MECHANICS OF READING

4.1. On reading

Reading is one of the language skills often associated with writing. Reading skills and abilities are associated with decoding of written symbols and are developed gradually. It is said that a child starts to read from the very birth even. The infant's acts of listening and reacting to the sounds and words are stages in the preparation for the complex process of acquiring the skill of reading at a later stage.

Reading is a continuous process. Various other aspects are involved in the process of learning to read. They are intelligence, language facility, visual ability, audio ability, physical factors, environmental influences and emotional factors.

Based on these, reading skill may be said to be acquired in three stages. The first stage may be called the recognition stage. At this stage, the learner simply recognises the graphic counter part of the phonological items. In other words, it is recognising a spoken form corresponding to the written form.

The second stage may be called as the structuring stage. At this stage the learner sees the syntactic relationship
of the items and thereby understands the structural meanings of the syntactic units.

The third stage is called as the interpretation stage. This is the ultimate stage in the process of acquiring reading. At this stage the learner acquires the method of comprehending the significance of a word, a phrase or a sentence in the overall context of the entire discourse he reads. Higher secondary students are expected to be at this stage and certain skills are expected to be mastered by them at this level. The following are some such skills to be mastered:

1. Refining word analysis skills
2. Using context as an aid to meaning
3. Using the dictionary to verify pronunciation and word meaning
4. Interpreting figurative speech
5. Reinforcing accent and stress
6. Reading for different purposes (i.e.) main idea, details, drawing conclusions, etc.
7. Using reading as a tool to locate needed information in various content areas
8. Using the glossary and index of a book
9. Interpreting graphs and charts
10. Outlining and summarizing
A study was undertaken to know whether the students have the above said skills at the +2 level. Prior to that, a pilot study was conducted with due focus given to two aspects of reading namely the mechanics of reading and the role of language and strategy over the learning of reading.

4.2 Test on the mechanics of reading

The mechanics of reading involves recognition of written symbols which make up the words and group of words in a text. To have a better control in the mechanics of reading, pupils should have the following:

1. **Sight recognition vocabulary**: It is the vocabulary which is readily understood by sight. It does not give any obstruction to the readers while they read a text.

2. **Phonics**: The ability to relate spellings and sounds. The reader must be able to guess the pronunciation of a new word on the basis of his prior experience of identifying other similar words.

3. **The skill of analysis**: The students should have sufficient knowledge of the morphology and syntax of the language so as to be able to guess the new words and groups of words.
4. The ability to read ideational units: A slow reader fixes his eyes on single words at a time rather on word groups. A good reader will be able to decode the entire group of words within limited fixations. This requires familiarity of the words and syntax of a language.

4.2.1 Aim

The main idea of the thesis itself is evaluation of reading comprehension. In order to comprehend, reading should be performed meaningfully. Only when the mechanics of reading is mastered, reading becomes meaningful. To test whether children read a text meaningfully and to see whether they have mastered the mechanics of reading, a test was administered. A known passage was given to them for reading and their reading mechanics was recorded. Both girls and boys were taken as test subjects.

4.2.2 Test passage

A known passage from Higher secondary English text was taken and administered to test the student's oral reading habit. The passage selected was given in the appendix. The given passage had altogether 240 words of which 116 are content words and others are functional words.
4.2.3 **Analysis**

The recorded material was analysed. In general when the reading mechanics of the students was analysed, it was found that they were very poor in vocabulary recognition, in phonics skill and also in syntax recognition. On analysing, it was found that the students had difficulty with the content words rather than with functional words. Their reading shortcomings could be discussed under three headings namely (1) repetition, (2) substitution and (3) use of pauses.

4.2.3.1 **Repetition**

While the students read the passage loudly many words were repeatedly pronounced. Twelve such words were identified. They are: (1) wondered, (2) undistinguished, (3) sabre, (4) unexpected, (5) good-humoured, (6) undistinguished, (7) artless, (8) cocktail, (9) sambrero, (10) palace, (11) and his and (12) part a.

4.2.3.1.1 **Reason**

The students repeat words of a text while reading under the following conditions:

1. When a word is lengthy with more number of syllables within it (undistinguished).
2. When words bring problems towards identification which again is due to their near similarity in pronunciation or spelling with other words. The word 'palace' is wrongly pronounced as the word 'place'. Students repeat the words in order to correct the mistakes they have committed.

3. When the words are culturally specific and they are not in the active vocabulary store of the children (ex. sombrero, cocktail, suit)

4. When the following word is a difficult one, requiring more time to pronounce, the students repeat the preceding words in this context.

4.2.3.2 Substitution

The other shortcoming noted while students read a text is the phenomena of substitution of words. Sometimes the students substitute the whole word or part of a word. For substitution they choose words which are similar in spelling or sound. Moreover, spelling pronunciation is followed by them while they read the words in a text.

