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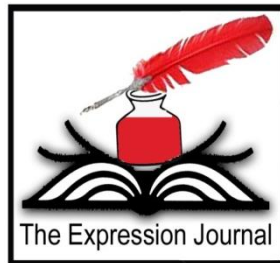The Expression Journal

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Teaching Reading to Undergraduate ESL Students of Kerala: Approach and Strategy in the Classroom Context

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Abstract

Reading is a key skill in language acquisition and hence the mastery of the skill demands proper training and practice. Students and teachers often take the acquisition of reading skill for granted and avoid orientation in the development of this important skill. Though reading is considered as a receptive skill, it is not a passive activity. Reading for comprehension at advanced level requires new approaches and strategies. However, in the classroom context both the teacher and students encounter hurdles in managing reading lessons. In ESL classrooms, effective reading instruction involves a combination of strategies to enhance comprehension and language acquisition. Employing pre-reading activities, such as predicting content or activating prior knowledge, engages students and sets a purpose for reading. During reading, instructors can encourage the use of context clues and teach vocabulary in context to improve understanding. Post-reading discussions foster critical thinking, allowing students to express their thoughts and opinions in English. Additionally, incorporating diverse reading materials, such as authentic texts and graded readers, accommodates various proficiency levels, making the learning experience both challenging and accessible for ESL students. This article tries to explore some of the issues that pop up while teaching reading and discuss strategies applicable in ESL classrooms in Kerala.

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Introduction

Reading is a basic skill to be acquired in the language learning process. At university level, the mastery of reading skill becomes more important to creatively engage with books and reading materials in various disciplines. The 'reading skills' acquired at the secondary level will not suffice to deduce different layers of meaning after reading a text at undergraduate level. "The reality is that most first-year students lack academic reading skills, especially because University level reading greatly differs from High School reading." (Hermida, 2009, p. 20). She further states that most students employ non-university strategies to read academic texts, which results in students taking a surface approach to reading. This article deals with the problems of teaching reading in classrooms and suggests some approaches and strategies that can be employed in the classroom context in order to train undergraduate students in Kerala to read with enhanced level of comprehension.

Teaching English as a foreign language basically involves the teaching of the four basic skills of language acquisition: listening, speaking , reading and writing. Listening and reading are often referred to as receptive skills and speaking and writing as productive skills. Though reading is considered as a receptive skill, it is not a passive activity. Tickoo (as cited in Khanal,2013) states that "Reading is not, as many still believe, a passive activity in which readers just move their eyes over the printed page in a linear order. It is interactive in that in it the reader brings his personal knowledge (or schema) to the text in front of him." However, "…there is little evidence to suggest that students at any level will acquire these skills and strategies if they have not been explicitly taught." (Carrel as cited in Dreyer & Nel, 2003) Lack of proper orientation to language teachers in adopting appropriate approaches and strategies pertaining to reading skill will lead to defective reading strategy on the part of learners, resulting in slack reading and poor comprehension.

Intensive reading:

In classrooms, teachers and students engage in intensive reading where the focus is getting detailed interpretation of the text, understanding the main idea and the supporting ideas, connecting the information with previous knowledge and the outside world, understand inferential meaning etc. In intensive reading, students normally work with short texts with close guidance from the teacher. The aim of intensive reading is to help students obtain detailed meaning from the text, to develop reading skills – such as identifying main ideas and recognizing text connectors – and to enhance vocabulary and grammar knowledge. "It is important to note that these two approaches to teaching reading – intensive and extensive reading – should not be seen as being in opposition, as both serve different but complementary purposes (Carrell & Carson, 1997; Nuttall, 1996).

Extensive reading:

According to Carrel and Carson (1997). "...extensive reading...generally involves rapid reading of large quantities of material or longer readings (e.g., whole books) for general understanding, with its focus generally on the meaning of what is being read rather than on the language."(p.40-50). Extensive reading offers many advantages to readers, some of which are listed below: (Day &Bamford,1998; Karshen,1993; Nation,1997).

1. Enhanced language learning in such areas as spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and text structure.
2. Increased knowledge of the world
3. Improved reading and writing skills
4. Greater enjoyment of reading
5. More positive attitude toward reading
6. Higher possibility of developing a reading habit.

