

Academic Reading Proficiency of Freshmen in the College of Education of DMMMSU-SLUC: Input to the Design of Instructional Modules for English 101

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Abstract - The study described the academic reading proficiency level of incoming college freshmen which served as an input to the design of learning modules. It used a validated 50-item researcher-made test and two sets of questionnaires to determine the adequacy of learning activities and the extent of utilization of academic reading strategies by content area teachers. The research found the student-respondents unprepared for college work given the moderate academic reading proficiency index. Concerned language and content area teachers failed to provide enough learning activities and sufficient opportunity and training in the use of academic reading strategies that will enhance students' level of proficiency in content area reading. It is recommended that topics designed to develop academic reading skills of senior high school students be included in the course content in secondary schools; that English teachers provide more learning activities and experiences expected in content area reading; and that content area teachers become active reading teachers by facilitating comprehension through the use of time-tested academic reading strategies.

Keywords - academic reading strategies, proficiency test, content area reading, instructional materials

INTRODUCTION

The quality of an institution and that of a system of higher education are determined to a considerable extent by the abilities of those who are admitted and retained as students. The global education sector asserts this to be more than a fact, be it in basic education, collegiate, or graduate studies level. Significantly, the issue of quality has snowballed into a concern among public and private education sectors anywhere in the world today. It is quite interesting to note that same has been prevalent even among the premier colleges and universities in the United States (LAO Report, 2001). The same has become a truism in fully developed countries where compliance to continuing program accreditation has become a catchword if not a status symbol among colleges and universities that have the proclivity of maintaining their stature on the map of excellence in higher education. Besides continuing program accreditation, the performance rating of students in licensure examinations determines to a large extent a college's or a university's success or failure in its ability to produce quality graduates. Fine performance in licensure examinations guarantees that taxpayers' money is not wasted on individuals who do not have the will or are less than ready to succeed in their studies. In other words, this implies that the success or failure of a university depends on the success or failure of the students who venture on a career. Obviously, this advances the fact that a student's degree of preparation in the basic education level has positive significant effect to his success in college. The common denominator then is a student's degree of preparation. The question is: how prepared are high school graduates to undergo the rigors of college education?

In an electronically published news from the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), University officials of the California State University (CSU) reported that more than two-thirds of freshmen arrive "unprepared" for college level reading, writing or mathematics. Lois Romano, The Washington Post Staff Writer, reported that the reading proficiency of college graduates has declined in the past

decade with no obvious explanation. The report was based on the result of an Adult Literacy Assessment given to some 19,000 sixteen year olds or older. The Assessment which focused on reading proficiency and mathematics pointed out glaring difficulties in reading tables, following instructions, understanding labels, comparing viewpoints on prose materials, locating facts on a document, general reading comprehension; and using the library. Experts assume that this could be attributed to the failure or lack of will by most state schools to select the best from high school graduates for the sheer purpose of bolstering enrollment.

This searing reality finds sharp congruency in Philippine setting where the issue on quality college freshmen and quality graduates seem not a real concern to bother anyone. State funded higher education institutions are constantly being pressured to address the issue over quality inputs (freshmen) and quality outputs (graduates).

In the local perspective, Ana Marie Pamintuan in her hard-hitting column "Sketches" mentioned that 700,000 graduating high school students – more than half of batch 2007 – are unfit for college, or that rather than take technical-vocational education, a third of the graduates prefer to become dancers and actors ... for lack of aptitude for college. The foregoing observations leave us no room for complacency. At this point, a common denominator is clearly discernible: poor academic reading skills of freshmen pose a threat to their success. This is a pretty good reason that alarms us all.

Generally, high school students are spoon-fed, so to speak. The result: freshmen feel lost at the cutting edge in tertiary education. In great proportion, the precollege years of students are strongly shaped and influenced by their high school teachers who perform the role of the good and typical "classroom provider." This results in a systemic overdependence of students on their teachers which is likewise aggravated by the severe lack of instructional materials particularly textbooks that greatly boost student performance in the content areas in particular and in their reading skills in general. Unwittingly and perhaps due to the lack of flexibility, skill, and foresight, teachers in the secondary level inadvertently deprive their students the chance to work on their own to acquire and develop necessary coping skills for them to survive in a university.

One of these coping mechanisms every freshman must possess before entering a university is a well-developed array of study skills extensively manifested in his reading skills in the content courses across the curriculum. Academic reading, reinforced by class lectures in the content areas as social sciences, biology, psychology, anthropology, humanities, computer science, and many more, has become the main medium in most academic classrooms in universities. As such, incoming freshmen are expected to toe the line if they are to succeed in academics besides the fact that this requires a great deal of applying the language skills they have learned and acquired.

