

ACADEMIC READING EXPERIENCES OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS PURSUING AN MA-TESOL: A MIXED METHODS STUDY

Experiencias con la lectura académica de estudiantes internacionales que cursan una maestría en TESOL: Un estudio de metodología mixta

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ABSTRACT

The United States is a primary destination for international graduate students. For those whose first language is not English, academic reading is an obstacle that must be overcome to achieve academic success. This exploratory, sequential, mixed methods study investigates the academic reading experience of seven international MA-TESOL students in a southeastern U.S. university and identifies the most impactful factors within four consequential categories: reading challenges, reading adjustment, reading efficacy, and reading support. Findings suggest that with institutional, faculty, international and domestic peer support, and engagement with the reading process, students can overcome initial reading concerns and eventually acquire sufficient reading skills to complete their master's program successfully. Implications suggest that academic reading support for international graduate students should nurture collaborative efforts, emphasize knowledge of reading strategies besides language proficiency, and promote parity or interconnectedness with academic writing.

Keywords: academic reading, mixed methods study, international ESL students, graduate students, master's in TESOL (MA-TESOL)

RESUMEN

Los Estados Unidos son un destino principal de los estudiantes internacionales de nivel post-grad. Para aquellos estudiantes cuya primera lengua no es inglés, la lectura académica es un obstáculo a ser vencido para lograr éxito académico. Este estudio exploratorio secuencial de metodología mixta investiga las experiencias en la lectura académica de siete estudiantes internacionales que cursan una maestría en la enseñanza de inglés a hablantes de otras lenguas (TESOL, por su sigla en inglés) en una universidad en el sureste de los Estados Unidos e identifica los factores más impactantes dentro de cuatro categorías consecuenciales en la lectura: desafíos, ajuste, eficacia, y apoyo. Los resultados sugieren que, con el apoyo de la institución, los profesores, y los compañeros de estudio internacionales y locales, y con una interacción en el process de la lectura, los estudiantes pueden vencer estas preocupaciones iniciales respecto a la lectura y finalmente adquirir suficientes destrezas de lectura para completar exitosamente su programa de maestría. Las implicaciones sugieren que el apoyo en la lectura académica para estudiantes internacionales de nivel post-grad debe cultivar los esfuerzos colaborativos, enfatizar el conocimiento de las estrategias de lectura además de los conocimientos de lengua, y promover paridad o interconectividad con la redacción académica.

Palabras Claves: lectura académica, estudio de metodología mixta, estudiantes internacionales de inglés como segunda lengua (ESL, por su sigla en inglés), estudiantes al nivel post-grad, maestría en la enseñanza de inglés a hablantes de otras lenguas (MA-TESOL, por su sigla en inglés)

INTRODUCTION

A top destination for international students is the United States. By studying there, many hope to develop future career opportunities and gain experience that will improve their employment prospects either in the United States, internationally, or at home. It is also seen as a means to gain new perspectives on their field of study as well as build connections and networks (Urban et al., 2014). International

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students benefit in their own countries from having an American degree (Guruz, 2011) as it is valued by governments and the private sector (Garcia & Villarreal, 2014). There is also the appeal of being in an English-speaking country. This alone is a major incentive for students who are intent on pursuing a career in English language education.

In 2018-19, the number of international students in the United States surpassed one million for the fourth consecutive year, increasing by 0.5% to reach a new high of 1,095,299 (Open Doors, 2019). Out of a total of 377,943 international graduate students, 220,622 pursued a master's degree. These included students from many different countries undertaking a master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (MA-TESOL). Typically, this graduate degree prepares students to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) to adult learners in the United States. It also prepares graduate students to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to adults and/or children in non-English speaking countries. Most international students in an MA-TESOL program have native languages other than English and are welcomed by universities because of their personal experience with English language learning, their varied educational backgrounds, and their diverse views on teaching and learning.

Previous studies of international students have tended to concentrate on particular thematic areas such as acculturation issues (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998), adjustment challenges to the new country and education system (McNamara & Harris, 1997), obtaining employment skills and professional experience (Spencer-Rodgers, 2001), career decision-making (Shen & Herr, 2004), and student expectations about U.S. higher education (Chow, 2011; Kingston & Forland, 2008). However, research has been lacking on the academic literacy needs of international students who are non-native English speakers pursuing a graduate program of study. Such students must overcome numerous obstacles, not least of which is academic reading. The objective of this mixed methods study was to explore the academic reading experience of international ESL graduate students in the MA-TESOL program and to identify the factors that influence their reading performance. By doing so, this study spotlights a crucial component in academic success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The International Transition Experience

Transition experiences for international students can be both positive and negative as they adjust to new social, cultural, educational, and linguistic obstacles associated with living and studying in a foreign country (Onabule & Boes, 2013; Terrazas-Carrillo et al., 2014). Evidence shows that international students are quite adaptable, receptive, and positive about the transition experiences they encounter (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Moores & Popadiuk 2011; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). Many students find ways to alleviate acculturative stress by possessing an optimistic attitude and adopting a growth mindset (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Nunes & Arthur, 2013). Nevertheless, they face more challenges transitioning to postsecondary education life compared with the transitions of their U.S. peers (Hall, 2013; Heyn, 2013; Yuan, 2011). It is not unusual for new students in the United States to find it hard to adjust to many simultaneous changes. In this new academic environment, they must contend with new professors, subjects, and teaching approaches. While these are challenges faced by every student, they may have a greater impact on those whose first language is not English. The reality is that for most international students, entering American universities and colleges can be an overwhelming transition. One of their principle concerns is the ability to cope with the academic demands while operating in a second language.

