

## THE PROBLEM OF COMPREHENSION AND RATE OF READING TO THE LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AT THE UNDER-GRADUATE LEVEL IN THE UNIVERSITY OF SINDH

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### **Abstract**

*The majority of the learners of English at the under-graduate level in the University of Sindh Jamshoro belong to the rural areas of Sindh, and non-English medium background. They were neither taught reading as a skill nor underwent a formal training and instruction in comprehension and rate of reading at the Secondary and the Intermediate levels. That is why these learners face a lot of problems in order to understand not only Compulsory and Optional courses, but also Major/Core courses at the under-graduate level in the University of Sindh Jamshoro.*

*Thus this article focuses on the problems and the remedies in comprehension and rate of reading so that the learners may be able to understand and to get the maximum output out of these courses for their present and future needs.*

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### **Introduction**

Comprehension may be defined as learner's capacity of understanding of text/material. Rate of reading is meant to increase speed, and efficiency of a learner to read maximum amount of text within minimum and specified time. Developing comprehension and rate of reading of the learners of English play paramount role in the teaching learning process. These give food for thought to both the teacher as well as the learner. It is indispensable for the learner/reader to overcome the problems of comprehension, and rate of reading in order to make his/her reading more beneficial, and effective. Comprehension and rate of reading, which are the ultimate objectives beyond word recognition, are complex processes. The printed page itself contains no meaning. It is just ink on paper. Meaning comes from the mind of the reader. Thus, the problem in teaching learner to read with understanding becomes one of providing many different experiences, selecting reading materials that relate to experiences learners have had, and

using skills that facilitate comparing the language on the printed page to their experiences.

Reading is an activity controlled by the eyes and brain of reader. The role of eyes is to receive messages and the role of brain is to work out the significance of these messages. Indeed, a reading text moves at the speed of the reader. The reader has to decide how fast he/she wants to read a text.

A text replete with lexical items would cause serious problems when the lexical items are not properly graded in the culturally unfamiliar texts. The learners would slow down their reading speed at the snail's pace and would depend much on the dictionary. Hence remedial and drastic measures are required to improve comprehension and rate of reading of the learners of English at the under-graduate level in the University of Sindh Jamshoro.

### Objectives

- a) To develop comprehension, and rate of reading of the learners of English at the under-graduate level in the University of Sindh Jamshoro.
- b) To make the learners good readers in order to get the maximum output out of the prescribed courses at the under-graduate level in the University of Sindh.

### The Problem of Comprehension

"Comprehension skills are the ability to use context and prior knowledge to aid reading and to make sense of what one reads and hears" (SIL, 1999). A learner can not said to be reading unless he/she also comprehends. Hence a *fundamental objective* and an *ultimate purpose* of all reading instruction as well as the printed word are *comprehension*. Comprehension relies upon the concepts the reader brings to his/her reading such as experiences, background knowledge and learning etc. It helps to develop the reader's ability to recognize the implied ideas and to draw the inferences or conclusions that are not mentioned in the text. It employs accumulative and additive processes for the recognition of word and fact. The learners differ as per their levels of comprehension. That is why some are able to comprehend main ideas while others miss important details, or vice versa. *Word meaning, idea relationships and reasoning* are the three

*components of comprehension.* The complex processes involved in reading comprehension are divided into three following categories:

1. Vocabulary instruction
2. Text comprehension instruction
3. Teacher preparation and comprehension strategies instruction

The complex concepts in the text cause to make the reasoning difficult and comprehension decreases. Reading materials may be simplified only by reorganization and simplification of the relationships among the concepts presented.

It has come to know that the majority of learners of English at the under-graduate in the University of Sindh remain quiet and passive in reading activities in the class. They have several individual following reasons for it for example:

- a) I am afraid of making mistakes in reading a text in the class.
- b) I am not interested in reading text/material.
- c) I shall leave a bad impression on the teacher.
- d) I am a timid person by nature and get nervous easily.
- e) My vocabulary is limited and unknown words create problems while reading.
- f) My reading speed is very slow.
- g) My pronunciation is poor.
- h) My classmates will laugh at me.
- i) The English course is above the level of my comprehension.

