

# A Needs Analysis for a Discipline-Specific Reading Intervention

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a needs analysis that sought to explore students' reading challenges as an initial step in designing an appropriate reading intervention programme for first-year Sociology students. The aim of the paper is to suggest conditions for the production of an effective reading intervention programme by determining the needs of the students in the first-year Sociology class. A survey using an open-ended questionnaire was used to explore students' reading challenges. The responses were analysed using content analysis. The analysis showed a variety of learner needs and revealed that most of the students have difficulty in reading their first-year Sociology texts. Comprehension was the main challenge, but other specific areas such as vocabulary, length of texts, language, and affective issues such as motivation and interest were also mentioned. The findings show that this cohort of first-year Sociology students had reading challenges that involve cognitive, language and affective issues. Based on the results of the needs analysis an intervention programme that addresses cognitive, language and affective issues is recommended for this cohort of students.

**Keywords:** affective factors, reading comprehension, reading challenges, needs analysis

## 1. Introduction

The importance of reading in academic literacy cannot be over emphasised. The construct of academic literacy, as outlined by Cliff, Ramboa and Pearce (2007) and Weideman (2007), is mainly reading-oriented. In other words the ability to read successfully underlies academic literacy. In order to be academically literate, students should be able to make meaning from texts, extrapolate from texts, apply high level inferencing and distinguish between essential and nonessential information, among others. In addition, students should be able to comprehend texts within certain domains (Klos, 2012; Ngeape, 2012; Scholitz, 2012). Thus students' ability to cope with course work and academic requirements within specific disciplines are highly dependent on their ability to read academic texts.

Effective reading is one of the determining factors of academic literacy at tertiary level, as this has a direct effect on students' academic writing and ultimately academic performance. There are a number of factors that militate against students' ability to read effectively. Pretorius (2000) attributes reading challenges at tertiary level to the lack of emphasis on reading at school level. Poor teaching methods at school level have also been identified as a factor that hinders reading development (Currin & Pretorius, 2010; van Staden & Howie, 2010). These factors among others contribute to learners' reading challenges at school level and eventually translate into serious reading challenges at tertiary level.

Yeld's (2009) report on the National Benchmark Test Project (NBTP) shows that a number of students have low literacy levels. The test determines students' level of preparedness for academic tasks at tertiary level. The NBTP classifies students into the three main levels namely the proficient or academically prepared level, the intermediate or academically disadvantaged level, and basic or academically high risk levels. Yeld (2009) indicates that most of the students are placed at basic or intermediate levels. Evidently, many entry cohorts in South African institutions face academic challenges, specifically in academic reading.

For Cliff et al. (2007), the central point of academic literacy is the readiness to cope with reading and writing given that students need to be active, critical readers. They specify that students' capability to select main ideas from supporting ones and to track, identify, evaluate and extrapolate academic arguments in texts, as well as work with numerals and visual forms reasonably, constitutes academic literacy. As such, students have to read

deeply for meaning, be able to make arguments and pay attention to the structure of the texts they read in order to readily formulate written responses to their academic tasks in a logical, coherent, cohesive and precise manner (Cliff et al., 2007). Pretorius (2007) situates academic literacy in terms of a reader's ability to locate details and utilise different textual features to construct deep meaning. She adds that students' ability to make meaning from texts includes their understanding of words and discourse signals within that context. Reading in essence is a very crucial part of academic literacy. Nevertheless, research continually shows that the reading ability of South African tertiary students is a cause for concern (Cliff, 2014; Pretorius, 2007).

In addition, the relationship between language and the ability to read and think critically in a specific discipline are directly linked to students' academic success at tertiary level. This implies that academic literacy entails a meaning making process based on written texts for a particular programme directed at a specific group. For many South African students, the use of English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) creates a barrier to effective comprehension. English for instance, is the language in which students have to write, read and learn. However, English language is usually their second, third or even fourth language. To complicate the issue even further, these students are expected to read and write discourses that are specific to a particular discipline. In spite of the many intervention programmes to support students, their reading comprehension abilities at tertiary level are fairly low (Ngwenya, 2010; Pretorius, 2000).

