

Correlation between Informal & Formal Reading: Does Pleasure Reading Improve Academic Reading Comprehension of Students in English at Elementary Level

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Abstract

It is no secret that increased use of technological gadgets at economical rates has led to steep decline in reading habits which is fairly alarming. The extravagant exposure to technological equipment has brought along the affordable entertainment for people of all ages aside from their educational and occupational benefits. But this has made extensive reading a stultifying business in the view of most people especially the children of school age which is even more upsetting. Securing high scores in the academics is an established expectation of parents, teachers and school leaders which is hooked up with the basic skill of adequate reading comprehension. This study was aimed to investigate the correlation between extensive and intensive reading skills. It is precisely intended to produce an empirical evidence towards substantiating the fact that pleasure reading profoundly affects the reading comprehension of students at elementary level. For this research, the stratified mixed sampling and experimental research methodology was adapted. The data comprised of students' achievement scores in reading comprehension tests. The collected data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively in order to measure the impact.

Key Words: Extensive Reading, Intensive Reading, Formal Reading

Introduction

In present era, the ability to use English language as communicative tool with adequate level of proficiency is widely acknowledged particularly in educational and professional spheres. It serves as an escalator for achieving academic excellence and professional growth. Lack of English language proficiency holds back a vast majority of students from achieving high scores in examinations across various disciplines. Reading is one of the most productive ways to improve English language competency in learners but unfortunately it is showing a diminishing trend among school goers owing to their overwhelming exposure to various forms of technological devices. Significance of reading seems to be greatly underestimated by students, teachers, school leaders and parents who tend to seek better academic performance in other means and tactics. The fact of reading being on the decline poses a glaring menace to the education world. Our new generation in particular has been overwhelmed by this wave, which I would term here as reading deficit. They are more inclined to spend their free time playing video games, cyber surfing and texting via cells instead of reading novels or informative books. Schools on the other hand, also seemed to have added fuel to this fire by substituting a number of their reading-focused activities with non-reading activities in the name of so-called activity based teaching. According to PISA (Program for International Students Assessment) students who have

been exposed to story-reading at preschool and primary stage, they performed way better than others as revealed in their recent international exam for reading comprehension.

As regards the linguistic teachers, they tend to have plans for their students' linguistic growth which are more hinged on the hooks of mechanical methods instead of basing them onto the principles of nature. They are more inclined to teaching syntaxes, semantics, and skills of cracking the codes of text in fragments through practicums and drills instead of through rich language exposure such as reading. A few decades ago during the pre-technology era, a good proportion of population, irrespective of age or socioeconomic strata, would spend their leisure by reading books of their choice but this culture received serious blow as a result of unrestrained use of technology. The school goers have particularly been effected by this and it is because the premature and unlimited exposure to electronic media made reading a dull and unexciting exercise for them. It created a need for conducting research studies intending to produce empirical evidences for supporting how extensive reading eventuates into healthy academic yields in general and in language development in particular. This research was particularly aimed at investigating the impact of extensive reading on intensive reading skills of students. This research paper attempts to find if students with the tendency of extensive reading are able to score highly in response to a range of skill-based questions such as literal, inferential, analytical and evaluative. As the study is intended to investigate the correlation between extensive and intensive reading practices, its findings will refine the common understanding of the people regarding the relation between the two. It will also substantiate the basis for school based programs promoting culture of independent reading among school going students. This will also highlight

the scope and degree of the impact that free reading activities cause on the formal reading for comprehension test, thereby underlining the need for schools to initiate and expand the program aiming to cultivate independent reading habits among learners. It stands beyond the shadow of all doubts that the most fertile period to initiate reading is during early age, still it is never too late to start reading as regular practice (Sheldrick-Ross, McKechnie and Rothbauer, 2005)

Literature Review

It is a widely acknowledged fact that the yields of reading are reaped across all the walks of life from schooling to university, from personal to professional life and from ethical to cognitive skills, as endorsed by various research studies. According to Joseph Addison, -Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the bodyl. There is a deep connection between reading and academic achievements. The students who are fond of reading for pleasure or for pastime they appeared to have scored in their academics way better than those who shy away from the reading. Studies show that reading plays a crucial role in helping students achieve high scores across all the subjects (Baier, 2005). Experts try to focus on the benefits of extensive reading on language development, we learn that it plays pivotal role in the process of language acquisition.

