CHAPTER I
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INTRODUCTION

Reading has come to hold the most significant place in the field of education since it functions as a means of communication in a highly literate society. It is perhaps the most important skill taught as the 'tool' skill because the progress in other subjects depends considerably on the development of Reading Ability in students. Speaking, listening, reading and writing are four language skills to be developed in all students at elementary school level.

Although various types of voice recording, namely telephone, telegraph, radio and teletype, have been introduced in the communicative process, yet technology could not replace reading which still serves certain unique purposes. Reading is the chief means for acquiring knowledge by people in all walks of life (Rao and Subramanyam, 1984). The great value of reading lies in the fact that the printed material provides the most illuminating and varied records of human experiences that are now available and they can be examined and restudied again and again at the reader's convenience and interest. It provides a basic channel of interpersonal, intercultural and intercontinental communication. A person who cannot read is partially blind in the modern world and experiences several difficulties in discharging his civic duties and also reaping the full benefits of living in the democratic society.
The art of reading is as old as humanity. From the very dawn of human civilization, man is known to be a reader, be it drawing, a symbol or any other material. Historically considered, the development of research in reading closely mirrors that of educational research in general and of educational psychology in particular. According to Huey (1908) research in the field of reading was first carried out in the laboratories of Europe, in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Reading as is well known, plays an important role in school education. It forms the basic tool for achieving proficiency in all other school subjects. The success of any student in the school is largely dependent on the extent to which his reading skills have been developed. A student with a high degree of proficiency in reading can comprehend all the subjects taught in the school and is well placed in reaching academic excellence. As the quantum of reading material is constantly on the increase, necessitating the student to assimilate the information from time to time in order to cope with the tremendous growth of knowledge, it becomes increasingly important for the schools to improve the learner's skill in reading.

Reading involves the whole personality, comprising countless personal and social values and thus can even contribute to personal growth and development. Good reading can also extend one's sights beyond the petty concerns of daily life, and feed the creative mind. Perhaps because of all the above mentioned aspects, the Education Commission (1966) in its report, submitted to the Government of India, Minis-
try of Education, dealt with the aspect of teaching of reading in primary schools. The following lines from the report clearly indicate the strong feelings of the members of the Commission in regard to the improvement of reading standards at the primary stage:

"We would like to emphasise an important aspect of education at this stage, viz., reading with understanding. If proper foundations for this are not laid at this level, the entire future education of the child will receive an irreparable set back. Adequate attention has not been paid so far to research in beginning reading, to the evolution of proper scripts which the Indian languages have, to the preparation of graded vocabularies, to the designing of primers and readers for class 1, and to the evolution of tests of reading readiness and competence. It has not yet been possible to organise the proper training of teacher-educators at the primary level on these matters, and the average primary teacher generally tries to teach reading in a rule of thumb manner. It is the neglect of this crucial area that is responsible for a good deal of stagnation at the lower primary stage. We recommend that a study of these problems should be taken up in earnest and that a vigorous programme of improving reading instruction at the lower primary stage should be developed in all parts of the country".

In short, the commission observed that if proper foundations for reading are not laid at the lower primary stage, the entire education of the young learners will be futile.
In India, reading failure is one of the potent cause of high rate of wastage and stagnation at the primary stage. It is a sad fact that, years after the first Education Act, which introduced compulsory education with government aid, one can still find the illiterate, the semi-literate and the functionally illiterate people in the country.

The Primary school enrolment through classes I to V reveals an alarmingly downward trend. According to official statistics quoted in the Fourth All India Educational Survey, 1982 with 100 students in Class I, their enrolment in Class II falls down to 72.9, in Class III to 59.0, in class IV to 47.3 and in class V to 39.0.

In the present era, Reading Ability has acquired greater significance, as learning depends largely on one's ability to interpret accurately all that is printed, thus rendering reading with a high degree of social significance. Reading helps in understanding and appreciating the common achievements and goals of the whole human family and their unique contribution to the concerned nations.

It is well known that Reading helps one to understand and adjust to new conditions of life. Some of the important purposes for which people read have been listed by Gray (1960), and they include such diversified items as:

"To know and understand current happenings, for immediate personal satisfaction of value, to meet practical demands of daily living, to further avocational interests, to carry on and promote professional or vocational interests, to meet socio-civic needs and demands (good
citizenship), for self development and improvement including extension of cultural background, to satisfy strictly intellectual demands and to meet spiritual needs”.

Thus, Reading is considered as the chief aid to learning. It is the first of the 3 Rs that is considered as important to be learnt by the child throughout the ages. The knowledge contained in text books is useless to pupils if they cannot read properly and comprehend the ideas. The ability to read and comprehend is a pre-requisite to academic success.

