Exploring Processes of Reading and Meaning-making in Second Grade Classrooms: Part 1

Pooja Bahuguna

Abstract

This paper presents details of Part I of a significant classroom-based research study. This descriptive study explored reading and meaning-making processes in second grade classrooms. The objective of the study was to explore and describe the nature and focus of reading instructions, nature and quality of literacy environment and effectiveness of the reading instructions in order to help students become engaged readers whose reading attempts are meaning-driven. I used observation on field notes, journal entries and interviews with teachers as the sources of data collection. The findings are interesting, they lead us to think and reflect about reading comprehension instructions in early primary grades in Indian context.

Keywords:

Comprehension – Process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning that involves an interplay between the knowledge and capabilities of the reader, the demands of the text, the activities engaged in by the reader and the sociocultural context in which reading occurs.

Comprehension instruction – A teacher does/says something to help children understand or work out the meaning of more than a single, isolated word.

Emergent Literacy – Emergent literacy is a developmental model of learning how to read and write, which acknowledges the children's ability to read and write before they get direct and formal instruction.

Introduction

What is the purpose of reading? The answer seems obvious to all—it is related to comprehension or getting the meaning. Similarly, educators and researchers unanimously agree that the goal of teaching reading is teaching comprehension and meaning-making (Smith, 2004, Dooley and Matthew, 2009, Sinha, 2010, 2012, Wilkinson and Son, 2011). Such researchers support that reading is a constructive process since it involves acquisition of meaning. It is also a complex process since meaning construction

happens while there is an interaction between the text, the reader and the context (Ruddell and Unrau, 1994). It is definitely not a passive process composed of isolated skills like identifying symbols and sounding them correctly. Consequently, learning to read is much complex than sounding out each letter and word correctly. Reading comprehension is also much more than just repeating what is in the text. Readers need to bring all the experiences of reading – the words, pictures, meanings, feelings, questions — in order to comprehend a text.

They interpret the texts based on their prior experiences, knowledge and opinions. This constructive view of reading raises questions towards sequential approach to reading instructions and advocate creating context of meaningful reading experiences. It is also believed that reading comprehension in the early primary grades should take place and should feature engaging reading materials and rich discussion (Smith, 2004; Dooley and Matthew, 2009; Sinha, 2010, 2012; Wilkinson and Son, 2011). In the Indian context, NCERT has been conducting programs and taking up projects to promote significance of early reading with meaning. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) emphasised on reading with meaning as a focused area. The End Term Survey Report of Mathura pilot project (2012-13) also revealed various aspects about the process of reading in early years of schooling like how children essentially look for meaning while reading a text and they love to read meaningful text materials. These documents mention about how children bring capital of meaningful language to school which should be used to learn literacy. Since literacy is a social practice, classroom as an important literacy environment significantly influences children's reading processes. Teachers' beliefs equally play an important role in creating meaningful literacy environment wherein children are engaged in meaningmaking.

Rationale of the Study

This study draws its rationale from two significant sources. The first source is the conceptual framework: emergent comprehension perspective which holds the belief that children's early encounters with print should be meaningful and interesting. The second source is the research context i.e., Indian classrooms. Early reading and meaning making processes of second grade children have not been explored much in

Indian context. Primary schools are often the first to introduce literacy instructions to children in Indian context. Classes one and two are considered significant stages for developing the important skill of reading comprehension. The challenge here involves creating enabling environment and opportunities for reading and writing. When it is reported that students in senior grades cannot comprehend the texts even the fluent decoders, it has a connection with prevalent reading and meaning making processes in second grade classrooms.

Review of Literature

In the Indian context, the NCF (2005) cognizes the fact that children begin constructing knowledge before entering a formal school. This fact was first given attention by emergent literacy theorists regarding reading and writing (Clay 1991, and Teale and Sulzby, 1996). Emergent Literacy perspective provides the view that literacy development follows a continuum, as opposed to the Reading Readiness Perspective which held the maturational view that children need to wait to read until they are mature. Emergent Literacy perspective considers a child as knowledgeable about the ways in which print works. The term Emergent Literacy means all the processes, knowledge and skills which are exhibited by young children and are related to later development of conventional reading (Teale and Sulzby, 1996). Dooley and Matthew (2009) suggest bridging the early real world experiences of young meaning makers to the desired outcome of becoming effective constructors of meaning. Clay (1991) in her pioneering research studied the young learners' progress from emergent readers to conventional readers. According to Clay, young children develop various language processing systems (syntax, semantics and grapho-phonemics) as a consequence of their early life experiences.

