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Reading Academic English. A Case Study:

StratApp– The Art of Learning

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to describe the different issues that might help university students improve their English academic reading skills. Therefore, this piece of research attempts to identify the several key skills and strategies which are crucial for academic reading and which teachers should take into account at universities in which English is not a first language. Researchers on the subject argue that the features of academic English are relevant to familiarise university students with the language academic texts have. In order to find a possible way to teach students how to read academic English, the advantages of mobile learning have been put forward. The present study illustrates its theoretical background together with a description of how to turn non-academic texts into academic ones (B1-B2 level). This has been exemplified by describing a game-based mobile application, *StratApp - The Art of learning*, whose goal is to improve the English academic reading skills of university students (up to a B2 level). Its ultimate objective is to make students autonomous readers of authentic academic texts.

Key words: reading, strategies, skills, academic English, mobile learning, text adaptation, academicisation, *StratApp-The Art of Learning*

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, reading academic English has received a lot of attention as it is a skill university students need to acquire (Anderson 2003; Arnbjörnsdóttir and Ingvarsdóttir 2009; Lornark 2010; Grabe 2014). The ability to read and interpret academic texts is a critical component of success at a university level as the majority of the assigned materials are in English due to the role it appears to have as a lingua franca. Due to the difficulty academic texts have and the problems which undergraduate students face with them, a number of studies (Urquhart and Weir 1998; Anderson 2003; Koda 2005) have claimed that equipping learners with tools that enhance their reading academic skills could be a possible solution to overcome these troubles.

Some studies have investigated the scarcity of research and dearth of attention paid to developing academic skills (Hellekjær 2009; Grabe and Stoller 2012). Scholars acknowledge the difficulties students have, although little is done in order to solve them, since it is usually taken for granted that students who start university have developed the sufficient skills and strategies to address different academic texts.

Many researchers (Lahuerta 2008; Lornark 2010; Grabe 2014) argue that teaching students reading strategies and skills would help them learn how to approach academic texts. Strategies are very useful when having to deal with different comprehension obstacles as they aid readers to organise, elaborate and evaluate information derived from a text (Koda 2005). Nevertheless, the majority of students have poorly developed reading skills as it seems that nobody has taken care of this issue in previous stages.

In a similar vein, the teaching of the features of academic English has also been seen as a positive factor. Cobb and Horst (2001) and Hirvela (2001) scrutinised the connection between reading and writing and found out that improvements in reading academic skills are reflected when writing and vice versa. Hence, familisaring students with the characteristics of academic English would be beneficial for them because once they interiorise these features they will have fewer problems when they encounter them in specialised readings. What is more, some scholars, such as Grabe (1991) consider that reading and writing should be taught together in advanced reading preparation.

Even though there are different ways to teach students how to read academic English, mobile learning seems to be very effective. The importance of technology in our lives is undeniable due to the connectivity mobile phones provide and the different applications which facilitate our lives, including the field of education. In the last years, mobile phones have been a useful tool for students to learn language as it a more innovative, dynamic and ubiquitous way of learning. Despite the shortage of projects devoted to the improvement of reading academic skills in English, results have observed an increase in students' motivation and reading skills (Wang and Smith 2013; Gutiérrez-Colón et al. 2016).

The purpose of this dissertation is to describe the different issues that might help university students improve their English academic reading skills. This study includes a brief account on what the literature says about reading academic English in order to understand the importance it has at a university level. An outline of the main reading strategies and skills following Urquhart and Weir (1998) and Koda (2005) is provided, together with the main features of academic English which can be used to improve this skill. In addition, the effectiveness of mobile phones in language learning, namely in

reading, is addressed. Finally, a practical part is included in which the issues which need to be taken into account when turning a non-academic text into an academic one are explained. In order to do so, I have selected two of the texts I created for the development of the innovative game-based application *StratApp – The Art of Learning*[1] whose main goal is related to this dissertation: to improve the English academic reading skills of university students.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Reading academic English

In recent decades, the importance of reading academic English has significantly increased, as English is the preferred language for international studies as well as a medium of instruction in many universities (Cobb and Horst 2001; Grabe and Stoller 2012; Samigullina 2018). It is often taken for granted that students at this level possess the necessary skills and strategies to deal with academic reading in their L1 and their ability to transfer them to L2 reading in English (Hellekjær 2009). However, this is not completely true as they lack an academic range of vocabulary (Lornark 2010) and reading skills: "they often select ineffective and inefficient strategies with little strategic intent" (Lahuerta 2008: 168). In other words, undergraduate students tend to present a low level of reading skills and strategies, which play an important role in understanding academic texts.

Hellekjær (2009) and Grabe (2014) studied reading in a second language and concluded that reading in an L2 is a process which is not very different from that of reading in an L1 despite the linguistic impediments students may have in relation to the

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[1] Check the following page for more information about the app: http://stratapp.eu/.

foreign language. It seems that curriculum designers mainly focus on teaching lexis, syntax, functions and discourse patterns, neglecting reading skills. Therefore, it is not surprising that many students enter university education unprepared for the reading demands placed on them. Nonetheless, the ability to read academic English texts efficiently is a crucial skill university students need to develop, given that, in order "to broaden their knowledge, students have to read textbooks, research articles, and journals, most of which are published in academic English" (Lornark 2010: 166).

Grabe and Stoller (2012) and Grabe (2014) examined the shortage of attention devoted to reading academic English research given the quantity of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts which recognise reading as one of the main skills students need to acquire to succeed in their studies. It seems that reading skills are simply assumed to be important, but little discussion exists on how to develop them. Hence, some universities, although not many, are already offering courses on how to train undergraduate academic reading skills as lecturers and professors have become aware of the issue (Ntereke and Ramoroka 2017). Moreover, in some English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university settings, students are expected to take English reading courses in order to acquire and develop acceptable reading skills. In section 2.2, we will explore the different strategies and skills university students can use to improve their academic reading.

2.2. Reading strategies and skills

As Ntereke and Ramoroka (2017) acknowledge, there is a large percentage of university students who struggle with reading academic texts in L2 English because they do not have adequate reading skills. In order to develop them, two factors need to

be considered: first, teaching undergraduate students how to acquire reading skills and strategies, and secondly familiarising them with the features of academic English, which will be dealt with in section 2.3.

There is a fair degree of confusion in the literature over the difference between the terms *skill* and *strategy*. Even though some authors (e.g., Nuttall 1985; Sarig 1987; Olshavsky 1977, among others) frequently utilise them as synonyms,[2] Urquhart and Weir (1998) and Hellekjær (2009) argue that they are not interchangeable as their meaning is not exactly the same: "strategies represent conscious decisions taken by the reader, skills are deployed unconsciously" (Urquhart and Weir 1998: 97). Koda (2005: 217) highlights that it is important to bear in mind that "reading cannot be accomplished without the readers' desire and intent to read more efficiently."

Strategies can be classified into lower level and higher level (Grabe 2009). We will be only considering high level strategies since lower level ones imply the linkage between orthographic form and sounds of the language and the aim of this dissertation is to explore the strategies that involve the conscious introspection on the part of the reader (i.e., high level strategies). The literature identifies a broad array of reading strategies and skills labelled differently, but only the most salient ones will be addressed using Urquhart and Weir (1998) and Koda (2005). Skimming and scanning are techniques that enable readers to read selectively and extract important information. Scanning involves looking quickly through a text to search for a specific piece of information (e.g., phrase, name, figure or date). Owing to the fact that the focus is placed on local comprehension, most of the text will be ignored. Skimming involves reading the text quickly to get a general impression (i.e., get the main idea) to evaluate

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[2]See Appendix A to see how strategies and skills overlap.

the potential usefulness of a text, or establish a macropropositional structure as an outline summary.