Smith (1971) has rightly pointed out that reading is so inter-related with the total educational process that academic success requires successful reading. Experience has taught us that those who fail in school have usually failed in reading. Gierdina Bruno pointed out that if the first button of a man's coat is wrongly buttoned, all the rest are certain to be crooked, and reading is the first button in the garment of education (Smith, 1971).

Reading has been defined differently by different people. Some think of reading as a sounding out of printed words, either with or without comprehension of meaning. Others restrict their concept of reading to the ability to read aloud. It is now known that effective reading involves all that of the higher mental processes, such as recall, reasoning, evaluation, imagining, organising, applying, and problem solving (Deboer and Dallmann, 1967).

Thus the nature of Reading Ability appears to be very complex and the results of many investigations into reading disabilities have emphasised that it is only very rarely that reading difficulties can be attributed to a single factor.
The complex character of the reading process makes it very difficult to survey the causes of reading difficulties and, as a result, educationalists are still faced with a number of problems. It is frequently only possible to state that certain factors are connected with reading difficulties. It has been found that factors or groups of factors are apparently related to reading difficulties but it has not always been possible to differentiate between cause and effect. Previous investigations have shown that students who are labelled as being seriously backward or retarded in reading may exhibit many anomalies, that is physical, mental, social and emotional deficiencies, but researches have shown that many of the anomalies exhibited have little or no relation to reading failure in certain individual cases, but are of significant importance in others (For. e.g. Hughes, 1975).

Thus it appears that it may not be possible to explain Reading Ability in terms of any single factor, but by a number of factors such as the student's personal attributes, their home background, their personality traits, and the type of school in which they study. Each of these factors need a short explanation. Taking the first factor, personal attributes, one may say that the vital role of personal attributes in Reading Ability is indisputable. Success and achievement in life depend very largely on general health, vision, hearing and speech. A student's ability to read printed matter is closely connected with the quality of his sight. Like visual sensation, auditory acuity of the ability to use the ears, to sense an auditory
stimuli etc., play an important role in the beginning phases of reading. If for some reason, the child's hearing is defective or the speech he hears is slurred and indistinct, then his language growth will be delayed which will automatically lead to difficulty in reading. Speech impediments also affect reading in several ways (Benton, 1982; Naidoo, 1972; Gibson and Levin, 1975; Johnson & Myklebust, 1967).

General mental ability which is another important personal attribute, is also an important determinant of reading readiness and reading progress. The abilities of reasoning, abstract thinking, interpretation, problem solving comprehension and concept learning are common to both intelligence and reading. High positive correlation has been found between the intelligence quotient and the reading achievement of children (Rao and Subramanyam, 1982).

Though the intellectual capacity affects reading achievement in a student, it also inevitably affects his ability to read. In this context, it has been found that some students with relatively higher scores on intelligence tests have been observed to be backward readers and some students with not so very high intellectual scores have been found to be very good readers. Thus other factors like motivation, interest, study habits etc. appear equally important. There have been a few studies relating Reading Ability with reading habit showing therein a positive relationship between the variables (Srivastava, 1966; Rao and Subramanyam, 1982). Apart from these, Reading Ability may also be affected by the interest in a student to read. As is well
known interests are learned and they arise from the interaction of the basic needs with the means used for satisfying them. Interest in reading is parallel to learning how to read. As William James (1890) suggested 'Only what we partly know always inspires us with a desire to know more'. Thus a person reads because he has an interest to learn more and to know more. Consequently, lack of interest in reading may be a cause for poor reading. As pointed out by Nemoitin (1932), there often appears to be a substantial and marked relationship between ability and interest. High interest in a subject tends to be associated with high ability in that subject whereas low interest is associated with low ability.

Wheat (1955) pointed out that as a person learns to read, reading enters his mental make-up as a permanent mode of behaviour. Reading is then used as a means of engagement, studying and thinking. Work and play are then arranged in order to provide time for reading. Reading is used to discover new interests and thus becomes a dominant interest in the individual.

Thus to increase reading skill, it appears essential to have a need to promote the reading habit amongst students and to promote a generation of book lovers. As pointed out by Norvell (1946) there appears to be no other factor so powerful as interest in developing reading proficiency.

The second factor, home background also plays an important role in Reading Ability. There is a considerable evidence that poverty
of environmental stimulation (early fatigue life etc.) at an early age can result in a stunting of the learning process which is possible irretrievable and which may not be compensated for the later placing of a student in an enriched environment. Lack of certain habits in the home may retard the acquisition of a language. Students by themselves have less experience with books and thus may not fully appreciate what reading really is and so may have less interest in acquiring it. Hence it is imperative on the part of the parent at home to instill an interest in the child to read, to learn more and to acquire knowledge. In this context, many surveys have shown a relatively lower average reading achievement and a higher incidence of scholastic backwardness among students from lower socio-economic status (impoverished environment) than those from higher socio-economic status (enriched environment) (Morris, 1966; Goodacre, 1967; Hughes, 1975).

