

## Developing the skill of Reading

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### Abstract

The aim of the paper is to share how the reading skill can be developed. The tendency to read English has decreased a lot and there are a variety of reasons for this. The introduction of computer technology and use of communication technology are the main reasons. Young people prefer to surf the computer or carry out communication over the telephone, SMS, chat room or email instead of reading. This is unavoidable. The new technology certainly can offer every piece of information learners would be looking for. However, this does not reduce the importance of reading.

Reading makes one reflective, our cognitive energy gets engaged during the process of reading. It is reading that leads to high order skills required for thinking: interpretative abilities, analytical capabilities, logical ways of going about things and creative abilities.

Many of our graduates do not read, this is because they cannot read, that is, they are not taught how to do reading. In other words, they don't possess the skills which are required for the activity of reading. The researcher believes that if reading is taught in a planned way and the required skills are imparted through practicals they can be given the first-hand experience of interacting with the text. Once a learner realizes that he or she can read, they proceed further (during which their teacher has to help them) and begin to enjoy reading. In a course of time the more they read, the more they enjoy and the more they get experience.

Reading means going through the text with a purpose. Reading does not mean just to go over the text but extracting the substance of it in the shortest possible time.

This paper claims that reading for information in the era of information is undoubtedly significant but it is reading that takes learners from the printed lines to what lies beyond them and for this learners have to be deliberately trained.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the issue why students these days don't read and what could be done to make them read.

**KEYWORDS:** Reading skills, developing reading skills, loud reading, supplementary reading

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### The need to know the reading skill

Students today have many opportunities to gather information. Books are not the only tools that one is exposed to. Using a mobile phone, reading from a tablet or searching something on the internet has opened the floodgates for finding and accessing information. Students should not just be taught to learn to read but to **read to learn**. With proper reading skill one can explore topics ranging from the complexities of the human mind to the making of the robot.

According to one credible international survey, it is said that "the world's **top 500 most powerful professionals** have one thing common; their reading speed is more than **500 words per minute**."([http://yoursatcoach.com/reading\\_skills.html](http://yoursatcoach.com/reading_skills.html)) This shows that the

ability to read is essential in today's world. A person's reading skill is responsible for increasing one's ability to learn and whip through volumes of information. The ability to read gives an edge over others by making it possible for one to go through piles of papers quickly. During one's professional life one has to read various documents. Whether one is a doctor, lawyer, businessman, engineer, scientist, proofreader, teacher or student doesn't matter. If the person is not a skilled reader one cannot cope up with the increasing work load and may find it difficult to finish the work in time. A lawyer has to go through all the case files before preparing for any case. To go through the files one has to be fast and also at the same time understand what one is reading.

According to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, "Reading is the single most important skill necessary for a happy, productive and successful life." (<http://everydaylife.globalpost.com/importance-reading-skills-14778.html>)

Educational researchers have found that there is a strong relation between reading and academic success. It is seen that a student who is a good reader does well in studies than the student who is a weak reader. The more supplementary reading one does, the more it is helpful for the student to do well in the exam. Weak readers are unable to do well in the exam as compared to the good readers. (<http://esl.fis.edu/parents/advice/read.htm>)

These days one needs excellence to be valued in the job market. Only marks do not help a person get a job. It is the knowledge not only of one's own subject but also of other subjects that helps secure a good work position. Major Multi Nationals see the practical knowledge of the candidate and then select the person for the job.

Some outstanding personalities are well read. Well-read people aim for excellence. Excellence is voluntary that's why not many people tend to read. Dr APJ Abdul Kalam has said - "*Learning gives creativity, creativity leads to thoughts, thoughts provide knowledge and knowledge makes you great.*" To learn and to gain knowledge one needs to read. And it is reading that eventually makes a person great.

### **What does reading mean**

"Reading" means reading any text with maximum comprehension. The text could be of any type: in print, electronic form, newspaper, magazine, etc.

