

Literature in the Reading Classroom: Some Reflections

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Abstract

Reading is one of the most important components of language learning. It is also the most essential skill for students in order to perform effectively in different subject areas in school. However, young children can develop an interest in reading only if they have access to interesting, meaningful and age-appropriate books. Appropriate use of children's literature by the teachers can work wonders as it promotes active and engaged reading. In the present paper, I will discuss the criteria for selecting children's literature for early readers as well as the strategies for teaching how to read with the help of this literature.

Key words: Reading, Engaged reader, Authentic children's literature, Response

Introduction

Reading is one of the important components of language learning in schools. It is important to be a competent reader not only to learn the language, but also because reading skills add to the competency of the students in other subject areas as well. Thus, reading can alter the whole schooling experience of a student. The word reading stands for reading meaningfully and not merely sounding out or decoding the written text. For young children, it is very important that the process of learning to read be pleasurable and enjoyable. However, young children can develop an interest in reading only if they have access to interesting, meaningful and age-appropriate books. Books which are somewhat predictable and have a familiar context and vocabulary are especially helpful in promoting active and engaged reading. In fact, if children are given the right exposure in the initial classes, not only will they develop good language skills, but their critical and imaginative thinking will also mature. A rich collection of children's literature in a classroom or in a library of the school can work wonders to make reading interesting and enjoyable for children. Unfortunately, not all

books make for good classroom reading, and so it becomes imperative for the elementary grade teachers to take certain parameters into consideration while choosing literature for children. The correct books, combined with appropriate teaching learning strategies will help to bring books and children close to each other. In light of this discussion, I will first look at the criteria for selecting authentic literature for children. This will be followed by a study of some teaching learning strategies that the teachers can use to create opportunities for meaningful engagement between the children and the literary text.

Criteria for Selecting Authentic Children's Literature

1. The reading should be enjoyable, and without any overt teaching or moralizing.

Reading literature should first and foremost be enjoyable for children, i.e. the reader should get pleasure while reading the literature (Purves, 1972). Purves further explains that pleasure is not the same as laughter, but is a sense of appreciation by the reader that whatever has been written

is as it should be. Rosenblatt (1976) argues that literature is a medium of exploration for the reader. It can help readers to explore their own nature, become aware of their thoughts and feelings, and develop a view point on various issues. One can find such books with publishers such as NBT, CBT, Tulika, Eklavya, and Katha. Story books from these publications are based on themes such as friendship, children's dreams, family, childhood fears, bravery, and so on. The stories are written from a child's perspective and are not written with a view to just teach moral lessons.

2. The text should be written from a child's perspective.

Children's literature should not depict the stereotypical idea of a child's world, which is sanitized and without the internal struggles and contradictions that children actually face in their daily lives. Children are a part of society and they live amidst all the social realities; moreover these realities are complex and have their own contradictions and struggles. They have their fears, inhibitions and constraints. They also face issues such as poverty, exploitation, death and discrimination at the levels of gender, caste, class, religion, etc. Hence it is important that these concerns be represented in their literature (Sinha, 2005). This will enable the children to be informed about such issues and develop a view point regarding them.

In children's literature, the central character is often the same age as the reader, but this may not be the case every time, and it is certainly not a necessary component for the story to be relevant to the reader. Also, it is not essential for the story to revolve around a world of fantasy, where there is one hero who solves all the problems and the story ends on a happy note. Instead, it is more

important that the child should be able to relate to the issues raised in the story in some way (Kumar, in *Shiksha Vimarsh*, 2005).

3. The text should represent diversity and diverse perspectives.

It is very essential that children's literature represents the diversity which exists in society and the world at large. Diversity in terms of culture, language, caste, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and differently-abled people are important elements that can make children's literature beautiful and rich. According to Sinha (2005), in a society which is full of diversity, it is essential to be familiar with different groups of people, and to establish a relationship with them; and literature can be the medium that facilitates this familiarity.

