The Reading Teacher's Magic Wand

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The Magic Wand

Like the prototypical image of a wizard with his magic wand, the reading teacher teaching a class of lower primary children invariably has a 'wand' of his/her own. The need for holding on to a rod or cane – no matter how basic in shape and character – seems to be almost instinctive for many teachers. The cane perhaps symbolises authority and power; in earlier times, before rules on corporal punishment were passed by edict, it was used to threaten or to inflict punishment on those pupils who were seen as lethargic, apathetic, inattentive or mischievous. "Spare the rod and spoil the child" was a maxim many teachers of a past generation seemed to believe in.

Deprived of the authority to wield a stick in class to impose discipline, teachers have found better uses for the stick. The stick now comes in a variety of shapes and forms – from hi-tech laser beam pointers to telescopic metal rod antennas that fold into the shape of a pen. Basically, teachers have always found the need for a pointer. A pointer has the following invaluable functions:

(a) It assists in drawing attention to a specific point in a text on a whiteboard, a page in a Big Book or a projected slide on a screen.

(b) It is useful in showing linkages between words, points or images in a displayed text.

(c) It can be used to elicit a response from pupils by drawing their attention to a specific point in the displayed text.

(d) It can be used to direct chorus reading.

Using the Magic Wand

The intention of this article is to discuss the use of the pointer in reading lessons conducted in lower primary classes.

In the hands of a competent teacher, the pointer becomes a very useful device enabling him/her to direct pupils to read aloud effectively and to direct pupils' attention to critical points in a text. However, when an unskilled novice or a teacher uses a pointer, the result is, in my own observation as a teaching practice supervisor and external examiner, often quite disastrous. What one usually hears is incantation parading as oral reading; pupils chant rather than read a text aloud meaningfully, mesmerised, I suspect, by the teacher's magic wand. This intoning of words from a Big Book hardly sounds like English and is quite offensive to an educated ear. If unchecked, this style of 'reading' could become habituated and pupils could grow up with the belief that English should be read aloud in the manner taught in class. The 'seesaw' intonation can be so infectious that it creeps into spoken English. Indeed, one does not need to look very far to identify a victim of the magic wand. Oral English examiners for the GCE 'O' level oral examination will, I believe, confirm that there are examinees who read aloud in this manner, showing absolutely no inkling that English is more of a stress-timed rather than a syllable-timed language.

Stress-timed and Syllable-timed Languages

The difference between these two types of languages has been pointed out by no less an authority than David Abercrombie. The following excerpt from Abercrombie (1967, 1980) p. 97-98 explains this difference very lucidly.

"Consider, however, an utterance in English, a language with a stress-timed rhythm:

Which is the train for Crewe, please?

It contains four stressed syllables, which, train, Crewe, please, and their equal spacing in time can be made apprarent (if it is not so at once) by tapping with a pencil on a hard surface simultaneously with these four syllables as the sentence is spoken. The resulting taps will be clearly isochronous.[1] But if one taps on every syllable (there are seven in all) the taps will be unequally spaced, some of them coming more quickly than others. That this is bound to happen follows from the fact that the number of unstressed syllables which separate the stresses from each other is constantly varying, as is made evident if the stresses are marked off by vertical lines, thus:

| Which is the | train for | Crewe, | please?

We can see that *which* is separated from *train* by two unstressed *syllables*, *train* from *Crewe* by one, and *Crewe* from *please* by none; yet the interval of time separating them is the same in each case. The rate of syllable succession has thus to be continually adjusted, in order to fit varying numbers of syllables into the same time-interval. In other words, there is considerable variation in syllable length in a language spoken with a stress-timed rhythm, whereas in a language spoken with a syllable-timed rhythm the syllables tend to be equal in length."[2]
(Abercrombie, 1967, 1980 p. 97-98)

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[1]   Deterding (1994), however, notes that "In searching for evidence for or against stress-/syllable-timing, it would be naive to expect anything approximating perfect isochrony: anybody who produced speech with any unit of speech repeated with complete regularity would sound like a robot".

[2]   Deterding (1994) citing Miller (1984) notes that "languages are better described along a continuum, being more-or-less stress-or syllable-timed, rather than falling absolutely into one category or the other."

