

Developing Reading Skills of the *New Generation* Students

Naujos kartos studentų skaitymo įgūdžių plėtotė

STUDIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES / KALBŲ STUDIJOS

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The article focuses on the issues of reading of foreign language students at contemporary universities. The age of information, rapid development of IT have affected reading preferences and reading skills of our students. In this ubiquitous multimodal digital environment our students' reading preferences have been shifting: digital rather than printed text reading has become an everyday reality. Therefore, a new kind of literacy is required – the ability to read multimodal texts, the latter having an impact on reading. This raises a very important question for educators: What particular reading skills do our students have to acquire in order to fully comprehend multimodal texts? Moreover, in order to understand the meaning of specific professional texts read in English or any other foreign language, the reader requires linguistic as well as specific professional knowledge and particular (cognitive, metacognitive) reading skills, or in other words, disciplinary literacy is required. Consequently, this raises new requirements for university teachers – to teach *New Generation* foreign language (FL) students the reading skills necessary for understanding the meaning, critical assessment and evaluation of professional texts in a foreign language. Thus, the aim of the article is to establish what particular reading skills students need and have to acquire in order to understand the meaning of specific professional texts read in the English or any other foreign language. The aim is specified by the following research questions: what kind of texts (digital or printed) are preferred by *New Generation* FL students and what reading strategies are employed by students learning English as a second language? The research was carried out at Vilnius University in 2016. The analysis of students' reading strategies made it possible to conclude that their reading skills need to be developed more in the process of teaching/ learning foreign languages.

KEYWORDS: cognitive reading strategies, reading preferences, online and printed texts, *New Generation*, foreign language students.

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Abstract



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Introduction

Teaching reading skills, developing reading strategies has always been at the centre of teaching languages for specific or academic purposes at universities. However, it has been recently noted by university teachers of languages that most of the students, even those who come to university with the basic reading skills developed, have difficulty in understanding longer texts, finding logical relationships between constituent parts of the narrative or making inferences. The general, most frequently expressed opinion is that modern digital technologies have negative impact on reading. As noted by N. Carr (2013), modern readers are so much affected by getting information mostly from digital sources that alongside with the change in the reading habits the transformation in thinking is also taking place. This concerns most of the people working with modern information technologies. The questions that language teachers have now to answer are: whether the changes in reading habits are particular to all the age groups of computer users, and to what degree those changes in the reading habits are characteristic of younger generations. How do students of the *New Generation* approach the text? How can teachers improve their learners' reading skills?

Recently quite a number of controversial discussions have appeared on different characteristics of the *New Generation*, their personal traits, social relationships, communication skills (McCrinkle, Wolfinger, 2010; Wilson, 2004), their attitudes towards education and employment (Benfer, Shanahan, 2013; Roehling, Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry, Vandlen, 2011; Stewart, 2009; Werth, Werth, 2011), etc. Among the different, and sometimes quite controversial observations, one factor becomes evident – the *New Generation* students are under exceptionally great impact of information technologies, their learning skills are presumably different from those of the previous generations. As noted by Benhamou (2015), “they have a short attention span and tend to skim-read rather than read properly, which can lead to difficulty at school”. The question now for educators stands as follows: should teachers adapt to the existing situation, regard the learning habits of the learners or should they attempt at developing the appropriate skills in their students? Before answering the question on how to help students with more effective reading of academic or specific texts related to their subjects, we decided to investigate into the situation at Vilnius University. Thus, the aim of the present research is to find out *what particular reading skills our students need and have to acquire in order to understand the meaning of specific professional texts read in the English or any other foreign language*. The aim was specified by the following research objectives, first of all, what students read (what kind of texts: digital or printed), how do FL students read subject-specific texts, and what reading strategies are employed by the students of the English language.

Theoretical Background of the Research

The analysis of literature on educational aspects of teaching students of the *New Generation* gives proof that due to the increasing number of digital texts, their reading is mostly screen-based. The screen-based approach to text is characterized by the decrease in time in which the text is read, as readers usually search for key words only and read texts selectively, which is called non-linear reading (moving from one page or site to the other) (Liu, 2005, 2012). As S. Birkerts (1996) puts it: “Awed and intimidated by the availability of texts, the reader tends to move across surfaces, skimming, hastening from one site to the next without allowing the words to resonate inwardly”. Therefore, readers spend more time searching and browsing than actually reading deeply and with the necessary attention. This happens due to extensive amount of other topics and articles a reader is offered to read while reading online, which distracts him/ her from the text read at that time (Birkerts, 1996).

