

THE POWER OF READING: SKILLS AND STRATEGIES FOR EFFICIENT READING AT ADVANCED LEVEL

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Abstract

Reading has emerged as a central problem among all academic problems in Pakistan. Most students even at the master's level suffer due to poor reading traits. Majority of students develop severe personality problems, when they fail to grasp the main concepts of a text. Thus, reading disability entraps a student in a vicious circle: he does not understand the text, reads slowly, and does not enjoy reading, consequently, does not read much and finally gives up reading. According to the United States Commission of Education, "Every problem of our school, of poverty of troubled parents about our school, and learning disorder seems to show some association with reading difficulty" (Chapman & Czerniewska: 1978). The report of the U.S. Commission holds true in the case of Pakistan even to date also. The launch of mechanical tools like AI and Chat GPT have further aggravated the reading issue among the students. Yet the importance of reading in academic life could not be diminished by such innovations. The present paper, therefore, attempts to establish the reading power by identifying the reading problems of students and delineating important reading techniques and strategies to enhance students' reading comprehension, enabling them to tackle every reading text effectively at the advanced level, and finally, becoming accelerated readers.

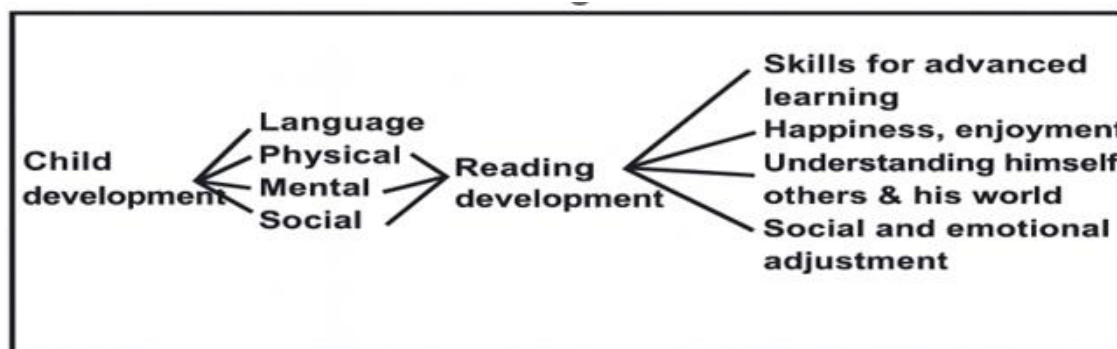
Key words/terms: Reading, comprehension, skills, strategies

1. Introduction

Reading proficiency is the royal road to knowledge. It is essential to success in all academic subjects. By reading books, readers grow both emotionally and intellectually.

Grellet (1987) defines 'reading' as understanding a written text by extracting required information from it. Thus, reading is more than seeing words clearly, more than pronouncing printed words correctly and more than recognizing the meaning of isolated words. An efficient reader interprets the text according to his knowledge of language, appropriate knowledge of the world as assumed by the writer, and the former's ability to interpret. It is for this reason that reading is referred to as a 'psycholinguistic guessing game' (Williams: 1989, 2007. Dornyes: 2005, Collet, 2004).

According to Krugman (1956, & Collet, 2004), Reading disability has a same profound influence on educational growth as a severe emotional involvement. Both limit successful functioning Both limit successful functioning and results in a variety of undesirable behaviour manifestation. Reading as an integral part of child's development has implications for his personal, social and mental development as represented in the given diagram.



**Fig
1.1**

Child development theory

Reading is a political issue (Wallace and Temple,1990). What a text book publishers consider to be controversial, hesitate to publish, that many teachers would consider an interesting topic to talk about. Thus, reading instruction is not the question of pedagogy but also of power and influence.

Reading is a pressing economic issue, because in this age of media communication, satellite information and AI, the students' deficiencies in Reading translate into a problem of economic competitiveness for both in society and professional industry.

Reading occupies a special place in the complex of the four basic language skills, other components of which are: listening, speaking and writing. There are two main reasons for reading being a special skill among the other language skills. The first is that reading alone provides the main input for successful production, communication and language performance. It is through reading that people are able to understand others' ideas. If all people were identical there would be no point in most communication. Communication in reading is different from everyday conversation with someone. In conversation, one can stop and ask for an explanation whenever needed. But when one has a difficulty in reading, one need to interrogate the text because the writer is not available for consultation. Yet, effective communication with the author can be achieved indirectly through the text, and a writer's intention can be understood only through proper manipulation of the text.

