

Helping Children Become Readers

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Pathways to literacy

Literacy, for the purposes of the census, is the ability to write one's name. But to reduce literacy to a signature is obviously to trivialize it. Nor is literacy merely the ability to recognize alphabets, and to put them together to read words, or to read a text. Although all these skills are part of the road to literacy, true literacy is *the ability to read independently, a text of one's choice, and understand it.* (Note that literacy is not merely the ability to read a textbook and answer questions based on it, just as arithmetic is not simply the ability to learn up the correct solution to every problem in a given book.)

The 'text of one's choice' may be trivial, such as a road sign; or ephemeral (impermanent) such as a newspaper or a poster; it may be an official text, such as a contract at work; or it may be a text that needs a more intellectual and imaginative engagement. But if we ultimately want to be able to read for information, knowledge, and imagination, we must recognize that literacy is a journey. At school, all we can do is start the child off on this journey. What roads the child takes, how far down the road the child goes, and at what pace; these decisions are not in our hands. They are a matter of individual choice.

Our task, therefore, is to empower children to build on and construct their own pathways to literacy. A child who leaves school should do so with the ability to read what he/she wants or chooses to read. A person who can read only what they have been taught to read is not

a reader. The aim of teaching reading is to create readers.

A child's ability to read is a skill that stays with him/her through life. However, this skill grows and develops with the child and is not a competence that we can give to the child as a full-blown ability.

In this paper, I shall first attempt to outline models of literacy. I shall then present an argument to highlight the fact that what is missing in our schools is voluntary reading of a text chosen by the child herself/himself; this is a critical step in creating a reader.

Models of reading

There are a variety of 'models' for teaching an individual how to read and the methodology of teaching depends on the model chosen. At one end is the 'bottom-up,' letter or alphabet and word recognition approach; at the other end, the 'top-down', whole word, holistic, meaning-making approach; the interactive compensatory model often brings together the two approaches.

The bottom-up approach

The bottom-up approach draws on the skills involved in proof reading, where every letter is attended to, and reading is slow and painstaking. It is the kind of reading we do as adults, of unfamiliar names (try reading the names *Bryzinski, Urquhart, or Cholomondeley*; or the words *semordnilap*,

matutoltepa, scaphoid, pococurante, metencephalic, rhabomancy, and paraskevidekatriaphobia). These are all real words that can be found in the online Macmillan English Dictionary and the Random House Dictionary.

While reading the unfamiliar names or the words in the above paragraph, most people will perhaps first read them letter by letter, or syllable by syllable, and then join the letters and syllables to form a word. According to Gough (1985), this is called the *bottom-up* process of reading, where reading proceeds from part to whole. In this model, the reader first identifies the letters, then combines them into spelling patterns like *spr* or *bl*, and finally proceeds to word recognition.

This model gives very little importance to world knowledge, contextual information, or other higher order reading skills of the reader. It equates reading with the decoding of visual symbols. Moreover, it may not present an accurate picture of how a skilled reader actually reads, for it is well known that skilled and fast readers are not very good at proof reading!

The top-down approach

The top-down approach makes use of the skills involved in a quick, holistic recognition of words. It is how we read logos, brand names, or names that are very familiar to us such as name of a place (*Delhi*), product (*Xerox*), and people (*Sachin Tendulkar*); many pre-school children and illiterate adults can recognize signboards of shops, and names of products (popular soaps and toothpastes). That is why smaller local products often imitate the names and logos of the larger well known brands!

All of us read to acquire information. For this, we use our knowledge of the world and

contextual information. That is how we can read words that are half hidden, or written in ink that has been washed away. Therefore, one can easily read the words with faint letters in this sentence: “Yesterday we took the children to the zoo. We saw lions and tigers.”

According to the top-down model of reading, a reader goes from the whole to the part, is carried forward by the meaning, and brings to the text his/her knowledge of the world, as well knowledge of the language. The top-down model emphasizes that we are very good at *predicting* what occurs next in a text.

The interactive compensatory model

The ‘interactive compensatory model’ argues that while reading, both sets of skills – bottom up and top down – are utilized by a skilled reader, as and when required. A person who is not very familiar with a language may not be able to predict the words as compared to someone who has knowledge of the language. Such a person would use a bottom-up approach while at the same time attempting to predict from his knowledge of the world, or subject.

Different types of texts use different models of reading. For instance, the rapid reading of detective fiction involves skills quite different from those required for reading a list of culturally unfamiliar names, such as a roster of delegates at an international conference. On the other hand, we read a bus sign very rapidly and selectively, with just a quick glance to confirm that it is indeed the bus we want. We thus have a repertoire of reading skills at our disposal and the models of reading are not mutually exclusive.

