

# Postgraduate Students' Perceptions of their Academic Reading and Writing: A Case of Teachers Studying at a Ghanaian University

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*Abstract: Students' literacy levels, in particular their academic reading and writing, have been an area of concern in education for many years. Students who have high academic reading and writing proficiency are usually successful, academically. A number of tertiary students have shown low literacy levels, which have had an impact on their academic performance. These low literacy levels and consequently poor academic performance have led to high failure and attrition rates. In supporting students to improve their literacy levels and academic performance, a better understanding of their perceptions of their academic reading and writing is important. This is particularly important for postgraduate students, as the literacy demands at this level are more complex. The aim of the study was to determine how the cohort of postgraduate students at a university in Ghana, who are also teachers at school level, perceive their academic reading and writing. In order to assist the postgraduate students to improve their own academic literacy, as well as their ability to assist their learners, the Language Unit, which provides academic language support to students at the institution, undertook the current study. A questionnaire on a Likert scale was used to collect data, which were analyzed to determine the students' perceptions of their academic reading and writing. The results of the descriptive study showed that although the cohort of postgraduate students perceive themselves to be competent in some writing activities, they had rather low perceptions of their academic reading, in particular their reading of academic journal articles. The results indicate the need to revise the literacy support course and to include a reading component. Recommendations were therefore made for a more tailored approach to improving the students' academic reading and writing.*

*Keywords: Postgraduate Students, Teachers, Academic Reading and Writing, Strategies, Self-Efficacy Beliefs, Reading and Writing Challenges, Literacy Levels*

## 1. Introduction

An area of much concern in the field of education is students' levels of academic literacy, in particular their academic reading and writing. Researchers such as Boakye and Linden (2018), Pretorius (2002) and Wolf (2018) point out that students often struggle to read longer texts and find it difficult to follow complex arguments. While literacy at school level is obviously important, reading and writing become highly crucial at university level (Boakye 2017b; Stanford and Richards 2018) and even more so for postgraduate students. A number of scholars, including Boakye (2011), Parrot and Cherry (2011), Pretorius (2000; 2002), and Roberts and Roberts (2008), have pointed out that it is at tertiary level that reading difficulties and ineptness become strikingly obvious. A number of students perceive academic reading and writing as challenging, yet they remain indispensable activities for university studies, especially postgraduate studies (Akinmolayan 2015). Mason, Harris, and Graham (2013) confirm that a majority of students continue to find academic writing difficult and challenging.

Students' ability to read and write proficiently has a huge impact on their academic performance (Boakye 2017b; CCAAL 2010; Pretorius 2002; Stoffelsma and Spooren 2018), and particularly at postgraduate level where the literacy demands are more complex and challenging (Dowse 2014; Singh 2014; Stanford and Richards 2018). The high level and complex literacy skills required at graduate and postgraduate levels have contributed to the high failure and attrition rates at this level of education (World Bank Group 2018). Nearly half of students in South African universities drop out of tertiary institutions every year (DHET 2017). The situation is not any better in other African institutions such as Ghana (Atuahene and

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Owusu-Ansah 2013). Thus academic reading proficiency and academic performance have been found to play a contributory role in the attrition rates of many African countries (World Bank Group 2018).

A number of literacy support programs have been introduced at various universities to help improve the literacy levels of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. However, whereas literacy research at undergraduate level abounds, there is limited research at postgraduate level in relation to students' academic reading and writing. The study focused on postgraduate students in the Education Faculty of a university in Ghana. These postgraduate students are also professional teachers who teach at the school level and were registered for the literacy support course at this university. For students pursuing a postgraduate degree in education, higher literacy levels (including appropriate use of reading and writing strategies – techniques used in reading and writing) and high belief in their ability to read and write proficiently are of utmost importance. They are required to read a large number of texts and need to think and read critically at a higher level, as well as communicate effectively, in order to succeed academically (Dowse 2014). It is therefore important to investigate these postgraduate students' perceptions of their literacy levels.

In addition, these postgraduate students, as teachers, need to have a high level of academic literacy, as this is indicative of their ability to successfully teach literacy in the primary or secondary school classroom. Stoffelsma and Spooren (2018) point out that the reading proficiency of student teachers is related to the quality of their teaching and thus has an effect on the learners they teach, and consequently influences the quality of education in a country. According to education researchers such as Ben-Peretz (2001), Guerriero (2014) and Verloop, Van Driel, and Meijer (2001), teachers' pedagogical knowledge influences their teaching, as teachers often teach from their knowledge base or from their expertise. Thus, investigating these teachers' perceptions of their academic reading and writing would shed more light on their literacy instruction at the school level.

An area that has not been given enough attention is how qualified teachers, who are teaching and pursuing a postgraduate degree in education, perceive their literacy abilities and approach their own reading and writing activities. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to investigate how teachers pursuing postgraduate qualifications perceive their literacy abilities, in particular their academic reading and writing. The aim of the study was to investigate the postgraduate students' perceptions of their reading and writing abilities, their literacy challenges and their self-efficacy levels.

