

Improving Students' Reading Skills by Motivation: A Pilot Study

Author: 1

Dr. B. Kanchana Mala,
Assistant Professor,
Department of Humanities and Languages,
Sona College of Technology,
Salem – 636 005.
Email id: kanchana@sonatech.ac.in

Author: 2

Dr. M. Renuga,
Professor and Head,
Department of Humanities and Languages,
Sona College of Technology,
Salem – 636 005.
Email id: renugam@sonatech.ac.in

Author: 3

Dr. M. Saraswathy
Assistant Professor,
Department of Humanities and Languages,
Sona College of Technology,
Salem, Tamil Nadu, India.
Email id: saraswathy@sonatech.ac.in

ABSTRACT

Reading, the most important tool in all academic advancements, is a fundamental survival skill. It transfers experiences to individuals so that the readers may expand their horizons, identify, extend and intensify their interests and gain deeper understanding of the world (Green, 2002). Reading is regarded as one of the most important components in learning a language and it is an essential tool for lifelong learning for all learners (Pandian, 1997; Mokatsi, 2005). This concept is also supported by Krashen (1993), who states that, through reading, readers develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary and advanced grammar and becomes excellent spellers. Reading habit, thus, will improve the language proficiency and make the reader a better speaker.

KEYWORDS : Reading, motivation, assessing, ESL learner and EFL learner.

INTRODUCTION

Reading, the most important tool in all academic advancements, is a fundamental survival skill. It transfers experiences to individuals so that the readers may expand their horizons, identify, extend and intensify their interests and gain deeper understanding of the world (Green, 2002). Reading is regarded as

one of the most important components in learning a language and it is an essential tool for lifelong learning for all learners (Pandian, 1997; Mokatsi, 2005). This concept is also supported by Krashen (1993), who states that, through reading, readers develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary and advanced grammar and becomes excellent spellers. Reading habit, thus, will improve the language proficiency and make the reader a better speaker.

Students' expertise in reading is globally recognized as a sign of competency. Exams such as IELTS, TOEFL and BEC require the candidates to have a good degree of proficiency in reading along with other language skills such as listening, speaking and writing. Reading in English is an essential skill for ESL students because strong reading skills will help students make good progress in academics as well as in a career. According to Carrell (1988:1), for many students, reading is far the most important of the four macro skills required much, particularly in English as a second or a foreign language. Reading confers a host of possible benefits on the reader. A reader not only learns what has been discovered by others but also builds on the foundation of information that he receives through reading.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The art of reading

Reading is essentially a thought process. While going through the literature on reading, one comes across many statements such as: Reading is primarily a visual task; it is recognition of words; it is reproducing; it is a step to personal development. Patricia Carrell et al define reading as an interactive process where readers employ their background knowledge and past experience to make sense of the text (1998). According to Shaw, reading is thinking with the author and adsorbing his ideas. Artley looks at reading as the art of reconstructing from the printed page, the writer's ideas, feelings, moods, and sensory impressions. Reading possesses unique characteristics. It is often called an indirect form of learning. The relationship between independent reading and positive academic development include significant correlation between wide reading, increased academic vocabulary and cognitive development (Cunningham & Stanovicle, 2003). The habit of reading makes the readers learn to understand reasons for making moral and ethical choices. Lloyd Alexander says, we have machines to think for us; we have no machines to suffer for us or to rejoice for us... read "Nonutilitarian" books for relief, from the humdrum routine of life. A good reading habit is important for the development of personality and mental capacity. This habit is necessary for a healthy intellectual growth and plays a very crucial role in enabling a person to achieve language proficiency (Grabe and Stoller, 1997). By reading books, one can develop his fantasy and imagination, creativity, general knowledge of the world, moral and cultural values. Since reading is a skill that requires much practice to perfect, activities that practice reading, bringing both success and enjoyment to learners, will help foster an ongoing interest in reading as an activity of choice (Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997). Students who read actively and frequently improve their comprehension of text as a consequence (Cipielewski & Stanovich, 1992). Reading often can increase sight word recognition, vocabulary, fluency, text comprehension, as well as knowledge (Morgan and Fuchs 2007:). Studies show that students who like to read score better in most subjects than students who do not like to read (Krashen 2004:35-36). Students who struggle with reading, often avoid the discomfort by choosing to not even try. Several research show that the more students read, the better they read and the more pleasure they get out of reading.

Factors that make reading difficult

It is hard to imagine any academic or professional work that does not require efficient reading skills. Reading is not a natural process. The habits necessary for efficient reading must be acquired during the beginning period of reading instruction (Ahuja:1991:39). There are various factors that affect the reading

efficiency of an individual. Some of them which are within the individuals are: vision, vocalizing, word blocking, word analyses, monotonous plodding, finger pointing, backtracking, rereading and purpose of reading. The other set of factors that are in the environment of the readers are: illumination, readability of the matter and motivation.

