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THE HIDDEN REWARDS OF EXTENSIVE READING IN ENGINEERING EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The proposed study aspires to demonstrate and evaluate the hidden rewards of extensive reading in engineering education. It also briefs the prevalent practices of reading instruction, the technical institutions of JNTU, Hyderabad adopt with regard to language proficiency. According to Kappel (1964) "Every examination of the problem of our schools, of poverty; every question raised by troubled parents about our schools and every learning disorder seem to show some association with reading difficulty". This raises pertinent questions about the nuances of reading and its role in language proficiency. The need for such study should be examined at four levels: Firstly, the primary objective is to analyze their reading habits and behavior in order to appraise their reading. Secondly, the neglect of reading like listening poses a serious problem as is reflected in poor communication of engineering graduates. Even the educational system has to shoulder the blame to a certain extent. Thirdly, the teaching of reading should not be confined to few comprehension passages and vocabulary building exercises but should provide ample opportunities to practice extensive reading for logical thinking and effective communication. Finally, the continuous evaluation has proved futile time and again despite continuous tests and evaluation. This reflects the lack of extensive reading among students. Many engineering colleges had supplementary reading in their English syllabus in the past. Hence there is an urgent need to rethink about the inclusion of extensive reading. Considering the above factors, it becomes quite essential to familiarize students with the term, 'Extensive Reading,' the unique distinction with intensive and its relative role in promoting language proficiency and employability in today's competitive world.

Key words: hidden rewards, intensive and extensive reading, language proficiency, engineering education, communication, fluency, continuous evaluation and employability.

Extensive Reading and its Myriad Terms

Extensive reading involves reading a lot of uncomplicated materials or texts for pleasure. It is generally believed to enhance foreign language learning. Extensive Reading (ER) is a practical approach to second language reading. The greatest advantage of ER is that it offers readers enough choice to select their texts thereby generating interest among them. It is in contrast with intensive reading. The development of

reading skills can have a profound impact on personal and professional fulfillment as it is often associated with academic achievement, success and life-long learning skills. Reading various books is of a particular importance in disseminating knowledge from one generation to another and ER is no exception. Interestingly, ER “in the EFL/ESL context is an approach to teaching reading whose goal is to get students reading in the English Language and enjoying it” (Day et al., 2011, p.10). The golden principle in which ER is based is that we learn to read by reading (Smith, 1994; Krashen, 2011). Michael West (1936 cited in Day & Bamford, 1998, p.5), the designer of the methodology of ER, calls it supplementary reading. Another name suggested for ER by Mikulecky (1990) is pleasure reading, which insists on reading for pleasure and enjoyment as a main characteristic of ER. In his book, *The Power of Reading*, Krashen (1993b) terms ER as free voluntary reading. ER has also been called “sustained silent reading, drop everything and read, or independent reading” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p.5). All these terms share the same objective of generating avid readers and endow them with the pleasures of reading.

Differences between ER and IR

One of the big differences between ER and IR is that students in IR generally read succinct and difficult passages to answer comprehension questions. Furthermore their comprehension is tested on the number of correct answers. On the other hand, Extensive Reading furnishes students to opt for a book of his choice without any stipulated time to complete reading. In other words, he can read at his own pace without pressure. Thus pleasure supersedes pressure. The table below gives a comprehensive idea of the differences between ER and IR.

Table1. Differences between ER and IR

Extensive Reading (ER)	Intensive Reading (IR)
Improvises general comprehension to a great extent	Enhances comprehension to some extent
Read as many books as possible at one’s will	Reading is limited to short passages. The teacher is a facilitator.
Simple texts	Complex texts
The emphasis is on fluency, pleasure and confidence	The focus is on word-for-word reading, learning new grammar, vocabulary and translation
Devoid of reading techniques and grammar	Reading strategies and grammar play a significant role
Students can read in the class or wherever they wish to	Students usually read only in a class
Reading is exempted from comprehension questions or follow-up activities	Reading usually comprises comprehension questions and language activities
Readers skip or ignore new words. No prediction	Readers seek the assistance of a dictionary for new words or rely on their memory
Teachers, if at all, assess learners through book reports, diaries, book discussions, etc.	Teachers always initiate and assess learners’ performance through exercises, tests, comprehension questions etc.