### **Why don't students read?**

The researcher has come across, during her classroom interactions at various levels, that there are these following kinds of readers:

1. The students who know how to read and they read a lot but their number is microscopic and usually they were not found going beyond what they are supposed to do for the exam.
2. Those students who know how to read, but cannot read for various reasons, mainly on account of regular distractions like TV, computer and whiling away their time in something which is of no use for their self-improvement.
3. Those students who do not know how to read at all, neither do they have any awareness that they have no ability to read. They enjoy bliss in their ignorance.

The main focus of this paper is on the second and the third type of students and how to make them acquire the reading skill and develop among them the reading habit.

There are various reasons why students don't read. The most common reason that the researcher has found is that **learners don't like reading**. They feel bored and **do not have patience to read huge books**. A majority of students cannot enjoy reading because they have no ability to read. In the experiment conducted the researcher found that when

the learners are told to read a small passage or a news item or even the advertisement they were not able to do it because in the very first few lines they would come across vocabulary items alien to them. The lack of vocabulary items made them lose their confidence and the whole exercise of sitting and reading appeared to them absolutely futile.

The next very common reason has been that students **don't find time to read** because of lots of distractions in their daily life. A lot of their time is consumed by the stressful situations of submissions, completion of assignments, anxiety for preparing for the exam and the fear of uncertainty in the job market that lurks at the back of their minds. Some of the students and even teachers have also been found saying that they have "more important things to do" than reading any kind of book. (Grabe, W, Dilemmas for the Development of Second Language Reading Abilities, in Richards, JC, Renandya, WA, Cambridge University Press 2002, **Methodology in Language Teaching, An Anthology of Current Practice**)

The third important factor that dissuades them is there aren't many books which can interest them and if there are, many students do not know how to choose from them. There is a great need therefore to guide the students what they should read. It has been found that in a large number of colleges the books issued to students are only the textbooks. There are hardly any books the libraries have for supplementary reading and there is hardly any college which offers the facility of issuing extra books for extra reading.

In addition to this, our libraries are yet to think of providing space for students where they can choose the books they wish, sit comfortably and carry out the reading activity to their satisfaction.

#### **Experiments to develop reading skills**

The researcher conducted a survey and found that students don't read because **they can't read. They have never been taught reading.** It's common knowledge that teaching reading has no space in our teaching and learning system, neither has it any significance in our evaluation system. Very few teachers encourage extra reading other than the syllabus. Students have not been taught how to look up references and how to make use of the library. They are never taught how to go about the text. Supplementary reading apart, students are notable to read even their own textbooks.

The result of all this is - students lack confidence because they are not exposed to new ideas which can activate their creativity. The increasing competition demotivates them. The student's imagination power does not develop and they tend to become cynic and inactive. The desire to discover new things gradually dies away. Therefore, in the globalized context they do not have the guts to get into competition. But can our students survive this way? The answer is 'no'. To make our students good readers, we have to teach them how to read.

There is a small group of students, particularly from the English medium background, who love to read, but many of them don't read the right books and are carried away by those which they shouldn't read. They are carried away by detective novels, crime stories and science fiction and also books that help improve their general knowledge. Students also love to go through magazines based on various topics like health, fashion, cars, etc. The English background students are motivated to a considerable extent. To develop the reading habit among them, therefore is not very difficult. "However, the availability of

materials that they do like to read can make a lot of difference. These learners usually do not read much. To get them hooked on reading, they need access to a good collection of books and other materials that they want to read. Unfortunately, the kind of material that these students are more likely to pick up (eg: ghost stories, comics, and the like) may be hard to find, or even nonexistent, in schools.”(Richards, Thatcher, Shreeves, Timmons, & Barker, 1999;Worthy, Moorman, & Turner, 1999; in Richards, JC, Renandya, WA, Cambridge University Press 2002, **Methodology in Language Teaching, An Anthology of Current Practice**, page number 296)

Some students like stray reading but it is done for passing the time and not much learning takes place from it. There are very few students who do serious reading.

