

# Exploring the Experiences and Attitudes of Post-Year One University of Botswana Students on Academic Reading

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**Abstract:** *This paper investigated the reading experiences and attitudes of post year one students who studied academic communication and study skills at the University of Botswana. There was a niche for this investigation because while the Communication and Study Skills Unit (USSU) teaches basic language skills including speaking, listening, reading and writing to all first-year students from different faculties of the university, it hardly gets feedback from students on how they cope with reading in subsequent levels to improve their academic performance. The study adopted a qualitative research approach to investigate the problem using open ended questionnaires and focused group discussions. The findings indicated that students appreciated the reading skill from year one as it improved their writing skills, it helped them to pay attention to key details amongst other things when reading and it improved their performance due to using relevant citations and knowing how to analyse them. The study concluded that lecturers of various disciplines and faculties should emphasise the reading skill and appreciate its importance towards students' academic performance.*

**Keywords:** reading skill, post year one, feedback, attitudes, experiences

## INTRODUCTION

Reading at university level does not only involve understanding the written or printed words or symbols. It is different from high school reading (Maguire et al, 2020; Hermida: 2009) as it employs cognitive and eclectic processes that require the application of deep mental representation, interpretation and synthesis of information collected from various written texts. Reading allows students to integrate knowledge acquired from multiple sources through metacognitive processes, enabling them to successfully cope with both academic (Wood, 2022) and professional situations. As such, reading requires continuous systematic reflection of what has been studied. Hence, through reading, students should be able to analyse, integrate, compare, apply, and critically think about the information they have read. Such skills are built on the premise that students should acquire self-directed reading and learning skills attained at

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year 1 tertiary level to cope with that which they would learn in subsequent years. Therefore, reading difficulties in students may limit their academic and professional training which can lead to poor academic performance as well as frustration. The reading skill, thus, requires concerted efforts from researchers, educators, and policy makers to create opportunities for the development of students' academic performance at various levels of education.

Reading is part of literacy skills that are key not just to one's academic life but also to one's personal and professional development. It is also requisite in learning across the disciplines (Ntereke & Ramoroka, 2017, p.1.). Reading is important for learning new information, comparing ideas by different scholars/writers on similar themes, reinforcing memory retention skills, supporting leisure, etc. The ability to read effectively is perhaps one of the most important skills students need to facilitate their learning and academic success. Thus, universities across the world strive to equip their undergraduate and even postgraduate graduates with a myriad of attributes, reading being among them. It is safe to believe that a considerable amount of learning is through reading, good performance in assessment tasks such as tests and examination, which are heavily reliant on students reading their course materials as well as reading for assignments and other tasks. Besides, the success of any academic writing is based on what students/scholars have picked or drawn from the literature read.

In an endeavour to assist students to acquire a good level of academic reading proficiency, upon entry into UB, year 1 students are taught academic reading skill, as part of the communication and academic literacy skills offered by the Communication and Study Skills Unit (CSSU). The communication skills are taught as part of a lifelong learning menu recommended by the UB. Unfortunately, at UB, formal teaching of the academic literacy skills (reading skill inclusive) ends at year 1, with the assumption that students would use the acquired skills to cope with academic work from year 2 onwards. Hence, the importance of this study cannot be overemphasised as it will provide insights on the extent to which students put into practice, after year 1, the reading skills they have learnt and acquired in the first year.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the improvement of the post-Year 1 students' academic reading skills and suggest possible solutions on what could be done to deal with the academic reading challenges they would encounter. The findings might also inform faculty/instructors about measures that can be taken to provide continuous academic reading support beyond Year 1. The outcome of several studies conducted has made available useful feedback from students about instructional pedagogies (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 1994; Camiciottoli, 2001, Park and Kim, 2011 and Tabata-Sandom (2015). Details from the findings of these studies are further discussed in the literature review section.

## **Background to the Study**

Reading remains a fundamental skill for tertiary education, as it underlies students' academic success. The University of Botswana admits students from various socio-economic backgrounds, cultures and diverse linguistic backgrounds and they are all required to successfully complete their education. Reading remains one of the key activities by means of

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which students can attain their academic goals. The University of Botswana's mission is to provide excellence in the delivery of learning to ensure that the society is provided with talented, creative and confident graduates. It also hopes to equip students with advanced knowledge and understanding through excellence in research and its application in socio-economic development through high impact engagement in business, professions, government and civil society (University of Botswana's Annual Report, 2021). Thus, for UB to achieve its mission, it has to create a conducive environment for acquiring content knowledge and literacy skills like reading. Given the lack of proper reading instruction in secondary schools, students tend to transit to the next educational levels with poor reading skills (see for example, Biakolo, 2007:13) and this negatively impacts their learning as they advance to tertiary education.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **Empirical studies on L2 reading perceptions, strategies, and challenges**

