Exploring the Conceptions of Academic Reading Comprehension by
Iranian Graduate Students of Applied Linguistics

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Abstract

Although the importance of reading in higher education as an index of success has been highlighted, the metacognitive knowledge or beliefs of graduate students have remained under-researched. This qualitative study reports on a study that, first, examines how graduate students of applied linguistics conceive of academic reading and academic readers in their graduate programs; second, what factors they believe can contribute to the development of those self-conceptions; and, third, if there was the possibility of adding a course on academic reading to their MA programs, how they would judge the advantages and disadvantages of such a course. In so doing, in-depth interviews were conducted with 31 graduate students at eight different universities. The findings revealed considerable changes in the participants' conceptions as the result of taking part in their graduate programs. They attributed those self-conceptions to their efforts and struggles as well as their teachers' help and guidance. Their perceptions of an academic reading course were positive. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

Metacognitive knowledge, referring to "what students know about themselves, the tasks they complete and their learning strategies" (Cotterall & Murray, 2009, p. 34), influences learners' perceptions of the tasks and their strategic choices (Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011). Learners' metacognitive knowledge is considered synonymous with learners' beliefs, and they are used 'interchangeably' (Wenden, 1999; Victori, 2004). This is the stance we adopt in this study. Flavell (1979) divides metacognitive knowledge into three main types; first, personal knowledge, defined as learners' knowledge about themselves and others; second, task knowledge, described as learners' knowledge about the resources and information required to complete the task; third, strategy knowledge, explained as knowledge about the strategies needed for effective completion of the task. Learners who lack metacognitive knowledge have trouble understanding when to use strategies and why (Pintrich, 2002). In the context of second language learning, learners' metacognitive knowledge or beliefs refer to "the common assumptions that learners hold about themselves as learners, about the nature of language learning, the learning process, variables influencing their learning" (Öz, 2007, p. 54).

Despite the importance of metacognitive knowledge or beliefs in learning, they have received scant attention in language education (Dhieb-Henia, 2003; Yüksel & Yüksel, 2012). Although previous studies have attempted to study learner's metacognitive knowledge or beliefs about their learning (e.g., Woods, 2003; Ohata & Fukao, 2014), the scope of these studies is limited to either general EFL/ESL learners or undergraduate students. Moreover, Cox, Friesner, and Khayum (2014) contend that the significance of reading as an essential skill in academic success in any field of study and at all levels of education is extensively accepted; however, little is known about what reading in academic contexts means to students (Mann, 2000).

Accordingly, the present study reports on an interview-based study into the beliefs or conceptions of Iranian graduate students of applied linguistics about their academic reading practices. We chose to focus on

reading for two main reasons: first, reading is considered a crucial skill in any university course (McGrath, Berggren & Mezek, 2016); second, although reading plays a crucial role in writing and now it is accepted that reading and writing are interdependent and good writers are good readers (Hirvela, 2004), it has received less attention (McGrath et al., 2016). This study adds to the literature in this regard.

Review of Relevant Literature

Metacognition is defined merely as 'thinking about thinking' (Flavell, 1979). Wenden (1986) posits that metacognition is composed of a strategic and knowledge component. In other words, metacognition is the overarching term which covers both metacognitive strategies, which refer to "planning, monitoring and evaluating … through which learners manage, direct, regulate, and guide their learning", and metacognitive knowledge, which refers to "information learners acquire about their learning" (Wenden, 1999, p. 436). Wenden (1998) further argues that utilizing *planning*, *monitoring* and *evaluation* is known as self-regulation in cognitive psychology. Negretti and Kuteeva (2011, p. 97) contend that the literature on metacognition reveals two elements; first, 'metacognitive awareness' or 'metacognitive knowledge of cognition' which eludes to "learners' awareness of their knowledge, of the task, and their thinking/learning strategies"; second, 'metacognitive regulation' which refers to "how learners use metacognitive awareness to monitor and control their thinking and learning". Likewise, Serra and Metcalfe (2009) maintain that metacognitive knowledge can encompass learners' knowledge about the task, information about their ability to do the task, and the strategies they could deploy to do it.

