Teaching Early Literacy In Indian Languages

Maxine Berntsen

When a child enters school at the age of five or six, she already has a basic grasp of her first language. She has a vocabulary of at least 4,000 words, and a mastery of basic grammar. This means she can interact with others and carry on a conversation. Moreover, she has in her head a model of the world that organizes and structures the life experience that she has had up to this point.

Once she goes to school, her major task for the first three years is to become literate, that is, to learn to read and write what she already knows on an oral basis. In the process of becoming literate, the child also takes some of the first steps in developing a reflective awareness of what she has hitherto known only on an unconscious level.

Western Debate on Teaching of Early Literacy

In western countries particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, the method of teaching early literacy has long been a matter of intense debate. Traditionally, children were taught by the phonic method in which the emphasis was on mastering decoding - that is, learning the sound-letter correspondences. In the 1930s, a new method was adopted, which started children on learning a basic vocabulary of about 50 words by whole-word recognition ('sight method'). This method came under attack in 1955 with the publication of Rudolf Flesch's Why Johnny Can't Read. Flesch argued that the sight method had produced a generation of learners who could neither read nor spell. Since then there has been a great deal of experimentation and intense debate on reading methodology, with some experts advocating the systematic teaching of phonics and others the 'whole language approach' which argues that children learn to read and write by active engagement with meaningful texts. For some time the debate became so bitter that it was referred to as the 'Reading Wars'. In some cases the debate has had political overtones, with conservatives advocating the teaching of phonics.

Lack of Debate in India

In India, on the other hand, there has been little debate and experimentation on the methods of teaching early reading. At times there has been a tendency to accept uncritically the received wisdom from the West - often with a considerable time-lag.

In what little discussion there is, it is seldom taken into account that there is a crucial difference between the problems of teaching early reading in English on the one hand, and in the majority of Indian languages on the other. English spelling is chaotic because the spelling system was established long ago. This meant that the pronunciation of the words went on changing while the spelling remained constant. As a result, a given letter of the alphabet (especially a vowel) can be pronounced in several ways, and a given sound can be represented by several different letters. In short, there is a poor fit between sounds and letters.

Sound-letter Fit in Indian languages

The situation in Indian languages is quite different. To take Marathi as an example, barring a few exceptions, each character of the Devanagari script is to be pronounced in only one way, and each sound can be represented by only one character. On the face of it, therefore, learning to read an Indian language should be a far simpler task than learning to read English.

The traditional method of teaching reading in India focused on this correspondence of character and sound. Students memorized and learned to recognize the basic characters of the Devanagari script, the *mulakshare* in the traditional order, an order brilliantly laid down by the ancient grammarians, who had analysed the place and manner of articulation of each sound. Along with each character, the child memorized a word starting with that character - the Indian language equivalent of 'a for apple.' After learning the *mulakshare* the child learned the *barakhadi* in which

an abbreviated vowel sign (along with the *anusvar* and *visarga*) is added to each consonant character. After that the learner turned to the symbols for the conjunct consonants (*jodakshare*), perhaps the one place where the script lacks transparency. Once a child had learned the code, she was introduced to words, sentences and longer texts in the form of stories or poems.

This is a very logical, systematic method and millions of Indians have learned to read in this way. However, it has its drawbacks, especially in a classroom situation where many children are first-generation school goers. There may be a considerable time period before the child is actually able to read meaningful material. Thus the process of acquiring decoding skills requires a good deal of application and perseverance. For this reason, the method probably works best in a situation where the home atmosphere is supportive of learning and study.

Common sense suggests that in teaching early literacy in India we should take advantage of the near-perfect fit of pronunciation and script. This means teaching letter recognition - phonics, if you will. But at the same time we can incorporate in our approach an opportunity for the child to be introduced to meaningful and emotionally appealing texts. This is what I have tried to do in developing the Pragat Shikshan Sanstha (PSS) approach to reading.