Vocabulary knowledge is a neglected area in relation to full comprehension which is essential to train as "vocabulary knowledge correlates more highly with reading comprehension than any other variable" (Koda 2005: 186). Expanding the lexicon implies recognising more words in texts, which is crucial for reading comprehension as readers will spend less time thinking about the meaning of the words and thus, they will be able to relate the words to the surrounding context more quickly. Once the words are understood, the structure needs to be processed to access the meaning of the sentence. This strategy is known as syntactic parsing, which implies analysing a string of words and assigning thematic roles to the different phrases. Understanding the role that, for instance, a noun phrase plays with respect to the action or state described by the verb of a sentence is a must for comprehension. Therefore, syntactic parsing is always indispensable when having to deal either with simple sentences or with passive structures and heavy noun phrases. Besides, recognising discourse organisation and genre is an ability which helps identifying the kind of text we are dealing with and thus, its local feature and objective. Topic sentences, also known as focus sentences, are one of the most important aspects of discourse organisation as they summarise the main idea of the paragraph in a sentence (Wallwork 2016); they are usually the first sentence in a paragraph.

Reading strategies that support comprehension include reading the text carefully in order to get the main idea(s) of the text. Some of the strategies that could be applied are (Urquhart and Weir 1998: 202):

- Separating explicitly stated main ideas from supporting detail by recognising topic sentences or lexical indicators of importance.

- Generating a representation of the text as a whole.

- Understanding the development of an argument and/or logical organisation.

- Making propositional information inferences, typically answering questions with *where* and *when.*

- Making propositional explanatory inferences concerned with motivation, cause, consequence, answering questions with *why* and *how*.

Even though fluency is not a reading strategy in itself, it is worth mentioning it in this section as it is closely linked to comprehension. Different studies (Sawaki and Sabatini 2007; Taguchi et al. 2012) have demonstrated a relationship between reading fluency and reading comprehension development in L2 contexts. There is variation in relation to the reading speed for good readers,[3] but the average is around 200 words per minute (see Nuttal 1985: 35-47). Nuttal (1985: 37) also postulated that, despite the fact that there is an average speed, the difficulty of the texts also needs to be taken into account: "the time required to read a text carefully depends on its linguistic difficulty and the density of the information it carries (...) reading speed is worthless unless the reader has understood what he has read; so comprehension must also be measured." Finally, in academic environments, it is paramount to learn how to read critically (i.e., go beyond the literal meaning) to evaluate the arguments in the text. Academic reading includes: identifying the author's goal, drawing conclusions, separating fact from

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[3]Check the following webpage in case you want to find out your reading speed: www.readingsoft.com

opinion and the reader's opinion from the text, and evaluating arguments (e.g., cause and effect, chronological order, materials and methods used, etc.).

2.3. Features of academic English

According to Ballard and Clanchy (1992), academic English differs from other styles for its specialised use and language. It implies a more analytical, objective, intellectual and rational approach and a serious tone characterised by impersonality and formality. There are many characteristics that are inscribed within academic English, but for the sake of simplicity and clarity, only the most salient ones will be explained.

Academic texts are usually characterised for having complex sentences which contain long noun phrases that refer to abstract inanimate concepts which are somehow compensated by the use of a fairly simple syntax and the use of the simple present. There is also an extensive use of passive forms so as to avoid personal pronouns, since it is generally claimed that science should be "independent of the person writing about it (...) as it is inherently more scientific and logical" (Wallwork 2016: 127). A preference for impersonal passive constructions over personal ones is observable in academic writing.[4] Verb nominalisations might also be used when trying to avoid personal pronouns since the focus does not need to be on the writer, but on the message conveyed. Furthermore, academic texts present a predominant use of full forms (i.e., no contractions); synonyms to avoid repetition, and technical vocabulary to avoid ambiguity and vocabulary vagueness in word choice. Slang or colloquialisms are not used for being too informal while phrasal verbs are barely used. The Academic Word

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[4] A personal passive has pronouns or nouns as subjects. An impersonal passive is constructed by using impersonal constructions with *it* and *there* as subjects and thus, the resulting tone is more detached.

List (AWL)[5] may be of great help as it contains words that appear frequently in a broad range of academic texts. Hedges and boosters are communicative strategies used to increase or reduce the force of the statement. The former are used to reduce the force of the statement due to uncertainty of truth, whereas the latter are used to demonstrate the confidence and certainty about what the writer is trying to convey (Hyland 1998). Additionally, rhetorical questions are not a feature of academic texts and are usually transformed into declarative sentences.

The organisation of a text and its paragraphs is a key factor in academic writing in order to give cohesion to a text and enable readers to make sense of what they are reading. First of all, a text needs to have 3 essential elements: an introduction, which provides a general overview of the topic that the essay is going to be about; a body, which contains the development of the topic, and a conclusion in which the main ideas are summarised. Longer academic papers have a different structure which is more complex and may vary depending on the field of research. Besides, paragraphs should contain a topic sentence and be organised in a way in which the information flows logically (Swales and Feak 2012). This can be achieved by means of connectors and punctuation which help to link ideas and relate them to one another. Otherwise, the readers will have to "determine the semantic connection of the clauses through contextual information and/or prior knowledge" (Koda 2005: 97) by themselves. Swales and Feak (2012) and Wallwork (2015; 2016) remark that in formal writing, coordinating conjunctions, such as *but* or *and,* cannot be used as sentence starting words. Finally, conciseness is paramount to avoid redundancy and obvious information: "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no

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[5]https://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/resources/academicwordlist

unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts" (Strunk and White 1979: 23).

Overall, academic writing is a formal style which is characterised by using passive voice and heavy noun phrases. Hedging is used to reduce the strength of the statements, and technical vocabulary is preferred to colloquialisms and repetitive words. Cohesion, which can be attained by the use of discourse markers and punctuation, is paramount to make the text flow logically.

2.4. Mobile learning

Educational technologies have evolved enormously in the past forty years. Laptops and mainly smartphones have made a notorious impact since they are substantially relevant in students' lives as a means to communicate and are gadgets that have managed to attract their attention (Hamdan, Rosseni and Abdul-Manaf 2012; Chee, Yahaya and Ibrahim 2013; Wang and Smith 2013; Gutiérrez-Colón et al. 2016). The fact that they can be bought at a low cost, the different applications in which information can appear in an interactive way, and the large amount of information we can have on a small and ubiquitous screen are some of the advantages that appear to demonstrate their usefulness (Wang and Smith 2013; Gutiérrez-Colón et al. 2016; Jordano de la Torre and Pareja-Lora 2016).

Traxler (2009) (cited in Gutiérrez-Colón et al. 2016) claims that the use of mobile phones in learning and teaching is gradually increasing since they are more attractive and have less format limitations than traditional books (e.g., linear characteristics). This kind of learning is referred to as 'mobile learning', also known as M-learning, and it can be defined as follows: "Mobile learning involves the use of

mobile technology, either alone or in combination with other information and communication technology (ICT) to enable learning anytime and anywhere" (UNESCO 2013: 6). Despite the fact that not all educators agree on their use and suitability, the European Commission (EC) has funded a number of research projects focusing on mobile technologies, especially the United Kingdom, where educational projects based on mobile technology have been most prevalent. The EC's aim is to enable and support the development of language learning since "the use of portable equipment in M-Learning can help to improve students' motivation, improve skills to organise, promote accountability, encourage collaborative learning, and help review student progress more quickly and efficiently" (Savill-Smith and Kent 2003, cited in Chee et al. 2017: 212). Chee et al.'s study (2017) was designed to promote and raise awareness among instructors, learners and institutions on the importance of using new and ubiquitous technologies, such as mobile phones and their applications, in learning. In a similar vein, Gutiérrez-Colón et al.'s study (2016) has argued positively for the effectiveness of the use of mobile applications to improve reading skills and the increase in motivation that students report after having used them.

