

## Students' Perceptions of Themselves as Readers and the Concept of Reading

DOI: 10.15804/tner.2015.41.3.07

### Abstract

The study was conducted on 122 first-year engineering students at the tertiary level to explore the students' perceptions of themselves as readers and the concept of reading. Data collected by open-ended brainstorming interviews with the students were classified according to the themes and presented in tables. The result of the study demonstrates that most of the students at this level wish to be good readers since they feel that reading improves their personality, word power and employability skills. The presented study aimed at finding the opinions of young adults because in the present age, more emphasis is put on the role of the learner in the language learning process. As language learning is primarily a learner-oriented activity, learners' preferences influence their learning. Interest on the part of the reader plays a vital role in developing the habit of reading. Hence, learners' needs and interests should be taken into consideration for effective learning and teaching to take place. Thus, the study shows that it is appropriate to understand students' conception of reading for promoting their interest in reading and enhancing their reading skills.

**Keywords:** *reading, learners, students' perceptions, academic success*

### Introduction

Reading is a skill which enables one to comprehend a message or information. It is a complex activity that involves both perception and thought. Devarajan (1989) defines reading as the art of interpreting printed and written words. Irvin (1998) 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". Humans have been reading for ages and thus words of knowledge have been passed on from generation to generation. Reading influences the promotion of one's personal development in particular and social progress in general. Reading has increasingly been the object of empirical and theoretical investigations for a long time. Smith and Robinson (1980) define reading as "an active attempt on the part of the reader to understand a writer's message". According to Toit (2001) "reading is a process of thinking, recalling and relating concepts under the functioning of written words". Reading is a skill that banishes ignorance.

Reading is the ability to recognise and examine words or sentences and understand the information within. It is a cognitive process of understanding a written linguistic message and examining and grasping the meaning of written or printed characters, words or sentences. Reading is the ability to understand words contained in a document and make use of the knowledge for personal growth and development (Dadzie, 2008). It is the art of interpreting printed and written words, the most effective process of conscious learning, which influences the extent and accuracy of information as well as the attitudes, morals, beliefs, judgement and action of readers (Panigrahi and Panda, 1996; Eyre, 2005). Reading is always considered as an important element in a person's culture and education. This habit is necessary for a healthy intellectual growth and plays a crucial role in enabling a person to achieve language proficiency (Grabe and Stoller, 1997). Regular and systematic reading sharpens the intellect, refines the emotions, elevates tastes and provides perspectives for one's living, and thereby prepares a person for effective participation in the social, religious, cultural and political life. Thus, a reader not only learns what has been discovered by others, but also builds on the foundation of the information that he receives through reading.

In any academic or higher learning context, reading is perceived as the most prominent academic skill. It is through reading that learners learn new information and become able to synthesize, evaluate, interpret and learn more about their subject matter. Reading is a very important issue, which is not only about enjoyment but a necessity; the basic tool of education (Mokatsi, 2005). Students' expertise in reading is globally recognized as a sign of competency. Exams such as IELTS, TOEFL and BEC require the candidates to have a good degree of proficiency along with other language skills such as listening, speaking and writing.

The reading skill is essential to succeed at college. If students cannot read at the expected level, they are unable to keep pace with the curriculum and almost always left with poor qualification. This can result in limited career choice. Failure to learn to read may trigger off inappropriate behaviour within the classroom

setting to divert attention from the perceived inadequacies (Chapman & Tunmer, 2002). A learning problem may manifest itself as a behavioral problem. For most students, difficulties in reading are preventable if they receive effective classroom instruction that is tailored to meet their needs and interests (Clay, 1998). Thus, reading skills are always positively correlated with academic success.

Pursuing an engineering degree requires extensive reading practices which will enable the learners to extend their overall development. Students of the engineering programme have to possess an ever increasing range of skills to maintain relevance with the global environment of the new millennium. To be updated, they need reading skills, which is a vital component recognized by academia and industry alike. According to Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson, without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfillment and job success will inevitably be lost (1985). Reading skills are essential for an engineering student who aspires to carry out his or her professional practice in the global arena. Inadequate and ineffective reading skills reflect badly on the individual and the profession. With effective reading skills an engineering graduate gets more employment opportunities and increased career-improvement prospects. Once an engineer progresses beyond the entry level, he or she spends a lot of time reading technical material, analyzing it and responding to it. According to the Berkeley alumni survey, supervisors spend an average of ten percent of their time critiquing the writing of others, but this amount nearly doubles when engineers move into positions like project head, department head or division director. Moreover, engineers at all levels must be able to assimilate written technical information efficiently. Hence, the reading skills of the students at the tertiary level must be improved.

