

# Teaching and Researching Reading in Indian Context

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## Abstract

The importance placed on reading skill emerges from the necessity of performing well that starts from primary stage of learning to the workplace scenario. One of the first things children are pressurized to do at early schooling is 'Learn to Read' and of course that remarks their progressive transformation to become an expert in reading. Using descriptive method of research, the study traces the importance and efforts taken by second language teachers and students towards the development of reading skills from primary class to university education in Indian context. It also addresses the existing lag in English language education, necessity of infusing the requirement of specially designed curriculum, and to fulfil the need of learners especially who felt difficulty in reading. The study suggested skill-based instruction in detail at each level as a remedy for rectifying deficits in reading.

**Keywords:** English as a second language learning, Subskills instruction, Reading in Indian context, NCERT.

## Introduction:

Proficiency in English language skills have become an important desideratum for current generation to meet the global needs. Among four language skills (LSRW) reading occurs as an undeniable part of learning which helps to negotiate the printed form of knowledge. It is also an acute advantage in achieving the target and has become a part of survival hack in professional and academic setting. Without being a skilled reader, it is harder for an individual to achieve his or her goals. Hence there is a demand for an aspired learner to learn to read, not only in mother tongue but also in a second language. Hereinafter, it has been a societal responsibility to provide room for every person to become a skilled reader. Wherefore, there is an emerging need for the formulation of standardised resources especially to the students in developing countries like India. In Indian context L2 refers to English language which is been practised as an official as well as a medium of instruction ever since, the period Britishers barge in and it still continues. In India students from primary to higher secondary classes are taught to read. For whatever reason they are not good at reading even at their higher studies. The present study is an effort to answer the following research questions;

1. How far higher education in India lends scope to the language enhancement of students in engineering streams?
2. What are reading-based courses framed to sort out the inconsistency in reading performance midst the Indian ESL students?

In an attempt to find out the reason behind this, the study aimed to analyse the curriculum framed by NCERT for English language education and also the measures the syllabi of the university level English courses with special reference to reading skills.

### **The Models of Reading:**

Language acquisition differs widely among all existing languages on par with orthographic representations of sounds (Recognising particular pattern of letters as a meaningful word) which means phonological processing or awareness over manipulating sound of the spoken word and language properties (arbitrariness, displacement, discreteness, productivity, cultural transmission and so on). For instance, in Italian and Spanish languages decoding plays prominent role at the early stage of language learning whereas in English and Portuguese decoding comes a long way even after early stage for better understanding. Hoover and Gough proposed a model SVR (simple view of reading) according to which skilled reading as a matter of fact involves decoding skill and linguistic skill as its asset. They strongly recommended the idea of interconnecting the subskills for ensuring advanced level reading.

$$\text{Decoding} + \text{Language Comprehension} = \text{Reading Comprehension}$$

They put forth an argument that reading comprehension scores can be predicted via their decoding skill and language comprehension skills [1]. The influence of both the skills in strengthening reading output is an undeniable fact. When it comes to decoding, word recognition, letter, sound and processes are on board and for comprehension part **are** all higher order skills like thinking, reasoning, imagining and interpreting involved. Therefore, the early stage reading process is relying on the decoding skills which is teachable whereas the comprehension skills are up to the mark of learner's knowledge over the subject. The deficit at the initial attempt of teaching reading can be rectified with the specified training on lacking areas. On the contrary, it is visible that learners have to take lead at the accomplishment of higher order skills as it is solely about the content knowledge, they wish to acquire. And also, that goes beyond the concern of language teachers in most of the cases. In a little while, the view on simple view of reading was testified with an alternate model called componential model. Joshi and Aaron added speed of processing as an additional factor and witnessed improvement in terms of predicting the overall reading comprehension performances at the grade three level and its effectiveness, at the further stages of learning upper grades. On other hand componential model of reading also suggests three domains respectively psychological, cognitive and ecological domain [2].

The proclaimed models end up with a view that reading is a holistic process including reading factors and subskills across language, learners, environmental factors whichever, effects on overall comprehension. Over the observations on these models and existing researches on reading, it had been found that the subskills of the languages are transferable. Hence it is deriving the point however the components and properties of language differ; the subskill and strategies can be transferable [3] from one language to another language. Moreover, reading performance of learners after the acquisition of basic skills which falls in decoding has to be considered as an indicator for their preparedness over the next level learning [4]. It shows their mental ability to go for higher order thinking skills. Henceforth, Thorndike stated that 'reading as a reasoning process' which goes beyond the specified skills. Following him, Davis substantiated the point by stating that comprehension is not about depending on skills rather it involves the mental ability of the learners to accomplish the skill oriented tasks as well and teaching an individual skills or focusing on individual task may not be benefitted for the improvement of the other skills [5].