Despite the fact that the number of projects based on mobile applications are apparently increasing, albeit at a slow pace, the majority of studies and research are focused on learning vocabulary. Wang and Smith's study (2013) examined the feasibility and limitations of using mobile phones to learn skills other than vocabulary, such as reading and grammar.

Learning how to improve reading academic English by means of mobile applications is an area in which there is significantly less research. It is true that there are studies which deal with reading skills, but the ones devoted to reading academic

English are scarce. One of the investigations that has dealt with this is Gutiérrez-Colón et al.'s project (2016), whose objective was to improve learners' reading skills in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) by means of instant short messages (m-learning). Nevertheless, the fact that the texts were too short posited a problem for developing reading academic skills.

One of the most recent projects and the one that will be analysed in the practical part of this dissertation overcomes some of the issues found in the previous study. *StratApp – The Art of Learning* is an innovative and almost pioneering game-based mobile application which aims at improving academic English reading with longer texts and a set of comprehension questions whose goal is to aid students to develop their academic reading skills. What makes this app unique is that the materials are original texts which have been academicised and adapted following the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001) and the Core Inventory for General English (2015) to B1 and B2 levels.

3. Text creation

This section corresponds to the practical part of the dissertation, which has been mainly based on the work I am doing for the European Project *StratApp – The Art of Learning*. It is a project within KA2 Erasmus+ whose objective, as mentioned before, is to improve the English academic reading skills of university students (up to a B2 level) by means of a game-based mobile application. The architecture of the app is the following: it has a placement test which evaluates the English level of students so as to direct them to the B1 or B2 level. Each level includes 5 different texts related to the field of education. Each text has 250-300 words and 5 different kinds of activities which

include reading comprehension activities, vocabulary exercises based on the AWL, and an activity on connectors.

Below the different issues which have been taken into account when adapting texts to the *StratApp – The Art of Learning* app will be described. For instance, finding and selecting the texts, the characteristics of B1 and B2 texts, and how to turn non-academic texts into academic texts to be uploaded to the mobile application. All the examples have been extracted from the *StratApp – The Art of Learning* app which are my own work.

3.1. Finding and selecting the texts

Finding appropriate texts to adapt for pedagogical purposes is not an easy task since it depends on several factors. Texts can be found among a number of journals, education books, broadsheet papers (*The Guardian, The New York Times* or *The Independent*), manuals of teaching techniques, websites based on education and journalistic articles which have a varied range of levels of English. Once we found some texts, a database was created by means of an Excel file in which the most relevant details of the text (metadata)[6] were included: author(s), date, title, book publisher (if relevant), book title/webpage/newspaper, place of publication, number of pages and last accessed date. A number of fields in order to facilitate the task of choosing the texts that are eligible for adaptation were also added: topic, number of words, text type, difficulty, key words, summary and comments.

The selection of the texts needs to take into account the vocabulary which the learners will profit from, structural and lexical difficulty, the topics that are of interest to

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[6]See Appendix B for an example.

the students and the target audience. The first step is to determine the level of the texts and the target level so as to be able to select them correctly before starting with the adaptation task. A1 and A2 texts are not considered in this dissertation for two main reasons. First of all, generally students who finish *Bachillerato* end with a minimum B1 level in Europe. Secondly, A1 and A2 levels contain very basic vocabulary and grammatical structures which posit a problem for introducing technical vocabulary and complex sentences. Therefore, it seems reasonable to deal with B1 and B2 in order to familiarise undergraduate students with academic English. The adaptation of C1 and C2 texts is neither considered in this dissertation as *StratApp – The Art of Learning* did not deal with these levels. Hence, texts from different levels were selected to adapt them to B1 and B2 levels. If these texts already presented characteristics of B1 and B2 levels, the task of adapting was easier.

The combination of structural and lexical difficulty of texts is paramount as they should have the right level of complexity in order for learning to take place as Williams (1984: 18-9) points out:

> [The text] It should not contain a large amount of language that is too difficult for most of the class... if too difficult, then either the pace of the lesson will be slow, and boredom will set in, or the pace will be too fast, and the learner will not understand enough, and frustration will result.

In other words, if we want students to develop reading skills and make them familiar with academic English, texts cannot be loaded with very complex vocabulary and structures; otherwise, they will desist and will become frustrated with themselves, which will affect their learning negatively. The adaptation was carried out by means of adjusting the level of the text to a B1 or a B2 following the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) and *Core Inventory for General English*

(2015) guidelines.[7] It is critically important to modify the texts with due caution so as not to make everything explicit and create 'easy' texts. This is discussed by Nuttall (1985), who claims that retaining and/or including challenging lexical items helps the learner's intelligence one step further from where s/he is.

Additionally, interest and suitability of content play a critical role as well. Selecting texts which appeal to students contributes to their motivation or will to read them carefully. As Williams (1984) adds, using a range of materials which deals with the topics they are studying will help consolidate and extend both their language and their knowledge. For all these reasons, as *StratApp – The Art of Learning* was designed for university students of primary and secondary school education, the texts that were chosen dealt with education, but had a wide range of topics with the hope that they would call their attention and would be of help in their bachelor's degree.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the more structured the original text is, the easiest it will be to adapt. Ideas need to be clearly ordered from the beginning in order to maintain a cohesive structure, which is essential for ideas to flow logically.

3.2. B1 and B2 characteristics

When facing the problem of academicising and adapting texts to a specific level, we inevitably turn to features of academic English, which have been explained in detail in section 2.3, and to the characteristics of the English level we want to adapt the texts to. Below, a chart which underlies the main traits of B1 and B2 texts is provided, which has been created by following the *CEFR* (2001) and the *Core Inventory for General*

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[7] A simplified version of the *CEFR* and the *Core Inventory for General English* can be found in section 3.2.

English (2015). This table will be of great help in section 3.3 when having to turn a non-academic text into an academic one and adapt it to the target level.

	B1	B2
Grammar	Present: simple, continuous and perfect	Present: simple, continuous , perfect and perfect continuous
	Past: simple, continuous and perfect	Past: simple, continuous, perfect and perfect continuous
	Future: present continuous, going to and will	Future: present continuous, going to, will, future perfect and future continuous
	Modal verbs: present and past tenses	Modal verbs: present and past tenses
	Passive structures: personal simple passives in all tenses	Passive structures: personal and impersonal in all tenses
	Conditionals: zero, first, second and third	Conditionals: zero, first, second, third and mixed conditionals
	Reported speech	Reported speech
	Defining and non-defining relative clauses	Defining and non-defining relative clauses
	Some complex auxiliaries	More complex auxiliaries
		Adverbial phrases
		A lot of emphasis on suffixes
Discourse markers	Connectors: very basic use of connectors and not frequent. Not all texts may contain them and if they do so, they are mainly connectors of addition, contrast, cause or example. Addition: *moreover, also* Contrast: *despite, in spite of, but, although, though* Cause: *because, since, as, due to* Example: *for example, like* Result: *therefore, so, as a result* Purpose: *to, in order to*	Connectors: frequent use of connectors of all types: Addition: *besides, furthermore, in addition (to)* Contrast: *nevertheless, nonetheless, even though, conversely, yet* Cause: *owing to* Result: *thus, consequently* Example: *for instance, to illustrate, such as* Purpose: *so as to*
Vocabulary	Phrasal verbs: very few and very frequent ones like *switch on, set up, turn up, get on.*	Phrasal verbs: wide range of phrasal verbs and extended use. The ones which appear the most are the ones in which the verb is a common one such as *make, take, put, get* or *turn.*

Table 1.Simplified version of the characteristics of B1 and B2 levels (adapted from the *CEFR* 2001 and *A Core Inventory for General English* 2015).

