

A STUDY ON IMPROVING AND ASSESSING THE READING SKILLS OF STUDENTS IN TWO TEST FORMATS OF VOCABULARY AND CLOZE TEST

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This study aims at improving the reading skills of the students by motivating them. An entry level vocabulary test was conducted prior to the training on 12 first year engineering students. The scores were recorded. Then reading practice was given for three weeks where newspaper articles and short moral stories from motivational books were given for reading. Then an exit level vocabulary test was conducted and the scores were recorded. A t test was also conducted comparing the scores of the entry and exit level tests. The findings of the test revealed that there was a significant improvement in the participants' vocabulary was an indication of a considerable progress in their reading skills. Consequently, the participants showed an increased interest in improving their reading habit and knowing new words.

Keywords: reading skills; motivation; reading practice; assessment; vocabulary test; cloze test.

1. Introduction

The highest purpose of education is for the individual to become aware of oneself. Socrates rightly admonished, "Know yourself", and declared that the unexamined life is not worth living. Knowing oneself begins with the habit of reading, because reading serves purposes manifold. Worldly knowledge needed for personal and social adjustment too can be attained through reading habit. Reading books confers a host of possible benefits on the reader. A reader not only learns what has been discovered by others but also builds on the foundation of information that he receives through reading.

The ability to read well is regarded as one of the most valuable skills a human being can acquire. "Bhagavad Gita" was Gandhiji's daily guide and was a great source of encouragement to follow non violence. Fisher says that,

in the August 6th, 1925 issue of "Young India", Gandhiji wrote "I turn to the "Bhagavad Gita", and find a verse to comfort me, and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies and if they have not felt any visible or invisible effect on me, I owe it to the teachings of the "Bhagavad Gita." (1950 : 33).

This substantiates the point that human personality continuously evolves through reading, since it is a crucial factor that influences both intellectual and emotional growth.

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Reading is the most important tool in all academic advancements. It has always been an important part of the learning process. In this modern age of information, reading is a fundamental survival skill. It expands the mind and develops intellectual curiosity. Experience has taught that those who fail in school usually have failed first in reading.

1.1. Roles of Language Teachers

Teachers of the present age are often amazed at students' eagerness to learn, their creativity, persistent effort in academic and personal development, athletic and artistic accomplishments. This is evident from the manner the students display their strong sense of responsibility in their curricular and co-curricular activities. To enable students to excel in personal and professional lives, teachers can play a significant role by enhancing their reading habit. Hopkins asserts that,

each child builds his values by thoughtful, deliberate action in life situations which he faces, assisted by understanding and helpful adults (1954 : 305).

Though personal interest is vital, teachers can play this powerful role by ascertaining the needs and concerns of the students.

Reading habit must be fostered by language teachers since the importance of motivation in reading is undeniably great. Teele affirms thus 'the goal of all readers should be to understand what they read' (2004 : 92). Teachers must help students realize the objective of reading. Wheat remarks,

As teachers, we are concerned with two phases of interest. First, the interest of the student must somehow be captured if he is to read: and second, we must help the student to make reading a habitual activity. Indeed, it is at the point when reading becomes a permanent mode of behaviour that reading acquires a motivational force of its own (1955 : 57-58).

Motivation leads to the development of lifetime reading habits – one of the major objectives of good reading instruction.

Several researches confirm that student motivation is the key factor in promoting reading successfully. According to Guthrie, Perencevich, Tonks and Wigfield, 'The development of motivation to read should be supported because it is a determining factor in how much students will read' (2007). A student's real interests unfold only when the teacher motivates him, observes him and provides him with an opportunity for free self-learning. It can neither be stimulated by simply telling a student how much fun it is or how important it is to read a particular book nor by offering books that someone else has enjoyed reading. Teachers should find out for themselves, for time spent exploring pupils' needs and interests is a good investment. Hence, motivation towards reading must be carried out with wide assortment of reading materials for the students. Teachers must encourage reading habit by introducing different reading strategies to the students. Making inferences, visualizing, predicting, questioning and summarizing are some of the

reading strategies identified by research to improve reading comprehension which elevates the interest to read.

