



A semi-annual peer-reviewed scientific journal - issued by the
College of Education at Zawia University
Issue twenty-eight - December 2023



Analyzing Reading Text Annotations Among Libyan Students at the University of Zawia

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ABSTRACT

This research studies the issue of political activity in Fezzan,

This study delves into the practices of Libyan students at the University of Zawia concerning their annotation techniques. Employing a qualitative approach, we scrutinized the annotations generated by students enrolled in the English department at the University of Zawia. Through focused group discussions, we explored the various types of annotations, their placements, the motivations driving their use, and the tools or methods employed for annotation purposes. Our research unveiled that common forms of annotation included underlining, highlighting, circling, drawing arrows, and taking notes. Annotations were typically found within the text, in the margins, on personal documents, and within notebooks. Furthermore, our findings highlighted that students engaged in annotation for purposes such as comprehension, retention, revision, exam preparation, upcoming applications, and knowledge enrichment. It was also observed that participants benefitted from using pencils, pens, and highlighters for their annotation needs.

تحليل شروح نص القراءة لدى الطلاب الليبيين بجامعة الزاوية

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الملخص:

تتناول الدراسة ممارسات الطلاب الليبيين في جامعة الزاوية فيما يتعلق بتقنيات الشرح. وباستخدام منهج نوعي، قمنا بفحص التعليقات التوضيحية التي قدمها الطلاب المسجلون في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الزاوية. من خلال مناقشات جماعية محددة، استكشفنا الأنواع المختلفة من التعليقات التوضيحية، ومواقعها، والدوافع التي تدفع إلى استخدامها، والادوات أو الأساليب المستخدمة لأغراض التعليقات التوضيحية. كشف بحثنا أن الأشكال الشائعة للتعليقات التوضيحية تشمل وضع خط تحته، وتمييزه، ووضع دائرة حوله، ورسم الأسهم، وتدوين الملاحظات. عادة ما توجد التعليقات التوضيحية داخل النص، وفي الهوامش، وفي المستندات الشخصية، وداخل دفاتر الملاحظات. علاه على ذلك، أبرزت النتائج التي توصلنا إليها أن الطلاب شاركوا في التعليقات التوضيحية لأغراض مثل الفهم والحفظ والمراجعة والتحضير للامتحانات والتطبيقات القادمة واثراء المعرفة. ولوحظ أيضا أن المشاركين استفادوا من استخدام أقلام الرصاص و أقلام التحديد لتلبية احتياجاتهم التوضيحية.

1. Introduction:

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill crucial for academic success, particularly for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. In order to grasp the content effectively, students are required to engage with reading materials attentively. Day (2018) emphasizes the importance of reading texts multiple times and actively interacting with them to enhance one's understanding of their meaning and message. It is at this juncture that annotation and close reading play pivotal roles in the reading experience (Day, 2018: 28). Consequently, students should consider annotation as an essential tool for comprehending reading materials.

According to Porter-O'Donnell (2004: 82), annotation involves marking the text to identify significant information and capturing the reader's thoughts, facilitating the comprehension of challenging materials. Holschin and Aultman (2009: 139) further elaborate on annotation as a valuable reading strategy. This strategy entails reading aloud while employing various marking techniques, such as underlining and highlighting words and passages, as well as making notes in the margins of the text with questions, comments, inferences, and examples.

Numerous scholars in the academic literature have underscored the role of annotations in enhancing students' comprehension of texts. As asserted by Zywika and Gomez (2008: 6-7), text annotation empowers students to cite evidence, develop logical deductions, and explore ideas not explicitly stated in the text. Additionally, annotated texts serve as invaluable guides for upcoming tasks, such as end-of-unit assignments, study sessions for end-of-unit tests, and various classroom activities. Proficiency in analyzing and evaluating assigned texts equips students to tackle more demanding readings in higher grades, college, and the workplace. Furthermore, according to Singhal (2001), the act of comprehension through annotation reveals the intricate process by which readers engage with a task, illustrating the steps taken to comprehend and derive meaning from the text. Effective reading is a prerequisite for comprehending any reading material, as emphasized by the Learning and Information Service (2013: 1-2): "By reading effectively, you will learn to question and survey the text you are reading, thus gaining a deeper understanding of your subject."

