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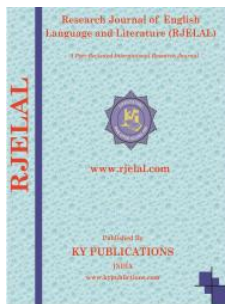
ANALYSING READING SKILLS OF UNDER GRADUATE STUDENTS OF ENGINEERING INTERMS OF READING STRATEGIES: A STUDY

AMMAJI NALLI¹, Prof. L. MANJULA DAVIDSON²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Andhra University

²Co-Research supervisor, Department of English, Andhra University

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ABSTRACT

Reading is one of the most complex cognitive processes where the reader, from constant interaction with the text, constructs meaning. Reading is an act of communication in which information is transferred from a transmitter to a receiver and this makes reading an active process of negotiating meaning. The reader's role is too paramount to be ignored. As has been very appositely reported by Smith (1971, p.12) : " Skilled reading utilizes redundancy of information from a variety of sources—so that, for example, knowledge of the world and of language will reduce the need for visual information from the printed page. " Reading is therefore a highly valued and much-coveted skill that students need in order to progress in their career. Academic reading forms an essential component of any sensible education system. The ever-increasing demand for high levels of literacy in our technological society makes this problem even more pressing (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In Academic Reading, students sample different types of texts to read and analyse them critically. Research reveals that a good reader is actively involved with interpreting the text, and they are aware of the process or strategies they use to understand what they read. During the last decade, advances in theory and research have improved our understanding of the reading process.

The present study was a modest attempt to establish what reading strategies had been used by students of engineering for whom English is a compulsory subject in first year and third year. A study was conducted across four engineering colleges in four districts of Andhra Pradesh to determine the type of reading strategies employed by students as they negotiated texts that dealt with various themes ranging from science and technology to human interest.

Introduction

Despite strident calls to resist the evils of "linguistic imperialism" (Phillipson, 1992) and stop the slaughter of indigenous languages by English, the imperious English continues to march on, impervious to its detractors and glorying in its own invincibility across the globe. In India, the stature

of English is such as to invest anyone using it with power, pride and prestige, opening a universe of ideas and opportunities. The curriculum reflects the ever-desperate need for English and measures initiated to accord English the importance it rightly deserves.

In engineering curriculum, reading is one of the listed skills and developing reading skills is recommended but hardly ever followed in practice in many engineering colleges thanks to a concatenation of several factors, not least teacher nonchalance and student indifference towards learning English.

To investigate the extent to which reading and reading strategies are being promoted in engineering colleges where English is taught as a compulsory subject in first year and third year, a study was embarked on with data collected and analysed to reveal the trends on offer with regard to the teaching learning of reading skills.

Literature review

In general, strategies are defined as “specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information.” (Brown 2007 p.119). Reading strategy as “the mental operations involved when readers approach a text effectively to make sense of what they read.... Good readers apply more strategies more frequently... and more effectively than poor readers.” (Pani 2004). The impact of these strategies on reading is conceived to be of utmost importance in any act of reading. Brown (2001) pints out that “reading comprehension is a matter of developing appropriate, efficient comprehension strategies (ibid P. 306). There have been some studies which have enumerated poor readers’ characteristics. Lau (2006), for example cites the following in the literature: a) They do not know how to construct the main ideas and macrostructure of the text b) they are not familiar with the text structure and do not make use of the text structure to organize the main ideas c) they have little prior knowledge and do not know how to activate their knowledge to facilitate text comprehension d) they have difficulties in drawing inferences to achieve in depth understanding the texts, e) they lack metacognitive ability, and are not aware of the problems that emerge during reading and do not know how to monitor their reading process. Therefore, at this juncture it is very important to teach reading strategies to the

engineering students to improve their reading comprehension skills.

