



READING STRATEGIES TO ENABLE DISADVANTAGED LEARNERS TO BECOME PROFICIENT LEARNERS: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The ability to read academic texts is considered one of the most important skills that undergraduate students of engineering learning English as a Second Language (ESL) need to acquire. That is the reason engineering colleges in Andhra Pradesh have English in the engineering curriculum. Reading well is a skill that is non-negotiable. It has long been recognised that ability to use reading strategies when reading enables the reader to negotiate a text better than when reading it without any awareness or use of strategies.

This study looks in specific at the awareness levels among undergraduate students of engineering about strategy use in reading. A research question, namely, whether students have any knowledge of reading strategies was used as the basis for carrying out the study. Besides reading passages that were given to students as part of data collection, questionnaires and personal interviews comprised methods of data collection.

Keywords: *Reading strategies, Disadvantaged learners, Descriptive, Narrative, Expository, Metacognition.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The rationale for undertaking a study in this much researched area is worth looking at, and the following observations by Aspiring Minds, an employability solutions company, will be a fitting preamble and an eye opener:

Table 1 : Employability Percentage of Engineering Graduates in different roles

ROLE EMPLOYABILITY IT ROLES

Employability

Software Engineer – IT Product	3.67%
Software Engineer – IT Services	17.91%
Startup Ready – IT Services	3.84%
Associate –	
ITeS Operations (Hardware and Networking)	37.06%

ENGINEERING ROLES

Design Engineer – Non IT	6.56%
Sales Engineer – Non IT	19.08%

NON-TECH ROLES

Business Analyst – KPO	10.86%
Associate – ITeS/BPO	40.57%
Technical Content Developer	11.66%
Creative Content Developer	16.72%

DESIGN ENGINEER

Chemical Design Engineer	1.64%
Civil Design Engineer	6.48%
Electrical Design Engineer	6.50%
Electronics Design Engineer	7.07%
Mechanical Design Engineer	5.55%

(2016, pp.9-10)

(<http://www.aspiringminds.com/sites/default/files/National%20Employability%20Report%20-%20Engineers%20Annual%20Report%202016.pdf>)

It is apparent from what has been mentioned that engineers are for the most part not employable and the reasons are many, one primary reason being lack of communication skills. While comparing employability data across cities the organisation found that “ candidates who have spent a significant part of their lives in metros gain better exposure to English and computer education, helping them become more employable” (2016, p.28). One of the chief reasons attributed to low employability is

poor communication skills which among other things includes inability to read, understand and analyse texts.

THE STUDY

The study was compelled by an urgent necessity to explore the problems related to reading reported in undergraduate students of engineering and the kind of strategies the students tried to employ or employed to cope with reading difficulties. This was important because students are expected to sample long passages, grasp texts, and formulate answers to questions and passages that figure in exams during their time at college and after, in competitive exams and entrance exams for going abroad or gaining admission for higher studies in India or elsewhere. The importance of reading skills cannot be gainsaid or wished away.

This study concerned itself with a main research question:

1. Do students have any knowledge of reading strategies?

The question was framed with a view to bringing out the problems students come face to face with when reading their lessons or a reading passage or an article in a scientific journal or magazine.

The participants were 200 first year students pursuing undergraduate study in various branches of engineering. Based on the geographical region and the type of school offering education, students were classified into the following categories:

1. Rural areas and English medium schools
2. Rural areas and regional medium schools
3. Urban areas and English medium schools
4. Urban areas and regional medium schools
5. Semi urban areas and English medium schools
6. Semi urban areas and regional medium schools

All of them were undergraduate students of engineering and data were collected from four engineering colleges in the districts of East and West Godavari, Krishna and Guntur districts. These districts were chosen since these have a large number of engineering colleges and educational institutions in Andhra Pradesh and a varied population joining the courses of study. It needs mentioning that soon after



the Congress came to power in 2009 in erstwhile united AP, one of the decisions taken in the field of education was to make it a level playing field and that resulted in scholarships being granted to students of all communities and from deprived socio economic background, leading thus to a rush for admission into professional courses such as engineering, medicine, business studies, etc.

The students had received basic education in English with difference only in terms of years of exposure and quality of education imparted. Students from rural areas and English medium schools were 30 in number, those from urban areas and English medium schools were 50 in number, those with an education on schools from rural areas and regional medium schools were over 60, while those from urban areas and regional medium schools were around 10 in number. Students from semi urban areas and English medium schools were 35 while those from semi urban areas and regional medium schools were 15 in number. The numbers clearly point to how everyone preferred English medium education for their children though of course in rural communities English medium schools were not readily available.

