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Reading-while-Listening at the Tertiary Level: Perceptions and Implications

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Introduction

Tertiary students usually face several challenges in reading comprehension because they have not developed the reading skill adequately. Language learners more so confront difficulties, like, linguistic, social and cultural when they read subject-specific texts in their particular discipline (Evans & Andrade, 2015). Research on reading shows that in spite of 12 years of schooling, many engineering students have not developed their reading skills effectively, so they lack comprehension while reading. These learners do not improve their reading skills even during their undergraduate days because the English courses for engineering and English faculty handling the courses do not give sufficient importance to it, assuming that the reading skills acquired at school are satisfactory. The present study was planned to make reading stress-free for the students so that they could cope with the reading assignments given to them.

At the level of higher education, reading skills are taught as a part of study skills wherein a strategic approach is used to inculcate them. Side by side, strategy instruction is imparted to develop reading, and thus reading skills become a part of the study skills course. It is an accepted fact that input-reading, as well as listening, plays a pivotal role in the development of a language. Several studies authenticate that teaching language using online books and audiobooks can promote the understanding and enjoyment of reading. Chang (2009) notes that to improve the learners' comprehension, vocabulary and sentence construction, the students should be introduced to both the input, reading and listening simultaneously. Keeping such notions in view, the teacher-researchers introduced two classes of engineering learners to an effective approach of reading and listening at the same time through an online Reading-while-Listening (RwL) website for two hours per week in the Language Laboratory for four weeks. In addition, they planned some RwL activities to immerse the participants in the RwL mode to give them an intensive reading experience of the text. The teacher-researchers wanted to find out whether the learners benefited from the RwL mode, and also their perceptions of the mode. The qualitative



feedback taken showed that the RwL mode enabled the learners to develop their reading and listening skills and also experience a higher level of comprehension.

Literature Review

The aim of the study is to enable students to develop their reading skills through the Reading-while-Listening (RwL) mode of input. Grabe (2009) points out that the more the students get exposed to reading, the more they gain reading efficiency. Specialists agree that extensive listening practice can improve listening fluency (Chang & Millet, 2014; Chang & Millet, 2016; Chang, Millet & Renandya, 2019). Winn et al. (2006) show the effects of RwL on the reading fluency of adult learners and point to the fact that repeated reading in the RwL mode can promote reading skills. For Brown et al. (2008), most of the learners find the RwL mode comfortable.

Research by Chang (2009) reveals that the majority of the students accept that the RwL mode has a positive influence on their reading and listening skills. The mode refines word recognition skills, inspires the students to read, makes the stories interesting, and encourages keen attention. Woodall (2010) confirms that students attain a higher comprehension level and faster reading fluency while indulging in the RwL technique. Chang (2011) affirms that the RwL group of learners showed a considerable gain in vocabulary and listening fluency more than the 'read only' and 'listen only' groups. Chang and Millet (2014) assure that simultaneous reading and listening augment not only the learners' existing background knowledge but also their reading fluency. Chang and Millet (2015) further ensure an increase in the reading rate when using the RwL mode.

Gobel and Kano (2014) determine that RwL has a significant effect on reading rate and vocabulary recognition, but not on general English proficiency. Nakashima, Stephens, and Kamata (2018) affirm that students usually display superior skills in the RwL mode. Teng (2018) records a better vocabulary acquisition through the RwL input. The research of Mestres et al. (2019) on young learners shows a clear preference for the RwL mode.

John (2020) conducted a study on low-proficiency learners of English and found that RwL enhanced their language skills. While tracing the eye movements of learners during the RwL mode, Conklin et al. (2020) noticed that L2 learners displayed eye movements similar to that of L1 learners. Duy and Peters (2020) suggest that teachers should consider the learners' preferences when choosing the mode of input. It is a fact that not many studies are conducted to observe the tertiary students' inclination for the RwL mode. The ones conducted investigate the effects of RwL on the proficiency level of students; and they are mostly quantitative.

This paper is based on two research questions: (1) What are the engineering learners' perceptions of the Reading-while-Listening mode of input? (2) What are the implications of introducing the Reading-while-Listening mode to engineering learners?

The Research Methodology

The research method includes: (1) the participants of the study, (2) the intervention, the activities conducted in the classroom, and (3) the qualitative feedback and the data collection.