4. The text should include different genres of literature.

It is essential for children to be exposed to different genres of children's literature. Not only does this develop their interest in reading, but it also exposes them to diverse ways of thinking and expression. In addition, it enables children to develop literary understanding and an interest in reading. When they are exposed to a range of literary genres, they can choose for themselves the stories they want to read. For instance, some children may be interested in folktales, and others in science fiction. When the children are given the freedom to choose what they want to read, they are more likely to engage in reading. It is therefore the responsibility of the teacher to identify the reading interest of the students and make provision for books accordingly. Genres can range from traditional literature (folk tales, fables, animal talking stories, etc.), to poetry, picture books, comic books, realistic fiction, historical and science fiction.

5. The text must have original and varied themes.

Originality in themes, topics, situations and characters enhance the quality of a literary text. When children are exposed to original ideas through literature, the possibility of expansion of their thinking horizons also increases. This happens because a good literature engages the reader with itself at different levels. Themes which are related to different social realm as I have mentioned earlier, invites the reader to stretch their mind and think reflectively. Therefore, it is essential that the collection of literature for children should cover the themes ranging from fantasy to various social realities. In fact, good literature has a balance of literary elements such as genre, plot, language, characters, style, theme, and illustrations. All these elements together make the text a satisfying whole.

To conclude this section it can be said that in a classroom it is very crucial for the teacher to evaluate the children's literature from various dimensions. It is imperative to consider that the details given in the story should give a sense reality. Language spoken by the characters, representation of cultural, social, religious, gender and other related aspects should have genuineness to which the reader can easily relate to. Presence of these aspects make any children literature an authentic unit.

So far, I have discussed the criteria on the basis of which one can decide the authenticity of literature while collecting books for children. Now I will discuss some of the strategies through which a teacher can bring children and books close to each other so that children can meaningfully engage with the text.

Strategies to Bring Literature and Students Close to Each Other

1. Space for talking about the literary text

In a literature classroom, it is imperative that the teacher should provide space for the children to express their feelings and ideas with regard to the text they have read. The purpose of using literature while teaching is to strengthen language, develop patience through listening, develop imagination, enhance critical thinking and develop an understanding about human behaviour (Kumar in *Shikha Vimarsh*, 2005; NCERT 2005; Rosenblatt, 1976). It is therefore important that children should talk and share their responses to the text with each other. The teacher can pose open-ended questions to the students about the story to create a space for sharing their responses. A few examples of such questions are:

- What do you think about the main protagonist of the story?
- Which character of the story did you like or dislike?
- Do you agree with the representation of gender in the story? What do you have to say about the way the girl rescued her brother from the strange creatures? Do you think a girl can do such things?
- Which part of the story can you relate to?

2. Read aloud sessions

Simultaneously reading stories aloud from a story book and showing the written text and illustrations can be crucial for the young readers from the point of view learning to read. The teacher must however use books that have a large font size as well as illustrations for such read aloud sessions, as this ensures better visibility of the book. Although there are many such books available in the market, for example

Khichdi from Eklavya Publication, the teachers can make big books of their own. Read-aloud sessions are a very powerful way to bring children and books together in a pleasurable setting. In read-aloud sessions teacher reads for the children. The teacher ensures that the written text is visible to all the children. When the teacher reads the story book for the children by showing them the text of the book the children get an exposure to the print in a meaningful and an interesting context.

Consistent read aloud helps the teacher to achieve two important goals of language teaching. First and foremost, they create an interest in reading amongst early learners. This happens because the teacher reads the story with such a pace that depicts the mood and emotion of the story. S(he)also takes care of incorporating adequate intonations, expressions and voice modulations while reading the story. In this way these sessions support children's literary and literacy development inviting children to share their views on different aspects of the story is also one of the key features of read aloud session. Such literary conversations help the children to understand that their views regarding the story are also very important and can be shared in the classroom, which is one of the important objectives of teaching literature (Rosenblatt, 1976).

Secondly, while reading story for the children the teacher also draws their attention towards her/his change in tone while reading punctuations, directionality of the print, relationship between the illustration and the print written along it, various styles of opening and closing of story, and so on. And therefore we can say that read aloud

sessions introduce and develop an understanding of various writing conventions and the function of the print.

3. Response journals

Response journals are personal notebooks in which students write informal comments about the stories they are reading. The teacher can also ask the students to write about their feelings and reactions to the characters, settings, plots and other aspects of the story in their journal. This gives the students an opportunity to think and reflect about the story. The teacher can give a written feedback in the response journal, and in this way a dialogue can be maintained between the teacher and the students.

