CHAPTER - 2

ASSESSMENT OF READING HABITS AMONG ENGINEERING STUDENTS

1. Introduction

Although the research at Cambridge University (Geoghegan 1983) showed reading to be a relatively minor problem for students compared with the other three main areas, nevertheless, we shall look at it briefly as the greatest need of students is the ability to read textbooks. This ‘need’ was expressed by 90 per cent of students surveyed by Ostler (1980) in an American university. In a similar type of university survey among faculty members in Saudi Arabia, Hohl (1982) found that reading was ranked first by 48 per cent as a requirement for success in university. It is likely that in most EFL university situations, reading academic texts will be the biggest requirement for students. The two surveys do not indicate if students had difficulties with reading.

In any self-assessment or questionnaire-based survey, students almost always cite reading as the skill causing them least difficulty. This is probably correct, at least in relation to the other skills. However, this does not mean that students have no problems at all with reading. The most usual difficulty is that indicated in Geoghegan’s analysis at Cambridge (1983), i.e. an inability to read at adequate speed (also borne out by other surveys viz. Jordon and Mackay 1973 and blue 1991).

One early study in the USA (Plaister 1968) reported on a reading course for foreign students which contained timed reading exercises:
Most of our students are word by word readers and, as a consequence, read at very low rates- 125 to perhaps 150 words per minute.

Probably the first exponent of reading speed techniques, and the writer of a course in faster reading for use overseas, was Fry (1963). He distinguished three kinds of reading speeds and then compared the performance of a poor reader and a good reader. This is tabulated below (Fry 1963). He based his reading speeds on those acquired by students before and after attending his courses; he regarded 20 wpm as an attainable minimum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speed</th>
<th>Poor reader</th>
<th>Good reader</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Study reading speed is used when material is difficult and/or high comprehension is desired.</td>
<td>90-125 w.p.m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>80-90% comp</td>
<td>80-90% comp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Average reading speed is used for everyday reading of magazines newspapers and easier text-books.</td>
<td>150-180 w.p.m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70% comp</td>
<td>70% comp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>Skimming is used when the highest rate is desired. Comprehension is intentionally lower.</td>
<td>Cannot skim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>50% comp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1 – Reading speeds**
The Three Speeds of Reading

Many students, just starting at university, need help to cope with their often newly-found independence. In this respect, the type of help that is provided by books is highly relevant. The areas that are particularly appropriate are:

- organizing reading
- establishing a routine
- planning the working week
- making a timetable
- being realistic over the use of time, etc.

Some books make use of checklists or grids to prompt students to question themselves. Others pose questions to initiate self-awareness and then proceed to discuss and compare. A good example of an initial awareness-raising activity is shown below: it encourages students to be realistic. It is within a unit on ‘using your time’.

Answer the following questions about yourself –truthfully! If you reply truthfully, you will have learned something about your work rhythm which will be useful when you come to plan your weekly study timetable.

1. How often in an hour do you feel the need to get up and stretch your legs while you are reading a textbook?

2. At what time of the day do you work best?

   (a) Morning

   (b) Afternoon

   (c) Evening

   (d) Late at night
3. Write down the hours when you can study at the same time every day in the week

(meal times and travel times do not count!).

Answer the following questions about things that affect your planning:

1. How long does it take you to read ten pages of a textbook?
2. How long does it take you to read ten pages of a novel?
3. How long does it take you to write a two-page class paper?

Discuss your conclusions with a partner. Are you both being realistic? Are you being honest?

1.1. Academic reading

Reading, as a skill, is normally linked with writing. This is a fundamental characteristic of the target academic situation in which students are typically reading books and journals, noting, summarising, paraphrasing, and then writing essays, etc. In practice, material for reading, the link with writing is normally included. Although the focus may be on various reading strategies and comprehension practice, the resultant exercises usually involve writing (apart from some multiple-choice questions and yes/no, true/false formats).

Reading for academic purposes is a multifaceted subject. However, there is one fundamental aspect which can be the starting point for other considerations. When students read, it is for a purpose. Clearly, students can have different purposes in their reading; these will include:

- to obtain information (facts, data, etc.)
- to understand ideas or theories, etc.
to discover authors’ viewpoints

to seek evidence for their own point of view (and to quote) all of which may be needed for writing their essays, etc. (vestnik journal, 2013)

In the process of reading, students will be concerned with the subject-content of what they read and the language in which it is expressed. Both aspects involve comprehension, though of different kinds. Depending on the reading purpose, different reading strategies and skills will be involved; in turn, the skills can be divided into sub-skills.

