A STUDY OF THE ISSUES AND THE FACTORS ON READING

EFFICIENCY IN ESL AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This study attempts mainly to explore various reading pedagogies employed by English language instructors and to understand certain teaching methodologies, materials, and evaluation techniques. At the outset, the importance of students' reading proficiency is overviewed. In the review section, some relevant studies about reading skill development and various approaches to improve reading proficiency have been discussed. The need for achieving proficiency in reading through some useful methods, material and efficient evaluation techniques are critically reviewed. The methodology that used in this study is survey method for students. Further, the data collected is analysed and interpreted using various statistical tools, such as tables, bar-charts etc. As per this study, students believed that vocabulary, word familiarity and dictionaries played a huge role. Anxiety, reading for short durations, culture, mother tongue, and group reading do not seem to impact reading efficiency. Finally, the conclusion is made based on the review of the literature and the research data collected.

KEYWORDS: Reading Efficiency, ESL, Teaching Methodology, Material & Evaluation

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INTRODUCTION

In the present context of the globalized world, the levels of English proficiency have reached new planes. Regarding students' reading proficiency, there is a great need of individual needs improvement. Though most of the prescribed reading texts are accessible to the students, not many do read, as such. It is indeed a paradoxical situation that in spite of the availability of books in the market, there are not many readers. Affordability is not a constraint. The books remain unused at home. Even when used, the reading proficiency is hardly any better. For this, there are various reasons for this status of students. Students generally seem to memorize the rules of grammar and do not spend time to understand its applicability. Given the same rule in a different situation, they fail to apply the learnt rule. When lecturers in colleges, have reading sessions, it is a student-centered activity with a minimum of the teacher's role. Greenwood (1998, p.5) rightly points out that teachers fail to recognize the potentiality of reading, and they neglect/ ignore it in the classroom. Greenwood further states that teachers are the first to blame for this issue, and the students next. When given time to complete a task, few students do, more than half the students fail to complete it correctly. The answers, when discussed, still do not arouse the curiosity of passive students. Thus, the reading session is over, yet, no progress, as such would have been made. The vocabulary, reading speed, interpretation, to name a few challenges impede the reading process.

There is no intellectual engagement, analysis, and inferences made. Teachers also do not encourage detailed discussion on these fronts as the time-bound syllabus completion process apparently glares at them in the face. It is observed that vocabulary is a big challenge to students in the reading process. Thamarana (2015)

mentioned that the 'Visual Scaffolding' is a multimedia related strategy in which the language used in instruction is become more understandable by using various media like drawings, photographs along with providing audio to hear English words. This strategy is useful in teaching vocabulary (Thamarana and Narayana, 77). Once the students read a passage, they fail to understand the meaning of a few words. Unable to comprehend, they lose interest in reading further. In fact, the next reading passage at another given time may be, discouraging too. The use of an electronic dictionary, in the form of thesaurus is quite common, given the current technology in their mobile phones, but the discouraging of the use of such phones while in class poses yet another challenge. Thus, students' weaknesses, coupled with the enforcement of rigid rules, affects the positive impact of reading sessions. Sometimes, the syntax could be an issue, given the weak understanding of grammar. Further, long sentences, inferences, concentration and interest could be contributing factors for poor reading skills. The ubiquitous use of technology in the form of interesting video and computer games, has apparently robbed students of the little interest generated for reading. Thus, seems to be of paramount importance when it comes to explaining the weak reading skills of students in Andhra Pradesh. Now a day, the concept of free time is questionable, with technology take over the time period in the day of a student. Students would rather play online games, chat on the web, use Facebook, than reading.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The 'Reading' component of English Language for English Language Learners has always been a very challenging task. Reading is a comprehensive area which encompasses many other factors, due to which difficulty with 'reading comprehension' arises. Thus, it is an area providing a serious challenge to English language learners. The 'sink or swim' mentality (Clara Brown, 2011) makes 'reading comprehension' a tough challenge even to those who are motivationally driven to doing well. The interactive process model, a widely-recognized model which explains 'Reading' and 'Listening' comprehension, states that comprehension is the outcome of the interaction between linguistic and background knowledge (Dubin and Bycina, 1991). Background knowledge is the knowledge of backdrop in which the text is written. Not being aware of the background of the text, many readers find it difficult to clearly follow the text, this creates confusion in the minds of the readers. Thus, comes the difficulty of being unable to correlate the questions to the correct answers. It should be noted if the answers were to be 'direct', the correlation would not be very difficult, but logically arriving at an answer, in other words, 'inferring', becomes difficult. Besides, in 'reading comprehension' a reader can read a text back and forth (Thompson, 1995). This helps in correlating the next, but even this practice fails if the basic understanding of the text and the context in which it should be understood is not clear. So, opening up the reader's mind to think of 'what may follow next' in the reading text is crucial. Thus, the importance of background knowledge, which Clara Brown (2001) says should not be overlooked, and that learners should be supported with, will be crucial in boosting the understanding levels of the readers. This will further help them to anticipate, to know what to look forward for, and gradually, the task of reading, understanding and inferring becomes a mentally affordable task. According to Peregoy and Boyle (2004), when readers can anticipate what the reading is going to be about, they can generate reasonable predictions, making much more sense out of the reading. Most of the language learning and teaching strategies are intended to achieve the necessary skills like Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (Thamarana 2015, pp. 76). On the same lines, linguistic knowledge meant knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, whereas background knowledge meant content knowledge of the reading text.

