

*Some insights into the academic reading experience  
of English philology students*

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Abstract

The paper reports the results of a study which aimed to investigate selected aspects of the academic reading experience of English philology students concerning the use of reading and note-taking strategies. Having accomplished a variety of academic reading assignments in linguistics, psycholinguistics, literature, history, culture, and EFL didactics, the participants of the study developed as disciplinary readers and acquired an array of metacognitive strategies which made it possible for them to consciously reflect on the process of learning English and gaining subject-specific knowledge. The students filled in a questionnaire with two closed-item questions regarding the helpfulness of reading and note-taking strategies and two open-ended questions probing their preferences for combining the two types of strategies and switching to the native language while using them. The analysis of the participants' assessment of the helpfulness of reading and note-taking strategies and their preferences for the use of those strategies made it possible to gain some valuable insights into the students' strategic approach to disciplinary reading. Some implications for future research and more efficient academic reading practice will be suggested.

*Keywords:* academic reading; notetaking strategies; learning from text; disciplinary knowledge

## 1. Introduction

A high level of reading competence is undoubtedly a critical factor in learning, as it is a fundamental source of knowledge for L1 and L2 students in academic settings worldwide. Involving EFL university students in enhanced reading practice, however, is a demanding task for teachers, which has been proved by empirical findings (e.g., Dreyer & Nel, 2003; Levine, Ferenz, & Reves, 2000). Nowadays, thanks to modern technological advances, in higher education programs students' learning is assisted by both conventional print materials and texts in multimodal electronic forms, which they read as a coursework requirement or as part of independent study. Specialists in different fields of educational research have also shown more concern for the fact that the development of reading skills is typically accompanied by writing skills; hence a more common use of the term *literacy skills* in recent literature.

A significant contribution to the discussion of reading and learning has been made by the advocates of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), defined as "language research and instruction that focuses on the specific communicative needs and practices of particular groups in academic contexts" (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002, p. 2). Subscribing to such a standpoint does not, however, make it easier to define the relationship between EAP and English for Specific Purpose (ESP), which can be interpreted as that between concentrating on the processes of knowledge acquisition by individual learners at the academic level versus working with texts and activities specific for particular sub-fields (Hamp-Lyons, 2011, p. 94). The concern over establishing similarities and differences between these two areas has also been touched upon in the debate on the need for conceptualizing the reading process as naturally combined with some learning outcomes. As a result, it has become obvious that providing a coherent framework for improving reading skills and content area learning of all students, including learners of English, that is taking a disciplinary approach to reading practice, is indispensable (e.g., Fox & Alexander, 2009; Schoenbach et al., 2012).

English philology BA and MA programs in Poland require that students do a range of subject-specific courses in linguistics, psycholinguistics, applied linguistics, history, literature, culture or foreign language teaching methodology which are heavily based on a selection of written sources. In addition to this, students are offered General English classes which support them in attaining high proficiency levels in both oral and written communication skills. Such an intensive three- or five-year period of study equips students with the relevant disciplinary knowledge as well as shaping their beliefs, perceptions and attitudes concerning the learning and teaching process in academic settings. English philology students are thus given an opportunity to become learners of English who are

capable of efficiently using their language skills as well as employing an array of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, many of which are assumed to be transferable to their future professional work. Students' metacognitive awareness of themselves as advanced EFL learners and language users for content purposes enables them to present their views and self-report on their language-related experience. The present study set out to probe philology students' perceptions of selected aspects of their reading experience, with special emphasis on reading and note-taking strategies which have been found potentially helpful in academic study.

## 2. Academic reading – in need of a strategy-based approach

In order to better understand reading as an educational practice taking place in academic settings, it is imperative to investigate the evolving nature of the construct of reading, which is constantly being reconsidered in the light of an increasing body of theoretical positions and research findings (Fox & Alexander, 2009; Grabe, 2009; Sabatini, Albro, & O'Reilly, 2012; Schoenbach, Greenleaf, & Murphy, 2012). Reading experts, psychologists, psycholinguists, educational psychologists, applied linguists and foreign language teachers have been making continuous attempts to develop an adequate conceptualization of reading as a process, ability, competence, skill, behaviour and a goal-directed social practice. It has been convincingly argued that a universal, unified model of reading is needed, one that would comprise such features of reading as multidimensionality, developmental nature, intentionality of the author-reader meaning making, and goal-directedness (e.g., Alexander & Fox, 2013; Alexander & Jetton, 2000; Alexander & The Disciplined Reading and Learning Research Laboratory, 2012; Fox & Alexander, 2009; Grabe, 2009; Kintsch, 2005; Perfetti & Adlof, 2012; Sadoski & Paivio, 2007). Hence a definition of the role played by reading cannot be restricted to text decoding and comprehension. What is required is a thorough exploration of readers' response to the text, and readers themselves as representatives of particular socio-cultural communities, with their own individual characteristics (e.g., background knowledge, strategic knowledge, interest, motivation, etc.) when guided by task-oriented and/or personalized goals.

