



## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## READING PRACTICES AND SKILLS OF INDIAN UNDERGRADUATES

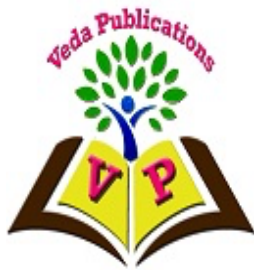
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## ABSTRACT



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The sub-skills of reading form an important part of the reading process. Good readers make use of an appropriate sub-skill unconsciously to suit the specific purpose of reading. This paper aims to explore and evaluate the relation between self-awareness of the sub-skills and reading abilities of first-year Undergraduates in an Indian university. To achieve this, a self-assessment questionnaire of sub-skills was administered to 15 undergraduate students enrolled in a central university. The software DIALANG was then used to measure the reading comprehension of the students. The analysis of the results showed that most of the subjects were aware of the important sub-skills required to be a good reader. However, this awareness was not reflected in their reading comprehension as the DIALANG test revealed that the reading proficiency of the 15 students varied from A2-C2 CEFR levels. The results provide an insight into the reading abilities of Indian students.

**Keywords:** *Reading Comprehension, Sub-Skill, Self-Assessment, DIALANG*



Reading is impacted by different factors. Jeon (2011) lists morphological and phonological awareness, vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, and cognitive strategies among the most important factors. This paper focuses on the relationship between reading and cognitive strategies in adult Indian learners. It is believed that metacognitive abilities increase with age, and those abilities help us to make informed decisions. Researchers have observed the relation between cognitive reading knowledge and reading comprehension over an extensive period of time. This paper is also an attempt in the same direction: The study focuses on how undergraduate students understand cognitive strategies and its reflection on their reading skills.

Sheorey & Mokhtari (2001) define cognitive strategies as the deliberate actions readers take when comprehension problems develop. To simplify, the processes employed by a reader to better comprehend written text are known as cognitive strategies. Bimmel et al. (2001) have divided cognitive strategies into three different groups: Group 1 entails the use of linguistic and non-linguistic prior knowledge, such as prediction, inferencing, and so on; Group 2 strategies require manipulation of text elements with a high information value, such as skimming, scanning, summarizing, and so on; Group 3 includes strategies that use structure-marking elements in text, such as interpolation. Although the classification of these strategies is not exhaustive, they have been used in subsequent studies to understand the impact of cognitive strategies on reading abilities.

An extensive body of research exists in Europe and America on the role of cognitive in reading

proficiency. It has been found that the use of these strategies mainly depends on two factors: the difficulty of the reading task and the reader's proficiency level. For the purpose of this paper, the difficulty of the reading task was not considered as a factor since the researcher used DIALANG as the reading assessment. DIALANG is a computer-adaptive test and construct the items based on the test-taker's proficiency. The latter factor, i.e., proficiency level, is used as the variable to better understand the impact of cognitive strategies. Studies with adult learners (Phakiti, 2003; Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001) report that advanced learners effectively use metacognitive strategies while reading. However, other studies (Yamashita, 2002; Brantmeier, 2000) have reported contrasting results, where no relation was found between reading proficiency and the use of metacognitive strategies.

### Methodology

A mixed questionnaire containing close-ended multiple-choice questions was created by the researcher. The questionnaire, on the whole, had eight sections and fifty-five items. The section titled "Skill Specific Self-assessment as a reader" has been discussed in detail in this paper. This section focuses on the awareness of various sub-skills of reading among the participants. The aim is to assess if the subject is familiar with the strategies such as scanning, skimming, and prediction required for good reading ability and whether they use these skills while dealing with the text. The sub-skills of reading are termed as cognitive strategies – actions that can be performed while reading to further the comprehension. Strategies from each of the three groups (Group classification by Bimmel et al., 2001)

were incorporated to form this section of the questionnaire. The items were revised based on multiple discussions with an expert in the field of assessment to suit the needs of the study.

The second tool used in the research in order to test the participants on their reading abilities was the DIALANG test. While the questionnaire focused on the theoretical knowledge of the participants regarding reading as a language skill, the test was used to assess how accurately they use this knowledge in order to become good readers. DIALANG is an online software developed in collaboration by a number of higher education institutes in Europe. The test is offered in 14 different European languages and evaluates five skills: reading, writing, listening, grammar, and vocabulary. The respondents are awarded scores corresponding to the Common European Framework (CEF) of language learning. DIALANG is a Computer Adaptive Test (CAT) where the questions asked from the respondents depend on the level of answers they provide.