### **Reading in Indian Context:**

The approach towards reading differs in accordance with the purpose. When it comes to academic setting, students read to evaluate, comment, interpret and also to use information. It

helps them to construct better understanding of text [6]. Thereupon critical approaches towards reading is considered to be essential for the students in higher education for reading content-oriented journal articles, resources available in all forms. Because the fundamental expectation from a student is to backup with all evidences to prove their work as honest, impartial and logical to the forum. Also, it helps them to assess whether the author of the text has given adequate justification to prove their points right apace with the added knowledge over the content. The researches on reading skill is to some extent, a call for emphasising understanding ability more of word recognition. Comprehending complex information is important for academic success especially after secondary level of schooling. Reading is not fact-finding process rather an attempt to have conceptual understanding. Students find difficulty in comprehending technical texts than narrative texts [7]. As follows, there is a general assumption that being able to read is one of the ultimate accomplishment or goal for an educated person. Considering the purposes of reading, is in acceleration than the past as it moves towards its contribution for the self-development of an individual in this competitive world. Thus, the subtle and complex process goes beyond the imitation of written to oral constraints to meaning making and understanding the relationship between text and author in most cases. In due course of understanding the text learners seeks the assistance of knowledge of sub-skills in each stage driven by their purpose and type of texts.

The study focused on preparedness of students for higher studies in engineering stream who have had all their schooling and graduate courses in Indian educational institutions. They are basically inclined to reading deficiency. It also affirms that there is a gap in English language teaching and learning process in Indian schools and colleges [8]. It directly affects their performances in higher level academic learning. Students in Indian ESL classrooms are widely differed based on their proficiency level. Together with, they have been practicing rote learning method simply to pass out the exams. In spite of having comprehension-oriented learning [9] from their early schooling to higher education level, students are well trained to memorize the information from text books. Level based courses and training might be helpful for the targeted learners [10] that constrain the standardised courses for skills in specific to reading.

## **Analysis and Discussion:**

### **Reading English in Higher Education:**

Reading is treated to be the basic requirement for tertiary level learners even though it is not their native language. In this milieu, it has been treated like a hindrance for the development of student who lacks proficiency in reading. The study presents the report on the English language syllabi analysis be specific to reading skill amid Indian educational institutions particularly in engineering streams and the course designed by NCERT for school education. In order to target the syllabus of engineering institutions the researcher preferred National institutional ranking framework (NIRF) which is a methodology adopted by ministry of human resource development (MHRD). Institutions were categorized by this framework through several parameters like teaching learning resources, research progress, perception of stakeholders, graduation outcomes, outreach and inclusivity. The analysis includes both Category A institutions (state, private, deemed to be and autonomous institutions) and Category B institutions (affiliated institutions) [NIRF 2017-2018]. The institutions have been selected randomly for further analysis. From the top 100 institutions, 50 have been selected based on the locality in each state (i.e different regions like urban, rural, city, semi urban and so on.) from which only 23 institutions are given open access information regarding their curriculum. The common view attained from all the referred

institutions is that they are training students towards attaining a job after the completion of course. So, most of the institutions has set up technical English into their curriculum where the tasks and lessons target only on interviewing skills, better communication in terms of reading, speaking and writing, formal writing as such emails, report writing, taking notes of the meeting, and so on. Further, very few universities from the south India pointing the initial process of LSRW skills learning in their syllabus.

The main concern of the researcher is to identify the reading related courses and practise availed by students in the higher educational institutions. So, the emphasis was given on tracing out the reading related content in the prescribed syllabus. The study on the syllabus of various institutions all over India revealed that only very few organizations are concentrating on strategies and subskills-based learning. Some have been following basic level comprehension-oriented practices and the rest choses literature approach to test the reading skill of students. Therefore, it is visible that there is no exposure to skill-based teaching [11] in Indian context. It is also inferred from the analysis that most of the course developers give prominence to summarizing with an assumption that it is only the bests way to show the betterment than any other skill-based testing. Consequently, comprehending exercise takes place in the regular reading classroom activity. More of all there is a common perception prevailing around the university educators that students should prerequisite with all basic LSRW skills when they entered into a university academic setting. Hence, proper course / module-based practice for each and every LSRW skills are required to enhance the overall performance on reading skill of the student.