In particular, international students in higher education often struggle with academic reading. Perhaps this is not surprising given that native students with no language barrier can also find academic reading to be challenging. Not only are international students at the graduate level supposed to adjust to more advanced second language literacy tasks, but also to another academic culture and perhaps even a new field of study. Therefore, improving their preparedness and ability to cope with academic requirements is a concern for many institutions. Though international students sometimes undertake an

academic or foundation/pathway English program preceding or during their studies, “this alone may not be enough to meet their diverse literacy needs” (Maunsell, 2019, p. 1).

Reading Barriers

Academic reading at university is an obstacle for international students whose native language is not English. It takes time to master academic reading skills, especially given insufficient English proficiency (Phakiti et al., 2013). International students are often bemused by the copious amounts of required reading at the graduate level. The volume and complexity of academic reading commands greater time investment, much re-reading, and often overdependence on using a dictionary (Cheng et al., 2004). Getting assignments done by deadlines can be a struggle if readings take international students longer to finish (Zhang & Mi, 2010). Several studies have revealed that non-native English speakers spend far longer than native speakers to finish reading and are slower in becoming accustomed to critical academic reading (Cheng et al., 2004; Durkin, 2004; Reid et al., 1998). Second language learners often spend so long attempting to understand the material that they may be left with little time (and confidence) to reflect critically on it. This is problematic because graduate level education involves critical reading, critical evaluation, and the capacity to integrate information from a myriad of sources (Grabe, 2009).

Second language learners from different cultural traditions approach reading differently because of the influence of their previous learning experiences and first language literacy practices (Zhang, 2017). They may be accustomed to different orthographic structures and so use different information processing procedures when reading English texts (Koda, 1995). Because international students are influenced by background knowledge and culture, they need schemata to make the required connection to the new academic context. “Because of varied L1 reading practices, the kind of reader schemas they bring to bear on their L2 reading interact necessarily with their reading process and comprehension” (Zhang, 2017, p. 218). It takes time to become used to a new culture, educational environment, and academic expectations, all through a second language (Andrade, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008). The challenges of new academic reading practices can be a heavy load to carry for many international students (Bell, 2000; Nambiar & Ibrahim, 2011).

For international ESL students, the change of country prompts a move from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’ (Grabe & Stoller, 2002) owing to the different academic requirements. When English is taught and learned as a foreign language in the native country, the students are at the stage of ‘learning to read’, mainly focusing on the knowledge of English language, such as understanding word and sentence meaning. While studying in an English language environment at a master's level, they are expected to engage in critical reading, specifically, to integrate what is being read with other information sources, to engage in critical evaluation, and to apply these to their specific reading tasks (Grabe, 2009). Hence, they reach a stage of ‘reading to learn’. The goal of critical reading requires them to integrate, evaluate, and choose among competing interpretations in order to make and support their own argument. Although master's study signifies a new stage of ‘reading to learn’, international students are actually doing catch-up ‘learning to read’ at the same time, with more efforts being made to understand the text meaning. As a result, their academic reading encompasses both ‘learning to read’ and ‘reading to learn’. The disparity between these two unique goals in their respective learning environments inevitably leads to reading complexities.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic reading experiences of seven international ESL graduate students in an MA-TESOL program at a university in the United States and the academic reading challenges they must overcome to achieve success. The questions used to guide the study were as follows:

- 1) What is the academic reading experience of international ESL graduate students in the MA-TESOL program?
- 2) What factors impact the academic reading performance of international ESL graduate students in the MA-TESOL program?
- 3) How do follow-up quantitative findings help explain the initial qualitative results?

Research Design

A two-phase exploratory sequential mixed methods design was used. A mixed methods approach was seen as the best way of answering the aforementioned research questions and producing a pragmatic final report. It could lead to a better understanding than either qualitative or quantitative alone by presenting more evidence from different perspectives, thereby adding breadth and depth to the findings. Mixed methods would also maximize the strengths of both approaches, help corroborate findings, and allow for discovery of something that may have been missed by adopting a monomethod (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The most advantageous characteristic of conducting mixed methods research involved triangulation because the researcher could approach the issue of academic reading from different vantage points including data sources. Such exploration was required because the variables were unknown and thus needed to be first identified in order to then be studied quantitatively. Also, the results from the qualitative phase informed the development of the quantitative instrument and the formation of test items. On completion of both phases, the researcher integrated the two data sets and drew overall conclusions.