On the one hand, this type of reading (in conventional methodology of teaching reading named skimming and scanning), looking for the key words and well-developed skills of selective reading might help a reader to cope with the immense amount of information presented online and is quite effective in search of the required sources of information. However, these strategies are ineffective and even adverse when applied to the text which needs deeper approach.

According to the research conducted by C. McKnight, A. Dillon, and J. Richardson (1990), the difference of navigation spent for going back to the index and content pages is twice bigger than navigating on paper rather than on digital printed text. However, the data about students' preferences concerning paper-based and screen-based reading is not consistent. Some studies have found that despite the increasing popularity of digital texts, students do prefer to study from paper-based material rather than a screen-based one (Ackerman and Goldsmith, 2011; Darginavičienė and Janulienė, 2015). However, experience with students of information technology and software engineering at Vilnius University gives evidence that students do not turn to paper-based texts if they have a choice of a digital variant, and even scan or make photocopies to have the screen-based paper handouts. The question remains open since this might depend on different factors such as the age of readers or their specialization, i.e. the subject of studies.

In order to understand the meaning of specific professional texts read in the English or any other foreign language, the reader requires linguistic as well as some specific professional knowledge and particular (cognitive, metacognitive) reading skills, or in other words, *disciplinary literacy* is required. Consequently, this raises the following requirements for educators – to help students acquire the necessary reading strategies and develop reading skills necessary for: understanding the meaning, critical assessment of the text content, evaluation of professional texts in a foreign language.

It should also be mentioned that reading comprehension is a very complex phenomenon depending on many psychological factors of the reader. According to P. van den Broek and C. A. Espin (2012), some of reading comprehension processes are considered to be automatic and others strategic, which could be learnt by instruction and intervention. If the reader masters reading strategies by practicing and could apply them successfully in the reading process, text comprehension increases. Other scholars (Manoli and Papadopoulou, 2012) maintain a similar opinion by claiming that teaching a set of strategies can help students comprehend texts more efficiently. As H. Küçüköğlü (2012) states, students' reading comprehension could be improved through instruction of the reading strategies, such as: predicting, making connections, visualizing, inferring, questioning, and summarizing which are shown by research to improve reading comprehension.

As regards reading strategies, they are considered to be deliberate, flexible, conscious actions that readers apply and adapt to a variety of texts in order to construct meaning from texts, and overcome difficulties in the reading process (Urquhart, Weir, 1998), or in other words, having employed effective reading strategies, students are able to read accurately the information from print and beyond (Maasum, Maarof, 2012).

The first step in deciding what kind of reading strategies students need is to find out a) what are the aims of reading that students set for themselves, b) how do FL students read subject-specific texts, and c) what are the reading strategies that FL students employ to understand subject-specific texts?

Alongside with the questions raised, it was interesting to check what kind of texts (digital or printed) are preferred by the research participants, FL students.

Research Methods and Sample

Theoretical: the analysis of educational literature on educational aspects of teaching students of the *New Generation*, reading comprehension and reading strategies;

Quantitative: diagnostic research was carried out to investigate the respondents' reading preferences and reading strategies. The research instrument – an original questionnaire was developed consisting of four major parts, overall including 23 items. The first part of the questionnaire contained 6 questions that were targeted at finding out foreign language students' preferences of reading printed and/ or online texts about: general news (entertainment, sports, politics, etc.), news within the area of students' studies and finally specialized professional (subject-specific) literature in both the Lithuanian and the English languages. The second part of the questionnaire included three questions about students' ways and modes of reading: *deep reading*, when the reader searches for answers to particular questions; *consistent reading*, when the reader searches for particular information within the text; *scanning*, reading the headlines, looking through the text to find out the key-words, concentrating on conclusions, graphic representation of the text (Nauckūnaitė, 2004). The third part of the research instrument consisted of 12 items directed at finding out the research participants' cognitive reading strategies (Giasson, 2014). The students were asked to answer all the questions by indicating the frequency of their practices applied in terms of reading (preferences, methods and strategies of reading) on a 5-point scale (5= always, 4= very often, 3= often, 2= sometimes, 1= seldom). The research participants' answers *very often*, *often*, and *sometimes* were chosen for the statistical data analysis.

