

Teaching to Read: A Critical Discussion

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Abstract

Reading is an integral part of our lives. The low proficiency in reading skills of undergraduate students has prompted me to take up this critical discussion on how reading skills are taught at the primary level in schools. In the NCERT English text book that I examined for the present analysis, I found significant gaps in the understanding of reading as well as in the classroom transaction of reading skills.

Key words: Reading, Decoding, Anticipation, Integration, Textbook, Exercises

Introduction

Reading is a basic language skill which we are exposed to since childhood. During my primary years of schooling, I recall, reading was not really given much importance as a separate skill; there was more emphasis on writing skills. No special effort was made to promote reading skills. The only activity that we engaged in for improving our reading skills was reading the English lessons aloud in the class and being corrected by the teacher if our pronunciation was wrong. Occasionally, the teacher would explain parts of the text or the meaning of a word as it was read aloud. Reading, it seems, was mostly viewed as decoding and transforming a graphic script into its phonetic form.

Reading is a crucial skill that is required in every walk of life. It is a window to the world and impacts our life significantly. So it is worthwhile to critically reflect upon how reading skills are taught in the primary years of schooling in the present times. As a faculty at Sharda University where presently I am teaching English to undergraduate and post-graduate Engineering students, I feel appalled at the poor quality of reading exhibited by 95 percent of my students. They struggle with decoding of words; they read haltingly; they have no idea where to pause; they have no idea of syllable stress or word

stress; there is no intonation and their whole attention is on decoding the written script. In order to understand the meaning of a text, they have to read it several times. In fact, most of them are rather poor and reluctant readers. All this made me very curious about how reading skills are developed in primary school students in contemporary times.

The present discussion on the teaching of reading is based on a critical appraisal of the reading exercises in a primary level English text book *Marigold*, published by NCERT.

Reading is Strategic

Our understanding of reading as a process has evolved over the years. It is now viewed as a very sophisticated language skill, which comprises of a range of sub skills, the main purpose of which is not just decoding the text, but also comprehending its meaning. Before starting to read, it is important to understand the purpose of reading—whether it is aesthetic or efferent. This will dictate the method we adopt for reading.

Reading is viewed as a strategic activity. A good and effective reader employs various strategies to comprehend the meaning of a text. Meaning is created when there is an interaction between the reader's prior knowledge on the topic of the text, his/her past experience and the text

itself as advocated by Schema Theory (Adams and Collins, 1977). The same text therefore may have different interpretations, depending on the reader's background, prior knowledge and experiences. Besides, reading is not always a bottom up approach as advocated by Skill's method in which the reader begins with the identification of letter, then word, and then moves towards full texts (Sheridan, 1981). The reader reads in chunks, applies prior knowledge, anticipates and builds expectations, evaluates the textual content, makes connections with his existing knowledge and then arrives at the meaning of a text (Grellet, 1981).

According to research, reading comprises three main skills—decoding, anticipation and integration of meaning. Each of these skills is made up of various subskills. Decoding is the process of recognizing the graphic form and converting it to its phonetic form (NCERT, 2005). This process can be developed by improving recognition of word-shape, enhancing sight vocabulary and accessing the internal lexicon. Anticipation is a skill which involves predicting the meaning using the semantic or grammatical context, or the topic of the sentence, or by referring to prior knowledge. Integration of meaning involves connecting the skills across the ideas in order to achieve the main purpose of arriving at the meaning of the text. The psycholinguistic model which views reading as prediction of meaning suggests that reading is a top down approach (Sheridan, 1981). Skimming, scanning and identifying the central idea, the main points and the supporting details of a text also aid the reading process. According to Grellet (1981), an understanding of the organization of the text will significantly impact reading. It is important to practice all three sub skills repeatedly by means of dedicated activities until the reader can use them automatically. According to EduGains, an

education website, this will give the reader more time to integrate the meaning of the text, thereby improving the reading skills remarkably.

