

Developing English Language /Literary Competence: An experimental study at the first year Degree level through Reading Skill

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ABSTRACT

A language exists in full actuality in literature. It is there as idioms, phrases, words and so on with the meaning, intention, force in which their life resides are uttered and meant by both the author and taken by the audience. Language in the full sense in the full concrete reality that eludes the cognizance of any form of linguistic science does more than provide an analogue for a culture in that full sense which very much concerns all of us. Literature is a mode or manifestation of language.

It is imperative to note that the approaches to reading depend on the levels of the learner. The approach to reading varies from reading at the word level to reading language as a whole (at the discourse level-paragraph and long stretches of language (drama, novel, fiction, biographies, short stories and so on)). Hence in this background, the reading ability of a sample of students at the first year degree level is analyzed. The researchers with their experience of having taught the tertiary level students have learnt that the reading ability of these students is far below the levels expected and required of them. This is so in their use of the language in social contexts. This is so because of their lack of vocabulary. In this background, in this paper, an attempt is made to highlight the inter-relatedness of both language and literature and thus the strategies that can be used to develop in the learner both linguistic competence and literary competence. Further it also attempts to find how 'Reading' as a skill can be developed and used for realizing the objectives for which both literature and language are meant. The term literary competence is used in this paper to refer to the development of the following abilities: Understanding plain sense, Understanding context, Learning to empathize, Learning to appreciate and Learning to be creative; that constitute literary competence.

All the issues stated above are discussed in relation to the prevailing system of language education at the first year degree level in terms of the classroom methodology, content prescribed and so on.



INTRODUCTION

In India English language has been taught as an official associate language and it has become the lingua franca of the most in the multi lingual pluralistic society in India. The objective of teaching the same has been to develop the communicative competence in the learners through the acquisition of the ability to listen, speak, read and write and the related sub skills. The purpose of language teaching being so, how well the teaching of skills contributes to the user of the language becoming fluent, accurate and appropriate has been the subject of the research for many. With the role of English language becoming more and more established in the global village, it has all the more become a passport to social-act and economic progress of individuals and the country as a whole. It has spread around the world in three concentric circles.

Kachru (1982) inner circle refers to regions where English is traditionally the primary language and the outer circle refers to regions where it has the role of a second language in a multi lingual set up and the expanding circle includes countries where it is a foreign language. Hence the changing roles of English and the corresponding objectives of teaching are the same. With the shift in paradigms in the teaching of English in terms of product oriented to process oriented ness, from teacher centeredness to learner centeredness, and now to learning centeredness from teaching of English in isolated bits and pieces to the teaching of language as communication, the importance given to the development of the different skills of language also has been changing and the emphasis is now on communication. Further with Krashens's dichotomy between learning and acquisition it has become imperative to look at language acquisition processes and the process of learning. Researches have revealed that the teaching of English language need not be always in the linear sequence (L, S, R, & W). This sequence has been questioned, though history has been

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for developing the aural-oral skills to begin with. That reading promotes acquisition of language has been observed by many researchers. Reading promotes acquisition at the adult level as has been shown in the additive formula given below:

(Reading + effort + comprehension =) language acquisition

which includes the learner acquiring both competence and performance. Thus there is the need to develop reading skills in the learners of English language which includes developing the ability to read at different levels (reading the lines, reading between the lines and reading beyond the lines) through inferences, interpretation and evaluation leading to comprehension of the texts. Besides comprehending the verbal texts one must also have the ability to trans-code pictorial texts such as tables, charts, maps, graphs and so on besides authentic texts which use the register of the field. The learner must not only be able to decode but also construct meaning and thus express either orally or through writing what he/she has comprehended.

Any language can be acquired if the user/learner of the language has the ability to comprehend. For it is observed that comprehension proceeds expression. Hence the focus on the receptive skill namely 'reading' wherein the learner is required to negotiate with language, meaning, making hypothesis, guesses and seeking answers for the questions that come to his/her mind while involved in the process.

Further, reading involves the ability to amalgamate the visual experience (print) and the non-visual experience (the previous experience), there is also a need to provide the language learner with a lot of opportunities for experiencing language (consciously/ non consciously). How can a teacher of English help the learner to have these experiences?