3.3. Adaptation and academicisation of texts to *StratApp – The Art of learning*

This section provides an example of how to academicise and adapt a non-academic text to a B1 and a B2 level for the mobile application *StratApp – The Art of learning.* Once the main aspects to bear in mind before displaying a text on a mobile phone screen have been outlined, they will exemplified by means of the steps that were taken and the problems faced in the process of adaptation. As previously mentioned, the different adapted texts that will be used below have been adapted by me.

Before adapting a text for a mobile application, there are several matters to consider which can posit a problem for the reader. The most common drawback is the size of the screen in which the text will be displayed, since reading (and answering questions) can be exhausting due to having to scroll up and down. There also seems to be a preference for receiving materials on paper rather than via mobile phones which may affect learners' decision to use this app (Huang and Lin 2011).When establishing the word limit of texts for *StratApp – The Art of Learning,* we did not know what size would be suitable for reading not to be tiring and cause students to abandon it. A first length of 500-600 words was seen favourably since it already implied a considerable reduction of the original text. However, once tested, we realised it was too much text to read on a tiny screen and a new length of 250-300 was proposed. Despite being too short for an academic text, it was enough to let students familiarise with academic English and not become tired when reading.

According to Wang and Smith (2013), smartphones are seen by students as their private domain that maintains them disconnected from university. Even though the use of mobile phones as an education tool is increasing, new ways of engaging students to use them for learning should be explored as university students rarely use it. Bearing

this in mind, an appealing layout and activities had to be designed as well as choosing topics which were both of interest to the students and academic-like. In order to avoid students becoming demotivated and prompt them to use the app, different strategies following a 'competition-game-like' manner were adopted, such as giving extra points for reading the text fast; creating non-frustrating pop-up messages when spending too long reading or failing to answer the questions; congratulating pop-up messages for doing activities and reading at a proper speed, and creating activities by using a variety of question-answer model (e.g., tilt your phone to click to the correct answer or multiple choice questions).[8]

As for strategies and skills, despite our initial desire to include many, we ended up with a few. At the beginning, scanning, skimming and full comprehension skills were going to be included. Nevertheless, when the activities were tested we realised it was not possible because of a button to go backwards was missing and the size of the screen was small. As a consequence, scanning and skimming were removed, full comprehension was maintained, and vocabulary activities including connectors and technical vocabulary were added.

Drafting an adaptation can be easily done by having the original text on the left in a table and divide it into paragraphs.[9] Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2 will illustrate how to how to academicise and adapt a text to a specific level following the different features of academic English bearing in mind the maximum length of the text (250-300). Nonetheless, in the same vein that characteristics are general, finding an original text to which we can apply all the features of academic English is not possible. As a result, a

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[8]See Appendix C.
[9]See Appendix D for a sample.

B1 text will be analysed first and then, a B2 text will illustrate the remaining features which have not been dealt with in the first text.

3.3.1. B1 text

The first text is an article which explains the success of Finnish schools. The task of reducing the number of words it had was difficult as there were eight paragraphs which mixed ideas. Its original title, "Why Finland's schools are so successful?", is a rhetorical question, which needs to be avoided in academic writing. It was converted to a noun phrase "The success of Finnish schools" and, the adverb *so* was eliminated for being far too colloquial.

As for the structure and organisation of the text, the original one abounded with extremely short sentences and many paragraphs which repeated the same ideas in a disorganised way. Hence, for ideas to flow logically and achieve cohesion, the text had to be completely reorganised.[10] First of all, there were many paragraphs which mixed topics and were not properly distributed as it can be seen in the following table:

Original text: Why Finland's schools are so successful? (534 words)	Adapted text: The success of Finnish schools (266 words)
1- Introduction (PISA results)	1- Introduction (PISA results, history + new system)
2- School organisation	2- School organisation and characteristics + funding
3- Teaching highly regarded	3- Equal opportunities + homogeneous society
4- Characteristics of schools	4- Teaching highly regarded
5- Money	5- Conclusion (NEW)
6- Equal opportunities	
7- History & present system	
8- Homogeneous society	

Table 2.Summary of the topics of the original text and of the adapted one.

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[10]See Appendix D for the adapted text.

It makes no sense to explain the history of Finnish schools and the new system at the end of the text since what we expect in the introduction is a brief account of how the Finnish school evolved (i.e., a general overview of the topic). Consequently, paragraphs 1 and 7 were amalgamated. Then, school organisation (paragraph 2 of the original text) and its characteristics (paragraph 4 of the original text) and funding (paragraph 5 of the original text) were joined as they are all related. Furthermore, a homogenous society (paragraph 8 of the original text) is one which gives equal opportunities (paragraph 6 of the original text) to its citizens and thus, these ideas were put together in one paragraph as well. Paragraph 3 of the original text, which contained the reasons why teaching is highly regarded, was not amalgamated with other paragraphs because this topic was different from the rest.

Apart from that, some paragraphs were too short as can be seen in the original text, and they had to be connected by means of punctuation and connectors, which will be illustrated later on.[11] Finally, following Swales and Feak (2012), a conclusion for the text had to be created as the original one did not contain one. The original text ended with a paragraph dealing with Finland's homogeneous society, but it did not summarise the main reasons of Finland's success:

(1) [Original text: paragraph 8] A part of Finland's success is also owed to the fact that its society is homogenous. There are not so many differences between the wealthy and poor, as in America or other western European countries. This is reflected in the classroom too. Teachers always try to show pupils how to behave socially and care for others. They teach them that taking responsibility is very important for their future careers.

Below a suggested conclusion can be seen which contains a connector [1] to inform the readers that what they are reading is a summary of the whole text. Hedging [2] was used to reduce the strength of the final statement:

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[11]See Appendix D for the adapted text.

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(2) [Adapted text: paragraph 5] To sum up [1], Finland's educational system is seen [2] as a model which some countries are trying to imitate due to the government's commitment to children's education, the small dropout rates, and teacher appreciation.

As pointed out above, paragraphs had to be reduced in order to create a text of 250-300 words, which means that ideas had to be grouped. Owing to the fact that for length reasons it is not possible to go over each paragraph, an explanation of how paragraph 1 of the adapted text was created is provided. Below you will find paragraphs 1 and 7 of the original text:

(3) [Original text: paragraph 1] For many years the school system in Finland has been very successful. In the PISA survey, which compares reading, math and science knowledge of 15 year olds around the world [3], Finland is not only the top European country but also competes with Asian giants like Shanghai, Singapore and South Korea [4]. But [5] what makes the educational system in this small country so strikingly different from others in the western world? [6]

(4) [Original text: paragraph 7] Until the 1960s, Finland's school system had been influenced largely by its neighbour, the Soviet Union. Most students left school after six years; some went on to private school. Only the wealthy ones got a better education [7]. In the middle of the 1960s, the Finish government saw the need to change and modernize their education system if they wanted to be internationally competitive [8]. Lawmakers made a simple decision: a single school for all the 7 to 16 year olds. They also put a focus on language learning. Students learn Swedish as their second and English as their third language.