As far as the authors of this paper can tell, no studies have investigated experiences and attitudes of post-year 1 ESL students towards academic reading skills. However, previous empirical research on reading by students, particularly L2 university students, has focused on a vast range of themes, including the relationship between L1 and L2 reading (e.g., Yamashita, 2004, 2007), motivation and reading achievement (e.g., Unrau and Schlackman, 2006), attitude and the willingness/ability to read (e.g., Jeon and Yamashita, 2014), reading anxiety and the learning process (e.g., Arnold and Brown, 1999), relationship between reading anxiety and readers' perception of reading difficulties (e.g., Saito, Horwitz and Garza, 1999), Reading proficiency levels (e.g., Ipek, 2009), and reading and its effect on vocabulary knowledge (Krashen, 1989). Much of this existing literature has tendered to focus on the researchers and their interest in undertaking either an experiment that looks at specific relational aspects of learner reading (e.g., reading anxiety vs. perceptions of reading difficulties) or a survey, based on a methodological model (e.g., Foreign Language Reading Anxiety Scale [FLRAS]) that aims to address such relationships.

A study by Ntereke and Ramoroka (2017) examined the reading competency of first-year undergraduate students at University of Botswana. The results surmised that "majority of students enter the university with poorly developed reading skills and strategies which cause huge reading difficulties for them", (p. 5). This was indicated by students experiencing difficulties in questions "that required high-order thinking and interpretive skills", (p.5). Another area that showed students' struggles in applying reading skills was in the cloze questions which was meant to scale students' linguistic knowledge to connect with texts. However, the end results indicated general improvement in students' performance, reading proficiency and others, after completing the reading module observed. The study is in a way related to the current on, though it addresses the students' competencies on starting university and after completion of first year literacy skills modules, reading included; while the current investigation is focused on students' experiences and attitudes towards academic reading post year one.

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Another study was conducted by Magogwe (2013), to explore University of Botswana's Social Science students' metacognitive awareness of reading strategies in English as a Second Language, and the study targeted students of different academic reading aptitudes. The study yielded heterogeneous responses for the different reading strategies examined informed by the varied students' levels of reading proficiencies, (pp.3-7). In summary, "majority of Social Science students reported in this study were quite capable of using Global Reading Strategies to read academic materials such as books and journals, but they need to be assisted to do so substantially", (p.7). The study is relevant to the current on in part; examining awareness and use of reading skills, but did not focus on students' experiences and attitudes of the same, a focal point for the current investigation.

Sheorey and Mokhtari (1994) studied reading habits of Eighty-five undergraduate college students in the US. They distributed open-ended questionnaire and elicited various reading habits of the students. Their study revealed that students devoted an unusually low amount of time to academic reading. Sheorey and Mokhtari also found that students committed even less time when it comes to reading non-academic material. The students who participated in this study generally agreed that they needed to improve their reading skills if they were to succeed as college students. In their conclusion, Sheorey and Mokhtari (1994) note that college reading instructors needed to treat postsecondary education to be very specialised, "and that many students do not always reach the maturation level necessary to deal with the demands of college reading".

Camiciottoli (2001) studied the habits and attitudes of 182 Italian university EFL students on extensive reading in English. Camiciottoli designed a 22-item close-ended questionnaire to gain insights on how frequently students read in English, what their attitudes towards reading were, as well as reasons that limited their reading frequency, and the factors that influenced frequency and attitudes. Camiciottoli found that the students generally showed a negative attitude towards reading, and the number of years of instruction did not necessarily lead to more frequency in reading and positive attitudes towards reading. She noted a potential reason for the limited reading practices of the students as being a "low priority among these students who are apparently unable or unwilling to find sufficient time for it" (Camiciottoli, 2001: 147). In her conclusion, Camiciottoli calls for an extensive reading programme to be implemented to support students' reading in English in Italian universities.

A study by Park and Kim (2011) explored students' perceptions with regards to how electronic literacies could enhance reading strategies of college-level ESL learners. They sought to find out what students thought about how the reading of online L2 texts could be made more efficient and effective. They adopted a qualitative approach and elicited think-aloud reports from ten (10) English language Learners (ELLs). The learners met the researchers' bi-weekly over the course of six months to record their views as they completed diverse online activities on reading. The study revealed seven strategies the ESL learners used to read online texts, namely (1) using hypermedia, (2) using computer applications and accessories, (3) dialoguing, (4) setting up reading purposes and planning, (5) previewing and determining what to read, (6) connecting prior knowledge and experiences with texts and tasks, and (7) inferring. Only the

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first two strategies are unique to online reading while the remaining five strategies are also paper-based reading strategies. Park and Kim concluded that ESL learners online reading strategies were mainly based on strategies they previously used in paper-based reading.

