

Exploring the Challenges Faced by the Bachelor's level Students in Reading English Textbooks

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Abstract

Reading textbooks written in second or foreign language is considered more challenging than written in reader's mother tongue. If the textbooks are written considering the level of the students, they read and comprehend the texts without extra effort. With this in mind, the study tries to explore the challenges faced by the bachelor level second year students while reading the textbook 'Readings for the New Horizons'. The participants of this descriptive phenomenological study consisted of 15 students studying specialization English in Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) second year. I employed purposive sampling to select the participants and unstructured interview to collect the data. The collected data was transcribed and thematized and findings of the study were presented and analyzed employing descriptive techniques of qualitative data analysis. The findings revealed that students consider unfamiliar words as the major challenge followed by length of the reading texts, less proficient in English, sentence structure, content included in the textbook, number of lessons or reading texts incorporated in the textbook and lack of reading habits. The teachers need to involve students in intensive reading to overcome the challenges and to develop the habit of reading texts written in second language.

Keywords: reading, Readings for the New Horizons, B.Ed. second year students, challenges

Introduction

Reading is a process of making meaning of the written texts. It is an individual activity which takes place in different ways from reading. Moreover, it is viewed as the most important skill of language which

fosters second or foreign language learning and academic success of a learner. Similarly, the development of other skills of language largely depends and imagined only after full-fledged development of reading skill. A large number of linguists, including Singh (2011), Russell (2013), McLean (2014) and Turkyilmaz et al. (2014) emphasize that reading comprehension is the main goal of textbook reading. Showing the importance of understanding, Grabe (2009) also writes “reading is centrally a comprehending process” (p.14). Reading comprehension largely depends on the difficulty level of the texts included in the textbooks. If the lessons included in the textbook match to their level, they will read and understand them easily. Otherwise, reading becomes more challenging for them and they seek for other simplified versions of the texts like guides and guess papers. Furthermore, if they contain more difficult vocabularies and complex grammatical structures, the reading texts become difficult for students

With this view in mind, the present study attempts to explore the challenges faced by the bachelor’s level students while reading the textbook Readings for the New Horizons. It is one of the textbooks prescribed for the students studying in B.Ed. second year specialization in English Education under Tribhuvan University. Awasthi et al. (2016) state that it is prepared with a view to enhance the students’ horizons of knowledge through the reading of interdisciplinary texts in English and the topics which have dealt with diverse field of studies like human rights and freedom, social sciences, education and language teaching, globalization and postmodernism, east and west, masterpieces, love, war and peace, travel and adventure, health and medical sciences, sports and entertainments, science and technology, nature ecology and environment and reading for creative writing include authentic English writings in order to broaden the students’ worldview and present glimpse of different socio-cultural realities expressed through the English language which can be utilized in teaching English.

It remains unclear whether the textbook Readings for the New Horizons is challenging or not for students to read and comprehend. According to Jaishi (2010) the language used in the book is complex and the texts included in the textbook are from complex to simple instead of simple to complex. Based on this finding, it can be concluded that the textbook does not match with the level of the students. I also have been teaching the same textbook for five years. In informal conversation with me many of the students and my other colleges who have been teaching this textbook in other campuses told me that the texts incorporated in the textbook are really challenging for the students. If these challenges are not addressed in time and the students are allowed to base their readings only on simplified materials like guides and guess-papers instead of reading prescribed textbooks, goals and objectives set in the curriculum cannot be achieved. Moreover, it is necessary to expose the challenges which students face while reading the textbooks prescribed in the course and seek for the possible solutions to overcome the challenges.

If the challenges faced by students in studying textbooks written in a second language are explored; the teachers, students, syllabus designers and textbook writers will be in great benefit. If teachers are aware of the challenges faced by the students while reading the textbooks written in a second language, they can change their strategies or activities in different stages of teaching reading. As a result, the students’ reading and reading comprehension skills will be improved. Similarly, the findings of the study will be one of the bases to select the texts in the courses for the students of bachelor level. More than this, this study will set

the basis for the authors who wish to write the textbooks for bachelor level students.

The study focuses only on exploring the challenge faced by bachelor level students in reading the textbooks ‘Readings for the New Horizons’ but does not explore the solutions to the challenges faced by the students. The study was confined to 15 students who are studying English as a major subject in B. Ed. second year at a constituent campus of Banke district. The data was collected using unstructured interview only. The findings and interpretation were presented employing descriptive phenomenology methodology of qualitative research design.

