Enhancing Reading Comprehension Skills of Prospective Teachers Using Suitable Reading Strategies

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Abstract—This study focused on using appropriate reading strategies to improve the reading comprehension of prospective teachers in two teacher education colleges in the Vellore District of Tamil Nadu, India. The paper begins by introducing the importance of English language in the contemporary environment, and then highlights the significance of reading comprehension for academic purposes. Three reading strategies were employed in the experimental study. The sample size and the testing methods employed in the experiment are described in the methodology section. The statistical analysis to determine the reading comprehension skills was done with mean, paired sample t-test and co-efficient. The results confirm that the use of appropriate reading strategies enhances the reading comprehension skills of the samples.

Index Terms—academic language, reading comprehension, reading strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

English is a major international link language that is predominantly used in the Internet, in commerce, politics, courts, industry, education, and entertainment. Therefore, it is essential to effectively comprehend English. It serves as a passport to higher education and offers a fillip in enhancing career prospects. The usage of the English language in modern-day communication, films, journals and newspapers and in social media has necessitated the "understanding of English" in all its dimensions.

A British Council report of 1999 claims that worldwide, there are one billion English language learners. In many communities, such as those in Cameroon or India, daily existence requires speaking more than one language. In addition to L2 users, linguistic minorities need another language for education or healthcare.

To provide learners with activities and skills that are appropriate for their language and academic performance, teachers need to implement creative aspects and employ innovative strategies to teach academic self-concepts and offer skills that are suitable for their academic and language achievement (Fareen, 2013). Learning a second language raises learners' awareness level and serves as a means of significant exposure to the mother tongue. It also enhances the learning of new cognitive skills. Learners widen their views and their outlook on society by mastering another language (Cook, 2007).

This paper addresses the issues and viewpoints of teachers as well as that of prospective teachers studying in education colleges (B.Ed.) to improve English communication skills in those colleges. Readers are usually unaware of the cognitive process taking place within their brain. Reading is a receptive process that consciously or subconsciously involves the use of one's fingers, eyes, brain, ears (in loud reading) and memory. Reading is more of a psychological interaction than a purely physiological process. This is demonstrated by the fact that many notable personalities have spent a significant portion of their lives reading.

A. Reading Comprehension Skills and Academic Language

Reading is a form of bi-polar communication in which the writer communicates with the reader or vice versa. It occurs in the physical and the mental realm. Reading is a transformational experience as well as a philological practice. Those who excel in reading also excel in processing and evaluating information. Understanding leads to acquisition of knowledge. In human memory, knowledge is arranged into components called 'schema' or 'schemata.' The information already stored in long-term memory is called schema, and it is activated by the development of information and by comparing it to the source that is already recorded in long-term memory. Knowledge, which is portrayed as a psycholinguistic model of reading, is a conceptual system for comprehending.

Alshumaimeri (2011) observed a positive impact of the reading method on Saudi EFL students' comprehension performance. He states that reading is an important skill for both learning and communication. Reading lessons,

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according to current educational trends, is a vital stage in the development of mental and linguistic talents. Reading quietly, reading with subvocalization (creating the sounds of the words while reading silently), and reading aloud to oneself are all examples of reading strategies. Whenever readers have adequately researched the subject, they understand the context better and also perform well linguistically. However, when they do not think about the subject beforehand and do not read adequately about the topic, they struggle to engage with the assignment or activity (Holme & Chalauisaeng, 2006).

The level of literacy competence of future generations is greatly influenced by prospective teachers. However, this circumstance also raises questions regarding the motivation behind reading and the attitudes of potential teachers towards reading skills. This study was done to examine these aspects. Academic, social, professional, and personal criteria were considered for analyzing the reading skills of the potential teachers. The data were examined based on the guidelines of content analysis. Each criterion was calculated using the frequencies and percentages of participant responses. The study reiterated that the reading skills of prospective teachers were vital for academic, social, and personal reasons. Practical education, a general cultural knowledge and professional competencies are required for teachers to perform well in their profession. The intellectual, social, and personal benefits of reading skills are directly related to the requirements. Reading is, therefore, essential for being a successful teacher (Dogan, 2014).

