

Investigating the Factors Responsible for Poor English Reading Comprehension at Secondary Level at Select C.B.S.E Schools in Aligarh

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Rationale

The study aims to find out the issues responsible for poor English reading comprehension at secondary level at select C.B.S.E secondary schools in Aligarh and proposes to provide solutions and improvement in teaching techniques.

The first revelation from the Holy Quran “IQRA” which means “READ” makes it very clear about the importance of reading. Reading is a guessing game in which the readers reconstruct the message which is encoded by writers (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). ‘*The reading is thinking*’ is a popular notion in the area of literacy instruction (Cunningham & Allington, 2006; Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Reading being an important skill is very important to master in order to succeed in any walk of life. It is an activity that involves comprehension, word recognition, motivation, and fluency. One of the main purposes of reading is comprehending what you have read. The purpose of reading changes with different types of readings. These different types of readings can be labelled as: scanning, skimming, reading to learn, reading for general idea/understanding, reading for critical evaluation and reading to integrate information (Carrell & Grabe, 2010). Scanning is such a reading process which needs recognition of some visual form such as: number, word, or phrase (Carver, 1992). Reading for understanding, is a reading process that requires visual and semantic process and the mental construction of the text summary (ibid). Reading to learn does not only require summary of a text but also different chunks of information which are elaborated in different sets of information (ibid). Reading comprehension occurs when reader extracts and combines different types of information from the read text and makes a link between the new information and the already known ones (Koda, 2007).

Reading of a text in second language (English language) is more complex than reading in 1st language. There are a lot of variations in L2 reading such as variations in age, training, schooling motivation, socio-economic level, and at individual level (Carrell &

Grabe, 2010). The readers, reading in L2, have to acquire a complex cognitive ability which is different from reading in L1 (ibid).

Reading comprehension is complex process, in which many other skills are used (Cain et al, 2004). Many factors are involved which affect this reading comprehension process (Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Samuels, 1983) and these factors are related to the text, context, work and the reader (Snow, 2002). Vocabulary is also one of the main factors which affect reading comprehension (Nagy, 1998 as cited in Bauman, 2009).

Vocabulary is an important factor that has an effect on reading comprehension. Researchers say that reading comprehension in L2 requires different amount of vocabulary. Laufer (1989) investigated to find out how much amount of vocabulary is necessary for reading comprehension. She concluded that 95 per cent of the text should be known to the reader to understand the whole text. Nation (2001) proposes that the required percentage for comprehension ought to be approximately 98 per cent. Taking these research in consideration we can understand how necessary it is to have a good knowledge of vocabulary. If a person's vocabulary is weak, comprehension of any text will become difficult. Students who have problems in reading comprehension have poor or limited vocabulary (Biemiller & Boote, 2006; Rupley & Nichols, 2005).

The knowledge of vocabulary and comprehension also helps in reading speed in L2. Carver (1992) studied that when reading L1, readers can go about 200-300 words per minute. Fluency develops as reader's progress with age and grade. Floyd and Carrell (1987), say that people with lack of background and cultural knowledge of L2 can improve their comprehension by specially being taught the cultural and background knowledge of target language. Students can perform better if prior knowledge and topic interest is high than students whose topic interest and background knowledge are low (Carrell & Wise, 1998).

Meta-cognition also influences the reading abilities of learners (Brown et al, 1986). Successful and fluent learners show better level of controlling their actions during reading and meta-cognition knowledge than novice and less successful learners or readers (Baker & Beall, 2009). Successful readers use different type of strategies for successful comprehension (Pressley, 2006). The readers who use more strategies score high in reading comprehension tasks (Anderson, 1991). For better performance, knowing of different strategies does not mean performing well; a reader who knows how to use different strategies can perform better (ibid).

If reading comprehension is weak it is bound to affect higher education and research studies difficult. People with low level reading ability and comprehension find it difficult to comprehend text and differentiate between closely related texts.

In this paper an attempt will be made to figure out the problems and difficulties which create a barrier in English reading comprehension, as to bring about a viable solution to improve the skill. With the frequent advancement in the world of education the traditional teaching methods are getting outdated. New teaching methods have been introduced to teach reading and other language skills. This paper aims at focusing on some new techniques that should be employed in secondary classroom to improve reading comprehension.

Objective of the Study

- To find the problems and difficulties in reading comprehension at secondary level.
- To enhance the reading skills of students at secondary level.
- To develop a perspective of diverse methods being employed for reading comprehension.
- To offer suggestions for improvement.