Scaffolding, as suggested by Clara Brown (2011), is a technique that helps in making reading comprehension

easier by encouraging to overcome language barriers (by familiarizing students with related vocabulary) by providing culture-specific example and by enabling the students to read and understand better. Being anchored on Stephen Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory (1985a), this technique also suggests that comprehension is enhanced when both linguistic knowledge and background knowledge are sufficiently dealt with, for the benefit of the readers. Thus, in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978, p. 86), English language learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge in their native language are to be taken as stepping stones to build the effectiveness of 'reading comprehension'. There are some theories of reading, which explain the nature of reading, the various factors that need to be considered, and the studies in this regard which explain reading as a mental process. Thamarana (2016) mentioned that "a good reader with an average speed (250–500 wpm) of reading of magazines, newspapers used for regular reading through which one can comprehend 70% of the content" (Thamarana and T, 4). They are (a) psycho-linguistic view of reading which states that reading is not a linear process, but readers understand and hypothesize while reading, based on their own background knowledge of the text and also on the background knowledge of how language works (Goodman, 1970). (b) The Schema theory states that knowledge is systematically organized (Rumelhart, 1980). A schema is made up of distinct components or parts which have been ordered in a particular way. The various tasks of anticipating, understanding, storing and retrieving upon necessity are all guided by these schemata which a reader possesses and uses naturally. Schema theory states that the reader, when he reads and understands, does so by combining the textual understanding as also his understanding of the world which he always carries at the back of his mind. The stored mental information, which is schemata, helps thus in the reading process.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the reading pedagogies employed by English language instructors.
- To understand the teaching methodology, materials, and evaluation techniques.

The Research Questions

- What are the reading pedagogies employed by English language instructors at Under-graduation Level?
- How are the teaching methodologies, materials, and evaluation carried out for English language classes?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research is a process, which necessarily includes an idea, an opinion or a hypothesis that has to be supported by evidence in the form of either qualitative or quantitative data so that it can be established as a fact, as a science. The evidence that has to be empirically proved should employ appropriate empirical methods, which are a part of the standard research methodology. Thus, the empirical process includes data choice of appropriate research instruments, data collection methods, testing and analysis of data and so on. In this study, the empirical research aims to focus on the reading challenges faced by English language readers, the pedagogical approaches, curriculum, and evaluation procedures etc. An attempt has been made to explore the reading difficulties faced by non-native English language readers at the undergraduate level. Nunan (1999, p. 231) points out that, "A questionnaire is an instrument for the collection of data, usually in written form, consisting of open and / or closed questions and other probes requiring a response from subjects." This is one of the most preferred methods to collect data. In this method, a set of questions is given, the answers to which lead us to proving our hypothesis/ opinion or assumption. These questions are based on certain variable/ constructs which form the focus of our discussion. The questions asked are based on a Likert scale, where the options range from

1- strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. The questions can be open ended, which gives the respondents the option of giving detailed answers, based on their opinions; they can also be closed questions where the answers are restricted to a 'yes', 'no', 'neutral' etc.

Students' Questionnaire Survey: The students' questionnaire, based on the five-point Likert scale had the options – 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neutral', 'agree', and 'strongly agree'. It has two sections, one for demographics and the other for the main study variables. The first section was to elicit responses about the demographics of the respondents, so that information from this section could be used to correlated data from the main study variables, and draw suitable inferences. The second section which covered the main areas of focus in the study as regards difficulties faced during reading, were leading questions. The reason was the responses could be weighed with more accuracy, because they would have to be critically analysed by the respondents, before being given. The questions covered the cognitive, affective, socio-cultural and pedagogical factors that play a role in the difficulties faced by English language readers. A few of the variables were grammar, motivation, noise, learner-centered approach etc. None of the questions in the students' questionnaire were 'qualitative'. They were used to elicit numerical data only.

