

Chapter - ISIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDYContents.

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

"Our world is a reading world". This significant observation by Bond and Tinker (1957) has to be properly understood in the context of education in the modern world. The ability to read proficiently constitutes one of the most important skills a person can acquire. Proficient reading implies clear comprehension of the communication presented in print or writing. Since today's world is a reading world, effective reading becomes necessary if one has to adjust properly to one's living in the complex modern world.

Reading touches various aspects of a person's life: in daily life activities, in schools, in recreation, in citizenship and in personal and social life. One can function more efficiently as a citizen in a democratic society, maintain better social and personal adjustments and appreciate better his cultural heritage if one can read well. The importance of good reading proficiently can be fully understood in the context of international and national perspectives.

1.2 INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Concepts concerning the nature of reading have undergone tremendous changes during the past

half century or so. Reading which was considered previously as a simple process is now recognised as complex process. The importance of good reading ability becomes obvious when we examine the handicaps of those who fail to learn to read. In addition to being handicapped in practically all walks of life they all too often tend to become frustrated individuals who are prevented from satisfying many of their important emotional or intellectual needs.

Tarnopol (1976) defined the handicapped as being neither retarded nor culturally deprived and as being either a neurological handicap or emotional disorder, or both, such that their academic work was significantly below their intellectual capacity. In almost all industrialised nations special education facilities exist for intelligent children who experience great difficulty in learning in a normal school situation.

Reading problems in non-retarded children are now acknowledged worldwide. It is significant that the ability to read is now being seen as both a necessity and a right, especially in the industrialised nations. The extent of reading problems cannot be correctly estimated in the absence of internationally accepted reading tests. But the existence of the

of the problem has been recognised.

Countries like Austria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and the USA already have legislations to provide special education for non-retarded children with reading problems. It has been found that remedial reading was required more in the case of boys than girls and the ratio was stated to be three boys to one girl.

In most Western countries today reading programme has become an inseparable part of the curriculum. The great majority of educators today believe that reading is a thinking process. Comprehension therefore is recognised as one of the most important aspects of reading, including word recognition, knowledge of word meanings, sentence and paragraph comprehension. The coordination and integration of word meanings into an organised idea basically constitute good comprehension. Lack of comprehension becomes one of the main reading disabilities.

With a view to determining the reading levels of children in fifteen countries, the International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement (IEA) developed a reading comprehension test, a reading speed test and a test of word knowledge in twelve languages. In this study children in fifteen

countries were tested at ages 10 and 14 years and in their last year of secondary school. These countries were : Belgium (Flemish), Belgium (French), Chile, England, Finland, Hungary, India, Iran, Israel, Italy, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden and the United States.

The reliability of the comprehension tests were found to be high except in India and Iran where they appeared to be too difficult. The reading levels in the three developing countries (India, Iran and Chile) fell far below those in the economically developed countries. Only ten to fifteen percent of the students in the developing countries scored as well as an average student in the developed countries in a test of reading comprehension (11973).

All the developed countries have strong systems of universal education. It is no wonder that they are much ahead of a developing country like India in reading levels.

1.3 NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Compared to the reading position of developed countries, India is far from achieving a high level of performance in reading. In the United States today there are reading centres and reading clinics in some

of the universities for improving reading of students of all levels and grades. According to the National Centre for Educational Statistics, "one out of every four, eleven year old children in the United States reads at or below the level of an average nine year old child. About seven million public school pupils in the United States (about sixteen percent of school enrolment) requires special instruction in reading (1975).

This situation in one of the most advanced countries in the world should not make us complacent about the serious problems of reading and comprehension in India. Because of the high percentage of illiteracy in our country, this problem has not so far been considered with the seriousness that it deserves. As a result, many of our students have remained poor readers. A brief survey of educational problems in India becomes necessary in order to understand the problems of reading comprehension with special reference to the English language.

1.4 THE FIELD OF EDUCATION AND THE PROBLEMS IN INDIA

The field of education is as vast as human life. Educationists have given various definitions of education which prove its important role in the development of human personality. The field of

education in India has always presented many complex problems and demanded solutions in the past. They were largely the problems which lacked a native idiom and environment. But the attempt at reconstruction of education in the post-independence period in India forms an important landmark in the history of Indian education. Several commissions were appointed to survey, to study, to review and to recommend improvements in different sectors and stages of education. Since education holds the key to national prosperity, it was stressed that there should be transformation of the whole educational system to suit the needs and requirements of the country.

