

Teaching of Skimming at Tertiary Level: Theoretical and Pedagogical Issues

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Abstract: At the tertiary level, skimming has been viewed as either an essential reading skill or dismissed as a skill too basic to be taught. As an exploratory study, this paper looks at theoretical conceptions of skimming, examines studies dealing with skimming as a reading skill and strategy, usage of skimming in reading academic texts as well as skimming while reading on the Internet to assess its relevance and to offer suggestions for its teaching at the tertiary level.

Keywords: Teaching, Skimming, Theoretical, Pedagogical.

INTRODUCTION

Skimming has been deemed either a rapid reading skill leading to superficial understanding or a demanding cognitive or metacognitive skill. The relevance of skimming at the tertiary level will be explored through first looking at reading issues for tertiary students, defining the concept of skimming, investigating studies related to skimming at tertiary level and concluding with recommendations for the teaching of skimming.

READING AT TERTIARY LEVEL

A key, but often overlooked, skill that is essential to academic and professional success is reading ability. At the tertiary level, students are expected to read extensively and to read a vast amount of texts ranging from textbooks, journal articles, Web pages, novels, textbooks, manuals, magazines, newspapers, and mail. This is affirmed by Badariah et al. (2011) who have highlighted how 'Diploma students and undergraduates need to read a lot of academic texts, journals, websites and magazines regularly which require them to use high level of reading skills and therefore making reading an effortful activity' (p.34).

As Nel, Dreyer and Kopper (2004) see it, reading for university courses is demanding as students need to complete a large quantity of reading in a limited amount of time. Students need to 'use what they read for purposes such as absorbing, analysing and summarising information' (p. 95) through identifying specific issues, questions or misunderstandings to 'raise in seminars, with subject tutors, or critique in oral presentations or in written work' (p. 95). Blue (1993) highlights how students at tertiary level have to understand the overall content, distinguish main points from supporting detail, skim, scan, question, look for assumptions and intentions, analyse, synthesise and evaluate. However, research reveals that a significant number of first-year university students are not adequately equipped with reading strategy use and they struggle to meet the expectations of the academic community (Perkins, 1991; Dreyer, 1998).

Still, even though tertiary students need reading skills and strategies to read and learn effectively, why specifically skimming? When Brown (1994) talks about the development and use of different reading strategies for efficient comprehension, he highlights skimming and scanning as being the most valuable for learners. Cheng (1996) investigated academic reading using a questionnaire, two sets of reading tests and a textbook analysis to reveal that the essential reading skills required of foreign language learners and the

skills they had most problems with in their academic studies were 1) skimming; 2) reading a text or parts of a text more slowly and carefully to extract all the relevant information for a written assignment such as an essay, dissertation or examination; and 3) understanding unknown words. The participants in her study perceived skimming as an essential academic reading skill because they faced massive amount of information in their academic studies which required them to read selectively by applying the skill of skimming. It leads Cheng (1996) to conclude that 'it is crucial for both native speaking learners and non-native speaking learners in the academic setting to read widely about their subjects in order to carry out their research' (p. 280) and that skimming and efficient reading for main ideas are important study skills for learners in the EAP context. Ding (2008), in discussing the implications of fast reading for college students, sees fast reading as consisting of two skills: skimming and scanning – both playing different roles in reading. To Ding (2008), both skimming and scanning are important for doing well in college English tests, for studies in general and for Internet reading,

Given the importance of reading skills, especially skimming, for tertiary students, we need to ask: What is skimming? Is it a rapid reading skill or strategy that leads to superficial reading or is it cognitively demanding? What light does research throw upon the relevance of skimming at tertiary level and what general directions do they offer for teaching?

DEFINING SKIMMING

Effective and efficient readers learn to use many styles of reading for different purposes. Urquhart and Weir (1998) distinguish between five kinds of reading: scanning, skimming, search reading, careful reading and browsing, though they acknowledge that the list is not exhaustive. Weir et al. (2009) note that reading activities are either more local or more global in their orientation so while the act of 'scanning' (i.e., locating specific information within a text) has a more local focus; the act of 'skimming' (i.e., obtaining an overview of a text) is a more 'global' form of reading.

According to Grellet (1981) both skimming and scanning are 'specific reading techniques necessary for quick and efficient reading' (p. 19). When skimming, one goes through the reading material quickly in order to get the gist of it, to know how it is organized, or to get an idea of the tone or intention of the writer (p. 19). Skimming requires an overall view of the text and implies a definite reading competence. Richards et al. (1992) too see skimming as reading for gist, a type of rapid reading which is used when the reader wants to quickly identify the main ideas from a passage. According to Nutall (1996), skimming is the 'process of rapid glancing through a text either to search for a specific piece of information (a name, a date) or to get an initial impression of whether the text is suitable for a given purpose' (p. 49). In other words, skimming is a strategy that gives readers a sense of the theme, purpose, organisation of the text, perspective or point of view of the writer, issues, arguments and theoretical perspectives through using the author's organizational cues, introductions and conclusions, headings and sub-headings, italics and summaries. Skimming can also help the reader make decisions about where to place the greatest focus when there is limited time for reading (Freedman). According to Liao (2011), skimming is done at a speed three to four times faster than normal reading. People often skim when they have lots of material to read in a limited amount of time.