The fourth part of the questionnaire included two open questions that the research participants had to answer, i.e. why they like to read printed and online texts; *qualitative* data analysis was carried out by applying categories and subcategories for each question.

Statistical: descriptive statistics (frequency counts) to measure research participants' preferences of reading, ways and modes of reading, and cognitive reading strategies applied by FL students reading. Software package SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Science) version 20.0 was used to carry out the statistical analysis of the empirical research data.

The study was based on a survey carried out at Vilnius University in 2016.

In order to find out foreign language students' reading preferences and reading strategies, a questionnaire of 23 items was offered to 171 students (77 males, and 94 females) of business, law, physics, linguistics and mathematics. The majority of the students who took part in the research represented mathematics (65), and linguistics (64), physics (23), minority – law (11) and business (8). 152 of all the respondents were first-year students and the rest – 19 were in the second year of their studies. The age of the students varied from 19 to 23 (with 102 students being 19, nearly a third of them (56) being 20 years old, and the rest of them representing 22 and 23 year-old age groups. The level of the English language as estimated by the students according to *Common European Framework for Languages* was between B1 and C2 with most students being of level B2 and C1. The majority of the students had achieved B2 level (83) and slightly less had achieved C1 level (76), the minority claimed to have reached C2 (8) and B1 (3) level of the English language knowledge.

Research Results

As it has been mentioned, the research aimed at finding out what students' preferences of reading are, the research participants had to answer how often they read printed and/ or online texts about: general news (entertainment, sports, politics, etc.), news in the field of their studies (science news) and their professional subject-specific literature in both Lithuanian and English. As it can be seen from the data provided in Figure 1 below, reading of online and printed texts (general news and science news) *online* ones distinctly prevail.

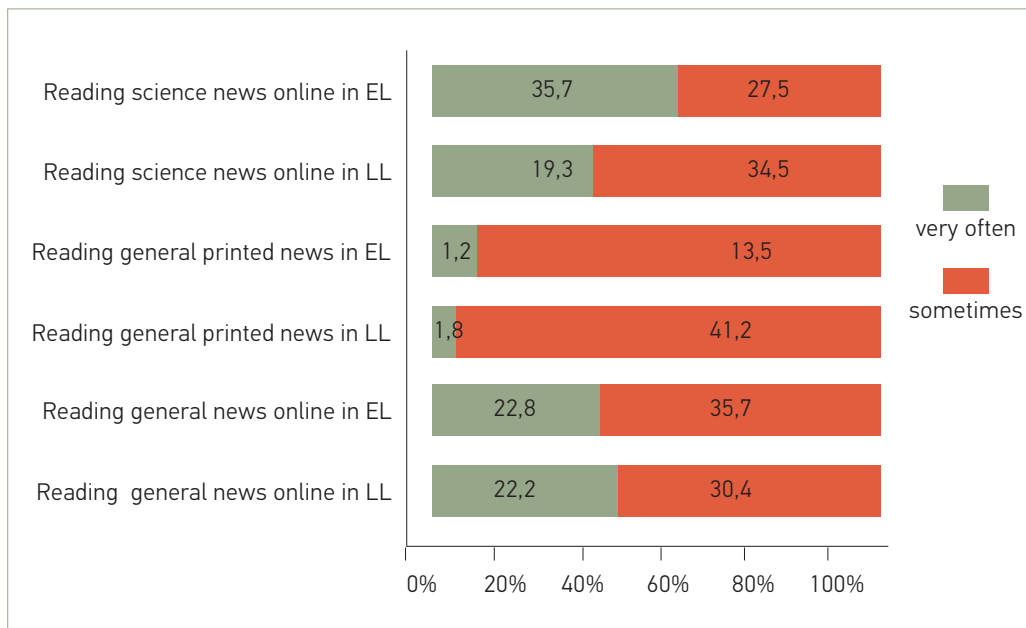


Figure 1

Students' reading preferences of science news and general news online/ printed texts in the English (EL) and Lithuanian languages (LL)

The statistical research data analysis revealed that students prefer reading science news online in the English language more than in Lithuanian. Students seem to like reading texts about general news online more than their printed versions with no differences being found in the English or Lithuanian languages. Obviously, while reading printed versions of general news students read more in the Lithuanian language than in English, this might be due to more Lithuanian printed papers available.

