

The reading habits and practices of undergraduate students at a higher education institution in South Africa: a case study¹

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ABSTRACT

Research conducted in South Africa has shown that the reading literacy level of students entering higher education is lower than is desirable. In an attempt to gain an understanding of students' reading habits and practices, this study explored students' goals in reading, the challenges they face while reading, and the reading behaviours experienced and modelled in their homes. The data were collected by means of a student questionnaire and interviews. The findings of this research have implications for all stakeholders, as they show that reading is marginalised at all levels, and that measures need to be implemented immediately to develop positive reading habits and practices in students. Amongst other things, it is suggested that in order to position students as producers of knowledge, it is imperative for lecturers in various disciplines to play a greater role in encouraging students to read and in helping them attain the reading conversancy required in these lecturers' disciplines.

Keywords: reading, reading habits and practices, higher education, disciplinary reading, academic literacies

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Reading is not only an essential life skill; it is also regarded as the cornerstone of learning. The acquisition of knowledge through reading is crucial for the learning process and is an important academic task in which students need to engage. Much of the research on reading, both in South Africa (Balfour, 2002; Ngwenya, 2010; Bharuthram, 2012) and in other parts of the world, such as in Australia (Rose, 2004) and Sweden (Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine, Malmstrom & Mezek, 2012) acknowledge a strong relationship between reading and academic performance. There are also many studies at a national and an international level that show that a growing percentage of students enter university with inadequate reading literacy – as a result, these students often struggle to meet the necessary academic requirements of their disciplines (for example, Chanock, Horton, Reedman & Stephenson, 2012; Divoll & Browning, 2013; Bharuthram & Clarence, 2015). These findings should raise concern because at the university level students are often expected to enhance the teaching and learning process by reading widely in their subject areas, either in preparation for lectures or to supplement their lecture notes. To this end, many modules have a list of prescribed and/or recommended readings, generally in the form of textbooks that students are expected

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to engage with alongside their lectures and coursework. These reading materials are intended to provide greater exposure to the various academic disciplines the students are studying. However, many students do not heed even numerous requests by lecturers for them to read outside of the classroom (Berry, Cook, Hill & Stevens, 2010).

It is well known that increased reading has benefits that extend beyond the acquisition of content knowledge. Increased reading also has the potential to improve reading ability as well as the readers' attitudes to reading (Lukhele, 2013). It also aids in the transfer of language-related skills (Pecorari et al., 2012). Furthermore, reading different texts may enhance students' skills in text comprehension, as they begin to acquire a technical vocabulary, become familiar with different text types, as well as textual elements. However, to gain these benefits students have to form the habit of reading the prescribed or recommended texts.

The findings of prior studies on students' reading habits and practices are not encouraging. For example, a study by Burchfield and Sappington (2000) over a 16-year period found that at two colleges along the Texas/Mexican border only 30% of students completed any given assignment. The results of Brost and Bradley (2006) differ slightly as they found that most of the students in their sample from a university in Missouri did some of the assignment reading – some students claimed that they had read everything as required, and a handful admitted that they did not do any of the assigned reading. It would seem that students do not always realise the potential benefits that they can obtain from additional reading and the fact that their lack of interaction with course reading(s) can have a negative impact on their overall learning and development as students (Pecorari et al., 2012). The above situation can ultimately pose a threat to the quality of university education, as students may graduate with limited and / or restricted knowledge in their respective fields. In this regard, Palani (2012: 93) describes reading as '...a tool of the acquisition mind; it is the vehicle for obtaining ideas that cannot be transmitted verbally' and '...is a crucial factor affecting intellectual and emotional growth'. He argues that reading and the educational process are interrelated and that in order to achieve educational success, successful reading habits are essential.

Owusu-Acheaw (2014: 2) defines reading habits as a 'well-planned and deliberate pattern of study which has attained a form of consistency on the part of the students toward understanding academic subjects and passing at examinations'. He argues along similar lines as Palani (2012: 92), stating that 'reading habits determine the academic achievements of students to a great extent' and that 'both reading and academic achievements are interrelated and dependent on each other'. It is widely acknowledged that the inculcation of good reading habits and practices should begin in early childhood, and that good reading habits also need to be instilled in children of school-going age, when they are still at an impressionable stage. This should be reinforced throughout higher education.

