

Why can't/don't My Students Read?

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Abstract: *The interrogative mode of the title indicates the burden and commitment of all well-meaning English language teachers at the tertiary level toward their students who are not able to read anything worthwhile in English either extensively or intensively. The study highlights the need for the teachers to be reflective and proactive, rather than complaining and reactive, to the way learners acquire reading skills. One of the indisputable realities of the English classroom in India is that learners don't engage in reading and the lack of reading habit results in poor acquisition of writing skills, too. The present article is a research finding of an Action Research on the reasons for English language learners' inherent inability to cope with reading materials prescribed or take-home reading lists suggested by teachers from time to time at the tertiary level. This observation-based classroom research discusses not only the causes of poor reading practices but also remedial measures for students to overcome them. An important finding is that poor reading skills of English language learners are not insurmountable and that teachers devise appropriate classroom strategies to facilitate learners' reading.*

Keywords: *Learner autonomy, reading styles & strategies, barriers to reading, comprehension skills, micro-skills of reading*

1. INTRODUCTION

English in India has been rightly called the “library” language in the Kothari Commission Report on Higher Education (1964-66) since students gather knowledge through print and electronic sources independent of the teachers to a very large extent. Students at the tertiary level are expected to supplement the input through lectures in the classroom through extensive reading outside the classroom. The biggest 24x7 hour knowledge resource these days is the Internet. It has become the gateway to knowledge acquisition and production. Browsing, reading, reflecting, and writing have become indispensable and desirable academic activities that also foster learner autonomy. Ironically, majority of students are neither capable of independent extensive reading in their own chosen fields of study, nor intensive reading for career purposes like BEC exams. Several reasons can be attributed to this pathetic situation as they cripple learner autonomy. It is an open secret that students are unable to not only read books and articles, but also express themselves in writing through research and academic writing. They memorize the ‘notes’ dictated or browsed through the Internet for examination purposes.

Reading leads to reflection, reflection leads to research, research leads to innovation, and innovation leads to development. Hence, in a big way, reading and development are closely interrelated. The most important language skill for the Indian learner of English is reading because it is the most useful one. In fact, reading involves a number of other skills. Reading empowers students intellectually. It leads to exploration and research in one's chosen field. It also enables them to fine-tune their writing skills. As a macro-skill of English, it can be learnt and therefore should be learnt. This article interrogates why Indian learners of English are either unable to or don't read.

2. RESEARCH METHOD & RESULTS

The principal object of the present classroom research is to empirically identify the causes for poor/nil reading habit among college students and to suggest the pedagogically viable solutions for them to overcome the deficiencies. The following are the hypotheses for the present study:

1. Majority of college students are handicapped by poor/nil reading habit.
2. They face a number of reading problems.
3. These problems are not insurmountable.

Based on the hypotheses, the following research questions were framed for proper investigation and interrogation of the issue at hand:

1. Why are college students handicapped by poor/nil reading habit?
2. What are the barriers to developing their reading skills?
3. What are the ways to improve their reading habit?

Six students from each of 21 undergraduate departments and 4 students from each of 13 postgraduate disciplines belonging to both arts and science streams at the American College, Madurai were selected at random to act as subjects for the present study (N= 180). The total number of classes is 90 (63 classes of 21 undergraduate programmes that include BA, BSc, BCA, B.Com, & BBA, and 27 classes of 13 postgraduate programmes that include MA, MSc, MBA & MCA. The total number of students was divided into three sections (Arts UG, Science UG, & PG) and there were asked to read three short passages with the view to assessing and identifying their reading speed, comprehension skills, reading skills, problems in intensive reading. Three passages appended to the present study targeted students' knowledge of the reading and comprehension skills. The subjects were also asked to read a short story of their choice, a topic story in any English daily, or any worthwhile posting on Face book. In the second and third sessions, they were asked to share their extensive reading experiences with each other. They were also encouraged to discuss the barriers and problems that they experienced while reading both extensively and intensively. Solutions to any ELT problem should first come from the learners and they can be supplemented by ELT practitioners later. Observation as an empirical method was employed for collecting reliable data and analysis. The major findings of the study are as follows:

1. Majority of the subjects are slow and/or poor readers.
2. Their comprehension ability is far from satisfactory.
3. They need expert guidance in the process of reading and in the cultivation of reading as a mode of critical and creative thinking. In lower classes, they had never been taught the mechanics, micro-skills, and techniques of aggressive reading.
4. Their main barrier is psychosomatic: they believe that they cannot read anything worthwhile except for exams and that there is no sense of immediacy and urgency to do so.
5. Many of them disagree with the perception that the present day generation doesn't read anything at all by asserting that they have better resources to be preoccupied with for accessing the latest information than books of literary value. Some of them are technology-enabled visual and spatial media like the internet, social networking, TV and so on.
6. Their reading is inefficient chiefly because it is hampered by undesirable habits developed at the lower levels of schooling. They were either unnoticed in the past or encouraged at present.

