



**Corollary Effects of Academic Reading: Acquisition of Academic Language and Attainment of Writing Competence by M.K Senthil Babu**

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**Abstract**

Several studies have proved the constructive effect of reading on language acquisition and academic writing. Reading qualitatively improves language competence by creating an impact on the learners' vocabulary, grammar, spelling, syntax, content, and fluency. Academic reading is the practice of reading academic materials to inherit knowledge pertaining to a specific discipline. Thus, academic reading unlike other traditional methods effectuate language acquisition by synthesizing the newly acquired knowledge with the already existing information. In this context, comparing form focused template based instruction method and academic reading, this study elucidates that reading is more effective than instruction in the acquisition of linguistic components such as vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills. The study also foregrounds that by reducing the reader's writing apprehension, academic reading enables academic achievement. Since reading aids a better acquisition of language, this study proves that reading is desirable than receiving instruction focused on form.

**Keywords:** Academic reading, Academic writing, Writing apprehension, Language acquisition, Language competence.



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### **Introduction**

Several studies have proved the constructive effect of reading on language acquisition and academic performance (Pitt M et al,1989; Cromley, 2009). Reading qualitatively improves language competence by creating an impact on the volume of vocabulary, grammar, spelling, syntax, content, and fluency. (Greaney 1970; Krashen 1989; Ponniah 2008; Hsieh, Wang & Lee 2011). Accordingly, reading specific academic texts helps readers to acquire specific academic language (Hyland 2007). Academic reading is the practice of reading academic materials to inherit knowledge pertaining to a specific discipline. According to Dutcher (1990) academic reading is an active and collaborative meaning making process involving three components namely readers' prior knowledge, information comprehended by reading a text and situation which demands reading. Academic reading is also defined as an intricate information processing skill by Akarsu and Harputlu (2014), with which readers perform meaning creation from academic texts and from subsequent ideas and thoughts related to them. Academic reading situates readers in a specific academic environment and enables knowledge attainment (Erickson, Peter and Strommer 2006). Academic materials include discipline-specific texts, educational materials, encyclopaedias, science reports among others. There is a compulsion, necessity and a larger purpose behind reading these types of academic texts. Academic reading requires frequent and multiple reading of the text, where the reader must be slow in the process in order to comprehend the text completely. Thus, academic reading unlike other traditional methods effectuate language acquisition by synthesizing the newly acquired knowledge with the already existing information. In this context, by comparing form focused template based instruction method and academic reading, this study elucidates that reading is more effective than instruction in the acquisition of linguistic components such as vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills. Further, this study also foregrounds that by reducing the reader's writing apprehension, academic reading enables academic achievement. Since reading aids a better acquisition of language, this study proves that reading is desirable than receiving instruction focused on form.

### **Benefits of Academic Reading**

Academic reading improves academic language competence by creating an impact on the learner's overall knowledge of content, vocabulary, grammar and syntax. Content knowledge



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is defined as knowledge of discipline specific concepts by Guthrie & Alao (1997). In academic reading, only when the input is comprehensible that the reader can acquire essential knowledge about content. However, the text has to retain certain level of complexity in order to expose the reader to new concepts. If the text is simple and does not have conceptual freshness, only repeated exposure to the already familiar content happens (Day and Bamford 1998). Academic reading help readers to acquire the pattern of academic texts (Boyle & Peregoy 2001). Since academic reading is complex than general reading, academic readers read more and they possess more content knowledge in comparison to non-readers (West & Stanovich 1991). Besides helping readers to acquire relevant knowledge about content, academic reading also enhances the reader's knowledge of utilizing the content in an organized way.

In order to comprehend an academic text, it is essential to have a knowledge of academic vocabulary. In determining the learners' ability to comprehend, knowledge of academic vocabulary is a decisive factor (Laufer 1997). Academic readers hold a high chance of attaining more academic vocabulary and verbal abilities (Cunningham & Stanovich 2001). Major studies show that vocabulary is incidentally acquired through reading (Nagy, Herman and Anderson 1985). In comparison with explicitly learnt words, incidentally acquired vocabulary through academic reading retains for long in the mind of readers. Academic reading makes them familiar with complex syntactic structures, new vocabulary, etc. which improve their cognitive abilities. Thus, reading academic texts not only leads to the acquisition of academic vocabulary but also develops academic learning.