With this understanding of reading, one can now create a structured process to teach reading skills, which will involve carrying out appropriate activities before, during and post-reading.

The English Text Book

Analysis of a few texts from the NCERT English Textbook *Marigold* for Class V students gave me an insight into how reading activities are developed in schools. *Marigold* comprises of a mix of short poems and popular fictional narratives covering themes which conform to the learners' immediate physical, social and cultural environment (NCERT, 2005).

The first unit includes a poem "Ice cream" by Rachael Field. The poem is preceded by a colorful picture of an ice cream vendor with children flocking around his van. This picture gives a cue to the reader about the content of the text. There is a second cue in the form of a question, which is a kind of pre-reading activity. It is meant to draw the reader's attention and prepare him/her for reading the text that follows. The layout of the text tells the reader that it is a poem and not a narrative text. It is surrounded by illustrations, which also feeds the imagination and expectations of the child regarding the content of the poem.

The next text "Wonderful Waste" is a short story that emphasizes on avoiding waste of vegetable scraps which instead of throwing away can be reused effectively. This is accompanied by an illustration which allows the reader to anticipate what the text is all about. In fact, the title itself tells the reader that waste can be used in a positive manner. The illustrations are colourful and captivating. There is a cue preceding the text that conveys the message that waste can

be useful. This draws the child's attention to those parts in the story which shows how waste can be useful. The text is followed by difficult words, their meanings, reading comprehension questions and an exercise on identifying true or false statements. There is another exercise on colouring the boxes that have rhyming words, which is meant to improve the child's grapheme-phoneme correspondence, and hence the word shape and to some extent the sight vocabulary.

The last text of this unit is "Bamboo Curry". The text is preceded by colourful pictures and a leading question: "Have you ever eaten a bamboo? Let's read this picture story and find out which part of the bamboo can be cooked and eaten." The question is designed to provoke the reader to scan the text to look for specific information. The exercises following the text focus primarily on enhancing writing skills and pronunciation practice. There is no specific exercise for reading.

The unit ends with a Teacher's Page, which gives explicit instructions to the teacher on how to carry out the transaction of the text. In this, teachers are instructed to encourage students to read folk tales from different parts of the country and also compare the cultural and linguistic aspect of the folk tale that he or she is reading with the cultural and linguistic aspect of his or her own mother-tongue. While in this section the authors seem to realize the importance of exposing children to other interesting texts, they do not suggest a list of supplementary books.

Given here are some sample reading exercises from the English text book 'Marigold'. The reading exercises across the units are of a similar kind. So only a representative sample is presented here. It may be noted that only a portion of the entire question has been presented:

1. There are Reading comprehension questions after every poem as well as the narrative texts.

2. 'True or false' exercises: State whether the following sentences are true or false

(i) Rip was kind to children. _____

(ii) Rip was a hard-working man. _____

3. Complete the following sentences.

(i) Rip's village was situated _____.

(ii) The children of the village loved him because _____.

(iii) _____ was his constant companion.

4. Instructions for reading supplementary Reading Material

The exercises mentioned here are inadequate to train the students to enhance their reading skills. Although exercises 1, 2 and 3 require that the child to go through the text several times, that does not necessarily contribute to an improvement in their general reading skills. Besides, exercise 1 is boring and unimaginative. Exercise 4 is very vague and there is no follow up activity to ensure that children actually read the supplementary books. Moreover, the authors do not provide a list for supplementary reading either.

All texts are followed by a list of new words and their meanings. Attempts have been made to keep the exercises child-centric. The reading exercises are named as 'Reading is fun' or 'Let's read' so as to make the child feel comfortable with the idea of reading and not consider it as a difficult and formidable task. The questions that follow the poem are designed to allow the child to draw the answers from his/her daily life experience. The answers to some questions may be found in the pictures accompanying the text and to others in the text itself. The questions have an interesting, informal, friendly and conversational tone and make a personal connect with the child as she/he can relate them with his/her life experiences. For instance, questions such as "In which season is ice cream popular?", or

Table 1

Approximate Number of Exercises to Develop Various Language Skills (Marigold, Class V)

Language Skills	Vocabulary	Reading Comprehension	Traditional Questions on grammar	Spoken Fluency	Writing Skills	Listening Skills	Orthography	Fun Activities
Approx. No. of Exercises	11	3	32	17	34	1	8	21

“Who feels joyous on seeing the ice cream man?” makes the child recall his experiences with the ice cream man.