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7. Socio-economic factors such as caste, family background, school background, medium, economy, and religion are factors that determine their (in-) efficient reading.
8. Insufficient mastery over vocabulary poses a big threat to their reading.
9. Lack of focused concentration for a longer period bothers most of them.

3. DISCUSSION

Reading class should aim at facilitating the learning process of micro-skills of reading. The most effective method of mastering reading as a skill is a continuous practicing under professional guidance. Learning mechanics of reading, techniques of reading, mastery of sub-skills of reading, and continuous aggressive reading should be the target of any reading class.

Reading is a process of identifying the sight-sound-sense. In other words, it is a matter of decoding written symbols and meaning attached to them. Readers should recognize the written symbols that make up words, phrases, clauses, sentences and inter-sentences at a progressively faster speed. They, therefore, need to know four important mechanics of reading:

1. Familiarity with the visual symbols of words so that their reading would not be obstructed by them;
2. Intelligent guessing the sound values of words on the basis of prior experience of similar words;
3. Sufficient knowledge of word formation and sentence formation for a quicker grasp of meaning of words and groups of words; and
4. Their ability to read by sense-groups rather than individual words.

The following bad habits prevent readers from mastering the mechanics of reading:

1. Pointing at the words with a finger or pencil;
2. Moving the head from side to side rather than using eye movement;
3. Mouthing words audibly synchronizing with lip movement;
4. Pronouncing words mentally sans audibly.
5. Perceiving only one word per 'eye-fixation'; and
6. Regressing or backward eye movement along a line.

Readers should understand a basic fact that reading involves both the eyes and the brain/mind. Eyes like a camera focus and refocus on the line and transmit it to the brain that interprets and then the mind responds. Though the eyes are externally motionless, they do move for quick successive fixations. Hence, there is a perfect, smooth, continuous coordination between the eyes, the brain, and the mind in terms of transmission of the reading visuals, interpretation of the same, and meaning-making respectively. Poor readers' fixation on individual words is longer and their speed correspondingly is limited by the simultaneous movement of the eyes, lips, tongue, and audible whispering.

Reading involves a variety of skills. It depends upon what is read and why it is read. Some of the main text-types that one usually reads are:

- Literary texts and other passages like essays, diaries, anecdotes, biographies

- Poems, limericks, nursery rhymes
- Newspapers and magazines that include headlines, articles, editorials, letters to the editor, classified ads, weather forecast
- Textbooks and guidebooks
- Puzzles, travel brochures, catalogues, rules for games
- Instructions, directions, notices, rules & regulations, posters, signs, forms, graffiti, menus, price lists, ticket...
- Comic strips, cartoons & caricatures
- Statistics, diagrams, flow/pie charts, time-tables, maps
- Dictionaries, telephone directories...

Reading is a routine in the life of an average literate person and therefore it cannot be avoided. It is also an endless process of guessing because what the reader brings to the text being read is more important than what one finds in the text. **Munby (1978)** lists the following main ones:

- i. Recognizing the script of a language;
- ii. Deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items;
- iii. Understanding explicitly stated information;
- iv. Understanding information when not explicitly stated;
- v. Understanding conceptual meaning;
- vi. Understanding the communicative value of sentences & utterances
- vii. Understanding intra-sentence relationship;
- viii. Understanding relations between the parts of a text through lexical cohesion devices & grammatical devices;
- ix. Interpreting text by going outside it;
- x. Recognizing indicators in discourse;
- xi. Identifying the main point or important information in a piece of discourse;
- xii. Distinguishing the main idea from supporting details;
- xiii. Extracting salient points to summarize
- xiv. Selective extraction of relevant points from a text
- xv. Basic reference skills; and
- xvi. Transcoding information to diagrammatic display.

