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Bridging the Reading Gap: Enhancing Reading Skills among Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

Reading lies at the heart of academic success in higher education. Yet, for many undergraduate students, particularly those coming from rural and semi-urban backgrounds, reading in English remains a challenging and often intimidating task. This article explores the nature of reading difficulties faced by undergraduate learners, examines the social, educational, and linguistic factors contributing to poor reading proficiency, and suggests practical strategies to bridge the existing reading gap. Drawing from classroom experience, established theories of reading, and current pedagogical practices, the study argues that sustained, meaningful, and learner-centred interventions are essential for developing effective reading skills. The paper concludes that reading improvement is a gradual process that thrives best in supportive classrooms and reading-rich academic environments.

Keywords: Reading skills, undergraduate learners, ESL, rural education, reading strategies, higher education

Introduction

Reading is one of the most fundamental skills required for success in higher education. Undergraduate students are expected to read a wide range of texts—textbooks, reference materials, journal articles, and digital resources—and engage with them critically. However, in many colleges, a noticeable gap exists between these academic expectations and students' actual reading abilities. This gap is particularly evident among students from rural backgrounds, where exposure to English outside the classroom is often limited.

For such learners, reading English texts is not merely an academic task but a source of anxiety and frustration. Many struggle to understand even moderately complex passages, which affects their confidence and overall academic performance. As a result, they tend to depend on rote memorisation, guidebooks, or classroom notes rather than developing

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independent reading habits. This article focuses on understanding this reading gap and proposes ways in which teachers and institutions can work together to enhance reading skills among undergraduate students.

Reading as an Active Process

Reading is no longer viewed as a passive activity of recognising words on a page. Contemporary views treat reading as an active and meaning-making process. Goodman famously described reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game," emphasising the role of prediction and prior knowledge in comprehension (Goodman 135). Readers continuously interact with the text, using linguistic cues and background experience to construct meaning.

At the undergraduate level, reading involves much more than literal comprehension. Students are required to identify arguments, evaluate ideas, draw inferences, and relate texts to broader academic and social contexts. As Grabe points out, academic reading demands strategic competence, including the ability to skim, scan, and read critically (Grabe 47). Without explicit training in these strategies, many students find academic reading overwhelming.

Nature of the Reading Gap

The reading gap among undergraduate students is the result of multiple interrelated factors. One major cause lies in earlier schooling practices. In many schools, reading instruction focuses largely on examination requirements, encouraging translation and memorisation rather than comprehension and interpretation. Students enter college having read very little independently, especially in English.

Socio-economic factors further widen this gap. Rural students often lack access to libraries, newspapers, and digital reading resources. English is rarely used in daily communication, which limits exposure and practice. Cummins notes that insufficient linguistic input adversely affects the development of academic language proficiency (Cummins 67).

Psychological factors also play a significant role. Fear of making mistakes, low self-confidence, and the belief that English texts are inherently difficult discourage students from engaging with reading materials. Over time, this avoidance reinforces poor reading habits and deepens the gap.

Common Reading Difficulties

Undergraduate students with weak reading skills typically face several recurring difficulties. Slow reading speed is one of the most common problems. Many students read word by word, focusing excessively on unfamiliar vocabulary. This bottom-up approach interrupts comprehension and makes reading a laborious process.

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Limited vocabulary knowledge is another major barrier. Even when students understand grammatical structures, lack of vocabulary prevents them from grasping the overall meaning of a text. Nation emphasises that vocabulary knowledge strongly influences reading comprehension (Nation 23).

In addition, students often struggle with inferential and critical reading. While they may answer factual questions, they find it difficult to interpret implied meanings, analyse arguments, or evaluate the writer's viewpoint. This weakness significantly affects their ability to engage with academic texts at the undergraduate level.

The Teacher's Role in Bridging the Gap

Teachers occupy a central position in improving students' reading abilities. Effective reading instruction begins with understanding students' existing proficiency levels and identifying specific problem areas. Instead of assuming that students will acquire reading skills naturally, teachers need to provide explicit guidance.

Teaching reading strategies is particularly important. Students should be shown how to preview texts, predict content, identify main ideas, and summarise information. Pressley argues that strategy instruction is most effective when students understand not only how to use strategies but also when and why to use them (Pressley 91).