During the first three five year plan periods, education at all levels had expanded tremendously. Though quantitative expansion of education took place yet qualitative improvement suffered. The problems studied by the various commissions were specific in nature, namely: determining the aims of primary, secondary and higher education, improvement in the quality of education and research, medium of instruction, improvement in the examination systems, evolving a national pattern of education, diversification of courses, curriculum, teachers' problems, organisation of educational and vocational guidance,

religious and moral education and last but not the least, the 10 + 2 + 3 pattern of education.

But the main difficulty is that compared to the immensity of the problems the resources are extremely limited and within these resources we have not only to accommodate the competitive claims of different sectors of development but also to reconcile in the field of education the pressing claims of expansion with the urgent need for qualitative improvement. The inadequacy in the standard and quality of teaching, the rapid increase in the number of schools and their enrolment, teachers' salary grades, wastage and stagnation in primary and secondary stages etc. are some of the innumerable problems of Indian educational reconstruction.

The recommendations of the various commissions on the position of English in India calls for some discussion. It is accepted that English can no longer be taught as a literary language but it has to be taught as a language of comprehension. But it should also be noted that English is taught in our schools as a second compulsory language today and that is the measure of recognition of the importance of English language. Moreover, English is an international language and is found necessary for progress and advancement.

However, adequate attention has not so far been paid to reading as a field and its problems in the Indian context with special reference to the English language. Lack of comprehension in reading in English is a serious reading disability among our students today. Reading ability among students at the primary and secondary levels can no longer be taken for granted. If we are to keep in tune with the progress of education in general and of reading as a field in particular made in the world outside, we must develop an appropriate programme of reading instruction in our schools, colleges and universities.

1.5 READING AS A FIELD:

Reading is one of the most important aspects of education today. Knowledge of the three 'R's in which reading occupies the first place is considered as the beginning of education. Reading habits not only help an individual in accumulating stores of knowledge and wisdom from the cultural heritage but are also a very ennobling and stimulating pursuit. Reading thus becomes a powerful lever in the moral, intellectual and social advancement.

The importance of reading has now been recognised throughout the world. The formation of an

International Association for Reading in 1958 with extensive membership throughout the world and the National Committees in some twentyone countries is evidence enough that reading today has become a field of study, investigation and research. Despite the impact of the radio, television and other mass media, the necessity and importance of reading have not lessened.

Reading as a skill has developed gradually over a period of many years. As an independent field of study it has rapidly developed in the developed countries during the last twenty years. Primary and Secondary schools, Colleges and Universities have become painfully aware that their students cannot do the reading expected of them. The urgency to provide for the teaching of reading is keenly felt and educational institutions in the Western countries are taking a lead in developing reading instruction programmes at all levels.

A study of special education by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO 1956) shows that in many emerging nations in Africa more basic problems are so pressing that special education is often non-existent. Education is not compulsory in many countries there. Under such circumstances the question of reading as

a field of study or problems and disabilities associated with reading does not arise.

In contrast, reading as a field is still in an emergent stage in India. It may be observed that reading as a science has not made as much progress as was expected. This is more particularly so in the case of reading comprehension in the English language. Students at the school and university stage are found to suffer from a serious disadvantage in reading comprehension. It is true that literacy in India is as low as thirty percent. At the same time more and more schools come into existence to cater to the needs of the people. It is significant that during the last decade or so more books are printed and sold and more people are taking to reading today.

But considering that seventy percent of our people are still illiterate we are still nowhere close to the ideal of a reading society. Even in a country like the United States of America where almost every one is literate it has been felt that more people ought to read. A non-reader in India is practically cut off from cultural activities and finds it difficult to mingle with educated people. It is in this context that reading becomes an important factor in one's make up in the modern world.

Reading ability in English is important for scholarship in schools and universities. Reading after all is the meaningful interpretation of verbal symbols. While in the West they have switched over to the stage of 'reading to learn', we are still in the stage of 'learning to read'. Reading is essentially a process involving meaning. That meaningful response is the very heart of reading process cannot be over-emphasised.

