Chapter 6
Students' Perspectives on Reading Instruction and Reading Engagement

Astrid Roe

6.1 Introduction

Good reading skills are a prerequisite for success in education, at work and in everyday life, Moreover, reading engagement and good reading strategies are key factors in achieving such skills. Reading engagement certainly has an immediate influence on students´ reading ability, and it might predict to what extent students will read in the future, and thus influence their learning success in life. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in the United States shows that adolescents who identified themselves as being interested in reading achieved better scores on the tests, and they had better high school averages than students who were less interested in reading (Donahue et al. 2003).

International surveys like PIRLS (Principle Investigators and Research Leaders Survey) and PISA have provided strong evidence for the benefits of engaged reading, which has consistently been found to be a critical variable in reading achievement. PISA 2000 showed that the level of reading engagement had the largest median correlation with achievement, exceeding even the median correlation between reading literacy and socio-economic status (Kirsch et al. 2002). In PISA 2009, students' knowledge and awareness of reading strategies were also measured. Students were asked to evaluate the extent to which a range of strategies are useful for learning and remembering information in texts. Students whose evaluations of the strategies matched those of experts had considerably higher levels of reading performance than those who were less familiar with or uncertain about the usefulness of these strategies. These results suggest that school can play a significant role in bridging the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, by acting

A. Roe (✉)
University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway
e-mail: astrid.roe@ils.uio.no

as strong clear determinant of students' levels of reading engagement and reading strategies (OECD 2009, p. 61).

Quantitative studies can investigate students' reading achievement, attitudes towards reading and awareness of reading strategies by means of standardized tests and questionnaires. Such studies serve the purpose of yielding results that can be generalized to larger populations. In order to get a better insight into what actually takes place in the classroom, and to give more in-depth knowledge about selected groups of students, there is a need for qualitative research methods like classroom observation and interviews. In the present study, interviews have been used to investigate students' experiences in terms of their teachers' role as a contributor to their reading engagement and their knowledge and awareness of reading strategies.

6.2 The Importance of Reading Engagement and Reading Strategies

Reading engagement encompasses motivation, cognitive interaction, and receptivity to the text. Engaged readers are interested in finding value in texts, and engagement is therefore equally as important as cognition in the process of reading (Guthrie and Cox 2001; Pflaum and Bishop 2004). Reading engagement not only involves voluntary reading for pleasure and positive attitudes towards reading, it also includes the commitment and perseverance that committed readers mobilize in order to read challenging or complex texts necessary to obtain a personal advantage or a specific goal, for example to pass an exam or to obtain certain civil rights. Furthermore, it is essential for the maintenance and further development of reading skills beyond school. The teacher's role as a motivator of good reading habits and a contributor to students' reading motivation should therefore not be underestimated. By contrast, teachers who neglect these instructional practices undermine students' efforts to become self-directing, resulting in students who are disengaged from reading and fail to progress in reading achievement (Guthrie 2008).

Reading strategies are what effective readers do to understand and learn from written texts. In other words, effective readers are strategic readers. In using effective strategies, the reader interacts with the text by conceiving reading as a problem-solving task that requires the use of strategic thinking, and by thinking strategically about solving reading comprehension problems. When readers are strategic and reflective about their thinking and learning, they are said to be utilizing metacognition skills, and in connection with reading the term *metacomprehension* can be used (Gavelek and Raphael 1985, pp. 22–23; Osman and Hannafin 1992; Caverly et al. 1995). Several studies have found an association between reading proficiency and metacognitive reading skills (Artelt et al. 2001; Brown et al. 2004).

In the teaching of good reading strategies explicitness is a key factor. Explicit or formal instruction of reading strategies is believed to lead to improvement in textual understanding, and there are indications that explicit reading instruction

has positive effects on students' achievement. Researchers have concluded that a structured, explicit, and scaffolded approach to instruction has a positive impact on students' academic achievement (i.e. Roseshine and Stevens 1986; Good and Brophy 2008). Moreover, Mackeya et al. (2007) found that students' perceptions and teachers' intentions about the linguistic target of corrective feedback overlapped the most when feedback was provided explicitly. The underlying principles of effective instruction that have emerged from educational research conducted over the past 30 years can be viewed as the basis of effective, explicit instruction, while the elements of explicit instruction can be seen as methods to ensure that these principles are addressed in designing and delivering instruction (Archer and Hughes 2011, p. 64).

