

## **Exploring Strategies to Teach Vocabulary to Disadvantaged Learners**

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### **Abstract**

Despite the indispensability of reading as a skill to young adults, this skill continues to remain neglected or only lip service paid to its teaching. There can't be a better way to emphasise its importance than in competitive exams where students who are technically sound end up scoring poorly in reading section and many students of engineering struggle in their futile attempts to master the techniques of reading. A study was thus conducted to arrive at an informed conclusion about the reading problems faced by undergraduate students of engineering and their attempts to cope with it. Two research questions, namely, the nature of reading problems encountered by students with respect to understanding reading comprehension and (b) the reading attitudes of the students that feed into their reading habits. Questionnaires, reading passages and personal interview formed instruments of data collection.

### **Introduction**

It will be in order to recollect why the study was undertaken in the first place with an appositely remarkable observation from DeMoulin and Loye, 1999)

Learning to read is a means to an end. If children have difficulty learning to read early, how can they be expected to excel in other subjects as well? The best prevention of reading difficulties, therefore, is early intervention strategies at the pre - school/kindergarten kevel. Instead of heated debates on which approach is best suited for early reading success, educators should be discussing the most efficient method (s) that produces the best results (p.43)

This is very crucial since reading comprehension is a vital skill that is critical in the educational success of individuals. In the absence of adequate reading comprehension skills,

students can suffer all through their academic life. Reading comprehension if not taught or learnt the right way, can lead to a lot of frustration and difficulties later on for students, in their academic pursuits and career. In the area of science, research informs us that many students lack sound knowledge of reading strategies to generate inferences, leading to poor comprehension of science texts.

This makes it apparent that reading as a skill is required not just when reading texts in English for pleasure but also for knowledge and awareness. Ignorance in one area leads to concomitant ignorance in other areas and this creates a chain of unfortunate consequences for the students, a sentiment rather sharply expressed by Elder and Paul (2004):

A typical college student is unable to deeply comprehend what he or she reads. Most students have few of nay intellectual tools that would enable them to read deeply, and then apply what they have read (p.1)

It was one such context that necessitated the present study, the researcher having first-hand experience of what obtains on engineering colleges in the name of English classes and English lab.

### **The Study**

The study was a result of the deep felt and urgent need to look into the problems of reading reported in undergraduate students of engineering and the kind of strategies the students tried to employ or employed to cope with reading difficulties. This was important because students are expected to read long passages, comprehend lessons, answer questions in the last semester examinations that test their knowledge of not just written English and oral English but their ability to read and understand texts.

This study concerned itself with two research questions:

- (1) What is the nature of reading problems encountered by students with respect to understanding reading comprehension?

(2) What are the reading attitudes of the students that feed into their reading habits?

The questions were framed with a view to unravelling the problems students come face to face with every day of their lives as students. In particular the study focused on the coping mechanisms of students when they encountered new or unfamiliar vocabulary, an important aspect of reading since “as many teachers of FL reading comprehension will attest, when their students are faced with an unfamiliar text in the foreign language, the first challenge seems to be its vocabulary (Grabe & Stoller, 1997; as cited in Koren, 1999, p.1).

The participants were 200 first year students pursuing engineering in various branches ranging from Civil to Mechanical to ECE and EEE. These students could be classified into the following categories based on their origins and the schools they had been to

1. Rural areas and English medium schools
2. Urban areas and English medium schools
3. Rural areas and regional medium schools
4. Urban areas and regional medium schools
5. Semi urban areas and English medium schools
6. Semi urban areas and regional medium schools

All of them were undergraduate students of engineering and data were collected from four engineering colleges in the districts of East and West Godavari, Krishna and Guntur districts. These districts were chosen since these have the maximum number of engineering colleges and educational institutions in Andhra Pradesh and offer inkling into the kind of student population drawn from different echelons of society.

