

Factors and Issues affecting the reading proficiency among engineering students in ESL Contexts: A study

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Abstract:

This study attempts mainly to explore various reading pedagogies employed by English language instructors and to understand certain teaching methodologies, materials, and evaluation techniques. At the outset, the importance of students' reading proficiency is understood. In the review section, some relevant studies about the development of reading skills and various approaches to improve reading proficiency have been discussed. The need for achieving proficiency in reading through some the useful methods, materials and evaluation techniques are critically reviewed. A mixed method of using both qualitative and quantitative analysis is used to understand the reading proficiency. Further, the data collected through quantitative methods such as survey is analysed and is used to triangulate along with classroom observations and teacher interviews. Most students believed that vocabulary, word familiarity and dictionaries played a huge role in enhancing reading skills. Anxiety, reading for short durations, culture, mother tongue, and group reading do not seem to impact reading efficiency. Finally, the conclusion is made based on the review of the literature and the research data collected.

Keywords: Reading Efficiency, ESL, Teaching Methodology, Material, Evaluation.

Introduction:

In the present context of the globalized world, the levels of English proficiency have reached new heights. Enhancing students' reading proficiency, depends a great deal on individual commitment and motivation. Though most of the prescribed reading texts are accessible to the students, not many use these as materials for developing reading efficiency. Affordability and availability are not a constraint anymore. However, the materials remain largely unused. Limited engagement does not lead to improvement in reading proficiency. Greenwood (1998, p.5) rightly points out that teachers fail to recognize the potentiality of reading, and they neglect/ ignore it in the classroom. It is observed that vocabulary is a big challenge to students in the reading process. Thamarana (2015) mentioned that the 'Visual Scaffolding' is a multimedia related strategy in which the language used in instruction, becomes more understandable by using various media like drawings, photographs along with providing audio to listen to the texts. This strategy is useful in teaching vocabulary (Thamarana and Narayana, 77). Once the students engage with a text and fail to understand the meaning of a few words, they lose interest in reading further. In fact, the next reading passage at another given time may be, discouraging too. The use of an electronic dictionary, in the form of thesaurus is quite common, given the current technology in their mobile phones, but discouraging the use of such phones while in class poses yet another challenge. Thus, students' weaknesses, coupled with the enforcement of rigid rules, affects the positive impact of reading sessions. The other issue that students face is syntax, given the weak understanding of grammar. Further, long sentences, inferences, concentration and interest could be contributing factors for poor reading skills. The ubiquitous use of technology in the form of interesting video and computer games, has apparently robbed students of any interest in reading. Thus, seems to be of paramount importance when it comes to explaining the weak reading skills among the students. Now a day, the concept of free time is questionable, with technology take over. Students would rather play online games, chat on the web, use Facebook, than reading.

Review of Literature:

The 'Reading' component of English Language for English Language Learners has always been a very challenging task. The 'sink or swim' mentality (Clara Brown, 2011) makes 'reading comprehension' a tough challenge even to those who are motivationally driven to doing well. The interactive process 1, a widely-recognized model which explains 'Reading' and 'Listening' comprehension, states that comprehension is the outcome of the interaction between linguistic and background knowledge (Dubin and Bycina, 1991). Background knowledge is the knowledge of context in which the text is written. Not being aware of the context of the text, many readers find it difficult to clearly follow and this creates

confusion in the minds of the readers. Thus, comes the difficulty of being unable to correlate the questions to the correct answers. It should be noted if the answers were to be 'direct', the correlation would not be very difficult, but logically arriving at an answer, in other words, 'inferring', becomes difficult. Besides, in 'reading comprehension' a reader can read a text back and forth (Thompson, 1995). This helps in correlating to the next, but even this practice fails if the basic understanding of the text and the context in which it should be understood is not clear. So, opening up the reader's mind to think of 'what may follow next' in the reading text is crucial. Thus, the importance of background knowledge, which Clara Brown (2001) says should not be overlooked, and that learners should be supported with, will be crucial background context in boosting the understanding levels of the readers. This will further help them to anticipate, to know what to look forward for, and gradually, the task of reading, understanding and inferring becomes a mentally affordable task. According to Peregoy and Boyle (2004), when readers can anticipate what the reading is going to be about, they can generate reasonable predictions, making much more sense out of the reading. Most of the language learning and teaching strategies are intended to achieve necessary skills like Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing (Thamarana 2015, pp.76). On the same lines, linguistic knowledge meant knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, whereas background knowledge meant content knowledge of the reading text.

