

SIGNIFICANCE OF READING SKILLS

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Abstract

Reading a text is considered an important and mandatory ability in English language learning situations for several reasons. A student at his/her higher levels of learning spends a great deal of his time reading. For this, the student has a need to put a conscious effort, understand and apply what is being learnt in academics. Reading for academic purpose should be done not as a passive activity but to be done actively which leads to the development of learning more. The learning process becomes more challenging as and how the learning skill is developed. The present paper provides an overview of the importance of reading skills, reading comprehension, the problems encountered by the students while comprehending passages and ways for improving comprehension skills.

Key words: reading skill, reading comprehension, intensive and extensive reading, skimming, scanning etc.

Introduction

When asked why do we read books, Joseph Addison said :“*Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.*”

Reading is a skill that involves both idea and thought. It consists of two important processes, recognizing the word and comprehending it. Readers in general make use of their prior knowledge of the words, vocabulary and grammar while reading a text. Reading skill enhances the process of acquisition of language. It serves as good source for improving writing skills later and also learning the features of language. Reading a text involves various reasons. One of the important purposes is that it is very helpful in academic situations. An interaction is created between the reader and the text to understand it. Widdowson (1979) says that “reading is the process of getting linguistic information through reading; the information conveyed by the writer through the print medium is retrieved by the reader”

Francis Bacon in one of his essays, ‘Our Studies’ wrote, “Reading maketh a full man.” According to Gray, “Reading is a form of experience.”

What is Reading Comprehension?

Reading is a distinguished process of communication. It involves receiving, recognizing, interpreting and comprehending a written text. The reader needs to understand the written language, and possess the ability to recognize the words accurately used in various contexts. Reading comprehension refers to the identification of the central theme of the text along with knowing its main ideas. A reader can draw appropriate conclusions from the text only after decoding a written text. Thus the reader has to critically evaluate and explicit information, comprehend its literal meaning, identify facts and opinions and finally draw inferences and conclusions. The process of reading comprehension concludes with response in the form of

understanding and evaluating the given text. Examples that take immediate response can be of reading a mail or a letter and giving reply.

A skilled reader understands the interaction between the words seen in the passage and the way they are triggered outside the text. This art is simply not reading but interacting with the text. The reader can create questions about the theme or central idea of the text, the context and the plot, and connect the events present in the text with that of the prior knowledge that he has. Thus reading comprehension is a continuous and creative process that is determined by an individual's cognitive development. Some learn this technique through education while some others by experiencing reading books, well developed language and ability to make inferences.

Reading comprehension is more complicated than it might appear initially. It is defined as acquiring knowledge of a text and applying strategies to derive meaning from written form. It involves the active process of arriving at a meaning from the given text (Durkin, 1993). It enables the reader to create a clear idea of the text through the effective use of strategic processes, meta-cognition and comprehension monitoring and evaluating. The reader is required to possess prior knowledge and working memory, basic reading skills, vocabulary, drawing inferences, making predictions and motivation. The level of understanding the text depends on how the reader triggers knowledge outside the text message.

The main aim of developing a student's reading comprehension skill is to make him/her efficient reader and become independent learner. Krashen and Terrell remarked that materials used for teaching language skills should be slightly beyond their current level of competence to make their learning effective. It is only through practice that reading skill can be improved and mastered. Hence the material used should be so designed that it would help learners to seek better opportunities for improving the skill. The material should be designed to improve all the four language skills like Summarizing and Note making, comparing news paper articles and news bulletin, taking part in discussions, debates, improving lexis structure of the sentences, inferring a given text and so on. The text should provide meaningful tasks that encourage the students to read more.

Reading Strategies

Reading strategies can be divided into two main categories. Meta-cognition is a strategy that enables the reader to think, plan for learning, evaluate oneself the process of learning, and monitor comprehension. On the other hand cognitive strategy is a mental process that is directly connected with the process of acquiring information to learn, store and retrieve or use the information. Cognitive devices are again divided into two categories, top-down and bottom up. In bottom up model, reading is what is meant to be a process of decoding, identifying letters, word phrases and then sentences in order to know the meaning. Top down model is linked with Schema theory that focuses on the role of reader's background knowledge in the process of reading. Researchers have been emphasizing that meta-cognition is the most appropriate approach in the reading instruction and is now deemed to be the effective approach in the academic context to meet the needs of advanced level readers.

Reading strategies

- ✓ Make reading a active process
- ✓ Help in students learning and thinking process
- ✓ Raise levels of confidence among students
- ✓ Develop lateral thinking skills among the learners
- ✓ Enable the students to improve their levels of concentration
- ✓ Improve the standards of students on academic levels

Learning to read is a skill that some students perform quite adeptly while some encounter many problems doing it. Disability to read could arise at any level and there arises a question if there exists such a categorical range of success in learning to read. In India, the schools and colleges consider languages as first, second and third subjects consequently and the optional subjects line up later. The students are identified as being 'good', or 'better' readers depending on the standard reading ability.

Good readers can effectively know what they read and keep monitoring their understanding levels. They follow certain strategies to know pre-reading, while reading and post reading tasks regarding a text. Skills like re-reading the passage, trying to connect again to the passage are difficult in poor readers because of which they lose connectivity with the passage while reading. (Jitendra, Hoppes & Xin, 2000; Moddy, Kennedy & Brady, 1997). It has been observed that students with poor reading skills distract their attention and increase their anxiety due to their inability to understand the given text. This hinders their development of knowledge in vocabulary and accumulation of information. (Lyon, Shywitz & Shywitz, 2003).