1.2. **Strategies and skills**

Some of the main strategies, skills and sub-skills utilized in reading are as provided by vestnik journal are as follows:

- prediction
- skimming (reading quickly for the main idea or gist)
- scanning (reading quickly for a specific piece of information)
- distinguishing between:
  - factual and non-factual information
  - important and less important items
  - relevant and irrelevant information
  - explicit and implicit information
  - ideas and examples and opinions
  - drawing inferences and conclusions
  - deducing unknown words
  - understanding graphic presentation (date, diagrams, etc.)
• understanding text organization and linguistic /semantic aspects,
• relationships between and within sentences (e.g. cohesion)
• recognizing discourse/semantic markers and their function.

The skills listed above (Vestnik, 2013) are frequently taken as the basis for practice material in textbooks. Sometimes the skills are taken separately, or in combination, and used as the focus for the unit or exercise, but more frequently they are integrated within units in the form of activated/tasks/problem-solving, which are topic- or content –based. The texts that are used as the basis for the practice are usually authentic, though possibly adapted or abridged depending on the language level. Although the focus of the practice is on the reading skills, some exercises are usually included on the comprehension of certain aspects of the reading passage together with word study/vocabulary practice and some relevant grammatical focus.

1.3. Sample for the study

The present study began with the assessment of the reading habits of the Karunya University students. 100 students from various branches of B. Tech courses were chosen for the study.

1.4. Methodology for assessing reading habits

The following questions were put forth to them:

1. How much TV do you watch on an average day at home?
2. How long do you spend with your laptops?
3. Do you have free time?
4. Do you do any regular reading (for example, a daily newspaper, weekly magazines, occasional novels)?
5. When are you most likely to do your reading?

6. Do you have any aversion to reading?

7. Did your teachers in school make you interested in reading?

8. Do you enjoy reading?

9. Arrange the following skills in the order of your preference: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing

10. Has your knowledge increased due to reading?

1.5. The Data

To the first question (Chart 1) “How much TV do you watch on an average day at home?” the majority of the students (81%) answered that they spend an average of 1 – 5 hrs every day watching TV. This is an issue of great concern. An alarming note was given by 11% of students who replied that they watch TV for 6 hours 45 minutes to 12 hours regularly. Only one student watched a normal of 30 minutes to 45 minutes every day. 5% of students watched TV depending upon their moods and 2% of students did not have the habit of watching TV.

Chart 1 – Time spent on watching TV
To the second question (Chart 2) “How long do you spend with your laptops?” yet another issue with youngsters again there was 83% spending 1 – 5 hours every day. To this question too the scholar got an alarming reply of 6% of students spending 6 hours – 12 hours 30 minutes in their laptops. Only 11% of students spent a normal 15 minutes – 1 hour with their laptops.

This is the reason why to the third question “Do you have free time?” (Chart 3). 31% of students expressed that they do not have any free time for reading. An average of 56% of students have 45 minutes to 3 hours of free time, 8% of students have even 3 hrs 30 minutes to 6 hours of free time. Obviously they are wasting time, and 5% of students keep themselves busy, having only 30 minutes.
To the fourth question (Chart 4) “Do you do any regular reading (for example, a daily newspaper, weekly magazines, occasional novels)?” the sad answer was that 33% of students don’t read anything at all. But 30% of students have the habit of reading newspaper, 20% of students read stories and novels, 13% of students read weekly magazines. 4% of students alone have real interest in reading. They read anything that they come across.
46% of students expressed that they prefer reading at night when the question “When are you most likely to do your reading?” was put forth to them (Chart 5). 8% read between morning and noon, and 5% in the morning. However, 26% of them read during their leisure time and 4% when they are bored. 10% of students read when there’s something interesting and 1% reads when some sports events go on.

![Chart 5 – Reading time preference](image)

![Chart 6 – Reading aversion](image)
The responses of the sixth question “Do you have any aversion to reading?” show that the majority (91%) do not have any aversion (Chart 6). Only 2% of students expressed aversion, 2% of students feel that reading is very boring 4% like to read only at times. There is only 1% of students to affirm that he feels fresh and good while reading.

