Reading in the Indian Classroom

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we will attempt to explore the implications of the implementation of an important educational policy—Chunauti 2018—an initiative of the Delhi Government to curb the dropout rate of students and to improve the quality of education with a special focus on students who are weak in studies. The division of classes into groups on the basis of performance has been done with the objective of creating an environment that facilitates effective learning. The basic premise of this division is that teaching will be more effective if the students are at the same level with regard to their understanding and capabilities. This policy has practical ramifications and has considerably influenced classroom practices. The researchers, while understanding the processes and its effect on classroom practice, developed an intervention plan for students enrolled in the *Nishtha* program for Class VI to address some of the problematic issues that result from policy and practice interface.

Keywords: Chunauti 2018, *Nishtha* program, educator-facilitator, learner literacy, reading comprehension

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT SITUATION

Two educational policies—No Detention Policy of the RTE (Right to Education) Act 2009 and Chunauti 2018—have changed the educational terrain in India remarkably. The provisions of No Detention Policy of the 2009 RTE Act ensure that learners do not fail, but keep graduating to a higher class every year. The problem however arises when these learners face exams in class IX. The Delhi Government introduced Chunauti 2018 scheme in June 2016, with the objective of identifying the weakest learners from classes VI to IX and providing them with special attention to ensure that they successfully cleared class X by 2018. This move aimed at "leaving no child behind" in school. To achieve this, the learners

were divided into two groups based on their learning and reading capabilities. These groups were called *Nishtha* and *Pratibha*. *Pratibha* comprised of students whose performance was at their grade level while *Nishtha* comprised of students whose performance was below their grade level. The school assessments revealed that there was improvement in the reading ability of the students of *Nishtha* group, but they could still not read class VI textbooks with ease, so another intermediary level (Vishwas) was created, where these students were taught some foundation topics so that their transition to the syllabus of class VII could be facilitated.

The Government of Delhi expected that 59 per cent of students in Classes VI, VII and VIII would have started reading and learning independently from their textbooks following an intervention that started in September 2016. Chunauti 2018, the interventional initiative to improve the reading and learning abilities of students in Delhi government schools was initiated after reports showed that just 25 per cent students of class V could read and learn with ease.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

Learners who struggle to comprehend their textbooks(this is true at all levels of school learning), are at a severe disadvantage as even though they can read haltingly, they cannot comprehend what they read. As a teacher educator, I could see that the school students were suffering because of their inability to read with facility. It was the despair of my interns that prompted the two of us (myself, the teacher –educator and my intern) to devise an intervention plan to improve the comprehension level of the learners. Reading comprehension is essential in order to ensure learner literacy in all subject areas. It is imperative that a student is able to comprehend what he/she reads and retain the information. It is therefore crucial to implement the right strategies to mitigate the reading problem.

The reality of the school system which the B. Ed. intern encountered was an eye opener for her. She was deeply shocked that the students of *Nishtha* were not able to make meaning of a simple text and were even unable to answer "how" and "why" questions based on it. Some of the students told the intern that they faced difficulty in comprehending texts, and had to rely on help books and guides to understand even simple English texts.

READING AND ITS IMPORTANCE

According to Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson (1985), reading is a basic life skill that is used both in school and in everyday life. It is the cornerstone for a child's success in school and throughout life itself. Without the ability to read well, opportunities for personal fulfilment and job success would inevitably be

lost. Despite its importance, reading is one of the most challenging areas in the education system in any country. The ever-increasing demand for high levels of literacy in the technological societies of today makes this problem even more pressing.

What exactly is Reading Comprehension? While the definition is simple, the act of reading comprehension is not simple to teach, learn or practice. It is an active, interactive process that occurs before, during and after a person reads a text. When reading a text, a person engages in a complex array of cognitive processes, simultaneously using his/her awareness and understanding of phonemes, phonics and the ability to comprehend or construct meaning from the text. In fact, the last component of the act of reading is reading comprehension; but it cannot occur independent of the other two elements. It is also the most difficult of the three.

The complex nature of reading comprehension makes it difficult to develop the ability to comprehend texts quickly and independently. Therefore, it needs to be taught consciously by teachers and parents over an extended period of time. The teacher/facilitator(the teacher-educator as the facilitator in this action research) should have a background and understanding of how reading comprehension can be done. Support for reading comprehension can extend up to elementary school so that texts with a higher difficulty level can be negotiated with facility. As reading material becomes more and more complex, diverse and challenging, learners need to learn newer strategies to aid reading comprehension. For instance, informational texts require different comprehension strategies. Therefore, reading strategies need to be refined, practised and reinforced continually since reading is a lifelong process that changes based on the depth and breadth of the text that is being read.

