Title

Academic Prereading Activity Menus to Support International ESL Students in Higher Education

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Academic reading at college and university poses a real challenge for international students with English as a second language. Often the main hurdles are a lack of language proficiency, critical-reading skills, or background knowledge. Also, unfamiliarity with cultural and academic conventions plays a role. Even with intensive English-language training, reading success remains elusive without the support and participation of faculty, especially at the critical prereading stage. This article examines the obstacles that negatively affect student reading and elaborates on the importance of faculty intervention by incorporating effective prereading strategies in their classrooms. Specifically, 3 activity menus are provided that contain a selection of strategies to help with activating prior knowledge, analyzing text features, and developing vocabulary.

Why do international students in higher education struggle with reading? It is complicated. Understandably, if academic reading can be demanding for native English-speaking students, then it is likely to be even more so for students for whom English is not their native tongue. They are not only required to adapt to the literacy demands of another language, but also to a new academic culture and discipline. While it may be common for international ESL students to undertake a foundation or intensive English program before or during their studies, this alone may not be enough to meet their diverse literacy needs. College and university faculty can do more to help international ESL students navigate course readings. This is especially true when students first come into contact with a reading. It is here, at the prereading stage, that critical groundwork can be laid to prepare students for academic reading success.

Based on recommendations in the second language (L2) reading literature and the author's own experience as an EAP instructor, the aim of this

article is to provide prereading strategies for faculty to support international students in their classes. These strategies are presented in the form of activity menus divided into three distinct categories: activating prior knowledge, analyzing text features, and developing vocabulary. A description and justification for each activity are provided. Depending on the context, these activities can be either selected individually or else combined during the prereading phase to help international ESL students become more adept readers.

Barriers to Reading Success

It takes time for international ESL students to develop academic reading skills. However, a lack of English proficiency can greatly impede their progress (Phakiti, Hirsh, & Woodrow, 2013). Students may find reading comprehension disrupted because of unfamiliarity with English vocabulary, a weak understanding of complex syntax and multiple-meaning words, and a lack of equivalent words between English and their native language. Even when these students are considered proficient readers of English at an advanced level, they may display different reading processes when dealing with the complex input of a second language text as compared with their native English-reading peers. However, while language difficulties are of obvious concern, academic experiences, expectations, and differences in learning and teaching practices also create problems. For example, international students with little experience of academic texts are often staggered by the large volume of required reading (Wilson, 2003). The amount and complexity of academic reading demands more time, much rereading, and perhaps an overdependence on dictionary use (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004). In the end, if readings take international students longer to complete, then meeting assignment deadlines is a struggle (Zhang & Mi, 2010).

Misunderstandings can also occur in terms of the concept of scholarly critical reading or evaluation (Durkin, 2004). Students not only need to become proficient language users and independent actors, but they also have to engage in higher-order thinking. However, the notion of challenging scholarship may be culturally inappropriate for some students. Cultural variations in discourse patterns and previous learning patterns affect how academic reading is performed. Kuzborska (2015) found that unfamiliarity with the English-speaking study environment affected students in terms of knowing how much critical analysis was required in a discipline, interpreting unfamiliar texts, and expressing their criticality in the discourse appropriate for that discipline. Koda's (1995) study showed that students from four different cultural backgrounds, in which written texts used different orthographic structures (Arabic, English, Japanese, and Spanish), used different information-processing procedures for reading English text. Because of their unfamiliarity with English writing conventions, international stu-

dents may have difficulty recognizing both the organizational structures and writing conventions that would otherwise guide their reading. This not only makes it difficult to keep up with reading, but it may lead to misunderstandings of the text.

Being able to connect what they read with their previous knowledge can be a concern for international students. If they have no knowledge about the topic of the reading text, then their attempts at comprehension may prove challenging. However, it is sometimes the case that the lack of background knowledge is not the real issue, but rather it is the lack of activation of background knowledge (Ajideh 2006). Without the appropriate background knowledge or schemata built up, they will not be able to comprehend the material. Furthermore, the prior learning experiences and L1 literacy practices of students with different cultural backgrounds mean they approach second language reading differently (Zhang, 2017). Perhaps they come from an academic tradition or educational system in which they are responsible for every line of a reading assignment, so they read slowly and meticulously. Being held accountable for the minutiae in readings could now mean greater difficulty in assessing the relative importance of information. For example, they may even have trouble knowing when—in a US class—it is appropriate to skim. This, along with language difficulties, can make it difficult for students to keep up with a rather heavy reading load.