1.6 IMPORTANCE OF READING COMPREHENSION IN ENGLISH:

If Macaulay's famous minutes (1835) led to the introduction of English as a medium of instruction, Wood's Despatch of 1854 is described as the Magna Carta of English education in India. Since then English language won many green pastures in its unhindered career in India, But with the attainment of independence the study of English underwent a sea change. Hindi replaced English as the lingua franca of India. Though English no longer enjoys the same status as in the past, it has an important place as a foreign or second language or as the language of practical utility. The Official Language Commission has rightly remarked: "English has to be taught hereafter principally as a 'Language of Comprehension' rather than as a literary language so

as to develop in the students learning it a faculty for comprehending writings in English language".

This however does not mean that English has to be studied as a second foreign language like French or German. In fact, Nehru (1959) rightly placed the position of English in India when he said: "English is our major window on the modern world". Today English is a language that continues to dominate the international scene. In addition to being a library language it acts as a link language in India.

English is the mother-tongue of 250 million people in the world (United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada and Australia). Nearly a hundred million people in countries like India, Pakistan, Africa, France and Soviet Union, use English as a second or foreign language. Practically one out of every ten persons in the world knows English. Seventy-five percent of the world's mail, fifty percent of the world's newspapers, over sixty percent of the world's radio stations and more than fifty percent of the world's scientific and technical periodicals use English as a medium of expression.

Today English is the language through which we can establish social, economic, cultural and political relations with other countries. It has

opened the gates of western science and technology for use. It is also the language of trade and industry. It has exercised a healthy influence on Indian languages and literature. English is important for statesmen and politicians, scientists and doctors, engineers and educationists, businessmen and research workers. The importance of English in the vocational and cultural fields, educational and recreational areas, in so far as India is concerned, cannot be underestimated. The recent policy statement of the Government of India on the compulsory teaching of English as a second language from the Sixth grade onwards clearly shows the position that English still occupies in our educational system (1975-76).

The importance of, and urgent need for, the development of reading instruction programme in English in our schools and universities should therefore be understood in the context of the above discussion. Reading, as Gray (1940; 1948) says, involves the recognition of important elements of meanings in their essential relation, including accuracy and thoroughness of comprehension. He points out that reading is also a form of experience that modifies personality.

In the earlier stages of teaching reading in English the following five methods have been used:

1) Alphabet method (2) Phonetic or Phonic method (3) Word method or 'look and say' method (4) Sentence method and (5) Story method. It should be stressed that that method is the best which lays the foundation of the attitudes and skills required for good reading: a thoughtful reading attitude, a clear grasp of meaning, accuracy and independence in word recognition etc. However, as far as the Indian context is concerned, it is evident that more study and research are needed to evolve a suitable method of reading in English. The aim of reading activity is to enrich the knowledge of pupils by adding to their experiences and information.

Two types of reading are universally known, namely, the loud and silent reading. Reading aloud which is considered as a form of speech helps to give practice in good pronunciation, articulation, correct intonation, right emphasis, tone, speed, so that voice may correctly interpret the sense. Oral reading helps to develop self-reliance among pupils. Silent reading helps to develop the power of apprehension and comprehension and the capacity to enjoy the works.

In the context of today reading is a skill

which one needs. The one who can and does read has at his command the tools necessary to be completely informed and entertained for the rest of his life. Technically three aspects of reading have been recognised, viz, developmental, functional and recreational. But children differ in their potentialities. Not every child is a good and intelligent reader. There are some who suffer from reading disabilities.

Reading disability may be due to a combination of many causes. Harris(1961) has identified eight factors which hinder reading. They are :

- (1) lack of reading readiness
- (2) mental retardation
- (3) physical handicaps
- (4) directional confusion
- (5) special brain effects
- (6) emotional handicaps
- (7) accidental interference with learning
- (8) poor teaching.

Adapted, corrective and remedial reading programmes are considered to be some of the effective means to overcome handicaps in reading.

Harris has noted ten skills which one must acquire in reading comprehension. They are:

- (1) acquisition of a rich, extensive and accurate vocabulary
- (2) ability to grasp the meaning of units of increasing size, phrase, sentence, whole selection
- (3) ability to find answers to specific questions
- (4) ability to select and understand main

ideas (5) ability to understand a sequence of events
(6) ability to note and recall details (7) ability
to grasp the organisation of the author's plan
(8) ability to follow directions accurately (9) ability
to evaluate what one reads (1) ability to remember
what one has read.