The acquisition of these experiences is more important when the learner is getting exposed to literary texts which use language of a different kind; that is different from common prosaic language used in everyday. The language of literature includes in it social communications, stylistic variations, different vocabulary and structure, for, it is a known fact that language of literature is deviant. However, if language competence is ensured, acquiring literary competence will not be a difficult task. There have been many approaches to the teaching of reading for language acquisition at different levels. One such approach is the task based approach.

Having underlined the importance of reading it is imperative to note that the approaches to reading depend on the levels of the learner. The approach to reading varies from reading at the word level to reading language as a whole (at the discourse level- paragraph and long stretches of language (drama, novel, fiction, biographies, short stories and so on)).

Hence in this background, the reading ability of a sample of students at the first year degree level is analyzed. The researchers with their experience of having taught the tertiary level students have learnt that the reading ability of these students is far below the levels expected and required of them. This is true in their use of the language in social contexts as well. The reasons are many: lack of opportunities, lack of vocabulary and so on. Thus there is a need to develop reading.

Further very quick informal evaluation of the chosen samples proficiency in English language, informs their inability to perform in English. This is more in their inability to read and comprehend texts of different types and of varying lengths.

From an interaction with the samples it is evident that they do not have the desire to read. Yet another reason as understood from the learners is that the prescribed text book that includes authentic texts that have a high literary value and loaded heavily with passive vocabulary. To comprehend such texts there is a need for the learner to equip himself/herself with a set of meaningful and effective strategies which not only promotes reading but also their reading ability; i.e. the ability to read and comprehend both literary and non literary texts. When the learner is given a set of strategies which will facilitate his/her Comprehension of non literary texts it is presumed that he/she will incidentally acquire high levels of language proficiency. Also if he/she is exposed to literary texts and suitable strategies for comprehending them he/she will be acquiring what is called literary competence besides language competence; i.e. the ability to understand at the surface level, to learn to empathize, and to create language to express. In other words he/she will be in a position to understand and become sensitive to the language of the discourse and the language of different types of texts in different genres.

The Readers' role in Reading the text

Readers comprehend a text when they construct a mental representation for incoming pieces of verbal information. Objective agreements about textual content and meaning are therefore necessarily limited to exploit statements and the reasonable inference made about any text. From the standard point of interactive research, a text consists of explicit assertions and logical implications about these assertions as assessed by readers. "Schema research demonstrates how the mind, acquires the knowledge from existing information". To comprehend a text, a reader's personal schemata must interact with that of a text. To schematize readers must intend to do so and be able to relate new meanings to what they already know. The more links between new and previously acquired knowledge, the greater the "depth of processing", the stronger an assumed memory trace of the schematic structure of a text by linking it to our own pre-existing cognitive structures or schemata.

An objective reading of the text assumes that the reader is a passive comprehender of the text that is external to him and ignores his concerns and expectations. Stanley Fish advocates, in order to describe the shape of the language, it will be necessary to make use of all the information that formal characterization of language can provide, although that information will be viewed from different perspective. Rather than regarding it as directly translatable into what a word or a pattern means, it will be used more exactly to specify what a word, as he comes upon that word or pattern, is doing, what assumptions he is making, what conclusions he is reading, what expectations he is forming, what attitudes he is entertaining, and in short, what acts he is moved to perform... the interpretative effort demanded of the reader who must negotiate it. This implies the role of the reader in our literature - language reading classroom.

THE LEARNING MATERIALS

The term materials refer to the texts prescribed for General English Course at the first year degree level in the colleges affiliated to Bangalore University. The language learning depends on materials that are being used in the classroom. Materials should help learners to develop confidence. "Relaxed and self confident learners learn faster"... Learners' must be ready to acquire the points being taught. "Certain structures are acquired only when learners are mentally ready for them". In this context it is worth noting the impact the learning materials can achieve on the learner. They can

achieve impact through novelty which includes unusual topics, illustrations and activities; variety should break the monotony with unexpected activity in the learning situation. And interesting and appealing topics of interest to the learners' offer possibility of learning something new and attractive presentation and so on.