Reading is considered an essential skill in any university course (McGrath et al., 2016). Second language readers have difficulty understanding academic texts (Snow, 2002) in that they seem to lack the right metacognitive strategies (Tavakoli, 2014). The literature related to reading shows that metacognitive awareness plays a crucial role in increasing comprehension and facilitating the teaching and learning

processes (Auerbach & Paxton, 1997; Baker, 2008). It has also been argued that comprehension happens at the metacognitive level where there is planning, monitoring, and evaluation (Carrel, Gajdusek & Wise, 1998). What differentiates good readers from poor readers is their use of reading strategies to solve reading comprehension problems (Grabe, 2004; Brantmeier & Dragiyski, 2009). Poor readers are not good at 'planning,' 'monitoring,' 'regulating,' and 'evaluating' and have trouble in choosing the right approaches to become good academic readers (Tavakoli, 2014). Moreover, metacognitive strategies in reading help learners weigh the difficulty and the cognitive demands of a text, determine if they can understand the text, decide what cognitive reading strategy to employ with regard to the task at hand, and finally, consider their cognitive abilities and situational constraints (Hamdan, Ghafar, Sihes & Atan, 2010). Several reasons determine the appropriate use of reading strategies such as learners' experience in dealing with the target language, their age, and transfer of reading strategies from their first language to the second or foreign language reading (Alhaqbani & Riazi, 2012).

The available research has addressed different aspects of metacognitive knowledge or beliefs. One set of such studies has explored the nature of metacognitive knowledge and its role in language learning (Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Wenden, 1998). Some other studies have investigated students' beliefs about language learning (Horwitz, 1987; Victori, 1999; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). There are also studies which have attempted to explore the relationship between metacognitive strategy instruction and use and the university students' academic reading practices and achievements (e.g., Wenden, 2002; Dhieb-Henia, 2003; Shokrpour & Fotovatian, 2009; Zhang & Wu, 2009; Zare, 2013; Zhang & Seepho, 2013; Dabarera, Renandya, Zhang, 2014; Tavakoli, 2014). The results of these studies have indicated a positive correlation between the use of reading strategies and students' reading comprehension achievement. Other studies have explored the differences between ESL/EFL or native/non-native students concerning their metacognitive

reading strategies while reading academic English texts (e.g., Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001; Mokhtari & Perry, 2008; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2008, Karbalaei, 2010; Jafari & Shokrpour, 2012). The results of these studies have indicated that both native and non-native students who possess higher reading abilities use more reading strategies than students with low language proficiency (Alhaqbani & Riazi, 2012; Yüksel & Yüksel, 2012). Some studies have used questionnaires to examine reading strategies (e.g., Malcolm, 2009; Mokhtari & Reichard, 2004) and a few others have explored the correlation between metacognitive knowledge and genre awareness and how a genre-based approach to reading and writing can develop metacognitive genre awareness (e.g., Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011). Some case studies have examined the effect of metacognition on successful reading comprehension in academic contexts (e.g., Taraban, Rynearson & Kerr, 2000; Zhang, Gu & Hu, 2008). The results of these studies have shown a positive relationship between metacognition and academic reading.

In their study, inspiring the present study, Ohata and Fukao (2014) attempted to investigate how EFL learners perceived and thought about academic reading and themselves as academic readers, and how such conceptions of self as academic readers came into existence. The analysis of 10 in-depth interviews with 10 Japanese first-year students revealed that their conceptions of reading in a second language had substantially changed as a result of their shift into academic content based EAP settings. Ohata and Fukao (2014) concluded that learners' conceptions of themselves as readers and texts for reading are repeatedly getting shaped and reshaped as a result of becoming more cognizant of the requirements and expectations of different educational and social contexts.

Considering the paucity of qualitative studies into L2 learners' metacognitive knowledge or beliefs (Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011; Ohata & Fukao, 2014), particularly their conceptions of academic reading (Mann, 2000), the importance of academic reading in higher education (Hirvela, 2004; Mann, 2000; McGrath et al, 2016), especially in the Iranian

context where there is a rapid growth in the number of students accepted into the graduate programs of applied linguistics (TEFL) (Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015), the present qualitative study aimed at exploring graduate students' metacognitive knowledge of or beliefs about academic reading. We raised the following research questions:

1) What are Iranian graduate students of applied linguistics conceptions of the key aspects of academic reading at graduate programs?

2) What factors do these students think have influenced the development of their conceptions?

3) What are these students' attitudes towards a prospective course devoted to (advanced) academic reading at the graduate programs of applied linguistics?

Method

Participants

The participants of this qualitative study were 31 graduate (i.e., MA) students of applied linguistics (TEFL), 19 females and 12 males, in the third semester of their programs. The participants' age ranged from 23 to 41 with an average of 25. The participants were from 8 different universities located in Tehran, Karaj, and Kermanshah. These universities were different in size and ranking. The participants were contacted in person and asked if they were willing to participate in the present study. A total of 37 students, out of all those who were asked if they were willing to take part in this study, expressed their willingness for participation in the interview. However, 31 students finally attended the interviews.

