<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>A gentle push for reluctant readers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Quah May Ling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source</strong></td>
<td><em>ASCD (Singapore) Review, 4(2), 56-58</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Published by</strong></td>
<td>Singapore ASCD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.

The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

Copyright © 1994 the Author(s)
A Gentle Push for Reluctant Readers

Quah May Ling

Young people who can read (well or poorly) but won’t far outnumber those who cannot read at all. The former, who choose not to read, for whatever reason, are often called reluctant readers. They have little advantage over those who are illiterate. The challenge of motivating our children to read in schools is two-sided. First, we have to rekindle a desire to read in those who have already decided to avoid reading at all costs. Second, there is the problem of igniting in children who are learning to read to have a lifelong interest in reading before they become reading casualties. This article will address the problem of reluctant readers, examine some major causes and indications of reading reluctance and discuss some approaches to reading instruction that will introduce children to reading in a positive manner so that potential problems may be alleviated.

Causes for Reluctance

A child’s reluctance to read is often either a disguise for poor reading skills or an indication that reading did not interest him enough for him to develop adequate skills. Sometimes halfway through his school years or later, the child (or teenager) can read well but neither enjoys it nor appreciates its value. Whatever the reason, he may intentionally lose his place, make excuses about forgetting to bring the basal reader, ask to leave the classroom or complain of hurting eyes or headaches. All these behaviors are sending out messages of avoidance.

The causes of reading reluctance are many and varied. One of the most common causes is that related to the child’s self-esteem when he “loses face” in front of peers. When a child is required to read aloud, he may make incorrect responses, as often reading is “a psycholinguistic guessing game” (Goodman, 1967), or does not know what is expected, what is correct or incorrect and these inadequacies are exposed to peers and teachers. If a decoding or reading error is corrected aloud by the teacher, the child’s errors are immediately pointed out to others in the group or classroom. In some instances, if the teacher is angry or irritated with the child’s frequent reading mistakes and this is evident to the other children, the child will lose confidence in reading. Repeated experiences of this kind of failure result in frustration, loss of self-worth, and soon, anxiety over reading itself.

Other factors which contribute to reading reluctance include a lack of sufficient background information or schemata to enable the child to deal with the concepts, situations, or events found in the reading materials. Materials containing content which are foreign or outside the reader’s experience are meaningless and do not catch the child’s attention as they are not personally important.

Once a child begins to register a reluctance towards reading, a teacher may subconsciously label him a problem reader even though he may have developed some effective strategies to cope with reading. If a child is placed in a weaker reading group according to his
reading skills, it is likely that he will remain there virtually the whole school year and thus establish or reinforce a cycle of failure-frustration-avoidance-greater failure-greater frustration-more avoidance, resulting in the child becoming a self-fulfilling failure which will inevitably affect his self-esteem.

Approaches to Reading Instruction

Catching reading problems before they occur calls for a shift in both perceptions of the reading process and attitude towards reading errors, and a change in the reading materials used to teach reading. Reading teachers need to look upon errors as clues to the child's system of logic, rather than as a sign of lack of intelligence. A policy of encouragement during the early reading process will create an environment in which the child is relaxed and willing to take risks.

A successful remedial program must be structured in such a way that the risks the child is asked to take are those that can be managed. A gradual increase in the risk taking should be built into the reading task until the child is able to deal successfully with the risks inherent in a traditional reading session.

Michael (1981)

Results from experiments focusing on ways children could be trained to imitate others in imposing on themselves higher performance standards in game situations indicated that children who observed peer models exhibiting high or low standards of self-reward imitated those standards. The implications of these results where reading motivation is concerned suggest that reluctant or slow readers would show marked achievement and interest, if they observed their peers modelling strong skills and interest. They also suggest that isolating poor readers in remedial classes away from better peer models, may be a self-defeating approach. A great deal of subtlety and tact are required of teachers in drawing children's attention to peer models, as well as a teaching policy of enthusiastic encouragement as opposed to comparison.

Reading in combination with other artistic and creative activities teaches children that reading is not an isolated task. For example, after reading a story, a child may draw or paint a picture of a scene in the story, or depict his impressions of the story. In addition to improving retention, this teaching method works as a springboard to motivate further reading on topics of interest and encourages personal responses to the reading materials.

Reading materials, probably the most critical factor in developing reading skills and interest should be appropriate for each child. Award-winning children's literature that children themselves might choose to read is likely to engage their interest in reading far more than the basal reading series, and it, too, can be used as a springboard to further reading in subject areas or by the same authors. Sometimes it takes only one good work to hook a child into a lifetime of reading or to rescue a child who is losing interest.

Using newspapers, comics, children's magazines and other materials that children come into contact in their daily lives (including language experience stories written by the children themselves) as part of instructional materials is an approach that will emphasise the fact that reading can be fun and that it has a purpose, something that teaching skills in isolation often fails to do. Marvin (1993) found the use of newspapers for reading and writing a worthwhile pursuit if it was used in conjunction with cooperative learning groups.

Motivating Activities

Children's everyday activities are a fertile ground for developing literacy. Young children use oral language as a tool to solve problems and make sense of new experiences. Literacy begins as children learn to use the tool of language - from the spoken word to the pen and paper that help them write down their thoughts which can later be used for reading (language experience approach) to the books that enable them to learn from others (Britsch, 1993). The language experience approach to reading is recommended for use with reluctant readers because the approach utilizes the child's own interests to generate material for reading and writing and the teacher is able to work within the child's current level of language competence at all times, thus ensuring that no loss of face is involved.

Many activities have been developed by teachers for the classroom to keep young readers interested in reading while developing higher level skills. Some of these teaching ideas emphasise reading as a pleasurable activity. These ideas include games, multimedia activities and writing exercises that focus on survival reading materials, vocabulary extension, and skill reinforcement. Ciani (1981) provided suggestions for working with children who function at a frustration level or have an aversion to reading, including using popular music and motivating through improved self-concept.

Teachers in other subjects can use activities to integrate language
Catching reading problems before they occur calls for a shift in both perceptions of the reading process and attitude towards reading errors, and a change in the reading materials used to teach reading.

Arts with other subject areas including drama, science, photography and career awareness. An example of this activity is the use of restaurant menus in a science discussion class of the four basic food groups to see how restaurants group their foods. These activities can prove particularly useful in reminding children that reading is not a separate subject but is an important process used in all subject areas.

Factors outside the classroom, particularly the home environment, may also have an impact on reading motivation. Exposure to reading aloud, to being read to by adults and siblings and to using the library will generate early reading interest in children. Another valuable support for the reading programme is the class, school or home computer. With just one computer and one printer, the teacher and children can create a rich assortment of original projects to add to their enjoyment of reading (Ramondetta, 1993). The graphics which may include superheroes and aliens are bound to capture the children’s imagination and the professional-looking results will motivate even your most reluctant readers.

Conclusion

The educational path is wide enough and has sufficient branches and sideroads to accommodate all children. A fresh approach to the reading process, a positive attitude towards reading errors (children can learn from them!) and a variety of activities that integrate isolated skills and present reading as a way to gather exciting and useful information can provide just the gentle nudges needed to keep many children from wandering off or getting left behind.

REFERENCES


Quah May Ling is Head & Senior Lecturer, Division of Specialised Education, National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.