As for the term *academic reading*, while L1 reading researchers tend to broadly define it as reading for the purpose of acquiring disciplinary knowledge from expository texts at secondary, college and primary levels (Hamp-Lyons, 2011), Grabe (2009), an L2 reading expert, postulates distinguishing six academic purposes for reading. Apart from the three aims generally recognized by L2 theoreticians and practitioners, that is reading for general understanding, reading aimed at finding some specific information (scanning) and reading for quick understanding (skimming), he proposes three other categories particular

to academic reading. They are the following: (a) *reading to learn* – organizing the text content into a coherent frame against one’s background knowledge in order to complete a task or for future reference; (b) *reading to integrate information* – synthesizing information from different parts of a text or multiple sources and building a content-organizing frame; and (c) *reading to evaluate, critique, and use information* – recognizing the reader’s attitudes, emotional response, interest, and preferences in interpreting texts for some future purpose, as well as processing them intertextually (Grabe, 2009, p. 8). Noteworthy is the position held by Fox and Alexander (2009, p. 232), who argue for a change in the conceptualization of text/reading comprehension itself. They make the following statement: “what is required is *not* an expansion of existing models but rather a fundamental reconceptualization of the nature of text comprehension” [emphasis in the original]. Some change in thinking about the reading process was brought about, for example, by the Transitional Extensions Model, which accounts both for reading multiple texts of various types (informational and argumentative, but also non-static/non-linear ones) with the meaning developed across texts, as well as for the interaction between the text as the author’s product and the readers’ response (Fox & Alexander, 2009, p. 233).

Undoubtedly, one of the key issues in investigating academic reading concerns an interdependence between the processes of reading and learning involved in subject-matter knowledge acquisition. Such terms as *reading to learn*, *reading to study*, *learning from text*, and *learning by/from reading* clearly point to the importance of the bond between reading and learning (see Chodkiewicz, 2014, for further discussion). Content-based reading generally means sustained reading of multiple texts belonging to the same subject field with some cumulative effect of gaining disciplinary knowledge and enhancing one’s literacy skills (e.g., Grabe, 2004; Martin, 2013; Swaffar & Arens, 2005). In the case of second or foreign language (L2/FL) instruction, however, language objectives are also frequently treated as predominant due to the underlying assumption that the learners’ language deficiencies need to be amply compensated for. On balance, in order to meet the adequate standards for both content and language learning in L2/FL academic settings as well as to ensure good control and flexibility in accomplishing particular reading tasks, readers have to use appropriate strategies that will help them reach the two-fold goal of the reading tasks they perform (e.g., Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008; Chodkiewicz, 2014; Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005).

Over the last two decades research into the strategic nature of the reading process has aimed to identify a range of reading strategies, model their taxonomies, and delineate the scope of their role. With some universal (metaphorical) reading models gaining popularity in L2/FL contexts, different claims as to the role of strategies in text comprehension have been made. Whereas Kintsch

(2005) assigns a compensatory role to strategies, namely that of repair in the case of comprehension failure, Graesser (2007) assumes that the deployment of effective strategies helps readers establish a coherent meaning of the text, depending on their goals, establish causal relationships between events, and obtain necessary explanations. In Broek's (2012) view, coherence building strategies play a fundamental role in enhancing text comprehension. Strategies which help readers overcome the limitations of their attentional capacity and working memory are particularly useful when it comes to searching one's memory for prior text (e.g., rereading), activating background knowledge (including retrieval from other sources), as well as identifying themes or inferring abstract ideas. In his research, Linderholm (2006) found that the most helpful strategies in text comprehension and recall are making connections with prior knowledge, looking for explanations, and generating cause-and-effect questions, rather than skimming for the main points or looking for definitions of terms. He also concluded that less-skilled readers may wrongly feel satisfied with just rereading/reviewing a book, while lacking more effective strategies for enhancing reading for study purposes, such as paraphrasing, making inferences, monitoring comprehension, summarizing, or monitoring accuracy. Many other reading specialists (e.g., Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2002; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995) emphasize the importance of the transaction between the reader and the text, which takes the form of constructively responsive reading and is extensively based on the reader's strategic activity.