The underlying secrets to this phenomenon are gradually unfolding as more and more research studies are being conducted in this realm. What has until now been unearthed is that there are several factors that are ought to be credited for the high academic scores. However, some of the predominant factors are the basic skills that an extensive reader happens to develop by dint of avid reading which include: sound general knowledge

base, ability to extract information from the text, cognitive ability to analyze information in the text, and the ability to read faster.

During pleasure reading a reader runs through a heap of books on a range of themes thereby pushing the frontiers of his knowledge of various fields. It gradually enriches reader's knowledge base automatically. As free reading removes the boundary of topic-specific reading which is generally observed in academic reading. A number of studies have shown that extensive reading both deepens and widens general knowledge of readers (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Echols, West, Stanovich, & Zehr, 1996; Stanovich & Cunningham, 1992, 1993). Avid reading has always played significant role in increasing knowledge of the readers, as supported by various studies (Commission on Reading, National Academy of Education, 1985).

Indeed, the exercise of reading involves the process of eye and mind coordination whereby reader unlocks the codes of text and constructs the meaning out of it based on his own prior knowledge and the context of the text. This multidimensional process engages the mind of readers meaningfully and this is how it enhances the cognitive performance of mind besides bringing about a positive attitudinal changes (Guthrie, Schafer, & Hutchinson, 1991; Kaestle, 1991; Zill & Winglee, 1990).

Independent reading allows the reader to come in contact with a wide variety of words frequently. The frequent interaction with the vocabulary of different subject areas help them intuitively memorize the words in a more natural fashion which adds to the reserve of their vocabulary. Thus, it indicates that avid reading enlarges their vocabulary power and makes the activity of reading smoother and meaningful for them, (Miller & Gildea, 1987; Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985; Sternberg, 1985, 1987)

Yet another key point to be evaluated is whether there is any connection between reading speed and reading comprehension or both are independent of each other. But it is worth noting that there is a strong relation among extensive reading, reading fluency and reading comprehension. The habit of reading volumes of books voluntarily exposes them to a bulk of text that they read through in a flow provides them a nurturing ground to practice their ability to read faster and faster extensively thereby developing them a fast-pace reader eventually.

As reading is futile without comprehension, it is important that students are equipped with adequate level of reading fluency as well as science of cracking the code of words so as to have sound reading comprehension, (Pardo, 2004). Thus it substantiates the fact that reading fluency and reading comprehension are two closely connected skills. Even reading fluency influences the reading comprehension of the readers (Broughton et al 1978; Nuttall op cit; Champeau de Lopez 1993).

Extravagant reading of books, novels and other forms of reading material allows the avid reader to interact with a variety of writing styles by writers of various backgrounds and perspectives. Their ability to decipher the textual tune of various writers eventually develops them into a proficient readers with sounder reading comprehension. Various studies indicate that extensive reading improve reading comprehension skills of readers, (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986; Juel, 1988; Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991; Stanovich, 1986, 1993)

Moreover, the existing research suggests that reading at an early age lays sound foundation for subsequent skills development (Scarborough, 2001). Effective reading means the ability to read accurately and to understand as much of the text as you need in order to have complete sense of it (Greenal and Michael, 1986).

Key Words

PISA: Programme for International Students Achievement

ER: Extensive Reading

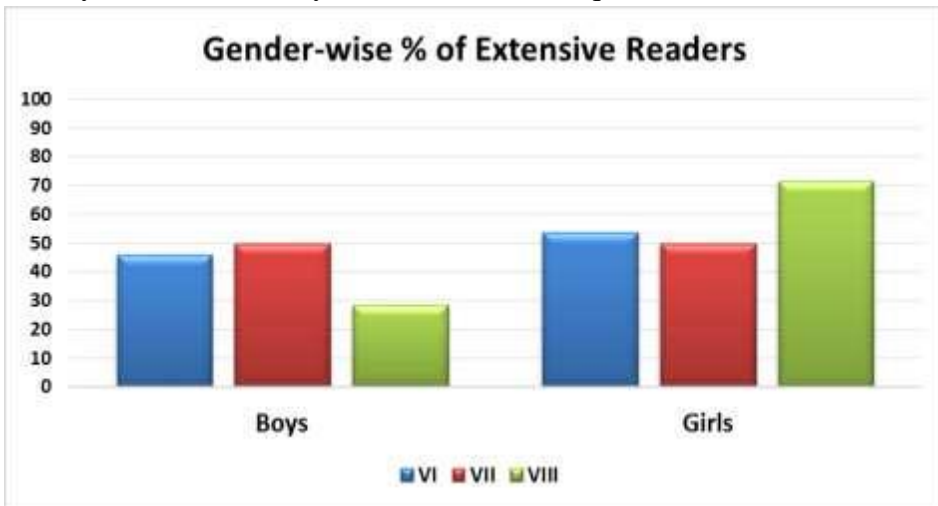
IR: Intensive Reading

FR: Formal Reading

ESL: English as Second Language

Methodology

The study employed mixed research methodology. Through a questionnaire the researcher collected data about the number of ER students in each class of the elementary section of the school under study. Since the ratio of extensive readers was as low as only 34 out of the total of 137 students in the whole elementary section, the entire population comprised of 34 students was employed in the study. The identified extensive readers were given a standardized reading comprehension test as per their academic level. The researcher then analyzed the performance of the participants against literary, inferential, analytical and evaluative questions.