The units of reading are determined on the basis of contextual knowledge and an individual's reading abilities. Reading proficiency is crucial for academic success. The use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies can improve reading comprehension. For better comprehension, learners need to master the principles of reading skills. The first stage in learning a language is learning without comprehending the text. While reading comprehension is taught in schools and universities across the world, it is mainly taught using the traditional approach of comprehension, which seldom helps achieve the desired effect. When learners use the same strategy to grasp texts of various genres and levels, they are more likely to miss the crux of the material. If a learner excels in reading, he or she will excel in overall academics as well, which subsequently leads to success in academic and professional situations.

B. Reading Comprehension Process

Reading is a receptive, psycholinguistic process, which is similar for all the subjects, regardless of race, age or reading proficiency. All readers employ the three-cueing system, namely graphophones, syntactic, and semantic systems (Goodman, 1970). Before the turn of the twentieth century, attempts were made to comprehend the reading process. For instance, Huey (1898) contended that if we could comprehend reading, we might comprehend how the human brain functions. A reader's ability to recognize words and construct meanings is an important part of their reading process. According to the word recognition (WR) view, Writing is a secondary representation of communication because spoken language is spontaneous and easy to understand. The only way to access the meaning of words is by matching them to their verbal equivalents in the lexicon. This process of word recognition needs to become quick, precise, and automated for typical readers to read at the appropriate pace (Goodman, 1997).
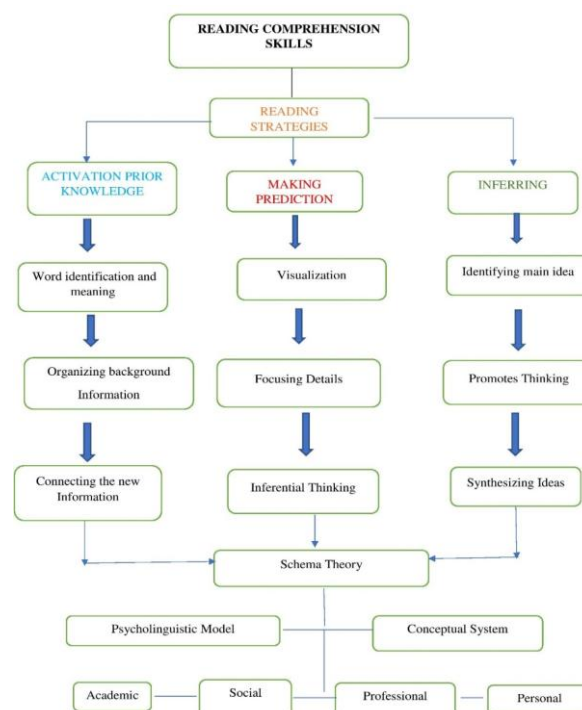

Figure 1

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of reading comprehension. In this study, three reading strategies, namely, activation of prior knowledge, making predictions, and inferring were employed to enhance reading comprehension.

C. Schema Theory in Reading

"Schema theory combines neuroscience's well-established terminology for levels of structural analysis (brain region, neuron, synapse) with a functional vocabulary, a framework for analyzing behavior that does not require a commitment to hypotheses on the localization of each schema (unit of functional analysis), but can be linked to a structural analysis when necessary" (Arbib, 1992). Even if the application of the schema changes from domain to domain, schema offers a high-level of language that is shared by brain researchers, cognitive scientists, connectionists, ethologists, and even kinesiologists. A person with good comprehension agrees that top-down processing aspects that go beyond schema availability should be given more attention. "Knowledge-based" approach denotes the "top-down" strategy, whereas "text-based" approach refers to the "bottom-up" approach.

Barsalou (1999) states that perceptual symbol system theory is perhaps the most renowned reading comprehension theory. In addition, he argues that sensory experiences (audition, vision, taste, smell, and touch) are directly stored in long-term memory. Schemata have also been proposed in cognitive linguistics as a mechanism to relate physical activities, perceptual experience, and semantic thinking. It is worth emphasizing that adopting feature schemata is more of an art than a science, while adding or removing a single schema seldom has a substantial influence on performance. However, the overall impact of a large number of well-chosen schemata may be remarkable (Charniak & Johnson, 2005). Having schematic knowledge offers the advantage of relying on default information.