The purpose of reading is that reading is for pleasure and reading is to gain information.

Intensive Reading

Intensive reading refers to reading a text using sub-skills like skimming and scanning. It focuses on vocabulary and grammar, identifying themes and ideas, making inferences and gaining a deeper understanding of the written text. Intensive reading skill trains the student to read the given text in a detailed manner. An efficient and quick reading, either skimming or scanning will give a quick idea of the entire text.

Jespersen says: "To keep students occupied with the text repeatedly in such a way that they do not lose sight in the meaning, so that they may thus become so familiar with it at last that they know it almost or entirely by heart, without having been directly required to commit it to memory."

Intensive reading becomes more beneficial and joyful only after learning the technique of developing extensive reading skill.

Extensive reading

Extensive reading technique can be administered in students who have mastered certain words and only at high school level. The learners should have developed the ability to recognize the words already known, as extensive reading involves reading longer texts, generally read for one's pleasure. Here, the students read the given text silently and quickly to understand the content of the passage and grasp the meaning of it as a whole while the teacher plays the role of a supervisor. This helps the learner to expand passive vocabulary.

According to Thompson and Wyatt, "The exact procedure to be adopted will depend upon the nature of the subject matter to be read and the skill in reading already acquired by the class."

The procedure involves the teacher giving a brief introduction of the topic to arouse interest among the learners. Vocabulary with meanings related to the text should be given to the students in advance. The students should then be asked to read the text silently with a moderate speed after which questions can be raised by the teacher. The students can also be asked to summarize the text in their own words. Tasks like précis writing or essay writing can be given to the students which will improve their language skills. Certain techniques are to be followed by the teachers in case of students who read very slowly. There are chances that they may fail to understand the general idea presented in the passage due to their lack of vocabulary skills. In such a case, the students can be given their time in accordance to finish the task. Both the intensive and extensive reading skills increase reading efficiency of the learner. Reading novels, poems or stories or articles of interest do not require more time than actually needed and hence the reading speed in these cases is faster compared to reading academic texts, technical proposals and professional articles which require more concentration and hence reading speed cannot be taken into consideration. Reading needs may vary but the students can be encouraged to keep track of their reading abilities.

According to Thompson and Wyatt, "The main purpose of extensive reading is the cultivation of taste for reading and it seeks by encouraging the habit of visualizing what is read to make reading a form of visual instruction".

The reader should locate the material to be read from a well designed book or website which can help him to identify if it is subject specific. The reader can have a preview of the course and probe the information in various texts simultaneously by using table of contents or indices. For more ideas, the reader can use a variety of graphic images, bullet points, footnotes, illustrations and symbols etc to look for specific information. The next stage here is that the reader should go beyond the previewing of the text and begin to analyze and determine if the text is useful to solve the purpose. The reader should practice reading strategies like skimming, scanning, rereading the text, and framing ideas.

Scanning

Scanning is a process to quickly locate specific information or a fact, numbers or names. Trying to search the meaning of a word in a dictionary, looking into the details of examination results, train schedules, specific points in a text, are some of the examples for this technique. What is important in this technique is to increase the speed of scanning with accuracy. The first step is to gain the general idea of the text without paying attention to the

detailed meaning of the text. The reader has to keep in mind what he is looking for without getting confused. For example, to know the name of a person or a place, using capital letter can provide clue. Scanning is a process of getting a bird's-eye of the text. Facts or figures may be hidden and hence the reader has to scan indexes and headings. It is important to look for the phrases or words required to be scanned. When the eye catches one of the keywords, the surrounded material can be read with a keen observation to get the idea. Multiple scan is necessary when using multiple key words or phrases. Sometimes students try to search for answering a specific question. Each question to be answered should be scanned separately and read carefully. When the words are located, the surrounded text should be read if the answer is apt. Re-reading the question is to be done to determine if the answer found is accurate and relevant. Great concentration is required for the reader while scanning a text to be read. This helps the reader to analyze the way information is identified and structured.

Skimming

Skimming is a process of reading that is done to get a rough idea of the passage given for reading. The main objective of skimming is to know and analyze the central idea of the text and involves quick reading and getting quick analysis. Every passage or text has a theme or central idea which has to be identified by the reader. Hence the process involves reading the paragraph or the given passage from the title till the end. The opening and closing paragraphs generally give an idea of identifying the central idea. Both skimming and scanning techniques of reading are essential for efficient reading. Through scanning method of reading, one can try to locate particular information while through skimming, one gets to know the entire gist of the passage by going through the text quickly. Sometimes the reader may skim a passage out of curiosity and interest and later scan the same passage in order to jot down a name or a number which may be of some use to him/her.

Conclusion

One can acquire substantial knowledge in subjects like Arts, Science, Social Sciences or Computer Science etc. through reading. Reader should interact with the texts and learn about the thoughts, emotions, culture and tradition and of men and women of bygone days residing in different countries. Works of great authors educate the readers on various aspects like the problems encountered by the people, and the way of their lives. Thus reading books or texts will offer solutions to certain critical situations that may come across in life. Hence the reading skill should be made a habit at the primary school level by the teachers. Awareness should be provided to the students on the importance of reading skills at each level. Reading skills can be made a platform to the learners to enhance their critical thinking skills, develop thoughts from different points of view, incorporate new ideas, and finally develop knowledge.

According to Dave Singh, " Teachers follow their own method: for after all, a teacher is the principal method. Much depends on his personality, expression, initiatives, drive, devices etc. However, still there are broad steps in a lesson which no intelligent teacher can afford to miss without detriment to his efficiency of teaching.

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