Data Collection

In order to explore the graduate students' metacognitive knowledge of or beliefs about academic reading, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews lasted from 26 to 48 minutes. The interview questions (see appendix for the list of the interview questions) aimed at eliciting the participants' beliefs as to what they

deem to be characteristics of students who are academically literate in doing their reading assignments (e.g., what is their understanding of the critical aspects of academic reading; what does the phrase academic reading mean to them; what are some examples they can think of when talking about academic reading at graduate programs), what factors have been influential in shaping their conceptions (e.g., how academic reading has been learned, the examples, processes, or experiences learners deem as necessary), and how they would perceive a prospective course on academic reading (e.g., does a course designed for advanced academic reading help them or not, how do they think it could support or assist them?). The participants were given the option to choose the language of the interview, and all of them preferred to speak in Farsi. Having informed the participants and gained their consents, the interviewer audio recorded all the interviews. The interviews were then carefully transcribed verbatim for later data analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Creswell, 2007; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2014) was adopted as the method of data analysis for the qualitative data obtained from the interviews. In order to minimize biases and the imposition of preset themes on the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the researchers decided not to determine prespecified themes at the time of data coding. Using an inductive approach to data analysis, the researchers read transcribed interviews several times to get an initial impression of the data. Constant reading of the data enabled researchers to assign initial codes to different sections of the data according to their content. For instance, an excerpt such as 'there is a need to decide what to read and what to ignore' was initially coded as 'selective reading'; 'it's good to know what you are looking for even before you start reading' was coded as 'purposive reading'; 'it's essential to read from different sources to understand a topic or an argument' was coded as 'multiple source reading'; and 'good students are good at strategic reading and do skimming and scanning all the time' was coded as 'skimming and

scanning'. Later reading and rereading of the data enabled researchers to check and revise these codes, find redundancies and overlaps, and squeeze these codes into more overarching ones. This helped the final themes, depicting the data, to emerge. For instance, these final readings led to assigning the examples mentioned above and other segments of the data with similar coding as 'strategic reading.' In order to cross check the accuracy and credibility of the analysis, a researcher with experience in qualitative data analysis analyzed the data using the same method. The process produced the Kappa coefficient of 91%, corroborating the consistency of coding.

Results

This section presents the thematic patterns regarding participants' conceptions of academic reading, the sources of such conceptions, and their attitudes towards an 'advanced academic reading' course. Table 1 summarizes the main themes emerging from the data. It illustrates the themes regarding participants' conceptions of academic reading (RQ1), the factors they attribute the development of such conceptions to (RQ2), and finally their attitudes towards adding a prospective course called 'advanced academic reading' to graduate programs (RQ3). Each of these themes will be discussed in the following sections, and selected extracts from the interviews will be provided.

Table 1.

Summary of the main themes

Research Questions	Themes
RQ1: Students' conceptions of academic reading	Strategic reading
	Genre awareness
	Content knowledge
	Critical literacy
	Digital literacy
	Language proficiency
RQ2: Factors influencing students' conceptions	Personal efforts
	Teachers' help
RQ3: Students' attitudes towards an advanced academic reading course	Positive attitudes

Students' Conceptions of Academic Reading

The first research question probed students' conceptions of academic reading and what they think different aspects of being academically literate in reading are. The emerging themes are discussed in what follows.

Strategic Reading

One of the most frequently recurring themes referred to the importance of the strategic nature of reading at the graduate programs. Participants pointed to the importance of selective reading, purposeful reading, multiple source reading, and skimming/scanning. Participants referred to the importance of selective reading, arguing that they do not have the time to read all the assigned materials. They believed that selective reading could help them read what is needed. S13 put it this way:

> *Here you have to be good at 'selective reading.' While studying at the graduate level [i.e., MA], you are faced with a large number of materials to read and if you are not good at deciding where to read and how to read then you are in trouble (S13).*

Similarly, S10 mentioned that:

> *When I started my graduate program, I thought I needed to read all the sources our professors assigned us to read. Nevertheless, now I understand that we need to be selective in our reading of the sources. It helped me a lot to manage my assignments. However, I believe sometimes we go too far in being selective and skip almost everything. This is dangerous. We may lose some critical points. We should be experienced and wise to find the right balance. Sometimes you can refer to your classmates to decide how to proceed (S10).*

Interestingly, here S10 cautioned against too much selective reading and contended that it could sometimes lead to missing some important

points. She mentioned experience, wiseness, and collaboration as solutions to stay away from such a pitfall. Participants referred to the importance of familiarity with the genre of articles in facilitating selective reading. They contended that one needs to read what serves their goal.

