

Learning to Read in English in Standard One: Some Major Difficulties of National Primary School Pupils

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Bacaan Bahasa Inggeris lazimnya tidak diajar sebagai satu matapelajaran sekolah rendah di Malaysia tetapi diajar sebagai satu aktiviti kaedah mengajar Bahasa Inggeris. Oleh demikian seorang murid dalam darjah satu di Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan akan menghadapi beberapa masalah semasa ia mula belajar membaca dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Masalah-masalah utama tersebut adalah (1) penguasaan bahasa ibunda serentak dengan Bahasa Inggeris; (2) penguasaan mekanisme membaca; (3) kesesuaian kaedah mengajar guru; (4) kesesuaian alat membantu baca dan latihan bacaan; (5) jenis buku teks dan (6) persediaan murid untuk membaca.

Introduction

Reading is seldom taught as a subject in Malaysian primary schools but only as a necessary by-product in the teaching of English. This situation remains unchanged even when the New Primary School Curriculum was implemented in all primary schools in Malaysia in 1983. Reading as a subject is very important because it is still the major avenue by which an individual may become a life long learner (Jenkinson, 1973).

A pupil in a National Primary School learning to read in English for the first time may encounter many problems in the areas of language and language acquisition, reading process and the methodology of teaching him reading.

Language and Language Acquisitions

When a child enters Standard One in a primary school at the age of 6 years he has already acquired a working native language that is necessary to his needs. He has control of his phonological system (McCarthy, 1954; Templin, 1957) because by the age of four to five years, he has mastered the majority of his native language sounds (Ervin and Miller, 1963). The child's morphological development is also well developed (Berko, 1958; Ruddell, 1967). He has also control of his syntactics and is able to comprehend sentences, produce expanded and elaborated sentences. (Fraser, Belugi and Brown 1963; Brown and Frazer, 1964, Strikland 1962; Loban, 1963; Ruddell & Graves 1967; O'Donnel). In fact, a child's pre-school native language acquisition by the ages six to seven, may already prepare him to learn to read in his own native language.

In Malaysia a Malay pupil entering Standard One in the National School may be prepared to read in Bahasa Malaysia, the medium of instruction. He may, though, encounter some problems of standard and non-standard Bahasa Malaysia because the spoken Bahasa Malaysia at home may be full of slangs and restricted code, while the Bahasa Malaysia at school is formal. On the other hand a Chinese or Indian pupil entering the same National School, has greater problems. He may not have acquired the Bahasa Malaysia pre-requisites to learn to read in the medium of instruction. Six months later his problems are further complicated when he is introduced to read and learn the English language.

Since language acquisition is one of the pre-requisites for learning to read, the Malay, Chinese or Indian pupil may not be proficiently equipped in the English language to learn to read in English. Listening, understanding and speaking in the English language are the necessary pre-requisites to effective learning to read in the English language. The Malay, Chinese or Indian pupil has to hear and read sounds, words and syntactical structures of the English language with which he is not familiar. He may or may not be sufficiently exposed to the English language at home. Even if he is exposed to the English language at home, his level of the 'language maturity' in the English language may not be adequate enough for him to use it as a frame of reference to comprehend the aural and oral aspect of the English language necessary to learn to read the formal aspect of the written English language in school.

The English Language as a Subject

Since the English language is taught as a subject in all National Primary Schools with a time allocation of 240 minutes per week, (a) pupils may not have enough exposure to the English Language in school; (b) they need lots of aural and oral practice to master the English language; and (c) they require more time either to practice reading aloud in class or need to have silent reading practice.

Since the teaching of English starts six months later during the first year of primary schooling, Standard One pupils face time restriction to really master (a) the basics in the English language as well as, (b) to master the mechanics of initial reading in English.

Reading as part of the learning of the English Language

Since reading is seldom taught as a subject, but as a necessary tool to teach the English language, there may not be special times set apart for the teaching of reading from the teaching of the English language. Beginning readers need time to master the mechanics of reading and to do the pre-reading activities conducive to the learning of reading.

The Reading Process

Piaget's (1959) general theory of the development of logic in children can be applied to the child's learning of the written form of the language. In "The Language and Thought of the Child" Piaget's concept and description of ego-centric language and thought below the age of about seven or eight years is relevant to an understanding of the child's mode of thinking at typical beginning reading age in Standard One.