Setting and Participants

The study took place in a public, urban university in the southeastern United States. For the academic year 2018-19, the university had an international population of 1,097 students from 83 countries, almost 5% of total student enrollment. 951 were enrolled in a degree-seeking program while 146 were enrolled in an Intensive English Program. For the past fifteen years, international students have enrolled in this university's Master of Arts in Education degree in ESL, known as the MA-TESOL. In this program, courses are delivered through online, blended, or face-to-face learning. International students originate from regions all over the world including Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Specifically, the seven participants in this study come from the countries of China (2), Oman (1), Taiwan (2), Vietnam (1), and Yemen (1).

Data Collection

The data collection process was both elaborate and comprehensive. The primary phase was a qualitative investigation of academic reading in which interview data were collected from two former MA-TESOL students. The qualitative findings, including themes, statements and quotes, were then used to create a survey for a larger sample in the second phase of the study. The survey was first tested with a pilot sample for applicability, reliability, and validity through which respondents were asked for their feedback. The survey was further modified before being administered to the larger sample. The fact that participants provided input on the survey design helped with its validity and relevance. As a result, the resultant measurement tool was more effective. The final survey was administered online to eight current MA-TESOL students at the same university in order to corroborate and expand on the qualitative findings. Table 1 lays out the various phases of this study.

Table 1. *Data Collection Procedures*

Phase	Procedure	Product
Qualitative Data Collection	1) Develop an interview protocol with open-ended questions 2) Conduct two individual semi-structured, in-depth interviews with former international MA-TESOL students 3) Transcribe interviews	Interview data on the academic reading experience of international MA-TESOL students
Qualitative Data Analysis	1) Reading and rereading the interview transcripts 2) Coding the data 3) Thematic analysis	Main themes/categories identified
Quantitative Instrument Development	1) Construct a questionnaire based on interview themes & variables and informed by the literature 2) Create a pool of survey items for each theme 2) Use a Likert-type scale 3) Review by peers for relevance and applicability	Survey instrument (for piloting)
Quantitative Data Collection	1) Pilot questionnaire with former international MA-TESOL graduate students 2) Refine the questionnaire length and items based on respondents' feedback 3) Administer modified questionnaire via an online survey to measure the academic reading experience of 8 current international MA-TESOL students	Survey data addressing the factors that impact academic reading performance of international MA-TESOL students.
Quantitative Data Analysis	1) Import data into SPSS. 2) With descriptive statistics, establish reliability and validity of the survey scale and items	Present descriptive results and intercorrelations of the survey.
Integrated Data Analysis	Integrate the results of the qualitative and quantitative phases in narrative form using corresponding themes, survey items, and quotations.	Discussion of findings and recommendations for students, faculty & institution.

Qualitative Phase. For the qualitative phase, the researcher conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews with two former international MA-TESOL students who had just completed the program. For the interviews, questions were crafted to encourage participants to share how they felt about their academic reading experience. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions which gave the participants an opportunity to elaborate in their responses (see Appendix 1). Further probing questions were used to clarify or expand on the information provided. The length of individual interviews ranged from 40 to 60 minutes. Questions were based on a review of the literature and identification of studies that have examined student academic experiences. The interview questions followed a predetermined pattern. The researcher took brief notes throughout in order to capture significant words or comments, as well as to record thoughts and reflections. These notes were used to clarify responses, elicit additional information, and aid in the later transcription and analysis of the recordings. Data were verified using member checking and rich, thick description. The interview recordings were electronically stored under password protection. All identifying information was de-identified to protect participant confidentiality. Summaries were created of participant responses and used in the data integration phase. From this interview data, four themes emerged which included academic challenges, academic reading adjustment, academic reading efficacy, and academic reading support.

Quantitative Phase. The survey instrument design for the second phase built on the themes generated from the qualitative data. For each theme, a survey item pool was developed (see Appendix 2). These were pre-tested and refined in order to increase reliability and validity. In other words, the survey was piloted with two former international MA-TESOL students in order to obtain feedback on whether the questions were interpreted in the same way, and whether the response categories were sufficient in number. The only modifications required after the pilot phase were related to the demographic questions where the researcher decided to rephrase some questions, use fewer words, and increase clarity. Overall, the pilot phase helped to improve the accuracy of the data. The final survey started with a demographic section, which consisted of 5 questions. This was followed by a 4-point Likert Scale comprising the traditional “strongly disagree–strongly agree” response continuum. The

researcher felt that this was an effective way to measure respondents' attitudes or beliefs about a particular topic. There were 37 items in the form of declarative statements with a clearly positive or negative opinion. Respondents also had the opportunity to offer comments under each theme as well as to answer an additional comment question at the very end (see Appendix 3). The survey was administered online using Qualtrics. It was sent to eight current international students on the MA- TESOL program. Five out of eight people responded, which was a response rate of 62.5%.