D. Reading Strategies

It is important for proficient readers to actively engage with the text and be aware of their strategies for comprehending it. Through the teaching of reading skills, teachers may aid students in improving comprehension. Research has demonstrated that using strategies like prediction, making connections, visualizing, inferring, questioning, and summarizing can help readers understand what they are reading (Block & Israel, 2005). The following reading strategies were predominantly used in this study.

(a). Activation of Prior Knowledge

Learners need to have good reading skills when learning a language, which in turn, stimulates knowledge acquisition. Reading is not just a process of obtaining new knowledge, but it also helps make a connection between the prior knowledge of the readers and their understanding of the text.

A study says that this strategy was contrasted with a more conventional text-based strategy where the emphasis was on picking out crucial facts as the readers read, much like an innervation reading position (Spires & Donley, 1998).

Short story previews that emphasized on recalling previous information crucial to comprehending the text, as one of its components, were inspired by the strategy of 'Enhancing Prior Knowledge'. This has shown that activating such knowledge boosts comprehension. According to the study, learners' learning from stories was significantly enhanced when they read the previews before reading the stories (Graves & Cooke, 1980).

Current research seems to support the need for giving students the activation of their past knowledge or the creation of a foundation if one does not already exist. It is crucial to provide students with opportunities to use their collective experiences and past knowledge. Through this procedure, teachers help students transition from mere memorization of facts to meaningful learning. It also initiates the process of linking learning experiences rather than just retaining them as isolated facts. Prior knowledge is a crucial component in this effort to create meaning (Christen & Murphy, 1991).

(b). Making Prediction

Educators and academics more commonly refer to the use of previous information as guessing, whereas official psychological language typically identifies it as hypothesis testing. Reading is thought to be impossible without prediction, and as children only learn to read via reading, the chance to practice and improve prediction abilities must be an essential component of learning to read (Smith, 1975).

The strategy of making prediction is recommended for enhancing learners' comprehension of texts in the teaching–learning process. This paper confirms that making predictions enhances reading comprehension skills. This strategy is taught to learners to help them anticipate the text's content in light of their prior knowledge. Students learn how to arrange information before reading a book, compare it to information they have heard before, and then combine both sets of information after reading (Jufri, 2018).

Increased executive functioning, such as planning and organizing, is vital in improving reading comprehension skills, according to a more recent study (Locascio et al., 2010). Making predictions, keeping track of what they are reading, sequencing and retelling a text, and making conclusions are all part of planning and organizing. Several studies on these skills emphasize the value of imparting inference-making strategy.

(c). Inferring

Drawing conclusions from information that is indirect rather than explicitly stated is known as inferring. It is a crucial ability in reading comprehension. Inferring denotes drawing personal meaning from the content. Certainly, it is

the inference strategy, in which the reader attempts to comprehend and interpret the reading material by projecting his/her meaning on it. With prior knowledge about the content, the reader understands the link between obviously stated information and inferred information, and he/she draws inferences from it (Zwiers, 2004).

Qualitative studies have revealed similarities and discrepancies between the inference processes employed by young readers and adults (Linda, 1990). When a barrier is reached, focus declines. Readers who possess high proficiency and good background knowledge verify existing interpretation and empathize with the substance. Assuming default interpretations and withholding or repeating information are the strategies most commonly used with readers who are low in skill and have less background knowledge (Phillips, 1988).

