

Acquiring Reading Skill by Second Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

In the field of second language (L2) learning, reading is considered as one of the significant skills needed to be developed in order to master the target language as it is being a receptive skill which leads to produce writing as well as speaking skills. Hence, considerable research now suggests that, in addition to the phonemic awareness skills which support early decoding, skilled reading also requires more general oral language competencies, particularly those involving the use of decontextualized language. The current study intends to explore how do students acquire the reading skill in the process of second language learning while investigating the ways to prevent the difficulties of reading. Accordingly, a questionnaire was employed contemplating how reading skill is acquired by the learners. Further, Uva Wellassa University has been selected as the research location, where the data were collected from 40 undergraduates, utilizing the simple random sampling method. Moreover, the statistical software, 'Minitab 15' has been used for analytical purposes. According to the results ascertained through the analysis, most of the respondents read through internet and newspapers representing equal percentage (43%) by each. Moreover, the motive of reading for most of them is searching latest news (30%) and having fun (22%). Furthermore, reading newspaper articles (48%) and books (35%) are graded as the best methods to acquire reading skill by the majority. Thus, the findings are beneficial in improving reading skill of L2 learners in Sri Lankan education arena assisting syllabus designers and curriculum developers providing benefits for future researches to be conducted pursuing this line of research.

Keywords- reading, second language, acquiring, skill, English.

1. INTRODUCTION

Considerable research now suggests that, in addition to the phonemic awareness skills which support early decoding, skilled reading also requires more general oral language competencies, particularly those involving the use of decontextualized language [1]. In the contemporary world, it is significant being bilinguals or multilinguals more than being monolinguals as it leads increasing the brain power according to the results ascertained in some research. Moreover, English as a language has gained

much power and acceptance in worldwide being the *Lingua Franca*. Most of the nations in the world have focused their attention on achieving the competency in English Language not only as a Second Language but also as a foreign language. Hence, Sri Lanka too needs stepping towards the global context and the government has already had a plan on improving language competencies among the younger generation of the country under the programme "English in Our Way".

Moreover, there is a growing tendency greater than ever among most of the Sri Lankan parents wanting their children to be conversant in English language. However, English occupies the place of a second language in primary, secondary and tertiary levels playing vital role in the education system in Sri Lanka. Since it is a language, all the four basic skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing should have been exposed adequately in order to master the English language. Currently the teaching of English language is focused on achieving these four essential skills in island's education arena.

Even though, all four skills are highlighted as significant in learning any language in order to master the particular language, it is reading which is paid the least attention in the second language teaching and learning process in secondary as well as the tertiary level education. However, at present, most L2 learners do not tend to read more in their target language even though reading is significant as a receptive skill which leads to acquire the other two productive skills; writing and speaking.

Many children who start to learn a new language go through a "silent period" before they attempt to speak in a second language. This period can last for as little as a few days to a period of a few months. Shared reading activities and storytelling that is engaging and relevant help develop children's confidence and understanding of a new language. Listening to stories read aloud helps young learners tune into new words and sounds and to develop an understanding of the grammatical patterns of a language.

The purpose(s) for reading and the type of text determine the specific knowledge, skills, and strategies that readers need to apply to achieve comprehension. Reading comprehension is thus much more than decoding. Reading comprehension results when the reader knows which skills and strategies are appropriate for the type of

text, and understands how to apply them to accomplish the reading purpose.

Recent research on reading is used to establish a set of facts about reading and reading growth that is relevant to establishing instructional objectives and methods for the prevention of reading difficulties. Within the context of our current understanding of the reasons many children find it difficult to learn to read, the research also identifies the instructional conditions that need to be in place to prevent the development of reading difficulties in all but a very small proportion of children. [2]

Hence, it is noteworthy ascertaining the fact that how L2 learners acquire the skill reading with the purpose of preventing the difficulties of reading while facilitating learners in improving their reading skill. Consequently, understanding how reading is acquired by L2 learners will enlighten the process of teaching reading as a skill in L2 acquisition.