Several reasons can be inferred to be behind the strategy of substitution. These reasons are to be validated. Some of the reasons are:

1. Spelling pronunciation
2. Unwanted cuttings
3. Known vocabulary substitution

4. Graphic, phonic confusion and

5. Related word selection, etc.

Some such strategies behind the substitution and the examples illustrating these strategies are the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No.</th>
<th>Textual words</th>
<th>Substitute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>scar</td>
<td>/ceyar/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>crescent</td>
<td>/kri:sent/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>chin</td>
<td>/ceyin/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>wound</td>
<td>/vaund/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>grey</td>
<td>/giri/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>/Ka:ntamal/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>liquor</td>
<td>/likyu:r/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>walk</td>
<td>/valk/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>trifle</td>
<td>/tri:fil/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>/no:ni/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

II. Known vocabulary substitution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl.No.</th>
<th>Textual words</th>
<th>Substitute</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>ran</td>
<td>/ran/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>broad</td>
<td>/bo:d/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>wondered</td>
<td>/wainde :d/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>features</td>
<td>/fx:ktars/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>caused</td>
<td>/karsd/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>from</td>
<td>/fa:r/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>common</td>
<td>/ka:mpaund/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>suit</td>
<td>/succu/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>clean</td>
<td>/Kla:san/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>lottery</td>
<td>/la:ri/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>one</td>
<td>/a:n/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>saw</td>
<td>/Se:/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>due</td>
<td>/dav/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>cocktail</td>
<td>/Ku:kuteyl/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>was</td>
<td>/Ve:r/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>that</td>
<td>/di/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>his</td>
<td>/him/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>smile</td>
<td>/Simpil/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When the above table is analysed, it is found that the students have followed some strategy in substitution also.

1. They have substituted a word with other words which are similar in one or two letters.

   broad /baːd/
   caused /ˈkɔːzd/  
   palace /ˈpleɪs/

2. They have distorted the pronunciation of some words. They have pronounced them adopting spelling pronunciation technique.

   chin /ˈtʃɪn/  
   wound /ˈwɔːnd; vɔːnd/  
   trifle /ˈtrɪfli; ˈtrɪflə/  
   none /noʊn/
3. Faulty pronunciation occurs due to the inability to differentiate 'voiceless' and 'voiced' plosives. Hence they substitute the voiceless sounds in a word into voiced ones and *vice versa*.

- drink /trink/
- bar /par, pa:r/
- shabby /shuppy; /Sappi/
- brandy /paranty; /pe:ranti/

4. On seeing the first two letters of a word they tend to assume the word. This leads to wrong sight based inference of words. Such inferred words may be wrong words also.

(examples) his him; /him/
saw say; /Se:/
that the; /di/

4.2.3.2.1 **Comment**

When the reading habit of both the boys and girls are compared, the girls performance in reading or mechanics of reading is better and faster than that of the boys. Content words have given problems in identification during the reading process for both boys and girls. This is due to the poor vocabulary store.
4.2.3.3 Use of pauses while reading

So far, we have discussed the nature of vocabulary recognition and pronunciation, etc., among students while they read a text. The next important point to be tested is their comprehension ability. This could be recognised even from their oral reading performance. If a passage is to be read meaningfully one should give pauses at appropriate places while reading. These pauses may occur at the end of a sentence, at phrasal boundaries and also at the end of ideational units. If one reads the given text giving appropriate pauses, then it will be easy to understand the text.

4.2.3.3.1 Passage

The passage given to test the mechanics of reading, to know whether the students have difficulty in pronunciation, etc., is used to test the pauses they adopt while reading. The passage is given in the appendix.

In our test situation, the given passage, if it is to be read meaningfully, it should have roughly pauses at 43 points. But our students tend to use more number of pauses and at points where they are not expected to do so.
Possible pausing points | Students response with wrong pauses placement
--- | ---
1. It was on account of the scar/that I first noticed him/for it ran/broad and red/in a great crescent/ from his temple to his chin/ | It was/on account of the/ scar that/I first noticed him/for it ran/broad and red in a great/crescent from/his temple to his chin |
2. He used to come into the palace hotel/at Gautemala city every day/at cocktail time/and strolling leisurely round the bar/offering lottery tickets for sale/ | He used to come/in to the palace/Hotel at/Gautemala city/every/day at/cocktail/ time and strolling/ leisurely/round the bar offering/lottery tickets/ for sale |

4.2.3.3.2 Comments

From the above table, it is clear that the students have problems in making ideational cuttings while reading. So it is evident that as and when they read, they do not comprehend the matter. Their reading is mechanical. It is not governed by the purpose of comprehension of the text. The simple point that it may be possible to place pauses after a comma and a full stop itself is not followed by students.

