

Original Paper

Challenges of Reading Comprehension in Early Primary Classrooms of India

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Abstract

The present paper provides details of a significant classroom based research study that explored the status of reading and comprehension instructions in early primary classrooms of Indian context. It is significant as there has been dearth of research in any of these fields—early reading, reading comprehension in early school years, and early grade classrooms in India. The study was exploratory, descriptive and qualitative in nature. It examines the nature of comprehension instructions, quality of reading experiences, whether reading experiences are meaningful for learners or not, kinds of reading materials present and accessible to students and nature of their engagement with texts in second grade classrooms. It describes various challenges of reading comprehension in early primary classrooms and evaluates the situation in light of the recommendations provided in the policy documents.

Keywords

comprehension, decoding, matra (phonic sound), bottom-up approach, Emergent comprehension

1. Introduction

Reading is a constructive process since it involves acquisition of meaning. It is also a complex process since meaning construction happens while there is an interaction between the text, the reader and the context (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994). It is definitely not a passive process composed of isolated skills like identifying symbols and sounding them correctly. Consequently, learning to read is much complex than sounding out each letter and word correctly. Therefore, reading comprehension is much more than just repeating what is in the text. Readers need to bring all the experiences of reading—the words, pictures, meanings, feelings, questions- in order to comprehend a text. They interpret the texts based on their prior experiences, knowledge and opinions. This constructive view of reading raises questions towards sequential approach to reading instructions and advocate creating context of meaningful reading experiences. Recent research has also emphasized the constructive and interpretive processes of reading

(Goodman & Goodman, 1994, RAND, 2002, Dooley Matthew, 2009). However, RAND (2002) study group pointed that researchers have made considerable progress in identifying and addressing children's early decoding difficulties but less attention is paid to children's comprehension skills. The context of the classroom becomes significant site to explore since much of the reading instructions are received in the classrooms.

Children's literacy experiences across grades have been a growing concern in Indian context (Sinha, 2010; 2012). This challenge becomes even grave as schools are often the first setting to introduce literacy instructions to significant number of children in Indian context. The document prepared by MHRD, Government of India (2014) titled, *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat* mentioned about the lack of meaningful and socially relevant engagement with books and active engagement with variety of reading based activities in the classrooms. The National Curriculum framework (2005) of India also emphasizes the need to go beyond the textbooks, and use a range of reading materials in the classrooms. The recent End Term Survey Report of Mathura pilot project (2012-13) conducted by National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) revealed various aspects about the process of reading in early years of schooling like how children essentially look for meaning while reading a text and they love to read meaningful text materials. NCERT (2014) developed a document titled, Learning Outcomes at Elementary Stage that provides class wise learning outcomes for all subjects including language. The document clearly mentions about how children bring capital of meaningful language to school which should be used to learn language. Teachers' beliefs equally play an important role in creating meaningful literacy environment wherein children are engaged in meaning making. Similarly, classrooms need to have meaningful and interesting reading materials in order to talk meaningfully about texts. All such policy documents along with research strongly advocate that reading comprehension in the elementary grades should take place, should start early and should feature engaging reading materials and rich discussion. Since, literacy is a social practice. Therefore, classroom as an important literacy environment significantly influences children's reading processes, reading habits and reading skills. Hence, it is very important that children in early primary grades should learn to read for meaning and children's reading attempts should be meaning driven (Kumar, 2004, Sinha, 2000, 2010).

Sadly, there has been visible lack of in-depth classroom based research which examines the quality of reading comprehension instructions in Indian classrooms (Sinha, 2010, 2012). The present paper provides details of a significant classroom based research study that explored the status of reading and comprehension instructions in Indian classrooms keeping the given recommendations in mind. I will examine the nature of comprehension instructions, quality of reading experiences, kinds of reading materials present and accessible to students and nature of their engagement with texts in second grade classrooms in this paper. It will also focus on teachers' views and beliefs about reading comprehension.

2. Methodology

I observed six second grade classrooms for an academic year. Detail notes were written. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students. Written records of their responses were made. Data was analysed by content analysis method wherein it was checked for emerging patterns and categorized in various sub headings. Verbatim were specially analysed to establish some correspondence between reading processes and reading instructions in the classrooms.

2.1 An Example of a Reading Event from a Classroom

This section describes some of the reading events, I observed in the classrooms. These accounts will help to connect points of reflection and analysis (given later) with real reading experiences. Also, they describe some patterns of reading pedagogy common in all six classrooms.