In another study Tabata-Sandom (2015) examined L2 reading perceptions of learners of Japanese and their motivation to read. Tabata-Sandom adopted a survey approach and administered a questionnaire to 132 learners of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL). The study found that “respondents’ confidence to master L2 Japanese reading did not increase according to their developmental stages” (Tabata-Sandom, 2015: 283). It further suggests that pleasure of reading did not necessarily come across as a motivation for L2 reading of Japanese. Tabata-Sandom (2015: 286) concludes with the keynote to teachers and instructors of L2 reading that “mere extensive reading may not pose enough challenges to satisfy learners’ language learning desires”.

On the contrary, in a study conducted by Mokibelo & Monaka in (2019) on teacher classroom practices in developing the reading skills in literature classroom at Junior secondary school, the findings indicated that English was too difficult for the learners hence, comprehending and understanding the literature texts was a challenge, teachers gave students objectives that were not within their capabilities, the lecturer method dominated the class and therefore students were passive, inactive and silent throughout the lesson, teachers needed to think outside the box to create a conducive environment by means of a variety of learning and teaching styles in order to reach the students. While this was a study at lower learning, the implication is that the reading challenges encountered at higher levels could be inherited from lower levels of education due to appropriate learning and teaching styles in reading skill. Skilled readers integrate the skills to enhance comprehension and acquisition of the skill. The feedback in the classrooms was loud enough to demand relevant and appropriate pedagogical practices.

Challenges have been observed with second language learners. Kasemsap and Lee (2015) conducted a study in Thailand with Thai University students. The findings revealed that Thai students are weak in English reading comprehension. The results indicated that students had problems with sentence structure, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, understanding technical words, not knowing the word meaning and facing complex and very long sentences with many dependant clauses or paragraphs and other unfamiliar words. The identified problems could impact negatively on their reading and scoring good grades.

Overall, the empirical studies reviewed here, which focused on either ESL, EFL or JFL, aim to understand reading strategies employed by students better in the contexts of the studies. They highlighted a need for instructors to regularly appreciate from learners what innovations of instruction might be helpful in helping students to improve upon their reading and learning. In the Botswana context, ESL reading is a crucial skill taught to L2 university students. As previously indicated, the current study sought to understand post-year 1 students’ experiences and attitudes towards academic reading, as well as challenges they faced while reading for academic purposes. With that in mind, this study therefore asked the following specific research questions: a) Did the students find the reading skill they acquired at Year 1 useful at



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post year one?; b) What techniques did they use to improve their reading skill at Post Year 1?; c) What challenges did they encounter while trying to improve their reading skills?; and d) What solutions did they put in place to improve their reading skills? These questions were to sought feedback from the students' experiences and attitudes of academic reading from Year 1.

### **Theoretical Framework: The Reading Models**

This paper uses two types of reading models: the top-down and interactive reading models by (Harris and Sipay, 1984). The reason being that the reading discussed in this paper is at an advanced level - tertiary education and therefore, the two models have been found to be relevant to this study because they help to predict and examine the factors influencing the outcome of the study. The two models are used because they complement each other. Reading is taught by lecturers in the CSSU and they should employ strategies to impart the reading skills to students and at the same time using students centred strategies for students to acquire the skill. The two models also inform the lecturers' pedagogical strategies on developing the reading skill in the classrooms. Reading is a complex process that is based on philosophical view that the brain and the reader are at the centre of reading with understanding as well as succeeding to read. Further, the since reading requires language competence and cognitive skills for comprehension, the idea is to gauge through students' perspectives to see if indeed the top-down model can be applied or it needs to be strengthened. Further, the interactive model of reading also demands students to be active readers and undertake even more collaborative activities. The model is predictive in the sense that background knowledge is vital to the text for students to scan and skim. These skills may activate the high level of schemas in the reading process. Without background knowledge of reading skills, it may be difficult to interpret, analyse and synthesise information read. The two models of reading attempt to explain and predict reading behaviour.