1.7 OBJECTIVES OF READING PROGRAMME

What then are the objectives of reading?
Having the right goals and knowing what they are is
the first imperative in developing a sound reading
programme. The Year Book Committee of the National
Society for the Study of Education has pointed out
that the reading programme should be integrated with
the school programme. A reading programme, according
to the Committee USA, in an elementary school:

- 1 Is consciously directed towards specific
valid ends which have been agreed upon by the
entire school staff;
- 2 Coordinates reading activities with other
aids to child development;
- 3 Recognises that the child's development in
reading is closely associated with his
development in other language arts;

- 4 .At any given level, is part of a well-worked out larger reading programme extending through all the elementary and secondary school grades;
- 5 Provides varied instruction and flexible requirements as a means of making adequate adjustments to the widely different reading needs of the pupils;
- 6 Affords, at each level of advancement, adequate guidance of reading in all the various aspects of a broad programme of instruction --- basic instruction in reading, reading in the content fields, literature and recreational or free reading;
- 7 Makes special provisions for supplying the reading needs of cases of extreme reading disability; in other words, a small proportion of pupils whose needs cannot be satisfied through a strong developmental programme;
- 8 Provides for frequent evaluation of the outcomes of a programme or for such revisions as will strengthen the weaknesses discovered.

It is only when a reading programme is fitted harmoniously into the total educational programme that its purpose is clearly understood. The

established purpose is to get information and to enjoy communication with the author and with others. It also makes reading a growing experience, develops tastes and expands interests. Readiness for reading has also to be built up in a child through proper motivation. A reader who develops skills enjoys reading. As his skills increase, his tastes develop. For such a reader reading makes a full life. This is the ultimate goal of teaching reading.

1.8 APPROACH TO READING INSTRUCTION

There are a variety of approaches to reading instruction. A specific approach has to be adopted depending on a particular situation and the nature of children. Bond and Wagner (1950) have described six modern approaches. They are: (1) teaching word recognition (2) oral instruction (3) silent reading (4) instruction based on reading experience charts (5) to make reading a thought-getting process, centred around purposeful activities (6) reading instruction based on a well-organised coordination of all other methods. One becomes a good reader when he achieves a satisfactory degree of maturity in the development of his reading abilities, skills, interests and tastes.

1.9 READING IN SCHOOLS

It has already been stated how in a reading comprehension study done in fifteen countries it was found that ~~that~~ reading levels in the three developing countries (India, Iran and Chile) fell far below those in the economically developed countries. In the economically poorer countries major problems were found in the availability of educational facilities, teacher training, class size, special education and remedial programmes. Lester and Muriel Tarnopol (1976) comment on this observation that this is an example of the debilitating influence that the total educational environment may have and seems to indicate that "schooling does make a difference".

A school thus becomes an agent of education, an agent to conserve and transmit culture. As a social institution a school fulfils the special needs of society by socialising the individual. Socialisation refers to the process by which persons acquire the knowledge, skills and dispositions that will make them able members of their society.

In an ideal situation the teacher becomes an agent of socialisation in a methodical manner. It may be observed that the Indian schools and teachers

have failed to achieve the ideals set above in view of the defective organisational patterns such as rigidity in teaching methods, curriculum, promotion of bookish knowledge and absence of constructive activities.

In a democratic society schools have to take upon themselves the responsibility of training youth for efficient citizenship and to foster in them those skills and attitudes by which they can contribute towards the development of society. Indeed, a good school programme stems from community needs as an integral part of the life of the people. Schools should develop as nerve-centres of effective communication not only between pupils and pupils but also between the student world and society. A programme of reading instruction should therefore become a vital part of a school educational programme.

The essence of modern teaching on the intellectual side is to give the child a mastery over the tools of learning and a lively curiosity and hunger to gain such knowledge and experience which sustain him through life.