At tertiary level, students are not only required to read academically but should also be able to read and write in related subject fields. Sociology seems to be one of the subjects that pose reading challenges to students. The first-year Sociology module requires students to read texts from various sources and different genres. They are also required to paraphrase, summarise and synthesise information from the readings at a higher academic level. In addition, they are expected to read and comprehend dense discipline-related texts. With regard to disciplines such as Sociology, texts are denser due to the various theories and concepts, as well as the writing style of the authors. As a result, a number of Sociology students seem to have challenges in reading the texts and understanding the concepts. These challenges are reflected in their writing of assignments and examinations, which a number of students perform poorly. Very little has been written on reading of Sociology texts. In order to assist and support these students, a reading intervention was proposed to improve the students' understanding of Sociology texts. However, for the intervention to be effective, a study was conducted as a needs analysis to determine the students' specific needs in the reading of Sociology texts. The importance of a needs analysis in enabling course designers to develop discipline-specific language, reading and writing courses to meet the learners' specific needs is emphasised by researchers such as Chen (2006), Jiajing (2007) Kaewpet (2011) and Robinson (1991). According to Jiajing (2007) analysing the specific needs of a particular learner group serves as the prelude to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course design, because it determines the 'what' and 'how' of an ESP course. Chen (2006) also reached the conclusion that ESP course designers should explore and identify the learners' potential needs first. The aim of the study was to determine if students have challenges reading Sociology texts, what specific challenges they have, and whether the challenges are multidimensional (cognitive, affective, etc.). This paper discusses the opinions reported by students and presents a framework for addressing students' reading challenges. First, the importance of tertiary level reading in general, and the reading of Sociology texts are discussed. Thereafter, reading challenges that students may encounter are explained, together with a theoretical basis for a needs analysis. Finally, the qualitative study on the needs analysis is presented.

## **2. Reading at Tertiary Level**

Students' reading at tertiary level stands out as one of the most important academic tasks. Through reading, students are exposed to various academic materials and also to the academic conventions required at tertiary level. Students are also required to read to improve important skills such as extracting main ideas and supporting details from texts; paraphrasing; making meaning from texts; and summarizing (Alderson, 2000; Boakye, 2012, Cliff et al., 2007). A number of students find these activities very challenging. In recognition of these challenges in academic literacy, Cliff et al. (2007) establish that there has been increasing interest to improve academic literacy levels for entry cohorts. Obviously, the need for inclusion of techniques that will activate students' willingness to read in order to develop an appreciation for the various strategies that good readers use in a meaningful way becomes evident. According to Bharuthram (2012), Cliff et al. (2007) and Pretorius (2000), through independent reading students are able to comprehend texts and other reading materials. The understanding of their reading materials would enable them to analyse, critique, paraphrase, summarise and synthesise information appropriately. Boakye (2012) points out that tertiary reading primarily involves reading to learn, as well as critical reading or deep reading as referred to by Roberts and Roberts (2008). This type of reading entails a high level of comprehension that requires high level inferencing and analysis of texts (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Pretorius, 2000, 2007). Consequently, educators expect students to read at the required level by

making the necessary inferences and extrapolating from texts. They are also required to understand the relevant concepts, perceive relationships between different parts of a text, question what they read, and synthesise information, with little or no background knowledge (Alderson, 2000; Boakye, 2012; Boughey, 2009; Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Furthermore students at tertiary level need to be able to read large quantities of printed materials, consisting of large volumes of academic texts, within limited timeframes. They are also expected to read and understand high-density and abstract texts. Reading materials often comprise of discipline-specific vocabulary that students need to understand. Yet, in South African institutions of higher learning, reading comprehension is a challenge, as a number of students are not able to cope with the required amount and level of reading materials (Boakye, 2012; Boughey, 2009; Cliff et al., 2007). The situation is compounded with discipline-specific texts (e.g. Sociology texts) that are extremely dense and heavily concept-laden.

### **3. Sociology Texts and the Reading of Sociology Texts**

The nature of Sociology texts requires students to engage deeply with texts in order to comprehend. Sociology is a science that recognises truths of social structure, social function and social development. According to McKenzie (1999) although the stress on the function and the structure of Sociology may be important, its abstraction however, overlooks the role of human agency by concentrating on social realities as portrayed by the media and written texts. For this reason, Sociology can be seen as a subject that enables the consideration of “human motives and interactions, and attempts to alert social agents to the complex structures of institutions, and their roles in social discourses” (McKenzie, 1999).

