

## IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC READING SKILLS FOR THE FIRST YEAR ENGINEERING STUDENTS

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### ABSTRACT

Since last forty years and so, reading skills attracts the attention of educationalists, teachers, researchers and students due to its role in academic achievements and success in one's life. There lies a mutual relationship between student's academic success and mastery over the reading skills. However, it is found out that sometimes students, as well as teachers, take this basic skills for granted and adopted only surface approach towards reading skills and academic reading materials. This paper aims to clear the importance of teaching reading skills for the first year engineering students and explain the need and role played by reading skills in student's life and academic success and how to achieve it.

**KEYWORDS:** *Academic Reading Skills, Surface Approach of Reading, Deep Approach of Reading*

### INTRODUCTION

It is observed that success at college and university level demands mastery over some fundamentals skills from students before they entered the college. There are some skills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking presentation, reasoning, analytical skills, which becomes the pre-requisite for entering the college (Tinto-1993). However, the importance and influence of these skills are accepted and established, many a time it is neglected by both students and teachers. The professors hardly put any attempts to teach and improve the academic reading skills of newly entered college students. At the college level it is taken for granted considering that students have already learned it at school level (Erickson, Peters, Strummer, 2006). But the truth is different from this notion. Many reports suggested that the students at college level lack academic reading skills, as it is greatly different from what they have learned at the school level.

Reading enjoys a very dignitary position and plays a very dynamic role in the development of human being and the world society. It is very important for the academic success and achievement of the students. In this regard, Vernon (1971 p.1) states that "The ability to read is generally regarded not only as the basis of education but also an essential possession of the citizen of civilized countries".

In earlier century literacy was considered the right of few aristocratic and elite, it is after 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, is considered as the basic right of all the human being without any distinction of color, caste, and power. Out of all the valuable skills that average person learns in his lifetime, the ability to read is the most important since it is the most universal and the most useful for everyone today.

Accepting the importance and influence of reading proficiency in human life Strange (1967 p. 67) denotes that reading is

“The royal road to knowledge, it is essential to the success in all academic subjects. In modern life learning depends largely on one’s ability to interpret the printed page accurately and fully”.

Moreover, it is believed that a person who can read and write is able to lead mankind. The printed word has the power to revolutionize the way of thinking and living. As we are living in a post-modern era, where there is a rapid advancement in technology, we have to face the condition of “information explosion” and “information overloaded”. Though some of the information is coming from electronic media such as television or radio, we do not much require reading skill but most of the information which we required to fulfill or cope up with our daily need comes from the written source like newspaper, books, magazine, and computer. This requires reading skills. In this era of computer and technology, the world becomes the global village, and it becomes easy to acquire any needed information very easily at your doorstep by using the internet. However through all these means of information are easily available to use these means, one has to develop and reading skills and so it becomes the pre-requisite skill of human life according to Gray & Rogers.

“Reading is an indispensable factor in modern life, interwoven with work, recreation and other activities of young people and adults. Its great value lies in two facts; printed material provides the most illuminating and varies records of human experience that are now available; and they can be examined and restudied time and again at readers convenience in acquiring clear understanding, in development of rational attitude, some of these values cannot be attained so effectively through other media because the individual is not free to pause and deliberate at will”.

And that’s why the reading ability is considered as the bare necessities of modern life. In day to day life, people encounter material for reading either in their first language or a foreign language. In such scenario, knowledge of the language in which the material is written is imperative. Hence the ability to read for various purposes at a different time in one’s life becomes paramount important for every individual.

So, reading is undoubtedly considered as one of the important skill of human life. It is also integrated into our education system and now it becomes the synonyms of the education system and there for the ability to read is must for any students who aspire a great success in life and in academic. According to Grelying and Joubert (1988), there is a direct relationship between successful studies and good reading. In the educational development of a person reading serves as a foundation stone for further learning. According to Grove and Hauptfleish (1982:1) “Success in reading very often ensure success in another subject, as a sound reading ability is a gateway to the acquisition and expansion of knowledge in all school subject.”

This view is further supported by the empirical studies conducted on the reading skills. The report and result of the studies and research show the positive relationship between students reading skills and their academic success. It is a proven fact that the person having good reading skills perform better in life and in a career than the person who doesn’t get mastery over the skills.

In 2004, the department of education U.S.A. has conducted the studies on reading skills and documented that

“Research shows that children who read well in early grades are far more successful in later years; and those who

fall behind; often stay behind when it comes to academic achievement. Reading opens the door to learning about math, history, science, literature, geography and much more. Thus, young capable readers can succeed in these subjects, take advantages of other opportunities (such as reading for pleasure) and develop confidence in their own abilities. On the other hand, those students who cannot read well are much more likely to drop out of school and be limited to low paying job throughout their lives. Reading is undeniably critical to success in today's society".

In 2007 Sloat, Beswick and Williams also conducted research to find out the effect of good reading skill on student's academic life and they concluded the report by noting that "Reading is essential to student's academic achievement. Failure to learn reading during primary level may cause a student to be lacking in the ability to read well. In addition, students with limited literacy skill may develop poor self-esteem, lack-motivation, display behavioral and academic problems; thus leading them to be alienated from regular curriculum.