These different models of reading offer to us strategies that complement each other in the teaching of reading. Just as there are alternative

routes to good health, whether through diet and exercise, yoga and meditation, or medication and surgery, there are alternative routes to literacy and the pedagogy of reading. Different techniques may be appropriate for different individuals at different times. Thus teachers need to be aware that there are different routes to literacy, and the fact that these routes are not mutually exclusive but can complement each other. In addition to that, the pedagogy of reading must also create awareness of the various models of reading that can be used to teach reading. This awareness is important because different individuals have different preferences, interests and aptitudes. There is no single way of teaching that is suitable for everyone, at all times.

Learner autonomy and learner-chosen texts

A classroom is made up different types of individuals. Pedagogy is not a matter of covering the syllabus or of imparting skills or knowledge, but of affecting individual minds. When the many minds in the classroom engage in a process of cognitive activity, they begin to take charge of this activity and to explore their capacities and limitations in the domain of thinking, just as on the playground they explore the possibilities of physical action. Learning consists of mental activity, and mental muscle is built up during this activity. To teach is therefore to provoke individual mental activity.

Thus, reading is best learnt when a child tries to read and when every child chooses the text which is at the right level of challenge and interest *for that child*. Krashen (1985) uses the term “*i+1*” to describe a cognitive zone of language growth; if your ability is at level *i*, your best learning occurs if you are exposed to language whose complexity is just one step

above your ability. The psychologist Vygotsky (1986) describes a ‘zone of proximal development,’ wherein you can solve with help, problems that are a little more complex than those that you can solve on your own. These insights however, leave the level ‘*i*’ or the zone of proximal development, open to our interpretation. Just as it is difficult to prescribe how hungry someone should be, or how sleepy, it is difficult to prescribe what a person should be able to read. To take care of hunger and sleep, caregivers try to encourage a routine, and provide the facilities to eat and sleep. The same approach needs to be adopted for reading.

Therefore, our schools need to have more of read-aloud stories at the early stages, and additional reading hours at the later stages of reading. Even the prescribed textbook can be taught in a way that encourages learner autonomy. I have described (Amritavalli, 2007) how a group of disadvantaged learners (whose English was much below the standard expected of them) was asked to simply ‘find something that they could read’ from a textbook. Every student managed to find something, even if it was only a couple of sentences. Most astonishingly, what we were left with at the end of such sessions of finding readable texts, was a ‘book within the textbook’ that the children could read on their own.

This ‘book within the textbook’ consisted of: (i) only the picture pages (which contained line drawings); (ii) none of the prescribed reading passages; (iii) poems, and other material such as dialogues for practice, vocabulary exercises, grammar exercises, etc. In short, every piece of text that looked short enough to be read by a learner, had short paragraphs, involved turn-taking and dialogue, short lines (as in poems), and most importantly, was a short text, was chosen. These were not

texts of over two or three pages that had to be 'taught' for two or three days, but texts that could be read and completed in about a quarter of an hour.

When we think about it, most of us read short texts every day, except for those of us who are addicted to reading long novels, or are teachers and academics. Most everyday reading is done for short stretches of time, and for specific interests or information. Researchers in the UK looking at children's reading choices found, to their surprise, that children read a lot of poetry, and that the weakest children choose to read poetry (Hall & Cole, 1999). This is because poems are short texts with short lines, and their rhyme and rhythm, aids in the predictability of the text.

Finally, in our day to day life, we as readers choose what we want to read. Yet, the classroom gives no opportunity for a child to do the same. Let me end with an anecdote to emphasize that a lot of ability and effort underlie the exercise of choice of a text, by a child. A group of nine-year olds learning Telugu as a second language (for about three years) were told by their teacher that after the summer vacation, each of them would have to share with the class something that they had read in Telugu during that vacation. As a result, the children found themselves *looking for texts that they could read and that they could share*. Their parents were also pleasantly surprised that Telugu story books or magazines that had so far lain neglected were now being leafed through and discussed in pairs and groups by these children.

In this short paper, I have not touched upon the 'sub skills' of reading such as 'skimming' and 'scanning', but the reader can easily guess what these sub skills are, and appreciate the fact that a lot of scanning and skimming

happened before each child finally decided on a text to read and present. The children included cartoons and jokes in their search for suitable texts. At work, I came across a group of adult international students, learning English at our institution, again searching for jokes, anecdotes and other such short materials to read in English. None of our prescribed texts had such materials.

Whether child or adult, the learner-reader is the best judge of what he/she wants to read. We need to research into children's reading choices in countries such as the UK, to ascertain what fluent readers in different age groups are reading on their own; this will serve as a benchmark of what the most successful reading programmes for particular age groups can do in our schools.

References

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