L earning to Read – The Place of Phonics and Real Books in the Reading Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

The debate over how to teach reading has been a long and acrimonious one, with two distinct camps each advocating different approaches. A recent *Straits Times* report "Furore in NZ over how reading should be taught" (August 15, 1995) showed that this "war" is still on-going, in the most literate nation in the world, New Zealand, where the conflict has been like before, between a phonics approach and the whole language approach which was pioneered in New Zealand.

In Singapore, much of our beginning reading curriculum has been imported from New Zealand through REAP or the Reading and English Acquisition Programme, but with the recent introduction of a thematic approach to language teaching, questions have again been raised about how beginning reading should be taught. In particular, there has been concern about the neglect of phonics, and some schools have, in fact, considered abandoning the big books in favour of a phonics-based programme.

In this paper, I would like to address this issue of phonics versus big books again. I will begin by discussing what the new 1991 syllabus has to say about how to teach beginning reading and go on to outline some of the issues that have arisen from the document. I will then summarise some research findings about the reading process and draw some implications from there for beginning reading instruction in the Singapore context.

THE SYLLABUS, READING AND READING INSTRUCTION

Reference to reading in the Primary English Syllabus can be found in Chapter 2, "Pedagogic Approaches and Implications for Methodology" (pp. 34-35), as well as on pages 45-46 in Chapter 4, "Spectrum of Skills and List of Communicative Functions". The former is a list of reading

activities and examples, while the latter comprises a list of skills, for example, reading silently and in a sustained manner, skimming and scanning, etc.. Lim (1995, p. 7) has commented at length on the lack of reference to teaching beginning reading in the syllabus, and on the fact that there is little distinction between "the range of skills to be mastered by a six-year-old learning to read and by a twelve-year-old reading to learn". In short, there is no attempt in the syllabus to distinguish between reading in the foundation stage (Primary 1 and 2) and reading in the orientation stage (Primary 5 onwards), or what is commonly described as the processes of learning to read and reading to learn. In fact, this information was also significantly absent in previous English language syllabuses. Lim has also pointed out that although the principles of REAP and ACT were incorporated into the new syllabus, no clear statement of the role of reading in language acquisition is found in the syllabus. I believe, this is partly because the syllabus focuses on language learning rather than the broader issue of literacy acquisition.

THE ISSUES THEN THAT HAVE ARISEN FROM THIS OMISSION

The lack of discussion about teaching beginning reading in the Primary English syllabus has left a gap with regard to reading instruction, and this has been compounded by the simultaneous introduction of a thematic approach and new textbooks with the syllabus. In fact, the textbooks and their schemes of work have, for some schools, become the de facto syllabus. Some schools have continued the practice of reading big books and following up with book-flood activities incorporating these into their thematic units as presented in the PETS materials. Others have not given up the big books, but have greatly reduced the time spent on them as well as on the follow-up activities. Instead, phonics or some letter-word identification programme has been introduced with the belief that more skills training is the way to learning to read.

The main issue, as I see it, is making a decision between a holistic approach and the sub-skills approach to learning to read. The former, whose philosophy is summarised by the belief that you learn to read by reading, is represented by the strategies advocated by REAP and in part, by the PETS materials. The sub-skills approach, on the other hand, tends to place more emphasis on phonics instruction, which in itself is a problematic concept to start with, but for the purposes of this discussion, I will take Adams'(1990) definition of phonics instruction as "a system of teaching reading that builds upon the alphabetic

principle, a system of which a central component of the teaching is the teaching of the correspondences between letters or groups of letters and their pronunciations".

Since there is no reference to these approaches in the syllabus, it is not surprising that, despite reassurance and statements about these approaches from both the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education, teachers are generally unsure of the role of these approaches in learning to read. A related concern is that of students who are in need of reading remediation. Should they do more reading or more activities that are focused on word accuracy?

RESEARCH AND READING TEACHING

The teaching of reading has to be guided by a philosophy or a theory of reading that can help us make decisions about what to teach, how to teach and how to assess achievement in the reading process.

We know that reading theories vary from a top-down or inside-out theory of reading that is not text dependent to a bottom-up or outside-in theory which argues that the text is fundamental to reading. The bottom-up theory argues that children should be taught to read from a part-to-whole approach. First, they must learn to decode in order to translate letters into sounds, and they must learn how to blend these letters and sounds into words and to put words together into sentences, and ultimately build up the complete text and its meaning. Meaning thus resides in the text itself and reading instruction is aimed at making the learner a rapid and fluent decoder so that automaticity is achieved.

The top-down or inside-out theory (Goodman 1976; Smith 1982) suggests that the meaning of the text is in the reader's head and not in the text. Fluent readers make predictions about the text's meaning based on their background knowledge, and this knowledge that a reader brings to the text is as important to comprehension as is the meaning the writer introduced into the text. Accurate decoding and word recognition thus become secondary concerns in the teaching of reading.

Between these two extreme views is the interactive theory of reading which contends that, meaning is in the text and in the head of the readers. Readers make use of two types of cues to help them read and these are visual and cognitive cues. Visual cues are those cues that

we see in the text and these include the words and illustrations. Cognitive cues include three components: the semantic, syntactic and graphophonic cueing systems. This approach which combines the development of both print and world knowledge is generally more acceptable.

