

Academic Reading in English Language: Basis for Learning Other Subjects in Indian Context

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Abstract. The paper focuses to highlight the point that proficiency in English language reading helps Indian students to enter the global market with competent expertise in their respective subjects. If reading is the aim, well-designed reading materials need to be created. The problem is clearly one of developing methods to meet adequately the specific needs of students of different streams like engineering, medicine, humanities, hotel management, fine arts etc.. It should not be directed towards teaching words and mechanical reading of the words and structures of English. It should be aimed at making the students use the language for communicative purposes. Reading activities are similar to learning music. Both Reading and music involve recollection, appreciation, and meaningful comprehension. This activity begins with the rhymes of the nursery. In a similar way, poetry and drama nurture reading skills in young adults. Thus, teaching reading in a systematic manner would help the ESL students immensely in mastering their optional subjects which are mostly content-based and require reading of many and varied textbooks. So, this training of mastering reading should begin at a very early stage and continue till the students enter their professional or technical courses at tertiary level.

Keywords: academic reading, communication, music in relation to reading, content subjects, competence

1. Introduction

Of all the language skills, reading is the easiest to begin with and easiest to test in a second language situation. It would be helpful to examine the desired developments to be followed in the practice of educating young children through reading. To make children practice reading to understand is pivotal to comprehend how systematically learning can be processed in their minds. Active reading provides the required learning ability to children. It also encourages language development. Reading activity can be done in the classroom. William Break and Fredericka L. Stoller opined,

Many have argued for the past 15 years that reading is the most important academic language skill for second language students....Reading is the primary means for independence whether the goal is performed better in independent tasks, learning more about subject matter or improving language abilities.[1]

2. Academic Reading, a Pre-cursor to Advanced Reading in Other Subjects

If reading is the aim, well-designed reading materials are required. The problem is clearly one of developing methods to meet adequately the specific needs of students of different streams like engineering, medicine, humanities, hotel management, fine arts etc. It should not be directed towards teaching words and mechanical reading of the words and structures of English. It should be aimed at making the students use the language for communicative purposes. Regarding communicating, Asher Cashdan opined that,

When we use language to find out what we think and feel, we are learning. When we use language to tell others what we think and feel, we are communicating.[2]

The assumption that the teacher should select a set of vocabulary and structures is to say those elements of usage are enough. The teacher should slowly introduce vocabulary in graded phases and present them to students. They should be encouraged to go through a text of passage and discuss the contents. They also should be encouraged to rearrange the content in a better form, so as a layman can understand it. This would, to a large extent, meet the demands of the language for communicative purpose. In other words, the usefulness of language learning through reading does not depend only on what specific pieces of language the learner reads. They should be able to use the language creatively and transfer the vocabulary and structures to contexts other than the

purposes. Another technique is to reverse this process: the students are given a very simple passage or dialogue and are asked to elevate its level. This would make them aware of the levels in which language can be used. Academic reading material should be made available to the students. At the same time, vocabulary also is introduced. This would enable the students not only to read a wide variety of written pieces but also nurture them to write independently. The aim of good language teaching is to make the students good communicators to express what they feel and think on their own besides academic contents.

If this situation prevails, even vernacular medium students will join the mainstream of English medium students. This method of language training would pave way for the non-English medium students to pursue technical, medical and other professional courses without any difficulty. This also places the vernacular media students - who studied English only as a language till class X on par with the English medium students. Hence, if this method is put into practice, the parity between vernacular media and English medium students will be eliminated to a large extent. To achieve this, encouragement of purposeful talk among pupils becomes crucial. The vernacular media students may hesitate to talk initially. It is the responsibility of the teacher to encourage them to speak out what they read and comprehend. Asher Cashdan expresses his emphasis on comprehension skills as follows:

The development of comprehension skills does not depend, in practice, on an innate ability to answer questions. Children must be taught and trained to use all the cues available semantic, syntactic and phonological - and to manipulate the language in order to extract the full meaning from it.[3]

This was basically the result of a change in the perception of the role of English in colonial and post-colonial societies. With research across many different fields being done and published in English Language, the Teaching of English as a foreign language arose as an independent profession. Many countries started learning English as a foreign language; but the Indian situation is different. Due to the multi-linguistic setting of the country, English has been adopted, out of practical necessity, as the intra-national medium. This fact has assumed greater proportions as English, as a language, assumed the status of a global language.