Review of Literature

In informal conversations with me, many of my colleagues expressed that the students neither have the habit of reading nor do they like to read. My own experience of reading textbooks was not memorable and pleasant when I was a student. Due to lack of reading habits, students’ reading ability and comprehension of the reading text is poor in Nepal (Tiwari, 2022). In addition to this, there are many challenges which students face while reading the textbook. Some of these challenges, based on my experience, may include weak word recognition skills, inadequate knowledge sources, gap between readers’ background knowledge of the reading texts and application of ineffective reading strategies.

As mentioned by Strong et al. (2014), students often face six different challenges in academic reading. The first one is text structure. Regarding the text structure, they write “Often, the overriding pattern used to arrange the part-to whole or big-idea-to-subtopic relationships is invisible to students. Lacking a big picture to work from makes it unlikely that students will be able to extract the essential information from their reading (p. 55)”. Similarly, the second challenge in reading the text is information overload. The textbooks contain various facts, old as well as new concepts, names, charts and so on as contents. Students need to remember all of these things. If these things are not memorized, students will not be able to pass the exam. It is difficult to remember all these things. So students find it difficult to read. The third challenge is the “authority” of the textbook. Almost all the students agree that the contents or subject matter and writing styles of the reading texts are really big obstacles for reading comprehension. Among many challenges, one of the challenges is unfamiliarity with the vocabulary included in the textbooks. Hirsh and Nation (1992) in this context state, a reader should be familiar with 95% of the words of the reading texts in order to understand the texts in detail. But these graduate students are unfamiliar with many of the words included in the textbook. So it is difficult for the students to read and comprehend the reading texts included in the course books. The main reason for their dislike of reading is due to unfamiliar vocabulary which they encounter while reading the textbooks. Textbooks contain many words that students do not know. If there are unfamiliar words in the textbook, it will be difficult for the student to read and comprehend the texts. Apart from this, the cultural words used in the textbook make readers difficult in comprehending the text.

In a similar manner, Shehu (2015) has identified four general problems faced in reading. The first of the challenges he mentioned was the challenge of vocabulary. Readers cannot comprehend the texts if the words used in texts are unfamiliar and difficult for the student. So, unfamiliar vocabulary is taken as one of the major challenges by the students. The second challenge he mentioned is working memory. The inability

of the students to remember all the content given in the reading text is a common complaint. It is also very difficult to memorize all the subject matter included in the textbook. Absence of extensive reading is the third challenge. Students have to read many textbooks on many subjects. Therefore, extensive reading is equally important for the students. But students can't read extensively due to their limited vocabulary. Therefore, students have problems with reading. Of course, teachers encourage intensive reading for the textbooks. But, it requires a lot of time and effort.

University of Wellington (2022) has listed six common challenges that students have said they faced with academic reading. At university it seems that students are required to do a lot of reading. So they take a lot of reading as a challenge in reading. Academic terminology is another challenge for the students. Depending on the area of the subject matter, there will be some academic words which are very often used in the reading texts. Such words are also causing students problems in reading. In the same way, selective reading is considered as one of the challenges in reading. Because the students need to read a lot, it is necessary for them to identify which parts of the reading are the most important to concentrate on. It is commonly believed that maintaining focus on the important part is critical reading. But students cannot distinguish the most important and the least important texts included in the textbook. So they are having trouble reading. Finally, we expect our students to read critically at the college level. To do this, they reflect on what you have just read, relate it to what they have already known, and decide whether they find the arguments in the texts are valid or invalid. Students also consider such a critical reading as a challenge in reading.

Quod Erat Demonstrandum (Q.E.D) foundation (2022) has also listed six challenges which readers read while reading the texts. Among them, the first one is reading comprehension or the attention components. First, a reader requires sufficient mental effort to begin, continue and comprehend the reading texts. But, the students sometimes lack the energy needed to read lengthy chapters or exhaust themselves before finishing reading assignments. Therefore, reading becomes a challenge for them. Second, the students should be able to take the most important information or message given in the reading texts. In this too, the students have difficulty in determining the most essential message in the reading texts. If the students are unable to determine the most important and essential information in the reading text, it will create them difficulty to read the texts. Lastly, the students start reading the passage without previewing which is believed to be very essential for reading comprehension. Similarly, as mentioned in the list the second challenge in reading is memory. Students are unable to retain what they have read. For example, they have forgotten where they started reading by the time they come to the conclusion section of a reading text. Moreover, students are unable to retain and recall the message when it is required. The third challenge is language used in the reading text. Language here implies syntactic structure and words used in the reading texts. Complicated syntactic structures and unfamiliar vocabulary are very often major challenges in students' reading. Similarly, the fourth challenge as mentioned in the list is higher order cognition. While reading, the student has trouble grasping abstract ideas. Students find it challenging to contrast or compare concepts while reading. In fact, students do not employ reading comprehension strategies like predicting to help with understanding. Additionally, the students do not assess their own level of knowledge to monitor

