Self-selected reading for pleasure through "Talk to Books" app to improve reading skills among tertiary level learners

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ABSTRACT

As English Language teaching faculty, it is our common experience that a majority of the engineering students lack the required language development, to equip them with the necessary employability skills. Despite twelve years of previous exposure to English language, they remain deprived users of advanced language abilities. Many learners remain poor readers due to non-availability of appropriate resources or ignorance of the significance of reading in their personal and professional life. Of the four language skills (LSRW), reading occupies the most helpful for the acquisition of language and literacy. In this regard, it becomes the prime responsibility of language teachers to inculcate a flair for reading among the students during their formative years. Self-selected reading for pleasure is a tremendous help in language development. This research paper is an attempt at motivating thirty first-year engineering students to develop their reading skills through an app called "Talk to Books" introduced by Google which allows the reader to communicate with a book. It is believed that given an opportunity to select a book of their choice, i.e., self-selected, reading could have an impact in improving reading skills. It involves asking questions and getting responses which can help a reader determine if one is interested in reading that book or not. It further serves as an alternative to the conventional SQ3R strategy of reading. The pre-test and post-test results showed that when the learners used the app it motivated the students in their reading to a considerable extent.

Keywords*: Reading skills; Reading for pleasure; Use of App "Talk to Books".*

Introduction

"I read so much that sometimes I would hide under the covers with a flashlight and not go to sleep until I was finished with my book. (Reyna Grande, *The Distance Between Us*, p. 241).

Of all the four skills, reading has at all times and in all ages been a great source of knowledge and pleasure. Today, the ability to read is highly valued and very important for social and economic advancement. In today's world, with so much to know, the importance of reading has increased. Basically, reading is done for gaining knowledge and information. Many students

read for entertainment and pleasure, too. As a result of reading books over a period of time, a learning process is formed. Educational researchers have found that there is a strong correlation between reading and academic success. A student who is a good reader is more likely to do well in school and pass exams than a student who is a weak reader.

Teaching and learning of English in an ESL/EFL context

As teachers it is our common observation that English language has been taught like a content subject rather than as a skill in most of the educational institutions. The teachers depend excessively on the materials and try to explain the content and dictate notes and expect the students to reproduce the same notes in the examinations. Reading is rarely taught as a skill, but frequently tested in the formative years in most of the schools. There is little importance given to the process-based approach. In the present context, the students have had about twelve years of previous exposure to English language in school. It is pathetic to know that even after such long years of exposure the learners are not in a position to exhibit minimum proficiency in communicative abilities. They grope for words when they have either to speak or to write in English. It is felt that in such a scenario the learners must develop their reading skills to become proficient users of the language.

Literature review

Franken (1988:3) has pointed out that the study of motivation has traditionally been concerned with the arousal, direction and persistence of behaviour. Simply put, motivation is what makes people do (or not do) something. In a majority of classrooms, students consider second language reading 'difficult' despite the teachers' efforts. Recalling the description of "the world of real L2 reading classes," Aebersold and Field (1997:116) mention that the students are "unsure of what they have read" and "apprehensive" about classroom practices. They further state that the consequences of students leaving second language courses with negative attitudes towards reading are seldom discussed. Students in the present study are not able to build a deep, principled knowledge base, and they have little practice applying the strategies required to process texts deeply.

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 (Coiro, 2003). In the present study, students were given autonomy in selecting their own reading texts to find whether their motivation levels increased or not.

Why motivate learners to read in the English classroom?

As teachers, we believe that reading occupies a prominent place in the process of language learning. As a 'receptive' skill, it helps the learner in the production and

honing of writing skill – a higher order skill. Moreover, reading skills are essential to succeed in society. Those who are good readers tend to exhibit progressive social skills. A person who reads widely is able to mix with others. He is a better conversationalist than those who do not read. Reading broadens the vision.

Reading for pleasure includes reading novels, stories, and articles on topics that interest us, such as humour, horror, mystery, romance, and thrill. There must be innumerable books that humans read for pleasure. Reading for pleasure is the right term for reading novels and stories on topics that we like because they really do give us pleasure and refreshes our minds. In this regard, the Internet is indeed a boon for students who are interested in reading. There is a plethora of web tools which provide a large variety of literature which suits their interests.

The present research has been designed to help 30 students of engineering to improve their interest by making them involve themselves completely in the process of reading.

What is "Self-selected reading for pleasure"?

Self-selected reading is an exercise for students to explore and read books independently at their own level. The goal of self-selected reading is to create an authentic opportunity for students to see themselves as competent and engaged readers. There is overwhelming evidence supporting the powerful impact of self-selected reading on literacy-related aspects of language competence, in first and second language acquisition. In fact, self-selected reading might be the only way we acquire academic language (Krashen, 2012).