Vygotsky (1962) replicated and expanded Piaget's research on the relationship between children's thought and language but directed his research towards the problem of teaching Russian children the written form of their spoken language. This research has also implications why learning to read in Standard One is difficult for a Malaysian pupil. Vygotsky found that:

1. Our studies show that it is the **abstract** quality of written language that is the main stumbling block.
2. The child has little motivation to learn writing when we begin to teach it. He feels no need for it and has **only a vague idea of its usefulness**.

It is difficult for a Standard One pupil, whose ego-centric view of his environment and who is not ready for abstract ideas yet, to understand the reason or purpose of learning to read the written form of the English language, which is an artificial form of the natural spoken form. This confirms Reid's (1966) investigation which reports that for the beginners, reading

is a mysterious activity, to which they came with only the vaguest of expectancies. 'These children displayed a general lack of any specific expectancies of what reading was going to be like, of what the activity consisted in, of the purpose and the use of it'. Reid also found that these children had great difficulty in understanding the abstract technical terms such as, 'word', 'letter', 'sound' to explain about language.

It is necessary for a Standard One reading teacher to explain simply that reading written language is like listening to oral language when mummy reads a story aloud from a book. It is important for them to know the purpose of reading the written language or a book so that they can read their favourite stories by themselves when mummy is too busy to do so.

The next step for pupils to learn is the mechanics of reading from left to right in the English language as they may not know how it is done and how to progress reading from line to line. Some Chinese pupils may have seen their parents reading the Chinese (Mandarin) newspaper from top to bottom and right to left of the page. The Malay pupils may have seen Jawi (Arabic script) newspaper which requires reading from right to left. The Indian pupils whose parents read the Tamil newspaper may know that reading Tamil is from right to left of the page. Most teachers seem to assume that pupils know how to use the eye movements progression correctly when reading the English language text.

It is very important for pupils to associate with the 'written word the meaning that has been associated with the spoken word'. (Dechant, 1970). For example the pupils can be taught that this group of letters "C-A-T" says 'cat' and means the same as the pussy 'cat' they have at home. Dechant stresses the importance of making the pupils pay 'close attention to the word' and 'to make a proper association'. Pupils should understand that it is important to associate the sound with the 'printed symbol' and also to understand the meaning of the 'printed sound'.

How the initial reading process takes place in a reader is still not fully understood as reading is 'a case of complex human learning'. (Barr, 1974). Most theories of how children learn to read are based from theories of (a) competent reading process researched by Goodman, 1964; Gough 1972, Vanezky and Calfee, 1970; (b) behavioral analysis of the reading tasks of Coleman, 1970; Gagne, 1970; Samuels, 1973, (c) extensions from formulations of language acquisition based on linguistic theory by Brown 1970, Ryan and Semmel, 1969.

These formulations are of little help to understand the process used by beginning readers and Barr (1974) recommends observing children as they learn to read. The method employed by pupils to learn to read is dictated by the teaching instructions employed and the reading texts, which chooses the reading method to project. In a Malaysian Primary School, which of the reading method is chosen by a teacher to teach initial reading?

The Methods of Teaching Reading

Both research and experience have shown that there is no single right method to teach reading. The process vary according to (a) standard level, (b) material or text presented; (c) the purposes of the reader; and (d) different teachers teach in the methods they believe in. This implies that in a crowded standard one class, the Malaysian teacher has no time to tailor reading methods to suit individual pupil. Chall (1967) noted that teachers using the supplied texts of a particular design seldom supplemented them with outside materials.

The following are the main methods of teaching reading explained briefly.

- (1) **The alphabetic method**, which is familiarity with the forms and names of letters, for example, teaching 'Kuk - a - tuk' for 'cat'. Smith (1977) says that children might find it difficult to detect their units in speech.