A new theoretical perspective in understanding L2 reading has been provided by McNeil (2012), who modified an earlier model by Bernhardt (2010). McNeil (2012) postulates that two factors in L2 reading, namely L1 reading ability and L2 language knowledge, be supplemented with background knowledge and strategic knowledge (both previously defined by unexplained variance). The model not only maintains that deficiencies in any source of knowledge can be compensated for with knowledge in other sources, but, what is more, it postulates that the extent of the contributions of particular components changes with the growth of the reader's language proficiency. In the case of higher-proficiency learners, strategic knowledge plays a predominant role in reading, while the role of background knowledge becomes diminished. McNeil's (2012) reading model corroborates the generally accepted view that enhancing readers' strategic competence and heightening their awareness of effective strategy use should constitute a vital component of both implicit and explicit L2/FL reading instruction.

The present paper will be limited to discussing selected types of reading strategies whose adoption can be particularly useful in academic instruction. Special interest in academic reading has been taken by Mokhtari and Reichard (2002), and Mokhtari and Sheorey (2002), who designed two surveys measuring

adolescents' and adults' perception of reading strategies, for L1 language users (MARSI – *Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory*) and L2 language learners (SORS – *Survey of Reading Strategies*). The surveys aim to raise learners' awareness of the process of reading and learning from text as well as of their responsibility for monitoring their learning and motivation. The strategies Mokhtari and Reichard (2002) considered useful in academic reading practice included taking notes, paraphrasing text information, revisiting previously read information, asking self-questions, using such reference materials as aids, underlining text information, discussing texts with others, and writing summaries of texts.

An insightful reading strategy framework for academic reading has also been offered by McNamara, Ozuru, Best, and O'Reilly (2007). The four prongs of strategies they propose, with a central component called *monitoring comprehension and reading strategies*, are: (a) *strategies to prepare to read* – setting and recognizing goals for reading; (b) *strategies to interpret words, sentences, and ideas in the text* – close reading helpful in constructing a coherent textbase, bridging inferences, marking, and annotating; (c) *strategies to go beyond the text* – activating prior knowledge; and, finally, (d) *strategies to organize, restructure, and synthesize the text* – using selected information from the text (McNamara et al., 2007, p. 467). With the help of those strategies, readers can constantly monitor the coherence of the mental representation of the text and update the relevant information so as to learn and remember the target information. Ediger (2006), on the other hand, distinguishes five metacognitive strategies which can be used for the purpose of reading to learn, that is *reflecting on what has been learned from the text, underlining or marking the text, thinking how to use the text in the future, making notes about what one has read, and paraphrasing what the author wrote in order to remember it*.

As can be seen from the foregoing discussion, note-taking is a strategy which has been assigned a crucial role by researchers interested in academic reading practice. In the following section, it is looked at in more detail.

### 3. Note-taking – an essential strategy for an academic reader

Note-taking, a strategy used in educational, professional, and everyday life situations was described by Williams and Eggert (2002, p. 173) as “a pervasive practice among college students”, implemented in class discussions, during lectures, or while reading. Slotte and Lonka (1999) point out that the goal of making notes should be defined in terms of learning by writing rather than simply recording the contents. It has also been stressed that notes constitute a condensed form of some source material which is generated by a person who is simultaneously involved in the process of listening, studying or observing some kind of language-

related performance. The information gathered is remembered by creating external memories intended for some future use as a consequence of the activation of the processes of thinking, learning, and creating (Piolat, Olive, & Kellogg, 2005). A similar view is held by Armbruster (2009, p. 221), who notes that the present interpretation of note-taking behavior has its roots in the cognitive-constructivist view of learning, and that is why the significance of the role of "motivation, attention, knowledge acquisition, encoding, learning strategies, and metacognition" should be underscored. Despite this, in some academic contexts, note-taking is taken to denote primarily information transmission and storage, whereas in everyday and professional life it tends to be associated with problem solving, decision making and manipulating information (Piolat et al., 2005). As far as L2/FL instruction is concerned, note-taking gives learners an opportunity to efficiently perform tasks with both content- and language-related goals.

The benefits of note-taking in an L2 environment were first brought to our attention by language learning strategy specialists. O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p. 138) defined note-taking as an activity which accompanies language tasks and consists in reformulating the information into a more concise form by means of using words or concepts in their abbreviated form. Oxford (1990, p. 86-90) coined a category of *creating structure for input and output* to cover taking notes, summarizing and highlighting, stating that taking notes requires thorough understanding of information obtained from listening and reading materials before it is transformed into the written form. Kiewra (1989) described note-taking as covering such diverse types of behavior as viewing a lecture multiple times, generative note-taking, or using a framework to take down notes. Yet, despite identifying many common features that characterize note-taking as a construct appearing in both listening and reading situations, some important differences should be noted with regard to the two modes of receiving input. Whereas readers set their own pace in combining the processes of reading and writing, re-reading and reviewing the material as they wish, and deciding when to read and when to take down notes, the listening process is strictly limited by the speed of delivery and quality of the oral input. Listening also puts considerable demands on note-takers as they have to select high-level information from the structure of the material provided; thus, they participate in a cognitively demanding 'structure search process' (Rickards, Fajen, Sullivan, & Gillespie, 1997; Kobayshi, 2005).