2.2 Reading of the text—*Bulbul* (Hindi Textbook—*Rimjhim*)

The teacher asked children to open chapter number and read aloud the title of the chapter-*Bulbul*. Teacher asked children to open practice notebooks as well. The teacher started to read as follows:

Teacher—*Chalo hum pehla paragraph padhenge- kya tumne kabhi bulbul dekhi hai.*

(Let us read the paragraph—have you ever seen a nightingale?)

Teacher read aloud the first line word by word- *kya tumne kabhi bulbul dekhi hai.*

(Have you ever seen a nightingale?)

Then, children read aloud that line word by word, following their teacher.

Teacher—*Ab hum mann me yeh line padhenge. Ab sabhi bacche book band karke copy me 'kya' likhenge. Ab check karte hain, 'k' pura hai ya aadha? 'y' pura hai? Matra kaun si hai- aa.)*

(Now we will read this line in our minds. Now close your books and write the word 'kya' in your copies. Now let us check the spelling- is 'k' full or half? Which matra is there- aa.)

Teacher—*Chalo sabhi ko pehli line padhne aa gai na?*

(Now you all have learned how to read the first line, have you?)

Children—yes ma'am.

Then, teacher and students discussed about the punctuation - question mark and its usage to end the sentence.

Teacher read aloud the next line, students followed her-

Bulbul ko pehchanne ka ek saral tareeka hai.

(There is an easy way to identify a nightingale.)

Teacher read aloud a portion of the paragraph. Students followed her and read it aloud.

Then, teacher asked children to encircle the word- '*chidiya*', she instructed children as-

jaha 'chididya' aya hai usse gola kare. Ab ye bataye 'ch' pe kaun si matra ha? 'd' pe kaun si matra ha? 'y' pe kaun si matra hai? Ab isse rough notebook pe likho. Acha bataoki 'chi' bana ya 'chee'.

(Wherever you find the word '*chidiya*', encircle it. Now tell me which *matra* (phonic sound) is attached to the letter 'ch', 'd', and 'y'. Now write it in your notebooks. Ok, tell me does it sound as 'chi' or 'chee' (long vowel sound or short vowel sound.)

Teacher discussed the spelling of few more words like *saral*, *poonch*, *tareeka* (easy, tail, way)

Teacher then asked a child to read the previously selected paragraph. She instructed her as-

A padegi aur uski galti pakadni hai.

(A will read aloud and you will have to point towards her errors.)

This was the detailed observation of one language period that I observed. There are a lot of points to think about this reading lesson. Next section presents those points of analysis and discussion.

2.3 Processes of Reading and Comprehension in the Classroom

This section will highlight many features of processes of reading in second grade classrooms as exemplified above. The process of reading was correct identification of vowel sounds (*matra*), blending with *varna* (letter) and sounding it out successfully while reading a text in second grade classrooms. Throughout the year, the focus was on introducing *matras* (vowel sounds) in a sequential manner and reading the text by using this knowledge. The objective of Hindi reading pedagogy was to make learners aware of each *matra*—its formation, sound and how to blend it with the (*varna*), like- $k + i = ki$ ($k+ee=kee$) and use this knowledge while reading. There was a great amount of time spent on this drill so that the process of blending *varna* and *matra* and sounding out the blend correctly could be practiced thoroughly.

The teachers' reading instructions had direct focus on successful application of blending the *matra* with the *varna*.. Each time teachers presented model reading of texts; their focus was on identifying *matra*, blending of *varna-matra* and sounding it correctly.

The processes of meaning making were explaining the meaning of the text, asking factual questions during the reading and asking word meanings occasionally, but this attention used to shift quickly to practice correct blending of *varna-matra*. Teachers mostly did not read the complete texts in one go, it was broken into pieces and one piece was read aloud at a time. It is because the process of reading the text involved identifying and sounding the *varna-matra* blend and thus reading each word correctly. The occasional comprehension instructions included underlining the difficult words, telling the word meanings and explaining the texts. There was no independent reading time observed in the classrooms. Children mostly recited few selected lines of the texts as teachers read aloud them. Learners were reading the texts without focussing on meaning as they were taught to read this way.

