

The role of EFL reading skills at an international university and the higher cognitive activities in the process of reading for academic purposes

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Abstract

The level of students' reading skills best forecast their academic achievement. It is especially important for students learning in English as a foreign language. Research shows that too often students' skills are not adequate to the tasks that higher education poses in front of them. The research was held in 5 universities representing 5 countries (Azerbaijan, Iraq, Georgia, Finland, and Turkey) which are on different educational level, concerning the student motivation to read, quality of their reading skills and possible solutions.

Keywords: reading skills, EAP, motivation, measures to improve skills' level

Introduction

In contemporary student-centered higher education, whatever students' majors are, their reading (in the language of education) skills are crucial, as, while teaching is mostly done by oral intercourse, independent study in large majority of courses is mostly done via reading. Normally, university students are demanded to read heaps of textbooks, articles, etc.

On the other hand, it is not a secret to anybody that reading is not terribly popular today among the young generation. They prefer video and audio materials which without any special effort can enter their brain (however, probably, without leaving a notable impact on it) to reading. They also prefer mechanically pushing all kinds of buttons and keys on their numerous digital gadgets to sitting with a book, either fiction or non-fiction. Of course this generalization does not concern all university students, but certainly a large enough group whose size varies from country to country.

Not only the motivation of academic reading in English is not very high, but, as a quite natural consequence, the quality of reading skills in the native language too often isn't high enough, either. Reardon, Valentino and Shores (2012, p.17) research has shown that American students perform modestly above average compared with those in other developed countries (and well above average among a larger set of countries). Moreover, there is no evidence that U.S. students lose ground relative to those in other countries during the middle school years. Thus, although literacy skills in the United States are lower than needed to meet the demands of modern society, the same is true in most other developed countries (based on PISA assessments). PISA evaluation programme defends two-dimensional 15 years-old student efficiency in reading, first of which is the knowledge ac-

quisition techniques based on different text types and the second is the knowledge processing skills such as interpretation, comprehension and exploitation. In its evaluation, therefore, PISA exploits paragraph based *continuous texts* – narratives, articles, discussions, and non-continuous texts such as lists, forms, graphics and diagrams. Reading literacy, according to PISA assessment (OECD, 2009a, p. 23), involves understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society.

It goes without saying, that English as a foreign language reading skills of students doing their studies in English, are even worse, and so is the motivation. This constitutes a big problem for the quality of higher education, which is widely spread today. This is why I decided to study the problem in several countries and try to offer some possibilities of improvement of this situation.

Method

A questionnaire survey in 5 countries, one university from each country (Azerbaijan, Iraq, Georgia, Finland, and Turkey; totally 5 universities), was used to assess freshman students' academic reading skills in English not as part of English language teaching, but as part of learning skills that international universities' students need for their studies in their majors. The choice of the countries, on the one hand, dealt, on the one hand with Western and more successful and developing and less successful. Totally 178 students participated in the survey on a volunteer basis, however 11 students' questionnaires had to be dropped (which is a reason-

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able number / percentage), due to improver (not corresponding to the instruction) filling them in, so only 167 questionnaire results are presented. I want express my gratitude to teachers (Venera Unal, Maia Samkashvili, Mehmet Numan Kanar, Elvira Koran, Tamar Mikeladze, Ahmer Sherkan Tanriover) who helped me organize the survey and to the students who kindly agreed to participate in it. Some questions are in the multiple choice format, others are in Likert scale format, asking students to assess how much they agree with the given statement, in terms of a scale from 0 (totally disagree) to 5 (absolutely agree), some are in mixed format (multiple choice plus Likert scale).

Find the questions below.

1. How much you did you use to read in your mother tongue (including educational materials) before you enrolled to an international university?

- Less than 10 pages per week
- 10-20 pages per week
- 21-50 pages per week
- 51-100 pages per week
- More than 100 pages per week

2. Rate your experience in reading academic (educational) texts, besides school textbooks, in mother tongue before you enrolled to an international university (from 0 – none to 4 – often read scientific articles).

3. Rate your attitude to reading in mother tongue, from 0 (totally dislike) to 4 (very much like)

4. Rate your attitude to reading in English, from 0 (totally dislike) to 4 (very much like)

5. Rate your attitude to reading fiction, from 0 (totally dislike) to 4 (very much like)

6. Rate your attitude to reading non-fiction, including educational materials, from 0 (totally dislike) to 4 (very much like)

7. Assess your reading skills in English compared to your reading skills in your native tongue (from 0 – much worse to 4 – as good as).

8. When you read in English for academic (educational) purposes, rate your problems (from 0 – causes least problems to 4 – causes most problems; **do not use the same ratings more than once**):

- knowledge of English in general (vocabulary, grammar, reading skills)
- terminology
- formal / scientific style (“dry”, long and complex sentences, etc.)
- volume
- subject contents

9. What can help increase your motivation to read large volume of materials in English for your studies (Rate from the worst idea – 0 to the best idea – 4; ; **do not use the same ratings more than once**)

- Reading from the Internet and electronic books, instead of on-paper books
- Rewarding oneself for reading each reading batch (e.g., 50 pages) done
- Gradual increase of reading matter volume (e.g., not more than 20 pages per course in the first month of Freshman year, by the end of semester it may increase up to 100 pages)

d) More debates, problem solving activities in class, based on/following the read materials

e) Feeling that the goal of what you have to read is not just to pass the exam, but to be successful in one's profession

10. What can help you improve your academic reading skills? (Rate from the worst idea – 0 to the best idea – 4; ; do not use the same ratings more than once)

a) More classes (hours) in academic reading (at Prep or in the Freshman year)

b) More emphasis (explanations, tasks) on terminology, while teaching the subject matter

c) Using in English classes not only scientific articles and textbooks, but also scientific-popular publications and mass-media

d) While learning English (e.g., at a Prep program), reading more interesting texts, fulfilling more interesting activities (games, competitions)

e) Increasing the professional background knowledge via reading up in the native tongue

Results

The results are shown in the tables below (Table 1).