In light of the fact that reading is integral to academic success, this case study explores students' reading habits and reading practices² at university, in an attempt to gain a better understanding of why students are not reading, as well as some of the challenges that they may face while reading. In addition, in an attempt to acquire and present a holistic view of students' reading practices, this research also examines the reading habits and practices of the families from which students come, as well as students' own reading habits and practices in their immediate family circle, from early childhood and throughout their schooling. Although there is a body of literature on this topic internationally, there has thus far been little research in the South African context that focuses specifically on the reading habits and practices of university

2 This study forms part of a larger PhD study which examined students' reading and writing attitudes and practices in higher education (Bharuthram, 2007).

students. It is hoped that an understanding of some of the challenges students face with regard to reading may encourage academics to play a more substantial role in motivating students to read course material and raise lecturers' awareness of the importance of embedding reading literacy into the curriculum. Moreover, it is hoped that this research will also encourage discussions across different platforms in higher education on the importance of instilling positive reading habits and practices in students, thereby promoting a culture of reading since, as discussed earlier, reading is the essence of all formal education.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In an attempt to acquire an understanding of students' reading habits and practices, three research questions were asked:

1. What are the participants' goals in reading?
2. What challenges do participants experience during reading?
3. What are the reading behaviours that typify the particular families from which participants come?

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Research context: This research was conducted at a university of technology in South Africa where the researcher worked as an academic development practitioner with students from the Faculty of Health Sciences. In particular, the researcher taught an academic literacy course to students registered for an extended first-year programme. It is in this capacity that the researcher had access to the research participants. Prior to the commencement of the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the academic institution's research committee to conduct this study.

Participants: The participants in this study were 62 students (20 men and 42 women). All were first-year students registered for different diplomas across the Faculty of Health Sciences. Of the 62 participants, 12 were registered for the extended first-year programme and attended the academic literacy course that the researcher taught. Nine of the 12 literacy course participants were identified as English Additional Language (EAL) students. These 12 students also participated in interviews and were therefore regarded as the primary participants. The remaining 50 students were selected randomly, based on their willingness to participate. Students were assured that their responses would be treated as anonymous, and that they could withdraw from the research process at any point during the research.

Research methods: Both quantitative methods (a questionnaire) and qualitative methods (interviews) were used to obtain as full an understanding of participants' reading habits and their reading practices as possible, as recommended by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007).

1. *The questionnaire:* All 62 students filled in the questionnaire, which was designed to get a sense of students' reading habits and reading practices. The first section of the questionnaire contained two open-ended questions. These are:
 - (1) 'Describe some specific reasons (goals) a person might have for reading.'
 - (2) 'What are some of the things you can do if you have difficulty understanding something you are reading?'

The first question was worded in such a way as to encourage students to provide an indication of how much they knew about reading for different purposes. The second question examined instances in which

students experienced difficulty in comprehension. The responses to both questions provided measures of the number and types of reading goals and strategies participants could generate through free recall.

The next set of questions (Questions 3, 4 and 5) which were closed-ended questions focused on reading for leisure, reading frequency and academic reading. These are the following:

- (3) 'Other than materials prescribed in your discipline, do you read anything else? If no, please state why? If yes, please tick whichever applies: newspapers, popular magazines, novels/literature, other (specify).'
- (4) 'How often do you read? – Daily, Once a week, Once a month, Other (specify).'
- (5) 'Do you read recommended material related to your discipline/course that you are studying? – Never, Occasionally (rarely), Sometimes (about 50% of the time), Often (specify).'