## **2. Literature Review**

The language proficiency, reading comprehension and academic performance of students are known to be reciprocally related to a large extent (Boakye 2017b; Grisso 2018; Nyarko et al. 2018; Pretorius 2000; Pretorius 2002). Ampiah, Akyeampong and Leliveld (2002) in Stoffelsma and Spooren (2018) point out that the English language proficiency of learners, as measured by national examinations through receptive and productive skills, is proving to be the limiting factor in promoting effective reading comprehension, knowledge, and skills. In a study conducted by Stoffelsma and De Jong (2015) using undergraduate student teachers at a Ghanaian University, the authors found that 52% of the students were reading below the required level.

A variety of studies have investigated the kinds of challenges that university students encounter when reading academic texts (e.g. Boakye and Linden 2018; Boakye, Sommerville, and Debusho 2014; Phakiti and Li 2011; Pretorius 2002; Singh 2014; Stoffelsma 2014). Some of these challenges include extracting and synthesizing information from various sources (Phakiti and Li 2011), acquiring new discipline-specific terminology (Short, Harste, and Burke 1996), and ascertaining how much critical analysis is required in a discipline, as well as expressing the level of criticality in the discourse that is appropriate for the discipline (Singh

2014). Others have also noted challenges such as misunderstanding of the concept of critical evaluation, difficulties with the concept of critical reading, cultural inappropriateness of challenging scholarship for some students, difficulties in analysing essay questions, and differences in the way different cultures structure literary texts (Durkin 2004 in Singh 2014, 78). According to Guthrie (2008), the effects of these challenges intensify as students climb the educational ladder.

These challenges can influence how students perceive their literacy levels, which in most cases is negative. One article that looks at how postgraduate tertiary education students perceive literacy is Singh's (2014) study of postgraduate students in a taught master's program. In the research project, international students who were learning in their second language were surveyed to find what challenges they face in academic reading and how they overcome them. Activities such as reading quickly to find information, working out meaning of difficult words, and reading quickly to get overall meaning, were rated as the most common challenges in academic reading for these postgraduate students (Singh 2014, 81). Other students also stated that low proficiency in English language prevented them from participating in academic literacies practices such as reading fluently and writing effectively. The students also reported that they had difficulty comprehending the material they read (Singh 2014). Singh (2014) also found that to overcome these challenges, students were more likely to read the assigned material many times or use a dictionary more often. Singh (2014, 82–83) notes, however, that these repair strategies are time-consuming, tedious and cognitively demanding, and do not result in students' grasping and adapting quickly to the new and different academic expectations in postgraduate programs. This meant that these students' perceptions of literacy were not as positive as one would expect of a postgraduate student who is also engaged in teaching.

Due to students' continuous challenges with literacy skills, Fujimoto et al. (2011, 2) argue that, with regard to reading academic journal articles, students should be guided by providing a rationale for the task, providing students with a clear starting point for the task, providing relevance cues to direct students' reading, and encouraging collaboration among learners. In their research project, the authors evaluated the use of these guidelines to determine how students perceive the effect of this guidance on their reading proficiency. Overall, the response was positive (Fujimoto et al. 2011). Of particular interest were the results on students' control beliefs, in other words, what made reading difficult for them. A number of students believed that "external barriers to their learning such as the length of articles, their vocabulary, complexity and uninteresting content" were their main hindrance (Fujimoto et al. 2011, 8). Others stated that their own performance and behavior, such as "procrastination, laziness or lack of motivation", hindered them (Fujimoto et al. 2011, 9). These control beliefs matter because if "students identify the barriers to their success as being internal and controllable (such as motivation), they are more likely to change their behavior with intervention and thereby experience greater success in the future" (Fujimoto et al. 2011, 9). The converse also applies.

Research conducted in two urban public primary schools in Ghana by Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond (2011) highlighted teachers' use of inappropriate teaching methods based on their erroneous beliefs. Primarily, the data showed that the teachers believe and teach literacy as rooted in skills, based on the wider belief of many Ghanaians, as explained by Andoh-Kumi (1998 in Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond 2011). Thus, many teachers lack a complex understanding of academic literacy, as explained by Lea and Street (1998), and the purpose of teaching it. Furthermore, a number of teachers tend to use the widely criticized transmission skills method (Clarence and McKenna 2017; Jacobs 2010; Lea and Street 1998) to teach literacy, which arguably "interrupts learners' attention, reduces their reading speed and also affects their confidence in reading and learning generally" (Opoku-Amankwa and Brew-Hammond 2011, 101). The skills approach to academic literacy, in contrast to the academic literacies approach, also decreases the development of critical reading and critical thinking and, most importantly, prevents students from perceiving academic literacy as socially constructed and transformative. According to Lillis et al. (2015, 6), the academic literacies approach is perceived as an approach that is used "to signal a critical and social practice perspective on reading and writing in the academy" and should be the approach of choice. Opoku-Amankwa

and Brew-Hammond (2011) argue that teachers should be using dynamic and engaging strategies to teach academic literacy. However, the teachers' use of inappropriate methods of instruction may not be deliberate, but rather due to a lack of understanding; as stated by Ben-Peretz (2001), Guerriero (2014) and Verloop, Van Driel and Meijer (2001), teachers teach from their knowledge base.

In their study of Irish student teachers, Murphy et al. (2014) found that young education graduates struggled to hold a complex understanding of literacy and were only aware of more traditional literacy teaching strategies (such as rote learning and flashcards) and that they themselves struggled with academic reading and writing (Murphy et al. 2014).

