

AN INVESTIGATIVE STUDY OF READING CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH JOURNAL ARTICLES AMONG JORDANIAN GRADUATE STUDENTS AT JERASH UNIVERSITY

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Abstract:

The current study sheds light on the research carried out in the area of academic reading practices adopted by English language, literature, and education graduate students at Jerash University. The main purpose of the study is to examine the challenges encountered as well as the strategies used to overcome these challenges of reading English journal articles. The instruments used in the study are a questionnaire of academic reading difficulties prepared for (40) graduate students, and a focus group interviews carried out on (12) graduate students to collect qualitative data. The qualitative findings reveal that the difficulties encountered by Jordanian graduate students are: reading quickly to grasp the overall meaning, using own words in note taking, quick reading seeking for information, understanding the organization of the text, and taking notes and pointing out key ideas. The research findings show also that the challenges faced are attributed to the use of English as the medium of instruction in graduate studies. The employed strategies to overcome the challenges are also highlighted by the study findings. It is to be noted that at the time of having challenges and difficulties in academic reading, the students are not really responsive toward overcoming these challenges. The study concludes by suggesting administrative policies and reading programs to support the academic reading needs for students in order to help achieving academic success.

Keywords: *Academic reading, English journal articles (EJA), Jerash University, graduate student, overcoming strategy.*

Introduction

The last few decades witnessed an accelerated growth in research into reading and reading practice among EFL\ESL students. This area of research has been accouterment from different standpoints and perspectives (see, for example, Shen, 2006; Richardson & Eccles, 2007; Pretorius & Currin, 2010). This considerable growth of research into reading due to the fact that effective reading is regarding a significant approach for productive learning. As reading is mixed with the whole educational process, it is then a prerequisite of educational success. Being able to read and to write will not only equip the foundation of academic disciplines, yet it is also supreme for lifelong success from kindergarten to future employment of adults (Cassell, 2004; Jordan, Snow & Porsche, 2000). In this regard, it is instructive to note that, the importance of reading lies in its importance as a basic tool for education and not only for enjoyment (Makotsi, 2005).

In foreign and second language learning, reading is viewed as essential for learning and acquiring the language. A reading ability is often all that is needed by learners of EFL (Bernhardt, 2005; Hudson, 2007). Likewise, Barnett (1989) stated that reading is an important skill in foreign and second language in undergraduate and graduate programs and it is perceived as “communication, as a mental process, as the reader's active participation in the creation of meaning, as manipulation of strategies, as a receptive rather as a passive skill”.

For most of EFL learners, reading is one of the main sources of language input since they are living in an environment where English is not spoken. EFL learners mostly start learning English by reading books, texts, and articles. According to Li and Wilhelm (2008, p. 291) “readings is considered to be one of the most substantial skills language learner needs to grasp which helps them to construct vocabulary, motivates their lifelong learning and improve L1/L2 language skills”.

Understanding the reading strategies and skills by graduate students is an essential concern as they are depending upon reading and writing skills to succeed in their graduate studies. In spite of claiming that all graduate students in different contexts are encountering academic difficulties (Lin and Scherz, 2014; Ren and Hagedorn, 2012; Alghail and Mahfoodh, 2016) yet, there is a real need for studies that go beyond this generalization by examining these specific academic difficulties. In a study aiming to evaluate the graduate students' learning experiences in Master programs in Jordan, Al-Rawashdeh (2010) found that graduate students' problems were mostly related to academic adjustment. Virtually, various researchers recommended that there is a need for further research to be carried out and more studies to be conducted to gain a well understanding of the academic difficulties that graduate students encounter considering the variety of cultural and social backgrounds of the different societies.