2. *The interviews:* Each of the 12 primary participants was interviewed twice. The interviews were conducted approximately two months after the completion of the questionnaire. In the first interview, for the purposes of triangulation, students were asked the same questions as in the questionnaire. This enabled the researcher to compare the questionnaire responses of the 12 primary participants with their oral interview responses. Furthermore, since the interviews were conducted only after the analysis of the questionnaires, this approach offered an opportunity to probe responses that were not clear in the questionnaire, as well as to address new questions that arose from an analysis of the questionnaires. The second interview, which consisted mostly of semi-structured questions, focused primarily on the reading practices that occurred in the participants' immediate family circle and in the school environment. The second interview was designed to increase understanding of the reading behaviours that typify the particular families from which the participants come, as well as the influence, if any, that the schooling system has had on their reading habits and practices. The aim was to obtain a holistic picture of the participants' reading habits and practices. Each interview was tape-recorded and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Data Analysis:

1. *Questionnaire:* The responses for most of the open-ended questions were thematically analysed. For each question, the participants' responses were used to compile an initial list of words/phrases that described responses pertinent to the question. This method was adopted from Taraban, Rynaerson and Kerr (2000) and is in line with the views of other researchers, such as Arzipe (1994), who argue that in analysing data we search for patterns, and look for categories to work with, from which new perspectives may emerge as we begin to interpret the data. Where categories could not be formed for certain questions, the main comments for each participant were summarised and used depending on their significance to the research question. The responses to the closed-ended questions were counted and the percentages were calculated and recorded.
2. *Interviews:* The interviews were first transcribed, and then the responses to each question were highlighted and summarised, searching for patterns of thought and behaviour in order to get a sense of students' reading habits and reading practices.

FINDINGS

Question 1: Student goals for reading: Most participants listed two reading goals (range: one to five). The goals listed were categorised into the three broad categories as used by Taraban et al. (2000: 290-291), namely, educational goals, casual reading, and practical reasons for reading (see Table 1).

Table 1:
Students' goals for reading

Goals	Percentage (n=62)
Educational Goals:	
- Increase general information/knowledge	56.45%
- Obtain better understanding of subject/topic	35.48%
- For educational purposes	22.58%
- Learn vocabulary	20.96%
- Improve reading speed	14.51%
- Improve language	08.05%
Casual Reading:	
- Relaxation/Pleasure	32.25%
- Countering boredom	03.23%
- Escape from world	01.61%
Practical Reasons:	
- To know what is happening in the world/current issues	20.97%
- To communicate effectively	01.61%
- To help other people	01.61%

As shown in Table 1 above, the highest number of goals recorded related to educational goals, followed by casual reading. The last category was practical reasons for reading. These findings are similar to those listed by the participants in the studies of Saumell, Hughes and Lopate (1999) and Taraban et al. (2000), which indicated that students tend to read more for learning purposes than for enjoyment or for escapism.

Of note is that in the interviews the majority of the participants indicated that although they read mostly for educational purposes, they did this only when they were forced to, for example, when they had to complete an assignment or prepare for a test. Other than this, because of the demands made on them by their disciplines they have very little time to devote to casual/practical reading.

Question 2: Strategies employed when experiencing difficulties in reading: The number of strategies listed per participant was two (range: one to four). See Table 2 below.

Table 2:
Strategies employed when experiencing difficulties reading

Reading strategies used	Percentage (n=62)
- Seek assistance from friends	75.08%
- Seek assistance from lecturers	09.67%
- Use a dictionary to understand unknown words	51.61%
- Read the text more than once	45.16%

In addition to the responses shown in Table 2, many of the remaining responses were lower-order cognitive responses to comprehension difficulty (for example, 'obtain a simpler source', 'read aloud', 'take a break' or 'stop reading'). A very small proportion of the participants reported using more sophisticated strategies (for example, 'make points or summaries' and 'generate questions about the material'). While it is encouraging to note that the majority of students indicated enlisting assistance from a friend or using a dictionary to manage their reading difficulties, it is a matter of concern that only a very small percentage of students indicated willingness to seek assistance from a lecturer.

The interview data revealed similar findings. Only one participant said that if friends were not able to help her understand a text, then she would approach her lecturer. The inability or reluctance of students to approach academics for assistance could have a deleterious effect on their learning, as it means that the lecturers are often unaware of the students' difficulties at a particular level.

