

Effect of Book Review Writing Activity on School Students' Reading Competencies: A Study

Suvarna Desale

Rajendra Kumbhar

Abstract

Reading a review is a necessity before selecting any book to read. Writing a book review is an activity that can result in the development of various skills. This paper discusses the impact of book review writing activity on the reading competency of school children. Action research of one year was carried out on 40 students from 5th standard of a CBSE school to assess the effect of writing book reviews on their reading competency. The action research contained detailed monthly planning and execution by noting regular observations and reflections of the researcher. The data was collected through book reviews written by students as an assignment for library-teaching periods for the research duration. The actions were modified according to the observations of the population. The findings identified that students became more involved readers when they wrote a review of their reading. The writing of book review stimulated the discussion about the content of the book, which further enhanced the reading habit. So, it was concluded that book review writing is one of the most important activities to develop students' reading and writing competencies, as well as clarity of thought.

Keywords: Action Research, Library Activity, Primary Students' Reading, Reading Comprehension, School Library

1. Introduction

Today in the digital marketing era, consumers first look for the review of each product. Similarly while choosing a book; readers want to know the opinions of those who have read that book before. With the information explosion, there are numerous materials available in the market, good quality or mediocre quality. So, before making a particular choice, it becomes necessary to read review of those materials. However, writing these reviews is an activity that requires complete understanding of the product.

This paper depicts the assessment of Book Review Writing activity using Action Research method to check its influence on the development of reading competence among school children.

In 1996, The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges stated that 'Writing' is more important than 'Reading' and recommended doubling the number of time students spent on writing (As cited in Graham and Hebert, 2010). However, after ten years, Biancarosa & Snow (2006) conducted a research to study the impact of 15 elements of reading on lessening the emotional crises, social crises and public health crises. In their report "Reading Next", they found the evidence

showing that reading habits can be instilled in foundation years i.e. school age, rather than later in life. As a continuation of this research, in an extensive report viz. "Writing Next", Graham & Perin (2007) stated that writing is a powerful tool for improving reading, thinking and other learning skills. They supported that the process of reading and writing about the reading texts, both practices go hand in hand. The writing improves comprehension about reading texts. Finally, it reflects to inculcate the reading competency of students.

1.1 Explanation of focal terms

This paper is built around two main concepts: Book Review; and Reading Competency. Definitions of both, given by Harrod's Librarians' Glossary (2005), are considered here.

The book review is defined as "An evaluation or personal opinion of a book published in a periodical or newspaper, broadcast on radio or television, or appearing on the Internet." As this definition shows, the crux of the book review is reviewer's personal opinion of the book. This research made every effort to follow the definition and encouraged the students to write their honest personal opinions in the reviews.

While, Competencies are "The mix of skills, expertise and experience needed to fill a role at the required level, and achieved through identifiable outcomes; they may be defined in terms of 'behaviours'." The development of reading competency, in this respect is an achievement of various skills like better comprehension of the content; clear and confident expression of thought; and overall enhanced fondness for reading.

2. Review of literature:

To find out that previously published material on the research topic, a literature search was carried out in primary and secondary sources. It was seen that there were no sufficient studies on the effect of book review activity on reading competencies. A number of studies conducted on a strong connection between reading and writing, both in theory and in practices were retrieved. These studies showed that writing can improve comprehension. However, the writing of book review is an important activity which should be started from an early age in students. This will reflect on their reading competency for life.

Graham & Hebert (2010) observed that both reading and writing as literacy skills support each other and enhance the reading comprehension of students. They stated that the primary goal of reading is to make meaning from text, but writing review of readings provides strong evidence of comprehension. To determine these both theories they conducted quasi-experimental tests and examined the effectiveness of writing practices on improving students' reading. The study recognized three important contributions to viz. "(i) Students should write about what they read; (ii) The teacher should teach the writing skills and structure of texts; (iii) Teacher should emphasize to students to write about what they read out of syllabus."

On similar lines, Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman (2011) conducted a study using an experimental method. They aimed to investigate the effect of teacher's storytelling aloud on the reading comprehension of the Saudi elementary school students. The results showed that the experimental group which was taught by the researchers outperformed the control group. This indicated that reading aloud in English

language has a positive impact on students' performances; building their interest in the reading process, stimulating discussion, and enhancing self-confidence.

Ntereke & Ramoroka (2017) studied the reading capabilities of first-year Humanities students of Botswana University. They commented that at school-age students had only textbook learning, but at the college level the interpretation of assigned material was more important. This study was conducted using the pre-test and post-test method. The findings showed that there was a mixed and wide variation in reading competency of students between when they entered the university and after the completion of the first term. The teaching and learning had a positive effect on reading ability of students.

