of reading strategies for academic reading (Table 4) based on an open-ended pilot questionnaire answered by university students. The rubric *"How I read for assignments"* includes 16 items, describing actions taken before or while reading, mostly relating to expeditious reading on a global level but also including careful reading strategies on the local and global level.

Table 4: Strategies for academic reading (Weir et al 2009: 122)

1.	Think carefully to make sure I know exactly what I'll be looking for before I start reading.
2.	Look quickly through whole text for general understanding before doing anything else
3.	Gradually understand what a text is about by reading the sentences slowly and carefully in the order they occur
4.	Remember where relevant info is or mark its location for later use in writing my assignment
5.	Think carefully of key words and quickly look for them or words with similar meanings to check if text is worth reading more carefully
6.	Look at the titles or headings of a text before deciding to read it quickly
7.	First get overall meaning of text e.g. by reading first paragraph and conclusion and first sentence of other paragraphs
8.	If I do not know the meaning of a word in a text, I try to work out its meaning
9.	I read a text slowly all the way through even if some parts do not seem relevant to my assignment
10.	I read slowly only those sections of a text I have marked as relevant when going through it quickly before
11.	While reading I try to relate content to what I know already and judge its value
12.	I look back at previous parts of the text to check meaning
13.	I try to understand how the text is organized: how the ideas and details connect with each other
14.	I make notes on relevant points from the text as I go along

15. I integrate information from the text I am reading with information from other texts I have already read
16. I read critically to establish and evaluate the author's position

As we can see, the strategies used for academic reading listed here are closely connected to the reading aims discussed in the previous subchapter. Indeed, for the selection of suitable reading strategies, the reader first needs to acknowledge what the goal of their reading process is and then formulate a deliberate plan as to how to fulfil this goal. There are reading strategies that are more suitable for careful reading, such as reading the text all the way through, judging its content, and inferencing the meaning of unknown words; there are also strategies that make the reading process faster for expeditious purposes, such as looking for titles and headings or only reading certain sections of the text. Some strategies are better suited to dealing with issues happening during lower-level processing, while some help the reader create mental models and representations necessary for higher-level processes. If the reader, however, has not set clear aims for their reading and thus has not selected suitable strategies for reaching those aims, the reader may experience certain obstacles when reading.

1.4 Reading problems

Having mapped out the general reading aims of academic reading and the different reading strategies that can be used to reach those aims, it is important to focus on the reason *why* we conduct studies that examine students' reading habits: to find out what kind of problems they have while reading that prevent them from fulfilling their goals. This inquiry forms the basis of providing students with the support they need in the form of additional instructions regarding the most suitable reading strategies. One can visualise this progression as a graph (Figure 2), where the reading process starts with the formulation of the reading aims and ends with the fulfilment of these aims, while reading problems are the disruptors

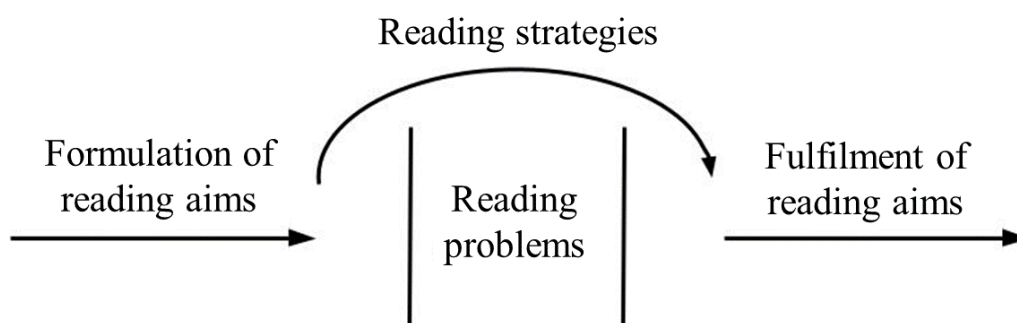that impede the progress and reading strategies are the means with which these difficulties can be overcome.

Reading strategies

Formulation of reading aims → Reading problems → Fulfilment of reading aims

Figure 2: The simplified reading process

What then makes reading difficult in the case of academic reading? There are plenty of potential problems that students may have when reading academic texts, which is why it is useful to turn to Weir et al's study (2009) once again. When discussing the context validity of reading tests and what factors may influence the reader and cause difficulties, Weir et al (2009: 107) describe the "context validity parameters" relevant for reading tests in two categories: parameters related to linguistic demands (e.g. lexical resources, cultural/content knowledge, task input/output, etc.) and those related to the task setting (text length and time constraints) – it is not just the reader's personal abilities and language level that affect their reading experience. Indeed, their preliminary questionnaire identified that students actually struggle most with the amount of academic reading that they need to do in the time that is given (Weir et al 2009: 104). Based on their analysis of different studies, Weir et al (2009) created a list with potential problems for the rubric "*When I read for assignments, I have difficulty with*" in their main questionnaire (Table 5).

Table 5: Problems when reading for assignments (Weir et al 2009: 125)

1.	The time available to do the necessary reading
2.	Reading texts where the subject matter is complicated
3.	Words I do not know
4.	Sentence structures

5.	Finding relevant information quickly
6.	Lengthy texts
7.	Lack of background knowledge to understand the content
8.	Making notes on information I will need
9.	Reading carefully to understand the main ideas
10.	Summarizing ideas from a text in my own words
11.	Understanding a detailed logical argument
12.	Reading critically to establish and evaluate the author's position on a particular topic
13.	Relating the content of a text to my existing knowledge
14.	Deciding what is important for me and what is not
15.	Reading a text quickly to decide whether I should study it carefully
16.	Understanding the text as a whole; how main ideas and details are connected to each other
17.	Integrating information from text I am reading with info from other texts I have read

An important influencer of how difficult the reader considers the text to be is the length of sentences and words, which often goes together with the overall "sophistication" of a text; for example, the extensive use of subordinate clauses and derived words are features of more complex texts (Hinkel 2003: 276). Another aspect that influences a reader is, of course, their ability to recognise words (Harmer 2007: 272). For a fluent reading process that does not cause the reader difficulties, the reader needs to be able to sight read, which in turn requires lexical access to happen at great speed – it is not sufficient that the reader has vaguely encountered the vocabulary before; they also need to be fully familiar with it to recognise the words instantaneously. Perfetti (1997: 342) highlights that people who are less skilled in reading comprehension often struggle specifically with lower-level processes related to the identification of words and issues with working memory; however, since higher-level processes are often reliant on the efficiency of lower-level skills, any problem with the latter impedes the reader being able to process the information they have read. The more effort the reader puts into the lower-level processes, the more strained their working memory becomes, leaving no processing space for the creation of text based and intertextual representations necessary for good reading comprehension (Enright et al 2000: 12). This makes word recognition, lexical access, and syntactic parsing the foundational skills of reading that require particular attention.

The vocabulary used in academic writing, however, is not the same as in spoken or conversational discourse, or literary fiction, making academic reading a more complex endeavour. Baumann and Michael (2010) suggest a scheme of categorization of academic vocabulary with five categories, differentiating between domain-specific academic vocabulary (rarer specialised vocabulary that varies in different academic fields) and general academic vocabulary (more frequent words and phrases that are used across fields). There are multiple general academic word lists created for the purpose of advancing students' vocabulary; most famous and widely-used of them is probably Coxhead's "A New Academic Word List" (2000). Hyland and Tse (2007) argue that some items in Coxhead's list are frequent due to their concentration in only a couple of academic fields, not all; furthermore, the items on the list are often polysemic, creating domain-specific literacies that are formed inside a theoretical and methodological framework characteristic to those fields. Instead of general academic word lists that can be unreliable, Hyland and Tse suggest creating activities that allow sufficient in-context exposure to academic vocabulary when teaching academic language.

The less focus is given to domain-specific academic vocabulary in specific academic contexts, the more likely it is that students will find themselves struggling when trying to orient themselves while reading academic texts in their field. Indeed, Gernsbacher et al (1990) demonstrate with their research that less skilful readers struggle with eliminating the irrelevant meanings of words when reading, which slows down their reading process significantly as they spend time creating irrelevant structures. Since academic vocabulary is often polysemic, with words having a wide range of meanings that vary based on the context in which they appear (e.g. compare the definition of the word *analyse* in the fields of discourse studies, statistics and chemistry), it can be argued that the readers' difficulties with understanding a complex subject matter of a text can come down to their confusion regarding

the specific meanings of the academic vocabulary they encounter. This, consequently, will affect the way the reader follows how detailed arguments are formed, how they relate the information to their existing knowledge and their critical reading skills, in addition to their speed of reading.

The aims of academic reading should be the integration of information between different sources and understanding how ideas are connected in a text, which are higher-level processes that require a lot of processing capacity. However, we can hypothesise that people who are struggling with these higher-level processes, including understanding difficult subject matter of texts, may do so because of problems they may experience with lower-level skills, which for proficient readers are fast and automatised. These issues with lexical access, syntactic parsing and creating semantic propositions are likely to cause difficulties especially for non-native readers as they are language-specific processes.