Without comprehension, reading is nothing more than tracking symbols on a page with our eyes and sounding them out. However, as we know, understanding what is being read is the primary goal of reading and is essential for thriving and functioning in today's world. Reading comprehension is also a critical component of functional literacy as we all need to comprehend basic texts such as bills, leases, directions on packaging, transportation documents, bus and train schedules, maps and travel directions. With the ability to comprehend what is being read, individuals also continue to develop socially, emotionally and intellectually.

When dealing with reading, we encounter two layers of reality: one that we can see and one we cannot see. The purpose of reading is to make the inherent hidden layer of meaning visible and clear (Kose, 2006). Teele (2004), asserts that the goal of all readers should be to understand what they read. Research shows that

good readers are actively involved with the text and are aware of the processes they use to understand what they read. Different strategies can be developed for facilitating reading comprehension, such as answering and generating questions, summarizing, predicting, making connections, visualizing and inferring which are the strategies proven by research to improve reading comprehension (Block & Israel, 2005; Duke, & Pearson, 2005).

Comprehension involves the construction of ideas by the reader while negotiating the writer's ideas represented in the text. During the process of negotiation of meaning, five major aspects come into immediate play:

Vocabulary development: To understand the words used by the writer, it is essential to have a good knowledge of words and their meanings.

Literal comprehension: This involves the ability to capture the central thought and main ideas, significant details, the sequence of events and answer specific questions from the given text.

Inferential comprehension: For this the reader needs to understand the cause-effect relationships, anticipate the events that follow and form opinions.

Evaluation: This is the judgement based on the readers' prior experiences, knowledge or values and involves making studied value judgements.

Appreciation: This involves the readers emotional and aesthetic ability and sensitivity towards the written text. The reader should be able to identify with the characters and their emotions.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A learner who possesses prior knowledge about reading strategy is better able to comprehend a given text. McNamara, Ozuru, Best and O'Reilly, T. (2007), state that reading strategy is important for reading comprehension. Appropriate and effective implementation of reading strategy involves not only monitoring, but also includes guidance to achieve effective comprehension. However, it does not suffice to simply explain the strategies to a learner; one also has to ensure that there is sufficient reinforcement of the comprehension strategies.

Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist perspective gives great insight into how to support struggling readers in their reading development. It is important that the reader constructs understanding of the text by drawing on prior experiences and active construction, rather than passive acquisition. The role of the teacher in the process of active construction is that of a facilitator who fosters construction of comprehension through social interaction.

It is clear that many readers lack the reading abilities and knowledge about the genre of texts that they read in the classroom. However sometimes, learners also need domain specific knowledge about science, history or other topics. Textbook materials in particular tend to be challenging for most learners because learners lack domain specific knowledge. Moreover, they contain unfamiliar words and concepts, and have organizational structures germane to instructional textbooks. In addition, textbooks tend to have numerous cohesion gaps, posing an additional hurdle for learners. These gaps occur when there is little conceptual overlap or explicit connections between sentences. The challenges posed by poorly written texts are compounded for learners with less knowledge about the domain (McNamara, D. S., Kintsch, E., Songer, W. B., and Kintsch, W., 1996; McNamara, D. S., 2001).

Teaching reading strategies such as comprehension monitoring, paraphrasing and bridging inference is one of the most effective means of helping learners overcome the challenges of reading. In fact, the importance of reading strategies is becoming increasingly recognized. Strategy instruction is particularly effective for learners with less domain knowledge or lower reading skills (O'Reilly, Rowe, Boonthum & Levinstein, 2007).

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Objective

To develop and foster reading comprehension in learners

To enhance the vocabulary as well as the ability of learners to communicate what they have learnt textually

Sample

Twenty students of class VI of Government Co-Education School Karampura, New Delhi were chosen as the sample for this research. The teacher educator and an intern were the researchers for the study. The period of the research spanned fifty-six days of internship that B.Ed. interns were expected to complete in their final year of B. Ed.

Procedure

The intern's preliminary interactions with the school teacher were organized with the objective of understanding what the teacher perceived to be the cause of her students' poor language abilities and what strategies and measures she employed to deal with the problem. The teacher felt that the students faced

difficulty in understanding the English language and in its acquisition as they were not "immersed" in it. The intern also observed the teacher while she taught and interacted with the students. The classroom observations were conducted over a period of ten days during which the intern wrote detailed reflections in her journal about the teaching pedagogy of the teacher and how she interacted with her students. The teacher was traditional in her approach and employed the grammar translation method, with the primary focus on text book teaching and rote memorization of answers to textual questions. It was quite evident that the teacher was not taking any concrete steps to foster reading comprehension and writing in her students. The classroom was bereft of material resources and access to reading material. A print rich environment and meaningful engagement with literature eases the transition from home environment to classroom reading and writing. These systemic barriers compounded the socio-linguistic lacunae that were the natural corollary of the students' family background.

IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM AREAS

The students were given a simple story to read and comprehend from their NCERT textbook, following which they were asked to answer some pertinent questions based on the story. This was done before implementing an intervention plan for fostering reading comprehension. The answers of the students were assessed and recorded. The issues that emerged included difficulty in:

Decoding and pronunciation: The students were not able to decode unfamiliar words. One of the students pronounced son as "soon"; he was unfamiliar with the word "soon" and thought that it meant *beta* (son). Most of the students read "sh" as "ss", and "h" instead of "sh" in the word "show", which consequently became "sow". Much was pronounced as "muck". Also, most of the students knew the meaning of the word "agree", but did not know the meaning of "disagree". The students faced problems in both reading and speaking.

 Reading comprehension: Reading comprehension involves both word recognition and understanding the meaning of the word. While reading, the students encountered words that they could not recognize and which they consequently skipped to move ahead. The more blank spaces there are in reading a text, the more difficult it is to "make meaning of a text"; the text then becomes even more difficult to comprehend.

Negotiating the narrative (depending on the type of text): Reading also requires the ability to negotiate the narrative of the text—to comprehend the plot of the narrative, the main idea, specific details and make inferences while reading.

After identifying the major problems, the intern had intensive discussions with the teacher educator. Together, they revisited language theories and deliberated upon the processes of language learning. These reflections and discussions yielded a framework which was fleshed out in the form of a plan which incorporated the following strategies to foster comprehension:

Pre-reading: The chapter selected for reading was titled "Who did Patrick's Homework", from the Class VI NCERT textbook *Honeysuckle*. To create a bridge between prior and new knowledge, worksheets were given to the learners before reading the text. The theme of the story was not alien to the students— homework is something that children don't do willingly. Some of the questions in the questionnaire were: Do you like homework?; Do you do it yourself or get help to do it?, etc. A section related to word meanings was also included with a few interesting words such as "Nintendo" and "ignoramus", which were part of the text. The intern, acting as the facilitator, intervened when the students faced difficulties in completing the worksheets. The students found the words difficult to read, although a few of them were aware of Nintendo.

During reading:

Skimming and scanning: These are important strategies that facilitate reading comprehension. The students were asked to read and reread the story after scrolling through the textual questions to find specific and relevant information. Initially, this required the intern to explain to the class how to find the information by closely referring to the text. For example, the second paragraph posed problems for most of the students because suddenly in a real world there appeared "a man of the tiniest size". Though the young students did not lack imagination, words like "tiniest" were not easily comprehensible, nor easy to pronounce. The accompanying picture in the textbook resolved the issue of the meaning of the word for the quick-witted among them, and they could identify, "what was the cat playing with?" The issue of pronunciation was not as easily resolved.

Fostering vocabulary: An annotated glossary was developed for the students to identify the new words that were peppered throughout the text. These included words such as "ignoramus", "tiniest", "britches/breeches", "wrinkled", "cursed", "squeaked", and "elf", amongst others. The students needed to understand the meaning and usage of these difficult words while negotiating the text.

Story maps: After reading the story, the students were divided into pairs. They were asked to draw pictures and write headings to understand the elements of the story graphically by focussing on the important elements of the narrative—the characters, the setting, the events, the problem and the resolution to the problem.

They used these story maps to retell the story by focussing on the boy who hated hard work; this was an enriching learning experience and also enjoyable. Most importantly, they learnt an important axiom of life, that there is no replacement for hard work, as they retold the resolution to the problem in the story.

Questioning: Questioning before, during and after reading facilitates reading comprehension, as it requires the reader to ask questions of themselves to construct meaning, enhance understanding, find answers, solve problems, find information and discover new information (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). The questioning strategy was initiated by the intern, which encouraged the students to engage with the text throughout the reading process. The simple fact that answers need to be found to questions makes reading purposeful and aids struggling readers. The students took time to answer the questions, going back and forth within the text, but they learnt the importance of this strategy. A few students even learnt to place question marks in the margins and underline difficult words. This strategy was also used to teach the students how to ask questions, before, while reading, and after reading, thereby helping them build interest in the text. As this was their first attempt, it was a bit arduous and painstaking, but as they graduate to other texts it could became a part of the reading process for some of them.

Inferring: Through inferring, students are able to draw conclusions, make predictions, identify underlying themes and use information to create meaning (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000). Students were also taught how pictures can be used to aid comprehension. The students were taught how to title paragraphs, which helped them bring out the essential meaning of the paragraph.