The students are never made to read and the teachers never correct them or help them. In short, **reading is never taught as a skill**. And the students **never get the first-hand experience of what reading actually means**. “We are less likely to be successful in encouraging our students to read if we ourselves do not read. This advice is particularly important when first beginning an Extensive Reading Programme. We can show students the books or other materials we have just read or are reading, let them see us read silently, and read aloud to them from our favourite materials. This sends a strong message that we value reading and that our students should do the same.” (Campbell, 1989; in Renandya, WA & Jacobs, GM, Extensive Reading: Why Aren't We All Doing It? In Richards, JC, Renandya, WA, Cambridge University Press 2002, **Methodology in Language Teaching, An Anthology of Current Practice**)

As a researcher, it was noticed that a majority of the teachers are not well read. Therefore, they weren't able to add novelty to their lectures. Students complaint that there are times that they have no desire to attend any type of lectures in college. Students always expect their teachers to have more knowledge than what they have after reading the books related to the subject of their study.

#### **The Reading skill and learning of English**

The ability to read is directly related to the acquisition of English. It is the only channel apart from listening through which a learner receives English. The more it is received the more competent one can become. In this sense, reading has a definite pedagogical purpose. Reading thus plays an important role in learning of English.

However the question is - How to make our students get the first-hand experience of reading? How to develop their reference skills?

The researcher conducted a survey of 30 students. Maximum students were from the vernacular medium and only eight students had an English background. Out of the 30 students only fifteen students listened to English news or songs. 12 students said they read occasionally. Only four students were confident to write in English. When asked **the reason why** they didn't read, more than fifty percent of the students said they didn't read because they would not understand **what they read**. They found it difficult to understand the text given to them for reading. There was not even a single student who read the newspaper daily. Only one person did supplementary reading that too not regularly. And three students referred to books other than the prescribed one.

The same thing was done with a few more groups. It was found that a large number of students had no ability to read because they did not know how to read. This was because they were never taught how to read with speed and with understanding.

Usually the students are asked to sit and go through the newspaper. When they are given the newspaper, they make an attempt to read. In the course of time, they are told to read anything that they find interesting. They do the same exercise every day for sometime. When it is done regularly they develop the capacity to sit. Initially they are not able to even look at the newspaper, but eventually they become bold enough to do it. Later they are told to look only at pictures and read the small captions given below the pictures and correlate the pictures with the captions. So even if they do not understand all the words given in the caption they are able to relate to it because of the pictorial context. Slowly they start reading advertisements, comic strips or pictures of some happenings like a meeting or strike, a procession or an accident.

After doing this activity the students realize that they can learn English from it and they try to read some news items on their own. If they have any problem I'm always there to guide them. The students can be told to go through different books and look for short stories. The stories could be from anywhere, Aesop's fables, Panchatantra, Ramayana, etc. The stories are not more than a page or so. They are asked to bring at least one story every week. Some of them share a story aloud in front of the class. If they are unable to tell the story then they are asked to read it aloud. In this way, the researcher has tried to teach them loud reading which includes stress patterns, pronunciation, intonations, rhythm. When they begin to enjoy loud reading they do it more, this is how their reading habit is developed. The students are also asked to pick up interesting sentences which have specific expressions. Slowly they get trained in identifying the beauty spots of the text. If they find any difficult words or phrases, they are directed in how to refer to a dictionary. The dictionary habit also develops with the reading habit. This activity includes a blend of reading from the books and using the technology as well- like referring to the cell phone dictionary while reading a book etc.

The students are exposed to different types of materials so that they become familiar with different kinds of genre and accustomed to reading for different purposes and in different ways.

**Conclusion:** If the liking for reading is developed in a controlled way and if it is monitored properly the researcher has found that students can go for free reading. If they try on their own they get more confidence. They may read any type of book they want. The book could be a recipe book, a magazine, a novel, a journal, some article, a book on fashion, picture album with captions, book on design, drawing, arts and architecture, etc. The books which are simple, interesting and within the experience of the learners attract them.

These are tried techniques illustrated in this paper and it has enabled to gain confidence to say that if these techniques are properly deployed students do develop liking for reading and in course of time they become good readers which ultimately contributes to their ability to express effectively.

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