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Reading Skills for Academic and Personal Development

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Abstract:

Language skills have contributed greatly to human development. Polished language skills are required to shape and groom one's personality. Reading is one of the four essential language skills. Reading and writing require special effort to learn because listening and speaking are foundational skills, whereas reading and writing are productive skills. Developing reading skills is like building a foundation. To understand the plan for developing reading skills, one needs to examine the reading habits of proficient readers. Reading a particular piece of literature is about finding the right approach so that it becomes a pleasurable activity. A reader should engage in activities such as reading aloud, summarising, raising questions, and visualising. A good reader should focus on reading repeatedly, reading aloud, role-playing, jotting down the main points in the text, discussing, questioning, creating mental pictures, and guessing the next episode. Technology has enhanced reading skills through greater accessibility, improved comprehension, and expanded vocabulary. Reading thus serves as a crucial tool for personal and academic development by enriching cognitive functions, deepening understanding, broadening horizons, and cultivating knowledge.

Keywords: Reading, Comprehension, e-reader, scanning, skimming, extensive reading.

Language is a significant achievement in human history; it acts as a primary foundation for communication. Language acquisition is an essential part of human development because it distinguishes humans from other animals. Animal communication is limited to their needs,

but human communication is the most advanced skill. Language skills have contributed greatly to human development. Polished language skills are required to shape and groom one's personality. Language skills constitute life skills. Language skills are integral to human life. The basic skills of a language are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The "Four Language Skills" refer to the essential components of language mastery: reading, speaking, listening, and writing. These skills are interdependent, meaning effective communication often requires the simultaneous use of multiple skills (Vance). Other skills that can be learned through language learning include effective communication, dialogue, presentation, conflict resolution, leadership, and rapport-building. Reading is one of the four essential language skills. Reading and writing began with the origin of script, before literature existed in oral form. In this article, reading skills are discussed as fundamental to comprehension and various strategies for developing them are elucidated.

Reading and writing require special effort to learn because listening and speaking are foundational skills. In language acquisition, reading and writing are particularly productive skills because they require deliberate effort to understand and create meaning. Reading and writing, on the other hand, require more structured teaching, as they are not innate processes and necessitate explicit strategies for comprehension and expression (Vance). Reading requires identifying and understanding symbols written conventionally. Grabe W., in his article 'Areas of research that influence L2 reading instruction', reveals that learning to read does not occur in the same way that learning to speak does. Reading must be explicitly taught (Grabe, 2006). Reading requires sustained effort; it can become a habit that makes a person one of the most civilised.

Reading skills are the mental tools children need to decode, read, understand, and think about what they've read (Plessis). Developing reading skills is like building a foundation. The stronger the foundation, the stronger the building. In the same manner, strong reading habits

can be formed in childhood. Therefore, special efforts are taken to form good reading habits in childhood. These childhood habits shape a reader's academic and personal growth. At the initial stage, a child must begin recognising letters and words; then she or he must understand what the words mean; and finally, she or he must comprehend whole paragraphs and pages in their context. It is a highly complex process, and it is crucial to read with the eyes and interpret with the brain. However, it keeps the children engaged and fosters good habits that enhance their learning.

Defining reading can give a clearer idea of reading skills and help develop them. The Oxford English Dictionary defines reading as the 'activity or skill of looking at and comprehending the meaning of written or printed matter by interpreting the characters or symbols of which it is composed'. Learning to read means creating meaning purposefully. A reader must read the text, become part of it, and interpret and understand its meaning. The author encodes meaning in the text, and the reader decodes it. The reader tries to understand the meaning hidden behind the symbols and structures. Thus, it demonstrates the complexity and challenge of the reading process. But it can be mastered with continuous practice. It is essential to review the various purposes of reading before focusing on strategies to develop reading skills.

1. To get an education: Reading is one of the four important language sub-skills. Learning or education begins with recognising letters and words. The whole learning process begins with reading. The purpose of reading is to get an education or to become literate.
2. To get pleasure: Apart from being literate, reading is done for pure pleasure. It is an enjoyable activity. A person can get pleasure from reading various forms of literature: poetry, drama, stories, and novels.

3. To acquire information and knowledge: Books are rich sources of knowledge and information, and reading provides the reader with the information and knowledge he or she seeks. Almost all critical information and knowledge are stored in books, and individuals must read to access them.