Literacy learning is a social phenomenon. The culture of the classroom

shapes the definition of literacy, literacyrelated instructions and assessment. For instance, in some classrooms children are instructed to demonstrate correct application of literacy skills by doing drill sheets. While in other settings, children are engaged in tasks like interpreting and composing texts. Classroom contexts highly influence students' developing conceptions of reading and writing. Similarly, classroom contexts influence children's growing interest and willingness of engaging in literacy tasks. Turner (1995) examined the effects of instructional contexts on children's motivation for literacy. The study observed basal as well as whole language classrooms for daily instructions. Children were interviewed too. The study found that the strongest predictor of motivation was the literacy task. In whole language classrooms, children were engaged in open tasks where in higher order thinking was required. During open tasks, children used more reading strategies. Factors that influenced children's motivation were opportunities for challenge, for satisfying interests and for collaboration. Almasi and York (2009) dismissed the traditional definition of discussion staple instructional activity used in classroom for many years. Discussion in its typical form occurs as a post reading event. This type of discussion is also called teacher-led discussion. The type of questions asked during this more controlled teacher led discussion of text tends to be literal, factual and known answer questions. Therefore, there's little to discuss in such type of discussion because the underlying assumption implies that there is single, correct interpretation of text. Cazden (1986) characterised patterns of discourse in these classroom events as having an I-R-E (initiate, respond, evaluate) participant structure. She observed that teachers talk too much in the classroom and the words present in the classroom are mostly their words and not the children's. She argues that teachers tend to focus more on forms of children's language to rectify errors rather than what they mean in

their language use. Comprehension usually suffers in such instructional contexts that lead to student passivity and disengagement. It is because comprehension requires active cognitive and self-regulatory strategies to make sense of texts.

Further, this paper is divided into various sections. First section presents some reading events to elucidate how reading happened in the classrooms. Second section presents analysis of the reading and meaning-making processes. Next section presents teachers' beliefs about reading. Then, I present points to reflect, and discuss implications in the last two sections.

Reading Event in Classrooms: Some Examples

I begin by describing some reading events from the second grade classrooms.

Event-1: Reading of the text - Bulbul (Textbook - Rimjhim)

Teacher asked children to open the lesson and read aloud the title of the chapter-Bulbul. Teacher asked children to open the practice notebooks as well. Teacher started to read as follows:

Teacher – Chalo hum pehla paragraph padhenge— kya tumne kabhi bulbul dekhi hai.

(Let us read the paragraph - have you ever seen a nightingale?)

Teacher read aloud the first line word by word- 'kya tumne kabhi bulbul dekhi hai'. Then, children read aloud that line word by word, following their teacher's reading.

Teacher – (Ab hum mann me yeh line padhenge. Ab sabhi bacche book band karke copy me 'kya' likhenge. Ab check karte hain, 'k' pura hai ya aadha? 'y' pura hai? Matra kaun si hai- aa.)

(Now we will read this line in our minds. Now close your books and write the word 'kya' in your copies. Now let us check the spelling- is 'k' full or half? Which matra is there? – aa.)

Then, teacher discussed about when children use the word 'kya'. One of the responses was as follows:

Child - Kya tumhe titli achi lagti hai?

(Do you like a butterfly?)

Teacher – Chalo sabhi ko pehli line padhne aa gai na?

(Now you all have learned how to read the first line, have you?)

Children- yes ma'am.

Then, teacher and students discussed about the punctuation - question mark and its usage to end the sentence.

Teacher read aloud the next line, followed by the students-

'Bulbul ko pehchanne ka ek saral tareeka hai.'

(There is an easy way to identify a nightingale.)

This way, teacher read aloud a portion of the paragraph. Students followed her and read it aloud.

Then, teacher asked children to encircle the word- 'chidiya', she instructed children as-

'jaha 'chididya'aya hai usse gola kare. Ab ye bataye 'ch' pe kaun si matra ha? 'd' pe kaun si matra ha? 'y' pe kaun si matra hai? Ab isse rough notebook pe likho. Acha bataoki 'chi' bana ya 'chee'.'

(Wherever you find the word 'chidiya', encircle it. Now tell me which matra is attached to the letter 'ch', 'd', and 'y'. Now write it in your notebooks. Ok, tell me does it sound as 'chi' or 'chee'.)