> *I think it is essential for us to know where in an article or book we can find what we are looking for. For example, if I am looking for ideas for doing research, I will go the ideas for further research (S1).*

Participants also referred to purposeful reading as another important factor influencing their reading in the graduate programs. They highlighted the importance of knowing one's purpose before starting to read. They reported that their purpose could determine the way they read a source. S21 said that:

> *You should know why you are reading. You would read differently when you are reading to learn something, i.e., the source of knowledge, then when you are trying to find some point to add to your research projects. For the first type, you may need to read more of the sources, but for the second type you may do quick skimming and scanning and read the part that helps complete your assignment (S21).*

S3 echoed the same belief:

> *Academic reading in graduate programs means knowing when to read what parts of the source and for what purposes and in what order. I know when reading a book, I need to do differently as compared to when I read an article (S3).*

Participants referred to the importance of reading from multiple sources in order to understand a topic, a theory or an argument or to accept or reject an argument. They mentioned reading from multiple

sources as one of the main differences between reading at undergraduate (i.e., BA) and graduate programs. For instance, S29 mentioned that:

> *Reading from multiple sources is one of the basic presuppositions of academic reading, but many students are either not good at it or do not care about it ... This is one of the main differences between academic reading at the undergraduate and graduate level (S29).*

Participants also believed that it is important to read from different sources. They attributed this understanding to their participation in graduate programs. They pointed to the change in their beliefs as to what reading is and how one should do it. For instance, S13 contended that:

> *When I started my graduate studies, I thought it is like undergraduate, and I need to understand everything before going on to the next page. However, now I know that I need to go forward and backward .... It is essential to read from different sources to understand a topic or an argument (S13).*

Some participants pointed to skimming and scanning and how important it is for students to use these two strategies while doing their reading assignments. S9 put it this way:

... if I want to know whether a book chapter fulfills my goals I do skimming and scanning ... I scan to see if there is any summary at the end of the chapter so that by reading it, I could decide what to do (S9).

Genre Awareness

A considerable number of participants considered genre awareness as an essential factor in academic reading. S15 argued that the first thing which comes to her mind when she hears 'to be academically literate in reading' is the concept of genre and discourse community.

> *Academic reading reminds me of the discourse community and genre and moves and steps within genres. You will be an excellent*

academic reader if you are familiar with the structure of the books and articles you read (S15).

S23 claimed that his experience in reading and translating different texts has helped him to become familiar with the generic differences across disciplines and this has made reading at the graduate level easier for him.

... [working as a translator] I have been dealing with different kinds of genres, and this has made me an excellent academic reader now. I am familiar with the generic differences within different disciplines. For example, understanding law texts is difficult in that they are full of GRE words. Understanding chemistry texts is less difficult for me in that these texts are more factual ... My familiarity with the genre has helped me with reading my assignments (S23).

Similarly, S31 contended that familiarity with the generic structure of different texts facilitates one's understanding of them. S31 put it this way:

You need to know what information is presented at each section of the readings you do at the graduate level; for example, abstract, introduction, methodology, discussion, etc., (S31).

Complaining that he still was not well familiar with the generic structure of articles and books that he was supposed to read, and what each section presented and also what the subtle differences between different sections were, S4 highlighted the importance of genre familiarity.

I still do not know what the difference between 'literature' and 'background' is. We need to know what each section of books and articles presents, how they are organized and what their differences (S4) are.

Likewise, S1 was unhappy about the way genre is touched upon in MA programs. He argued that genre is being taught in a way which does not facilitate reading and writing of the academic assignments. Instead, it is introduced abstractly and at some point, just as an avenue of research.

> *From the very first day of our MA program, I was being told about the genre. However, it was more like an academic lecture talking about abstract aspects of the genre and as something which needs research to be discovered. This discovery was being presented in a way which was highlighting the need to discover the genre in different disciplines for the research purposes. We were not being told about the specific genres of our discipline and were not given chances to practice them (S1).*

Content Knowledge

Participants contended that reading at graduate programs is different in that one needs to have good content knowledge to understand what they are reading. They highlighted knowledge in research, statistics, theories of language teaching and learning as the most important ones. For example, S13 referred to a 'threshold' of knowledge needed for understanding what one reads.

> *You cannot write well if you cannot read well and reading requires a threshold background knowledge of applied linguistics and the main theories of language teaching and learning (S13).*

The same argument was put forward by S12.