In the past, researchers made a lot of effort to examine learners' reading habits (e.g. Mokhtari, & Sheorey, 1994). Reading habits are associated with students' gender, age, educational background, academic performance and professional growth. Magazines and newspapers are found to be the most preferred reading materials of teenagers. It is also clear that informational reading is the main purpose of adult reading and their most popular books are adventure, crime, social problems, novels, politics, and sports in ranking sequence. Platt (1986) reviews several selected studies on adolescents' reading preferences and concludes that adolescents do read extensively in books, periodicals, and newspapers. A study by Cabral and Tavares (2002), concerning the reading habits of students, reports that students read for academic purposes (97.8%) almost as much as they use reading as a hobby (97.2%). The study by Hassell & Rodge (2007) shows that 72% of students read in their leisure time, of whom 22% read constantly and 50% read when they get a chance. McKenna, Kearn and Ellsworth (1995) and Hassell and

Rodge (2007) reveal that girls have more favourable attitudes than boys toward both recreational and academic reading.

## **Objective**

The issue of students' perceptions about reading, which is the subject of the research, is not used to decide the academic scores of the participants. The main purpose of the study was to find out students' opinions about the reading habit, which helps in their personality development and their self-concept as readers.

## **Methodology**

The participants in this study were 122 first-year engineering students at an autonomous engineering institution in south India, who were in their first year of studies in the 2013/2014 academic year. There were 65 female and 57 male respondents and their ages ranged from 18 to 19. In this study, the data was collected by using the brainstorming method with the help of interviews. The participants in the study were asked about their perceptions of themselves as readers and their perceptions of reading.

Prior to data collection, a week was given to the students to ponder over their opinions regarding the reading habit in general. Specifically, the participants were asked to think about themselves as readers. They were asked to come prepared for the interview. During the data collection period, a platform was established by means of the brainstorming method. Each student was asked to express his/her opinion on reading. In this interactive process, every student expressed their perceptions about themselves as readers. Then they were asked about their opinions on reading. Sample articles for each question were given to the students with the aim of providing ideas of possible answers. The responses were written on the board. During the brainstorming session, the plus signs were added for the repeated replies and their frequency was calculated. After all the opinions were collected, an evaluation of each question was carried out.

The answers written on the board by the students during the brainstorming for the evaluation were put to the vote. The items that were not suitable for the subject in the vote were eliminated and the remaining articles which were similar were combined and their frequencies were determined and recorded. After the study, the data obtained was categorized by evaluating and recorded in tables.

## Findings

The students' perceptions of themselves as readers are categorized under three headings in Table 1.

The definitions of reading that were made by the participants are given with categories in Table 2.

**Table 1.** The students' answers to the question: How do you evaluate yourself as reader based on your reading capability?

Categories	Students' thoughts
I am a good reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I use what I have read when speaking and writing.</li> <li>• I read materials that exceed my ability.</li> <li>• I am a good writer for I read widely</li> <li>• My reading capability helps me to access new words and helps me to decode unknown words.</li> <li>• I share what I read</li> <li>• I share what I read in social media</li> <li>• I feel good</li> <li>• I possess good word power</li> <li>• I make predictions about the text and check them</li> <li>• I am a good speaker because I read widely</li> <li>• I can relate things and ideas</li> <li>• I choose different genres every time I read</li> <li>• I use reading strategies effectively</li> <li>• I actively engage in the text I read</li> </ul>
I am an average reader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can guess the meaning of certain words in a sentence.</li> <li>• I look at examples in the dictionary to learn how to use a word.</li> <li>• I think that being able to read and comprehend information is important.</li> <li>• I read only when there is a need</li> <li>• I read less because of other activities</li> <li>• I read rarely because of the unavailability of books</li> <li>• I don't read much because of time constraint</li> <li>• I cannot read technical books without guidance</li> <li>• I read only when motivated</li> <li>• I read for a purpose</li> <li>• I am aware of strategies</li> </ul>
I do not read because	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I begin to panic when I start reading</li> <li>• My vocabulary is very limited</li> <li>• I do not get support from my family</li> <li>• I cannot concentrate for a longer time</li> <li>• I feel I do not possess the skills needed for efficient reading.</li> <li>• My comprehending ability is poor</li> <li>• I was not taught to read widely</li> </ul>

Categories	Students' thoughts
I do not read because	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I never read</li> <li>• I lack self-motivation</li> <li>• I don't like reading books</li> </ul>

Based on their replies, the students are categorized under 7 segments. They are as follows:

**Segment 1:** 'Bookworms' (11%). This segment can be called bookworms. They spend a lot of time reading. They read hardback and e-books, getting through twelve books a month.