Some explanantion of the various cueing systems in the interactive approach is needed here. The semantic system draws upon our knowledge of the world, our cultural knowledge, and other prior experiences to help us process and interpret the new information. For instance, we can only understand why in the following sentence, the family was shocked by the man's act of eating durians and drinking *Anchor*, only if we have the cultural knowledge about durians and about the danger of combining them with drinking *Anchor*, which is a local brand of beer.

> *He would shock his family by downing several glasses of Anchor after a big durian feast.*

Syntactic knowledge is the knowledge of the language system itself, that is, the grammar. Here is an example from Gibbons, 1991.

> *Mary is a very good shringer. She ... everyday.*

To be able to predict the answer, *shrings,* you need to know these three things about English:

- the only word that will fit there is one that describes what Mary does – a verb
- the word from *shringer* must be *shring* (generalising from pairs like *writer-write*)
- the word will end in an "s" (generalising from she *writes,* etc.)

The graphophonic system refers to the way spoken language is represented through written symbols, in this case, the letters of the English alphabet. Readers often have intuitive knowledge of the sounds and symbols of written language and are familiar with some of their common combinations and relationships. For instance, they are aware of the probability of certain sequences of letters in words and this contributes to their rapid identification during reading.

However, these theories are based on models of fluent readers and do not necessarily account for our students, who are children learning

to read in what is essentially a second language for most of them. Our young students have considerable gaps in their knowledge of these three systems. They are often unfamiliar with graphophonic cues, have insufficient background or cultural information, tend to rely too much or too little on graphophonic cues, and are unable to predict because they are not sure of the language.

In my own experience of working with some weak readers, I found that, in most cases, they tend to over-rely on one system. For instance, they overuse their prior knowledge of the situation in the text rather than focus on the graphophonic cues when they are reading familiar texts. Thus, in their oral reading of such texts, they make meaningful miscues but these are still inaccurate. For example, a child reads,

"Give me some food," he yelled.

instead of

"Get me some food," he shouted.

When a child does this persistently throughout the text, his comprehension of the text will decline, and for comprehension purposes, accurate reading is essential. Adams (1990), in her review of the major reading research studies, said that the evidence suggest that the most critical factor beneath fluent word reading is the ability to recognise letters, spelling patterns, and whole words effortlessly and quickly, and this skill is vital for comprehension. For second language readers then, all three sources of information are important because children who are not competent need more strategies so that they can fall back on others if one does not work.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS IN TEACHING READING OR IN PLANNING READING PROGRAMMES

Given this information, what then are the roles of both these approaches in our schools? Research has suggested that overall superior reading achievement is associated with reading programmes which combine systematic code instruction along with meaningful connected reading. In short, both skills instruction in phonics and extensive reading of meaningful books are essential components and this has proven to be valid with both weak and advanced readers.

We know the importance of reading aloud to children regularly as an activity that prepares children for formal instruction. However, we

also know that this practice is not an intrinsic part of our child-rearing culture yet, and many children would not have experienced bedtime stories, or have stories read to them frequently, or even have books at home. The extensive reading of big and small books should remain an integral part of our learning to read programmes in schools because many of our children get their first experience of being read to, of enjoying stories and of extended exposure to book language from these lessons.

What about phonics instruction then? Reading stories is important to develop students' oral and listening skills, but they also need to learn about letter and word knowledge. All programmes in reading should strive for a balance between phonics activities and the reading and appreciation of informative and engaging texts. This objective is, in fact, inherent in the REAP approach where, after the reading of the story, the teaching points of each big book lesson are often focused on letter and word discrimination and recognition.

However, having said that, I must admit that the issue is more complicated, for there are still the questions of what form phonics instruction should take, how much phonics to teach compared to extensive reading, and also what phonics programme to choose, given the range that is available. I have no answer to that beyond pointing out that each school situation differs.

Some schools will have less need for phonics instruction than others, depending on their students' backgrounds, although good students do benefit from some explicit teaching of word-attack skills within the context of holistic texts. But it is certainly not true that the weaker the students, the more phonics they will need. In fact, weak readers need more exposure to books and extended reading because they often do not get enough opportunities to read. Often reading remediation lessons tend to focus on word recognition and in class, these same children get shorter, more simplified texts and more instruction on isolated word recognition than regular children. Their total reading time on real texts is thus considerably reduced. For such remedial readers as with other beginning readers, the texts that they are given to read are equally important. Texts with a higher proportion of words that children can decode easily tend to promote independent word recognition growth and contribute to less frustration in the beginning reading process. Schools should then take a hard look at the texts that are being used for teaching beginning reading and for remedial reading. The two sets should not be the same.

Finally, it is important to put each of these two practices in perspective in our own reading programmes. Just reading stories alone will contribute to preparation for reading, but will not help in accuracy in word reading and recognition, an essential skill for comprehension which is the ultimate goal of all our reading programmes. Similarly, phonics instruction by itself without any reference to extended reading texts does not help to develop meaningful reading. Phonic rules and generalisations are a means to an end, and once children can read, this knowledge is largely superfluous.

There has been no major "war" on reading in Singapore so far, although I do understand that daily "battles" are waged between teachers, parents and schools over how children should learn to read. Such altercations are not necessary if we remember that children learn differently, and that some may benefit from phonics instruction more than others. Similarly, many children have learnt to read without any prior instruction in letters and sounds. As teachers, we must be flexible in our teaching approaches and strive towards incorporating elements of both approaches instead of over-emphasising any one of them.

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