Scaffolding, as suggested by Clara Brown (2011), is a technique that helps in making reading comprehension easier by encouraging to overcome language barriers (by familiarizing students with related vocabulary) by providing culture-specific example and by enabling the students to read and understand better. Being anchored on Stephen Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory (1985a), this technique also suggests that comprehension is enhanced when both linguistic knowledge and background knowledge are sufficiently dealt with, for benefit of the readers. Thus, in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (1978, p. 86), English language learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge in their native language are to be taken as stepping stones to build the effectiveness of 'reading comprehension'. There are some theories of reading which explain the nature of reading, the various factors that need to be considered, and the studies in this regard which explain reading as a mental process. Thamarana (2016) mentioned that "a good reader with an average speed (250-500 wpm) of reading of magazines, newspapers used for regular reading through which one can comprehend 70% of the content" (Thamarana and T, 4). There is a psycho-linguistic view of reading which states that reading is not a linear process, but readers understand and hypothesize while reading, based on their own background knowledge of the text and also on the background knowledge of how language works (Goodman, 1970). (b) The Schema theory states that knowledge is systematically organized (Rumelhart, 1980). A schema is

made up of distinct components or parts which have been ordered in a particular way. The various tasks of anticipating, understanding, storing and retrieving upon necessity are all guided by these schemata which a reader possesses and uses naturally. Schema theory states that the reader, when he reads and understands, does so by combining the textual understanding as also his understanding of the world which he always carries at the back of his mind. The stored mental information, which is schemata, helps thus in the reading process.

Objectives of the Study:

- (1) To explore the reading pedagogies and strategies employed by English language instructors.
- (2) To understand the teaching methodology, materials, and evaluation techniques.

Research questions:

- (1) What are the reading pedagogies employed by English language instructors at Under-graduation Level?
- (2) How are the teaching methodology, materials, and evaluation carried out for English language classes?

Research Methodology:

In this study, the empirical research aims to focus on the reading challenges faced by English language readers and the pedagogical approaches of English language teachers. An attempt has been made to explore the reading curriculum, and evaluation procedures, difficulties faced by non-native English language readers at the undergraduate level. Nunan (1999, p. 231) points out that, "A questionnaire is an instrument for the collection of data, usually in written form, consisting of open and / or closed questions and other probes requiring a response from subjects." This is one of the most preferred methods to collect data. In this method, a set of questions is given, the answers to which lead us to proving our hypothesis/ opinion or assumption. These questions are based on certain variable/ constructs which form the focus of our discussion. The questions asked are based on a Likert scale, where the options range from 1- strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree. The questions can be open ended, which gives the respondents the option of giving detailed answers, based on their opinions; they can also be closed questions where the answers are restricted to a 'yes', 'no', 'neutral' etc.

Strategies and Techniques of Reading:

Reading is the fundamental building block upon which people's intellectual abilities are constructed. We are all aware of how crucial reading is. In basic education in particular, it is given the highest attention. Many people think that reading is a reliable indicator of one's scholastic achievement.

A basic idea underpins the majority of the courses we are taught: read, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and obtain knowledge. Thus, it is impossible to dispute that reading is one of the most sought-after abilities. One way to translate writing into meaning is by reading. It enables the reader to interact with the message and translate a written word into a meaningful language with independence, comprehension, and fluency. Certain reading strategies can make us better and more thorough readers if they are mastered at an early age. These abilities may not always be acquired as strict theories or guidelines, but once fully grasped, they can undoubtedly improve reading abilities and raise the amount and quality of work we produce after reading. These skills might not necessarily be learned as rigid theories or rules but if understood well once they can definitely enhance the reading skills and increase the quality and quantity of output that we get from after reading.

There are few reading techniques and styles:

- 1 Scanning.
- 2 Skimming.
- 3 Active Reading.
- 4 Detailed.
- 5 Speed.
- 6 Structure-Proposition-Evaluation
- 7 Survey-Question-Read-Recite-Review.