Tracing the Root Causes of Classroom Incantation

One of the possible sources of this classroom incantation may be traced to the practice some teachers have of pointing to every word in the sentence as the teacher moves rhythmically from one word to the next in the text of a Big Book. The result is predictable: pupils read the text aloud, word-for-word, stressing every word and every syllable of every polysyllabic word equally.[3] Every preposition, article, determiner and conjunction is given the same stress time as every lexical item. Essentially, one might note that pupils are reading words aloud rather than a sentence or a phrase. Hubbard, et al (1986) also note that

> "Problems of sound formation often arise because of distorted, exaggerated stress patterns. Many learners tend to produce utterances of the type, 'GIVE.IT.TO.HIM.' instead of, 'GIVE it to him'. And unfortunately it is often the teacher who is the cause". p. 208

Moreover, in many cases, long sentences are not broken into sense groups but are read in one breath, a pause occurring only when pupils run out of breath. But just as great rivers usually have small beginnings – sometimes a spring at the source – the cause of bad reading could be traced to what appears to be a innocuous practice.

The deleterious effect of this practice of pointing to every word on the page is that it destroys all sense of English rhythm and intonation. Intonation "is often considered a prime carrier of affective information for many psychologists to whom emotion and attitude are of central interest" (Johns-Lewis, 1986, p.125); besides affective information, different intonation contours often convey different meanings altogether. There are a limited number of intonation contours in English "which are recognised by everyone who studies

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[3]   Incidentally, Cruttenden (1994) observes that "in ordinary connected speech, monosyllables account for more than 80% of words occurring, with words of two syllables coming next with 15%, three-syllable words with nearly 3%, and longer words occurring comparatively rarely". p. 274

intonation" (Bing, 1984, p. 11)[4], although the exact number varies with different phoneticians. It is important, therefore, for the teacher to teach these basic intonation contours. The best place to teach intonation is, I believe, in the reading lesson in lower primary classes where pupils are young enough to acquire the intonation patterns of the language without difficulty. The lower primary level is a critical and prime stage within the school system for the teaching of intonation and prosodic features.

Making Proper Use of a Pointer

In order to teach intonation, word and syllabic stress, and rhythm, the teacher can use a pointer to great effect as the pointer provides the means of combining visual, kinesic and auditory images instantaneously: the teacher is able to trace the intonation contour with his/her pointer while vocally modelling the phrase or sentence in the Big Book. The pointer then has the power to produce incantation or to elicit reading that conforms to normal intonation patterns. It can be used to create a sense of stress-timed rhythm and to develop the concepts of word and syllabic stress. It is not difficult to find adults in various professions who have not acquired these basic speech concepts: this becomes evident when they attempt to read a paper or a letter aloud.

Whatever theoretical arguments one might choose to advance to defend chorus reading from a Big Book are invalidated if in the process, the prosodic and intonation features of the language are ignored altogether. All that is really accomplished in such a case is that the teacher succeeds in getting pupils to bark at print. Such theoretical arguments show gross inadequacy. A good theory, on the other hand, should be readily applicable: it has been observed that there is nothing more practicable than a good theory.

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[4]   A good discussion of intonation is to be found in Roach, P (1989, 91) Chapters
       15 - 19; an article on intonation in Singapore English by Goh, Christine C.M
       "Intonation Features of Singapore English" will also be found in this current issue.

How to Teach Pupils to Read Aloud Effectively

In order to illustrate the approach proposed, the following page from Mercer Mayer's (1980) book *What do you do with a kangaroo?* has been selected.

"What do you do when you go to the bathroom to wash your face, and hanging there where your towel should be, brushing his teeth like he owns the place is an Opossum? He says to you, "The toothpaste you use is much too sweet, and your toothbrush, I'm sorry to say, is all worn. Please get me a new one tomorrow."

The approach does not require the teacher to have more than a rudimentary knowledge of phonetics. Hence technical notation has been avoided in the description of the approach. The teacher should focus on the salient features of the text, viz. pronunciation, phrasing, rhythm, stress and intonation.