Conversely, reading activities in the tertiary level are more focused, more direct, and more purposeful than the reading activities students used to have in high school. As content areas become rich sources of input for reading activities, the reading materials presented become increasingly more technical and scientific, offering greater demands upon the students' comprehension skills. It is within this perspective that content area teachers come in and play one important role.

The above mentioned reality has been exacerbated by the recent paradigm shift being aggressively advanced in the teaching and learning environment in the education system more particularly in the tertiary level. With this present change of roles in the teaching and learning environment, many freshmen often feel lost in big campuses knowing not how to cope with the mainstream learning trends employed by the experienced ones within the existing set up. The reason is that many freshmen are ill-prepared and have difficulty adapting to the new system.

DMMMSU more particularly the South La Union Campus in Agoo, La Union, has its own share of the aforementioned dilemma as regards the poor academic reading skills of its college freshmen. A more glaring evidence of this is the annual measly performance of freshman applicants in the English Proficiency Test which is an integral part of the DMMMSU College Admission Test.

For this reason, there is a felt need to strengthen and enhance reading instruction to enable unprepared students to cope with the demands in college, particularly among those who will eventually become teachers. Interestingly, the role of content area teachers expands beyond mere instruction on content, for likewise; they serve as reading

teachers indirectly. This bridges the gap between the demands of comprehending texts and the comprehension competencies of many students. It is assumed therefore, that the content area teachers play a crucial role by not merely suppressing the problem but by arresting it as well, for unless these students receive adequate help from teachers in making sense from reading materials in subject areas, they may find themselves in the losing end.

In today's educational context, where no student is to be left behind, every content area teacher has a responsibility to help students access, read, and understand texts successfully and productively. To achieve this end, there is a felt need to enhance if not overhaul the existing academic reading instructional strategies. At this point, retooling the content of English 101 (Study and Thinking Skills) by seeing it as academic reading-based is one measure to ease the problem and in the present dearth of instructional materials which are institutionally validated and recognized the need for this study gains much stronger ground.

FRAMEWORK

Indisputably, college students *read to learn*. This is a clear departure from *learning to read* in the elementary, and to some extent, even in secondary schools. Reading to learn gains support from the constructivists' view of teaching. Constructivism spouses the theory of learning which posits that students learn by actively constructing their own knowledge (Colker; Scholnik, 2006). Constructivism portrays the reader as actively building a mental representation by combining new information from the text with previously acquired knowledge (Spivey, 1989).

Radical as it is, constructivism relegates rote memorization of facts in the backseat while it supports the idea of problem solving as its centerpiece. Ultimately, constructivists promote pedagogical practices that are geared toward developing the productive skills of the learners giving teachers enough information to uncover what learners want to learn and how to organize activities that will induce the learners to construct meaning, comprehend, and gain knowledge (Colker, 2006).

In support, Jackeline and Martin Brooks, in *The Case for Constructivist*

Classrooms, explained that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. Learners are seen, not as mere accumulators but active creators of their own knowledge. This is reinforced by Scholnik, Kol, and Abarbanel (2006) citing von Glasersfeld (1995) and Duffy and Cunningham (1996). Accordingly, concepts cannot be transferred from teachers to students – they have to be conceived and that learning is a process that involves active construction and not passive acquisition. With this premise in view, and with the most conducive learning environment, tools and equipment, and without dismissing the active role of the teacher or the value of expert knowledge, the students *learn how to learn*. The development of the students' study and thinking skills is a crucial adjunct to this learning perspective.

Constructivism recognizes the value and importance of prior knowledge, or schema, including concurrent experiences, multiple information sources, social negotiations of meaning and integration of new understandings and existing knowledge networks (Shymansky, 1994).

Spivey (1989) mentioned that central to the constructivists' view is the concept of organization – not only organization of the knowledge that readers bring with them, such as schemata, frames, and scripts, but also the organization of the text and of the mental representation built from the reading text. Briefly, readers must be able to approach texts knowing how texts are conventionally organized and knowing how to use text structure in forming representations.

In relation to this, Rummelhart (1976) explained how people learn through the schema theory – a theory about knowledge – which impacts both reading research and instruction. Schema (singular for schemata) represents an individual's stored knowledge such as knowledge of the world, knowledge about language, and knowledge about text structures. Added to this is the information on how to use this knowledge. In short, a schema serves as a building block of cognition or knowledge. An important principle, schemata or prior knowledge posits that we cannot learn new information unless we can link it with something we already know. Learning, therefore, depends largely on the store of knowledge an individual has.