In order to incorporate the history of Finnish schools and the new system to the first paragraph, only essential information was maintained as Strunk and White (1979) claim. First, the description of the PISA survey was omitted [3] as what is interesting is the fact that Finland's education was rated as one of the most successful ones in the last 50 years. Besides, as the text dealt with Finland's success, it was unnecessary to mention all the countries in which education is also outstanding apart from the country in question [4]. Regarding the lines of paragraph 7 of the original text where Finland's school history [7] and the new system [8] were densely explained, they were

summarised by skipping details which were irrelevant. The adapted text shows a reduction of the two original paragraphs to a single one:

> (5) [Adapted text: paragraph 1] The PISA survey shows that Finland's school system has been highly successful in the last 50 years. Until the 1960s, it was influenced by the Russian model [9], where only the wealthy could afford a good education. In the 1960s, the Finnish education system was modernised [10], and has now become the internationally competitive model that many countries want to implement.

The second paragraph was reorganised by incorporating paragraphs 4 and 5 of the original text into it as they were related. Paragraph 5 had a topic sentence which was related to how schools were funded, but the arguments that followed had no relation whatsoever with it. Therefore, the first half of this paragraph [14] was incorporated in the adapted paragraph 2 which dealt with the organisation of schools, whereas the second half [15] was blended with the adapted paragraph 3, which dealt with teaching as well. The rule that was followed to reduce the number of words was the same that was applied to the previous paragraphs: selecting the most important information and omitting details. Ideas were connected by means of different connectors which will be explained in the adapted version.

> (6) [Original text: paragraph 2] First of all [11], the Finish government makes [12] it possible for all children to attend preschool, which comes [12] after kindergarten. Compulsory education begins at 7 [13]. Teachers work [12] with their pupils in school as much as possible [13]. They have little homework to do when they get home. When teachers are not with the pupils they spend a lot of time in schools working on the curriculum and new projects. They teach [11] in teams if it helps them reach their goals. That is why dropout rates are low compared to other countries.

> (7) [Original text: paragraph 4] Schools in Finland are small, at least for international standards. More than in any other country teachers are ready to prepare children for life. In some cases they know every pupil in their school and can adjust to them. Teachers try everything to succeed with their pupils. Most of the pupils get additional help in their elementary school years, either by the teachers themselves or through specially trained educators.

> (8) [Original text: paragraph 5] Most of Finland's schools get their money from the government [14]. The people who are in charge of the education system,

from teachers to administrators are trained teachers, not politicians like in other countries [15].

The adapted paragraph shows the reduction of the three original paragraphs to a single one:

(9) [Adapted text: paragraph 2] The reasons for this success are manifold [16]. Firstly [17], schools in Finland are usually small and prepare children for life. With the aim to [18] know their students well and make them succeed, teachers themselves are in charge of the curriculum and new projects. As a consequence [19], dropout rates are relatively [20] small in relation to other countries.

The adapted paragraph starts with a paraphrased noun phrase of the last line of the first paragraph which was informal: it started with *but* [5] and the sentence was itself a rhetorical question [6]. The new sentence includes the word *manifold* [16], which exemplifies that there is more than one reason for the success of Finnish schools. To state the different reasons, the use of sequence connectors [17] is crucial to give the text an order and enable the reader to identify the reasons with ease. Even though the second paragraph of the original text starts with a sequence connector [11], the topic sentence is not accurate as it talks about the government's commitment to provide preschool for all children and then the paragraph continues with a new idea without properly connection. What is more, for ideas to flow logically, extremely short sentences [13] and different ideas were joined by means of connectors: a connector of purpose [18] was used to introduce the explanation of why teachers took care of the curriculum, and a connector of result [19] was used to show that the small dropout rates were the consequence of teachers' job (previous sentences). Hedging [20] was introduced to soften the generalisation that Finland's dropout rates are small in relation to other countries as it might be a bit strong. In spite of this, there are some elements present in the original text which met academic style and were not modified: frequent use of basic syntax and wide use of simple present tense [12].

As for the adaptation to a B1 level, some changes had to be made in order to make it more accessible to readers. For instance, following the chart on page 15, the connector *owed to the fact that* was changed to *due to*; the adverb *strikingly* was changed to *highly*. The adjective *homogeneous* was eliminated, and the noun phrase 'the same educational opportunities' was added. Furthermore, connectors which were below this level such as *too* were changed for more sophisticated ones, such as *moreover*. Nevertheless, as Nuttall (1985) mentions, in order to take learners to another step, challenging vocabulary, which they can guess by the context, needs to be added. Students who have reached a B1 level, in this case, should already be familiar with B1 words and would profit from exposure to some B2 words. Therefore, not all the words which were in the original text were changed (e.g., *rate, wealthy, competitive*). Additionally, several words which did not correspond to a B1 level were included in the text with the aim of making students broaden their vocabulary knowledge. The majority of these lexical items (e.g., *irrespective, appreciation, hence, commitment*) were later referred to in the activities section so as to consolidate their meaning and see whether learners were able to guess their meaning by the surrounding context.

Regarding grammar, the original text generally had B1 level structures. There were defining and non-defining clauses and a zero conditional clause, but there were no passives. Consequently, owing to the fact that passives are extensively used in academic English, several constructions were added. B1 level passives are characterised for being personal and therefore, some personal passives were included [9]. Moreover, some impersonal passives [10] which corresponds to a B2 level were added for students to start familiarising themselves with these kinds of structures, which are not only found in higher levels of proficiency, but are typical of academic writing.

3.3.2. B2 Text

The second text[12] is an article which was taken from the education section of the *Independent,* written in first person. According to Ballard and Clanchy (1992), this text would be rated as personal, colloquial and subjective, which is the opposite of what academic texts should be like. Nonetheless, the topic was chosen because it is very appealing to university students as challenging gender roles is a current issue at schools.

(10)   [Original text: paragraph 6] As part of my [21] research into LGBT identities, I've [22] worked with young transgender people. And [23] while they don't [22] often have a voice in debates surrounding how children should be spoken to about gender, they're the ones who best understand what they need.

(11)   [Original text: paragraph 7] In 2015, I [24] interviewed a number of young people who again and again told me they just want to be accepted for who they are – as Zack, who was 15, explained: "Just respect it, even if you think it's a phase – how are we supposed to work out who we are, if you're contradicting who we're trying to be?"[25]

(12)   [Original text: paragraph 8] Access to support was a main hurdle for all the young people in my [26] study. They couldn't [22] find the information they needed at school, and didn't know who they could talk to – 17-year-old Dan explained to me [27] how it took him so long to find professional help that he considered suicide

A number of contractions [22] can be observed, which had to be replaced with full forms [31] for the text to meet academic requirements. Throughout the text there were many instances of a personal approach in the use of the pronouns *I* [24]*, my* [21, 26] or *me* [27]. The first possessive pronoun *my* [21] was changed for a noun phrase [28] while the second one [26] was substituted with a definite determiner [33]. Passivisation [30] was utilised to avoid a sentence which had many personal pronouns and which started with *and* [23] because this connector of addition cannot be used at the

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[12]See Appendix D for the original text.

beginning of a sentence in formal writing. The personal pronoun *me* was replaced with a reorganised sentence with a neutral tone [34].