316 students participated in the main study. The questionnaire consisted of thirty questions. The chosen colleges had students from different departments like Engineering, Management, Science and Commerce participating. The researcher chose these colleges not only because they had predominantly non-native students of English, but also because the researcher had better access to these students. Further, it should be noted that these students come to study in these colleges, after having done their secondary schooling from various parts of the country. Therefore, it is a highly representative population of under-graduate colleges in Andhra Pradesh.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

It is understood by the demographics that regardless of the gender, boys and girls alike at the undergraduate level, come from homes where half the parents are bachelor degree holders, besides most of the rest who are master degree holders. Irrespective of what their mother tongues are, more than half of them come from home where there is an English-speaking environment. The dominating use of English while with friends (84.8%) or with relatives (43.4%) cannot go unnoticed. Most of the students in the current survey are from the Engineering department and English as the medium of communication at school is a startling 92.7%. Moreover, the medium of instruction at college is English. Thereby, the impact of English on students, whether at school, at college or at home is undeniably dominating. The commonplace usage of English is only added to the exposure and contact with English language. When students talk freely, they use English and also very infrequently switch to other languages, despite having the choice to switch over to any other language. It is interesting to note that a few never switch to any other language while speaking in English. In fact, most of the students are equally comfortable with their mother tongue, if not more, but they do not follow this to interfere with their English language speaking environment. They seem to enjoy speaking in English. Though 229 had learnt English at school and around 96% come from English medium schools, it is certainly surprising that their reading abilities are far less as compared to their oral communication skills in English.

The results procured from the results of the students' questionnaire survey have been classified into four categories, i.e., 'very high', 'high', 'low' and 'very low'. The interpretation key for the above categories is

1.00 – 1.99 = very low (very poor)

2.00 – 2.99 = low (below average)

3.00 – 3.99 = high (good)

4.00 + - very high (excellent)

Tables 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 below present the results of the students' questionnaire survey in accordance with this interpretation key.

Section – A: Cognitive Variable Affecting the Reading Abilities of Students

Table 1.1

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
1	Proficiency helps in reading more complex material	3.58	0.868
2	Being familiar with a variety of words makes reading easy	4.16	0.902
4	Vocabulary is a valuable predictor for good reading comprehension skills	4.15	0.794
6	Pausing while reading increases comprehension	3.57	0.839
8	More educated readers find reading easy	3.81	0.922
12	Good grammar simplifies the Reading process	4.08	0.76
14	Dictionaries are a big help to readers	4.17	0.804
15	Reading speed is better when proficiency is better	3.92	0.739
18	Familiarity with topics makes reading easier	4.08	0.76
20	Making inferences during reading tasks is very essential	3.63	0.828
24	Reading for short duration brings better reading efficiency	3.52	0.863
25	Knowledge of grammatical structures helps improve reading	3.92	0.771
26	concentration is significant for good reading skills	4.11	0.73
30	Reading is the easiest skills compared to listening, writing and speaking	3.42	1.037

Figure 1.1

This section of the questionnaire consists of 14 questions that deals with the cognitive factors that influence the reading abilities of English language learners. For item 1 (proficiency helps more complex material) the mean score is 3.58 whereas for item 2 (Being familiar with a variety of words makes reading easy) mean score is 4.16. The mean score for the

statement, “vocabulary is a valuable predictor for good reading comprehension skills” is 4.15. Item 4 (Pausing while reading increases comprehension) has 3.57 and mean score for the item 5 (More educated readers find reading easy) has 3.81. For item 6 (Good grammar simplifies the reading process) the mean score is 4.08 whereas the mean score for the item 7 (Dictionaries are a big help to readers) is 4.17. For item “reading speed is better when proficiency is better” has 3.92 mean scores, whereas the statement, “familiarity with topics makes reading easier” is very low. For item 10 (Making inferences during reading tasks is very essential) the mean score is 3.63. For item 11 (reading for short duration brings better reading efficiency) the questionnaire survey mean is 3.52 and for the item 12 (knowledge of grammar structures helps improve reading) the mean score is 3.92. For item 13 (Concentration is significant for good reading skills) the mean score is 4.11 whereas the mean score for the statement, “Reading is the easiest skills compared to listening, writing and speaking) is 3.42.