Given the complex nature of the discipline, students are to be supported in their reading of Sociology texts. Yet Sociology lecturers often tend to assume comprehension skills. Roberts and Roberts (2008) stipulate that less than half of Sociology students actually read because many of these students possess marginal reading comprehension skills. They believe that the nature of Sociology texts makes reading of these texts to be viewed as a complex process by students (Roberts & Roberts, 2008). It is this particular process to which sociologists themselves have paid little attention, in spite of its paramount importance to students’ successful understanding. But any endeavour to read with understanding is a skill that is built over the years, especially during school years. Yet, a number of students do not receive adequate and effective reading instruction at school. Many students simply discover the appropriate use of reading strategies by trial and error – a process chiefly influenced by the unintentional metacognitive processes which influence people’s memory (Roberts & Roberts, 2008). However, there are still students who do not intuitively discover and develop successful reading strategies. A number of these students are non-traditional students who have neither read in their home language nor read extensively in the English language.

In a study specifically directed at Sociology courses in an undergraduate Sociology programme in America, Roberts and Roberts (2008) reveal that 37.7% of students spend less than five hours a week studying for all class courses. The authors also refer to another report, which states that few students (including those who eventually earned an A or B) admitted to reading their assigned materials (Roberts & Roberts, 2008). In their own survey studies, the authors discovered that just over half of the students said they usually read their texts. In view of such revelations, Roberts and Roberts (2008) dismiss assessments on reading strategies that encourage surface learning where students are expected to read assignments and respond to quizzes. Instead, they examine issues of reading comprehension and suggest a theory of deep learning where they offer an approach that ensures that students read their course materials while simultaneously being introduced to strategies for deeper comprehension.

### **4. Addressing Academic Reading Challenge**

Jacobs (2013) reflects on the issue of academic literacy interventions in South African higher education and suggests that knowledge should be placed at the centre of academic literacy and subsequently, academic reading. She points out that the majority of South African literacy practitioners have restricted academic literacy to ‘skills’ Discourse. Pretorius and Bohlmann (2003), and Pretorius (2000, 2004) conducted studies in academic reading using students studying Mathematics and Psychology, respectively. Pretorius (2000) found that for students in the distinction groups reading was an effective learning tool. They effortlessly used text –based clues to understand patterns of meaning and relationships in the texts they read. This strategy enabled them to construct new knowledge. The reverse pattern for weaker students, however led to poor reasoning. They were unable to utilise linguistic and semantic clues in the texts as a basis for making inferences. In addition, Pretorius (2004) acknowledges the importance of linguistic knowledge in reading, but adds that reading requires more than that, as specific cognitive-linguistic skills are also needed for development. For many South African students, English language is often their second, third or even fourth language. However, in most institutions,

English is the main language of teaching and learning (LoLT). To complicate the issue further, at tertiary level students are expected to read and write discourses that are specific to a particular discipline, as well as understand and use discipline-specific words and concepts.

Nation (2006) points out that knowledge of the vocabulary in a text is one of the factors that affect reading and that if students struggle with reading because of many unknown words a lot of the pleasure will be taken out of the reading. He further explains that if a reader knows 90% of the running words, then there will be 10 unknown words in every 100. If each line in the text contains 10 words then there will be one unknown word in every line. Reading, according to Nation (2006), will certainly be a struggle in this instance. Nation and Anthony (2013) state that a reader needs to know more than 95% of the words in a text in order to easily comprehend the text. Nation (2006) recommends extensive reading and various techniques of explicit vocabulary instruction to increase the vocabulary size of second language learners.

Besides the need to address the linguistic and cognitive reading skills of students, the affective dimension also needs to be developed. In addressing reading challenges, a number of researchers have focussed primarily on strategy instruction without giving attention to the affective dimension. According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) instruction aimed at improving students' academic reading should comprise of cognitive and affective strategies, as both are important. Researchers, such as Alderson (2000), Grabe and Stoller (2011), and Verhoeven and Snow (2001), all emphasise the importance of affect in reading proficiency. Guthrie and his colleagues in several studies have acknowledged the role of motivation in reading development, and introduced the CORI programme to improve students' cognitive and affective reading levels (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004; Guthrie, McRae, & Klauda, 2007; Guthrie, McRae, Coddington, Klauda, Wigfield, & Barbosa, 2009). The various studies conducted have all pointed to the success of improving students' academic reading through cognitive and affective strategies. Studies that investigate affective aspects of reading are limited, especially in Africa and in particular at tertiary level. Yet, students' reading challenges are usually multidimensional comprising both affective and cognitive issues.