Scanning:

Reading quickly to locate specific information is known as scanning. When we need to locate specific information fast, we can use the reading strategy of scanning. In scanning, we read a passage with a question in mind and ignore irrelevant details in order to find the answer. It is also possible to describe scanning the text as a reading technique that is employed to extract certain points by examining the entire text. Readers can quickly scan a book's summary, preface, or opening and closing chapters to identify its key points. This method is used, for instance, to look up a name in the telephone handbook. The question of how to scan a paragraph or the desired text.

Skimming

Skimming is a deliberate, selective reading approach where we concentrate on a text's primary ideas. We purposefully omit text that offers information, anecdotes, statistics, or other elaboration when skimming. This method of reading is used to grasp the main ideas of the entire text. This method is typically applied when reading a magazine or newspaper. Using this method, we read rapidly to grasp the essential ideas and largely ignore the details. It is helpful for getting a sneak peek at a passage before reading it in detail or for regaining comprehension of a passage after reading it in detail.

Extensive and Intensive reading

The pleasure of reading is having unrestricted access to all types of written content. You can become a proficient reader with practice, regardless of whether you're concerned about your reading speed or your capacity to quickly grasp concepts.

Extensive reading:

The ability to freely consume any type of written content is what makes reading enjoyable. You can become a proficient reader with practice, regardless of whether you're concerned about your reading speed or your capacity to quickly understand concepts. Make it a habit to read everything, including business reports and novels. You should read a lot if you want to make the most of your reading experience.

Intensive Reading:

With intensive reading, students are expected to read the short text attentively and thoroughly in order to fully comprehend it. Students who engage in intensive reading do so with particular learning objectives and assignments. It is comparable to extensive reading, in which students read books for pleasure and to improve their general reading abilities. The students read a brief text and arranged the events in chronological order. One of the most important skills we can acquire to improve our comprehension of information is intensive reading. when we are required to read a report for work

Students' Questionnaire: The students' questionnaire, based on the five-point Likert scale had the options - 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neutral', 'agree', and 'strongly agree'. It has two sections, one for demographics and the other for the main study variables. The first section was to elicit responses about the demographics of the respondents, so that information from this section could be used to correlated data from the main study variables, and draw suitable inferences. The second section which covered the main areas of focus in the study as regards difficulties faced during reading, were leading questions. The reason was the responses could be weighed with more accuracy, because they would have to be critically analyzed by the respondents, before being given. The questions covered the cognitive, affective, socio-cultural and pedagogical factors that play a role in the difficulties faced by English language readers. A few of the variables were grammar, some of the questions in the students' motivation, noise, learner-centred approach etc. questionnaire was 'qualitative 'nature.

316 students participated in the main study. The questionnaire consisted of thirty questions. The chosen college has students from different departments of Engineering like Computer Science, Electrical, Electronic and Mechanical participating. The researcher chose these students not only because they had predominantly non-native students of English, but also

because the researcher had better access to these students. Further, it should be noted that these students come to study in these colleges, after having done their secondary schooling from various parts of the country. Therefore, it is a highly representative population of undergraduate colleges.

Data Analysis and Interpretation:

It is understood by the demographics that regardless of the gender, boys and girls alike at the undergraduate level, come from homes where half the parents are Bachelor degree holders, and or Master degree holders. Irrespective of what their mother tongues are, more than half of them come from home where there is an English-speaking environment. The dominating use of English while with friends (84.8%) or with relatives (43.4%) cannot go unnoticed. Most of the students in the current survey are from the Engineering college with English as the medium of communication at school is a startling 92.7%. Thereby, the impact of English on students whether at school, at college or at home is undeniably dominating. The commonplace usage of English only adds to the exposure and contact with English language. When students talk freely, they use English and also very infrequently switch to other languages, despite having the choice to switch over to any other language. It is interesting to note that a few never switch to any other language while speaking in English. In fact, most of the students are equally comfortable with their mother tongue, if not more, but they do not follow this to interfere with their English language speaking environment. They seem to enjoy speaking in English. Though 229 had learnt English at school and around 96% come from English medium schools, it is certainly surprising that their reading abilities are far less as compared to their oral communication skills in English.