The learners have reading fears because there seems to be no *logical connection* between the *spelling* of words and their *pronunciation*. English language is *phonemic* that is an *orthographical system*, which logically and sensibly *reflects* its *pronunciation*. It causes a major stumbling block to reading English text/material. Most of the learners expect to say what they read, that is to pronounce written letters in roughly the same way those are written so they often have great problem.

They also have reading fears in learning to *associate pronunciation* with *meaning* and it is largely due to the non phonemic spelling of nearly of all English words. English spellings are a poor guide to pronunciation. They read English on the pattern of their mother tongues and can not observe proper ascending and descending of stress in order to convey the sense of a word, sentence and passage appropriately because ascending and descending of stress may change the meaning of phrases, sentences

and questions etc. They mostly read with high pitch, unpleasant and rough tone. It is equally important to know the relation between pitch and intonation. These factors contribute towards communicative inefficiency and lack of reading comprehension in the learners.

The reader identifies a word by its form, shape, structural part or by the implication of the context. The reader selects the most appropriate meaning out of many shades and meaning associations of a word in the contextual setting. Thus he/she keeps on proceeding to another word, again cementing a logical connectivity to the preceding word. He/she may obtain the main ideas of the paragraph by recognizing cause-effect, comparison-contrast and question-answer relationships etc. that lead to the generalization.

*Spache* (1962, pp.68-70) defines the mental processes forming the structure of intellect to the interpretation of *model of comprehension* as under:

1. *Cognition* is the discovery or recognition of information. It employs that a sentence conveys a thought.
2. *Memory* is the retention or recall of information. It employs that comprehension relates to the successive thoughts in mind till the sentence is finished. Moreover, these thoughts should be understandable with reference to the reader's experience.
3. *Divergent Production* is deductive thinking that proceeds from general to particular. It employs that some sentences convey an idea rather than a clear statement.
4. *Convergent Production* is inductive thinking that proceeds from particular to general, from part to whole. It employs the literal meaning of the sentence.
5. *Evaluation* is critical thinking. It reacts critically either to the total acceptance or rejection of the idea presented in a sentence.

*Letton* (1958, p.76) describes the following *five levels of difficulty* of the *facts and relationships* in the terms of *comprehension*:

1. *Factual-recall* or recognition of stated details, finding specific details.
2. *Reorganization*-recognizing or stating the main idea, summarizing the central thought, outlining the given facts, classifying ideas.
3. *Inferential*-anticipating outcomes, drawing conclusions or inferences, recognizing sequence of related ideas and implied details, perceiving relationships (cause-effect, time, size, part-whole, etc.).

4. *Interpretive*-recognizing and interpreting figurative language, recognizing connotation and denotation of words, forming sensory impressions, interpreting idiomatic language, reacting tone and mood.
5. *Evaluative*-comparing and contrasting concepts with own experience and various sources, distinguishing between fact and opinion, eliciting generalizations, making judgments about the author's purpose and veracity, recognizing propaganda techniques, reacting to the author's style.

"Reading is thinking with *experiences and concepts in relation to printed matter*", Sochor (1959, p.47) defines. It is argued that the reader gains no more from the printed page than he/she brings to it in terms of background. The reader may get a high degree of reading efficiency by adjusting his/her rate, degree and type of comprehension to the required purpose.

Artley (1948, p.65) explains the following *four trends of comprehension development*:

1. There is evidence of increasing accuracy in answering questions which presumably measure various types of comprehension.
2. Learner displays an increasing ability to comprehend difficult texts gradually.
3. There is continuity to improve the rate and speed of reading comprehension in respect of difficult materials.
4. There is gradual increase in the amount of reading matter which can be tackled efficiently at one time.

### **Rate of Reading**

Bridges and Hudson (1941, p.314) hold that the emphasis upon comprehension is as effective as rate training itself in producing increased speed of reading. The classroom activities and teaching materials are mainly adapted to suit to this new purpose of improving the rate of silent reading. It is considered that there is co-relation between the *rate of reading* and *comprehension*. There is no rate at which learners ought to read because it depends upon one's purpose, difficulty of the language, and cultural unfamiliarity of the material etc. Most of the learners read everything at the same slow speed and do not take efforts to read faster or slower as required. The rate at which the material is covered becomes slower as depth and detail of understanding increase. The training of learners in silent reading creates more efficient reading and better

comprehension but it occurs only in easy reading materials. The lack of clarity of the text reduces rate of reading. In such cases the rapid reading becomes an act of thinking. However, there is little relation between rate and comprehension in difficult and culturally unfamiliar texts. The rate of reading and comprehension do not vary only in difficult materials but also in the purposes of the reader.

