

Improving Reading Comprehension Using Reading Strategies

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Abstract - Reading is fundamental in all academic disciplines. Many of the teachers do not think that teaching reading is a part of their job. This may be due to the constraints to complete their syllabus for examination. The teachers should also realize the difficulty the students face while reading the subject matter and comprehend it. This results in low rate of students' success and retention. Moreover they lack interest in reading and go for notes and guides which results in rote learning. Number of views has been expressed to improve the Reading Skill of learners. It is suggested that learners who are very good in reading the first language can achieve proficiency in the second language also, but this study points to another direction, how more reading improves one's sight vocabulary & thus one's reading speed and comprehension. This article suggests various strategies adapted to the Engineering students to improve their reading speed and their comprehension level.
Key Words: Reading proficiency, strategies, improvement, speed

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading is of the important basic skill. The other three skills are listening ,writing and speaking. It is a complex process. It is a visual task and needs thinking process. It is a receptive skill. The writer encodes thought as language and the reader decodes the language to thought. Reading is an interaction between the reader and the text. It is

Decoding—Comprehending—Analyzing—
Responding

It is a twofold process. It is sensory and perceptual process which needs visual skills to visualize the words understands it and interprets the meaning of it. It involves comprehension beyond decoding and literal level interpretation of printed symbols.

II. PURPOSE OF READING

Reading serves various purposes. Generally [1] has given 1620 purposes for reading under nine headings

1. To gain meaning
2. To gain information
3. To guide activity
4. To find Values
5. For social motives
6. To solve problems
7. To remember
8. To enjoy
9. To organize

In a classroom:

1. To find answer to a specific question
2. To determine the author's aim and purpose
3. To follow a sequence of related events
4. To find the central thought of the selected text
5. To find the most important points and their supporting details
6. To select facts which relate to a problem
7. To judge the validity of the statements
8. To find facts supporting a point of view
9. To draw valid conclusions from materials read

III. IMPORTANCE OF READING

In today's technological world reading is an important tool which is necessary to improve the writing skill and speaking skill which every graduate needs to get a job in this competitive job market .It gives the confidence to face the world and express ones ideas clearly without hesitation

“Reading.... must be developed, and can only be developed by means of extensive and continued practice. People learn to read and to read better by reading” [2].

What this means is that the students should be adequately exposed to the English language. This can happen only if they are given enough exposure to the written script of that particular language. This is essential because

“Reading begins with the accurate swift and automatic visual recognition of vocabulary, independent of the context in which it occurs” [3], [4], [5], [6] and [7].

The implication here is that by practicing reading continuously one can improve one’s reading. For this the reader should have the basic familiarity to the script of the language he / she is reading. Also the reader should be able to decipher the words immediately. This automatically leads one to the concept of sight vocabulary.

This aspect of reading is to be seen in the light of the observation. “Poor reading in a second language is due to poor reading ability in the first language. Poor first language readers will read poorly in the second language and good first language readers will read well in the second language” [8]. But the second language reading classes of mine has brought some interesting results which don’t appear to substantiate the above view.

IV. CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES

1. Previewing – learning about the text before really reading it.
2. Contextualizing - placing the text in its historical ,biographical and cultural contexts
3. Questioning - to remember the content
4. Reflecting - examine the personal responses
5. Outlining and Summarizing- identifying the main ideas
6. Evaluating - testing the credibility and emotional impact
7. Comparing and Contrasting - exploring the similarities and differences in the text

V. THE STUDY

33 final year students of Engineering participated in this study which aimed to improve the reading comprehension ability, reduce the reading time and increase the retention level. 18 of them were from regional (Tamil) medium classes (at their school level) and 15 from English medium classes, but they had their engineering education only in the English medium. The students from the regional medium said that they regularly read in their mother tongue and

they were found to read about 250-300 words per minute and comprehend easily. Since they were good readers in their first language their ability to transfer that skill to the second language was required to be tested in this study.

Five passages were given to them for reading comprehension over a period of ten days. The passages were graded and administered sequentially. They were monitored and the time taken for each passage and their comprehension abilities were also tested. The results are as follows.