The second is that reading involves complex cognitive skills, which lead to communication, different from other linguistic skills. Preston, T., Allington, R.L, & Pressley, M. (2023). The reader does not only decode a message, but he also makes predictions and inferences based on what he reads; he may impose his own organization on information he extracts or may respond to the text, subjectively, according to the reader response theory. At a more sophisticated level, he reacts to what he reads, assessing the accuracy of its facts, the value of its opinion, or the quality of its style (Matthews, Spratt & Dangerfield: 1986; Alderson: 2000).

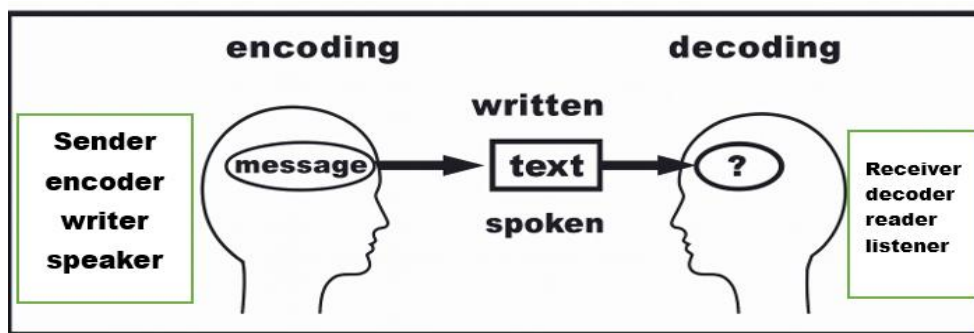


Fig: 1.2. Communication process in Reading (Adapted from Nuttall, 1988)

The Text functions like ‘Do-it-yourself construction kit’. A reader tackling a text resembles the amateur furniture maker, unpacking his do-it-yourself construction kit and trying to work out, how the pieces fit together. It is this process that lend a support to the notion of reading as a constant making and remaking of ‘hypothesis’ a psycho-linguistic guessing game’. (Nuttall, 1988).

2. Hypothesis

Students of the English language can become accelerated readers if major reading skills and strategies are instilled and infused in them in a systematic and methodical way.

3. Research questions

- a. What are the different problematic areas of reading for the learners?

b. What are the different skills and strategies that would enable the learners to become accelerated readers?

4. Methodology

Using an action research approach, the researcher has selected theoretical aspects of Reading Skills by Grellet (1987) and Nuttall (1988) to identify the reading problems of English language learners, at the advanced level within the pedagogic framework of the International Islamic University, Islamabad, in the Department of English.

4.1 Population

The population consisted of twenty -five mixed ability group of learners at the advanced level, who were taught Reading Skills by the researcher for a period of four months (1 semester).

4.2 Instrument

The instrument used was a questionnaire, which was self-developed following a pattern used to classify and evaluate reading problems according to International Reading Standards.

Two questionnaires with the same themes were distributed to the learners, one in the beginning of the semester, before teaching any of the reading skills, to assess and evaluate the learners' reading proficiency and their reading problems. The second questionnaire was distributed towards the end of the semester, after reading skills were taught, to gauge the learners' progress and to assess the effects of teaching reading skills on the overall development in all the major aspects of reading delineated in literature review.

The questionnaires consisted of nine questions, designed to provide a general and global view of learner's problems as well as competence in reading. The questionnaire was designed around the following major aspects of reading as have been delimited in theoretical framework by Grellet (1987) and Nuttall (1988) :

- a. Previewing
- b. Anticipation
- c. Prediction
- d. Skimming
- e. Scanning
- f. Word Analysis Strategies
- g. Comprehension Building Strategies
- h. Critical Reading
- i. Extensive Reading

The qualitative and quantitative method of data collection was adopted because it offered the greatest opportunity to capture learner's opinion in the time available. The researcher had limited time of 7-8 hours a week with the learner's group, so the method of data collection had to be effective in producing evidence of problem in reading by the learners and strategies and skills to overcome those problems. The quality of data gathered was good and informative and greatly helped to suggest strategies and guidelines to overcome those reading problems.