> *Academic reading equals good content knowledge. One needs to be well-familiar with the theories and concepts of his discipline to be an excellent academic reader at graduate programs. ... Sometimes I have no problem translating the readings in my head; however, I cannot understand the full text in that I do not have the necessary background knowledge (S12).*

S20 argued that academic reading is intertwined with research and one cannot understand books and articles they read if they are not familiar with research and statistics.

> *Reading of academic papers is made possible only when you have good background knowledge in research. If you lack sufficient knowledge about research designs, data collection and analysis, and statistics, then you will have a hard time trying to read the academic papers (S20).*

Similarly, S7 echoed the same belief:

> *At the start of the graduate program, I had difficulty understanding many academic papers. The reason was that I was not good at research, qualitative/quantitative research designs, statistical analysis models, and data collection and analysis.*

Digital Literacy

A large number of participants mentioned the importance of digital literacy as an indispensable part of academic reading. Their arguments highlighted the importance of digital literacy in finding the relevant articles and ease technology provides in reading. For example, S7 said:

> *At graduate programs, academic reading is intertwined with technology in many different ways. You cannot smoothly proceed if you lack digital literacy. You cannot do your homework if you do not know how to find the relevant articles (S7).*

Similarly, S13 thought that:

> *Academic reading does include the expertise of finding relevant articles that you need. Technology has made reading much more manageable. You can find access to a world of information by just going online and knowing how to find what you want.*

S27 argued that digital technology has made it easier to find access to what one is looking for, by either facilitating their movement back and

forth throughout the text or finding what they are looking for or finding summaries or videos that might make reading difficult texts easier.

> *I know how to work with computers and the internet, and this has put me in an excellent position to manage my projects and reading assignments. Sometimes for completing my projects, I use "Ctrl + f" and look for the keywords that can help me complete my project and read those parts. Sometimes I go online to read the summary of a theory I am supposed to read in an assigned article and then come back to the paper and then I am in a better position to understand the theory. Some other times, I go to some YouTube channels to understand some ideas and then read the main assigned materials (S27).*

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy was another theme which was frequently mentioned by the participants. Here they argued for the significance of adopting a critical stance towards what is to be read. Many of them argued that, mainly due to their previous educational experiences, they find it difficult to be critical of what they read. S7 claimed that they have never been asked before to be critical of what they read and she still find it difficult to think and read critically. She criticized her previous teachers for not asking her or teaching her to be critical of what she read. She went on to argue that:

> *… no one had ever asked me to think critically during my previous education. However, reading at graduate programs requires you to think critically. Some teachers want you to think critically … they ask you to write critical commentaries. The idea is formidable at first… Now I am still having trouble with this, though I guess I am better than when I started my graduate program (S7).*

Similar to S7, S19 claimed that critical reading is an essential aspect of reading at every stage of education. She argued that, in her case,

critical reading was encouraged at the graduate level. She criticized the culture of not asking students to think critically.

> *… Everybody asks you whether you have read your assignments or not. Nobody asks whether you have thought about what you read or not. To me, academic reading refers to our ability to analyze and find the strengths and weaknesses of ideas and research designs (*S19*).*

S21 maintained that it is essential to be critical of what one reads. She also referred to the difficulties she faced when she tried to be critical of what she read.

> *Although it is not easy, you had better question the sources and ideas you read. You should not think that they are gospel truth and you should accept everything. You should think to see what you agree with and what you disagree with.*

Language Proficiency

Finally, some students referred to general and academic English language proficiency as essential aspects of academic reading. Although they did not report severe problems concerning proficiency, they argued that this is a simple requirement which is quite vital for academic reading. Some of the themes reporting proficiency problems came from interviews with participants (6 participants) who had studied a non-English major at the undergraduate level. Contrary to participants who had studied an English major for their BA studies, these participants referred to some problems they faced as a result of low proficiency in either general English or academic English. For example, S25 said:

> *I studied engineering for my undergraduate studies. For this reason, I face many problems while doing my readings ... I often need to keep a dictionary close to me so that I can check the meaning of the words that are new for me (*S25*).*

Similarly, S18 argued that:

Contrary to my classmates, I have problems with the general or academic words used in the readings. I need to spend more time to understand what words mean (S18).

These participants were asked to give some examples of the words or phrases which they have difficulty understanding their meanings. They mentioned words and phrases such as "under the sway of a powerful method, underpinned by a method, a core tenet of audiolingualism, spawned by the method, graded sequence of the metacognitive task, segmenting, ponder, and enthralled." Participants also mentioned that words need to be understood within the context of the text and the framework of the disciplines. S17 put it this way.