The other principal task of the survey was to establish how the students approach their special subject-specific literature (Figure 2 below).

It seems evident that students like reading special professional literature online slightly more often in the English language than in Lithuanian. Students more often read special literature in Lithuanian online than their printed versions in Lithuanian as well. However, there seems to be no difference in students' preferences of reading the printed version of special literature in both languages, English and Lithuanian. Generally, it could be stated that reading texts for specific purposes online prevails in both languages, English and Lithuanian.

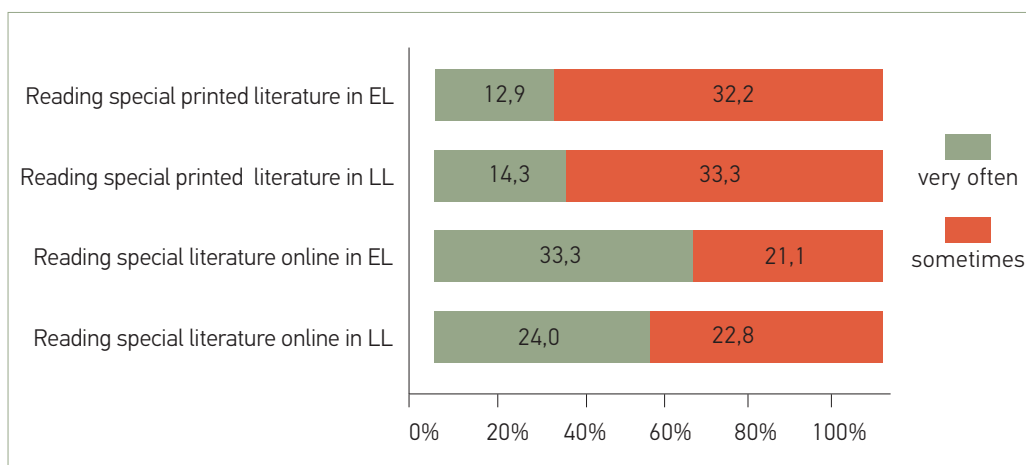


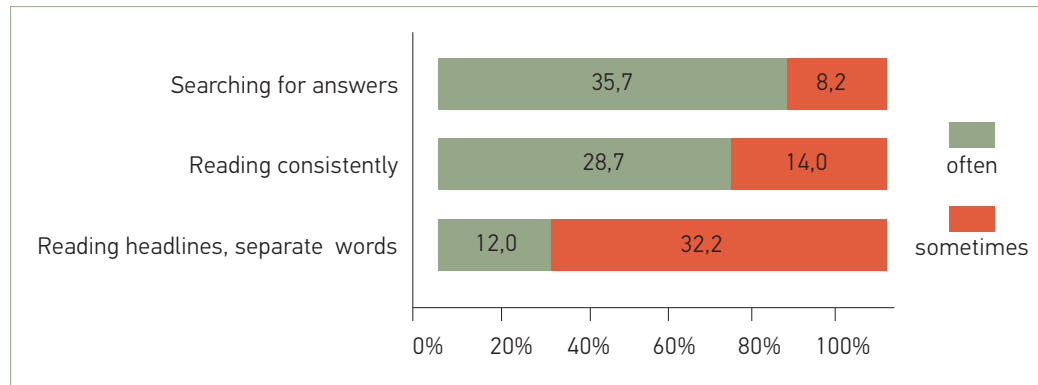
Figure 2

Students' reading preferences of special subject-specific online/ printed texts in the English (EL) and Lithuanian languages (LL)

Contrary to our expectations, the students did not confirm the conjecture that their reading was mostly based on “surfing headlines, catching separate words in bold, skimming the conclusions, and having a quick look at pictures or graphs” (Figure 3 below).

