

Rekindling Reading Habit of Entry-level Undergraduates: A Case Study

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Introduction

Reading is a vital factor affecting intellectual and emotional growth of children, one of the most important skills to acquire. Sir Richard Steele has logically remarked, “reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body.” But the definition of reading has undergone many changes. In the past, reading simply meant to extract visual information from any given script. Thereafter, reading became much more complex and involved the understanding of a whole text composed of written signs. Smith and Robinson in their study regarded reading as “an active attempt on the part of reader to understand a writer’s message” (3). G. Devarajan defined reading as “the art of interpreting printed and written words” (14). Judith Irvin (37) describes the reading process as “the 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.” It “loads the mind with new software” commented Satija (55). Thus, reading is the ability to recognise words, examine sentences and understand the information within or get exposed to a world of imagination. It is a cognitive process of understanding a written linguistic message and to scrutinise and grasp the meaning of written or printed characters.

Setting the scene

Reading as a habit is regarded as an essential life skill which not only intensifies knowledge, but also sharpens our thinking and increases awareness in all daily life issues. A person who widely reads is expected to exhibit progressive social skills, as he can interact with others in a far better way because reading is likely to widen his vision and perspective. Reading is usually a private act, a personal and individual relationship with a book; but then, “it is the environment as long as it is favourable,” which according to Michael Gault (16), encourages the setting up of this relationship. Educational researchers have established that there is a strong correlation between reading and academic success. A student with good reading habit is more likely to do well in school and then in college and pass exams in excellent levels as he can comprehend and appreciate the organizational structure of a piece of writing.

He can grasp ideas, follow arguments and detect implications. There is also a strong correlation between reading and vocabulary knowledge; students who have a blameless vocabulary are usually good readers.

Reading spaces itself between a rock and a hard place in the current academic scenario where students have so much pressure to score high marks and concentrate on their career that they read only textbooks. With the technological advancements in this satellite and i-net era, reading habit seems to have taken a beating. What appears to have changed over the years is the taste of youngsters who are more inclined to light readings with the plot they identify themselves with than the one yarned with heavy philosophical concepts. With the cinema, television and internet taking up a great deal of attention of children, teenagers and even adults, the habit of serious reading seems to take a low graph. It is proven that in this technological society the demands for higher levels of literacy are creating unfavourable consequences for those who fall short. This is even more of a reason to get into the habit of reading books.

Statement

From earlier time to present, there have been different causes of poor reading habits among the undergraduate students. The nature of reading ability is very complex from observation, one could risk the generalization that most students do not know how to read effectively and as a result they are faced with reading problems especially during examination hours. The researcher discovered that during her teaching periods many of the students were not able to read their textbooks properly or follow the notes given to them in various subjects. Some could not even read and comprehend the question papers during their examinations. As a result of their poor reading habit, they failed woefully in their examinations if the questions were not read out to them. These reasons stimulated the present study on the reading habits among the entry-level undergraduate students.

The habit of reading is a demanding task which has to be skilfully developed over the years and, it is important to note that there are many complex problems that may result in its poor manifestation among students. It could be the instructional standard in the school attended by students, the environment in which they read or were not able to read and several other physiological factors. Some students may tend to read poorly because of their inability to discover their reading problems. Lack of positive motivation by parents and teachers also affects the student ability to read.

Review of Literature

Reading has increasingly been the object of empirical and theoretical investigations since a long past. Norvell as cited by Hanna and McAllister (1960) identifies that sex and age are the two principal factors affecting reading habits. James Moyes (2000), Catherina Stenberg (2001), Catherine Ross and S. Abram delineate female as more heavy reader than male. Clark and Foster (2005) report that girls enjoy reading greater than boys and boys tend to hold more negative attitudes towards reading than girls. McKenna, Kearn and Ellsworth (1995) and Hassell and Rodge reveal that girls have more favourable attitudes than boys for both recreational and academic reading. Igun and Adogbeji report that nearly two-thirds (61.5%) of postgraduate students are motivated for study and reading primarily by the desire for knowledge and skills, while 22.5% study mainly to pass their examinations and tests and for self-development. In their study concerning the students reading habits, Cabral and Tavares (2002) reflect that 97.8% students read for academic purposes. Kaur and Thiyagarajah interpret that while many students prefer spending as much as 3-5 hours per week in reading yet the breakdown of the responses indicate that 69.8% of them spend this amount of time on literary works, 28.6% on newspapers and 25.4% on novels. Devarajan (1989) reports no matter what the socio-economic background is, the majority of the students (51.96%) are interested in reading literature especially novels followed by Science (34.66%). Clark and Foster report that for students, their mother (42.5%), teacher (38.5%) and father (32.4%) are the most frequently cited reading partners. 83.9% of student-informants admitted mother teaches them to read, followed by their teacher (72.2%) and their father (65.0%). Studies on reading habits and reading interests of school students of varied age and the role of library and family in developing and inspiring the love of reading in particular were conducted by Karen Anderson (2007), Noormah Shahriza (2007), Briony Train (2007), Boström and Lassen (2006), Elena Corradini (2006), Valeda Dent (2006), Celep and Bucket (2005) and Brier and Lebbin (2004).