Kiewra (1989) distinguished three basic functions of note-taking that enhance learning, namely encoding, external storage, and encoding plus external storage. Separating the encoding and storage functions in practice means that the information encoded in the form of notes will not be reviewed at a later time by the note-taker, whereas reviewing the notes only may mean elaborating on the notes taken down by another person. Foos, Mora, and Tkacz (1994) confirmed

the observation that learning is more efficient when information retention is enriched with the so-called *generation effect*, that is when the notes have been made by the note-taker himself or herself. Encoding plays a critical role in determining the quality of notes. The quality of the encoding phase of note-taking, on the other hand, significantly depends on the depth of semantic processing and the effort note-takers make to comprehend the textual material with their personal goals in mind. Once the coded information has been appropriately integrated and synthesized, its efficient attentional processing ensures successful learning and retention of the target material (Faber, Morris, & Lieberman, 2000; Kiewra, 1989). Focus on the external storage function of note-taking additionally enhances one's understanding of the organization of the text structure, which results in producing better notes (Faber et al., 2000). Hence note-taking promotes learning owing to the fact that it involves both encoding text information and reviewing the product (Kobayashi, 2005; Van Meter, Yokoi, & Pressley, 1994). In an attempt to efficiently code information, note-takers use a wide variety of individual strategies and techniques to make their notes concise and adequate for their purpose (Piolat et al., 2005). The form that such notes take is particularly important when note-taking is carried out under time pressure and abbreviations are used in order to adjust the pace of note-taking to the speed at which the material is being presented. This is the reason why note-takers simplify lexis and syntax (e. g., suffix contraction, telegraphic style), use symbols, and put notes into different formats organizing them linearly vs. non-linearly (Kiewra, 1989; Piolat et al., 2005). Comparing the reduced form of notes with the original input material, Piolat et al (2005, p. 293) described them as "summarized products with different formats".

As for the effectiveness of note-taking, two basic problems have been investigated. On the one hand, the outcomes comprehension and/or learning were measured, either receptively or by recall (Kobayashi, 2005). On the other hand, the quality of notes, that is the selection and organization of information into an external product, were analyzed and evaluated. In both cases different methods were used. Peverly, Ramaswamy, Brown, Sumowski, Alidoost, and Garner (2007), for instance, found a positive relationship between note-taking during a videotaped lecture and learning, which was operationalized as the quality of a summary of the lecture written without the notes. By comparing L1 and L2 lecture note-taking by undergraduate students, Clereham (1995) proved that L2 students had more difficulty in input processing, which resulted in omissions of information elements, especially at lower levels of hierarchy, as well as in the signaling of rhetorical structure. Gabryś (2011), in contrast, found a group of Polish students in BA TEFL program to be successful in producing notes rich in content and in eliminating full sentences. In Carrell's (2007) opinion, more research is needed into the

quality of the content of notes (e.g., main ideas vs. details), their organization at the macro and micro levels, and note-taking efficiency (using abbreviations and symbols, paraphrasing, etc.). Although most of the studies carried out so far have concerned note-taking following lecture discourse processing, in some respects, as mentioned before, the analogy to reading is obvious. Of importance is also the fact that even though much note-taking takes place spontaneously, many teachers find it beneficial to improve learners' note-taking skills by introducing some elements of strategy training instruction (Kiewra, 1989; Kobayashi, 2006; Williams & Eggert, 2002).

As already pointed out, note-taking is fundamentally based on the cognitive processes of comprehension and production, which are influenced by metacognition. Academic settings provide students with many opportunities for using note-taking in practice and developing an awareness of the concept of note-taking, its functions, and its purposes. Having examined a pattern of college students' perceptions of note-taking, Van Meter et al. (1994), for instance, offered a theory of note-taking, conceptualized as college students' self-regulated behavior. The researchers outlined the major characteristics of note-taking used in situations in which the text, which is the source of information, is available to the note-taker at all the phases of the activity, including reviewing, with no time frame imposed on it. The first component of the framework concerns setting multiple goals in view of future assignments or exams, which determines the note-takers' attention allotment, level of comprehension, and memorization of the content. The second component focuses on the criteria that students adopt when selecting the content to be included in the notes (e.g., definitions, main points, concepts or ideas) and the way in which it is structured (key terms, outlining, etc.). Then come the contextual factors affecting note-taking, that is, the method of input presentation, the note-taker's knowledge and characteristics (prior knowledge and expertise in taking down notes), as well as the content of the notes as required in the light of the demands of a particular course (verbatim or paraphrased form). Finally, the notes are reviewed, rewritten and used for future purposes. How note-takers perceive the different aspects of selected procedures they follow is an important issue whose investigation the present exploratory study also aims to contribute to.