Teacher discussed the spelling of a few more words like saral, poonch, tareeka.

Then, teacher asked a child to read the previously selected paragraph. She instructed her as –

'A padegi aur uski galti pakadni hai.'

(A will read aloud and you will have to pick her errors.)

Event 2: Reading of the Text - Meethi Sarangi (Textbook-Rimjhim)

Following is the account of another

reading event. First teacher told children which text they were going to read and asked a few questions.

T- Aaj hum dusra path karte hain-meethi saarangi acha ye batao kya lag raha hai saarangi kya hai?

Child 1- Ma'am ye koi rang birangi cheez hai.

Child 2- Gaana bajaane ki koi cheej hai.

Child 3- Baaja hai ek tarah ka.

T- (Haan saarangi ek baaja hai. Budhe baba ke hath me saarangi hai jis pe taar hai. Iss par lakdi ghumate hain to bahut achi awaaz aati hai. To hum pehla paragraph padenge. Chalo pehle ye batao saarangi kaise likha hai?)

(T- Today, we will read another lessonmeethi saarangi. Tell me, what is saarangi?

Child 1- ma'am, this is a colorful thing.

Child 2- something that is used to play songs.

Child3-it is a kind of a musical instrument.

Teacher- hmmm. Saarangi is a musical instrument. The old man is holding it up and it has many chords. One has to use a wooden stick to play it and it creates a pleasant sound. So now, we will read the first paragraph. Next tell me, how do we write the word- saarangi?)

This way, the teacher tried to discuss the word saarangi. Then, teacher read aloud the text and modeled how to read the text by breaking the words into letters and sound out each letter – matra blend correctly. After reading a line, she stopped reading and started asking questions.

T- Saarangivaala kaun hoga?

Child-Baba

T- jo saangi bajata hai. Saarangi ke g pe kaun si matra hai-/i/ ki. kaun si /i/- badi ee kyunki hum jyada saans kheench rahe hain. Ab dekho dusri line puri ho gai ab isse fir padenege

(T- Who was saarangi vaala?

Child- the old man.

T- The man who was playing the saarangi. In the word -saarangi, the letter -g has the matra (sound) - /i/. Which /i/ sound- the

long /ee/ sound because we hold our breath for a longer time. Now, we have read the second line, let us read it again.)

After reading three lines in this way, the teacher explained the entire paragraph in her words. Then, she instructed children to encircle the difficult words that she would be speaking aloud.

I observed reading of this text in all the classrooms. Surprisingly, the process of reading of this text was similar in different classrooms in terms of the procedure and focus while reading. First, teacher (or a bright student) read aloud selected portion of the text (not the entire story in one go), explained that particular portion and discussed few difficult words in terms of their spelling, sound and meaning.

Processes of Reading & Meaning Making in the Classrooms

I observed sixty language periods and noted that reading did not happen every day in second grade classrooms which is noteworthy as it was in contrast to what MHRD, Government of India (2014) document, titled 'Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat' proposes. This document suggested total two and a half hours to be earmarked to reading and writing out of four instructional hours. More precisely, thirty minutes are to be devoted to independent reading by children. However, I did not observe any reading time or opportunities given to children to read independently.

The following points will help to know the nature and focus of reading processes in classroom context:

Reading Texts & Classroom Process-Reading texts followed a sequence in all six classrooms. First, teachers read the text, followed by students' choral reading and teachers explained the text. There was no point of time in my observations when I saw children reading or exploring books independently for themselves. Sometimes, the teacher would call one or two so called bright students (considered by teachers)

to read aloud selected portion. But then also, explanation was provided only by the teacher.

Dominance of Textbook-Textbook-'Rimihim' was the major print material available and used in all six classrooms. It was the prime source of reading in all the classrooms. It was also the only visible, accessible and highly used print material by the children. Oral storytelling was happening occasionally in one of the classrooms. Kumar (2004) argued that textbook teaching is the minimal-compulsory activity happening in Indian schools. The textbook continues to have similar active presence in language periods. It was believed that children can learn only through textbooks.

Reading of the Story: Fragmented Experience- Teachers never read complete text in one go. They often read selected portion of the text, asked many questions, explained those lines and discussed difficult words. There was an underlying assumption as also shared by the teachers that children cannot read such lengthy texts in one go as given in the textbook. Hence, teachers simplified the text by breaking it into smaller portions. So, children never got to hear or read complete story/poem. They had to wait till next couple of days to know complete stories.