Theorists and researchers can differ in their view of whether skimming is a cognitive or metacognitive skill. Devine (1983, 1993) comment that skimming a text for key information involves the usage of cognitive strategy, whereas assessing the effectiveness of skimming for gathering textual information would be a metacognitive strategy. Other than the cognitive and metacognitive dimension, Davis and Bistodeau (1993) talk about how studies in both first and second language reading research generally provide a binary division of cognitive strategies as bottom-up and top-down. Readers engage in a variety of processes during reading (Aebersold and Field, 1997). Readers normally start by using the bottom-up strategies like processing information at the sentence level where they focus on identifying the meaning and grammatical category of a word, sentence syntax and text details. Barnett (1988) and Carrell (1989) added that while the students are processing the information provided by each sentence, they check to see how the information fits into their existing schema, using top-down strategies like background knowledge, prediction, getting the gist of a text, and skimming. To Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), reading is an interactive process between the reader and the text as well as the interaction of cognitive skills involving both an array of lower-level rapid, automatic identification skills and an array of higher-level comprehension or interpretation skills. Paran (1996) view

expeditious reading such as skimming or search reading where the focus is on the macrostructure of the text as top-down in approach. In skimming a text, we are likely to depend more on top-down processing, because we do not have to translate detailed information in the text (Ueta, 2005).

STUDIES ON SKIMMING AT TERTIARY LEVEL

Research on skimming at tertiary level can be categorized into these major groups: studies on issues related to skimming as a reading skill and strategy, usage of skimming in reading academic texts and skimming while reading on the Internet. Through the studies, it can be seen that researchers have defined skimming in various ways ranging from skimming as a rapid superficial reading skill which does not lead to deeper processing of text to skimming as a higher order cognitive or metacognitive skill requiring top down processing.

Reading skills and strategies

Researchers have looked at skimming as a reading skill or strategy for tertiary students in terms of difficulties students have with it as well as whether there is the usage of skimming in reading. Using two reading tests which covered seventeen kinds of reading skills, Floris and Divina (2009) investigated the kinds of reading skills that ten EFL (English as a Foreign Language) university students studying at an English Department of a private university in Surabaya, Indonesia had difficulties with. The investigators defined skimming as glancing rapidly through a text to determine its gist or main idea (Nuttall, 1996). To test the subjects' abilities in skimming skill, the respondents were asked to write the main idea of a particular line or a certain paragraph of a particular reading text. They found that 42.5% of the respondents' total answers were incorrect. Out of the 17 test items, skimming was the fifth most difficult skill after recognizing text organization, paraphrasing, inference from context and summarizing.

When Ebrahimi (2012) investigated L1 and L2 reading strategies of ten Iranian university students of different level of English proficiency by asking them to respond to a reading strategy questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, he found that advanced proficiency students used more strategies reading in L2 compared to the less proficient students. He also found skimming for general ideas to be one of the reading strategies commonly used in reading the L1 and L2 texts besides strategies such as slowing down the speed of reading of difficult parts of the text, perseverance in continuing to read difficult parts of the text, self-encouragement to continue reading through difficult parts of the text, paying close attention to the text read, cooperating with peers to understand the text, and requesting clarification, correction, and feedback from the teacher.

In searching for a reading pedagogical model that provides a framework for educators in foundation or mainstream tertiary programmes, Savery (2012) examined the efficacy of targeted reading strategies instruction for 14 tertiary students for critical reading of printed and digital texts using blended e-learning. At around week five of the intervention programme, the lecturers implementing the programme made the decision to add skimming and scanning to locate explicit information into the instructional programme to better meet the specific needs of these learners. The slight reading gains within the small student sample suggested that targeted reading comprehension strategies instruction may be a valid approach for raising adult learner reading levels in tertiary contexts. There was evidence of improvements across the five targeted reading comprehension strategies which comprised skimming and scanning, applying background knowledge, using text structure, summarisation, generating questions and mental imaging. The move to include skimming in the study underscored the importance of skimming as a reading strategy for tertiary students.

