

A Reading Programme for Elementary Schools

READING IS CENTRAL TO THE LEARNING PROCESS, AND AS GHOSN (1997) POINTS out, "...carefully chosen children's literature allows children to develop their receptive language in entertaining, meaningful contexts and naturally invites them to repeat many of the predictable words and phrases, which children gradually take ownership of and add to their receptive and productive language."

One of the most difficult tasks of a language teacher, both in first (L1) and second (L2) language contexts, is to foster a positive attitude toward reading. Unfortunately, due to time limits and other constraints, teachers are often unable to actively encourage children to seek entertainment and information in reading materials. Many language teachers in elementary schools must rely totally on the basal class readers. This often creates a negative mind-set in children who consider the effort required to interact with texts an unattractive alternative

to the instant gratification offered by the electronic media. This problem is exacerbated in areas where children have limited access to the print medium.

However, school reading programmes can help young learners develop those language skills necessary for success. But implementing an effective reading programme depends, to a large extent, on children having access to reading materials that are relevant to their own needs and interests, being encouraged to participate in carefully structured activities, and being given incentives to promote reading. This article suggests ways to achieve these goals.

Beginning a reading programme

According to Moon and Raban (1992), identifying the differences among children on a developmental continuum and providing appropriate reading materials for them in busy classrooms is a challenge that teachers can meet with enthusiasm and skill. At the outset of a reading programme, it is helpful to initiate a candid discussion with pupils to determine their general attitudes about reading and to gather information on the amount and variety of reading materials to which learners have ready access.

The Macdonald Report (1990) on the Threshold Project reports that research carried out in South African elementary schools indicates that children in underprivileged areas fail to cultivate the reading habit, necessitating the establishment of school-based reading programmes. However, under straightened circumstances, providing even basic reading materials to students to begin a reading programme can be a very daunting task unless the teacher develops a number of strategies to deal with the problem.

Ways of increasing reading materials

I have found the following measures helped provide students with increased access to appropriate reading material in an under resourced school.

Reading box

One idea is to begin a simple “reading box” where the teacher and students collect basic reading materials. These may include teachers’ and students’ own writings, advertising leaflets, newspaper articles, community newsletters, cartoons, comics, magazines,

poetry, picture storybooks, cereal boxes, labels, postcards, and letters. Kress (1995) points out that, in a multicultural context, a seemingly mundane text can reveal as much about culture, society, power, and identity as a more complex text.

Fund-raising

In the absence of a school library, a simple fund-raising project may be organized to obtain inexpensive reading materials for a class library. In this way, a small selection of books can be circulated in the class on a regular basis. With the assistance of class librarians, teachers can ensure that this precious core of reading materials is well maintained and available to all.

Public library

If there is a public library nearby, the teacher may visit this facility and, with the consent of the librarian, reserve a selection of materials for students, taking care to have a balance between fiction and nonfiction. Any core selection should contain books by favourite authors and should cover a range in reading difficulty. A class visit to the library helps students learn about the procedure of borrowing the materials.

Book selection

At any stage of the programme, students should be able to suggest additions or replacements to the core collection. This type of input allows the learners to take ownership of the process. Each time the selection is finalized, students should receive copies of the list. A separate section is allocated for listing additional reading matter. This allows students to select books of high interest.

Cultural factors play an important role in the selection of appropriate materials in a multicultural class. For example, some of my students did not enjoy animal stories. I realized that this stemmed from the fact that for religious reasons they were not encouraged to have pets. The teacher’s knowledge and understanding of cultural factors can help students overcome obstacles that may deter them from developing positive attitudes toward reading.

Motivating activities

Since coaxing children to read can often be a major problem, teachers need to use every available resource at their disposal to motivate young readers. Building a foundation for a

class-based reading programme begins with an informal classroom atmosphere. Learners should be able to identify closely with the teacher as a reading mentor who is willing to share his/her own early reading experiences with young learners. The use of audiotapes and videotapes, although useful in initiating the further exploration of texts, can never replace teachers who arouse students' interests by reading aloud selected extracts from well-chosen texts.

I have found the following strategies and activities very valuable in encouraging reading.

Reading teams

Divide the class into reading teams that are named after popular reading series such as The Sweet Valley Kids and The Jug Valley Juniors. Children can create attractive bookmarks and badges to show their allegiance to their particular teams. Two large posters with the names of these teams may be prominently displayed in the class. Each team member's name should be inscribed on a broad arrow which points towards a central target area (See Figure 1). Regular glances at the signatures on the book list of each child allow the teacher to draw a smiling face or a similar symbol on the arrows of individual readers. A predetermined number of rewards enable the team to earn a colourful sticker in the central target area. At the end of the agreed period, the team with the largest number of stickers in the target area, as well as the runners-up, earn rewards that have also been negotiated by the teacher and pupils in advance. Prior discussions between the teacher and pupils should determine realistic targets and set time-limits to fulfill the ongoing aims of the programme.