1.5 Academic reading in a foreign language

While basic cognitive processes, including those used for reading comprehension, work the same way across different languages, and metacognitive reading strategies, in theory, are transferable in the same way, we cannot generalize and claim that reading comprehension is automatically the same in different languages since there are many factors that influence the reading process (Grabe 2009: 1). There is certainly a difference between the experiences of native and foreign language speakers at universities (Weir et al 2009: 102). Often the issues of foreign language speakers rise from the lack of knowledge about vocabulary – their lexical access is limited –, which in turn causes problems with sight reading and impedes other processes.

Tercanlioglu's research (2004), for example, indicates that metacognitive strategies are used more by native speakers while a lot of effort of English as foreign language students

is being spent on decoding information, thus leaving them with less processing capacity for higher-level functions. Enright et al (2000: 12,13) agree, emphasising the amount of lower-level processing done by foreign language readers and their lack of interactive engagement with the text due to that. They also identify three key differences between native and foreign language readers: 1) foreign language readers can rely on their native language reading experience to aid them when reading; 2) their reading process itself is thus "cross-linguistic"; and 3) they often start reading before achieving sufficient oral proficiency in the language (Enright et al 2000: 7). Thus, the reader's native language can be used for scaffolding, to solve problems with lexical access and syntactic parsing, conduct comprehension checks and monitor their reading process, as well as clarify and predict text structure, content, and other characteristics (Upton and Lee-Thompson 2001: 472, 491). This means that while foreign language readers may struggle more with lower-level processes, they can still take advantage of the reading strategies and skills they have acquired when reading in their native language to help them fill the gaps created by their lack of linguistic knowledge of the foreign language.

Even so, there are limits to how useful the reading skills and strategies acquired in the readers' first language are when taking into consideration their overall level in the language that they are reading in. At some point, when the reader's language level is low enough and their knowledge of lexical and grammatical features is insufficient for faster processing, the reader is unable to compensate for the gaps in their knowledge with the use of reading strategies. The reader is unable to deploy efficient skills and strategies when their processing power is almost completely used up by decoding unfamiliar information. Because of this, expeditious reading strategies and skills (e.g. skimming, scanning) are what often differentiate between native and foreign language speakers as the transfer of skills from one

language to another is only possible when the language level of the reader is high enough (Kikerpill 2017: 138, 139; Weir et al 2009: 101).

While this study is specifically concerned with the students of English Language and Literature, academic reading in English is a universal concern for higher education as more and more materials in different fields of study are being written in this modern academic *lingua franca*. Yapp et al (2021: 2) claim that reading strategies acquired in the first language do not automatically transfer to reading done in a foreign language – contrasting with the previously referenced studies that say that this is the case – to argue for explicit instruction of strategic reading in English for university students to whom it is a foreign language. The current study does not agree with Yapp et al (2021) regarding the non-transferability of reading strategies, but there is a case to be made about the necessity of more explicit English-language reading instruction as it may reveal and help the students overcome the underlying problems that they may have when reading in a foreign language, whether these problems stem from the inability to use strategies or issues with lower-level processes.

While the focus group of this study has a high level of English as a foreign language, it is still important to pay attention to what affects the students due to their language. We maintain that the (meta)cognitive processes responsible for reading comprehension function the same irrespective of the language, just like the students' aims and their use of strategies for academic reading are mostly not influenced by their language, unless language acquisition or practice itself is one of the goals of their academic reading or the reader comes across problems that stem from language gaps that they need to overcome with the use of certain strategies. In the following chapter, a group of students will be examined to see what their perception of academic reading in English as a foreign language is by looking at why and how they read, as well as what difficulties they experience.

2 STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ACADEMIC READING

As the study of academic texts has a central position in all university curricula, but the needs of the students differ based on their fields of study, it is necessary to identify the reading habits of students in specific curricula. In the case of this study, the target group are the BA students (from Year 1 to Year 3) of the Department of English Studies at the University of Tartu, majoring in English Language and Literature. Kikerpill (2017) has investigated the problems that the students at the University of Tartu have while reading *Estonian* texts for academic purposes, but the current study focuses on a group of students who are expected to do most of their academic reading in *English*, which is a foreign language for the students who apply to study in this programme. The aim of this study is not only to find out what reading strategies the students use, what aims and problems they have in order to compare the results to other similar studies done with different focus groups, but also to provide the instructors at the English department with data that will help them to design study materials and activities that foster the academic reading skills of their students based on their particular needs.

2.1 Methodology

This study is based on previous research and the methodology of Kikerpill (2017) and Weir et al (2009). Kikerpill's study (2017) has taken (with significant modifications) the questionnaire used to examine the students' academic reading from the study by Weir et al (2009) to survey 80 university students from different fields of study, 61% of whom were Estonian and 39% non-native Estonian language users. Weir et al (2009) studied a diverse body of students at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK (both native and non-native English speakers, under- or postgraduate students of different years of study, etc.). Their main questionnaire, formed based on a preliminary questionnaire, was distributed both on

paper and electronically in 2006 and yielded a total of 766 responses. The questionnaire items have been discussed in the literature review section. In addition to Kikerpill (2017), this questionnaire has also been modified to be used in studies by Dabiri et al (2016) and Thienpermpool (2015). Weir et al (2009) and Kikerpill's (2017) works will also be used as points of comparison to analyse the results of this study.

For the most part, the questionnaire of this study (titled "Academic reading of BA students at the UT English department" – the transcript of the online questionnaire can be found in Appendix 1 of this thesis) is the same as in Weir et al (2009); however, some changes have been made to fit it better to the aims and the target group of the study. The first personal details section is only concerned with the year of study (first, second or third in the BA studies), first language(s) and nationality of the respondent – for the purpose of seeing if these variables play any role in the results. The age and gender of the respondents were not deemed necessary information due to the small size of the target group and because the aims of this study do not require making gender and age distinctions in the data analysis.

The main part of the questionnaire (titled "Academic reading I") uses the same questions as Weir et al's study (2009) with slight variation in wording. The modified questions are as follows:

- "The following sources of information are important in my studies:",
- "The following purposes for reading are important in my studies:",
- "How I read for assignments:", and
- "When I read for assignments, I have difficulty with:".

The respondents are asked to show the extent of their agreement or disagreement on a Likert scale (*1 – Definitely disagree; 2 – Mostly disagree; 3 – Neither agree nor disagree; 4 – Mostly agree; 5 – Definitely agree*) for each statement. These statements have been discussed in the literature review section of this thesis as they are a part of the theoretical

background. While the statements in the first question (sources) and the last (problems) remain the same as for Weir et al (2009), changes were made to the ones in the second (purposes) and third (strategies) questions. Based on previous discussions, feedback from the pilot questionnaire and the author's own discretion, the statement "Understanding the meaning of the text as a whole: working out how the main ideas and details in a text relate to each other and to the author's purpose" from Weir et al's questionnaire was deemed too confusing for the respondent, especially in the context of the other statements, and was thus replaced with the statement "Understanding the structural coherence and cohesion of the text" in the question about reading purposes. Since the target group of the questionnaire of this study are all English as foreign language speakers then an additional purpose was also added among the statements: "Language acquisition" – to see if it was an influencing factor for their academic reading.

Based on the feedback from the pilot questionnaire, the wording of many of the statements in the questions about purposes and strategies were slightly changed to make them more easily understandable; for example, the statement "I look back at previous parts of the text to check meaning." was changed to "I look back at previous parts of the text to check the meaning of something I do not understand.". In addition to that, four new statements were included in the question about reading strategies, taken from the questionnaire from Kikerpill's study (2017) and translated into English:

- "I check the meaning of an unknown word or phrase from a dictionary."

- "I summarise what I have read in my head."

- "I re-read parts of the text multiple times to understand its meaning."

- "I often make pauses while reading to think about what I have read."

These statements were included because the author of this study found them to be an important addition to the list of reading strategies, especially to those of foreign language

speakers. As discussed previously, there does not just exist one definitive list of reading strategies that manages to include all variations of individual metacognitive processing. For this questionnaire, the number of statements for this question was limited to twenty not to make the questionnaire too tiring for the respondent. However, each of the four questions in the "Academic reading I" section had an additional voluntary open-ended question "Are there any other [sources/purposes/strategies/difficulties] you wish to specify?" to allow the respondents to make any additions they felt were necessary.

The third part of the questionnaire (titled "Academic reading II") differs from the last two questions of Weir et al's (2009) questionnaire. The multiple-choice question "How much academic reading do you estimate you do in English compared to other languages? (E.g. You do about 61-80% of your academic reading in English.)" was added to have a rough estimate of how much reading the respondents do in English, as there are subjects in the English Language and Literature curriculum that require academic reading in languages other than English. Since this study is concerned with English as foreign language students, then it is important to provide this estimate. The second question in the last section is dedicated to reading preferences concerning paper or electronic medium ("What affects your preference regarding using a printed copy or a digital copy of a text when reading for an assignment?"). This question is open-ended to allow the respondents to express their opinions freely and to provide qualitative data with individual nuances. The question does not provide data for any specific research questions of this study, but it was nevertheless included to give additional information about the students' perceptions on academic reading that could benefit the teachers at the English department. The last question of the questionnaire ("Do you have any additional comments about the content of this study?") is another open-ended question that gives the respondents an opportunity to make any additions, should they wish to.

