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Reading as a core component of developing academic literacy skills in L2 settings

ABSTRACT
Academic reading has gained considerable interest among language theoreticians and practitioners as a key component of generally understood academic literacy competencies. Yet, despite the unquestionable importance of developing advanced reading skills in both L1 and L2 academic settings, a definition of the concept of academic reading is still not easy to formulate. In an attempt to better understand the notion of academic reading, this article first, provides an overview of the goals of academic reading comprehension, with special focus on reading to learn, and then, discusses the relationship of academic reading to other concepts currently employed with reference to academic literacy. The article finishes with some guidelines for L2 reading instruction developed at the academic level.
Keywords: academic literacy, academic reading, reading to learn

1. Introduction

It may be observed that over the last two decades the skill of reading has gained a special status in subject matter instruction in academic settings and it is treated as an essential skill for students in achieving their education-related goals. Academic reading is typically taken to be an aspect of a multi-component construct of academic literacy which can be explained as "ways of thinking, reading, speaking, and writing dominant in the academic setting; […] ways of receiving knowledge, managing knowledge and creating knowledge for the benefit of a field of study" (Neeley, 2005, p. 8). Such a perspective on academic literacy suggests that even though the term 'academic reading' refers predominantly to the skill of reading, it is inextricably bound with all of the other elements of academic literacy, as noted by Neeley (2005). In the opinion of some scholars, however, it is academic reading and academic writing that constitute two central and integral skills underlying all the other academic skills and competences (Peelo, 1994; Norris & Phillips, 2009; Chodkiewicz, 2014; McCulloch, 2013; Hirvela, 2016; Lillis & Tuck, 2016;

McGrath, Berggren, & Mežek, 2016). Thus, it seems to be highly justified to explore the notion of academic reading as an aspect of academic literacy.

2. Defining academic reading and its purposes

A frequent attempt at defining academic reading concerns the discussion of its prime objectives. Clearly, academic settings require that reading is conceptualised as much more than general comprehension, searching for simple information or skimming the text. Yet, these aims are unquestionably also present when reading at the academic level as they represent the most fundamental and universal reasons for text processing. There are, however, a number of more specific purposes for reading that are characteristic of academic-related educational situations.

Due to the fact that academic reading is closely connected with the idea of working with multiple texts, reading to integrate information is regarded as one of main purposes for reading (Urquhart & Weir, 1998; Mayer, 2002; Rouet, 2006; Britt, Rouet, & Durik, 2018). As explained by Grabe and Stoller (2011), readers are expected to select relevant ideas from different sources, interpret them, and, finally, restructure. Integrating information from multiple texts is frequently associated with another purpose for reading, that is reading to critique. In fact, having a critical stance towards expository texts is an elementary feature of an academically literate person (Wallace, 2003). One more reason for reading which occurs naturally in formal education settings concerns reading to write (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). As already mentioned, developing one's academic literacy and content-area knowledge frequently involves the integration of these two receptive and productive skills.

Since reading and learning processes typically get interwoven in instructional contexts, another objective of academic reading closely connected with those listed above is reading to learn (Harrison & Perry, 2004; Chodkiewicz, 2014; Oakhill, Cain, & Elbro, 2015). Underlining the mutual relation between reading and learning, Grabe and Stoller (2019) recognize knowledge acquisition as the final goal of text processing. They point out that reading to learn is a purposeful activity performed by learners as well as by experts in a given field due to diverse inner and external stimuli. It is important to note that this purpose for reading is often perceived by researchers as a separate concept that is also referred to as 'reading to study', 'learning by reading', 'learning from reading', 'learning from text', 'studying from text', 'content-based reading' and 'knowledge-based reading' (Chodkiewicz, 2014, 2015b). Although different terms have been launched by reading specialists, they generally depict reading to learn as a multi-layered concept based on interrelated components and processes.

Koda (2019) identifies three interrelated operations that constitute the foundations of any effective reading to learn experience. They concern building text-meaning, constructing personal-meaning, and refining knowledge. In other

words, readers get involved in creating the meaning of a particular text by analysing its linguistic and discursive features. Also, apart from activating own background knowledge of the subject matter, they reflect on the similarities and discrepancies between the current state of their knowledge and the content of the text they read (Koda, 2019; Koda & Yamashita, 2019). There are a number of what Grabe and Stoller (2019) call 'reading abilities' that L2/FL readers employ while performing such operations (p. 9). They include, among others, reading for main ideas and details, inferencing, using relevant reading strategies, analysing text structure and discourse, integrating information from multiple texts, and rereading texts purposefully. The analysis of both the quantity and the cognitive complexity of these abilities makes it apparent that reading to learn is a complex construct.

3. Academic reading in light of current approaches to L1 and L2 literacy

Issues in developing advanced reading skills have been discussed with reference not only to the concept of academic reading but also to a range of other approaches or frameworks connected with L1/L2 literacy. They include, for instance, English for academic purposes, English for specific purposes, content-based instruction, content-area reading, disciplinary literacy, and critical literacy. It is crucial to take them into consideration while exploring the concept of academic reading as they seem to either partially overlap with it or to be closely related to it.