The materials prescribed should allow learners to process at their own space of learning allow for different styles of learning and should provide opportunities for independent study, self evaluation and progress in learning. Also materials should help learners to develop confidence. Relaxed and self confident learner learns faster. Rutherford and Sherwood Smith assert that the role of the classroom teaching materials is to aid the learner make efficient use of the resources in order to facilitate self discovery. The objective of the materials prescribed for the first year undergraduates to the colleges affiliated to the Bangalore University is to develop communicative competence and literary competence. Literary competence refers to the knowledge the learner has to interpret the literary text in many ways and also it means that the language can be used in a deliberately responsible way to create metaphorical meanings. The text book is considered as basics for the development of language skills because it is the only material available uniformly for the teacher and the student. The text book present in concrete form should be taught in given time. It is taught to the learners in the given time. It provides the check list to measure the progress made by the learners; it consolidates what the learner has learnt and it also serves as record of the achievement of the pupil.

STUDY SAMPLE

The sample in this study included students of B.Sc, B.Com and B.A who learn English Language in their graduate level. The participants of this study were selected from college affiliated to Bangalore University in Karnataka State that offers General English for students in the first year undergraduate level. The students chosen are across different localities and backgrounds. Girls and Boys were selected to represent both genders in order to study how each gender responds to literature and develop literary competencies. The samples for this experimental research have had a minimum of eight to ten years of formal learning of English as their second language. The sample includes students from differing socio economic and linguistic backgrounds with different levels of motivation and levels of proficiency in English. A vast majority of the sample has not imbibed reading

as habits in English. These learners do not read at home or read newspapers or journals at home or college library. They do not read for pleasure or for reference required for their course because they do not understand English. But their purpose of learning English is to get a job and not to get mastery over the language skills or to get more knowledge in their course by reading books. In order to find out the needs of these learners a questionnaire was prepared and administered on nearly 108 students.

Sample Details

Stream	Boys	Girls
Science	25	23
Commerce	19	18
Arts	9	14

The research was conducted in the following stages.

Stage 1

Identify the samples attitude to reading and the needs as felt by them. To assess and find out the needs, a reading attitude survey was conducted using a questionnaire. Samples were instructed to read the question and mark the single best answer for each of the questions on a separate answer sheet. The data collected was later analyzed for interpretation. The following table sums up the findings.

Criteria	No of students needs met	No of students needs not met
To Pass	36	72
To Converse	32	76
To Understand the course content	30	78
To Exam	29	79
To Interview	17	91

At this stage the researcher identified the major causes for failures in General English course as the unproductive teaching and unguided learning which have left a wide gap between the unexpected learning outcomes and the actual attainment of the students. The researchers have also found out that the prevailing examination system does not make provision for students to attain competence. The courses books designed do not try to meet up the demands of the learners.

Stage 2

A pre test was conducted to establish the samples existing levels of reading comprehension. The pretest included items to test the samples language proficiency (R/W) and literary competence.

The test included items on:

1) **Language Proficiency Test:** A test was administered to measure participants’ vocabulary knowledge. Vocabulary includes two codes: Vocabulary Difficulty and Vocabulary Knowledge. Vocabulary Difficulty is an expression of not knowing the meaning of a word or not being able to figure out the meaning of a word, Vocabulary Knowledge is a paraphrase of a word meaning or use of synonym.

2) **Reading comprehension test:** The test was administered to measure participants’ overall reading comprehension. The ability to read the text and answer the questions based on it was in fact, one of the reading comprehension strategies being taught was tested. Questions were incorporated as much as possible to make the lessons more interactive. Students were given different activities, outlined on the worksheet, to facilitate the comprehension process. Students were given as much time as possible to complete assignments during the programming period.

3) **Reading Strategies test:** It was administered to measure participants’ knowledge of reading strategies. Skim read, scan read, predicting, summarizing, organizing, analyzing and taking note was tested to execute the present study and which is a major test as far as the research is concerned. The pre test was assessed and the data collected were recorded for comparisons with the post test.

Stage 3

A unique curriculum was designed and finally transacted using the principles of task based learning and teaching. The curriculum included materials and texts of different types with different activities and tasks.

Stage 4

A post test was conducted to verify the effectiveness of the changed curriculum procedures of transaction and types of tasks and activities.