5. Theoretical Framework

Nuttall (1988) has delineated the reading problems of English language learners trapped in vicious circle of frustration ; leading to failures in reading ability and has delineated theoretical aspects of Reading for English language learners at advanced level.

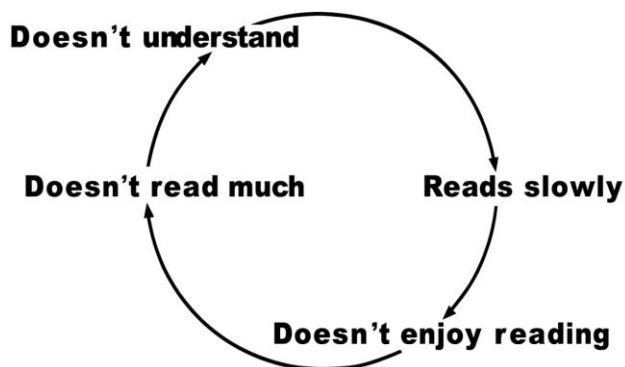


Fig: 5.1. Vicious circle of Reading inefficiency

For this reason the researcher has selected theoretical aspects of reading by Nuttall(1988) combined with Grellet (1987) to enhance effective and efficient reading traits among the learners. The same reading skills and strategies formed the basis of a Questionnaire; data collection and examination.

5.1 Skills and strategies in reading

A conscious use of techniques is helpful when a part of a text is found to be difficult. There are more than twenty-one techniques to comprehend a text accurately; understanding the conceptual meaning, the communicative value of sentences and utterance, relations within sentences, relations between parts of a text through grammatical cohesive devices, recognizing indicators in discourse and discovering organization of a text, etc. (Rzayea, A. (2023), Barker, T.(2021). Thus a reader can arrive at reasonable understanding, if one is able to trace the overall pattern of a text and to underline the types of reading, in order to determine the skills required for reading effectively.

The following diagram schematically sums up reasons and styles for reading:

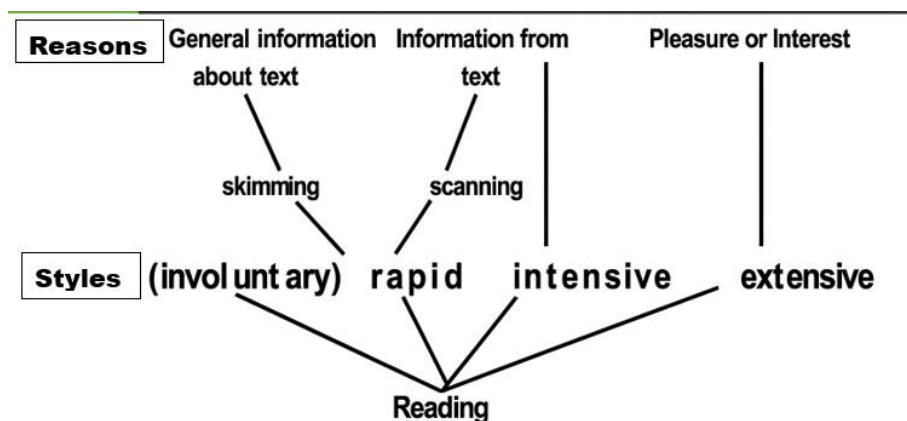


Fig: 5.2. Style and reasons for reading (Adapted from Williams, 1989, 2007)

Whatever the style and reason of reading may be, there are certain techniques that are helpful when a reader is faced with a part of a text that one finds difficult in everyday life. Out of large variety of available skills and strategies, the following are considered as inevitable for successful Intensive reading by Nuttall (1988) and Grellet (1987):

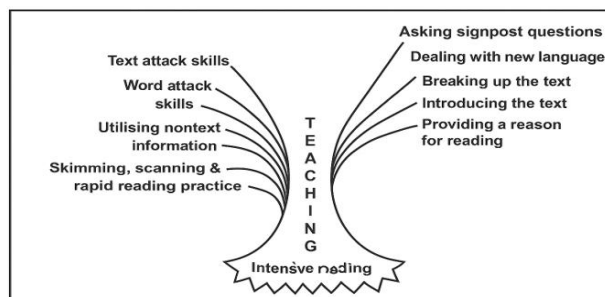


Fig: 5.3. Theoretical aspects of Reading Skills

5.1.1 Previewing

Previewing is a very specific reading technique which involves using the table of contents, the appendix, the preface, chapter and paragraph heading, in order to find out where the required information is likely to be.