2. Research Plan

The area of focus of this research is to improve the habit of reading through practice sessions and to assess the improvement after training. The researcher is of the belief that encouraging reading habits at an early age among students would ensure a better future. According to Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson,

without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success inevitably will be lost' (1985).

The researcher also hopes to provide a meaningful learning experience to the students by group practice, partner practice and independent practice. This action research also analyses the improvement of reading skills by assessing their responses. According to Brown and Dowling,

action research is a term which is applied to projects in which practioners seek to effect transformations in their own practices...(2001).

The main aim of any action research is to find solutions to real problems faced by students and seek ways to improve their success.

The aim of this study 'A Study on Improving and Assessing the Reading Skills of Students in Two Test Formats of Vocabulary and Cloze Test' is to enhance the reading habit by providing motivation and regular practice. A small group of 12 first year engineering students was taken as sample. Initially, an entry level vocabulary test was conducted to know the word power of the participants. Their scores were recorded. Then reading practice was given for three weeks. Articles from newspapers and motivational books were given. Then an assessment was done, for assessment is an integral part of learning process. Bachman and Palmer believe,

language testing could enable the constructor to make inferences about test takers' ability to use language to perform tasks in a particular domain (1996).

Students' progress could be measured by different procedures. There are several test formats in use such as summary writing, short-answer questions, multiple-choice questions, oral recall, etc. Each format has its own advantages and disadvantages. For the purpose of this study, only two test formats, namely, vocabulary test and cloze test, were taken into consideration. According to Hedge,

testing was referred to the specific procedures that teachers and examiners employed to measure the learners' ability in the language (1998).

, it is clear that any reading instruction must end with an assessment.

For vocabulary test, texts on several topics were given. Papers carrying simple texts were supplied to the readers. Some words were printed in italics. The meaning of those words must be chosen from the options given. Through this format, students' ability to comprehend the meanings of words was assessed and the scores were recorded. Sometimes, there were situations where the students inferred the meaning of a particular word on their own. This can be considered as a sign of progress in the comprehending ability. The advantage of vocabulary test was that, it assessed the understanding of words as a single unit of the whole passage thereby, the passage as a whole.

Another test format adopted was cloze test. Every fifth word of the text was removed and was replaced with blank spaces. Since stories are a natural part of life, short moral stories were taken for this test. Moral stories were chosen for the reason they motivate the readers to think, enhance language skills and cognitive development, and stimulate thinking. The readers need to choose the correct word that fits the blank space from the choices given. This was again used to check the vocabulary of the students. They found this test interesting because homophones were included in the options. Choosing the right word from the homophones needs basic knowledge of spelling and meaning of words. The students answered correctly and the responses indicated that there was an improvement in their word power.

To verify whether the reading practice improved the performance, a *t* test was conducted comparing the scores of the entry and exit tests. The data is furnished below.

X	$X - \bar{X}$	$(X - \bar{X})^2$	Y	$Y - \bar{Y}$	$(Y - \bar{Y})^2$
42	-3	9	59	-10	100
40	-5	25	68	-1	1
48	3	9	72	3	9
50	5	25	73	4	16
34	-11	121	58	-11	121
40	-5	25	68	-1	1
50	5	25	74	5	25
40	-5	25	65	-4	16
51	6	36	72	3	9
52	7	49	78	9	81
50	5	25	71	2	4
43	-2	4	70	1	1
540		378	828		374