Question 1

7 students (18 %) chose “a” option (read less than 10 pages per week in their native tongue), 3 students (8 %) – “b” (read 10-20 pages per week), 3 students (8%) – “c” (21- 50 pages), 10 students (27%) – “d” (51-100) and 15 students (39%) - “e” (more than a 100 pages). The result is generally not so bad, as the majority of students (66%) read more than 50 pages, but the need for university students is in more than 100 pages, which is only 39% student's answer.

Question 2

The answers to this question are more dramatic. 11 students (29%) have never read any academic text in mother tongue besides the school textbooks. Even some students who generally read enough have chosen the answer “0”, which means they are not academically oriented yet, which is a big problem. The average answer is 1.9, which means that students have read on average quite few academic texts in mother tongue. At university they deal with academic texts, but without having this experience even in mother tongue it is too difficult.

Question 3

5 students (13%) don't like at all reading in mother tongue. I would be rather surprised if they would like reading in a foreign language, as it is more difficult. The average answer is 2.9 which is not bad, also there are many answers “4”, which gives hope they will be high achievers in learning.

Table 1
Azeri students' answers

	Questions																					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8					9					10				
								a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e
Student																						
1	B	4	2	0	4	4	2	3	2	0	4	1	2	4	3	0	1	0	1	3	4	2
2	D	2	4	4	3	4	3	0	4	1	3	2	1	0	3	2	4	0	2	3	4	1
3	D	4	4	4	4	1	3	1	4	2	3	2	2	4	3	0	1	0	1	3	4	2
4	A	0	0	2	2	4	2	3	2	0	4	1	4	3	0	1	2	0	2	4	3	1
5	D	2	3	2	3	3	3	0	1	3	2	4	0	1	3	2	4	4	3	0	2	1
6	A	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	4	3	1	2	1	4	2	3	0	0	4	3	1	2
7	E	3	4	3	4	2	3	0	4	3	2	1	1	3	0	2	4	0	1	2	4	3
8	D	2	3	3	3	2	3	4	2	3	1	0	0	1	4	3	2	2	3	4	1	0
9	A	1	1	2	0	2	1	3	2	0	4	1	1	0	3	4	2	0	1	3	4	2
10	A	0	2	2	4	3	3	1	4	3	0	2	1	2	3	4	0	0	2	3	4	1
11	E	3	2	2	3	3	2	4	0	1	2	3	2	0	1	3	4	1	2	3	4	0
12	D	3	4	1	3	1	0	0	4	3	2	1	2	3	1	4	0	0	3	2	4	1
13	A	0	0	3	2	2	3	3	1	0	2	4	2	3	1	4	0	4	1	3	2	0
14	E	2	4	4	3	3	3	2	4	3	1	0	3	2	1	0	4	2	1	3	4	0
15	E	4	4	3	4	3	4	2	4	3	1	0	4	0	1	2	3	2	4	3	0	1
16	E	4	4	3	4	2	3	3	2	0	4	1	3	2	4	1	0	2	3	4	0	1
17	E	2	3	4	4	2	2	0	4	3	2	1	1	0	2	3	4	1	2	0	4	3
18	D	3	4	3	0	3	2	0	1	2	3	4	1	2	0	3	4	3	0	4	1	2
19	A	1	0	2	3	1	2	3	2	1	4	0	3	4	0	2	1	2	1	4	3	0
20	E	2	4	3	4	1	2	4	1	0	3	2	4	2	0	1	3	3	2	4	0	1
21	D	3	3	4	2	2	2	4	2	1	0	3	2	3	1	0	4	2	1	4	0	3
22	A	2	2	2	3	3	2	1	4	3	2	0	0	1	2	3	4	1	0	2	3	4
23	E	3	4	3	4	2	2	0	3	4	2	1	0	1	2	4	3	0	1	2	4	3
24	E	0	0	4	2	1	3	4	2	1	0	3	1	2	3	4	0	0	1	2	3	4
25	E	0	4	3	1	4	2	3	2	0	4	1	1	2	3	4	0	0	1	2	3	4
26	D	2	3	4	4	2	2	1	3	2	0	4	2	4	3	0	1	2	3	1	0	4
27	B	3	3	4	3	3	3	1	0	4	3	2	1	3	2	4	0	2	3	1	4	0
28	E	3	4	2	3	1	2	3	2	0	4	1	1	3	2	4	0	2	3	1	4	0
29	C	0	4	2	3	4	3	1	4	0	2	3	1	0	2	4	3	2	3	1	4	0
30	D	0	4	4	3	4	4	3	2	0	4	1	1	2	3	4	0	2	3	1	4	0
31	E	3	4	4	4	3	0	4	0	3	2	1	2	3	4	1	0	0	3	2	4	1
32	B	2	3	2	2	4	3	0	4	3	1	2	0	2	4	3	1	0	1	4	3	2
33	C	0	2	4	4	2	2	3	4	2	1	0	4	3	0	2	1	4	3	2	0	1
34	E	0	2	3	3	0	2	0	1	4	3	2	4	3	0	2	1	0	2	4	3	1
35	C	3	4	3	2	3	3	0	3	4	1	2	3	0	2	4	1	0	1	2	4	3
36	D	4	3	4	2	2	3	0	1	4	2	3	1	0	2	3	4	0	2	4	3	1
37	E	0	4	3	3	0	4	3	2	0	4	1	1	0	2	4	3	0	1	2	4	3
38	E	2	3	4	4	3	3	3	2	0	4	1	2	0	1	3	4	1	2	4	3	0