To the best of my knowledge, while there exists a substantial body of research on annotations from various perspectives, there has been relatively limited exploration of annotations generated by students worldwide. This research endeavor aims to address this gap by scrutinizing the annotations produced by Libyan students at the University of Zawia. This investigation encompasses an examination of the tools employed by students for annotating reading materials, the diverse types of annotations employed, their respective locations within the texts, and the underlying motivations for their usage. This research endeavor contributes a valuable addition to the existing body of literature on this subject matter.

2. **Aim of the Study:** The principal objective of this study is to investigate the practice of reading text annotations among

undergraduate students enrolled in the English department at the University of Zawia.

3. **Research Questions:** This study addresses the following research questions:

What are the common types of annotations utilized by Libyan students when reading texts at the University of Zawia?

Where do Libyan students typically position their annotations within the text during their reading activities?

What motivates Libyan students to annotate their reading materials?

What processes and tools or methods do Libyan students predominantly employ when annotating texts?

These research questions form the basis for the examination of reading text annotations produced by Libyan students, offering valuable insights into their reading strategies.

4. **Literature Review:**

4.1 Definition: Annotation is a learning strategy employed by students during the reading process. According to Porter-O'Donnell (2004: 82), annotation involves marking the text to identify significant information and to capture the reader's thoughts, facilitating the comprehension of challenging material. Furthermore, Holschin and Aultman (2009: 139) define annotation as a valuable reading strategy that entails reading aloud while employing various marking techniques, such as underlining and highlighting words and passages, in addition to making notes in the margins of the text, which may include questions, comments, inferences, and examples. Additionally, Dollins (2016) regards annotation as a form of close reading, wherein the reader offers opinions on the text's content and interprets the information presented. Moreover, annotation is considered by Conley (2008) as one of several cognitive literacy strategies that assist students in recognizing structure, analyzing ideas, deriving meaning, and effectively conveying their understanding of the text.

4.2 Types of Annotations: Numerous researchers in the literature have highlighted the versatility of text annotations, showcasing various forms and components. For instance, Marshall (1997) suggests several forms of annotations, including:

1. Underlining or highlighting higher-level structures, such as section headings, and using telegraph marginal symbols like asterisks or crossouts.

2. Employing short highlightings, circling words or phrases, and utilizing other within-text markings, along with marginal symbols like asterisks.
3. Incorporating short notes in the margins or longer notes in other textual spaces, including words or phrases placed between lines of text.
4. Adding appropriate notations in the margins or near figures and equations.
5. Extending highlighting or underlining for emphasis.
6. Including notes, doodles, drawings, or other markings unrelated to the materials themselves (Marshall, 1997: 135-136).

Similarly, Flippo and Caverly (2009) elaborate on the components of text annotations, which encompass:

- a. Crafting concise summaries in the text margins using the student's own words.
- b. Numbering multiple ideas, such as cause-and-effect relationships or characteristics.
- c. Noting examples in the margins.
- d. Annotating information on graphs and charts when applicable.
- e. Identifying potential test questions.
- f. Indicating confusing ideas with a question mark in the margins.

Similarly, Zywica and Gomez (2008: 158-159) assert that students can employ a variety of annotations to enhance their close reading experience. These annotations encompass:

- Encircling headings and subheadings.
- Outlining content vocabularies, as well as challenging and perplexing words.
- Employing a double underline to emphasize main ideas or significant facts.
- Using a single underline for emphasis.
- Employing abbreviations like "def." for definite and "inf." for information, among others.
- Employing an asterisk to denote transition words.
- Incorporating an equal sign encircled around crucial information.
- Adding a question mark adjacent to puzzling information.
- Utilizing an arrow beside words that provide direction or indicate the need to complete a task.

4.3 Advantages of Text Annotation: Annotations play a pivotal role in encouraging active reading and fostering reader engagement. They prompt readers to interact with the text, creating a tangible record of their thoughts as they progress through it. In alignment with this perspective, Hartini (2019) affirms that annotating while reading

facilitates the process of making notes on information and ideas necessary to answer posed questions. Text annotation offers several advantages for students, including:

a. Enhancing students' concentration, reducing distractions, and minimizing the need for repeated readings of the text. b. Providing an instant self-assessment of their comprehension of key concepts within the text. c. Enhancing memory retention. d. Aiding in effective test preparation. e. Eliminating the necessity for extensive re-reading of chapters. f. Facilitating the expression of ideas in students' own words.