Attaprechakul (2013) investigated the inference strategy required for effective reading of a journal article, and found that the learners frequently used bottom-up processing. They omitted challenging material, particularly the technical details and the graphics. To improve their comprehension, they asked peers for assistance. Samples were effective in understanding the thesis statement, the main idea of the section, and the definitions of the examined terms and clauses. The underlying thesis, the article's tone, and other people's perceptions of the research findings, on the other hand, were harder for them to infer.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Samples

The samples for this study were B.Ed. students from urban and rural areas enrolled in Vellore District, Tamil Nadu, India. B.Ed. is a two-year professional teacher training program, which aspiring teachers undergo after graduating in Arts or Sciences. B.Ed. is a prerequisite for a becoming a secondary level teacher in India. The samples comprising females and males were in the age group of 22 to 26 years. The majority of them had studied in Tamil, their native language, till their undergraduate Programs. Most of them struggled to comprehend what they were reading because they were reading in English.

The composite Vellore district has 43 B.Ed. institutions, which includes 42 private institutions and 1 government institution. For this study, a government institution and a private college were selected. The samples were split into two groups: controlled and experimental. The sample size was calculated on the basis of the Kerjcie-Morgan formula, Therefore, 120 samples consisting of 60 in the experimental and 60 in the control group from both the colleges took part in the study. The study's main objective was to enhance the reading comprehension abilities of samples using suitable reading strategies. The samples of both the private and the government college benefitted from enhancement in their reading comprehension skills using the strategies.

B. Methods and Materials

The study considered the significant positive strategies to improve reading comprehension skills. Research findings highlight the value of employing reading strategies to increase reading comprehension and enhance the overall English language and academic achievement. This is an important aspect with aspiring teachers because it will be reflected in their profession as full-time teachers.

C. Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were considered for this experiment.
- H_01: There is no difference in the mean value between the Control Group and Experimental Group of Private College.
- H_02: There is no difference in the mean value between the Control Group and Experimental Group of Government College.
- H_03: There is no enhancement in reading comprehension among prospective students.

Research methodology for the study employed was the pre-test / post-test design.
The experiment included:
- Pilot study
- Pre-test
- Treatment
- Post-test
- Data Analysis

(a). Pilot Study

To assess the Post viability of the research, a pilot study on reading comprehension was carried out at the beginning with 10% of the population. Following that, tests of reading comprehension were conducted based on the inputs derived from the pilot study. The strategies used in the main study and the pilot study were identical. Additionally, data on the participants' experiences outside of the classroom and their opinions were gathered.

(b). Questionnaire

To gather the necessary personal and academic data and to conduct the investigation, a questionnaire was distributed and collected from 150 samples.

(c). Pre-Test and Post-Test

The study used the pre-test and post-test design. Questions for the pre-test and the post-test were adapted from IELTS and the test items were attuned to the reading comprehension level of the samples. All the questions were of multiple-choice. The goal was to make the samples identify and use the information in the provided content. They had to determine the author's point of view, matching the data to the inquiries. Also included was a summary or inference of the data from the notes, tables, and flowcharts. The aim was to help the samples comprehend the questions and provide a brief response. Effective comprehension is required for sentence completion and sentence matching tasks. The validity and reliability of the pre-test and post-test were investigated prior to the pilot research. Following the pre-test, the experimental samples were offered 30 sessions on using strategies to enhance reading comprehension. To help them with better reading comprehension, flexible schedules were adopted. Strangely, the samples that had difficulty in understanding the 'content' had a clear understanding of the 'context'. The samples were instructed to read using the appropriate reading strategies. At the end of the experiment, the samples exhibited better comprehension than at the beginning.

The study confirmed a positive variation in the reading performance of the samples between the pre-test and post-test. The goal was to continuously track the samples' development over the given time. At the exit level, the post-test was administered. Statistical techniques were used for analyzing the data and assessing if reading comprehension skills among prospective teachers of Vellore district improved with the use of reading strategies.

(d). Reading Strategies Employed

The following reading strategies were employed in this study:
- Activating prior knowledge
- Making prediction
- Drawing inference

(e). Test Items

The 50-minute pre-test, which had five sections comprising five test items, employed the following test items. The questions did not test their memory, but were aimed at assessing their comprehension level. Multiple choice questions (MCQs) on reading comprehension were given. The total score of 50 marks was distributed as 10 marks for each section. The test items included:
1) Questions on topics that the samples had prior knowledge about
2) Completing sentences by guessing the content
3) Reading the instruction and guessing the recipe
4) Reading a news lead and comprehending it
5) Studying a picture and answering questions.