### **The top-down model of reading**

The top-down model requires language competence and cognitive skills for comprehension. Harris and Sipay (1984) argue that in this model, the readers' language competence and cognitive skills play a key role in the construction of meaning from printed material. This argument is based on the psycholinguistic theory in which there is interaction between thought and language. Goodman (1967) argues that reading is a process which involves using available language cues that are selected from perceptual input on the readers' prediction. Therefore, as information is processed, the reader makes tentative decisions about meaning, confirms, rejects or redefines their thinking as the reading progresses. The reader also uses graphical information to support or reject hypotheses about meaning. In this regard, meaning in the top-down model of reading is obtained by using only as much information as necessary from the graphics, syntactic and semantic cues system, which other cues are based upon the readers' linguistic competence. The top-down model theorists believe that skilled readers go directly from print to meaning without firstly to speech, hence, this model is for advanced levels. In essence, the top-down model could sharpen students' intellectual ability because it allows students to read with understanding, it allows the reader to bring in their background, culture and experiences to the print. The model shares the same sentiments with that of social constructivism theory by

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a Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) that allows students to drill deep into the ocean and unearth hidden issues, analyse and assess what they are reading and come up with their views and create knowledge. The social constructivism also believes that readers are active participants in the creation of knowledge and therefore instructors have to stimulate and facilitate conversation within students. This means reading depends on interpersonal interaction and discussion for meaning. These are high order reading skills, suitable for advanced readers. The theory also challenges instructors to assist students to become better readers by giving them tasks that are challenging cognitively. Lastly, the reader is an involved participant that has to uncover information hidden in the print (Flowerdew, 1990:250). The model emphasises language, that the students should understand, be competent in the language used to enable them to apply themselves. The language aspect will help them to explore the meaning, discover meaning and induce meaning from a text. This will lead to students being able to solve problems and apply themselves.

### **Interactive Model of Reading**

The interactive model was developed by McClelland and Rumelhart (1981) and Rumelhart & McClelland (1982). The interactive reading model is defined by Rumelhart as the meaningful interpretation of printed or written symbols while comprehending as a result of interaction between perception of graphic symbols that represent language and the readers' language skills and knowledge of the world. In the process of reading, the reader creates meaning that are intended by the writer (Harris & Sipag, 1984: 8). This means that reading in this case is a result of employing a number of interrelated skills that develop gradually over a period of time. In this regard, reading depends on the recognition and comprehension of written symbols that are influenced by readers' perceptual skills, decoding skills, experiences, language background, mind-sets and reasoning abilities. The interactive model is also linked to the social constructivism theory (Lev, Vygotsky, 1978), because it also highlights that readers have to be constantly active, search for meaning and more importantly undertake collaborative activities that will be enhanced through conversation. The interactive model also demands that students be active readers, students should work as a team and work collaboratively with others for better understanding. Thus, teachers could provide reading assessment tasks that encourage students to work in groups to share and exchange information, analyse and make decisions as necessary. Therefore, group projects and research essays tasks should be common at tertiary education.

Further, the model challenges the lecturers to give students high order tasks that can develop their comprehension and understanding skills in order to apply themselves, tasks that can integrate other basic language skills such as writing, speaking and listening; tasks can develop both the academic and professional development to apply; tasks that students can be able to generate meaning from both the physical and psychological contexts to develop their critical thinking skills, problem solving and contextualising the information to real life situation. It is a powerful model for providing relevant responses from students. For the students the model demands that they develop their vocabulary knowledge, decoding knowledge, syntactic and discourse knowledge, metacognitive skills as well as comprehension. These cannot be

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developed in a vacuum without a considerable amount of input from lecturers. Hence, the model informs classroom pedagogy as well as learning strategies.

In conclusion, both models demand effective and efficient pedagogical practices and effective learning styles in reading for both lecturers and students to impart knowledge in reading and for the students to acquire the reading skill. The two models demand a robust, active and task-based reading practices.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach with a blend of quantitative approach were used to collect data for this study at the University of Botswana. The quantitative method was used to quantify the results of the study; hence, the qualitative approach dominates the analysis. The study investigated the following key research questions: a) Did the students find the reading skill they acquired at year 1 useful at post year one? b) What techniques did they use to improve their reading skill at post year one? c) What challenges did they encounter while trying to improve their reading skills? and d) What solutions did they put in place to improve their reading skills? The key research questions were important to find out from the students whether they applied the skills they learnt or not.

Post year one students from all faculties of the university formed the population of this study because they have already completed Communication and Study Skills Courses in their first year where the reading skill was developed to help them get grounded with university learning. The participants were respectively in years II, III and IV. The Post Year 1 Students were selected for this study since the authors believed that their experiences in reading and doing assignments, reading for test, preparing for oral presentations in subsequent levels could offer some form of feedback in applying some of the reading skills taught at year 1.