According to the English language experts, it has been an accepted inference that the four skills that constitute the learning of a language are:

a) Listening; b) Speaking; c) Reading; and, d) Writing.

It is needless to emphasize that without “listening” there is no possibility of “speaking” a language; as such in order to speak, the learner has to listen to that language. Similarly, without vocabulary enhancement “reading” becomes a difficult task; and without the right sense of grammar, “writing” is impossible. The English teachers of the vernacular media, particularly in the rural and semi urban areas generally follow bilingual method and explain everything in the mother tongue of the students on the pretext of making them understand. This denies the students any chance of listening to English even in those limited hours allotted to the English subject.

Among the four skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, the first two skills are mostly non-existent in vernacular media schools. Children who are not exposed to the primary skill of speaking naturally find it difficult to cultivate the other skills. Generally, in such classes, there is no opportunity given to the students to read the textbook. Thus the denial of speaking and reading skills makes the learning of writing a more complicated process. As a result of this method, the students of vernacular media classes remain passive observers in the class without learning any language skill. As a result, they mug up the chunks of English just to clear the examination, and remain bad performers in English. These students subsequently develop such diffidence in English; they turn out to be failures in higher education, however bright they are.

Vernacular media students study English subject for only six years in their schooling with just one English class per day. Even in this class, the teachers mostly follow bilingual method and explain the lessons in the vernacular. Thus, exposure to English is almost absent for them. Despite having exercises in many language skills, like word study, usage and grammar, spelling, composition and comprehension, the students

are not exposed to skill-based language study. The child learns the mother tongue or L1 naturally, with the help of “listening” as first activity, followed by “speaking.” When a youngling starts speaking and responding, then he/she is sent to school. The child who is already familiar with different skills of the mother tongue is ready to learn through Reading and Writing skills, as he/she learns his/her mother’s tongue.

Academicians, intelligentsia and more so, the government should initiate some concrete steps to strengthen English language teaching. Competent English language teachers should be provided in the schools and create environs in the school premises for the provision of listening to and speaking in English at least for a few stipulated hours every day. These two skills, listening and speaking are vital in developing the other skills. Usually in the vernacular media classes, the teachers hardly read out the lessons and hardly speak in English with the students. They encourage the students in rote learning, and dictate a few summaries of the lessons to make the students pass the examinations. Thus, the skill-based teaching of English is almost non-existent; and, as a result, the students do not learn any skill of English language in general, academic reading skill in specific.

The vernacular media students who study English in an unskilled way are forced into a disadvantageous position after class X. Some of them prefer to pursue polytechnic courses to become engineering technicians. Even if they obtain admission into the course by writing entrance examination, the students from non-English medium schools are placed in a disadvantageous position while dealing with English skills such as, reading with comprehension. This anomaly is conspicuous and needs immediate attention of the academicians and others involved in the system. In a competitive world, with a fast paced technological development, the students who are taught English in an unskilled way face social problems like unemployment, and personal problems like lack of self-confidence and inferiority complex. These factors not only affect the individual lives but also may impede the overall growth of the nation.

In *Teaching Language as Communication*, H. G. Widdowson observes,

To begin with, it will be generally acknowledged that the ultimate aim in language learning is to acquire communicative competence, to interpret, whether this is made overt in talking or corresponding or whether it remains covert as a psychological activity underlying the ability to say listen, write and read.[4]

Thus, the language pedagogy should encourage the learner to inquire into the rationale, which should justify the activities to harness study of technical subjects. Hence, it is imperative to frame the English language syllabus in sync with the technical course material of the students. Students must also learn to relate English language to their courses of study. They also should be able to use it as vehicle for interaction with the technocrats and other professional experts. To achieve this target, it is necessary to design the English syllabus in tune with their content subjects. In fine, the English should be a stimulus and tool for the students to pursue their technical or other professional courses. In this regard William Little Wood, a communicative language expert opines,