## ***2.1 Reading Strategies and Affective Factors***

Reading strategies (e.g. pre-reading, application of background knowledge, and monitoring comprehension), defined as the deliberate and conscious procedures used by readers to enhance text comprehension (Mokhtari and Sheorey 2002), are considered as key to ensuring that students are able to read for comprehension (Hosseini et al. 2012). Pressley (2000) points out that good readers apply a variety of appropriate strategies to the text they are reading, which helps to improve comprehension. The use of reading strategies also encourages critical thinking, deep reading and the internalization of a text (Hosseini et al. 2012). This is not only applicable to first language learners, as Hosseini et al. (2012) argue, but is just as effective for students reading in a second or target language. The affective dimension, according to Grabe and Stoller (2011), relates to factors such as motivation, self-efficacy and attitude. Appropriate use of reading strategies goes hand in hand with the affective dimension of reading, as explained by Boakye (2012), Grabe and Stoller (2011), and Guthrie (2008). Self-efficacy, which is the belief in one's capability to organize and execute the course of action required to manage prospective situations, is directly linked to motivation, and the two affective factors have a bi-directional relationship (Boakye 2012, 73). Bandura (1986, 25) states that "people's level of motivation, affective states and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true". Zare and Mobarakeh (2011) found that reading self-efficacy, overall use of reading strategies and subcategories of reading strategies were significantly positively correlated. The result of their study indicated that the participants, who on average felt confident of their capabilities to perform general reading tasks, also demonstrated an ability to use three different subcategories of reading strategies (metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective) at an acceptable level. Zare and Mobarakeh (2011) conclude that if people do not believe in their own capabilities and power to create and produce the things, situations or behavior they expect, then they make no effort to achieve what they want. Consequently, if students do not believe in their academic reading and writing abilities, they will not make the necessary effort to achieve the required proficiency.

Pajares (1996) noted that self-efficacy could influence students' choices, efforts, and perseverance when confronted with obstacles, stress and anxiety. For instance, students who had high self-efficacy beliefs were persistent when faced with challenges and were more successful in academic achievement (Wang and Pape 2007). Eslami and Fatahi (2008) examined the efficacy beliefs of non-native English speaking (NNES) Iranian EFL teachers, their perceptions of their teaching efficacy in terms of personal capability to teach EFL, and their perceived English language proficiency level. A modified version of the teachers' sense of efficacy scale (Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2001) was used to measure self-efficacy for management, engagement and instructional strategies. The results of the study revealed that the more efficacious the teachers felt, the more inclined they were to use communicative-based strategies.

Schunk (2003) believes that perceived self-efficacy, or students' personal beliefs about their capability to learn or perform behaviors at designated levels, plays an important role in their motivation and learning. Zimmerman (1997) adds that students' perceived self-efficacy influences their skills acquisition, both directly and indirectly, by highlighting their persistence.

Thus, students' self-efficacy and their use of appropriate strategies, which have a bi-directional relationship (Boakye 2012), are crucial in their successful reading and writing activities.

It is evident from the discussion above that strategy use and the affective factor of self-efficacy belief influence students' literacy abilities. The study therefore sought to determine students' perceptions of their academic reading and writing through their strategy use, self-efficacy beliefs and related challenges. The aim of the study was to determine the perceptions of teachers pursuing postgraduate qualifications regarding their literacy activities, specifically, strategies used in reading and writing academic texts, their self-efficacy beliefs, and the challenges they experience with reading and writing, particularly reading of academic articles. The following questions, therefore, guided the study:

1. What are the perceptions of teachers pursuing postgraduate qualifications regarding their academic reading and writing activities?
2. What academic reading and writing challenges do the teachers face?
3. What are the self-efficacy levels of the teachers?

### **3. Methodology**

A descriptive research method was used for the study. A survey questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. Creswell (2014) explains that a survey design provides a numeric description of trends or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. From the sample results, the researcher generalizes or draws inferences to the population. Thus, in order to obtain a description of the students' perceptions of their academic reading and writing, a survey questionnaire was used, and descriptive statistics were used to present the data. Descriptive statistics are used to describe the basic features of data in a study, and they provide simple summaries about the sample (Narkhede 2018). With descriptive statistics, a researcher describes what is, or what the data shows of the sample. By describing the data in a simple manner, measures of central tendencies, such as means, are generally used (Narkhede 2018). Although descriptive statistics are quite straightforward, their importance should not be overlooked, as they are used for data reduction purposes, such as exploring and summarizing the data in an understandable and meaningful way. According to Leedy and Ormord (2016), they are the summaries of the data and tell us a great deal about the patterns of the scores in terms of averages. A descriptive analysis was therefore used for the study to provide a description of trends among the cohort of students with regard to their opinions and perceptions of their academic reading and writing. The study did not seek the participants' verbal responses.

#### **3.1 Participants**

The participants were the 2018 cohort of teachers registered for the Master of English Education program and enrolled in the Advanced Writing course as an academic literacy support course. Students who register for the Master of English Education are required to take the Advanced Writing course. The questionnaire was completed by the students during one of their Advanced Writing classes. There were 37 students enrolled for the course. A majority of them (95%) were professional teachers, and 92% were teaching English either at primary or high school level. Ninety-two percent (92%) had obtained just one degree and 5% had a second degree, while 3% (one student) did not respond to that question. The majority (54%) were between 30 and 39 years old, while 38% were between the ages of 40 and 49 years and only 8% were aged between 25 and 29 years. Table 1 presents the demographics of the cohort of students in percentages.