The results procured from the results of the students' questionnaire survey have been classified into four categories, i.e., 'very high', 'high', 'low' and 'very low'. The interpretation key for the above categories is:

1.00 -1.99= very low (very poor)

2.00-2.99 = low (below average)

3.00-3.99 high (good)

4.00 + - very high (excellent)

Tables 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 below present the results of the students' questionnaire survey in accordance with this interpretation key.

Section – A: Cognitive Variables affecting the reading abilities of students

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
1	Proficiency helps in reading more complex material	3.58	0.868
2	Being familiar with a variety of words makes reading easy	4.16	0.902
4	Vocabulary is a valuable predictor for good reading comprehension skills	4.15	0.794
6	Pausing while reading increases comprehension	3.57	0.839
8	More educated readers find reading easy	3.81	0.922
12	Good grammar simplifies the Reading process	4.08	0.76
14	Dictionaries are big help to reader	4.17	0.804
15	Reading speed is better when proficiency is better	3.92	0.739
18	Familiarity with topics makes reading easier	4.08	0.76
20	Making inferences during reading tasks is very essential	3.63	0.828
24	Reading for short duration brings better reading efficiency	3.52	0.863
25	Knowledge of grammatical structures helps improve reading	3.92	0.771
26	Concentration is significant for good reading skills	4.11	0.73
30	Reading is the easiest skills compared to listening, writing and speaking	3.42	1.037