Each section of the test comprises 30 questions based on the different sub-skills. The test in any of the skill begins with the placement test, which helps the computer to gauge the level (Easy, Intermediate and Difficult) of the questions to be asked. After the placement score, a self-assessment consisting of a list of questions is presented to the learner. This test measures how an individual assesses her own level of proficiency in the specified language. In the feedback, the test compares the self-assessment level to the actual score they receive following the test. In case of a mismatch between the scores, it offers plausible reasons for the discrepancy. DIALANG provides the user with the choice to skip the placement test as

well as the self-assessment test. However, for the purpose of this study, the students were asked to attempt both the sections before taking the reading test.

### DESCRIPTION OF POPULATION

In this study, the population consists of 15 undergraduate students from the English and Foreign Language University pursuing B.A. English (Hons.). Out of the 15 subjects, 9 are in their second year of the graduation program, and 6 in their first year. The subjects had a gender ratio of 3:2, i.e., 9 of them were female and the other 6 were male. The average age of the subjects is 19 years.

The online language assessment was first taken by the researcher in order familiarize themselves with the process. After the completion of the questionnaire and the trial run of the DIALANG test, they were administered to the undergraduate students. Owing to a fewer number of resources (the number of computer systems and space available), the subjects were divided into two groups based on their semester. The data from both the assessments was then collected and analyzed.

In the online test (DIALANG), the students were asked to only attempt the placement test, the self-assessment, and the reading section. The background section in the questionnaire revealed that most of the participants started learning English in their schools at the primary level. The exception arose for two of the participants, who had Bhojpuri as their mother tongue and began learning English in the secondary level at school. Even though the maximum number of subjects had access to learning English in their schools, the medium of instruction for one-third



was Hindi. 10 of the participants went to schools where the medium of instruction was English.

### ANALYSIS

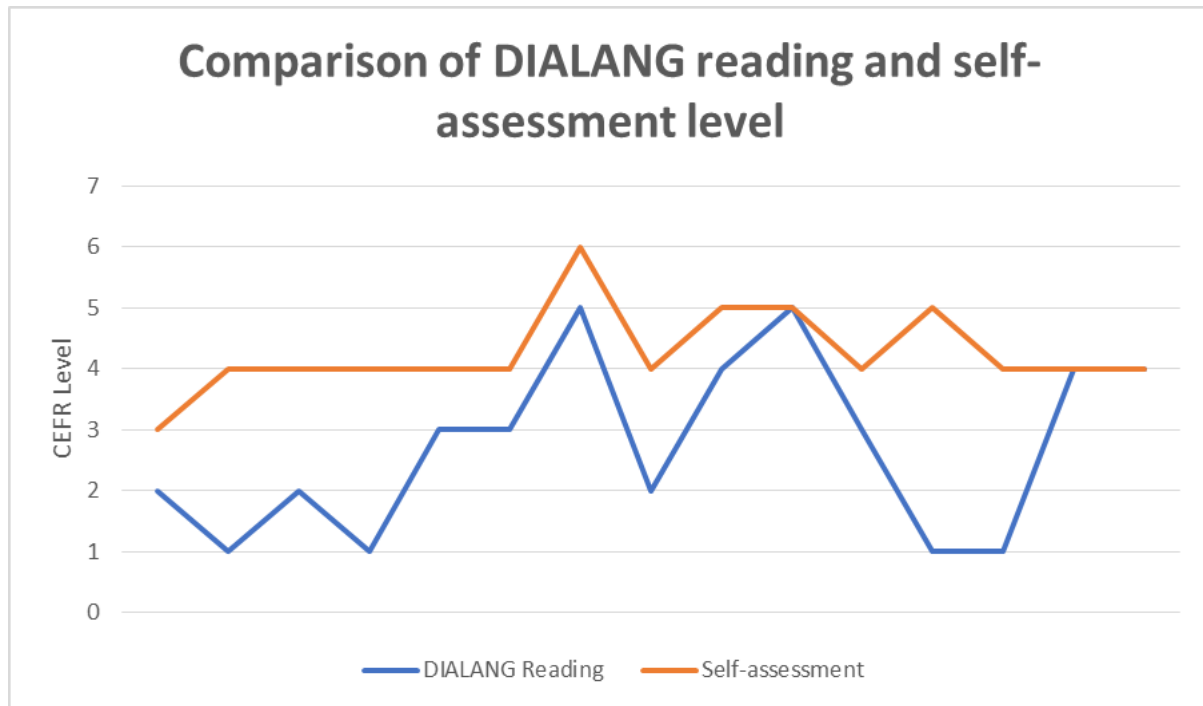


Figure 1 compares the DIALANG test level and the self-assessment level of the participants. In order to simplify the data and plot, the different levels of DIALANG result which are Beginner (A1), Elementary (A2), Intermediate (B1), Upper Intermediate (B2), Advanced (C1), Proficient (C2); were assigned the values of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 respectively. Series 1 in the figure represents the DIALANG test level of the participants while Series 2 represents the self-assessment level.