#### 4. The study

The study presented in this paper is a qualitative study into the nature of academic reading experience, as reported by undergraduate English philology students at a Polish university. The outcomes of the study of the academic subjects students take are heavily dependent on their level of language proficiency and

reading competence in English. Undoubtedly, an array of successfully implemented strategies can help them cope with high reading loads and the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge.

#### 4.1. Research questions

The primary goal of the study was to investigate to what extent a group of Polish students of English philology found it helpful to use a range of reading and note-taking strategies in their course assignments. A secondary goal was to obtain more direct information on their reading performance by asking them which of the reading strategies they combined most frequently with note-taking. Finally, the study aimed to find out to what extent, when and why, the students found it beneficial to switch to their native language while using all of those strategies. Thus, the students were asked to reflect on their nearly three-year experience in reading in academic settings and report on their views, perceptions and practices concerning the following aspects of strategy use:

1. how helpful they found the reading strategies listed;
2. which reading strategies they used were accompanied by note-taking most often;
3. how helpful they found the note-taking strategies listed;
4. in what circumstances, how often and why they found it beneficial to switch to their native language in reading and/or note-taking-based tasks performed in English.

#### 4.2 Participants

61 out of 77 third-year English philology undergraduate students from the Department of English at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin took part in the study in the year 2011. No demographic information was collected, and the responses provided by the students in the questionnaire were anonymous. By the time the study was conducted, the participants had completed a wide range of practical English courses as well as having acquired a body of knowledge in linguistics, psycholinguistics, British and American literature, culture, and EFL didactics. As teacher trainees they had also acquired some initial teaching skills and developed an awareness of basic problems concerning reading skills instruction. However, little explicit and no systematic training in the use of academic reading and note-taking strategies had been offered to them.

### 4.3. Data collection

The data analyzed in this study were obtained from a printed questionnaire designed by the present author, partly based on the instruments developed in a previous study (Chodkiewicz, 2009). The four items included in the questionnaire were reviewed by two EFL university teachers so as to introduce any modifications that would help make all the statements clear to the respondents and representative of the constructs they measured. The two questionnaire items consisted of closed-item questions based on a five-point Likert scale, and the other two questions were of an open-ended type; one required multiple answers and the other called for descriptive responses from the participants.

The questionnaire items, that is the two sets of 12 reading and note-taking strategies, were rated by the students in terms of their helpfulness by choosing one of five options on a Likert scale: 5 – very helpful, 4 – helpful, 3 – neither helpful nor unhelpful, 2 – not helpful, 1 – very unhelpful. As explained by Carrell, Dunkel and Mollaun (2002), being asked to assess the helpfulness of strategies gives learners an opportunity to reflect and self-report on their experience. It makes it possible to raise learners' awareness of their individual language practices which can be conceptualized in terms of strategies and activate their perceptions of the value of strategy use. The first open-ended question, in which the students were asked to list the reading strategies that they would most often choose to be accompanied by note-taking, was directly related to the participants' experience. It sought to elicit information concerning the activities in which the students' use of a particular kind of strategy-focused reading behavior encouraged taking down notes. The second open-ended question aimed to investigate the students' decisions to switch to Polish in reading and taking notes on disciplinary texts in English. The students were asked to identify the circumstances in which they would switch to the L1 and then state how frequently and why they would use such a procedure. In the process of coding and analyzing the responses to this question by two EFL experienced teacher-researchers, apart for the three coding categories straightforwardly suggested in the question, that is: (a) the circumstances of switching into Polish; (2) the frequency; and (c) the reasons for doing so, a fourth category was added, namely other comments/ideas connected with the L1 use in L2 reading practice. What is more, due to a wide spread of answers that described the circumstances in which the students used the L1, a finer-grained list of sub-categories was proposed. As the students' responses were of different length and not all them were well-organized, only their clearly identifiable elements were included in the analysis.