Focus of Reading- The focus was chiefly on two aspects. First was on accurate decoding words by identifying correct matra. As discussed earlier, teacher read selected part of the text. The follow up discussion was often about picking up words, looking at spelling, noticing the matra, identifying it and sounding out matra/words correctly. In fact, identifying matra, blending it with letters and pronouncing the blend correctly was the only reading strategy focused by teachers explicitly. Post reading tasks often were underlining a particular matra words and writing them in the notebooks. Therefore, children focused only on accurate sounding out the words correctly, instead of reading with meaning. Second aspect focused while reading a text was meaning of difficult words. Word meanings received

special attention. Teachers only selected the words worth discussing.

Role of Children during Reading- The children's actions in these classes can be categorized as: listen to teacher's words, answer teacher's questions, follow teachers/ better readers' read aloud (chorus reading by children) and write according to teacher's instructions. They were given opportunities of reading only through choral reading of the text. Independent reading opportunities were missing, even in the classroom where storybooks and other reading materials were present in visible form. There also, children did not get opportunities to read or explore those materials independently. Therefore, the agency of a child as a thinking being, as a capable reader was often missing.

Print Environment: Children's Literature, Student Engagement and Reading with Meaning

Environmental print is everyday print. The print environment mediates the literacy lives of many students. However, the presence of print environment in schools is not enough. Use of print environment is what makes it worth. This section provides description about print environment of the second grade classrooms.

Printenvironment in second grade class rooms were in the form of charts, displayed on the walls. Topics covered in the charts were: Kaam apne apne, Aakar, Mahino ke naam, Gilahari ki tasvir, Yatayat ke sadhan. The charts were far from children's reach. It was observed that children's literature was completely missing in two schools. The only book that children had to read was their textbook Rimjhim. Children's literature was present in one of the classrooms of school-1. The teacher used to narrate a story occasionally in that classroom. It was observed that she picked storybooks, read those herself and narrated stories. Children were rarely shown print and illustrations given in the storybooks.

Teacher often focused on telling or asking word meanings while telling the stories.

She selected all possible words to discuss that she found difficult. Following are some examples:

T- nanhe mane kya? Golmatol ka kya matlab hai? murgi ne jee bhar ke laad kiya laad matlab?

(T- Tiny means? What does round shaped mean? The hen loved her chick very much, loved means?)

Teaching spellings of the words was the most important activity, even during storytelling. There was constant shifting of the focus from storytelling to teaching spellings to telling word meanings. For instance, the teacher wrote the title of the story on the board and read it aloud. Then, she quickly shifted her focus and said:

Dekho bacho maine nanhe kaise likha hai. Na, n, h, e- nanhe. Yeh adha /n/ hai kyunki isme danda nahi hai. Yeh adha kyu hai?

S- Kyunki isme danda nahi hai.

T-Kaise likhoge shikar. Yeh kaun sa /sh/hai?

(See children, how I have spelled the word - nanhe. 'Na, n, h, e'-nanhe. The letter /n/ is half because it does not have a stroke. So, why is it half?

S- Because it does not have a stroke.

T- How will you spell the word shikar? Which /sh/ is this?)

One of the bases of selecting words was their spelling. If the teacher found the spelling complex, then she discussed those words.

To sum up, teacher focused on the spellings of the words and meaning of difficult words during the storytelling and discussed them just like she did with textbook stories. Teacher's focus kept shifting from storytelling to discussing spellings and *matra* to telling word meanings.

Beliefs about reading

Semi structured interviews with teachers helped to know about their underlying assumptions regarding reading, what teachers consider most important to be followed in classrooms in order to develop and enhance reading skills in children. Following are teachers' views about reading:

"Bina ruke ache se padhna pathan hai, bina atke padh rahe hain, purna viram pe ache se ruk raha hai."

"Bacha ache se pehchan karke shabd sahi se pronounce kar sak. Ye tabhi ayega jab akshar gyan hoga."

"Pathan, bache ke anusaar Rimjhim me kahaniya padhna hai."

"Pathan kisi cheej ke ko padhkar samajhna hai, apne ander inculcate karna hai."

"Pathan jaise path ki reading hai, pehle usse bacho ko samjhana ki hum lya padh rahe hain."

