A Critical Appraisal of the Present Status of Reading Ability in English Language at the Secondary School Level in Haryana

Vanite Bala
Karam Singh

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Abstract

In contemporary world the importance of English is benchmarked due to global and technological changes. Gaining more and more knowledge has become a necessity, and that is only possible through mastery in the skill of reading English. Since English has been stamped as the library language all over the world, and reading comprehension is a priority area in all English language teaching programmes, so also in Haryana state. The present study is to diagnose the present level of reading ability in the state. The diagnostic test is applied to cover five hundred students; and teachers' opinionnaire is applied to cover hundred teachers randomly selected from five districts. The overall situation of reading ability in English is found precarious. The education system, methods

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and techniques of teaching and socio cultural factors are found responsible to some extent for the below average level standard of English reading ability.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to read written material is very important in the civilized world. In a society characterized by globalization and technological change, where knowledge is becoming increasingly important, reading ability is a key skill for active participation. Reading proficiency is the royal road to knowledge and it is essential to one's success in all academic subjects. Seyed Hussein Fazeli (2010) and Shayistz (2003) state that reading comprehension is an important life skill. It is one of the most important domains in education, because it is the best predicator of success in higher education and job performance. Elley (1994) stresses that reading ability is necessary for many occupations and a prerequisite for future life-long learning Levin (1975) noted that the ability to read well is the basis for success in school and later.

This implies that the skill of reading must be more strongly emphasized than other skills,- especially in case of English which is attested as the library language all over the world. Besides, advanced skills of language can be mastered only when the learner has the ability to read and comprehend the material. Einstein noted, "reading is the most complex task that man has ever desired for himself."

The priority of reading ability is also uppermost in the minds of most of the educational planners. The Education Commission (1964-68) accepted the idea that English is an exclusive 'window to the world' and the Study Group Reports (1969) emphasized that reading comprehension is a priority area in all English language teaching programmes. This has a special importance when we think of the place of reading at secondary level. Haryana is one of the states in India where English language is still facing a very precarious situation. In spite

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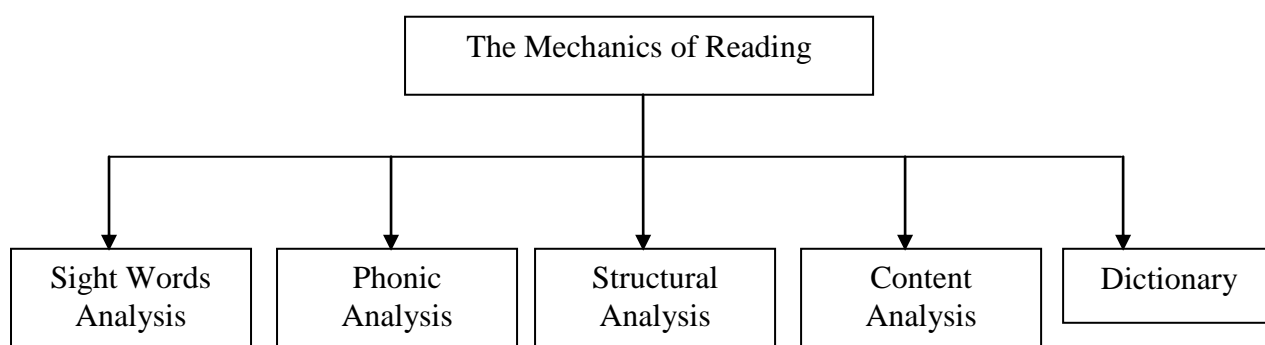
of the fact that English is taught as a compulsory subject from class 1 onwards, the overall scenario is dismal.

So, to critically examine the reading ability of English Language is the need of the hour. Considering the principles of diagnosis, that is, early diagnosis is of crucial importance which is a continuous and developmental process interwoven with teaching, to recognize the multiple causation of reading disability. Diagnosis underlies prevention as well as remediation of reading difficulties

Diagnosis not only puts emphasis on defining the nature of the individual's reading difficulties and the conditions causing them, but also concerned with positive factors on which one may build the skill. It is time saving in the sense that teacher can focus his/her attention on the specific help that student needs by avoiding trial and error, as well as unnecessary instruction and practice. Diagnosis can be done by observation in class without extra material or extra time. The level of the reading ability of a reader can be evaluated with respect to two main aspects of the reading: the first concerns the mechanics, and the second the mental abilities involved.