Grammar is a set of definitive rules and principles which enables logical and coherent communication in a language. Based on the type of acquisition followed by the reader, grammar knowledge can be categorised into two types namely explicit grammar knowledge and implicit grammar knowledge. Explicit grammar knowledge refers to knowledge of grammar gained through by consciously following the rules stated in grammar books whereas implicit grammar knowledge is acquired subconsciously while reading texts. Academic reading helps readers to gain grammatical knowledge implicitly from academic texts. Several studies dismiss the explicit method of teaching grammar (Krashen 1982; Krashen 2004b) by observing that learners do not acquire grammar in the order prescribed in grammar texts. An



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empirical study shows that grammar acquired incidentally helps readers to perform well in grammar tests (Ponniah 2008). Learners acquire the rules of the grammar incidentally through the exposure to academic texts and while writing and editing they make use of this incidental learning, which is referred to as “subconscious feel for correctness” (Ponniah 2009, pp. 6). Various studies show that learners who follow conscious learning of grammar fail to perform well in tests in comparison to those who acquired grammar in a subconscious manner through reading (Ponniah & Krashen 2008b, 2009). Ponniah (2007, 2008b) claims that subconsciously acquired grammatical competence can be readily put to use in actual performance. Thus, academic reading of texts provides relevant knowledge of grammar to readers.

After acquiring knowledge about content and vocabulary used in the text and attaining grammatical competence, it is important to synthesize and utilise it in an organised manner. With the help of cognitive abilities readers has to determine syntactic rules because there are no specific rules in creating syntactic arrangement and it cannot be taught but acquired in a subconscious manner while reading. Syntax is associated with “how words are put together to build phrases, with how phrases are put together to build clauses or bigger phrases and how clauses are put together to build sentences” according to Miller (2002, pp. 9). While constructing complex sentences, knowledge of syntax is essential in conveying the idea without compromising the meaning. Krashen (2004b) states that syntax can be incidentally acquired through reading. In other words, academic reading facilitates readers to arrange linguistic elements such as words, phrases, clauses and sentences in a meaningful manner.

**Form Focused Instruction Template Based Learning**

Form focused instruction template based learning, which is identified as a conscious method of language learning, is one of the traditional ways followed by learners to achieve language competence. Ellis (2001, pp.1-2) describes that form focused instruction is, “any planned or incidental instructional activity that is intended to induce language learners to pay attention to linguistic form.” This type of learning instigates the learner to take efforts to concentrate on the form in a conscious way. When learners’ thrust is on form they are automatically motivated to learn grammatical rules in the same way. Since learning of language is done in a mechanical way, and when learners are impelled to focus on the



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linguistic form in a conscious manner, it may not have a profound and sustained impact on the reader. As they are trained to consciously follow grammatical rules both explicitly and implicitly, this kind of induced learning might be helpful only for a limited period and it will not persist over a long-time span. This foregrounds the existing controversies regarding form focused instruction which is a pertinent problem in second language acquisition (Smith 1993 & Van Patten 1990).

**Limitations of Form Focused Instructions**

In learning a language and attaining linguistic competence, following form focused instruction method has its own limitations. In order to follow form focused instruction in classroom, teachers should possess a thorough understanding of the formal rules of language to ensure that learners meet the three important conditions to apply the rules of grammar in the second language (Krashen 1982). Primarily, learners should know all the fundamental rules of the grammar; secondarily, they should always focus on the form, and finally they should have time to apply those learnt rules. Generally, learners are only aware of rules which linguists have identified and instructed, even well-known grammarians do not possess a profound knowledge about all rules of a particular language. It has been speculated that through grammar manuals, grammarians perpetuate only instructions which they are aware. Only in grammatical tasks and assessments, explicit learning helps learners and it is uncertain in speaking and writing communication (Valdes, Capitelli and Alvarez, 2011). This is admitted by Ponniah (2011) in his study that consciously learnt grammatical knowledge is readily put to use in grammar test and not in real life situations. Various studies show that when compared to native speakers, it is difficult for non-native speakers to implement all grammatical rules and also to spontaneously improve the form based errors committed by students. It has been found that in most cases, students learn only few rules and follow that in their day-to-day life. Although learners would follow all rules of the language, they won't always be able to focus on the form. Lacking a thorough understanding of how language works at the multiple levels of form, grammar and structure, they cannot focus on all those aspects, if they do so there are chances that they might derange the content during the conversation. Consequently, the process of attaining fluency might get delayed since the attention gets diverted towards form. Due to the delay in developing fluency in speaking, the



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learners have to spend more time in reformulating their understanding of the linguistic form. Ultimately, focusing on the form reduces the spirit of students in learning the language. Thus, form focused instruction is a time consuming process to be followed in order to develop the language competence of the learner. As a pragmatic solution for the aforementioned problems that occur while following form focused instruction method, this article proposes academic reading as one of the remedies which productively helps the reader to achieve language proficiency.

