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## ENHANCING READING HABITS AMONG ENGINEERING STUDENTS THROUGH EXTENSIVE READING

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### Abstract

This paper describes an extensive reading program conducted for I year engineering graduate students at Gudlavalleru Engineering College. In today's rapidly growing world, sitting down with a book and reading to seek pleasure may be seen by some people as a tradition of the past. Reading is something that people do in their leisure time, but, in this advanced world, it would be a tremendous task to make the students read a few books. Usually, Students major source of their reading materials would be their lecturers', textbooks and notebooks. Some of their priorities would also include guides, study materials, running notes etc.

Students find the time and seek pleasure when they read a story or a short book in their mother tongue, but, they find it uncomfortable and a bit difficult to read a book or a story in a foreign language if the text is beyond their skills. Hence, the research has been taken up to make the students read the text, cultivate the habit of reading by including some of the abridged versions of the classics. The findings indicated that most of the respondents enjoyed reading the retold classics and some of the respondents read them every day.

**Keywords:** Extensive reading, Retold classics, Short stories, abridged versions, Language Proficiency.

## Introduction

It is believed universally that one of the best ways to help students improve their language proficiency and skill is to advise and motivate them to read extensively. Reading is the passion of the greatest people of all times since decades which helped to pass on knowledge to the present and future from many years. Reading habit influences in the evolution of one's personal development and social progress. Regular and systematic reading hones the intellect, refines the emotions, elevates tastes and provides perspectives for one's living and prepares an individual for productive participation in the academic, social and cultural and life. Reading kindles the imagination of a person by adding new sight to eyes and new wisdom to mind.

Reading has always been the aspect of research, in fact, it has been increasingly been the area of pragmatic investigation since years which is being studied from different dimensions by many researchers particularly by the specialists related to various fields like education, Psychology, Sociology, Media Studies etc. A few others such as Smith & Robinson states that reading is an active attempt on the part of the reader to understand a writer's message". Tait says that reading as a procedure of thinking, recalling and relating concepts under the functioning of written words". Irving defines reading as the process of interaction of what is in the head with what is on the page within a particular context that causes students to comprehend what they read.

Thus, reading is a cognitive process of understanding a written linguistic message and to examine and grasp the meaning of written or printed characters, words or sentences. This paper describes an extensive reading program conducted for first-year engineering graduate students at Gudlavalleru Engineering College. This program was intended to motivate the students to read extensively in English and thus help them overcome some of their problems in understanding English texts as a means towards increasing their proficiency in the language.

## Enhancing reading habits among engineering students through Extensive Reading

Regardless of the discipline or course of study, the English Language is the official medium of communication, with which all academic activities are performed. This leads to inferring that the academic performance of students is dependent on their reading habits. However, it must be admitted that most of the students read for examination purposes only, they hardly read beyond their examinations or their course of study. This signifies that such students do not enjoy reading voluntarily and that can have a negative influence on their academic performance too.

A study at the Japanese university on the effects of extensive reading on students' proficiency in English found that students who read more English books experienced significantly greater improvement in reading ability and vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, many investigations in

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many countries at various levels say that extensive reading aroused a free voluntary reading or sustained independent reading resulting in better reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling, and grammatical development.

The same perception towards extensive reading was included by the experts for the students studying at Gudlavalleru Engineering College. It was found that extensive reading has not only been pleasurable but also more beneficial for language acquisition than instruction in grammar. Thus, this study investigates the influence of reading interests and habits among the first year students of engineering at Gudlavalleru Engineering College.

An extensive reading program for the first year students was implemented in their course of study on the best means of helping them increase their proficiency in English. The issue of English proficiency has always been of concern among the student community. Lack of proficiency among students in English deprives them of the opportunities open to those who are able to use the language well. This is especially so for the students who come from a rural background and are from vernacular medium. Many students from rural background have difficulty in understanding English, and few are able to use English in simple conversation. This study was thus part of a larger study that tried to address the problem of how we could help the students, whose lack of proficiency in English is mainly because of their lack of exposure to the language.

It was advised that encouraging students to read extensively in English would be most effective long-term means to help them increase their vocabulary in English, and ultimately, their proficiency in the language. We thus decided to set up an extensive reading program for students in the college. This program was suggested by Dr. Ramanujam Parthasarathy, Director of ELTC of Gudlavalleru Engineering College, who suggested that some of the Classics which are available in the form of retold Classics ( abridges ones with color pictures) with may be used as a supplementary reading program for the first year engineering students in both the semesters.

The significance of Retold Classics

Reading Retold classics can play a very important role in quality education besides encouraging the students to develop the habit of reading. Reading classics makes smarter and strengthens the ability of an individual to think and make logical conclusions. Moreover, reading the classics would be like a brain workout. There are some other factors that would cater, such as:

*Increases the ability to understand:* Reading a retold edition of a classic gives the reader an introduction to the story that can greatly create an interest on the story and motivate the student to read the text beside increasing the understanding when the student later reads the original. This helps with a clear comprehension of the story and the pictures on the pages also help the students in understanding the story better. This often results in improving vocabulary too.

*Accessible to poor learners:* It is a fact that reading can be tedious and would be considered challenging by some of the students who are slow learners. But, reading these abridged classics, the students can completely comprehend the story and try to understand some of those difficult works and words.