The Participants of the Study

This study presents the introduction of the RwL mode of input to two batches of 62 first-year engineering undergraduates who are second-language learners of English, to enhance their reading skills. They are a mixed-

ability group with varying degrees of English language proficiency, ranging from A2 to C2 according to the CEFR framework.

The Intervention: Activities Conducted in the Classroom

As already indicated, the teacher-researchers introduced the reading-while-listening (RwL) mode to two groups of 62 first-year engineering students in an effort to enhance their reading skills. As the students were second-language learners of English, the faculty decided to use short stories as the reading materials through the RwL mode because the narrative element in them would be sufficient motivation for reading. Similarly, the reading-while-listening (RwL) mode was preferred to provide a relaxed reading of the short stories. The study was held for four weeks in the language laboratory during the regular English periods of 50 minutes each. At the outset, the students were acquainted with an online RwL website: <<http://esl-bits.net/>> to ensure that they took part in the activity under the supervision of the teacher. This website was chosen because it contains an ample collection of reading materials, like, classic novels, audiobooks, short stories and reading comprehension exercises along with audio aids.

To initiate the students to the RwL mode, the teacher-researchers played the audio of the short story, “The Open Window” while the students read the text on the screen. In the remaining sessions in the language lab, other short stories like Stephen King’s “After Life,” novellas like George Orwell’s “Animal Farm,” audiobooks such as Albert Camus’s “The Stranger” followed suit. Later on, some activities were conducted. The students were requested to choose any short story, novel, or audiobook from the website and decide on the listening speed they were comfortable with. In no time, they adapted themselves to adjusting the listening speed of the audio. They could also switch on to the mode they preferred – either the reading mode or the reading-while-listening mode.

The following post-reading activities were also organized in the classroom: (1) reading the stories from the above-mentioned website periodically, (2) submitting story reviews as written scripts, and (3) narrating the gist of the stories individually. They participated enthusiastically, and as they spoke individually, they could share their experiences with their classmates actively. Further on, many of them accepted the challenge of reading a few stories such as O. Henry’s “Gift of the Magi,” James Joyce’s “Eveline,” Leo Tolstoy’s “The Snow Storm,” Saki’s “The Story Teller” and “Gabriel Earnest,” Etgar Keret’s “Bus Driver who wanted to be a God,” “Hole in the Wall” and “Goodman,” Stephen King’s “Uncle Otto’s Truck,” and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.” As students continued to engage in the RwL mode, it became obvious that they enjoyed the reading-while-listening method.

The Qualitative Feedback and the Data Collection

The teacher-researchers conducted the feedback session to examine the students’ assessment of the RwL mode and the use of short stories as the reading materials. They collected the data of the feedback in three ways: (1) The spoken feedback -- an open discussion was conducted wherein the whole class participated, and their opinions were considered. (2) The written feedback -- a discussion was conducted in groups for which the students were given a feedback form that contained pointers like positives, negatives and suggestions. They were expected to fill the form and submit it. The data of the written feedback was collected and analysed. (3) The classroom observation -- the teacher-researchers supervised the students during the intervention and noted their observations.

Discussion and Result Analysis

As already stated, the teacher-researchers conducted the feedback to monitor what mode of input the students preferred -- the Reading mode or the Reading-while-Listening (RwL) mode. The data collected is thematically coded under two heads: (1) The students' perceptions of the Reading-while-Listening mode, and (2) The implications of the present study. The feedback shows that most of them favoured the Reading-while-Listening mode and admitted that they are grateful to the teacher for the exposure to the mode.

The Students' Perceptions of the Reading-while-Listening (RwL) Mode

As already stated, the study introduced the students to reading short stories through the Reading-while-Listening mode. Subsequently, a discussion was held to enable students to voice their opinion of the mode. Many of them said that they were being introduced to the RwL mode for the first time ever, and agreed that this is the best way to acquire reading and listening skills simultaneously. Later, the feedback was collected to check what the students preferred -- the Reading mode or the Reading-while-Listening (RwL) mode. The analysis of the data showed that many students favoured the RwL mode, and expressed their hope that the awareness of the new mode would encourage them to read more short stories in the future. Studies also report that the RwL mode is engaging and interesting (Brown et al., 2008; Chang, 2009). The following are some extracts from their written feedback:

We listened to short stories, novellas and audiobooks on ESL bits. The RwL mode helped us to learn more words, and improve our concentration. By reading and listening to the stories at the same time, our multitasking skills also improved.