Paraphrasing and summarizing: The process of summarizing requires the reader to determine what is important while reading, and to condense the information in the his/her own words (Adler, 2001). During the process of summarizing, the students were able to distinguish the main idea—the lesson that Patrick learnt—from the supporting ideas in the story, thereby facilitating reading for meaning.

Post reading: Post reading strategies help students to integrate new information into their existing schemata, hence allowing them to elaborate on the learning that has taken place.While questioning, before reading a text, helps to understand the level of the students' previous learning, post reading questioning facilitates understanding the information available in the text. There is an advantage in using higher-level, application type and structurally important questions, rather than questions that focus on facts or details, (Roe, Smith & Burns, 2011). Research has proven that students obtain greater gains from post reading questions if feedback is given on the answers, especially if it is on incorrect answers (Tierney

& Cunningham, 1984). Keeping in mind the findings of all these researches, post reading activities were organized. These included:

Re-telling, and discussing the story: This was done individually to glean the students' understanding of the story structure, its concept and setting. They were asked to identify and retell the beginning, the middle and the end of the story in order; describe the setting; identify the problem and the solution to the problem; identify and retell the causes of action and events and their impact, in this case primarily how Patrick became hardworking!

Post reading questioning: Provides the students with an opportunity to reflect and question what they have read, which is the core of effective comprehension (Roe, Smith & Burns, 2011). The intern asked pertinent questions, the answers to which the students had to write down, such as: Write one thing that you learned from this story; Discuss one thing that you learned today that could be used in your life. In another strategy, an interesting passage was selected from the story; in this case the closing paragraph was selected, which begins as follows: "Patrick still thought he'd made the tiny man do all his homework." This became an interesting topic of discussion when the students were asked the question, "What is the author trying to say here?", "Why do you think he says this?" These questions initiated a lively discussion, albeit in halting English, on whether Patrick was lucky or whether he learnt an important lesson that you have to work hard to succeed? The class was divided in this discussion, with most of them concluding that Patrick was lucky. The intern tried her best to make the students understand the message that the author was trying to convey. This strategy created an appropriate platform for the students to describe what they had read in the story, reflect on it and draw inferences. This strategy is crucial in driving home the point that once you have completed reading a text, you have to try to understand what you have read.

Reconstructing the story through dramatics: This helps focus the minds of the students on the nuances of character, setting and plot, while adding an element of fun to the lesson. It is essential that as the learners attempt to dramatize the story, they learn to use their understanding of print conventions such as quotation marks to interpret what each speaker is saying, and commas, periods and question marks to read with expression. This could not be achieved with these students, despite the fact that the teacher intern had demonstrated this facet of creative dramatics in front of the class. This is because the students had hardly any exposure to such interpretations of text. Nevertheless, the intern gave feedback to the learners, spelling out the nuances that they must pay careful attention to in the future.

At the end of the internship the students were given another story to read and

comprehend, in order to assess their progress with regard to their comprehension skills.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this research was to assess the reading level of the students and to improve their comprehension. The students were asked to read a short story from their prescribed textbook and explain in their own words what they had understood. This activity highlighted the inability of a few students in comprehending even simple sentences and the difficulty they experienced in negotiating complex sentences. While observing the classes of the language teacher, the truncated language learning of the students was highlighted.

The intern decided to make language learning a meaningful and enriching experience for the students and designed an intervention plan that incorporated different strategies to foster reading comprehension. The strategies employed, as described in the earlier section were that of summarizing, inferring, questioning and story mapping; these were practiced over a period of fifty days. At the end of fifty days, a second test was administered to the learners. An analysis of this performance revealed that out of twenty students, eighteen showed considerable improvement in reading comprehension. The pre-reading and post reading comprehension strategies helped the students acquire the skills needed for decoding and comprehending the story and elements of the theme, character and setting. The intern felt a sense of achievement when she saw that her students showed improvement in reading comprehension as they read and made sense of a simple text, even if it was halting.

Initially, the researchers had some reservations about how to implement the strategies in the classroom. Moreover, the students were not used to such a different approach to what they felt was a mundane task. The students had to be guided, monitored and mentored at every step of the process, especially for the questioning, inferring, and summarizing strategies.

CONCLUSION

The improvement in the reading comprehension of the students was rewarding, both for the learners and the researcher. The students developed a better understanding of the reading process and discovered the efficacy of different strategies. The combination of pre-reading, during reading and post reading strategies were extremely helpful in fostering and facilitating learning. The use of meta-cognitive strategies for developing interest in reading, coupled with vocabulary development enhanced the comprehension ability of the students

significantly.

Telling the readers why and when they should use different strategies, and how to apply them, can be effective for fostering reading comprehension. These simple exercises have an important impact on the readers, especially the ones who are struggling. For many of them these strategies could translate into the difference between passing or failing.

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