

Building Better Readers: The Role of Reading Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Exploring effective reading strategies to tackle the problem of reading comprehension is not an easy pedagogic activity. Students need to be trained to use the reading strategies effectively in order to solve the various issues related to reading. If not equipped to become autonomous, skilled readers, they are unlikely to make academic achievements and excel in their professional lives. This paper details how lack of proper background knowledge in the subject concerned, inability to understand the general content of the topic being discussed, unfamiliar words in a text material, poor grammar knowledge and non-motivating texts hinder smooth reading by the students. It also suggests practical remedies to make reading a meaningful, productive and focussed academic activity.

Key words: Effective reading; good readers; reading strategies.

Introduction

The ability to read in a second language is often considered as the most important skill suggestive of the mastery of a language. According to Anderson (1999), reading is a key to achievement in all other language skill. "The ability to read proficiently is significantly related to how much a person can achieve in his personal and professional life." (Block & Israel 2005).

In the Kerala scenario, reading is generally considered as the best possible and the most practical way of exposing the learners to the grammar and vocabulary of their second language and thus of acquiring mastery of the language. Right from the kindergarten days, the learners are taught to read the alphabet and monosyllabic words, which is widely acknowledged as the initial steps in gaining mastery of the second language.

When it comes to higher classes, learners are expected to read advanced and complex reading materials, which necessitates the reader to possess deductive and inductive inference skills, ability to comprehend hidden and implied assumptions and the capability to interpret, analyse, synthesize, and evaluate the knowledge base. The leisurely pace with which the learners had grown accustomed to reading in the yester years fails to help them in absorbing advanced reading materials. Here the reading task becomes a not so easy endeavour often demanding the dexterities of a skilled reader who can apply the different strategies to make reading effective. This becomes all the truer in the case of a student of science and technology as he has to deal with voluminous texts loaded with facts, figures and abstract concepts. So it is imperative that students of higher education should be developed

as 'autonomous, skilled readers'.

In order to meet the demands of the academic environment and the workplace a college student ought to master the reading skills, which otherwise would hamper his/her academic and career prospects. The researcher being a teacher in a higher education institution has come across the various problems faced by the students while reading texts. The common problems the students face while reading are: 1) finding the meaning of unfamiliar words, 2) comprehending the general import of the reading material, 3) lack of background knowledge related to the material, 4) lack of proper grammar knowledge, and 5) texts that lack motivation.

1) Tackling the problem of unfamiliar words

Vocabulary knowledge has been identified as one of the five essential components of reading instruction and a large body of research indicates the critical role it plays in reading comprehension (August, Carlo, Dressler & Snow, 2005; Baumann, 2009; Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997, Mancilla-Martinez & Lesaux, 2010). Vocabulary instruction in schools continues to be the teaching of the dictionary meaning of a word rather than equipping the learner to use the word in real life situations.

The challenge that unfamiliar words pose towards the comprehension of a reading text has been the major concern of many a teacher and student and it still remains unresolved. Unless the learners are trained

to comprehend unfamiliar words using different contextual clues, they will spend much time and energy revolving around the meaning of these words. Guessing meaning from context as a way of dealing with unfamiliar vocabulary in unedited selections, has been suggested widely by L1 and L2 reading specialists (Dubin,1993). Nation and Coady (1988) claim that there are two types of contexts. The first type is the context within the text, which includes morphological, semantic and syntactic information in the specific text and the second one is the general context, or non-textual context, which is the background knowledge the reader has about the subjects being read. Only by being sensitive to the context in which a word occurs, can one decide upon its appropriate meaning. The common types of contextual clues are detailed below.

a) Word Presentation: Most often, a close study of the way in which the word/phrase has been presented in the sentence gives adequate clues to arrive at the right meaning of a word. Words do not appear in isolation, but are embedded in the context of a narrative, an argument, an explanation and so on. So in order to determine the meaning of a word, one has to analyse how it occurs in the passage. The meaning of the unknown word might be explained or discussed with the help of a definition or interpretation or an example elsewhere in the passage. In short, a close study of the unknown word and the passage will throw more light on its meaning. Categorisation of the contextual clues and expressions/words which help to identify them are listed below.