The ESL and EFL learners confront a variety of difficulties while reading. Reading is, for many, a passive, boring activity, performed constantly in isolation and perhaps associated with skills which they feel they do not possess (Greenwood1998:5). Dechant (1982:73) states that achievement in reading is dependent upon the pupil's motivational readiness, and poor reading or reading failure may be caused by lack of interest. The most mentionable cause of poor reading is lack of vocabulary. Having a large and varied vocabulary will provide mastery over a range of different texts, when it comes to word-attack, comprehension, fluency and critical reading. Grabe and Koda list a number of research studies that show a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading both in L1 and L2 (Grabe, 2009, P. 265; Koda, 2007, P.5). Hudson claims that there is a general agreement that much second language vocabulary learning occurs incidentally through extensive reading, rather than through explicit reading, rather than through explicit vocabulary instruction" (Hudson 2007:245).

The mode and purpose of reading also affect the effectiveness of reading. Prior to reading any unit, the reader should be clear as to the purposes for which he is going to read. The most satisfactory purpose is one stated by the pupil himself. Where he cannot do this satisfactorily, the teacher's guidance should help provide him with a purpose; acceptable to him. (Bond and Tinker:1967). Internal readability of the reading materials in the form of comprehension levels also affects the reading efficiency of the individual (Ahuja: 1991). Hence reading becomes difficult to an ESL learner.

Efficiency in reading is dependent also on the students' motivational readiness. Cummins and Fagin suggest that the student who is interested in reading, satisfies the basic needs of self esteem, esteem of others, curiosity and success and personal adequacy (1954). Therefore, lack of motivation will also hinder efficient reading. To enable students to excel in personal and professional lives, teachers can play a significant role by enhancing their reading habit. Students' motivation to read is influenced by their level of reading skill and self-conception about reading. Research suggests that children's reading motivation relates closely with their reading abilities and experiences with reading (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Wang & Guthrie, 2004).

Reading motivation and ESL learners

Reading is an important language skill for students' success in higher studies. Reading habit must be fostered by language teachers since the importance of motivation in reading is undeniably great. In language learning, motivation is considered a key issue for learners to succeed (Dornyei : 1994). Several researchers also confirm that motivation is a key factor for successful reading. In the words of Guthrie et al., a student who is motivated to read will read more often (2004). According to Cherry (2012), motivation is defined as the method that allows people to launch, engage, and persist in goal-oriented behaviours. Brown (2001) defines motivation along the continuum of success and failure of any complex issue. Children who are motivated to read generally develop into more skillful readers (Anderson, Wilson and Fielding :1998). Motivation is a kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something (Harmer 2001:51). Teachers must help students realize the objective of reading and help students to look up on himself as a reader. Wheat (1995) remarks as teachers, we are concerned with two phases of interest. First, the interest of the student must somehow be captured if he is to read; and second, we must help the student to make reading a habitual activity. Indeed, at this point, when reading

becomes a permanent mode of behavior that reading acquires a motivational force of its own. Self – concept is closely related to reading success, and a student who does not see himself as a reader will rarely possess the reading habit (Ahuja:1991). Language teachers can promote the reading habit of students by several ways. They can help the students in finding happiness and enjoyment in reading, students must be encouraged from time to time for showing progress in reading. Reading materials for which the students themselves may feel the need must be provided. Turner(1995) states that students' intrinsic motivation, refers to their enjoyment of reading for its own sake, which is essential for engaged reading.

Research Plan

The primary aim of this study is to improve students' reading habit through motivating practice sessions and assessing the improvement after training. The researcher provides learning experience to the chosen group by group practice, partner practice and independent practice. This action research also analyses the improvement of reading skills by assessing their responses. According to Brown and Dowling, action research is a term which is applied to projects in which practitioners seek to effect transformations in their own practices...(2001). The main aim of any action research is to find solutions to real problems faced by students and seek ways to improve their success. This study employs the use of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978) to ensure that during independent reading time, all students have access to reading material that was not too difficult for them.

Research group

The sample group for the study is taken from the first year engineering degree of several disciplines like Electronics and Communication Engineering, Electrical and Electronics Engineering, Computer Science and Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Information Technology and Fashion Technology. The students are in their first semester of their under graduation. Regular reading hours have already been included in their academic schedule. The research group consists of 864 first year students. The ages of the subjects ranged from 18 to 19.