Table 2
Finnish students' answers

Student	Questions																					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8					9					10				
								a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e
1	C	2	2	2	3	2	3	1	0	3	4	2	0	4	2	3	1	0	1	3	4	2
2	D	2	4	2	4	3	2	0	3	4	2	1	0	3	4	2	1	1	2	3	4	0
3	C	1	3	1	1	2	1	1	4	3	2	0	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	0
4	A	0	4	1	2	2	1	1	3	4	2	0	1	0	3	4	2	0	4	3	2	1
5	C	1	4	3	4	2	2	2	3	4	1	0	0	1	3	2	4	2	3	1	4	0
6	A	2	3	2	3	3	2	2	3	4	1	0	4	3	1	0	2	0	1	3	2	4
7	C	1	3	2	2	2	1	4	2	3	0	1	3	0	2	1	4	0	1	3	4	2
8	C	1	3	1	2	2	2	0	4	2	3	1	3	0	2	1	4	0	1	2	4	3
9	A	0	2	2	2	1	3	1	0	3	4	2	1	3	2	4	0	0	1	2	4	3
10	D	1	4	2	3	2	1	1	3	4	2	1	1	2	0	4	3	0	2	3	4	1
11	C	2	4	1	4	3	1	3	4	2	0	1	1	0	4	3	2	1	2	0	3	4
12	E	0	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	4	1	0	0	1	2	3	4	3	4	2	1	0
13	C	2	4	3	3	3	2	0	3	4	2	1	0	1	3	2	4	0	1	4	3	2
14	B	2	4	3	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	0	0	1	2	3	4	0	1	2	3	4
15	B	3	2	3	1	3	2	4	3	2	0	1	0	3	4	2	1	4	3	2	0	1
16	C	1	3	3	1	2	2	3	2	4	1	0	4	1	2	0	3	4	0	3	1	2
17	C	4	2	2	2	2	1	2	4	3	0	1	1	0	2	3	4	0	1	2	4	3
18	D	3	4	2	3	3	3	1	4	3	2	0	0	3	1	2	4	1	0	2	4	3
19	E	2	4	3	2	2	3	2	3	4	0	1	1	0	2	4	3	0	1	2	3	4
20	B	1	4	3	1	3	2	2	4	3	1	0	0	3	2	1	4	1	0	3	4	2
21	B	0	3	1	2	3	2	1	2	4	3	0	1	3	4	0	2	2	3	4	0	1
22	C	2	3	3	3	2	2	0	3	2	4	1	1	3	1	2	4	0	1	3	4	2
23	D	2	4	4	4	3	4	0	3	4	1	2	0	1	2	4	3	1	0	2	4	3
24	B	2	3	3	3	2	2	4	2	3	1	0	0	4	1	2	3	1	4	3	0	2
25	C	2	4	4	4	4	3	0	3	4	2	1	0	2	1	3	4	1	2	0	4	3
26	C	1	4	3	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1	1	3	0	2	4	4	2	0	1	3
27	B	1	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	1	4	0	0	4	1	2	3	1	2	0	3	4
28	C	2	4	4	4	3	3	3	4	2	1	0	0	2	1	3	4	0	2	1	3	4
29	C	1	3	2	4	2	3	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4	0	0	2	3	4	1
30	C	1	4	3	4	3	1	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	0	4	3	1	0	2	4	3
31	B	0	4	2	3	3	2	2	3	1	4	0	0	3	1	2	4	4	0	1	2	3
32	E	4	4	3	4	3	2	2	0	4	3	1	4	2	0	3	1	0	4	3	1	2
33	C	2	4	0	4	2	1	4	3	2	0	1	0	1	2	3	4	1	0	2	3	4
34	D	1	3	2	2	2	1	1	2	3	0	4	3	0	1	2	4	4	0	3	2	1
35	D	1	3	3	2	2	2	0	2	3	4	1	1	2	0	4	3	0	1	2	3	4
36	A	1	2	2	1	2	2	0	2	3	4	1	0	1	2	4	3	0	4	1	2	3

Question 4

Unexpected enough, but only 2 students (5%) chose the answer "0", which means that some students do not like reading in the native tongue, but like reading in English, however, it may be explained by popularity of English and Internet (where one can hardly read much in the Azeri language). The average points is 2.8, which is a bit lower than for reading in the native tongue and is a good enough result. However, to study in English this result is not good enough.

Question 5

3 students (8%) answered "0" concerning their attitude to reading fiction (hopefully, not humanities students). The average result for attitude towards reading fiction is 2.9, which is normal.

Question 6

3 students (8%) answered "0", which is not good, but, luckily their percent is not high. The average attitude towards reading non-fiction is 2.4, which is problematic, considering how much they will need to read for education, and in the future for profession.

Question 7

2 students (5%) view their English reading skills as much worse than their reading in mother tongue skills, 1 student (3%) gave an answer "1", which is also very bad. Three students (8%) chose the answer "as good as" ("4"), 16 students (42%) – "almost as good as" ("3") – these students will have no serious problems studying in English. The average point is 2.6 which is tolerable, but not so good.

Question 8

The rating of difficulties is as follows:

terminology – 2.4

volume – 2.3

knowledge of English in general -1.8

scientific style – 1.8

subject contents – 1.7

Judging by these answers we can conclude that language factors matter more than contents, the biggest problems being terminology and text volume, which, based on the previous answers was quite predictable. It is good that on average none of the problems is too acute.

Question 9

The rating of motivating activities:

More debates, problem solving activities in class – 2.6

Gradual increase of reading matter volume - 2

Feeling that the goal to be successful in one's profession will be reached – 2

Rewarding oneself – 1.9

Reading from the Internet and electronic books, instead of on-paper books – 1.7

Students mostly hope that having more involving activities, gradually increasing the volume of the materials read and feeling of the professional usefulness

of what is being read can increase their motivation to read.