A total of hundred (100) students were sampled using random and convenient sampling. The students came from the following Faculties: Social Science, Science, Education, Business, Health Sciences, Engineering & Humanities. Majority (N=40) of these students came from the Faculty of Social Sciences comprising Law, Criminal Justice, Statistics, Psychology, and Social Work departments.

All the students selected randomly by their lecturers completed open ended questionnaires while four of the classes held focused group discussions to verify information provided in the questionnaires. The results from the open-ended questionnaires and group discussions provide concrete evidence and showcase measurable results on the students' attitude towards the reading skill, the students had mixed feelings about the reading skill they acquired from year one and this was depicted by the statistical graphics provided by their answers. Each key research question was followed to hear students' voices about what they say about the reading skill. The questions were addressed individually to ensure specific and adequate responses. The information provided by the students was tabulated where necessary to provide data driven insights about their reading skill. The tables provided a clear picture of their attitude towards



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reading and even where the numbers were small, information was not ignored because it could have a loud message. Data were read and reread to make comparisons and check similarities and differences. The analysis did not deviate from the key research questions and the results and discussion were presented according to each research question.

### The Results of the Study

This study sought to investigate experiences and attitudes of post year 1 students towards the academic reading skills they learnt at year 1 with the aim of recommending interventions that can improve their current reading skills. Specifically, the students were asked to indicate whether they found the academic reading skills they had been taught at year 1 useful, as well as to examine the techniques they currently used to improve their reading skills, the challenges they encountered and the solutions that in that opinion could be put in place to improve their reading skills.

The first question asked by this study sought to find out if the students found the academic reading skills, they had learnt at year 1 useful. The findings show that all the students (N=100) claimed that they did find the skills useful. Table 1 shows that majority of the students (N=93) indicated that the reading skills course at year 1 improved their performance while minority (N=2) claimed that the skills helped them to attempt the academic questions without doubt.

Table 1: Usefulness of the reading skills

Item	N
1. It has improved my academic performance	93
2. I read effectively and efficiently with comprehension	92
3. I am able to pick the key points when reading	85
4. It has helped me to improve the quality of my assignments and other academic work	84
5. It has sharpened my critical thinking skills, because I ponder the issues I read about	81
6. It has improved my writing and speaking because I have enough knowledge	80
7. I pass my tests, assignments, and examinations with high marks – thanks to the reading skill	78
8. It has enhanced my note making skills	77
9. It has helped me understand content much better	75
10. It has increased my vocabulary	69
11. It has improved my oral presentation skills	65
12. It helped me to apply my knowledge and skills in reading and writing	60
13. It has helped me to confidently participate in class debates because I would have read in advance	58
14. It has opened my mind	40
15. I apply different reading techniques in looking for information	36
16. I do not waste time searching for a book or journal in the library.	33
17. It helped me to better interact with the texts I read	20
18. Researching for assignments is no longer a headache	10
19. Before the lessons I skim through the topics we are going to do during lessons for better understanding	8
20. I am able to filter content I am reading and leave out what I do not need	8
21. Reading helped me to construct my sentences with coherence and cohesive devices	7
22. I attempt academic questions without doubt	2

The table above show the most frequent responses provided by participants. The responses suggest that post year one students apply their reading skills to the various courses they are reading for at the University of Botswana. The answers provided show development and improvement as well as application of higher reading skills. Further, the answers suggest that the correct application of the reading skill improves their academic performance (93/100 students). Not only has the reading skill improved their performance, it has also made a positive mark in writing and speaking skills (80/100 students) note making skills (77/100 students). The feedback provided by students is positive: *“I pass my tests..., it opened my mind..., it increased my vocabulary...”* These few verbatim statements indicate appreciation and positiveness towards reading skills acquired in year one.

A good number of students believed that the skill has contributed toward improving their critical thinking skills (81/100). There is also an indication that students read effectively and efficiently due to the techniques in reading they acquired, it is possible that they read with comprehension and understanding (92/100 students). The results above confirm that indeed some students apply the reading skills they learnt from their COM courses in year one.

The second question sought to investigate the reading techniques used by the students. Table 2 shows that...