The importance of reading is clearly recognised in schools in the Western countries. More time and effort is spent on reading matter than on

any other type of school supplies. It is regrettable that in India high-schools and colleges take for granted the reading ability of their students. It may be emphasised that this situation prevails particularly in the field of reading comprehension in English. Considering the recent policy statement of the Government of India regarding the introduction of English as a compulsory second language from the Sixth Standard, there is a strong case now than before for the formation of a National Committee for Reading in English. It is high time that we evolved definite objectives of reading instruction. The absence of such a committee at the national and regional levels has hindered the growth and development of reading as a field in India.

1.10 TOWARDS BETTER READING

The mental and physical processes involved in reading and comprehension in English are subtle, complex and difficult. Nevertheless, in the West notable progress has been made through research and experimentation on the nature of the problem and the factors that influence the development of reading as a field. The need for proficient reading was keenly felt in view of the growing complexities of modern life in the industrialised countries of the West.

Numerous investigations, surveys and researches during the last fifty years in the developed countries in all aspects of reading have helped to raise the status of reading as a science and established reading as an independent field of study. Major contributions to the area of reading comprehension are by Harris(1961), Werner and Kaplan (1952), Strom (1956), Crossen (1947) and Lefford(1946).

In contrast, in India though some researches were undertaken in the area of reading interests of pupils in general, not much work has been done in reading comprehension in English. The need for a comprehensive research in this area has been dealt with in previous pages. In interviews with the investigator several parents, educationists and English subject teachers have spoken of the poor standards in English among students and the need for better knowledge and comprehension in the language.

It is generally agreed that knowledge of English is essential in order to keep oneself abreast in the modern world. It may be noted that this desire on the part of parents, students and others for better knowledge of English, in so far as reading and comprehension are concerned, is not restricted to the urban elite but it has also been established by -

anthropologists that a vocabulary of as many as 200-250 English words are in common use among the illiterate people in rural area. The establishment of secondary schools and colleges in rural areas during the past decade or two has helped to enhance the desire for better knowledge of English among students in rural areas. This desire should be seen as both pertinent and relevant in the light of clear government policy on the teaching of English.

But it is equally clear that English cannot be taught as a literary language today. It can only be taught as a language of comprehension. Correspondingly, there should be a shift in the teaching of English. Proper emphasis has to be laid on reading instruction and comprehension programmes from the primary stage onwards. Even radical changes in curriculum would be necessary. Reading today contributes an indispensable avenue of communication. Greater recognition should now be given to the importance of proficient reading through successive stages of school and college levels. Five highly interrelated types of comprehension have been recognised as constituting major goals of reading instruction. They are: (1) reading for specific information (2) reading to organised (3) reading to evaluate (4) reading to

interpret (5) reading in order to appreciate.

Research findings as well as the common experience of teacher educators point to the fact that most of our students at all levels and grades are poor readers. Patel (1971) has rightly observed: "Today in our schools the teaching of reading is the most neglected aspect". Thorndike (1973) has justifiably concluded that the status of reading comprehension in India is fourteenth among fifteen countries. Looking to the important position that reading enjoys in today's world, there is vital need to train teachers in reading, the nature and mechanism of the reading process and remedial reading programmes. Accordingly new reading material has to be devised, if a steady growth in reading proficiency is to be achieved.

Some micro studies have been undertaken in the field of reading comprehension in English in India. They are dealt with in details in the next chapter. There are a number of factors which affect the reading capability of a student. Research in some of the factors, which singly or cumulatively cause reading disability, becomes inevitable if tangible improvement in reading and comprehension in English is to be achieved. Without the backing of

research findings no scientific approach for the growth and development of reading comprehension can be possible.

The present researcher has hypothesized some factors which may seriously affect the reading comprehension of pupils. They are: (1) attitude to reading (2) dependency and independency (3) socio-economic status (4) academi^c motivation and (5) anxiety. Extensive research in these specific areas was carried out. The objective was to find out the relationship of these factors with reading comprehension. The investigator feels that such diagnostic research will help in initiating remedial action and thus contribute to raise the standard of reading instruction programmes in our schools. The formation of a National Committee for Reading in our country, as suggested earlier will open a new frontier of knowledge for most of our benighted students in this area.

The investigator has also carried out several case studies of pupils who have secured high and low scored in the reading comprehension test, in order to provide an integrated approach to the subject under study and to identify deviations, if any.

Case studies as supplementing the main research appear to have been used as such here for the first time in this field of research in India.