Data Analysis

The qualitative analysis consisted of five steps: 1) data were initially explored by reading and rereading transcripts, 2) data were coded by segmenting and labeling the transcripts, 3) peer checking was used to verify the codes, 4) main themes were established by collapsing similar codes, 5) themes were connected and interrelated. The data analysis was effectively handled in that qualitative data produced four relevant themes related to the academic reading experience. The qualitative information gathered in this phase helped with survey development. For the quantitative phase, the data were checked and rechecked to ensure that nothing was missed or wrongly entered. Descriptive statistics included mean and frequency distribution to establish reliability and validity of the survey items and scales. A key step in the exploratory sequential design was adhering to an integrative data analysis, namely "building the connection from the qualitative analysis and results to the development of the quantitative feature" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 240).

To facilitate integration at the interpreting and reporting levels, the researcher transformed the quantitative data into a narrative description and later merged quantitative and qualitative findings into a combined analysis. By integrating the two, stronger inferences ensued (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The results of the combined qualitative and quantitative analysis are summarized here in both narrative and tabular form.

RESULTS

Qualitative Results

Interview data analysis produced four main themes associated with international students' academic reading experiences in a U.S. university: academic reading challenges, academic reading adjustment, academic reading efficacy, and academic reading support. Both international graduate students interviewed represented typical international MA- TESOL students. Student A, from China, had recently graduated from the MA- TESOL program along with Student B, from Vietnam. Both had strong feelings about the challenges, adjustment, efficacy, and support within the context of reading.

As regards specific academic reading challenges, Student A stated, "When taking the TESOL graduate program, I experienced a lot of difficulties." She never thought she would have to read so much in just one week and then always produce or write something. She found it difficult to relate to the readings. Student A talked about the importance of understanding and then reaching a general comprehension. "I found that when I was reading some academic papers or chapters from books, I felt I didn't catch anything and sometimes I was exhausted from reading these papers."

Student B found it hard to read for long periods of time and easily lost her concentration. "I can't read more than 30 minutes. My mind doesn't have the tendency to withstand the load of reading more than 30 minutes." She empathized with other second language (L2) students who experience reading difficulties in university. "They cannot very actively be engaged with a text because they lack vocabulary and knowledge of sentence structure and, most importantly, they seldom have that specific reading background."

As regards academic reading adjustment, Student A immediately experienced difficulties in reading academic English when she started the MA- TESOL program. "It was much more difficult than I expected. I felt overwhelmed when I first started my academic English reading." Student A thought the academic environment at the U.S. university was totally different from her home country, and she

needed a lot of time to adjust. “I thought academic difficulties would be easier but it more than surpassed what I expected.” She strongly suggested that students prepare well academically beforehand because the academic achievements matter for international students.

Student B lacked confidence in the beginning. She felt that previously she had not received enough specific instruction in how to read, or at least what she was taught did not register with her. She realized how reading within her MA-TESOL program was very important to her academic progress and also impacted her writing. “Things were very hectic for a long time, but it improved.” She knew that the English language would be a difficulty, at least at the beginning. “It is not really different from what I expected as I always acknowledged my problem even when I was in my home country. When I came here, I just tried to improve my language skills as much and as fast as possible.”

In relation to academic reading efficacy, when Student A did not grasp the main idea of what she was reading, it made it very difficult for her to complete the homework assignments. She found it difficult to relate to the readings and over time changed her reading habits. “I learned to use different approaches to get the meaning”

Student B also found it difficult at times to comprehend the main topic. Her reading improved by practicing reading regularly and by summarizing the reading materials. She found it helpful advice to summarize each paragraph in the reading materials so that when she finished reading all of the materials, she “could comprehend clearly the main ideas.” Her reading over time improved not least because of her large effort. “Yes, the pressure of getting an A in subjects kept me going.” “The more I read, the better my writing skill became. While reading, I could absorb good structures and grammar as well as academic vocabulary.” She started to write down new words that she encountered frequently. She did not have time to look up every word that she did not understand. She tried to avoid translating to her first language and preferred to use an English-English dictionary.

For academic reading support as of the beginning of her MA program, Student A took an academic English course in reading and writing. There her instructor taught her some skills in reading which she found very beneficial. “I could use these skills in my degree courses. If there were no pathway courses, I am sure that it might be very challenging for those who had no academic English background.” As a result, she found herself changing her reading habits. Student A also mentioned the help she received from professors and classmates. She regarded awareness of the issues and collaboration between students and professors as very important. “Yes, they helped me a lot.” She highlighted the fact that her college professors gave her feedback on writing more than on reading. One professor encouraged her to go to the Writing Center to receive help with run-on sentences. She found the Writing Center tutors to be helpful and explained how they provided useful insights. She thought this would also help with reading.

Student B also received language support in reading and writing through her pathway English courses that she took simultaneously with her master’s degree. Her reading improved by frequently practicing reading and by summarizing the reading materials. She felt that she received sufficient help from professors. “Whenever I had problems, I could make an appointment with either the tutors or my professors to get support from them.” However, she did feel that instruction should have been more “step by step because, I believe, it takes time and effort to solve this problem so we need to be instructed slowly.” She also received help from fellow students. “I worked with my classmates outside of class.” Other students helped her, especially by explaining academic vocabulary. She was not aware of any university resources online to help her with reading. Student B felt students could do more reading with professors in class so that they could be helped to improve their reading technique.