Reading academic books

There are researchers investigating skimming in textbook reading who choose to view skimming as superficial reading. For instance, Phillips and Phillips (2007), in timing text use of undergraduates studying accounting, examined different reading strategies in terms of sinking in versus skimming i.e. deep versus superficial processing of text. They found a correlation between intensity of reading and the quality of the students with higher performing students doing a deeper examination of the text-sinking in, whereas poorer

students refused to read or resorted to memorization. Phillips and Phillips (2007) then talk about how instructors can suggest the most effective ways for undergraduates to read the text: “Early on, instructors can explicitly mention the sinking in versus skimming reading strategies and remind students that they may not have time to return to the text if they adopt a skimming approach” (p.38).

Yonker and Cummins-Sebree (2009) who surveyed 298 introductory psychology students regarding textbook usage similarly view skimming as a reading skill that does not lead to deeper processing of text. The students in their study were compared on gender, student type (traditional vs. non-traditional), and textbook reading habits. They found that students who reported reading none to 25% of assigned text tended to use skimming as their reading method and that they read significantly less than students who reported a multifaceted reading approach. These students also considered the reading level of the textbook to be more challenging which led Yonker and Cummins-Sebree (2009) to raise this question: ‘Do the students read less because the text is too difficult or is the text too difficult because the students tend to skim less than 25% of the assigned reading?’ (p. 169)

However, another group of researchers see skimming as a cognitively challenging reading strategy used by more proficient tertiary students to enable them to learn from textbooks.

Nel, Dreyer and Kopper (2004) analysed the reading assessment profiles of a group of first-year students at Potchefstroom University in terms of whether they were efficient or inefficient learners. They used a Reading Strategies Questionnaire, based on the work of Oxford (1990), Pressley and Afflerbach (1995), and Pressley et al. (1995), to determine students' use of reading strategies. Their findings indicated that the undergraduates experienced difficulties across all aspects of the reading process (i.e. vocabulary, fluency, reading comprehension, and reading strategy use). An analysis of the data recorded during the interviews indicated that the efficient student read far more frequently (daily) than the inefficient student (only when told to do so by the lecturer). The efficient student also read and/or skimmed/scanned a greater variety of texts (e.g., textbooks, articles, documents, websites, etc.). The inefficient student seemed to "stall" at the during reading stage, while the efficient student continued to process after reading by re-skimming to pinpoint important ideas and reflecting on the meaning of the passage or text. This study reveals how reading to learn can be enhanced by the use of skimming and re-skimming at the tertiary level.

Badariah et al. (2011) investigated 245 undergraduates' level of reading motivation and their reading strategies use when they read academic texts to draw the conclusion that the undergraduates' motivation to read, which was of moderate level, had an influence on the use of the reading strategy. They used a questionnaire consisting of 45 items on motivation and a reading strategy inventory developed by Cor and Conny (2003) consisting 10 items of the cognitive strategies and metacognitive reading strategies. They discovered the top-down reading strategies used by the subjects to be skimming/scanning, association with prior knowledge, reference to the antecedent information, and prediction. In fact skimming and scanning were the most commonly used top down reading strategies among the students.

Reading on the Internet

The rise of the Web and the ready availability of source documents mean that tertiary students are increasingly required to read course outlines, assigned readings, or articles found on the Internet or to do research using the Internet. Researchers have become more interested in how readers cope when there is too much text to read in the time available. According to Duggan and Payne (2009), excessive information on the Web leads more and more people to skim-read rather than read web pages in detail. The literature on web browsing behaviour (e.g. Liu, 2005; Morkes and Nielsen, 1997) indicates that readers often skim; that is, they employ some form of rapid, selective reading strategy such as omitting words, paragraphs or pages. There is the need to teach skimming and scanning for more efficient Internet reading because these skills enable readers to ignore less valuable parts of the text and to focus attention on the more useful portions.

In both paper and screen reading, the purpose of skimming is to perceive text organization and search out the main ideas (Kol and Scholnik, 2000, p. 70). However, while skimming from paper involves quickly

looking over the whole text, selecting and discarding information, and quickly reading and highlighting selected parts (Feuerstein and Scholnik, 1995), to Kol and Scholnik (2000), screen skimming involves ‘reading the hyperlinked outline provided, clicking the outline to access specific sections of the text, quickly reading and highlighting those sections, and scrolling to read the highlighted sections to get the main ideas’ (p. 70). According to Smith (1999), readers often skim the whole web page first without opening any of the links to get a sense of the theme and argument of the text. They then either choose to leave that web page or go back to the beginning to read more slowly the entire page and click links to find more information.

While investigating classroom teachers’ application of research on Internet comprehension, media literacy, and classroom based best practices to teach new literacies - especially in comprehension - Alderton (2010) emphasizes that teachers must purposely bring skimming and scanning to the forefront as a way to support comprehension of Internet texts. Alderton (2010) defines skimming as

‘a way to quickly get the gist or the overall idea about a text. While skimming, the rate of reading is rapid, and minor details and words are overlooked. In the case of Internet text, skimming can reveal whether the Web site is appropriate for more in-depth exploration’ (p. 31).