The objectives of the current study, hence, are to address the challenges experienced by Jordanian graduate students when English journal articles are their material and thus necessitated their methods to overcome the challenges. The findings of the study hopefully will lead to increase the awareness of graduate students' learning experiences in Jordanian universities. The study also could be considered a contribution to the research that focuses on Jordanian graduate students in Jordan and Middle East region, which has not been given enough attention. This in turn can participate in formulating the policies and decisions aiming at assisting Jordanian graduate students to manage successfully academic challenges. In addition, there is a lack of studies that have examined academic reading difficulties facing graduate students in Jordanian universities, thus, this study is expected to effectively contribute to this field of research.

Review of Related Literature

Reading has been defined differently by many researchers. According to Alptekin, (2006, p. 494) reading is “an interaction of the reader's text-based and knowledge-based processes”. Barnett (1989) argues that reading includes interdisciplinary comprehensions from divergent fields of study such as sociology, education, and theoretical and applied linguistics. Qanwal and Karim (2014) view reading as a process of recognizing a written text in order to understand its contents. Academic reading is different from other forms of reading in its being complicated and focused according to the subject matter. Academic reading requires findings of authorial intensions and purposes. It then can be defined as a purposeful and critical reading of various academic texts in order to complete the study of a certain discipline (Sengupta, 2002). Moreover, Sengupta (2002) and Shen (2013) defined academic reading as a purposeful and critical reading of a range of lengthy reading texts for completing the study of specific subject areas. It is also different from other forms of reading, for academic reading is complex and discipline-specific, carefully synthesizing material from a number of sources. It requires consciously finding authorial intensions and purposes.

In the academic context, it is necessary for graduate students to understand textbooks, references, articles or magazines which are written in English language. Students practice reading to acquire knowledge and to gather information required for their academic disciplines and also for future career. This makes the ability to read and understand texts as the most important skill required in the academic context. However, some researchers assure that most EFL\ ESL graduate students fail to read texts written in English effectively (Alghail and Mahfoodh, 2016; Chen, 2017). The problems encountered by graduate students in many countries come from the reading materials themselves, the confusion regarding

grammatical structures, difficulty of vocabularies, and the lack of background knowledge (Chen, 2017). Students also have reading problems when they encounter unknown words (Manjet, 2014), especially if these are key words. Furthermore, the students need some basic knowledge on a text in order to understand it properly (Alderson, 2000; Nuttall, 2000). When the students have the basic knowledge on what they read, they can understand the main idea and easily can retain the information.

Studies on Academic Reading Practices among Graduate Students

In a study to examine reading difficulties among Asian ESL international postgraduate students who are completing a Master's Degree in TESOL at an Australian university, Phakiti and Li (2011) revealed that, students reported different types of difficulties. The difficulties include reading and writing such as synthesizing information, besides, the researchers found that factors such as English proficiency, self-regulation, motivation, self-efficacy, former learning experience and adjustment had an impact on their difficulties.

In another study on academic reading difficulties, Chen (2017) carried out a study to examine non-native English speaking graduate students' reading comprehension difficulties and the strategies when they are reading an English journals articles. The results of the study revealed that graduate students' have a medium-to-high level of English journals articles reading comprehension difficulty. These difficulties consist of: limited vocabulary, low reading speed, limited semantic knowledge, lack of reading efficiency, lack of syntactic knowledge, and short attention span.

Sidhu (2016) conducted a study to assess the postgraduate students' critical reading skills from the perspectives of students' supervisors. This descriptive study involved 209 postgraduate students and 121 supervisors from two local public universities in Malaysia. The data collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study revealed that there was a significant difference in the assessment of critical reading skills of postgraduate students from the perspectives of supervisors and postgraduate students. Students observed to have a higher level of readiness compared to their supervisors. Supervisors also felt that students possessed limited readiness in terms of critical reading skills such as questioning and evaluating texts.

