CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a delight for many people, a source of information, a way into new words and a means to extend and deepen one's understanding of the world. It is a highly complex process that involves a variety of cognitive functions including attention, concentration, abilities such as phonological awareness and rapid decoding, verbal comprehension and general intelligence [Stanovich and Freeman, 1984]. It is a structured set of cognitive processes, occupying a central place within cognitive psychology. Uta Frith calls it a "complex and astonishing accomplishment" [Frith, 1985].

Reading involves two fundamental processes, the recognition of words which is called 'decoding' and the comprehension of what is recognized. A child who learns to read and read well is forming useful spelling-to-sound habits based on rules, whether he could articulate them or not. Rules for pronunciation are formulated conditionally on what precedes and what follows as well as in terms of the letter group. Ellis [1984] suggests that skilled readers have seen most of the words they have to read many times and they know their meaning and pronunciation very well. Visual recognition of such words at once activates their meaning in a semantic representation system and their pronunciation can be retrieved from the phonemic word production system, either directly from the semantic system or through a one-to-one correspondence between units in the visual word recognition system and units in the phonemic word production system. Regularities in spelling-
to-sound predictability are termed spelling-to-sound correlations or grapheme-phoneme correlations. Whichever way the child is taught, he has to eventually discover the important spelling-to-sound correlations, if he is to be able to generate for himself the way to read new words. Reading, thus consists of decoding graphic materials to the phonemic patterns of spoken language which have already been mastered before reading is begun.

The ability to read and write are signs of literacy. Reading is one of the basic, essential and central skills, permeating most of what goes on in school, required for almost all school tasks, absolutely necessary for succeeding in the educational system and thus politically sensitive [E.g.: Chall, Jacob and Baldwin, 1990; Olson and Torrance, 1991]. Studies including a few in India [E.g.: Agarwal and Krishna, 1981; Sengupta and Veeraraghavan, 1988] have generally shown a close relationship between reading proficiency and academic achievement.

Many children experience difficulties in learning. The difficulty can either be specific, as occurs when a child experiences problems with some particular task such as reading or it can be general as occurs when learning is slower than normal across a range of tasks.

Rutter et. al [1970] in a detailed study of over 2000 children on the Isle of Wight found that overall 16% of children aged between 9 and 11 years had some handicap that hindered their educational progress. The most obvious distinction was between children who had general learning difficulties and thus experienced
problems with most types of subject matter and those who had a specific difficulty with reading and mathematics.

Reading disabilities are by far the most crucial component of any learning disability syndrome. Most children with other learning problems [E.g. arithmetic problems] also have reading and spelling problems. Reading disability typically involves a failure either to recognize or to comprehend written material. Recognition is the more basic of these processes, since a word must be recognized before it can comprehended. Comprehension is not usually at the level of individual words but rather at a level of phrases, sentences and integration of information across sentences [Oakhill and Gamm, 1988].

In 1968 ‘DYSLEXIA’ or reading disability was defined by the interdisciplinary committee on reading problems at Washington DC as “A disorder of children who despite conventional classroom experience, fail to attain the language skills of reading, writing and spelling, commensurate with their intellectual abilities.” It is also defined as a type of learning disability in which children fail to master basic processes such as ‘letter recognition’ and ‘sound blending’ despite adequate intelligence and educational opportunity. These definitions suggest that the term ‘reading disability’ does not refer to children who are mentally retarded, and who have had no educational experience. Children in the latter categories may also be poor readers, but they are not considered to have a reading disability.
In addition to having reading disability, these children must meet a number of other criteria, designed to rule out possible explanations for their reading difficulty. These criteria therefore function to exclude children for whom any of the possible explanations apply. A typical list of criteria cited by Vellutuno (1979) is:

1. An IQ 90 or above on either the verbal or performance scale of WISC.
2. Adequate sight and hearing.
3. Absence of severe neurological and physical disability.
4. Absence of significant environmental and social problems.
5. Adequate opportunity to learn to read.

Reading disability is common in the classroom although incidence of the same varies from one class to another. Gibson and Levin (1975) report that at least 15% of American school children have reading difficulties. Other authorities have estimated that the number of children with inadequate reading skills is significantly higher in cities than in other areas of the country[Carrol and Chall 1975; Goldberg and Schiffman, 1972]. Whatever the percentage, most educators agree that the number of children who read less efficiently than they should and could, is for too high.

More than other specific difficulties, reading difficulties hamper educational progress in a wide variety of areas because reading is the access route to a wide range of information. Failure to learn to read in the school years efficiently locks the child out of much of the remainder of the school curriculum. For example, the
presentation of arithmetic problems in the school curriculum occurs largely through the written medium. If a child has reading problems then this will hamper the child’s arithmetical progress. In fact, the co-occurrence of reading and arithmetical difficulties is common [Rutter et al, 1970].

Reading disabilities also adversely affect the acquisition of knowledge beyond the curriculum. This in turn adversely affects reading comprehension, which draws considerably on one’s general knowledge. In short, reading difficulties present a vicious circle [Butkowsky and Williams, 1980].

Reading disability signifies disharmony in the life of a child. The disharmony may arise from a variety of problems related to psychological, physical, educational, environmental and other difficulties or from the interaction that occurs among them.

Children with reading disability do not fall into set categories. They are found in all age groups, all ranges of intelligence and all cultural groups, and they have all types of physical and personality components. Pupils who read poorly grow up in diverse environments, they may live with understanding or punitive parents, in happy or broken homes. Some may be affected by these conditions, others remain untouched. In some instances, a child with reading problems shows severe emotional difficulty at the outset, sometimes the maladjustment manifests itself only after the appearance of poor achievement. But all children with reading disability manifest some disequilibrium in their lives.

In India not much research has been done in the field of reading disability, especially in rural children. Moreover most research has been conducted on English
The English language requires phonemic transcription, which means it can only be read by someone familiar with the phonology of the language transcribed. Liberman et al (1974), suggests that phonemic awareness may develop as a result of school instruction rather than precede the development of reading skills. In the English language some of the words are not read as they are written. However, most of the Indian languages have phonetic transcription, hence the grapheme-phoneme correlation is high, thus making it read as it is written.

Malayalam has a phonetic transcription and thus can be read by a person totally ignorant of the language, assuming he knows the alphabets and transcription of the language. However, the correlation between reading and comprehension may not be high.

Need for the study:

The ability to read, express oneself and reason are essential to achieving personal autonomy in society. Deficits in any of the skills will adversely affect the ability to independently support oneself and thus make him more vulnerable to exploitation. This skill is of more importance today as our world is a reading world. It is difficult to discover any activity whether in school or in the home, on the farm, or in recreational pursuits, that does not demand some and often considerable reading. Thus a deficit in this skill will have adverse effects not on any one phase of life but on one’s entire personality and lifestyle; and therefore it becomes imperative that we try and study the psycho-social correlates of reading ability and some ways of remediating problems in reading.