Hermosa (2002) echoes the work of Anderson & Pearson (1984)

regarding the use of schema in reading as an interactive process by Rummelhart (1976). The schema theory asserts that meaning is absent in a text, whether spoken or written, and that meaning is created only by using background knowledge (schemata). Prior knowledge (in the reader's memory) interacts and helps in processing and clarifying the incoming information (from the text) and how this knowledge must be organized to support this interaction. More elaborately, two sets of schemata – the reader's and that of the text – come into play in a reading act. Based on the theory, comprehension is greatly controlled by the extent to which the reader's and the text's schemata match. It can be deduced therefore, that the nearer the match between these two schemata is, the better, if not keener is the comprehension. In a capsule, prior knowledge is a keystone in reading comprehension.

This view of reading as a linking of previous knowledge with the information in a text gives birth to some important implications more particularly in classroom reading instruction. First, teachers must assist readers in making a connection between what they already know about a topic and that which is presented in a reading text before, during, and after reading. Second, teachers must be acquainted with the different types of text structure through timely exposure to a broad range of reading materials like stories, news articles, poetry, essay and the like. Moreover, both teachers and students become aware that reading is an active, purposeful, and meaning-centered activity and that there is a need to recognize the personal, social, and academic purposes for reading. Lastly, content area teachers must observe a dynamic use of strategies that guide readers to retrieve prior knowledge.

By its very nature, content area reading can be equated with academic reading which finds a strong underpinning on content-based instruction (CBI). Brinton, Snow, & Wesche (2003) as cited by James (2006) explained that allied to academic reading in both principle and practice, content-based instruction (CBI) is a language teaching approach taking center stage in education setup today more particularly in the secondary level. In its strictest sense, it refers to the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills. With a combined focus on form and experiential techniques, it aims to eliminate the artificial separation that exists between language instruction and subject matter classes in most educational setup.

The enhancement of academic reading skills especially among college freshmen likewise finds strong parallelism in the theoretical underpinning of English for Specific Purposes which is a ‘hands on’ and skills-based approach in English Language Teaching. Hutchinson and Waters (1990) contend that as English becomes the accepted international language of technology and commerce, it has created a new generation of learners who know specifically why they are learning a language – businessmen and women who want to sell their products, mechanics who have to read instruction manuals, doctors who need to keep with developments in their field and a whole range of students whose course of study include textbooks and journals only available in English. All these and many others need English and they know why they need it. Precisely, students know how to work and function gainfully with it and carry the skills learned from it as a lifelong useful experience.

In a nutshell, the figure below recaps the theoretical backbone upon which this study was anchored.

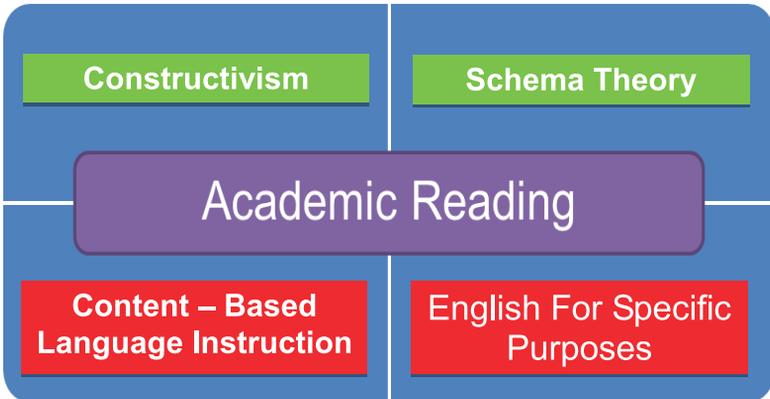


Figure 1. The Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Framework

Academic reading is also referred to as subject matter reading and reading in the discipline. It embodies what reading theorists

and experts call “reading to learn.” These terms refer to reading, understanding, learning, and using content areas, subject matter, or texts in the discipline such as science, history, or literature, for the purpose of gaining, demonstrating, and possibly creating knowledge in that discipline.

The pivotal question however, is whether students are proficient or not in academic reading across content areas. If not, where do they fall short of and to what extent in terms of proficiency? Proficient academic readers typically possess the ability to apply useful study skills and strategies in various learning situations. Likewise, he has a profound understanding of the nature of reading texts and the many forms they take.

