

LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH NEWSPAPER READING

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According to C.L. Wrenn, “Of all world languages English probably has the vocabulary which is the most copious, heterogeneous, and varied”.¹

The reason for this is that the English language has borrowed words from all languages and grown into a very rich language. Today it is considered to be the world’s most essential and useful language in communicating one’s thoughts and feelings both at the global and local level. In fact it has not only become a global phenomena but has a family of its own with all ‘varieties of Englishes’ as some scholars call within the family. So the need to learn the ‘associate official language’ has assumed paramount importance. In the words of Stephan Gramley, “English is felt to be the language of power, the language of prestige.”²

To acquire the English language people believe that the four basic skills – Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing (LSRW) – are of immense help. Of these skills, *Reading Skill* occupies a prime of place because, we, the Indians, spend considerable amount of time on reading English material than speaking the language. As a result, we can say that reading English language easily becomes part and parcel of our lives.

The English language is enshrined to be the *library language* even in the Indian constitution. So by reading English materials one can improve one’s language, particularly in a country like India where written models easily overweigh the spoken models. Hence the importance of Reading.

Reading is an activity characterized by the translation of symbols, or letters, into words and sentences that communicate information. It may mean something to the reader whose essential aim is to understand a written text, evaluate its significance, and use what he has read to enhance his knowledge or pleasure. It develops the mind, improves one’s imagination, ripens one’s creativity, etc. Improving one’s reading skills may also reduce unnecessary reading time and enable him/her to read in a more focused and selective manner. In simple, if one develops good reading skills, it will be very helpful for his future. Frank Smith rightly says thus:

Reading is a specialized and complex skill involving a number of more general skills that have to be understood in any serious analysis of the subject.³

It is, indeed, one of the mind’s most complex achievements that involves sophisticated cognitive and linguistic skills and has been described by the cognitive psychologists as *externally guided thinking*. Thus, reading is thinking under the stimulus of the printed page. It is a psycholinguistic guessing game.

Now a question may arise. What type of reading material one should keep with oneself to acquire the English language? How can one proceed meaningfully in the acquisition of that reading material? What are the strategies that develop one’s reading activity? What are the techniques of promoting one’s reading speed?

One can easily keep three types of reading material to learn the English language viz., *Light Reading*, *Apropos Reading*, and *Metaphysical Reading*. Daily newspapers, weeklies, monthlies, magazines constitute the *Light Reading* because while reading this material one need not pay enough concentration of attention. In other words, the material is more entertaining than serious and not needing much mental effort. *Apropos Reading* constitute the text books and the relevant criticism on them. While reading them one should pay attention on them as they foster your subject knowledge. The *Metaphysical Reading* includes books pertaining to philosophy and theosophy. It provides with solace and mental strength to human beings. If one keeps these three types of reading material and starts reading them one can easily improve one's English language. Milton aptly said, "A book is the precious life blood of human being" and "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and few to be chewed and digested." So, one can easily develop one's own thinking by reading materials systematically.

In the acquisition of reading skills, a newspaper may conveniently be divided into six sections. First is the section *Letters to the Editor* in a daily. The learner may read the reactions of the readers to various events that occur in the world. This may improve one's thinking besides the various linguistic nuances and samples. Then one may go to *Headlines* which give an overall record of the main news in the world. While going through this, one may come across complex words which pose problems. But the reader/learner should not look up to a dictionary immediately. He may try to read the next few lines and get the meaning of a word based on the context in which it is used. Look at the following passage.

Displaced families count their losses (*The Hindu* 07/12/2015)

The waters have receded as of now, and people are slowly attempting to return to what is left of their homes in most areas of Chennai. If the skies hold, and further flooding does not occur, then it may be safely assumed that the city has reached the 'post-impact' phase of the disaster.

In a flood scenario like this, a key characteristic of this phase is the looming spectre of epidemics and the larger question of sustaining relief and rehabilitation work.

By reading these lines one may infer that the meaning of *receded* is something to do with 'stopped or moved.' Similarly the reader may also try to guess the meanings of complex words such as *spectre*, *epidemics*, and *rehabilitation*.