### 5. Intervention Programmes and Needs Analysis

Students are not only required to read academically, but also within specific disciplines. According to Chen (2006), the design of language and reading courses for specific purposes is usually based on the specific needs of learners of a particular discipline. In such courses a needs analysis is conducted to ascertain the learners' target and learning needs). As cited in Gatehouse (2001), Strevens (1988) defines the characteristics of special purposes language courses to include the following

- designed to meet specified needs of the learner;
- related in content to particular disciplines, occupations and activities;
- centered on the language appropriate to those activities in syntax, lexis, discourse, semantics, etc., and analysis of this discourse;

Gatehouse (2001) lists a set of characteristics provided by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998: 4-5) to include the following:

- may be related to or designed for specific disciplines;
- may be used, in specific teaching situations; and
- are likely to be designed for adult learners, either at a tertiary level institution or in a professional work situation.

Although the later definition is less absolute and more flexible both indicate that language courses for special purposes are usually designed for tertiary students and likely to be related to specific disciplines. In defining *learner needs*, Robinson (1991) points out that these needs can be interpreted as learners' shortcomings, or what they lack in knowledge and ability in the language. She also notes that *needs* can refer to students' study requirements (what they have to be able to do at the end of their course) (Ibid). In this article, it is what first-year Sociology students lack in their ability to read and comprehend Sociology texts, as well as the reading levels expected of them. Reading researchers (e.g. Grabe & Stoller, 2011) often emphasise students' lack or inappropriate use of comprehension strategies. However, as Boakye (2012) points out most intervention programmes do not begin with a needs analysis in order to identify and determine students' specific reading challenges before an intervention. As a result, most interventions are mainly cognitive-oriented and focus only on explicit strategies. Yet reading for comprehension is propelled by other affective factors such as motivation, interest, attitude and self-efficacy. The aim of this paper is to highlight specific academic reading challenges that

first year students' encounter in reading Sociology texts, in order to design an appropriate framework for intervention.

There have been few studies in academic reading at tertiary level (e.g. Boakye, 2012; Cliff, 2014; Pretorius, 2000). In particular, not much has been documented on the reading of Sociology texts. In Sociology publications, there is almost nothing published on theoretical and empirical analysis of reading in sociology courses. Furthermore, most intervention programmes are conducted without a needs analysis. Most studies simply state institutional demands as areas of need and overlook the students' expectations and their specific needs. Msouleh and Jooneghani (2012) highlight the immeasurable role that a needs analysis plays in the identification of hidden assumptions and in providing insights for pedagogical implications. While acknowledging the importance of cognitive processing in reading, this paper argues that students' reading challenges are also affective-oriented and that a needs analysis before an intervention allows specific areas to be targeted for a more effective reading intervention. The paper reports on an investigation of first-year Sociology students' reading needs, and provides suggestions for addressing the reading needs of this cohort of students.

## **6. The study**

The aim of the study was to determine the specific reading challenges that first-year students face in reading Sociology texts.

Questions that were posed for the study were:

1. What are the opinions of first-year Sociology students regarding their challenges in reading Sociology texts?
2. Do students' opinions of reading challenges indicate both cognitive and affective dimensions of reading?
3. What are the specific areas of students' reading challenges?

## **7. Methodology**

The design is qualitative with some quantitative descriptive data in support of the qualitative data. An open-ended questionnaire was used to elicit students' opinions on the reading of Sociology texts. The complete questionnaire consisted of both closed and open ended questions. However, only the open-ended section is reported on here. Students had to write down their opinions on the reading of Sociology texts in answer to the question: Briefly explain any reading challenges you may be experiencing in the reading of Sociology texts.

### *7.1 Participants*

First-year Sociology students of the 2014 cohort at this University were used for the study. Most of the students take Sociology as an ancillary subject, and therefore the student cohort comprised of students from various faculties. A total of 325 students answered the questionnaire. However, only 265 students responded to the open-ended questions.

### *7.2 Data Collection and Procedure*

Students who were willing to participate signed an informed consent form and answered the questionnaire at the end of a tutorial session during the second semester of 2014. As the completion of the questionnaire was voluntary, some students did not participate.

