

# Reading without Meaning: The Dilemma of Indian Classrooms

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The primary goal of reading is to get the message. The purpose of reading, whether it is reading directions for using a product or reading a complex report on deforestation, is served only if we get the meaning. The ability to comprehend is especially critical in schools because all subjects require literacy to successfully develop knowledge. Therefore, not being able to read independently affects not only the language, but other subject areas as well. Thus, the goal should be to ensure that children develop strategies for comprehending a variety of texts ranging from narrative to expository.

Given the obvious importance of reading comprehension, the situation in Indian classrooms is, by and large, not very heartening. For example, in a study conducted on the children of elite schools of Mumbai, Narasimhan (2004) assessed their comprehension of narrative, expository, and instructional texts. The students displayed a wide range of proficiency in their performance and performed lower than the average in public exams. Narasimhan explained that this result showed that the students did not have the competence to comprehend unfamiliar texts. In a different context, Matreja (2006) studied the seventh, ninth, and eleventh grade students' comprehension of English texts in the Government schools of Delhi. She found that comprehension was not a priority in English classes and teachers depended on translation of the texts to ensure understanding. Consequently, it was not surprising that they performed poorly in reading comprehension.

While teaching eleventh grade students in an elite school of Delhi, Sinha (1985) found that the students were excessively dependent on the teacher for understanding literature.

No educator will ever deny the importance of reading comprehension, yet these problems persist. To look for an explanation for this state of affairs one needs to examine the prevalent classroom practices to see the possible role they play. The pedagogic practices in the school also unwittingly push students towards non-comprehension. In this paper, I will first describe the process of reading comprehension, and then examine the situation in the early primary and upper primary grades to understand the role the classroom pedagogy plays in aiding reading comprehension.

## Reading comprehension

In the past few decades, a lot of research has been done on reading comprehension. In the Indian colleges of teacher education students often say that listening and reading are passive processes while writing and speaking are active processes. Nothing could be further from the truth. Intensive research work (unfortunately not in India) shows that reading comprehension is a complex procedure. The meaning of the text does not get transmitted to the reader the moment he/she decodes the text. One can only examine one's own reading of a text in an unfamiliar area to know that; one may be able to decode it, but one cannot really understand what it says. Comprehension is a very complex "interplay between the knowledge and

capabilities of the reader, the demands of the text, the activities engaged by the reader, and the socio-cultural context in which the reading occurs” (Wilkinson & Son, 2011, p. 359). Further, it is not merely a memory of specific clauses and sentences, but the “overall meaning” made of the text by the interaction of reader, text, and context that matters (Duke & Carlisle, 2011). Clearly, it is a very dynamic constructive process. Some of the things that the reader has to do to remain engaged is to connect the text to his/her prior knowledge (Anderson 1994), be aware whether they are understanding it, and if they fail to comprehend then be able to take a corrective measure (Brown, 1980). Research in this area shows that children are generally not able to make connections to their prior knowledge, nor are they aware of their comprehension failure, and often require corrective strategies (Anderson, 1994) (Brown, 1980). In India too, we need to start focusing on the nature of comprehension instruction because it is critical for survival in school. Therefore, we will examine the situation in the Indian classrooms to see how the instruction influences the reading comprehension of the students. First, I will examine the early primary level where the child learns to read, and then I will proceed to look at the elementary grades.

### **Reading in the early primary grades: An exercise in meaninglessness**

Comprehension instruction is often disregarded in primary education, where the focus is on learning how to decode (Pearson & Duke, 2002). In India, the situation is worse than in other countries because elsewhere, teachers do read out stories to children and they have a wider exposure to children’s literature other than textbooks. In India, for a vast majority of children, schools are the only place where they

encounter literacy and schools tend to deal with literacy in what can be best described as a *layered approach* to reading: first, to be able to sound out the word, then worry about its meaning, and lastly, if at all, bother about the function and relevance of written language in further learning. Kaushik (2004), in her study to find out about teachers’ conceptions about early reading, found that teachers believed that the most important goal of early reading programmes was to get a sequential mastery of the letters and learn how to blend them to form words. This approach ends up sacrificing meaning for mastery over codes. Textbooks, especially primers, have been blamed for this problem. But the problems also reside with classroom practices. In this section we will first look at the texts and then examine the classroom practices in early primary grades.

Textbooks try to simplify texts so that reading is easy for beginners. However, often this simplification takes place at the price of coherence, meaning, and interest. Primers are one example of this approach. Traditionally, primers are not concerned about teaching children how to comprehend. Their focus is primarily on teaching them how to decode. Sinha (2000) analyzed Hindi primers and found that they are organized around vowel sounds (*matra*). Therefore, the lessons consist of a list of words based on the featured *matra*, followed by some sentences which utilize that particular sound. For example to teach the sound ‘i’ (vowel in hit) the following words were used: mithas, sitar, barish, palish, takia, bilav, dhania, lifafa, khatia [sweetness, sitar, rain, polish, pillow, tomcat, coriander, envelope, bed] (glosses are given in square brackets; see Sinha, 2000, p. 39).