6.3 The Interviews

6.3.1 The Selection of Students/Research Method

The 42 students who were interviewed in the present study were in their second year of lower secondary school and represented the six schools where the video study described in Chap. 2 was carried out, plus one additional school. The students' language arts teachers were asked to select three girls and three boys representing low, middle and high reading proficiency. Due to the unforeseen absence of two girls, who were replaced by two boys at one school, 22 boys and 20 girls were interviewed. A semi-structured interview protocol was used, and the total length of each interview was 15–20 min, depending on how much the student was willing to elaborate on each topic. Most of the interviews took place just after one of the language arts lessons that were video recorded, and if it was relevant, parts of the interviews were related to what had happened during that lesson.

The first part of the interview includes questions about reading engagement and reading habits and attitudes towards reading. This chapter presents the second part of the interview, which focuses on the teacher's role as a reading teacher, the students' use of reading strategies, and the students' views on difficulties in their text books. The students were asked the following questions:

- What have your teachers done to encourage you to read in your leisure time?
- What kind of reading instruction have you received in lower secondary school?
- What kind of reading strategies do you use, for example, if you have problems understanding the meaning of a text?
- Do you find the textbooks in any subject more difficult to read than the textbooks in other subjects?
- Is it important to be a good reader?

For each question they were encouraged to elaborate and give as many examples as possible. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed.

The transcribed material was systematized and organized in relation to the thematic content of the students' responses. As there turned out to be no obvious or significant differences between students from different schools, or with different proficiency levels in reading, the results will mainly be presented in terms of the percentage of students in the various response categories, for example, the percentage distribution of the various subjects that students found difficult. If the number of students in a response category is just one or two, the exact number is given. Examples of representative or interesting responses will be quoted to illustrate the findings. For some topics gender issues are interesting and will be reported and discussed.

6.3.2 The Teacher's Role in Promoting students' Reading Interests

The students spoke quite clearly and confidently about their teachers when discussing encouragement or inspiration to read in their leisure time. The students very clearly positioned themselves in four response categories and Table 6.1 shows the percentage of students in each of these categories. Only 5 % of them (two students) gave spontaneous positive answers about their present teachers, whereas nearly one-third of the students felt that their current teacher's attempts to inspire them often had a negative effect. Half of the students said that their current teachers had no effect on their reading interests. 17 % (seven students) referred positively to their primary school teacher.

One girl rather ironically put it like this: "Oh yes, the teacher sometimes comes up with stupid suggestions about boring books that we should read". Others explained that the teachers' suggestions in terms of reading activities always sounded like boring duties or school tasks that they were obliged to do, and consequently they had no desire to do them. In one of the classes the students had just worked with a reading project, and when reminded of this, one of the girls said:

> Oh yes, we had this reading project, but that did not really inspire me very much. It was like: Oh, I have to read a book and then write a summary of the book. And that is rather boring. Like, when the teachers say: You have to read this book within two weeks, and on Friday you must hand in an essay or a review about the book. And they give us 1000 questions about the book that we have to answer. That is reading on the command. I never do that when I read a Harry Potter book at home. I never write a little book review all by myself, voluntarily. I just read – or I don't.

Table 6.1 Teachers' effect on students' reading engagement (N = 42)

Positive effect	5 %
Negative effect	29 %
Only the primary school teacher had positive effect	17 %
No effect	49 %

The most positive students referred to teachers who encouraged them to read to become better readers – or in most cases – better writers:

> The teacher says we should read to become good writers, because we learn from good authors. And I also believe that we create images inside our heads during reading, and thus we learn how other people think and what they are like and so on.

One boy in the category "No effect" said that a male author who had visited his school had been really inspiring to listen to, and that he had actually gone to the library to borrow some of his books straight away. With regard to the teachers, the same boy put it like this: "The teachers never tell us why it is important to read, they just say that we should read."

Although the teachers referred to by these students will certainly have tried to encourage them to read, the students' responses suggest that teachers do not have the same status as a role model in secondary as in primary schools. Their rather negative responses may also be an expression of teenagers' reluctance to credit their teachers with having influenced their attitudes and interests positively. Selective memory or the fact that they simply have not been listening may also explain these results.