**Segment 2:** 'Love to read' (21%). They read 3 or 4 books per month. They are the second most regular book readers.

**Segment 3:** 'The net generation' or 'given the chance...' (17%). This group reads books nearly as often as segment 2, i.e., about 3 books a month. They like to read magazines. Despite being frequent readers they do not seem to love reading books as much as segments 1 and 2. They rarely read with the purpose of getting information.

**Segment 4:** 'No time to read' (15%). This segment does not read books often or have many books in their homes. Despite this they are fairly positive about reading books and would read if they had time.

**Segment 5:** 'Reluctant readers' (18%). This segment reads just one book a year on average. They prefer to read biographies, sports and special interest books. They have a less positive attitude towards reading in general. They feel that reading is boring and hard work.

**Segment 6:** 'Don't like reading' (10%). This segment does not tend to enjoy reading books. Nine out of ten never read e-books.

**Segment 7:** 'Don't read' (8%). This segment has very low levels of reading. Three quarters do not read any books in a typical year. Many were not read stories by their parents and do not enjoy reading for pleasure or getting information.

**Table 2.** Students' answers to the question: How do you define reading?

Categories	Students' thoughts	F
<i>It is a visual task</i>	• It is the process of looking at and understanding what is written.	5
	• Reading means extracting visual information from any given codes or systems.	4
	• Reading is a highly valuable skill.	11
	• It is a way to learn grammar and vocabulary.	6
	• It is the most important tool in academic advancement.	4

Categories	Students' thoughts	F
<i>It is nice to read</i>	• I don't understand what I read, but it is nice to read.	5
	• It is a fundamental survival skill.	3
	• Reading is making meaning from print.	1
	• It is not just for school but for life	3
	• It is a social act that has to be shared with others.	1
	• Reading is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them.	4
	• It helps me to keep myself happy.	2
	• It helps to acquire knowledge.	6
<i>It improves personality</i>	• Personality is continuously modified through reading.	7
	• It elevates lateral thinking.	3
	• It makes us happier and more likely to feel that the things we do in life are worthwhile.	6
	• It makes one think more critically about what is right and wrong in society.	1
	• Reading is a process of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning and problem solving.	2
	• Reading is a crucial factor affecting intellectual and emotional growth.	6
<i>It is the basic skill</i>	• It is one of the essential aspects of the functioning of human beings.	2
	• Reading serves as a form of recreation and enjoyment.	4
	• It aids in social and personal adjustment.	2
	• The concept is easy, but the process is a lot more complex.	3
	• Reading keeps us better informed.	5
<i>It is a boring task</i>	• Reading is, for many, a passive, boring activity, performed constantly in isolation.	
	• It helps to have a better understanding of oneself.	2
	• It contributes to competency in writing.	4
	• Reading takes a large amount of effort.	1
	• Learning to read is complex.	3
	• Reading and writing are a developmental continuum rather than gained skills.	1
	• Required information, skill and more information can be gained through reading.	1
<i>It is fun</i>	• Reading is a gateway to a whole universe of enjoyment and learning.	1
	• The goal of all reading activity is the comprehension of meaning.	1
	• Mental growth is associated with the acquisition of reading skills	2
	• Reading does not mean that a person needs to understand everything he reads, because people read for different reasons and purposes.	2
	• Reading takes a large amount of effort.	2

The majority of the students in the research group admitted that they liked reading books. They consider reading as a highly valuable skill and as the best way to learn grammar and vocabulary. Many students said that reading is a fundamental survival skill. For some, reading is a passive activity that takes a large amount of effort. The students at the tertiary level have a great desire to improve their reading habits. Stipek (1984) observes that students enter college expecting to be successful and feeling good about themselves. When young adults enter college, their conception about reading is already substantially formed. At the same time, the impact of the school environment cannot be overlooked. According to Hoge, Smit and Hanson (1990), it is a combination of school factors, family, and innate intelligence that appears to be an essential ingredient to increasing students' self-esteem during academic years. One of the participants said: *"I just feel like I'm always hopping from assignment to assignment, class to class, and appointment to appointment. And by the time I actually get to sit down and do stuff, it's nighttime and I have to do homework."* Lack of time, again and again, comes up as the reason why students do not read as much as they want to. *"I just don't carry a book around with me because I should be using my time for college,"* says a participant. She also adds: *"personally, when I have a load of pages to read for class, I'm really sick of looking at words by the end of it."* Others say that regular reading of authentic books will help to improve reading skills. Many feel that student motivation is a key factor in successful reading. According to Guthrie et al., a student who is motivated to read will read more often (2004). *"A way in which college libraries can highlight leisure reading materials is by making them more visible,"* a student remarks. *"Honestly, a lot of tertiary level students don't realize that academic libraries have leisure reading books,"* she says. *"Books transport me to another world. I feel I'm a character in the story as the plot unfolds. I don't feel merely a distant observer,"* says a student of a chosen group, who claims to be a voracious reader.