International students may rarely apply reading strategies that would ensure the sort of comprehension that is aligned with the required level of learning. A new country and academic environment call for a change in reading practice. No longer is basic word and sentence meaning sufficient. Reading an academic text is not like reading a novel. Students must evaluate their understanding of the information. In higher education, students must engage in critical reading, critical evaluation, and integrate various information sources (Grabe, 2009). Unfortunately, many L2 readers are unprepared for the shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn" and the mismatch between these two rather distinctive goals. In reality, most international students are obliged to encompass both of these simultaneously in their academic reading and are often playing catch-up "learning to read" while they attempt to engage critically with complex texts.

A Recipe for Success

Achieving success in second language academic reading requires both language ability and reading skills. It is important to note that reading comprehension is not solely determined by a reader's language knowledge, but also by how a reader engages in strategic behavior to understand a text. Less language knowledge can be compensated for by engaging in strategic processing (Kolić-Vehovec & Bajšanski, 2007). Strategies are behaviors that are consciously selected to facilitate understanding (Nordin, Rashid, Zubir, &

Sadjirin, 2013). For example, readers decide how much time to spend looking at a word and whether to reread a section or to skip a section. They must decide when to summarize, question the text, or make predictions. Strategy use is a very good indicator of skilled text comprehension (Estacio, 2013). According to Grabe and Stoller (2001), strategic readers combine a wide repertoire of strategies. If one strategy does not work, it can be replaced by another. Also, the use of a particular strategy successfully requires orchestrating it vis-à-vis other strategies (Anderson, 1991).

Reading is not just a receptive skill but rather "a nonlinear, active process" (Oxford, 2017, p. 273) in which readers combine both linguistic knowledge and world knowledge to make meaning. Therefore, not only might international ESL students need to reach a certain language threshold, but also new incoming material should be related to their previously acquired knowledge. This is where prereading strategies become crucial. Bell (2017) refers to prereading strategies as "enabling activities" because they provide readers with the necessary background to organize and comprehend the new material. In general, the goals of the prereading stage are to activate the students' knowledge of the subject, to provide any language preparation that might be needed for coping with the reading, and to build motivation to want to read. The latter is a significant factor in academic reading success because motivated students avail themselves much more of learning opportunities (Unrau & Quirk, 2014).

Besides semantic and syntactic knowledge, the student should know something about the text in order to understand it better. Connecting what readers know to new information is the core of learning and understanding. When a connection is made, comprehension increases. Familiarity with the topic and content of a text can activate the proper schemata more efficiently as compared to having no idea of what the text is all about. Therefore, the prereading stage deserves special attention since it is here, during the students' first contact with the reading, that their background knowledge becomes activated (Maghsoudi, 2012). This is not just important for the student but also for the instructor, who becomes informed of what his or her students already know.

Prereading activities prepare international ESL students for what they are about to read. If done in the right way, they promote not only access to prior knowledge but also a preview of text features to get a sense of the content and organizational structure. Context is provided for possibly unknown topics and subtopics. The more prior knowledge and experience students have about the topic of a given text, the better they understand it. Also, students become better prepared for the kind of language and vocabulary that might be used. The more words students know and recognize, the better they understand a text (Nation, 2001). All of this increases confidence and engagement. In the next sections, the author provides three prereading ac-

tivity menus that can be adopted by university instructors and used either for whole-class, small-group, or individual settings. Categories include the activation of prior knowledge, the analysis of text features, and the development of vocabulary. Activities can apply to both international ESL students and their native peers in whole-class, small-group, or individual settings.

Activating Prior Knowledge

English language learners have great difficulty jumping into new texts without any background support. It is helpful if they know at least something about the topic before reading. The following menu focuses on activities the instructor can implement to activate prior knowledge.

1. **Prereading Plan (PreP):** A reading is selected for the class. The central concept is identified and stated in a brief sentence. This statement is shared with the class to stimulate discussion. The class can be divided into small groups. Students in each group are asked to list words and phrases from their prior knowledge that are associated with the central concept. Students group the ideas into logical categories. Groups share their list of associated terms with the class. Then, they reflect on the specific relationship of each term they listed to the central theme. Students have the opportunity to listen to other explanations and interact with their peers. The purpose of helping students to link their background knowledge with concepts in the text is to set up appropriate expectations about both language and content.

2. **KWL:** This graphic organizer is divided into three parts: (a) what students already know, (b) what students want to learn, and (c) what students have learned (see https://www.eduplace.com/graph icorganizer/pdf/kwl.pdf). These parts can be altered to include different questions. For the first two steps of KWL, students and the instructor engage in oral discussion. They begin by reflecting on their knowledge about a topic, brainstorming a list of ideas, and identifying categories of information. Next, the instructor helps highlight gaps and inconsistencies in students' knowledge, and students create individual lists of things that they want to learn about the topic or questions that they want answered. In the last step of the strategy, students read new material and share what they have learned. The instructor can develop a three-column poster with each question in a column and list the responses. KWL improves students' ability to make connections among different categories of information. It works for students at all levels by encouraging involvement in their own learning.