\bar{X} – entry test scores

y – exit test scores

$\bar{X} = 45$ $\bar{Y} = 69$

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$$S^2 = \frac{1}{n_1 - n_{2-2}} [\Sigma(x - \bar{x})^2 + \Sigma(y - \bar{y})^2]$$

$$= \frac{1}{22} [378 + 374] = \frac{752}{22} = 34.18$$

$$S = 5.846$$

$$t = \frac{\bar{x} - \bar{y}}{s \sqrt{\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2}}} = \frac{45 - 69}{5.846 \sqrt{\frac{1}{12} + \frac{1}{12}}} = \frac{-24}{5.846 \sqrt{0.1667}}$$

$$= \frac{-24}{5.846(0.4082)}$$

$$= \frac{-24}{2.3866}$$

$$\text{Cal } t = 10.0561$$

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Deg of freedom} &= n_1 + n_2 - 2 \\ &= 12 + 12 - 2 \\ &= 22 \end{aligned}$$

$$\therefore \text{tab } t \text{ for } 22 \text{ d.f at } 5\% = 2.07$$

$$\text{Cal } t > \text{tab } t$$

Reject H_0

$$\text{Now } t = \frac{\bar{x} - \bar{y}}{s \sqrt{\frac{1}{n_1} + \frac{1}{n_2}}}$$

$$= \frac{54 - 59}{14.18 \sqrt{\frac{1}{12} + \frac{1}{12}}} = \frac{-5}{14.18 \sqrt{0.1667}} = \frac{-5}{14.18(0.4082)}$$

$$= \frac{-5}{5.78896}$$

$$\text{Cal } t = -0.8637$$

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Deg of freedom} &= n_1 + n_2 - 2 \\ &= 12 + 12 - 2 \\ &= 22\end{aligned}$$

\therefore tab t for 22 d.f at 5% = 2.07

\therefore cal t < tab t

H_0 is accepted. From this, it is clear that the students showed improvement in understanding the meanings of words.

4. Findings

The results of the reading practice and the experience the researcher underwent show that there was a lack of motivation among the students at the beginning of the training. The researcher had some worries regarding providing time for reading practice. That became possible because in the college, where the study was conducted, reading hours were included in the regular schedule for the first year engineering students in their curriculum. Another question in mind was about the success of the regular reading practice as it was new to the students. In order to overcome this situation, the researcher had to motivate and monitor the students in every step of the practice especially in inferring the meaning of the words based on the context. After the training, the improvement was experienced by the researcher. It was rewarding both for the participants and the researcher. Encouraging students from time to time for showing progress in reading and providing books that fit students' immediate interests served as vital tools during the training. Strang and associates rightly remark,

if we think of reading as contributing to personal development and effecting desirable personality changes, we will provide our students with reading materials that meet their needs, or have some applications to their lives (1961).

The action research was a productive experience since the students' increased interest for reading and the desire to learn new words were really gratifying to the researcher as a teacher. The participants expressed that after the reading practice, they are alert and curious to know about new words.

4.1. Scope for Further Research

Future research can be done including a larger random sample. Checklist can be maintained to note the improvement of each student every week. Metacomprehension differences between male and female students can be analysed in future. This study may also be carried out by two different researchers and the results of the students showing improvement and that of the students who do not show improvement can be compared and the reasons can be investigated.

4.2. Conclusion

In this study, 12 students (first year engineering program) took a simple vocabulary test (entry test) prior to the training. The researcher assessed the students' performance, giving each student an individual vocabulary score which can be considered a good metric that measured their comprehending ability. Then reading practice for three weeks was given where they read articles from newspapers and motivational books. At the end of the training, a vocabulary test and a cloze test (exit test) were conducted to assess the participants' improvement in understanding the meanings of words. A *t* test was conducted comparing the scores of the entry and exit tests. The results of the *t* test proved that there was an improvement in the students' vocabulary. The three week reading practice lent the participants a considerable amount of investment into the hard work of learning. The assessment done helped them realize their potential as progressive readers. They expressed that though it was a simple training, it was transformative. In this light, they were dedicated to their reading throughout the study. The researcher was also able to sense the escalation not only in the vocabulary of the students but also in their interest to read. In short, the best way to promote the habit of reading is to motivate students to read. One way to do that is to help students find value and meaning in classroom reading tasks and activities

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