6.3.3 Reading Instruction: What Is That?

When the students were asked what kind of reading instruction they had received in lower secondary school, the vast majority of them expressed confusion and seemed to have problems understanding the question. Some misinterpreted the question and thought reading instruction had to do with decoding of letters like the first reading instructions they received in primary school. Others started to talk about fluency when reading aloud, and some thought it meant special instruction for students with reading difficulties, for example, dyslexia. In other words, for many of these students, the term 'reading instruction', meaning 'reading strategies instruction', seemed not to be part of their consciousness or field of knowledge.

After having cleared up these misconceptions, by explaining that we were going to talk about reading instruction in terms of reading comprehension strategies, it turned out that 67 % (28 students) still gave negative answers like

– *No I haven't*
– *I don't think so*
– *I cannot remember*
– *I still don't know what it is*

Among these 28 students, six eventually remembered that their primary school teachers had talked about reading strategies, but their present teachers had not. Two of them held that they had only learnt reading strategies at home, and one student mentioned that her English teacher had taught them reading strategies in English as a foreign language. Still, 46 % of the students were not able to recall any kind of reading instruction, except for early beginner instruction (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Reading comprehension instruction in secondary school language arts lessons (N = 42)

No reading instruction except for beginner instruction	46 %
Some reading instruction, one example from each student	33 %
Only reading instruction in primary school, in foreign language lessons or at home	21 %

One of the girls who said that she did not know what reading instruction was had just attended a language arts lesson where the teacher had addressed specific literary techniques that the author of an argumentative text had used in order to promote his views. She was reminded of this, and asked if she thought such knowledge could help her understand the meaning of the text better. She replied: "I don't know, I did not think of it as reading instruction, I thought of it as language arts, but of course, such knowledge may influence my writing skills positively."

Knowledge of how texts are built up, the author's use of literary techniques, genre features, writing style, etc., are embedded in good reading strategies, and can undoubtedly help students understand the meaning and intention of a text (Mc Laughlin and Allen 2002; Duke and Og Pearson 2002). If the teacher had stated explicitly how knowledge about the textual features can contribute to better understanding of the text, the students would probably have recognized it as reading instruction.

One-third of the students reported that they had been given reading instruction in lower secondary school, but none of them gave more than one example:

- *Writing key words (3 students)*
- *Doing written strategy exercises in exercise booklets (1 student)*
- *Study the headings in the text books to get an overview of the content (2 students)*
- *Skimming the text to quickly get an impression of what it is about (3 students)*
- *Writing reading logs after reading fiction (2 students)*
- *Reading slowly to avoid missing important details (1 student)*
- *Regularly stop and think about what one has read (1 student)*

The students were asked what strategies they used to understand what they read, especially when they were supposed to learn something from it. These were the two most common responses:

- *I read the difficult passage over again*
- *I ask someone (teachers, peers or family members) to explain difficult words and/or sentences.*

The majority of the strategies mentioned by these students represent only a narrow selection of what are considered essential strategies by leading reading researchers. For example, the strategies promoted in reciprocal teaching (Palincsar and Brown 1984): summarizing, questioning, clarifying and predicting, and the four categories of strategies mentioned by Anmarkrud in Chap. 3: memorization, elaboration, organization and monitoring. Studying headings or skimming through the text to preview it, which was mentioned by a total of five students (12 %),

can be defined as *predicting*. Likewise, the following comment, mentioned by one student, can be categorized as summarizing: "I regularly stop and think about what I have read".

The 44 language arts lessons that were videotaped show several sequences where teachers discuss the content of texts with the students, for example, by relating it to other texts or to the students' personal knowledge or experiences. The teachers also frequently ask questions about the content or formal features of the texts. This is in line with good reading instruction, and teachers who do this is discussed by Anmarkrud in Chap. 3. However, none of the interviewed students mentioned these dialogues or situations when we talked about reading instruction. As long as students do not perceive this form of teaching as reading instruction it is highly uncertain whether it has any direct effect. Knowledge of the text is always an advantage, but the instruction has probably not been explicitly related to reading comprehension.