Reading as speaking occurs in a context rather than in isolation. The meaning of a text is not found just in the sentences themselves, but is derived from previous knowledge stored in the reader’s mind and the processes through which the reader tackles it. “We do not find meaning lying in things nor do we put it into things, but between things and us it can happen” [3].

Hence, the current study has been designed to explore the reading skill of the L2 learners in order to prevent the difficulties while introducing remedial measures to improve reading in the tertiary level education.

2. METHODS

The Context of the Study

The research question was formulated as: How reading is acquired by the second language learners? Further, this research was conducted to ascertain the answers to the question; How to prevent the difficulties of reading in L2? and what effort should be made to facilitate L2 learners in order to improve their competency in reading.

The Participants of the Study

Selected sample for the study was 40 undergraduates at Uva Wellassa University who use only English as the medium of instruction and random sampling unit based on degree programme grouping is used to select the sample. A conscious effort was made to ensure that all participants used for this study have studied English in their schools [based on 4].

Data Collection

With the aim of having a clear picture on acquiring reading skill in English by undergraduates, organized University of Jaffna

questionnaire has been distributed among 40 respondents as primary data collection method. Moreover, relevant data has been collected through classroom observations.

Research Instruments

Both the qualitative and quantitative methods were used for the research. Besides, the survey research method was also applied in which data were collected from undergraduates using a questionnaire consisting structured questions and selected lecturers were interviewed in order to obtain remedial measures for proper improvement of reading skill specially in second language learning. Since it is able to grant efficient data collection over the selected population, this method will be adopted.

The results reflect the common picture of acquiring reading skill in English by the undergraduates who are following their degree programmes in English in Sri Lankan universities.

Therefore, the research findings are advantageous to design teaching materials and to develop English language curriculum for successful achievement of the objectives of L2 teaching and learning process in Sri Lankan education arena.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Reading is an activity with a purpose. A person may read in order to gain information or verify existing knowledge, or in order to critique a writer’s ideas or writing style. A person may also read for enjoyment, or to enhance knowledge of the language being read. The purpose(s) for reading guide the reader’s selection of texts.

Hence the following Fig. 01 illustrates the most common media of reading by the respondents with their ranking.

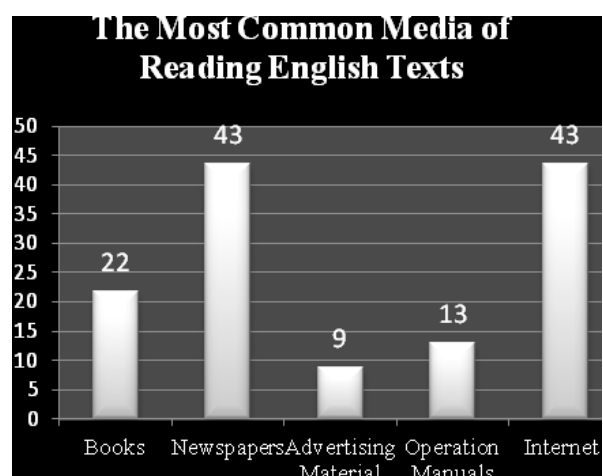


Fig.1 The most common media of reading texts

According to the Fig. 01, most of the L2 learners read in English through internet and newspapers representing 43% by each. Further, 22% of respondents have mentioned that their common media of reading is as books. This manifests that most of the undergraduates tend to read through internet, newspapers and books rather than using operation manuals or advertising materials. Therefore, teachers can focus attention on selecting reading texts from most preferred media of learners as it works well in achieving the objectives of L2 teaching process.