Response journals help to enhance the comprehension skills of the learners as it encourages them to make connections between the text, themselves and the world. Learners can question, infer, summarize the content of the story, engage themselves with it, and express personal responses. Rosenblatt (1976) says that children must be given lots of opportunities for aesthetic responses to literature. These are responses in which the reader draws on his/her personal experience to shape the meaning of the text, and so the meaning becomes more personal for the reader.

4. Story mapping or story web

Story mapping is a method in which a teacher uses a specific kind of framework or map related to the story to guide the discussion and develop a clear understanding of the structure of the narrative discourse. A story map generally revolves around the basic plot of the story. For example, a basic story map can ask about the beginning, middle, and end of the story; it could also relate to the main problem, the characters and solution to the

problem in the story. Story-mapping helps the readers to focus on the important parts of the story. By sharing their story maps amongst themselves, students can deepen their understanding of the structure of the story. Figure 1 illustrates a basic story map based on the story “*Haati aur Bhavre kee Dosti*”, a CBT publication.

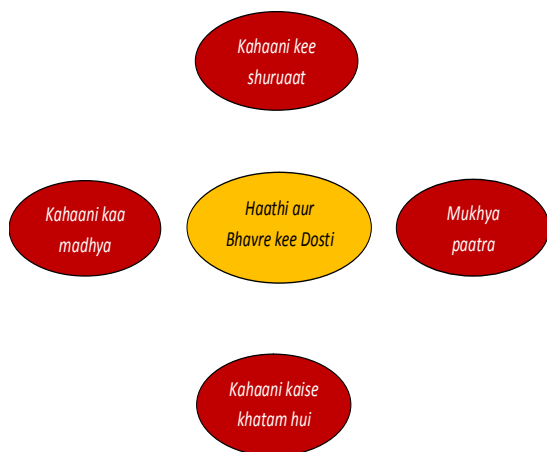


Figure 1. Story Map

Note: A worksheet can be developed within the story map by giving adequate space for writing responses about the story.

5. Class library and reading corner

Creating a pleasurable setting in the class for children’s literature also attracts children towards books. In fact, this is one way in which a teacher can bring books closer to children. I have observed during my school visits for classroom observations that in elementary classrooms, when books are prominently displayed in a class, students are always eager to touch, see and feel the books. They are so enthusiastic about wanting to read the books that they even use their recess period for reading. Interns also used children’s literature as a positive reinforcement for the children to make them

accomplish other tasks. For example, if in a classroom some of the children show interest in reading over accomplishing a maths activity, then the teacher can offer the child to take any book of his or her choice after finishing the task. These kinds of options given to the children actually expedite their speed of finishing their work. This is the power of children’s literature; it can generate a natural zeal for reading amongst children who are often considered as reluctant readers in our government schools (Sah, 2009).

6. Story board

In order to develop an interest in reading, it is essential that children should be surrounded by literature in a literature rich classroom. Developing a story board is an effective idea to push the reading habit amongst students. Story boards can be developed in various ways. One way can be to put a single story on a board. The story can be written in a big font size and can be accompanied by prominent illustrations. The idea behind this is that children can read the story at any time and any number of times, even if they do not have access to the book. They can also share their responses to the story with their friends while doing this they can defend their view points or arguments by referring the story or illustrations depicted on the board. Another way of developing the story board can be to put up an interesting part of the story to generate curiosity. At the end of the story the teacher can write, “What happens next? If you want to know, then read this story book from your reading corner!” By inciting their curiosity in this manner, the teacher can motivate the children to read stories, even with all their limitations.

Conclusion

It is clear that literature plays an important role in developing critical and imaginative thinking as well as developing language skills amongst children, especially in their early years of schooling. However, it will be inappropriate to assume that children can be given any thing in the name of the children's literature. Therefore, it is important to choose the books carefully and wisely. Along with this, meaningful teaching-learning activities are also required to engage children with the text. In this whole process, the teacher has an important role to play. The teacher has to ensure that children have access to interesting, diverse and enjoyable books that encourage them to express and share their responses with each other without any hesitation. Creating a literature rich classroom can help in fulfilling one of the objectives of the National Curriculum Framework, 2005 of developing reading culture amongst the children and making them lifelong readers.

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