Reading is for making meaning. In other words, reading is done either for pleasure or for information. Hence, it involves a set of mental or comprehension skills. They are concerned with

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location, identification, reorganization, interpretation, and evaluation of information from the text that is being read. **Grellet (1995: 3)** defines comprehension as “understanding a written text...extract[ing] the required information from it as efficiently as possible”. The comprehension of a text involves:

1. Global comprehension: the ability to perceive the over-all organisation of the text in terms of themes and sub-themes, & structural relationships;
2. Local comprehension: the ability to locate & identify individual points and draw inferences;
3. Referential comprehension: the ability to recover factual information scattered over the text;
4. Reorganisation of information: the ability to rearranging the retrieved information in a form which is more convenient and easier to remember;
5. Inferential comprehension: the higher level ability to draw inferences from stated facts;
6. Prediction: the ability to predict what is likely to follow in the text; and
7. Evaluative comprehension: the ability to discriminate between what is stated and what is implied as fact and opinion.

The ultimate aim of every student who wants to become a better and faster reader is to become an efficient reader. An efficient reader should be a person who can be methodically followed as an ideal target. An efficient reader, therefore, is one who possesses the following micro-skills of reading/abilities to

1. Derive meanings from known vocabulary and grammatical structures, contextual clues and derivations;
2. Read at different speeds (from 150 to 600 words per minute) to suit different purposes;
3. Vary the degree of comprehension from complete comprehension of details to the retrieval of essentials only depending on the purpose;
4. ‘Skip’ and ‘skim’ intelligently as & when necessary;
5. Combine reading at different speeds;
6. Think selectively during the process of reading, relate significant statements, & distinguish fact from opinion;
7. Infer and interpret – read between and beyond the lines; and
8. Anticipate statements, arguments, events, and the like.

Techniques of reading boost the morale of the readers. So, the best way to improving one's reading is simply reading, more reading, and still more reading for longer periods of time from simple to difficult/challenging reading materials. It is absolutely unproductive and therefore repetitive to keep reading what is simple and unchallenging. One should read everything and always with a calm, sure sense of confidence and immediacy. Reading should also be flexible depending on the purpose. To become a faster reader requires intelligent practice, single-minded purpose, and enduring patience. Concentration on the text will be aided by instantaneous perception and wide fixation and the lack of regressions and lip/limp movement, and the presence of rapid cognitive reaction to the page.

Reading should always be related to other skills though the principal purpose of the reading course is to develop reading skills. Teachers should provide ample opportunities for student-readers in the Reading class to link the different skills through reading activities like ‘reading & writing’ (summarizing, mentioning in a letter what one read, note-making...), ‘reading-listening’ (comparing an article and a news bulletin, making opinions and texts...), and ‘reading & speaking’ (discussions, debates, appreciations...). Testing should also combine all these micro and macro skills of language.

4. FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

In the light of the study conducted, the following suggestions can be gleaned through:

1. English teachers should undertake action research on specific problems/issues confronted in reading classes;
2. There should be in-service training programmes and workshops for teachers on the teaching methods of reading and construction of exercises skills-wise;
3. Reading Texts with worksheets on contemporary topics that interest students should be prepared locally; it can be done in collaboration by English teachers from a cluster of colleges located in the same city/district;
4. English teachers and English learners should learn to view reading as the gateway to knowledge production and accordingly, they should provide top priority to reading in the curriculum;
5. Teachers should consult the international English proficiency test makers like TOEFL, IELTS, BEC and GRE so that they can bridge the gap between what educational institutions are providing and what industries require from the present graduate students and prospective employees;
6. Students should exercise learner autonomy by owning up responsibility for their learning through reading. Their reading should start with dailies & magazines of their choice, popular young adult fiction, and then move on to more difficult texts instead of being contented with easy and unchallenging materials;
7. Every student should cultivate dictionary skills and dictionary consultation should become second nature to them; and
8. A lot of effort and energy should be expended on research on methods of teaching reading and construction of tasks to be done by learners independent of teachers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Reading classes should aim at developing students’ micro-skills of reading, and enhancing their comprehension and vocabulary power. Each class should provide reading experiences and practices with exercise reading passages that target a particular skill in each of them. Conscious, deliberate, intensive practice in peripheral vision, span of recognition, fixations & afterimages, perception, retention & recall, skimming & scanning, responding to central meaning, fast reading and the like should be attempted. Extensive reading at home and discussion of the same in the class will help students improve their other oral skills besides creative and critical thinking skills. Quality readers are the best learners. Committed facilitators are better than talking teachers. Committed facilitators are not addicts to textbooks, but enrich texts with their supplementary materials for use in every class.