Even many earlier study on reading schools suggested the positive co-relation between reading skills and academic success. The studies show that reading process and reading ability will directly help the students to excel academically (Alderson, 1984, Carrell, 1991, Clarke, 1979, Cziko, 1978).

Even in 2000, one more research conducted on the reading skill and its role for the university going students by Levine Fernez & Reeves. They denote that the ability to read academic text is considered one of the most important skills that university student of English as a second and foreign language ESL/ESL need to acquire (Levine, Ferenz & Reeves, 2000).

On the other hand, a student who does not possess good reading skill faces difficulties at every footstep. He can't score well in his education and always left behind in each & every situation of life. So Grove & Hauptfleisch (1982;1) states that "Reading to learn is becoming more & more important in that it creates almost limitless possibilities for achievements" and because of this Anderson, Hiebert Scott and Wilkinson(1985;1) considered reading as "a basic life skill".

Indian students start to learn English as a required course from the fifth grade in elementary school and have to continue to study English until the twelfth grade as mandated by National Curriculum. Furthermore, Universities in India regard student's English proficiency as an important component that the students have to acquire for not only their academic success but also their competitive career and so most require from the students. The universities take variety, of approaches to ensure student's proficiency over the English language during their education and for that college in India used the books written in English and more over the medium of instruction is also in English. So the proficiency in English becomes more important for their academic success than ever before.

However, through the students learn English from fifth grade to twelfth grade, their English reading skills are not fully developed in India. Till today though different approaches available to teachers, a teacher taught reading by using Grammar translation method. So for the learner, it becomes difficult to get mastery over reading skills as reading is a complex process of decoding and comprehending the written messages and the students have little knowledge regarding reading strategies before they entered the college. To put in another way, the students do not have a chance to develop their academic English reading skills and strategies before college, but they are forced to read technical textbook in English for their academic success as soon as they entered the college. As a result, though they have a certain level of English ability in

general they find it difficult to read and comprehend the textbook which is written in English. In other words, Indian college students might have basic communication skills in reading English but they still lack academic English reading skills because of the reason mentioned above. So the researcher has decided to conduct the research in college and try to find out the role, function, and importance of reading strategies in enhancing the reading skills of college students

Now let us consider what is surface and deep approach of reading? A surface approach of learning means grasp and accept the information presented in the text. Here the information presented in the text is considered in isolation. There is no link between the information presented in the text and world outside it. The only purpose of such reading is to retention of examination which denies the retention of knowledge and information. On the other way in a deep approach of reading, students use their analytic, reasoning, problem solving, synthesizing and connecting strategies to pull out meaning from the text and then reconstruct their own meaning and understanding of the text. In deep approach students try to decode the message encoded by the author. In order to understand the information presented into the text, reader use their own background knowledge and understanding of the world. According to Bowden & Marton students focus on the sign i.e. the text itself while in deep approach students focused on what is signified i.e. the meaning of the text. According to Marton and Saljo (1976) in surface approach students identify unlinked and isolated fact and memorize it only while in deep approach students try to find out the connection between the different facts, try to understand authors view point, try to decode underlying meaning at the text.

Now let us consider what academic reading is? Reading does not exist in isolation. It is influenced by author's own viewpoints, belief, reader's own background knowledge and experience, time and place in which it is written and again in situation it occurs (Hunt 2004). Reading does not mean to find the facts and information from the text but it is working with text. When reader, reads the text he tries to recreate his own meaning of the text by keeping in considering the authors viewpoint and in this process of recreating meaning he uses his own back ground knowledge and experience. However, the process of recreating meaning demands specific strategies form the reader. A skilled reader used reading strategies to pull out meaning from the text. However, many students who enroll for the first year are not able to apply these strategies and hence find it difficult to read academic texts due to unfamiliar subjects and nature of the text. So it is recommended that in the first year of college students need to teach specific reading strategies, a general analytical tool to felicitate the learning (Bean 1996). The general analytic tools for reading includes following items:

- Purpose of the text
- Context
- Deconstruction of the assumption
- Testify and evaluation of authors arguments
- Consequences of author's arguments

When a reader starts to read the academic text they have to keep it clear that why they are reading any assigned text. What are the reason, objective and purpose of reading the text. The students have to be very clear regarding the need and expectations from the text.

When reader understands the context, they discover the situation and circumstances in which the author wrote the text. In order to understand the context, it is necessary to know about the author, his personal life, his style and his taste and for these students should read more than one book by the same author. Again it is necessary to identify the central idea and differentiate fact from the opinion.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is observed that the academic text includes some concepts, terminology, and debate which are not familiar to the students. In order to understand this concept, a student should further read encyclopedia, dictionary and reference books. The most important task in the process of reading is to evaluate author's argument. They have to consider arguments, an example provided by authors to make his point clear and strengthen his argument. A reader has to use his own analytical and judgmental skill to understand the implication and application of author's arguments. In order to do these, a reader has to find a connection between the different texts, relate author's arguments to his own experience and other topic learned in the class. So understanding all the points mention above students become able to understand the text well and perform better in the study and in life too.

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