The ratio of girls in the group of extensive readers was marginally greater than boys as depicted in the above graph. The most evident difference in the gender wise ratio was observed in class VIII wherein the proportion of girls was as high as 78% whereas the proportion of boys was as low as 30% only. On the contrary, in class VI and VII the ratio of boys and girls as approximately 48% to 55%.

Research Instruments

There were four different tools employed in the study: a questionnaire and three reading comprehension tests one for each class VI, VII and VIII respectively. The first tool, which was tailored in accordance with the data requirement, consisted of items aimed at investigating about the choice, range, frequency and motivation of students for reading. On the other hand, the reading comprehension, each being grade-specific, comprised of two passages followed by a set of varied skill-based questions: literal, inferential, analytical and evaluative.

Procedure

The questionnaire was used with all the students of elementary section in order to separate out the extensive readers. And then reading comprehension tests were administered with the extensive readers only. Students' achievement against each of skill-based question in reading comprehension revealed their level of comprehension across a range of sub-skills.

Data Collection

Students' achievement data was collected and analyzed through excel sheet on a range of assessment scale points. Firstly, the data was analyzed in comparison with their choice, frequency, range and motivation for

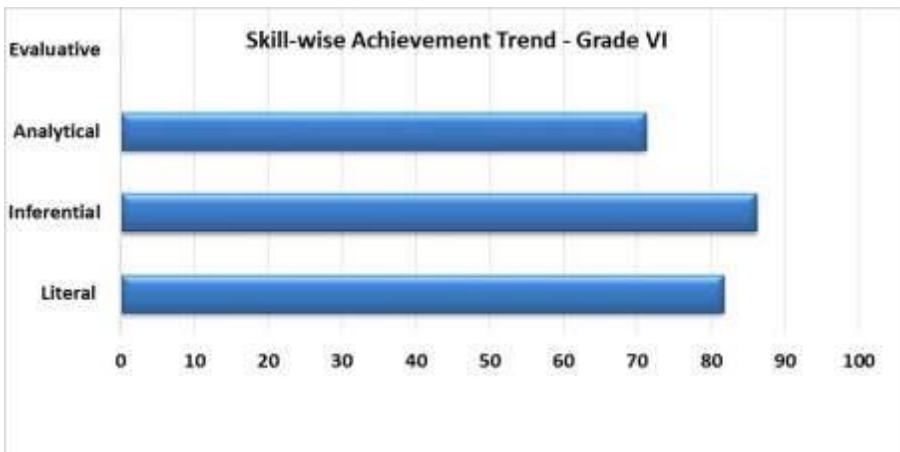
reading. Secondly, their achievement was evaluated on a four point scale hinged on four basic layers of reading comprehension: literal, inferential, analytical and evaluative.

Variables

The study involved two kinds of variables; one independent variable and the other dependent variable. Independent variable causes the impact whereas dependent variable is recipient of the very impact. Hence, in this study free reading was independent variable whereas controlled reading was dependent variable. The free reading is done during leisure hours and at the choice of the reader in order to seek pleasure whereas controlled reading is time-bound and aimed at preparation for examinations. The research study aimed to find out whether free reading causes an impact on controlled reading skills.

Data Analysis

The analysis conducted on Microsoft excel showcased class wise, gender wise and skill wise achievement of students. It also covers the consolidated achievement trend of students in the last graph followed by comprehensive conclusions.