For a long time academic reading skills have been found to be closely connected with English for academic purposes (EAP) (Hirvela, 2016; Hyland, 2016; Hyland & Shaw, 2016; Lillis & Tuck, 2016). However, due to the fact that the scope of the concept has evolved, and that nowadays it is used with reference to both research and practice-focused contexts, a further distinction between language used for general academic purposes and for more specific academic purposes has been proposed (Hyland, 2012; Charles, 2013; Humphrey, 2016; McGrath et al., 2016; Stoller, 2016; Wilson, 2016). Hyland (2016) suggests using two terms which clearly point at this demarcation, namely 'English for general academic purposes' (EGAP) and 'English for specific academic purposes' (ESAP) (p. 18). The former is connected with teaching elements of language skills and subsystems that are universal and shared by all disciplines first, and then, moving to those that are more discipline-specific. The latter, on the other hand, advocates instructing students from the very beginning on the so-called specialised features of academic English. This distinction signals a two-fold goal of academic reading instruction which should assist students in noticing not only general features of academic expository texts but also the ones that are characteristic of disciplinary texts.

Researchers often find it important to look at academic reading as related to a variety of educational situations covered by the concept of English for specific purposes (ESP). Evidently, a commonly accepted view nowadays is that academic reading events should be analysed in the context of particular academic

courses or programmes (Hirvela, 2013; Paltridge, 2013; Parkinson, 2013). It is widely acknowledged that developing students' ESP reading skills should involve explicit instruction on the identification of rhetorical features in texts exploited in the classroom as well as shaping students' discourse analytic skills (Martinez, 2002; Hyland, 2012; van Dijk, 2012; Hirvela, 2013).

Academic reading is also regarded as one of the key skills to be promoted in content-based instruction (CBI), which means teaching a second language in parallel with the content of a given subject area. Adopting the principles of CBI provides students with opportunities to use academic language in meaningful contexts and become familiarised with discipline-specific vocabulary (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008; Chodkiewicz, 2015a). Importantly, this approach draws attention to the fact that attending to lexical-grammatical structures of written texts can enhance content knowledge acquisition. This means that language instruction demands that the content of reading material should be processed appropriately so that the text becomes logical and rational to its readers (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Twyman, McCleery, & Tindal, 2006).

It is justified, then, to treat academic literacy and academic reading as tightly connected with subject-matter learning. Content-area reading, also referred to as 'reading in content areas' (Herber, 1970), encourages the idea that developing students' reading comprehension skills should be a naturally embedded element of content subject instruction (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Adopting this approach to reading on a regular basis guarantees that students are provided with meaningful purposes for reading, authentic content materials, systematic practice in text comprehension and, importantly, training in developing proper study skills (Handsfield, 2016).

Since academic reading has commonly been explored in relation to specific disciplines of knowledge, a distinction between the so-called subject-matter/subject-area/content-area literacy and disciplinary literacy has been recognized (Moje, 2008). Content-area literacy instruction denotes the development of students' general capability of reading and writing to learn from subject-matter texts while adopting a range of cognitive strategies, and it is commonly referred to as reading expository texts across diverse content areas (Fang & Coatoam, 2013). The basic assumption behind disciplinary literacy, on the other hand, is that there exist profound rhetorical and linguistic differences between specific disciplines (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012). By way of illustration, as it emerges from corpus linguistics literature, while authors of computer science texts typically take advantage of verbs that are of formal character (e.g., *prove, define*), the authors of texts belonging to the field of linguistics use verbs related to verbal communication (e.g., *argue*) and cognition (e.g., *see, feel*) (Teich & Fankhauser, 2010). It is mandatory for students, then, to focus on the unique features of disciplinary texts in order to succeed in constructing experiential meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning of a particular text (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2008; Hillman, 2014; Humphrey, 2016). What is more,

disciplinary literacy practices involve the adoption of certain skills and strategies typically employed by experts responsible for co-construction of knowledge in a particular discipline (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). This means a shift from the use of general subject-matter study skills and strategies to more specialized and more advanced ones. As a consequence, students are to be supported in developing literacy practices, cognitive skills, and the knowledge of language and discourse characteristics of a particular discipline (Fang & Coatoam, 2013; Hillman, 2014).

Apart from being looked at as a cognitive-based and knowledge-driven process, reading at higher levels of education is approached as a social process and realistic practice to be analysed, discussed, and finally, evaluated. Indeed, critical thinking underlies the study of academic disciplines and constitutes one of the major educational goals in the western world (Wilson, 2016). The significance of taking a personal stance by students on the information to be learnt is depicted in the well-known Taxonomy of Educational Objectives developed by Bloom et al. (1956) and in its revised version proposed by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001). Academic reading, therefore, should engage students, especially those at the university level, in creating their own perspective on the issues described in texts they read. In other words, academic reading demands a dialogical interaction with expository texts on the part of a reader, that is his or her 'critical engagement' (Abbott, 2013). In order to achieve this goal, critical literacy, as Janks (2010) calls it 'reading against texts' (p. 22), needs to be placed in the centre of instruction. Students have to become aware of the authors' beliefs on the content of texts they are exposed to, which can be expressed, for instance, by means of evaluative language (Hyland, 2005) as well as of the possible influence of such beliefs and language on the text interpretation. Simultaneously, readers need to learn how to analyse, interpret and question arguments, postulates and hypotheses expressed in target texts (Wallace, 2003; Wilson, 2016).