The reading ability can be described as a process of signal – sound – sense. It consists, essentially, of decoding of the printed symbols on a page and gleaning meaning from them. Once the 'mechanics' of reading is mastered, it becomes a process of thinking under the stimulus of the printed page. Both these aspects further include several major skills areas:

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(a) The Mechanics of Reading

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                    ┌─────────────────────────────┐
                    │   The Mechanics of Reading   │
                    └─────────────────────────────┘
        ┌──────────┬──────────┬──────────┬──────────┐
        ▼          ▼          ▼          ▼          ▼
  ┌──────────┐┌──────────┐┌──────────┐┌──────────┐┌──────────┐
  │Sight Words││  Phonic  ││Structural││ Content  ││Dictionary│
  │ Analysis ││ Analysis ││ Analysis ││ Analysis ││          │
  └──────────┘└──────────┘└──────────┘└──────────┘└──────────┘
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(i) **Sight-words recognition:** The skill of having familiarity with the visual shapes of words and their decoding into meaning and sound.

(ii) **Phonic analysis:** It is the ability of specific sound generalization to guess the pronunciation of a new word on the basis of his/her prior experience of similar words.

(iii) **Structural Analysis:** The student should have sufficient knowledge to comprehend the meaning of words, or group of words. The familiarity with the rules of word-formation, using prefixes like pre-, pro-, re-, sub-, in-, un- in, etc., or suffixes like –tion, -ness, -less, ful, -ity, -ous, -er, -al etc.

(iv) **Content analysis:** A good reader has the ability to read by sense groups rather than individual words: The students 'hops' visually from one word to the next, smoothly across the lines, taking in entire groups of words – visually and mentally at a time.

(v) **Dictionary Analysis** – It must be mastered for good reading skills. In the shortest possible time, one should know how to consult the meaning of a word from the dictionary.

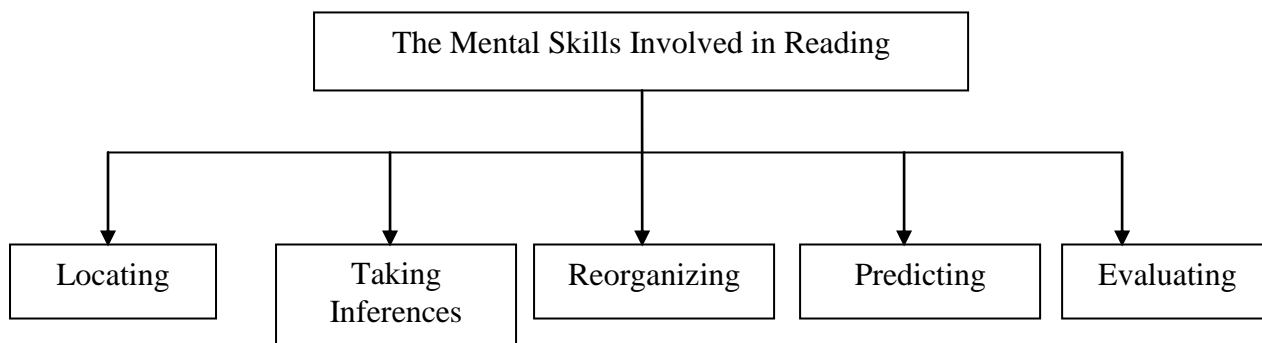**(a) Mental ability involved in reading**

This involves the understanding of written codes contextually. The concept formation, the evaluation and drawing the inferences are the basic skills involved in mental ability.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│        The Mental Skills Involved in Reading  │
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| Locating | Taking Inferences | Reorganizing | Predicting | Evaluating |

(i) Locating - If a reader has the skill of locating facts, names, specific words, identification of the sequence of events in the content, he surely comprehends the meaning better and faster. The mental ability to remember few sentences together is always helpful in quick understanding of the material.

(ii) Re-organising – The reorganization of information involves the categorization (classification) of information as well as a process of selection and summarizing.

(iii) Taking inferences – It is the ability to draw inferences from stated facts, fill in the information gaps on the basis of what has not been explicitly stated, that is, cause-effect relationships. The inferential comprehension requires reasoning abilities which are higher and more complex than those involved in factual comprehension.