The questionnaire was hosted electronically using the Google Forms survey administration software and sent to the students using the mailing list of the department and other online platforms. The software was chosen due to its user-friendly interface and popularity, with the intention of minimizing any technical issues that the respondents may encounter when using a survey platform they are unfamiliar with. The introductory section on the first page of the questionnaire gives an overview of the aims of the study and the structure of the questionnaire. Each of the sections appear on separate pages that one can access once they have finished responding to all the questions marked obligatory. The questions that expect a response on the Likert scale are formatted as a matrix with the statements on the left. The responses of this questionnaire are completely anonymous. Responses to the questionnaire were submitted from May 18 to June 2, 2022. The data was analysed using Microsoft Excel software.

2.2 Results

Altogether, there were 27 responses (13 first-year students, 7 second-year students, 7 third-year students), which makes up about 23% of the total number of students studying in the English Language and Literature programme at that time (119 students total, of which 48 are first-year, 35 second-year and 36 third-year students). 24 respondents chose Estonian as their first language and 3 students Russian, with one of the latter also choosing Russian as their nationality while all the other respondents labelled themselves as Estonian. Because of the small number of respondents whose first language differs from the rest, their responses cannot be used to generalise about differences between Estonian and Russian native speakers' perceptions – thus, their responses will not be highlighted separately in the following sections.

For the question "How much academic reading do you estimate you do in English compared to other languages?", about 7% of the respondents (two first-year students) replied that they do 41-60% of their reading in English; 26% of the respondents (four first-year students, one second-year student, and two third-year students) replied that they do 61-80% of their reading in English; and 67% of the respondents (seven first-, six second-, and five third-year students) replied that they do 81-100% of their reading in English. In all years, the majority of the students do their academic reading mostly in English, with second-year students reading in English the most. This is likely because first-year students have a larger number of general obligatory courses in humanities, which are usually in Estonian, and because third-year students are often more focused on the subjects of their minors, which may include courses in languages other than English. Because of the large amount of reading done in English, the results will be discussed through the focus of academic reading being done in a foreign language.

The author recognises that 27 responses overall does not make a very big data set; however, due to the nature of this study, generalisations will still be made based on the mode responses of each question. It must be noted for the sake of clarity that because of the small size of the data set, the percentages from the total number of respondents may seem deceptively large. For example, 23.1% of first-year students equals three respondents out of 13, or in the case of second- or third-year students, 42.9% is representative of three responses out of seven. Because of the unequal numbers of respondents from different years, the first-year responses are more likely to show a general pattern, while second- and third-year responses (that have about half the number of first-year respondents each) are less likely to do so. Any further discussions about the results of this study need to take this into consideration. It is suggested that these results be seen more as informed conjectures than

definite conclusions – further research is encouraged for all the aspects that are discussed here.

In the following tables, the full values of the percentages given are rounded to one decimal place. Each of the tables shows the percentage of the "*5 – Definitely agree*" responses to the statements (abbreviated as D) as well as the sum of "*5 – Definitely agree*" and "*4 – Mostly agree*" percentages (abbreviated as D+M). To better demonstrate the results, the statements of each question were given a rank order (r/o) based on the percentage of the D or D+M responses, showing which statements were more popular among the respondents. For example, if 10 students chose the option "*4 – Mostly agree*" and 15 students chose the option "*5 – Definitely agree*" for "*Journal articles*" in the question of "*The following sources of information are important in my studies*", then the D+M percentage was calculated by adding together the number of respondents in those categories (*10+15=25*) and calculating what percent that number is of the total number of respondents (*25/27*100 ≈ 92.6%*); since that is the largest percentage in that category (D+M), it received the rank order "1.". If the percentages given in the tables were equal, the final rank order was decided using the full data set of the Likert scale responses for those statements.

2.2.1 Sources of information

Table 6 summarises the students' perceived importance of different sources of information in their studies. The sources that the respondents consider most important are journal articles, books, internet sites and reports. Magazines and newspapers are seen as significantly less important. While first- and second-year students see journal articles as the primary sources of information, with internet sites ranking second and books as third, third-year students consider books as the most important sources, with internet sites ranking fourth, below reports. One possible explanation for this difference could be that third-year

students are expected to do more independent research for their BA theses, which could include more focus on analysing primary sources as well as finding published references for their literature review; however, it could also just come down to individual preferences with no general pattern across the study years.

Table 6: Responses for the question on sources of information

The following sources of information are important in my studies:	All		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
	D (r/o)	D+M (r/o)	D+M (r/o)	D+M (r/o)	D+M (r/o)
1. [Books]	40.7% (2.)	81.5% (2.)	69.2% (3.)	85.7% (3.)	100.0% (1.)
2. [Journal articles]	55.6% (1.)	92.6% (1.)	92.3% (1.)	100.0% (1.)	85.7% (2.)
3. [Reports]	14.8% (4.)	66.7% (4.)	53.8% (4.)	71.4% (4.)	85.7% (3.)
4. [Internet sites]	40.7% (3.)	77.8% (3.)	84.6% (2.)	85.7% (2.)	57.1% (4.)
5. [Newspapers]	7.4% (5.)	18.5% (5.)	7.7% (6.)	42.9% (5.)	14.3% (5.)
6. [Magazines]	0.0% (6.)	14.8% (6.)	15.4% (5.)	28.6% (6.)	0.0% (6.)

Two respondents also added additional sources that they would consider important in the open-ended question: podcasts, videos, and corpora. With the possible exception of videos, these sources have little to do with the processes of academic *reading*. Nevertheless, the inclusion of podcasts and videos as important sources highlights the fact that getting information from types of media that use different means of auditory and visual input (compared to just plain text) is seen as more and more relevant by students. The inclusion of corpora as a source of information brings out an interest in and awareness of pre-existing data sets that aid students in conducting their own academic research.

2.2.2 Purposes of academic reading

Table 7 summarises the students' perceptions regarding the purposes of reading in their studies. The most important purposes for the respondents are "Integrating information

from different texts for use in assignments, exams", "Searching texts to find information for assignments and exams" and "Basic comprehension of main ideas". "Understanding the structural coherence and cohesion of the text" and "Language acquisition" are seen as less important, though not unimportant.

Table 7: Responses for the question on the purposes of academic reading

			All	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
The following purposes for reading are important in my studies:		D (r/o)	D+M (r/o)	D+M (r/o)	D+M (r/o)	D+M (r/o)
1.	[Searching texts to find information for assignments and exams]	77.8% (1.)	92.6% (2.)	92.3% (1.)	85.7% (3.)	100.0% (2.)
2.	[Basic comprehension of main ideas]	63.0% (2.)	92.6% (3.)	92.3% (2./3.)	100.0% (1.)	85.7% (3.)
3.	[Understanding the structural coherence and cohesion of the text]	44.4% (4.)	74.1% (4.)	69.2% (5.)	85.7% (4.)	71.4% (4.)
4.	[Integrating information from different texts for use in assignments, exams]	63.0% (3.)	96.3% (1.)	92.3% (2./3.)	100.0% (2.)	100.0% (1.)
5.	[Language acquisition]	33.3% (5.)	66.7% (5.)	76.9% (4.)	57.1% (5.)	57.1% (5.)

Noticeably, in the case of first-year students, language acquisition ranks higher, and understanding structural coherence and cohesion lower than for other years. This is likely because improving their language skills plays a more important role for the students during the first year of study, giving the more advanced (text production oriented) consideration of analysing coherence and cohesion markedly less attention (23.1% of first-year students chose "*Mostly disagree*" for this statement, compared to no responses expressing disagreement with the importance of language acquisition). Another distinction that can be made is that third-year students consider the integration of information from different texts particularly important, with all respondents choosing "*Definitely agree*" for this statement. Though this purpose is considered important by all students, we can see that the skill of synthesising learned information into a broader web of knowledge is something that likely gets more attention during the third year of study.

As an additional purpose, one third-year student noted in the open-ended question that they consider "finding out what has been previously done in a field, or learning more about a specific field" as a significant regard, highlighting the fact that for the purposes of producing new research independently, academic reading needs to help the students form a broader understanding of their field of study in general, not just help them complete assignments and exams. This is especially topical for third-year students who are writing their BA thesis and need to read a large number of texts to form the theoretical basis for their own work.