Table 1.1

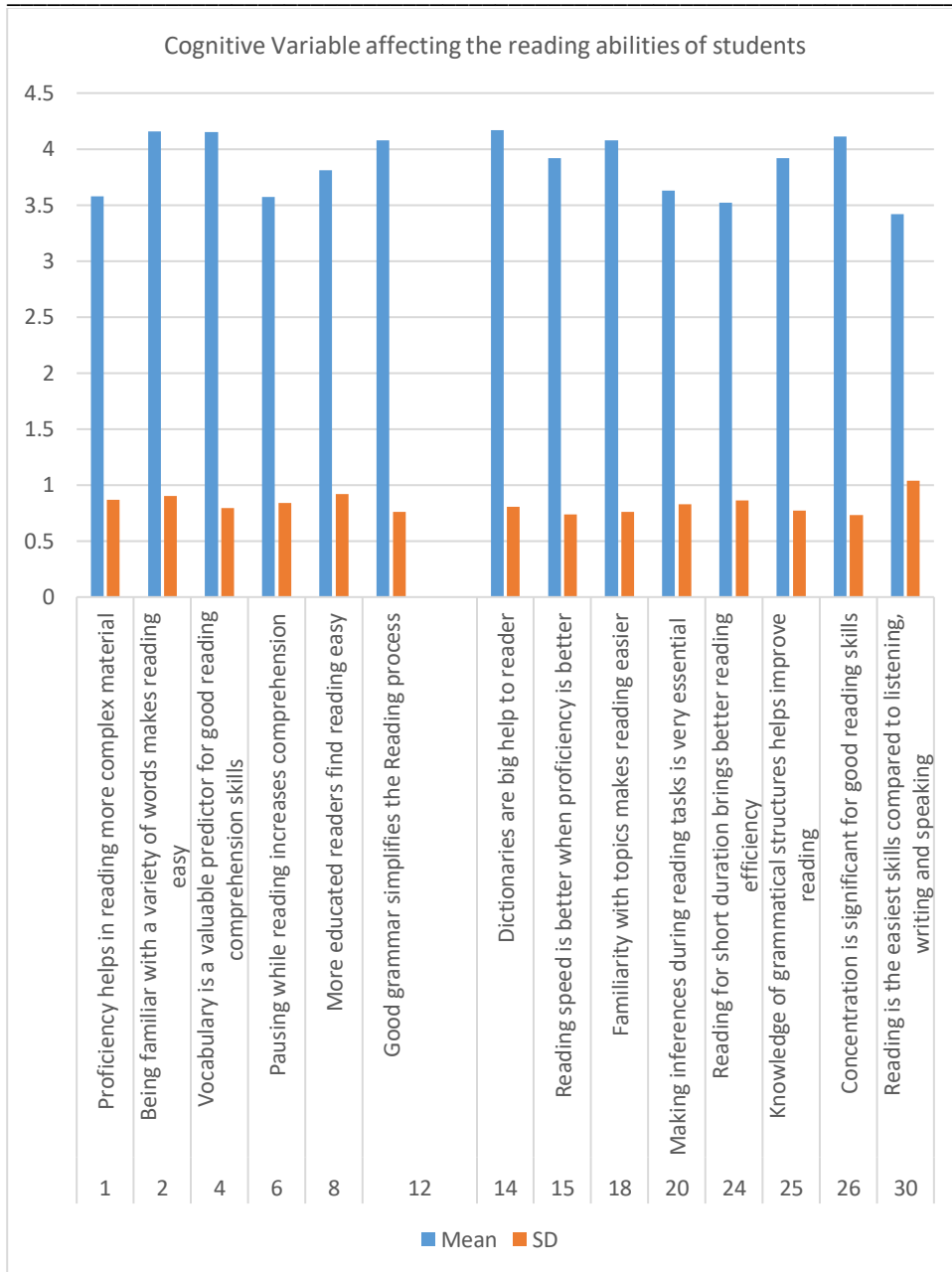


Figure 1.1

This section of the questionnaire consists of 14 questions that deals with the cognitive factors that influence the reading abilities of English language learners. For item 1 (proficiency helps more complex material) the mean score is 3.58 whereas for item 2 (Being familiar with a variety of words makes reading easy) mean score is 4.16. The mean score for the statement, "vocabulary is a valuable predictor for good reading comprehension skills" is 4.15. Item 4 (Pausing while reading increases comprehension) has 3.57 and mean score for the item 5 (More educated readers find reading easy) has 3.81. For item 6 (Good grammar simplifies the reading process) the mean score is 4.08 whereas the mean score for the item 7 (Dictionaries are a big help to readers) is 4.17. For item "reading speed is better when proficiency is better" has 3.92 mean score whereas the statement, "familiarity with topics makes reading easier" is very low. For item 10 (Making inferences during reading tasks is very essential) the mean score is 3.63. For item 11 (reading for short duration brings better reading efficiency) the questionnaire survey mean is 3.52 and for the item 12 (knowledge of grammar structures helps improve reading) the mean score is 3.92. For item 13 (Concentration is significant for good reading skills) the mean score is 4.11 whereas the mean score for the statement, "Reading is the easiest skills compared to listening, writing and speaking) is 3.42.

Section -B Socio cultural variable factors

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
7	Responsible students learn faster because they correct their errors faster	3.7	0.891
9	Mother tongue influences English reading efficiency	3.27	0.974
11	Familiar environments enhance reading capability	3.74	0.769
19	Noise levels affect reading and understanding	4	0.896
28	Cultural backgrounds decide	3.41	0.859

	importance attached to reading		
29	A reading environment at home produces better readers	3.96	0.857

