

The Story of Independent Readers in Class I

P. K. Jayaraj

Introduction

“Shhhh...! Do not disturb. The First Graders are being transported to the ecstatic world of reading!”



I have often thought of hanging a board with this message on the door of a classroom. The usual scene in any classroom may have children reading often especially when the art of reading is newly acquired and the excitement of having mastered this skill shows on their faces. It is interesting to look at their intense expressions. Sometimes they read aloud, muttering under their breath, or glance at an attractive picture with their probing eyes. One wonders—are they trying

to find in the text what they are looking at in the picture, or are they simply trying to reinforce what they have read with the help of the picture? I do not have a clue!

They insist on books with attractive pictures. In fact, they look at the pictures first and start reading only after they have had a good look at them. With some books they start with a bang. However, often they do not make much headway and get stuck, failing to make sense

of what they are reading. They feel they have bitten off more than they can chew. Then they come running to the teacher. “Miss, please read this for me!” they plead. They pester the teacher till she reads it out to them.

It turns out, and I learnt that only later, that the teacher gives them challenging books on purpose. She does not want all the readings to be a cakewalk for the children and therefore the books are not meant to be all that easy! The teacher believes that the children ought to go to grown-ups for help when they find the going tough. That is the only way for them to go up to the next level in reading.

The Learning Story

The following learning story is an example of a teacher's persistent attempt to make the learners of Class I independent readers. She teaches in a rural government upper primary (UP) school, GUPS Kanathur, Kasaragod district, in Kerala. Her attempts ultimately culminated into a comprehensive reading programme for Class I. Not only did the programme promote genuine interest in reading among the Class I learners, it also enhanced their literacy skills and confidence.

Overview

Ms. Santha¹ of Kanathur Government Upper Primary school stated:

The training I attended in 2012-2013 was really an eye-opener. The programme DISA, developed by DIET Kasaragod, intended to be used in Class I, had specific processes for promoting early reading as a habit among the students. I also understood that if children acquire reading skills very

early, it would make them independent learners of all subjects. As an elementary teacher from a remote school, I decided to implement the insights derived from DISA into my teaching-learning processes.

This conviction of Ms. Santha led to the genesis of the reading programme to develop Class I learners into independent readers of Malayalam. The teacher further believed that by implementing this programme in her class, every learner in her classroom would be able to develop:

- reading skills
- writing skills
- listening and speaking skills
- confidence in learning.

The Context: The School and the Learners

GUPS Kanathur in Kasaragod district is a small school under the Muliya Panchayath. It has 10 divisions, 11 teachers and 200 students. The learners hail from different communities such as the upper class, other backward communities and scheduled castes and tribes. Kanathur is situated inside the government reserve forest. People of this area are basically farmers and agricultural labourers. Most pupils are second or third generation learners. Malayalam is the mother tongue of most of the people in the area. However, people belonging to the scheduled tribes speak Tulu at home. The parents wish to give quality education to their children. People belonging to the higher social strata have access to newspapers and TV. There is a library in the village but students have no access to it.

People by and large seem to believe that it is the duty of the school to cultivate the habit of reading among the pupils. So the students are

generally not in the habit of reading books at home. Hence, school is the only place where they get the opportunity to read books. The people of Kanathur expect the school to provide good education to their children.

The Process: Good Practice in Detail

Ms. Santha visualized, planned and implemented a number of strategies to transform her learners into good readers. In the first phase of the process, she introduced the students of Class I to the world of books.

Phase 1: Introducing students to the world of books

The teacher planned and implemented several strategies during the month of June. As a result of these processes, the students became very confident in picture reading and retelling stories with the help of pictures. These strategies included the following:

- Story telling with appropriate gestures and body language
- Reading stories from illustrated story books, thereby enabling the learners to retell the story with the help of pictures
- Compiling classroom generated texts, pictures and students' writings into big books
- Enabling learners to read books by asking relevant questions
- Introducing and familiarizing the learners with the different parts of a book—title, name of the author, cover pages, inner pages and pictures
- Re-reading the books in different ways—reading out to the whole class, reading out to groups and reading out to individual students

Phase 2: Revealing the world of letters to the learners

Some of the strategies used in the first phase continued in Phase 2 as well. Additionally, in the second phase the teacher decided to integrate books that were relevant to the themes and concepts given in the Class I text book. For example, the first unit in the Malayalam text book was about rain. The teacher identified seven books related to rain that were appropriate for the level of the learners. However, she could get only four books from the school library. So she bought some of the books and collected the remaining from other teachers and friends. Essentially, the teacher's focus during the second phase was to enable the children to read books and make meaning out of them. The classroom processes and strategies used in the second phase were:

- Reading pictures and making predictions about the content/story of the book
- Reading by correlating the words and pictures
- Modelling different reading strategies, such as asking questions, making tone variations, making children respond through prediction, speaking like a character, etc.
- Enabling the learners to do different tasks based on reading, such as drawing and labelling, drawing pictures and making a collage, making word and sentence webs, role-playing incidents and characters, retelling a story and continuing the story from where it ended, etc.
- Retelling and rewriting the stories in any way that the students wanted
- Compiling students' compositions (words, sentences and pictures) into big books
- Creating a reading corner in the class

During this stage, the learners acquired the ability to read words, phrases, sentences and simple texts. They also learnt to respond to what they were reading by drawing pictures, speaking, writing and performing individually as well as in groups.

Phase 3: Making learners independent readers

The strategies used in phases 1 and 2 continued during this phase too. In addition to that, the teacher used some more strategies for reading, comprehending and responding to the text. She used books with pictures that were appropriate to the level of the learners and of interest to them. She also included a few books that were just a little above the learners' level and therefore a bit challenging. The books included stories, small plays, small poems, descriptions, biographies and autobiographies. The teacher made note of the different reading styles of the learners. Some of them liked to read loudly, some of them silently. One of the students in particular, Gopika, had “a Gopika style” of reading. Gopika liked to cover the parts of the page that she was not reading. There were some learners who liked to look at the pictures before commencing reading. Some learners began reading in grand style, but after some time they found it very difficult to continue because the book was beyond their level. They would then go to the teacher and request her to read the book for them.

The following are some of the strategies used by the teacher in this phase:

- Enabling learners to retell the story in the form of a summary
- Making learners identify the characters and their features
- Making learners identify the character

they liked the best and asking them to give reasons for their choice

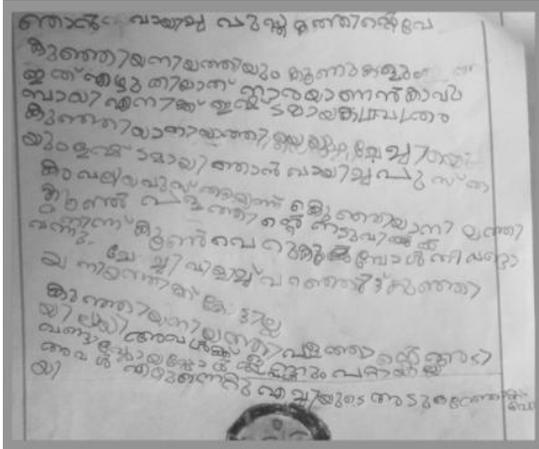
- Getting the class to perform the story as a drama in groups and the class as a whole
- Writing about the story
- Presenting book reviews in front of the class
- Compiling the learners' writings into big books

The Changes after the Strategies

Towards the end of the academic year, the students of Class I had become independent readers of Malayalam. They were also able to do the following:

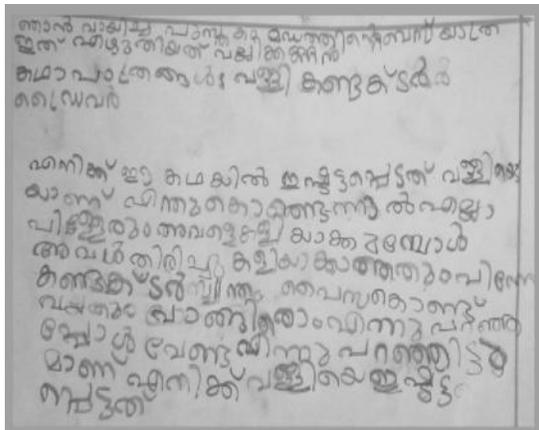
- Ask and answer questions on the key details of a text (with prompting and support)
- Retell stories and understand the central message of the text (with prompting and support)
- Describe characters, settings and major events in the story
- Identify words and phrases in the story and predict their meaning
- Differentiate between different types of books such as story books and books that give information
- Identify who is telling the story at various points in the text
- Use illustrations and details from a story to describe characters and settings
- Identify the reasons why they liked or supported a character
- Compare and contrast the experiences of the characters in stories
- Read prose and poems of appropriate complexity for Class I (with prompting and support)

The following are some of the samples of the book reviews written by the students in Malayalam. Gopika even added a note of appreciation.