5.1.2 Anticipation

Anticipation in reading means guessing about the text on a global level. Anticipation helps the reader to think about the theme of the passage and to dig out the implicit meaning of the writer. It aims to encourage the students to think for themselves, because the more one looks forward to reading and anticipates in mind what the text could hold in store for the reader, the easier it will be to grasp the main points of the passage. This will also create the desire to learn, which leads to more effective reading (Grellet: 1987; Grabe & Stoller: 2002).

5.1.3 Prediction

This is not only a technique, but also a skill which is basic to all reading techniques. For the sake of prediction, the reader is not supposed to read all the sentences, but has to rely on 'grammatical, logical and cultural clues' (Grellet: 1987) to get an idea of what is likely to follow. The organizational pattern in the text, such as cause and effect', comparison and contrast', 'addition and sequences', etc., will help in predicting a text.

5.1.4 Skimming

Skimming is necessary for quick and efficient reading, as it allows the eyes to glance through the page quickly to get a gist. The following steps according to Spache and Berg (1967) help in skimming:

- Read the title and the first paragraph quickly.
- Read sub-heading and the first sentence of the remaining paragraphs, and float over the body of the material, looking for the main ideas of paragraphs, clue words, such as names, dates, etc, direction words and numbered sequences and ideas set off by attention getting markings, such as italics, arrows and so on. Skimming is both horizontal and vertical.

5.1.5 Scanning

Scanning means looking very quickly over a piece of reading matter to find the answer to specific question, e.g. a name or a date. According to Spache and Berg (1967) the following steps help while scanning a topic:

- Scan, but do not read in the usual way, the paragraphs that follow, to find the answers to questions.
- If the material is lengthy or difficult, a preliminary skimming will be profitable in order to find the part of selection for particular information.
- Above all, you must keep in mind exactly what it is you are searching for.

5.1.6 Word analysis strategies

Vocabulary is an important and troublesome issue in content area. In order to handle difficult vocabulary students must be coached 'word attack skill' (Nuttall: 1988, 1996). They must be trained to infer meaning from the context, rather than looking at a dictionary unless it is

Discourse markers fall in to three main classes according to Nuttall (1988, 1996) which can be well summarized in the below given diagram:

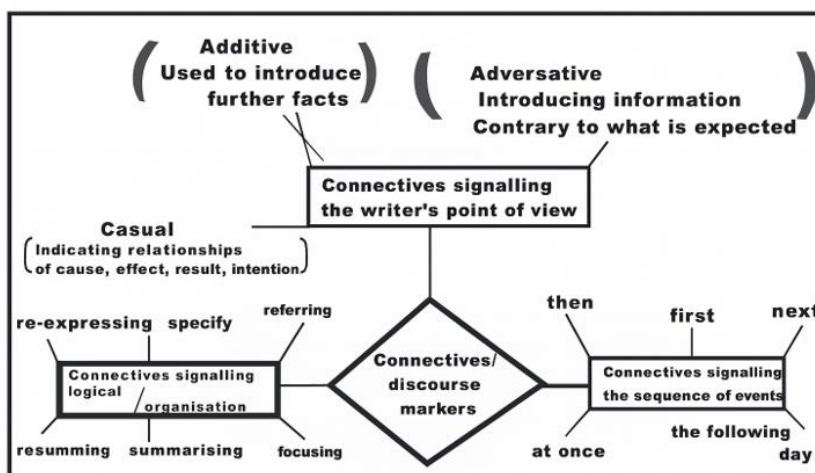


Fig: 5.4 . Categories of Connectives/Discourse markers

Reference/ substitution involves identifying the meanings of words like his, them, one, etc. and comparatives(smaller, same, additional etc).

An elliptical expression is one where something necessary to the sense is left unsaid, e.g., they came although they were asked not to (come).