### **The Study**

This study is designed to describe how reading is more beneficial than form focused template based instruction method and how reading helps readers in the acquisition of linguistic components such as vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills among others. Since reading aids a better acquisition of language, this study proves that reading is desirable than receiving more instruction with a specific focus on form.

### **Area Chosen for the Study–Business English**

Business English is the area chosen for this study since it is part of the participants' academic curriculum in which they had to study business English for a semester. The topics covered in the discipline include Email writing, Report writing, drafting the business plan, writing circular and writing a case study.

### **Participants**

The participants of the study were first year post graduate students pursuing their Masters in Computer applications at the National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirappalli, India. The subjects have cleared the All India Engineering Entrance Examination/ Joint Entrance Examinations conducted by the Central Board for Secondary Examinations (CBSE). In their undergraduate course, they have gained enough exposure to English language and also they had the habit of reading and possessed general language proficiency.



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### **Procedure**

Business English writing is used as a representative plan for the study to identify the impact of reading academic texts. Methodologically falling under the non-probability sampling, the study is qualitative in nature. Students were collectively given a pre-test on academic business English writing. The test was conducted to analyse their language proficiency based on the aforementioned linguistic parameters like content, organisation, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. Followed by three classes of reading the same material by the experimental group and traditional method of learning the same material by controlled group, students attended a post-test.

### **Pre-Test**

The pre-test was conducted to evaluate students' prior knowledge of language before the study. Based on the chosen topics related to Business English writing, the students were asked to answer certain questions on email writing, report writing, business plan drafting, circular writing and preparing a case study.

### **Treatment Period**

After the pre-test, students were segregated into two groups; the experimental group titled as Reading Group (hereafter, RG) and the controlled group named as Form Focused Template Based Instruction group (hereafter, FFTBIG). During the treatment period, the reading group was provided reading materials and a brief introduction about academic reading and its benefits. Since the concept of academic reading was not familiar to the students, it was taught in a theoretical manner. Only academic texts were provided to both groups since the materials chosen are from Business English texts. After the introductory session, the reading group was asked to read the materials on their own without the author's intervention. They were advised not to look up the dictionary if they could not comprehend the material and its content. During reading period, the reading group were instructed to seek the advice of the author if they failed to understand the meaning of words or sentences. In such cases, they were redirected to guess the meaning of the text or the meaning of the words were provided by the author. In another classroom FFTBIG was given oral instruction about the material which



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was given to reading group. The two groups were strictly instructed not to indulge in any academic discussion regarding the materials and the treatment period lasted for about three months.

### **Materials and Methods**

A sample writing was taken under each genre and it was used to provide an understanding about specific business writing skills to subjects. Reading materials included the format of drafting an email, writing the case study, circular writing, report writing, and business plan. When readers read these samples of business writing on their own, the subjects of controlled group were not given materials to read but were orally introduced to business writing. They were informed that writing business plan, business emails, reports, case studies and circulars will be taught under business writing. Using the samples, content, language, style and vocabulary used in different genres were discussed.

### **Post Test**

Followed by three classes of reading the material by experimental group and instructing the same in traditional method to the controlled group, students attended another test on business communication. Readers undoubtedly performed better than non-readers in post-test and the differences are statistically significant for five units content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics.

### **Rubrics**

The rubrics taken for the study include content, organization of ideas, vocabulary including technical jargons and words, usage of language, and mechanics or the grammaticality of sentences. The answers were evaluated based on the ESL composition rating scale (Jacobs et al ESL 1981) since the answers are related to English as second language. The scores were given based on the following parameters, Content-5;Organization-3;Vocabulary-3;Language use-3; Mechanics-1.





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### Statistical Tools

The scores were calculated using Statistical Package (SPSS). Several tests including independent sample t- test, effect size (cohen's d), MANOVA and reliability test were conducted. To compare the pre-test and post test performance of the participants, the independent sample t- test was conducted. Effect size value (cohen's d) was calculated (0.2-small; 0.5- moderate and 0.8-high) using the same statistical tool (SPSS) which assists in measuring the magnitude of difference between the groups.

### Result Analysis

The independent sample t-test shows that both readers and non-readers performed similarly in the pretest and the difference between the group is statistically not significant for all the parameters including the over-all performance of the students. Even Cohen's value shows that there is no effect in the parameters.