The participants were each asked to fill out a questionnaire and answer questions given in four reading passages meant for testing various reading strategies and styles. The time taken for data collection was four weeks involving personal visits to the colleges.

Students were required to answer four reading passages that focussed on various strategies of reading based on a passage: *predict, monitor, decode, infer, fix the problem, summarise, evaluate and synthesise*. There were clear instructions on the dos and don'ts of the activities. They were told to be honest in their responses. Each reading passage was 700-800 word long with a lot of content and function words, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, and commonly used words. The difficulty levels were: easy, medium, hard and challenging.

RESULTS

The consolidated results are reported below in the form of tables and charts. As may be seen from data analysis, a huge number of students were

unable to mark correct answers to questions asked. On average the first question was answered correctly only by 2%, a shockingly low figure given that students have had at least 8 years of schooling where they had been taught in English. Question II was answered correctly by 8% while the third question was answered correctly by 18.3% of them. The fourth and fifth questions were answered correctly by 17% and 19.4% respectively.

Name of paragraph : Dangers of social networking
Readability level : challenging
Passage type : descriptive
Percentage of questions correctly answered: QI : 2 % QII : 8 % QIII : 18.3 % Q IV : 17 % Q V : 19.4 %

As for the second passage the statistical details are as follows: Data make it clear that only 5% of students arrived at the right answer while to the second question only 10% were able to make it. The third question was answered correctly by 15.3% while the fourth and fifth were answered correctly by a mere 22% and 22.35% of students respectively.

Name of paragraph : Hollywood
Readability level : tough
Passage type : narrative
Percentage of questions correctly answered: QI : 5 % QII : 10.4 % QIII : 15.3 % Q IV : 22 % Q V : 22.35 %

The third passage was of medium difficulty and it was expected that students would fare better in answering this passage than earlier ones but the results were disappointing. Only 8% of students obtained the right answer to the first question while 18.24% got the second answer right; the third question saw 19% score correctly and the fourth was answered correctly by 24.45% of students while the fifth one was answered by 26.3% correctly.

Name of paragraph : Engineering and employment
Readability level : medium
Passage type : expository
Percentage of questions correctly answered: QI : 8 % QII : 18.24 % QIII : 19 % Q IV : 24.45 % Q V : 26.3 %

The fourth passage, namely, the one graded as easy, did not fare any better insofar as student



responses went; the first answer was marked correctly by just 12 % while the second was marked correctly by 14.23 %; the third question was scored well by 22.3 % while the fourth one was marked correctly by 27 %. The last question was answered correctly by a mere 30 % of students.

Name of paragraph : Life in America
Readability level : easy
Passage type : descriptive
Percentage of questions correctly answered: QI : 12 % QII : 14.23% QIII : 22.3 % Q IV : 27 % Q V : 29.65 %

DISCUSSION

If one looks at the results one cannot help being dismayed at the poor proficiency levels of students in using reading strategies. This was also reflected in the responses they were honest enough to supply in the questionnaire. On average not more than 20 % of students were able to answer any question correctly even if there were students who had been the recipient of English medium education; based on responses from the questionnaire and personal interviews with students, the following points for introspection emerged.

140 students were first generation learners with illiterate parents; children of farmers, farmhands, labourers, and those in blue collar jobs had gained admission to engineering and they lacked the scaffolding in reading and writing. Parents were too poor and ignorant to appreciate the necessity of providing their children with the facilities they needed to cope with language learning. Around 135 students (around 67.5%) said they never read anything, be it newspapers or novels or short stories in English. While children of first generation learners found it difficult to obtain resources from lack of financial support, those who could afford were uninterested in anything except Whatsapp and Facebook and were not too keen to improve their reading skills. They somehow thought it unnecessary to improve this very essential skill and that showed in their poor performance.

For analysing reading strategies employed by students, MARS (Metacognitive Awareness of Reading Strategies Inventory) by Mokthari and Reichard (2002) was used and the strategy use was

classified under three broad headings - *Global Reading Strategies (GLOB Subscale)*, *Problem Solving Strategies (PROB Subscale)*, *Support Reading Strategies (SUP Subscale)*.

Question numbers 1. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____ 7. _____ 10. _____ 14. _____ 17. _____ 19. _____ 22. _____ 23. _____ 25. _____ 26. _____ 29. _____ figured under Global Reading Strategies (GLOB Subscale) while questions 8. _____ 11. _____ 13. _____ 16. _____ 18. _____ 21. _____ 27. _____ 30. _____ comprised Problem Solving Strategies (PROB Subscale) and questions 2. _____ 5. _____ 6. _____ 9. _____ 12. _____ 15. _____ 20. _____ 24. _____ 28. _____ figured under Support Reading Strategies (SUP Subscale).