Quantitative Results

Of the five survey respondents, two were from Taiwan, and the others were from China, Oman, and Yemen respectively. Three of these respondents were also taking an academic English course along with their MA-TESOL courses. Regarding these respondents’ experience with graduate level study, several specific factors accounted for their reading challenges, adjustment, efficacy, and support.

Academic Reading Challenges. The survey section on Academic Reading Challenges consisted of ten statements (see Table 2). It was notable that all students agreed, though not strongly, that the reading assignments were too long. Students were almost evenly divided in their views on motivation and degree of reading difficulty. Almost all agreed that there was too much new vocabulary to learn. Two students did not feel that they relied on dictionary use as such while the others admitted they did. They were split on whether reading was beneficial to their writing or whether reading made them feel extremely tired. Regarding English proficiency, outside of one student, all considered their English level to be sufficient to understand the main ideas in reading texts though the majority agreed that they tried to understand everything. More students agreed than disagreed that reading was more difficult than writing. For the comment question, one student stated that “reading comprehension is the reason why it takes some time for me to finish any reading. As a non-native speaker of English, I read slower than a native speaker because I have to stop at any point to make sure I understand the meanings.”

Table 2 *Academic Reading Challenges*

#	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total (N)
1	The reading assignments are too long	0%	0%	100%	0%	5
2	Motivation to read is a problem for me	0%	40%	60%	0%	5
3	Reading comprehension is difficult for me	0%	60%	40%	0%	5
4	There are too many new words to learn	0%	20%	20%	60%	5
5	I must rely on a dictionary to understand new words	0%	40%	20%	40%	5
6	Reading doesn't benefit my writing	40%	60%	0%	0%	5
7	Reading makes me feel exhausted	0%	60%	40%	0%	5
8	I don't have enough English proficiency to understand the main ideas in a text	40%	40%	20%	0%	5
9	I try to understand everything in the reading	0%	20%	40%	40%	5
10	Reading is more difficult for me than writing	0%	40%	60%	0%	5

Academic Reading Adjustment. The section on Academic Reading Adjustment consisted of ten statements (see Table 3). Notably, no student strongly disagreed with any statement. All students agreed with two statements that referred to the help from the university with student academic adjustment and the difference in their reading practice now compared to before. Also, students accepted that they read more now than previously in college/university, considered that reading assignments suited their learning style, and usually connected their reading to previous knowledge. Unlike the others, one student disagreed that familiarity with the topic helped with understanding. All students acknowledged that the faculty had introduced them to new learning styles. Students were almost evenly divided on whether they expected the amount of reading they had to do or were prepared for what was required of them. Most of the students found the reading easier at this stage in their learning than upon first embarking on the MA-TESOL program. One student still did not find reading to be any easier.

Table 3 *Academic Reading Adjustment*

#	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total (N)
1	I read more now than in my previous university/college career	0%	0%	60%	40%	5
2	The reading assignments suit my learning style	0%	0%	80%	20%	5
3	My university offers opportunities to help international students adjust to academic life	0%	0%	100%	0%	5
4	My reading practice is different now than previously	0%	0%	100%	0%	5
5	I can usually connect what I read to previous knowledge	0%	0%	80%	20%	5
6	I understand the reading more when I am familiar with the topic	0%	20%	40%	40%	5
7	Faculty have exposed me to new learning style(s)	0%	0%	80%	20%	5
8	I did not expect the amount of reading we must do	0%	60%	20%	20%	5
9	I was sufficiently prepared for the reading requirements when I arrived here	0%	40%	60%	0%	5
10	Reading is easier for me now than when I first began the MA-TESOL program	0%	20%	40%	40%	5

Academic Reading Efficacy. The survey section on Academic Reading Efficacy consisted of nine statements (see Table 4). Students were divided on their concern with academic reading. All agreed that they could use different reading strategies to help with their understanding and that, as a result, they were able to comprehend main ideas. They felt that they could summarize information in a text or synthesize information from multiple texts, take effective notes, and meet deadlines for assigned readings. Students answered that they usually read outside the assigned readings and could critically evaluate information in the readings. One student commented, “I actually agree and disagree with the statement about deadlines. I can meet deadlines for assigned readings but, as I wrote in the previous comment, reading comprehension takes time.”

Table 4 *Academic Reading Efficacy*

#	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total (N)
1	I am not concerned about my academic reading	40%	20%	40%	0%	5
2	I can use different reading strategies to help me understand	0%	0%	100%	0%	5
3	I can understand the main ideas in a text	0%	0%	80%	20%	5
4	I can summarize information in a text	0%	0%	80%	20%	5
5	I can synthesize information from multiple texts	0%	0%	80%	20%	5
6	I can usually take effective notes when I am reading	0%	0%	80%	20%	5
7	I can meet deadlines for assigned readings	0%	0%	100%	0%	5
8	I usually read additional material outside the assigned readings	0%	0%	100%	0%	4
9	I can critically evaluate the information in the reading	0%	0%	100%	0%	4

Academic Reading Support. The survey section on Academic Reading Support consisted of eight statements (see Table 5). Students recognized faculty help with understanding and, except for one student, agreed that they provided reading tips. The majority agreed that faculty gave more advice on writing than reading and that international peers helped them with their reading. They were almost evenly divided on whether domestic peers helped them with their reading. Four students agreed and one student disagreed that they learned new reading strategies, that the university provided support resources, and that the department offered academic reading support.