Table1.2

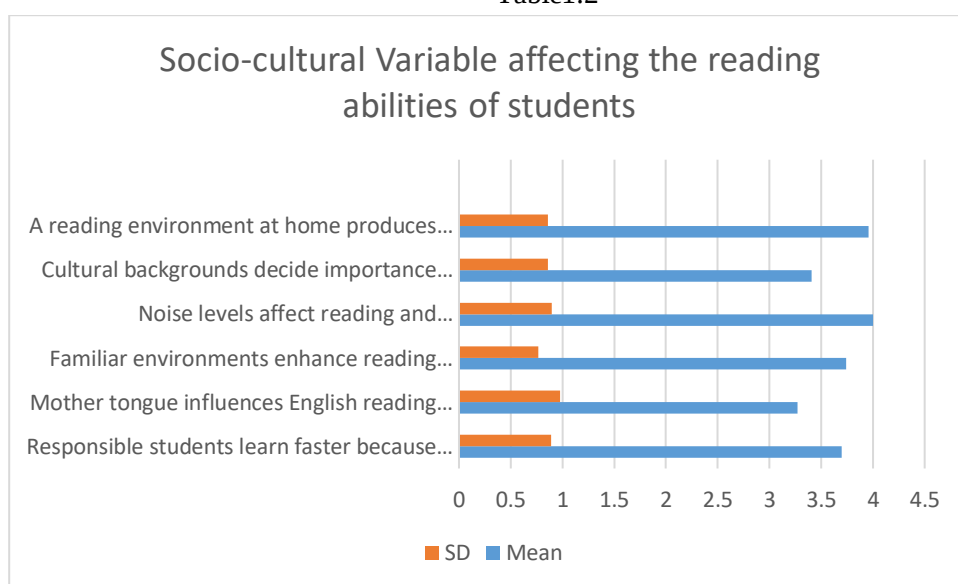


Figure 1.2

Section B of the questionnaire consists of six questions that deal with the socio-cultural factors and discusses the results of table 1.2 that influence the reading abilities of English language learners. For item 7 (responsible students learn faster because they correct their errors faster) the mean score is 3.7 whereas for the mean score of item 9 (Mother tongue influences English reading efficiency) is 3.28. For the item 11 (Familiar environments enhance reading capability) the mean score is 3.74 and for the item 19 (Noise level affect reading and understanding) the mean score is 4.00. The mean score of the item 28 (Cultural backgrounds decide importance attached to reading) is 3.44 whereas the mean score for the item 29 (A reading environment at home produces better readers) is 3.96.

Section -C Affective Variables affecting reading abilities of students

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
3	Motivation is significant to building vocabulary	4	0.807
16	Interest in English language increases reading ability	3.94	0.824
17	Anxiety is a significant factor affecting reading comprehension	3.6	0.846
23	Confident readers find Reading easy	4.09	0.819

Table1.3

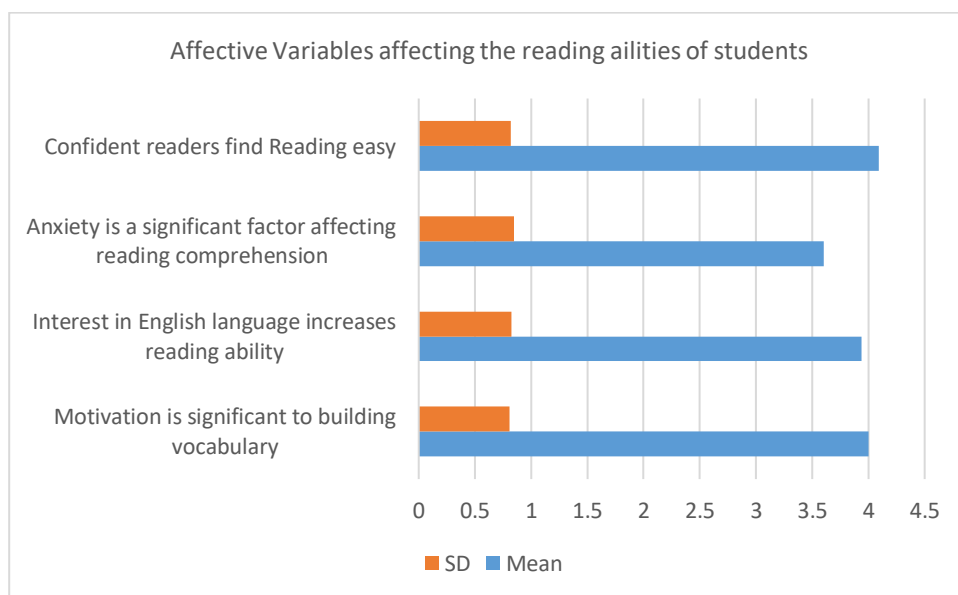


Figure 1.3

This section of questionnaire consists of four questions that deal with affective factors and discusses the results of table 1.3 that influence the reading abilities of English language learners. For item 3 (Motivation is significant to building vocabulary), the mean scores in

the questionnaire survey is 4.00 whereas for the item 16 (Interest in English language increases reading ability) the questionnaire survey has a mean score of 3.94. For item 17 (Anxiety is a significant factor affecting reading comprehension) the mean score is 3.60 and for item 23 (Confident readers find reading easy), has 4.09 mean score.