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APPENDICES

Passage 1: Dry Ice

Read: in 90 seconds or less, read the following passage and Circle T or F for each statement

Can you imagine ice that does not melt and is not wet? Then you can imagine dry ice. Dry ice is made by freezing a gas called carbon dioxide. Dry ice is quite different from ordinary ice, which is simply frozen water.

Dry ice was first manufactured in 1925. It has since fulfilled the fondest hopes of its inventor. It can be used for making artificial fog in the movies (when steam is passed over dry ice, a very dense vapour rises), and for destroying insects in grain supplies. It is more practical than ordinary ice because it takes up less space and is 142 degrees colder. Since it evaporates instead of melting, it is cleaner to use. For these reasons, it is extremely popular, and many people prefer it to ordinary ice.

Dry is so cold that if you touch it with your bare fingers, it will burn you!

Respond:

1. Dry ice is made from water, but because it is specially treated it does not melt. T/F
2. The first dry ice was manufactured in the 1950s. T/F
3. Dry ice has more uses than ordinary ice. T/F
4. Dry ice is not as cold as ordinary ice. T/F
5. Artificial fog can be made by passing steam over dry ice. T/F

Passage 2: The Best Learning

Read the following passage and complete the sentence

The best learning is that which occurs in adulthood. Our psychologists have demonstrated fairly conclusively that, for most people, the ability to learn is at its peak in the years from eighteen to forty-five. There is evidence to show that, even after forty-five, learning power remains high if it is exercised carefully and systematically. Adults can learn better than children; maturity is not a bar but an incentive to the person who wishes to develop his own potentialities. It is significant to recall, among other things, that virtually all the really great teachers, both religious and secular, have taught adults, not children. Naturally, the elementary school and the high school should do something more than keep children war and dry. They can do little more, however, than prepare their pupils for the real education which maturity will bring.

Reading for rapid comprehension:

Adults are -----

-----.

Passage 3: Self-Respect and Self-Confidence

No one can live with himself comfortably without self-respect; without self-confidence no one can enjoy the sense of satisfaction in accomplishment. Self-respect depends upon an emotional equilibrium in which anger, resentment, fear, and love are supports to the person's efforts and activities, not whips drive and lacerate. Self-confidence depends upon ability, upon the adequacy to meet a situation, or to do something successfully. It incorporates also a capacity to take stock, to be honest in self-appraisal, so that one doesn't shoot at the moon and torture oneself for missing it. It means knowing what one knows—and more important—knowing what one doesn't know and not being ashamed to say so.

The standards are set unconsciously—social, puritanical, intellectual, perfectionistic—we rarely meet perfectly; but too many of us dwell upon the things we don't do, the questions we didn't answer, to the point where the things done well are insufficient to support our self-respect and nurture our self-confidence. Then there follows self-abasement, inferiority feelings, inhibitions, and depression.

This quirk of human nature frequently has its roots in the home and environmental settings. As a small child, little Willie is subjected to a constant barrage of: Don't! Stop It! Why did you do that?—the equivalent of "You stupid little idiot." The parent forgets that he or she is Olympian authority in the small one's eyes. This constant equivalent of "you stupid little idiot" chokes the childish struggle for being important and for building self-confidence. There is no thought of giving any praise or approval to the fumbling successes of the child. And the final lethal dose of poison to building self-respect and self-confidence is "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" administered so frequently with no thought of its stultifying effect. In later years, the fear of being shamed throws the stutterer into a dither, sends the alcoholic to have another drink, and the neurotic to hide in the cave of his inhibitions.

Mr. X, a stutterer, never stutters when he issues commands as a drill sergeant at the armory. He is confident and sure. But when he meets any person who symbolizes authority, he stutters miserably. He first stuttered when he faced uniformed authority five years ago to take a test and failed. You will not be surprised to learn that his stern father, the symbol of authority, never offered him as a child a word of approval for his accomplishments, but only the belittling condemnation of "Aren't you ashamed?"

It's time for an inventory. Take stock, but with excitement; not with the doubts of an inhibited soul! What you have done and experienced can be the foundation for self-respect and self-confidence.

Comprehension Test on the gist:

1. What, in brief, makes for self-respect and self-confidence? -----

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2. In what ways do childhood relationships play a role in failing to support an adult's self-respect and self-confidence? -----

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