

ENRICHMENT OF LANGUAGE AND CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS THROUGH BOOK READING

Rachuri Raajitha
Lecturer
Department of English
University College for Women
Koti, Hyderabad.

Abstract

English language acquisition process has undergone several changes and has been re-assessed by many an expert and now most of them are of the opinion that reading literary texts provides rich linguistic input and stimulates the students/learners to practice and enhance the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in addition to instantiating grammar, word and sentence structures, and learning new vocabulary. Reading a text is considered an important skill in the English language acquisition process. The teacher plays a great role in bringing out the efficiencies of the learner/student when it comes to teaching-learning English language. There have been many theories laid down by various theorists and linguists in the teaching process. However, the teacher can choose any strategy in order to bring the desired results. We are now undergoing the stressful days staying indoors due to the rapid spread of Covid. It is time for the teachers to assist their students even during the pandemic times to enrich the language skills through virtual platforms. This is a technological era and the learners have to put in a conscious effort to understand and apply what has been learnt in academics with the help of available technological equipments. Reading is done for both pleasure and information. Active reading enables a learner to learn more. It also enables the learners to develop critical thinking abilities that are helpful for everyone at all stages to encounter the problems that arise in an individual's life. It is here that learning process becomes challenging. Reading is not an easy process as felt. Reading comprehension is rather a difficult task and is to be developed in a planned and strategic manner. The present paper provides an overview of the importance of reading skills, reading comprehension, the problems encountered by the students while comprehending passages and ways for improving comprehension skills.

Key words: reading skill, reading comprehension, intensive and extensive reading, skimming, scanning, critical thinking skills, language enrichment etc.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has made lives of everyone confined to their homes, and also has lead to isolation with a view to preventing infection. In the present time of crisis, reading literature can be used as a tool of enrichment of language and also as one of best options in supporting our health system as it engages one in a good activity of passing time at home while being in isolation. Literary narratives enable the readers to explore more of the text and develop their critical thinking skills. A few learners enjoy reading novels and other texts of their interest to pass their time in quarantine while others tend to know the barbarity of the world outside.

Pandemics destroy lives of people and become the reason for the destruction throughout the world. But writers have not stopped producing wonderful works in spite of this devastation. The novel 'The Last Man', written in 1826 by English novelist Mary Shelley was one of the first novels that portrayed the terrible catastrophic events of a future world severely devastated by a plague and also of contemporary theories of the nature of the contagious disease. Tagore's poem *Puratan Bhritya* (The Old Manservant) written in 1909 exemplifies the painful story of a person who serves his master but finally dies with smallpox. Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) portrays how gravediggers charged their fee four times during the Spanish flu. Kushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* published in 1956 speaks of the sorrows and the trauma of the people when they had to get separated and move away to other country. They had been living together in harmony in India in spite of the existence of many religions. There might be a question as to why reading books is important when once reading was not unusual. Reading books comes in bringing with it great benefits. It not only develops verbal ability but also enriches the humane qualities like compassion, love, empathy and many more. Reading books improves critical thinking and creative thinking skills. The play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare teaches to think wisely and promptly. Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*, portrays the impact of racism on the lives of people. Reading thus has many benefits and reading literature in particular develops inquisitiveness among readers to read more.

Why inculcate reading habit among students?

Teachers must encourage their students to read books on literature. There are various books available now online in many editions such as kindle and pdfs. So it is important for the teachers teaching English as literature and also as language to probe into strategies of developing the skill of reading in virtual classrooms even during the pandemic times when every student and every teacher has to stay indoors for days and months. It is clearly evident that language teaching is possible even in the absence of manual classrooms, and teachers across the globe have already been doing it through various platforms like Google Classroom or Zoom.

When asked why we read books, Joseph Addison said: "*Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.*"

Francis Bacon in one of his essays, 'Our Studies' wrote, "*Reading maketh a full man.*" According to Gray, "*Reading is a form of experience.*"

Reading skill is very significant for various reasons. It encourages the reader to develop his thinking, monitor his ideas and also judge his thoughts in becoming a better person. These concepts can be categorized under an umbrella term *critical thinking* that includes various concepts like creative thinking, reasoning and logical thinking. Reading skill helps not only in the acquisition of language but also in developing the above mentioned concepts.