### *7.3 Data Analysis*

The data was analysed qualitatively, using content analysis following the systematic procedure outlined in Taylor–Powel (2003). First the responses were grouped into negative and positive responses. Next, they were organised into emergent themes (cognitive, affective quantity of reading materials, etc.). These were then sub divided into various sub-themes. A percentage was obtained per sub-theme by dividing the number of times the sub-theme was mentioned by the total number of students (265) and multiplied by a hundred.

## **8. Findings**

The analysis showed that most of the students encounter challenges in reading their first-year Sociology texts. Students also revealed specific challenges regarding cognitive and affective issues, quantity of work, language issues, and difficulty of texts.

### *8.1. Descriptive Analysis*

First, the comments of the students were listed and coded into negative (reading challenges) and positive (no reading challenges) responses. Majority (74%) of the 265 students said they were experiencing reading challenges, whereas 36 (14%) indicated that they were not experiencing challenges. The remaining 34 (12%) did

not respond to that question. The figures indicate that most of the students were struggling with the reading of their Sociology texts.

Next, the response patterns were identified and ideas were organised into coherent themes. Three main themes were identified: affective, cognitive and the quantity and length of assigned reading. Although a few of the responses could not be categorised into any of the three themes, a substantial number of students (71%) indicated reading problems that were cognitive-oriented, such as vocabulary, comprehension, and conceptualisation. Although the reading challenges could be related to affective issues (e.g. a number of the students explained that the difficulty could be due to the absence of support at tertiary level unlike at school level), a number of students (15%) explicitly stated affective reading challenges. Of note was the 37% of the 265 students who mentioned the quantity and length of the reading materials. The issue of language was mentioned 12 times constituting a 5% indication.

Besides the three main themes, the responses were further grouped into specific recurrent themes such as affective (motivation, interest, autonomy, etc), vocabulary, comprehension, language, quantity of reading, reading materials, and suggested solutions. The percentage for each sub-theme is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Sub-themes showing students' reading challenges

Themes	Number of students	Percentage
<b>Cognitive</b>		
Comprehension	115	61%
Vocabulary and concepts	55	29%
Reading materials (type of genre, journal articles, variety of reading material, content, discipline-relatedness, abstract nature and writing style of texts)	19	10%
<b>Language</b>	12	5%
<b>Affective</b> (motivation, interest, etc.)	40	15%
<b>Quantity and length of reading</b>	97	37%

Although affective issues could be combined under one theme, the cognitive issues were more varied and were therefore presented individually. Most of the challenges were related to comprehension. Quantity and length of texts were also cited several times. In addition, vocabulary, reading materials and affective issues were also pointed out. The qualitative aspect of the study citing excerpts from students' responses is given in the next section.

## 8.2 Findings: Thematic Analysis

The various themes emerging from the students' responses are listed with excerpts and discussed. The excerpts provide insight into the students' perception of their specific challenges. A number of students also provided suggestions on how they have attempted to manage the challenges. Examples of these suggestions are presented under the category of 'Possible solutions' in 8.2.1 below.

### 8.2.1 Cognitive-related Reading Challenges

This category is sub-divided into 1. Comprehension and critical reading 2. Concepts, vocabulary, and diction 3. Reading materials (journal articles, diversity of reading material, content, discipline-relatedness, abstract nature and writing style of texts) 4. Language. Each questionnaire was numbered. There were 325 answered questionnaires. However, as indicated earlier, only 265 completed the open-ended section. The excerpts are provided according to the numbering of the questionnaires.

- Challenges in comprehension and critical reading

In relation to comprehension 61% stated that they were having challenges. Some of the responses given were:

19: *I struggle with the extraction of the main ideas in order to understand the text*

24: *... a lot of work to read and lack of understanding*

38: *Confusing ...*

57: *Difficult to interpret, process and understand*

75: *Overwhelming reading challenges*

108: [...] *I find it difficult to extract the relevant information that is important*

202: *In some readings it is difficult to find the main argument*

303: *Readings sometimes based on background information and extra knowledge*

120: *reading requires critical thinking and extracting, organising ideas under main themes, which is difficult*

138: *I do not have an understanding of Sociology at all.*

It is evident that students have challenges in reading and understanding Sociology texts. A number of students (e.g. student 38) are simply confused. Others find the reading overwhelming and the texts complex. A number of the students specifically pointed to challenges in identifying the main ideas. Many of them have difficulty with understanding.

