

Developing Reading Skills in English: The Role of Motivation and Attitude

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ABSTRACT

Language skills in English have become more important today than ever before. The need for proficiency in English is quite pronounced in the educational field and also at the workplace. In order to cater to this demand, institutions are giving more importance to communication skills today. The onus of turning out students who possess good skills in English is on the English language teacher. But often, the issue of a learner's motivation to learn English is not adequately addressed. This paper attempts to create a general awareness with regard to concepts of motivation and learners' attitudes towards English. The paper looks at these issues with regard to reading. It discusses certain theoretical aspects of reading before focusing on motivation and attitude.

Introduction

In our routine life, we're involved in various forms of reading. These include, but are not limited to, serious academic reading, reading for entertainment, glancing at newspaper and magazine headlines to know whether the article is worth reading, reading aloud in class or elsewhere and looking at schedules. From a cognitive point of view, Day and Bamford concisely define reading as "the construction of meaning from a printed or written message" (2012, p.12). The meaning thus constructed is relative to individual readers. The individual reader cannot be expected to see or understand only that meaning which the author intends. Rather, the reader is using his knowledge, experiences, values, beliefs, etc. with regard to what he reads. Tickoo argues that "efficient reading is not just finding or gathering meaning from the printed page;

it often lies in creating personal meanings in interacting with the message on the page or the screen. Good readers arrive at their own best meanings by making use of the most effective and economical means, that is, those that demand minimal investment of time and energy to produce maximal gains" (2010, p.22). Thus, reading is an active process that involves the reader, the text and meaning making.

Reading as Interaction

From a theoretical perspective, there are several models that try to explain the reading process. Two prominent ones in this regard are the bottom-up model and the top-down model. The bottom-up model of reading is a conventional view of reading according to which readers are mostly passive receivers of whatever a text provides. Meaning here primarily exists within the text

and the reader is expected to decode this. The reader has to decode the letters, symbols and other linguistic features on the written page and convert these to their auditory equivalents so as to make sense of the text. Though it is true that words and other formal features of the language are required to comprehend a written text, the bottom-up theory has often been criticized for its over-reliance on the formal structure and for not considering the reader as an active player.

The top-down model, based on a cognitive perspective, came as a counter to the bottom-up theory. Here it is the reader and not the text that is at the centre of the reading process. While interacting with the text, the reader makes certain assumptions and hypotheses, confirms or even rejects these hypotheses, makes new assumptions and proceeds with the text in this fashion. This theory of reading brings into play the reader's prior knowledge or schema. It lays stress upon the interactive nature of reading and the constructive nature of comprehension. While this theory may have gained prominence, it is also important to note that it is not possible to discard the bottom-up model completely, for without adequate knowledge and understanding of the form and structure of the language, readers cannot link the written symbols to their spoken equivalents.

There is also the metacognitive view of reading which focuses on the control readers execute on their ability to understand a text. Metacognition lays stress on what a reader is thinking about even as he is reading. That

includes many aspects like identifying the purpose of the reading before reading, identifying the form or type of the text before reading, projecting the author's purpose for writing the text (while reading it), choosing to skim, scan or read in detail, and making continuous predictions about what will occur next, based on information obtained earlier, prior knowledge and conclusions obtained in the previous stages.

An individual might have several reasons for reading. This varies from reading an advertisement, a lecture note, an application form, a map and a telephone directory to reading a legal document, the schedule of trains leaving a particular railway station or the label on a processed food packet. The way we read each one of these is influenced by our purpose for reading. For example, the quick scanning of the telephone directory to find a specific piece of information is entirely different from the careful attention paid to each word in a legal document.

Unlike the reading done in a second language classroom, where the focus is often on things like sentence structure, pronunciation, grammar, and so on, in all the examples mentioned earlier, reading is undertaken so as to obtain something—information, facts, ideas and enjoyment from the material. This, in short, is the message that the reader attempts to comprehend. The term 'message' is an important component in the communication process. It is something that is transmitted from the sender/encoder to the receiver/decoder. The writer here is the encoder who

has a message which may be an idea, an argument or facts which he wants to share. For this the message must be encoded, i.e., put into words. Once it is encoded, it becomes a text and is now available to the reader who decodes the message which enters his mind and communication occurs.

This is too simplistic and problematic too, because here it is assumed that the reader is by and large passive by nature and accepts the message/text in its entirety. We know that not all meaning in the text is understood by the reader in the manner the writer intends. The reader brings into play his values, beliefs, knowledge, culture and ideologies, all of which play an important role in his understanding of a text. The meaning of a text is not something that exists within a text waiting to be soaked up by the reader. Rather, the reader plays an active role in attempting to get the meaning out. If a writer and a reader share similar ideological beliefs, backgrounds, attitudes, and so on, the reader may be able to interpret the text with little conscious effort. Even here there is the danger of reading meanings in a text that are not there simply because the reader's sense of having much in common with the writer is very strong. But if the writer and reader are from different backgrounds and cultures, then the reader has to make more effort in comprehending the text. The writer too has an important role to play here, as the text is what he has formulated; it is the message that he is attempting to communicate. What is important to note is that the reader, the writer and the text are all integral

constituents of the reading process and each contributes towards the comprehension of meaning.

