Research Paper ARTS

An Assessment of the Comprehension Skill of Educationally Disadvantaged Learners

Mr. Imtiyaz M. Shaikh | Research Scholar: Pacific University of Udaipur

ABSTRACT

As students learn to read they are able to decode the text by orchestrating a range of cues. To become fluent readers they must also understand or comprehend what they read. To help them do this they need to be taught a range of reading comprehension strategies and be encouraged to reflect on their own understanding and learning. Such an approach helps students go beyond literal interpretation and recall to explore the complex meanings of a text using inference and deduction. They can begin to learn these strategies from the earliest stages of learning to read. This paper will help you to understand how readers make sense of what they read, review the research evidence and suggest ways to teach reading comprehension strategies.

KEYWORDS Comprehension skill, Assessment and Comprehension strategies

Introduction

Reading proficiency is a long-term developmental process; what constitutes "reading well" is different at different points in the reader's development. The end point proficient adult reading-encompasses the capacity to read, with ease and interest, a wide variety of different kinds of materials for varying purposes and to read with comprehension even when material is neither easy to understand nor intrinsically interesting. Adult reading involves reading for pleasure, learning and analysis, and it represents a prerequisite to many forms of employment, to informed participation in the democratic process, to optimal participation in the education of one's children and to gaining access to cultural capital. A formal definition of reading comprehension may seem unnecessary because the term is used so widely and its meaning is assumed to be generally understood. Over the last decades, there has been much research into reading comprehension. Past research was characterized by attempts to: identify the sub-skills of comprehension; establish a hierarchy of skills; teach these skills in a progressive order. Teachers may be familiar with comprehension exercises based on this approach from their own experience at school. Recent research is based on seeing the student as actively engaging with the text to create meaning acquiring strategies whilst engaged in authentic reading rather than as a separate set of skills applying cognitive, interpretive and problem-solving strategies; influenced by differences in their own experience. There is growing consensus about the kinds of experiences students need to develop their reading comprehension, the teaching model to support this and the range of strategies that might be helpful.

Teachers often assume that students will learn to comprehend merely by reading. Although some will, many others will not. Teaching students to comprehend is challenging because reading is complex. Students who are good comprehenders use strategies in reading to learn new concepts, get deeply involved in what they are reading, critically evaluate what they read, and apply their new knowledge to solve practical as well as intellectual problems. But many students fail at doing these things. One problem is that classroom materials are often so difficult to comprehend or uninteresting that many students cannot or will not read them. Moreover, comprehension instruction tends to be emphasized less in subject-matter classrooms where teachers are focused on content. Sometimes students miss early opportunities to learn because comprehension instruction is delayed until the later elementary classes, even though a focus on comprehension is desirable from the very beginning of reading instruction. In the absence of a consensus on standards for comprehension achievement and instruction throughout the elementary, middle, and secondary classes, it would not be surprising if a student's access to excellent reading comprehension instruction is not systematic or sustained.

Aims and Objectives

- To design a diagnostic test to assess the comprehension level of the educationally disadvantaged learners.
- To assess whether these learners can comprehend paragraphs given in simple English.
- To assess whether they can answer simple 'Wh' questions in English.

Tools

The Following tool has been used:

1. Diagnostic test to assess the comprehension level of the educationally disadvantaged learners.

Research Methodology

Sample

The sample consists of 25 students from a secondary grant-in-aid minority boys' school selected randomly.

Needs Identification

English (Second Language) textbook of 9th Std., focuses on the use of Communicative Approach to enable students to be fluent in using English language. A major point to bear in mind is that the textbooks are designed centrally and that students comprise of varied diversities, complexities and individual differences in social, economical, cultural, educational, geographical milieu, etc. In spite of well designed textbooks as observed by the researcher it seems as the comprehension skill of the learners is not up to the mark. Thus, to overcome this obstacle it is the prime duty of the teachers to be aware of how to handle and implement the textbook and enhance the comprehension skill of the disadvantaged learners. The teachers should establish a good rapport with their learners to find out their problematic areas. Thus, to analyze the needs of these disadvantaged learners, the researcher has conducted a diagnostic test to find out the grey areas of the learners, which is a hurdle in enhancing their comprehension skill.

Description of the Diagnostic Test

The diagnostic test is designed on the basis of the syllabus prescribed at the high school level in Gujarat. It has two parts. Part one covers personal information such as their parental education, their fathers' occupation and the problems faced by them in comprehending extracts and texts in English. Part two has two simple paragraphs to extract information giving

weightage to five types of questions viz. multiple choice, fill in the blanks, true and false, 'W/h' questions, and inferential questions. The questions are such to assess the comprehension level of the learners. They are expected to read the given paragraph carefully and answer the questions given. The questions chosen are thematic, multiple choice and of inferring. Here, the paragraphs are carefully selected keeping in view the level and interest of learners as the familiarity of the content encourages learners to search for the correct answer.