Furthermore, Spears (2000) suggests that when students keep a pencil in hand and annotate their reading, they reap two distinct advantages:

1. Enhanced Concentration: The act of taking notes compels them to focus on the writer's narrative, thereby improving their attention and comprehension.
2. Improved Direction: Annotations act as a navigational aid, helping students trace the trajectory of the writer's thoughts.

Additional benefits of annotations include the development of new study techniques for information retention, the ability to read with a clear purpose, and the empowerment to take charge of the material rather than being overwhelmed by it. Moreover, students can harness annotations to craft insightful and persuasive interpretations of the text, which can serve as valuable reference points in classroom discussions (Morris, 2012).

Furthermore, as highlighted by Zywica and Gomez (2008: 157), annotation brings with it a range of merits that assist students in comprehending the material they read. These merits encompass:

a) Enhanced Visualization: Annotation prompts students to create mental images as they read, facilitating a deeper understanding of the content and fostering engagement with the text. b) Quick Reference: Annotations serve as a repository of critical information, easily accessible for reference by students. c) Reading Style Development: Annotation aids in the development of a reading style that proves beneficial in future reading endeavors. d) Improved Reading Speed and Accuracy: Over time, annotation not only enhances students' reading and retention abilities but may also lead to increased reading speed and accuracy.

To date and to the best of my knowledge, there is no existing literature that has examined the practice of annotation production by students in various contexts worldwide, including Libyan students.

5. Research Methodology and Design:

This research adopted a qualitative research design to address the research questions outlined above.

Participants: The study involved 14 participants, with 7 students from the Applied Linguistics program and the other 7 from the Translation program. The selection of this sample was purposive, as it aimed to gather valuable insights (Tongco, 2007). All participants were enrolled in the English department within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Zawia.

Instrument: To collect data, this study utilized focus group discussions. According to Finch and Lewis (2003), focus groups are a vital tool for data collection, as they provide a means to perceive, experience, and understand the world around us. Moreover, employing focus groups allows researchers to gain deeper and more comprehensive insights into phenomena (Massey, 2010).

The researcher purposefully selected 14 Libyan students from the University of Zawia, following the recommendations of Morgan and Krueger (1998). This selection strategy was employed because the researcher aimed to work with a specific group of participants who shared a common background.

The discussions were conducted on July 15, 2023, at the English department. The participants were divided into two separate groups, each consisting of seven students. Prior to the discussions, the researcher ensured that all students were willing to participate, and the timing and location were convenient for them. Additionally, the participants were instructed to communicate in Arabic to facilitate deeper discussions. Each discussion session lasted for approximately half an hour. The researcher used semi-structured question guides to steer the discussions. All discussions were recorded and subsequently transcribed manually.

6. Data Analysis and Findings:

In the analysis of the focus group data, the researcher employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis method. Following the stages of this analysis approach, the researcher meticulously reviewed and re-reviewed the transcriptions of the data, along with careful listening to the recorded discussions to ensure their accuracy. Subsequently, the researcher embarked on a thorough examination, actively seeking and probing for themes that were pertinent to the research questions. Each theme was meticulously identified, named, and subjected to further scrutiny. The researcher

depicted these themes upon achieving a comprehensive understanding of how they interrelated and emerged. The following themes were identified:

Theme 1: Types of Annotations Theme 1 focused on the various types of annotations utilized by the participants during their reading of texts. Most participants acknowledged using a variety of annotation types, and a consensus emerged regarding the practice of highlighting difficult or unfamiliar words, phrases, or sentences. For instance, Participant 1 stated, *"I highlight difficult words and phrases when I do not understand them,"* while Participant 4 explained, *"When I do not understand the text, I highlight sentences and phrases."* Furthermore, Participant 3 noted, *"I highlight unfamiliar words and phrases."*

