Guided Independent Reading (GIR): A Programme to Nurture Lifelong Readers

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INTRODUCTION

If the objective of language learning is to nurture readers who will eventually become lifelong readers, efforts should be made to help students become independent readers. The focus should increasingly be on nurturing independent reading and instilling in learners the importance of reading as an end in itself, that is, reading as a pleasurable activity from which the reader acquires personal and social benefits. In helping learners acquire a love for reading, educators also equip them with a tool for language learning: by reading extensively, learners acquire or reinforce writing skills, vocabulary, and language structures within meaningful contexts.

This article discusses a programme that the author has designed, which may be used as a supplementary reading programme in upper primary and lower secondary classrooms. It is designed for students who can read with varying degrees of proficiency, but who generally will not read for various reasons, such as failure to develop a love for reading, unavailability of appropriate reading materials, insufficient time to read extensively because of school demands, and lack of motivation to read extensively. The programme offers students opportunities to first discover, and then sustain interests within an environment that is relaxed and autonomous, yet appropriately structured. The primary objective of the programme is to develop a community of readers who share the pleasures of reading, motivate one another by example and interact with fellow readers in discussing texts read. This eclectic programme, termed Guided Independent Reading (GIR), draws from several approaches, largely culled from reading in English, that have been found to be effective in nurturing independent readers.

Research on reading in which students read extensively, have ownership over the materials they choose to read, and are allowed to read in a relaxed, non-judgmental environment within the classroom has mostly shown that these activities contribute to the development of independent reading and language learning. Used as a supplementary programme, they are variously termed sustained silent

reading (SSR), pleasure reading, uninterrupted sustained silent reading (USSR) (Allington 1975, Gambrell 1978). Used as a part or all of a language programme, they are generally known as self-selected reading (Greenman & Kapilian 1959). The consensus is that students experience enhanced interest in reading and simultaneously develop language skills with extensive reading within the regular school curriculum.

In connection with extensive reading, research has shown that reading aloud to children exerts positive affective and cognitive effects. Smith (1982) and Teale (1984) reported that reading aloud to children helped them to grasp the structure of stories better, thereby enhancing their comprehension of texts and propelling them towards becoming independent readers. Research has also shown that activities that complement reading, usually done after reading, have been effective in reinforcing and extending the affective and cognitive benefits that are attendant on extensive reading (Manning & Manning 1984). Related to peer interaction is "retelling procedure" (Brown & Cambourne 1988). This procedure has been recommended as "an all-purpose, extremely powerful learning activity" for practicing "a range of literacy skills (reading, writing, listening, talking, thinking, interacting, comparing, matching, selecting and organizing information, remembering, comprehending)" (p.1). In retelling, students retell texts that have just been read, orally or in writing, to their peers. Reader and peer then discuss the retold texts and compare respective versions.

In reports on extensive reading, a recurrent focus has been on 'reluctant readers': people who can read with varying degrees of proficiency, but are averse to reading. Grimes (1991) stresses the importance of "finding hooks to catch reluctant readers" (p. 45). An important 'hook' lies in the selection of reading materials. Materials that are recommended for neophyte or reluctant readers are ones that are easily managed, books that are short and action packed, with a strong story line, and books that are straightforward, of high interest, and can be completed quickly.

Each of the approaches and initiatives discussed above has been shown to contribute positively to the personal, cognitive, and academic effects of extensive reading. Although they are usually discussed separately, they are, in fact, complementary approaches, all working towards a common objective — the nurturing of lifelong readers. Because they are complementary, they have strong potentials for being integrated into a coherent program to maximize efforts at developing independent readers. The following section outlines one such

programme that the author has designed for use in classrooms where students have yet to become independent readers. An eclectic programme, it adapts the best of the approaches and organizes them into a structure that allows for freedom and autonomy, together with guidance from teachers.

THE GUIDED INDEPENDENT READING (GIR) PROGRAMME

The Guided Independent Reading (GIR) programme aims to motivate students to read extensively — as many books and as much reading material as possible, to feel excited about the books and materials, and to interact with other students through thinking and talking about texts read and sharing readings. The programme requires that teachers be well-informed about books and reading materials that appeal to the target students. Ample opportunities also need to be provided for students to select books that appeal to them, with help from teachers if needed, to read independently and also with some support from peers and teachers, to share experiences in reading, and to monitor individual progress. While allowing scope for independence and autonomy, students are also monitored and mentored through the structure that this programme provides.