The usefulness of language learning doesn’t depend only on what specific pieces of language the learner encounters. Still more, it depends on whether he masters the more general principles which underlie them. Language structures and communicative functions are not bound to specific situations once they have been mastered so that they can be used creatively, they can be transferred to contexts other than the one where they were initially acquired.[5]

Pupils remember and learn what they themselves formulate rather than what is presented to them in the form of formulated contents by the teacher. With the availability of advanced vocabulary, advanced reading and comprehension skills, the student has an opportunity to become an independent writer with meaningful practice activities. By the time the students complete +2 courses, they realize that they can write independently. In the present day world the student is expected to write for different purposes. It may be preparation of notes, an oral power point presentation or e-mail messages. The first step for developing writing skills is to include a small piece of writing regularly in every English class. It is as follows:

Writing in isolation is often felt by students somewhat boring. ‘Collaborative writing’ gives students room for ‘thinking time’ and ‘discussion time’ and makes writing not only interesting but encouraging.[6]

This collaborative writing exercise includes project work, preparing important points for discussion in intra group discussion etc.

3. Music as a Subject that contribute to Reading

Students who are involved in reading are better readers as both sides of the brain are utilized in a manner very similar to learning music.

Reading Skills	Music Skills
Letter recognition	Note recognition
Sound/Symbol	Sound/Symbol
Syllabication	Performing Rhythm Patterns
Vocabulary	Vocabulary
Rhyming	Rhyming
Parts of speech	Elements of music
Sentence structure	Phrase Structure
Punctuation	Articulation
Story Writing	Composition
Comprehension	Aural analysis
Silent reading	Audition
Fluency	Fluency

Fig.1: Effects in Reading[7]

Reading encompasses a whole lot of activity of the brain since it involves optical nerves, cognitive and memory activities of the brain. Both reading and music involve recollection, appreciation, and meaningful comprehension. This activity begins with the rhymes taught in nursery. The rhymes are imprinted in the brain of pre-schoolers long after learning the rhymes. The rhymes which are related to reading and the music which is related to reading are interdisciplinary to hone and enhance the reading capabilities. In a similar way, poetry and drama nurture reading skills in young adults.

The prime factor of reading is imperative that it is a constant process of guessing. But what the content writer brings to the text is often more important than what one finds in it. This is the very much reason that from the very beginning the students should be taught to use what they know to understand unknown elements. This can be achieved through proficiency in English which will become basis for learning other subjects.

4. English Language Reading: Basis for Learning Other Subjects

To make pupils who are proficient in academic reading may learn the other content subjects, but the teacher should make a conscious effort to inculcate the habit of taking the thoughts of the first-draft written down as a record. This practice makes the initial thoughts clear and does not allow the pupil to think bottomless thoughts and put the same on the paper. This exercise on the part of the English teacher goes a long way and trains the pupils to transfer this skill while they listen to the content subjects. The responsibility of inculcating this habit lies on the English teacher of the intermediate or +2 level in Indian context. This concept may be termed as writing for learning. It helps to conceive new ideas from language. In later stages, pupils could develop skills to combine different concepts and ideas. This skill, if developed among the pupils leads to mastery of complex concepts. While reading in English class, the same exercise of note taking should be given importance. Teachers should encourage their pupils to handle such skills. These skills will come handy to read their content subjects, to use indexes, and catalogues. They also help to keep one’s own notes and bibliography.

At present, it is more important to teach the students English for communicative and professional needs. Therefore, literary content should be reduced to a large extent and at the same time English teachers should help their pupils to learn their content subjects objectively. This could well be achieved by nurturing note-

taking, group discussions and debate skills, using their content subjects. The English teachers could help the students in a two dimensional manner by using the content of the other subjects in preparing the supplementary materials and carry on classroom activities.

- They can help the students to master the language skills
- They can help the students understand their content subjects more easily

Thus, teaching reading in a systematic manner would help the ESL students immensely as it would help them improve not only their communicative competence, vocabulary and structures, but also in mastering their optional subjects which are mostly content-based and require reading of many and varied textbooks. So, this training of mastering reading should begin at a very early stage and continue till the students enter into their professional or technical courses at tertiary level.

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