After discussing the purpose of reading, it is equally essential to explore the types of reading. Reading can be divided into the following ways:

1. Skimming: It is a rapid reading technique in which a reader glances over the text, focusing on headings, subheadings, and bold text. It is 'to read something quickly in order to find a particular point or the main points' (Oxford). It helps to grasp the 'gist of the text', but it is not advised for a comprehensive reading. Its purposes include understanding the main idea, assessing relevance, and revising prior study.
2. Scanning: It is also a quick way to get specific information from the text. Unlike skimming, scanning is a targeted reading strategy in which a reader seeks specific information, locating answers within a text. Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines scanning as 'to look quickly but not very carefully at a document, etc.'. It is also not a comprehensive reading.
3. Intensive Reading: Here, a reader tries to read comprehensively, engages and interacts with the text. It is active reading, in which the reader participates in understanding the text by asking questions, taking notes, and constructing meaning. It helps to an academic, comprehensive and critical study of a particular text.
4. Extensive Reading: Extensive reading is reading for pleasure; it is broader reading. It includes reading longer literary texts, such as novels, dramas, and magazines. Unlike intensive reading, it is done through faster, pleasurable reading rather than deep, critical

analysis. The reader can select more engaging material for comprehension, reading it quickly without paying close attention to every word.

With the assistance of the four types of reading discussed above, a reader can employ strategies to develop reading skills effectively. To understand the plan for developing reading skills, one needs to examine the reading habits of proficient readers. A good reader can explain the skills. A reader can become a good reader only when he/she learns to read effectively, employing all four types of reading. He/she reads differently depending on the text and its purpose. A good reader skims a newspaper and reads a magazine extensively. If reading a book for pleasure, the reader may read rapidly to get the main ideas. But when researching a project, the reader may slow down to focus on details and statistics, or take notes and reread portions of the text to ensure an accurate understanding. Each of these ways of reading involves strategic decision-making by the reader who adjusts reading strategies to achieve a reading purpose (Edigar).

Reading a particular piece of literature is to find the right approach so that it becomes a pleasurable activity. A reader should choose reading material as per her/his interest, if she/he is not interested in fiction, she/he can go for non-fiction, articles, magazines and newspapers. Readers should explore various formats, including eBooks, graphic novels, audiobooks, book clubs and online discussion forums. Reading games are a new approach to improving reading skills in technology-based, evolving contexts. There are some reading games that would enrich reading activities, such as a literary scavenger hunt, book bingo, a reading challenge, guessing ends, character analysis, and reading speed. Theme selection, author studies, book swaps, reading journals, and multilingual reading offer a varied and rich reading experience.

A reader should engage in activities such as reading aloud, summarising, raising questions, and visualising. Building vocabulary is the next step that can be done with word

games and contextual guessing. Forming good reading habits includes cultivating comprehension through reading stories, participating in discussions on the read text, and keeping reading journals. A gradual introduction to interesting topics can increase readers' speed and comprehension. Reading must be an enjoyable activity rather than an achievement skill. To make reading a fun activity, a reader should read journals, magazines, and newspapers, organise storytelling and role-playing, and play word games. It is often said that 'Practice makes man perfect'; therefore, consistent practice across genres such as plays, poetry, novels, and short stories, along with targeted reading, is key to fostering greater comprehension and speed-reading. A good reader should focus on reading repeatedly, reading aloud, role-playing, jotting down the main points in the text, discussing, questioning, creating mental pictures, and guessing the next episode. Learning new words every day would foster a reader's comprehension and fluency. Therefore, readers should begin learning new words, infer word meanings from context, and select books appropriate to their reading level. Vocabulary development is best achieved through reading a varied type of material.

In the modern era, as technology and the internet have become ubiquitous, reading has undergone significant change. There has been a rise in the use of digital technology and screen time, which is shaping our reading habits. With the increase in smartphones and e-readers, digital reading has become a necessary alternative to reading books. Most popular books are audiobooks for Gen-Z, where they can listen to thousands of audiobooks instead of reading them. It offers them an opportunity to enjoy on the go while multitasking. Social media and the internet have revolutionised access to information, making vast amounts of information available to readers at their fingertips. Unfortunately, it has reduced the duration of sustained reading concentration; most readers today have difficulty focusing on specific, detailed information. The Internet inundates readers with a variety of sources, making it difficult to select the best material and sometimes diverting their attention to other forms of entertainment.

Reading becomes more challenging due to the proliferation of technology-based apps and their variety. Reading apps offer considerable variety, which makes it difficult for readers to choose the best app. They offer personalised choices based on a reader's emotional state. An AI-powered reading app directs readers to their areas of interest, which can keep them away from good books.