Other participants disclosed their use of circles, notes, underlines, and summaries. Participant 9 shared, *"I almost write everything, I do not highlight, but I write a summary in my sheet."* Participant 6 indicated, *"I underline each word when I do not understand,"* and Participant 11 described, *"For me I prefer to write everything when I read. I write my notes to understand"* Participant 7 mentioned a different approach, saying, *"Um...I circle the words, phrases or anything I do not understand."* Participant 5 explained, *"I underline, highlight and circle words and phrases in the text."* Notably, one participant mentioned using arrows as annotations and said, *"No I do not underline or highlight or even write notes. What I used is different types of arrows to help me understand and beside each arrow I write abbreviations."*

Theme 2: Annotation Placement This theme delves into the typical locations where participants choose to place their annotations while engaging with academic texts. The participants described various places where they preferred to make annotations, falling into the following categories:

a) Beside, Above, and Below Words/Phrases b) In Margins: Right, Left, Top, and Bottom c) On Private Paper, Colored Stickers, and Notebooks

Within the first category, three participants emphasized the efficacy of annotations made directly within the text. Participant 8 explained, *"When I write my comments/ annotations, I write them in the text beside words, phrases or sentences."* Another participant, Participant 13, shared, *"I write my annotations inside the text. When I find difficult words or phrases, I write the meaning or notes above*

them." Participant 9 indicated that *"when for example I write the meaning or notes of anything I write under words or phrases."*

Regarding the second category, some participants provided insights into their practices. Participant 7 reported, *"I write anything ..er I mean my annotations in the margins and I like to comment on margin-left and margin-right."* Another participant, Participant 5, mentioned, *"Writing annotations in margin-top and margin-bottom helped me a lot."*

In the third category, the data revealed that a majority of the participants (6 out of 14) relied on using private papers to create their annotations. For instance, Participants 1 and 14 stated, *"...when we write our annotations, we use private/ separate papers and write whatever we want"* Participant 4 commented, *"I use a notebook when I comment or write my notes...it is easier."* Notably, one participant, Participant 2, mentioned using colored stickers and explained, *"I use colored stickers and write my annotations on them and after that I stick them on margin-top to be clear for me when I come back to them."*

Theme 3: Motivations for Annotating Reading Materials This theme explores the underlying motivations that drove the participants to annotate their reading materials. When the participants were queried about their reasons for annotating, five distinct categories emerged:

a) Revision b) Enhanced Understanding c) Exam Preparation
d) Future Reference e) Knowledge Acquisition f) Memory Enhancement

In the first category, two participants highlighted the significance of annotations for revision. Participant 3 explained, *"Highlighted and underlined words and phrases helped me in revising the texts"* Additionally, Participant 9 noted, *"When I write down my notes in the margins, this means that they are important to revise them when necessary."*

Notably, nearly all participants (10 out of 14) concurred that their primary motivation for annotating reading texts was to deepen their understanding. For instance, Participant 1 stated, *"Actually annotations are very important because they helped me to understand the reading texts."* Furthermore, Participant 5 emphasized, *"When I annotate, I read it many times until it ingrained in my mind, with this way I understand the text easily."* Participant 8 elaborated, *"When I write my comments/ annotations inside the text, they helped me focus*

and understand more." Interestingly, those participants who mentioned that annotations helped them in understanding the materials added that they wrote their annotations in Arabic, which further facilitated their comprehension. Participant 12 stated, "*Annotations helped me a lot to understand the texts especially when I write my comments with my own words and write them in Arabic.*"

Concerning the third category, one participant, Participant 4, underscored the importance of annotations for exams, asserting, "*annotated words and phrases are important in exams.*"

In the fourth category, three participants articulated their belief in the long-term utility of annotations. Participant 4 stated, "*I will make use of annotations later in future,*" while Participant 2 expressed, "*For me annotations are very important since I will go back to them in future, when I will be a teacher, or may be someone will find it helpful.*" Participant 7 further added, "*I really think that annotations will help me later when I will study postgraduate studies.*"

Only one participant, Participant 11, noted that annotations were essential for acquiring knowledge, explaining, "*If I annotate in the text, this means I annotate only important information that is said by my teachers. These annotations help us to increase our personal knowledge.*"

Lastly, in the sixth category, two participants (Participants 3 and 8) emphasized that annotations were useful for enhancing memory retention. Participant 3 remarked, "*Annotations helped me to understand and to remember more,*" and Participant 8 affirmed, "*Annotations is beneficial for remembering the main information.*"