TABLE I
READING SPEED OF TM & EM STUDENTS

Sl. No	Passage Length (no. of words)	Time taken by TM students (in min)	Time taken by EM students (in min)
Passage 1	346 (Feather)	3 to 15	2 to 3
Passage 2	644 (The lemon tree)	6 to 8	2 to 3
Passage 3	411 (The wise owl)	3 to 7	1 to 2
Passage 4	675 (Industrial Needs)	3 to 8	2 to 3
Passage 5	440 (Adventure on the high seas area)	3 to 8	2 to 5

VI. ANALYSIS

The comprehension questions were of the following types,

1. Global comprehension
2. Inferential and
3. Vocabulary items

These were tested through multiple choice, true or false, gap-filling and picking the right alternative questions.

When the first passage was given and tested it was found to be difficult for the Tamil medium students. They took a long time to read and comprehend. They were found to be weak in their understanding ability. When asked about the difficulties they informed that they were reading letter by letter every word. They were also found to be reading and re-reading the same matter again and again. Some of them were lip-reading the passage. Still comprehension was not complete for they could

not grasp the overall meaning or relate the individual ideas to the overall information. What seemed to be lacking was their sight vocabulary. By seeing the first few letters of a word they could not guess the word with reference to the context. So, they were told about the various methods to be followed while reading and the following strategies were used.

VII. PREPARATORY STRATEGIES

1. Allotment of separate period for the activity
2. Encouragement and Motivation
3. Lowering the anxiety
4. Individual attention
5. Choice of passages to suit the students' interest level

VIII. READING STRATEGIES

A. Psychological preparation

Separate hour was allotted for the students to read apart from the regular hours. A stop clock was provided to each student to note the time they take to read the passage. Since it was after the college hours the students were relaxed and that created an interest among the students to read. This made the students to realize the importance of reading. They were mentally prepared to concentrate while reading the passages. This increased their receptivity gradually.

B. Structural organization

The passages given were graded from simple to complex with regard to vocabulary, structure as well as organization of the information. The questions also were framed in such a way that it kindled the interest of the students. It ranged from multiple choices to inferential questions.

C. Re-reading

They were asked to read once and again to re-read the same passage. Reading and re-reading increased the sight vocabulary since it made them attain familiarity of the words. At the same time, they were not asked to lip-read or read aloud.

D. Prior preparation through discussion

A Particular passage (Passage 4) was discussed in order to make the students mentally prepare themselves regarding the theme of that passage. This prior preparation helped them read the passage faster.

E. Mental involvement

Their mental alertness increased since inferential questions were asked. They tried to infer the meaning by reading once again which improved

their reading speed. This made them to think about the passage. This improved their retention level of the passage.

F. Vocabulary

The vocabulary questions viz, finding the equivalent from the given choice improved their ability to guess the meaning with reference to the context, true or false questions made them to understand the content of the text and fill in the blanks improved their comprehension.

This had a beneficial result. The students were able to comprehend the passage better and became more familiar with words. Perhaps this could have improved their sight vocabulary.

“The development of a large vocabulary can be seen as over learning words to the point that they are automatically recognized in their printed form. The best and easiest way to accomplish this is to read a great deal” [9].

Further, during the period of this study, the students were asked to read English Newspapers regularly and before starting the session they were asked to recollect what they had read and say it.

TABLE II
COMPREHENSION ABILITY OF TM & EM STUDENTS

Questions type	TM Students %	EM Students %
One word	50-55	80-85
True or False	65-70	75-80
Fill in the blanks	60-65	80-85
Global	40-50	80-85
Inferential	20-40	60-80

IX. FINDINGS

- 1) The regional medium students had difficulty with inferential questions. Only the English medium students were able to answer the inferential questions, 60 to 80% of inferential questions were answered correctly by the English medium students and 20 to 40% of them were answered correctly by Tamil medium students.
- 2) In the passage which was discussed before reading, all the students both (English and

Tamil Medium) scored well (i.e) 100% correct.

- 3) Even though the Tamil medium students took more time to read they were not able to understand and answer the questions. On the other hand, the English medium students took less time to read and answered nearly all the global questions and 80% of inferential questions correctly. This seems to confirm the observation that fast readers comprehend better than slow readers.
- 4) An appreciable improvement was seen among the Tamil medium students as far as global comprehension was concerned. The number of correct answer increased considerably from the first passage to the fifth passage [30 % to 75%]

X. CONCLUSION

These results indicate that the students would read well and improve their comprehension level if proper and adequate strategies are followed with appropriate motivation. More and more reading with mental involvement makes the learner read faster and better which in turn will bring them out of fear and make them attain self confidence in all their endeavors throughout their life.

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