Reading is a complex activity that involves comprehending a text and interpreting its ideas in multiple ways. Goodman (1970) says, "*The purpose of reading is the reconstruction of meaning*". Reconstruction of meaning attempts to give a wider scope of understanding in that it involves reading a text, understanding between the lines, reaching the context beyond the content, analyzing and interpreting it in multiple directions, all of which are mentioned by Bloom in his *Taxonomy of Objectives*. Reading can be for pleasure or for gaining information. It can be oral or silent as it depends on the purpose of the reader.

What is Reading Comprehension?

Reading is a complex activity and involves decoding a text. It centers on the activity of reading, recognizing and comprehending a written text. The primary focus is on the identification of the central theme of the text,

and evaluating the text in a critical manner. What the reader triggers outside of the text matters the most as this task enables the individual to develop his thinking skills. Here the concept of questioning oneself or the teacher while probing into the text to know beyond their thinking level occupies much prominence as the task of questioning leads to improving critical thinking.

The concept of questioning is not newly recognized and can be dated back to 2500 years and more when Socrates had first laid the foundation for it. It is named as '*Socratic questioning*'. The technique of Socratic Questioning is done to develop thought based ideas among students. This technique is very helpful for both teachers and students. It allows the learners or the students to understand a text beyond their capacities and increase their knowledge on the topic to the fullest extent. It is an effective way to bring out the hidden and unnoticed ideas to the brim.

The act of questioning is related to the higher-order thinking skills that Bloom had discussed in his '*Taxonomy of Objectives*' that enables the students to gain ownership of what they have been learning. The act further leads to discussions, debates, and numerous interpretations. For this, the teacher can raise as many questions as possible regarding the topic or the text after introducing the topic. Socrates, the Greek philosopher and the teacher opined that the practice of probing into appropriate and thoughtful questioning in the classroom leads to better thinking and this further leads to critical, and logical thinking.

For example, the teacher can introduce the topic of Julius Caesar written by Shakespeare. The episode of the death of Brutus is awestruck and pulls the learners into an anxiety to know what had taken place before and after the incident. The teacher can raise questions once the topic has been discussed in the classroom. The teacher can then instruct the students to read the episode in detail which will encourage them to probe further into the topic. Encouraging the students to think of questions such as the ones mentioned below, enhance the thinking skills furthermore.

- ✓ What do you think the main issue is about?
- ✓ Do you think it is the most important issue to be discussed?
- ✓ What makes you think that?
- ✓ Do you want the truth to come out? Give your reasons.
- ✓ Can you list certain assumptions which might have lead to the death of Brutus?
- ✓ Do you have any proofs for your assumptions/arguments?
- ✓ Why did you get this idea? Is this your own idea or have you discussed this with your friends?
- ✓ Do you think these assumptions lead to further discussion on the topic?

The students should be encouraged to read the entire text if not in verse but at least in prose and make an analysis of their own. The students should be allowed to question the teacher but in turn the teacher can encourage them to find answers on their own. Reading the text will also enable the students to develop a better hold of the vocabulary by knowing synonyms, antonyms and also one-word substitutes all of which form part of grammar. Thus it is clearly evident that the teacher/instructor is the one who 'scaffolds' the learners from one level of perception to the next.

Krashen and Terrell are of the opinion that the material chosen to teach literature and language to the students ought to be slightly beyond their perception levels. Good reading skills can improve the other language skills like writing and speaking. Kröll says in his book *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing* written in 2003 that there is no evidence for this assumption but one can consider that the reading skill can definitely add to the developing of writing and speaking skills. The idea of intertextuality helps them to know the relationship between varied texts and also to know how different works influence the author. For example, the learners must be encouraged to analyze James Joyce's *Ulysses* written on the basis of Homer's *Odyssey*.

Reading is a very important skill to be possessed by all irrespective of age. One can become skilled at reading when the individual begins to interact with the text and trigger outside the text. Coronado and Oakhill (2001) say that reading is a pervasive and vital activity in our lives, we read for pleasure, to acquire new language or skills, to keep up with current events, and to navigate our complex world. According to Alderson and Urquhart (1984), reading knowledge of a foreign language is considered to be of a great significance for academic progress, professional success, and personal growth. This is particularly significant with respect to English language as English is the language in which most of the literatures are published. The focus of the English language teacher should be on making the student efficient and an independent learner. The material framed to teach the students should be able to bring out the inner talents at a later stage which relate to both writing and speaking skills. Tasks like summarizing, note-making, précis writing, essay writing, making inferences, taking part in debates and discussions can be effectively taken up by a skilled reader. However, practice alone can make all these possible.