In Kerala, the undergraduate curriculum integrates a communicative and exploratory form of interactive education system, so that the students may develop an inquisitive mind and discover the power of self-determination and discipline to grow up into successful professionals and good human beings. So, the present study caters solely to the need of the undergraduates.

Limitation of the Study

The present study is limited to the undergraduate students currently in semester two in a famous women's college in Trivandrum, under the University of Kerala. All informants shared almost the same linguistic environment. They all had Malayalam as their mother tongue.

The Objective

The specific objective of the paper is to find out the reading habit among the undergraduates- time spent for serious reading, use of reference materials, academic journals; and spells of light reading for magazines, novels and newspapers. The purpose is to study thoroughly the reading habits of the students with the aim to identify their reading attitudes, purposes, preferences and tastes. This would lead to develop some suggestions for solution of the expected lack of passionate reading habit among the undergraduates. This study will help to establish whether our undergraduate students are on par with the expected academic parameters in the acquisition of intellectual skills.

Methodology

This case study method used well-structured questionnaire for collecting data. To find the reading habit of the undergraduates, a survey was conducted among the second semester students of a reputed college in Trivandrum under the University of Kerala. 200 questionnaires were distributed among second semester Mathematics, Botany and English undergraduate students. Questionnaires, with varied choice of reading and enjoying English comics, novels, newspaper, magazines, academic journals and using dictionary were distributed to them. The reading corner of the college library was chosen in order to have minimum outside intervention and least disruption while marking the frequency of their choice and use. Thirty (30) questionnaires returned from Mathematics optional, thirty five (35) from Botany optional students and fifty six (56) from English optional. Of the thirty five attended questionnaires from Botany optional, only thirty were complete. There were just forty completely attended questionnaires from English optional. Therefore, a total of 121 questionnaires were returned but only 100 were used. So, informants for this study included 100 students from Mathematics, Botany and English optional. All the informants had Malayalam as their mother tongue.

Data Assessment and Analysis

The chief objective on assessing the data was to find the reading habit of the undergraduates. The data was subjected to statistical analysis to assess the focus of the study. The rate of recurrence of the informants was recorded and assessed. Statistical analysis was done to get a more accurate view of the findings. The analysis helped to understand the numerical scores received when assessing the elicited data. The results of the findings in percentage are as in the tables below.

Table 1: Informant Reading Frequency

Informant Reading Frequency in Percentage					
Kinds of Books	Always	Mostly	Often	Rarely	Never
English Comics	0%	8%	26%	42%	24%
English Novels	2%	23%	35%	25%	15%
English Newspaper	12%	33%	35%	18%	2%
English Magazines	5%	31%	42%	18%	4%
English Journals	0%	0%	6%	39%	55%
English Dictionary	54%	20%	18%	6%	2%

Table 2: Reading Habit among the Entry-level Undergraduates (Optional Break-up).

Reading Habit among the Entry-level Undergraduates						
KINDS OF BOOKS	OPTIONAL	FREQUENCY				
		ALWAYS	MOSTLY	OFTEN	RARELY	NEVER
ENGLISH COMICS	MATH	0	7	7	13	3
	BOTANY	0	0	7	11	12
	ENGLISH	0	1	12	18	9
Findings in Percentage		0%	8%	26%	42%	24%

ENGLISH NOVELS	MATH	0	4	12	10	4
	BOTANY	0	0	7	13	10
	ENGLISH	2	19	16	2	1
Findings in Percentage		2%	23%	35%	25%	15%
ENGLISH NEWSPAPER	MATH	0	9	14	6	1
	BOTANY	0	6	13	10	1
	ENGLISH	12	18	8	2	0
Findings in Percentage		12%	33%	35%	18%	2%
ENGLISH MAGAZINES	MATH	3	6	13	7	1
	BOTANY	2	6	13	7	2
	ENGLISH	0	19	16	4	1
Findings in Percentage		5%	31%	42%	18%	4%
ENGLISH JOURNALS	MATH	0	0	4	15	11
	BOTANY	0	0	1	10	19
	ENGLISH	0	0	1	14	25
Findings in Percentage		0%	0%	6%	39%	55%
ENGLISH DICTIONARY	MATH	15	6	6	1	2
	BOTANY	11	11	5	3	0
	ENGLISH	28	3	7	2	0
Findings in Percentage		54%	20%	18%	6%	2%

Findings of the Study

The result of the present study revealed that the reading motive of majority of the students was getting information to improve their general knowledge. The findings of the study showed that most of the students preferred reading materials in Malayalam and that a large number of informants read materials related to their subjects. English magazines and novels emerged as the favourite among a vast number of informants. 23% of the informants read English novels mostly while 35% read them often. Students found reading Malayalam newspapers comfortable to those in English but of the

hundred informants, 33% mostly and 35% often read English dailies. The study indicated that academic journals were the least popular among the undergraduates but most of the students used reference materials like dictionary; 54% of the informants always considered dictionary as their study companion while 20% used it less frequently.