Table 2: Reading techniques used by the students

Item	N
1. I highlight the most important points	99
2. Scanning	98
3. Skimming	90
4. Short notes – note making	85
5. Reading to pick the key points	85
6. Paraphrasing	70
7. Summarising texts	66
8. Rereading to familiarise myself with the text	55
9. I do detailed reading	48
10. Actively read by making notes and asking myself questions	36
11. Find meaning of words	30
12. Make a mind map	23
13. Reading novels	3
14. I make sure I have an objective before reading	1
15. None of the students mentioned intensive and extensive reading skills	0

The responses from participants suggest that students benefited from the teaching and learning of the reading skill at year one. The results suggest that when students read, they apply reading techniques such as skimming (90/100 students), scanning (98/100), summarising texts for better understanding and as they read they identify and highlight the key points (99/100 students). Further, there is an indication that students make notes as they read (85/100 students) and even paraphrase (70/100 students) to avoid plagiarism. These expressions of affirmation and gratitude indicate the effort and input reinforced by CSSU lecturers which helped the

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK students to acquire these reading skills. The results show that students have acquired reading techniques to improve their academic performance. However, important to note is that students do not have a purpose for reading since only one student mentioned that they identify an objective to follow before reading. Students did not mention that they read extensively or intensively especially at higher levels such as year 3 and 4.

The third question identified the challenges encountered by the students when reading. Table 3 shows that students indeed encounter problems in reading.

Table 3: Challenges encountered by the students

Item	N
1. 1. Applying referencing skills – citations	97
2. Poor internet connections	96
3. Lack of resources at UB	89
4. Not understanding and not being able to grasp content	88
5. Inconducive environment	83
6. 1jPoor concentration	82
7. Why discontinue the reading skill at year one when we have not yet mastered it? – its absence in the next levels breaks learning	82
8. Laziness to jot down key points	79
9. Reading is time consuming especially when dealing with complex topics	78
10. Working under pressure	75
11. Struggling to understand	75
12. Lack of full comprehension of the text	65
13. Modern Technology is a serious distractor	62
14. Lack of time to improve my reading	45
15. I still find note making difficult	26
16. Confusion about the meaning of words and what I just read	19
17. It hard to summarise	18
18. Reading one sentence more than once	12
19. Not being able to understand key terms	12
20. I skip important information	11
21. Unavailability of books – have to borrow them	10
22. Laziness to read – relying on lecturers notes only	10
23. 1. I cannot use the words I read in my writing	2

The responses above demonstrate that even though students claim that they have acquired the reading skill, they still encounter challenges in reading. This is a grey area that needs attention. Most students are clustered around poor internet connection at the institution even though this is not directly related to the reading skill (96/100 students). Further, they blame the institution for not providing enough resources even though they did not specify which ones (89/100 students). Also, students believe that they fail to use citations in their writing (97/100). What does this mean? They write unscholarly papers/ assignments? Then how do they score high marks? Do their lecturers note that they do not use citations? These questions are relevant after all what the participants said in Question 1. The challenges contradict the appreciation they mentioned unless the participants rendered lip service to question one. The results also show

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that some students are lazy to read and this could be a contributory factor to their poor performance. The results show that more needs to be done on the reading skill, hence some students suggested that it should continue in subsequent levels. The challenges mention here require concerted effort towards reading from all the lecturers to sustain the skills.

The fourth question sought to the students' opinions about how the above challenges could be addressed. Table 4 shows the challenges encountered by students.

Table 4: How the challenges encountered by the students can be resolved.

Item	N
1. 1. Use of timetables and schedules	95
2. Managing time	90
3. Reading to understand	85
4. Being committed to the reading skill and practice it	74
5. Upgrading and improving network connectivity at UB	70
6. Practicing reading more frequently	70
7. Practicing reading and writing on daily basis	65
8. Determination to take or make notes	63
9. The reading skill should be taught in years II, III, & IV	50
10. Making the environment in the library conducive by installing air conditioners which can control the hot temperature rooms	40
11. Providing more computers in the library	30
12. More exposure to different assignments	25
13. Making reasonable exam timetables that are not packed	11
14. Being given adequate time to research	10
15. Teach reading skills that are applicable	3
16. Mobile phones being silenced during reading/study time to avoid distraction	3
17. Should always be given material to read to practice	3
18. Using an audio and pocket dictionary are necessary in reading	2
19. Providing adequate books in the library	2
20. Students need to put more effort	2
21. Being focused	1
22. Lecturers should reduce the amount of workload for students	1

The table above suggests that students are aware of some of the possible solutions to their challenges. Most students believe that they should have a schedule, hence, draw a timetable and follow a schedule for reading (95/100 students). Students also believe that the reading skill can be improved by managing time (90/100 students). Other student suggest that they need to read with understanding in order to interact with the text (85/100 students). Also, some students believe that when reading they should make notes for reference and better understanding (63/100 students). Again, students see as a solution the improvement of network connectivity at the university (70/100 students). Half of the students believe that the reading skill should be continued up to year IV level (50/100). The overall responses suggest that students pass the bug to other issues that could be indirectly related to reading and could not be easily resolved by them through self-reflection. In essence, the responses provide feedback that can be helpful to the lecturers in CSSU as well as the university at large. The solutions may require self-