Figure 3

Percentage of students' ways and modes of reading



Only 12 % of the students said they often use scanning technique while reading. Most of the students pointed out that they were “searching for the answers to the questions posed by themselves or the teachers” (unfortunately, the scope of the survey is too limited to establish the manner of the search). Around 29 % of the students stated that they would usually “read fast and consistently till they find what they need”. Nearly 36 % of the respondents admitted that they search for answers to particular questions, which could be considered to be deep reading.

Since the relevance of the type of reading is closely related to the aim of the activity, it is difficult to make assumptions about the quality of the mode of reading applied by the students. More research is necessary to establish the connection between the task and the type of reading technique applied.

The most important issue that the research was aiming at was to find out what cognitive strategies students employ while reading professional texts, which of these strategies are less developed and what teachers have to take into consideration when giving reading tasks in teaching students academic or professional language. The questionnaire contained 12 questions on cognitive reading strategies students are supposed to apply when reading texts on their specific subject matter in the English language (Figure 4).

The results of the survey presented in the above figure permit to claim that the students' approach to the text is rather superficial. They apply the habits developed previously (at school) to read unsophisticated texts, which seldom require more refined cognitive reading skills. According to the students' answers to the questionnaire, they usually “read once more if something is not clear” (39 %), just over the third of the respondents “assess statements, establish links, make conclusions” (34 %), “use imagination, evoke associations, find analogies” (34 %) or “rely on previous knowledge” (33 %). It is quite astounding that only just over a quarter of the respondents state that they “predict primary and secondary ideas” while reading and “rely on special terminology” (25 %), around 20 % of students sometimes underline what is important (which, certainly, is more characteristic of paper-based reading) and compare the main idea with the supporting ones. Very few students “raise subject-related questions” (12 %). Another surprising factor is that even though more than half of the respondents say that they “predict primary and secondary ideas” (28 %), less than 20 % acknowledge that they compare the main idea with supporting ideas. A small number of students “rely on graphic representation before reading”. Very few students think that they can “use knowledge about text/ paragraph structure” (14 %) or “deconstruct complex sentences” (13 %); the least often used reading strategy by the students is raising subject-related questions, the reading strategy that could presumably lead to a more critical approach to the text content.

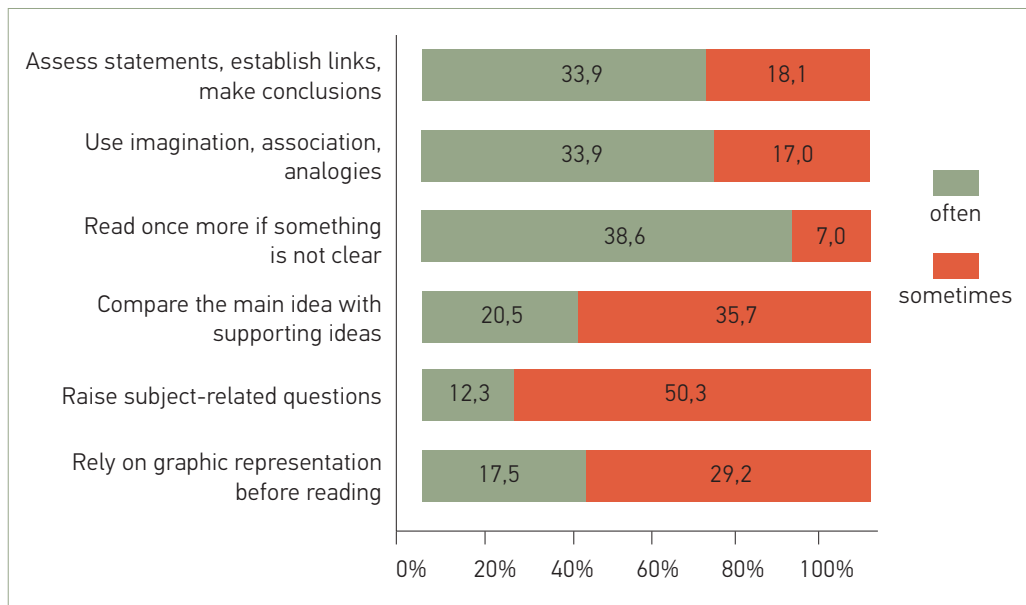


Figure 4

Frequency of cognitive reading strategies employed by the students of the English language