2.2.3 Strategies

Table 8 summarises the students' perceptions regarding how they read for assignments, meaning what kind of reading strategies they use when doing their academic reading. The most popular responses are as follows (*Definitely agree + Mostly agree* over 60%):

1. I remember where relevant info is or mark its location for later use in writing my assignment. (85.2%)
2. I re-read parts of the text multiple times to understand its meaning. (85.2%)
3. If I do not know the meaning of a word in a text, I try to work out its meaning based on the context. (77.8%)
4. I look at the titles or headings of a text before deciding to read it quickly. (77.8%)
5. I look back at previous parts of the text to check the meaning of something I do not understand. (74.1%)
6. While reading I try to relate content to what I know already and judge its value. (74.1%)
7. I make notes on relevant points from the text as I go along. (70.4%)
8. I check the meaning of an unknown word or phrase from a dictionary. (66.7%)
9. I look quickly through the whole text for general understanding before doing anything else. (63.0%)
10. I integrate information from the text I am reading with information from other texts I have already read. (63.0%)
11. I quickly look for key words or words with similar meanings to check if a text is worth reading more carefully. (63.0%)

Table 8: Responses for the question on reading strategies

		All		**Year 1**	**Year 2**	**Year 3**
How I read for assignments:	**D (r/o)**	**D+M (r/o)**		**D+M (r/o)**	**D+M (r/o)**	**D+M (r/o)**
1. [I think carefully to make sure I know exactly what I'll be looking for before I start reading.]	22.2% (13.)	51.9% (13.)		53.8% (10.)	57.1% (12.)	42.9% (17.)

2.	[I look quickly through the whole text for general understanding before doing anything else.]	33.3% (5.)	63.0% (9.)	38.5% (19.)	71.4% (5.)	100.0% (2./3.)
3.	[I gradually understand what a text is about by reading the sentences slowly and carefully in the order they occur.]	11.1% (16.)	51.9% (14.)	61.5% (9.)	42.9% (13.)	42.9% (18.)
4.	[I remember where relevant info is or mark its location for later use in writing my assignment.]	63.0% (1.)	85.2% (1.)	84.6% (2.)	71.4% (4.)	100.0% (1.)
5.	[I quickly look for key words or words with similar meanings to check if a text is worth reading more carefully.]	25.9% (10.)	63.0% (11.)	53.8% (15.)	57.1% (8.)	85.7% (6./7.)
6.	[I look at the titles or headings of a text before deciding to read it quickly.]	33.3% (3.)	77.8% (4.)	53.8% (12.)	100.0% (1.)	100.0% (2./3.)
7.	[I first get the overall meaning of a text e.g. by reading the first paragraph and conclusion and first sentence of other paragraphs.]	22.2% (12.)	59.3% (12.)	61.5% (8.)	42.9% (14.)	71.4% (11.)
8.	[If I do not know the meaning of a word in a text, I try to work out its meaning based on the context.]	48.1% (2.)	77.8% (3.)	76.9% (3.)	85.7% (2./3.)	71.4% (12.)
9.	[I check the meaning of an unknown word or phrase from a dictionary.]	22.2% (11.)	66.7% (8.)	69.2% (6.)	57.1% (9./10.)	71.4% (10.)
10.	[I read a text slowly all the way through even if some parts do not seem relevant to my assignment.]	7.4% (19.)	29.6% (20.)	53.8% (13.)	14.3% (20.)	0.0% (20.)
11.	[I read slowly only those sections of a text I have marked as relevant when going through the text quickly the first time.]	11.1% (17.)	51.9% (15.)	30.8% (20.)	42.9% (15.)	100.0% (4.)
12.	[While reading I try to relate content to what I know already and judge its value.]	25.9% (9.)	74.1% (6.)	76.9% (4.)	57.1% (11.)	85.7% (6./7.)
13.	[I look back at previous parts of the text to check the meaning of something I do not understand.]	29.6% (7.)	74.1% (5.)	69.2% (5.)	85.7% (2./3.)	71.4% (13.)
14.	[I try to understand how a text is organized: how the ideas and details connect with each other.]	18.5% (15.)	48.1% (17.)	53.8% (11.)	28.6% (19.)	57.1% (15.)
15.	[I make notes on relevant points from the text as I go along.]	33.3% (4.)	70.4% (7.)	61.5% (7.)	71.4% (7.)	85.7% (8.)
16.	[I integrate information from the text I am reading with information from other texts I have already read.]	29.6% (8.)	63.0% (10.)	53.8% (14.)	57.1% (9./10.)	85.7% (5.)
17.	[I read critically to establish and evaluate the author's position.]	22.2% (14.)	48.1% (16.)	46.2% (16.)	42.9% (16./17.)	57.1% (14.)
18.	[I summarise what I have read in my head.]	3.7% (20.)	37.0% (19.)	46.2% (17.)	42.9% (18.)	14.3% (19.)
19.	[I re-read parts of the text multiple times to understand its meaning.]	29.6% (6.)	85.2% (2.)	92.3% (1.)	71.4% (6.)	85.7% (9.)
20.	[I often make pauses while reading to think about what I have read.]	11.1% (18.)	44.4% (18.)	38.5% (18.)	42.9% (16./17.)	57.1% (16.)

With 63% of the respondents having chosen "*Definitely agree*" as the option for "I remember where relevant info is or mark its location for later use in writing my assignment.", it seems to be a fundamental strategy that is used by students, which together with "If I do not know the meaning of a word in a text, I try to work out its meaning based on the context." (48.1% – "*Definitely agree*") are approaches that can be taken during reading without significant effort or time-consumption. In contrast, re-reading parts multiple times is something that requires more time and concentration – it is not perhaps everyone's first choice; though, it is considered the most important strategy by first-year students. It certainly helps with understanding in a straightforward manner, requiring simple repetition, and is thus something that is practiced more often. Looking back to previous parts of text to check meaning is a strategy very similar to that. Making notes on relevant points is a more time-consuming way of marking relevant information, but it assures the reader that they have something more substantial to refer to in case they forget what they have read. Checking the meaning of an unknown word from a dictionary is again a slower method for ascertaining meaning, but for foreign language students it can be a more efficient way of dealing with issues of lexical access than by simply guessing – this strategy is also more popular with first-year students.

Looking at the titles and headings in a text, looking for key words and looking quickly through the entire text (planning strategies) are considered more important by second- and third-year students than by first-year students. Relating the content to what the reader already knows and judging its value, and integrating the received information with information from other texts are also two similar strategies. The latter strategy is considered more important by third-year students than by first- and second-year students.

The strategies that were perceived as less relevant for the students were reading the text all the way through (D+M: 29.6%), summarising (37%), making pauses to think

(44.4%), trying to understand the organisation of the text (48.1%), evaluating the author's position (48.1%), reading only relevant parts (51.9%), reading carefully in order (51.9%), thinking about aims before reading (51.9%), and first getting the overall meaning by reading parts of the text (59.3%). As was apparent with the purposes of reading, it seems that is not so important for students to focus on the structure of the text as a strategy to aid their reading process either. The three strategies considered least important are all strategies that require time so they may not necessarily be considered to justify the effort when compared to other strategies that are seen as more efficient. In addition to that, we can see that there is a rising trend over the years to spend less time going over the whole text carefully, instead paying attention to the parts that are relevant: "I read slowly only those sections of a text I have marked as relevant when going through the text quickly the first time." is considered more important by third-year students compared to first-year students, and the opposite is the case with "I read a text slowly all the way through even if some parts do not seem relevant to my assignment." and "I gradually understand what a text is about by reading the sentences slowly and carefully in the order they occur.", which are more popular with first-year students.

As an additional strategy, a third-year student responded that they first read the abstract or the conclusion or analysis sections to see if the text is something that they could use, and only then reading from the beginning. This strategy points to the awareness that the student has about the generical features of academic texts and their ability to use the structure of the text to their advantage by limiting the time they spend on ascertaining whether the text is necessary for their purposes. This is a strategy that is likely to be characteristic especially to third-year students who need to look for relevant texts to suit their own individual research. In comparison, a first-year student pointed out that they read the assignment that they are given first and then try to complete it when reading the text for the first time – rather

than judging the relevance of the text to their study, they are looking at their reading through

pre-set assignments and they keep their engagement limited.

2.2.4 Problems

A summary of the students' responses to the question regarding difficulties they have

when reading for assignments can be found in Table 9. The problems that the students find

the most pressing are the following (*Definitely agree + Mostly agree* over 40%):

1. reading texts where the subject matter is complicated (92.6%)
2. the time available to do the necessary reading (81.5%)
3. lengthy texts (77.8%)
4. lack of background knowledge to understand the content (48.1%)
5. deciding what is important for me and what is not (44.4%)
6. finding relevant information quickly (40.7%)
7. summarizing ideas from a text in my own words (40.7%)
8. words I do not know (40.7%)
9. reading critically to establish and evaluate the author's position on a particular topic (40.7%)

Table 1: Responses to the question on reading problems

When I read for assignments, I have difficulty with:	All		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
	D (r/o)	D+M (r/o)	D+M (r/o)	D+M (r/o)	D+M (r/o)
1. [the time available to do the necessary reading]	33.3% (3.)	81.5% (2.)	69.2% (3.)	85.7% (3.)	100.0% (2.)
2. [reading texts where the subject matter is complicated]	59.3% (1.)	92.6% (1.)	84.6% (1.)	100.0% (1.)	100.0% (1.)
3. [words I do not know]	7.4% (8./9.)	40.7% (8./9.)	38.5% (9.)	42.9% (6.)	42.9% (7.)
4. [sentence structures]	3.7% (13.)	22.2% (13.)	30.8% (12.)	28.6% (10.)	0.0% (16.)
5. [finding relevant information quickly]	14.8% (6.)	40.7% (6.)	30.8% (11.)	57.1% (4.)	42.9% (6.)
6. [lengthy texts]	55.6% (2.)	77.8% (3.)	76.9% (2.)	85.7% (2.)	71.4% (3.)
7. [lack of background knowledge to understand the content]	18.5% (4.)	48.1% (4.)	53.8% (5.)	42.9% (5.)	42.9% (5.)
8. [making notes on information I will need]	3.7% (14.)	18.5% (15.)	30.8% (13.)	14.3% (13.)	0.0% (17.)
9. [reading carefully to understand the main ideas]	0.0% (17.)	14.8% (17.)	15.4% (17.)	0.0% (16./17.)	28.6% (13.)
10. [summarizing ideas from a text in my own words]	11.1% (7.)	40.7% (7.)	53.8% (6.)	0.0% (14./15.)	57.1% (4.)