3. **Anticipation Guide:** This graphic organizer is a series of open-ended questions or statements (usually 6 to 10) related to the topic or point of view of a particular text (see https://cdn-educators.brainpop.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/anticipation_guide.pdf). Students work silently to read and then agree or disagree with each statement. The statements also may be read aloud. Students can be put in pairs or groups in case they are having trouble making connections with the topic or with the language. This allows weaker students to contribute in a more supportive environment before participating in a whole-class discussion. Statements can also be read aloud to support struggling readers. Students engage with topics at their current level of understanding. An anticipation guide works best when students are required to read something that contains unfamiliar information.

4. **The Turning Wheel:** Students are divided into groups of three or four. Each group is given a large piece of paper or poster on which the reading topic and subtopics are written. Each group has a different subtopic and writes down everything its members know. Posters are passed around in a particular direction. Students continue adding to the next poster they receive, but it has to be new information not already listed. This proceeds for about 5-10 minutes, and the last pass must get back to the original group. The original group discusses all the statements on the poster and circles the three most essential to the topic. They write the statements on the board and discuss each poster. Students can also write the statements in their notebooks afterward. This collaborative effort helps all students to engage more easily with topics.

5. **Prequestioning**: Prequestioning is a conventional type of prereading strategy that also focuses on idea formation about the upcoming reading. Here the instructor and students start asking some questions, guessing answers, and—above all—drawing some inferences before reading begins. Questions are not asked to test students' comprehension but to pique their curiosity, and to prompt them to make associations between the topic and their background knowledge. The instructor should identify student expectations—what do they think the reading will be about? Students can change the title, headings, and subheadings into questions. In addition, guided reciprocal peer questioning gets students to generate explanatory answers to questions as part of group learning. Students remember more if they read with questions in mind rather than adopting the "sponge" approach—simply trying to absorb everything.

Activating prior knowledge not only helps students make connections

between what they know already and what they are about to learn, but it also helps them become mentally engaged in upcoming learning. Choosing activating strategies can directly set students up to be more successful readers.

Analyzing Text Features

This second menu of prereading activities is collectively referred to as analyzing text features. The aim is to provide students with a map and/or road signs to navigate texts.

1. **Surveying:** This gets students to skim and scan through headings, subheadings, charts, graphics, bold and italicized words, first and last paragraphs, or first and last sentences in paragraphs. With books, for example, students can look at glossaries and indexes. Indexes are important, for example, when there is a specific topic on which a student needs to write a paper. Chapter questions usually highlight what the writer thinks is important to know. Students may be introduced to a textbook by asking them to open to an assigned chapter and scan the pages. After a few minutes, they must point out what they think the particular chapter addresses, what are the most important aspects, how it is organized, and what they would highlight on a given page and why. Students' comprehension of readings relies not only on their language skills but also their ability to recognize the organizational structure and conventions of written English, and also to recognize the markers authors use to signal when they are challenging previous research, switching tactics, or asserting a new claim. When features recur in predictable patterns, they help the reader to find information and make connections. Readers who understand how to use these features spend less time unlocking the text and have more energy to concentrate on the content.

2. **Textbook Scavenger Hunt:** This activity helps students search for specific areas of the material before reading. They receive a list of key items to be found, must note the page on which the items are located, and write down the method they used to find the information. Unlike in a standard scavenger hunt, the items should be chosen on the basis of how well they will clarify the way the text is put together. Items might include a list of specific terms and important text features (color-coded text, bulleted lists, italic or bold print). Students develop strategies for effectively finding information in texts and become familiar with the main features of the texts they will be using.

3. **Reading Guide:** This advanced organizer can be created with study or reading questions designed to point students to key ideas,

applications, patterns, and connections. This is posted online so that students can refer to it. It includes a series of prompts that ask students to preview particular features of text and note how they are related to the main body of the text. Students may be provided with simple survey questions regarding their reading text, and the instructor takes the students through these questions. Instructor-led questions can direct students toward a reading goal. This provides students with a purpose and clarifies expectations. Online or in-class discussions can be used to follow up afterward. Reading guides cue students as to what is considered important, which is really what they want to know.

4. **Make Connections:** To help when students encounter an assigned group of readings, the instructor has them take those readings out and set them side by side. Students are given a couple of minutes to think about how this group of readings might fit together. They might ascertain this by skimming the titles, the headings, and the abstracts (if any), and deciding on the purpose of each reading. A discussion can be promoted with questions such as: How do these readings support a central theme? Do the readings provide opposing perspectives or different disciplinary traditions? Would any of the readings be better understood if approached in a particular order? Why or why not? An instructor should spend at least some time at the beginning of the course looking at readings with students, explaining why they were chosen, and incorporating interesting tidbits about the author.