The students had some kind of exposure to English ranging from extensive to minimal. Students from *rural areas and English medium schools* were 30 in number, those from *urban areas and English medium schools* were 50 in number, those with an education in schools from *rural areas and regional medium schools* were over 60, while those from *urban areas and regional medium schools* were around 10 in number. Students from *semi urban areas and English medium schools* were 35 while those from *semi urban areas and regional medium schools* were 15 in number. The numbers clearly point to how everyone favoured

English medium education where possible for their children and that it was in rural areas that English medium schools were still not readily available for students to join.

The participants were each asked to fill a questionnaire and answer questions given in four reading passages meant for testing their command of vocabulary. The time taken for data collection was about four weeks since each of the colleges needed to be visited in person by the researcher.

Students were required to answer four reading passages that focussed on vocabulary and for each reading passage students were given about 30 minutes and there were clear instructions on what to do and what not to do. For example, students were specifically asked not to score out an answer once they marked it in the sheet given to them. They were asked not to copy anything from anyone since this was only an exercise that was not part of any formal testing. They were told to be honest in their responses.

Each reading passage was 700-800 word long with a lot of items such as idioms, phrasal verbs; words not so commonly used as well as commonly used words figuring in the passages. The difficulty levels were: easy, medium, hard and challenging.

## **Results**

The consolidated results are reported below in the form of tables and charts. As may be seen from data analysis, a huge number of students were unable to mark correct answers to questions asked. On average the first question was answered correctly only by 2 % , a shockingly low figure given that students have had at least 8 years of schooling where they had been taught in English. Question II was answered correctly by 8 % while the third question was answered correctly by 18.3 % of them. The fourth and fifth questions were answered correctly by 17 % and 19.4 % respectively.

Name of paragraph : Mass media
Readability level : challenging
Passage type : descriptive
Percentage of questions correctly answered: QI : 2 % QII : 8 % QIII : 18.3 % Q IV : 17 % Q V : 19.4 %

As for the second passage the statistical details are as follows: Data make it clear that only 5 % of students arrived at the right answer while to the second question only 10 % were able to make it. The third question was answered correctly by 15.3 % while the fourth and fifth were answered correctly by a mere 22 % and 22.35 % of students respectively.

Name of paragraph : Social networking
Readability level : tough
Passage type : narrative
Percentage of questions correctly answered: QI : 5 % QII : 10.4 % QIII : 15.3 % Q IV : 22 % Q V : 22.35 %

The third passage was of medium difficulty and it was expected that students would fare better in answering this passage than earlier ones but the results were disappointing. Only 8 % of students obtained the right answer to the first question while 18.24 % got the second answer right; the third question saw 19 % score correctly and the fourth was answered correctly by 24.45 % of students while the fifth one was answered by 26.3 % correctly.

Name of paragraph : mobile phones
Readability level : medium
Passage type : expository
Percentage of questions correctly answered: QI : 8 % QII : 18.24 % QIII : 19 % Q IV : 24.45 % Q V : 26.3 %

The fourth passage, namely, the one graded as easy, did not fare any better insofar as student responses went; the first answer was marked correctly by just 12 % while the second was marked correctly by 14.23 %; the third question was scored well by 22.3 % while the

fourth one was marked correctly by 27 %. The last question was answered correctly by a mere 30 % of students.

Name of paragraph : Smog
Readability level : easy
Passage type : descriptive
Percentage of questions correctly answered: QI : 12 % QII : 14.23% QIII : 22.3 % Q IV : 27 % Q V : 29.65 %

## Discussion

If one looks at the results one cannot help being dismayed at the poor proficiency levels of students in reading comprehension. On average not more than 25 % of students were able to answer any question correctly even if there were students who had had an English medium education; based on responses from the questionnaire and personal interviews with students, the following points for introspection emerged:

- 140 students were first generation learners with barely literate parents; children of farmers, farmhands, labourers, coolies, cobblers, drivers and those in blue collar jobs had gained admission to engineering and they lacked the scaffolding in reading and writing. Around 150 students said they never read anything, be it newspapers or novels or short stories. While children of first generation learners found it difficult to obtain resources due to lack of financial support, those who could afford were either unwilling or indifferent to enhancing their reading skills. They somehow thought it unnecessary to improve this very essential skill and that showed in their poor performance.
- Almost 65 % of students found reading for comprehension an alien and alienating experience; this may be attributed to the fact that reading passages were never part of the learning process in the English classroom. As a rule, reading passages that students were expected to read by themselves were done for them by the teacher who simply trotted out the answers after a perfunctory reading. Sometimes the text would be read out, the meaning explained in Telugu or in many cases simply translated for the students in Telugu and the answers given out.
- Teachers did not ask students any questions to elicit the right response from them; for example, questions may be classified as - Yes-No questions, Wh-questions, tag

questions, choice questions, hypothetical questions, embedded questions, and leading questions. None of these were asked to bring out the answers from students since this was regarded as time consuming by teachers who chose an easier way out - giving out the answers themselves.

- No student was encouraged to use a dictionary by a teacher. Students confessed that it never occurred to them to use a dictionary because they had never felt the necessity; around 16 % said they used google to look up a word when it became inevitable and those who claimed they used dictionary said they used it only a few days before English theory exams.

### **Recommendations**

Reading is a very important skill that cannot be taken for granted. Vocabulary can improve and learners able to use language with ease only if they begin to tackle texts of various levels of reading difficulty. There are four broad levels of vocabulary proficiency that one comes to face when reading, these being listening vocabulary, reading vocabulary, writing vocabulary, and speaking vocabulary. The one that concerns us is the third category which we encounter when we begin to sample a text. A few recommendations that will enable students to learn vocabulary are supplied below:

1. Active processing strategy: students need to do something with the word instead of just committing the word to memory.
2. Strategy of contextual usage: students must be made aware of the various contexts in which the word/idiom is used. Taking the help of corpus linguistics will help in this regard and students can be given practice in use and usage.
3. Review strategy: There need to be review activities and word games where students are exposed to rich vocabulary and usage; students need to be taught *collocation* and *connotation* to bring out the subtle differences in making meaning. Several perspectives on using a word will then emerge, making learning fun and useful.

4. Summarizing strategy: Thus strategy requires students to determine what is important in what they are reading and to put it into their own words. Instruction in summarizing helps students to :
  - a. Identify or generate main ideas
  - b. Connect the central ideas
  - c. Eliminate unnecessary information
  - d. Remember what they read
  
5. Metacognitive strategy: Metacognition is "thinking about thinking." Good readers use metacognitive strategies to think about and have control over their reading. Before reading, they clarify their purpose for reading and preview the text. During reading, they take control of their understanding, adjusting their reading speed to fit the difficulty of the text and taking care of any comprehension problems they have. After reading, they check their understanding of what they read. It involves the following stages:
  - a. Identifying the difficulty - "I don't understand the third paragraph on page 14."
  
6. Locating the exact nature of the difficulty: "I don't get what the author means when she says, 'Arriving in Hyderabad was a milestone in my family's life.'"
  
7. Paraphrasing the difficult sentence or passage in their own words: "Oh, so the author wants to say that arriving in Hyderabad was a very crucial event in her family's life."
  
8. Looking back through the text: "The author talked about social networking in II chapter, but I don't remember what it is. If I re read that chapter, I can figure out what exactly it is. "
  
9. Look forward in the text for information that might help them to resolve the difficulty: The text says, "The Yom Kippur war was fought for seven days in 1973. I don't understand the term "Yom Kippur". If I browse the chapters ahead I would probably know what the term is and who fought the war and why.



Most importantly, teaching needs to be learner centred instead of the teacher taking centre stage and dictating the pace and type of learning. This is very essential since:

With the learner centred approach, teachers bring command of context knowledge but design flexibility for learners to construct their learning. Learner needs and characteristics take precedence over knowledge of facts and skills (Brown, 2003, p. 52). The onus of teaching is obviously on the teacher and if only the teacher takes learning to the students through some of these strategies, she will achieve what lecturing won't in many years.

## Conclusion

Reading is a critical skill and improving the skills of learners is just a matter of teaching them how to use these skills intelligently. This paper attempted a modest move in that direction by recommending the teaching and using of some sensible strategies to make learners independent readers.

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