6.4 Metacognitive Awareness

The majority of the interviewed students admitted that they often thought about something else when reading texts that did not engage them, which is not surprising. A common problem during reading is that one's mind may wander onto something else midway through the page. Conscious readers discover quickly that their minds have wandered and are able to take relevant action, which means they have well developed metacognitive awareness. When asked what they did if they found themselves thinking about something else during reading, most of the students said that they started over again. However, many of them admitted that reading the passage twice or even three times did not always help. 24 % of the students (eight boys and two girls) said that they did not mind, because even if they re-read the passage several times, the content was either so boring or complicated that they still couldn't concentrate. The following dialog with one of these boys is representative of these students:

I: What do you do if you don't understand what you are reading?
S: Sometimes I read, and at the same time I think about something else, then I haven't understood.
I   How far can you read before you become aware of that?
S: Sometimes it can take long.
I: What do you do when you realise that you have been thinking of something else?
S: (laughs) I close the book and conclude that I have read it.

These students seem to consider school reading as a task which is finished when it is done, regardless of what they have learnt from it. This fits with the findings of researchers who claim that adolescents' reading problems may be caused by problems with the interpretation of the contents rather than with the decoding of words.

And in many cases they are probably caused by lack of concentration and attention. Mechanical and unconscious reading may thus explain why students with no diagnosed reading difficulties perform poorly on reading tests (i.e. Catts et al. 2005).

6.4.1   Easy and Difficult = Fun and Boring?

The students were asked if they found any of the text books or other school-related reading material particularly difficult to read. One-third of the students could not think of any particular subject, but those who did mentioned Science (14), Language Arts (6), History or Social Science (6) or Religion and Ethics (5). These subjects are generally heavily text based and include quite a lot of reading, and the texts involved may be demanding in terms of advanced vocabulary and complicated sentence structures. One striking finding was that nearly two-thirds of the students who mentioned a certain subject, changed the wording in their answers from "easy" or "difficult" to "fun/interesting" or "boring". The following two examples are representative illustrations of their answers:

> Well, it depends, it has to be interesting. You must want to read it. Most subjects become interesting if you force yourself to read and understand it. If I don't care, it becomes rather boring. I find science pretty tiresome. There are so many strange words, and the content is sometimes hard to understand. If the teacher has not gone through it properly with us, I really have to concentrate, and I have to read it again and again until I understand – and then all of a sudden I sometimes become interested.
>
>   Yes, I have noticed that if we have been working with something extremely boring in Science, like you just sit and read, but you have no interest whatsoever in learning it, then you don't get it, and you have to read it again and again, and it becomes more and more boring … but in social science, we have been learning about law and order, and that has been very interesting, because we have not had anything about it before, And then everything sits in your head after having read it once.
>   … Come to think of it… the science books are quite easy to read…

Interest and commitment obviously play a major role in reading comprehension. Many of the students also mentioned other factors that characterized texts that they considered difficult – or boring – as most of them put it:

- *compact with a lot of information*
- *texts too long – too much to read*
- *small fonts*
- *complicated charts, tables and graphs*
- *old-fashioned language*
- *advanced language*
- *formulas and scientific language*
- *difficult words*

These may be characteristics of texts that are apparently difficult, and thus, apparently boring. Nevertheless, these are texts that students will encounter more and more often in their further education and working life.

6.5   The Importance of Being a Good Reader

Finally the students were asked what reading meant to them personally and whether they thought it was important to be a good reader. Almost all of them admitted that reading is important.

I: Why is it important to be a good reader?
S: Because you have to, you read all the time, it is something you need out there (. . .) there are signs and maps and. – well – when you start upper secondary school, you have to be able to read and understand what you read, so . . . Even if we have advanced technology, I don't think anyone can read for you, and then you just understand somehow. They invent more and more all the time, so you have to read more and more to get to know what they have found out, so . . .

Thirty-six percent of the students related the importance of being a good reader to becoming a better writer. Some of them also mentioned language-related factors like improving their knowledge of grammar and academic terminology. Thirty-one percent focused on the personal and intellectual development that reading supports and the importance of learning something new. Fourteen percent mentioned technical reading skills. One reason why so many students mentioned writing skills is probably the strong emphasis on writing instruction in Norwegian schools. Writing instruction does not end when the students have learnt the basic writing skills, and most secondary school teachers of language arts give students explicit writing instruction regularly. Special attention was paid to writing instruction in secondary schools after the successful introduction of "Process Writing" in the late eighties. A large study of Norwegian 10th graders' writing skills concludes that Norwegian students are good writers (Berge et al. 2005).