Owing to the fact that the research into LGTB was explained in first person, there was a need to invent a name and a date [29] for the study as all studies are referenced in academic articles. Furthermore, the 3 paragraphs were blended into one omitting all the literally quoted experiences which did not provide extra information. Opinions [25] reported in first person, which only reiterate the ideas already exposed, were removed as they should not be included in academic writing unless they make the arguments progress (i.e., they are references which are relevant to the arguments and are the product of researchers or experts rather than students).In order to amalgamate ideas, a connector of addition was used [32].[13]

> (13)   [Adapted text: paragraph 4] A research into LGTB identities [28] (Lanmark 2015) [29] raised several issues. It was found [30] that those identities do not often [31] have a voice in debates surrounding how children should be spoken to about gender and be accepted for who they are. In addition [32], access to support was a main handicap for all the young people in the study [33], as they could not [31] find the information they needed at school, and did not know where else to look for it [34].

4. Conclusion

In this dissertation, a description of the importance of reading academic texts at university level has been provided. The majority of scholars agree that learners have trouble with these specialised texts due to two reasons: firstly, undergraduate students are unfamiliar with the characteristics of academic English, and secondly they lack reading strategies and skills. Therefore, the main features of academic English have been described substantially using Strunk and White (1979), Swales and Feak (2012) Wallwork (2015; 2016). Then, the difference between the terms *strategy* and *skill* was

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[13]See Appendix D for the adapted text.

put forward to show that authors sometimes interchange these words as if they were synonyms and only the most salient strategies and skills to reading academic texts were explained. Due to the importance that technology has in our lives, the issue of mobile learning has been addressed in order to find out to what extent it is efficient. Surprisingly enough, research showed a shortage of projects whose goal was to enhance reading academic English since the majority are dedicated to vocabulary learning or are graded stories which have nothing to do with academic texts.

In this vein, an app which dealt with enhancing learners' reading skills in ESP by means of instant short messages (Gutiérrez-Colón et al. 2016) was presented. However, the fact that it was based on very short texts was seen as a problem to develop an acceptable level of academic reading. Hence, another mobile app whose objective was the same was described (*StratApp – The Art of Learning)* was considered for being unique in the sense that it has longer texts which were adaptations from authentic ones to academicised B1 and B2 levels. Another reason which makes it exclusive is the variety of activities it includes which help promoting reading skills and strategies and the familiarisation with academic English vocabulary.

The practical part of this dissertation has been an attempt to provide all the steps and factors which need to be taken when trying to create a text for pedagogical purposes. For instance, where to find a text and how to select it according to the target level, audience and topic of interest; take into account the different characteristics of the levels that texts will we adapted to and the academicisation process, and the several mobile phone issues that need to be considered when displaying a text. In order to do this, two texts of the mobile application *StratApp – The Art of Learning* have been analysed. The examples discussed in section 3.3 have been commented on to give a

general view of the main salient features of academic texts. On the one hand, as has been seen, informal traits such as sentences starting with *but* and *and,* contractions or personal pronouns need to be avoided. Passive voice and long noun phrases are widely used so as to avoid these issues. On the other hand, cohesion is paramount for the text to achieve an intelligible structure and the flow of ideas. This has to be enhanced by the use of connectors and proper punctuation, and by the creation of topic sentences and paragraphs.

Finally, these texts have also been used to demonstrate that if we want learners to improve their academic reading skills, texts need to be adapted to their level. This can be achieved by following the *CEFR* (2001) and the *Core Inventory for General English* (2015) to know the grammatical and vocabulary features each level has. As pointed out in section 3.1, the better a text is structured and the more academic features it has, the fewer changes for adaptation will need to be made. The first text we have analysed was chosen to show how difficult it is to blend and reduce paragraphs for ideas to flow logically and thus, to underline the crucial relevance that organisation and cohesion have in a text. The second text was chosen in order to portrait how to avoid personalisation.

Nevertheless, this dissertation has some limitations due to length and time issues. An extensive analysis of the texts dealt with in section 3.3 would have been optimal to provide more examples on how to adapt different texts. In addition to this, being able to explain the types of activities which are included in the app would have been enriching to have a general picture of what the mobile application includes. It would have been ideal to test the app with undergraduate students in order to evaluate the extent to which the different texts and activities have been effective.

Finally, more research into the field needs to be conducted in order to develop more projects and new ideas which help undergraduate students improve their reading academic skills. Instead of taking for granted a skill which is crucial at a university level for students to benefit from the assigned readings, more courses which guide students on how to read and write academic English should be provided.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Strategies		Skills
Olshavsky (1977)	Sarig (1987)	Munby (1978), Nuttall (1982), Lunzer et al. (1979)
Use of context to define a word or synonym		
Synonym substitution	Synonyms	
Stated failure to understand a word	Ongoing self-evaluation; mistake correction	
Re-reading	Repeated reading	Repeating reading
		Skimming or scanning
Interference	Paraphrasing	Understanding information I the text, not explicitly stated
Addition of information	Extra-textual content	Interpreting text by going outside it
Stated failure to understand a clause	Deserting a hopeless utterance	
	Flexibility of reading rate	Variations in reading rate

Table 3. Distinguishing features between *skills* and *strategies* (from *Reading in a Second Language: Process, Product and Practice,* by Urquhart, Sandy & Weir, Cyril., 1988, p.97, London/New York: Longman).

Appendix B

The following metadata includes: author(s), date, title, book publisher (if relevant), book title/webpage/newspaper, place of publication, number of pages and last accessed date.

Figure 1.Metadata Excel spreadsheet.

Table 4 is an example of the source of the original text that was described in section 3.3.1 with its details. As previously mentioned, this information is especially useful when having to select the text you want to adapt.

Author	Date	Title
English Online.	(No date)	*Why Finland's schools are so successful?*
Webpage	**Last Access**	**Topic**
https://www.english-online.at/news-articles/education/finlands-school-system-is-successful.htm	Accessed 29/10/2018	Finnish education
Number of Words	**Type of text**	**Difficulty**

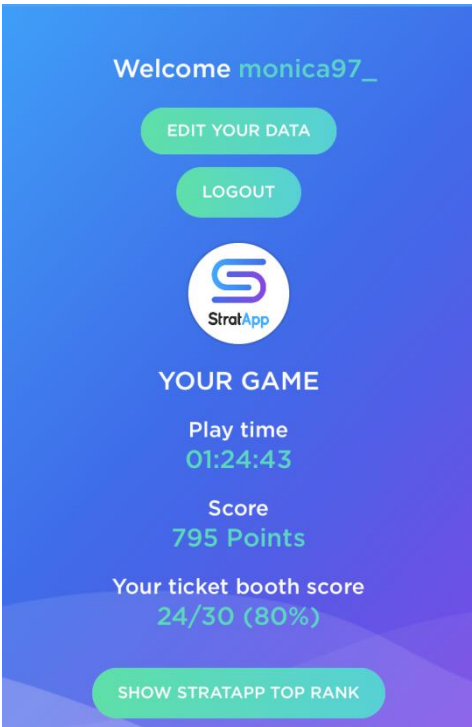| 534	Article on a blog	Low
Keywords	**Summary**	**Comments**
Finland, education, success	This article outlines the reasons why Finnish schools are so successful and gives a glimpse of its history.	Not well structured, disorganised ideas. Not very long sentences. No connectors.