I may see a word and know the general meaning of that word, But that word might have a different meaning in academic contexts, and for this reason, one should be familiar with the academic and technical words and what they refer to in their disciplines to understand them (S17).

Factors influencing students' conceptions

Similar to Ohata and Fukao (2014), in this study, it was attempted to understand what factors these participants attribute their conceptions. The results of the data analysis led to two themes namely 'personal efforts' and 'teachers' help.' These two themes will be explained in the following sections.

Personal Efforts

Participants here contended that their conceptions of academic reading had been the result of their efforts and 'trial and error.' Some of them were unhappy with their teachers' assumptions that academic reading happens by itself and students know how to read. They argued that 'academic reading at the graduate level is very different from the undergraduate level.' S13 put it this way:

I was not happy with the way our teachers viewed reading. To me, reading was thoroughly ignored by them, and it was left to us … I tried a lot, read a lot, had a tough time cracking some of the basic rules of academic reading (S13).

Similar to S13, S29 contended that:

When I started my graduate studies, I went through the hell trying to read all the books, book chapters, and articles that were on our syllabus. I failed so many times, and I felt terrible that I was not talented enough to read all the assignments. However, after many attempts to read and understand everything, now I know that there is no need to read from A to Z and memorize everything (S29).

S17 argued that his interest in this major has helped him to spend more time and energy learning how to read. He put it this way:

My interest in this significant and also academic reading helped me to pay more attention and spend more time on how to read better (S17).

S3 referred to an incident that had helped him to change his conception of academic reading and do her readings more efficiently. She put it this way:

I was not good at reading my assignments at the start of the MA program, but I resisted and kept on reading desperately. However, by accident, one day I decided to take notes and chart what I read systematically. I was surprised by the results. That made me go online and find out more about active reading strategies, and that made much difference in my reading ability (S3).

Teachers' Help

On the other hand, a considerable number of participants attributed their current conceptions of academic reading to the efforts and guidance of their teachers. They argued that the hints and strategies that their teachers provided them with helped facilitate their academic reading. S25 described how one of her teachers had helped her, and her classmates find relevant articles and know credible journals. S25 put it this way:

> *One of our teachers taught us how to find articles, and how to give references. She taught us about prestigious journals, told us how to recognize them, and how to download articles (S25).*

Likewise, S14 referred to a teacher's attempt to help them learn the generic features of their readings. S14 argued that:

> *Our teachers helped us understand some of the rules of academic reading. For example, for our advanced writing course, our teacher had us read different sections of articles and try to guess the generic rules (S14).*

Similarly, S12 maintained that:

> *One of our teachers at graduate studies asked us to write summaries, and this helped us pay more attention to what we read and how the authors have expressed their intentions (S12).*

Much along the same lines, S2 referred to his teacher's tips which had helped her learn how to adopt the right look at what she read. She put it this way:

> *One of our teachers asked us to come up with some questions while we did our readings. My attempt to ask a question helped me become more mindful of what I read and also be more critical of what I read. I appreciate what he asked us to do (S2).*

Finally, S25 referred to a teacher who shared reading hints during her teaching time. S25 argued that these hints had helped her do her readings in a better way.

> *We had this teacher who used to give us reading and writing hints during class time. Her hints ranged from how to read and write correctly and how to perform better at a graduate level. She repeatedly warned us against plagiarism and talked about credible and predatory journals (S25).*

Students' Attitudes Towards an Academic Reading Course

The participants were asked to share their attitudes and feelings towards a course on advanced academic reading. In other words, they were asked to share their attitudes towards the possible advantages and disadvantages of a course on academic reading. Overall, the participants expressed positive views about such a course and argued that it could help them understand the strategies, techniques, and pitfalls of academic reading much faster and it could prevent them from struggling and disappointment. For example, S16 argued that such a course could save time and energy and lead to better learning outcomes. She put it this way:

> *A course titled 'advanced academic reading' could help newcomers a lot. Although many students will finally find out the many rules of reading by themselves, teaching those rules will undoubtedly lead to better results and improve them (S16).*

Similarly, S27 believed that many students are doing their readings in a wrong way by keeping their undergraduate conceptions of reading and this may lead to failure and disappointment. She argued that such a course could help students move on the right track form the very start.

> *If we could have a course on advanced academic reading, and we could receive some hints from the teachers, it could prevent us from taking the wrong path, and we could do everything correctly from the very beginning (S27).*

S13 argued that a reading course could help them learn the differences between different genres and teach them how to be a strategic reader.