The most challenging and influential reading platforms are social media, which simultaneously offer a variety of both credible and misinformation, thereby significantly reducing attention span and physical reading. Social media platforms offer readers a range of book clubs and discussion forums that can serve as valuable sources of reading for pleasure and purpose. Smartphones have become a primary reading device, offering readers audiobooks and e-books, making reading and listening a combined experience. Readers seeking greater flexibility tend to prefer audiobooks, which allow them to multitask. The changes in traditional reading demonstrate a major shift in the ways we devour information from various sources. Changes in reading formats will continue with technological evolution, and readers must adapt. It is a time of transformation for readers; traditional reading is declining, making libraries appear deserted. Popular bookstores and historic libraries are closing or experiencing reduced visitor and reader traffic. A culture is changing, and a new culture is evolving, and readers need to adapt.

Technology has enhanced reading skills through greater accessibility, improved comprehension, and expanded vocabulary. It offers interactive e-readers, apps, customised fonts and displays, built-in dictionaries, and text-to-speech (TTS) engines. TTS or text-to-speech engines or TTS supporting e-readers, apps assist readers by reading aloud with visual impairment or disabilities like cataract, glaucoma and dyslexia. Overall, technology has enhanced the reading industry by providing access to a rich array of reading material across diverse sources.

A reader requires mastery to understand quickly; otherwise, reading is a complex and difficult skill. Reading involves vision, hearing, memory, language, and logic, all of which work together. If one part is weak, the whole process can break down. (Plessis). A reader has to decode the meaning encoded in the text by the author. It requires effort on the reader's part, but reading can be effortless if practised. A reader must master vocabulary to achieve reading fluency and speed. Reading skills can be developed by engaging with interesting and enjoyable texts; reading literature for pleasure can improve comprehension. It can reduce stress; a reader can read about anything that interests him/her. A literature student in India can read literature written by Indian authors such as Rabindranath Tagore, R. K. Narayan, V. S. Naipaul, Shri Aurobindo, Mulk Raj Anand, Ruskin Bond, Sudha Murthy, Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Amish Tripathi, Zumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. For a student studying English as a second or foreign language, reading material should offer a blend of rich Indian culture, experience, and diaspora. For example, Tagore's stories and his masterpiece *Gitanjali* offer readers a deep understanding of Indian culture and metaphysics. The deep spiritual and lyrical journey in *Gitanjali* enriches the reading experience. A reader should then go for an extensive reading of R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* and *Guide*. The stories in *Malgudi Days* are deeply rooted in contemporary rural India.

The reader can improve their comprehension by first reading works by Indian writers, then by classical English literature. He/she can begin by reading *Essays* by Francis Bacon, romantic poetry, Shakespearean plays, and then fiction. Reading literature will enrich his/her reading comprehension and give him/her command over the language. A reader should develop a habit of reading and gradually increase their reading speed. Books should be chosen a bit below the reader's level. While engaging with the text, a reader should ask questions, highlight, take notes, preview, reread, add new vocabulary, and achieve a thorough understanding through cognitive reading. Reading becomes enjoyable when it is practised regularly. Every skill

requires constant practice and conscious effort; reading is no exception. A reader needs to improve speed, maintain concentration, manage vocabulary, and develop critical thinking. Forming reading habits fosters personal growth and enhances academic performance by expanding knowledge. It shapes a person's personality by incorporating others' experiences and further expanding the reader's understanding.

There are several reading theories worth understanding. One notable theory is reader-response theory, which holds that meaning is created through the reader's interaction with the text. It was long thought that the writer creates meaning and fixes it within the text. Notable critics of reader-response theory who gave due weight to the reader in the creation of text meaning include Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, and David Bleich. Why does a common reader need to know the reading theory? It emphasises the reader's individual psychological and emotional reactions in shaping the text's meaning. It shifted the focus from the writer to the reader. Reading is thus an active and dynamic process that involves the reader's participation. Reading is crucial in learning new things, improving memory, and expanding knowledge.

Lifelong learning often promotes reading as a way to explore and acquire knowledge and skills applicable in real life (5 Ways Reading Can Change Your Life). Consequently, reading enhances vocabulary and concentration, broadens understanding, and fosters critical thinking. It is important to remember that the most successful leaders are also avid readers. Reading skills are vital for building key life and social abilities. Interacting with literature fosters skills such as leadership, conflict resolution, critical thinking, and interpersonal communication. Reading thus serves as a crucial tool for personal and academic development by enriching cognitive functions, deepening understanding, broadening horizons, and cultivating knowledge.

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