*Understanding of the Storyline:* Sometimes it would be difficult for some readers to understand the line of the story, especially, if it is a classic. Hence, the abridged and illustrated ones can help the readers to comprehend it easily.

*Increase in the Vocabulary:* Reading any book can help build vocabulary skills, but these editions of retold classics of classic literature can add more new ranges of words.

*Moral Messages:* Classic literature teaches about life lessons through human history. Classic literature shows that a lot of life's problems that have the same basic patterns. They deliver the same message repeatedly. Our students can learn life lessons and receive more intuition and inspiration to face real life.

*Improves Critical Thinking and Cultural Knowledge:* Like other benefits of reading books, reading the abridged editions of classic literature may also train the students to think more critically. Reading classic literature is the shortest and easiest way to learn about the culture of people and places. It will always be a surprise to find the connection between the real facts and the story of the classic literature we read. It ends up being a sort of accomplishment in our learning.

The aims and features of the program

Extensive reading is intended to motivate the students to read as many books as possible, and to be excited about reading. However, to inculcate some seriousness in them a few retold classics have been included a part of their syllabus. It is a kind of free voluntary reading in which students read quietly when they have some free time. It is acutely aware of the fact that without incorporating reading composition as part of a class program, the students might not read English books on their own.

The following are the key features of Extensive reading:

- Two retold classics are included in the syllabus for both the semesters at the first year level.
- The teachers need to be well-informed about the books and reading materials that prescribed to their students.
- The teachers must encourage the students to read the retold classics for pleasure.
- The teachers should organize a discussion once in a fortnight on a few chapters of the book.
- The assignments should be within the students' level of competency.
- The students read the retold classics outside the classroom and come for the discussion
- Students' knowledge of the book is tested in the form of multiple choice questions.

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The students are not allowed to choose what they want to read, but, they will be given a list of six to four books during the first year course.

S. Chand and Blake ELT books have been used because it was observed that these books would be simple enough for the students to read and understand. Hence, we focused on motivating them to read as much as they could by having the program as part of an in-class program in the form of discussions and question and answer session etc. so that students could be guided and helped by their teachers whenever possible.

#### Post-reading activity

The students are asked to read the books outside class time. The real reason is that there will never be sufficient time in class to do enough reading. But, encouraging less motivated students or reluctant readers to read in their free time may be a very difficult task. Setting time aside for reading in class tells the students that is a very important activity.

When it comes to the post-reading activity the students are asked to do when they finish reading a book, there are a number of options. Once the teachers make a few attempts to know whether the students have actually read the book, the teachers can conduct an activity on their interest such as discussions, role plays and some more questions that include:

- If you could give a present to one of the characters in the book, who would you choose and what would you give them?
- If you could invite one of the characters in the book to a party, who would you choose and why?
- If you want any part of the story to be changed, what would you change about the story?
- Which character is the most similar to you or the least similar to you and why?
- Did you read anything in your book that surprised you? Explain.
- What is that you found in the book new and interesting?

#### Findings

This was clearly evident during the observations of a few of the classes. When the books were introduced to the students for the first time, the students answered that they never read any book or would never like to read a book. When enquired further, the students said that English books were difficult to understand and that there were so many words that they didn't know the meaning. Going around the class and helping the students with the problems they had in reading allowed the teachers to gauge the difficulties they had in trying to understand the text.

The stories are not taught to the students in the classroom but they are supposed to be read by the students outside the classroom. The teachers only facilitate the students to discuss the aspects of the story, such as character analysis, the plot of the story, summary of the story, analysis of the book etc. Secondly, they are encouraged to give presentations on any of the topics related to the

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text or the story. Next, students may be also given an opportunity to role play some of the characters of the story. During these classes, the role of the teacher will be an observer as well as participant, in which the teacher himself demonstrates so as to initiate or motivate students. The teachers didn't find any problem with any of the students as they were in a position to understand the text and do the post-reading activity.

### Conclusion

Reading is important for every individual who aspires to grow because reading is also a part of learning in life. It helps to educate people in many ways. This shows how important reading or learning is. Therefore, reading has to be strongly promoted as an academic, interpersonal, social or family related activity.

First, among the list, the young students are recommended to make good use of their time by reading more materials that are related to academic purpose more than leisure purpose. It is not wrong for them to read comics, magazines etc, but it has to be in the appropriate amount in which they should read academic reading materials more.

Teachers are the mentors of students. The students spend most of their time with the teacher after their parents. In light of this fact, the teacher should know the type of books students should enjoy reading. Hence, they need to recommend appropriate numbers of books outside the classroom, and school libraries. This will give students the freedom to choose a book according to their taste.

The results of this study suggest that students' perusing their professional course such as engineering may be benefitted from extensive reading. However, whether extensive reading helped to increase their *proficiency* in English is something that cannot be determined conclusively by this study, given the fact that this study was conducted over a period of three years, and that the effects of extensive reading on the students' language proficiency can best be seen in the long term.

The attitude and the abilities of the students would certainly improve if they are to read English books as it is very likely that their proficiency in English will increase in the long term if the practice of reading is extended.

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