> *We were tortured learning some of the basic rules of academic reading. Teaching those rules would have helped us a lot, e.g., how to read a book or an article, what the main differences among different genres are, where to read and where to skip (S13).*

S15 echoed the same viewpoint. She believed that similar to writing, there are conventions to academic reading. She argued that learning those rules could be of great benefit.

> *We are told about the convention of writing, but we are never told about the conventions of reading. There are undoubtedly academic reading conventions, and many students will learn better when they are explicitly given the rules (S15).*

Contending that reading at the graduate level is very different from reading at the undergraduate level and learning these differences takes much time if left to students, S18 highlighted the pressing need for such a course.

> *We were asked to do many things during our graduate program, but we were never told how to do them. For example, we were expected to write summaries of the sources we read, or we were told to write a review of the books, but we did not receive any education. We were even not told how to learn to do them on our own (S18).*

Discussion

A review of the available literature reveals that while productive skills such as writing have received more attention in the EAP literature (e.g., Lillis, 2003; Lea & Street, 2006), receptive skills such as academic reading have received less attention (Abbott, 2013). This is so while the

significance of reading as a crucial skill in academic success in any field of study and at all levels of education is extensively accepted (Cox et al., 2014). This qualitative study aimed at providing a contextual picture of the Iranian graduate students' metacognitive knowledge about academic reading at graduate programs. It explored the metacognitive knowledge or beliefs of these students about academic reading. Similar to the previous studies such as Ohata and Fukao (2014), in this study, the participants believed that, as a result of studying at a graduate level, their conceptions of academic reading have changed. Participants repeatedly compared reading at undergraduate and graduate programs and how different they could be. They pointed to the massive amount of readings a graduate student needs to do. As a result, they highlighted the importance of selective and purposeful reading, the significance of reading from multiple sources in order to understand or reject some idea or theory, and the importance of genre awareness, content knowledge, digital literacy, and critical literacy at graduate programs. Ohata and Fukao (2014) attribute the change in their participants' beliefs to the change of context from EFL at a high school to EAP at a university. The results of our study reveal that beliefs are prone to change even across academic levels at university, i.e., undergraduate and graduate levels.

Participants in this study argued for the strategic nature of academic reading at graduate programs. This is in line with Grabe (2008, p. 220), who argues that professional readers are good at being 'strategic' and quick to decide how to read and proceed based on "goals, reading tasks, and strategic processing abilities." University students are faced with a large number of readings to do (Benson, 1991). Those students who are good at selective reading will be able to manage these readings appropriately (Dhieb-Henia, 2003). Participants of our study argued for selective and purposeful reading as well. Also, similar to (Weir, 1983, cited in Dhieb-Henia, 2003), the participants of this study referred to the difficulty they had in managing this large amount of readings especially at the beginning of their graduate programs. As the results related to the third research question revealed, the participants argued that if they could

be taught how to do their reading assignments strategically, the way they are taught about academic writing, they could do much better in their studies from the start of their graduate programs. They reported that sometimes novice readers might go to the extremes in using strategies and take the wrong path. They argued for being sensible, experienced and wise in using strategies; for example, they cautioned against being too selective and losing some important points. The participants argued that readers need to be good at "extracting what is important for the reading and discarding what is insignificant" (Dhieb-Henia, 2003, p. 387). Indeed, students need to have metacognitive knowledge of their abilities and of the task at hand and of when and to what extent to use such strategies (Pintrich, 2002). A course on reading could help students to move from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' which means that they need to learn when and how to use appropriate strategies. This practice "is likely to help learners to be metacognitively aware, to become effective users of the language and eventually to become strategic readers" (Alhaqbani & Riazi, 2012, p. 248).

Moreover, the findings of this study point to the importance of genre awareness as an essential factor in empowering students to become academically literate in doing their academic readings. Students' metacognitive awareness of genre helps them understand and write different discursive texts (Negretti & Kuteeva, 2011). Although participants argued for the importance of genre awareness in helping them do their readings, some of them contended that they still needed more experience and education to work with different genres and to understand different purposes of various genres. Considering the positive attitudes of participants regarding receiving education in academic reading, it can be argued that teaching these students about different genre types could help them do better in their studies and lead to better outcomes in graduate programs. Students could be taught different text types and how each text type could require a different set of reading strategies (Dhieb-Henia, 2003).