Question 10

The rating of the measures for improvement of academic reading skills:

reading more interesting texts, fulfilling more interesting activities – 2.8

using not only scientific articles and textbooks, but also scientific-popular publications and mass-media – 2.7

more emphasis on terminology – 2.1

increasing the professional background knowledge – 1.7

more classes in academic reading - 1.2

Students mostly hope that reading more interesting texts, fulfilling more interesting activities and using not only scientific articles and textbooks, but also scientific-popular publications and mass-media will help them increase their reading skills' level.

Table 2. Finnish students' answers

Question 1

4 students (11%) chose "a" option (less than 10 pages per week in their native tongue), 7 students (19%) – "b" (read 10-20 pages per week), 16 students (44%) – "c" (21- 50 pages). So students having a habit in mother tongue to read very little in majority (totally 74%!), which proves that in a European country where education level is viewed as high, students also have lack of practice in reading, which inevitably brings about problems with quality of reading skills. 6 students (17% %) – "d" (51-100) and 3 students (8%) - "e" (more than a 100 pages). The result is generally quite unsatisfactory. However, quantity does not always mean quality, so let us see.

Question 2

5 students (14%) have never read any academic text in mother tongue besides the school textbooks. The average answer is 1.5, which means that students have read on average quite few academic texts in mother tongue. At university they deal with academic texts, but without having this experience even in mother tongue it is too difficult.

Question 2

5 students (14%) have never read any academic text in mother tongue besides the school textbooks. The average answer is 1.5, which means that students have read on average quite few academic texts in mother tongue. At university they deal with academic texts, but without having this experience even in mother tongue it is too difficult.

Question 3

Surprisingly, compared to the previous answers, there are many enough students who say they really

Table 3
Georgian students' answers

Student	Questions																					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8					9					10				
								a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e
1	D	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	3	2	1	0	0	1	2	3	4	4	2	1	3	0
2	B	0	1	0	1	0	0	4	3	2	1	0	0	1	2	3	4	4	3	2	1	0
3	D	2	3	4	2	3	2	4	2	1	0	3	1	2	0	4	3	3	0	4	1	2
4	D	4	4	4	2	3	4	2	4	3	0	1	1	2	0	3	4	3	2	1	0	4
5	B	1	3	3	3	4	4	4	3	2	1	0	4	2	1	3	0	0	1	3	4	2
6	E	4	2	2	2	2	4	4	1	0	2	3	0	4	1	2	3	4	1	0	3	2
7	B	3	4	2	3	4	3	0	2	3	1	4	4	2	0	1	3	2	4	1	3	0
8	C	2	3	2	3	2	2	4	3	2	1	0	2	3	1	0	4	1	0	2	4	3
9	E	4	4	2	3	3	4	0	1	2	4	3	4	0	2	3	1	2	1	0	4	3
10	D	3	3	3	3	3	3	1	3	4	2	0	3	4	2	0	1	3	1	0	4	2
11	E	4	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	0	2	1	4	0	3	2	1	0	3	1	4	2
12	E	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	1	2	0	3	4	1	2	0	0	3	1	4	2
13	E	4	2	1	3	3	3	4	3	0	2	1	3	2	0	1	4	0	4	1	3	2
14	E	3	4	3	3	2	3	4	3	1	0	2	3	1	2	0	4	1	3	2	4	0
15	D	3	3	3	4	3	4	4	3	2	0	1	3	0	1	2	4	0	4	1	3	2
16	D	3	4	3	3	4	2	3	4	1	2	0	4	1	2	3	0	2	4	3	1	0
17	A	0	3	3	3	3	2	4	3	1	2	0	3	4	1	2	0	1	3	2	4	0
18	A	3	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	0	1	4	4	0	3	2	1	2	4	1	3	0
19	C	4	3	3	2	2	2	4	3	1	2	0	4	1	2	3	0	2	3	1	4	0
20	D	2	2	1	1	1	1	4	3	1	2	0	4	3	2	1	0	1	3	2	4	0
21	B	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	3	1	2	4	3	4	1	2	0	0	4	2	3	1
22	B	3	2	2	1	2	1	3	4	0	2	1	4	0	1	3	2	0	2	1	4	3
23	B	3	4	2	3	4	3	0	2	3	1	4	4	2	0	1	3	2	4	1	3	0
24	A	0	2	1	1	1	1	4	3	1	2	0	4	0	1	3	2	1	2	3	4	0
25	D	4	4	4	3	3	3	3	4	2	1	0	4	0	3	2	1	1	3	2	4	0
26	B	1	1	2	1	1	2	3	4	0	2	1	4	2	0	3	1	0	3	1	4	2
27	E	4	4	2	3	3	4	0	1	2	4	3	4	0	2	3	1	2	1	0	4	3
28	A	0	2	1	1	1	1	4	3	1	2	0	3	4	1	2	0	2	4	1	3	0
29	A	2	3	2	1	1	1	3	4	0	2	1	4	2	1	3	0	3	2	1	4	0
30	C	2	3	2	3	2	2	4	3	2	1	0	2	3	1	0	4	1	0	2	4	3
31	B	0	2	2	1	1	2	4	3	0	1	2	1	3	2	0	1	3	4	2	1	0
32	B	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	3	1	2	0	4	0	3	2	1	1	3	2	4	0
33	D	2	2	2	2	1	1	4	3	0	1	2	1	3	2	0	1	0	4	1	3	2
34	C	3	2	2	3	2	2	3	4	0	2	1	3	4	1	2	0	1	4	2	3	0
35	D	4	2	1	3	3	3	4	3	1	2	0	4	0	3	2	1	1	4	2	3	0
36	E	4	2	2	2	2	4	4	1	0	2	3	0	4	1	2	3	4	1	0	3	2

like reading in the mother tongue (18 students – 50%). The average answer is 3.2 which is quite good, which gives hope they will be high achievers in learning.

