
Title	The importance of motivation and a stable environment as factors in reading success
Author	Ruth Wong
Source	<i>6th World Congress on Reading, Singapore, 17 - 19 August 1976</i>
Organiser	International Reading Association

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SIXTH WORLD CONGRESS ON READING:
Reading in the Service of Mankind
17-19 August 1976
Shangri-la-Hotel, Singapore

**The Importance of Motivation and a Stable Environment as
Factors in Reading Success**

by

Dr Ruth Wong

Director

Institute of Education

Singapore

on

Tuesday, 17 August, 1976 at 2.30 pm

Right at the outset of this presentation, I should clarify that I accepted the invitation to speak on the topic merely as an interested layman. I make no claim to any significant research on the subject, nor indeed can I say that I have specialist knowledge of reading as a process. My approach to the topic will be determined largely by experience and, if questions are raised in the course of discussion, they should be viewed as those from someone anxious to seek answers to some of the problems which language learning in a multilingual context has persistently highlighted.

The skills of reading and writing, associated with literacy, have generally been accorded pride of place among the important outcomes of schooling. Indeed, the attempt on the part of governments to provide universal schooling is basically a logical consequence of the desire to teach a nation to read and write. This purpose is also supported by some evidence that the positive link between GNP statistics and literacy rates is more than tenuous, though countries with high literacy rates may not necessarily demonstrate ability to achieve high GNP's. Be that as it may, the educational system as a whole is judged by the literates it produces and, where it has not been entirely satisfactory in this respect, it comes under re-examination and renovation. This has been the case in Singapore where, not so long ago, the Deputy Prime Minister dwelt at some length in a public address on the thousand-million dollar waste incurred in the production of illiterates - a counterproductive effort in development terms, because the result could have been more economically achieved without any investment in schooling! Thus, in multilingual Singapore, where bilingual proficiency is an expressed aim, the present preoccupation is with teaching children how to read and write competently in at least one language, if not in two.

But the achievement of these ends is complicated by a lack of recognition on the part of both parents and teachers as to what might be implied in the objective, "language proficiency." As in other societies, a tendency exists to single out reading ability as an indicator of educability. Though reading is not all of language, there is often an undue concentration on

teaching reading to the exclusion of other language skills such as speaking or listening. Anxious parents would consider it a lapse on the part of teachers, if their children did not return with some reader before the first term in school is out. Thus the more important question, "Can Ah Fook or Rahman or Govindasamy really read?" is super ceded by "Does Ah Fook or Rahman or Govindasamy possess a reader?"

A result of this attitude is that, in the rush to establish its existence, reading ability tends to end up as something very far less than what it should be. Some of the more obvious ills discernible in school samples are reading for single-word rather than sentence meaning, inability to read without accompanying lip movements, inability to comprehend the information provided by the writer, or to critically select the important cues in information, or to associate ideas relevant to the information. It goes without saying that in many cases, speed in reading is sadly wanting. Reading, according to Wardhaugh¹, comprises an attempt on the part of a reader, "to discover the meaning of what he is reading by using the visual clues of spelling, his knowledge of probabilities of occurrence, his contextual-pragmatic knowledge, and his syntactic and semantic competence to give a meaningful interpretation to the text". He goes on to specify that reading is "an active process, in which the reader must make an active contribution by drawing upon and using concurrently various abilities that he has acquired."

Wardhaugh's definition of reading suggests an active engagement in communication between the reader and the author. The need for reading as an active process of this nature is crucial in the kind of bilingual education that Singapore seeks to provide, because certain subjects are taught in one language and others are taught in the second language. For children in the non-English medium schools (Chinese, Malay or Tamil as the case may be), mathematics and science have to be studied in English, while in English medium schools, Education for Living, a subject which integrates social studies with ethics and moral values, has to be taught in the school's second language. The situation is complicated by the fact that the school's second language need not be the child's second language, and neither first nor second school language need be the child's home language. Inability to read in either of the school's first or second language poses the problem of inadequacy in meeting the demands of the subjects which have to be taught in such a language.