Survey method is adopted in order to collect data for the study. A questionnaire is supplied to the group. Five major questions are asked to get information regarding their age, nationality, gender, educational qualification and medium of instruction in school. The students are asked to specify the approximate number of words they know in English. Then they are also asked to write a few lines about their reading habit.

The researcher meets every student in person and supplies the questionnaire. The collected data is computed by SPSS 17. There are 415 (48%) female and 449 (52%) male students in the research group. Among them 11 students are from Nepal, 7 from Sri Lanka, 1 from France, 1 from Thailand, 1 from Malaysia, 1 from America and 1 from Sudan. 707 (82%) students are from English medium schools and 151 (17%) are from regional medium schools. One of the students is from Sudan who has learnt in Arab medium school. 5 are from schools where Nepali was the medium of instruction. In this heterogeneous research group nearly 824 (95%) students are independent learners. 40 (5%) students are slow learners. When they are asked about the frequency of their non-academic reading, 404 (47%) of the participants responded that they are readers who read every day. 347 (40%) students had the habit of reading a few times a week. 113 (13%) students said that they read rarely.

Table:1

Variables	Sub-variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	449	51.96
	Female	415	48.04
Medium of instruction	English	707	81.82
	Regional Language	151	17.47
	Arabic	1	0.11
	Nepali	5	0.57
Nature of the reader	Independent learner	824	95.37
	Struggling learner	40	4.62
Frequency of non-academic reading	Everyday	404	46.75
	a few times a week	347	40.16
	Rarely	113	13.07

Frequency and percentage are used to explain the gender, medium of instruction, nature of the learner and the frequency of reading, etc.

Prior to the reading practice, the students of the research group are made to answer a questionnaire in which they are to specify their reading capability and reading habit. 541 (63%) students of the research group are found to be independent learners and 323 (37%) are slow learners. It is found that 291 (34%) students feel that working out English grammar exercise will help improve their vocabulary and language proficiency. A majority of the students that is 463 (54%) is of the opinion that reading practice in English will help them to enhance their word power. 110 (13%) students believe that watching television programmes in English without subtitles can be done to learn new words. For the question ‘How much time do you spend working on English everyday outside the classroom?’ 199 (23%) students say that they spend two hours every day, 435 (50%) students say that they spend one hour a day and 230 (27%) students say that they spend less than 30 minutes per day.

Table: 2

Variables	Sub-variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Are you an independent learner?	Yes	541	63
	No	323	37
Which of the following things do you try to do outside classroom regularly to improve vocabulary?	working out English grammar exercise	291	33.6
	Reading stories or other books in English	463	53.5
	Watching TV programmes in English without subtitles	110	12.7
How much time do you spend working on English everyday outside the classroom?	2 hours	199	23
	1 hour	435	50
	Less than 30 minutes	230	27

Two hours of reading practice are allotted every week in the academic schedule for the first year engineering degree. Several reading strategies like making inferences, visualizing, predicting, questioning and summarizing are also explained to the students before the reading practice. Since stories are a natural

part of life, short moral stories are given during the reading hours. Moral stories are chosen for the reason they motivate the readers to think, enhance language skills and cognitive development, and stimulate thinking. Articles from newspapers and several motivational books are also given to the chosen group. The students feel that continuous reading hours make them read more since they feel motivated to read more. According to Cox, Guthrie, Metsala and Wigfield (2000), the amount children read can be a predictor as to how much children comprehend. A child's motivation level is a factor of how much they will read. For this reason, the more motivated a student is to read, the more reading he or she will do.

Pre and post attitude surveys are also administered to ascertain changes in students' sense of self-efficacy, preferences and perception towards reading. After several hours of reading practice, the same questionnaire (Table:3) is given to the students. 702 (81%) students of the research group say that they have become independent learners. Earlier the number of independent learners were 541 (63%). The number of slow learners has also reduced from 323 (67%) to 162 (19%). The table shows clearly that 28% of the students are of the opinion that working out English grammar exercise is the best way to improve their vocabulary and language proficiency. 69% of the students strongly feel that regular reading practice in English will improve their word power. 3% expressed that watching television programmes in English without subtitles will also help to learn new words. 246(28%) students said that they work 2 hours everyday outside the classroom to improve their proficiency in English, 566 (66%) students said that they spent 1 hour a day and 52 (6%) students said that they spend less than 30 minutes per day.