11. [understanding a detailed logical argument]	3.7% (12.)	22.2% (12.)	23.1% (14.)	14.3% (11.)	28.6% (10.)
12. [reading critically to establish and evaluate the author's position on a particular topic]	7.4% (8./9.)	40.7% (8./9.)	46.2% (8.)	42.9% (7.)	28.6% (9.)
13. [relating the content of a text to my existing knowledge]	3.7% (11.)	33.3% (10.)	53.8% (7.)	0.0% (14./15.)	28.6% (14.)
14. [deciding what is important for me and what is not]	14.8% (5.)	44.4% (5.)	53.8% (4.)	28.6% (8.)	42.9% (8.)
15. [reading a text quickly to decide whether I should study it carefully]	7.4% (10.)	18.5% (14.)	15.4% (15.)	28.6% (9.)	14.3% (15.)
16. [understanding the text as a whole; how main ideas and details are connected to each other]	3.7% (15.)	14.8% (16.)	15.4% (16.)	0.0% (16./17.)	28.6% (11./12.)
17. [integrating information from the text I am reading with info from other texts I have read]	0.0% (16.)	29.6% (11.)	38.5% (10.)	14.3% (12.)	28.6% (11./12.)

It can be seen that the biggest problems in academic reading are concerned with the complex subject matter of the text, the time available to do the necessary reading, and having to read long texts – over half of the respondents consider these to be issues that cause them problems or frustrations while doing their academic reading. The other difficulties are not seen as pressing as the first three; however, some of them point to issues that could be improved through the use of certain reading strategies, like finding information quickly and deciding what is important. The students also seem to be slightly insecure regarding their background knowledge and vocabulary; these factors probably also affect how they perceive their understanding of the subject matter overall. It potentially points to concerns about lexical access when dealing with unfamiliar academic texts. Skills of summarising, critical reading and evaluating texts appear to be something that could use some improvement for some students, as well. A difficulty that looks to be more troubling for first-year students compared to second- and third-year students is relating the content of the text to their existing knowledge.

A first-year student described their difficulty with concentrating on a text and finishing reading it when it is long and there is no specific assignment given with it, such as

answering questions. The issue here is both connected to the length of texts as well as needing a specific focus given for reading them. It implies that the way that the academic reading assignment is presented to the student influences how the reader will be able to complete the reading.

2.2.5 Paper or digital copies

The students' full responses to the open-ended question "What affects your preference regarding using a printed copy or a digital copy of a text when reading for an assignment?" can be found in Appendix 2. Though a lot comes down to individual preferences in this question, certain patterns can be seen in the responses that may be categorised as follows:

- Different aims for reading and the use of certain reading strategies

- Students' (physical) ability, text length and clarity – accessibility issues

- Convenience and availability – attainability issues

- Issues with waste of resources

For many students, the deciding factor that affects whether they prefer doing their reading using a paper or digital copy is the aims they have for reading the text and the corresponding reading strategies they want to implement to achieve that aim. When the students need to find specific information quickly, they often prefer using a digital copy because they can use the "Ctrl + F" function to look up keywords from the text; when they want to concentrate on a text more thoroughly, however, they prefer using a paper copy for highlighting and note-taking. Some students find the opposite to be the case: it is better for them to highlight and take notes on a digital copy, especially when they use the computer for notetaking regularly. The majority still prefer to write things on paper.

Regarding accessibility, an influencing factor that was mentioned multiple times was the strain that reading things digitally puts on the eyes, especially when the material is long, while another answer points out that a digital copy provides its own light, so it is better for them to read when it is late. Most of the time, the students prefer using printed copies for longer texts and digital ones for shorter assignments, which corresponds with the previously stated aims and strategies, as well. The opposite is also mentioned: that lengthy texts are easier to read digitally because the student can use the search function to find the parts that are relevant for them and that long texts printed on paper are inconvenient to use. One response remarks that when material is distributed to the students, it should be clearly readable because when it is "badly printed" then it is difficult to understand.

When speaking of attainability, students noted that digital copies are much easier to access than paper ones because they are readily available even when there is no library nearby. It was also said that digital copies can be used across different devices everywhere they are, without carrying paper copies around. There are also a lot more texts to choose from online, according to one response. For some respondents, an important consideration is the waste of resources that comes together with paper copies of texts, especially when they are handed out to the entire class. Because of this perceived waste, some students are reluctant to use paper copies altogether, or even when they otherwise would prefer reading texts on paper, they use a digital copy because they do not want to use paper excessively due to environmental impact or personal finances. Overall, digital copies are considered more convenient to use because of their easy access and they are seen as less wasteful.

2.3 Discussion

The following discussion gives an overview of the results of this study, comparing them to the results of Kikerpill (2017) and Weir et al (2009) as well as bringing in relevant

concepts from the first chapter. The aim is to focus on the perceptions that the students have of their own academic reading to determine if there are any significant problems with their reading process compared to what is expected of them. Some suggestions for future reading instruction at the university will be given.

2.3.1 Journals, internet sites and critical reading

The results for the evaluation of sources that students see as important and less relevant for their studies do not generally differ from what was reported by Kikerpill (2017: 145-146) and Weir et al (2009: 119). The most important sources for the students are journal articles, books, internet sites and reports, while magazines and newspaper articles are not considered to be very relevant in their studies. The relative unimportance of newspapers (and thus also magazines) in academic study is, according to Kikerpill, to be expected. For the purposes of discourse analysis and cultural study, however, the use of newspapers and magazines can be justified also for academic reading; especially since nowadays they are readily available online and are accessible study materials. Nevertheless, their importance should not exceed that of more academic texts like journal articles and reports because they do not aid the students in their own production of academic texts through the immersion in domain-specific discourses. In this regard, the responses to this study reassure this: newspapers and magazines *are* used, but never seen as more important than other sources.

There is a concern that might be addressed about the broad category of "internet sites", though. For future research, it might yield more insightful results if this category is reassessed, since for the modern student, all the other sources are potentially also accessed through internet sites. As discussed in the respondents' answers to the open-ended question regarding digital copies of texts, online materials are much more easily attainable than printed materials and there is a lot more to choose from, meaning that because of this

accessibility, students may prefer to use internet sites to access any kinds of materials and sources for their studies, instead of using physical copies. This can become a problem when students have not sufficiently developed their ability to critically assess the texts they are reading. As shown by the responses to the question about problems, critical reading and evaluating the author's position can cause problems for some students, which is why this issue needs to be addressed explicitly.

Another consideration that can be discussed is the fact that using books for academic reading in the case of language and literature students also includes books of fiction and other literary texts, as opposed to a larger number of textbooks that are likely used in other fields of study. The answers where students elaborated on the sources they thought were important also provided interesting suggestions as to what is seen to be more topical today (e.g. audio-visual materials). It might be of interest to research the students' use of different sources for their academic studies and their genre awareness in depth in the future, with the categories reassessed, to provide further insight into students' learning habits. As this was not the main goal of the current study, the categories given by Weir et al (2009) are sufficient to observe broader trends.

2.3.2 Towards integration of information and independent research

When looking at the purposes for academic reading that the students see as most important, we can claim that integrating information from different sources is considered the most important aim out of the ones given. In Weir et al's study (2009: 120-121), the most popular purpose for both native-speakers and English as foreign language speakers was searching texts for required information, which was second in popularity in this study. Integrating information was not seen as important by foreign language speakers according to Weir et al's data, ranking last in combined *Definitely agree + Mostly agree* responses

(henceforth EFL D+M). This could potentially indicate that the BA students of English Language and Literature have recognised the importance of the more advanced aim of seeing how ideas are connected across texts, having moved a step further from the simpler goal of just finding information or understanding the main ideas – this is seen as the aim in university education by Enright et al (2000: 6). The data also seems to indicate that this perception is more so the case with second- and third-year students, showing that this is a view that is probably developed throughout the academic study period.

Nevertheless, the second more complex purpose of understanding "how main ideas and details relate to each other and author's purpose", or "understanding the structural coherence and cohesion of the text", is not seen as important by the respondents of this study, while for Weir et al (2009: 120) it ranks second (EFL D+M). This could be due to students not seeing the structure of the text and the organisation of ideas as important considerations for their purposes (it has the highest number of responses expressing disagreement out of the five statements), or because the respondents do not entirely understand what is meant by this statement (which was deemed a possibility during the piloting of the questionnaire). In either case, we can highlight the fact that this is something that would perhaps require more attention in the classroom, since understanding coherence and cohesion is both closely related to the students' own production of academic texts as well as a prerequisite to using effective reading strategies. This is necessary especially for first-year students, who are still developing their understanding of the form of academic texts as a whole.