Vocabulary helps to give cohesion to a text in two ways (Williams: 1989; Schmitt: 2008). Firstly when a writer makes a reference, and instead of using a pronoun uses a noun phrase. Secondly, when there is 'piling up' of words in a text to give it a unity tone.

But in many sentences, there are no discourse markers to aid interpretation. In such instances the reader has to recognize the functional value of the sentences in the text. The functional value help the students to understand the underlying pattern of meaning that are given expression through the medium of a text. It also enables the reader to understand the possibilities of misinterpretation and to handle them. Three categories of functional value as discussed by Nuttall (1998) can be diagrammatically presented as:

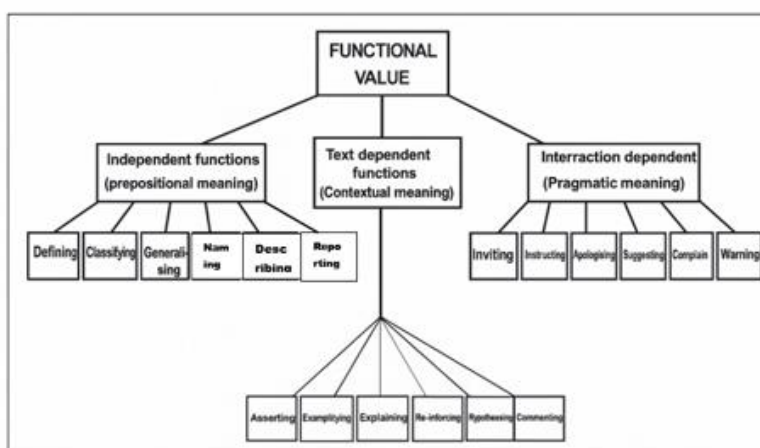


Fig:5.5 . Categories of Functional Values in Reading Text

5.1.7.2 Textual coherence

Besides cohesion, it is coherence that constitutes discourse. Strictly speaking, it is the discourse that has coherence, while the text has cohesion. Coherence can be described as a

quality of the underlying thoughts and the way they are organized into a message. The way the message is expressed will reflect the coherence which is achieved by means of the linguistic devices of cohesion.

Every text has a rhetorical structure which shows how the writer has organized and shaped his material and given it coherence to suit his purpose and makes it a text that is read. Coherence in a text is achieved through organizing a sequence of sentences which is generally organized into paragraphs: The well-organized paragraph includes the topic, the topic sentence and developmental sentences. The principles of organizing a paragraph may be the sequence of events described, the logical progression from specific to general or general to specific, problem-solution, evidence-hypothesis, classification-examples ad so on. Paragraph writing is the key to essay writing. A thesis is also, an extensive essay based on research.

Coherence in a text above the paragraph level is hierarchical as presented in a diagram.

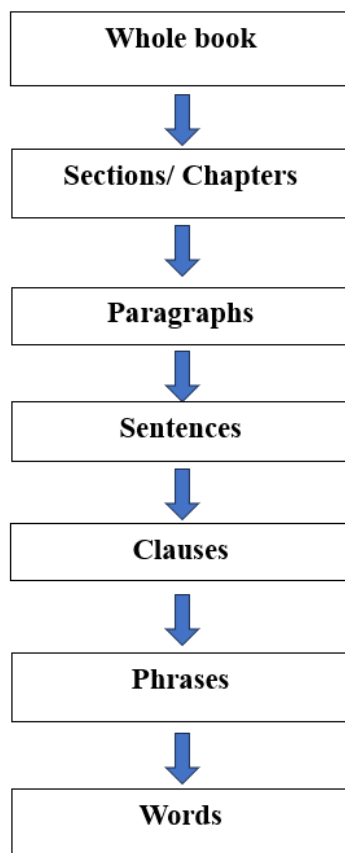


Fig:5.6 Organization above Paragraph level

However the hierarchy may be differently structured in different types of text. A reader must carefully examine this organization in a structure of a text, because it will result in a clearer understanding of the overall message.

5.1.8 Critical Reading

Reading effectively involves a purposeful examination of reading text and the best technique for critical reading is Questioning the Author approach (QTA) (Block, Collins, Israel & Susan: 2005; Tovani: 2004; Tompkins: 2006). It is an approach designed to establish students interaction with the text to build greater understanding. When students read in QTA lesson, they are taught to question the ideas presented in the text while they are reading, a strategy that

differs from many traditional approaches that ask students to answer questions when they have finished reading the text.