The causes of slow reading may differ from learner to learner. Learners differ on account of their training in silent reading, level of material, purpose and manner of approach to the act of reading. The inherent cause in the reader is vocalization or the tendency to inner speech while silent reading. If the reader moves his/her lips, tongue or larynx while reading, he/she intends to read silently at the rate of his/her speech which is much slower than reading speed. Some of the learners are habitual to read the text through moving their fingers or pens over the text which causes to reduce the rate of reading. Thus there is direct proportion between rate of speech and rate of silent reading. Some of the learners have poor habits of slow reading, which are important obstacles in rate of reading. The scarcity of early training in effective word-attack skills and phonics may decrease the rate of reading. Moreover, new vocabulary reduces the tempo and rate of reading. It also makes the comprehension slow.

If the text/material is disinteresting then it causes to demotivate the reader and he/she reads slowly. There is strong role of writer's style and difficult textual structure such as long and involved sentences, complex clauses, tables, graphs, diagrams and pictures, which relate to guessing and implied meaning rather than stated meaning. Rereading, unorganized and unimportant note-taking and outlining may decrease the rate of reading. Carlson and Thorsten R. (1949, p.500) argue that it is true that when these factors of difficulty, interest, and style are favourable, the reader spontaneously responds with increased speed.

The learners from non-English medium background rely on the translation of words, phrases and clauses from mother tongue into English and vice versa for understanding. This whole process is time consuming and tiresome for the reader, all above mentioned

causes may be remedied by effective teaching method and suitable reading instruction.

The repeated practice in timed reading of short and easy texts may be initiated in the class for the development of rate of reading of learners of English at the under-graduate level in the University of Sindh. The previewing or surveying difficult material at pre-reading stage is very useful technique. It is done through reading headings, identifying the topic sentences of each paragraph and the introductory and concluding paragraphs etc. Later on it may be improved by moving eyes over the summary sentences and the key words and phrases in the given text promptly.

Scanning for specific piece of information in the text is a rapid skill for the development of rate of reading. It is considered that only one out of five learners read selective and omits irrelevant extracts of text/material. Consequently rate per second is of no use unless it is accompanied by comprehension because efficient reading involves high reading speeds with high levels of comprehension.

## Conclusion

A good learner is fluent reader. Fluent reading is characterized as rapid, purposeful, interactive, comprehending, flexible, and gradually developing. It is rapid because the reader is required to maintain the flow of information at a certain rate to form associations and inferences necessary to comprehension. It is purposeful because the reader intends to read either with a purpose of enjoyment or information, or research etc. Moreover, purpose ignites motivation among learners. It is interactive because the reader uses information both from his/her background knowledge and the printed page. It also involves other skills to function together at a time. It is, comprehending because the reader expects to understand the required text for academic or non-academic purposes. It is flexible because the reader applies a variety of strategies to read effectively. It is gradually developing because the reader does not become fluent reader within any prescribed time period. It is rather a continuous process of long-term effort for reading fluency. In fact, comprehension, and rate of reading are complex processes, which require time, resources, efforts,

congenial situation, relevant material, and trained resource person/tutor.

However, skills such as extracting specific information, obtaining gist of a text, and identifying the general idea of a text can be utilized successfully even though the learners do not understand the whole text at the under-graduate level in the University of Sindh Jamshoro. It is necessary to train learners to understand what is important even though they can not understand everything. Of course, they will feel difficulty in scanning, skimming and surveying within limited/specified time unless the teacher insists on these skills to be performed quickly. Tasks of comprehension and rate of reading should be performed in a limited/specified time. If it is carried on regularly the teacher will find the amount of limited/specified time becoming less and less. In the words of Harmer(1991, p.191), "We will look at reading to confirm expectations, reading to extract specific information, reading for communicative tasks, reading for general understanding, reading for detailed comprehension(information) and reading for detailed comprehension(function and discourse)".

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