

Reading difficulties of UG students and strategies to overcome them with reference to Mumbai University

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Introductions :

Although a classroom may contain many children, the teacher has to be concerned with the successes and failures of individual children, rather than the class as a whole. It is therefore necessary for a teacher to understand why a child fails. The most important clues can be found in the words of the language itself for written words differ in the degree to which they tap particular reading processes. Irregular words such as “have”, “was”, “print”, “bear”, require the use of lexical processes if they are to be pronounced correctly, while regular words such as “those”, “but”, “face”, may be read by either lexical or sub lexical means, and nonwords require the use of sublexical procedures (Goulandris and Snowling (1991) in Funnell and Stuart (1995, p. 93). There are three distinctive reading skills which contribute to competent reading: the ability to recognize familiar written words, the ability to use phonic skills to pronounce unfamiliar words and the ability to understand what is being read. Good readers can shift between alternative strategies as needed, so that reading progresses as efficiently as possible. The three skills are independent of each other.

In reading, word recognition occurs when a written word is recognized as a familiar word and pronounced correctly regardless of whether it appears in isolation or embedded in text. Moreover, many teachers have been led to believe that reading words out of context is an unnecessary skill and that word recognition is of no consequence. This view according to Goulandris and Snowling (1991) in Funnell and Stuart (1995, p.93) is both misleading and inaccurate. Word recognition or lexical processing is a vitally important component of skilled learners and the inability to learn to recognize written words accurately and automatically needs to be evaluated and the specific problems documented. Therefore, when assessing reading it is important to examine an individual's ability to read both text and single words presented out of context so that linguistic and contextual cues are no longer available to assist word recognition.

Reading problems are found among every age group and in every college classroom, although some students are at greater risk of reading difficulties than others.

1. Shaywitz (1996, in Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998, p. 24) asserts that all reading difficulties, whatever their primary etiology, must express themselves through alterations of the brain systems responsible for word identification and comprehension. He further states that even in disadvantaged or other high-risk populations, many children do learn to read, some easily and others with great difficulty. Cognitive studies of reading have identified phonological processing as crucial to skilful reading, and so it seems logical to suspect that poor readers may have phonological processing problems. Shaywitz (1996) further states that one line of research has looked at phonological processing problems that can be attributed to the underdevelopment or disruption of specific brain systems.

2. Hengari (2007, p. 3) mentions that these teachers and learners are indeed confronted with the issue of language differences as the medium of instruction is not their primary language. Both teachers and learners may have limited English proficiency and as a result have difficulty understanding and using this language.

Sometimes the instructional deficiency can be traced to a lack of an appropriate curriculum, although Silver and Hagin (2002), concluded that there is no specific curriculum that can be used to teach reading to learners experiencing reading problems.

3. Teachers who are poorly trained in effective methods for teaching beginning readers, the lack of textbooks and other reading materials, noisy and crowded classrooms and so on are some of the factors contributing to reading problems among the learners. It is regrettable (Kozol, 1991; Natriello, McDill and Pallas, 1990) that schools with these detrimental characteristics continue to exist. These schools often exist in low-income areas, where resources for children's out-of-school learning materials are limited. As a result the effect can be very detrimental to students' chances of becoming skilled readers.

4. Hayland (1995, p. 109), states that teachers can do a lot to steer students towards efficient independent reading by making reading tasks more explicit and helping them to concentrate on their reading for a specific purpose.

5. Hayland (1995, p. 109), who says that teachers should create an awareness of reading flexibilities in their learners and that teachers should bear the purpose of their teaching in mind in order to improve the skills that will best help their students in future

Reading Difficulties

Some of the problems associated with English Language Learners struggling to read can be attributed to particular methods of reading instruction that either test rather than teach reading

or that do not take into account the differences between learning to read in a first and a second /subsequent language. For example ,when a reading teacher asks his or her students to read a passage and answer the comprehensive questions that follow or to write a summary ,or to explain the meaning of individual words and then to write the words in a sentence, all these are testing and not really teaching reading.