Preparation of the Diagnostic Test

The assessment of the comprehension skill of disadvantaged learners has been conducted by preparing a diagnostic test. The test paper had two parts. Part-A as discussed above. Part-B comprised of two paragraphs each carrying ten questions and 20 marks. It has been designed on the basis of the prescribed syllabus keeping in mind the content and grammatical items covered in the syllabus of 9th and 10th Std., and the pattern of the question papers of the school examination. The diagnostic test paper has been prepared after discussions with experts and academicians in the field. It has been finalized after making many versions.

Findings

(i) Due to financial conditions, majority of parents are school dropouts. 45% are below SSC while 30% have passed SSC, 5% have passed HSC. 20% could not get chance to go to school.
(ii) After careful assessment, it was found that 85% students have very limited vocabulary, 80% have inadequate knowledge of grammatical structures, and 95% have problems in punctuation marks whereas 90% are unable to comprehend the text whereas 85% do not get any guidance at home.
(iii) 75% students scored marks below five. 10% of them scored between a range of five to ten. 10% of them scored between ten to fifteen and only 5% scored above fifteen marks.
(iv) Majority of them could not get the gist of the subject matter.
(v) Majority of them were not able to use correct forms of verbs as they are not familiar with the different forms of the verb. Most of them used –'ing' forms without giving any thought.
(vi) Majority of them did not have any idea about the parts of speech and their basic use like pronouns, 'to be' forms, adjectives, etc.
(vii) Students lack knowledge about the concept of interrogative words and their appropriate use.
(viii) The written answers suggest that they were not able to use 'Subject-verb-agreement' properly. They often get confused while using singular- plural and genders.
(ix) Lack of understanding of the different tenses, which are prescribed in their syllabus.
(x) Unacceptable gaps in reading performance persist between students in different demographic groups as observed here with the disadvantaged learners.
(xi) Disadvantaged students are performing increasingly poorly as they enter the later years of schooling when discipline-specific content and subject-matter learning are central to the curriculum. It is because of lack of proper exposures.

Conclusions

We want to encourage students to become enthusiastic, autonomous and thoughtful readers who not only decode the text but also understand and engage with what they are reading. Teaching is central to this. Policies and programmes intended to improve reading comprehension are regularly adopted, but their effects are uncertain because they are neither based on empirical evidence nor adequately evaluated. It is believed that a vigorous, cumulative research and development programme focused on reading comprehension is essential if we want to address these education problems successfully. Very little direct attention has been devoted to help teachers develop the skills they need to promote reading comprehension, ensure content learning through reading, and deal with the differences in comprehension skills that their students display. Thus, there arises the need to strengthen the role of the teacher, which is crucial and inexplicitly encouraging in the use of different comprehension strategies. Comprehension improves when teachers provide explicit instruction in comprehension strategies and when they design and implement activities that support understanding. The structure of the literacy hour provides the context for direct teaching and application of reading comprehension strategies across the primary age range. The strategies can be applied to picture books as well as more complex texts. The wider reading environment in the classroom and school provides further opportunities for extensive reading. But as teachers many a times we fail to face the particular challenges that second-language readers face due to those students' limited vocabulary and linguistic knowledge. So certain suggestions are given which can be implanted to develop the comprehension skill of the disadvantaged students.

Suggestions

In the light of the above discussion, it can be stated that to enhance the comprehension skill of the students a wider reading environment is necessary and should be created in the following ways.

- Encourage extensive reading. Research indicates that the most recent developments in improving comprehension have taken place in classrooms that promote extensive reading. This creates an environment where high quality talk about texts can be encouraged.
- Emphasis should be given to develop students' phonic skills, their vocabulary and teaching them about words. Students, who can decode quickly and accurately and have a sight vocabulary of known words, can autonomize some of the reading process, freeing up more mental capacity to think about the meaning of what they read.
- Ensure regular opportunities for independent, extended reading.
- Provide access to a wide range of quality reading materials.
- Provide opportunities and resources to read for a range of purposes across the curriculum.
- Plan a read aloud programme for all ages; provide story narrations, puppets and art affects for retelling stories.
- Plan opportunities for students to use the class collections and the school library; promote reading at home.
- Organize a regular author focus in each class; organizes special events, for example book weeks author visits, story tellers, book sales, book awards, etc.
- Liberate personal reading achievements, e.g. book awards, reading heroes and advocates, displays, etc.

If these suggestions are implemented certainly fruitful results can be achieved.

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