Section-D Pedagogical factors as variables affecting the reading abilities of students

No.	Statement	Mean	SD
5	A learner-driven approach enhances students' language learning	3.76	0.733
10	Practice sessions help in developing speed	4.07	0.714
13	Teacher-intervention can help students with low English proficiency	3.88	0.773
21	Feedback is necessary for improving reading efficiency	3.7	0.793
22	Class instruction methods contribute greatly to reading efficiency	3.74	0.83
27	Group reading makes reading easier	3.24	1.011

Table 1.4

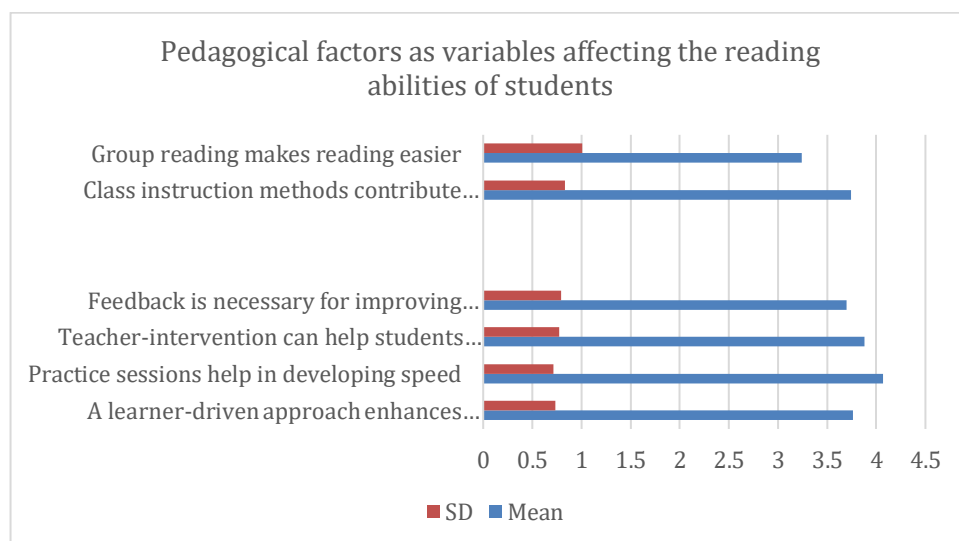


Figure 1.4

This section of the questionnaire consists of 6 questions that deal with the pedagogical factors and discusses the results the results of table 1.4 that influence the reading abilities of English language learners. For item 5 (A learner-driven approach enhances students' language learning) the mean score in the survey is 3.76 whereas for item 10 (Practice sessions help in developing speed) the mean score is 4.07. For item 13 (Teacher-intervention can help students with low English proficiency) the mean score is 3.88 and the mean score of the item 21 (Feedback is necessary for improving reading efficiency) has 3.7. Item 22 (Class instruction methods contribute greatly to reading efficiency) has 3.74 mean score whereas the item 27 (Group reading makes reading easier), the mean score is 3.24.

Discussion of results

Students believed that vocabulary, word familiarity and dictionaries played a huge role. It can be understood that the general perception about language learning efficiency in general, and reading efficiency in particular, depend greatly on the knowledge of words, or word power and their usage. On the same lines' proficiency, grammar and reading speed also play a very significant role in the way students feel it impacts their reading. Their attempts are mainly to improve their proficiency. It can be noted that both word familiarity and reading speed are crucial factors for them to have reading friendliness. Another factor where they feel they need to improve is reading speed, which is an essential component of fluency. It can safely be concluded that the difficulty students face with reading is basically vocabulary, and fluency. They also feel that they do not have enough practice for reading, either at home or at school. Though they are aware of this shortcoming, they are not making efforts to change the situation, which can partially be handled by them. Anxiety, reading for short durations, culture, mother tongue, and group reading do not seem to impact reading efficiency. The students seemed to be unaware that their culture could have a role in their efforts to read well. In essence, the impact of most of the factors on reading efficiency is confirmed while some strengthen the earlier beliefs, some research is contradictory, though sparingly.

Conclusion

According to the data analyzed, the conclusions made in the study, to better the reading practices and reading situation of the Indian students at the undergraduate level. Reading speed, concentration and fluency should be a part of the reading hours in the classroom. But since just increasing reading speed makes no tangible progress, it should be associated with vocabulary and word familiarity, as reading speed would, only then, make sense. Fluency, which is reading speed and comprehension can then be improved in students. As per this study, having a noiseless, conducive environment boosts the concentration of the students. It should be noted that having schools in the middle of busy roads, where the

incessant noise from the traffic, street vendors, and loud speakers, can have a deterring effect on concentration and comprehension. It would be beneficial if schools and colleges have an area earmarked for educational institutions whereby noise and disturbance can be minimized.

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