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examination by the post year one students as well as a reflection on pedagogical practices used  
by lecturers to teach the reading skill.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

### **The reading skills acquired improves academic performance**

The findings revealed that students seem to appreciate the skill of reading as it improved their academic performance in various ways. There seem to be a connection between their academic performance and good reading skills. For example, most students believed that the reading skill they acquired from year one has significantly *“improved their academic performance...they can effectively and efficiently read...apply different reading techniques.. do not waste time searching for a book or journal... able to filter content..”*. This is an indication that the reading skill has positively impacted on their academic performance and that they have become better readers. Further, the students appreciated the fact that the skill has sharpened their intellectual ability as well as being influential in improving their writing skill. Like Garner (1987) argued reading strategies are supposed to remedy cognitive failure. The other critical thing is that some students are able to filter content they read and pick the key points, which is an indication that students reading with comprehension and understanding. Brown (2007) holds the same sentiments that acquisition of the reading skills makes the students to be in control and manipulate information to suit their needs. Again, the fact that after reading students are able to share and express their feeling and thoughts and contribute towards debates made in class are positive signs of application of the skill. In essence, the reading skill had led to their solutions of improving the skill other students' wish it could continue in subsequent levels. Ngabut (2015) on reading theories argue that at an advance level such as tertiary education readers' cognitive and language competence play an important role in acquiring the reading skill. This could mean that students critically think, synthesise information and make decisions on what they read (Ngabut, 2015). This is consistent with the top-down model that required the students' background is recognised under cognitive processes the reading skills and its application starts with the reader (Harris and Sipay, 1984; Goodman, 1967, 1971). However, there is evidence that some students at UB underperform, supplement and retake, although the reasons could be different, we cannot rule out poor reading skills that lead to mediocre marks and poor academic performance. Camiciottoli (2001) argued that there were students who showed negative attitude towards reading and this contributes to poor academic performance. The students' perspective and attitudes towards reading indicated that they apply high order and advanced skills in reading.

### **Reading techniques used by students**

The findings revealed that students apply advanced reading techniques to improve their reading. While each student constructs a unique reading identity and finds ways to sustain their reading habits, there are some commonalities identified in behaviours and attitudes of students. For example, most students identify the key points as they read and even make notes for reference. For example, one students said, *“as I read, I identify the key points and underline them, it depends on my assignment.”* Again, there is an indication that the information they source out is paraphrased and summarised to show comprehension and understanding of the



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texts they read. *"Paraphrasing is difficult but I want to do it to better capture the point I am writing about."* Further, students appreciated skimming and scanning information at the initial stages of reading to identify the sources they want to use. Half of the students studied take the trouble to reread the texts they have identified. Rereading assists in picking up new information that could have been missed when reading for the first time, helps students to make connections, strengthens the pattern of reading, assists in gaining better understanding and helps students dive deeper into the text.

Of the hundred students that were studied, only one student indicated that when they read they have an objective in mind. This could help the student focus on what they are reading for, they can look for appropriate answers. Further, none of the students mentioned reading a variety of texts for an assignment and also doing intensive reading where they can ask themselves questions, make comments, make comparisons and check relevancy of the information they are reading. This technique, though ignored is suitable for students at tertiary learning. Pam and Kim (2011) argued that students use the following reading strategies to read: 1) using hypermedia, (2) using computer applications and accessories, (3) dialoguing, (4) setting up reading purposes and planning, (5) previewing and determining what to read, (6) connecting prior knowledge and experiences with texts and tasks, and (7) inferring. These strategies have not been mentioned by students at UB. Some students seem to be still using the traditional way of reading and yet the strategies mentioned here could improve their reading skills even further. Most of the responses provided by students are consistent with what Rumelhart (1980) says. The scholar argued that the interactive model requires students to interpret, analyse and make decisions with the information they read, their background, experiences, and mind-set are all critical to reading (Rumelhart, 1980). While the model requires students to be constantly active and apply the reading techniques where necessary, there is a possibility that some students ignore the skill.