Although most of the participants (66 percent) self-assessed themselves to be at B2 level, i.e., upper-intermediate level, the test result showed the participants to be of mixed levels. Seven participants were basic users of English, where out of the seven participants, four were at the basic level (A1) whereas the other three at the intermediate level (A2). Three out of the six intermediate users were at lower intermediate (B1), while the other three were upper-intermediate (B2). Only two of the participants had advanced levels (C2) of proficiency.

As figure 1 shows, there is a wide disparity between the self-assessment and their actual reading proficiency. There can be a number of reasons that might explain this difference. One of those factors was the limited exposure to self-assessment questionnaires. It was evident while administering the test that the participants faced problems while attempting the self-assessment test.

The observation that stood out was that all participants, despite the different proficiency levels, assessed their reading abilities at a higher level than the test results. In a number of cases, the disparity was immense. For example, a reader with proficiency of A1 level assessed themselves as B2. One of the female participants with A1 level of proficiency assessed herself to be at the C1 level. Although the researchers have reason to believe that this participant had problems focusing on the day of the test due to some personal factors. Had the test been conducted on another day, the participant may have scored better in the test. Only 3 out of the 15 participants (with a proficiency level greater than B2), i.e., 20% of the total participants had the same level for both the tests.



### Questionnaire Analysis

As the questionnaire was a paper test, the answers for every item were entered in a spreadsheet by the researcher. The process was then verified by another expert in the field to ensure that there was no discrepancy while transferring the responses. The figures were then generated in the form of pie charts and graphs to analyze the data.

#### Are you able to guess what comes next in a story?

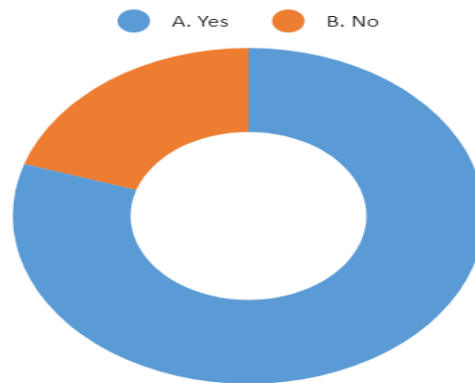


Figure 2

The analysis showed that most of the participants answered positively and were aware of the skills required for better reading practices. 80 percent of the learners (12 out of 15) agree that they can use prediction, a Group 1 strategy while reading, as shown in Figure 2. Prediction is one of the most basic cognitive strategies employed by readers while approaching a text (Brown, 2004; Lee, 1969).

#### Are you able to grasp the main idea in a text?

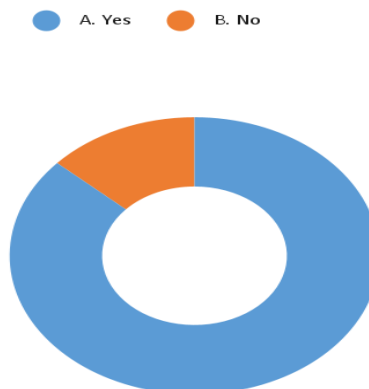


Figure 3

Similarly, 86% of the participants agreed that they can find the main idea in the text, while 73% were able to differentiate the main idea and the supporting details (Figure 3 and 4). Only two out of the 15 participants accepted that they had difficulties grasping the main idea. However, the DIALANG score is not consistent with these results. As seen in the feedback provided by DIALANG, the questions were mainly divided into three broad categories: predicting, looking for main idea, and reading for detail. And the results show that the participants could not get the answers right for these questions. The average DIALANG level of the participant is B2 which shows that though they might be aware of the skill but are not very proficient in it.



Can you differentiate the main idea in a text from the supporting details?