- Reading materials: journal articles, variety of reading material, content, discipline-relatedness, abstract nature and writing style of texts

A number of students (10%) stated that the reading materials posed reading challenges for them. Some of the responses given were:

2: *The interpretation of the information in articles and journals is difficult*

26: *No attention given to reading materials by lecturers*

81: *difficult subject content*

107: *Reading materials are very complex and challenging to understand*

115: *The subject specific material is more technical and difficult*

150: *Texts are old; the language structure is different, takes longer to read*

167: *difficult to understand the prescribed texts*

244: *The variety of readings from different authors intensifies the work due to different views and makes it difficult to grasp*

288: *most of the readings have 99% irrelevance to the topic and lack the necessary content for understanding*

292: *The content is difficult to understand as it is not in a simple format.*

In addition to students' general comprehension challenges at tertiary level, the reading materials in Sociology also seem to compound the problem. Students pointed out difficulties in understanding the reading materials. They mentioned variety of texts that they had to read, extra information in the texts that students perceive as irrelevant, and most importantly the structure and style of academic journal articles. The students found the reading of journal articles very challenging as stated by students 2, 107 and 132. In particular, they found the articles to be complex and confusing. A number of students believe that the texts which they are expected to read and understand are unnecessarily dense and confusing.

- Concepts, vocabulary, diction

Challenges pertaining to vocabulary, and concepts were mentioned 55 times constituting 29%. Examples of these challenges as provided by students are given below.

7: *Some articles are difficult to understand due to vocabulary*

23: *Readings are challenging and contain complex vocabulary*

32: *Difficult vocabulary adding to incomprehensible nature of texts*

55: *Use of strange difficult words, making it hard to understand the work*

58: *Theorists use jargons that are unfamiliar, making it difficult to understand concepts*

64: *Too many new concepts. Looking up a lot more words in dictionary*

195: *Difficult to understand the work because the texts use all these unfamiliar words*

209: *Many sociological terms difficult to understand*

323: *The challenge is understanding the vocabulary used.*

A substantial number of students attributed their inability to readily understand the texts to the many unfamiliar words and concepts. This is understandable as according to Nation and Anthony (2013), a reader needs to comprehend approximately 95% of words in a text in order to understand. Students 311 and 323 expressed their frustrations thus, “vocabulary in Sociology is much difficult to read and understand”; “The challenge is understanding the vocabulary used”.

- Language

For second language learners, language is an important issue in text comprehension. A number of students commented on the language aspect. Perhaps this could have been compounded by the abstract nature of Sociology texts. Students who attributed their comprehension difficulties to language issues regret that the course is not offered in their home language.

*13: Lack of understanding concepts in English*

*102: Texts not in home language therefore lack of understanding. No in-depth explanation*

*104: Language barrier due to lectures being in English makes concepts difficult to understand*

*232: Language barrier. I was previously taught in Afrikaans so I have difficulty understanding some English words and concepts*

*291: Texts not in mother-tongue so difficult to understand new terms due to not fond of reading.*

The consensus was that comprehension difficulties are compounded by language issues.

Students’ responses seem to suggest that better comprehension would be achieved if they were to engage with the texts in their home language.

- Quantity and length of reading materials

Closely related to the issue of text difficulty is that of quantity. A number of students (34%) reported on the quantity of reading materials and the length of the texts.

*20: Adjusting to the amount of work is overwhelming*

*21: Difficulty is added when readings are too long*

*50: Struggle to do the reading within the given time frames*

*103: Readings are too long and too many*

*105; Hard to get to main points of the reading due to length*

*113: Texts are too long and when reading them focus is lost*

*235: Sociology has too many readings*

*239: A lot of reading that is not thoroughly explained*

*188: Required to read a lot of articles within short time*

*183: Readings take a long time to process, a lot of repetition that wastes time.*

Although students at tertiary level are expected to read large quantities of printed materials often constituting large volumes of academic texts within limited timeframes, while consciously making an effort to understand high-density and abstract materials, it is apparent that the students are not prepared for this or do not have the reading ability to cope. They refer to the density of texts, length and volume of the reading materials as challenges.

Given that academic reading is the primary constituent for meaning construction and interpretation, students’ ability to cope with course work and academic requirements within specific disciplines, are highly dependent on their ability to read. Interestingly, in their attempt to gain comprehension there is over-dependence on dictionaries, which makes the reading time-consuming. As a result a number of them stated that they do not complete the assigned readings.