Although weak knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is believed to be the primary reason for the difficulty of academic reading for Chinese students (Wen, 2003), in our study, except for 6 participants who had studied non-English majors for their undergraduate studies, the rest of the participants did not mention severe problems with general or academic English proficiency. They mentioned English language proficiency as an essential requirement though. Those 6 participants reported problems with either general English, mostly referring to vocabulary and grammar, or academic English and disciplinary discourses. Although students appear to possess the required language competency, they have difficulty in fully understanding texts (Eskey, 2005). Indeed, the problem that the majority of students in this study referred to is in line with what Hyland (2003) argues for, contending that these problems do not revolve around language proficiency, preferably around the literacy practices leading to academic texts.

The participants of this study argued that an advanced academic reading course at graduate programs could help them learn about the genres, strategies, techniques, and pitfalls of academic reading at the start of their programs and prevent them from struggling and disappointment. Following their arguments, it can be said that an advanced academic reading course could be helpful in teaching and raising their awareness about the differences in reading at undergraduate and graduate programs. Such a course could teach newly arrived students the strategies that skilled readers use such as "planful thinking, flexible strategies, and periodic self-monitoring" of which novice students seem to be ignorant (Paris & Jacobs, 1984, p. 2083). We believe, if it is not possible to add such a course to the graduate curriculum, even changing the title and content of the existing course namely 'advanced academic writing' to 'advanced academic reading and writing' could prove beneficial. As Dhieb-Henia (2003) argues, metacognitive strategy instruction, especially at undergraduate or post-graduate programs, could prove effective, though one should keep in mind that 'discipline-specific reading skills' take time to develop.

Conclusion

Considering the little research that has been conducted to understand what reading in academic contexts means to students (Mann, 2000), this qualitative study investigated the conceptions of graduate students of applied linguistics on academic reading.

In this study, participants pointed to some critical aspects of academic reading such as its strategic nature, the importance of genre awareness, critical literacy, digital literacy, content knowledge, and language proficiency. It can be argued that the fact that they mentioned these aspects does not mean that they are good at them as well. In other words, because beliefs may not always correspond to practices, we believe that caution needs to be exercised in assuming that they may be good at these areas as well. Further studies could investigate whether students are competent in these aspects while doing their readings at the graduate programs or not.

In line with the previous literature, (e.g., McGrath et al., 2016), the results of this study show that the problem of academic reading needs to be explored in light of the literacy practices that shape academic texts (e.g., Hyland, 2003) rather than the sole focus on linguistic knowledge (McGrath et al., 2016). Accordingly, future longitudinal studies could explore how such conceptions of academic reading come into existence and what literacy practices and events can trigger and develop such conceptions. This study was limited to qualitative data. Future studies could include both qualitative and quantitative data in order to provide a richer understanding of academic reading at the graduate programs. Previous studies demonstrate the importance of students' conceptions of reading. These studies are mostly limited to the high school or undergraduate students' conceptions, limiting the generalizability of findings to the graduate levels. The results of this study add to the literature in this regard.

The findings of this study could further help curriculum designers to understand students' needs at the graduate levels better. This study can contribute to practice by showing different aspects of academic reading

which could help design curricula for them and provide instructional materials in accordance. Another implication of this study is that academic reading at graduate programs needs to receive more attention. The findings of this study can provide teachers with accounts of what students think and need and also what they go through and experience in their graduate programs.

Accordingly, teachers could increase students' metacognitive awareness of both the nature and purposes of reading and also the strategies that they could use to accomplish their reading goals (Alhaqbani & Riazi, 2012). Students cannot acquire and use successful reading strategies incidentally and can start doing their readings without fully understanding what they are expected to do (Dreyer & Nel, 2003). We argue that teachers can help these students know their habits which could help them get rid of their chronic treatment of readings and look for more effective strategies for doing their readings (Dreyer & Nel, 2003). Teachers could increase students' metacognitive awareness of their readings and provide them with explicit instruction of the strategies they could use (Tavakoli, 2014).

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Appendix (interview questions)

Research question 1

1) What comes to your mind when you hear 'academic reading'? / What does the phrase 'academic reading' mean to you?

2) What does it mean to read at a graduate level?

3) What are the characteristics of students who are good at reading at the MA level?

4) What do you think are different aspects of reading at MA level?

Research question 2

5) What factors do you think have influenced the way you perceive reading?

6) Are there any specific experiences or events you might want to refer to? / Are there any experiences or events that left an impression on you?

Research question 3

7) You know that there is a course called 'advanced writing.' Do you think that adding a course called 'advanced academic reading' to the MA curriculum could prove beneficial? If yes, why? If not, why?

8) Any other comment that you would like to make?