Question 3: Reading for pleasure: Almost all participants (93.54%) indicated that they read material other than that required for their studies. Of all the reading materials listed, newspapers were most popular (64.51%), followed by magazines (61.29%) and novels (40.32%). Four participants indicated that they only read material required for their studies. Some reasons given were:

...once I start reading maybe a novel I won't have time for my school work.

And

I don't have the time to read other things beside the subject I'm doing.

Question 4: Reading frequency (all types of reading material): The figures presented below present a bleak picture of the reading habits and practices of the participants. It appears that just over half of the students are aware that reading increases one's knowledge (see Table 1), but they still do not read extensively or even on a daily basis as shown in Table 3.

Table 3:
Reading frequency (all materials)

Reading frequency	Percentage (n=62)
- Daily	35.48%
- Once a week	25.80%
- Two to three times a week	16.12%
- Once a month	11.29%
- Time permitting or when bored	09.67%

Question 5: Academic reading:

Table 4:
Academic reading

Reading of academic material	Percentage (n=62)
- Sometimes	43.54%

Reading of academic material	Percentage (n=62)
- Often	33.87%
- Occasionally	20.96%
- Never	01.61%

The above table suggests a limited commitment to the reading of academic material. This finding is in line with the findings of Pecorari et al. (2012) and Brost and Bradley (2006). Some participants who reported that they read occasionally also elaborated, saying that they read only in preparation for an assignment/project or a test.

Only two of the interviewed participants indicated that they engaged in additional reading in order to improve their understanding of the subject content while the remainder of the 12 participants relied heavily on lecture notes and study guides. Participants also reported that they found their prescribed and recommended textbooks difficult to read and that they often experienced problems in understanding subject-specific terminology. In addition, they reported that they received almost no or limited encouragement from their lecturers to read which is of great concern. Apart from the fact that reading is rarely mentioned, it seems that lecturers provide students with lecture notes, without creating situations where students are encouraged to consult reading materials to compile their own notes and in doing so to expand their disciplinary knowledge.

Family and childhood reading habits and practices: Most of the 12 primary participants come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, where reading was considered a luxury. All English Additional Language (EAL) participants reported that their parents neither read to them, nor encouraged them to read. However, some of them did remember being told stories and poems by their parents and grandparents. It therefore seems that many of the EAL learners come from an 'oral cultural' background, in other words, from a culture that does not place much value on reading.

School experiences of reading: Most of the EAL participants who were interviewed came from schools that were very poorly³ resourced and therefore had different schooling experiences from the English First Language (EL1) participants who attended better resourced schools. All the EAL participants started to read only when they entered primary school, some through the use of their home language readers. Of note is that a few of the EAL participants only began to learn English from Grade 3. On the other hand, all of the EL1 participants knew how to read some words before entering primary school. Both the EAL and EL1 participants reported that they learnt to read by decoding syllables or words, however, for most of them the formal teaching of reading stopped either in Grade 3 or in Grade 4.

Participants recalled that their reading in secondary was tested through prepared or unseen reading passages, reading comprehension tests, tests on prescribed set books and book reviews. These were done mostly to satisfy assessment requirements and it would therefore seem that reading was viewed as a 'once-off activity'. Reading as a hobby was not encouraged, and participants had little or no exposure to the range of genres available.

³ For example, some of these schools did not have a library, and students were required to share reading material.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this research reveal that most of the primary participants of this study, especially the EAL participants, were severely disadvantaged in several ways with regard to their reading development.

Firstly, the participants lack a solid reading foundation, which should have been provided in their immediate family unit. Most of them come from a cultural background that values oral story-telling rather than the written word. According to Lukhele (2013), cultural beliefs play an important role in developing positive reading attitudes. If a student comes from a culture where reading is viewed in a negative light, then it is likely that the student will develop a less favourable attitude towards reading. This will inadvertently affect the student's reading practices. Most participants also came from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or from homes where their parents were not in a position to participate actively in their learning development. Hence, many of them entered school with very little exposure to books.