They further state that apart from the high volume of readings, the texts are also lengthy, which increases the complexity and makes it difficult to deeply engage with the texts for maximum comprehension. The issue of quantity and volume of texts is often associated with limited time, reading speed, poor time management, loss of focus and confusion. Other students (e.g. student 239) expect the lecturers to thoroughly explain the texts.

- Affective



The opinions shared on affective issues were also noteworthy. Some reasons given were the length of the texts, the topics and the fact that the texts are heavily concept laden. It is clear that a number of students require affective reading support. A number do not find the readings interesting, others do not have any interest and some find it difficult to settle down and start reading due to the nature of the texts.

*5: Readings are boring and meaning gets lost*

*11: I am a slow reader and found the readings to be boring due to difficulty*

*15: My problem is how to settle down and start reading*

*25: Amount of material increases disinterest in work*

*91: Work is complex and there is reliance on self-motivation to get through the work*

*100: Long boring readings with difficult vocabulary*

*123: Difficulty arises when you do not find interest in the texts*

*147: Boring content results in struggling to read them*

*174: A lot of reading but the work is interesting*

*274: Lack of encouragement to read in high school causes problems of reading at university*

*286: Challenge is trying to find interest in the readings, most of them are boring and too scientific.*

The majority of students who explicitly mentioned affective issues stated that the reading materials are not interesting. They stated that with too many new concepts, new genres and various texts which are very long, they become overwhelmed and anxiety sets in. The texts according to the students are not only difficult to understand but also time consuming, which makes them boring to read. One of the few positive responses was by student 174, who stated that despite the fact that there is a lot of reading, the work is interesting. However, this is an isolated case, as the majority of students indicated they do not find the texts interesting.

In relation to autonomy the students pointed out that the level of independent work is overwhelming for them. They stated that at university, they discover that not only are they required to work independently in most cases, but also have to search and read relevant materials related to their specific disciplines on their own. From this perspective, the students complained that:

“It becomes your own problem to solve as opposed to high school where teachers helped.”

“It's your own responsibility to research and read topics to gain thorough understanding.”

Apparent in the responses above are students' under-preparedness for tertiary level reading. Low levels of motivation and self-efficacy also seem to influence students' reading comprehension. Students' expectations of teachers guiding them step by step and reading together with them at the school level, are contrasted with tertiary level institutional expectations of independent readers.

- Possible solutions

Although tertiary students may face challenges when it comes to reading and understanding Sociology texts, a number of them provided comments on how to deal with the challenges. Others also explained how they are dealing with their own reading challenges. This is apparent in the following responses:

*It's a challenge understanding the vocabulary but dictionary and tutorials help.*

*At university things are done at a certain pace, reading cannot be left for the last minute.*

*The level of reading is higher than in high school and has to be done in one's own time.*

*Constant reading assures one of not falling behind in the semester.*

## 9. Discussion

The responses show that for this cohort of students, reading challenges were both cognitive and affective. The fact that students explicitly stated affective issues meant that these issues were important to them. Another pertinent issue that was raised was the quantity and length of assigned reading. It seems the length and quantity of the reading materials have an effect on the students' affective reading levels. In other words, they lower their motivation and self-efficacy levels. The students find the texts difficult and consequently develop negative attitudes towards the readings.

From the students' responses, the majority of them would require support in the processing of texts. Reading instruction should therefore provide students with strategies that will assist them in text comprehension. Their

overwhelming response on the difficulty of texts may also suggest that scaffolding as a pedagogical strategy could help students approach difficult texts gradually.

It is also obvious that students seem to believe that their success in academic reading and subsequently, academic achievement depends on the support of their teachers. This shows that most of the students lack confidence in their own ability to read and critically engage with academic texts successfully. In order to improve students' poor beliefs in their reading ability, techniques that improve self-efficacy are suggested. For example techniques such as teaching of explicit reading strategies and providing frequent and positive feedback could help improve self-efficacy and raise students' beliefs in their ability to read successfully.

Students find the structure of the texts rather complex due to the diction. As a result they are unable to make meaning from the content and summarise appropriately. The students have to consult dictionaries for comprehension of texts. This results in low reading speed and consequently boredom to which the students openly acknowledged. Deep reading where students in their search for understanding and meaning, engage deeply with texts would also help to improve comprehension. This type of reading, it is assumed, would extend to long-term semantic memory and increase students' readiness to take charge of their own reading and learning. To this effect assessments that require deep engagement with texts, as recommended by Roberts and Roberts (2008) are recommended.