## 5. Results and discussion

In order to estimate the degree of helpfulness of particular reading strategies, the ratings given by all the participants in response to the first item of the questionnaire were collected, and the mean, standard deviation and median were computed (see Table 1 below). As can be seen from the table, despite the fact that the participants did not generally find the strategy of *studying diagrams, tables and graphic resources* helpful in reading disciplinary texts, they identified the remaining strategies as helpful to a varying degree. It is interesting to note that the students perceived *rereading parts of the text found difficult to understand* ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) as the most helpful strategy, and also thought it helpful to *study all the parts of the text highlighted by the author* ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and *read a paragraph after the paragraph to identify the most important ideas* ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ), which are relatively natural and straightforward actions taken by academic readers. A lower degree of helpfulness was assigned to the following two strategies: *I first read the whole text for general comprehension, then for detail* and *Having finished reading I look at the text to check its main ideas again* ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 1.21$  and  $M = 3.52$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ , respectively), which are more effortful to use since they require reading the text twice with different purposes in mind, yet they can prove efficient in constructing a situational model of the text. The respondents' ratings of the helpfulness of the academic strategies discussed seem to suggest that they tend to rely on the structure of the text and look for the author's guidance throughout it. The more independent strategy of *looking for new information introduced by the author* seemed to be of much less relevance to them. One might hypothesize that at least some of the students participating in the study had not become competent in using a full repertoire of strategies enhancing reading academic genres. As already mentioned, rereading, given the highest rating in this study, has been proved to characterize less-skilled readers (Linderholm, 2006).

Some further insights into the philology students' reading experience were drawn from their responses to the second question which concerned their preferences for using note-taking in combination with particular reading strategies. The respondents were expected to enumerate the reading strategies which they would use most often accompanied by note-taking. Similarly to the previous observations, the analysis of the data included in Table 2 shows that the participants demonstrated a tendency to follow the author's cues in text processing since as many as 39 out of 61 (64%) respondents stated that they took down notes of the parts of the text highlighted by the author. The students' answers also suggest that they find it important to read academic texts for the main ideas because a number of them reported noting down the information

concerning the main ideas of the text and supporting arguments, as well as important details (22-28 responses, 36%-46%). On the other hand, relatively few students (12 answers) mentioned taking notes of the titles of chapters or sections, which might also be considered significant for directing them in the comprehension of the gist of a passage. Fourteen students reported noting down some vocabulary items from a dictionary, which seems to suggest that the respondents, advanced learners of English, generally rely on other strategies of dealing with unfamiliar lexis while reading.

Table 1. The students' perceptions of the helpfulness of reading strategies – descriptive statistics.

Reading strategies	Helpfulness (1-5) (N=61)		
	Mean	SD	Median
1. I reread those parts of the text which I find difficult to understand.	4.36	0.91	5
2. I study all the parts of the text highlighted by the author.	4.22	1.02	5
3. I read a paragraph after the paragraph to identify the most important ideas.	4.01	0.92	4
4. I focus on specific chunks of information.	3.85	1.01	4
5. I pay attention to all the important details and supporting arguments.	3.75	0.96	4
6. I first read the whole text for general comprehension, then for detail.	3.72	1.21	4
7. I check some words/phrases I don't know in a dictionary.	3.68	1.13	4
8. I follow the main ideas of chapters/sections drawing on the text structure.	3.56	1.09	4
9. I pay attention to all the titles of chapters/sections to fully understand the text.	3.52	1.08	4
10. Having finished reading I look at the text to check its main ideas again.	3.52	1.19	4
11. I look for new information introduced by the author.	3.40	0.88	3
12. I study all the diagrams, tables and other graphic resources carefully.	2.49	1.10	2

Table 2. The number of the students reporting the reading strategies most often accompanied by note-taking.

Reading strategies most often accompanied by note-taking	Number of students' responses
1. I study all the parts of the text highlighted by the author.	39
2. I read a paragraph after the paragraph to identify the most important ideas.	28
3. I focus on specific chunks of information.	26
4. I pay attention to all the important details and supporting arguments.	24
5. I first read the whole text for general comprehension, then for detail.	22
6. I follow the main ideas of chapters/ sections drawing on the text structure.	22
7. I reread those parts of the text which I find difficult to understand.	21
8. Having finished reading I look at the text to check its main ideas again.	18
9. I check some words/phrases I don't know in a dictionary.	16
10. I look for new information introduced by the author.	14
11. I pay attention to all the titles of chapters/sections to fully understand the text.	12
12. I study all the diagrams, tables and other graphical resources carefully.	2

On the basis of the students' responses to the two questionnaire items discussed so far, it can be hypothesized that, when working with academic texts, the students would choose to use a number of reading strategies they regarded as helpful, but only some of those would be accompanied by note-taking. It is interesting to note that rereading, which was reported to be 'very helpful' by the majority of the respondents, would generate a relatively low amount of note-taking (21 responses – 34%).

Table 3. The students' perceptions of the helpfulness of note-taking strategies – descriptive statistics.