We can also see that, though considered as important by a large number of students, language acquisition (the category that was added to the questionnaire and that was not featured in Weir et al's study) is not considered more important than the aims focused on gaining information from the text. It looks to be more popular among first-year students so we can hypothesise that they are using their academic reading as extensive reading practice

during a time of rapid improvement due to sudden extensive use of the English language. By the third year, there are more students who do not see language acquisition as an important goal for their reading, presumably because after three years of immersive study, they are satisfied with the language level that they have achieved and they have other more important goals; namely, to focus on their independent research. While teachers may consider aiding the students with setting goals for general language acquisition through their academic reading, it is still more valuable to focus on preparing them for individual research into their fields of interest through advancing their domain-specific literacy (which includes academic language), so that the students can better integrate information and combine it into a text of their own production.

2.3.3 From time-consuming careful reading to pre-planned efficiency

When comparing the results of the question "How I read for assignments" to Kikerpill (2017) and Weir et al (2009), we can see that the most popular statement in all three studies in this category is remembering and/or marking the location of relevant information, affirming it as a fundamental strategy used by students that helps them with the retention of information as well as fulfilling assignments. This is also confirmed by the students' answers to the open-ended question regarding their preferences on digital and paper copies of texts: highlighting and note-taking were mentioned as important strategies by many. Making notes on relevant points is considered more-or-less equally important in all three studies, as well as integrating information from different texts, and relating the content to what you already know – the last two are both used for higher-level reading processes, which is often what is important for conducting academic research independently, not just for fulfilling assignments. Noticeably, the strategy of integrating received

information with information from other texts shows a rising pattern for its relevance over the years among English Language and Literature students.

The least popular out of all shared statements between the studies is reading the text all the way through even when some parts are not relevant. The latter, together with the strategy of gradually understanding the text by reading it in order, is more popular amongst the first-year respondents of this study, implying that during the start of their university years, the students know fewer effective reading strategies than they do by the third year. This demonstrates that a) the assignments the students are expected to fulfil during the first year likely require more careful reading done on the global level, b) some students are perhaps not yet aware of strategies that can aid them with expeditious reading, and c) the students acquire these strategies during their studies.

One of the more surprising results of this study is the popularity of re-reading parts of text to clarify meaning – compared to Kikerpill's study (2017), where the statement ranked eighth in the rank order of *Always + Often* responses (50% of the respondents), in this study, 85.5% of the students see it as an important strategy, ranking it second overall. As another strategy that focuses on careful reading, this time on a local level, it is more popular among first-year students to whom it is the most important; though, it is not unpopular among second- and third-year respondents either. As mentioned before, careful reading strategies alone are not enough for academic reading at the university – teachers should definitely be encouraged to aid the students in the acquisition of reading strategies that help them find information efficiently so that they would not feel pressured to pore over every single part of the texts with equal attention.

The second and third most important strategies in Kikerpill's study (2017) were related to vocabulary: checking unknown words from the dictionary, which was not included by Weir et al (2009), and working out the meaning of unknown words based on the context.

Both of these strategies are related to careful reading on a local level, demonstrating the importance of the lower-level skill of word recognition in the process of reading – these two strategies also revealed the biggest difference between native and non-native Estonian language users, as native speakers preferred inferring meaning based on context and non-native speakers preferred using a dictionary (Kikerpill 2017: 149). Unfortunately, no comparisons can be made with Weir et al's (2009) data in this regard; however, we can see that inferencing based on context is more popular among the non-native speakers of English in this study (D+M: 77.8%) than among the ones in Weir et al's (EFL D+M: 63.8%). Overall, the respondents of this study prefer inferencing over looking things up from the dictionary (which is more popular among first-year students compared to second and third), suggesting that their language levels are high enough to feel more comfortable making guesses. In Kikerpill's (2017) results, the lowest ranking statement was "I pay no attention to unknown words and continue reading" (which was featured neither in this or Weir et al's (2009) study), showing that lexical access is important for students when doing academic reading; the same can be assumed about the English Language and Literature students since they consider figuring out the meaning of unknown words quite important.

The most significant difference between the results of this study and the results of Weir et al's (2009: 122) data on English as foreign language students is concerning the strategy of "I think carefully to make sure I know exactly what I'll be looking for before I start reading", which ranked second for Weir et al (EFL D+M: 77.4%) and 13th in this study (D+M: 51.9%). For Kikerpill (2017), this ranked seventh with 55% choosing "*Always*" or "*Often*". The relatively low popularity of this response is unexpected, but it could potentially hint at the students' habit of doing careful reading on a global level – they are not often looking for specific details and thus spend less time planning for how to retrieve that information. However, strategies like looking at the titles and headings in a text, looking for

key words and looking quickly through the entire text are pre-reading strategies that are more popular among the students. They are meant to guide the rest of the process by getting an overview of what the text is about, if there is relevant information and what the reader should be paying attention to when reading the text more carefully – this allows the reader to direct their focus better. According to Klapwijk and van der Walt (2011: 28), this planning stage also includes, in addition to goal-setting, activities like identifying text type, activating previous knowledge, and predicting what the text is going to be about. The only post-reading strategy included among the statements in the questionnaire is summarising, which ranked second lowest overall (D+M: 37%), also raising the issue with what happens after the students have finished reading. When assigning academic reading, the teachers could perhaps provide students support in setting goals for their reading, finding a focus, and demonstrating strategies to help them use the features of the text to their advantage in expeditious reading. Additionally, more practice opportunities can be given for specific post-reading activities like summarising, which allow the students to improve drawing conclusions and synthesising a large amount of information for their purposes – practices that become very important for their independent research.

An issue that already became apparent when looking at the students' purposes of academic reading is the lack of focus on the organisation of the text. The strategy of understanding how a text is organised ranks higher in Weir et al's (2009: 122) results (EFL D+M: 61.9%) than it does in this study (D+M: 48.1%). Weir et al (2009: 123) hypothesise that understanding the structure of a text may not be a popular response because students do not consciously acknowledge it as a strategy; instead, it happens in the back of the student's mind as a skill rather than a strategy – this, in turn, would lead them to underestimate how much information they actually receive from this process. The third-year student's reply to the open-ended question for the use of strategies (that they use the abstract and conclusive

sections to determine the relevance of the text) implies that at least one third-year student is aware of the organisation of academic texts and their generic features, pointing to the fact that this issue is indeed addressed in their courses. In either way, teachers might consider drawing more attention to this aspect to help the students turn this skill into a deliberate strategy, particularly in the case of first-year students, who seem to be less aware of ways to find information faster because of the way their assignments are formatted.

2.3.4 Lower- and higher-level processes in creation of understanding of subject matter

Looking at the data of what students see as problems during the process of reading, understanding how the main ideas and details are connected (what we might also call coherence and cohesion) is not considered to be a problem by the large majority of the students (D+M: 14.8%), showing that this aspect likely gets little attention during reading, illustrating again the lack of concern towards the organisational aspects of the text (this time the organisation of ideas). Compared to Weir et al's (2009: 125) responses, where 34.6% of non-native and 23.5% of native respondents found it to be a problem, the students of English Language and Literature lean more towards the native speaker side in this regard. The same is the case with "understanding a detailed logical argument", "reading carefully to understand the main ideas", "reading a text quickly to decide whether I should study it carefully" and "sentence structures", which cause less problems to the respondents of this study than to the non-native English speakers in Weir et al's study (2009).

However, the opposite is the case with deciding whether something is important or not in a text – this difficulty ranks fifth overall and is thus something that the students of English might require help with. Alongside finding relevant information quickly and summarising, determining the importance of information is something that can be made more efficient with the application of certain reading strategies, like pre-planning the reading

process by setting goals, paying more attention to the way the text is organised and where necessary information may be found, as well as post-reading activities that help with reflection and synthesis of information. Teachers might consider going through these stages together with the students to help them practice these skills.

Without doubt, the three aspects that cause the students the most difficulties are reading texts where the subject matter is complicated, the time available for the reading, and the length of the texts. This top three is shared by Weir et al (2009: 125), though it is not as easily distinguished by the percentages of agreement as is the case in this study, where there is a significant jump from the third to the fourth most popular answer (77.8% to 48.1%). The time available to do the necessary reading and the length of the text are both parameters related to task setting and the difficulties that they may present may not necessarily have to do with the students' own reading abilities as they are often dictated by external factors. Nevertheless, there are certain aspects that can influence the amount of time the students feel is necessary to spend on reading, such as their overall speed of reading, their time management skills, what the student sees as the purpose of the reading task (careful or expeditious reading) and how the student can use effective reading strategies to achieve that goal with less time spent on the task. Whether these factors influence the students individually or not, the teachers should definitely give both the length of the text and the time given to read it a lot of consideration when choosing reading assignments for their class and check with the students whether they have the time in their curriculum to dedicate a significant amount of time on a more lengthy text if that is what the teacher has set as an aim. Alternatively, the teacher can instruct the students on how to use suitable strategies to reach the goal of that specific assignment if careful reading itself is not the purpose of the task.