Item	Purpose	Signal word / Punctuation	Example
Definition	To give the precise meaning of a word	<i>that is, called, means, parentheses or commas, dashes</i>	<i>Fluoroscopy, examination using fluoroscope, has become a common procedure nowadays.</i>
Synonym	To make the meaning clear, for emphasis	<i>in other words, also, as, like, similarly</i>	<i>The mountain pass was a tortuous road. In other words, it was winding and twisting.</i>
Antonym	To show inequalities, apply contrasts	<i>however, but, although, unlike, on the contrary</i>	<i>The pupils of the eyes contract in light; however, they dilate when it grows dark.</i>
Example	To help infer the meaning of the word	<i>including, such as, for example, for instance</i>	<i>Celestial bodies such as the sun, moon and stars always arouse the curiosity of children.</i>
Cause and effect	To establish something using reason	<i>since, though, thus, so, because</i>	<i>She wanted to impress all her dinner guests with the food she served. So, she carefully studied the necessary culinary arts.</i>

It is generally seen that even these types of training to decipher the meaning of the unfamiliar words are not being given by teachers. It is not the mere familiarisation with these ‘Signal Words’, but also acquiring the skills to identify the ways in which these words help in finding out the meaning of the unfamiliar words that is to be imparted. However, it is to be admitted that, in certain cases this process might not always be successful in arriving at the exact meaning of the word. But this

technique is sure to assist the learners to narrow down the possibilities of the meaning.

b) Affixes: One strategy to identify the meaning of unknown words is breaking the word into roots and its smaller parts (affixes). Knowledge of Affixes (prefixes and suffixes) and word roots help students work out the meaning of an unfamiliar word.

For example, the meaning of the word “incredible” can be guessed if one is familiar

with the word “credible” which means “believable”. An idea of the prefix “in”, which generally means *not*, helps in reaching out the correct meaning of the word as

“unbelievable”. Prefixes generally change the meaning of the word and suffixes change the part of speech. Some common prefixes and suffixes are given below.

Prefix	Meaning	Example
non, un, in	not	unhappy, non-violence, inconvenience
Mis	wrongly, not	mislead, misunderstand
Anti	against	antisocial
Inter	between	interstate
Pre	before	Pre-degree
Re	back	reorder
De	reverse	destruction

Root/base	Suffix	Part of speech
explore (v)	exploration	V—N
teach (v)	teacher	V—N
happy (adj)	happiness	Adj—N
acceptable (adj)	acceptability	Adj—N
hospital (n)	hospitalize	N—V

c) Parsing: Knowing grammatical category of the word is another way of working out the meaning of the word. It is generally seen that verbs end with morphemes ‘*ing*’, ‘*ed*’ and adverbs with *ly*. If the word ends in “**-tion**”, it would most probably be a noun. Similarly, if the word ends in “**-ise**”, it often turns out to be a verb. In a nonsensical sentence like “The tref plened salfully”, one can cleverly guess that ‘plened’ might be a verb and ‘salfully’ an adverb if one knows parsing. This helps him to work out the meaning of the words.

d) Noun Combinations: Combinations of nouns are common in academic texts. A “steel box” is a box made of steel and a “computer programmer” is someone who programmes computers. The problem is to understand the relationship between the nouns. A “hand towel” is a towel for drying our hands but a “bath towel” is not a towel for drying the bath. A “paper bag” is a bag made out of paper, but a “hand bag” is not a bag made out of hands and a “shopping bag” is not a bag made out of shopping. Williams (1984) distinguishes ten different functions:

Function	Example	Expansion
B of A	<i>brewery warehouse</i>	the warehouse of (owned by) the brewery
Means	<i>heat-affected zone</i>	the zone affected by heat
Purpose	<i>safety harness</i>	a harness for the purpose of improved safety
Location	<i>roof trusses</i>	trusses on the roof
Materials used	<i>steel boxes</i>	boxes made of steel
Cause and effect	<i>frost damage</i>	damage caused by frost
Extent	<i>tension areas</i>	areas over which there is tension
Characteristic	<i>striation markings</i>	markings characterized by striations
Shape or form	<i>web plates</i>	plates in the shape of webs
Representation	<i>force and motion data</i>	data that represents force and motion

In order to understand these combinations, it is necessary to identify the headword and work backward.

2) Inability to understand the general import of the material

Understanding the main idea of the passage is an important component of comprehension. Main-Idea Comprehension involves a reasonable knowledge of basic grammar, effective comprehension strategies to use with more difficult texts...and a large receptive vocabulary-knowledge base. The different comprehension strategies which would help understanding the reading text are: 1)Skimming, 2)Scanning, 3)Predicting, 4)Summarising, 5)Forming Questions, 6)Inference, 7)Monitoring Comprehension, and 8)Using Graphic Organisers.