Question 4

Only 1 student (%) chose the answer “0”, which means the majority to this or that degree like reading in English, may be explained by popularity of English and Internet. The average points is 2.3, which is really lower than for reading in the native tongue, which is not a very good result for studying in English.

Question 5

The average result for attitude towards reading fiction is 2.8, which is normal.

Question 6

The average attitude towards reading non-fiction is 2.4, which is problematic, considering how much they will need to read for education, and in the future for profession. It looks they are not quite ready to be undergraduate students yet.

Question 7

9 students (25%) gave an answer “1” (reading skills in English are much worse than in mother tongue, which is bad. One student (3%) chose the answer “as good as” (“4”), 6 students (17%) – “almost as good as” (“3”) – these few students will have no serious problems studying in English. The average point is 2 which is not good.

Question 8

The rating of difficulties is as follows:

scientific style – 3.1

terminology – 2.8

volume – 1.8

knowledge of English in general - 1.8

subject contents – 0.7

Judging by these answers we can conclude that scientific style and terminology are a big problem, which was predictable based on previous answers. The problems is quite acute.

Question 9

The rating of factors to improve motivation:

Feeling that the goal of what you have to read is to be successful in one's profession – 2.9

More debates, problem solving activities in class – 2.4

Rewarding oneself for reading each reading batch – 1.9

Gradual increase of reading matter volume - 1.8

Reading from the Internet and electronic books, instead of on-paper books – 1.1

More professional orientation of teaching and more active tasks are the factors that Finnish students mostly rely on in the increase of their motivation

Question 10

Factors for improvement of academic reading skills

Reading more interesting texts, fulfilling more interesting activities (games, competitions) – 2.9

Increasing the professional background knowledge – 2.3

Using scientific-popular publications and mass-media – 2.1

More emphasis (explanations, tasks) on terminology – 1.6

More classes (hours) in academic reading - 1.1

Finnish students believe that their reading skills can be improved mostly via providing more interesting texts and activities and increasing their professional knowledge.

Table 3. Georgian students' answers

Question 1

5 students (14%) chose “a” option (less than 10 pages per week in their native tongue), 9 students (25%) – “b” (read 10-20 pages per week), 4 students (11%) – “c” (21- 50 pages), 10 students (28 %) – “d” (51-100) and 8 students (22%) - “e” (more than a 100 pages). The result is generally not so bad, as half of students (50%) read more than 50 pages, but the need for university students is in more than 100 pages, which is only 22% student's answer.

Question 2

5 students (14%) have never read any academic text in mother tongue besides the school textbooks. The average answer is 2.4, which means that students have read on average quite few academic texts in mother tongue, which is not very supporting for university studies.

Question 3

There are no “o” answers, which is already good (there are no students who totally dislike reading in mother tongue). The average answer is 2.8, which is not bad, also there are many answers “4”, which gives hope they will be high achievers in learning.

Question 4

Only 1 student (3%) chose the answer “0”. The average points is 2.2, which is lower than for reading in the native tongue (quite naturally) and is a tolerable result. However, to study in English this result should be significantly higher.

Question 5

3 students (8%) answered “0” (hopefully, not humanities students), which is not too high. The average result for attitude towards reading fiction is 2.3, which is not brilliant.

Table 4
Iraqi students' answers

Student	Questions																					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8					9					10				
								a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e
1	C	1	2	2	1	3	2	3	1	0	4	2	1	0	2	3	4	0	2	1	4	3
2	A	0	3	3	2	1	3	1	0	2	3	4	0	4	1	2	3	4	3	1	2	0
3	C	2	2	2	3	2	3	1	4	0	3	2	1	2	0	3	4	2	3	4	0	1
4	D	3	3	3	3	3	2	4	3	0	2	1	2	3	4	0	1	0	3	1	2	4
5	C	3	3	3	3	3	3	4	3	0	2	1	1	0	2	3	4	2	3	4	0	1
6	B	4	3	3	4	2	2	4	3	0	2	1	4	3	0	1	2	2	1	0	4	3
7	A	0	2	2	3	4	3	3	1	0	4	2	4	3	0	2	1	2	3	1	0	4
8	A	1	3	3	2	2	3	4	3	0	2	1	4	3	0	2	1	2	1	0	4	3
9	A	1	2	2	2	4	3	4	3	0	2	1	4	3	0	2	1	2	3	1	0	4
10	A	1	2	2	4	4	3	1	0	2	3	4	4	3	0	2	1	2	3	1	0	4
11	A	1	2	2	3	1	1	3	1	4	2	0	1	2	0	3	4	1	3	4	2	0
12	A	0	3	4	4	2	3	2	3	4	0	1	3	2	1	0	4	0	2	3	4	1
13	C	2	2	2	3	2	4	2	3	4	0	1	3	0	1	2	4	0	2	1	4	3
14	A	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	3	4	0	1	3	0	2	1	4	0	2	3	4	1
15	B	4	4	2	4	2	2	4	0	3	1	2	3	0	2	1	4	0	2	1	4	3
16	C	3	3	3	2	3	2	4	0	3	1	2	0	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	0
17	D	3	2	2	2	3	1	1	0	4	2	3	2	0	1	4	3	2	3	0	1	4
18	C	2	3	1	1	2	3	3	2	4	0	1	4	2	1	3	0	1	2	3	0	4
19	C	2	1	4	4	4	3	4	1	2	0	3	4	3	0	1	2	1	0	2	4	3
20	C	3	1	4	4	4	3	1	4	2	3	0	3	2	1	0	4	2	3	4	1	0
21	A	1	4	2	1	1	2	4	1	2	3	0	4	1	0	3	2	0	2	1	3	4
22	B	3	4	2	1	1	1	2	4	3	0	1	4	2	0	3	1	0	1	2	3	4
23	D	1	4	4	3	1	3	3	1	0	4	2	4	3	0	2	1	0	2	1	4	3
24	B	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	0	1	3	4	4	1	2	0	3	2	3	1	4	0
25	B	3	4	2	3	1	2	1	4	3	0	2	4	1	3	0	2	0	2	3	1	4
26	A	1	4	2	4	0	3	1	3	2	0	4	4	0	2	1	3	0	1	3	4	2
27	E	4	3	4	3	3	3	0	2	3	1	4	3	2	4	1	0	4	3	1	0	2
28	B	2	3	4	0	1	2	0	2	3	4	1	4	1	2	3	0	2	0	4	3	1
29	B	1	3	2	2	3	2	1	4	2	3	0	4	2	0	3	1	0	2	4	3	1
30	A	1	2	3	4	3	2	4	3	2	1	0	4	0	3	2	1	0	3	2	4	1
31	D	1	3	4	1	3	2	3	2	4	1	0	4	2	0	1	3	0	2	4	3	1
32	E	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	0	1	4	2	2	0	1	3	4	3	0	2	4	1
33	A	0	2	2	1	3	1	4	2	1	3	0	4	0	3	2	1	2	3	4	1	0
34	D	2	3	4	3	4	2	0	2	3	4	1	3	4	0	1	2	3	2	0	4	1
35	A	0	2	4	4	4	4	0	4	1	2	3	4	0	1	2	3	0	1	2	3	4
36	A	0	4	4	0	4	4	0	2	1	4	3	4	0	3	2	1	0	1	2	3	4
37	B	2	2	3	1	2	3	0	1	2	3	4	1	0	2	3	4	0	2	1	3	4