their reading. Word decoding is considered as the fifth challenge. Most of the students are unfamiliar with sound symbol correlation which causes reading problems. The last or sixth challenge in students' reading is comprehension. The ultimate goal of reading is to comprehend the directly and indirectly expressed meanings of the reading texts. Students often fail to understand intended meanings of the reading texts.

In a similar way, common challenges of reading as mentioned by Roller (2022) include reader's slow reading speed, poor comprehension ability in silent and loud reading, skipping of words while reading, inability to decode syllables and words and associate them with phonics and limited knowledge of the words given in the texts.

The research studies which I have reviewed mainly focused on the challenges which students face while reading academic texts written in first language. None of the research studies have concentrated their focus to explore the challenges faced by the students while reading the texts prescribed in a course and written in second language. So, this study is different from other studies. Although the other studies were different, they helped me to identify the research topic and area which need to be explored in the interview.

Methodology

The study prepared in descriptive phenomenology based on the primary source of data. The participants of the study consisted of 15 B.Ed. second year students studying specialization English in one constituent campus in Banke district. I employed convenience sampling while selecting the area of the study and purposive sampling to select the participants of the study. Of the 15 participants participated in the study, nine were girls and six were boys. I was thought of involving half of the boys and half of the girls among the participants. But the total number of the girl students were seven. So, I selected all the seven girls and eight boy students as the participants in the study. Of those involved in the study, eight participants speak Nepali as their mother tongues, six speak Tharu and one Maithili. All the participants studied in community schools and started learning English from class one. Almost all the students considered themselves as weak in English. Eight of the participants mentioned that they studied major English according to their own interest. But, seven of the participants maintained that they studied major English as per the wishes of their parents even though they were weak in English. The name of the participants was written in alphabetical order and coded them from S1 to S15

Second year students were targeted because I have been teaching the textbook 'Readings for the New Horizons' for four years and more importantly, I was very much familiar with the participants. Such a familiarity with informants could help me to communicate with them in an expressive manner during the period of collecting data. In this connection, Bernard (2002) also writes familiarity of the participants to I helps to communicate their experiences and opinions in a clear, expressive, and reflective manner play vital roles while selecting sites and samples. Similarly, in most of the cases, research participants do not want to be intervened by unfamiliar persons. If I was not familiar with the participants, they would feel hesitant to express their opinions in the interview. The instrument of the study consisted of an unstructured interview. I employed unstructured interview as the technique of data collection since rich or more detailed information required in research was possible only through unstructured interview. The choice of medium

of language to be used in the interview was also given to the participants. All the participants expressed their desire to be interviewed in Nepali language therefore all the interviews were conducted in Nepali language. Each of the interviews were audio recorded and no time limit was set during the interviews to allow the informants to express their opinions as much as they wanted. The average interview time was 34 minutes. The audio recordings were transcribed, thematized and presented and interpreted employing descriptive phenomenological research methodology.

Results and Discussion

The findings of the study are presented as the themes. A total of seven themes related to the challenges faced in reading the textbook 'Readings for the New Horizons' have emerged based on the interview data. These themes are presented and interpreted below one by one.

Unfamiliar Words

All the participants agreed that they could not read or understand the text because the words in the textbook were unfamiliar to them. Furthermore, almost all of the participants stated that unfamiliar words were the major obstacles in reading and understanding the text. In this context, participant number five reported that he liked to read but he could not understand the meaning of most of the words of the reading texts. He further questioned me and asked if he could read and comprehend the text without knowing the meaning of the words. Thus, vocabulary as mentioned by every participant is the main barrier to reading comprehension. The participants further reported that they liked reading a book that was filled with unfamiliar words. With the exception of two participants, almost everyone stated that they would quit reading when they encountered unfamiliar words in the reading text. Majority of the participants mentioned that they could neither understand nor enjoy reading.