Reading success in the Singapore context, therefore, implies reading ability in two languages. The recognition that not all children are of equal ability in this respect has brought about a modification of expectations. Progress in the learning of the two languages is monitored from the first

¹ Wardhaugh R., *Reading: A Linguistic Perspective*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., U.S.A. 1969 p. 133.

day that children enter school so that each child may be enabled to develop the necessary skills in the use of these languages. By the fourth year of school, the decision is taken as to whether the child should continue in a full programme of bilingual education, or in a modified programme in which oral competence in the second language would be considered a more realistic target, with reading ability defined in minimal terms, namely, ability to read simple and obvious statements. The concentration in the modified programme would be on strengthening competence in the first school language. Even so, it is not clear what are important characteristic differences between written language and the spoken language, say, of the illiterate adult. And, if the oral proficiency aimed at is that of the literate man, in what respects would we expect the reading or written ability to be less than oral ability? In what elements of language should lie the difference? Also, what cognitive demands are implied in the aim, "ability to read simple statements?"

Then there are the questions associated with decision-making. It will be the classroom teacher on whom falls the onus of deciding whether Ah Fook, Rahman or Govindasamy should be given the modified programme or continue in the fully bilingual stream. Here, the assumption, never explicitly expressed, is that children who cannot read or are found lacking in language skills are cognitively deficient. It does not often occur to decision-makers that the low level of linguistic competence could be the product of other factors besides the genetic. Two of these have been specifically assigned for discussion in this paper.

Let me turn first to environment. This may be considered as comprising a home component and a school component. In so far as the latter is concerned, the knowledge of the teacher and her attitude towards the subject are important in that they determine her teaching methods. Reading instruction in schools commonly takes one of two forms. One is the exercise in utterance, where the class either reads a story in unison or individually, with the teacher interrupting the "reading" here and there to correct a mispronounced word or to pull the reader up for lack of a pause or a breathing fault. The other reading mode is silent reading, followed by the teacher or a pupil reading aloud, this in turn is followed by a battery of questions, oral or written to assess comprehension. The teacher is careful to ensure that new words are listed on the chalkboard and the meaning to each word particularly looked for in the dictionary. In neither of these modes is reading treated adequately, if at all, as an active process in the sense that Wardhaugh describes it.

With group size at 40 or more, the class teacher is also hard put to it to pay much attention to individual differences produced by the social environment of the child. The common complaint is that many children come from a low socio-economic environment and hence do not profit and,

perhaps, cannot profit much from the teaching in school. But Bernstein² referring to his code concept, elaborates on the fact that a restricted code does not mean that "the users do not realise at any time, elaborated speech variants, only that such variants will be used infrequently in the process of the socialisation of the child in his family," He stresses that such children are not linguistically deprived. He has suggested that "we should work with what the child has to offer... The introduction of the child to the universalistic meanings of public forms of thought is not compensatory education - it is education... We should start knowing that the social experience the child already possesses is valid and significant, and that this social experience should be reflected back to him as valid and significant. It can be reflected back to him, only if it is a part of the texture of the learning experience we create."

Thus, in the classroom, the attitude, the teaching strategy and the methods of the teacher would be important. Samph³ examined the influence of teacher verbal behaviour on attitudes and reading performances of below average achievers and established an outcome favouring the group taught by teachers who showed more frequent behaviours allowing for student freedom of expression, such as praise and use of student ideas. To be able to encourage reading development, teachers must believe that their pupils have something to contribute. To a degree (how great, it has not yet been established empirically), pupil failure in reading could be the outcome of a teacher who makes her students the objects of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Most teachers are not aware that a proper selection of reading materials is important. The content of the reader must be suited to the experience of the child and within his level of interest and comprehension. Children, who experience too much failure in responding to a text as beginners at reading, get easily discouraged and do not progress. They even stop learning to read.

There are also pleasurable activities which can be associated with reading. I remember how once I was greeted by a four-year old niece with the words, "I have a compelling desire to kiss you." I was duly kissed. Then I asked her who taught her the statement. "I learnt it myself from my book," she claimed. I was curious. "Do you really know how to read?" "Yes", was the reply. "Show me your book and read it to me". She brought out the little book, 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', and played the little record that accompanied the book and began to do what she termed "reading", by placing her finger on each word as the record played, flipping over each page at a given signal. She had not really even

² Bernstein B., *Class, Codes and Control*, Vol. 1, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1971 pp. 190-200.

³ Samph T., "Teacher behaviour and the reading performance of below average achievers", *Journal Educational Research*, Feb 1974, 67, 268-270.

begun to recognise words such as "compelling" and "desire", because she could not point them out when I stopped the record. But she had already engaged in communication with the narrator and was able to apply verbally what seemed to her childlike mind to echo her own emotion.

Here, we see an example of the inextricable relationship between reading and language learning. The more the child reads the more she savours language and the more she knows of language, the better will her reading improve. Motivation too *is* implied in this situation.