In addition, tutorials could be structured to present the information in a scaffolded manner. A summary of each reading could be made by lecturers to provide an initial understanding before students deal with the original texts. The summary will also provide background knowledge, to ease comprehension.

Although "Sociology has to recognise truths of social development, structure and function" (McKenzie, 1999), too much focus on structure and function tends to make Sociology texts abstract. The level of abstraction in the texts adds to students' difficulties, as stated in the following excerpts: *Sometimes the terms aren't explained in the texts or lecture and the texts sometimes don't come together*. Considering the high level of support at high school, it seems reading materials at first-year level should be presented in a scaffolded manner, instead of simply expecting students to read and understand various, original articles. As one student stated "there is no attention given to reading materials by lecturer".

Understanding the vocabulary and concepts in the readings seems to be a major challenge to the students. Others indicated that they would prefer summarised versions to provide general understanding.

For a number of the students, reading is approached with avoidance tactics. In other words they try to avoid the activity. According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) disengaged readers find it difficult to settle down to read. Students' affective reading levels could be developed and improved by applying the affective reading techniques (e.g. praise and rewards, knowledge goals, interesting texts, etc.) as suggested by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) in their framework for engaged reading. A detailed discussion of this framework is given in Boakye (2012).

A number of students are concerned that the module is not offered in their home language and texts are all in English. It seems that the complexity of texts and the new concepts that students have to grapple with are compounded by the language issue. Perhaps, if concepts are first explained in students' home language before the students engage with the concepts in English, a better understanding could be generated. The strategy of *translanguaging* may be a possible solution. Translanguaging as a pedagogical strategy allows students to use different languages and practices in the classroom to aid comprehension (Garcia, 2009a; Lewis, Jones, & Baker, 2012). This strategy could be used in a scaffolded manner to improve students' understanding.

In answer to the first question on what students' opinions on reading of Sociology texts are, the majority of them indicated facing challenges. The fact that 48% indicated having challenges and only 13% seem not to have challenges indicates that most of the students require support in the reading of their texts. Thus a needs analysis for effective reading intervention is required to support the students. As Roberts and Roberts (2008) point out lecturers do not seem to take serious recognition of this issue and continue to teach expecting students to be able to comprehend the texts and use the information to write essays in answer to assignment and examination questions. A number of the students actually pointed out the lack of support, stating that there are no in-depth explanations from lecturers.

In answer to whether the challenges are both cognitive and affective, it seems from the responses that students have challenges in both dimensions, although cognitive challenges were cited more often. Reading intervention should therefore consider affective techniques that will benefit these students, as well as help improve the cognitive aspects. Whereas the majority mentioned cognitive issues, a noteworthy number also mentioned affective issues. Reading, as argued by researchers such as, Verhoeven (2001), Guthrie and Wigfield (2000),

involves both affective and cognitive issues. Students also included other important issues such as language and quantity of work. The quantity issue, as indicated could be dealt with by providing students with summarised versions before they read original texts. The language issue could be dealt with by adopting a translanguaging approach that would enable them to understand concepts better in the home language before engaging with them in English.

## 10. Conclusion

This paper has shown the importance of a needs analysis in reading instruction. Through a needs analysis students' specific challenges of academic reading in Sociology have been identified. The challenges include cognitive, affective and linguistic issues. More specifically, students indicated challenges pertaining to comprehension, vocabulary, quantity and length of reading materials, motivation, interest and language issues. While the cognitive challenges can be dealt with by explicitly teaching reading strategies, the affective challenges could be addressed by using some of the teaching techniques from Guthrie and Wigfield's (2000) framework for engaged reading, such as praise and rewards, interesting texts and positive feedback. An extensive reading component and explicit vocabulary instruction could be included to improve reading speed, increase vocabulary, and improve word recognition and general reading comprehension abilities. In addition, translanguaging could be used to address the language issue. It is hoped that by applying these techniques, students' specific challenges would be addressed and the reading of Sociology texts made less challenging.

We hope that the results of our investigation, would lead other academics and educators to investigate students' specific reading challenges before an intervention, in order to design reading programmes that meet students' needs. Such a programme will help to achieve effective reading development in discipline-specific reading interventions. For further research, it is suggested that the emergent themes be compiled into a questionnaire to derive quantitative data to compare with the qualitative data.

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