Some prior studies have shown evidence of a connection between socio-economic status and academic success (Sirin, 2005; Bornstein & Bradley, 2012). Other studies (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Shute, Hansen, Underwood & Razzouk, 2011) have shown that there is a strong correlation between parental involvement and increased academic achievement, and argue that a home environment that encourages learning is more important to student achievement than a family's income, education level or cultural background (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Furthermore, learning to read prior to entering school is essential as a foundation for learning; many studies (for example, Clay, 1991; Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994) have shown that children who are read to before they enter school are more likely to be successful in learning to read, as they are more likely to 'approach print with high expectations of its meaning and possess knowledge and familiarity with story structure and the language of the text' (Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994: 93).

In recent years, literacy initiatives and programmes have been launched by governmental and non-governmental organisations to promote a culture of reading and improve literacy levels among parents and caregivers. Nevertheless, the problem of low reading literacy levels is still of great concern. Hence, stronger and more controlled measures need to be put in place at governmental level to educate parents/caregivers on the value of reading and reading extensively, as well as on the importance of playing an active role in their children's education.

Secondly, learning to read in school and developing the ability to read for meaning is essential both in the Foundation and Intermediate phases of learning, as it lays the necessary foundation for the more sophisticated reading required in higher education. However, as noted earlier in the findings, and as Pretorius and Currin (2010) point out, although many educators in South African schools acknowledge that reading is important, little direct attention is paid to reading after the Foundation Phase. As a result, 'for many children reading develops at a suboptimal level and they have problems accessing, understanding and integrating information from written texts' (Pretorius, 2002: 34). Decoding skills are necessary, but Cummins (2001) states that they are insufficient for reading comprehension development, because acquiring decoding skills does not automatically imply proficiency in reading comprehension. Therefore, it is important to continue with some structured teaching of reading after the decoding stage. In addition to this, educators need to take seriously the plea of 'Back to books' made by researchers (Baka, 2000; Lukhele, 2013) – they should become readers and teachers of reading (Lukhele, 2013) too, and in so doing be role models for the younger generation.

As a result of the two concerns raised above it is no wonder that many students enter higher education with a vast mismatch between the expectations of school and the expectations of higher education. Bridging this gap is a challenge and is immensely difficult for most of them. With regard to more specific concerns relating to students' reading habits and practices in higher education, the following were noted. Firstly,

the primary participants interviewed reported that they enjoyed reading, but explained that because of time constraints they read only for academic purposes, and read only when they had to complete an assessment task or were studying for a test or examination. This situation is of concern, as it seems that students are not engaging in reading for pleasure, and their academic reading is itself very limited. Given that research shows that reading for leisure improves vocabulary knowledge and reading proficiency (Roberts, 2008), this is problematic. Furthermore, reading extensively has a positive effect on academic performance (Collier, 1989).

It is worrying that very few students indicated using sophisticated reading strategies to assist them in overcoming their reading difficulties. This finding could be attributed to their lack of knowledge of reading strategies, resulting perhaps from inadequate/insufficient teaching of reading at school and a lack of extensive reading.

The fact that most of the participants reported that they only read when they were forced to do so suggests that they are extrinsically motivated. Therefore, the challenge for lecturers is thinking of ways to raise and build their students' intrinsic levels of motivation for reading, as engagement in reading is strongly correlated with reading achievement to such an extent that it may enable students to overcome disadvantages due to socio-economic status or parents' educational backgrounds. In addition, academics should create positive reading habits and attitudes in their students, but it is also important for them to create an environment that fosters the 'intention to read' and for students to 'continue reading'. In this regard, Mathewson (2004) claims that positive reading attitudes alone do not necessarily lead to reading, unless the 'intention to read or continue reading' is present.