When students learn on their own, they remember what they read well and effectively. When a text is forced on them, they do not enjoy the task. However, to develop a student's love for reading, it requires careful curation and an awareness of their interests and preferences. As far as instruction for self-selected reading is concerned, it is the teachers' responsibility to create the conditions that motivate students to love and enjoy reading.

Rationale for using technology in the classroom

Today's students are tech-savvy and are often seen fidgeting with their advanced or latest mobile phones, the features of which make them easily access various social networking tools and sites. These online tools and sites can distract their studies but an intelligent teacher, who is interested in experimenting with technology to the fullest, can encourage students to spend time online for a constructive purpose. Such teachers can make learning enjoyable. It is strongly believed that the educational system in the future will be decided by the development of technology. Teaching using technology motivates the learners to learn, increases their learning ability and enhances their performance.

In this context, the researcher attempted at motivating thirty students to develop their

reading skills through an app called "Talk to Books" introduced by Google, which allows the reader to communicate with a book.

Research objective and hypothesis

The objective of this study was to determine if exposing thirty undergraduate students to online reading apps would indeed motivate them to improve their reading skills. It was hypothesized that the students would be interested to read on their own with focussed attention and improve their reading comprehension levels, too.

Research questions

1. Will the learners develop an interest in focussed reading on their own with the intervention?

2. Will there be an improvement in their reading comprehension levels?

3. Do the learners enjoy the new reading app?

Research Methodology

The study was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, a pre-test was conducted to test the comprehension levels of thirty participants by exposing them to a printed reading passage. The performance on the task was evaluated and the scores for comprehension were tabulated as pre-test scores. Secondly, they were subjected to the intervention of using the "Talk to Books" app. The students selected books of their choice and interest, and read them. Finally, a post-test in reading comprehension was

conducted to see if there was any improvement in their comprehension and motivation levels. The scores were tabulated and compared with the pre-test scores for analysis.

Intervention with the use of "Talk to Books" app in the classroom

"Talk to Books" app is a free web service developed by Google. It was used in the present study to encourage students to derive pleasure through self-selected reading. With the help of this app, the students could select a book of their choice and interest. "Talk to Books" is a new way to explore ideas and discover books. Thirty students from the first semester studying for their B. Tech. degree were involved in the present study. They were asked to make a statement or ask a question to browse passages from books using experimental AI. Google's latest AI experiment lets students talk to books and test their word association skills.

"Talk to Books" lets students converse with a machine learning, trained algorithm that surfaces answers to questions with relevant passages from texts written by humans. It lets them "make a statement or ask a question, and the tool finds sentences in books that respond, with no dependence on keyword matching." In a sense, the students would be talking to the books, getting responses which could help them determine if they were interested in reading them or not.

In the box "Say something..." the student has to make a statement or pose a question, and press "Go". Once the student asks a

question (or makes a statement), the tool searches all the sentences in over 100,000 books to find the ones that respond to his or her input based on semantic meaning at the sentence level. There are no predefined rules binding the relationship between what the student puts in and the results s/he gets.
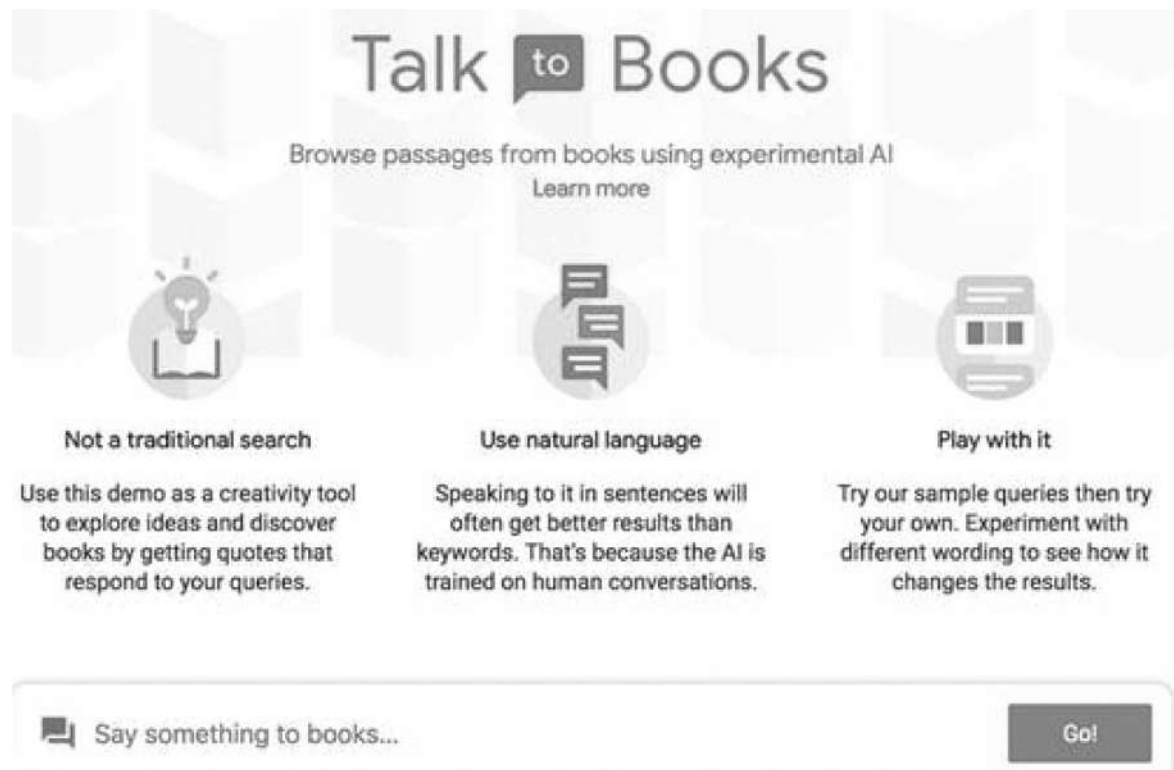
Talk to Books