We could visualize the story while reading and listening to it simultaneously. We also enjoyed the story, and our listening skills also developed, side by side, and the content is well stored in our brains. The chance of forgetting it is very rare.

Some students found the RwL mode effective and informative. They were thankful for being introduced to the mode because they could build up their vocabulary, and learn how to construct sentences. Many studies also confirm the benefits of learning vocabulary through the RwL mode (Brown et al., 2008; Chang, 2011; Duy & Peters, 2020).

No doubt, our vocabulary improved a lot by listening to the same words many times. We learned new phrases and expressions. Sometimes we became conscious of new sentence constructions.

We enjoyed reading and listening to the story side by side. We could easily guess the meaning of some unknown words and understand the story.

The students admitted that their reading speed, reading fluency and comprehension skills improved (Chang & Millet, 2015; Winn et al., 2006; Woodall, 2010). Other studies on RwL report an improvement of L2 comprehension skills (Chang, 2009; Chang, 2011; Chang, Millet & Renandya, 2019; Duy & Peters, 2020; Woodall, 2010).

The RwL mode improves our concentration, and sharpens our critical thinking and comprehension skills. This is a good method when we are lethargic to read books. It reduces our effort to read, and makes the stories more believable.

The Reading-while-Listening approach increases our reading speed and reading fluency. We understood that by reading and listening at the same time, we could read and grasp the text faster than the group that chose the Reading only mode.

A handful of students noted that it was very convenient to read a text with the help of an audio guide, rather than reading it themselves.

RwL enables us to read in a relaxed manner. The advantage of this mode is that once the reading starts, we are persuaded to listen whether we like it or not.

This was a new experience for us. The descriptions make the reading lively. It saves time when compared with reading without the audio.

Some students accepted that the RwL mode enabled them to grasp the spoken language better; made them conscious of accent, voice modulation, and pronunciation. A few students felt that the RwL mode is a kind of pronunciation drill as they could correct their own pronunciation if they wanted to:

With voice modulation and accent, narration becomes interesting, and easy to visualize the scenes and characters.

We realized that the pronunciation of many words is different from the way we pronounce them. So, we tried to correct the pronunciation of those words.

However, there were negative reactions, too. One group said that the RwL mode creates two tracts of imagination in the head, and hence it is difficult to concentrate. There is a cognitive overload in the Reading-while-Listening mode, according to Duy and Peters (2020):

The joy of reading is when the reader takes time to imagine all the scenes described in a story. In this mode, it is not possible to take our own time to imagine when we read and listen to the audio at the same time. The RwL mode curbs our imagination as the reader sets the tone for us.

In this mode, we are tied down to reading and listening. If we lose track of the reading or listening, we get stuck. It is not easy to go back for a particular sentence. That is time-consuming.

Some students faced difficulties with regard to the pace of the audio. A few bluntly said that reading and listening simultaneously was difficult. It kills the joy of reading:

Some of us could not cope with the pace of the audio. The pace of the audio does not suit our reading pace often. It is either faster or slower than the audio recording. Sometimes, the fastest audio was considered slow, and the slowest audio was fast.

The speed of reading and the accent of the speaker were different from ours. So, at times we struggled to keep pace with the reading. Time and again, we felt sleepy. So, we felt that the RwL mode limits our intellectual capabilities.

In spite of the difficulties, the students felt that RwL is the best way to gain reading and listening skills. When the RwL activity was introduced, the students had a mixed reaction for they feared it would be a part of internal assessment, and perhaps to their disadvantage. Some were for it while others, against. However, most of the students were happy to read the selected stories, and share their new experiences during the group discussion sessions. Those who had an inadequate proficiency in English could move from small utterances to longer sentences. They acknowledged that the source recommended was relevant, suitable, feasible, objective, and above all a learner-centred one. The exposure to the new mode and the vocabulary uptake were reflected in their narrations and write-ups as well. The activity, in general, enabled the learners to gain a rich experience and paved the way for integrating the receptive and productive skills.