For each statement there were five options given:

- 1 means "I never or almost never do this."
- 2 means "I do this only occasionally."
- 3 means "I sometimes do this." (About 50% of the time.)
- 4 means "I usually do this."
- 5 means "I always or almost always do this."

Students were asked to make a choice by circling the number that applied to their use or non-use of strategies. They were told that there were no right or wrong answers – the answer reflecting their reading habits and deployment of certain plans to cope with reading difficulties.

Questionnaire analysis revealed the following:

- a. The mean score for Global Reading Strategies (GLOB Subscale) was 1.74 implying that students never practised the strategy or did it very occasionally. It reveals also that because of poor or little tendency to read, students were finding it challenging to apply any of these strategies; they were not told about it by the teacher who either did not feel the necessity or simply chose not to invest time and care in getting learners to read and improve their reading.
- b. The mean score for Problem Solving Strategies (PROB Subscale) was 2.43 which hinted that students used these strategies only occasionally or just 50 % of the time. They probably used the strategies in the



- exam to answer questions. They admitted at the time of interview that they only intuited these plans without being aware of them.
- c. As far as Support Reading Strategies went, a meagre mean of 1.8 was obtained which pointed to almost nil use of such strategies. This was a worrying trend as competence levels in being able to make sense of reading passages was low and needed remedying.
- Almost 68 % of students found reading for comprehension a tiresome experience; this may be attributed to the fact that reading passages were never part of the learning process in the second language classroom. Passages that students were expected to read and understand were solved for them by guide books and *bazaar* notes which students relied on to pass exams. Sometimes the text would be read out in class and the correct answers given out without any discussion or reasons as to why the answers were correct or incorrect.
 - Questions were not asked of the students to get them to think, analyse and reason or apply logic; questions may be broadly classified as - *Yes-No questions, Wh-questions, tag questions, choice questions, hypothetical questions, embedded questions, and leading questions*. These never figured in the teaching and learners couldn't be bothered. That showed in the poor and often discouraging answers to the reading passages.
 - 60 % of the students were unable to summarise the reading passages in clear language. They were sadly unable to simply use words and phrases from the passage to sum it up.
 - 70 % of the students were unable to infer the meaning of difficult words from the passage; they did not know how to use contextual clues to get the meaning.
 - 68 % of the students were unable to scan the passages to arrive at the right answer; they took a lot of time and the researcher observed that many students were reading

the passage all over again to find the right answer !

- 72 % of the students were unable to decode the central message of the passage and give a suitable title to the passage.
- 85 % of the students reported that they were not taught the skills and sub skills of reading and that this piece of information was not meant to be shared with teachers or the management of colleges data was collected from.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reading is a very important skill that cannot be wished away as insignificant. Vocabulary can improve and learners able to use language with ease only if they begin to tackle texts of various levels of reading difficulty and this calls for practise with teacher assistance as and when needed in the initial stages. Using reading strategies is an essential component of reading and success can be achieved if one follows ACTIVE method of teaching it, a method advocated by Anderson (1999) for effective reading. This is how it works :

A – **Activate prior knowledge** – teacher needs to ask questions of learners and find out what the students' background knowledge is and supply the missing details.

C – **Cultivate vocabulary** – this is important since no reading for meaning is possible without teaching and learning vocabulary. Vocabulary needs to be taught through contexts and plenty of live examples.

T – **Teach for comprehension**- often reading is taught as if it were a chore requiring quick conclusion; teachers need to ask questions in mother tongue and plain English to clarify meaning to the best extent possible for learners.

I – **Increase reading rate** – this is best done by asking students to read aloud instead of reading passages or texts for them; students need to be told the importance of reading and doing it in front of their classmates. This would inform the teacher of the student's ability to read with stress on punctuation, rhythm and diction.

V – **Verify reading strategies**- This is pivotal to progress since the student must know where he /she has undergone a lapse and rectify it. Students need to be made aware of various and varied reading



strategies that will help them negotiate a text or passage on their own with little help except as a facilitator from the teacher.

E – **Evaluate progress** – this needs to be done on a regular basis through class tests, exercises, rehearsals, reading cards and games etc. Once progress is monitored and recorded students know how far they have come and how much more of the journey to proficiency remains. They can alter, abandon or change transform their approaches and strategies to reading accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Reading is a critical skill and improving the skills of learners is just a matter of teaching them how to use these skills intelligently. This paper attempted a modest move in that direction by recommending the teaching and using of some sensible strategies to make learners independent readers.

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