Successful academic readers are those who possess mastery of the following important skills. First, the reader understands meaning. He must be able to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words and word groups, establish the relationships clearly among sentences and recognize implications, categorize conceptual meanings, like comparison, purpose, cause and effect. Second, the reader understands relationships in the text. He considers text structure, assesses the communicative value of sentences; spot relations between the parts of a text through lexical and grammatical cohesion devices and indicators in discourse. Third, the reader marks out important points, distinguishes main ideas from supporting details; recognizes supported claims and claims unsupported by evidence – fact from opinion; extracting salient points to summarize; following an argument; reading critically and evaluating the text. Fourth, the reader employs efficient reading practices like surveying the text, chapter or article, skimming for gist or general impression; scanning to locate specifically required information and reading quickly. Finally, the reader is a note taker and an efficient user of notes.

Content area teachers play a very important role in the development of academic reading skills of college students as they provide the authentic texts in various forms. With constant use of reading strategies students gain proficiency in content topics and at the same time gain proficiency in reading.

These academic reading skills and strategies are expected to be utilized not only by English teachers during their reading classes but

also by content area teachers as they take up content topics. This means that the content area teachers perform a two-way function: that of becoming content area teachers and that of becoming reading teachers. Obviously, it is bringing the act of reading outside the confines of the regular English class into the content area classes. This is the original concept of academic reading or reading in the content areas.

To simulate the real meaning and essence of academic reading or at least to approximate what really takes place in content area classes where much reading takes place, the reading teacher in a regular English class uses subject matter-specific texts as launch pads. In this manner the teacher brings the students closer to the actual learning experiences in their respective subject areas. A dual purpose now emerges: the students develop their reading skills and at the same time learn content area topics.

With the above concepts, one thing becomes clear: that fundamental to any learning activity in college is reading and central to any act of reading is comprehension (Forgan, Harry W. and Charles T. Mangrum II, 1990).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study was conducted to determine the level of academic reading proficiency of freshmen in the College of Education in DMMMSU-SLUC which was a chief input to the design and development of instructional modules for English 101. Likewise, this study looked into the level of adequacy of learning activities in English 101 in terms of developing academic reading proficiency and the extent of utilization of academic reading skills and strategies by content area teachers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Descriptive Research Design was used in this study. It attempted to get the current academic reading proficiency level of the students in the College of Education by way of deriving data from a 120 incoming freshmen in the said College. This served as one of the inputs that determined the nature of intervention measure to be done to upgrade their reading skills.

A validated 50-item researcher-generated Academic Reading Proficiency Test was used as the primary data-gathering tool to determine the academic reading proficiency level of the respondents. Secondly, two sets of questionnaires were used to gather two sets of perceptions: (1) the perception of the respondents as to the adequacy level of learning activities in the course English 101 that develop academic reading proficiency; and (2) the perception of the respondents as regard the extent of instructional utilization of academic reading skills and strategies by content area teachers.

Frequency count, percentage, arithmetic mean (simple mean) were the statistical tools used in analyzing the data in this study. Frequency count and percentage were used to determine the academic reading proficiency level of the respondent groups along the identified academic reading areas.

For the perceived level of adequacy of learning activities in English 101 and the perceived extent of utilization of reading strategies by content area teachers, the arithmetic mean (or simple mean) was used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general, the college freshmen in the College of Education manifested a Moderate Proficiency level in academic reading. Specifically, the freshmen showed low proficiency level in vocabulary skills, reading comprehension skills, and note taking skills. As to the adequacy level of learning materials and activities in English 101, the sophomores who took the course during the previous semester were given Moderately Adequate learning activities and experiences that enhanced their academic reading proficiency on all six areas included in this study. This study likewise found out that the sophomores were exposed to academic reading strategies only moderately by content area teachers in their classes.

Based on the above-mentioned findings, a set of Learning Modules for English 101 was developed as a material to enhance the academic reading proficiency of students in the College of Education of DMMMSU SLUC.

CONCLUSIONS

The freshmen enrolled in the College of Education lack the necessary preparation to assume college work as manifested in their moderate academic reading proficiency level. As to the current adequacy level of learning activities in English 101, the result of this study suggests that teachers handling the course failed to provide their students more than enough learning activities that will enhance their academic reading proficiency. Significantly, content area teachers, particularly those handling General Education Courses did not provide students sufficient opportunity and training in the use of academic reading strategies that will enhance their level of proficiency in content area reading.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To arrest the prevailing problem, the following frontline measures must be implemented.

First, topics that will develop the academic reading skills of senior high school students must be included in the course content of fourth year high school during the last quarter of the school year to prepare them for college work.

Second, teachers in English 101 should provide varied and more than adequate learning activities and experiences which approximate what students are expected to do in content area reading.

Finally, content area teachers must go beyond being mere content area teachers. They must assist their students in facilitating comprehension by making them use time-tested academic reading strategies. This makes content area teachers active reading teachers as well.

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