IV) Prediction - What is likely to follow in a piece of text on the basis of linguistic clues, as well as to visualize the logical organization.

V) Evaluating Comprehension – The ability to judge the accuracy, acceptability, value etc. of the statements made by the author of a text; on the basis of textual evidence of discrimination between what is stated,1 and what is 'implied' in facts, opinions etc.

OBJECTIVE

The main objectives of the study are:

- To investigate the level of reading ability of 9th grade pupils in Haryana.

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- To study the causes responsible for below average performance of learners.

METHODOLOGY

Keeping in view the nature of the study the survey method of research is adopted for this study. In this method data is collected at a particular point of time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared or determined. The present study is to diagnose the reading ability. It is obvious that the teaching and learning cannot be studied in any artificial setting. So Diagnostic test (Pre-test) is applied over five hundred students of class 9 selected randomly from districts Kurukshetra, Karnal, Panipat, Jind and Rohtak. The diagnostic test for making group reading inventory is constructed by adopting the guidelines and directions given by Dr. David Shephered when he was serving as reading consultant at Normalk which is also reproduced by Ruth Strang in her book entitled *Diagnostic Teaching of Reading* (second edition) page no. 127.

The different skills are categorized under two inventories 1) Formal inventory 2) Informal Reading Inventory, to diagnose the basic skills of reading. Care is taken to remain in track for the purpose of testing both the main aspects of reading, that is, (1) the Mechanics of Reading (2) Mental Ability involved in reading. The variety of items is framed in the questionnaire so that complete process of reading, which may be described as signal – sound – sense: can be tested with the help of a diagnostic test of reading. The teachers' opinions are also taken into consideration to identify the areas where students face difficulty, and the factors affecting teaching and learning of reading skill.

The Informal reading Inventory consists of six micro-skills of reading namely, speed, posture, phrasing, word attack, pronunciation and

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stress/intonation. The four point scale is used to record the scoring that is, Excellent-4 Marks, Goods-3Marks, Average-2 Marks, and Below Average-1 Mark. Similarly Formal Reading Inventory Record is also categorized as Excellent if the score is 75-100, Good 50-75, Average 25-50, Below Average 0-25. The total score of both the Informal as well as Formal Inventories is taken as the actual reading ability of students. In the present study the response of students as well as teachers are counted, calculated and tabulated. The simple percentage method is used for calculation of results.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

SECTION - I

On the basis of the performance in the diagnostic test, the students are categorized in three groups - those who score below 33% are placed in below average group, those who score between 33% to 66% are grouped as average, and above average category is allotted to those who score above 66% marks. The sole objective of this test is to detect the areas of weakness, or the skills in which students face difficulty. The data so obtained is tabulated in table 1.1

Table-1.1

Performance of Students in Different Areas of Reading Ability
N-500

	Areas of Reading Ability	Above Average	Average	Below Average
1.	Comprehension	50(10)	220(44)	230(46)
2.	Vocabulary	50(10)	120(24)	330(66)
3.	Pronunciation	70(14)	130(26)	300(60)
4.	Stress/Intonation	90(18)	170(34)	240(48)
5.	Reading of Prose	60(12)	230(46)	210(42)
6.	Reading of Poetry	45(9)	145(29)	310(62)

Note – Figure in parenthesis shows percentage.

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The table 1.1 diagnoses the fact that the performance of students in reading is considerably poor. It is in fact the decline in motivation at this age to choose to read, is one of the reason. "As students move through the grades, especially at the middle school level, their motivation to choose to read tends to decline" (Donahueetal, 1999; Guthric & Wigfield, 2000). In the specific skill of comprehension 46% students perform below average, while 44% students perform at average level. Only 10% students cross the line to above average level. Abu-Rabia (2003) supports the findings of the present study i.e. students face difficulty in reading comprehension in English. It also reveals that their vocabulary part is also weak. A large section of students, that is, 66% remains in the lowest category of below average, 24% find place in average category, and only 10% are in above average category. The problem in the area of vocabulary proficiency is also revealed by Ramamoorthy (1992) and Jayashree (1989).