Research Questions

- What are the factors affecting English reading comprehension?
- To what extent is reading skill necessary to improve other language skills?
- How do students with poor reading comprehension cope with the syllabus?

Significance of the Study

The study is significant in a number of ways. It will bring up useful data which will help in deciphering the problems in reading comprehension. The suggestions and remedies will prove to be useful for improving the reading comprehension and teaching methodology. This research in the long run will help in developing better English reading skills at secondary level. It will help the authorities in developing better curriculum in such a way that reading skill has a magnified focus and it will also help to overcome difficulties and factors responsible for poor reading comprehension.

Methodology

The research was descriptive in nature. The quantitative and qualitative research was carried out for this study. The survey consisted of 4 teachers (who taught secondary classes; from both schools) and 80 students of classes 9th and 10th from two C. B. S. E schools, out of which 40 students were from class 9th from both the schools combined and 40 students from class 10th from both schools combined. The students were given a passage from their texts and were asked to read aloud so that their reading speed and word recognition could be checked. The students were asked to provide meanings of some difficult words in both languages that is Hindi/Urdu and English, so that the level of their vocabulary could be checked in both the languages. Some questions were put up for the students to provide answers so that the sentence structure of students' writing could be checked. The sentence structure of students in writing would help to test the comprehension level of students'

reading (How much students' reading comprehension is affected by the sentence structure; do the students with poor syntax structure understand the text in the same way as the students understand with strong syntax structure in writing). The answer to the questions would also help give an idea of the comprehension of the students, whether the answers of the asked questions are relevant to questions. It would also help to deduce the critical writing of the students. Critical writing helps come to a judgment of reading comprehension, if the students wrote critically; their reading comprehension would be excellent. Writing and reading aloud would help to incorporate reading skill with other skills.

Results and Findings

The test revealed that the students were not able to supply meanings in English to the difficult words. Upon investigating, the reason that surfaced was that the students were not taught meanings in English; rather they were explained the meanings in their mother tongue. They were not in a practice of memorizing meanings from English to English. In writing meanings of the words from English to their mother tongue, the results varied from student to student. A small percentage of students were able to provide the meanings of more than 60 percent words, some students were able to give the meanings of more than 50 per cent words, and many students could not supply the meanings of more than 30 per cent words. The results in supplying meaning in mother tongue were different than providing meanings in English because students were taught the meaning in their mother tongue so that they could at least understand the crux of the text. When students were asked to read the passage loudly to test their reading speed and word-recognition, varying results were found. A small number of students were able to read the passage fluently and pronounce the words accurately. But many students were not able to read fluently; many were not able to read some words. These types of words seemed alien to them as they had to recognize the alien words written in the script.

After reading the passage, when the students were asked to write the answers to the questions at the end of the passage, many students could not write a well-structured sentence. The use of articles, prepositions and punctuations seemed very weak. Some students according to their understanding picked up a passage from the text to answer the question and many were not able to even understand the question properly. Very few students were able to answer the questions correctly but that too in broken language.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it becomes obvious that there exist many significant factors which affect reading comprehension. These key factors include poor mastery over vocabulary, tendency of cramming instead of learning and understanding; objective is to pass the exam and not to build up skill, weak sentence structure and tenses, not using the tricks to deduce the meaning from context, no custom of reading the newspapers, novels, articles and other books, and lack of awareness from both sides: from teachers and students in developing the skill. Students are not trained in different types of reading skills like loud reading,

intensive reading, extensive reading and silent reading for the enhanced comprehension of the text. Reading strategies like skimming, scanning, predicting previewing, anticipation and reading in portions are unknown to students. Reading skills also develop other linguistic skills. If reading proficiency is good, students can write and utter well-structured and meaningful sentences. It provides them good amount of vocabulary, written model, and the awareness of different cultures and societies to make them write and speak in a sophisticated way.

Recommendations

The following recommendations may prove useful in improving the reading comprehension:

- No method of teaching can be called complete in itself. A combination of methods should be applied by the teachers by gauging the ability of the students.
- To improve vocabulary, word meaning should be taught in English to English.
- Teachers should discourage rote-learning and cramming and make students understand the text. This will enhance their creativity.
- Teachers should demonstrate how to deduce meaning from the text.
- Sentence structures, parts of speech and tenses should be taught in a proper manner.
- Other language skills should be integrated with reading skills and taught.
- Students should be made aware of all reading strategies.
- Teachers should teach reading of words and sentences with correct stress and intonation.

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