Poster displays

Class posters displaying newspaper reviews, illustrations, and synopses from publishers' catalogues may create an awareness of the variety of publications produced for young readers and help everyone to keep track of new books by favorite writers.

With the help of the art teacher, reading teams may design and display colourful collages composed of favourite book titles. Young learners should also be encouraged to develop visual literacy by translating verbal texts, like short stories and poems, into visual texts by means of pictures and graphic illustrations. This type of activity is useful in fostering infer-

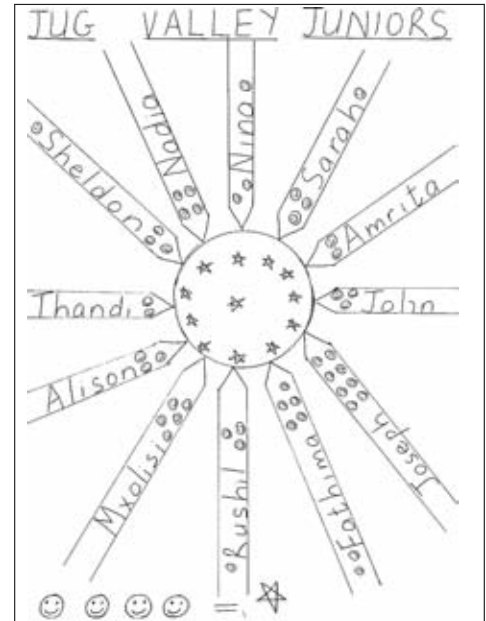


FIGURE 1

ential comprehension, allowing students to read between the lines.

Creative activities

Teachers can motivate children to read by developing practical as well as creative activities linked to the various subjects. This may include such diverse activities as building kites or model aeroplanes, growing herbs, or preparing simple meals. The science and geography teachers can help select suitable reading materials for these types of activities. Show and Tell sessions act as links between reading nonfiction and encouraging expository oral discourse.

Reading/writing area

A specific area of the classroom should be reserved for the children's own writing. Time should be set aside at regular intervals for reading and discussing materials. In multicultural classrooms, the writing wall can become a forum for cross-cultural exchange, especially if individuals or groups are encouraged to write down and illustrate short family histories or popular folk tales from their own communities. Producing class magazines that cater to a variety of interests and abilities can integrate the processes of reading and writing.

Outside class activities

Reading activities outside of the classroom not only increase the reader's motivation, but they also enable the teacher to overcome the constraints imposed by having large numbers of

students in small classrooms. Reciprocal and nonreciprocal reading skills (Widdowson 1978) can be achieved more easily in an outdoor setting. Reciprocal reading allows students to interact with one another in interpreting their materials. It can include choral renditions of poetry, oral book reports, and dramatizations of short stories. Team members may use this environment to boost team reading targets.

Nonreciprocal reading, which enables the students to interpret and understand information according to their own experiences, can be included quite easily into outdoor reading activities, since children are often content to find cool, shady areas to read books undisturbed. The teacher can derive maximum benefit from the relaxed atmosphere by having individual consultations with students who are experiencing difficulty in attaining the minimum targets.

Structured activities

Once students become motivated to read, a number of learning activities may be incorporated to promote reading.

Book reports

Children should submit brief, structured book reports which are written under specified headings. These may include a listing of main ideas and supporting details, the discussion of favourite characters, the reader's personal opinions, and a short section on vocabulary extension. Reading activities thus become more focused and enable children to become more coherent and concise in their responses. Since the reading programme allows children to have input into the selection of core reading materials, getting students to read the texts and to submit book reports is not as onerous a task for the teacher as it usually is.

Written reports can play a vital role in promoting critical literacy. According to Varaprasad (1997), reading "...should be treated as a creative and challenging activity where students' questioning and interpretative abilities are triggered." In my experience, reciprocal reading based on structured book reports encourages interactions and debates, thereby providing a useful starting point for critically examining texts. Students who have read the same texts tend to interpret these from varying perspectives, and it soon becomes apparent that a particular text can evoke a variety of individual responses and interpretations.

Thus, children learn that meaning does not reside in the text but is created by their own unique interactions with the text.

Teaching techniques

Whole language approach

Whole language learning is facilitated by an approach to interpretation that is sequenced and developmental. Gonzalez (1998) describes a project which incorporates both oral and written elements and places an emphasis on discourse analysis, specifically the use of story grammars. This approach contains elements of both reciprocal and nonreciprocal reading. Children are involved in a series of activities, which begin with the reading of a narrative, followed by the filling in of a story grammar map, retelling of the story, and feedback.