Later, a friendly talk with the informants revealed that only a minority had separate reading space at their home and most of them preferred watching TV shows of their choice than reading books or magazines. They also disclosed that the source of their non- academic reading materials is either their college library or individual subscription of their parents.

Suggestions and Conclusion

The above findings of this study lead to conclude that the undergraduate students need to improve their reading habits. Their disinterest in reading books and newspapers in English is one of the reasons for their poor mastery of the language, anxiety in presenting term papers in seminars and poor conversational skills. Inappropriate vocabulary and want of fluency in using the language are the disquieting after effects of poor reading habit. The students must be made aware of the importance of the language and the effectiveness of the social appropriacy in the use of English which could be cultivated excellently by a progressive and constant reading habit. They should be made aware of the fact that reading is an indispensable tool of language learning and that every course of study is accomplished partly through good reading. For effective promotion of reading habit among them, it must be made pleasurable and voluntary. Therefore, one of the major goals of the college libraries is to inspire a love for reading - to promote a reading culture among its users.

The library of an educational institution is generally regarded as the central focus in the teaching and learning process. The emphasis these days is very much on learning and developing information acquisition skills, instead of teaching. Rather than mastering facts, students now need to be taught information acquisition skills and how to learn. The role of the teacher or a librarian, therefore, includes encouraging students to cultivate both individual and collective habits of reading especially when reading is not part of our background at home.

This implies the need of promoting a variety of activities that could enhance love of reading and libraries, providing skills on how to find books and maximize their utility, offering tips on reading skills through interactive talks, video tapes and films and also help them to “engage in creative, leisurely, and pleasurable reading” (Segum 42). Undergraduate course instructors can assist the

librarians to have a heightened awareness of the reading difficulties faced by the students. One of the steps taken to minimise reading problems can be by “incorporating study skill components within the courses or to make reading lists in particular literature texts more manageable” (40). This activity can assist in the promotion of autonomous learning and make students more independent and resourceful. Book-discussion-clubs or Reading Clubs may be encouraged in each college in order to cultivate healthy reading habits among students. Here the students get the opportunity to read books and meet weekly to discuss on the books they have read, thus finding a new sort of fellowship where they will be able to speak perceptively not only about books, but also about the issues they faced in the content, while reading it.

Teachers and librarians can also arrange a field trip to make reading social and exciting. The students may be allowed to visit a local library, a university library or a bookstore. Than checking out or buying books, they get an awesome experience of being surrounded by thousands of books, seeing the world of possibility in print, meditating over what is accessible to know and explore. Also, this is an event that parents can organize and administrators can support or encourage. Inviting authors to speak is another activity to enhance the habit of reading that can be supported by subject instructors and parents. Students can be greatly inspired from hearing an author, if possible, one from a similar background to theirs, speak about reading and how the habit had influenced them in their own creativity.

Furthermore, at home, parents can allow their children to have a good time with different books or magazines. Now, the teenagers tend to indulge in social media websites and get wrapped up in a non-existing, virtual world. This brings down their social interaction and reading habit. The usage of new abbreviations to express oneself on the social media hampers the language development which in turn affects writing and reading. But with the help of caring parents around them, they can be better at reading because disinterest in reading is mostly seen due to no encouragement to reading. To amend this, parents have a prominent role to play rather than blaming the social media through which the teens are getting connected instead of being alone.

Moreover, the government can take some measures in promoting the habit of reading by creating more public places to read. We have many parks, cinemas and entertainment centres, but it is necessary to have more libraries in our state. Also, the government can provide a large number of books to each school and student centres which are designed for the cultural development among families. In spite of celebrating reading for a week in a year, it should facilitate to celebrate reading every day.

Reading is surely a remarkable habit that pours rich thoughts in young minds. It can make a stagnant, uncreative mind resourceful and innovative. Reading enriches one's intellectual abilities. Depth in reading helps to develop the mind and personality of a person; it provides insights into human problems, and influences attitudes and behaviour. In other words, reading helps to mould a person's character. It is well known that books can be a stimulating agent for building oneself. In this technological era, books and reading habit must be made relevant by developing age- appropriate and quality literature. It is commonly believed that there is a lack of literature which can suit contemporary needs and thoughts. The classics might be good but do not necessarily suit the taste of everyone. The college libraries must in this case serve as the conducive environment by integrating completely into the educational system to achieve the overall objectives of the system. Libraries must transform as the optimum spots to stimulate the intellectual growth of the students through the provision of appropriate instructional as well as reading materials for students, thereby helping to foster a reading culture in our society.

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