Reading problems result from the learners being asked to perform at educational levels for which they are not ready developmentally. Teachers, who are poorly trained in effective methods for teaching beginning readers, the lack of textbooks and other reading materials, noisy and crowded classrooms and so on, are some of the factors contributing to reading problems among the learners.

Testing reading has a place in the curriculum but only after we teach our students how to read. We must also recognize that students learning to read in their first language have more knowledge of grammar and vocabulary than ELLs learning to read in a second/subsequent language. Furthermore, ELLs also have varying levels of English language proficiency that have an impact on reading comprehension.

The command of English reading strategies and skills for graduate students is an essential concern as postgraduates are especially dependent on reading and writing skills to succeed in their higher studies. Poor readers do not realise the importance of effective reading strategies and they lack the ability to monitor reading activities (Cubukcu, 2008).

Students pursuing their higher studies in Mumbai University have to use English in their academic activities. So, they use English for doing presentations, writing assignments, writing proposals. Also, the materials the students read and refer to are all in English language.

Many students often needed extra time for reading. The students' poor English contributed significantly to their academic problems because it stood as a barrier to success within their academic environment.

Students' academic difficulties were associated with the management of reading and writing tasks. There were strong associations among general academic difficulties, academic reading, and writing difficulties.

The most difficult academic reading sub-skills for the students in this study are (1) taking brief and relevant notes, (2) using own words in note taking, (3) working out the meanings of difficult words, and (4) identifying supporting ideas/examples. It was difficult for them to identify supporting ideas or examples in the reading materials they had to do. (7) Identifying supporting ideas/examples (8) Reading carefully to understand a text (9) Identifying key

ideas (10) Understanding organisation of a text (11) Taking brief, relevant notes (12) Using own words in note taking (13) Reading quickly to get overall meaning (14) Reading quickly to find information (15) Working out meaning of difficult words (16) Understanding specialist vocabulary by the graduate students when they indicated that they had to read journal articles and book chapters more than one time to find the information they were looking for. Furthermore, they felt that they had to read more than one time to be able to understand the content of journal articles and other reading materials so that they could improve the quality of their answers. Consuming their time in reading, consequently, affected the way they adopted to manage their time.

Academic reading is big problem and the time students give to reading research articles or publication is long time. In the meantime, there is variability in styles of the authors in writing, so we can find some papers easy to understand while others are rather difficult.

Another academic reading difficulty the students in this study reported was connecting what they read to their knowledge about a particular topic. The students revealed that they read different research articles and book chapters but they faced some difficulties in finding connections between what they were reading and their prior knowledge in their first language.

Teaching Reading

We can teach reading to ELLs. The goal of teaching reading to ELLs is for our students to be able to turn 'learning to read' into 'reading to learn' so that they can become fully functioning members of our society.

Learning to read in a first and a second language

Most of the research that has been conducted on reading has focussed on students learning to read in their first language, but an increasing amount of recent reading research has related to students learning to read in their second language. However, many of these studies have been based on the original first language studies. There is general agreement that ELLs begin reading in the second language with a different knowledge base (e.g. more world knowledge, more developed cognitive abilities) than they had when they started to read in their first language, and this has an impact on how we teachers should approach reading instruction.

The ways in which second language comprehension processes and instruction may differ from first language contexts can be classified as follows (adapted from Aebersold &Field, 1997, and Grabe & Stoller, 2002):

- 1) Linguistic differences between the first and the second language
- 2) Individual differences between first and second language readers.

3) Sociocultural differences between the first and second language.

Linguistic Differences –

Research has suggested that there are differing amounts of lexical, grammatical, and discourse knowledge at the initial stages of first and second language reading. For example, Grabe and Stoller (2002) point out that by the age of six, most first language readers are ready to read because they have already learned grammatical structures of their first language, and they already have nearly 7,000 words stored in their heads. However, ELLs do not have this word bank to draw on when learning to read in the second language.