Despite the differences, if one looks at the big picture, reading is crucial for language proficiency. In this regard, it is important to determine whether ER or IR or both should be used in the class room. The key to a successful reading program is striking a balance with the two techniques of reading. Too much IR leads to lack of fluency while over emphasis on ER prevents one from using reading techniques without the guidance of a teacher. Hence it is quite important to ensure both techniques are judiciously used in a classroom. Such balance should be executed before the program can take shape.

Teaching of Reading in Engineering Education

One of the main problems of teaching reading in engineering education is the intensive reading instruction which is not sufficient to improve overall reading abilities and especially fluency. The Engineering students’ low proficiency level in English in general, and poor communication in particular are clear indicators

of reading deficiency. Therefore reading shouldn't be confined to academic rigor, but they also extend to pleasure and personal development. The development of reading abilities can increase brain capacity for language and literacy skills, as well as vocabulary knowledge, listening and language skills, attention and curiosity (Almahrooqi & Denman, 2016)

English is usually the second choicest language and books are not as freely available unlike developed countries thereby hindering the progress of the students from school to university. The technical institutions across India realized the increasing significance of communication and employability skills in the last one and half decades. In the academic context, an engineering student has to read large amounts of technical texts to accomplish his academic requirements but mere exposure to reading will not suffice. To be employable in the modern world, he should be more than just a literate. He is expected to read and comprehend technical materials to resolve complicated problems. For instance, he should solve a calculus problem or comprehend a write up on Digital Design. Unfortunately, students heavily rely on course material/guides to score marks or grades and reading of text books is neglected. On the other hand, the purpose of technical writing is to communicate specific information in a precise and concise manner. A student who is an avid reader will certainly be a good writer. In short extensive reading certainly makes a marked difference in spoken and written communication.

Reading Blocks

One of the common problems of education in underdeveloped countries is the lack of reading habit and books are not as freely available in these countries thereby hindering the progress of the students from school to university. The situation may be slightly better in developing countries like India but the truth is that reading habit is neither socially acknowledged nor established. English is the choicest second language in India. The National Achievement Survey conducted by National Council of Education Research (NCERT) in 2016 (Deccan Chronicle, Nov. 3, 2017:5) for class five students discloses that many students who enter middle school have a great deal of difficulties in reading, basic math and subject knowledge. The report concludes that students scored 45% in reading comprehension, 46% in math and 50% in environmental studies. In other words, more than half the students who don't possess reading skills somehow manage to reach the ninth grade without much difficulty. Consequently the succeeding classes and common examinations will pose quite a challenge for them as they have completely lost their reading habits by this time. The problem persists throughout their studies and careers. Another problem that nags students is clear and logical thinking. While technology has revolutionized reading with modern gadgets like kindle, smart phones and I-pads, people have developed a stunning attachment to internet as they had for T.V. in the 20th century. However, the reading gadgets are out of reach of common man as they are expensive. Thus the problem hibernates and dates back to school thus widening the lingering gap from school to college. Therefore extensive reading boosts fluency, logic and employability. The government of Telangana in a surprise move in 2016 introduced a Class Readiness Program popularly known as '3 R's program' to improve the basic competencies in reading, writing and arithmetic for students in primary, upper primary and high schools. The 3R program will be conducted for 45-60 instructional days. Considering the steps taken by the government, the new batch of school students may be better equipped in reading to counter the challenges of communication. (www.teachersbadi.in/.../telangana-tsschools-class-readiness-programme-3rs-programm)