The following steps based on QTA will help the reader in critical evaluation (Beck, Isabel, Mckeown, Margaret, Hamilton, Rebecca, Kucan & Lind: 1997).

- Examine the source, reliability, regency, accuracy and competence of the writer.
- The reader must examine the author's implications present in the text. He must understand the inferences intended by the writer and infer words and styles. The reader must try to identify the author's obvious and hidden purposes and assumptions and try to distinguish between facts and opinion.
- Finally, the reader must react to the author's use of devices to infer his thinking.

5.1.9 Extensive Reading

Students can deal with the full-length texts only if they are exposed to extensive texts frequently. Therefore, learner should be provided with extra reading material by allocating a library period, and by devoting some class time to extensive reading. Extensive reading should be 'appealing, easy, short and varied.' (Williams: 2007; Renandya: 2007; Chamot; 2005; Bell: 2001).

For extensive reading the SQ3R technique is useful for students to follow. It is a strategy for private study and consists of five steps: Survey, Question, Read, Review and Recite.

This technique is useful if the teacher has not provided any guidance and thus makes the learner independent readers. At the same time, it not only produces active involvement with bright students but weak students can also improve their reading by using this technique.

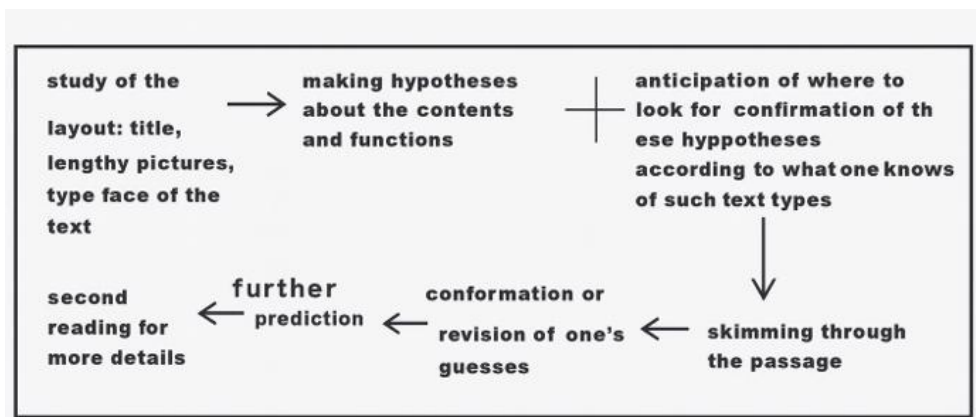


Fig:5.7 . Logical progression of Reading Process

The above-mentioned techniques and skills should not be taken as final and decisive factors in accelerating reading speed and comprehension. There are number of other skills that need to be complemented with reading: the study skills of note-taking and summarizing, etc. and should be mastered by students to become confident and successful readers. However, the proper selection of reading skills depends on many things: the nature of material, familiarity with it, and interest in it, background and purpose for reading. Above all in real life reading purpose constantly varies and therefore all the techniques and skills vary according to the style of the text studied and the purpose in reading it.

6. Results/Findings

Statistical analysis of the questionnaires is presented in tabulated form below, in which scores for learner's problems related to each aspect of reading is calculated and means percentage is

obtained. In the second table the mean average of learners' reading improvement is presented which reveals the progress and improvement on the part of learners.

Questionnaire Analysis before using teaching techniques

Questions	Mean % of Problems
Does the skill of previewing help you in reading the text	48
Do you try to anticipate the meaning of the text before getting into the detailed study of the text	80
How do you predict the message of the text	40
How do you read to get the gist of the text	75
How do you locate the specific information from the text	55
How do you understand the meanings of the difficult words in reading text	90
How do you comprehend the meaning of the text	90
How do you find the hidden meanings of the text	95
How do you feel while reading a news paper or a story book or any other material in the reading class	90
Average Mean	73.66666667