(Reading is reading without stopping, reading without halting, stopping at punctuations properly.

Reading is that the child should identify words and pronounce it correctly. This knowledge comes after practicing all letters and their sounds.

According to the child, reading is reading stories of Rimjhim textbook.

Reading is understanding what you read and inculcating the same.

Reading is reading the lesson where children are first explained about what we would be reading.)

above-mentioned views indicate teachers' understanding of reading which is closer to traditional approach to reading. For majority of teachers, reading is decoding, which is, reading is exact and accurate sounding of words as given in the text without any deviation. In this case, reading is considered as depending only on one language cue which is phonics. The contemporary reading theories like Whole Language Approach and Emergent Literacy Perspective, reading is considered as an integration of three language cuesphonics (letter-sound cues), syntax (words and sentence cues) and semantics (meaning cues). This view was absent in responses of teachers. In case of grade two, matra (vowel sound) and its symbol is considered the important basic aspect that children need to learn before they begin reading. Teachers mentioned that letter knowledge is given and strengthened in grade I. So, the focus is now on *matra* in grade two. Therefore, teachers worked hard and focused only on providing and strengthening this knowledge. This belief is manifested in practices like picking up isolated difficult words, identifying *matra*, blending it with letter, and finally sounding it correctly.

Teachers also talked about challenges faced by themselves while teaching reading like lack of parental support, absenteeism, children do not bring books and so on. Some interesting responses were:

(Matraye seekhne me samay lagaate hain. Likhte acha hain par likha hua padh nahi sakte.)

(They take time to learn matra.

They write well but cannot read what they write.)

Teachers believed that knowing *matra* is a prerequisite of learning to read. Those who struggle in identifying *matra* or who are still in the process of learning matra are considered poor readers. This is sequential approach towards reading and negates its holistic nature. The view that children write well but cannot read suggests that copying words or sentences from blackboard in notebooks is considered writing. Copying is considered as same as writing. Reading and writing are taken as two isolated skills and both are not connected in reading instructions.

Discussion

It is evident that reading process was traditional in nature in the second grade classrooms. The focus was mainly on correct application of knowledge of *matra*. Reading was mostly done in choral style or in round robin reading style in the classrooms. These styles are criticized by researchers like Allington (2013) for being less effective for two reasons. Firstly, a single child reads in

these styles and others are following along as their classmate reads aloud. So, all children do not get chance to engage in reading. Secondly, these styles produce lot of teacher interruptions during reading. Teachers interrupt every time a reader makes an error while reading. Thus, these styles foster the interruptive behavior and readers begin to read slowly.

Instructional emphasis on meaning making seemed incidental in the classrooms. Comprehension was not the focus. Teachers explaining the text, underlining and telling meaning of difficult words cannot be regarded as engaging in meaning making activities. Rather, children could not engage with meaning because there was no continuity in reading since they were guided to read text in pieces. Hence, the reading experiences were fragmented experiences. Explaining the text was the only time when learners experienced reading as a meaningful activity. However, this experience never stayed long with them because teachers often shifted learners' attention towards key words or how to read a word correctly by blending letter-sound correctly.

Learners did not get enough opportunities to engage in meaningful and extended conversation about a text. There was mainly one type of interaction pattern noticed, teacher-student type. Student-student type interaction pattern was missing. Knowing the meaning of new words of the story was another instructional emphasis. However, it is important to reflect on the issue whether

the meaning of the text can be accessed only through words. Research supports the view that reading alone can do the job of building a large vocabulary and that reading for meaning is more efficient than direct instruction for vocabulary development (Nagy, Herman, & Anderson, 1985).

Implications

The quality of reading instruction given in the early primary grades like second grade, where focus is not on meaning construction, is definitely a matter of concern. Sadly, teachers are preoccupied with traditional ways of teaching reading by using precise letter-identification and simplifying texts. They are either not aware of constructive view of literacy or confident as how to create meaningful reading environment. Collective understanding needs to be built that reading is much more than precise sequential identification. According to Sinha (2010) and Bahuguna (2016), such practices have a link with pre service training of teachers and its curriculum. The theoretical foundation of reading is missing in many of such programs. Teachers should be educated of wider understanding of literacy which fosters practices of meaningful and joyful reading. They should know the power of story-reading, using real books to read for enjoyment and setting up reading corners that include enjoyable, quality children's literature. There should be dedicated time every day for teachers to read aloud and discuss interesting books.

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