As it has been mentioned earlier, the research instrument included two open questions that the respondents had to answer, i.e. why they like to read printed and online texts. Having analyzed the research data qualitatively by applying categories for each question, the following reasons for preferences of reading printed texts emerged: <more pleasant to read>, <more understandable>, <better to see the length of the text>, <easier to find the main idea and understand the peculiarities of the text>. Reasons for preferences of reading online texts as stated by the research participants were as follows and seem to outweigh the reasons provided by the respondents for reading printed texts: <possibility to copy the text into word format>, <easier to understand because of the style of the language>, <more convenient>, <wider choice of literature online, more updated sources, faster to find>, <information is presented in a more attractive manner>, <wider explanations are provided>, <more informative, objective information>, <more ecological>. Thus, it could be assumed that the students prefer reading online texts rather than printed ones.

- _ The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the research data revealed that the *New Generation* of students definitely prefers online, screen-based texts to the paper-based ones. They read *science news online in English*, they read *news and subject-specific literature* online in both English and Lithuanian, and they *do not like reading printed news* either in English or Lithuanian.
- _ The analysis of the research results made it evident that the students approach texts differently: they employ *Deep reading*, when in search for answers to particular questions; they apply the skills of *Consistent reading*, when they search for particular information within the text; and they use *Skimming* or *Scanning the text* by reading the headlines, looking through the key-words, concentrating on conclusions and exploring graphic representation of the text.
- _ The study permits to make some essential conclusions on teaching/ learning to read professional subject-specific texts. Teachers should find ways of developing students' reading skills by encouraging students to employ the following reading strategies:
 - _ using knowledge about the structure of the text, paragraph;
 - _ comparing the main idea with supporting ideas;
 - _ raising subject-related questions;
 - _ deconstructing complex sentences.

The ways of developing methodology for helping students acquire these reading skills is the subject of another research.

Conclusions

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Roma Kriaučiūnienė, Zita Mažuolienė. *Naujos kartos studentų skaitymo įgūdžių plėtotė*

Straipsnyje pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas užsienio kalbų studentų skaitymo klausimams šiuolaikiniuose universitetuose. Informacijos amžius, spartus IT vystymasis daro įtaką mūsų studentų skaitymo preferencijoms ir skaitymo įgūdžiams. Dėl tokios turtingos skaitmeninės aplinkos kinta mūsų studentų skaitymo pomėgiai: skaitmeninio, o ne atspausdinto teksto skaitymas tapo kasdienybe. Todėl būtinas naujos rūšies raštingumas – gebėjimas skaityti multimodalius tekstus, kurie daro poveikį pačiam skaitymui. Tai kelia tam tikrų klausimų pedagogams: kokius skaitymo įgūdžius mūsų studentai turi įgyti, kad gebėtų visiškai suprasti multimodalius tekstus? Be to, norint suvokti konkretų profesinį tekstą anglų ar kita užsienio kalba skaitytojas turi turėti ne tik lingvistinių, bet ir specialių profesinių žinių, taip pat gebėti taikyti tam tikras skaitymo strategijas (kognityvines, metakognityvines), arba, kitaip tariant, skaitytojui būtinas tam tikras dalykinis raštingumas. Tai savo ruožtu kelia naujus reikalavimus dėstytojams – mokyti naujos kartos studentus skaitymo užsienio kalba įgūdžių, kurie padėtų suprasti profesinių tekstų užsienio kalba prasmę, juos kritiškai vertinti ir įvertinti. Taigi straipsnio tikslas yra išsiaiškinti naujos kartos užsienio kalbų studentų skaitymo įgūdžius, kurie yra būtini skaitmeniniame pasaulyje. Tyrimas atliktas Vilniaus universitete 2016 metais. Atlikta naujos kartos studentų skaitymo strategijų analizė leidžia daryti išvadą, kad jų skaitymo įgūdžius reikia ir toliau tobulinti užsienio kalbų mokymo ir mokymosi procese.

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