In addition, Kheirzadeh and Tavakoli (2012) carried out a study to investigate the reasons lie behind academic reading difficulties. The participants were 34 postgraduate EFL learners at University of Isfahan. The results showed that the main reason causing reading difficulty for post-graduate students is the lack of knowledge of content. Postgraduate students agreed on the common fact that words with multiple senses make a text incomprehensible. This approves the above mentioned claim that EFL learners may not comprehend a text since every English word has more than one meaning and knowing of them is sometimes impossible for EFL students. This is because living in a non-native context takes the chance of having more contact with English in different contexts.

In this regard, an insightful study was conducted by Tonryet al (2009) with the aim to identify doctoral students' perceptions of challenges that prevent them from reading empirical articles. The participants were 148 doctoral students in the field of education at a large metropolitan research extensive university. The participants were enrolled in sections of a one-semester research design course offered over a 2-year period. The results proved that there were six barriers that students encounter as preventing them from reading empirical articles: lack of time, physical factors, lack of relevancy, lack of statistical background, language style, and accessibility. In the most recent study conducted in UK by Kuzborska (2015) examining the international students' viewpoints that guided their academic reading practices. The study found that academic reading difficulties encountered by international students could not be attributed to their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary or a reader's cognition; rather these difficulties were related to their abilities of social interaction with other members in their academic environment.

Method

In order to identify the challenges encountered by the Jordanian graduate students when they are reading English journals articles and their preferred method to overcome these challenges, the study employed both qualitative and quantitative designs. For 40 graduate students, the use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gather data regarding the academic reading challenges faced by graduate students at Jerash University is a process that is supported by Bryman (2004) who argued that using both a quantitative and qualitative approaches produce valid and reliable research findings. The background study of the participants is in the fields of English language and literature and educational studies at the level of a master degree course. Twenty two students were males, and eighteen were females. The rationale for selecting the participants is premised on the fact that they have to be full-time master students in taught master programs and they have to be in their second semester or later.

Research Instruments

Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study tries to examine academic reading difficulties adopted from the questionnaire used by Evans and Green (2007). The questionnaire includes two main parts; the first part was used to obtain personal details of the participants regarding their age, gender, social and demographic background. The second part included (10) items to get the information on students' perceptions of their academic reading difficulties when they are reading an English journals articles. Researchers often use the examination of the academic reading difficulties when they set out to identify students' level and perceptions of academic reading difficulties studies at undergraduate and graduate levels. Several researchers claim that while conducting such studies, the academic reading difficulties questionnaire generated data that are so reliable and valid (see for example, Atai and Nazari, 2011; Manjet, 2014; Alghail and Mahfoodh, 2016).

Focus Group Interview

The second instrument used in this study for collecting data is the focus group interview. Unlike the quantitative method in the study which is the questionnaires, this instrument represents a method where data is collected through direct interaction between the participants and the researcher (Creswell, 2012). This is a part from collecting an authentic and additional data to enrich the study. Thus, focus group interview is not only a useful technique to obtain views and perceptions of respondents regarding certain issues, but also it is a more flexible method compared with observation or questionnaire survey. Focus group technique is used in this study to identify the students' preferred methods of how they can overcome their academic reading difficulties when they are reading English journals articles. The selected questions for the interview are adapted from a study by Atai and Nazari (2011) and Manjet (2014). These questions are designed to get answers to the research question of the study about the reading difficulties when they are reading English journals articles and the perceived methods they used to overcome these difficulties.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected by the questionnaires is analyzed using both techniques; descriptive and one way ANOVA statistics. The descriptive data is used to describe and to summarize the characteristics of the collected data. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17 is used to analyze the data. To analyze the qualitative data, the interpretations of the qualitative data are conducted following a sequence of processes based on content analysis. The process of analyzing the interviews is done firstly according to Gay and Airasian, (2003) analysis by transcribing, then segmenting the transcripts and then coding of the segments and finally categorizing the codes. It is necessary to note that the processes of coding and categorizing the segments are done simultaneously to make sure that the transcripts are categorized into the appropriate units according to the established codes.