However, according to Byrnes [5] the purpose for reading also determines the appropriate approach to reading comprehension. A person who needs to know whether she can afford to eat at a particular restaurant needs to comprehend the pricing information provided on the menu, but does not need to recognize the name of every appetizer listed. A person reading poetry for enjoyment needs to recognize the words the poet uses and the ways they are put together, but does not need to identify main idea and supporting details. However, a person using a scientific article to support an opinion needs to know the vocabulary that is used, understand the facts and cause-effect sequences that are presented, and recognize ideas that are presented as hypotheses and givens. Reading research shows that good readers,

- Read extensively
- Integrate information in the text with existing knowledge
- Have a flexible reading style, depending on what they are reading
- Are motivated
- Rely on different skills interacting: perceptual processing, phonemic processing, recall
- Read for a purpose; reading serves a function

Therefore highlighting the point of motivation, the respondents were questioned to reveal the reason or the motive of reading in English which is indicated in the Fig. 02. Most of the L2 learners read with the motive of knowing latest news (30%) and having fun: music, movies, fiction, Internet etc. (20%).

“Reading for pleasure is the single biggest factor in success later in life, outside of an education. Study after study has shown that those children who read for pleasure are the ones who are most likely to fulfill their ambitions. If your child reads, they will succeed”[6].

The above statement obviously manifests the significant of motivating learners in reading for pleasure University of Jaffna

as it improves not only the skill reading but assists in gaining the success in their lives.

The Motive for Reading in English

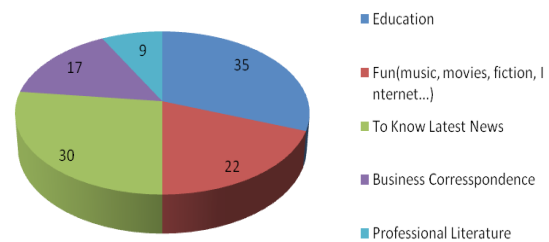


Fig 2 The reason/motive for reading in English

As Fig. 02 exhibits, majority of L2 learners identified their motive of reading is as knowing latest news and having fun, the reading skill can be enhanced if teacher can bring the latest news items and implement fun activities in the L2 classroom which contribute effectively enlightening reading skill of the learners.

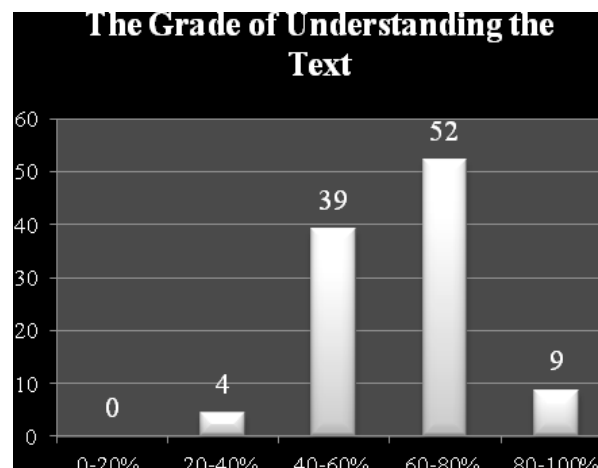


Fig 03 The grade of understanding the texts

Fig. 03 depicts that most L2 readers (52%) understand 60-80% of what they read and 80-100% of reading is understood by 09% of respondents only. Hence, the attention should be focused on improving the understanding of the texts by the readers through enhancing their vocabulary. Moreover, it is obvious making L2 learners aware of the skimming and scanning techniques in reading in order to make readers better equipped with understanding what they read.

Practicia Carrell [7] tested L2 learners of English with a test to see not only whether the presence or absence of context made a difference to how much they could understand, but also the importance of whether the text had precise words like ‘clothes’ and ‘washing machine’, or vague words like ‘things’ and ‘facilities’. Both advance

learners and natives found lack of context affect their comprehension. The provision of context varied in importance according to the stage of L2 learning. At the early stage of learning, linguistics aspects of words are as important to understanding as context. One interesting side effect of Carrell’s research was that, while native speakers had a fair idea of how difficult the passages were for them to understand, non natives did not! However, later research by Roller and Matombo [8] did not get the same result.