Browse passages from books using experimental AI
Learn more

Not a traditional search

Use this demo as a creativity tool to explore ideas and discover books by getting quotes that respond to your queries.

Use natural language

Speaking to it in sentences will often get better results than keywords. That's because the AI is trained on human conversations.

Play with it

Try our sample queries then try your own. Experiment with different wording to see how it changes the results.

Say something to books...   Go!

Figure 1. The screenshot of the "Talk to Books" App

Analysis and Mode of Evaluation

The analysis phase included a comparison of pre-test and post-test scores. A reading comprehension test was conducted with the thirty engineering students before the intervention of the study. The reading comprehension questions were designed to test their comprehension skills. The written answers from the reading task were collected and marked by the researcher. These marks were recorded as pre-test scores. After the students had participated in the intervention, another test was conducted and the scores were recorded as post-test scores. Both the scores were subjected to a comparative analysis. After the completion of the tasks, these two independent sets of scores were used as raw data for calculating performance means, standard deviations and t-tests.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics Section (pre and post-test)

Variable	Count	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	95% LCL	95% UCL
Pre -test	30	68.98744	9.323030	0.4196908	77.68486	78.33002
Post -test	30	66.88099	10.696310	0.4255222	66.94898	68.81300
Difference	30(total)	2.10645	7.442448	0.3205785	9.03340	10.12849
T for confidence Limits = 0.9420						

Table 2: Tests of Assumptions about Differences Section (pre and post-test)

Assumptions	Value	Probability	Decision (5%)
Skewness Normality	2.5421	0.011458	Reject normality
Kurtosis Normality	3.4254	0.000254	Reject normality
Omnibus Normality	17.4526	0.000154	Reject normality
Correlation Coefficient: 0.575268			

A correlation coefficient of 0.5 indicates that the three-fold normality of the tests could not be rejected to a certain extent. T-Test with alpha .05 is verified by repetition of the test at alpha .01. At 5% level, the means differ at t = 0.94. Hence, the statistical results show that there is a less significant difference in the comprehension of the pre-test reading compared to post-test reading. Though the difference is not much, there is still a considerable improvement in the comprehension levels of the students after the intervention.

Findings

Since the learners selected the reading texts on their own, there were no compulsive reading tasks enforced on them. Due to the advancement in technology, it was possible to make language learning interesting to the students focussing on reading skills. By incorporating 'Talk to Books' app as an intervention, it was found that the students enjoyed and were thrilled to find a book where their statement or question was elaborated on and described by an author. This feature captured their attention and got them involved in the most complex activity of reading, which is a higher order skill of language learning.

Conclusion

The quantitative data analyses from the statistical data positively verify and prove the hypothesis of the present research study, namely that the Google App "Talk to Books" showed improvement with reference to the learners' reading performance in comparison with previous reading tasks. This answers the research question by indicating that self-selected reading for pleasure can positively affect reading performance in learners and improve their comprehension skills. Though it is early to generalize based on the present findings, as the researcher has still to explore the

potential of the tool to the fullest, the tool was used in the study to see if the students could improve their reading skills and develop a flair for reading books of their interest and choice.

Limitation of the Present Study

An elaborate study with a more rigorous research design and statistical analysis will shed more light on how the "Talk to Books" app can be used to convert the students into lifelong readers.

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