Question 6

3 students (8%) answered “0”, which is not good, but, luckily their percent is not high. The average attitude towards reading non-fiction is 2.4, which is problematic, considering how much they will need to read for education, and in the future for profession.

Question 7

1 student (3%) views his/her English reading skills as much worse than their reading in mother tongue skills, 8 students (22%) gave an answer “1”, which is very bad. Frankly speaking, it is surprising why they chose to study at an international university. 7 students (19%) chose the answer “as good as” (“4”), 9 students (25%) – “almost as good as” (“3”) – these students will have no serious problems studying in English. The average point is 2.3 which is not good.

Question 8

The rating of difficulties is as follows:
knowledge of English in general – 4.4
terminology – 3.1
volume- 1.6
scientific style – 1.3
subject contents – 1.2

Judging by these answers we can conclude that language factors matter more than contents, the biggest problems being knowledge of English in general and terminology, which, based on the previous answers was quite predictable. Students of an international university who think that their knowledge of English is inadequate for studies at an international university really made a strange choice of a type of the university. They will either have to fight a lot or will not be able to graduate.

Question 9

The rating of motivating activities:
Reading from the Internet and electronic books, instead of on-paper books – 2.8
More debates, problem solving activities in class – 2.0
Rewarding oneself – 1.9
Feeling that the goal to be successful in one’s profession will be reached – 1.7
Gradual increase of reading matter volume - 1.4
Students mostly hope that application of internet and more involving activities based on what they have read can increase their motivation to read.

Question 10

The rating of the measures for improvement of academic reading skills:
reading more interesting texts, fulfilling more interesting activities – 3.2
more emphasis on terminology – 2.6
using not only scientific articles and textbooks, but also scientific-popular publications and mass-media – 1.4
increasing the professional background knowl-

edge – 1.2

more classes in academic reading – 1.7

Students mostly hope that reading more interesting texts, fulfilling more interesting activities and having more emphasis on terminology will help them improve their reading skills.

Table 4. Iraqi students’ answers

Question 1

14 students (38%) chose “a” option (less than 10 pages per week in their native tongue), 8 students (22%) – “b” (read 10-20 pages per week), 8 students (22%) – “c” (21- 50 pages), 5 students (14 %) – “d” (51-100) and 2 students (9%) - “e” (more than a 100 pages). The result is quite poor, as the majority of students (77%) read very little; 14% of students read more than 50 pages, but the need for university students is in more than 100 pages, which is only 9% student’s answer.

Question 2

6 students (16%) have never read any academic text in mother tongue besides the school textbooks. The average answer is 1.8, which means that students have read on average quite few academic texts in mother tongue, which is not very supporting for university studies.

Question 3

There are no “o” answers (there are no students who totally dislike reading in mother tongue), which is already good. The average answer is 2.7 which is not bad, also there are some answers “4”, which gives hope they will be high achievers in learning.

Question 4

Nobody chose the answer “0”, which means they knew where they were going to study. The average points is 2.8, which is even a bit higher than for reading in the native tongue (which is unexpected, but this may deal with their professional orientation) and is a tolerable result. However, to study in English this result should be significantly higher.

Question 5

2 students (5%) answered “0” (hopefully, not humanities students), which is not too high. The average result for attitude towards reading fiction is 2.4, which is not brilliant.

Question 6

1 student (3%) answered “0”, which is not good, but, luckily the percentage is not high. The average attitude towards reading non-fiction is 2.4, which is problematic, considering how much they will need to read for education, and in the future for profession.