The next question put forth to them i.e., “Did your teachers in school make you interested in reading?” most of the students (74%) affirmed that they did (Chart 7). Only 21% said “No”. And for 5% of students the answer was “Sometimes”.

Yet to the eighth question “Do you enjoy reading?” the majority (75%) said “Yes” (Chart 8). 20% of students expressed that they sometimes enjoy reading and only 5% said that they don’t enjoy reading.
In order to assess how important reading skill is for students, they were asked to arrange the four skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) in the order of their preference (Chart 9). Only 14% of students prioritize reading. For the majority (47%) Listening skill is the first preference. Speaking was preferred by 29%, and Writing by 10%. 

Chart 8 – Enjoying reading

Chart 9 – Language skill preference
“Has your knowledge increased due to reading?” was the last question asked (Chart 10). In spite of neglecting reading, 94% of students said “Yes”. Only 3% said that reading has increased their knowledge to some extent, and 3% had no idea whether reading has helped or not.

1.6. **Analysis of the Study**

As per the data collected from students, it is disheartening to know that students spend an average of 1 – 5 hours watching TV and spend 1 – 5 hours with their laptops. They do have 45 minutes to 3 hours of free time but one third of them don’t read anything at all.

The next one third read only newspapers, and another one third read stories, novels and weekly magazines. It is with this group (67%) that motivation can be done to promote reading. It is learned that students prefer reading at night. This study shows that although students don’t read much, they do not have any aversion to reading. This once again is a happy note to start with.
Of course for most of the students their teachers in Schools have got them interested in reading, and they are confident that they would enjoy reading from their past experience. However, students in Colleges give up reading because as grown-ups they prefer listening and speaking. Reading is only their third preference and writing is a heavy task for them.

Yet the majority knows that knowledge increases due to reading. Therefore reading has only been a skill that they students are getting out of touch as College students. It is but necessary that teachers foster reading habits in students to become better thinkers.

1.7. Aims of Teaching Reading

Reading means decoding, understanding and interpreting the text that was read. Every writer has a message to convey and he wants the reader to understand the message. So a reader must approach a text with an expectation to identify the same. Reading plays a pivotal role in the life of everyone, especially students. Pupils of all ages have to use English as a Library language and therefore reading skill is very useful to them.

So the aims of teaching reading to pupils are many

- To reading with normal speed
- To understand lexical and structural items
- To use proper pronunciation, stress and intonation (if reading aloud)
- To guess the meaning of words from the context
- To consult a dictionary
- To make summary of the material read
- To know the mood of the writer – serious, jocular etc.
• To recognize the graphic signals like punctuation marks, capitalization and infer the meaning.

Reading is done mainly to obtain information. The information is the content of the written matter and therefore, gathering information is an intellectual act. It is a fact-finding activity. We read many reference books with a view to obtain facts for our study, research projects, jobs or as a piece to work on our environment, could be factual. On the other hand reading with an intention to improve our intellectual skills to influence others, or manipulate ideas could be intellectual. We also read for emotional gratification. We peruse books on religion and philosophy, stories and magazines for the sheer pleasure of reading.

So reading is definitely done with a purpose. So an English teacher teaching reading is more concerned with the use of the language rather than the usage, and with the function rather than the form.

1.8. **When should Reading be started?**

In our classrooms everyone is in hurry to start with the reading of the textbook from day one. In the order of the four language skills, reading comes after speaking. Reading should be started after they have learnt to listen and speak at their level. The reading matter (of the lesson) should first be introduced orally through narration, discussion, question and answer etc. Then they will read it with understanding.

In learning to read the mother tongue, a lot of speaking must have gone before they read. The pupil is fully familiar with the sounds and sentence patterns of the mother tongue. He has learnt a few words and knows by constant speech practice in what order to put them to make a sentence. He listens to people and reacts to them through speech.
In teaching a foreign language too, the same method holds good i.e. whatever he is to read must have been discussed and talked about orally by the teacher and students. The first few weeks in a class must be devoted to oral work and pattern practice.

1.9. **Teacher’s Role**

In case the teacher feels that the class cannot carry out this activity efficiently, then a more ‘definitive’ version may be given by the teacher. The words can be expanded into short phrases so that it gives more support to learners.

e.g., A man, 38, schoolmaster, self contained

mother dies,

very fond of mother, ----

while compiling the list of words for dictation the words chosen should be rich in content so that students are stimulated to think.