**Table 1: Background Information of Participants**

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<b>Profession</b>	
Professional teachers	95%
Non-professional teachers	5%
<b>Subject of teaching</b>	
Teaching English language at school level	92%
Teaching other subjects at school level	8%
<b>Highest qualification</b>	
First degree in English studies	92%
Second degree	5%
Not answered	3%
<b>Age</b>	
25–29 years	8%
30–39 years	54%
40–49 years	38%

*Source: Boakye 2020*

### **3.2 Research Instrument**

The research instrument was a survey questionnaire. The survey questionnaire was closed-ended and required responses on a Likert scale (Babbie 2010; Creswell 2014; Leedy and Ormrod 2016). Respondents provided their perceptions by choosing a response of strongly agree (1), agree (2), disagree (3), or strongly disagree (4) on a scale of 1 to 4. There were 15 questions that elicited the students' perceptions of their reading and writing of academic texts. Twelve of the 15 questions (questions 1–4, 7, and 8–15) had an affective slant, relating particularly to students' self-efficacy. The questions were adapted from Boakye (2017b), Grabe and Stoller (2011) and Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, and Cox (1999). Analysis showed that none of the questions would have allowed a higher Cronbach's alpha score if deleted, indicating that all the questions could be included.

### **3.3 Data Collection and Procedure**

Data were collected during one lecture period of the Advanced Writing course. At the end of the two-hour lecture, students completed an informed consent form and answered the questionnaire by indicating their level of agreement or disagreement to the statements on the four-point Likert scale. Students were assured of anonymity and had the option to decline participation. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Humanities and the Department of English before administering the questionnaire.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

The analysis was purely descriptive. As stated by Nassaji (2015), in second language research, descriptive research design can be used to collect data about learners' behaviors and experiences. He points out that the goal of this descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics, and does not answer questions about how or why the characteristics came about, but rather addresses the what question (i.e. what are the characteristics of the population or the situation being studied?). It can include quantifiable data that can be analyzed using frequencies, percentages, or averages. The data can be used to provide simple summaries about the beliefs, viewpoints, opinions, or perspectives of the sample. The data used for this study were analyzed descriptively. The frequencies (percentages), means, and standard deviations were calculated to present students' perceptions of their academic reading and writing. Cronbach's alpha was also calculated for the reading questions and for the writing questions to determine their consistency, and the data were then analyzed to determine how the students

perceive their academic reading and writing. There were no inferential analyses done, as the aim was to elicit students' perceptions of their academic literacy without any comparisons in terms of age, academic qualification or professional education.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The study sought to determine the students' perceptions of their academic reading and writing in terms of their use of reading and writing strategies, their challenges with academic reading and writing, and their self-efficacy beliefs. The results, as presented in Table 2 and Figure 1, show mixed responses regarding the students' use of strategies for reading and writing, their challenges in academic reading and writing, and their self-efficacy beliefs. The responses indicate that overall, the students use appropriate writing strategies. However, their responses for the reading of academic texts show that their perception of their academic reading was rather low, indicating the use of inappropriate and ineffective strategies for reading academic texts. This may be due to the fact that the module is an Advanced Writing course, which is more focused on writing, with little attention being given to reading, especially reading of academic articles. This unbalanced focus on literacy support has given rise to students perceiving themselves as good writers but poor readers, yet effective writing is usually the result of efficient reading (Grabe and Zhang 2013; Hedgcock and Ferris 2018). The use of inappropriate strategies to secure meaning is also evident in their responses to questions pertaining to their use of reading strategies.

From the results given in Table 2, it seems that students perceive themselves to be competent in academic writing. However, there are a few responses that suggest there are certain writing tasks that a number of them struggle to perform. In particular, respondents indicated that they struggle with synthesizing information from different sources, starting the writing process, and reading academic journal articles. The responses are shown in Table 2 and Figure 1 below. Questions 1, 2, 3, 7 and 9 were phrased in the negative and were reversed for analysis. These are marked with a preceding "r".

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistics of Questionnaire Responses