### **Reading English in School Education:**

This particular finding leads to quest on school curriculum of English language teaching and learning. Therefore, the view next move on to NCERT (National council for educational research and training), an organization which holds responsibility for school education system (i.e. from primary to higher secondary level). NCERT was established with the motto of supporting a common school educational system despite of diverse culture across country. It assists government in implementing and designing new policies in the field of school education. It also supports for the improvement of children by claiming their right to proper education in all corners of the country. The objective of language curriculum as per NCERT is in two-fold. They are for basic proficiency and using English language as a medium of knowledge acquisition. Meanwhile the notion of beholding multi-lingual as a unique strength of the country, the policy makers aim to utilize English for uniting different language speakers of the country. With a step ahead of it the newly framed draft of national policy of education recommends the three-language formula in education to enrich all other Indian languages [NEP,2019].

The objective of teaching English in early stage (Class I-X) of school are to build proficiency in oral and written communication in social settings, acquire knowledge or information from resources, facilitate self-learning, transcode, participate in discussions. From class XI-XII the objectives are to comprehend and listen to presentations on varied topics, communicate fluently in both academic and social forums, ability to comprehend English of varied register, translating content from mother tongue to English and vice versa, improvement in higher order skills like reasoning, drawing inferences, and grasping main idea of the text and so on. By the analysis of the competency framework of NCERT for English language learning clearly depicts three levels in terms of class divisibility. The school education in India is classified into primary, middle and high level. In which primary school covers classes from I to V (Pre-primary I&II, Primary III-IV);

middle School classes from VI to VIII; high level comprises high school from IX & X and higher secondary from XI&XII. The objectives noted above are categorized as per the levels of the learners (Table 1). It visualizes the holistic perspective in the construction of English language curriculum within the different pedagogic curriculum that eases teaching English.

As the study focuses on reading skill, it is inferred that no level-based reading sub-skills or reading strategies training [12] has been given to the students as of in other standardised English proficiency guidelines around the globe. The syllabi of English are also limited to certain context. Instant feedback and testing are lacking due to the fact that teachers are giving more concern for marks than knowledge acquired. Most of all the educational board in India is following integrated approach; though it is useful in one view it becomes negative when students are neither good in one skill nor in the rest as well. On this ground, emphasis is required. In higher secondary level, concentration was much on listening and writing and also sudden emphasis on the literary text where the contents of language was taught with the aid of literary texts. Predominantly from primary to higher secondary, repeated forms of reading are in practice as follows, Silent reading, choral reading, paired reading, and reading aloud.

The moto of NCERT to provide context-oriented education turns defective as students find it harder to cope global trends without proper language education. For instance, comparing NCERT guidelines of language teaching with standardized sources of English language proficiency frameworks with reference to reading brings out some of the inadequacies of Indian context. (See Table 1 represents the skills infused in the guidelines proposed by NCERT for various level of school education). The major discrepancies found between NCERT and other sources are Levels of learners.

**Table 1. Subskills of Reading in School curriculum**

LEVELS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION (NCERT)	SUBSKILLS OF READING
<b>Level 1 (Class I)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize words,</li> <li>• Recognize Letters,</li> <li>• Read simple words/short sentences</li> </ul>
<b>Level 2 (Class III - V)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aesthetic reading</li> </ul>
<b>Level 3 (Class VI - VIII)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Specific Details,</li> <li>• Main Idea,</li> <li>• Critical thinking,</li> <li>• Reading between the lines,</li> <li>• Go beyond the text</li> </ul>
<b>Level 4 (Class IX - X)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarizing,</li> <li>• Evaluation,</li> <li>• Appreciating literary texts,</li> <li>• Transcode</li> </ul>

