

# Developing Reading Comprehension Ability of the Students of ATIs through Innovative Methods

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## Abstract

Reading comprehension is a combination of the acts of reading and comprehension, i.e. it is the act of understanding what a student is reading. But, the act is not simple to learn or practise because reading comprehension is multidimensional and complex; and it is an intentional active interactive process. Further, reading comprehension is a language ability and important for a student of Higher National Diploma in English (HNDE) at Advanced Technological Institute (ATI), to become a strong and capable reader. When he develops this ability, he easily captures the content knowledge of a text. Though many sources are available to develop the reading comprehension ability, for this paper, short stories and computer technology as an innovative method are used to promote the reading comprehension. While stories are considered, their distinctive features like brevity, modernity, and variety make the content knowledge of a text appealing and interesting to language learners. Further, stories can offer learners adequate linguistic, intellectual, and emotional involvement. As a result, the students will develop the comprehension ability firmly. As far as the computer technology is concerned, it plays a vital role in language education and its advances have created high hopes among the learners, who believe that the digital devices offer great promise as learning tools for language development. Thus, having considered all these facts in mind, a simple but effective student-friendly computational tool named as Reading Developer is designed for increasing the reading comprehension ability among the HNDE students at ATIs.

**Keywords:** reading comprehension, computer technology, stories, distinctive features, linguistic involvement, language development

## Introduction

Students read for a variety of purposes among which they read to be successful in their academic activities, to learn about news and events, to communicate with one another, to get from one place to another, to acquire new knowledge about an array of topics, to figure out what to eat, to learn the process for making or doing something, to entertain themselves, etc. Teele (2004) asserts that the goal of all the readers should be to understand what they read. That is, when they read something, the purpose is to try to understand what the author's intention is. In order to be a good reader, a learner should set a goal for his reading; therefore, good readers have a solid purpose for reading. But, what is reading, exactly?

## Reading

Reading is an interactive process in which a learner of HNDE acquires a wealth of knowledge and experiences. Many scholars have given their definition about what reading really means. First of all, Anderson et al. (1985) state that reading is a basic life skill, i.e. it is a lifelong skill

to be used by a student both at an educational institute like ATI, school, university, etc. and throughout his life. The academic success of a student of ATI greatly depends on the mastery of an academic reading skill. Mikulecky (2008) says that reading is a complex combination of conscious and unconscious thinking process. Nunan (2003) remarks that reading is a fluent process of readers combining information from a text and their own background knowledge to build meaning. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), reading is a process by which the meaning of a written text is understood. When students read texts fluently in their native language, they use this process to extract meaning from the text. But, second language reading, as is true of all aspects of language knowledge and use, is complex and the development of fluent reading abilities by second language students is a challenging undertaking (Schmitt and Rodgers, 2020). Snow et al. (1998) also say that reading is important, but it is one of the most challenging areas in the education system; and the ever-increasing demand for high levels of literacy in our technological society makes this problem even more

pressing. Reading is essential to individual development and national development strategy. With the improvement of technologies and the advent of emerging reading media, reading ability has gradually become indispensable for students to develop their personalities, obtain knowledge, and promote their social development. Meanwhile, it also concerns the cultural inheritance, technological innovation, and future development of a nation, receiving more and more attention from the countries all over the world. Reading ability enhancement has become a development strategy and important demand in many countries. Thus, the improvement of reading skill is essential as it plays an important role in any educational system. Reading influences reading comprehension.

### Reading Comprehension

In the process of reading, the understanding that results is called reading comprehension (Schmitt and Rodgers, 2020). Reading comprehension is a combination of the acts of reading and comprehension. It is an indispensable ability in the dissemination of knowledge. Further, reading comprehension is an important ability of human intelligence and the core component of literacy. Good reading comprehension depends on knowledge of the meanings of the words in the text. Comprehension occurs when the reader extracts and integrates various information from the text and combines them with what is already known. "The more you read, the more things you know" – This is a famous quote by Dr. Seuss. Further, reading comprehension is a linguistic ability which involves thinking about the words that were just read and deriving a meaning, for just those words and the text as a whole. In simpler terms, reading comprehension is the ability to read, understand, process, and recall what was just read. The scholar, Agustiani (2010), states that reading comprehension is the degree to which a student understands what he reads; and further the scholar says that if the student does not read to understand, he will read for nothing. Therefore, comprehension requires the reader to be an active constructor of meaning. Further, comprehension enhances language and vocabulary knowledge. The strong relations between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension have been acknowledged for many years (Carroll, 1993; Davis, 1944;

Thorndike, 1973). Some estimate that about 90% of the words need to be known for a reader to have a good chance of understanding a text (Nagy and Scott, 2000).

Good learners use a variety of comprehension strategies simultaneously and, according to scholar, Pressley (2002), the learners know how to intentionally apply specific strategies to help their comprehension, particularly with regard to challenging texts. The National Reading Panel (2000) emphasizes the fact that comprehension is an active process between the reader and a text, i.e. a process that is both 'purposeful' and 'thoughtful'.