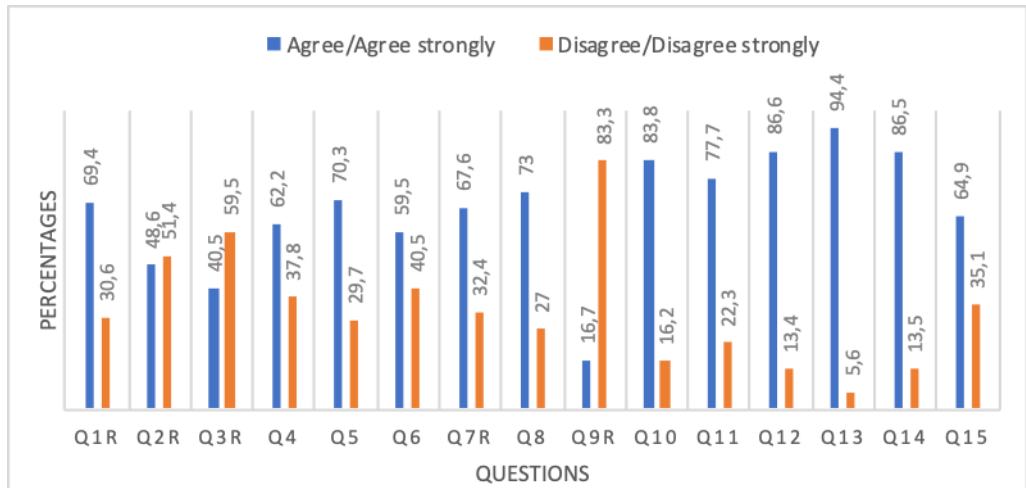
	Strongly Agree (1)		Agree (2)		Disagree (3)		Strongly Disagree (4)		Mean	Std. Deviation
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
<i>rQ1: I find it difficult to look for information on a given topic.</i>	8	22.2	17	47.2	11	30.6	0	0.0	2.08	0.732
<i>rQ2: I find reading journal articles quite challenging.</i>	6	16.2	12	32.4	15	40.5	4	10.8	2.46	0.900
<i>rQ3: I usually find it difficult to synthesize information from different sources.</i>	5	13.5	10	27.0	20	54.1	2	5.4	2.51	0.804
<i>Q4: I am able to follow the arguments and claims of authors easily when I read journal articles.</i>	2	5.4	21	56.8	13	35.1	1	2.7	2.35	0.633
<i>Q5: I am aware of and understand the structure and main sections of a research article.</i>	4	10.8	22	59.5	10	27.0	1	2.7	2.22	0.672

<i>Q6: I consider the structure and main sections of a journal article when reading such articles.</i>	2	5.4	20	54.1	12	32.4	3	8.1	2.43	0.728
<i>rQ7: I find it difficult to structure my arguments and ideas when writing.</i>	9	24.3	16	43.2	11	29.7	1	2.7	2.11	0.809
<i>Q8: I always begin my writing with an outline.</i>	2	5.4	25	67.6	7	18.9	3	8.1	2.30	0.702
<i>rQ9: I usually get writer's block (find it difficult to start) when I have to write an assignment.</i>	1	2.8	5	13.9	20	55.6	10	27.8	3.08	0.732
<i>Q10: I can write a good academic paragraph.</i>	3	8.1	28	75.7	6	16.2	0	0.0	2.08	0.493
<i>Q11: I can write using an academic style and tone.</i>	3	8.3	25	69.4	8	22.2	0	0.0	2.14	0.543
<i>Q12: I can write an accurate summary of information that I have read in English.</i>	5	13.5	27	73.0	5	13.5	0	0.0	2.00	0.527
<i>Q13: I can revise my own writing to improve the development and organization.</i>	9	25.0	25	69.4	2	5.6	0	0.0	1.81	0.525
<i>Q14: I can identify problems in my writing and see what should be improved.</i>	10	27.0	22	59.5	3	8.1	2	5.4	1.92	0.759
<i>Q15: I can use appropriate strategies to fix problems with my writing.</i>	4	10.8	20	54.1	13	35.1	0	0.0	2.24	0.641

Source: Boakye 2020

The responses of “agree” and “strongly agree” were combined and compared with those of “disagree” and “strongly disagree” to provide a clearer indication of the students’ positive and negative responses. The combined responses are shown in Fig 1 below.





**Figure 1:** Combined Percentage Responses  
*Source: Boakye 2020*

Figure 1 provides a clearer picture of the responses of agreement and disagreement. As a reversed statement, responses to question 1 show that a majority of the students (69%) do not have difficulty in searching for information. Students were asked to respond to the statement, “I find it difficult to look for information on a particular topic.” As it was not specified whether the search implied using a search engine or reading to get information, the students may have interpreted it in either way. However, in whatever way it was interpreted, a majority of them do not seem to perceive searching for information as a challenge. The mean of 2.08 on a scale of 4 reflects a borderline response. That is, students were mainly converged between agree and disagree, with very few at the extremes of strongly agree (22%) and strongly disagree (0%). A considerable proportion (30%) indicated that they struggle to look for information. These students may either be struggling with the use of technology to search for information online or lack the techniques to access the information manually. This finding resonates with Singh’s (2014) study, which found that postgraduate students struggle with finding information. There is therefore a need to improve the students’ ability to search for information, whether through technology using search engines, or manually using appropriate reading techniques to access information.

Question 2 asked if students found reading journal articles challenging. More than half of the respondents indicated that they struggle with reading academic articles. Responses to the reversed question 2 show that fewer students have positive perceptions compared to those who have negative perceptions of their ability to read journal articles. More than half of the students indicated that they experience challenges with the reading of journal articles. The mean of 2.46 indicates a move away from agreement to disagreement on the reversed question. This is an indication that the majority of students encounter challenges when reading academic journal articles. This is not surprising as the Advanced Writing course is mainly based on writing, with little if any, attention given to reading.

Question 3 indicated another area of difficulty, as the majority of respondents stated that they struggle to synthesize information from a variety of sources. Question 3 was also reversed for the analysis and the responses show that only 40% of the students indicated that they could synthesize information from various sources. The majority, 60% indicated that they find it difficult to synthesize information successfully. A mean of 2.51 was recorded for this question, indicating that the responses were more negative than positive.