The study also aimed at finding out methods through which tertiary level students can be made to develop their reading habits. A questionnaire was delivered to the research group.

**Table 3.** The priority among eleven methods for developing reading habits

Sl. No.	Methods	Percent	Rank
1	Positive attitude towards the reading habit	84	I
2	Motivation by teachers	81	II
3	Parental guidance and encouragement	74	III
4	Personal book choice	73	IV



Sl. No.	Methods	Percent	Rank
5	Constant use of dictionaries	70	V
6	Having clear reading goals	69	VI
7	Using the right style	66	VII
8	Visiting libraries	63	VIII
9	Well-constructed reading materials	59	IX
10	Interactive booktalks	55	X
11	Reading e-magazines	49	XI

The students in the research group strongly agreed that positive perception of the reading habit would elevate one's skills in reading. 84% of the participants expressed this opinion. 81% of the participants said that motivation by teachers would help to improve the reading habit. 74% of the group felt that parental guidance and encouragement were needed for increasing one's reading habit. 73% of the participants were of the opinion that personal book choice was essential for improving the reading habit. Several studies affirm that book choice should come from the student rather than being imposed by the teacher (Bozack, 2011; Davila & Patrick, 2010; Jenkins, 2009; Nichols & Cormack, 2009). Choosing books according to personal interests raises students' level of motivation, encourages them to adopt a positive attitude and perform better in this regard (Bozack, 2011; Gibson, 2010; Davila & Patrick, 2010; Jenkins, 2009; Nichols & Cormack, 2009; Merisuo-Storm, 2006). Constant use of dictionaries also helps in regular reading practice. Having clear reading goals is necessary for developing reading skills, claimed 69% of the group. Visiting libraries and well-constructed reading materials are their next choice for developing the reading habit. 55% of the participants were of the opinion that interactive booktalks would help in enhancing the reading habit. Reading e-magazines will also lead to an increased reading skill. From their responses it is also observed that the use of smart phones plays a major role in affecting the reading habits. Pivec (1998) carried out an investigation into teenagers' reading habits and reported that the main distractions in attracting teenagers' interest were television and the internet.

## **Conclusion**

In the present age, a lot of emphasis is put on the role of the learner in the language learning process, as language learning is primarily a learner-oriented activity. Thus, learners' needs and interests should be taken into consideration

for effective learning and teaching to take place. Reading is one such area, where learners' preferences influence their learning. To improve reading instruction it may be useful to examine the teaching practice from students' perspective. Gollop (2000) states that when one seeks information from students, the information should be obtained from the students themselves, and it is necessary to find out whether reading programmes are effective. Lloyd-Smith & Tarr, (2000) believe that there is a role for educational research to include students in decisions regarding their learning and valuing their views and opinions. This idea is supported by Williams, (2001) who believes that by allowing students a voice, valuable information can be provided to teachers regarding the effectiveness of their teaching. Hence, it is appropriate to know the self-conception of reading of the first-year engineering students.

Teachers must help students to realize the objective of reading and to look up on himself or herself as a reader. Wheat (1995) states that teachers should take into account two phases of interest. First, the interest of the student must somehow be captured if he/she is to read; and second, teachers must help the student to make reading a habitual activity. Indeed, at the point when reading becomes a permanent mode of behavior, it acquires a motivational force of its own. Self-concept is closely related to reading success, and the student who does not see himself/herself as a reader will rarely develop the reading habit (Ahuja, 1991). Hence, students at the tertiary level must be motivated to take up reading.

## **Recommendation**

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are made:

- Students who struggle with reading often avoid the discomfort by failing to even try. Hence, they should be enlightened about the nuances of reading through orientation programmes.
- Teachers should help students realize the objective of reading and help students to look at themselves as readers.
- Language teachers can promote the reading habit of students in several ways. They can help students to find happiness and enjoyment in reading.
- Teachers should encourage the reading habit by introducing different reading strategies to students.
- Students should be praised from time to time for showing progress in reading.
- Checklists can be kept to note the improvement of each student every week.

- Reading materials that students themselves may feel the need of should be provided.
- Many students admit that they are unable to spare time in their everyday activity. So regular reading hours can be included in the academic schedule to encourage reading practice.
- Books that are of the immediate interest of students should be made available in department libraries.
- Booktalks should be encouraged in the classroom setting.

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