1.9.1. **Teaching Reading in Later Stages**

Reading is an important activity in life. One can keep up to date with knowledge. Reading as a skill can be easily acquired by the weakest pupil. Silent reading is more useful as one grows up. Reading aloud provides scope for correction of sound features. Once the reading skill is acquired through comprehension exercises and faster reading material, the pupil can practice the skill unaided for self study and so on. When one reads silently, it is enough if the elements of English are recognized in context. Another principle is that the lesson material is simple in the beginning and it ought to be discussed orally before it is read.

Teaching reading in schools and colleges is as important as teaching the other language skills. In teaching a student to read we want him to be able to understand and
enjoy what he reads; to understand and obey instructions; to discover new facts and
information; and to find his errors and correct them. Clearly the teacher has to do more
than teach children to recognize the words. Teaching reading with these aims in
educating a student would ensure success.

1.9.2. Teaching to Make Understanding Clear

To understand meanings requires more than the simple answer to the question
‘What does this mean?’ It also requires that the student has thought of the meaning, of its
associations and of its particular meaning in a sentence. Understanding also helps a child
to sort out ideas in what he reads. The student has to learn to sort these ideas and
recognize that some are more important than others.

1.9.3. Reacting to what has been Read

All of us react to what we have read. We will laugh, will be sad, we will wait for
the ending. Later, if these reactions are guided to be thought provoking, everything we
read will have an effect on us. We may agree, disagree, be enthusiastic or critical or even
refuse to read what has been written because the author is, we believe, writing what is
untrue. This ability to read so that one can judge and make balanced judgments while one
reads, is the mark of the civilized man.

1.9.4. Changing Ideas and Behaviour

Students have to learn to change their behaviour and their ideas in response to
what they have read. Having made good judgments, the next step is to take from their
reading the ideas and attitudes towards daily living, which will make them people who
can deal wisely with problems, have a better understanding of people and situations, and
have wider interests. To read and to remain quite unaffected is a waste of time; but it is
also a waste of the accumulated, stored knowledge, experience and wisdom that books can bring into our lives.

1.9.5. **The habits of Attention and Discovery**

Certain habits can be formed. The habit of attention is important and it is linked with the habit of working within a time limit. This may sound old-fashioned advice, and certainly it would be wrong to let the clock rule life in the classroom. The habit of discovery is one the teacher must try to train. It is linked with the child’s huge natural curiosity. What the child discovers for himself is more valuable than what he is told.

1.9.6. **Learning to think**

The habit of thinking has to be trained. This is the habit of seeing a relationship, a link, an association, and of using what has been learnt previously. The teacher trains it by the way she makes sure that the foundation is good, that a child understands ‘this’ before he attempts ‘that’; by the way she, reminds her children of ‘what we did yesterday’; by the way she refuses to answer the children’s ‘why?’ but smiles and says, ‘You tell me’.

1.9.7. **Using imagination**

The teacher has to encourage children to solve a problem - often enough good questioning in the classroom leads a student to discover the answer for himself. She has to encourage a student’s power to see a picture in his mind or to imagine a situation. She can stimulate imagination by gentle encouragement.

Attention, discovery, thought and imagination all play a part in learning.

1.9.8. **The Pattern of Learning**

Thus the pattern of learning in a student takes place in the following way:
• He discovers and attends
• He thinks and imagines
• He remembers and recalls
• He solves problems and produces work which is honest and conscientious
• The student becomes a happy and useful member of his institution.

1.9.9. Students are individuals

Each student thinks and works at his own pace, and is happy because he is not being driven beyond his ability or kept back so that he works too slowly.

1.9.10. Development of Reading Skills through Supplementary Readers and Library Books

Dr. Shaik Mowla, *Techniques of Teaching English*, p. 150) stresses that silent Reading is a useful skill in the higher stages of learning a language. The senior student has to read a lot of reference and other books and get the gist of them for use in different subjects like science and history. He should learn how to read good literature for pleasure and profit. Silent Reading skill is useful all through one’s life.

While reading aloud has very limited purposes, silent Reading has unlimited advantages, personal, social and cultural. With an abundance of good books, old and new, a lot of printed material coming our way these days, the skill of reading this material with purpose and understanding is invaluable.