### Short Stories and Reading Comprehension

Short stories have multi-facets, i.e. they play an important role in several fields, especially, in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT). They help a learner of ESL improve his reading comprehension power immensely. Through reading a story, a learner comes to know about the text and comprehends the main idea of it. When a student engages in reading, he not only gets the basic idea of the text, but also understands the major characteristics of a short story *like setting, character, theme, dialogue, opening, closing, etc.*, language skills, cultural awareness, critical thinking skills, and creativity. In the 19th century, short stories developed as literary forms as magazines became more popular and widely read. English has now become a global language and there are more and more writers, both male and female, from countries and cultures all over the world writing their stories in English, even though English is not their native language. For example, F. Sionil Jose from the Philippines, Farida Karodia from South Africa, Witi Ihimaera from the Maori, Ha Jin from China, etc. are some of them.

Reading comprehension involves interpreting a text and constructing the meaning in the light of the gained background knowledge. The process of comprehending involves decoding the writer's words and then using background knowledge to construct an approximate understanding of the writer's message. To make comprehension easy, the *text structures* are important, i.e. they are to be clear, informative, and effective. Meyer and Rice (1984) use the term text structure to refer to "how the ideas in a text are interrelated to convey a message to a

reader". Another researcher, Gillian Lazar (1990), proposes that "the text should be sufficiently challenging without being so difficult; and it should be within the student's grasp, in terms of their linguistic, intellectual, and emotional capacities". At this point, it is noted that the structure of short stories are appropriate for reading comprehension process. Many short stories are available in simplified versions for English language learners. The language in these versions is graded for learners at various levels. They can read and understand the story and further, they tend to appreciate it with the deeper knowledge of comprehension. Along with the comprehension power, the students get the knowledge in pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities, too. Thus, reading comprehension is so exquisite and elemental. That's why, Victor Hugo says that "To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark". Learning to comprehend a story or any text is a continual and recurring process that is built up as students of ESL engage with a range of texts, simultaneously and actively accessing and constructing meaning. As learners comprehend the stories, they learn to draw on their personal, social, cultural, and academic knowledge and experiences in order to read and interact with the ideas in the texts. To comprehend the content of the text, students should not only have a good mastery of English, but the effective comprehension strategies, as well.

### Comprehension Strategies

Reading comprehension refers to the students' ability to read and understand the information presented in a written form, here the short stories. Good readers interact with the text, making and validating the predictions, creating questions about the characters, main idea or plot, monitoring their own understanding of the text, clarifying the confusing parts, and connecting text events to their own prior knowledge and experiences. The learners of ESL should be taught or made aware of the comprehension skills necessary to help them understand the text and be successful as independent readers. To boost the comprehension ability, some strategies or techniques are to be deployed by the students. Strategies are considered specific learned procedures that can be used by readers to foster active, competent, self-regulated, and intentional

reading (Pressley, 2006; Trabasso and Bouchard, 2002). Good readers apply the required strategies without knowing their knowledge while they read. Thus, a learner should be active enough to comprehend the text which he reads. It is considered as the first comprehension strategy. Active readers are considered as strategic and skilled readers. According to Alison Davis (2011), skilled readers:

- Learn to master concepts about print, alphabetic principle, sounds, letters and high-frequency words, and practise and use a range of decoding and word recognition strategies.
- Develop and use context and morphological strategies to work out the meaning of an unknown word; they also recognise when a word has multiple meanings and are able to work out the correct meaning of the word from the context.
- Develop and use semantic and syntactic cues to help them understand texts by drawing on their knowledge of grammatical structures of language.
- Develop automaticity of high-frequency words.
- Read with oral and 'in the head' fluency and accuracy.
- Become proficient in using and combining comprehension strategies to help them understand sentences, paragraphs, and whole texts; these strategies include prediction and re-prediction, making connections through linking to prior knowledge, visualisation, asking and answering questions, inference, identifying most important information, understanding the structure of the text, re-telling, summarizing, and evaluating.
- Make conscious decisions about when and how to use and integrate strategies for comprehension.

Here, the comprehension strategies such as *making connections*, *questioning*, *visualizing*, *inferring*, *determining importance*, and *synthesizing* are explored in some detail. As far as 'making connections' is concerned, learners make personal connections with the stories by using their background knowledge. Three main types of connections are identified while they read the stories. They are:

1. **Text-to Self (T-S)** – It refers to the connections between the story and the learners' personal experience.