Theme 4: Tools and Methods for Annotation Production This theme sheds light on how Libyan students at the University of Zawia go about annotating their reading materials. The participants employed a variety of tools, including pens, pencils, colored pens/pencils, and highlighters. The prevailing choice among the participants was pencils due to their ease of erasure, which allows for corrections. Participant 2 emphasized, "*I prefer to use pencils when I annotate because I can erase pencils easily if I make a mistake.*" Echoing this sentiment, Participant 13 noted, "*using pencils is easier than using pens because I can erase it when I want to correct any mistake.*" Participant 10 shared the view, stating, "*Pencils are easy to be erased than pens and highlighters when I annotate a text.*" In addition, participant P8 suggested, "*Colored pens or pencils are better for writing annotations*".

On the other hand, a few participants, including Participants 1, 4, and 5, favored the use of highlighters as effective tools for annotation. Participant 1 explained, "*highlighters are helpful and quicker especially when I use different colors.*"

7. Discussion:

The analysis of focus group discussions involving a subset of Libyan students revealed several key findings regarding the production of annotations:

Firstly, the students employed a variety of annotation types when engaging with reading materials. While not all annotation forms were utilized, participants demonstrated a range of annotation methods, with the most prevalent being highlighting, underlining, circling, note-taking, and drawing arrows. This diversity aligns with existing scholarly literature (Zywica and Gomez, 2008; Flippo and Caverly, 2009; Marshall, 1997) discussing the various approaches to annotating reading materials.

Secondly, the participants highlighted different locations for their annotations within the text. Some chose to annotate directly within the text, writing their notes beside, under, or above challenging or unfamiliar words and phrases. Others preferred annotating in the margins, consistent with the concept presented by Porter-O'Donnell (2004), which suggests that annotation entails writing in the margins. Additionally, some participants utilized private papers, notebooks, and colored stickers for their annotations.

Thirdly, the motivations driving participants to annotate while reading emerged from the discussions. Most participants emphasized the utility of annotations as strategies that aided their comprehension of reading materials and their ability to recall important information. These findings align with the views expressed by Hartini (2019) and Morris (2012). Some participants indicated that their primary motivation for annotating was revision, particularly in preparation for exams. Notably, a compelling motivation emerged from participants who recognized the future value of their annotations. They expressed intentions to revisit their annotations when they become teachers or pursue postgraduate studies. The pursuit of knowledge also emerged as a motivator for annotating, suggesting that annotations contribute to knowledge acquisition.

Lastly, participants recommended the use of various tools during the annotation process. Pencils were the preferred choice for most participants due to their erasable nature, allowing for easy

correction of errors. This aligns with the suggestion made by Spears (2000) regarding the advantages of using pencils for annotations. Additionally, colored pens/pencils and highlighters were used by some participants, highlighting the importance of having a variety of annotation tools at their disposal.

8. Conclusion:

This study sought to investigate the annotation practices of Libyan students at the University of Zawia, addressing a notable gap in the existing literature. Utilizing a qualitative approach, we examined the annotations produced by students enrolled in the English department at the University of Zawia. Focus group discussions were employed to delve into the various aspects of annotations, including types, placement, motivations, and methods or tools.

The findings unveiled a diverse array of annotation types, with the most prevalent choices being highlighting, underlining, circling, drawing arrows, and note-taking. In terms of placement, annotations were found within the text, in the margins, on private papers, and in notebooks. Motivations for annotating were multifaceted, encompassing the goals of enhancing comprehension, aiding memory, facilitating revision, preparing for exams, future reference, and acquiring knowledge.

Furthermore, participants demonstrated a preference for specific annotation tools, with pencils being the preferred choice due to their erasable nature, enabling error correction. Additionally, pens and highlighters were employed by some participants to facilitate their annotation practices.

In sum, this study contributes valuable insights into the annotation practices of Libyan students, shedding light on the various dimensions of annotation creation. These findings not only add to the existing body of literature but also provide educators and students with a deeper understanding of the benefits and strategies associated with effective annotation.

9. Pedagogical Implications:

1. **Promoting Annotation as a Learning Strategy:** Educators at the University of Zawia and similar institutions should recognize the value of annotation as a learning strategy. They can incorporate annotation exercises into their curriculum to encourage students to actively engage with their reading materials.