Academic Reading Difficulties

The used descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation for average academic reading difficulties and overall difficulties are analyzed in the study. The items were measured by the five Likert scales with frequency options ranging from very easy (1), easy (2), neutral (3), difficult (4) and very difficult (5).

Table 1: Frequencies of aspects of difficulties in academic reading

Aspect of difficulty	Very easy N %	Easy N %	Neutral N %	Difficult N %	V. difficult N %
1. Taking brief, relevant notes	4 10	7 18	4 10	12 30	13 33
2. Understanding organization of a text	8 20	7 18	6 15	14 35	5 13
3. Identifying key Ideas	10 25	5 13	3 8	8 20	10 30
4. Reading carefully to understand a text	11 28	15 38	5 13	2 5	7 18
5. Identifying supporting ideas/examples	9 23	11 28	2 5	8 20	10 25
6. Using own words in note taking	9 23	5 13	3 8	5 13	18 45
7. Reading quickly to get overall meaning	2 5	7 18	4 10	7 18	20 50
8. Reading quickly to find information	1 3	3 8	5 13	14 35	17 43
9. Working out meaning of difficult words	9 23	12 30	3 8	6 15	10 25
10. Understanding specialist vocabulary	7 18	8 20	5 13	12 30	8 20

The results in Table 1 demonstrates that the most difficult academic reading sub-skills for students in this study are (1) reading quickly to get overall meaning, (2) Using own words in note taking, (3) Reading quickly to find information, and (4) taking brief and relevant notes. In regards to the skill of reading quickly to get the overall meaning, 50% of the students view the issue as it is very difficult, 18% indicate that it is difficult, and 10% consider this skill as neither easy nor difficult. With reference to the skill of using their own words in note taking, 45% of the respondents found it as very difficult, 13% indicate that it is difficult, and 8% chose 'neutral' to describe their perceptions of the difficulty of this skill. For the item 8 which focused on the academic reading skill of reading quickly to find information, 43% of the respondents feel that it is very difficult, and 35% indicate this skill as difficult. However, 13% of the respondents consider reading quickly to find information as neither easy nor difficult. While 10% feel that the skill of taking brief and relevant note is neither difficult nor easy for them, 10% view it as very easy. However, 33% feel that it is very difficult for them to taking brief and relevant note while they are reading academic materials.

Identifying key ideas is viewed by the majority of the respondents as very difficult: 30% indicated that this skill is very difficult, while 25% view it as very easy. In contrast, 8% show that their perception of

the difficulty of this skill is neutral. Working out meaning of difficult words is viewed as very easy by 23% and as neither easy nor difficult by 13%. However, 30% of the respondents considered working out meaning of difficult words as difficult. About 11 respondents (28%) consider that the skill of identifying supporting ideas or examples is easy, while 5% of the respondents show that their perception of the difficulty of this skill is neutral. However, 25% of the respondents consider identifying supporting ideas or examples as very difficult. With reference to the respondents' understanding specialist vocabulary, 20% of the respondents perceive it as easy and 13% feel that it is neither difficult nor easy. On the other hand, 30% consider this skill as difficult. Reading carefully to understand a text is considered easy by 28% and very easy by 38% of the respondents and as very difficult by 18%. Regarding the skill of understanding organization of a text, 20% of the respondents felt that this skill is very easy. While, 15% of respondents reflect that it is neither difficult nor easy. However, 35% of respondents feel that it is difficult to understand organization of a text.

Based on the means of the responses given in Table 2, the six top aspects of difficulties in academic reading as perceived by the respondents are reading quickly to get the overall meaning (mean 3.57), using own words in note taking (mean 3.51), reading quickly to find information (mean 3.45), understanding organization of a text (mean 3.44), taking brief, relevant notes (3.43) and identifying key ideas (3.31). The other difficulties that are ranked between these academic reading difficulties in a descending order are "Understanding specialist vocabulary" (mean 2.81); "Working out meaning of difficult words (mean 2.75); "Identifying supporting ideas/examples (mean 2.70); "Reading carefully to understand a text" (mean 2.02).