There are prescribed books for intensive reading, consisting of prose and poetry pieces. Teachers over the years have been teaching the intensive readers with care and caution, analyzing the vocabulary, grammar and sentence patterns in prose and appreciating the beauty and imagery of the poems.
But for extensive reading, only one or two Supplementary or non-detailed readers are prescribed. For want of time and skill in teaching them, the teachers allow the students to read them at home contenting themselves with a few questions for written work and examinations. There are ways to teach Supplementary readers with pleasure and profit to the students. If handled with imagination, the training in extensive reading will yield hands on returns to the students at school and in after life.

As a preparation for extensive reading, the teacher, in the first few weeks of class trains students in the comprehension of a long passage or a story. According to Dr. Shaik Mowla,

- The teacher selects a passage or a story from the Supplementary reader. He introduces it orally to them outlining the important stages in the story, taking care to introduce some of the vocabulary items in the initial presentation.
- Then he asks them to read the story silently, going round to see that they do not move their lips nor point with the finger or pen where they are reading etc.
- He then asks them a few comprehension questions. Comprehension questions test a person’s ability to read and understand a piece of writing. They test his understanding and improve his reading abilities.

Dr. Shaik Mowla (p. 151) explains comprehension questions as being broadly of two types (a) Global (b) Local. Local questions are based on the passage as it progresses. Global questions are meant for testing the overall understanding of the passage.

These questions are of three different kinds (1) Factual (2) Inferential (3) Interpretative or Evaluative.
• Factual questions expect the students to locate particular facts occurring in different paragraphs.

• Inferential questions test whether the students can think beyond the material given in the passage or story. Is their own conclusion or inference about a character or an event in the story. That is why this kind of reading is called reading between the lines, which is a higher order reading skill.

• Interpretative or Evaluative questions: Here the students are expected to give their own critical assessment of a character or an event in the story. This skill is otherwise called reading beyond the lines, which again is a higher skill.

Reading comprehension can be tested by these questions as suitable to the class and the level if language skills of the students. The questions may also take the form of Summaries (Oral or written), Matching or multiple choice questions and plain dictionary questions to elicit meanings.

The questions on extensive reading passages can be in three stages.

• Pre-reading questions: Before the passage is read, the teacher gives a few questions for which the pupils have to find answers as they read the passage.

• While-reading questions: as they read the passage, they may look for answers for some questions based on the passage.

• Post-reading questions: After the passage has been read, a few questions, like the advanced types given above may be asked.

The teacher can check the pupils’ speed of reading by setting a time limit for the completion of reading. Speed reading is a great virtue these days when there is so much to read.
1.9.11. **Reading Habits relating to Library Books**

Dr. Shaik Mowla (p. 152) explains that generally students tend to concentrate on their prescribed texts and examinations all the year round. They rarely find time to do some extra reading from the library except newspapers and magazines.

- The teacher of English should tell them about the advantages of library reading. He should familiarize them with the books available in the school library. The books must be made available to students through Open Shelf system.

- The teacher may introduce one or two books by telling them the story or the contents partially, to increase their curiosity.

- The library periods in the time-table may be planned out for reading a few simple books and for discussion based on them.

- There should be competitions extra reading and prizes for the best students.

- New books must be prominently displayed from time to time.

- The teacher should set an example by reading extra books himself.

- There should be book review sessions for senior students. Teachers should have a specific aim of making children love books. ‘Reading maketh a full man’ said Bacon. They should develop the skill of silent reading which at the higher stages includes “Skimming”, to get the gist of what is read and “scanning” to get at specific information from a newspaper or a magazine.

Dr. Mowla (p. 153) insists that library reading should be made compulsory and a pleasurable activity. School libraries have to go a long way in stocking themselves with different kinds of books - originals and simplifies to suit different age levels and tastes of
students, all of them easy to read and easy to talk about. One’s wide reading holds the mirror up to one’s culture and refinement.

Reading, of all skills, is the most easily learnt and the most useful skill in an educated man’s life in today’s world. Books, our never-failing friends open up before us vast treasures of literature-scientific and other, and we will be the poorer if we do not read and benefit from them. Apart from fiction and drama, there is a vast body of printed material in newspapers and journals, articles and reports, timetables and street signs that we need to read to lead a purposeful life.

So, the school student has to be trained to read everything that comes his way, but with discrimination and foresight, to make his future bright. Reading helps everyone to spend their leisure usefully. The Kothari commission wanted us to use English as a library language, with all that a ‘rich’ library means.