What causes the students the most problems by far is reading texts where the subject matter is complicated (D+M: 92.6%); this is also the case in Kikerpill's study (2017: 152). Weir et al's results (2009: 125) show that English as foreign language readers are not at a disadvantage in this case, as 70.2% of native speakers consider it a problem when reading for assignments, compared to 58.5% of non-native speakers. Factors that may influence the perception of subject matter may be pre-existing knowledge of the field (including research methodologies and theories, as well as general background knowledge), critical evaluation skills and lexical access. Indeed, "words I do not know" is also considered to be a problem by 40.7% of the respondents of this study. Kikerpill (2017: 153) detects that difficult words in texts cause more problems for Estonian as foreign language students than for native speakers, ranking this issue as second in the overall list of problems and confirming, in conjunction with the popularity of respective reading strategies, that problems with lower-level processes affect reading comprehension in general.

Problems with vocabulary are not as significant compared to other problems highlighted in this study; however, there is a case to be made about the link between lexical access, domain-specific vocabulary, and students' overall awareness of their field of study. Understanding domain-specific vocabulary better could aid them with comprehending more complex materials – it is possible that the struggle with complex subject matter stems from the students not understanding what certain words or concepts refer to in the contexts that they are presented in; however, since the students know the primary meanings of these words and they are able to parse the text for syntactic information, they might not realise that they are missing the nuances necessary for full lexical access. This can subsequently cause issues with creating semantic propositions: the students do not understand what is actually being discussed in the text. As Hyland and Tse (2007) suggest, developing the students' domain-specific literacies requires the use of specific activities meant to offer opportunities to come

into contact with academic vocabulary in the authentic contexts of their field of study. This is also recommended by the author of this research based on the available data.

At the same time, it is clear that there should not be a focus on vocabulary acquisition alone as the other problems that students identify are also lack of background knowledge (D+M: 48.1%) and critical evaluation of the texts (40.7%). Additionally, first-year students find it more difficult to relate the content of the texts to their existing knowledge, which could both be due to the lack of domain-specific knowledge, as well as a general struggle with making connections between different topics. These are all higher-level processes, the development of which is the main aim of academic reading done at universities. They should thus take precedence, while at the same time we must acknowledge that they are reliant on lower-level skills like word recognition. These higher-level processes also develop on the condition that the purpose of the students' academic reading is not simply to find information for assignments, but increasingly to integrate information across multiple texts. For this, Enright et al (2000: 7) asserts, the students need to read more and be able to use more efficient strategies.

CONCLUSION

To examine the academic reading of the BA students majoring in English Language and Literature at the University of Tartu, this thesis explored the concept of reading as a series of inter-related cognitive processes that are directed by the aims that the reader has set, which are particularly important in the case of academic reading that is distinctive in its goal-orientation. It was determined that for efficient and productive academic reading, a student needs to be able to move from careful reading to expeditious reading to spend less processing capacity on the parts of texts that are not relevant for them – for this, the use of suitable reading strategies is necessary. The primary aim of academic reading should be to develop an understanding how ideas in texts are connected to each other and how to integrate information between different texts; however, difficulties with these higher-level processes may be caused by issues with lower-level reading processes that are language-specific and thus potentially cause more complications for non-native language users. Nevertheless, non-native language users should be able to compensate for these issues by using the reading skills and strategies they have acquired in their native language.

The aim of this study was to explore the reading of the students of English Language and Literature through this perspective and answer three research questions: 1) what reading strategies do the students use when doing academic reading, 2) what are the students' aims when reading these texts, and 3) what problems do the students have when working with these texts. To do so, a questionnaire was composed based on two previous studies and distributed to the target group. The answers to the research questions were used to draw conclusions about the students' general academic reading process to see if there are any important issues that need to be addressed during their instruction.

The overall results indicate no serious issues with the way students approach their academic reading and, indeed, similarities with native-speakers can be detected,

demonstrating that either the students' language levels are mostly high enough not to experience significant problems with lower-level reading processes and/or that they can use reading strategies to compensate for potential language gaps. They see the integration of information as an important goal for their reading and use effective strategies that aid them with higher-level reading processes, such as marking relevant information or taking notes. The prioritisation of building intertextual mental representations shows a rising trend over the years, indicating that the students' academic reading processes become better developed during their studies. Nevertheless, some suggestions can still be made to help improve their academic reading based on the responses they submitted to the questionnaire of this study.

The three aspects that noticeably cause the students the most difficulties are reading texts where the subject matter is complicated, the time available for the reading, and the length of the texts. The latter two issues may stem from problems that the students have with expeditious reading strategies, i.e. they struggle with spending less time on their reading because they tend to read the texts carefully from top to bottom, without prioritising sections where they might find relevant information. This is especially the case with first-year students. The students likely need some assistance with strategies that help them find information efficiently and help them to decide what is important for them in a text, either through task setting or explicit strategy instruction. More attention should be given to pre-reading strategies focused on planning the reading process, such as setting goals and thinking about how to retrieve the information necessary for fulfilling that goal. Additionally, the students would benefit from becoming more consciously genre-aware so that they could deliberately use the structure of texts and their organisation of ideas to their advantage in finding necessary information.

There are many factors that may influence the complexity of the subject matter of the texts that the students are reading; however, since it is the difficulty that the students see

as the greatest, the issue should be given some consideration. This problem may rise from the lack of pre-existing knowledge of the field of study – including topic specific as well as general background knowledge –, critical evaluation skills and lexical access. One might consider whether the students' confusion with subject matter can be improved through tasks focused on improving their domain-specific literacy, helping them create awareness of the lexical nuances of academic language in their specific field of interest. These types of activities can also be used to improve critical reading, highlighting discourse markers characteristic to academic texts. First-year students in particular also require some assistance with topic specific knowledge when given a reading assignment as well as help with making connections between different topics that aids in creating a better mental representation of certain fields of interest.

In general, while for first-year students it might be useful to provide more support with specific assignments to be completed while conducting their reading, additionally instructing them in suitable strategies or pre-teaching them relevant concepts, then the overall goal of the students' academic reading should be to move on from gathering information for assignments and understanding the basic main ideas of texts. For the purposes of their independent research and the production of academic texts, the students need to eventually focus on understanding the structure and organisation of ideas in the texts that they are reading as well as integrating and synthesising the information that they have collected into a coherent whole. They can do that once they have acquired strategies that allow them to work through a large number of texts efficiently and productively.

The author suggests further research on this topic as the conclusions that were drawn here are generalised assumptions based on the available data. This study was limited by the small number of respondents that did not equally represent all years of study, and the restrictive nature of the replicated questionnaire. More qualitative studies into the reading

habits of the students are needed to have a better insight into their reading processes, aims and problems. One might also examine the distinctive nature of academic reading done by students of language and literature, which includes, for example, literary fiction in addition to academic texts, or focus on the genres of texts that the students read to have a better overview of how generic differences affect their use of reading strategies. Additionally, any future studies might consider moving beyond recording the students' own perceptions and investigate their actual practices, using case studies. This thesis should provide enough input for the construction of hypotheses for possible future studies regarding the academic reading done by English Language and Literature students at this university.

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APPENDIX 1 – Online questionnaire transcript

Academic reading of BA students at the UT English department

Dear BA student of the English department,

My name is Ave Palm and I am currently studying in the Foreign Language Teacher MA programme at the University of Tartu. I am writing my MA thesis on the topic of academic reading of the BA students at the UT Department of English Studies. I would appreciate your assistance in filling in this questionnaire.

The main aim of this study is to find out students' perceptions of academic reading, what reading strategies you use, and what aims and difficulties you have. The results of this study will be presented to the teachers of the English department so that they might gain an insight into your reading experiences and, if necessary, change their approaches to better suit your needs.

This questionnaire has three parts: the first part will ask some background details; the second part asks you to rate your agreement or disagreement with given statements on a Likert scale; and the third part will ask a couple of questions for additional information. It should take approximately 10-20 minutes to fill in this questionnaire. Your responses are completely anonymous.

Your input is greatly appreciated!