Table 2: Descriptive statistics of items on academic reading difficulties

No.	Aspects of difficulty	Mean	Std.dev.
1	Reading quickly to get overall meaning	3.57	1.141
2	Using own words in note taking	3.51	1.681
3	Reading quickly to find information	3.45	1.477
4	Understanding organization of a text	3.44	1.631
5	Taking brief, relevant notes	3.43	1.489
6	Identifying key ideas	3.31	1.108
7	Understanding specialist vocabulary	2.81	1.104
8	Working out meaning of difficult words	2.75	1.101
9	Identifying supporting ideas/examples	2.70	1.417
10	Reading carefully to understand a text	2.02	1.000

Findings of Interviews

For the qualitative data of the study, the analysis of the records for the focus group interviews revealed that there were five areas or themes of academic reading difficulties. The themes have been addressed and examined throughout the process of interviewing with respondents. The five areas of academic reading difficulties were: limited time allocated for academic reading, using their own words in note taking, understanding the text to find specific information, understanding organization of a text and taking brief notes while reading. Direct quotes from the scripts have been used to validate the claims and a comparison between the findings generated from interviews and the others generated from the questionnaires has later been made.

The respondents in the focus groups revealed they had to read many English journals articles and books while writing their thesis and term papers. They explained that they felt that they had to read more

than one time to be able to understand the content of English journal articles and other reading materials so that they could improve the quality of their research. Consuming their time in reading, consequently, affected the way they adopted to manage their time; this view is reflected in the following opinions:

“Our supervisors told us to read more and more, and we have access to electronic journals and books and other research papers, we read a lot and this takes a lot of time because academic journals are very difficult for us to understand. The language of the journals is very difficult to understand from the first time”

“I need one week to read and understand one journal article, the vocabularies of the articles are very difficult to understand and need a lot of time”

Using their own words in note taking and taking brief notes while reading were another academic reading difficulty reported by the respondents in this study. The respondents reported that due to low their proficiency in English language, they cannot connect between what they were reading and prior knowledge in technical aspects of writing including the linguistics aspects such as weak command of grammar, poor organization of ideas, difficulties in expressing ideas logically and distinctly and limited vocabulary. All these are exemplified in the following views:

“When I finish reading the academic articles I can't write the summary of the articles or book or write note and combine it together”

“I know that my vocabulary in English language is very limited so sometimes I cannot express myself in a good way, besides, if I write my own word and use it in my thesis it will be very problem because it is very weak”

“Note taking when I finish reading books or articles are very demanding skills because it needs high understanding of what you read and high proficiency in English language to write in a good way”

Understanding the text to find specific information and organization of a text are also reported by the respondents as big challenges and difficulties. The respondents revealed that the academic ways of academic writing of English journal articles and book are very difficult and most of them cannot understand the text.

“When I start reading the English journal articles I feel confused because all the information in the article is very important so I don't know which information I must quote or take”

“I read many articles but the academic ways of writing the articles is very difficult because it is very short and have a lot of information, it looks like I read a thesis and I don't know how to make summary for the article”

“my friends advise me to read only the abstracts of articles but the abstracts have only short and brief information and this makes challenge for us because we don't know how to read for specific information, we read a lot of books and articles just to find what we want and this takes a lot of time”

Students' Preferred Methods for Overcoming Academic Reading Difficulties

The researcher asked the interviewees about their perceived methods for overcoming reading difficulties when they are reading English journals articles. Some of the feedback from the interviewees about suggestions and methods for overcoming reading difficulties suggest that students should do autonomous reading activities such as reading any book, newspapers and magazines in English language only. The following quote addresses this issue:

“This is our responsibility to read more and more anything in English language such as books, novels, magazines and newspapers, this will make us familiar with more English language vocabulary”