Skimming and scanning are two reading strategies that use rapid eye movement and keywords to know what the text is all about. Skimming is reading rapidly in order to get a

general overview of the material, whereas scanning is reading rapidly in order to find specific facts, e.g. figures or names.

Predicting is another reading strategy which makes the reading focussed by checking the predictions that they have made. It allows students to use information from the text such as titles, headings, pictures and diagrams to anticipate what will happen in the story (Bailey, 2015). When making **prediction**, students envision what will come next in the text, based on their prior knowledge.

Summarising as a reading strategy helps students find out the gist of the text.” ...instruction and practice in summarising not only improve students’ ability to summarize texts, but also their overall comprehension of text content” (Duke and Pearson 2002). “A proven activity in summarising is the GIST procedure where students create word summaries of increasingly larger texts” (Cunningham, 1982 as cited in Duke and Pearson).

Asking questions is a comprehension strategy that helps students clarify and comprehend what they are reading. When students regularly ask questions, they are encouraged to interact with the text in a meaningful manner. By trying to answer the questions comprehension is ensured.

Inferencing: For ensuring better reading and to draw conclusions from the given passage students need to develop the ability of inference. This “theory of mind” develops the skill of reading between the lines. “...is a cognitive mechanism that connects what we are currently attempting to understand with memory resources that provide our background knowledge” (Grabe, 2009). Through inference students will be able to draw conclusions, make predictions, identify underlying themes, use information to create meaning from text and use pictures to create meanings (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000).

Monitoring Comprehension: Monitoring comprehension is a reading strategy which helps to monitor the understanding of the text materials while reading them. In other words, it is metacognitive process of making students think while reading. Skilled readers would recognise that reading is not simply successful decoding of words; rather it is meaning making process which involves a lot of thinking processes. This thinking would enable one to supplement strategies like making connections, asking questions, making inferences when a text becomes complicated.

3) Prior Knowledge/Background Knowledge

The ability to recall information, and

concepts that one has already learnt previously, while reading a text, leads to better comprehension. “Comprehension occurs when the reader extracts and integrates various information from the text and combines it with what is already known” (Koda, 2005). Good readers always bring the information that they know to connect, infer and make judgements about the text they read. The information includes the ideas/concepts similar in theme to the reading topic, inferences/reflections made about the topic and some mental constructs about the theme developed.

4) Grammatical Competence

Is knowledge of grammar essential? Grammar knowledge never comes up as a topic for discussion when dealing with reading skills because it is often treated as a separate entity which needs a lot of time to master. But studies prove that there is a strong correlation between grammar knowledge and reading skills. Grammatical knowledge plays a significant role in lexical inference and developing an awareness of the context of the passage. A proper knowledge of tenses would inform us about the general context of the passage with regard to time; passives would help in understanding more about the subject and object of the sentence. Relative clauses make clear which person or thing we are referring to. In short, grammar knowledge would provide many discrete sets of information and contribute to the understanding of the reading.

The more comprehensive the grammar knowledge is, the higher the learners’ proficiency level in guessing words will be.

Therefore, it appears useful to put more focus on grammar teaching in the pedagogical settings so that it enhances language learning in all aspects.

5) Motivation

Motivation has an important role in the development of reading skills and this wide ranging topic involves multi components like teachers, instructional materials, classroom climate, setting up of goals, etc. It is seen that 'skilled readers' use their own reading strategies to comprehend a text material and have developed themselves as autonomous readers trying to overcome the hardships of reading. "Motivated individuals are optimistic, willing to work on different tasks, and aware of their capabilities: they want choice in controlling their environment and their learning, expect success, build connections with others, experience pleasure from their work, and take pride in their achievements. In brief, positive motivation is what activates effective language behaviour" (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000).

A major strategy to keep learners motivated, it is generally believed, is to provide texts which are interesting. But one cannot expect that he/she would come across only interesting texts in real life situations and again chances are slim that the learners can select and read the materials of their choice in their workplace situation. So the task of the teacher is to equip one to be intrinsically motivated to solve the problems of reading. Giving proper feedback on the learners' accomplishments and helping the learners to set their own goals are two ways to create motivation among the learners.

Conclusion

Acquiring reading strategies has become all the more important for students as they are faced with the ever increasing demand to understand academic texts. Reading strategies make students independent learners and readers. Teachers should enable students to apply, co-ordinate, adjust and modify reading strategies in order to make sense out of a reading text.

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