### **Challenges encountered by students in reading**

The findings indicated that students at UB encounter problems when reading or even before reading. Their problems can be categorised into two. The personal problems and technological problems. First, some students seem to not have acquired appropriate skills of reading because they still have problems with citing the sources within their essays although they have been taught to acknowledge sources they use in their writing. Further, other students argued that they do not grasp the content they read. There could be a lot of contributory factors to this such as poor concentration and lack of noting the key points. A good number of students reported to be lazy to note the key points. For example, students said: *"I still find note making difficult... there is confusion about the meaning of words and what I just said read... it is hard to summarise... reading once sentence more than once... not being able to understand key terms... I skip important information..."* The same problems have been noted from the Thai University students that they are weak in the target language English and therefore do not comprehend some of the information they read (Kasemsap & Lee (2015). Sheorey and Mokhtari (1994) also shared the same sentiments that if students do not commit time for reading, then it will affect their reading skills. Another possible contributor to lack of grasping content is that of an unconducive environment and modern technology such as face books and

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WhatsApp messages. If students are hooked up in this kind of technology, they may end up not reading altogether, the use of social media requires discipline. The second category is that of technological problems where there is poor internet connections that could make students not access information from different data bases that require the use of the wireless connections, lack of resources and unavailability of books to borrow. This is beyond students' control.

Another distressing phenomenon is that students still find note making and summarising a daunting task. This could mean that students may miss out on important information as they read and therefore, do not read with comprehension, they plagiarise the authors' words and do not follow the text because they are unable to pick the key points. If these students do not master the mentioned techniques of note making, summarising and paraphrasing it could mean that student might perform poorly academically. It requires a lot of practice for them to master the skill of writing, because it overlaps with reading. Rumelhart (1980) argued that the interactive reading model requires students to critically think. This depends on the instruction and tasks given to the students, they should be interactive and dig out students cognitive and language skills. Further, the instructors should clearly lay out the purpose of reading to guide the students (Ngabut, 2015). On the contrary, this runs parallel with the interactive reading model. The model demands exposure to opportunities where students can apply their reading techniques, this means that lecturers should give the students high order tasks to apply themselves.

### **Solutions to the problems of reading**

The findings of the study indicated that students reflected on the way they do things. Most of the solutions suggested require self-reflection and self-consciousness for them to practice the reading skill. For example, the solutions require students to create a schedule and timetable for themselves to follow, being focused, and committed to reading and finding time to read to improve their academic performance. Again, students should learn to use reading strategies to determine cause and effect, make simple inferences, summarize, or recognize an author's purpose. Some suggestions require that lecturers from various faculties of the University of Botswana should also emphasise the skill of reading. For example, students said, "*exposure to different assignments is necessary* and that they should be allowed to "*practice reading and writing more frequently.*" There is emphasis by the students to improve the library environment to make it a conducive place to study with air conditioners. Tabata-Sandom (2015: 286) advises teachers and instructors of L2 reading that when students read extensively, it may not pose enough challenges to satisfy their language desires. This means that students have to go back to intensive mechanisms to read and summarise, ask questions, make notes on main points, check their understanding, discuss what they have read and do the reading under a suitable environment. These were given by students in the first question though not all of them indicating how they appreciate the reading skill.

Though an old hat, Abraham (1955) points fingers at teachers and instructors and interrogates their teaching. The author argued that teachers also may not be good role models when it comes to reading, they use the same text all the time, same bibliography, same notes year after year and they do not adapt them to different classes and variations abilities. Whether this is true or

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not with instructors, it is vital to always refresh their notes and update them. Further, Abraham (1955) asks lecturers to reflect on the following questions: How often do we wait until we've met a class before we decide what to assess? How often do we update our bibliography? How much do we know the background of our students? The author believes that these questions would help instructors to assist learners to cope with reading before they would know who they are teaching. A British psychologist, Sir Frederic Barlett (1886-1969) argues that instructors should try to provide prerequisite knowledge and that more attention should be given to teaching high-order comprehension processes. This could partly assist learners at UB to read effectively and efficiently even in subsequent levels.

### **Implications of the study**

The study has implications on instructors that emphasis should be put on the reading skill for learners to constantly improve their reading. This requires collective efforts by different faculties and course coordinators to collaboratively emphasise and monitor students reading skills because it affects the quality of the assignments they produce.

The study has implications on learners because it is still not known what makes students supplement and retake courses, students have to read in order to acquire good grades. Though there could be various contributory factors to this, probably reading could be one of them.

### **CONCLUSION**

Students at the University of Botswana appreciated the reading skill they acquired at year one and argued that it has to continue in subsequent levels of tertiary learning. Some of the students' reading practices agree with the top-down and interactive reading models. The students' perceptions and attitudes towards the reading skill indicated that it has improved their academic performance through using appropriate reading strategies for reading, but this can be through language competence and interactive strategies they engage in as they collaborate to do their assignments and read for tests. However, this is not to say that there are no challenges they encounter, students have highlighted problems that indicated that learning the reading skill only in year one is not adequate, the reading skill has to be emphasized by instructors in other courses to complement the reading skill acquired from year one.

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