“as master students we should work to enhance our reading abilities, we should read more and more to be familiar with wide range of academic books and journals articles and asks our supervisors to help us to choose suitable books and articles that are related to our master study”

“I think any master students should firstly read any English articles that contain and include instructions on how we can improve our academic reading”

Group-work reading styles have also been proposed by some of the respondents. This would make necessary for students to start doing some group-work activities where each group present what they have read in advance. By doing so, respondents would have more chances to talk and express themselves and would also help them enhance their reading autonomy techniques as it would encourage self-learning. In this context, this view is reflected in the following responses:

“All the master students must learn from each other and help each other in everything especially in reading, if we can meet once a week we can learn from each other how we can overcome the difficulties in reading”

“We must learn from each other, we can meet and ask each other about any difficulties in reading and how other students do to overcome the difficulties in reading, I think we should make reading club for master students to discuss any issues related to reading difficulties”

Discussion and Conclusions

The present study can be considered as an attempt to point out and investigate the challenges encountered by Jordanian postgraduate students in the academic reading practices and their preferred approaches to deal with the challenges in academic reading. It is worthy to note that the sample of the study is included (40) master students at Jerash University in Jordan in order to achieve a better understanding of the challenges and difficulties encountered by the Jordanian graduate students when they are reading English journals articles. The methods utilized for data collection were both quantitative and qualitative methods. A set of questionnaire that cover academic reading difficulties was administered to the (40) graduate students while focus group interviews were administered to collect the qualitative findings from (12) graduate students.

The findings of the quantitative instrument showed that the reading difficulties encountered by Jordanian graduate students were as; reading quickly to get overall meaning, using own words in taking notes, reading quickly to find the information, understanding the organization of the text, taking brief, relevant notes and identifying key ideas.

The findings of the qualitative survey support the quantitative findings and highlight how the participants encountered various challenges in academic reading and they attributed the difficulties and challenges to a number of factors. Some of the more relevant reasons are related to the time constraints because of difficulties in practicing academic reading; weak proficiency, understanding the text to find specific information, understanding the organization of the text, taking brief notes while reading and the limited time allocated for academic reading itself.

What is resulted from this situation and from the prevalent attitude of the participants as suggested by the findings is the respondents' failure to understand and implement the academic reading in their context as Jordanian EFL learners. The current situation is attributed to many reasons as low English proficiency, poor vocabularies of English language and weak experiences in academic reading such as reading academic books and journal articles. In order to find out a solution and to overcome the academic reading difficulties, the researcher asked the interviewees about their preferred methods for dealing with academic reading challenges and difficulties. The respondents reported many strategies to overcome the academic reading difficulties such as do autonomous extensive reading activities such as reading any book, newspapers and magazines in English language only and group-work reading styles.

According to the study findings, it is worthy to offer some suggestions for future research in this regard. Firstly given is the small sample of 40 participants as its findings would be applicable and generalized to most of the Jordanian graduate student students of similar educational background or who are experiencing the same context of study. Thus, it would be helpful for further research to validate the findings, especially the findings in Table (2) which reveal that the vast majority of the respondents faced difficulties in academic reading. It could be claimed that the finding is a crucial and quite relevant to the study norms as the discussions have revealed most of the difficulties experienced by the respondents are directly or indirectly as a result of their low proficiency in the English Language and lack of experiences in academic reading. Thus, one of the important aspects of study for further research is to investigate the low proficiency and experiences of the students are principal features for Jordanian EFL learners in the Jordanian universities. Secondly, the current study concentrated on the academic reading given that academic reading is only one aspect of the four essential skills that are needed to be mastered by students for the sake of achieving good proficiency in the target language. There is a quite sufficient area for further research into the difficulties and challenges encountered by postgraduate students in the other skills such as writing and speaking among Jordanian graduate students in EFL context.

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