Table 1 shows that there are very few questions devoted exclusively to the enhancement of reading skills. Most of the exercises focus on improving writing and speaking skills, vocabulary, phonetic awareness, or grammar. Though reading is implicit in all these exercises, no conscious effort is made to improve the reading skills of the learner.

Analysis of a few texts from the NCERT English textbook *Honeydew* for Class VIII also reiterates the fact that reading skills are not given any special attention. A careful examination of *Honeydew* shows that there is a pre-reading activity to orient the reader to the textual content, and connect it to the reader’s existing knowledge. In addition, there are comprehension check questions within the text and the meanings of ‘difficult words’ as well as colourful illustrations in the margins of the page, which is quite helpful for the reader. The exercises mainly consist of four major parts namely: “Working With Texts”, which are comprehension questions; “Working With Language” which essentially focus on various grammatical aspects of the text; “Speaking” which include exercises to enhance speaking skills, and “Writing”, which include exercises to enhance writing skills.

The Class X English text book *First Flight* is also more or less along the same lines, with pre-reading activities, comprehension check questions, glossaries and exercises “Thinking

about the text”, “Thinking about language”, “Speaking” and “listening skills”.

In none of these books is there any special activity aiming at improving sight vocabulary or word recognition that comes from identifying word shapes. Also, there are very few activities that accelerate decoding through the use of flash cards, by improving grapheme- phoneme correspondence, through nonsense words, by using word games, by recognizing word shape or by improving sight vocabulary. Exercises to improve anticipation skills which require the child to guess, anticipate or question are also conspicuous by their absence. There is an attempt to improve anticipation skills in the pre-reading activity at the beginning of the text. However, additional exercises designed to anticipate meaning from semantic or grammatical cues need to be incorporated. There is also no exercise on how to anticipate the content of the text through pictures, titles, subtitles, italicized words, key words, graphic organizers and flow charts, etc. Likewise, there is no exercise to help the child to learn how to skim or scan a text and look for the central idea, main points, sub-points or finer details. Finally, there is also no exercise on preparing concept maps or on note –making.

There is also little attempt to consciously expose children to the organizational patterns of texts. Reading is a skill which cuts across the curriculum. By confining the learners to the narrative texts presented in the English textbook, we are limiting their ability to tackle texts of other registers and types such as expository, explanatory, scientific texts, etc.

Bridging the Gap

It is evident that there are huge gaps between our understanding of the reading process and the way we actually transact teaching reading skills in the classroom. In the present NCERT books, the reading exercises need to be more carefully designed by consciously focusing on a specific reading strategy.

Interesting Pre-reading activities which encourage the readers to reflect on what they already know about the topic need to be designed. Pre reading activities may be by questioning or using KWL charts (what you *Know*; what you *Want to know* and what you have *Learnt*), or by recalling personal experiences on a certain topic and sharing with the class or some practical activity like exploring some aspect of the outside world or watching a certain television programme on a topic, or reading up certain concepts from a book etc.

Explicit during-reading activities also need to be designed. Some of them are mentioned as follows:

- i. Exercises on skimming texts to get the gist or scanning the text for specific information may be presented in the form of a playful activity where the class is divided into small groups of five and the groups are provided with copies of the same text or different texts. Each group is required to arrive at the gist or locate specific pieces of information within a fixed time period. The teacher may keep track of the time with a stopwatch.
- ii. Interesting exercises on anticipation from semantic context or grammatical context may be designed. For instance- exercises like - Guess the missing word in the sentence – “The deep sea fishermen found a s _ _ _ _ in the sea” and “The deep sea fishermen found a s _ _ _ _ rock in the sea”. In the first sentence, from the

semantic context the reader might guess the word ‘shark’ and in the second sentence from the grammatical context article ‘a’ and the following noun after the blank, the reader might guess that the missing word is an adjective which could be ‘sharp’.