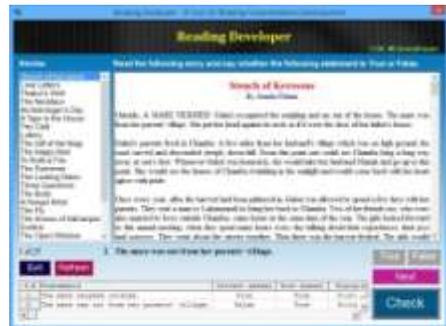
2. **Text-to-Text (T-T)** – It shows the connections between the story being read and to another story which was previously read.
3. **Text-to-World (T-W)** – It reflects the connection between a story being read and something that happens in the world.

While 'questioning' is considered as a comprehension strategy, it helps the students clarify and have a deep understanding of the story they are reading. Comprehension questions are of different types: *wh-questions*, *True-False questions*, *multiple choice questions*, *Yes-No questions*, etc. Another effective comprehension strategy is 'visualizing or visualization' which gives reading comprehension a three dimensional (3D) effect. Visualization makes learners to be involved with the story in the ways that make it personal and prosperous or memorable. Visual images help readers continue their reading smoothly and meaningfully. 'Inferring', another comprehension technique, is usually referred to as 'reading between the lines'. In this technique, context clues, picture clues, etc. are taken as the evidence to form a best guess of the story. As a result, making prediction, drawing conclusion, and finding the meaning of unknown words in the story become considerably easy for learners. When the students read the story, they have to determine the purpose of reading, i.e. they have to think why they read the story and what information which may be important or unimportant, they expect in the story. This is also another strategy, i.e. 'determining importance', in reading comprehension. When a student reads a story with a purpose, he comes to know the real value of it and he is benefitted by it. Another reading strategy is 'synthesizing'. It is a smooth flow of thinking and it is a changing process. Readers' thinking changes as they gather more information. As a result, the new information makes the learners re-evaluate their existing or background knowledge or schema to form a new schema. Thus, comprehension can be developed or made powerful through various strategies or techniques. When a learner of ESL applies the suitable strategy in reading a short story, he will increase the comprehension ability without any difficulty.

### Reading Comprehension and Computer Technology

Now-a- days, computer technology is more and more accessible. It is used to drill students on skills; concerning reading skill, it facilitates comprehension greatly, i.e. computer-assisted tools like *Speed Reader*, designed for developing comprehension enhance second language learners' comprehension ability, and they help a student of ESL become a skilled reader. For example, a study by Arroyo (1992) examined the effect of extended use of computers on reading achievement. Another interesting study in the area of reading based on computer technology was carried out by Pederson (1986) to determine if passage availability (making the reading passage available on a computer screen while answering comprehension questions) affected reading comprehension. Both studies indicated a statistically significant increase in reading achievement of the students who used computers. Further, the researchers point out that use of the computer also appeared to increase students' motivation to learn, in addition to an improvement in reading. Thus, having understood the importance of computers in reading, the researcher develops a simple user-friendly and effective computational learning tool named as Reading Developer for improving the comprehension power of ATI students.

### The Sample Visual of the Developed Learning Tool Reading Developer



### Methodology

The tool, *Reading Developer*, is a student-friendly computer programme which has been designed with the help of the computer language, Visual Basic 6. Twenty five (25) very interest-provoking, smoothing, and famous short stories, collected from books and magazines which are fully related to HNDE students, were taken as data for this tool. Then, twenty (20) *True-False* questions for each story

were carefully formed in order to make the students understand and answer them correctly. Then, all the stories and relevant questions were fed into the tool. As far as the mechanism of the tool is concerned, when a story appears, its questions are also displayed one by one for students' access. After answering the question, the student can check its status, i.e. *right or wrong*. If he likes, he can check the answer of the question one by one or in the middle or after attempting all the questions.

### Results and Discussion

Thirty (30) first year students from HNDE at ATI in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka were selected for this study. The participants utilized the tool eagerly and it was noted that the results were quite progressive, i.e. 70 percent of the students (i.e. 21 students out of 30) were successful in their first attempt of answering the questions. In the discussion with the students regarding the usage of the tool, mostly all the students said something, but nearly same. First of all, they stated that they felt comfortable when they had worked with such a computer-based tool. Further stating, the immediate feedback of the question at their every attempt was a special for them; and also all pronounced in one voice that this type of innovative tool had given them the confidence and also motivated them to learn the English language, especially to read a lot.

### Conclusion

Mostly every learner of HNDE knows that English language development depends on the integration of the four skills. Reading is one of them. Reading becomes meaningful only through the understanding of the text. It is known as reading comprehension. Reading comprehension is an intentional, active, and interactive process; and it is one of the pillars of the act of reading. A lot of reading without any doubt improves the comprehension power, especially short stories play a vital role in this regard. As far as a learner of HNDE is concerned, short stories as reliable and standard texts pave the ways to promote his reading comprehension ability. Not only the short stories, but is it fully realized that the use of computer technology in the form of tools like *Reading Developer*, for developing reading shows a higher comprehension rate. Therefore, it is felt that making the students expand their reading comprehension ability with the help of the computer technology-incorporated ways is

now timely apt; and it is the current language learning trend, as well.

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