Table 4.Source with details.
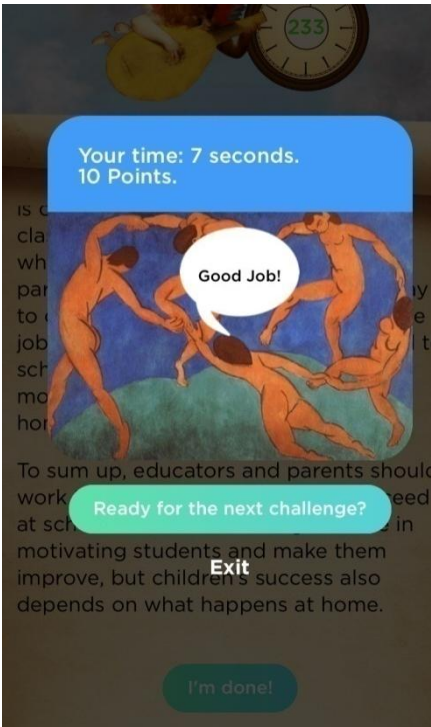
Appendix C

Figure 2. Account details.

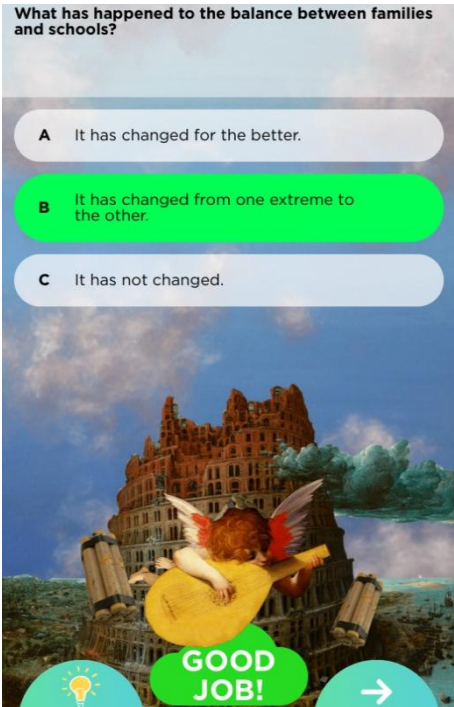Figure 3.Congratulating pop-up message for reading speed.

Figure 4.Congratulating pop-up message for activities.
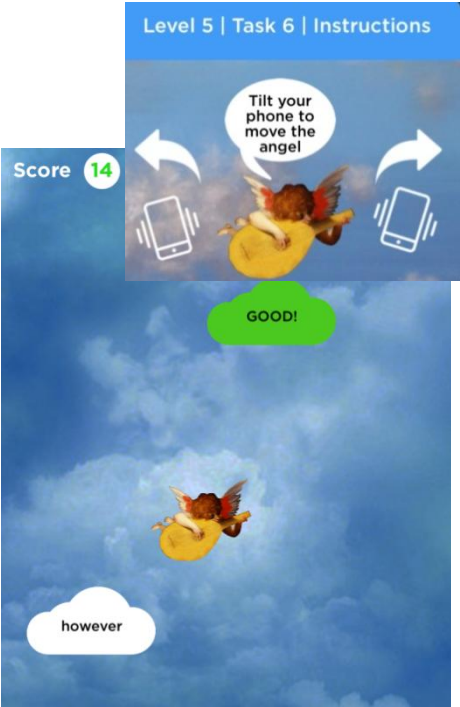

Figure 5.Connectors activity.

Appendix D

<u>Original B1 text</u>

Why Finland's schools are so successful?

For many years the school system in Finland has been very successful. In the PISA survey, which compares reading, math and science knowledge of 15 year olds around the world, Finland is not only the top European country but also competes with Asian giants like Shanghai, Singapore and South Korea. But what makes the educational system in this small country so strikingly different from others in the western world.

First of all, the Finish government makes it possible for all children to attend preschool, which comes after kindergarten. Compulsory education begins at 7. Teachers work with their pupils in school as much as possible. They have little homework to do when they get home. When teachers are not with the pupils they spend a lot of time in schools working on the curriculum and new projects. They teach in teams if it helps them reach their goals. That is why dropout rates are low compared to other countries.

In contrast to other nations teaching in Finland is a highly admired profession. Finland selects its teachers very carefully. Only talented students go on to a university and receive a master's degree in education. Finland only takes the best to educate its youth.

Schools in Finland are small, at least for international standards. More than in any other country teachers are ready to prepare children for life. In some cases they know every pupil in their school and can adjust to them. Teachers try everything to succeed with their pupils. Most of the pupils get additional help in their elementary school years, either by the teachers themselves or through specially trained educators.

Most of Finland's schools get their money from the government. The people who are in charge of the education system, from teachers to administrators are trained teachers, not politicians like in other countries.

All Finish children, whether they come from the city or a rural town, whether from a rich or poor family have the same opportunities in education. Education experts claim that there is very little difference between very good and the worst students. Two thirds of Finish pupils who finish compulsory education move on to higher education, the highest rate in the European Union.

Until the 1960s, Finland's school system had been influenced largely by its neighbour, the Soviet Union. Most students left school after six years; some went on to private school. Only the wealthy ones got a better education. In the middle of the 1960s, the Finish government saw the need to change and modernize their education system if they wanted to be internationally competitive. Lawmakers made a simple decision:

a single school for all the 7 to 16 year olds. They also put a focus on language learning. Students learn Swedish as their second and English as their third language.

A part of Finland's success is also owed to the fact that its society is homogenous. There are not so many differences between the wealthy and poor, as in America or other western European countries. This is reflected in the classroom too. Teachers always try to show pupils how to behave socially and care for others. They teach them that taking responsibility is very important for their future careers.

Source:

Why Finland's schools are so successful? *English Online Articles in Easy Understandable English f*or *Learners.* Retrieved 5 May, 2019, from https://www.english-online.at/news-articles/education/finlands-school-system-is-successful.htm

The success of Finnish schools

The PISA survey shows that Finland's school system has been highly successful in the last 50 years. Until the 1960s, it was influenced by the Russian model, where only the wealthy could afford a good education. In the 1960s the Finnish education system was modernised, and has now become the internationally competitive model that many countries want to implement.

The reasons for this success are manifold. Firstly, schools in Finland are usually small and prepare children for life. With the aim to know their students well and make them succeed, teachers themselves are in charge of the curriculum and new projects. As a consequence, dropout rates are relatively small in relation to other countries.

Secondly, all Finnish children have equal access to high-quality education and training. The same educational opportunities are available to all citizens irrespective of their ethnic origin, age, wealth or where they live. It is not surprising that two thirds of Finnish pupils who finish compulsory education move on to higher education, the highest rate in the European Union.

Teaching is a highly admired profession in Finland. Hence, teachers are carefully selected and only the best students are chosen to go to university and take a master's degree in education. Moreover, the government makes sure that the people who are in charge of the education system are these highly trained teachers, not politicians.

To sum up, Finland's educational system is seen as a model which some countries are trying to imitate due to the government's commitment to children's education, the small dropout rates, and teacher appreciation.

Text grid (adaptation)

When adapting a text, it is useful to have the original text on the left part of a grid and write the adapted text on the right part. This way you can compare both texts.