Questionnaire analysis after teaching reading techniques

Questions	Mean % of Problems
Does the skill of previewing help you in reading the text	25
Do you try to anticipate the meaning of the text before getting into the detailed study of the text	28
How do you predict the message of the text	20
How do you read to get the gist of the text	25
How do you locate the specific information from the text	10
How do you understand the meanings of the difficult words in reading text	30

How do you comprehend the meaning of the text	30
How do you find the hidden meanings of the text	60
How do you feel while reading a news paper or a story book or any other material in the reading class	50
Mean Averages	30.88888889

7. Discussion

The given statistical analysis of learner's questionnaire not only helped identify learner's reading problems in all major aspects of reading but also confirmed the hypothesis that learner's reading problems can be enormously reduced, and they can become accelerated readers if skills and strategies are properly instructed through appropriate teaching methodology. The overall result of the Questionnaire survey was that reading problems before teaching reading techniques were 73%, which were considerably reduced to 31% only after teaching reading techniques to the students.

The detailed analysis has shown that 48% learners had problems in reading technique of previewing, which towards the end of the course was reduced to 25% only. Similarly, 80% learners had a problem with the reading technique of anticipation, but the problem was greatly reduced to 28% only in the end of the course. 40% learners had a problem to predict the theme of the text, but continuous practice in the class resolved the problem and was minimized to 20% only. 75% learners were unaware of the technique of skimming, while the graded activities enhanced the awareness level, and the problem decreased to 25% only by the end of the course. 55% learners had difficulty in scanning, which also decreased considerably and only 10% learners had a problem towards the end. Learners had great difficulty and enormous problems in dealing with difficult words and understanding of the text. The results revealed that 90% learners had problems with handling of the vocabulary and similarly 90% learners had problems with the comprehension. With appropriate teaching of skills and strategies the learners showed considerable improvement minimizing the problem to 30% only. The biggest problem area in reading pervasive in the class was critical reading. The results clearly indicate that 95% learners were unable to unveil the hidden and implicit meanings of the text. However constant exposure and coaching yielded positive results and the problem though not considerably improved but was reduced to 60%.

The practice of using extensive material in the reading class is very limited and as a result 90% learners could not deal with the texts of extended lengths. Through the introduction of extensive material inside the classroom along with the intensive reading texts and with the techniques taught to learners, they were able to read the extensive material skillfully. Towards the end the problem was reduced to 50%.

8. Recommendations

The detailed analysis of questionnaire results leads us to conclude that reading skills if properly taught instructed and practiced through graded exercises and activity types has yielded positive results as is evident in the students' progress and development shown through the tables.

The following exercises and activity types were devised and applied for teaching all the reading skills that were being questioned by the learners both at the beginning of the semester and also towards the end.

Grellet (1987) Alderson (2000) and Bears (2003) are cited as informing sources for all the below suggested activities:

8.1 Previewing

- Giving a page from a book to read and think of at least three possibilities, which the passage is about.
- Supplying the daily newspaper, with the index of pages to find an answer to your given questions.
- Giving a few minutes to skim through a book i.e. to read few lines written on the back cover of the book, the table of contents and the beginning of the preface and then asking the students some questions about the book.

8.2 Anticipation

Asking questions before the text is read to make the students aware of what they know, what they don't know. For example before studying a text about the robot: such questions as given below can be asked for anticipation:

- a. What is a robot?
- b. Is there any difference between a robot and automation?
- c. What are robots used for?
 - Giving true false statements.
 - Asking the students to look at the title and the accompanying pictures to guess about the text.

8.3 Prediction

- Giving unfinished passages to propose an ending.
- Supplying the text with missing punctuation to predict where the sentences are likely to stop and look for certain words functioning as signals of a new sentences or paragraph.
- Giving a 'gapped text' interrupted after the conjunction and link-words to imagine what the text might be.

8.4 Skimming

- Asking the students to skim through a short story and underline the sentences or words that best sum up the main idea of each paragraph.
- Supplying the articles to read as quickly as possible to decide the best suited title for each of them.
- Giving the title, the first and last paragraph of an article to find out what the article is about.

8.5 Scanning

- Providing a dictionary page and asking the students to answer the teacher's questions.
- Giving a newspaper article to find what information different persons (e.g. someone who is looking for a gap, a shopkeeper etc.) might draw from it.
- Circling the relevant information about the topic from a jumbled up text.