IMPLEMENTING GIR

Several factors need to be considered in the implementation and maintenance of GIR. These include organizing the programme, establishing routines and expectations, selecting reading materials, implementing interactive activities, and monitoring progress and accountability.

GIR needs to be conducted in a spirit of positive expectations within classrooms that are relaxed, non-judgmental, and largely informal. Set within this ambience, there may be a tendency for some students to take GIR less seriously than classes that are examination oriented. It is therefore important that early on in the programme, teachers clarify expectations and the objectives of the programme. Once the objectives are established, the programme needs to be consistently carried out, with teachers ensuring that every period set aside for GIR is actually devoted to GIR. Expectations of students and their behaviour need to be consistently maintained so that predictability and familiarity are established, thereby contributing to the smooth running of GIR

classes. Pleasurable experiences, a classroom free of hassles and interruptions, and a relaxed atmosphere in which all the students know what is expected of them are prerequisites for the effective implementation of GIR.

The following is an example of how the programme can be organized:

• Choose one period each week (or two periods where time-tabling allows) for GIR. Mondays and Fridays are good days for GIR because beginning and ending the week with pleasure reading enhances the development of positive attitudes. On every GIR day, students are required to bring their books and reading materials to class and to begin reading as soon as the class begins. An area in the classroom is set aside for storage of reading materials so that students who forget their materials or need new ones can get them without any hassle. The teacher reads with the students, aloud or silently, depending on the GIR activities for the day. Interaction connected with the reading follows.

• Time blocks for reading and interaction need to be decided on and followed consistently. As a general guide, use shorter blocks of time for sustained silent or oral reading — ten to fifteen minutes — in primary level classes, classes with less proficient readers, or classes that tend to become restless easily. Classes with students who are more proficient in reading and more attentive, or higher level classes in secondary school can use longer blocks of time — twenty to thirty minutes — for sustained reading.

The following are examples of how GIR activities can be organized in a typical thirty-minute period of an upper primary class schedule:

Variation 1. Individual and partnership reading and interaction

• First 10 minutes – silent reading

• Next 10 minutes – read aloud to or with partner or group

• Last 10 minutes – share reading with partner or group - retell the texts, talk about what is interesting or exciting, discuss questions the reader may have, or the teacher has identified (refer to section on "Interaction as a Follow-up Activity" for details)

Variation 2. Whole class reading and interaction

• First 15 minutes – silent reading or teacher reads aloud to class

• Next 15 minutes – whole class interaction — thinking and talking about materials read, oral reading of selected excerpts, retelling of texts, doing sketches or role play

Following in-class reading, students will take the books or reading materials home and continue reading out of class. They are encouraged to read to, and with, parents who will acknowledge the readings in reading records that are used for monitoring reading.

MATERIAL SELECTION

The success of GIR depends largely on making right choices about reading materials and ensuring that these materials are available. In this regard teachers need to have substantial knowledge of books and other reading materials that appeal to students. In the selection of materials, both student interest and reading proficiency need to be taken into account. To ensure that students find pleasure in reading, they need to read materials that appeal to their various interests, materials that they can identify with and establish a bond with, materials that they can read comfortably without having to struggle with the overt meaning.

For GIR, a wide range of materials, including magazines, newspapers, short stories, popular fiction, folk tales, fables, inspirational and informative writings can be used. Students are encouraged to begin with shorter, more easily comprehensible texts such as short stories, magazine and newspaper articles, and to progress to longer texts such as popular fiction and inspirational writings. Classics or serious fiction may be used if the students voluntarily choose them. A note of caution, however, needs to be made in the use of books that are known for their literary merits but that do not appeal directly to students' individual interests or levels of reading proficiency. Carlsen and Sherrill (1988), in their study of books that appeal to lifelong readers, found that books that readers like are seldom associated with their literary merits. Of primary importance is the emotional impact that the books have on the readers, the insights that the readers gain, and the growth that they experience through the books.

In the selection of materials, the teacher needs, firstly, to be familiar with current materials that are appropriate for the target age groups – upper primary or lower secondary classes. Personal reading, browsing in libraries and bookstores, sharing information with fellow readers and librarians, talking to students and other youngsters about materials that

they like to read, and making inquiries with publishers are some ways to expand the teacher's repertoire of suitable reading materials. Having a knowledge of a wide range of suitable reading materials is crucial because the teacher needs to be in a position to advise the school on the purchase or loan of reading materials, and to guide students on their selection of materials that appeal to individual interests and are appropriate for different levels of language proficiency.

