

# Developing Academic Reading Skills among UG Students in Mumbai University



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## **ABSTRACT**

*Reading proficiency in an L2 does not develop as easily as it does in our first language (L1). Reading skills and reading strategies are different. The former are more automatic and applied to the text unconsciously, while the latter are used purposely to achieve a particular reading goal. Therefore, less skilled readers can and should be taught how to use more effective reading strategies.*

*Reading as part of academic study is a very active process. The age of technology growth is likely to make greater demands on people's reading abilities. Reading in second language (L2) settings continues to take on increasing importance. The overwhelming majority of societies and countries around the world are multilingual, and educated citizens are expected to function well in more than one language. L2 reading ability, particularly with English as the L2, is already in great demand as English continues to spread, not only as a global language but also as the language of science, technology and advanced research. Many people in multilingual settings need to read in an L2 at reasonably high levels of proficiency to achieve personal, occupational and professional goals.*

*Reading proficiency in an L2 does not develop as easily as it does in our first language (L1). Actually, the development of L1 reading also takes a considerable amount of time. L2 students seldom devote much time to develop strong reading abilities. People often conceive of reading as a matter of passively transferring information from the page into reader's head, what actually occurs is much more complicated. The reader has his/her own expectations, prejudices and previous knowledge, and these shape their understanding of the literature they read.*

## **Literature review**

In the past three decades or so, L2 reading research has focused on the question of how reading strategy can be taught to help L2 learners read more effectively and with greater comprehension. One important conclusion that can be drawn from this huge body of research is that strategy instruction

can indeed improve comprehension. However, closer inspection of these studies seems to indicate a more complex picture: (i) not all strategies are equally effective (i.e., some are more effective than others), (ii) not all students benefit from strategy instruction. (iii) little is known about how strategies work, (iv) more importantly, the effect of strategy instruction may not be as

large as many believe it is. In the absence of a strong research evidence for teaching reading strategies, it appears that we would need to exercise caution when implementing it in a reading programme. Brief instruction on those strategies (e.g., monitoring strategy) that have consistently shown positive effects on reading comprehension seems sensible, but organizing a whole reading problem for lower proficiency learners around the notion of strategies may not be particularly productive. With lower proficiency L2 learners, it seems sensible to focus more on developing their reading fluency, increasing the breadth and depth of their vocabulary and developing a rich base of background knowledge, all of which can be effectively acquired through rich and wide exposure to the target language.

Below is a brief summary of research into reading strategy instruction:

a. Strategy instruction can improve students' comprehension. In general, research has shown that students can benefit from reading strategy instruction. Teaching students to make predictions before reading, ask questions during reading, and summarize key points during and after reading and monitor their comprehension, for example, has been shown to increase students' comprehension of the text (Cotterall, 1990; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Pg, 2010).

b. While strategy instruction can be useful, there is no strong evidence that all reading strategies are equally effective in helping students read with better comprehension.

The Journal of English Language Teaching (India) LVIII/3, 2016

Dillingham (2006/7) did a review on reading strategy instruction and concluded that only a handful of reading strategies consistently produced positive results.

c. The impact of strategy instruction varies widely. In a small number of studies, the effect size of the strategy instruction is substantial (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), but in others (e.g., Dabarera, Renandya & Zhang, 2014), the effect size is quite negligible, that is, the improvement that students made following strategy instruction is not that educationally meaningful.

d. Research shows that good readers differ from poor readers in terms of the number of strategies they have and, more importantly, in terms of how effective they use these strategies in reading. The general conclusion is that compared to poor readers, good readers have a larger number of strategies and can use them singly or in combination more effectively to enhance their reading experience and improve their comprehension.

e. Not all students can benefit from strategy instruction. There are two things to note here. First, some students may already be using certain strategies in their reading quite efficiently, so teaching them strategies that they are already familiar with may not be useful or may in fact confuse them. Secondly, for L2 learners whose proficiency in the language is still at the lower end of the scale, strategy instruction may not be effective.

f. As pointed out by Willingham (2006/7),

brief instruction on reading strategies can be as effective as that which requires more extended instruction and practice. He further pointed out that comprehension strategy is ‘... easy to learn and use, and the only difficulty is to consistently remember to apply it’ (p. 44).