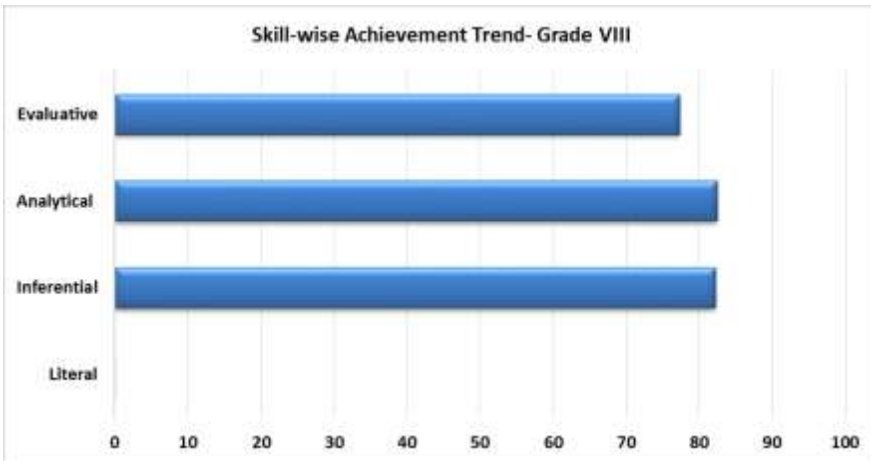


The above graph shows the achievement trend of class VI in the reading comprehension test against various questions which were based on four sub skills of comprehension: literal, inferential, analytical and evaluative types. Keeping in view the cognitive level of the class, the questions of evaluative type were not included in the test however the remaining three types of skills were covered. The graph vividly shows that students scored highly in the test on an average ranging between 72% and 87%. Their achievement rose highest up to 87% in response to inferential type questions whereas sank down to 72% in response of analytical questions and remained moderate in dealing with literal questions about 82%.

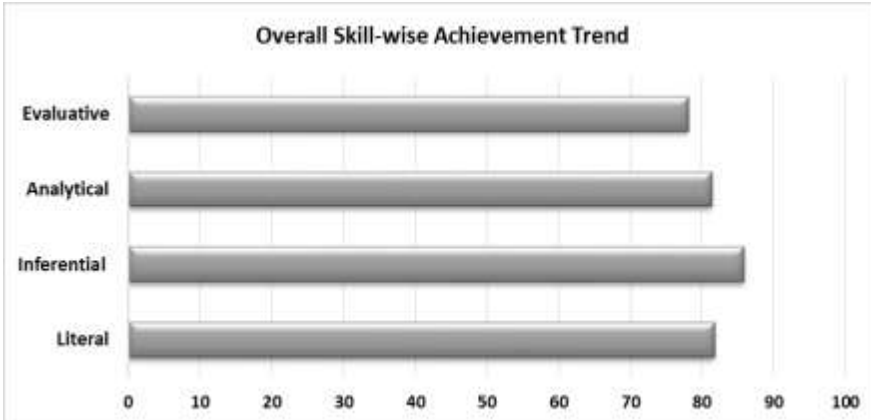


As shown in the graph, there was no questions of literal type included in the reading comprehension test keeping in view their cognitive level. Overall, achievement trend of students of class VII has been encouraging which remained between 78% and 86%. In response to inferential and analytical type questions the performance of students rose as high as 86%

whereas it steeply sank down to as low as 78% in response to the evaluative type questions.



As depicted in the graph, the reading comprehension test for class VIII did not cover the questions hinged on literary type questions keeping in view their high cognitive level. The overall achievement trend as mirrored in the graph is between 78% and 83% which is again admirable. Students appeared to have scored better in inferential and analytical questions up to 83% in comparison with scores in evaluative questions which is 78%.



The graph displays the consolidated skill-wise trend of all the classes. There is slight fluctuation in the trend. In response to evaluative, analytical

and literal questions the average achievement is between 78% and 82% whereas in response to inferential questions it is as high as 87%.

Conclusion

In the light of data analysis, it can be concluded that there is strong interlocking between extensive and intensive type of reading practices. In particular, extensive reading significantly affects the level students reading comprehension as they perform adequately well in formal reading comprehension tests. Irrespective of grade level, all the students have scored above average as mirrored in the both class wise analysis and consolidated analysis.

Moreover, if we further zoom in and look upon the comparative analysis the scores against each skill type, we shall easily be able to deduce that free reading helps readers particularly to develop their skills in pursuance of squeezing the implicit meaning out of the text being read. Keeping in view the trend of the achievements in evaluative questions, it can be concluded with adequate confidence that while reading freely they do not tend to evaluate various aspects of the information as such, since they more inclined to merely discern salient events and connections among them.

Furthermore, if we narrow down our lenses and view students' scores against literary type questions, we can determine that extensive readers do not tend to focus on the superficially strewn facts like dates and names of places etc. They merely mind the cause and effect related information and their connectivity. However, the finding of this research study produces sound evidences to prove that extensive reading significantly effects students' reading comprehension level.

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