Secondly, most of the academic reading that students engage in is restricted to their lecture notes and study guide(s). Total reliance on lecture notes encourages rote learning and characterises students as reproducers of knowledge, instead of positioning students as producers of knowledge. Pecorari et al. (2012: 245) argue that it may be possible that 'by not regularly assigning reading, teachers signal that the textbook is peripheral and therefore unimportant'. To this end, lecturers can play a pivotal role in contributing to positive reading habits and practices among their students. A suggestion would be for lecturers to limit their lecture notes and instead create situations that 'gently enforce' students to read. For example, in order to encourage students to read in preparation for a lecture, the lecturer could begin the lesson with a mini quiz/test. These could be done occasionally and contribute towards a set number of unplanned tests/tasks that contribute to the continuous assessment mark. This is just one example that could be varied to include reading and testing after a lecture, or after the completion of a particular section/topic.

Thirdly, all the students interviewed reported that their textbooks are difficult to read, resulting in heavily reliance on the dictionary. Lecturers need to be cautious when choosing prescribed or recommended readings. Pretorius (2005) argues that when the reading of academic material requires too much effort, and students consistently fail in reading these texts, this may lead them to become reluctant to continue reading or even to apply new reading strategies. According to Perera (1984: 275), the chances of full comprehension are reduced if 'unfamiliar subject matter expressed in technical vocabulary combines with intrinsically demanding sentence construction', which may be the case with some of the textbooks encountered by the participants. Admittedly some of the difficulties that students experience in reading and writing in higher education can be attributed to their limited proficiency in the English language, but students' reading ability is also an important contributory factor in their reading/writing difficulties. Furthermore, as indicated above, many of these students not only enter higher education with home literacies that are not congruent to the literacy practices of the institution, but also have an inadequate schooling background. They have to overcome these challenges, and have to acquire the literacy practices

of their individual disciplines. Students who are unable to make the required adjustments struggle to succeed academically (Greenbaum & Mbali, 2002; Ngwenya, 2010).

The fact that students experience texts as challenging to read stresses the need for continued reading instruction. The current trend is to rely on academic development initiatives to address students' reading and writing difficulties. While such academic development initiatives do have benefits, these initiatives on their own are insufficient to cater for all students, and to address some of the more specific disciplinary reading norms and conventions and/or challenges that students may experience. This problem is best dealt with by lecturers in the relevant disciplines, who have insider knowledge of their disciplines, and are thus better equipped to assist their students to read in their disciplines. It is therefore suggested that reading awareness and the teaching of reading be institutionalised across the curriculum, together with writing activities.

Finally, in the current situation, higher education institutions are forced to implement measures to address the shortcomings of the schooling system at additional costs. In order to prevent the situation from escalating, it is imperative that sustained and monitored initiatives are put in place at governmental level to ensure that there is greater family involvement in childhood education and that the schooling system produces scholars that are better prepared for higher education.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the reading habits and practices of first-entry students at a university in South Africa. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire and individual interviews. The findings reveal that the reading habits and practices of students are of great concern and are deep-seated. For the majority of the participants, their lack of reading exposure begins at home, where many parents are not able to engage actively in their children's learning process. Children from these backgrounds enter the schooling system with very little exposure to books. Some emphasis is placed on reading in the foundation phases of schooling, but this is not sufficient to develop these students as independent, critical readers. Hence, they enter higher education with the literacies of schooling, but not with a well-developed literacy repertoire for higher education.

The findings also indicate that students are not self-motivated to read. Instead, they read primarily when external pressure is applied and for educational reasons, and then only to a limited extent. Very few students read the relevant discipline-specific texts to supplement notes taken or given during lectures. The provision of handouts/notes by lecturers has a negative effect, and seems to create a sense that reading is not important. All 12 primary participants reported that they found their textbooks difficult to read. It should raise concern that very few students indicated using more sophisticated reading strategies to assist them in overcoming their difficulties, and this could be attributed to their lack of knowledge of reading strategies.

The above findings suggest that reading has been marginalised, and that in order to position students as producers of knowledge, it is imperative that all stakeholders begin to play an active role in developing and enhancing a culture of reading amongst learners. In the context of higher education, it is imperative that lecturers in the individual disciplines play a greater role in urging (even forcing) students to read and also in helping them to attain the reading conversancy required in their disciplines.

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