Analyzing text features helps students plot a course through their reading and encourages them to appreciate how vital it is to think about the features that support text. They also make better-quality predictions, anticipate their learning, and comprehend more fully, ensuring better understanding of the content being studied.

Developing Vocabulary

Vocabulary is used precisely in academic fields, and new terms are the building blocks for new concepts. While students are reading, they will often come across words that they do not understand. This third menu of activities is about developing necessary vocabulary.

1. **The Frayer Model:** This strategy uses a graphic organizer for vocabulary building. It encourages students to analyze and apply key vocabulary and terms in a variety of ways. This technique requires students to (a) define the target vocabulary words or

concepts in a reading selection, and (b) apply this information by generating examples and nonexamples. This information is placed on a chart that is divided into four sections to provide a visual representation for students (see https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/secrdng/cresource/q2/p07/sec_rdng_07_link_frayer_types_04/). The Frayer model should be explained or modeled and a graphic organizer provided to each student. The instructor reviews the vocabulary words or concept list with the class. Then, students are directed to complete the template individually, in small groups, or as a whole class. They read the assigned text and carefully define the target words or concepts. Students complete the four-square chart for each concept. Then they share their conclusions with the entire class. This instructional strategy promotes critical thinking and helps students to identify and understand unfamiliar vocabulary. The Frayer model builds connections among new words and concepts and creates a visual reference by which students learn to compare attributes and examples.

2. **Word Sort:** First, students copy vocabulary terms onto note cards, one word per card. The terms should include both new and known words. Then, either individually or in groups, students sort the words into categories. The sorting may be closed (the teacher provides the categories) or open (students choose their own categories and identify their own labels for each category). Once sorting has finished, students should discuss the reasoning behind the choices they made. In many instances, it is this phase of the strategy that results in the most learning for students and teacher alike. A variation on this exercise may include a multiple-intelligence approach whereby students, for example, draw a representation of the commonalties between the words in a category or create a graph illustrating the relationships between the groups. The Word Sort is a relatively simple, yet highly effective, method for building student vocabulary. The idea behind this strategy is to help students build semantic connections among terms as they learn new material. It has the added benefit of providing the instructor with information about the prior knowledge that students bring to a topic.

3. **Pair-Square With AlphaBoxes:** This activity helps students increase their word knowledge either before they begin a reading or at the end as they review what they have learned. First, students individually list all of the words that they know about a topic on their AlphaBoxes graphic organizer (see http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedl-letter/resources/alphaboxes.pdf). This is like the student's personal word wall. The instructor may use this as a classroom assessment for learning by simply noting the amount and kinds of words

students are recording on their sheets. *Pair:* Students work with a partner to compare their lists and add any words that they did not have on their own. *Square:* Two pairs of students get together and compare the words they have recorded on their AlphaBoxes graphic organizer. They will add to their personal sheets as they share the words and discuss why they should be included in the chart. This activity helps students learn vocabulary through repetition and discussion.

4. **K.I.M. Strategy:** This is a basic version of vocabulary frames, in which students identify the key term, information about it, and a memory cue based on their own understanding of the vocabulary term. The term or key idea (K) is written in the left column, the information (I) that goes along with it in the center column, and a picture of the idea, a memory clue, (M) is drawn in the right column (see https://4.files.edl.io/f4cb/01/28/19/165239-c7ae91c4 -94ed-4159-a358-3c6ee55140f4.pdf). The key idea may be a new vocabulary word or a new concept. The information may be a definition, or it may be a more technical explanation of the concept. The memory clue is a way for students to fully integrate the meaning of the key idea into their memories. By making a simple sketch that explains the key idea, students synthesize and interpret the new information, making it their own. Then, students can reference their drawings to easily remember new key ideas.

5. **Roadblocks:** Many times, instructors assign an integral reading that is packed with lots of discipline-specific terms and/or acronyms. The use of specialized language can prevent students from understanding and finishing assigned readings. During a prereading session, the instructor has students scan an article and circle any terms that might signal a "roadblock" to understanding. A list of these terms is compiled and made the focus of a discussion and explanation. This strategy is especially beneficial with subject terminology that is critical for overall comprehension.

Expanding students' vocabulary knowledge is essential because the greater the student's vocabulary the easier it is to make sense of the text. Vocabulary and overall comprehension are closely related.

Conclusion

In this article, the author provides example prereading activity menus that college and university faculty can incorporate in their classrooms to support international ESL students with academic reading. This support is necessary because studying at the tertiary level poses significant reading challenges for students who originate from different cultural, linguistic, and

educational contexts. Improving students' sense of preparedness raises their engagement and motivation, translating into better performance. Prereading strategies, in particular, reassure even the most insecure learner. Since there is a strong correlation between reading proficiency and academic success, instructors must not turn a blind eye to international students operating in a second language. If they teach prereading strategies explicitly and/or model their use, international students will learn them in practice and become more efficient readers.

Author

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