The PSS Approach

The approach I developed in 1987 is by no means radical or revolutionary. It is probably very much like what successful teachers have been doing for years. It has three parts:

1. A systematic teaching of sound-character correspondences (decoding)

2. Writing down experiences narrated by the children and then helping them to read the written account (organic reading / language experience approach)

3. Reading of additional material stories, poems, etc.

Decoding: The second and third parts, organic reading and reading of additional material, are perhaps self-explanatory, and their content will, of course, vary from time to time. The constant core of the PSS method is the decoding part, for which we have written a small primer titled, *Apan Vacu Ya* ('Let's Read'). If there are any special insights in my approach, they are perhaps in this area of decoding.

First of all, I realized that in preparing children to read, too little attention is given to the development of phonemic consciousness. As a child learns to speak, she unconsciously acquires the phonemes of the language. Before she can learn to read, this unconscious knowledge must become conscious. Only then does it make sense to say, for example, "This sign represents the sound 'm'."

Once children are aware that their speech consists of sound units, we can teach the graphic shapes of letters (characters), words and sentences. Among experts there is disagreement as to which of these should be taught first. What I have done is start with three letters, two vowel signs, and one word for sight recognition: *ai* - 'mother.' Then, in the same lesson, I have introduced all the words that can be made from these letters, and all the sentences that can be made from the words.

In selecting the letters to be taught, I used Sylvia Ashton Warner's insight that we should begin with words that are emotionally charged for the child. Though I made no attempt to elicit a key vocabulary for each child, I started with the words referring to the child, her mother, and her mother's brother. The words selected were: *ha/hi* 'this'; *mi* 'i'; *majha/majhi* 'my'; *ai* 'mother'; *mama* 'maternal uncle'; *mami* 'maternal uncle's wife.'

In order to use these words it was necessary to introduce some of the abbreviated vowel signs (*matras*) from the outset. This first lesson introduced the *kana* (*aa ki matra*) and the *velanti* (*ii ki matra*). By introducing two or three of these signs in each lesson, we immediately open up the number of words the child can read. After only five or six lessons the child is ready to read a short poem or connected story (at the beginning, only a few sentences long).

Role of the Teacher

Ultimately no method, no textbook is teacher-proof. I have had the excruciating experience of watching a teacher use our primer to teach her pupils to memorize the sentences in the lesson. We can give teachers well-constructed textbooks provide them with supplementary materials, but in the final analysis teachers have to have some conception of what reading is, and some skill in class management to organize instruction for children at varying levels of mastery. How to train teachers to do this is, unfortunately, is beyond the purview of this note.

References

- *Margaret Donaldson, in her classic study, Children's Minds (1978. London: Fontana) develops this idea very perceptively.*
- *Jeanne S. Chall covers this debate up to 1967 in the first chapter of her Learning to Read: the Great Debate (1967, McGraw Hill). For a more up to date survey see Robinson, Rihard D.; McKenna, Michael C.; and Wedman, Judy M. (1996). Issues and Trends in Literacy Education. Allyn and Bacon. In the United States, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act of 2002 includes a Reading First Initiative which strongly advocates the use of phonics. One extreme fallout of this Initiative is the widespread use of a test called 'Dibels' (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills). This test has been severely criticized by Kenneth S. Goodman in The Truth About Dibels: What It is, What it Does (2006). Portsmouth NH. Heinemann.*
- *The Pragat Shikshan Sanstha has produced a DVD film in Marathi titled Pragat Vachan Paddhati (the PSS Approach to Teaching Reading). A version with English subtitles will be available shortly.*
- *Today the need for phonemic awareness is widely accepted. In fact, it is included in the National Reading panel report of 2000, which formed the basis for NCLB. I hasten to add that while I would concur with some aspects of the report, I am totally opposed to the NCLB Act, which is a draconian measure.*

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Creating Graded Readers for Young Children

Kanchan Bannerjee

I would like to share my experience in developing Readers for Classes 1 and 2 in Kannada for Karnataka and a subsequent effort for Hindi Readers in Chhattisgarh. Both initiatives were on the platform jointly provided by UNICEF and the respective state education departments

A child who has stepped into Class 1, comes sometimes with some pre-school exposure or sometimes may be freshly entering the doorway of a school. Every child comes with his or her store of experience and vocabulary - the richness of the *bhandar* will vary on the base of the exposure at home and in the environment. Children from educationally deprived homes will be