The exact nature of the role of socio-economic status in determining whether a student will become a "reader" and his choice of reading matter, however is not clear. Havighurst (1949) showed that the proportion of time spent in book reading is not highly related to socio-economic status but that the specific type of reading done is highly related. This shows that Reading Ability also differs qualitatively in terms of socio-economic status.

A better home-background provides a stimulating atmosphere for students to study. They get an opportunity to explore and converse with parents who encourage their experimentation and curiosity. Further
more, the atmosphere provides varied social experiences which help in the growth of concepts and vocabulary. Many studies carried out in India as well as abroad have shown a positive relationship between student's home background and reading progress (Morris, 1966; Schonell, 1942; Benton, 1982). It is so because (1) reading means getting meaning from printed symbols; (2) meaning comes from the mind of the reader who gives these symbols meaningful ideas based on his own past experiences; (3) certain types of experience are less likely to be available to poorer class students as compared to affluent ones and; (4) the students from poorer as compared to affluent homes tend to learn to read relatively later. Their parents are also less involved in reading and writing activities and thus give less opportunity to students for pursuing such activities. Probably because of the above reasons, very few good readers may be found coming from poor socio-economic home background.

At the same time, it is important to remember that not all students from upper classes are good readers. Thus social class alone cannot determine a good or poor reader, but many other factors play an important role. For instance the attitudes of the parents such as their sympathetic and helpful attitude may provide an impetus to a student's efforts in learning to read. Donald Moyle (1972) has rightly remarked, "for the maintenance of good reading progress it would seem necessary to have at least a reasonable background of material provision, but it is probably more important that a child should have a happy relationship with the parents, who in turn should provide interest, stimulation and sympathy when difficulties arise". According
to Srivastava (1979), "Children need richness of experience especially in language and that costs parental time in talking with children rather than money".

The third factor which determines Reading Ability is the Personality trait. Many researchers have pointed out the importance of personality traits on Reading Ability (Hughes, 1975; Stott, 1958; Vernon, 1957). For instance, Hughes (1975) showed a positive correlation between six characteristics, viz., self-confidence, sociability, cooperation, perseverance, conscientiousness and emotional stability of personality factors and reading attainment.

Discussing the influence of personality traits, Srivastava (1979) suggested that Reading Ability to an extent may also be influenced by emotional stability and maturity. It has been generally observed in the abnormal context, that emotional disturbance and personality problems do appear frequently where there is difficulty in learning to read. However the question that arises is that, which is the cause and which is the effect? Most investigators who have studied the relationship between emotional problems and reading difficulties appear to agree that these two factors are frequently found together (Srivastava, 1979).

Apart from these three factors (Personal attributes, home background and personality traits), the type of school in which a student studies also contributes to the development of Reading Ability in students. The way in which the schools teach the 3 Rs decides whether
or not the students will develop the Reading Ability efficiently. In the school context, this development depends on the number of hours allotted to reading, amount of time spent on reading, the quality of teacher's interaction with the students during reading of lessons, the degree of emphasis laid on proper reading, writing and so on. Each school differs in its methodology of teaching as well as in their emphasis and focus on what to teach and what should the students learn. These differences amongst the different types of school result in differential proficiency in Reading amongst students, which in turn may affect their academic performance.

Thus Reading ability appears to be affected by a large number of factors, such as personal attributes, personality traits, home background and the types of school in which a student studies. Each of these factors are themselves constituted by many subfactors and hence any study on Reading Ability, to be considered as an effective one, has to deal with all these subfactors also. In this respect, the present study differs from all the other studies which have dealt with one, two or a couple of factors under one major factor such as personal attributes.

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The present study has made an attempt to understand the various factors that determine Reading Ability. For this purpose it has considered all the relevant subfactors under each factor and thus arrived at the correlates of Reading Ability.
Since no research can be considered adequate if it cannot contribute to the practical situation, the present study after having delineated the correlates of Reading Ability has also made an attempt to ascertain the effect of Reading Ability on the academic performance of students. This has been done by improving in students all the factors which have emerged as correlates of Reading Ability and then ascertained if this improvement in Reading Ability (in terms of its correlates) has led to an improvement in their academic performance.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will be able to throw light on one of the major areas of education viz., Reading in the primary schools. If the study is able to delineate the appropriate correlates of Reading Ability, it would then be possible to improve those correlates or factors that contribute to Reading Ability. This improvement can be brought about by imparting Reading Ability training to students or by making the training as a part of the instructional models or teaching methods followed in the schools, so that the teachers could make use of it in the teaching learning process.

Thus, one may expect that by improving the Reading Ability not only one can possibly improve the academic performance in students but also may be able to prevent many of the dropouts, stagnation and wastage at the primary level of education in India.