Certain reading strategies can be applied on the students. Meta-cognition is one such strategy that can be applied on those students with knowledge of vocabulary of certain words. In this aspect, the teacher should initially provide the outline of the text and then instruct the students to read it in detail. This will allow the students to plan to read the entire text, think critically and make interpretations on their own. Before approaching the teacher for the clarification of doubts, the teacher should encourage the students to think critically and make their own analysis.

Cognitive strategy depends on the mental ability of student. Here the student learns, stores and uses the same when required to perform. In this case, the role of the teacher is more when compared to the strategy of meta-cognition.

Extensive and intensive reading skills are also worth mentioning strategies. Both these skills allow the students to use skimming and scanning methods of reading. Skimming is used to get an overall understanding of the text while scanning is used to pick a particular information, name or number. Researchers are of the opinion that the strategy of meta-cognition is the most effective approach in the reading instruction in the academic progress of the learners. Students might encounter a few problems while learning to read as English generally is considered second or third language in Indian schools and colleges and hence the standard of reading skill varies depending on the basics learnt at the school level which falls primarily under the country's pedagogic framework. Reading is a mental process that needs the previous knowledge of the learner to relate and integrate further reading. Lack of good reading skills and poor vocabulary will hinder the accumulation of information and will make the learner handicapped in the process of language acquisition. The connectivity of ideas may be lost in the process leading to rise of anxiety levels in the learner. Tasks like pre-reading, while reading and post reading can be encouraged among the learners which will continuously keep the students in touch with the topic. Generally learners read novels or short stories with a constant pace while compared to reading articles or news bulletins. The latter are professional and academic related tasks and hence it is here that the teacher needs to keep a constant monitoring of the activities of the learner in the process of language teaching.

Jespersen says: *“To keep students occupied with the text repeatedly in such a way that they do not lose sight in the meaning, so that they may thus become so familiar with it at last that they know it almost or entirely by heart, without having been directly required to commit it to memory.”*

Reading becomes joyful and beneficial once the learner becomes acquainted with the skill of reading.

According to Thompson and Wyatt, *“The exact procedure to be adopted will depend upon the nature of the subject matter to be read and the skill in reading already acquired by the class.”*

They further add, “*The main purpose of extensive reading is the cultivation of taste for reading and it seeks by encouraging the habit of visualizing what is read to make reading a form of visual instruction*”.

Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives written in 1956 focuses on six important concepts in his framework which can be tapped by the teacher while teaching language and literature to students.

- ✓ Knowledge
- ✓ Comprehension
- ✓ Application
- ✓ Analysis
- ✓ Synthesis
- ✓ Creation

English language is inter-disciplinary. It is the language for teaching all disciplines such as History, Biology, Social Sciences or even Mathematics. Hence it is mandatory for teachers to focus on improving reading skill otherwise which may hinder the learner’s thinking skills. Teachers can make use of any strategy that can motivate the learners while reading in the language classroom. Focus on English language will enable the learners to improve in other disciplines, which is the main goal of Higher Order Thinking Skills as discussed by Bloom. Enabulele (2011) says, “*Students who are proficient in reading have a greater chance of success in the job market.*”