Table 5
Turkish students' answers

	Questions																					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8					9					10				
								a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e	a	b	c	d	e
Student																						
1	E	2	4	3	4	2	3	2	3	4	0	1	3	4	2	1	0	2	3	4	0	1
2	E	4	2	2	1	2	1	1	3	2	4	0	1	2	3	0	4	0	4	1	2	3
3	E	2	3	4	2	2	3	3	4	1	2	0	1	2	0	3	4	0	2	1	3	4
4	E	2	3	2	3	1	2	4	2	1	3	1	3	4	2	1	0	1	4	0	3	2
5	E	2	4	3	4	2	2	3	4	0	2	1	2	3	1	0	4	0	2	1	4	3
6	E	2	3	2	3	1	2	2	3	4	0	1	1	3	2	4	0	2	3	4	0	1
7	E	4	3	4	2	3	1	1	2	3	4	0	2	3	1	0	4	0	1	2	4	3
8	E	2	4	3	4	3	1	4	3	0	1	2	2	1	3	4	0	1	3	0	2	4
9	C	3	2	3	2	2	1	4	2	0	3	2	3	4	2	1	0	0	2	1	4	3
10	C	1	1	0	2	3	2	3	4	2	0	1	2	3	1	0	4	0	4	3	2	3
11	C	1	3	0	1	3	2	2	3	4	0	1	1	2	3	0	4	0	3	1	4	2
12	A	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	3	2	0	1	2	3	1	0	4	2	3	4	0	1
13	C	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	4	2	3	0	2	3	1	0	4	1	2	0	4	3
14	E	3	4	1	4	3	1	3	4	0	2	1	3	4	2	1	0	1	2	0	3	4
15	D	0	4	3	3	1	3	4	3	1	0	2	1	2	3	0	4	0	4	1	3	2
16	C	1	4	0	4	2	1	2	3	4	0	1	2	1	3	4	0	0	4	1	2	3
17	D	2	0	3	0	2	0	4	3	2	0	1	2	1	3	4	0	2	3	1	4	2
18	D	4	2	4	3	2	3	4	3	2	1	0	2	1	3	4	0	1	4	0	3	2
19	D	0	3	0	4	0	0	2	4	3	1	0	1	3	2	0	4	2	3	4	0	1
20	E	3	2	3	4	2	3	4	3	2	0	1	1	2	3	4	0	1	3	0	2	4

Question 7

Nobody views his/her English reading skills as much worse than their reading in mother tongue skills, 5 students (14%) gave an answer "1" (quite worse), so, the number of students whose reading in English skills are very poor is low. 3 students (8%) chose the answer "as good as" ("4"), which is very few, but many enough students (16 students - 43%) chose "almost as good as" ("3") – these students will have no serious problems studying in English. The average point is 2.6, which is not good enough.

Question 8

The rating of difficulties is as follows:
 knowledge of English in general – 2.3
 terminology – 2.0
 volume – 2.1
 scientific style – 2
 subject contents – 1.7

Judging by these answers we can conclude that all difficulty factors are approximately equal by importance, and none is really decisive. However, the fact that knowledge of English in general is first in the

ranking means that the students will have to work very hard on their English, in order to be able to graduate.

Question 9

The rating of motivating activities:

Reading from the Internet and electronic books, instead of on-paper books – 2.7

Feeling that the goal to be successful in one's profession will be reached – 2.3

More debates, problem solving activities in class – 1.9

Rewarding oneself – 1.4

Gradual increase of reading matter volume - 1.2

Students mostly hope that application of internet and more professional orientation during classes can increase their motivation to read.

Question 10

The rating of the measures for improvement of academic reading skills:

reading more interesting texts, fulfilling more interesting activities – 2.5

increasing the professional background knowl-

edge – 2.2

more emphasis on terminology – 2.0

using not only scientific articles and textbooks, but also scientific-popular publications and mass-media – 2.1

more classes in academic reading – 1.2

No factor is too important, except “more classes in ESP reading”, which is the least popular answer, other factors are approximately of the same importance. Students mostly hope that reading more interesting texts and fulfilling more interesting activities will help them improve their reading skills.

Table 5. Turkish students’ answers

Question 1

1 student (5%) chose “a” option (less than 10 pages per week in their native tongue), nobody chose “b” (read 10-20 pages per week), 4 students (20%) – “c” (21- 50 pages), 4 students (20%) – “d” (51-100) and 10 students (50%) - “e” (more than a 100 pages). The result is quite good, as the majority of students (50%) read enough; % of students read between 51 and 100 pages.

Question 2

4 students (20%) have never read any academic text in mother tongue besides the school textbooks.

Table 6

Comparison of average results

Question/country		Azerbaijan	Finland	Georgia	Iraq	Turkey
1	Amount of reading in mother tongue among majority	51 – 100 p.	21-50 p.	51-100 p.	0-10	above 100
2	Experience of reading academic texts in mother tongue (out of 5 points)	1.9	1.5	2.8	1.8	1.3
3	Attitude towards reading in mother tongue (out of 5 points)	2.9	3.2	2.8	2.7	2.6
4	Attitude towards reading in English	2.8	2.3	2.2	2.9	2.1
5	Attitude towards reading fiction	2.9	2.8	2.3	2.4	2.6
6	Attitude towards reading non-fiction	2.4	2.4	2.4	2.4	1.9
7	Quality of reading skills in English, compared to those in native tongue	2.6	2.0	2.3	2.6	0.9
8	Highest rating in difficulties	Terminology	Scientific style	Knowledge of English	Knowledge of English	Terminology
	Lowest rating in difficulties	Subject contents	Subject contents	Subject contents	Subject contents	Subject contents
9	Most popular measures to increase motivation	Debates and other engaging activities	More goal-oriented teaching	Reading from the internet	Reading from the internet	Rewarding oneself
10	Most popular measures to improve the quality of reading skills	More interesting texts and activities	More interesting texts and activities	More interesting texts and activities	More interesting texts and activities	More emphasis on terminology

The average answer is 1.3, which means that students have read on average quite few academic texts in mother tongue, which is not very supporting for university studies.