Table 5 *Academic Reading Support*

#	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total (N)
1	Faculty help me understand the reading	0%	0%	60%	40%	5
2	Faculty provide me with reading tips	0%	20%	40%	40%	5
3	Faculty give me more advice on writing than reading	0%	20%	60%	20%	5
4	My international classmates help me with my reading	20%	0%	80%	0%	5
5	My native English classmates help me with my reading	40%	0%	40%	20%	4
6	I have learned new strategies for improving my reading	0%	20%	80%	0%	4
7	My university provides reading support resources	0%	20%	80%	0%	4
8	My department offers academic reading support for international students	0%	20%	80%	0%	4

DISCUSSION

The aim of this mixed methods study was to investigate the academic reading experience of international MA-TESOL students in a southeastern U.S. university and identify the factors that most impact this aspect of their language and literacy competency. The qualitative phase helped determine four main themes. Using significant interview statements and quotes from former MA-TESOL graduates, a quantitative survey instrument was developed that consisted of key reading factors from within these themes. The survey was administered to current MA-TESOL international students in order to ascertain key determinants of their reading performance.

The academic reading experience of participants offers tangible insights into what helps with the reading process. Based on the results of the study, it is clear that international ESL graduate students in an MA-TESOL program may encounter academic reading challenges and anxieties. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily undermine their overall reading experience or academic success. With time and adequate institutional and peer support, students can overcome initial barriers and arrive at a point where their reading skills are sufficient to manage reading tasks.

The findings indicated that the international students faced different reading barriers. There was universal agreement among participants that the volume of required reading was too high while the majority agreed that there was too much new vocabulary. This made comprehension difficult as students tend to understand a text more based on the amount of words that are familiar and known to them (Nation, 2001). While basic word and sentence meaning may have been sufficient previously as English language learners, much more in-depth knowledge was required at the graduate level. Also, students were split on the degree to which they relied on a dictionary to translate words and the difficulty level of the reading comprehension.

Despite the reading focus in this study, students largely agreed that reading also had a beneficial effect on their writing. This highlighted the interconnectedness of reading and writing (Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Hirvela, 2016). There was some disagreement among students as to whether they considered reading more difficult than writing. It was acknowledged, however, that faculty supported them more with writing than with reading.

In general, motivation is another factor that is considered necessary for reading success. Garnering enjoyment from reading, approaching it with a positive mindset, and seeing value in it are all associated with motivation (Unrau & Quirk, 2014). By being motivated and enthusiastic, students are more susceptible to learning opportunities. However, in their responses, students appeared to disagree about the actual role played by motivation.

Students needed time to adjust to the new academic environment, but all agreed that the university offered opportunities to help them adjust. They all felt that their reading practices were different now than previously. The majority thought they were being exposed to new learning styles and that their background knowledge helped them. Over time, the reading demands became more manageable. The majority felt that their English proficiency was ultimately sufficient to at least understand the main ideas in the readings.

A difficulty for many studying abroad is that expectations do not meet reality. Many students find they must engage in reading tasks and with a reading volume beyond the norm in their own countries (Hirano, 2015). For example, the less experience that students from abroad have with academic texts, the more likely they are to struggle with reading large quantities (Wilson, 2003). In this study, students were divided in their view of what they had expected when they first came to a U.S. university and whether their previous experience provided adequate preparation.

Much agreement existed among students when it came to the perception of their own efficacy and ability in relation to academic reading. All indicated that they could use different reading strategies, meet deadlines for assignments, and read additional materials outside of the assigned readings. The majority felt that they could summarize or synthesize information and take effective notes. Despite this positive view of their reading efficacy, two thirds still indicated some anxiety about academic reading.

A mainly positive view existed regarding the level of support available to international students with most agreeing that faculty were helpful and provided reading tips. The majority also acknowledged the resources provided at the university and department levels. Students largely maintained that they were supported by their international peers but were almost evenly split on the level of support provided by domestic peers.

The interview and survey results suggested that these international ESL students corroborated in their responses regarding “contextually rich accounts” (Jang et al., 2008, p. 233) of the academic reading experience. Under the four themes of academic reading challenges, adjustment, efficacy, and support, great convergence existed between both former and current international MA-TESOL students. The emphasis on required English proficiency, high reading volume, and new vocabulary input corresponded strongly between both groups while strong agreement also existed on university support

provision, especially from faculty. All of these students appeared more confident in their reading ability after a period of time and developed new reading strategies through their program. In comparing both groups, current and former MA-TESOL students, some divergence was evident in the degree of reading anxiety experienced by each of these groups. The degree of anxiety around reading was more palpable among qualitative responses from former students compared to the quantitative responses from current students. Similar to the Yauch and Steudel study (2003), “the survey results ... also highlighted additional issues that had not yet been revealed” (p. 476), including the fact that when it came to peer support, this seemed to come more from fellow international students than domestic students and that more institutional support existed for writing than for reading.