A few students candidly expressed the idea that the RwL mode would have been an excellent method if introduced to novice readers. But for habitual readers like some of them, this practice is not so overwhelming because they were already in the habit of reading books and listening to audio as and when time permits. This is in keeping with the view of Duff and Maley (2007) that while choosing literary texts like short stories, there are several levels of difficulty for second language learners – linguistic, length, cultural, referential and conceptual. A study conducted by John (2016) on the students' preferences for the reading materials such as, general texts, literary texts and scientific texts, the majority of the students preferred scientific reading materials. In the present study, the students participated enthusiastically in reading the short stories, not because they prefer the short story genre but because they were introduced to a new mode – the Reading-while-Listening mode.

The Implications of the Present Study

The study introduced the Reading-while-Listening (RwL) mode to engineering students; this was done to help the students who have problems with reading so that they would be able to enhance their reading and listening skills simultaneously. A major implication of the study is that in the Reading-while-Listening mode, reading takes less time in comparison with the Reading only mode. Studies have claimed that by reading in the RwL mode, students can save time. For students at the higher level of learning, the greatest saving factor is time because they have too much to read but insufficient time for it. The participating students agreed that in the RwL mode, they were able to read and understand the text faster than the group that chose the Reading only mode:

The idea of reading and listening simultaneously was something new to us. It is definitely comfortable when someone else does the reading. We can finish listening to an audiobook faster than reading it. It saves time when compared to reading a book on our own.

The RwL mode of reading is good when we are lethargic to read books. The RwL mode makes reading the stories and listening to the stories stress-free. It not only reduces our effort to read but also saves our time.

Another major implication of the study is that Reading-while-Listening develops the concentration to read and involves the reader in the mode. Several students ascertained that they were fully involved in the activity as they were busy reading and listening simultaneously. The RwL mode encourages the reader to focus on the

story, and gradually increases the reading rate and the reading fluency (Chang & Millet, 2015; Winn et al., 2006; Woodall, 2010). Conklin et al. (2020) noticed that in the RwL mode of input, L2 learners displayed eye movements similar to that of L1 learners, and interpreted it saying that the RwL mode gives the students an immersion effect in the reading and listening activity. As a result, the RwL mode of input aids concentration and enables the students to get engrossed in the text:

Listening to the audio and reading the text at the same time without distractions boosted up our concentration. We were engrossed in the story.

The advantage of the RwL sessions is that we were extremely focussed on reading and listening.

The students were really engrossed during the Reading-while-Listening sessions. While walking around the class silently to record the students' attendance without disturbing them, one of the teacher-researchers noted that a few were startled as the teacher came near -- a point that proves that they were really drawn into the reading activity. The study implies that teachers can assist learners who have reading difficulties to become better readers by introducing them to the RwL mode without making the learners feel they are a disadvantaged lot. In brief, the RwL mode can render the transition from general reading to discipline-specific reading more efficient and relaxed.

The Limitations of the Study

Some of the participants of the study who were already familiar with listening to English channels seemed contented with the reading task, while the rest were apprehensive. Those students who had a limited proficiency in English, found the RwL mode challenging. During the Reading only mode, some students had to check the meaning of unknown words that occurred often in the text. They had other problems too – unknown words, impaired comprehension, unfamiliar pronunciation, non-familiarity of English accent, difficulty in understanding the spoken rhythm, strange culture, unusual traditions and customs, and lack of exposure to online reading. The study was limited in the sense that it was a qualitative mode of study. An experimental mode could have added more value to the results.

Conclusion

The teacher-researchers introduced the reading of short stories through the Reading-while-Listening (RwL) mode of input to two batches of engineering students with the intention of developing their reading skills, and to find out their opinion of the mode. In the feedback, most of the participants responded positively and a few negatively. Those who preferred the Reading-while-Listening mode admitted that it stimulated their listening ability, enhanced concentration, strengthened vocabulary, and enabled a better understanding and visualization of the story (Brown et al., 2008; Chang, 2011; Duy & Peters, 2020;). It improved their pronunciation, reading speed, reading fluency and level of comprehension (Chang, 2009; Chang, 2011; Chang & Millett, 2015; Chang, Millet & Renandya, 2019; Duy & Peters, 2020; Woodall; 2010). The RwL mode also helped the learners in general, and disadvantaged readers, in particular, to get ample practice in listening and reading to develop their language skills. In addition, the RwL mode created a positive impact on the learners and made them feel that gaining language skills is an enjoyable experience (Brown et al., 2008; Chang, 2009). As stated in the students' feedback, most of them favoured the RwL mode and admitted that, though they were exposed to the mode only for a short period, they hoped that the experience would have a long-term effect on them.

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