2. **Diverse Annotation Techniques:** Teachers should educate students about various annotation techniques, including highlighting, underlining, note-taking, and drawing arrows. Providing guidance on when and how to use each technique can help students choose the most effective method for their reading tasks.
3. **Effective Annotation Placement:** Educators can guide students on where to place annotations within their texts. This includes teaching them how to annotate directly within the text, in the margins, or on separate sheets of paper. Understanding the advantages of each approach can enhance students' comprehension and retention of material.
4. **Motivation for Annotation:** Educators should emphasize the importance of motivation when it comes to annotation. Encouraging students to annotate for purposes such as understanding, revision, exam preparation, and future reference can help them develop a more purposeful and strategic approach to reading.
5. **Utilizing a Variety of Annotation Tools:** Teachers should inform students about the range of annotation tools available, including pencils, pens, and highlighters. They can guide students in selecting the most suitable tool based on their preferences and the nature of the reading material.
6. **Fostering Critical Thinking:** Annotations can serve as a platform for critical thinking and discussion in the classroom. Educators can use annotated texts as a basis for class discussions, encouraging students to share their insights, questions, and interpretations.
7. **Support for Multilingual Students:** Given that some students in the study found it helpful to write annotations in Arabic, educators should be aware of the language preferences of their students. They can offer support and resources to multilingual students to help them make the most of their annotations.
8. **Future Career and Academic Planning:** Highlighting the importance of annotations for future use, such as in teaching careers or postgraduate studies, can motivate students to develop robust annotation practices that will benefit them beyond their current coursework.
9. **Encouraging Knowledge Expansion:** Educators can stress the role of annotation in expanding students' knowledge. By annotating essential information and insights, students can create

valuable reference materials for future studies and professional development.

10. **Professional Development for Educators:** Teachers and faculty can benefit from professional development opportunities that focus on effective annotation strategies. This knowledge can enhance their ability to guide and support students in developing strong annotation skills.

Overall, the findings of this research offer valuable pedagogical insights that can enhance the reading and learning experiences of students at the University of Zawia and beyond.

10. Suggestions for Further Research:

1. **Comparison with Other Student Groups:** Future research could expand on this study by comparing the annotation practices of Libyan students at the University of Zawia with those of students from different cultural backgrounds. Such comparative studies could provide valuable insights into how cultural factors influence annotation behaviors.
2. **Longitudinal Studies: Long-term investigations tracking students' annotation practices over** an extended period could shed light on the evolution of annotation skills and strategies as students progress through their academic careers.
3. **Incorporating Technology:** With the increasing use of digital reading materials and e-books, it would be beneficial to explore how students adapt their annotation practices when using digital platforms and e-readers.
4. **Annotation and Academic Performance:** Future research could delve into the relationship between the quality and quantity of annotations made by students and their academic performance. Understanding how effective annotation practices correlate with academic success can be valuable for educators.
5. **Teacher Guidance and Training:** Investigating the role of teacher guidance and training in enhancing students' annotation skills and comprehension could provide insights into effective pedagogical approaches.
6. **Annotation in Specific Disciplines:** Focusing on how students annotate texts in specific academic disciplines, such as literature, science, or social sciences, can reveal discipline-specific annotation practices and challenges.

7. **Multilingual Annotations:** Given that some students in this study found it beneficial to annotate in Arabic, further research could explore the impact of annotating in multiple languages on comprehension and retention.
8. **Annotation in Professional Contexts:** Examining how annotation practices evolve as students transition into their professional careers or pursue postgraduate studies can provide a broader perspective on the long-term benefits of annotation.
9. **Meta-Analyses and Systematic Reviews:** Conducting meta-analyses or systematic reviews of existing research on annotation practices across various student populations and settings can consolidate knowledge and identify trends and gaps in the literature.
10. **Intervention Studies:** Implementing intervention studies to assess the effectiveness of annotation-focused teaching strategies and interventions in improving students' reading comprehension and critical thinking skills.
11. **Quantitative Approaches:** Complementing qualitative studies with quantitative research to gather statistical data on the prevalence and impact of different annotation types and methods among students.
12. **Annotation Accessibility:** Investigating how to make annotations more accessible for students with disabilities, including exploring the use of assistive technologies and alternative annotation methods.

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