Benefits of ER

Extensive Reading may be likened to a store house of knowledge. Moreover the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. A recent study conducted by researchers at Yale University (Deccan Chronicle, Nov. 3, 2017:5) discovered the enormous benefits of reading. One of them is that the mortality rate of people who read for more than seven hours a week is lower by 11% compared to those who don't read. Medical experts bear witness that reading activates one's mental faculties and cognitive abilities. They also experience a sense of satisfaction as they read. On the other hand Psychiatrist Dr. Bharat Kumar Reddy opines that reading not only enhances one's intellect but also delays the age related illness such as dementia. It goes without saying that memory increases with reading. The study however indicates that reading magazines and newspapers didn't have the same impact as reading books. He remarked that an idle mind leads to depression as 28% of readers showed signs of depression. Psychiatrist Dr. Purnima Nagaraja says, 'reading a book cover to cover

requires patience especially with trilogies and longer series. Avid readers are more attentive and knowledgeable than poor readers. She also says that when one is engrossed reading or relate with a character, the brain produces neurotransmitters that counter depression. It's heartening to note that one in five readers don't feel lonely as they attach themselves with the characters in their books. Psychologist Dr. Surabhi Rao says that 90% of readers gain awareness through reading and elevate their quality of living. Finally reading permits one to live a longer, healthier and better (include the importance of writing as well) Hence reading acts as a key to communication especially for second language learners as they neither read nor speak at home or college. Moreover, mere reading with comprehension and speed will not suffice. Hence they should use extensive and intensive reading techniques. It is equally important to sensitize the teaching community to become facilitators and take up the reading tasks and activities to address the language problems. The framers of the Engineering English course should also incorporate supplementary reading to inculcate the reading habit. The advancement of science and technology in the twenty-first century undoubtedly has generated more employment opportunities for engineers and technocrats. Therefore the Training and Placement Cells should train students in soft skills and brush up their basic language skills for better employability.

Implementing ER in Engineering Curriculum

This study is an honest attempt of implementing ER in an engineering classroom and the various methods to implement it. It also discusses different ways and activities to be used in order to transform a reading classroom into a reading community of fluent readers. It is more reasonable to clarify the reasons why ER should be implemented in the curriculum design before discussing the ways in which ER could be implemented in the classroom. Moreover there is a large array of studies on ER and its benefits and contribution to the EFL/ESL learners' language development. These benefits are reported in research and literature about the underlining importance of integrating ER in the EFL/ESL classroom.

Reading, in most language programs is considered to be supplementary as learners are not required to read much. Such tradition has been followed from school to college and university. Many voices call for a shift to give more importance to reading in language education. Nuttal (1996), for example, says that the only way to learn reading is by reading, and students can read better if they read more. Belgar and Hunt (2014, p.31) also suggest that ER is "arguably the primary way that EFL learners can build their reading vocabulary to an advanced level". Bamford and Day (1997) liken reading with any other learned human skills such as cooking, driving or riding a bicycle. hence the more one practices it, the more fluent and skilled one becomes.

Tips to implement ER in a Technical Curriculum

There are many ways to implement ER in a technical curriculum. Firstly, the teaching community in technical institutions should create awareness about the importance of reading for personal and professional development among students in the first year itself so that they have four years of ample time to practice both intensive and extensive reading. Secondly, the syllabus should be designed on par with IELTS to enhance their language proficiency. Thirdly the evaluation process should test their LSRW skills. Fourthly library should be converted into a reading room to inculcate the habit of reading once a week. Finally, students should be encouraged to speak in English in campus to hone their communication as it instills confidence among them.

Some of the challenges that technical curriculum designers and teachers encounter while considering the inclusion of ER: time constraint, students' attitude to reading, commercialization of education and a widening gap between faculty members and the management. Moreover, ER cannot be linked to the syllabus or examination. The teachers should desist from the traditional roles of teaching and the confusion between ER and class readers add to the problems. Despite hurdles, the educational system should take a bold initiative to implement it as the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

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