These activities are, in turn, followed by individuals writing summaries and by pairs producing books. These books are presented to the whole class, and self-evaluations and reflection reports are completed.

The value of this approach is that students go beyond interpreting and summarizing and actually begin producing their own reading materials. The element of reflection and self-assessment, which is included in the final phase of this approach, leads students to create realistic criteria for evaluating other texts, thereby promoting the goal of critical literacy. As Laar and Holderness (1994) indicate, reading and writing are linked activities, and children's own reading experiences will help them to become more reflective, analytical, and self-critical writers.

Reciprocal teaching

Cooperative interpretation of particular texts can boost literacy at a number of other levels. Michaels (1995) discusses reciprocal teaching, developed by Brown and Palincsar, as a useful strategy for using students' home-based ways of speaking and reasoning as a bridge to the development of school-based literacies. In this approach, the students and teacher engage in a dialogue, collaboratively developing an interpretation of a particular text while reading it together as a group. Students take turns asking questions about the text, while others summarize or predict what will come next and clarify questions and answers. The teacher's role is to provide expert modeling,

to monitor the group's understanding, to engage in evaluating competence and difficulty, and to push for deeper understanding.

Reciprocal teaching enables children from a variety of backgrounds to go beyond merely reading and to actively practise higher-order thinking skills, the cornerstones of success in academics. Thus, reading becomes central to learning.

Encouraging parental involvement

Shirley Brice-Heath's (1983) ethnographies of communication in Tracton and Roadville in the southeastern region of the United States and her comparison of these two small communities with a "mainstream," middle class community, point to wide differences in literate traditions among different communities. She believes that successful teaching and learning depend on eliminating the boundaries between classrooms and communities. Thus, the teacher cannot begin to promote a reading programme without prior knowledge of the community's attitudes toward reading and the factors that may prevent a widespread acceptance of reading as an activity central to learning.

Meeting and discussing with parents at the outset of a reading programme promotes parental involvement in their children's reading outside school. This interaction with parents can alert teachers to potential problems such as the lack of transport to libraries, the absence of reading materials in the home, and the parents' lack of literacy skills. This knowledge allows teachers to adapt their reading programmes to suit the conditions in the communities.

Throughout the school year, it is important to continue communicating with parents via periodic meetings and letters. From time to time, parents can contribute to the reading box or help to raise funds for a classroom library.

Promises and rewards

A reading programme should schedule a special day each term designated for the pursuit of reading for pleasure. The following activities are very useful in creating an atmosphere of anticipation on this special day.

A period of time is set aside during which everyone in school reads silently. Thereafter, children display their ingenuity and artistic talents by decorating the school with posters that promote reading. A panel of teachers, parents,

and students then selects the most innovative posters, and books are awarded as prizes.

The climax of the day can be a special assembly to which parents are invited. Parents usually enjoy seeing their children receive certificates and watching them participate in special presentations. These may include choral recitations of poetry, reading selections from books, television advertisements, and lively dramatizations of short stories or poems.

One of the highlights of the event is always the announcements of each pupil's reading achievement. Even students who are normally considered to be underachievers receive public acknowledgment of their reading successes.

If a particular class has managed to produce a magazine during the term, copies may be given out at this assembly or may also be sold to raise funds for class libraries.

A special production may be planned to end this eventful day. In my experience, a favourite selection has been a performance of a choral poem or a rousing song that reinforces the message that reading is a fruitful and fun-filled activity. The children at my elementary school improvised a variety of sound effects to accompany a song that I wrote for this occasion.

Read 'n Rap

Give your mind a wonderful boon
Read 'til your imagination zooms!

Write your glorious compositions
Have the greatest conversations
Use your dictionary and thesaurus
Let us say it in a chorus!

Turn on, turn to reading,
Learn on, let your mind rip!

Enid Blyton, Raold Dahl, and Judy Blume
Histories, mysteries, tales of joy and gloom,
Let your knowledge become a vast pool
At the Jacaranda Primary School.

Read and turn on your mind power
Let it grow like the Eiffel Tower!

All the nurturing the soul requires
Is in reading matter which inspires
Leading us away from gripe and strife
To a wonderful way of life.

Turn off, turn off the television
Read and turn on your mind's vision!

Conclusion

A structured reading programme based on the specific needs of learners can become the focal point of activities in a multicultural English classroom. Interaction with the communities' surrounding schools may encourage parents to become involved in their children's reading. Giving children access to a core of selected reading materials also promotes the aims of a programme. This programme can also foster critical literacy and other higher-order thinking skills, as well as whole language learning.

Throughout a reading programme, children should be encouraged to become involved in decision making, and teachers should ensure that all reading activities are adapted to suit the particular conditions and needs both inside and outside the schools. By implementing a reading programme with incentives, teachers can create positive attitudes toward reading, thereby encouraging a life long involvement with books and reading.

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