Personal details
Please select or write the appropriate answer

Year of study
- [First year]
- [Second year]
- [Third year]

First language(s)
[Short answer text]

Nationality
- [Estonian]
- [Russian]
- [Other…]

Academic reading I
For each statement below, show the extent of your agreement or disagreement:
5 - Definitely agree
4 - Mostly agree
3 - Neither agree nor disagree
2 - Mostly disagree
1 - Definitely disagree

The following sources of information are important in my studies:
1. [Books]

2. [Journal articles]
3. [Reports]
4. [Internet sites]
5. [Newspapers]
6. [Magazines]

Are there any other sources you wish to specify?
[Long-answer text]

The following purposes for reading are important in my studies:
1. [Searching texts to find information for assignments and exams]
2. [Basic comprehension of main ideas]
3. [Understanding the structural coherence and cohesion of the text]
4. [Integrating information from different texts for use in assignments, exams]
5. [Language acquisition]

Are there any other purposes you wish to specify?
[Long-answer text]

How I read for assignments:
1. [I think carefully to make sure I know exactly what I'll be looking for before I start reading.]
2. [I look quickly through the whole text for general understanding before doing anything else.]
3. [I gradually understand what a text is about by reading the sentences slowly and carefully in the order they occur.]
4. [I remember where relevant info is or mark its location for later use in writing my assignment.]
5. [I quickly look for key words or words with similar meanings to check if a text is worth reading more carefully.]
6. [I look at the titles or headings of a text before deciding to read it carefully.]
7. [I first get the overall meaning of a text e.g. by reading the first paragraph and conclusion and first sentence of other paragraphs.]
8. [If I do not know the meaning of a word in a text, I try to work out its meaning based on the context.]
9. [I check the meaning of an unknown word or phrase from a dictionary.]
10. [I read a text slowly all the way through even if some parts do not seem relevant to my assignment.]
11. [I read slowly only those sections of a text I have marked as relevant when going through the text quickly the first time.]
12. [While reading I try to relate content to what I know already and judge its value.]
13. [I look back at previous parts of the text to check the meaning of something I do not understand.]
14. [I try to understand how a text is organized: how the ideas and details connect with each other.]
15. [I make notes on relevant points from the text as I go along.]
16. [I integrate information from the text I am reading with information from other texts I have already read.]
17. [I read critically to establish and evaluate the author's position.]
18. [I summarise what I have read in my head.]
19. [I re-read parts of the text multiple times to understand its meaning.]

20. [I often make pauses while reading to think about what I have read.]

Are there any other strategies you wish to specify?
    [Long-answer text]

When I read for assignments, I have difficulty with:
1. [the time available to do the necessary reading]
2. [reading texts where the subject matter is complicated]
3. [words I do not know]
4. [sentence structures]
5. [finding relevant information quickly]
6. [lengthy texts]
7. [lack of background knowledge to understand the content]
8. [making notes on information I will need]
9. [reading carefully to understand the main ideas]
10. [summarizing ideas from a text in my own words]
11. [understanding a detailed logical argument]
12. [reading critically to establish and evaluate the author's position on a particular topic]
13. [relating the content of a text to my existing knowledge]
14. [deciding what is important for me and what is not]
15. [reading a text quickly to decide whether I should study it carefully]
16. [understanding the text as a whole; how main ideas and details are connected to each other]
17. [integrating information from the text I am reading with info from other texts I have read]

Are there any other difficulties you wish to specify?
    [Long-answer text]

<u>Academic reading II</u>
Please select or write a suitable response.

How much academic reading do you estimate you do in English compared to other languages? (E.g. You do about 61-80% of your academic reading in English.)
- 0-20%
- 21-40%
- 41-60%
- 61-80%
- 81-100%

What affects your preference regarding using a printed copy or a digital copy of a text when reading for an assignment?
[Long-answer text]

Do you have any additional comments about the content of this study?
[Long-answer text]

APPENDIX 2 – Students' responses regarding their preferences using printed or digital copies of texts

• My main preference is a digital copy as reading goes much quicker. When I read a digital copy of a text, I first look if I can use Ctrl + F to look up keywords. A printed copy should be readable. Some teachers can give out badly printed material and it is really hard to understand.
• I mostly use digital copies since I don't have any libraries nearby.
• i would prefer printed copies, but use digital copies as they are easier to access
• Reading for assignments I prefer a printed copy because I can highlight important parts and write my own comments on the side. Using a printed copy also is easier on my eyes since I tend to be on my computer quite a lot for school so reading a long digital copy of a text can be straining for my eyes. I'm also not very good at using computers so I often struggle with figuring out how to highlight texts on different platforms.
• I would much rather have all texts digitally, but long printed copies are especially annoying to use.
• Printed copy is more convenient for highlighting important information
• I prefer to use a printed copy, but I will usually choose whichever copy is easier to access/find.
• Digital copies are usually more accessible. If I can't access the digital copy, I will turn to a printed copy.
• Printed copy is better for taking notes. Digital documents are better for finding quick information, but they can strain the eyes if they are very lengthy.
• The length of the text. If it's a longer one, I prefer a digital copy, because it enables me to use the find tool to locate words and phrases that are relevant to me.
• When I need specific information, I prefer a digital copy, as I can usually use the CTRL+F command and find the necessary information quickly. If i need to read a long text and not just for specific ideas, I prefer a physical copy.
• With a printed copy I can make hand written notes on the side of the text or take notes with a post-it. I study better when I write things through so that is more beneficial for me.
• My eyes get tired when I have to look at a screen for too long so I prefer paper. I also prefer taking notes on a paper rather than a .pdf file for example. I feel like I physically work through the text better.
• Availability and convenience
• The length of a text definitely affects my preference regarding using a printed copy or digital copy of a text. If the text goes on for multiple pages, I prefer using a printed copy as it is easier to highlight important parts of the text. I prefer using a printed copy if the text is 1-2 pages long since then it is not needed to highlight as much and I can write the information I want to grasp into a notebook or somewhere else.
• accessibility
• I mostly only use digital copies because they are available and don't require extra work. I do prefer a downloaded file instead of using an online source though. I might

like printed copies if I used them more but at the moment they are more a waste of resources.
• I generally find it easier to makes notes and highlight parts of the text when dealing with a printed copy.
• It depends on the subject; certain subjects, such as literature, history, or any type of language studies require me to write down more and it is suitable to do so on a printed copy. The same goes for highlighting passages in a given text. Digital copies work well in the case of taking a few notes for myself, or highlighting key terms in a text, especially if it is shorter.
• I prefer to use digital copies because I write all my assignments and mostly take notes on my computer and having all my materials in more or less the same place in front of me makes things easier. I also prefer digital copies because I can access them from different devices in different places when I need to. Also it is easier to carry around for example one laptop than like a few binders worth of printed out articles. It is a bit easier to highlight and write comments on a printed copy but then transfering that information to my computer is another hassle in itself.
• I usually complete the assignments late into the day, so digital copies are preferable as I can read them while lying down / don't need other source of light for them
• Environment - if the text is available online/digitally, I will read it digitally as I can still highlight the text and take notes (also that way I can always access it everywhere I am). If the text is not available digitally, then I'll read the physical copy of the book/journal/magazine and write my notes somewhere else. For example, I personally don't really like printed out handouts, as I think they use up too much paper when being handed out to the whole class.
• Printed copy is easier for the eyes but unfortunately worse for the environment, digital copy is better and a faster (sometimes more convenient) option
• I always read digital copies since there are so many on the internet and it is easier to choose from them
• Digital if I do not need to work on the whole text that thoroughly, printed if I need to work more thorough

RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Ave Palm
University Students' Perceptions of Academic Reading in English as a Foreign Language
Tudengite lugemine akadeemilises õppes inglise keeles kui võõrkeeles
Magistritöö
2023
Lehekülgede arv: 69

Annotatsioon:

Magistritöö eesmärgiks on uurida Tartu ülikooli inglise keele ja kirjanduse eriala bakalaureuseõppe tudengite lugemist akadeemilises õppes inglise keeles. Selleks on püstitatud kolm uurimisküsimust: 1) milliseid lugemisstrateegiaid tudengid kasutavad lugedes akadeemilises õppes, 2) mis on tudengite eesmärgid neid tekste lugedes, 3) millised on tudengite probleemid nende tekstidega töötades. Töö jaguneb kaheks suuremaks peatükiks, millest esimene annab ülevaate teksti mõistmise taga peituvatest kognitiivsetest protsessidest, akadeemilise lugemise eesmärkidest ja raskustest, lugemisstrateegiatest ning ka lugemisest võõrkeeles. Magistritöö teises pooles kirjeldatakse empiirilist uurimust ja andmete analüüsi. Tudengite lugemise uurimiseks on võetud aluseks Weir jt (2009) ja Kikerpilli (2017) tööd: kasutatud on küsimustikku, kus vastaja peab märkima oma nõusoleku antud väidetega Likert-skaalal, ning saadud vastuseid on võrreldud nende kahe uurimuse tulemustega.

Diskussioonist võib välja tuua, et kuigi inglise keele ja kirjanduse eriala tudengite suhtumine lugemisse paistab olevat akadeemilisele õppele sobiv, siis on neil ilmselt vaja rohkem tuge silmavale lugemisele sobivate strateegiate väljakujundamisel, näiteks aidates neid oma lugemisprotsessi eesmärgistada ja planeerida. Kõige suuremat muret valmistab tudengitele tekstide sisu keerulisus, mille üheks leevendavaks lahenduseks võiks pakkuda erialaspetsiifilise keele mõistmisele suunatud harjutusi, mis aitaks ka kriitilise mõtlemisega. Üldiselt peaks tudengeid juhtima nende akadeemilises õppes selleni, et nad on saavutanud piisavalt efektiivsed lugemisharjumused, et nad suudaksid teksti põhisõnumi mõistmise asemel keskenduda rohkem informatsiooni integreerimisele.

Märksõnad: lugemisoskus, teksti mõistmine, lugemisstrateegiad, lugemine akadeemilises õppes, inglise keel võõrkeelena

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