From another standpoint, reading as taught in the classroom could be improved. Even in some of the best schools, the concept of teaching reading is not enlarged beyond that of teaching beginning reading. At best, the teacher teaches word recognition and organisational skills which enable the pupil to understand the meaning of words, ideas and sentences in context. There is no programme in developmental reading by which pupils can advance to more efficient and critical reading. Russell⁴ believes that critical reading is the application of critical thinking to the reading process. Critical thinking is defined as a three-factor ability, comprising an attitudinal factor of questioning and suspended judgement, a functional factor involving the use of methods of logical inquiry and problem-solving, and a judgment factor of evaluating in terms of some norm or standard or consensus. Reading in secondary schools seldom exemplifies this aim of critical reading. At the secondary level, reading, as practised, is incidental to the study of literature. Thereafter, reading at the tertiary level becomes entirely an individual exercise in silent-reading with, perhaps 1 memory more than any other faculty engaged roost of the time. It is not surprising, therefore, that when graduate students, at the interview for admission to the teacher-training course, are asked, "What do you read?" the answer which is invariably given is "the newspaper" or the "Time Magazine" - the only diet of most readers. Embarrassment generally follows on further probing: "What else do you read?" Back comes the reply, "Shakespeare, Austin, Hardy, Dickens anything to grasp at a straw. It would seem that most of our local school products have not come to significant terms with what is truly reading. To them it is only associated either with textbooks or with the local newspapers.

How does the home environment affect reading attainment? There is one on-going study in Singapore by Soh⁵ on the code-switching ability of bilingual children, that is, the ability to code in one language information gained in another. Since this study has involved the reading of test items in couched in two languages as well as in one or the other, the results

⁴ Russell D.H. *Children Learn to Read*, Ginn, Boston 1964.

⁵ Soh K.C., "Code Switching of Primary School Children", a doctoral study conducted under the supervision of the writer, 1976.

might to a certain extent have applications for reading. It does not appear from this study that parental attitude in support of the study of the second school language alone could account for better performance on the code-switch tests and, by inference, on reading or language performance. But specific studies, more directed to the variables of the home environment have not as yet been carried out.

Elsewhere⁶, however, recent studies have highlighted the following which bear on home and familial variables:

1. Children from small families score significantly higher than others on the Expressive Language skill area assessed by the Iowa Test of Pre-school Development.
2. Generally speaking, children rated highest in amount of reading material at home are also highest in reading and language achievement.
3. Such variables as occupational status of the principal wage-earner, or the working status of parents do not appear significant.

So far I have not come across any study which has specifically addressed itself to the measure of stability of environment nor what this might represent. I would hypothesise, that a stable environment would include good adult models of the various languages to be learnt in a multi-lingual society, where, the more the various ethnic groups seek to adjust to one another in harmony, the more pidgins and creolised forms of language would tend to flourish.

At school, there should be a well-organised programme for consistent reading development, a library carrying a good selection of books, a good teacher who has had training in teaching reading and who remains with a given group of pupils for a period long enough to be given a chance to identify individual differences, to plan for individual development and extension and to give pupils confidence in the reading skills at the level for which they are reading.

At home, interested and concerned parents, a collection of good books, together with a genuine love for booklore on the part of the family as a whole would help to foster taste and progress in reading.

Finally, a word on motivation. Implicit in what has already been discussed above are the need for motivational techniques on the part of the teacher to help pupils to appreciate the need to learn to read. Reading materials, suited to the interests of children (many studies have already been carried out on this) and the availability of advice from adults in school or

⁶ Weintraub S. et al, "Summary of investigations relating to reading", Reading Research Quarterly, XI, 3, pp. 383-4.

home, as to the sort of books which might be read, would help to develop interest in books and lead to extensive voluntary reading.

In my own experience, I first began to read beyond the textbook, because I wished to please a teacher I particularly liked. She was also the provider of the books in those days, for then a proper school library was rare in Singapore. The books she loaned were a curious miscellany for a ten-year old - Kingsley's *Water Babies*, Anderson's *Fairy Tales*, Mrs Henry Wood's sob stories, all of Dickens that she possessed, Kinglake's *Eothen* and the like. There was no researcher at that time to determine whether there were harmful effects from this diet. Personally speaking, but for this source of support for the foreign language I was leaning in school, no linguistic support was available at home, for neither parent spoke a word of English, although they did exhort me to save my weekly pennies for the annual purchase of a book I wanted.

Taste for reading and for books, like good manners, must come early. Reading for information retrieval and vocational competence is a necessity; reading beyond this need is reading for living.