The third step pertains to the news regarding regional, national, and international spheres and knowing what obtains in the region, country and abroad etc. Keeping this context in mind the learner can understand the news appropriately. Fourthly, one may turn one's attention to the *Editorial*. This is the most cerebral to the entire newspaper. Hence some extra care is to be bestowed. Though at first, one finds some difficulty in getting at the substance of the material. The learner may not feel disillusioned by this. In fact, a good dictionary would easily come to rescue to the learner. If he comes across any difficult word he must look up the dictionary and note down the meaning of that word. To illustrate the point, the *Editorial* on 04-12-2015 entitled *Ending Politics of Remission* would be some help here. In this, the word 'remission' poses problems. Similarly in the very first ten lines the following are some of the difficult words: remission, convict, stern, etc. Any good dictionary would give the meanings thus: 'a period during which a serious illness improves for a time and things get better', 'to decide and state officially in court that somebody is guilty of crime', and 'serious and difficult'. Then the reader may read further and try to get the essence of the Editorial. But s/he must bear in mind that the

looking up of dictionary again and again would lead to failure in understanding the message. He must try to guess the meaning and comprehend the theme of the Editorial.

Next appear the ‘tie up features’ from leading foreign periodicals such as *The Guardian*, *Times Literary Supplement*, and *The New York Times*. Besides these, there are many special columns which the reader can concentrate. Almost all the supplements which come on each of the days will be of immensely helpful. If the reader reads a column like ‘Know Your English’ which has been coming over the years, s/he can easily improve her/his language skills and also the usage of vocabulary in different contexts. It also gives a good exposure to the reader to the current English. Thus, a careful reading of these features improve one’s own language and enhances the mental horizons of the reader.

Sports page is another feature that easily draws the attention of any reader. By reading this page one can promote the vocabulary of sports register. This type of reading activity is technically called *Skimming* as we look quickly over the material to get a general idea of the context of the material.

After a considerable reading of newspapers, one may go to weeklies, magazines, and digests in English. The most effective way of getting information from magazines is to scan the contents of the articles, pick out and understand key words and concepts. In any useful article, one may note down some key words and sentences and preserve them. This type of reading activity is called *Scanning*. Here the reader goes through the relevant pages, runs over his eyes through it. In other words, the learner looks quickly through the text searching for specific piece of information. He may use the same technique when he looks up a dictionary for the meaning of a particular word.

Next effort must lead to longer texts like short stories, humorous features, essays, and novels. This type of reading activity that provides with pastime is called *Extensive Reading*.

Apropos reading includes relevant text books and relevant criticism on them. When one reads them one should bestow enough concentration of attention on them. One must read them carefully, slowly, intently and try to understand each and every point and understand the overall view of the subject. For instance, in the beginning one may start reading essays written by the non-natives like R.K. Narayan and then one may go to the essays written by the native speakers of English like Stephen Leacock, O’ Henry who may easily arouse curiosity and also foster one’s own English language skills. This kind of reading is called *Intensive Reading*. It involves extracting specific information.

One should not stop with light reading and specific reading as man cannot live by bread alone. He must also get some solace by reading philosophical books like *The Holy Bible*, *Koran*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Mahabharata* and other metaphysical texts. The reading of such books not only makes the mind calm but also trains the reader getting command over the philosophical content.

A word about the rate of speed that one must follow while reading the material. The speed of reading should depend on the purpose for which one reads and the level of comprehension one aims at. A good reader is one who can vary his speed on while reading. For instance, when one reads for specific learning, one may read about 100-200 wpm for better memorization. If one reads for general comprehension, the speed rate may be 200-400 wpm. But when it comes to light reading material, one may go from 400-700 and more than 700 wpm.

While reading the material one must have good eye-contact. Generally, it is believed that there should be some motion move-stop-read-move-stop-read when one reads. For the sake of convenience, the eye movement may be divided into two levels – looking at every word at one time, and looking at every word, but in groups. Look at the following sentence.

Sanya is fond of sweets.

Instead of reading this sentence as ‘*Sanya / is / fond / of / sweets*’ it is better to divide the sentence into three meaningful groups i.e. *Sanya / is fond of / sweets*. This type of level not only makes the reader to understand the meaning but also saves the time. Thus, it is always advisable to take key words or a group of words at the time of reading instead of looking at each and every word at one time. The following are certain limitations which affect reading.

- a) The habit of pointing at the words with a finger or a pencil.
- b) The habit of moving the head from side to side rather than using eye movement.
- c) Vocalization, mouthing the words audibly, using lip movements.
- d) Sub-vocalization, pronouncing the words mentally but not audibly.
- e) Perceiving only one word for eye-fixation.

Thus, by reading books in English one can learn the English language. So, the dictum ‘*language through reading*’ should be followed by everyone in India. To conclude, we may tune with Francis Bacon, the father of English essay who says thus: “*Reading maketh a full man*”.⁴

References

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