Problems encountered in ESL classrooms:

Lack of motivation: Ahmadi etal. (2013) list four types of motivation that positively relate to students' reading comprehension: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation (p.10).They(2013) further state that "...reading motivation leads to improvement in language learning performance, particularly reading comprehension process, for different levels of students regardless of what learning context they are in. Furthermore, reading teachers need to go beyond their traditional roles by providing opportunities for their students to become motivated and develop their reading comprehension proficiency."(p.16)

*Defective reading strategies***:** Reading has a prime role in the cognitive development of a child and hence a good knowledge regarding the appropriate strategy is very important to fully comprehend a reading text. Unfortunately, even at undergraduate level students are found vague about how to read for better comprehension and understanding. They are often unaware of any reading strategy at all. Scoring good in reading comprehension does not always mean that the students have developed proper reading strategies.

Poor Vocabulary: Availably of a reasonable number of active and passive vocabulary is a pre-requisite to read with proficiency and comprehension. Knowledge regarding word classes, phrasal verbs, idioms and jargons are also essential. Absence of a good command over vocabulary in the

target language results in poor comprehension and misinterpretation. The readers also get bored easily as they stumble on unfamiliar words at each juncture and have to look up a dictionary to proceed.

*Lack of knowledge in Grammar and Syntax***:** As English is a foreign language and the sentence pattern and structure are different from the mother language of the students, it is essential that the students must have a basic understanding of the grammar and sentence structure of the target language for quick understanding of the reading text.

Disregard of Punctuation Marks: Para linguistic symbols used in written texts play a major part to convey meaning and to avoid ambiguity. Reading without paying attention to punctuation marks results in poor comprehension and misinterpretation**.**

Lack of Background Information: Reading comprehension requires background information on the topic in hand. To help readers understand a text better, new ideas have to be read in context. The previous knowledge of the student in the related areas serve as the context. Prediction, a very important subskill in reading also fails due to lack of related knowledge on the topic.

Types of approaches and strategies:

There are different approaches and strategies normally followed by ESL teachers with regard to teaching reading. Bamford and Day (1998) state that "As the 20th century draws to a close, there are, around the world, at least four distinctive approaches to the teaching L2 reading: grammar-translation, comprehension question, skills and strategies, and extensive reading."

Grammar-translation: According to Richards and Rogers (2001) grammar translation is a way of studying a language that approaches the language first through detailed analysis of its grammar rules, followed by application of this knowledge to the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language.Tan (2016) states that the main characteristics of GTM include explicit teaching of grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary lists, and translation of passages from one language to the other.

Comprehension question: Comprehension questions are of two types. The traditional practice is thatthe teacher asks questions before or after assigning a reading task to students. The students are supposed to skim and scan the text to find out the specific information sought by the teacher.In this method the teacher decides the output of the reading process. On the other hand, active comprehension method is more student cantered. According to De Charms, 1976. (as cited in Nolte& Singer, 1985) "Active comprehension is a process of generating questions throughout reading. In this method the students establish the goal, determine what content is important, generates questions and searches for answers to them. Active comprehension instruction places the locus of control in the students."

Skills and Strategies: "A skill is something you do automatically without thinking about it…A strategy in contrast is a plan. You reason when you do it and you adjust the plan as you go along*."(Duffy, 2009).*

Extensive reading is "…a technique in teaching reading which is defined as a situation where students read a lot of materials in their level in new language; they read for general, for overall meaning, and for information at one with enjoyment."(Day and Bamford, 2004)

Classroom strategy to teach reading:

Before deciding the best strategy, the teacher has to consider many factors such as the size of the class, students' level of understanding, type of the text to be read, motivation level of students etc. It is highly demanding on the teacher to choose and apply the appropriate strategy for the present classroom situation.

According to Block&Israel, 2005 (as cited in Saree et al. 2019), "Teachers can help improve student comprehension through instruction of reading strategies. Predicting, making connections, visualizing, inferring, questioning, and summarizing are strategies shown by research to improve reading comprehension." The activities discussed below are advisable to follow in a UG English classroom in Kerala while teaching a reading lesson. However, there is no hard and fast rule regarding the selection of strategies. A resourceful teacher is the master of the classroom and he/she is the person who knows his/her students well.

*Vetting the student's motivation***:** Teacher has to make sure that the students are well motivated to undertake the reading task assigned to them. The relevance of reading the given text must be brought home to students. The present text can be related with a contemporary event, or a movie scene, an incident from personal life or literature etc.