### **Rationale for the study**

In our life we need to acquire knowledge for various academic and non-academic purposes and reading plays a major role in the process of knowledge acquisition. Secondly, reading is a skill that gives the second language learner exposure to elements like vocabulary, grammar and text structure and enables the learners to develop the other language skills like speaking, writing. ‘Learning to read’ and language proficiency are interrelated as one’s language proficiency develops when one learns to read and basic language proficiency is a pre requisite to learning to read. Reading is a basic literacy skill and promotes language proficiency.

Learning how to read a second language is one of the most challenging aspects of second language learning as reading is a complex process. This study is, therefore, based on the following assumptions: teaching of reading involves the teaching of sub-skills/strategies and their effective use, and awareness and use of strategies can be enhanced through sustained training and concerted practice.

### **Research Problem**

It is generally observed that students, who

have insufficient exposure to academic reading in English at the school level, face difficulty in reading academic texts at the undergraduate level due to the specific nature of the discourse, the density of information and technical vocabulary present in the texts. The fact is, at this level, students are expected to read extensively not only the prescribed materials but also reference books related to their specific field of study. This takes a great demand on their self-study skills and strategies. However, the students at this level seem to be under prepared for advanced level reading and experience difficulty in this area.

The data obtained from the questionnaire and structured interviews administered in Smt MMK College suggest that students are not familiar with the process of reading and do not seem to use varied strategies to read the texts differently for different purposes. Their inadequate reading skills seem to hinder their academic progress and impact academic performance because assessment is largely carried out through exams, presentations, records, observations, seminars and projects. The study, therefore, focuses on problems related to reading for academic purposes.

### **Aim**

The objective of the present study is to enable students pursuing undergraduate study to develop adequate academic reading skills in English through strategy training.

### **Assumptions**

Based on the data obtained from the

structured interviews and questionnaire the following assumptions are made:

- a) Students are under prepared for the intensive reading they need to do at the undergraduate level.
- b) Reading as a language skill does not receive due importance in most of the schools and colleges.
- c) Many teachers seem to be unfamiliar with the notion of strategy training for developing reading skills.
- d) Undergraduate curriculum does not have any course for developing the learner's academic reading skills.

### **Hypothesis**

The present research is based on the hypothesis that a specially designed course aimed at developing academic reading skills through strategy training will improve academic reading skills.

### **Research questions**

- a) What are the problems that learners face in reading?
- b) What strategies do they follow in reading, if any?
- c) Does strategy training help learners develop academic reading skill?
- d) How can the learner be trained to use strategies to develop and enhance their reading skills?

### **Research procedure**

The following steps were undertaken for the

study -

- a) Questionnaire was administered to understand reading habits and reading strategies they are familiar with. The faculty was interviewed to elicit their views on the importance of reading and problems students face due to inadequate reading skills.
- b) The target group was administered a pre-test to assess reading proficiency in L2.
- c) Intervention by the researcher- the selected students were offered an intervention course focusing on developing reading proficiency in L2 through a wide variety of texts and tasks that were specifically designed for strategy training.
- d) Findings of the study were analyzed.

### **Reading Skills and Reading Strategies**

Reading skills and reading strategies are different. The former are more automatic and applied to the text unconsciously, while the latter are used purposely to achieve a particular reading goal. Therefore less skilled readers can and should be taught how to use more effective reading strategies.

According to Papalia (1987) more fluent readers use the following main strategies:

1. read things of interest
2. have knowledge about the topic
3. predict meaning
4. draw inferences from the title

5. skip words they do not know
6. guess the meaning of unknown words from the context
7. reread to check for comprehension
8. ask someone what a word means <sup>2</sup> ( Teaching Reading to English Language Learners –Thomas S.C. Farrell ,Corwin Press, US ,2009 pg 34 )

Research suggests that reading strategies can and should be explicitly taught to ELLs and that when strategies are taught, students' performance on comprehension tests improves, and they are better able to recall the contents of a text. Paris, Wasik and Turner (1991,p .609) have suggested six good reasons why we should teach reading strategies:

1. Strategies allow readers to elaborate upon, organize, and evaluate information derived from a text.
2. The acquisition of reading strategies coincides and overlaps with the development of multiple cognitive strategies to enhance attention, memory, communication, and learning.
3. Strategies and personal cognitive tools that can be used selectively and flexibly.
4. Strategic reading reflects metacognition and motivation, because readers need to have both the knowledge and disposition to use strategies.
5. Strategies that foster reading and thinking can be taught directly by teachers.