Question 3

There are 2 “0” answers (10% students who totally dislike reading in mother tongue), which is already bad. The average answer is 2.6 which is not bad, also there are some answers “4”, which gives hope they will be high achievers in learning.

Question 4

Fine students (25%) chose the answer “0”, which means they are not ready to study at an international university. The average points is 2.1, which is, naturally, lower than for reading in the native tongue and is a hardly tolerable result. To study in English this result should be significantly higher.

Question 5

2 students (10%) answered “0” (hopefully, not humanities students), which is not good, luckily the percentage is not high. The average result for attitude towards reading fiction is 2.6, which is not brilliant.

Question 6

2 students (10%) answered “0”, which is not good, but, luckily the percentage is not high. The average attitude towards reading non-fiction is 1.9, which is problematic, considering how much they will need to read for education, and in the future for profession.

Question 7

3 students (15%) view his/her English reading skills as much worse than their reading in mother tongue skills, 7 students (35%) gave an answer “1” (quite worse), so, the number of students whose reading in English skills are high (50%). Nobody chose the answer “as good as” (“4”), but a reasonable number of students (5 students - 25%) chose “almost as good as” (“3”) – these students will have no serious problems studying in English. The average point is 0.9, which is very problematic.

Question 8

The rating of difficulties is as follows:

terminology – 3.2

knowledge of English in general – 2.9

scientific style – 2.0

volume – 1.3, which is hardly believable, taking into consideration their knowledge of English subject contents – 0.9

Question 9

The rating of motivating activities:

Rewarding oneself – 2.5

Feeling that the goal to be successful in one’s profession will be reached – 2.1

Gradual increase of reading matter volume - 2.1

Reading from the Internet and electronic books, instead of on-paper books – 1.9

More debates, problem solving activities in class – 1.6

None of the activities seem too motivation to students, still rewarding oneself is the strongest.

Question 10

The rating of the measures for improvement of academic reading skills:

more emphasis on terminology – 2.9

increasing the professional background knowledge – 2.6

reading more interesting texts, fulfilling more interesting activities – 2.5

using not only scientific articles and textbooks, but also scientific-popular publications and mass-media – 1.5

more classes in academic reading – 0.8

“More classes in ESP reading” is the least popular answer, other factors are approximately of the same importance. Students especially emphasize teaching terminology.

It is not a very realistic thing to do cross-national comparison based on self-assessment questionnaires, as some nations are more reserved praising themselves, others like to overestimate themselves, and individuals differ within a nation. However, to see rather a general tendency than a comparison of one nation to another, I made up a summarizing table.

Table 6. Comparison of average results

Discussion

Though the questions 8-10 required to rate the answers in such a way that no rating was repeated (which was explained both in the questionnaire and orally by the teacher), all students from two universities did not get it right and had to re-answer the questions, also some answer-sheets had to be eliminated due to the same reason, proves that the students’ reading (and listening) skills are quite imperfect.

Results from country to country do not differ dramatically, and are in one direction. Unfortunately, only individual students’ answers show that they are really prepared for studies at an international university. On average, the results are below the desired level.

Students’ experience in reading

The amount of reading in mother tongue is dissatisfactory overall, except Turkey.

The majority of students in all countries do not have a satisfactory experience of reading academic texts, when they come to university (in Georgia the result is relatively good).

Attitudes towards reading

Attitudes towards reading (questions 3-6) are not bad, but they have to be higher, to provide quality education.

Quality of reading skills

The quality of English reading skills is, certainly,

lower than in the native language, but reading skills, compared to listening, speaking, and writing are the most achievable for native-like level, this is why the results cannot be viewed as satisfactory.

Difficulties

Subject contents is unanimously named as the least problem of reading at university, which is good news, as its knowledge will help them understand what they read. There is no unity concerning the most important difficulty, however, they all seem of linguistic nature.

Ways to improve

It was quite surprising for me to find out that students did not very much hope that linking reading with Internet would motivate them more, however, Georgian and Iraqi student more often chose this answer than other answers (but still not as many as I forecasted). On the other hand, Longhurst (2003: 343), who teaches history at Carnegie Mellon University, discovered that "even technologically proficient students, though generally enthusiastic about the use of online materials in undergraduate courses, have deep reservations about reading assignments located on the web instead of paper". Also, Spencer (2006) supports those findings with a survey of 254 graduate and undergraduate business students in British Columbia, Canada. He found that 92% of the students printed out the item when they worked concurrently with something else, 82% printed it out if it was long or complicated, 80% printed it out if they wanted to study from it, and 75% printed it when they wanted it to take notes. It looks that students still prefer to work with on-paper texts.

Concerning the most popular measure to improve the quality of reading skills, the students are quite unanimous: texts and activities should become more interesting (Turkish students stress the role of terminology).

Limitations of the study

Of course, 20-38 students are not enough to represent a student body of a university, and 5 universities / countries (totally 167 questionnaires filled) cannot represent the world, but, on the one hand, as their views are unanimous enough, and on the other hand, coincide with the findings in the literature review, they are reliable enough. Certainly, a deeper study can yield more exact results.

Conclusions

The questionnaire results showed that, though some individual and from country to country difference can be found, the general picture is quite similar in all the universities participating in the research, whether it represents an educationally more or less successful country:

- students have to read more, both in the native tongue and in English, both fiction and non-fiction
- the attitude towards reading is not bad, but not good enough to provide efficient studies,

- the quality of reading skills is hardly satisfactory,
- among difficulties especially often are named the level of English skills in general, knowledge of terminology, and the specific features of scientific style,
- however, there are possible ways to improve, which we recommend to take into consideration, such as linking reading with internet, choosing more interesting reading matter and applying more engaging reading activities, more often and effectively dealing with terminology.

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