- iii. Another exercise on anticipation could be predicting the content with the help of topic sentence or the first sentence of a paragraph. Usually in a paragraph, all the sentences are an expansion of the first sentence of the paragraph. The teacher may read out the first sentence of a paragraph and ask the students to guess what the content of the paragraph could be. This may be a group activity.
- iv. Another activity on anticipation could be by the use of nonsense words. The teacher might replace certain words in the text by some nonsense words and students are asked to replace the nonsense words with an appropriate word of their choice.
- v. Predicting meaning with the help of textual cues, topics and sub-topics, pictures or graphic organizers may also be carried out as group activities. Anticipation is a very crucial and effective skill and leads to better comprehension because it is easier to make connections between new knowledge and existing knowledge and evaluate, process and assimilate new information faster.
- vi. Exercises to improve sight vocabulary through flash cards or word shape may be carefully designed in the form of playful activities.
- vii. Another activity may be designed to identify the central idea, main points or supporting details of a text. Again if this is carried out in the form of a group activity it can be quite interesting. This will help even the poor and reluctant readers to at least get the gist of the text without focusing on finer details.

- viii. A special activity may be designed to recognize various organizational patterns of texts. This will improve comprehension because if the reader understands how information is organized, it will be easy for him to process information.
- ix. Exercises on taking down notes while reading a text or making flowcharts and concept maps will help the reader immensely to understand the interrelation within the concepts or characters in the text which will lead to a much better understanding of the text.

Post-reading activities such as making notes, critically discussing what has been read, making judgments, responding to the text or considering what is unsaid or unexplored needs to be emphasized. This will encourage the reader to think, reflect, discuss, analyse, comment and be an active reader.

If all these suggestions are implemented the lower level sub skills (mechanical skills) such as decoding, anticipation, word recognition etc. will become automatic after a lot of such exercises have been practiced repeatedly and less time will be spent on these sub-skills. The reader will get more time to focus on higher level skills and will integrate meaning, reflect critically and thus develop a broader, deeper and better understanding of the text.

It is true that language skills are best learnt when the focus is not on language itself, and in this paper, I have argued for a more structured approach to the teaching of reading skills. However, the exercises to teach reading skills can be presented in an apparently unstructured form, i.e. in the form of an activity or a game as discussed in the preceding paragraphs. This will take the readers' focus away from the fact that they are doing the exercise to improve their language skills.

Reading across the curriculum and beyond the curriculum also needs to be incorporated in the

school text book. Besides the English text book, text books of science, mathematics, social sciences should also be read in the English language classroom. The teacher needs to point out to children the various organization patterns and registers of language use. Register specific vocabulary also needs to be consciously looked into. The concept of reading in different registers needs to be introduced. Samples of texts from a social science text book, mathematics textbook (the textual part like the problems or instructions etc.) and English text book may be brought to the class and a careful comparison can be done in terms of vocabulary used, sentence construction patterns, styles of writing like narrative, expository, argumentative etc. and organizational patterns like topical, chronological, spatial, cause- effect, comparison-contrast, problem- solution etc. This may be a group activity and each group may be asked to make a presentation on what they observed. This will sensitize the readers to the various kinds of texts in different registers and it will make them more comfortable with reading in the content area. A list of books for supplementary reading should be provided to the students and a dedicated time slot should be allocated in the time table to ensure that students actually read these books.

Conclusion

There is a dire need to explicitly design proper Pre-reading, During-reading and Post-reading activities to enhance the various sub-skills in the reading process. Training students along these lines will create good, independent and competent readers, which in turn will have a long term impact on the quality of education.

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