According to the following Fig. 04, the majority of L2 readers (52%) recorded that the easiest texts they understand are as the entertainment material; song lyrics, movies subtitles etc while material related to their work and profession have been mentioned as the easiest by 35% of respondents recoding the second place.

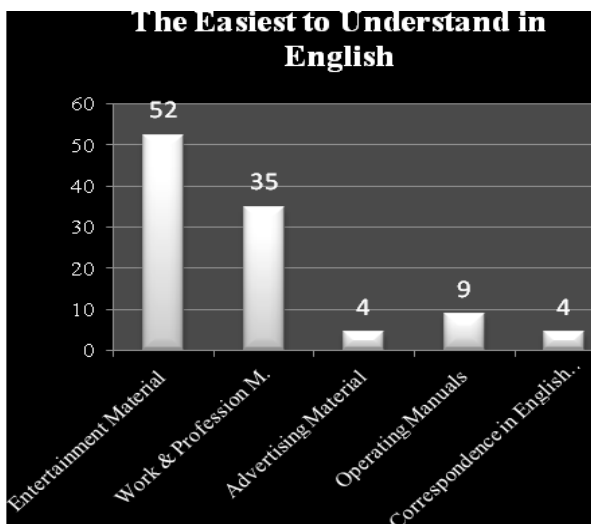


Fig 4 The easiest to understand in English

Parts of English Which You Find the Most Difficult to Understand

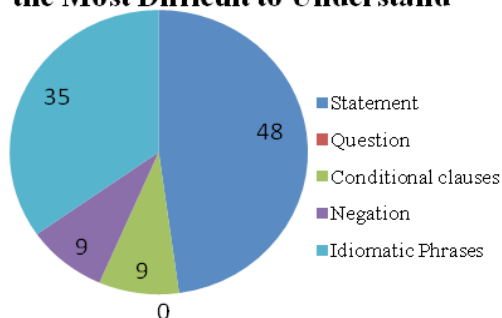


Fig 5 Parts of English Which You Find the Most Difficult to Understand

When considering the parts of speech which the readers of English as L2 find most difficult to understand, statements have been recorded as the most difficult element to understand by the highest number of readers (48%). Further, 35% of respondents declared that

idiomatic expressions are as the most difficult expressions to understand when they read texts.

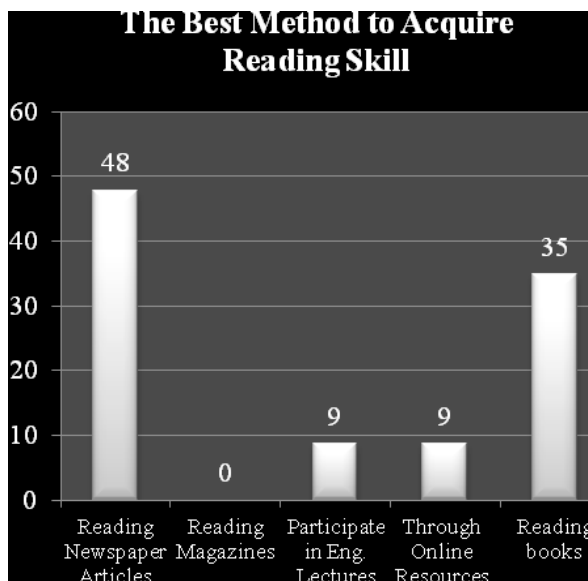


Fig 6 The best method to acquire reading skill

According to the Fig. 06, majority believes that reading newspaper articles and reading books are as the best methods of acquiring reading skill recording 48% and 35% respectively.

Hence, the results emphasize the way L2 learners improve their reading skill and the difficulties they encounter in reading and understanding the texts.

Previous research has shown that students learn languages more successfully when the language they are learning is relevant to their needs and interests. When learners are presented with information in this way, their learning is contextualized and they are able to make connections to their own experiences.