Overall, the meta-inferences or data findings from both the qualitative and quantitative components provided a more complete understanding of academic reading at a U.S. university for international MA-TESOL graduates whose first language is not English. The study points the way for more literacy-based research studies at this level, perhaps including a larger sample size across several institutions. This would further inform targeted institutional and program support for international ESL graduate students. It would also be beneficial to know how these students’ academic and linguistic experiences might inform an institution’s future work with English learners.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

From this and previous studies, it is clear that understanding texts is not solely determined by language knowledge. Reading success in a second language requires a combination of both linguistic ability and reading skills (Grabe, 2009). Language knowledge and effective use of reading strategies aid comprehension. In fact, effective strategy use can compensate for a lower level of language knowledge (Estacio, 2013; Kolić-Vehovec & Bajšanski, 2007). Students may have to learn to read differently than previously, e.g., not attempting to understand every word but instead paying attention to main ideas and how the author supported or defended these ideas. This in turn leads to greater reading speed. Strategic readers incorporate a wide range of strategies (Grabe & Stoller, 2001). If one strategy fails, another can take its place. As Anderson (1991) states, “It is not sufficient to know about strategies; a reader must also be able to apply them strategically” (p. 469).

Besides continued language development, it is important that international ESL graduate students be instructed on the effective use of reading strategies. A fundamental principle of learning and understanding is being able to connect new information to what is already known. As “a nonlinear, active process” (Oxford, 2017, p. 273), readers mix language knowledge (grammar and vocabulary) and world knowledge to aid comprehension. Reading is a process of active reflection (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992) where new content should be related to background knowledge. In this regard, pre-reading strategies play a vital role in activating background knowledge to help organize and comprehend new material (Maghsoudi, 2012). For example, pre-reading prepares students for the kind of vocabulary and language that might be used. International students who are encouraged to adopt pre-reading strategies are likely to engage more with academic reading texts and increase comprehension.

Faculty should collaborate and work with their international students in building reading skills. This in turn would foster greater confidence, engagement, and motivation. More peer support from domestic students would also help. This could take the form of a study group with a mix of native English speakers and international ESL students. Many domestic students also find academic reading to be difficult. They could work together in figuring it out. A study group or even an academic reading club would motivate students to read more and also advance academic socialization by having discussions with others in the graduate community.

There is a tendency for faculty and institutional support to concentrate more on academic writing while reading is often ignored. This is unfortunate as academic reading paves the way for academic writing and influences both its quality and depth (Niven, 2005). Furthermore, the integration of reading and writing is vital for overall literacy strategy and development (Grabe & Zhang, 2013; Hirvela, 2016). Both should be viewed together. International students should be encouraged, for example, to write while they read. Underlining, making notes, and/or writing short summaries assist

with concentrating and grasping difficult ideas. Trying to restate difficult ideas in their own words is beneficial.

Of course, there are no shortcuts. The one predominant principle in all of this is that the more students read, the better they become. Researchers unanimously agree on this (Grabe & Stoller, 2001).

CONCLUSION

International ESL students study at universities all over the United States. This remains a priority for higher education administrators because of these students' valuable contribution to campus diversity and internationalization. Many students see this experience in the United States as their best opportunity for professional advancement; however, university education poses challenges, especially for non-native speakers of English. Graduate level study, in particular, places high reading demands on international ESL students. Being faced with reading material above their language ability or comprehension can be frustrating, stressful, and overwhelming. Fortunately, students are able to overcome these challenges. It may require more time and hard work, support from a variety of sources, and resiliency. However, in the end, becoming efficient readers helps to ensure academic success. All of us must embrace our international ESL students in their efforts to become efficient readers.

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Appendix 1

Interview Protocol

Section 1: Content Introduction

1. Where are you from and when did you finish the MA-TESOL?
2. What is your language background?
3. What did you study before doing the MA-TESOL at UAB? What was that experience like?
4. Give a brief description of your previous English language learning experience. How and where did you learn?
5. In particular, what reading and writing difficulties did you have before doing the MATESOL?

Section 2: Perceptions about Reading

1. Can you tell me about the main reading difficulties you experienced here as a graduate student.
2. How did reading issues affect your academic progress?
3. What help did you get with reading at UAB? Give details?
4. How did your reading improve over time?

Section 3: Perceptions about Support

5. Do you think you got enough help with academic reading from professors or other UAB staff? In what way?
6. Did fellow students help you academically? Native or International? How did they help you?
7. Are there other college resources that you used to help you e.g. online. Where did you locate them?
8. What more could be done to help international students with reading?

Section 4: Perceptions about the graduate academic experience

9. How was the graduate academic experience different to what you expected?
10. What are the main challenges for international students in your view e.g. academically, socially, emotionally etc. Give details.
11. How have other international students you know felt about their academic experience?
12. In general, did you feel supported in your studies as an international graduate student? Explain.
13. How will this experience as an international student benefit you in the future?