The materials need to be accessible to students, with several copies available if specific ones are found to be popular. Materials can be obtained from various sources. The most readily accessible sources are school and public libraries that usually have large collections of materials in English. A class or departmental library can be built up from purchased or donated materials that have been read and recommended by teachers, students, librarians, and other interested readers. Students can also share and recommend materials that they have purchased or borrowed. Other sources are international and local reading associations that provide information on books and other reading materials that appeal to children, and publishers and bookstores that hold book fairs and book exhibitions.

INTERACTION AS A FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

The interaction phase follows sustained silent reading or reading aloud. Interaction is always carried out in a relaxed, non-threatening, non-judgmental atmosphere and students should voluntarily contribute to the interaction.

For the most part, interaction consists of sharing and talking about texts read during the sustained reading phase. As students read texts that they can comprehend and enjoy, they draw psychological and intellectual meaning from their reading. They react internally to the web of feelings and ideas that the texts pose. Particular episodes arouse strong emotions or questions. They need to be given an opportunity to express what excites or impresses them, to question what they have read, and to think individually and as a corporate body about their reading. Interaction allows them this opportunity — to share their reactions and responses with their partners, their group, or with the class.

In the interaction phase of GIR, a range of activities is used. The 'Retelling procedure', in which students retell stories, ideas, or

discoveries, taps into the storyteller that naturally exists in people. It also allows readers to summarize their reading, rephrase text, and identify closely with it. Retelling of exciting or moving episodes and events that concern the reader deeply, or ideas and discoveries that impress the reader are primary to the retelling process. By retelling contents that matters, the retelling stimulates the listener to become interested in the same text, thereby setting in motion a dynamic process of extending the circle of interested readers.

Another recommended activity for students is to voluntarily select and read aloud excerpts that they like most or feel strongly about. By reading aloud these excerpts, the readers share their personal responses with a community of readers, and focus on high points in the text that may lead listeners to become personally involved with.

Interaction activities can also be guided by the teacher, using questions that prompt thinking and reflection about texts. Questions that are suitable for 'guided sharing' need to be open-ended and applicable to most texts read. Examples of questions that teachers can pose are:

• Why (and how) did you decide on reading this book?

• Do any of the characters remind you of people you know? Tell us more about these people.

• Do you agree with what the writer says? Why?

• What do you like best about the book/article?

Whichever activities are used in interaction, it is important to recognize that each response to reading is a personal one. Each response needs to be accepted as the unique product of the reader who has interacted with the text from his or her own perspective and interpreted the text it according to individual experience and view of the world. In the true spirit of sharing, therefore, teachers and listeners should refrain from making judgments about the quality or 'correctness' of responses, and be accepting and supportive of students.

MONITORING READING

Because the primary objective of GIR is to have students read as extensively as possible, it is necessary to monitor their reading — to ascertain that they are reading extensively. For primary students,

monitoring can be done in two ways: as a whole-class celebration of the amount of materials read and as an individual accounting of materials read. In whole-class monitoring, reading charts are displayed prominently in the classroom. Using graphics or pictures like trees that grow with an increasing number of leaves, or skies that sparkle with increasing number of stars, students can trace one another's progress to motivate one another. Individual monitoring is done through the use of a 'reading record' that documents the type of materials read, number of pages read, dates of reading, and signatures of supervising adults.

For lower secondary students, an abbreviated reading record that is similar to the one primary level students use for individual monitoring allows them and the teacher to quickly track the amount and type of materials read in a specific period. An extended reading record is kept for more lengthy texts, such as short stories, popular fiction, and informative non-fiction. The extended reading record consists of a form with space sufficient for recording four items. The students fill in the title and author, pages read, and provide a short summary of the materials read.

In GIR, students are accountable in a non-threatening, individualized way. The whole process of reading — selection of materials, following routines, reading and interaction, keeping reading records — is monitored by teachers, who keep a checklist of their observations on an ongoing basis, and provide anecdotal records when necessary. At the end of the term or semester, a GIR participation mark is given which shows how well each student has participated.

CONCLUSION

This article has described a programme for developing independent reading among upper primary and lower secondary students. For readers who have yet to develop positive attitudes to reading, a classroom-based programme that addresses their special needs is an important first step towards overcoming resistance to reading, with the hope that these students will eventually become independent readers. A programme such as this needs to be carefully designed so that a good balance is struck between freedom and autonomy on the one hand, and the need for structure and accountability on the other. Consistently implemented, this programme will maximize chances of success in developing independent readers of its students.

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