Before pupils attempt to read a text aloud, it would seem to be procedurally meaningful to focus on the pronunciation of words that pupils have difficulty in pronouncing. Hubbard et al (1986) make this important observation on the teaching pronunciation, a feature of the language that has not received sufficient attention:

"We believe that the teaching of pronunciation is not an optional luxury to be left to advanced level studies of the language at university...But just as a student reaches university level with an active command of grammar structures and vocabulary so he should arrive with an active command of pronunciation. In other words, pronunciation should be an integral part of an English teaching programme from the early stages, just as the teaching of structures and vocabulary."..p 207

It is, however, important not to teach the word in isolation but to place it in the textual environment in which it occurs. It is, nevertheless, useful to look at the word in isolation initially, although as Roach (1989, 91) observes, this is "a rather artificial situation" since

"we do not often say words in isolation, except for a few such as 'yes', 'no', 'possibly', 'please' and interrogative words such as 'what', 'who' etc., but looking at words in isolation does help us to see stress placement and stress levels more clearly than studying them in the context of continuous speeech." p. 74

Word isolation can easily be achieved with the assistance of the word mask that appears to be part of the equipment of most reading teachers using the Shared Book Approach. Stress within the word or syllabic stress can usefully be taught. In the reading text from Mercer Mayer (1980), the teacher might wish to select the word "bathroom" as the consonant represented by the letters | TH | in BaTHroom appears from experience to be particualrly difficult for pupils. (Similarly the words tooTHpaste and tooTHbrush might be selected for further practice). The pointer could be used to point to the syllable that is stressed viz. BATHroom.

Then by using a technique known as backchaining (also advocated by Hubbard et al (1986), the teacher could re-site the word into its textual environment in the following manner using the pointer:

<div align="center">

bathroom

the <u>bathroom</u>

to the <u>bathroom</u>

<u>go</u> to the <u>bathroom</u>

you <u>go</u> to the <u>bathroom</u>

when you <u>go</u> to the <u>bathroom</u>

</div>

In this way, the whole clause is built up without the danger of pupils chanting out the words, especially if the teacher actively shapes the intonation contour and stresses the underlined words. During this process too, it is important to pay particular attention to rhythm following Abercrombie's model described earlier in this article. In a similar manner, the backchaining technique could be used for all the words pupils have difficulty in pronouncing.

After this initial preparation, pupils are ready to tackle the whole text. It is suggested that the teacher slide the pointer which should come to rest briefly on each of the words that should be stressed making sure that the right rhythm and intonation are observed for each sense- or breath-group. To emphasize rhythm, the teacher could resort to tapping at the stressed words. With a little practice, this skilful use of the pointer could produce markedly different results.

WHAT do you DO | when you GO to the BATHroom | to WASH your FACE, | and HANGing there | where your TOWel should be, || BRUSHing his TEETH | like he OWNS the PLACE || is an oPOSsum? || He SAYS to you, || "THIS TOOTHpaste you USE | is MUCH too SWEET, || and your TOOTHbrush, || I'm SORry to SAY, || is ALL WORN. || PLEASE GET me a NEW one | toMORrow." ||

It will be noted that the words which should be stressed in the text are written in capital letters; the stressed syllable in the polysyllabic words is also indicated in capital letters. A single or double line marks the boundary of each sense- or breath-group indicating as well the relative length of the pause.

At each of the boundaries too, there is a change in the intonation contour that the teacher should indicate with an appropriate upward or downward movement of the pointer. In order to avoid confusion, the text is presented again, de-emphasised this time to maintain clarity, with suggested intonation marks. The intonation contours (using a simplified non-technical system) have been suggested by Dr David Deterding, a phonetician lecturing at the National Institute of Education.

What do you \do |
when you go to the /bathroom |
to wash you /face, ||
and \hanging /there |
where your \towel should /be, ||
brushing his \teeth |
like he \owns the /place ||
is an \Opossum? ||
He \says to / you, ||
"This \toothpaste you /use |
is much too \sweet, ||
and your \tooth /brush, ||
I'm sorry to /say, ||
is all \worn. ||
Please get me a \new one |
\tomorrow." ||

A slash with an inclination to the right (/) indicates a rising intonation while a slash with an inclination to the left (\ ), a falling intonation.

Conclusion

As it would seem that it is firmly entrenched in school practice at the lower primary level, chorus reading as a technique could be vastly improved if it were to be conducted in the manner described above since it provides all the pupils in the class with maximum participation in the shortest time possible. However, the effectiveness of this mass practice should be tested out with individual pupils who might need further guidance from the teacher. Pursued in a systematic manner, guided chorus reading will, I believe, eventually instil in pupils an intuitive feeling for the prosodic and intonation features of English.

It will be seen, however, that skill and practice are needed in wielding the pointer if it is to be used to create the right magic of effective reading.

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