In addition, because ELL readers do not have a tacit knowledge of the second language grammar, they need some additional instruction in building a foundation of structural knowledge and text organization for more effective reading comprehension. Teachers of ELLs will probably need to teach vocabulary and discourse structure to their students from the very beginning of their reading classes, because most ELL readers will not have been exposed to many English language texts. So they will not have been able to build up any real processing skill nor the large recognition vocabulary that readers learning in their first language have.

Individual Differences –

Just as linguistic differences between the first and second language influence the rate and success of learning to read, proficiency levels in the first language can also influence reading abilities and successes for ELLs. Research suggests that ELLs who are more literate in their first language are more able to transfer reading skills from their first language, although the exact way ELL readers can positively transfer their knowledge is still not clear. Koda (2005) suggests that ELLs who are less literate in their first language can not really be expected to transfer many supporting resources to their second language reading contexts.

In addition, individual ELLs tend to differ in terms of their cognitive development and learning style, especially when they start to study in the second language (Aebersold & Field, 1997). For example, the reading strategies of a six-year-old learning to read in a second language are quite different from those of a 20-year-old learning to read in the second language in terms of world knowledge and reading strategies acquired in the first language. So teachers of reading to ELLs may have to consider different approaches for children than for adults.

Sociocultural Differences-

In some cultures literacy in the form of written texts may not be as common as it is in English. So teachers may want to consider what it means to be literate and how literacy is

valued, used and displayed in their ELL students' first languages. In addition, texts are not always organized in the same linear display in other languages as they are in English.

There can be cultural differences in the way texts express interpersonal relations with the reader in terms of presence or absence of personal pronouns and in terms of whether it is the writer's responsibility to read between the lines. So, teachers may want to become more aware of their ELL students' attitudes towards different types of text, their purposes for reading, and the types of reading skills and strategies they used in their first language. Teachers may also be interested in understanding their students' use of different reading skills and strategies in the second language, their beliefs about the reading process (e.g. the use of inference, memorization, nature of comprehension) their knowledge of text types in their first language (their formal schemata), and their background knowledge (their content schemata). This is because all of the above influence the level of success their ELLs will achieve while learning to read.

ELLs must engage in what Eskey (2002, p.6) has called 'parallel processing', whereby the reader simultaneously decodes and engages in cultural interpretations of the text. This invisible process of reading produces enormous challenges for teachers of ELLs, because reading does not 'generate any product that a teacher can see or hear or respond to.' (Eskey, 2002, p.6)

Correcting Reading Difficulties

Academic Reading -

The success at tertiary level depends on the students' ability to read and write academically, various attempts have been made at improving students' academic literacy. Academic reading skill is essential, but there is paucity of research in this area as well as glaring exclusion of this from the reading programme.

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) identify nine classroom principles to be applied in creating the appropriate environment for fostering motivation and creating engaged readers.

Learning goals

Real-world involvement

Autonomy support

Interesting texts

Strategy instruction

Collaboration

Praise and rewards

Evaluation

Teacher involvement

Learning and knowledge goals

This instructional technique refers to the purpose for learning and is linked to performance and learning goal theory. Whereas performance goals are based on outperforming others, learning goals are based on dedication to understanding and learning. Focus on learning goals produces long-term engagement and learning (Ames, 1992). Research showed that teachers who emphasised learning goals instead of performance goals contributed to students' self efficacy. The assumption is that students put in more effort and applied strategies more effectively when they were made to believe that understanding the work was more important than getting right answers (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000:410).

Real-world interactions

These can be referred to as authentic interactions. They refer to connections between academic curricula and the personal experiences of students. Reading instruction embedded within intrinsically motivating activities that relate to students' personal experiences, such as collecting information, observing and reporting, led to increases in reading motivation and strategy use (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Brophy, 1998; Guthrie et al., 1998; Anderson, 1999; Guthrie et al., 1999).