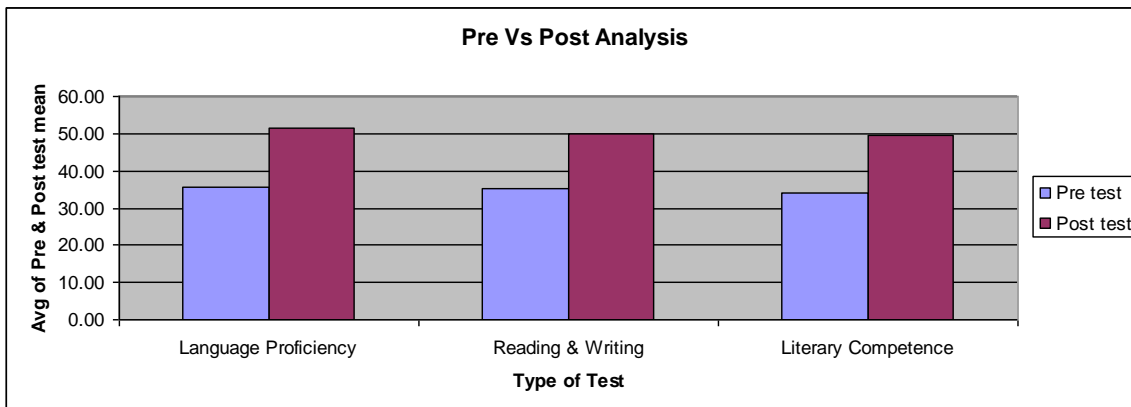
The means of pretest scores and post test scores were calculated and analyzed for comparison.

Integrated comparative analysis

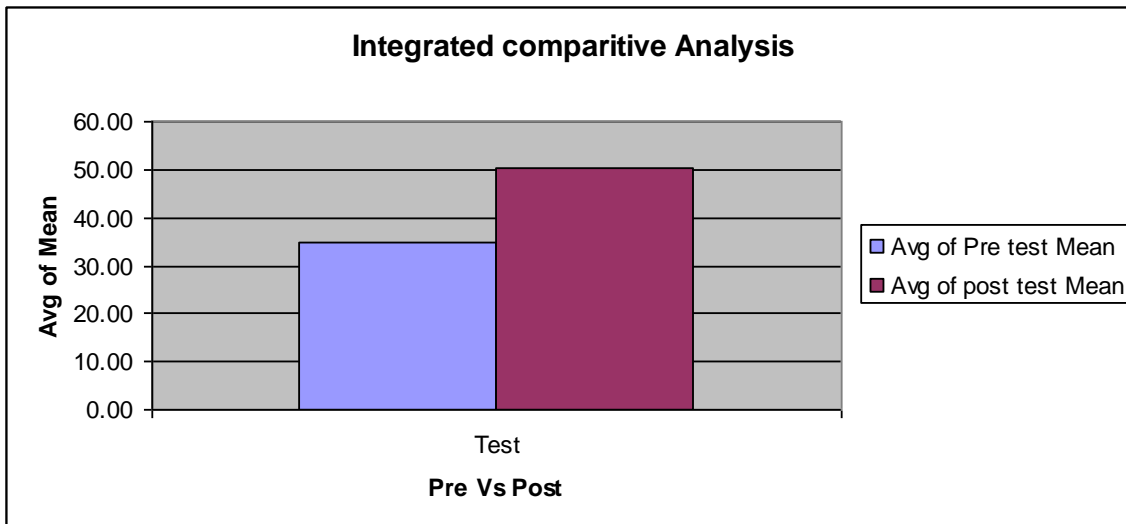
Type of Test	Stream	Gender	No. of students	Pre Test		Post Test		DM	% of increase in Mean
				Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Language proficiency	Science	Boys	25	35	12.79	52.32	15.21	17.32	49.49
		Girls	23	35.74	14.61	54.82	15.9	19.08	53.39
	Commerce	Boys	19	36.58	13.15	52.47	15.43	15.89	43.44
		Girls	18	35.61	15.12	50.77	16.62	15.16	42.57
	Arts	Boys	9	35	11.46	49	13.86	14	40.00
		Girls	14	35.93	13.44	50.14	15.34	14.21	39.55
Reading and writing	Science	Boys	25	35.08	12.96	51	13.89	15.92	45.38
		Girls	23	36.6	15.63	52.3	15.98	15.7	42.90
	Commerce	Boys	19	36.36	15	51.47	16.68	15.11	41.56
		Girls	18	32.72	13.66	45.83	17.99	13.11	40.07
	Arts	Boys	9	35.66	14.68	50.22	15.6	14.56	40.83
		Girls	14	35.14	16.59	47.78	15.78	12.64	35.97
Literary competence	Science	Boys	25	35.44	12.93	49.56	17.62	14.12	39.84
		Girls	23	34.34	12.74	49.34	16.6	15	43.68
	Commerce	Boys	19	33.31	11.57	50.57	14.11	17.26	51.82
		Girls	18	33.5	12.86	50.16	15.34	16.66	49.73
	Arts	Boys	9	35.33	12.6	50.55	13.33	15.22	43.08
		Girls	14	32.64	14.86	46.07	17.54	13.43	41.15