As far as words pronunciation is concerned, the scenario is almost same as 60% have faulty pronunciation, and fall in the category of below average, 26% students have just up to the mark pronunciation, and get a place in average section, while 14% of them ably take the place in above average level. In Stress and intonation, only 18% are near expertise, 34% have average stress and intonation pattern skill, and almost half of the group, that is 48% falls under the below average category. This is perhaps due to the impact of native language. Nagy, Mclure and Montserrat (1997) also found that bilingual middle school students made transfer of applying Spanish syntax to English which impairs their learning of English also.

Oral reading or fluency is an essential skill to master. The study shows that in reading of prose, students feel more comfortable than reading of poetry. In poetry 62% students find difficulty while in prose 42% find difficulty. The average reading ability of poetry is seen to be 29% while that of prose is 46%. The good readers of poetry and prose are 9% and 12% respectively. The result shows that the decoding skill of students is weak. Nathan & Stanovich (1991) also concluded that fluency is the ability to read effortlessly and is the result of automatic decoding.

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As the purpose of the diagnostic test is to find the area of difficulty, an overview of the same is graphed below.
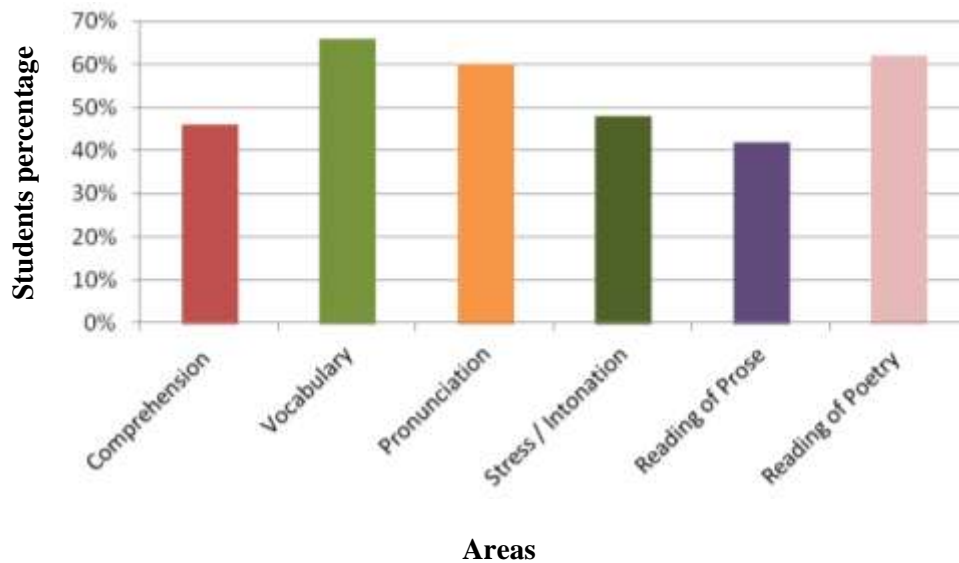

Figure – I   Areas where students face difficulty while learning Reading Skill

An overview of the bargraph represents that majority of the students are weak in areas of vocabulary, reading of poetry, and pronunciation of words. Almost half have difficulty in stress and intonation, comprehension and reading of prose. So in a way all the six areas need remedial treatment to improve the overall reading ability of students.

SECTION-II

Formal learning is the output of interaction between teacher and the taught in existing environmental forces. So teachers' opinion is significant to evaluate the actual area of weakness of reading, and the factors affecting the learning. The data of teachers' opinion is collected through the teachers' opinionnaire prepared by the researcher herself.

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Table-2.1

Teachers' opinion – Areas where students face difficulty

N-100

	Areas	To Great Extent	To Some Extent	Not At All
1.	Speed	30%	67%	3%
2.	Posture	13.11%	50%	36.67%
3.	Phrasing	43.33%	43.33%	13.34%
4.	Word-attack	23.33%	40.00%	16.67%
5.	Pronunciation	36.67%	60%	3.33%
6.	Stress/intonation	53.33%	36.67%	10%

The table 2.1 explains to what extent students face difficulty in the opinion of teachers in learning a specific reading skill.

It is clear from the data that stress and intonation are responsible for poor reading to a great extent. Students face difficulty in phrasing also. Aroun++d 43% teachers said students are not able to read to a great extent in thought units; again 43% said that students face difficulty in phrasing the content to some extent. Only a minor number of teachers that is 14% are of the opinion that phrasing is not at all a difficulty. Regarding pronunciation, around 37% teacher feel students have great difficulty while reading, and 60% stamp it to some extent, hardly 3% feel that no difficulty is there is pronunciation. Speed, one of the important micro-skills of reading is a difficulty to some extent in view of 67% teachers, and to a great extent for 30% teachers, and only 3% do not find any difficulty.