Inferring

Inference means findig out something that author does not actually say. To solve this,the reader needs to employ clues that are there in the text using his cognition. It goes by the name of reading between the lines. Students need to use their own knowledge along with information from the text to draw their own conclusions (Serafini, 2004.) Through inferring students will be able to draw conclusions, make predictions, identify underlying these, use information to create meaning from the text, and use pictures to create meaning (Harvey and Goudvis, 2000)

Summarizing

Summarizing is a strategy which helps students to organize ideas in sequence. The process of summarization requires the reader to determine what is important when reading and to condense the information in the readers own words (Alder, 2001). During the summarizing process, students should be able to identify main ideas and supporting details to distinguish the related knowledge from each other.

Predicting

This is an important skill that involves extensive use of background knowledge to predict or know based on what one has read the outcome of the writer’s opinions or views. The idea is to infer answers from the text based on one’s background knowledge and awareness of the themes dealt with by the writer of the piece.

Visualising

Forming a mental image of the ideas being conveyed by the text is as much testimony to one’s imagination as one’s powers of expression.

Making connections

Making connections and finding the links between what is known and what needs to be known , on the basis of one’s experiences, the world around one and one’s knowledge is easily the most essential as also the most neglected skill.

These are among the well-known strategies listed in the literature on strategies and strategy training.

The study

The study involved collection of data in various forms using the instruments given below. It was conducted over six months in four engineering colleges involving 100 students and teachers.

Research Questions

The study was performed to answer the following questions:

- (1) What type and frequency of reading strategies do the students use when reading texts?
- (2) Is there any significant difference in terms of gender in reading strategies?
- (3) Is there any relationship between strategy use and students' English proficiency?

Participants in the study

In order to generate authentic data, third year students of engineering pursuing different courses of engineering at four engineering colleges in four districts of Andhra Pradesh were chosen for the study. A total of 100 students were chosen for data collection besides teachers who had been teaching English as a second language to students. Out of the 100 students, fifty were males and fifty were females. A pilot study was conducted based on which the main study was conducted.

Instruments of data collection

The instruments adopted in the study were a questionnaire, interviews with teachers and students and data in the form of answers to six reading passages. The test and a group-administered questionnaire were used to collect data from 100 students to investigate the student awareness of reading strategies.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was made up of two parts. The first part sought personal details such as the student's age, gender, academic background, etc to know something of their background. The second part was their awareness of Reading Strategies.

Teacher interviews

The interviews were held with teachers to find out if reading skills and sub skills has been taught to students in an organised and structured fashion to enable them to master the nuances of reading.

Student interviews

The interviews were held with students to find out if the skills and sub skills of reading as well as reading strategies had been taught to them (students) systematically to make students handle reading passages with confidence and ease.

Classroom observation

Classroom observation formed part of the study as the researcher wanted to know for herself if.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data generated from 100 students based on the responses to reading passages was analysed and interpreted for recommendations and possible implications. Based on analysis of student questionnaire, teacher questionnaire, interviews with students and teachers as well as analysis of reading passages administered to students, the following conclusion were arrived at.

The first conclusion was that regardless of gender, the performance was poor and very disappointing across the board. This is illustrated in the table below.

Overall Grade for male and female students in Six Reading Passages

Grade	Boys' Grade	Boys' Percentage	Girls' Grade	Girls' Percentage	Overall Grade	Overall Percentage
A	0	0.00%	1	0.33%	1	0.16%
B	9	3.00%	8	2.66%	17	2.83%
C	34	11.33%	27	9.00%	61	10.16%
D	57	19.00%	52	17.33%	109	18.16%

E	200	66.66%	212	70.66%	412	68.66%
Total	300	100.00%	300	100.00%	600	100.00%

The table above clearly and unambiguously depicts the performance of both male and female participants in data collection. It is worth noting from the table that the performance was similar across the board for both male and female students. There were no differences in terms of grades scored or marks obtained for reading passages. Only 1 girl scored A grade for a reading passage while no boy scored an A. As for other grades, B grade was obtained by nine boys in total while eight girls obtained B grade, which comprised 3 % and 2.66 % of the total.

