

Reading: An Orchestration of Cues

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Reading is perhaps one of the most important skills taught in schools. Its use is not confined to the curricular area under which it is taught, namely language(s), but it is used right across the school curriculum. Consequently, the success in reading has serious implications for other subjects as well. Despite the obvious significance of reading, it continues to be an area of concern especially in the primary grades. Largely, children are taught reading skills which are often not lasting, and do not result in meaningful reading. Contemporary research in reading conceptualizes it as essentially a meaning-making process. Several strands of research from various disciplines converge to highlight the significance of meaning (Teale and Sulzby, 1986). However the pedagogy of language practised in schools often neglects the meaning-making aspect, and considers the mechanics of language more important. According to Kumar (2009), “Children breaking down words into letters and sentences into words are common sight in Indian primary schools” (p. 79). Sinha (2000) observes that the conceptualization of reading as an exercise in finding the oral equivalent of written language is an obstacle in making sense, and hampers comprehension.

This paper examines the reading of a good and a poor reader of Grade III. It analyses the noticeably different ways in which they process the text, and how they negotiate the challenges they encounter while reading.

The Language Cueing System

Goodman (1996) emphasizes on the importance of the harmonious functioning of the four language cueing systems—semantics, syntax, graphophonics and pragmatics. Successful or meaningful reading happens when all four systems function in tandem with each other. Semantics refers to the meaning aspect of a language system; syntax refers to the sentence structure or word-order in a particular language. For instance, in Hindi, the verb always follows the object, unlike English where the verb precedes the object. Graphophonics refers to the specific symbol-sound association in a language. For example, the sound /k/ in Hindi can be associated with only one symbol or letter. Pragmatics is about the use of language in specific ways in certain contexts. An over-reliance on just one or two cueing systems or a complete neglect of one or more systems by the reader can seriously affect reading and the meaning. The centrality of meaning in reading cannot be denied or compromised.

Miscue analysis, a technique for analysing reading, allows one to ‘peep’ into the ways in which a reader uses the four cueing systems. This technique was developed by Kenneth Goodman (Rhodes and Shanklin, 1993). Goodman (1996) coined the term *miscue* to refer to what are commonly perceived as errors while reading. This was to avoid the negative connotations of the word *error*. The technique looks at the ‘errors’ made by children during reading very favourably, and examines why and

how the reader has ‘deviated’ from the text. Interestingly, this analytical process reveals that all kinds of readers make miscues while reading. The analysis in the following section will reveal the complex ways in which the four systems function simultaneously to generate meaning. This multiple cueing system of language has been used as the framework for examining the reading of two children. ‘Good’ and ‘poor’ readers are terms routinely used in research literature. However, the intention is not to ‘label’ children but only to highlight the sharp qualitative differences in their reading.

Miscues: Nature of Reading

Two Grade III children—one a struggling reader and the other a good reader—were given an unfamiliar story, *Dehati ki gaay* (Shankar, 1999), to read aloud. Their reading was recorded, and later analysed to study the nature of miscues, or deviations they were making from the original text. The analysis revealed the qualitative differences in their miscues and consequently reading. A section of the text read by the children will be discussed here.

Consider Text A- the reading sample of the poor reader. The reader makes three miscues in the first sentence (S1). The first miscue is the splitting of the word *gaon* (village) into *ga* and *v*; the nasal sound is ignored completely. He does not bother to blend the parts of the split word and moves ahead. Soon, in the same sentence (S1), he misreads the word *gaay* (cow) as *gaya* (went/the name of a place) and *thi* (auxiliary verb ‘was’, in this context referring to a female) as *tha* (changing the referent to male). Locally, *tha* seems in consonance with *gaya*. *Gaya* and *tha* are words in Hindi, and may look visually similar to the words they have replaced. So, at the level of individual words, one may choose to overlook these ‘slips’. But on examining the syntax of the whole sentence as read by the child, the resulting meaning does

not seem very satisfactory. The second sentence (S2) is riddled with miscues but they are of a self-correcting nature. The reader skips the second word, *pratidin* (everyday), splits the word *paanch* (five) into *paan* and *ch* and blends it to sound out *paanch*, this time not missing the nasal sound—the *anusvar*. A similar splitting and blending takes place with the word *kilo*. After reading *doodh* (milk), the reader reads *diya* (gave) in place of *deti* (gives), corrects it, and reads *hai* (is) in place of *thi* (was). Considering the deletion of the word *pratidin* and the substitution with the word *hai*, the resulting sentence makes complete meaning even though the tense of the second sentence (S2) has been changed and is not in keeping with the first one. It is difficult to explain this miscue *hai* because visually, the text does not lead to it. In the third sentence (S3), *baich* (to sell) is read as *pahun* and *cha* which, if blended together, would make *pahuncha* (to bring it, here). This makes sense until one reaches the word *use*(that) which is read as *usse*, and the sentence structure begins to crumble at the word *paise* (money). Again at the end of the sentence (S3), the use of the plural form of the word *rehna* (to live) as *rehte thay* (changes the referent from singular to plural) brings incongruence between the singular subject, the *dehati* (the villager), and the substituted word *usse*. In the fourth sentence (S4), the word *gaon* is repeated, and the child reads it differently from the way he read it in the first sentence. This time, the *anusvar* stays and the long vowel \a\ is ignored. He progresses, and when he encounters the word *vivah* (wedding), his reading starts to falter. He makes two attempts at reading the word, the first time by splitting it, and then by blending it or trying to read the whole word. In both cases, he creates non-words. Again, he changes the tense when he reads *hai* in place of *ho*, and makes unsuccessful attempts at sounding out and blending the word *raha*, and finally ends with *th* for *tha*. In the fifth

sentence (S5), he reads in a similar manner. Interestingly, he stumbles over words he had earlier read with ease in the first few sentences. *dehati* and *doodh* are two such words. In S5 of Text A he makes three attempts at reading the word *vivah*, but does not meet with success.