Section – B: Socio-Cultural Variable Affecting the Reading Abilities of Students

Table 1.2

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
7	Responsible students learn faster because they correct their errors faster	3.7	0.891
9	Mother tongue influences English reading efficiency	3.27	0.974
11	Familiar environments enhance reading capability	3.74	0.769
19	Noise levels affect reading and understanding	4	0.896
28	Cultural backgrounds decide importance attached to reading	3.41	0.859
29	A reading environment at home produces better readers	3.96	0.857

Figure 1.2

Section B of the questionnaire consists of six questions that deal with the socio-cultural factors and discusses the results of table 1.2 that influence the reading abilities of English language learners. For item 7 (responsible students learn faster because they correct their errors faster) the mean score is 3.7 whereas for the mean score of item 9 (Mother tongue influences English reading efficiency) is 3.28. For the item 11 (Familiar environments enhance reading capability) the mean score is 3.74 and for the item 19 (Noise level affect reading and understanding) the mean score is 4.00. The mean

score of the item 28 (Cultural backgrounds decide importance attached to reading) is 3.44 whereas the mean score for the item 29 (A reading environment at home produces better readers) is 3.96.

Section – C: Affective Variables Affecting the Reading Abilities of Students

Table 1.3

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
3	Motivation is significant to build vocabulary	4	0.807
16	Interest in English language increases reading ability	3.94	0.824
17	Anxiety is a significant factor affecting reading comprehension	3.6	0.846
23	Confident readers find Reading easy	4.09	0.819

Figure 1.3

This section of questionnaire consists of four questions that deal with affective factors and discusses the results of table 1.3 that influence the reading abilities of English language learners. For item 3 (Motivation is significant to building vocabulary), the mean scores in the questionnaire survey is 4.00 whereas for the item 16 (Interest in English language increases reading ability) the questionnaire survey has a mean score of 3.94. For item 17 (Anxiety is a significant factor affecting reading comprehension) the mean score is 3.60 and for item 23 (Confident readers find reading easy), has 4.09 mean score.

Section – D: Pedagogical Factors as Variables Affecting the Reading Abilities of Students

Table 1.4

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
5	A learner-driven approach enhances students' language learning	3.76	0.733
10	Practice sessions help in developing speed	4.07	0.714
13	Teacher-intervention can help students with low English proficiency	3.88	0.773
21	Feedback is necessary for improving reading efficiency	3.7	0.793
22	Class instruction methods contribute greatly to reading efficiency	3.74	0.83
27	Group reading makes reading easier	3.24	1.011

Figure 1.4

This section of the questionnaire consists of 6 questions that deal with the pedagogical factors and discusses the results of table 1.4 that influence the reading abilities of English language learners. For item 5 (A learner-driven approach enhances students' language learning) the mean score in the survey is 3.76 whereas for item 10 (Practice sessions help in developing speed) the mean score is 4.07. For item 13 (Teacher-intervention can help students with low English proficiency) the mean score is 3.88 and the mean score of the item 21 (Feedback is necessary for improving reading efficiency) has 3.7. Item 22 (Class instruction methods contribute greatly to reading efficiency) has 3.74 mean scores, whereas the item 27 (Group reading makes reading easier), the mean score is 3.24.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Students believed that vocabulary, word familiarity and dictionaries played a huge role. It can be understood that the general perception about language learning efficiency in general, and reading efficiency in particular, depend greatly on the knowledge of words, or word power and their usage. On the same lines proficiency, grammar and reading speed also play a very significant role in the way students feel it impacts their reading. Their attempts are mainly to improve their proficiency. It can be noted that both word familiarity and reading speed are crucial factors for them to have reading friendliness. Another factor where they feel they need to improve is reading speed, which is an essential component of fluency. It can safely be concluded that the difficulty students face with reading is basically vocabulary, and fluency. They also feel that they do not have enough practice for reading, either at home or at school. Though they are aware of this shortcoming, they are not making efforts to change the situation, which can partially be handled by them.

Anxiety, reading for short durations, culture, mother tongue, and group reading do not seem to impact reading efficiency. The students seemed to be unaware that their culture could have a role in their efforts to read well. In essence, the impact of most of the factors on reading efficiency is confirmed while some strengthen the earlier beliefs, some research is contradictory, though sparingly.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the data analysed, the conclusions made in the study, to better the reading practices and reading situation of the Indian students at the undergraduate level. Reading speed, concentration and fluency should be a part of the reading hours in the classroom. But since just increasing reading speed makes no tangible progress, it should be associated with vocabulary and word familiarity, as reading speed would, only then, make sense. Fluency, which is reading speed and comprehension can then be improved in students. As per this study, having a noiseless, conducive environment boosts the concentration of the students. It should be noted that having schools in the middle of busy roads, where the incessant noise from the traffic, street vendors, and loud speakers, can have a deterring effect on concentration and comprehension. It would be beneficial if schools and colleges have an area earmarked for educational institutions whereby noise and disturbance can be minimized.

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