14. What advice would you give other students thinking of coming here to study?

Appendix 2

Table 2: Definitions of Variable & Development of Survey Item (Sample)

Themes	Item	Supporting Qualitative Data
Academic Reading Challenges	Reading comprehension is difficult for me The reading assignments are too long	Student A: I found that when I was reading some academic papers or chapters from books, I felt I didn't catch anything. Student B: My mind doesn't have the tendency to withstand the load of reading more than 30 minutes.
Academic Reading Adjustment	I did not expect the amount of reading we must do Reading is easier for me now than when I first began the MA TESOL program	Student A: I thought academic difficulties would be easier but it more than surpassed what I expected. Student B: Things were very hectic for a long time but it improved.
Academic Reading Efficacy	I can use different reading strategies to help me understand I can understand the main ideas in a text	Student A: I learned to use different approaches to get the meaning. Student B: I could comprehend clearly the main ideas.
Academic Reading Support	Faculty help me understand the reading My international classmates help me with my reading	Student A: Yes, they helped me a lot. Student B: I worked with my other classmates outside of class.

Appendix 3

Academic Reading Survey

Thank you for taking time to complete this academic reading survey which I am conducting as part of a mixed-methods study. Your responses are important in helping me understand the academic reading experience of international students in the MA-TESOL program. The results of this survey are confidential, and no identifiable information will be included in the final report of findings.

Based on your experiences in the MA TESOL program, please take a moment to respond to the following prompts as honestly and meaningfully as possible. Feel free to provide additional comments within the questionnaire and at the end.

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. When did you start the MA TESOL program?
2. When do you expect to graduate?
3. Where is your home country?
4. What do you identify as your native language(s)?
5. Are you doing (or have you done) an academic English course here? *Yes/No*

For each of the prompts listed below, respond to the following scale by circling a number from 1 to 4:

- 1— Strongly Disagree
- 2— Disagree
- 3— Agree
- 4— Strongly Agree

B. ACADEMIC READING CHALLENGES

<u>Level of Agreement</u>			
<u>Low</u>			<u>High</u>
(strongly disagree)			(strongly agree)

6. The reading assignments are too long	1	2	3	4
7. Motivation to read is a problem for me	1	2	3	4
8. Reading comprehension is difficult for me	1	2	3	4
9. There are too many new words to learn	1	2	3	4
10. I must rely on a dictionary to understand new words	1	2	3	4
11. Reading doesn't benefit my writing	1	2	3	4
12. Reading makes me feel exhausted	1	2	3	4
13. I don't have enough English proficiency to understand the main ideas in a text	1	2	3	4
14. I try to understand everything in the reading	1	2	3	4
15. Reading is more difficult for me than writing	1	2	3	4

Other comments (open-ended response):

C. ACADEMIC READING SUPPORT

	Level of Agreement			
	Low (strongly disagree)			High (strongly agree)
16. Faculty help me understand the reading	1	2	3	4
17. Faculty provide me with reading tips	1	2	3	4
18. Faculty give me more advice on writing than reading	1	2	3	4
19. My international classmates help me with my reading	1	2	3	4
20. My native classmates help me with my reading	1	2	3	4
21. I have learned new strategies for improving my reading	1	2	3	4
22. My university provides reading support resources	1	2	3	4
23. My department offers academic reading support for international students	1	2	3	4

Other comments (open-ended response)

D. ACADEMIC READING ADJUSTMENT

	Level of Agreement			
	Low (strongly disagree)			High (strongly agree)
24. I read more now than in my previous university/college career	1	2	3	4
25. The reading assignments suit my learning style	1	2	3	4
26. My university offers opportunities to help international students adjust to academic life	1	2	3	4
27. My reading practice is different now than previously	1	2	3	4
28. I can usually connect what I read to previous knowledge	1	2	3	4
29. I understand the reading more when I am familiar with the topic	1	2	3	4
30. Faculty have exposed me to new learning style(s)	1	2	3	4
31. I did not expect the amount of reading we must do	1	2	3	4
32. I was sufficiently prepared for the reading requirements when I arrived here	1	2	3	4
33. Reading is easier for me now than when I first began the MA TESOL program	1	2	3	4

Other comments (open-ended response)

E. ACADEMIC READING EFFICACY

	Level of Agreement			
	Low (strongly disagree)			High (strongly agree)
34. I am not concerned about my academic reading	1	2	3	4
35. I can use different reading strategies to help me understand	1	2	3	4
36. I can understand the main ideas in a text	1	2	3	4
37. I can summarize information in a text	1	2	3	4
38. I can synthesize information from multiple texts	1	2	3	4
39. I can usually make effective notes when I am reading	1	2	3	4
40. I can meet deadlines for assigned readings	1	2	3	4
41. I usually read additional material outside the assigned readings	1	2	3	4
42. I can critically evaluate the information in the reading	1	2	3	4

Other comments (open-ended response)

F. Any Additional Comments