Özad and Kutoglu (2010), in exploring the attitudes of 100 undergraduates towards the use of the Internet as a source/tool for obtaining information for their course work through a questionnaire, found that most students preferred to get information from the Internet rather than books. However, the undergraduates expressed uncertainty about the trustworthiness of the information accessed through the Internet. To Özad and Kutoglu (2010), this uncertainty may suggest that undergraduates need to be taught the necessary skills like skimming and scanning that can be used for eliminating unnecessary information and that tertiary students should be guided on how to search for information, discard junk information and read only what is reliable.

In assessing the reading skills and strategies of 38 tertiary students through a questionnaire, think alouds and interviews, Ng (2011) found that skimming and scanning were among the predominant strategies for reading texts on the Internet. Ketabi, Ghavamnia and Rezazadeh (2012) investigated the cognitive strategies used by Persian EFL graduate students while reading a hypermedia text. Results from data collected through think-aloud protocols indicated that the proficient group used mainly skimming the text quickly to get information, and using prior knowledge. In contrast, the less-proficient group mostly used paraphrasing, translation into L1, and referring to the dictionary as major cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

The studies by Özad and Kutoglu (2010), Ng (2011) and Ketabi, Ghavamnia and Rezazadeh (2012) have highlighted how skimming is utilised by tertiary students to read texts on the Internet.

TEACHING OF SKIMMING TO TERTIARY STUDENTS

The research examined have highlighted the importance of skimming as a skill or strategy to be taught to tertiary students to enable them to cope with the demands of academic reading as well as to read through vast amounts of texts on the Internet efficiently. What can tertiary educators do in response to meet this need?

In terms of teaching skimming as a reading skill or strategy, one ‘oldie but goodie’ reference is Grellet (1981) who has designed skimming exercises to show students how they can learn much by simply looking at the prominent parts of an article, by catching a few words only, or by reading a few paragraphs here and there in a story. The exercises are not meant to encourage students to read all texts in such a superficial way but to make students better readers who can decide quickly what they want or need to read.

For reading of academic texts, when introducing new lessons in the textbook, according to Ueta (2005), it is more desirable to start with skimming, rather than interpret the text word by word or sentence by sentence. In terms of enhancing reading skills, universities can also offer advice on how to skim textbooks as in the following example.

Sometimes you need to get the general idea or gist of a text. The way to do this is not by reading every word. Few text books were written with your specific course in mind. So you need to adapt the material to your particular purposes, given the course and the task at hand. Skimming is the sort of reading which would be appropriate if your tutor asked you to read several books and articles for the next tutorial. She would not expect you to be able to recite it word for word, but she will want you to be able to discuss the issues raised (Monash University library).

Wallace (2004) also gives useful tips for skimming to learn from textbooks or books:

Ask the right kind of questions by skimming through the text and think of it as a tool for learning that is supposed to help you to master your subject by evaluating the usefulness of the book and finding out where information is through looking at reviewers' comments, foreword or preface, contents page, printing history and the index' (p. 11), 'by using the first chapter where the author sometimes outlines what topics he is going to deal with in the book, why he is interested in those topics and how he is going to deal with them... and the last chapter ... for survey purposes, because the writer may summarise his main arguments and list his conclusions' (p. 20).

As skimming refers to the way readers quickly run their eyes across a whole text for its gist, one effective procedure to enable students to read a text to learn is the 'SQ3R technique' which starts with skimming the text for an overview of main ideas before embarking on more focused reading. Rather than automatically rereading, students are to quiz themselves on the material just read, reviewing those sections that are still unclear or confusing to them, organizing, and relating the concepts and facts, mastering technical terms, formulas and so forth and thinking of applications of the concepts (Martell, 2001).

As for skimming texts on the Internet, according to Alderton (2010) 'the goal of skimming is to quickly see whether the Web site contains the pertinent information before either digging deeper or moving to another site' (p. 32). Alderton then suggests the following tips for skimming on the Internet: Keep in mind the purpose for reading. Make note of key words or phrases that are relevant to their purpose. Focus on certain important sections of the text. Generally, skim the first paragraph, the first sentences of subsequent paragraphs, and the final paragraph. Nezami (2012) also advocates these strategies for skimming:

'Read the first and last paragraphs using headings, summarizers and other organizers as one moves down the page or screen. Read the title, subtitles, subheading, and illustrations and consider reading the first sentence of each paragraph' (p.308).

Other than those elements suggested by Alderton (2010) and Nezami (2012), readers can also skim the bullet points; the contents list; the images or graphics and links of a web page.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented an overview of theoretical issues and research in the area of skimming as a reading skill or strategy for reading academic and Internet texts to show how tertiary students need to be taught skimming to cope with the reading demands and to enhance their learning through effectively skimming vast amounts of texts. Suggestions have also been offered for the teaching of skimming for tertiary educators.

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