This makes reading more meaningful and appealing while also encouraging opportunities for L2 learners to develop their speaking and listening skills. Ideal texts for second language learners include books with simple and natural language and lots of repetition. The use of puppets, drama and illustrations can also support children in their understanding.

It has been disclosed the existing issues in the field of reading while students are learning the second language which is English that has been taken into account through the current study. Thus, the remedial measures have been identified with the purpose of treating the encountered drawbacks especially focusing on improving reading skill in learning English as a second language in Sri Lankan context. Moreover, the study has shed the light in which students internalize reading in English. Accordingly, those findings are beneficial to the second language learners,

teachers and syllabus designers as well as researchers who are interested in ascertaining further more on reading as a skill to be developed in the process of L2 acquisition depending on the findings of this study.

4. CONCLUSION

For many of us, when we sit down to read something, our eyes move across and down the page, understanding the message that the text contains without apparent effort. Such an unconscious process seems simple, but in fact, many of the other mental activities we do, reading is complex when examined in all its detail. It is complicated because it involves great deal of precise knowledge that must be acquired or learned and many processing strategies that must be practiced until they are automatic [9].

Present study intends to explore the remarks of the reading skill in second language acquisition in tertiary level education. Moreover, it has shed the light on highlighting the significance of identifying the difficulties encountered by most of the readers while they are involving in the tertiary level education especially in Sri Lankan university system. Accordingly, it has been emphasized the remedial activities. In addition, the pedagogical implication in language teaching and learning is also taken into account in concluding the remarks.

The study has been conducted with the prime objective of ascertaining how L2 learners acquire reading skill in their target language. Although the study has been carried out among undergraduates of Uva Wellassa University, we can have a common view on improving reading as a skill in L2 teaching and learning process while identifying the difficulties undergone by undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities.

It is recommended that making students aware about the significance of reading in order to master the target language as it paves the way to achieve the success in lives. Nevertheless, learners should not first provide only the reading text to read but using some authentic situations teachers can create reading materials or select activities related to their daily routines or topics familiar to learners. Thus, L2 learners would be able to gain knowledge with fun in English. Moreover, teacher can create array of activities by using one newspaper article. For an example, teacher can select a newspaper article on a great leader who is well known by international community, then students can identify the qualities of the particular person while getting familiar with why that person became world famous and instead of the activities such as gap filling, guessing true/false, matching synonyms/phrases, teacher

can extend the practical involvement of the learners by adding entertaining discussions and role plays such as grouping students according to who they believe the most important to be in order to build up a nation; a great leader, a politician, a social worker or an IT expert. These students can express their viewpoints while participating in active speaking activity and they gain fun through that activity as it is competitive because every group has to prove their belief conveying more points. These kinds of reading activities often make the L2 classroom very active.

In addition to that, the teacher should have the knowledge of learners' first language (L1) proficiency since it affects a lot in achieving L2. Furthermore, to motivate them in reading in their target language, teachers must provide numbers of intensive contextualized practices for students in order to make reading a habit of them. Once something becomes a habit, it is continued throughout their lifetime.

As far as the contemporary undergraduates are concerned, it is vital making them well equipped with the skill reading in English which is their second language facilitating them to achieve the success in their career. Moreover, motivating students in learning English and developing reading as a habit will lead students in achieving the goals expected from L2 teaching and learning. The importance of reading in writing skill is also highlighted by Eisterhold [10].

It is essential to increase the awareness among students about significance of gaining knowledge properly and using knowledge systematically in their academic environment. Teachers should also be the better facilitators for students in their learning process making better decisions on how the students should be fed with knowledge and what type of methods to be used in order to produce successful learners.

Moreover, the findings of the study will be significant for language teachers to identify the gaps in the existing teaching process and treat them effectively giving the advancement to second language learners. On the other hand, syllabus designers for English language can have more accurate in decision making process in designing syllabuses for school education as well as to tertiary education. Further, future researchers have been encouraged in the field of L2 learning and teaching especially focusing on improving reading discovering array of approaches to conduct researches considering this as a base line.

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