

INFLUENCE OF READING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

Arthi M

*Research Scholar, Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages,
Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India*

Dr.R.Srinivasan

*Associate Professor of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages,
Vellore Institute of Technology, Vellore, India*

Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of employing strategies in reading, and identifies the difficulties of teaching reading to tertiary level students. It suggests some suitable strategies to enhance the reading comprehension of students at the tertiary level. Prominent reading comprehension strategies namely i) prior knowledge activation, ii) monitoring and iii) confirming are discussed in this paper. The paper attempts to illustrate how these reading comprehension strategies could minimize the difficulties in teaching English language to the students at the tertiary level.

Keywords: *ELT, reading comprehension strategies, prior knowledge activation, monitoring, confirming, tertiary level students.*

Introduction

Reading is an important language skill that enables students to acquire knowledge by exposing them to a variety of texts and contexts. Today, the boundaries between subjects are narrowing down on account of the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of the knowledge domains. Information Technology has ushered in a revolution in the way students read. It has in fact led to a 'problem of plenty' where students are flooded with reading material from different sources such as web portals, blogs and the social media. Students need to make a judicious choice of what to omit and what to read. They can easily get drowned in the sea of information that opens up before them. The attention span of the students is also diminishing, and they get impatient too soon. The advent of e-readers such as Amazon's Kindle has it made possible for students to access a multitude of texts from a single device that is compact and portable. The electronic version of reading materials is gradually gaining popularity among students and professionals.

In this changing scenario of how learners, especially students at the tertiary level, read, it is essential to note that the process of reading can be enhanced with the help of suitable strategies. Paivo (1983) defines language strategy as, "... a skillful planning and management of language learning as carried out by the learner or language teacher." (189).

Before understanding the language learning strategies of tertiary level students it is necessary to have a brief idea on why the strategies for primary and secondary students are not considered here. Primary and secondary level learners, especially in countries such as

India, usually give importance to core subjects to score higher marks and obtain ranks to help them get admission to professional courses. At this stage, learning a language is auxiliary vis-à-vis learning the core subjects. Usually, the importance of language is realized only when the students appear for interviews, seek placement, and attend campus recruitment drives, which happen at the tertiary level. Learning a language is not an easy task at this stage, as it requires the use of suitable strategies and calls for constant practice. Teaching reading to tertiary level learners becomes challenging for the language teachers, especially when the learners do not attach significance to language learning. When it comes to second language learning, mastery of the language skills listening, speaking, reading and writing play a vital role. This paper focuses on the importance of reading comprehension strategies for tertiary level learners and emphasizes how it could enhance the language proficiency of the learners. It is pertinent to note that reading as a skill is not confined merely to the language classroom. The success of learners lies in comprehending the text appropriately, analyzing the information thoroughly and presenting the information coherently. Hence, reading as a skill is not an isolated one but an integration of the other language skills, especially the skills of written communication.

Therefore, language fluency is essential in academic and professional contexts.. There is growing agreement among language researchers that these dimensions of fluency must be assessed within the context of reading comprehension (Pikulski & Chard, 2005). Hence, this paper briefly discusses some of the major yet basic reading strategies.

Reading Skills and Comprehension Strategies

Basic reading skill involves the processes of skimming, scanning, extensive and intensive reading. Reading skills support the language learners to practice the English for General purposes, English language Teaching, English as second Language, English for academic purposes, English as foreign language and English for specific purposes. There is no significant difference between reading skills and reading strategies. At times, educators use these terms interchangeably for better understanding of the learners (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008). Over all reading comprehension strategies support the enhancement of reading skills, which ultimately leads to an improvement in language proficiency. The level of reading is intensive for the tertiary students. Teaching some strategies to the learners will hasten the language learning, especially with regard to reading comprehension. Some of the prominent strategies for enhancing the reading comprehension of the tertiary level students are discussed below.

Prior Knowledge Activation

Using prior knowledge of a concept or a piece of information to make prediction about the development of thought in the reading passage helps in better comprehension of the text. It is ideal to begin from the learner's personal experiences which are actively present in the learners mind. This is known as "schema" or "schemata". Schema as a method of assessment draws from the background knowledge of one's short term or long term memory. It helps develop self- monitoring strategies which would trigger thoughts from the learner's prior knowledge. It prompts the learners to explore the content and context further. The thoughts that wander or rush through the minds of readers, the searches and struggles for meaning, the reflections and associations, are hidden from the outside observer (Block,1986). This strategy is also referred to as predicting and inferencing. As they read, good readers frequently make predictions about what is to come (Campbell & Malicky, 2002; Daniels & Zemelman, 2004; Hock & Mellard, 2005; Pressley, 2002, 2006).

Monitoring

The next important and familiar reading strategy is monitoring. Learners are encouraged to attempt to resolve the meaning of new words and understand the concept of the context in a given text. After reading the text, the learners would attempt to predict the meaning of words and identify the contexts. Such words must be actively

self-monitored and should conform to the exact meaning of the context. Monitoring also acts as a vocabulary learning strategy. This strategy can solve the basic problems of reading comprehension (Coiro, J. 2003, Liaw, 2017).

Confirming

Here the reader refers to the authentic meaning of the words in a context and familiarizes himself/ herself with new words. The reader has to be focused on the objective of reading. While a reader attempts confirmation, he/she should stop predicting the meaning and confirm the original meaning from the context. The reader can resort to confirming the meaning of the words with a dictionary, or he/she can associate the given word to a similar context and confirm if his/her attempt at confirmation was correct. When the reader's prediction is correct, the reader can continue to follow the text without disturbing the flow of reading (Coiro, 2003, Liaw, 2017). This would result in better comprehension of the text and improved assimilation of the content, which leads to an enhancement of reading comprehension.

Conclusion

The three basic reading strategies discussed above will help the reader effectively comprehend the text. Since learners at the tertiary level are expected to read a wide variety of texts ranging from their domain specific ones to general texts, these strategies would help them improve their overall reading comprehension skills. Reading empowers learners to obtain information using suitable strategies and enriches the process of reading the text and aids in better understanding the content. It also helps in structural understanding, phonemic recognition and semantic processing. Language teachers could encourage the tertiary level learners to employ these pertinent strategies to reap the benefits of reading.

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