A. Yes B. No

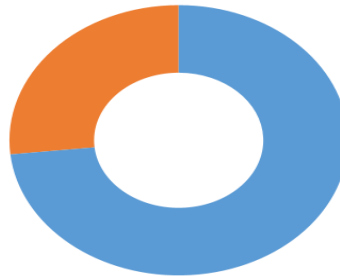


Figure 4

Though the participants are aware of the various skills and strategies used in reading, only four out of the 15 participants consider themselves good readers. 53% of the participants think of themselves as average readers while 2 of them consider themselves bad readers. This rating of the participants is somewhat consistent with the DIALANG results. Most of the participants proved to be intermediate users of language. Whereas only one participant considers himself as very bad reader, the DIALANG scores show that four participants were at A1 level of proficiency.

How would you rate yourself as a reader?

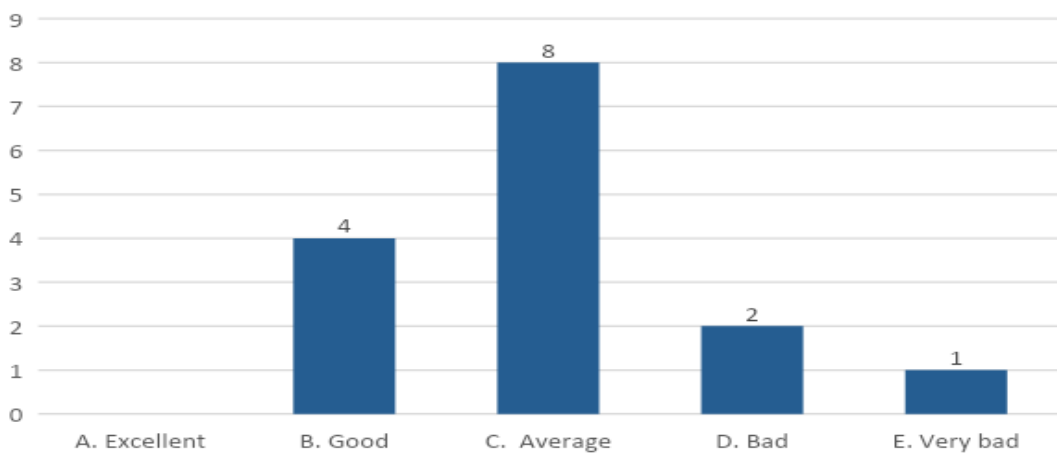


Figure 5

None of the participants rated themselves as excellent readers, however, based on the DIALANG scores, two of the participants have an advanced level of proficiency, and 3 students were placed at C1 in the self-assessment test. This is in contrast to the findings from other studies (Phakiti, 2003) that advanced learners of the language are more aware

about their self-assessment and can correctly predict their abilities.

So, the above discussion yields a number of interesting results. First of all, it shows that the average level of an undergraduate is B2, i.e., the upper-intermediate level. With the two self-assessment tests, it becomes evident that most of

them are aware of reading skills and strategies, but as their level is intermediate, knowing the skills is not enough to be a proficient reader. One needs to practice reading often in order to improve their reading skills. The role of awareness of these skills is one of the area which can be further researched upon.

There was a contrast in the results of the two self-assessment results. While taking the DIALANG self-assessment with "can-do" statements, 56 per cent of the learners were shown to have advanced levels of proficiency. However, when asked to assess themselves directly in the questionnaire, none of the students considered themselves advanced readers. The learners accept that they can perform advanced tasks but do not rate themselves as advanced readers directly. This can either be because of a lack of self-confidence or a lack of understanding the relationship between advanced tasks and proficiency.

Although most of the learners (96 per cent) seem to be aware of cognitive strategies, they might not be able to use them while reading as demonstrated by low test scores. The DIALANG reading test features questions that check the understanding of these cognitive strategies. Less than half the learners did not get the questions correct. The awareness of strategies was not reflected in the reading proficiency results. Other research by Sheorey and Mokhtari's (2001) and Guo and Roehrig's (2011) have also shown that L2 readers demonstrate an awareness of reading strategies regardless of their proficiency levels. A reason for this disparity between awareness of strategies and their active use could be the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis. A minimum level of L2 proficiency is required to read well in the

second language. So, the learners are aware of the reading strategies because of their native language and have not yet attained the required threshold of proficiency in English for adequate application while reading in English. The rest of the students showed no awareness of these strategies. Research (Phakiti 2003) has shown that when learners are actively taught reading strategies in classrooms, the reading test scores had a positive correlation with use of cognitive strategies. This establishes that Indian classrooms need to incorporate lessons on reading strategies in English where students can actively learn and practice using cognitive strategies.

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