Word-attack power is the most important skill of reading, as students usually omit or insert and repeat unnecessary words while reading which mar the speed as well as comprehension. In word-attack 40% agree that students have

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difficulty to some extent, and around 24% agree that students have difficulty to great extent, while 17% do not find any problem. Posture includes holding of book, finger pointing habit etc. Half the teachers find that the students are in the habit of finger pointing instead of eye-movement while reading in lines. Approximately, 13% noticed that they keep the book too close, or on the table while reading in standing position, and usually skip complete lines. Only 37% teachers observe the sense of right posture.

Concluding, the regional dialect and the mother-tongue greatly affect the pronunciation of the English language. The word attack skill and phrasing are weak which hamper the speed as well as concept formation. The improper stress/intonation also changes the meaning of the context.
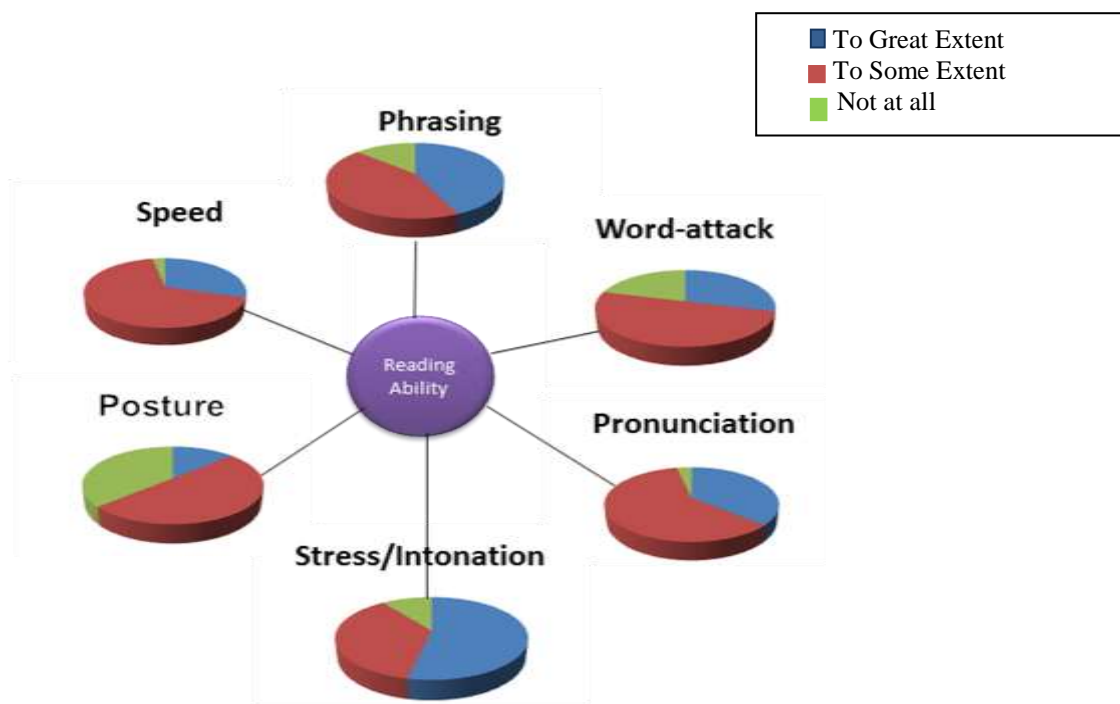

Figure – 2   An overview of Teachers' opinion

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An overview of pie-charts reflects the difficulty in all the six areas of reading ability which teachers feel while teaching.

The result of the present study is supported by (Daisy, 2010) that the situation of English Language in Haryana is in dismal state. What are the reasons for such a precarious level of English reading? The defective education policy, the dearth of trained English teachers, the unscientific methods of teaching foreign language or the socio-cultural system? The teachers opinion is sought in this regard and is clubbed in to three main factors.