Taken together, it is believed that the discussion undertaken in this article demonstrates how complex the concept of academic reading is. In the opinion of the current author, it might be worth conceptualizing academic reading as a kind of 'umbrella term' combining diverse approaches to L1 and L2 literacies. Undoubtedly, academic reading is a broad notion which still deserves more reflection on the part of theoreticians and practitioners with regard to different academic disciplines studied in a diversity of educational environments. It should also be acknowledged that enhancing students' academic literacy, which is to a large extent based on the skill of academic reading, should undeniably constitute a major objective of both content-area and language instruction.

4. Drawing some guidelines for enhancing L2 academic reading skills

As pointed out above, developing students' academic reading skills in the context of formal education requires an implementation of explicit reading instruction (e.g., Koda, 2005; Fisher et al., 2008; Grabe & Stoller, 2014; Cliff Hodges, 2016;

Schwanenflugel & Knapp, 2016; Chodkiewicz, 2018). Much scholarly discussion of fostering academic reading skills of L2 students pertains to establishing general goals for reading instruction. Overall, they concern the enhancement of students' both lower-level and higher-level text processing skills (Handsfield, 2016; Chodkiewicz, 2018). Foreign language readers, in particular, are recommended to focus on creating abundant recognition vocabulary knowledge, improving word recognition skills and reading fluency, as well as identifying the main ideas conveyed in texts. They should also be assisted in developing their skills of synthesizing, inferencing, discourse processing, and text structure analysis as well as in using their prior knowledge and reading strategies purposefully (Grabe & Stoller, 2009). Although each of these aims of foreign language reading instruction is not to be undermined in formal education, a range of other dimensions of academic reading need attention as well.

One fundamental way of enhancing academic reading skills is to provide students with continuous exposure to authentic texts which are fully communicative in their nature and which contain representative features of the content area that the students study (Dakowska, 2016). Hence, it is significant that students are acquainted with structural, linguistic and discursive features characteristic of texts of a given field (Buehl, 2011; Grabe & Stoller, 2014). Also, they should receive practice in establishing schemata critical for raising the awareness of comprehension clues (Hall et al., 2005; Usó-Juan, 2006; Chodkiewicz, 2016). In order to foster readers' formation of schemata, the principles of genre-based reading instruction can be followed (Hirvela, 2013).

Furthermore, it is essential that authentic texts used in the classroom are accompanied by tasks relevant in terms of learner and text characteristics (Hudson, 2007; Chamot, 2009) Such tasks ought to be suitable for particular educational contexts, and they should ensure that the target behaviour of readers is enhanced. It is also important that the intended communicative purpose of the text is clear enough so that students are provoked to respond to it with their attitudes (Bråten, Gil, & Strømsø, 2011; Dakowska, 2016; McGrath et al., 2016). When engaged in academic reading tasks, L2/FL students can also be directed towards more extensive activation of their background content knowledge as well as their knowledge of the native and target languages and cultures (Mishan, 2005; Gabe & Stoller, 2019). Adopting the widely-accepted reading session pattern comprised of pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading/follow-up stages (Chamot, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2011, 2014; Dakowska 2015) can be beneficial for giving students opportunities to practise diverse reading sub-skills and strategies adopted by expert readers in the course of studying disciplinary texts (Waters & Waters, 2001; Harrison & Perry, 2004; Grabe & Stoller, 2019).

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has been an attempt to contribute to a discussion on the concept of academic reading acknowledged in recent years to be a critical element of academic

literacy. It is hoped that the account of the fundamental theoretical underpinnings concerning academic reading given herein has demonstrated not only how complex and multilayer this notion is, but also how vital it is to provide second language students with adequate instruction aimed at the development of this fundamental academic skill. It is of paramount importance that L2 academic teachers should introduce well-structured instruction on academic reading into their content-area classes. Before offering it, however, they undeniably have to become acquainted with both theoretical considerations and research-based perspectives on the relevant issues concerning academic reading practice in L2 contexts.

It is crucial, then, that L2/FL reading research will be broadened in the coming years. Evidently, it is not sufficient that the instructional frameworks that are currently adopted in the classrooms are grounded in theoretical principles but they also should be investigated empirically. The present author believes that further research studies are needed not only to verify the effectiveness of particular reading instruction procedures but also to get more understanding of the development academic reading skills over time when students are provided with specific reading treatment or training. Thus, it seems to be justified for researchers to consider carrying out explanatory longitudinal studies with the use of a broad range of available methodologies.

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