Elicit background information: By raising a slew of questions the teacher can easily elicit as much background information as he/she needs. Once sufficient information related to the topic of the reading text is elicited, the teacher can further raise the curiosity of the students to predict the information they may expect to find in the text.

*Prediction***:** A good reader always use intelligent guesses and prediction based on their background information and experience as they read. Students may be asked to predict or guess the information after reading the title, looking at the illustrations if any or by just skimming the text. This step is very important that it will provide ample motivation for students to go through the text and verify whether their predictions are correct or not."This strategy also allows for more student interaction, which increases student interest and improves their understanding of the text." Oczkus, 2003 (as cited in Sari et al., 2009)

Relating to personal experience: It is important that the reader relates the information , events, narratives and characters in the new text to a similar experience in his/her personal memory. The source of the memory can be either own personal experience or gained from reading experience. The teacher's role is to facilitate the reader to move out from the text and connect to the world outside by way of building relations via memory and past experience. According to Telee, 2004 (as cited in Sari et al., 2019) text-to-world connections could be done by comparing characters in a story to characters today or comparing the content of the text to the world today.

*Comprehension Questions***:** The teacher can choose either the traditional comprehension method where the teacher prepares questions and the students read to find and solve the problem, or the active comprehension approach where the reader asks questions while reading or post reading. The advantage of the latter strategy is that, the students will approach the text in their perspective and the reading process will become more subjective and creative. The motivation of the reader will also get enhanced when they approach the text and asks questions as per their level of knowledge and understanding. The teacher can facilitate the questioning by giving some clues and open-ended questions.

Inferring: Inferring is a more advanced skill in reading. Here the reader reads beyond the lines and deduces meanings and interpretations that are not visibly present in the given text. The reader's prior knowledge and information will be the guide to make inferences. Knowledge about author motivation and his/her ideological affiliation, contemporary relevance of the text, readers' previous knowledge in related topics etc. may lead to intelligent inferences.

*Summarising***:** The process of summarization requires the reader to determine what is important when reading and to condense the information in the readers own words (Adler, 2001).The task of summarising involves identifying the main idea and the supporting ideas. The summarising skill further helps the students to comprehend the text in its organised format.

Apart from the activities discussed above, Janzen (2002) list s five classroom processes for effective teaching of reading: 1. General strategy discussion 2. Teacher modelling 3. Student reading 4. Analysis of strategies used by the teacher or by students when thinking aloud 5. Explanation/discussion of individual strategies on a regular basis.(p.289) His explanation of the process is as follows.

i.   **Strategy discussion with students:** The students are to be familiarised with the term 'strategy'. Initially the teacher has to do some explaining regarding the need of adopting strategies in order to maximise learning experience. The teacher discusses with students the strategy that they presently follow while reading for comprehension, elicits or suggests alternate and more effective strategies and enables students to transfer the knowledge to other learning tasks also.

ii.   **Teacher modelling:** The teacher is supposed to be an expert reader model for students to emulate. Janzen (2002) explains that for the purpose in classroom he used to model reading by way of loud reading of the text, incorporating a demonstration of subskills such as predicting, questioning, inferring etc using the technique of loud thinking.(p.289-290)

iii. **Student reading:** Students also read after the teacher by thinking aloud if possible.

iv.   **Analysis of strategy use:** It is a post reading activity in which the whole class is involved. They discuss what all strategies they used and how far effective while reading the text. The teacher gives feedback and suggests better strategies if necessary.

v.   **Strategy explanation and discussion:** After identifying the strategies used by the teacher or students, now the teacher names and explains them to students. The author suggests graphic organizers to facilitate explanation. Students are asked to write down the strategies the teacher or they themselves used which can be used further in group activities.

Conclusion:

The above discussion may help guide the teacher in an ESL class to understand the process of reading and some of the strategies and approaches he/she may adopt in the classroom context. The teacher will be at a disadvantage if he chooses one particular strategy at the expense of the other. For instance, in Kerala context, the elements of grammar translation method also work well on occasions when the reading text comprising a local or indigenous content is being taught. If the teacher is well aware of the different approaches and strategies, he/she can choose the strategy taking into account the type of text, proficiency level of students, and the purpose of reading.

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