6.6   Summary

The 42 students who were interviewed represented an equal distribution of readers with low, middle and high levels of reading proficiency; however, these three levels of reading proficiency were hardly reflected in the interviews. This may of course be due to the fact that the number of students in each group was so low that it is difficult to conclude that there are significant differences between them. Even so, there was no clear tendency for weak readers to speak less positively about reading than good readers. Although the best readers probably had better reading strategies than the poor and average ones, they were not able to express their knowledge better or use of it more explicitly than the others. With some few exceptions, no obvious gender differences appeared in this part of the interview.

The most discouraging finding was that the students had few positive things to say about their teachers as sources of inspiration or as motivators. Further, only one-third of these students could remember having received any kind of reading instruction in secondary school.

The majority of them had no clear idea of what reading strategies were, and there was a widespread perception among these students that reading instruction was the same thing as beginner-reading instruction or special education. Their explicit repertoire of reading strategies was rather narrow. Those who mentioned specific reading strategies that they used referred to techniques such as skimming and scanning the text, or writing key words.

When asked about easy or difficult texts, many of the students changed the wording to "fun" and "boring" texts. A positive aspect of the students' responses was that almost all of them believed that reading skills are important, not only at school, but also throughout life.

The results of these interviews may seem rather discouraging in the light of what constitutes good reading instruction in the research literature (i.e. Pressley 2002). However, one must bear in mind that interviews such as these do not give a complete picture of what has been going on in the students' classrooms. Moreover, students may give selective answers, or they may not always remember what the teacher has said or done. And last but not least, the intended teaching is not always in accordance with perceived student learning (Goodlad 1979).

It must also be added that these interviews took place before the school reform that introduced reading as one of five basic skills across the curriculum, and which has led to a much stronger emphasis on reading engagement and reading instruction in schools than before the reform (Hertzberg 2011). However, previous research has shown that school reforms, on their own, are not always enough to change teaching practice.

6.7   Implications for Practice

The encouragement to read and the explicit reading instruction that students receive throughout the first years of schooling are no doubt crucial for their future development as readers, but further follow-up at upper primary and lower secondary level is thought to be equally important However, until recently research has shown that reading instruction more or less ends after 4th grade, and that secondary school teachers' knowledge of what has been referred to as reading instruction and teaching of reading comprehension strategies varies a lot (Alvermann and Moore 1991; Pressley 2002).

The teacher's role is undoubtedly important, because not all students come from homes where reading is valued and where someone is able to help struggling readers.

And maybe most important of all, reading instruction must not stop when students have learnt to read after the first school years. Teachers must continue to give explicit reading instruction throughout secondary school. Most secondary school teachers know a lot about good writing instruction, and most of this knowledge can be transferred into good and explicit reading instruction. Teachers also know that reading and writing are equally important, and they know how to

develop students' writing skills. Now they need to be aware of the fact that students also need instruction to continuously develop their reading skills throughout school, and they need to learn how to teach good reading comprehension.

Reading takes on an increasingly prominent role in learning during middle and secondary school. There are strong indications that strategic and engaged readers provide themselves with self-generated learning opportunities that are equivalent to several years of education. Good reading skills may substantially compensate for low family income and poor educational background (Guthrie and Wigfield 2000, p. 404). The development of reading literacy involves not only the development of skills and knowledge, it also includes motivation, attitudes and behaviours (Guthrie 2008).

Interest in reading is facilitated by classroom and school contexts that emphasize the relevance of texts to the student's background knowledge and experience (Assor, Kaplan, and Roth 2002). When students read material that is directly related to their personal interests, their comprehension is higher than if their reading is driven by a desire for test scores only (Vansteenkiste et al. 2006). Likewise, texts rated as "interesting" are read more thoroughly than other texts (Schiefele 1999). Therefore it is imperative to find intriguing and catchy texts, especially for the weakest readers, and also to provide them with good reading strategies.

The teachers interviewed by Anmarkrud in Chap. 3 speak positively about the importance of being a good reader, and the way they speak about reading instruction indicates that their intentions are good. However, the interviews in the present study indicate that the degree of overlap between teachers' intentions and learners' perceptions is not always as expected. Furthermore, Anmarkrud and Bråten (2013), who also based their analyses on data from the video study, found that the teachers varied vastly with respect to the amount of comprehension strategies instruction they taught, that the repertoire of strategies taught was quite narrow, that the instruction was mainly implicit, and that the teachers lacked professional knowledge about reading comprehension and reading comprehension instruction. As reading engagement and motivation to learn seem to be mutually dependent on each other, the challenge is to translate them into viable classroom practice.

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