This failure in mastering the mechanics of reading may be due to lack of training in reading. Comprehension becomes easy when the mechanics is mastered. And Indian students are expected to be given more training with regards to the mechanics of reading.
4.3 A test on the role of language in comprehension

Test procedure

1. To test whether language or strategy, has a major role on reading, a passage in English and its translated version were given to students to read on different occasions and a set of questions were asked based on the text they read. This test was administered to verify the following:

a) whether the students read and comprehend better if materials are in their mother tongue

b) whether the students showing better reading habits in their mother tongue could read well the materials in a foreign language.

4.3.1 Passage

To test whether language plays a role in comprehension, an English passage was given to students for reading and some questions were asked based on the passage. The same passage was then translated into Tamil and that was also given to students for reading. The passage is given in the appendix.

On computing the responses drawn from 50 students for the objective and subjective questions related to the passages
given in English and Tamil version, the following table is obtained.

To calculate the degree of performance in subjective questions, we have roughly estimated the ideational units in the passage. If students give the answers fully they are rated as high degree performers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Objective questions</th>
<th>Questions &amp; answers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tamil (%)</td>
<td>English (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 per cent</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75 per cent</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 per cent</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 per cent</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>36.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 per cent</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.A.</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3.3 Comment

From the above table, it is clear that the students manifested better degree of comprehension if the passage is in Tamil than in English. It is evident that they have not transferred the strategy they have followed while comprehending Tamil to the situation of comprehending English. They view both the language as separate entities.

As for as the objective questions are concerned, we cannot say that they have comprehended the text and the questions fully before beginning to answer. There is evidence for random
selection rather than comprehension based selection. As for as the question and answers are concerned, majority of them could not do well in English.

When the answers given for the questions related to the passage were analysed, it is found that the students have merely lifted up the answers from the passage often and sometimes inappropriately. Only a very little percentage of the students have lifted up the appropriate answers. With regards to the Tamil passage they have followed the same strategy of lifting up from the passage, appropriately or inappropriately and in addition some have tried to answer appropriately or inappropriately in their own words. The strategies students adopted while answering are tabulated in the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy followed</th>
<th>Tamil (%)</th>
<th>English (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L I A</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O I A</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L A</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O A</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N A</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LIA = Lifting inappropriately
OIA = Own writing, inappropriate
LA = Lifting, appropriately
OA = Own writing, appropriate
NA = Not attempted

When the responses are analysed, it is very clear that the students have not tried to answer in their own words. Only very few have tried to do so. The rest of the students have
merely reproduced items from the passage, sometimes inappropriately.

With regards to Tamil passage, besides lifting up the answer from reading text, some students have tried to write answers in their own words and they have succeeded also. This may be because Tamil being their first language, a language to which they are more exposed, manipulation of that language has become easy for them. In other words they have acquired the skill of handling that language. But they have manifested lesser degree of comprehension skill in English. They could not use the strategy they have followed with regards to Tamil and duly shift it to the English passage reading context.

Let us now review some of the answers.

Q.1. "How has India developed in the last forty years?"

The expected answer is:

In the last forty years India has developed both in Agriculture and Industry. Factories have increased in number. We are using rivers to generate power. So there is a tremendous increase in the production of goods.
Students responses (Example for lifting inappropriately):

India developed in the last forty years. There has been a move to the towns, partly because of the improved services of lifting, water, amusements, the better chance of employment in the industries and so on.

Q.2. "Why is agriculture the most important industry in India?"

Expected answer

Agriculture is the most important industry in India because it is a land of villages. The soil and climate are conducive to grow food grains. Moreover, rivers like the Ganges and Indus make the land fertile. We have sufficient rainfall throughout the year.

Students responses (Example of lifting inappropriately):

The land is villages. Agriculture is more importance in India because, the chief crops grown are cotton, only things, and any difference in climate. So the agriculture is more important in the industry in India.

With regards to the use of cohesive word relating to the 'wh' questions, it is found that the students did not manifest the use of cohesion or coherence.
3. For instance, if a question 'why' is asked we expect the answer to be coherent which is at times reflected by the element 'because'. Why, we dislike mosquitoes? (Because) they bite us.

But such a conceptualisation is often missing. The answer for question with 'why'? elements does not reveal students search for factors with a 'because' element.

At least in Tamil, some per cent of the students have manifested their awareness of cohesion. Forty per cent of the population did not manifest the conceptualisation of cohesion in both Tamil and English. Only 10 per cent have manifested this concept both in Tamil and English.

4.4 Comment:

From the analysis, it is clear that though they have comprehension capacity at least to a minimal level, they do not have the concept of the language and its manipulation. Given the text and the question, at least some 20 per cent of the students could do meaningful reading and comprehend the answers. But comprehension become meaningful only if they could present it meaningfully in a correct language. Comprehension by itself is a subtle process that takes place in the mind. The expression of it, the visual representation of it is only in writing - wherein they require the skill of manipulation of the language - which is lacking in our students.