The results revealed that there was a significant difference between the samples pre and post test scores. The following is the graphical presentation of the scores.

Type of Test	Pre test Mean	Post test Mean
Language proficiency	35.64	51.59
Reading and writing	35.26	49.77
Literary competence	34.09	49.38



This study revealed that the post test score is higher than the pre test score and can be suitable approach to the first year degree students.



The study analyzed the students' problems in developing language competence, the present classroom pedagogy, strength and limitations of the of the existing syllabus and materials used at the first year undergraduate level to improve language/ literary competence through reading skill at the tertiary level students. For data on these areas, empirical investigations were conducted by the researchers in a college which has Science/Commerce/Arts streams of students from heterogeneous background. The methods for investigation included questionnaire survey, reading tests and evaluation of materials. The study shows that problems exist with students' reading skills. The main problem has been their vocabulary. The new words which they had not seen or heard earlier in every sentence proved as main hurdle for them to understand the texts. Many students depended on dictionary meaning more than the contextual meaning of words. As a result, they failed to understand the meaning words assume in the context of a text. Moreover, most of the students were unable to understand and analyze long sentences in a text. They also had problems with understanding the syntax and surveying text organization. The syllabus and textbook do not cater to the sub-skills of reading. The sub-skills which need more focus are scanning, skimming, predicting, summarizing and reading for evaluation. It also includes finding out the topic idea of a text and giving title to a reading passage. Higher order skills such as distinguishing facts and opinions, recognizing bias, finding out author's attitude, tone and mood, critical evaluation etc. are not covered in the syllabus, materials and texts. Moreover, the practice opportunities of the sub-skills are not adequate. Since the students are passive learners in the class Students' direct involvement in the classroom activities is totally neglected. The learning environment in most of the Indian classrooms does not engage their students in reading the text. Therefore, students' reading skills do not develop at all.

The findings imply that pedagogical approaches to teaching reading need special attention. Since this area of teaching English is very important for the present context of the country, changes are required to ensure students' engagement in reading activities. Instead of teachers' explaining texts, students should be made to read and find out the meaning of the text. During the research the researchers guided the students and helped them to reach the meaning a text implies. It must be kept in mind that reading skills will develop only if the students are made to read as much as possible. In selecting texts for students, the researcher paid careful attention since reading is mainly a text-based activity. Similarly the text book committee should select texts considering students' present linguistic and cognitive level. Interesting stories, anecdotes, jokes, sports and similar topics will prove interesting and motivating for the learners. The amount of reading activities in the textbook should be increased. Opportunities to practice reading should also be increased. There should be more varieties in the activities suggested in the textbook. Learning by doing should be the focus of teaching reading. The methodology should be based on controlled and free reading practices. As students' reading level is poor, guided reading will prove more effective as it has been established in this study. The methodology suggested here is the one which promotes interactive reading and equipping the students with different schemes/schemata for reading. Activities focused on the different sub-skills, but most of the activities were student centered and demanded more participation and involvement in reading. The activities in the class were task-based. Moreover, extensive practice was provided on developing higher order skills of reading. The present scenario in the classroom, is because of the very little amount of time spent in developing the ability to read and comprehend and the suggesting them is to increase the amount of time. Thus the study establishes the need for such teaching materials and methods that contribute or promote language competence.

In conclusion, the following suggestions are made

- Select materials that create interest and motivate the learners to read
- Make the classroom pedagogy student friendly and participating
- Design tasks which will demand the learners use of different strategies and devices to comprehend through risk taking attempts
- Facilitate pre reading discussions for promoting interest in reading
- Provide opportunities for learners to create their own schemata through practice
- Adopt interactive approaches to reading

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