TABLE 1

Sl. No.	Test Items	Measuring Readers' Understanding of the Text	Marks	Time (Mins.)
1	Reading Comprehension	Understanding the Question and Gaining the Response	10	10
2	Vocabulary	Recognizing the Subject and Retrieving the Answer	10	10
3	Activation of Prior Knowledge	Building a Connection between the text and their prior knowledge (From the First-semester Syllabus)	10	10
4	Prediction	Prediction/ guessing the terms that they already know; if not, confirming it with proper reference	10	10
5	Inference	Drawing personal meaning from the text and presenting it clearly in their own words	10	10

III. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The following tools were used for analyzing the data:
- Mean and Coefficient of variation
- Standard Deviation (SD)
- Paired t-test

To enhance the effectiveness of reading comprehension strategies, the mean and coefficient of variation of the pre-test and post-test scores of two separate groups were estimated.

TABLE 2

Private College - Control Group				
		Mean	N	Standard Deviation
Control Group	Pre-test	16.53	30	4.848
	Post-test	16.17	30	4.921

Table 2 shows the mean value of control groups. The pre-test mean value is 16.53 and the post-test mean value is 16.17. So, there is no considerable enhancement between pre-test and post-test among control group. There was no intervention and use of strategies in the control group.

TABLE 3

Private College – Experimental Group				
		Mean	N	Standard Deviation
Experimental group	Pre-test	15.20	30	4.483
	Post-test	18.77	30	3.645

Table 3 illustrates that after the use of reading strategies such as activating prior knowledge, making predictions, and drawing inference significantly influenced the reading comprehension skills of the experimental group. The pre-test mean value is 15.20 while Post-test mean value is 18.77. The samples' mean score showed a remarkable improvement and their reading comprehension skills were also enhanced. The strategies positively influenced the reading skills of the samples as seen in the improvement in post-test scores of the samples of the experimental group of private college. The samples could enhance their reading comprehension skills in the English language and the paired-test value of pre-test and post-test is shown in Figure 2.
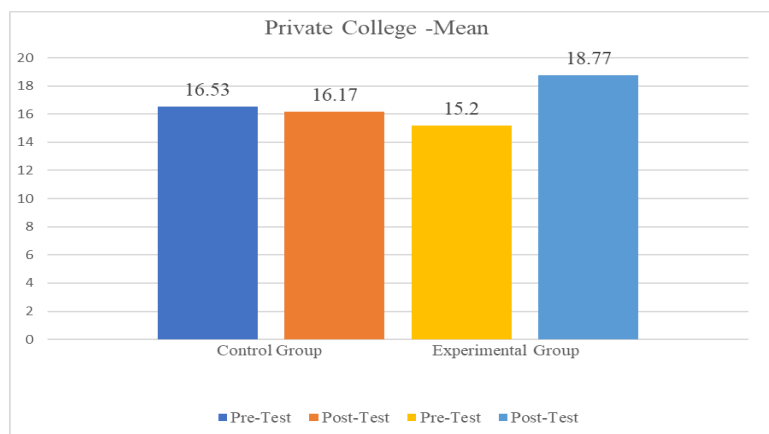

Figure 2

Paired sample T-Test

Figure 2 shows the variation amid the pre-test and the post-test value of the samples from private college. There was no considerable variation in the value of the pre-test and post-test of the control group while there was a noticeable improvement in understanding of the text skills of the experimental group samples. There were three reading strategies namely activating prior knowledge, making prediction, and drawing inference introduced for improving reading comprehension skills.

TABLE 4

Private College		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	Df	Sig.
Control group	Pre & Post Test	.367	1.245	.227	1.613	29	.118
Experimental group	Pre & Post Test	3.567	2.635	.481	7.414	29	.000

Table 4 shows the outcome of paired sample t-test value of private college. The control group significance value is .188 and the experimental group' p-value is below 0.05 and it is proved the effectiveness of reading strategies in enhancing reading comprehension skills amid prospective teachers of Vellore district.