Note-taking strategies	Helpfulness (1-5) (N=61)		
	Mean	SD	Median
1. I note down some important definitions and new terms.	4.70	0.69	5
2. I avoid writing too long and complex sentences.	4.70	0.49	5
3. I exclude unimportant information from my notes.	4.55	0.71	5
4. I use special symbols, etc. to highlight important information.	4.37	0.98	5
5. I use shorter or easier words than those appearing in the original text.	4.36	0.91	5
6. I enumerate selected items by using numbers or bullet points.	4.21	1.08	5
7. I organize my notes visually on the page.	4.16	1.00	4
8. I use outlining.	3.93	0.98	4
9. I paraphrase the text to put down my own notes.	3.85	1.10	4
10. I put my notes in the margin of the text.	3.72	1.26	4
11. I summarize the main ideas of a text using my notes.	3.40	1.20	4
12. I write complete sentences closely related to those in the original.	2.42	1.30	2

The participants of the study were also asked to rate the degree of helpfulness of a set of strategies and techniques employed in coding the information in the form of notes (in connection with the third research question), with their ratings being provided in Table 3. As for the note-taking strategies the students reported on, the highest value on the helpfulness scale was assigned to *noting down some important definitions and new terms* ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ). The students thus confirmed the view that unfamiliar concepts and terminology constitute a serious problem in the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge. The students also found it helpful to give the notes a short and concise form by *avoiding writing too long and complex sentences* ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ), *excluding unimportant information from their notes* ( $M = 4.55$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), and *using shorter or easier words than those appearing in the original text* ( $M = 4.36$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ). It is surprising, however, that their ratings for summarizing, which is claimed to be a major strategy in the reading process (Kintsch, 2005), were relatively low. It was the last but one strategy on the list ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ) while outlining and paraphrasing, the two strategies found basic for deeper processing of the reading content (McNamara, 2007),

were rated only slightly higher. The respondents agreed that the least helpful strategy in note-taking is *writing complete sentences closely related to those in the original* (the lowest rating  $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ). It may be concluded that even though the participants' ratings seem to suggest they are aware of the need to encode relevant information from a reading passage in a condensed form, they lay more emphasis on reduction than on paraphrasing and restatement of the content.

The fourth research question, which aimed to obtain information on the participants' use of Polish in academic reading tasks, elicited responses of varying richness and content organization. The qualitative analysis of the data made it possible to investigate the students' practices and rationale for the use of L1 in reading assignments. All the information provided was classified into the aforementioned four broad categories so that it comprised: (a) the circumstances of switching into Polish; (b) the frequency; and (c) the cause of doing so, and (d) other comments/ideas relevant for the discussion. With such an exploratory open-ended question having no detailed pre-specified categories, the students' responses varied considerably, as had in fact been expected. Apart from the fact that the students shared many opinions and beliefs, they also listed a number of highly personalized views of academic literacy practices. The students' responses proved particularly interesting as far as their description of the circumstances for switching into Polish and explanations of their potential actions to be taken were concerned.

A careful analysis of the participants' responses concerning the circumstances in which they decided to switch to Polish in academic reading showed that their decisions to do so, rather infrequent, generally emerged from the difficulty of the content of the subject matter areas and the complexity of the academic genres they studied. Further six sub-categories, however, were distinguished in order to better account for the way the participants described the circumstances in which they encountered difficulties. They were: (a) the courses pursued – philology subjects *per se* (14 responses); (b) topics, complex ideas to understand (15 responses); (c) complicated specialist texts (20 responses); (d) difficult concepts, specialist terminology (11 responses); (e) complex, unfamiliar vocabulary (14 responses); and (f) difficult grammar and sentence structures (8 responses). The labels suggested by the students certainly cannot be recognized as discrete categories. Still, they picture the way the students defined the difficulties experienced in learning from disciplinary texts. A number of the students found it beneficial to use Polish in dealing with linguistics, literature and history; they mentioned reading Shakespeare, poetry, and texts in Old English, in literary criticism, cognitive linguistics and descriptive grammar. The conceptual difficulty of the material they studied was confirmed by the fact that they found it problematic to deal with some texts, even when translated into Polish. The respondents also

sought Polish equivalents in an attempt to better understand specialist terminology, scientific terms and sophisticated definitions. As for the reasons why switching to Polish turned out to be beneficial, the respondents came up with numerous explanations such as comprehending subject matter knowledge more easily, better understanding of texts (the whole idea, the goal of the text, unknown vocabulary, sentences), better understanding of some concepts (also in L1), reading faster and in a more automatic way (saving time), as well as easier organization of thoughts in the native language.