Here, Gopika has retold Tolstoy's “Little Sister and Friends”. She has summarized the story in a few sentences, written the name of the book and a little bit about the characters in the story. What is noteworthy is that she has not made any grammatical errors in her writing.

Below is a note written by Athulya. She has named the book and the characters in it. She has also written that she likes the central character of the story, Valli, very much. She likes Valli because Valli is a strong character and does not want the help of the conductor. This is a very good character study indeed!



Going through the writings of children, it is clear that they had achieved the following by the end of the three phases:

- improvement in their vocabulary.
- ability to write a brief summary of what they had read.
- ability to analyse the incidents and the characters.
- ability to identify which character they liked and why.

Furthermore, students developed the ability to write the main ideas of a story as well as the supporting details. They also improved their handwriting and the mechanics of writing such as use of full stops, commas, etc. They acquired better understanding of grammar and usage too.

How the Change Took Place

While Ms. Santha independently developed a programme of action, she also had the whole-hearted support of the School Resource Group (SRG) and other teachers. All the teachers helped her in arranging the reading corner and collecting and displaying the books in the class. The teacher acquired a lot of conceptual clarity in the classroom processes during the planning. The help rendered by Mr. M. M. Surendran, one of the teachers in the school, was invaluable in planning the lesson and documenting the students' responses. He also demonstrated a very good example of peer mentoring. He was able to help by offering the following:

- Academic support for planning the classroom processes
- Documenting the main processes the teacher had used on the school blog
- Periodic assessment of the processes and mid-course corrections

- Motivating other teachers to take up similar programmes in their classes.

In the Class PTA meeting, the parents expressed their happiness that their children had become independent readers. They added that their children showed increased interest in reading at home. Some parents even bought books for their children. One parent donated a table to the reading corner to display books. The teacher helped the students present their newly-acquired skills such as story-telling, dramatization, reading aloud, etc. in front of the parents in the meeting.

The story of Ms. Santha and her students does not end here.

These students are now in Class II and Ms. Santha is still with them as their class teacher. She has already created a reading corner in the class and has started distributing books with interesting pictures and stories for the kids. She says, “I am an ordinary teacher. The training I got, the support I received from my colleagues and the expectations of the students' parents enabled me to undertake this programme.”

Assessment: The Very Heart of Teaching and Learning

This account of one teacher's classroom practice shows how assessment is integral to all areas of the curriculum and teaching-learning process. In this example, the assessment process provided the teacher with all the information she needed to make important decisions about the teaching-learning process—selecting curriculum objectives, identifying appropriate teaching methodologies, designing learning activities, choosing suitable resources, differentiating learning, and giving feedback to children on

how they were doing. These everyday activities place assessment at the very heart of teaching and learning. It is therefore part of what the teacher does on a daily basis in his/her classroom.

What is the purpose of assessment?

Assessment is about building a picture of a child's progress and/or achievement in learning, across the school curriculum over a period of time. Information about *how* the child learns (the learning process) as well as *what* the child learns (the products of learning) shapes this picture. The teacher uses this information to identify and celebrate the child's current learning, and to provide him/her with appropriate support for future learning.

What does assessment involve?

For the teacher, assessment involves gathering information to understand better how each child is progressing at school and using that information to further the child's learning. Assessment therefore goes far beyond just testing. It concerns the daily interactions between the teacher and each child that includes moment-by-moment conversations, observations and actions. Assessment is the process of *gathering, recording, interpreting, using, and reporting* information about a child's progress and achievement in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes. These aforementioned tasks are performed even when the teacher is questioning and listening to children, observing children working on a task, or using the results of a weekly test to inform his/her own teaching and learning. These activities can happen within a few seconds or, in contrast, over a period of days or weeks

depending on the purpose of the assessment and the methods used. The information gathered enriches the teacher's understanding both of what and how the child learns. The teacher can use that information to plan learning experiences based on objectives from the curriculum, and bearing in mind the child's previous learning. Through assessment, the teacher can construct a comprehensive picture of the short-term and long-term needs of the child and plan future work accordingly. Using assessment information in this manner, the teacher can support and extend the child's learning.

Endnotes

¹ Ms. Santha teaches Malayalam, Maths, EVS and English of Class I of Govt Upper Primary school, Kanathur, Kasaragod, Kerala. She uses an integrated approach in teaching first graders.

P. K. Jayaraj currently works as State Programme Officer, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. He was formerly the Director of State Institute of English, Kerala and Faculty of English Language Teaching at Regional Institute of English, South India, Bangalore. He participated in the English Language Fellow Programme in Washington, D.C, USA.

pkjajarajs@gmail.com