Attitude and Motivation

All these theories and facts about reading and the reading process are no doubt relevant to get a holistic view of reading as a skill. How do we apply these when we examine reading in relation to our students? We often find that the students' 'willingness to learn' plays a decisive role in their ability or inability not only to grasp important aspects of the language, but also to show an inclination to be practically involved in the process of language learning. This is the issue of attitude and motivation.

Day and Bamford ask the following questions about students of an ESL class that I'm sure English language teachers can identify with: "Are students reluctant to read? Do they seem forced or under stress? Do they come to class with fear and trepidation? Do they read anything in the 2nd language class other than the prescribed texts?" (2012, p.3). As teachers, we know that while the answers to the first three questions are 'yes', the answer to the last question is by and large 'no'.

Both attitude and motivation are important affective factors in the development of reading skills. Attitude is defined as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor" (Day and Bamford, 2012, p.22). It is a disposition to respond favourably or unfavourably to a

person, event, action, etc. But attitudes can be changed. For a language teacher, it is important at the very outset to know and understand the sources of student attitudes towards second language reading. We can begin by looking at students' general attitude with regard to first language reading. Studies have shown that learners with a positive attitude towards reading in their respective mother tongues are more likely to have a similar attitude towards second language reading than those for whom reading in the first language is not so important.

The family and home atmosphere also have a role to play here. Often those learners who see their parents, siblings and others at home engaged in reading activities are bound to value the importance of reading. It is also unfortunate that at times our educational system and we who are enmeshed in this system as teachers end up changing a learner's positive attitude towards learning to a negative one. It is widely believed among teacher trainers that given an option between choosing skill development and promoting positive attitudes, teachers often prefer the former. We feel that skills are more essential for learning than the attitudes students exhibit towards learning. We forget that without a positive attitude all the skills that we try to impart are not going to be fully acquired. The second language classroom environment too determines a learner's attitude. A learner's satisfactory experiences and feelings in the classroom with classmates, materials, activities, tasks and

also the teacher can help in shaping a positive attitude towards reading.

There is a general tendency to view both attitude and motivation as belonging to the same plane. Though both these can be attributed to the behaviours and actions of an individual, there are differences. Franken argues that the study of motivation has traditionally been concerned with the arousal, direction and persistence of behaviour (1988, p.3). To put it bluntly, motivation is what makes an individual do or not do something. From a teacher's point of view, there is a particular cognitive model which argues motivation as having two components—expectations and values. It is important to note that people generally undertake those tasks which they expect to be accomplished, while tending to avoid those which they think cannot be accomplished. Likewise, they do things which they value and avoid things that have little or no value for them, even if they expect they can do these.

If we apply this understanding to the realm of reading, we can see that unless learners have a reasonable expectation that they will be able to understand what they are going to read, they are less likely even to begin the task. On the other hand, if they feel that a particular reading material has great value as far as reading skills are concerned, they may actually try to read even difficult texts, because the value attached to reading overshadows the expectation that they will find it difficult to read such texts.

Along with the aspect of positive attitude,

Day and Bamford also identify a learner's socio-cultural environment as an important variable in motivating him (2012, p.29). A learner's family, friends and the society too have important roles to play in making him an interested or disinterested reader. What kind of support and encouragement is a reader getting at home? Are books valued among the peer groups? The relevance of books in the lives of a reader's near and dear ones will have an impact on his reading habit too. The very classroom environment needs to be positive so as to value and encourage reading. Such a classroom "can counteract the influence of society, family and friends if they're less than encouraging towards reading" (Day and Bamford, 2012, p. 30).

Do we have such classrooms? I'd like to refer to an actual experience. In our university, the department had initiated an entry level course for the freshers, specifically for improving their reading and writing skills. Therefore, the materials chosen for the course focused on developing students' basic academic skills. In short, the course aimed at helping students read and write without making errors. There were also students who were proficient and who felt that the materials used in the class were less challenging. One of them gave the following feedback about learners who were not very good in English: "It is expected that a person who has opted for an English Literature course is proficient in the language. If they're not, then it is up to them to reach the required standards. And if they cannot or will not, then it raises the question as to why they have opted for the course in the

first place?" A negative and discouraging mindset of this kind can be extremely detrimental to the learning environment. It becomes a roadblock in the path of a less proficient but willing learner and make him feel inferior, thereby demotivating him completely.

Conclusion

The atmosphere in the classroom has to be encouraging and supportive. That includes the teacher, fellow learners, materials, teaching aids, classroom activities, etc. All these are integral elements that play important roles in facilitating the reading process. In a mixed ability classroom, reading abilities would also be varied. Low level reading abilities would also lower the learners' expectation of success and thereby lower the motivation to read. Many a time, an ESL teacher in the Indian second language classroom is constrained by the curriculum. He has to deal with the syllabus regardless of the reading abilities of the learners. If he can somehow manage to break free from the constraints of the syllabus and the curriculum, learners can be guided to read at levels appropriate to their respective reading abilities. This will go a long way in minimizing the frustration that learners feel when they are forced to read beyond their reading capabilities.

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