Children's literature like story books seemed missing in the classrooms. Children had no access to interesting, relevant and authentic literature. In one of the schools, teachers used to narrate stories occasionally and story books were kept in the classroom. But again learners did not have opportunities to explore storybooks themselves and engage with them meaningfully. The stories given in the Hindi textbook *Rimjhim* were treated typically as any other lessons to be covered as part of the syllabus. The exercise questions were discussed in a mechanical way. The quality of children's literature as found in one of the schools was also low with explicit favour towards moral stories and least attention was given to authenticity and children's interest.

The reading pedagogy here was influenced by how teachers viewed reading and what dimension of

reading was considered most important to teach in the early grades. Mostly teachers believed that early primary grades like second grade is the preparatory stage for reading wherein children needed drill and practice of letter-sound knowledge.

The reading instructions focused on decoding skills and explaining the text in the form of questions. Such questions always targeted smaller unit of content-words. Generally, students received the meaning of the text instead of constructing the same through dialogue or discussion. Knowing the meaning of new words in the story was another instructional emphasis. Reading instructions in all six classrooms never had emphasis on reading strategies other than phonic and knowing new words. The teacher used to explain the spelling, meaning and usage of the new words. Mostly teachers corrected reading errors. Sometimes, the teacher encouraged the child to get the word by identifying all the letters and *matra* correctly. Teachers praised children for their efforts in sounding out words correctly. During and post reading, the teacher asked several questions which were mostly recall based factual questions. The open ended question like how and why were rarely asked. Prediction based questions were also incidental. The practice of retelling stories by children was also missing. Textbook-*Rinjhim* was the major print material available and used in all six classrooms. Textbook was the prime source of reading in all the classrooms. It was also the only visible, accessible and highly used print material by the children. Oral storytelling was happening occasionally in one of the classrooms. Kumar (2004) argued that textbook teaching is the minimal-compulsory activity happening in Indian schools. The textbook continues to have similar active presence in language periods. It was believed that children can learn only through textbooks. Teachers were the mediums to make this learning possible by using textbooks in the classrooms. Most of the time was spent on teaching how to decode the text in order to read. Other strategies like using picture clue was not discussed. The actual reading was limited to reading aloud of textbook lessons by teachers. Children were given opportunities of reading only through choral reading of the text to follow teachers' reading. Independent reading opportunities were missing, even in the classroom where storybooks and other reading materials were present in visible form. There also, children did not get opportunities to read or explore those materials independently.

2.4 Reflection and Discussion

Durkin in her landmark study revealed that a negligible percentage of time was allotted to teaching reading comprehension (Durkin, 1978). Since then, a lot of studies in west investigated about the quality of reading and comprehension instructions in classrooms. With the same curiosity, I started this study to know the process of reading and meaning making in early primary grades in Indian context. The traditional understanding of reading comprehension was that meaning is transmitted from the text to the reader. This view was challenged by constructivist literacy theorists and reading came to be viewed as an active process of constructing meaning by the reader while reading and transacting with a text. The reading and meaning making is always situated in a context and is influenced by various factors. Therefore, various theorists believe that reading is complex in nature. Consequently, learning to read is much complex than just distinguishing symbols and being able to sound them correctly.

Researchers question sequential approach to reading instructions. Anderson et al. (1985) explained reading comprehension as the integrated act of information from the text and the knowledge possessed by the reader to produce meaning. Brown (1980) highlighted the role of metacognition by pointing out that a reader needs to be aware when he/she fails to understand while reading a text and should take corrective measures. This means that a reader is not a passive receiver of information from a text but actively engages with the text and reconstructs it in the process of reading meaningfully. Keeping complex nature of reading in mind, researchers advocate creating context of meaningful reading experience even during the phase when children begin learning reading as argued by emergent comprehension theorists (Dooley, 2010, 2011, Dooley and Mathew, 2009). Teachers should also be in the role of facilitators who create reading context wherein students read and co-construct the text rather than simply transmitting what the author says (Smith, 2004, Mason and Sinha, 1993, Sinha, 2012). This is possible when the practitioners like teachers view reading not merely as a decoding process but as a complete act of reading including comprehension (Clay, 1991, Teale and Sulzby, 1996).