**Table 1 presents the mean scores and mean difference, p value, t value and effect size of readers and non-readers in the pre-test.**

Sl. No	Parameters	Pre-test of Readers Mean (SD)	Pre-test of non-readers Mean (SD)	Mean Diff.	P value	t value	Effect Size (d) Cohen's d (Effect size r)
1	Content	8.51(2.74)	8.80(2.16)	49	.687	.405	.117 (.058)
2	Organization	5.32(1.72)	5.74(1.17)	49	.413	.998	.285 (.141)
3	Vocabulary	5.23(1.95)	5.78(1.18)	49	.549	1.210	.341 (.168)
4	Language Use	5.17(1.99)	5.78(1.18)	49	.606	1.315	.372 (.183)
5	Mechanics	2.94(.668)	2.88(.681)	49	.743	.330	.088 (.044)
6	Total	27.19(8.64)	28.98(5.74)	49	.391	.866	.244 (.121)

N=26 for readers and 25 for non-readers

Standard deviation is given in parenthesis for raw scores.

Maximum score for the test is 70:15 for each parameter



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**Table 2 presents the mean scores and mean difference, p value, t value and effect size of readers and non-readers in the post-test.**

Sl. No	Parameters	Post-test of Readers Mean (SD)	Post-test of non-readers Mean (SD)	Mean Diff.	P value	t value	Effect Size(d) Cohen's d (Effect size r)
1	Content	13.57(2.17)	11.60(1.44)	49	.000	3.808	1.069 (.47)
2	Organization	8.98(1.49)	7.52(1.07)	49	.000	3.983	1.125 (0.49)
3	Vocabulary	8.23(1.51)	7.54(1.04)	49	.064	1.894	0.532 (0.257)
4	Language Use	8.25(1.46)	7.56(1.07)	49	.062	1.913	0.539 (0.260)
5	Mechanics	4.00(.916)	3.08(.702)	49	.000	4.012	1.127 (0.49)
6	Total	43.03(3.94)	37.30(4.60)	49	.001	3.465	1.337 (0.556)

N=26 for readers and 25 for non-readers

Standard deviation is given in parenthesis for raw scores.

Maximum score for the test is 70;15 for each parameter

The independent samples t-test (two-tailed) shows that readers performed better than non-readers and the difference between the groups is statistically significant for all the parameters except Vocabulary and Language use (Content,  $t = 3.80$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < .000$ ; Organization,  $t = 3.98$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < .000$ ; , Vocabulary  $t = 1.89$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < .064$ ; Language use  $t = 1.91$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < .062$ ; Mechanics  $t = 4.01$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < .000$ : Total score  $t = 3.46$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Cohen's value shows that there is a Large effect size of 1.33 for overall performance.

## Discussion

Analysing from a theoretical perspective, the study reflects that through reading the provided reading materials, readers subconsciously acquired relevant linguistic components and academic integrant since their focus was on meaning and not on form. This can also be termed as incidental learning. Such acquisition of language is consistent with the input hypothesis (Krashen 2004a). Input hypothesis describes that  $i$  represents the current language



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level of the reader and +1 refers the next level of understanding, such that when the reader receives a comprehensible input one step beyond his/her current linguistic competence, the reader gains a better understanding of the concept. The experimental group intuitively developed their language competence which is evident in their writings. Through reading they acquired substantive input that was necessary to comprehend and answer the questions while writing the test. According to the result of the study, academic reading not only enables the acquisition of all measures of linguistic components but also help them to understand how to implement it in actual performance. The improvement shown by the reading group indicates that reading academic texts and the exposure to the content greatly impacts in the acquisition of discipline specific language. Since instruction method is found to be boring and repetitive, the instructional class did not help students to improve their written academic competence which is consistent with the studies of Biber & Gray (2010). Reading business English materials provided an access to a wide range of vocabulary which is specific to the discipline and resulted in an improvement in post-test performance. Apart from acquiring the technical jargons, participants acquired their right usage as well.

Similarly, academic reading was found to improve in the participants' overall writing competence which is seen in Reading groups' post-test scores. In the post test, the participants developed coherence and cohesion in writing when compared to their pre-test performance which is clearly reflected in their answers. The repeated exposure to the format of business communication samples helped them in gaining deep understanding of the general structures of business writing. Resultantly, readers were professional enough to utilize the acquired words and the language pertaining to business writing. Accordingly, the answers of reading group showed eloquence in expression, writing fluency (Mason, 2007, K. Smith, 2007), clarity and precision in the articulation of ideas, arranging the ideas in a logical sequence while writing (studies reviewed in Krashen 2004a). Also, the familiarity thus gained with linguistic components and language structures reduced their anxiety in writing the test. Having gained substantial knowledge about business communication, the readers showed negligible writing apprehensiveness (SY Lee, 2001). Thus, a discussion with the participants revealed that reading the material reduced their writing apprehension resulting in an improvement in the writing.