Original text: Why are Finnish schools so successful?	Adapted text: The success of Finnish schools.
For many years the school system in Finland has been very successful. In the PISA survey, which compares reading, math and science knowledge of 15 year olds around the world, Finland is not only the top European country but also competes with Asian giants like Shanghai, Singapore and South Korea. But what makes the educational system in this small country so strikingly different from others in the western world.	The PISA survey shows that Finland's school system has been highly successful in the last 50 years. Until the 1960s, it was influenced by the Russian model, where only the wealthy could afford a good education. In the 1960s the Finnish education system was modernised, and has now become the internationally competitive model that many countries want to implement.
First of all, the Finish government makes it possible for all children to attend preschool, which comes after kindergarten. Compulsory education begins at 7. Teachers work with their pupils in school as much as possible. They have little homework to do when they get home. When teachers are not with the pupils they spend a lot of time in schools working on the curriculum and new projects. They teach in teams if it helps them reach their goals. That is why dropout rates are low compared to other countries.	The reasons for this success are manifold. Firstly, schools in Finland are usually small and prepare children for life. With the aim to know their students well and make them succeed, teachers themselves are in charge of the curriculum and new projects. As a consequence, dropout rates are relatively small in relation to other countries.
In contrast to other nations teaching in Finland is a highly admired profession. Finland selects its teachers very carefully. Only talented students go on to a university and receive a master's degree in education. Finland only takes the best to educate its youth.	
Schools in Finland are small, at least for international standards. More than in any other country teachers are ready to prepare children for life. In some cases they know every pupil in their school and can adjust to them. Teachers try everything to succeed with their pupils. Most of the pupils get additional help in their elementary school years, either by the teachers themselves or through specially trained educators.	
Most of Finland's schools get their money from the government. The people who are in charge of the	

education system, from teachers to administrators are trained teachers, not politicians like in other countries.	
All Finish children, whether they come from the city or a rural town, whether from a rich or poor family have the same opportunities in education. Education experts claim that there is very little difference between very good and the worst students. Two thirds of Finish pupils who finish compulsory education move on to higher education, the highest rate in the European Union.	
Until the 1960s, Finland's school system had been influenced largely by its neighbour, the Soviet Union. Most students left school after six years; some went on to private school. Only the wealthy ones got a better education. In the middle of the 1960s, the Finish government saw the need to change and modernize their education system if they wanted to be internationally competitive. Lawmakers made a simple decision: a single school for all the 7 to 16 year olds. They also put a focus on language learning. Students learn Swedish as their second and English as their third language.	
A part of Finland's success is also owed to the fact that its society is homogenous. There are not so many differences between the wealthy and poor, as in America or other western European countries. This is reflected in the classroom too. Teachers always try to show pupils how to behave socially and care for others. They teach them that taking responsibility is very important for their future careers. Words: 534	

Table 5.Comparison of the original text and the adapted text.

Almost half of trans pupils have attempted suicide – schools must do more to challenge gender stereotypes

It's believed that challenging them early on means children who don't conform will be less likely to experience bullying.

A recent report by the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender charity Stonewall, found that 80 per cent of transgender youth have self-harmed, and 40 per cent have attempted suicide. So the Church of England's recent guidance to its schools, urging teachers to allow pupils to "explore the possibilities of who they might be without judgement", is very welcome.

The document advises teachers to allow pupils to explore gender creatively, and not negatively evaluate behaviour that doesn't conform to stereotypes. This includes letting children dress up in typically "female" or "male" clothes, such as tutus or tool belts, whatever their gender.

The guidance has been welcomed by organisations supporting trans rights, such as Gendered Intelligence and Stonewall. It's believed that challenging gender stereotypes early on means children who don't conform to them will be less likely to experience bullying.

But the Church's guidelines have also been criticised for pushing a "transgender agenda", in the same way schools introducing kids to alternative sexual and gender identities have been. Recently, parents even removed their son from a school in the South of England, after it allowed another child to express their gender freely.

As part of my research into LGBT identities, I've worked with young transgender people. And while they don't often have a voice in debates surrounding how children should be spoken to about gender, they're the ones who best understand what they need.

In 2015, I interviewed a number of young people who again and again told me they just want to be accepted for who they are – as Zack, who was 15, explained: "Just respect it, even if you think it's a phase – how are we supposed to work out who we are, if you're contradicting who we're trying to be?"

Access to support was a main hurdle for all the young people in my study. They couldn't find the information they needed at school, and didn't know who they could talk to – 17-year-old Dan explained to me how it took him so long to find professional help that he considered suicide.

Occasionally, LGBT issues were discussed in school, but as 19-year-old Kyle put it: "Schools only care about the LGB side – they always forget the T."

The young people I spoke to also told me that, throughout school, they never heard anyone talk about trans issues or identities. Effectively, in school, trans people didn't exist. Little wonder then that 19-year-old Bella felt trans kids were treated as freaks by their peers. She told me how she was often called "tranny" and "she-male" and received death threats on social media.

Zack also talked about the impossible position he was in whenever he had that most basic need – to use the loo. He was regularly intimidated by boys who wouldn't let him use the "male" toilets at school. But if he tried to use the "female" toilets, he'd be threatened. Once, a group of girls said they'd stab him if he came into the "wrong" toilets again.

Maybe if gender was discussed more openly from a young age, trans kids wouldn't be seen as being so "different". Rather than confusing children who aren't transgender – as the critics fear – giving school pupils more awareness and knowledge could actually make them more compassionate.

Some schools are already working towards the goal of supporting students who don't conform to gender norms – including an all-girls school in London which now allows trans or non-binary pupils to be known as such. Similarly, Cornwall Council has provided transgender guidance to all schools in the county since 2012.

Even though such guidelines didn't exist at the schools the young people in my study went to, adults did try to help them. Unfortunately, though, they often got it wrong. Take Kyle's teacher as an example. He announced to his class that Kyle was trans, saying: "If anyone's got a problem with that, come and see me." Kyle felt humiliated, and that he'd been outed to his peers, who might not otherwise have realised that he was transgender.

To properly support transgender and non-binary youths, then, more needs to be done to understand what they need. Guidelines sent to schools are a step in the right direction, as they can encourage teachers not to reproduce gender stereotypes, and advise them on creating safe, gender-neutral spaces. But this isn't enough on its own.

After all, when I asked the young people to define transphobia, Dan said: "It's often just people getting things wrong because they're uneducated about it."

And this makes it clear it's not just children in schools who need education in this area.

Source:

Jones, Lucy. (2017). *Almost half of trans pupils have attempted suicide – schools must do more to challenge gender stereotypes.* Retrieved May 8, 2019, from https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/transgender-school-attempted-suicide-gender-stereotypes-a8058146.html

Challenging gender roles in schools

A recent report by the LGTB charity Stonewall found that 80% of transgender youth have self-harmed, and 40% have attempted suicide. It is believed that challenging gender stereotypes early on implies that children who do not conform to traditional genders will be less likely to experience bullying.

The Church of England's recent guidance to its schools, encouraging teachers to allow pupils to explore the possibilities of who they might be without judgment, is very welcome. The document advises educators to allow pupils to explore gender creatively, and to not negatively evaluate behaviour which does not conform to stereotypes. Nevertheless, the Church's guidelines and some schools have been criticised for introducing children to alternative sexual and gender identities.

A research into LGTB identities (Peter 2015) raised several issues. It was found that those identities do not often have a voice in debates surrounding how children should be spoken to about gender and be accepted for who they are. In addition, access to support was a main handicap for all the young people in the study, as they could not find the information they needed at school, and did not know where else to look for it.

If gender were discussed more openly from a young age, transgender children would not be seen as strange. Rather than confusing those who are not transgender, providing pupils with more information could actually make them more compassionate. Moreover, some schools are already working towards the goal of supporting students who do not conform to gender norms, and have started talking about transgender issues or identities.

Overall, to properly support transgender youths, more needs to be done to understand what they need. Thus, guidelines are starting to be sent to teachers to encourage them not to reproduce gender stereotypes and to advise them on how to create safe, gender-neutral spaces.