Table 3:

Variables	Sub-variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Are you an independent learner?	Yes	702	81
	No	162	19
Which of the following things do you try to do outside classroom regularly to improve vocabulary?	working out English grammar exercise	237	28
	Reading stories or other books in English	599	69
	Watching TV programmes in English without subtitles	28	3
How much time do you spend working on English everyday outside the classroom?	2 hours	246	28
	1 hour	566	66
	Less than 30 minutes	52	6

Another set of question is asked to the participants to answer. The set of questions further tests their improved reading capability. The students say that they have also realized the importance of reading habit. Table 4 indicates that 781 (90%) students say that they have started using the newly learnt English words while speaking and writing and 83 (10%) students say that they rarely use the newly learnt words. Extensive reading helps build vocabulary (Anderson & Nagy, 1992). Research has printed that one's vocabulary growth will result from reading volume and indirect instruction or language encounters. 799 (92%) students are able to guess the meaning of a word by using the other words in a sentence. 454 (53%) students have begun to look at the examples in the dictionary to learn how to use a word. Unanimously, all the students in the research group say that being able to read and comprehend the information is always important. After the reading practice, 715 (83%) of the participants give themselves grade I when

they are asked to rate themselves based on their vocabulary strength. This demonstrates the escalation in their reading habit.

85 (10%) students express that they have improved their reading capability from the beginner level to the intermediate level. 64 (7%) students are in the beginning phase of reading habit. 763 (88%) of the participants express that they try to read material that is higher than their ability level. 101 (12%) of the participants say that they do not try to read material that is above their ability level. When asked ‘*Will strong vocabulary base give access to printed language?*’ 841 (97%) of the participants strongly agree with the statement and 23 (7%) do not agree. 851 (98%) students of the research group accept that the comprehending texts provide access to new words and increased insights into decoding unknown words and 13 (2%) do not accept the opinion. 846 (98%) students accepted that regular reading of authentic books lead to an ability to read fluently with comprehension and 18 (2%) of the participants did not accept.

Table 4:

Statement		<i>f</i>	%	Male (<i>f</i>)	%	Female (<i>f</i>)	%	Total
I use the newly learnt English words in writing and speaking	Always	781	90	392	87	389	94	
	Rarely	83	10	57	13	26	6	
I can use the rest of the words in a sentence to guess the meaning	Always	799	92	443	99	356	86	
	Rarely	65	8	6	1	59	14	
I look at the examples in the dictionary to learn how to use a word	Always	454	53	252	56	202	49	
	Rarely	410	47	197	44	213	51	
Do you think being able to read and comprehend the information is important ?	Always	864	100	449	52	415	48	
	Rarely	0	0	0	0	0	0	
(After the reading practice) If you were to give yourself a grade based on how strong is your vocabulary which would you choose	I grade	715	83	365	81	350	84	
	II grade	85	10	43	10	42	10	
	Beginner	64	7	41	9	23	6	
Do you try to read material that is at your ability level or higher?	Yes	763	88	367	82	396	95	
	No	101	12	82	18	19	5	
Will strong vocabulary base give access to printed language?	Yes	841	97	439	98	402	97	
	No	23	3	10	2	13	3	
Do comprehending texts provide access to new words and increased insights into decoding unknown words?	Yes	851	98	443	99	408	98	
	No	13	1.5	6	1	7	2	

Does regular reading of authentic books lead to an ability to read fluently with comprehension?	Yes	846	98	441	98	405	98
	No	18	2	8	2	10	2

FINDINGS

The results of the reading practice and the experience the researcher has undergone show that there is a lack of motivation among the students at the beginning of the training. The researcher has had some worries regarding providing time for reading practice. That became possible because of the weekly reading hours included in the curriculum. Another question in mind has been about the success of the regular reading practice as it is new to the students. In order to overcome this situation, the researcher has motivated and monitored the students in every step of the practice especially in inferring the meaning of the words based on the context. After the training, the improvement is experienced by the researcher. It is rewarding both for the participants and the researcher. Encouraging students from time to time for showing progress in reading and providing books that fit students' immediate interests serve as vital tools during the training. Strang and associates rightly remark, if we think of reading as contributing to personal development and effecting desirable personality changes, we will provide our students with reading materials that meet their needs, or have some applications to their lives (1961). The action research is a productive experience since the students' increased interest for reading and the desire to learn new words are really gratifying to the researcher as a teacher. The participants have expressed that after the reading practice, they are alert and curious to know about new words.

CONCLUSION

The present study is aimed at motivating learners, especially EFL learners. It is evident from the study that motivation is an important factor that helps improve the habit of reading. The twenty four hours of reading practice lent the participants a considerable amount of investment into the hard work of learning. It is observed that a positive correlation exists between motivation in reading and the amount of reading. The survey done has helped them realize their potential as progressive readers. They express that though it is a simple training, it is transformative. In this light, they are found to be dedicated to their reading throughout the study. The results of the present study clearly shows that the quantity someone reads predicts the ability to understand new words even after factoring the word power already acquired and the gist of the reading material. In short, the best way to promote the habit of reading is to motivate students to read.

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