

Reading Comprehension at Higher Secondary Level

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This paper is concerned with an analysis of teaching of Reading Comprehension at the Higher Secondary Level. One of the objectives of the new course is to make the learners read English with comprehension and at reasonable speed so as to enable them to use English as a library language for gathering information and for enjoying reading. The course being learner-centered caters to the needs of the learners so that they may pursue higher studies or join professions of their interest. Hence the emphasis falls on the reading skill which seems to be the only viable objective for a majority of the students. Reading of all the communication skills probably has the greatest service ability. It also has high surrender value; which means that in teaching people to read several desired objectives can be achieved at the same time. Keeping in mind the immense educative value of reading, this paper focuses on the techniques of teaching English Reading and Comprehension at the Higher Secondary Level.

Now when the world has become a 'Global Village', the socio-cultural and economic needs of the society have undergone a sea change. The varied needs of the society have resulted in the diversification of courses. These various courses, again, emphasize reading in English on the part of the learners. Reading, therefore, holds the key to the development of real communicative competence in English for the learners. The vast majority of the students using English as a library language will have to enhance their reading abilities to understand the written language in this age of explosion of knowledge. Thus, this paper attempts to define the status of English in its socio-academic framework which leads to a focused discussion on the factors affecting reading proficiency of the learners.

It is an irony that most of the students at the Higher Secondary Level lack in reading skills. The achievement test at the plus 2 level speaks of the sorry state of affairs. Most of the students fail in the subject of English because of their poor reading habit. This problem needs immediate attention. It becomes necessary to analyze a cross section of the students' reading behavior so as to look at their manipulative abilities as far as the reading comprehension is concerned. This would lead to the suggestion of a number of remedial steps for improving their reading behavior, thus, making those better readers and better learners of English.

The main objectives to be considered while teaching Reading and Comprehension are as follows:

- 1) To study and identify the students' level of understanding and comprehending English texts.

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- 2) To identify and analyze the reading techniques at plus 2 level
- 3) To find out if there is a difference between high interest readers and low interest readers in applying the techniques.
- 4) To study and analyze the skill of guessing the meaning of unknown words
- 5) To find out whether there is a difference in the performance in reading by the urban students and the rural students
- 6) To find out whether there is a difference between the boys and girls in applying reading comprehension techniques.

To study the process, purpose and pedagogy of reading in detail we have to consider the division of reading into three stages. The first stage may be called the recognition stage. At this stage, the learner simply recognizes the graphic counterparts of the phonological items. The second stage may be called 'structuring stage'; where the learner sees the syntactic relationships of the items and thereby understands the structural meaning of the syntactic units. The third stage is 'interpretation stage'. It is the highest level in the process of reading and at this stage the learner comprehends the significance (not merely the meaning) of a word, a phrase or a sentence in the overall context of the entire discourse. This is the stage at which a learner really reads for information or for pleasure.

The mechanics and methods teaching reading:

The various methods of teaching reading are broadly divided into two groups – the Atomistic and Holistic. Some of the Atomistic methods are:

- a) The whole word method
- b) The sentence method
- c) The story method

The types of reading:

- 1) Intensive
- 2) Extensive

In Intensive reading, the students read not only for detailed comprehension of meaning but also for mastering the structures and vocabulary. In Extensive reading, the students read for information or simply for the pleasure of reading. In this kind of reading the primary object is general comprehension and not language study.

The important elements in all readings are speed and comprehension. Speed is a function of comprehension. Improved comprehension makes for faster reading. The two are very closely interrelated. The Higher Secondary Board has clearly defined the skimming and scanning reading speeds to test comprehension which is a part of the

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communication process of getting the thoughts that were in the author's mind into the reader's mind. In other words, it is intelligent interpretation that includes;

- 1) Reading to get the main idea
- 2) Reading to get important details
- 3) Reading to answer specific questions
- 4) Reading to follow the logical sequence and development of the idea
- 5) Reading to apply what is read
- 6) Reading for deductions and implications
- 7) Reading to evaluate

It is difficult to define comprehension because there are several variables within the reader which make reading a personal experience. Questions like whether pure thoughts exist by itself and if so whether it can be communicated in its pristine purity to the reader and whether it can be received by the reader need not detain us here. Mr. Fry himself has said "Reading can usually conveniently be thought of as being on two levels at once. First the reader should get objective facts... on a higher level; the reader should also get the subjective information. This subjective information might include such things as the tone and mood of the story". Macmillan defines comprehension as "Understanding what is written within, between and beyond the lines; in other words, intelligent interpretation".

Comprehension involves a limited vocabulary by constant use of a dictionary, reading with concentration, slowly and reflectively. Hafner opines "Comprehension means to grasp with. The proficient reader 'grasps with' i.e understands the meaning intended by the author". (1977:127)

A passage can properly be read with varying degrees of understanding. The scale of comprehension ranges from no meaning to complete understanding. The degree of desired comprehension will depend upon the purpose of the reader. The efficient reader will get from the printed page only what he is looking for. He may be distracted and charmed by other sounds and images but he will not rest until he has discovered the answer to his questions.

Variations in degree of comprehension exist not only among but within individuals. Thus an individual who reads every detail of the directions for performing an experiment may read a newspaper article only to find out whether anyone he knows is mentioned in it. In some cases, he may want only to get the general idea of a selection whereas in other case, he may read not only to comprehend everything that is written but also to get the meaning 'between the lines' and 'beyond the lines'. One of the characteristics of the efficient reader is the extent to which he can adjust the degree of his comprehension to his objective. Reading effectively is reading with comprehension.

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