Indian context presents a unique case as primary schools are often the first literacy environment for many children. These are also the first setting introducing literacy instructions to many children. Grades one and two are considered significant stages for developing the important skill of reading. As per the popular arguments, early primary grades like grade one and two are the important time periods to build foundation of reading skills. There is anyway negligible number of Indian studies that have explored children's reading and meaning making processes in classrooms. In this regard, this study is a much needed contribution in the area of descriptive and exploratory research about reading and meaning making processes of Indian classrooms.

It is natural that learners will have difficulty reading and comprehending a text if they are not able to make connection between the text and their prior knowledge, if they do not monitor their reading effectively and take appropriate corrective measures, if their reading is not strategic and if they are not flexible with using reading strategies. However, the basic issue with children for struggling to read and make meaning effectively is that they are not provided with open ended opportunities to experience reading as a fun meaning making activity and engage with authentic reading materials. Reading meaningfully is given secondary status compared to decoding in primary grades as the early primary grades are largely considered to be the preparatory stages. There is overwhelming attention on building phonological awareness in the early primary grades. In traditional classrooms, learning of reading and writing has been believed to be a bottom up approach which involve bringing children's attention to various mechanical aspects of text like recognition of letters, correspondence between letters and sound and several other such aspects which essentially do not address the meaningful and purposeful nature of literature. Earlier, the underlying belief in early primary grades was that children are non-readers and non-comprehenders before they start of formal instructions. Emergent comprehension theorists challenged this view. Emergent comprehension explains the relationship between personal experiences and reading. The phrase 'emergent comprehension' demonstrates the significance of the children's

early meaningful experiences that stimulates the development and use of meaning making strategies with potential to affect later reading and meaning making processes. Children's early exploration of print is not simply a process of mimicking adult strategies. Rather, it is a consequence of a thoughtful, conceptual exercise shaped through routine, text related interactions with significant adults ((Dooley, 2010, 2011, Dooley and Matthew, 2009). There is no single root leading to successful reading comprehension. There are various knowledge sources and processes available to a child that he/she has to integrate and use. All of this is possible in a literacy rich environment that supports development of reading and meaning making. Children build various concepts and their perspectives about literacy while participating in literacy practices with significant others.

The overwhelming focus on accuracy has some serious consequences for teaching learning process of reading in early primary years of Indian context. The classroom reading practices proved to be ineffective especially in enhancing children's meaningful engagement with texts. Also, what message children receive about the process of reading in the classrooms is a matter of concern which is reading is a simple process of identifying the *varna-matra* and sounding the blend correctly. The reading and meaning making processes in the classrooms were not in ally with the processes described and suggested in national level documents like Learning Outcomes at Elementary stage and *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat*. The pedagogic practices must focus on strengthening reading comprehension. The use of authentic, interesting children's literature is inevitable to build the view that reading is meaning making activity and to give exposure of reading meaningfully in the classroom context. This understanding needs to be developed among teachers.

2.5 Implications

In present time, teachers face constant pressure to follow traditional way of teaching reading in sequential manner as they are not aware of constructive view of literacy learning. Teachers are not aware about classroom environment that allows children to use their developing capabilities to reconstruct a text, engage deeply with reading materials and think like a problem solver. Rather, children are required to sit and follow directions for developmentally inappropriate duration of time with specific tasks that ignores the sophisticated learning processes happening in the minds in the classrooms. It is important to acknowledge the significance of early grades which is about the range of capabilities that are developing. It is equally important to have a dialogue with teachers regarding creating meaningful literacy environment with more of their inputs than just issuing orders to just follow guidelines.

The assumptions that reading is learnt in a sequential manner and young learners cannot handle complete texts need to be challenged as due to this children are deprived of opportunities of experiencing reading as meaningful activity. Children need to view reading as meaning making activity right from the beginning. If this view is focused and built right from the beginning, children will definitely enjoy reading and develop internal motivation to read. Therefore, the second implication for teaching is that young learners should have access to children's literature and opportunities of engaging

with them meaningfully. There should be focus on building reading and meaning making strategies that help them to become self-independent readers. This will support children's growing ability of using reading and meaning making strategies in an integrated way.

The quality of reading instruction given in the school, where focus is not on meaning construction, is definitely a matter of concern. According to Sinha (2010) and Bahuguna (2016), such practices have a link with pre service training of teachers and its curriculum. The theoretical foundation of reading is missing in many of such programmes. Thus, teachers need to be educated and updated about contemporary constructivist views on reading and significance of reading comprehension in their pre-service teacher education programmes and in-service training programs.

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