It is interesting to note that while the majority of the participants (39 out of 61 students) did not mention directly their frequency of switching to Polish (despite suggesting its restricted use), there was a group of 18 students who described it as happening infrequently (very rarely, rarely, seldom, not very/so/too often, sometimes, from time to time). Those students were generally of the opinion that reading even difficult course material in English is obligatory for a philology student, and switching to the native language should be highly restricted or even treated as "a last resort". Four students provided the following arguments against using Polish: (a) "I am more familiar with the specific terms in English rather than their equivalents in Polish"; (b) "I have never switched to Polish while working on English as I find it to be an unnecessary hindrance rather than something helpful (...) it is more beneficial to stick to the original language of the text. Sticking to the original saves you the trouble of looking for appropriate words to translate the ideas conveyed in the text, helps to memorize terms, definitions"; (c) "It has never happened to me, I don't think it would be of any help for me; I have to retain the data in English, so switching to Polish is useless, harmful, it would make it more difficult to learn"; and (d) "I have avoided switching to Polish ever since primary school. I dislike being thrown out of the flow of the text. Translation also interrupts understanding the task/text at its deeper level". One of the students observed: "Teachers always check our knowledge in English, even if the text is difficult – I try to comprehend it in an unchanged form. The only case when I do it is when I note down vocabulary from the texts with Polish equivalents in my vocabulary notebook before the test. Translating into Polish or taking notes in Polish would be nonsensical". These opinions are in accordance with the so-called *mother-tongue-avoidance-strategy*, adopted primarily by high-achievers who believe that the use of the native language hinders their L2 progress (Liao, 2006).

As stated above, a number of additional comments and ideas were also considered in order to analyze the participants' responses describing their personal views on the efficiency of dealing with large numbers of academic reading assignments. One of the students, for example, warned against translating difficult texts as the meaning of terms and words depends on context and their

translation has a negative influence on the development of reading skills in English. Another student recommended that one should work with the most important information in the text (paragraphs difficult to understand, sentences, unknown words) to make its comprehension easier, and then retain it by summarizing it and connecting it with a few crucial L1 words. An interesting procedure was described by a student who suggested rewriting a particularly difficult paragraph, a definition or a sentence in simple English first, then translating a problematic piece of text into Polish, and, finally, paraphrasing it in English to finally understand its meaning. Some respondents described their strategic use of L1 as closely dependent on specific subjects, classes or lectures, types of assignments, and even on the amount of time allotted to task performance.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Reading and learning from content area texts is a challenging task for L2/FL students. The present qualitative study aimed to increase our understanding of English philology students' views, perceptions, and practices associated with the reading and note-taking strategies they use in the academic context. The participants were asked to reflect upon their experience in reading academic texts and assess the helpfulness of several reading and note-taking strategies, and report on their practices in combining these two strategies as well as those in using the L1 in learning from FL disciplinary texts. Looking at their extensive reading practice, the students clearly demonstrated their willingness to optimize their strategic performance in order to make subject-specific reading more efficient. However, even though they seemed to be highly aware of the helpfulness of particular strategies, their responses to the four questionnaire items showed that they tended to be overly author- and text-dependent. They found it helpful to follow the structure of the text, read it paragraph after paragraph, and follow the writer's way of presenting the main line of thinking, but they seemed to underestimate such strategies as looking for pieces of knowledge that are new when compared against their background knowledge or reflecting on the text. As regards note-taking strategies, the respondents appreciated their role in creating efficient notes, such that are selective in nature, concise and simplified in linguistic form. Yet, they seemed to undervalue the highly recommended strategies of outlining, summarizing, and paraphrasing, which require a high amount of cognitive processing. In answering the open-ended question, the students described many individual strategies for working with difficult academic texts, both at linguistic and conceptual levels, which involved either infrequent switching to L1 or completely avoiding L1 use. On balance, the results of the study have yielded some important insights into the reading experience that the philology

students gained while pursuing courses in the target subject areas, which might be of interest to university teachers who design and conduct such courses. The results of the present study imply that even though the participants demonstrated considerable awareness of the strategies and practices they used in academic reading assignments, they could still be assisted in their strategy-oriented reading practice in a more principled way.

The present study, qualitative and exploratory in its nature, is limited in several respects. The analysis, which has concentrated on the participants' perceptions of the helpfulness of reading and note-taking strategies they had developed as philology students, did not consider such details concerning the students as the level of their reading competence, the amount of independent reading, or their interest and motivations in choosing the area of study. Such data could have helped determine the factors that might have influenced the participants' views and practices. Therefore, in the future, it would be worth conducting a study that would take into consideration such factors as students' FL attainment and content area learning outcomes. It would also be of interest to explore differences between the quality of academic performance and the beliefs held by good as opposed to poor readers. A deeper analysis of the issue could also be carried out by taking a longitudinal approach so as to examine the development of students' reading competence as well as their metacognition with a view to enhancing their command of the target language and content area knowledge.

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