Equally important is creating a classroom atmosphere that encourages risk-taking and discussion. When students feel comfortable sharing their interpretations, they are more likely to engage actively with texts and develop confidence as readers.

In addition, teachers need to function as reading role models. When teachers demonstrate their own engagement with reading—by sharing reading experiences, recommending books, or discussing articles—they help demystify the reading process. Such modelling reassures students that reading is not merely an examination requirement but a meaningful intellectual activity. Continuous encouragement, patient scaffolding, and constructive feedback can gradually transform reluctant readers into active participants in the reading process.

Classroom Practices for Improving Reading Skills

A structured approach to reading instruction can significantly improve students' comprehension. Pre-reading activities, such as discussing the topic or introducing key vocabulary, help activate students' background knowledge. These activities prepare learners mentally for the text.

During reading, tasks like skimming for main ideas, scanning for details, and answering guiding questions keep students focused and purposeful. Post-reading activities—such as summarising, group discussion, and reflective writing—encourage deeper understanding and critical engagement.

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Collaborative reading activities are particularly useful for undergraduate learners. Group discussions allow students to share interpretations and clarify doubts collectively. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development supports the idea that learning is enhanced through social interaction (Vygotsky 86).

Another effective classroom practice is the use of short, authentic texts drawn from newspapers, online articles, and everyday contexts. Such texts appear less intimidating than lengthy academic passages and help students connect reading with real-life usage of language. Gradually introducing longer and more complex texts builds confidence and stamina. When reading tasks are meaningful and achievable, students are more willing to engage actively and develop sustainable reading habits.

Importance of Extensive Reading

Extensive reading plays a crucial role in developing fluency and confidence. It involves reading large amounts of material for general understanding and enjoyment rather than detailed analysis. Day and Bamford highlight that extensive reading promotes positive attitudes toward reading and improves overall language competence (Day and Bamford 15).

For undergraduate students, extensive reading can include newspapers, magazines, short stories, and simplified novels. Allowing students to choose texts based on their interests increases motivation. Assessment should focus on participation, reading logs, or short reflections rather than traditional tests.

Integrating Technology in Reading Instruction

Technology offers valuable opportunities to support and strengthen reading development among undergraduate students. Digital texts, e-books, and online articles provide easy access to a wide range of reading materials that can be adapted to learners' proficiency levels. Unlike printed textbooks, digital resources allow students to revisit texts, adjust font size, and use built-in dictionaries, which reduces anxiety and supports independent reading.

Several specific digital tools can be effectively integrated into reading instruction. Online reading platforms such as **Newsela** and **CommonLit** provide graded texts with comprehension questions, making them particularly useful for mixed-ability classrooms. **Google Classroom** and **Moodle** allow teachers to upload reading materials, post guiding questions, and facilitate discussion forums where students can share interpretations and reflections. Annotation tools such as **Hypothes.is** enable students to highlight, comment on, and collaboratively analyse texts, thereby promoting active and critical reading.

Audio-supported reading tools also play an important role. Applications like **Read Aloud extensions**, **Natural Reader**, and audiobook platforms help learners connect

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written text with correct pronunciation and intonation. This is especially beneficial for students who struggle with decoding and fluency. When students listen and read simultaneously, comprehension improves and reading speed gradually increases.

Institutional Support and Curriculum Planning

Improving reading skills cannot be the sole responsibility of individual teachers. Institutions must play an active role by designing curricula that recognise reading as a core academic skill. Bridge courses and foundation programmes at the undergraduate level can address reading deficiencies early.

Well-equipped libraries, reading clubs, and language labs contribute to a reading-friendly environment. When institutions promote reading as a shared academic culture, students are more likely to view reading as a meaningful and rewarding activity.

Conclusion

Bridging the reading gap among undergraduate students is a pressing challenge in higher education. Weak reading skills limit not only academic achievement but also students' ability to think critically and learn independently. This article has examined the causes of poor reading proficiency and suggested practical strategies for improvement.

Reading development is a gradual and continuous process. With supportive teaching practices, appropriate reading materials, and institutional encouragement, undergraduate students can overcome reading difficulties and become confident, independent readers. Bridging the reading gap is therefore essential for academic success and educational equity.

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