- (2) **The phonic method**, where sounds of letters are substituted for letter names. It involved identifying letters or letter groups with the appropriate sound, and blending the sounds to pronounce the written word, for example: Ch/ai/r for 'chair'; but there is the danger that the pupil may divide the word 'chair' into c/h/a/i/r and may not be able to combine the letters into a whole word.
- (3) **The 'whole-word' or 'look-and-say' method** where configuration clues, the shape and length of the word are used to recognise words and to get meaning from the word immediately, for example: bat and dog. The danger lies in (a) lots of pupils lining up to be told the new word; (b) not looking closely at the beginning letter and guessing from the configuration clues, for example, rat for cat or vice-versa; and (c) the restricted vocabulary control of words may not encourage the pupil to decode new words on his own, as he is not taught how to decipher unfamiliar words.
- (4) **The sentence-method** is an extension of the whole-word method but it emphasizes the importance of comprehension by using the sentence instead of the word as the unit of meaning. It attaches less importance to letter-names or sounds, and context is used to recognise unfamiliar words as reading material is based on children's interest and spoken vocabulary.
- (5) **The 'language experience' method** stresses experience as a basis for learning. The pupils are encouraged to talk about their experiences, which are written down to be used as reading materials. The teacher edits the oral expressions and the pupils write out their experiences into individual news books or class-books, which are illustrated by drawings. This approach teaches at various stages, emphasis on sentences, words, letters and letter-sound correspondence. It takes into account Piaget's ego-centric language at this stage. It is a balanced program but is not an easy one to use in a large class, as the teacher must have a record of each pupil's vocabulary growth and diagnosis of their progress in phonic knowledge. "It has little in the way of training in visual and auditory ability built into it. It is very dependent upon children attaching importance to writing and reading as valid means of expression, in comparison to writing and reading as valid means of expression, in comparison say with painting, 'play' and other forms of free activity." (Goodacre, 1971).
- (6) **The 'individualized reading' method** . The teaching of reading is based on books that have been selected by the pupil rather than the teacher. This method provided for individual instruction in reading based on the type of book selected. It develops independent study activities and reading skills are taught to the pupil's needs.

The teacher teaching reading in Standard One to a large class may not be able to cope with (a) pupils' differing reading abilities; (b) time constraint for teaching; (c) managing the large class and (d) selecting the best method of teaching reading to suit each individual pupil. The teacher may probably select the reading method he is most familiar with to teach the whole class, regardless of whether each slow pupil is able to learn from this method.

Other Factors

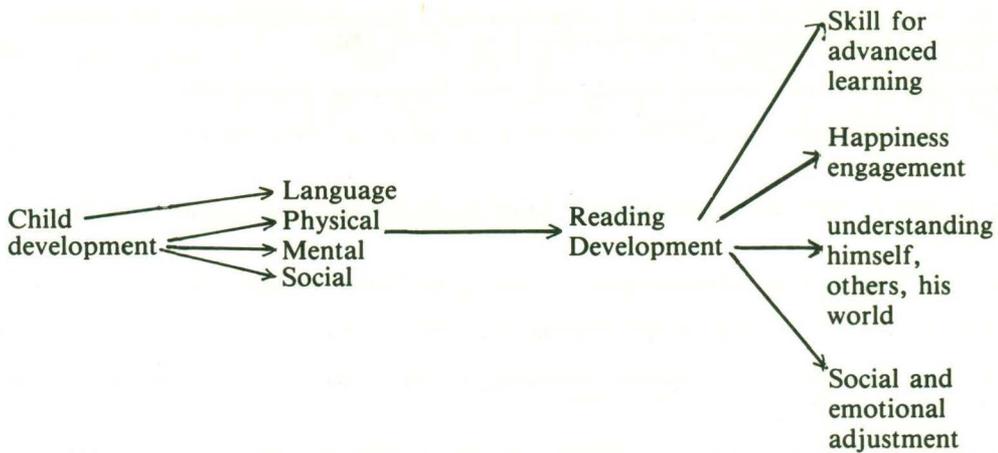
Whether a pupil in Standard One learns to read depends on a lot of other factors as reading is "an integral part of the child's development," which is dependent on 'his physical growth, language development, his general mental development, and his social development. These relationships may be expressed schematically as shown in the following diagram by Strang, 1967.

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(Diagram from Strang, 1967)

Unless a Standard One pupil is physically, mentally, socially and emotionally ready at this stage, he will find learning to read difficult, incomprehensible and boring.

Conclusion

Learning to read in English in Standard One poses a great problem to a pupil in a National Primary School. He encounters problems in (1) the language and language acquisitions not only in his native tongue but also in the target language, which is English; (2) the mastery of reading mechanics, which often presents a mystery to a beginner; (3) the choice of the reading method employed by his teacher, which may not suit him at all; (4) the type of help in reading aids and exercises to help him master reading at home and in school; (5) the type of textbooks used in school to help him master reading easily and with great interest; and (6) his reading readiness, which depends on his physical, mental, social and emotional growth and development up to a stage to facilitate his ability to learn to read.

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