8.6 Vocabulary

8.6.1 Contextual clues

Matching two lists of words (words and their: synonyms or antonyms)

- Finding equivalents of the given words from the paragraph given.
- Finding adjectives from the suggested paragraph which means the opposites of the given word etc.
- Providing the text to find all the words related to the basic idea of the passage and fill in the tables.
- Providing a paragraph with missing words that all derive from the same root.
- Omitting one word out of eight from the text, and asking the students to insert the most appropriate words in the blanks.

- Giving a text with one word omitted, and proposing a choice between three or four possibilities for each of the missing words (Prichard, 2008).

8.6.2 Deducing meaning through understanding word formation

- Providing words from the text to underline the suffixes.
- Asking the students to think and write some other words with the same suffixes.
- Providing the text to find some words with prefixes and to add those prefixes and to add those prefixes to the adjectives/nouns to make them negative.
- Providing a table to complete with appropriate words from the text.

8.7 Comprehension

Williams (1989), Nuttall (1988, 1996) and Greenall and Swan (1986) are used as informing source for the activities mentioned below:

8.7.1 Connectives

- Supplying a text with connectives omitted and replaced by gaps, to be filled in with two or three given connectives (multiple choice).
- Supplying a text as above and giving a list of connectives in random order / supplying a text as above with a list.
- Giving a few groups of sentences with a linking word in each group and asking to join each of the sentences into one sentence.

8.7.2 Reference/Substitution

- Giving a list of referents with empty spaces to be filled in with the items they refer to in the text.
- Circling the referents and asking the learners to underline the items in the text they refer to.
- Supplying the text with reference items omitted and replaced by gaps and supplying a list of omitted items in a random order.

8.7.3 Ellipsis

- Framing questions that focus on elided elements.
- Signaling the ellipsis in the given sentences by means of carets.

8.7.4 Vocabulary

- Giving a table with appropriate headings according to the vocabulary required to be completed.
- Supplying a text and a diagram illustrating a lexical relationship found in it, partially filled in.
- Circling, boxing or underlining terms with the same referents, and joining them with colored lines and giving them the same number.
- Devising questions for picking up the different items with same referents.

8.7.5 Organizing a Paragraph

- Supplying a paragraph with key sentences omitted and replaced by a gap to be filled with a correct key sentences chosen from the list of the possible key sentences given.
- Supplying a paragraph with one sentence/ sentences omitted (but not indicated by a gap).
- Supplying a paragraph in which all the sentences are scrambled.
- Giving sentences to be resembled with a question framework.

8.7.6 Organization above paragraph level

- Supplying a text with one paragraph omitted and given separately to be inserted at an appropriate place.
- Supplying a text with opening and concluding paragraph omitted and giving several opening and concluding paragraphs separately.

- Supplying a text with a topic sentence of each paragraph omitted and replaced by a gap to be filled with appropriate sentences given separately.
- Supplying a text with main headings and sub-headings to be numbered in a conventional way.

9. Conclusion

The aim of the study was to explore the reading problems of the students at the advanced level and to suggest certain skills and strategies to overcome those problems and finally to become accelerated readers.

The data analysis has revealed the fact that the majority of learners had serious reading problems in all major aspects of reading due to which they loose interest in reading. Most readers do not consciously think about the structure of the text in normal circumstances. The result is that the text may seem as a jigsaw puzzle in which parts can be identified but the way they fit together remains obscure, so they fail to read effectively. In order to read effectively and efficiently it is desirable that the reader must study the structure, development and organization of the text, carefully and thoroughly, which will remove all the impediments obstructing the path of fluent reading

It is only then that readers are able to grasp the real meaning that a text holds and drive real pleasure and learning that is the goal of all reading. Reading causes one to reflect on one's perceptions, make distinctions of new areas of reality and become sensitive to them. As Norman Cousins (as cited in H.G Rickover, 1974) has rightly remarked: "The proof of living is in memory, and all of us, through reading, can live five or six lifetimes in one. Through reading the sluices of the mind open up, making accessible the range of experiences otherwise beyond our personal reach."

It is thus crucial that we inspire the young to read; for if they do not read, they will never change this world or beat its manipulation in midst of havoc wrought by satellite information and ongoing AI systems warfare.

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