<b>Level 5 (Class XI - XII)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness of text structure,</li> <li>• Notes Taking,</li> <li>• Understanding cultural/global context,</li> <li>• Getting gist,</li> <li>• Understanding theme,</li> <li>• Supporting details,</li> <li>• Prediction,</li> <li>• Draw inference,</li> <li>• Understanding author,</li> <li>• Critical Appreciation,</li> <li>• Identifying text type,</li> <li>• Responding to questions,</li> <li>• Critical reading,</li> <li>• Familiarity in poetic language</li> </ul>
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Students who met with global standards are trained based on their level after being diagnosed their problem in language classroom. In contrast, students on Indian ESL classroom lack such opportunity due to unavailability of teaching learning resources, lack of proper trained language teachers and so on. Additionally, the shortage of subskills or objectives in Indian context also becomes a drawback. Such scales not only balance the actual fluency and also motivate students to work hard and set challenge for them to promote self-learning. Table 2 highlights the classification of student's level on par with their personal proficiency. In which it is clearly visible that NCERT based level is slightly common with the divisible pattern of ACTFL [13] whereas it does not match with the levels of CEFR and CLB. Apart from level of learning, distribution of skills in each category is prominent for the proper language acquisition. In this part NCERT based guidelines fall short. As mentioned in Table 1 reading subskills are equally distributed in each level. Some at times may be repeated just to check the entry and exit level performance level of the learners. Hitherto it lacks clarity and back reference to prove its validity with any of the authenticated sources since English is not our Native language.

**Table 2 (Classification of learner's levels)**

American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages	Common European Framework of References Languages	Canadian Language Benchmark	National Council for Educational Research and Training
<b>DISTINGUISHED</b>	<b>PROFICIENT USER</b> C2-Mastery C1-Efficient Operational Proficiency	<b>BENCHMARK 9-12</b> Benchmark-12 Benchmark-11 Benchmark-10 Benchmark-9	<b>Level 1 (Class I)</b>
<b>SUPERIOR</b>	<b>INDEPENDENT USER</b> B2-Vantage B1-Threshold	<b>BENCHMARK 5-8</b> Benchmark-8 Benchmark-7 Benchmark-6 Benchmark-5	<b>Level 2 (Class III - V)</b>

<b>ADVANCED</b> High Mid Low	<b>BASIC USER</b> A2-Wantage A1-Breakthrough	<b>BENCHMARK 1-4</b> Benchmark-4 Benchmark-3 Benchmark-2 Benchmark-1	<b>Level 3 (Class VI - VIII)</b>
<b>INTERMEDIATE</b> High Mid Low			<b>Level 4 (Class IX - X)</b>
<b>NOVICE</b> High Mid Low			<b>Level 5 (Class XI - XII)</b>

### Suggestions and Conclusion:

The study brings out the nuances of language learning with reference to reading skills from primary to tertiary level learners of Indian ESL classrooms. Based on the finding of the study conducted it is recommended to include adequate subskills and strategy instruction into practice. This will induce the learners to become better reader and it can be implemented for all other language skills as well. It may be considered to use or adopt any of the standardised language proficiency guidelines in to the curriculum design for Indian students to ensure the authenticity and foster advanced learning process. Later testing of skills, evaluating overall performances can be assessed using the framework. Additionally, teachers are suggested to monitor student's reading process and provide feedback through timely observations and to prefer technical/academic oriented texts than literary or narrative type simply to anticipate their functional purpose.

On the whole the study initiates an idea of teaching reading with exclusive training through academic reading materials and fortified to reduce the gap in research and teaching in real practice. It also necessitates the employment of trained language teachers. The government has to understand the fact that mere degree in language and literature is not sufficient to produce a certified language teacher. Hence, they have to arrange training programs, create awareness through workshop, seminars, conferences with the help of experts in the field. Alongside government has to arrange for proper resources in institutions, take initiative to balance teacher student's ratio. The study also suggests teachers to update their idea about new practices, digital tools, innovative method of teaching, appropriate approaches as per students' level, knowledge about the correlation between curriculum and actual outcome, understanding objectives and so on.

Due to time and resource constraints the present study is confined to engineering and school curriculum with special reference to reading teaching and learning. However, there are different streams of higher education institutions in India. Hence further study can be done with other syllabi analysis and can also concentrate on other language skills (LSW). Moreover, the secondary data of syllabi proves that almost the same set of syllabi is been followed at the major institutions of India with minimal differences in methodology. The study has referred ACTFL, CLB, CEFR, in future researchers can prefer some other standardised sources which has not been mentioned in the study. The finding of the study has implication for teachers and course designers in teaching reading in Indian ESL context.

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