Table 2.2

Factors Responsible for Below Level Performance
(Teachers' Opinion)

N=100

	Factors	**To great extent**	**To some extent**	**Not At All**
1.	Factors related to education system	41.33%	43.67%	15%
2.	Factors related to methods/techniques	37.33%	45%	17.67%
3.	Factors related to socio-cultural system	55.33%	31.33%	13.34%

The table 2.2 depicts that approximately 41 percent teachers are of the opinion that education system is responsible to great extent for below average performance and around 44 percent consider education system responsible to some extent and rest 15 percent give a clean chit to education system. Factors related to education system includes policy making, its implementation via 'Men', 'Method' & 'Material', curriculum framing evaluation via teaching – learning process. The factors related to method or techniques consist of the approach & motivation; methods or mechanics. As many as 45 percent teachers vote that method/techniques are also responsible for poor performance to some extent. Only 18 percent say that there is no problem in methods/techniques; on the other hand 37% teachers find fault

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in the methods of teaching in use to a great extent. As far as socio-cultural factors are concerned nearly up to 55% say these factors affect the reading ability to a great extent; 31 percent feel that they are responsible to some extent, while 14 percent do not find any problem in socio-cultural system. These factors include the psychological fear, biases against the British language, over-crowded classes, interference of mother-tongue, wide range of mental ability, and family attitude towards learning English.
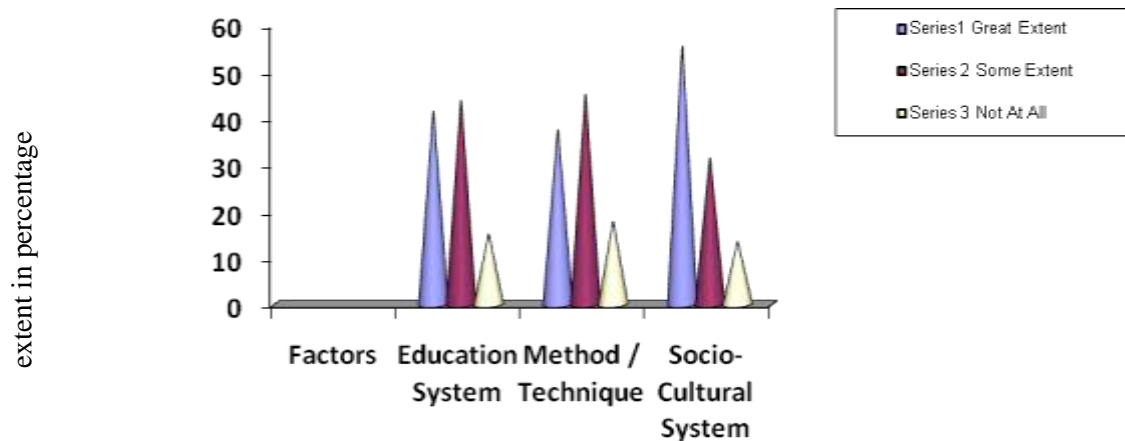

Figure – 3   Factors influencing the performance

The factors responsible for the above stated problems are: lack of constant pratice (Das Gupta, 1975), poor training of teachers, lack of students' involvement, improper evaluation (Bhattacharyajee 1984), lack of teaching aids,+   and   faulty methods of teaching (Mohire 1989).

It was also seen that the most prominent factor 'parental involvement' was found responsible for affecting teaching and learning of English as studied by Sharma (2000) and Shashi (1991). The overcrowded classes also hamper the teaching-learning pedagogy as the same was found by XU (2001). Last but not the least factor is the time the teacher devotes in class for reading. The reading skill has been given the minimum time, the least concern of the

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teacher. The observation of the present study is similar to the results of Rubio Fernando & David Schwarzer (2011) that only 8% of the total time is devoted to the teaching of reading.

Conclusion

The prevailing situation of English reading skill calls for the serious attention of the policy makers to awake, and train the English teachers to teach the foreign / second language using scientific methods and techniques. The level of reading ability of English is diagnosed as below average. Both the mechanics as well as mental ability involved in reading need meticulous remediation. Almost in all the areas from word- attach power to comprehension, majority of the learners have difficulty. The defective education policy, dearth of trained teachers, lack of scientific methods of teaching, transfer of mother – tongue, unawareness regarding the importance of English, especially reading ability, and other socio-cultural factors are detected to be responsible for such a dismal stage.

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