6. Strategic reading can enhance learning throughout the curriculum.

### **Problems**

Some of the problems associated with English Language Learners struggling to read can be attributed to particular methods of reading instruction that either test rather than teach reading or that do not take into account the differences between learning to read in a first and a second /subsequent language. For example ,when a reading teacher asks his or her students to read a passage and answer the comprehensive questions that follow or to write a summary ,or to explain the meaning of individual words and then to write the words in a sentence, all these are testing and not really teaching reading. Testing reading has a place in the curriculum but only after we teach our students how to read. We must also recognize that students learning to read in their first language have more knowledge of grammar and vocabulary than ELLs learning to read in a second/subsequent language. Furthermore, ELLs also have varying levels of English language proficiency that have an impact on reading comprehension.

### **Sample**

The sample was selected using the technique called 'cluster sampling' to ensure that the sample has all the qualities of the population and in addition, some qualities relevant to the study.

15 students of first-year BCom were selected by administering a pre-test (to 40 students

from whom the target group is selected) to assess their reading proficiency in L2. The study focused on undergraduate level students as at this level they are exposed to read extensively for exam, assignment, project, presentation, seminar, records observation and other academic work. Moreover, studies in the area of strategy training and instruction are generally relevant and meaningful when they are carried out with adults, as they are cognitively mature to reflect on the process of reading and strategy use. Also, at this level, students need a set of well developed strategies and study skills to cope with academic reading, which unfortunately, are not taught explicitly. Thus, undergraduate students having basic to intermediate proficiency in English were selected for the study.

Here is a brief account of the methodology used for the study

- a) The target group was administered a diagnostic test to assess their reading proficiency in L2 and then a set of students who have basic to intermediate level of proficiency in L2 were selected from the target group.
- b) An intervention study focusing on helping students develop their reading skills with the help of strategy training through a wide variety of texts and tasks were designed and offered. The findings of the study were analyzed.

### **Analysis**

Both quantitative and qualitative analysis

were used because the study deals with quantifiable features such as performance of the group in pre/post-tests, language proficiency of the learners, as well as non-quantifiable features such as reading habits, strategy use and transfer.

1. When there are unfamiliar words in the text, the students generally try to guess the meaning.
2. They read the entire text quickly and skip some part.
3. They read in English and summarize in Marathi/English.
4. They underline main points while reading the text.
5. They read the entire text once to get the gist of the text and then read paragraph by paragraph for deeper meaning.
6. They find illustrations /pictures/ flowcharts/diagrams helpful while reading in English.
7. They reread the text several times going back and forth to understand the text better.
8. They draw inferences from the text with the help of clues provided by the writer.
9. They have improved their reading skills, speed, and level of comprehension.
10. They feel confident about reading in English after training was given to them.

### **Conclusion**

Strategy should not be chosen by the

teacher. More learner-centered, learner-directed strategy training program where there is personal involvement of the reader should be designed and used in the classroom. Learners should be given motivation support in the form of material, awareness raising discussion, more practice in using strategies to help improve reading skills. From this the researcher could understand the individual differences and preferences related to strategy use and reading styles. This in turn was helpful in training and motivating the students according to their individual needs,

strengths and limitations.

### **Reference**

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### **READERS WRITE**

Dear Sir

Only this evening went through the Journal of Nov-Dec issue. Quite a good one. Thanks for all articles with Editorial. Articles like 'English as Lingua Franca: A Brief Review', 'The Official Status of English in India', 'Being Creative in the Teaching of English', '2B or not 2B', and all other ideas will help us a lot in our classroom teaching. Thanks again for such a nice issue.

Dhanesh Ram Sinha, Rajnandgaon Chapter, Chhattisgarh

4 February 2016