Question 7, “I find it difficult to structure my arguments and ideas when writing”, showed that the majority of students do not seem to have challenges with structuring their arguments and ideas when writing. Question 7 was also reversed, and the responses show that only 32% of the students perceive having difficulty in structuring their ideas and arguments in their writing

assignments. As stated, earlier the course focuses on academic writing, so the majority having positive perceptions of their ability to structure arguments was not entirely surprising. As the mean of 2.11 is above 2.0, no matter how small the margin, the 32% negative responses are worthy of note, as structuring ideas and arguments in writing is an important academic skill for students at tertiary level, more so at postgraduate level. For 32% of students still struggling with this academic skill, there needs to be a renewed focus on addressing this problem to meet their needs.

These results are interesting in light of the fact that 73% of respondents indicated in question 8 that they do not begin the writing process with an outline. This practice suggests a lack of planning and may have consequences for the proper structuring of a written text. The students' reading and writing challenges are further evident from their responses to question 9, which indicate that writer's block is an issue for 84% of them. If 73% of students are not using an outline to begin the writing process and 84% are struggling with writer's block, a connection could be inferred in that students may not be aware of, or do not use writing strategies to plan, structure and complete their writing tasks.

Question 9 was also negatively phrased and therefore reversed for the analysis. Very few students indicated that they do not have writer's block. An overwhelming majority (83.4%) indicated having writer's block or difficulty in starting a writing task. This question received the most negative responses, as shown in the mean of 3.08, indicating that the majority disagreed with the reversed statement. More specifically, 55% of them disagreed with the reversed statement, and 28% disagreed strongly. Although many writers experience challenges in getting a writing task started, the high percentage of students struggling with their writing in this regard indicates that there needs to be a review of how the Advanced Writing course is structured and whether it responds to students' needs in this regard by addressing this specific academic writing skill.

Responses to the five questions that were reversed show that students perceive themselves as experiencing challenges and lacking these academic reading and writing skills. Although 68% of the students agreed to the reversed statement in question 7, indicating that the majority of them do not find it difficult to structure their arguments when writing, it must be noted that a considerable number (32%) have difficulty in this area. For question 9, which was also reversed, a substantial number (84%) reported a negative perception of their ability to easily start writing an academic essay. The majority indicated that they experience writer's block and encounter difficulty in their academic writing. These negative perceptions have an influence on students' self-efficacy in relation to their academic reading and writing. Self-efficacy, as noted earlier, has implications for efforts expended in performing the tasks and, consequently, the achievement obtained. Zare and Mobarakeh (2011) found that students' perceptions and beliefs correlated with their ability and performance in a task.

The questions that were positively phrased and did not need to be reversed were questions 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15. Responses to question 4 (62% agree), question 5 (70% agree) and question 6 (60% agree) all show that the majority of students perceive themselves as being able to engage in these academic activities. However, since the means for these two questions are above 2 (i.e. 2.22 and 2.43), the negative responses are worthy of note and should be acknowledged, and efforts should be made to address those issues in the teaching approach and the content of the Advanced Writing course.

Although questions 4 and 5 also relate to the reading of journal articles, the majority of students (62% for question 4 and 70% for question 5) indicated that they had no problem following the arguments and claims presented in academic journal articles and that they were aware of the structure of a journal article. An interesting contradiction is found here in that students seem to find reading journal articles difficult (question 2) but also stated that they are able to follow arguments in journal articles (question 4). These responses could suggest that students may not be equating comprehension to being able to understand and follow an argument. Thus, the area of reading academic articles needs serious intervention, as postgraduate students are required to read and understand a large number of academic articles to write their own assignments and research essays. It must also be noted that although the

majority of students responded to questions 4 and 5 positively, a considerable number of students (38% for question 4 and 30% for question 5) stated that they had challenges in this specific literacy area.

Question 6 asked students if they consider the structure of a journal article when reading such texts. Fifty-nine percent (59%) of students reported that they do consider the structure. It seems that merely considering the structure does not lead to a better understanding, as more than half of the students (52%) indicated in question 2 that they find the reading of journal articles challenging. In addition, a significant number (41%) disagreed with question 6, indicating that almost half of the students do not consider the structure. Being aware of the structure of a journal article and considering this while reading helps with understanding (Fujimoto et al. 2011), and therefore needs to be emphasized in the course. Good writing is also preceded by good reading; therefore, providing the students with a foundation of strong reading will assist their writing. The ability required in question 6 needs to be given attention in the Advanced Writing course to provide students with this important skill.

Questions 8 and 10–14 also show that the students have positive perceptions of their academic reading and writing, with agreement not less than 70% for any of them. The means of exactly 2, for question 12, and just above 2 (2.08), for question 10 indicate these positive responses. For questions 13 (mean 1.89) and 14 (mean 1.92), the means were below 2, indicating mainly agreement, with higher percentages than the other questions for strongly agree (Q13 – 25%; Q14 – 27%).

Although the responses to question 15 showed more students agreed than disagreed, the percentage (65%) was not as high as those for question 8 (73%) and questions 10–14. However, a considerable number strongly agreed (11%), and a substantial number (35%) disagreed, indicating negative perceptions of their ability to use appropriate strategies to fix problems in their writing. The mean of 2.24, which is above 2.0, further confirms the extent of the students' negative responses to this question.