Although the individual words have a meaning, but put together they are not related (except for the *matra*) and hence they do not

have any collective significance. The sentences following the list of words are also disjointed, and operate only on the logic of sounds. Sinha (2010) questions the merit of primers by claiming that they, “actually teach ‘not’ to seek meaning while reading. If one reads these texts for comprehension, the experience will be very bizarre because there is no coherent text to comprehend in the first place” (p. 122). So not only is the engagement with the text ruled out, but the child actually learns to not construct meaning. Changes have taken place in the writing of these texts, especially by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) in recent years. However, many schools still utilize traditional primers to teach reading, which, even if coherent and not disjointed sentences, are still so insipid that they are not really worth reading.

Even when the texts are better written (for example, the recent attempt made by NCERT to keep the meaning component intact), they are not taught in the classes in a manner that aids comprehension. Children read aloud, copy or memorize the answers. Or else the story is utilized to teach other language skills, e.g. finding examples of nouns or verbs, and the focus is not on understanding. We observed classrooms in two different parts in India to illustrate the point. The first observation was from a grade one class in Jharkhand, where the teacher asked the children to read aloud a chapter several times. The focus was on correctly pronouncing words. Then she asked the children to copy the lesson in neat handwriting. Throughout, there was no discussion of the meaning or any other aspect of the text. The text was coherent and interesting, but nothing was done with it in terms of meaning. In another lesson in Bangalore, while reading the story, the focus was on

developing an understanding of the phonological awareness. Children were taught how to identify the syllables in a word. Second grade children spent about half an hour reading one paragraph of a story and they clapped as they heard each syllable. In this process of listening for each syllable and discussing words, the story element was completely destroyed as the children focused only on the sounds. In either case, comprehension was not even an issue in the learning. As a consequence of utilizing stories to teach various language skills, the children get distracted from the meaning of the text. Often, they lose sight of the fact that they are supposed to even look for a meaning.

There is a lot of debate about the different methodologies used to teach children how to read. However, this paper does not try to resolve that. The only point that is being made is that when stories or other texts are used only to focus on language components excluding meaning, children never learn to engage with the meaning of the text. This disengagement can have deadly consequences in terms of a loss of motivation to read (Block, Schaller, Joy & Gaine, 2002). In India, quite often, due to this approach in schools, children do not even realize that they should look for meaning. For them, reading in the early years is an exercise in meaninglessness. Children seek to make sense of the world, not to engage with nonsense. And a children’s programme in reading cannot afford to ignore a child’s basic nature. To ask a child to wait to make sense is not a sensible approach, as children need to make immediate sense. The postponement of comprehension can prove costly as disengagement with texts can set in and prove hard to rectify. Children may develop the firm belief that reading is nonsensical and fail to use literacy in a productive manner.

## Reading in the middle school

In the upper grades, teachers are more concerned with meaning. Typically, they address the issue of comprehension by telling the meanings of difficult words, explaining the text (at least the parts deemed difficult), and asking questions based on the texts. However, the question that needs to be asked about their instructional practices is, do they ensure that the students learn the strategies that will enable them to be independent in reading comprehension? Keeping this question in mind I will discuss some commonly used practices of Indian classrooms.

It is a practice to list difficult words at the beginning of the chapter and to go through them. However, the basis of their being classified as difficult is not very clear. Possibly, the words are selected based on the guess that they may be unfamiliar to children. Although vocabulary contributes to comprehension, yet this method has limited value in terms of understanding a text. Also, the overall value of that particular word may not be significant for understanding the text. Research shows that replacing one sixth of the words of the text with more difficult synonyms did not affect students' understanding of text (Freebody & Anderson, 1983). Thus, unfamiliar words do not always pose a challenge in terms of understanding (Nagy & Hiebert, 2011). In fact, theme related activities such as brainstorming and identifying words are better because they also help in activating prior knowledge (Nagy, 1988).

Explanation of the text post reading aloud by the teacher is a common practice in Indian classrooms. Sah (2009) conducted a study in the sixth grade classrooms in Delhi, and found that providing explanations was a common practice in the Hindi literature classrooms.

Sinha (1985) observed that while teaching English to eleventh grade students, that students were totally dependent on the teacher to get the meaning of texts. In fact, the students got agitated when she refused to provide a line by line explanation and demanded that she do so. This practice of explaining the text is so rampant that the teachers even feel the need to paraphrase some very obvious sentences. They do it with the purpose of making the text accessible to children; however the problem is that although their repackaging of the content may make the content accessible, but they hamper their students' chance of learning to read with comprehension. Hence, it has a crippling effect on the development of reading strategies. The teacher needs to take up the challenge of thinking of different ways of making the text accessible without providing readymade explanations. Sinha (1985) described a procedure in which several poems related to a theme were read and discussed by the students and during the process they lost their sense of dependency on the teacher. *Theme-based reading* will induce some attention to meaning. Prior knowledge discussions, reading related texts on the same topic, and most of all discussions, are ways of developing focus and independence in reading. Also, to take a *problem solving approach* while reading where the teacher "thinks aloud" what to do when she encounters a problem while reading can help students in acquiring strategies to handle a text which is challenging (Pearson & Duke, 2002). Question-answers are routinely used to assess comprehension of texts in the classroom. However, it is important to remember that they are valuable only if they permit the scope for thinking and inference. Factual recall questions can be answered even without comprehending the text as a whole.

To conclude, it is evident that, in spite of concerns about reading comprehension, classroom practices can inadvertently weaken the process of comprehending. It is important to attend to it right from the early primary years and include prior knowledge activation, instruction of reading strategies, and theme based discussions in the reading classroom.

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