An analysis of his reading shows clearly that the most commonly used reading strategy displayed in his reading is that of sounding out the constituent sounds in a word, and then trying to blend them together. More often than not, the use of this strategy does not lead him to the word in the text. Undeterred, he either leaves it at the non-word that has been created, or reads a form of the word which is acceptable in Hindi but syntactically inappropriate, and moves on. *Sakeg* and *uhe* in S5 and *veeh* in S4 of Text A are a few examples of such non-words. The child knows the letters and *matras* and he is using this knowledge in isolation to read. It seems strange that he is able to use this knowledge effectively in some places, and in other places he does not seem to be able to use it. One can speculate that the sole use of graphophonics cannot go a long way in supporting reading. In this case, the child is not actively bringing his knowledge of the sentence structure in Hindi to support his knowledge of the Hindi alphabet. More importantly, he does not seem to know that one reads for meaning, and so makes no attempt to preserve the global meaning of the text. Evidently, he is creating pockets of coherent phrases in some places, and in other places is completely abandoning the meaning and indiscriminately sounding out words. He is not worried about carrying forward or building on the meaning that has been created in the preceding sentences. Moreover, narratives tend to be in the past tense, and active use of the knowledge of this often used genre could have guided him to not switch tense from one sentence to the other.

The reading of the same section of the text by the good reader resulted in three miscues. In

the second sentence (S2) of Text B- the reading sample of the good reader, the child inserts the word *ek* after *doodh*, but goes back and repeats the stretch from *doodh*, this time without the earlier inserted word, *ek*. Like the poor reader, he also stumbles over the word *vivah* in the fourth sentence (S4), perhaps because it is not used as commonly as its synonym, *shaadi*. He makes two attempts, the first one being *vaan* which does not occur in the word at all, and then *viha* which gives him a clue about the word, and finally he reads it correctly. Lastly, there seems to be tentativeness in reading the word *sakega* in the fifth sentence (S5). This child is evidently monitoring his reading, and is alert to a changed and inappropriate syntax when he makes the insertion with *ek* and instantly goes back and rectifies it. He is simultaneously attentive to the sentence structure of the story and the meaning that is being created, and makes selective use of the strategy of focusing on the letters in a word.

The word *vivah* proves to be interesting in analysing the reading of the two children. The poor reader makes more attempts to read it, and is phonologically closer to the word in his attempts. He comes as close as *vivh* but does not use his knowledge of the world and steadfastly focuses only on the splitting and blending of the word. The reading of the preceding sentences does not support him because a coherent meaning does not emerge out of his reading. Therefore, his reading increasingly collapses. The other child consistently monitors his reading for meaning, and makes deviations or miscues which keep the meaning intact.

Conclusion

Miscue analysis urges us to listen to what children are telling us about their reading capabilities and the kind of help they need. Conceptualization of reading as an exercise in

decoding or simply sounding out words, limits our ability as teachers to support children's reading. More often than not, a child struggling with reading is asked to learn his letters and *matras* well (Kaushik, 2004). Such a suggestion overlooks the real complexity of the reading process. It also fails to communicate to the child that she has to actively integrate all the knowledge she has about the language—its sentence structure, the meaning of words, the letter-sound associations—towards one central objective of reading to construct meaning. The role that we have chosen for ourselves, one of correcting children and eliminating errors while reading needs to be redefined (Owocki and Y. Goodman, 2002).

Original Text – *Dehati ki gaay*

- S1 एक गाँव वाले के पास एक गाँव थी।
 S2 वह प्रतिदिन पाँच किलो दूध देती थी।
 S3 देहाती दूध बेचकर उस पैसे से मजे से रहता था।
 S4 गाँव के पास ही कहीं विवाह हो रहा था।
 S5 लोग उस देहाती के पास यह पता लगाने आये कि वह विवाह के समय उन्हें कितना दूध दे सकेगा।

Text A – Reading Sample of the Poor Reader

- S1 एक गाव वाले के पास एक गया था।
 S2 वह पाँच-पाँच की लो किलो दूध दिया देती है।
 S3 देहाती दूध पहुँचा कर उसे पै से पैसे से मजे से रहते हैं रहते थे।
 S4 गं व गंव के पास ही कहीं वी व ह वीह है रह रह थ।
 S5 लोग उसे देह देहती के पास यह पता लगाने आया कि वह वह वी वीव ह वीवह से उहे उहे की तने कितने दूर दे सकेगा

Text B - Reading Sample of the Good Reader

- S1 एक गाँव वाले के पास एक गाय थी।
 S2 वह प्रतिदिन पाँच किलो दूध एक दूध देती थी।

- S3 देहाती दूध बेचकर उस पैसे से मजे से रहता था।
 S4 गाँव के पास ही कहीं वा विहा विवाह हो रहा था।
 S5 लोग उस देहाती के पास यह पता लगाने आये कि वह विवाह के समय उन्हें कितना दूध दे सकेगा।

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