Autonomy support

Students' independence and responsibility is the focus of this technique. Its application to reading involves the teacher's guidance in leading students to make responsible choices in reading. Based on the convention that choice is motivating, the technique develops independence and affords students control over topics, themes and reading materials, with teacher support. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000:411) assert that individuals (students) prefer to be in command of their environment rather than to be manipulated by powerful individuals (teachers). With regard to motivation, Grolnick and Ryan (1987), Deci et al. (1991) and Sweet, Guthrie and Ng (1998), have shown benefits of autonomy support on intrinsic motivation and reading comprehension.

Interesting texts

The use of interesting texts (texts that are significant and readily understandable) is based on the assumption that texts that are personally significant and that meet the cognitive competence of students would be motivating, and consequently develop comprehension abilities. Grabe and Stoller (2002:30) argue that difficult texts that are beyond students' level of comprehension cause them to adopt coping strategies, which eventually lower their motivation for reading. Scaffolding using different levels of texts would enable students to

approach difficult texts gradually without losing motivation. In addition, interesting texts assist in focusing reading instruction on word recognition and word fluency (Stanovich & Cunningham, 1993; Elley, 1996; Morrow, 1996).

Strategy instruction (competence support)

This technique involves direct instruction of reading and comprehension strategies such as summarising, paraphrasing and synthesising through teacher modelling. A number of investigations have shown that strategy instruction increases intrinsic motivation and self efficacy (Anderson, 1991; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997; Dreyer & Nel, 2003; Worden, 2003).

Collaboration (relatedness support)

Social collaboration in the classroom was found to promote intrinsic motivation for reading and learning, and to maintain active learning over an extended period of time (Nolen & Nichols, 1994; Wentzel, 1997). The argument that engaged readers share ideas and discuss literature with others is the basis for this teaching technique for reading development.

Praise and rewards

At tertiary level, praise and rewards could be in the form of marks, encouraging comments, and book awards. Although this concept is known to be beneficial, in that it increases self efficacy and motivation, it could also have detrimental effects. Students can become extrinsically motivated and depend on performance goals, which involve the use of temporal and surface strategies such as memorisation and guessing. Their focus may be shifted to high grades, correct answers and completion of tasks, instead of comprehension and enjoyment. For praise and rewards to be beneficial, they should be given within what Wlodkowski (1985:182) calls 3S-3P. That is, praise should be sincere, specific and sufficient and should be properly given for praiseworthy success in the manner preferred by the learner".

Evaluation

Evaluation in the form of tests, assignments and projects should reflect students' ownership and provide motivation for reading. Evaluations that are purely teacher centred are controlling and may cause anxiety and diminish intrinsic motivation, which may curtail conceptual learning. Personalised evaluations, such as projects and portfolios, may be difficult to administer but these contribute towards instilling motivations for reading. As a result, an integration of standardised and personalised evaluations in order to produce optimal

results is suggested. Evaluating effort and progress (performance feedback) rather than absolute skills encourages success and enjoyment, and increases self-efficacy (Deci, Vellerand, Pelletier & Ryan, 1991; Au & Asam, 1996; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1997).

Teacher involvement

The teacher's knowledge of individual students; care about their progress; and pedagogical understanding of how to foster their active participation (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000:416) are important avenues for increasing students' motivation and fostering engagement. Bus (2001) showed that children who interacted positively with their parents and received parents' attention had positive attitudes towards learning, and subsequently achieved success in learning. Skinner, Wellborn and Connell (1990) showed through empirical evidence that adult involvement promoted reading engagement in learners, which led to achievement in reading and other subjects. When students feel that significant adults such as parents and teachers are involved in their learning, they become motivated and strive towards success in learning.

Conclusion

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