Questions 10 to 15 sought responses on students' actual writing and editing abilities, as well as their self-efficacy levels in relation to these activities. For these questions, the majority of students reported that they could write a good academic paragraph, with the appropriate style and tone. They also indicated their confidence in their ability to summarize and write well-organized paragraphs, and that they are competent in clearly identifying language errors and fixing them. Furthermore, they indicated that they are adequately knowledgeable about writing strategies that will help them write well-organized essays. These responses suggest that students are confident in their writing ability. However, it must be noted that, respectively, 16%, 22% and 14% of responses to questions 10, 11 and 12 (which relate to writing a good academic paragraph in question 10, using the correct style in question 11, and summarizing in question 12) indicated that the students felt they were unable to write well-organized paragraphs. These responses suggest that there is still a significant number of students who are not confident in their literacy skills or lack self-efficacy in their writing abilities. Another interesting result obtained was that 35% of the respondents felt they could not use appropriate strategies to fix problems with their writing, suggesting that this area of literacy development has perhaps been overlooked in the Advanced Writing course.

It is interesting that despite not using appropriate writing strategies (questions 8 and 9), a majority of students responded to question 7 by indicating that they do not find it difficult to structure their arguments and ideas when writing. This could result from the Dunning-Kruger effect, a cognitive bias of illusory superiority in which people mistakenly assess their cognitive ability as greater than it is. Essentially, those with low ability do not possess the skills needed to recognize their own incompetence. In other words, the incompetent lack the skills and cognitive abilities to recognize their own inability. The combination of poor self-awareness and low cognitive ability leads them to overestimate their own capabilities (Cherry 2019). Thus, the students may not be aware of their inabilities due to their incapability and may perceive their abilities as higher than they really are.

The above data analyses show that a significant number of students had negative perceptions of their ability to read journal articles (Q2 – 51%), and synthesize information from

various texts (Q3 – 60%). In addition, they also indicated having difficulty in starting a writing task (Q9 – 83%). Although the other questions had highly positive responses, there was a considerable number who indicated challenges in finding information (Q1 – 31%). Others were not being able to follow arguments and claims in journal articles (Q4 – 39%), not considering structure when reading journal articles (Q6 – 41%), having difficulty in structuring arguments and ideas when writing (Q7 – 32%), and not being able to use appropriate strategies to fix problems in their writing (Q15 – 35%). Although the majority of students had positive perceptions of these areas, the fact that considerable numbers perceive themselves as struggling in these areas is a cause for concern and cannot be overlooked. These negative perceptions also have implications for self-efficacy, which has a ripple effect on the students’ ability to perform in these academic reading and writing activities successfully (Boakye 2015; Pajares 2002, 2006).

In addition to the individual analyses of the questions, the questions were also grouped into reading and writing questions in order to determine how the students perceive their ability to perform reading and writing tasks individually. Cronbach’s alpha was used to determine the consistency in each group of questions. According to Taber (2018), Cronbach’s alpha is commonly reported for the development of scales intended to measure attitudes, perceptions and other affective constructs. Cronbach’s alpha was used to calculate the internal consistency coefficients of the questions included for reading and writing. Results of the reliability analysis showed that the questions had satisfactory discriminating power (0.74 and 0.79). Table 3 shows Cronbach’s alpha for the reading and writing questions. The analysis shows Cronbach’s alpha of 0.74 for the reading questions and 0.79 for the writing questions, which indicate consistency and reliability in each group of questions.

**Table 3: Reliability Statistics**

	<i>Cronbach’s Alpha</i>	<i>N of Items</i>
<i>Academic reading questions 1–7</i>	0.74	7
<i>Academic writing questions 8–15</i>	0.79	8

Source: Boakye 2020

Tables 4 and 5 below also show the means and standard deviation for each group of questions.

**Table 4: Item Statistics for Questions on Academic Reading (1–7)**

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>rQ1: I find it difficult to look for information on a given topic.</i>	2.0833	.73193	36
<i>rQ2: I find reading journal articles quite challenging.</i>	2.5556	1.13249	36
<i>rQ3: I usually find it difficult to synthesize information from different sources.</i>	2.5556	.93944	36
<i>Q4: I am able to follow the arguments and claims of authors easily when I read journal articles.</i>	2.3333	.63246	36
<i>Q5: I am aware of and understand the structure and main sections of a research article.</i>	2.2222	.68080	36
<i>Q6: I consider the structure and main sections of a journal article when reading such articles.</i>	2.4167	.73193	36
<i>rQ7: I find it difficult to structure my arguments and ideas when writing.</i>	2.1389	.89929	36
<i>Average mean</i>	2.3293		

Source: Boakye 2020

**Table 5: Item Statistics for Questions on Academic Writing (8–15)**

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>Q8: I always begin my writing with an outline.</i>	2.2059	.59183	34
<i>rQ9: I usually get writer's block (find it difficult to start) when I have to write an assignment.</i>	3.3824	1.15509	34
<i>Q10: I can write a good academic paragraph.</i>	2.0588	.48873	34
<i>Q11: I can write using an academic style and tone.</i>	2.1176	.53737	34
<i>Q12: I can write an accurate summary of information that I have read in English.</i>	2.0000	.55048	34
<i>Q13: I can revise my own writing to improve the development and organization.</i>	1.8235	.52052	34
<i>Q14: I can identify problems in my writing and see what should be improved.</i>	1.9118	.75348	34
<i>Q15: I can use appropriate strategies to fix problems with my writing.</i>	2.2353	.65407	34
<i>Average mean</i>	1.9669		