It is very important for a teacher to look into various ways through which he/she can develop reading skills in a virtual classroom now. The basic motto of reading books is to gain knowledge or for seeking pleasure. In a language classroom, the teacher should focus on developing the critical thinking skills of the learner. Though it is initially difficult for the reader/learner to read between the lines to understand the underlying meaning and intentions of the author, application of certain strategies will definitely bring out the desired outcome in a course of time. Initially they can infer what the words say superficially but may find it difficult to read between the lines to get the underlying meaning and intentions of the writer (Fisher, 2005). Language lab can be equipped with various books and materials that help the learners in the language acquisition. Students should be encouraged to express their opinions, jot down their views in writing, form novel and creative ideas, analyze and evaluate them and compare and contrast them with others in the classroom, all of which contribute for the development of Higher Order Thinking Skills that Bloom had stated in his *Taxonomy*. When learners understand the noticeable advantages of reading comprehension, they use various strategies in improving it. It is important for everyone to develop the habit of reading at all stages. Works of great authors can change our lives. They enable the learners to think critically and find solutions for problems that they encounter in their daily lives. Reading enhances the thoughts of learners from different perspectives that might give rise to innovative ideas which can be incorporated by an individual to have a successful life. It is the pandemic time now and the entire world is suffering. The teachers can assist the students to develop this skill of reading more during this time. Technology can be tapped to the fullest extent possible as smart phones are now available with most of the people. A lesson at the intermediate level namely *Lateral thinking* by Edward De bono would teach the learners/students the art of living in various critical situations. It is important for everyone to think critically and creatively and act according to the situation. Now is the time for the teachers to use technology and build the reading competencies of the learners. Various activities like passage reading, comprehending the text, vocabulary development and grammar exercises can be given online. It is not to be neglected to take feedback from the learners. This will allow the teachers to plan for the next assessment tests and future tasks to be given. It is entirely in the hand of teachers to follow their own method. However, a teacher cannot be replaced by any technological equipment. A teacher can sit at home and provide the ways of learning from any corner. It is all the personality, expression, drive and initiative that are needed. There are

several E-learning tools that have been helping the students of schools and universities learn the subject online while adapting to the new changes. Learners with a static mindset may find it difficult to adapt while the learners with a mindset of learning more and increasing their knowledge tend to approach various methods of learning. The virtual platform also allows physically challenged students to actively participate in learning environment (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). The trauma of being in isolation, psychological and emotional distress of the students could be understood and hence the teachers can make the optimum usage of online modes of teaching, make language learning creative and innovative and also interesting by using any of the convenient strategies possible.

References

- Ahmadi, M. R., & Pourhoseini Gilakjani, A. (2012). Reciprocal Teaching Strategies and Their Impacts on English Reading Comprehension. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(10), 2053-2060. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.10.2053-2060>
- Anderson, R. C., & Pearson, P. D. (1984). *A schema-theoretic view of basic processes in reading*. In P. D. Pearson, R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, & P. Mosenthal (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (pp. 255–292). New York: Longman.
- Coronado, C & Oakill, J. (2001). *Reading Comprehension difficulties: Processes and intervention*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33, 943-956.
- Alderson, J C (2000): *Assessing Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Alderson, J.C. & Urquhart, A.H. (eds.) (1984). *Reading in a Foreign Language*. London: Longman.
- Armbruster, B. B., Anderson, T. H., & Ostertag, J. (1987). Does text structure/summarization instruction facilitate learning from expository text? *Reading Research Quarterly*, 22, 331–346.
- Bloom, B. S.; Engelhart, M. D.; Furst, E. J.; Hill, W. H.; Krathwohl, D. R. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals. Handbook I: Cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay Company.
- Brookbank, D., Grover, S., Kullberg, K., & Strawser, C. (1999). *Improving student achievement through organization of student learning*. (ED 435094).
- Cziko, G. A. (1980). *Language competence and reading strategies: A comparison of first and second language oral reading errors*. *Language Learning*, 30, 101-116.
- DeBono E (1970) *Lateral Thinking*. London: Penguin
- Francois Grellet . *A practical guide to reading comprehension exercises*. Cambridge University Press 1981.
- Enabulele, A. (2011). *A Critical thinking in secondary language arts: Teacher perception and relevant strategies* (M.A. Thesis). Eric.
- Fairclough, Norman. Ed. *Critical Language Awareness*. London: Longman, 1992
- Jitendra, A. K., Hoppes, M. K., & Xin, Y. P. (2000). Enhancing main idea comprehension for students with learning problems the role of a summarization strategy and self-monitoring instruction. *The Journal of Special Education*, 34(3), 127–139.
- Goodman, K. (1973). *Psycholinguistic Universals in the Reading Process*. In F. Smith(Ed.) *Psycholinguistics and reading* (pp. 21-27). New York: Holt

Goodman, K. *Reading: Process and Program*. National Council for Teachers of English. Urbana, Illinois. 1970.

Raajitha, Rachuri. Significance of Reading Skills. (Topic presented in ELT Summit 2019, Article yet to be published)

Webliography:

https://www.criticalthinking.org/store/get_file.php?inventories_id=231&inventories_files_id=422 (Socrates Socratic thinking)