C grade was secured by thirty four boys and twenty seven girls representing 11.33% and 9 % respectively of the total percentage of grades. D grade was obtained by 19.00% of boys and 17.33% of girls respectively. Thus, across grades, there was no significant difference in the performance of boys and girls who were both equally handicapped in terms of socio economic or socio cultural factors and other pedagogic and non-pedagogic factors.

The maximum number of students fell in E grade, with 66.66 % boys and 70.66 % girls obtaining E grade. The table shows very clearly that both boys and girls belonged to the weak category of learners who had not been taught reading skills and sub skills in a detail or in an organized fashion by the teachers. The performance was equally dismal across colleges, implying that neither teachers nor learners seemed to invest any significant interest in teaching or learning reading. The A grader seemed to be an exception that proved the rule of learners being very poor in reading.

The table also reveals that regardless of the topic chosen for reading passage, the performance continued to leave a lot to be desired. The presence of so many E and D grades for both male and female students indicate that a lot needs to be done to improve reading skills.

The second and most conspicuous conclusion reached is that neither skills/sub skills of reading nor reading strategies had ever been

taught to students in any manner by teachers. At every stage of answering questions, students faced setbacks because of circumstances, teaching methods, teaching materials and also their own attitudes, which compounded by the indifferent attitude of teachers, made reading a very dull, boring and strenuous activity.

In particular the following difficulties were faced by students every time they attempted a reading task.

Difficulty in comprehension

It is evident from the comprehensions, a majority of the students have problems in understanding the literal, inferential, critical and compare and contrast questions.

Difficulty in guessing meaning from the context

When students are confronted with a new text test, they got stuck because of the shortage of vocabulary and not knowing the strategy of guessing meaning from context. When asked in questionnaire 2, majority of students responded that they take down the words and look for the meanings from the dictionary.

Difficulty in inferring for rhetorical purposes

Inference questions ask students to identify information or comprehend an idea that is not stated in the reading passage. In understanding and answering these inferring rhetorical questions, the students lag behind in this reading strategy.

Difficulty in making inference from stated facts

Ability to infer helps the reader to understand the meaning that lies between the lines. This needs the reader to also access prior knowledge. These abilities are found to be weak in these students. Their answers to inferential question give the evidence that they are lagging behind in this particular reading strategy.

Difficulty in using strategies of (impromptu) reading

When a comprehension passage was given to test the main idea, expressions or phrases in

context, grammatical features, scanning for a specifically stated details, unstated details or excluding facts not written, supporting ideas and vocabulary in context, more than fifty percent of the students could only score lower grades. This could be the reason for not having planned teaching of the reading strategies and practice.

Difficulty in outlining skills and overall patterns

It is basic for a reader to understand a text with different reading elements like central idea, main idea, supporting details, and the patterns of the text whether it is literal, fiction or nonfiction. Since, students were not taught these strategies in the language class room, a huge number of students got very low grades. Their responses were just reproduction of the lines from the passage and some have not given answers. So this gives us evidence that the students are failed in coping with outlining and sequencing patterns.

Implications of the study

Students need thorough and systematic exposure to reading strategies. The strategies of inferencing, making connections, visualizing, guessing vocabulary from context, questioning, predicting, making educated guesses, summarizing and paraphrasing need to be taught to them as part of reading. Teachers have always taught to the test and this has resulted in extremely non conducive atmosphere for teaching reading as a skill based activity. Students continue to rely on bazaar notes or guide books to get through exam and their answers are neither based on logic nor any form of intelligent reasoning.

To stem this unfortunate state of affairs, one needs to alert teachers to the dangers of lazy assumptions about reading, warn them against teaching to the test and inform them about the rich possibilities that exist with regard to teaching reading skills and strategies.

Reading is a skill and can be developed like any other skill provided the right inputs exist and are given to eager minds. This has not happened so far and now is the time to change it.

Students need to be given authentic materials from time to time to work on so that any reading passage is made easy to handle over a course of time. This is the surest way to tackle bad reading habits and ensure success whatever the circumstances.

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