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Thus, the reading group were able to organize the content qualitatively and aesthetically. On comparing the pre-test and post-test score of readers' vocabulary, post test score shows significant improvement. (Vocabulary  $t = 1.89$ ,  $df = 49$ ,  $p < .064$ ). The substantial improvement in the vocabulary of the reading group in the post-test performance reinforces input hypothesis (Krashen 2004a) which states that those who read more will acquire more vocabulary. The vocabulary unit of the readers' improved eventually. Echoing similar ideas, the "Reading and English Acquisition Program" conducted in Singapore asserts that students who followed "the shared book experience, language experience and free reading ("book flood"), outperformed traditionally taught students" in vocabulary tests and other language proficiency assessments (Krashen 2004a, pp.5). As Krashen observes that with the help of context clues readers acquire the vocabulary and its meaning (2004a), the reading group was able to perform better than the control group by gaining vocabulary through reading. The reading group reflected better construction of sentence in the post-test when compared to their pre-test performance. Although the experimental group had the basis of understanding in their pre-test they did not have an understanding of how to incorporate them. However, later reading enabled them to be familiar with linguistic elements. Thus, having habituated themselves with better words and complex sentences constructions, the reading group utilized the language effectively in their writings. In learning grammar, the controlled group performed moderately since they focused predominantly on form, unlike the experimental group whose focus was on meaning. Reading aided a subconscious acquiring of grammar for the reading group which underscores the earlier observations that reading provides necessary constituents in acquiring grammar (Krashen 2004a). This result resonates well with Ponniah's (2011) study that, through several exposures to language readers would intuitively acquire not only vocabulary but also grammatical competence as well as the methods of its effective utilization. ( $t=4.01$ ,  $df=49$ ,  $p < .000$ ). In post-test, the experimental group performed better when compared to the controlled group which indicates the proposed benefits of reading in acquiring writing competence. Thus, reading business English materials provided content knowledge and business language vocabulary, business writing style and sentence structure to the readers.



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### **Conclusion**

The exposure to language and content through logical inputs make academic language acquisition easy. For the controlled group, the lack of exposure to academic samples through reading created considerable limitations. Unlike the reading group, the controlled group was not provided reading materials hence they could not visually register the vocabulary and sentence structures in the samples. Since samples were provided to the experimental group, the prospects of acquiring the language and other related competences were high in comparison to that of the controlled group. The dearth of direct access to reading materials occasioned in the controlled group a certain level of unfamiliarity with the content. The limitations encountered by the controlled group who followed the traditional form focused instruction method can be analyzed under various parameters such as content familiarity, attention span, incomplete knowledge of language integrant etc.

The availability of reading materials occasioned rereading which enhanced readers' involvement with the finer aspects of language. Frequent reading created familiarity with the content, which made readers comfortable in using it. Considering the controlled group's knowledge about business communication as  $i$ , with a number of unfamiliar words related to business writing, Krashen's Input hypothesis finds a practical application where the level of input for them was  $i+1$ , acquisition failed to happen in the controlled group. In the controlled group, it is this absence of repeated reading that hindered the cognitive synthesis of academic language which they have absorbed to some extent through listening.

Also as a result of the various limitations of verbal communication method, the attention span of non-readers was inconsistent. The characteristic complexity of the content elevated by the lack of direct engagement with the samples had put subjects under pressure. Only when the mind is not pressured that productive acquisition of information could take place. Lack of reading materials forced the controlled group to channelize their total attention towards memorizing facts and format rather than experiencing the language and content. Resultantly, when personal interaction with the material facilitated better synthesis of knowledge in the experimental group, the absence of such an experience of reading hampered the effective comprehension of knowledge in the controlled group.



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Conclusively, the lack of specific focus on content is reflected in the low performance level of the controlled group. The skill which the experimental group has shown in constructing sentences is not shown by the controlled group. Due to their lack of complete understanding of the content, it can be said that the controlled group's knowledge about the content and writing was partial. Since controlled group failed to completely comprehend various ways of business communication, they encountered problems in implementing the received knowledge. Out of incomplete knowledge they experienced writing apprehension. In totality, all these factors and its negative aspects resulted in the low performance of the controlled group in comparison with the experimental group. To conclude, academic reading enabled reading group to reduce their writing apprehension and facilitated meaningful academic language acquisition.

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