Source: Boakye 2020

There were higher means for the questions on academic reading than for those on academic writing. Whereas all the means for the reading questions were above 2.0, indicating more negative responses, this was not so for the writing questions. For the writing questions, there were two questions with means below 2.0 and one question at exactly 2.0, indicating highly positive responses for academic writing. Questions on academic writing that had means above 2.0 were just marginally above, except the reversed question 9, which had an extremely higher mean of 3.38. It may be that reversing question 9 had implications for the high negative response. Whereas the average mean for responses to questions on academic writing was 1.97, the average mean for the responses to questions on academic reading was 2.33. It can therefore, be summarized that although there were generally negative responses to both academic reading and writing questions, students responded fairly positively on the academic writing questions compared to the academic reading questions, except for question 9. Despite the overall positive response on academic writing, writing techniques need to be emphasized, in particular those pertaining to initial writing such as writing outlines, brainstorming and free writing, in order to overcome writer's block. Furthermore, the responses point to the need to include instruction on reading, as reading is an important aspect of academic literacy and the foundation of proficient writing. In particular, students' reading of academic texts and academic journal articles, as well as synthesizing information from different sources, need intensive instruction, as questions pertaining to these two areas received more negative responses than the other reading questions.

It seems this cohort of teachers pursuing postgraduate qualifications would require more intensive literacy support to develop their academic literacy skills further. In particular, their reading of academic journal articles and their use of appropriate strategies for reading and writing need to be addressed in the literacy support course. Such a program would not only improve the teachers' own academic reading and writing for their postgraduate studies, but enable them to teach academic reading and writing to their learners in ways that are more appropriate. From the responses, it is evident that the perceptions of the cohort regarding their academic reading and writing were generally negative. This has negative implications for their self-efficacy. Reading self-efficacy is deemed important in developing reading proficiency. According to Pajares (2002; 2006), students with high self-efficacy have higher reading proficiency and vice versa. One way of developing self-efficacy is to teach strategies. As students are taught strategies and given the tools for efficient reading, they increase their self-

efficacy, which provides them with self-confidence and positive perceptions of their academic reading and writing. As explained earlier, there is a bidirectional relationship between the use of appropriate strategies in developing reading proficiency and self-efficacy. In order to improve these students' academic reading and writing and enable them to have positive perceptions, the Advanced Writing course needs to include a reading curriculum and to focus on academic journal articles. The writing curriculum also needs to be improved and include synthesizing. The majority of the students reported positive perceptions of their academic writing, but negative perceptions of their reading, which indicates low self-efficacy and poor reading proficiency.

In relation to the first research question, the responses of the students show that they seem to have positive perceptions of their writing ability, but negative perceptions in relation to reading, especially reading academic articles. In relation to the second research question, the students report experiencing reading and writing challenges, but more so in reading. Finally, in relation to the third research question, the students report adequate levels of self-efficacy beliefs for some writing activities, but low levels for academic reading. It is suggested that providing guidance for the students in a systemic way (Fujimoto, et. al. 2001), and adopting a more structured approach to the teaching of reading and writing strategies would help to increase the students' self-efficacy and address the challenges reported in the survey. In addition, collaborative activities should be undertaken frequently in order for students to learn from one another (Fujimoto et al. 2011). Furthermore, in order to ease the difficulty reported in the reading of academic articles, articles to be read by students should be introduced in a scaffolded manner in terms of length, density and relevance (Boakye and Linden 2018). Scaffolding the reading of articles, in addition to the explicit teaching of strategies, would help to build students' motivation and increase their self-efficacy levels, which, as stated by literacy researchers such as Grabe and Stoller (2011) and Guthrie (2008), are important affective factors in developing students' academic reading and writing abilities.

## **5. Conclusion**

This research aimed at eliciting postgraduate students' perceptions of their academic reading and writing. Data from a questionnaire survey were analyzed and presented using descriptive statistics. The main areas of analysis were their use of reading and writing strategies, their challenges in academic reading and writing, and their self-efficacy beliefs. The results show that whereas the cohort of postgraduate students, who are also teachers, seems to have a positive stance towards a number of writing tasks, they lack important aspects such as preceding writing with an outline, and struggle with the academic writing process. In addition, the majority seem to struggle with reading, especially reading journal articles. As teachers' knowledge and behavior impact on the learners they teach, the results point to a dire need for an appropriate literacy intervention for these teachers. Furthermore, as postgraduate students who need to search for information, be able to structure their writing, synthesize information from various sources, and read large volumes of academic texts including journal articles, these students need instruction that addresses these areas in order to equip them with the relevant strategies, raise their self-efficacy and consequently improve their academic reading and writing. Some recommendations, such as the inclusion of academic reading instruction, and scaffolding of texts have been made towards the improvement of the students' academic reading and writing abilities.

It is important to note that these are self-reports and that the students' actual performance in academic reading and writing were not analyzed in this study. Despite this disadvantage, self-reports are important and provide a general outlook on the situation (Abernethy 2015). For the purpose of this study, which is to determine the students' perceptions of their academic reading and writing, the self-reports have played an important role and shed light on this phenomenon. A future study may include a qualitative aspect to gain more insight into the students' perceptions of their academic reading and writing. Since the sample size for the study is fairly

small, findings pertain to the cohort of students, or a similar group in the same context, and cannot be generalized.

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