TABLE 5

Government College				
Control group		Mean	N	Standard Deviation
	Pre-test	17.83	30	4.542
	Post-test	17.10	30	5.108

Table 5 shows the mean value of control groups of reading comprehension skills. The pre-test mean value is 17.83 and the post-test mean value is 17.10. So, there is no considerable enhancement between pre-test and post-test among the control group. They followed the same conventional method of reading. There is no intervention and strategies were implemented for the control group of the government college.

TABLE 6

Government College				
Experimental group		Mean	N	Standard Deviation
	Pre-test	15.20	30	4.483
	Post-test	19.67	30	3.565

From Table 6 it is evident that after the intervention of reading strategies - activating prior knowledge, making prediction, and drawing inference - the reading comprehension skills improved considerably. The mean score increased, which confirmed that their reading comprehension skills were enhanced, as seen in the paired t-test because the obtained t-value is greater than the critical t-value. The paired-test value of pre-test and post-test is shown in the figure.
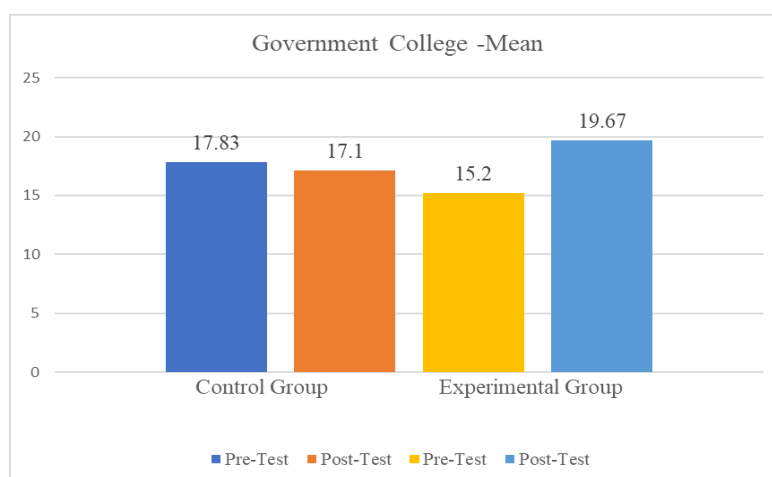

Figure 3

Figure 3 shows the variation amid the pre and post-test reading comprehension skills of government college prospective teachers of Vellore district. There was no noteworthy variation in the value of pre and post-test among control groups but there was a considerable enhancement in reading comprehension skills among experimental groups.

TABLE 7

Government College							
Control group	Pre & Post Test	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	Df	Sig.
		.733	3.832	.700	1.048	29	.303
Experimental group	Pre & Post Test	4.467	3.037	.554	8.056	29	.000

Table 7 shows the outcomes of paired sample t-test value of government college. The control group significance value is .303 and the experimental group' p-value is below 0.05 and confirmed the effectiveness of reading strategies in enhancing reading comprehension skills among prospective teachers of Vellore district.

The data in the graph shows that the post-test score of the experimental group was greater than the post-test values of the controlled group. Additionally, the percentage shows that it was higher than that of the controlled groups. This proves that the use of reading strategies to teach reading comprehension to the learners was successful with the samples.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

The difference in the mean value between the Control Group and Experimental Group samples of both, the Private College and the Government College, confirmed that there has enhanced in the reading comprehension skills among the experimental group with the use of reading strategies. We can infer that the reading comprehension of the prospective teachers of Vellore district improved significantly with the use of the reading strategies chosen for the study.

V. CONCLUSION

The results indicate that there is a significant difference in the pre-test and post-test scores between the experimental and control groups. The samples benefited from better reading comprehension skills as a result of using the reading strategies. Based on their performance in the post-test, we can conclude that the use of reading strategies had a positive effect on the reading skills of the samples. Regardless of the category of college chosen, the study suggests that strategies may be employed with graduate teachers to help them augment their reading comprehension. The statistical analysis of the research experiment conducted by the researcher exhibits the efficacy of the application of strategies in enhancing the reading comprehension in the English of the prospective teachers.

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