3. Research Design

3.1 Identification of the Problem

It was experienced that the students did not have a clear idea about what they read in the recreational storybooks. They used to take books from the library and return it in a few days. When asked about what they gained from their reading, they could not express in lucid terms what they had read. It was observed that many of them were afraid to talk about their reading, so they were told to write about their reading in a book review. After checking their written book reviews, it was noticed that most of the students are not able to write a book review as they were generally unaware about writing of book reviews. Therefore, a need to find out a technique to help students in writing the book review and develop their reading competency was perceived.

3.2 Significance of the Study

The book review activity in foreign country libraries is conducted by many scholar librarian-teachers. They publish their own book writings on institutional websites, students also give their valuable contributions. It motivates other slow readers as well to read and write about the books. In India, the librarian is rarely seen teaching the students how to read and write about the book. However, Book review activity is widely recommended in CBSE curriculum. The CBSE board also provided guideline that, the school library should have book club, book talk and book exhibition activities for the students. It is considered that students can inculcate recreational reading habits through entrainment and as an informal educational tool. This study focuses on the effect of book review writing activity on the reading competency of the primary school students. As per the best of the knowledge of the researcher, this is the first attempt to determine whether the students' reading competency significantly improves when they write the book review in their own language. Hence, this study may be of help to all school librarians to better understand their students. It will provide the step by step process of running this activity in the regular library routine.

3.3 Objectives

The book review writing activity is an essential part of the school curriculum and it has not been widely studied in the school libraries of India. The present study attempts to investigate the effect of writing a book review on the reading competency of primary students with following objectives –

- (i) To study the reading habits of primary school (5th grade) students

- (ii) To conduct library activity to improve reading competency of students
- (iii) To device action plan to increase writing activity of students
- (iv) To investigate the effect of 'Book Review' writing activity on the reading competency development of students

3.4 Hypothesis

Book review writing improves the reading competency of students.

3.5 Scope and Limitations:

The present study was carried out among primary school (5th grade) students of K. K. Wagh Universal School in Nashik district. The study was conducted during the period of one year (June 2018 to June 2019). The population of the study was purposively selected, consisting only of all the students (40) studying in 5th grade for the academic year 2018-19. The study was continued for academic year 2019-20 with the same population. The research focused exclusively on the development of reading competency, not considering improvement of writing or any other skills.

3.6 Research Methodology:

The Action Research method was used to conduct this study. It can be defined as 'An action-based research carried out to solve a problem is known as action research.' Action research is problem-solving research (Kumbhar, 2016). The variables used for this study are –

- (i) Independent Variable – Storybook Series 'Geronimo Stilton' by Elisabetta Dami (42 Volumes set), published by Edizioni Eiemme, Milan, Italy, the Year 2000.
- (ii) Dependent Variable – Book Review was written by students at every action.

3.7 Data Collection Tools and techniques:

Data was collected using -

- (i) Participatory Observation; and (ii) Document analysis using tools – (a) Book reviews written by students; and (b) Action Plan

4. Action Research:

Before the implementation of Action Plan, a prior informal assessment was taken of students' reading ability through reading their book reviews and interactions with students about their knowledge of reading and writing about storybooks. The month-wise Action Research executed is explained ahead in detail.

Action Research carried out during June-2018 & July-2018

- ❖ **Plan:** To provide age-related storybooks to students for developing the reading habit
- ❖ **Action:** The library books were circulated for home reading.
- ❖ **Observations:** Students were issuing and returning the books, but it was not apparent whether they were actually reading them.
- ❖ **Reflections:** It was thought that the students should be given the activity of 'Book Review Writing' to assess their understanding of the book content. The consideration was that when it's compulsory to write about the book, students will read them more carefully.

Action Research carried out during Aug-2018, Sept-2018 & Oct-2018

- ❖ **Plan:** To check the reading competency, getting the book reviews written form the students on the books that they have issued form the library.

- ❖ **Action:** Students were issued age-appropriate storybooks and were encouraged to write reviews on them.
- ❖ **Observations:** Students were not able to write a proper book review; there were no common format or sequence.
- ❖ **Reflections:** It was perceived to be important to give guidelines for a proper format of the book review.

Action Research carried out during Nov-2018 & Dec-2018

- ❖ **Plan:** To find out a suitable book review format for the students; to provide individual guidance to write book reviews, when required
- ❖ **Action:** Various formats of the book review were studied to find a suitable one. That selected format was demonstrated to the students in two special library periods. Cardboard displays were prepared and book review format was exhibited on them in large colourful fonts.
- ❖ **Observations:** Students liked the cardboard displays and they tried to emulate the same by bringing their reviews on colourful papers. Still, some of them had various doubts regarding the actual writing part. It was observed that some of the students were copying down the paragraphs directly from the book blurbs.
- ❖ **Reflections:** It was thought that through a proper written format was displayed, students still needed individual attention and guidance for writing the book reviews. The need was perceived to get the reviews written in students' own words, adding their opinions about the story.