Length of the Reading Texts

All participants noticed that the length of the reading texts was too long. Participants said that they would get bored with long texts. They said that it would be easier for them to write summaries if there were short lessons. On the question of why a summary is needed, they said that there was no need for a summary to pass the exam. In this context, one participant asked how he could write summaries of long texts, if the texts were short he could write summaries of the text. In this regard, three participants stated that they never read the texts of the textbook rather they read the summaries provided by the teachers. Two participants said that they had not seen the textbook yet. They further said that they only read the summaries given by the teachers. They also said that the textbook was not needed because they had the summaries and guess papers. Previous studies have also shown that vocabulary was one of the major problems in reading the textbooks written in second language. This study is also in agreement with the former research studies.

Less Proficient in English

Moreover, half of the participants claimed that they were not skilled in English. Specifically, almost all of the participants regarded them as less proficient in reading English language texts. Their inability was a result of the language and cultural barriers they faced. They had poor reading speed. They read extremely slowly indeed when faced with linguistic and cultural challenges. They used translation in these

circumstances. Even when they weren't having trouble, several people claimed that even when reading or writing in English or while taking tests, they were still thinking in Nepali. Due to their unfamiliarity with the culture and their high degree of language competency, students occasionally appeared to have difficulty reading. In fact, I have also experienced that the students are weak in reading. While teaching this textbook, 'Readings for the New Horizons' I asked the students to read some texts but students used to find it very difficult to read even simple lessons.

Sentence Structure

A significant number of participants mentioned that long sentences used in the texts caused them difficulty to read and understand the texts. Participants further stated that it was impossible to understand extended sentences with new content. Participants mentioned that in order to keep track of what they were reading, they had to read lengthy sentences more than once. Regarding this one of the participants mentioned that the sentences used in the textbook were long and difficult to read, therefore, he only read the summary given by his teacher.

Content Included in the Textbook

The majority of the participants stated that the contents included in the textbook were unfamiliar to them. They also mentioned that the topics in the textbook were largely written by foreign writers and they wrote the texts based on their own contexts and culture. Similarly, six of the participants stated that the reading texts contained in the textbook were outside the environment of Nepal which caused them a challenge to read and comprehend the text.

Number of Reading Texts Included in the Textbook

All the participants mentioned that number of lessons or reading texts given in the textbook is very high. One participant said that the person who wrote the textbook was a fool. In his opinion, the writer must have considered other courses prescribed for them. He further said that the content of this textbook was longer than other textbooks. During the interview, I asked one of the participants to count the total number of lessons included in the textbook. The total number of reading texts was 69 when counting. Five of the participants added that they read guide books and guess papers instead of reading textbooks. Of the participants involved, only six were found to have purchased textbooks. They said that guide books are easier to understand and less costly than textbooks.

Lack of Reading Habit

Most of the participants mentioned that they were not in the habit of reading. They also mentioned that they never read textbooks. Half of the participants said that they had never read all the reading texts given in the textbooks. They said that they only read the lessons which they believed to be the most important from the viewpoint of examination. They responded that they did not read the textbooks even if they studied school level in general and in class 11 and 12 in particular.

Conclusion and Implications

The students cannot develop the habit of reading if they consider reading as a challenging activity. If they do not read the textbooks prescribed in the course, they cannot achieve objectives specified in the

course. For this reason, textbook reading is considered important for the students. So, the teachers have to motivate and encourage the students to read the textbooks. Furthermore, the teachers should help the students to face the challenges they face which they have encountered while reading the textbooks. This will make it easier for students to read the textbooks. If students read the textbooks and comprehend the messages contained in the textbooks, the objectives specified in the course are also fulfilled. Although, this study has not addressed the strategies which can be used to deal with the challenges faced with the challenges in reading the textbooks, the study has clearly highlighted the problem faced by the students while reading the textbooks written in a second language in Nepalese context. Therefore, the study will be beneficial in many ways. On the one hand, it will be beneficial for the teachers who teach 'Readings for the New Horizons' at the college level. For example, the major problem faced by the students was unfamiliar words. Therefore, a teacher needs to involve the students in intensive reading to develop their habits of reading texts written in second language. On the other hand, the study will also be useful for other students as readers. Besides this, teachers who want to write textbooks need to pay attention to these challenges faced in reading the textbooks. Therefore, the findings of the study can function as a cornerstone for textbook writers. In the end, this exploratory study confirmed the findings based on the data obtained from a small sample of 15 students studying in the same campus. Therefore, it seems to be necessary to study with a large number of students studying in different campuses across the country to validate the findings of the study. Similarly, there is a need for a study that can solve the challenges that students face while reading textbooks.

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