Action Research carried out during Jan-2019

- ❖ **Plan:** To impart individual guidance for writing in own language, when required
- ❖ **Action:** Individual advice was given to the students who required help to write their opinions in their own words.
- ❖ **Observations:** Students showed a better understanding of the stories that they read and were able to write the reviews in their own words. It was also observed that there was enhanced interaction among students about what they had read. Students were enthusiastically discussing the stories among themselves.
- ❖ **Reflections:** There was no scope for the students to express clearly if they did not like the book that they read.

Action Research carried out during Feb-2019

- ❖ **Plan:** To explain the importance of honest feedback
- ❖ **Action:** Students were explained how their honest reviews, positive as well as negative, can make a difference for the next readers. Various examples like Amazon shopping reviews and peer opinions were given to clarify the points.
- ❖ **Observations:** Students showed marked interest to convey their own honest opinions in the book reviews. They continued preparing the decorated book reviews with better understanding and clear thought.
- ❖ **Reflections:** To bring the whole class together for a common read, it was decided that all the students will be given books in the same series.

Action Research carried out during March-2019

- ❖ **Plan:** To shortlist multiple series of storybooks for the students to read
- ❖ **Action:** There was a break in the book review activity due to students' annual examination. However, in the meanwhile, various storybook series available in the library collection was searched and examined for student selections.
- ❖ **Reflections:** It was decided that the available variety of series will be discussed with students once they are back for the coming academic year starting in April.

Action Research carried out during Apr-2019

- ❖ **Plan:** To discuss with the students, their choices for the series to be read
- ❖ **Action:** Students were given a brief outline of the various storybook series available in the library and asked for their choice. After a rigorous discussion about the various series, the majority agreed on the 42-volume series "Geronimo Stilton stories" by Elisabetta Dami.
- ❖ **Observations:** It was noted that though a variety of other types like horror/ghost stories, fairy-tales, fantasy-magical stories etc. were available, students found animal stories like the selected series more interesting.
- ❖ **Reflections:** It was determined that more details about the selected series will be explained to students.

Action Research carried out during May-2019

- ❖ **Plan:** To read some volumes of the selected series to be able to describe to the students the

various facets of the story and motivate them to read the series with interest

- ❖ **Action:** Six volumes were read to get the basic idea about the selected series.
- ❖ **Observations:** Since the students were gone for May vacation, student observations were not possible in this month. However, the reading showed that due to easy language, interesting plotline and numerous illustrations accompanying the text, this will be a fun read for the students.
- ❖ **Reflections:** A particular circulation system was deemed necessary to ensure that each student will get to read each volume of the selected series.

Action Research carried out during June-2019

- ❖ **Plan:** To give the students the basic information about the series; to plan the circulation of every volume to each student; to remind the students of the prescribed book review format.
- ❖ **Action:** Storyline of the series with its important characters was described to students without disclosing the ending. Students were reminded of the prescribed book review format that was decided the year before. Roll number-wise each volume was issued to the students.
- ❖ **Observations:** It was observed that all the students were eager to read the books and were waiting for the next library period for that.
- ❖ **Reflections:** Encouraged by the warm responses received, a book-talk by the students about the books that they have read was planned. It was decided that a month will be

given to let them finish reading at least 3 volumes of the selected series.

5. Findings:

Research showed that a well-planned and judiciously executed activity of book review writing brought remarkable improvement in the reading competency of students. It proved the hypothesis to be valid. It was observed that when students were suggested to read books from the series, due to the continuation of the storyline, it proved to boost their reading than a single title. Other observed positive changes in the student behaviour included added enthusiasm about reading; urge to discuss the read books with classmates; a clearer thought process, and a conviction to give their honest opinions about books. There was a higher level of interaction between the students and the librarian encouraged by a regular and informal dialogue. The habit of checking dictionary whenever they came across a difficult word was instilled in the students. Initially, the students were introduced to written reviews because they were unable to talk about books. However, the activity of writing book reviews influenced them so much that by the end of the year, they were deemed ready to give a book-talk based on their written reviews. Such an overall increase in confidence level of students was perceived.

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded that activities like book review writing are of utmost importance as they bring about various positive reading habits in the students. It is also very necessary to introduce such activities to students at an early age so that the influences can be developed during their impressionable years and will stay with them for life.

7. Suggestions:

It is suggested that similar research can be conducted for gender-wise reading competency to study whether boys and girls have different reading abilities genetically. A study can also be carried out on the impact of writing book reviews on development of writing competency. In addition, it is recommended that –

- ◆ At the beginning of the academic year, the school librarian should take efforts to understand the reading ability and reading interest of student.
- ◆ Students should be made aware of the various storybooks available with the library and be motivated to read them.
- ◆ Any new activity should be demonstrated in-depth to students, ensuring individual guidance.

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About Authors

Mrs. Suvarna Desale, Librarian, K. K. Wagh Universal School, Nashik.

Prof. Rajendra Kumbhar, Professor, Department of Library and Information Science, Savitribai Phule Pune University (formerly, University of Pune).

