

Creating Dependent Readers and Writers: Our Complicated Simple Pedagogic Approach

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Recently, I met a mother who was trying to make her two-year-old child learn how to talk. The committed mother was trying to do this by using various techniques:

- She would not allow the child to use any equivalent of the word in question. For example, if the child wanted water, she had to say, “Mother, I want water”. Approximations such as “mum” or “paanu” were not accepted by her mother.
 - The dedicated mother responded to the child only when the child spoke correctly. Mistakes were not responded to. The purpose was to force the child to speak correctly.
 - The mother thought that it was her responsibility to teach the child “how to speak”. If she did not fulfil that responsibility, the child would never learn.
 - She believed that if she did not focus on correct pronunciation and word selection right from a young age, her child would never learn it.
- Children do use different equivalent words to express their needs. These words should be accepted and responded to.
 - It is highly foolish to believe that if she does not correct the child, the child will continue to speak incorrectly even as an adult. In reality, children make mistakes, discover rules and correct themselves.
 - Predictions or guesses are not failures. They are the ways by which children understand language.
 - A child will learn to speak only by “speaking”. The child should be allowed to use language freely.
 - Young children do not learn to speak by instilling fear, or through drills and practice.

These responses of a mother (adult) might appear highly problematic to us. We may feel surprised about how the mother understands language learning. She probably does not understand the basis of language learning, for there is no child who speaks correctly and perfectly right from the first attempt.

If we had to explain her approach to language learning we might say the following to the mother:

- This approach is nonsensical.

I feel that most of us will agree with these points. Learning to speak is a natural process and, most children will learn to speak by themselves in a fearless and supportive environment. The proof of this statement lies in the fact that millions of young children become proficient users of their language by the age of 3 years.

Surprisingly, this developmental understanding about language learning gets completely reversed when we talk about learning to read and write. Most of our kindergarten or early primary grades reflect the same “nonsensical understanding” of the mother (adult) that we have just criticized.

It is indeed unfortunate that adults, who are so supportive when children are learning to speak, become highly traditional when the same children learn to read and write. In fact, all our

assumptions about learning get reversed when we focus on reading and writing. The reality is that we fail miserably in making children skilled readers and writers. Instead, we make them readers who decode without comprehension; and writers who can copy but cannot express themselves.

This article is written with the purpose of highlighting how in schools, we transform our children into dependent readers and writers. An attempt has been made to trace the journey of young children in the early grades of school. The article is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on how reading and writing is taught to young children in schools and in the second section there is a focused discussion with concrete suggestions.

The Beginning of School Life

Children are active and curious by nature. However, in classrooms, these active and energetic young minds are exposed to activities that hardly use their innate curiosity and willingness to learn. Till now, the child had engaged with different things in search of meaning; however, in school, the child is immersed in tasks where there is no focus on meaning.

This argument can be explored by examining three criteria: the general pedagogic approach, how reading is taught and how writing is taught.

General Pedagogic Approach

Most of the pre-service teacher preparation courses teach student teachers the general basis for pedagogy such as:

- Simple to complex
- Concrete to abstract

Let us explore the definition of “simple” with respect to reading and writing, i.e. which texts will be simpler for children to read or write?

The answer is that the texts which they can understand and derive meaning from easily are simpler for young children and conversely, texts in which they cannot find any meaning will be difficult or abstract for them. Words that children use in daily life will be simpler to recognize rather than words they do not know. Meaningless texts will be more complicated for young children, because in the absence of meaning, they have to depend entirely on rote memorization.

Surprisingly this simple understanding takes on a different interpretation in classrooms. We follow the practice of breaking meaningful words into several isolated units and making young children memorize these units one by one and later combining these meaningless units to recreate that same word. This description might sound complicated, but we actually make our children learn through this complicated interpretation of “simple”. It means that for teaching a word such as *kela* (banana), students first have to learn all the *varnas* (letters of the alphabet) first separately and then in combination with different *matras* and finally join the two to read or write *kela*.

With this “complicated simple pedagogic principle” in focus, we design reading and writing pedagogies for early grades. Let us now look at how children are taught to read and write.

Teaching Reading

Following the “Complicated simple pedagogic principle”, students are introduced to reading with the help of separate *varnas*. These units are practiced in a dedicated manner until they have been rote memorized by all the young minds in the class. After that, different combinations of these *varnas* are presented to the children. So, students start practicing two-letter-words such as कल *kal* (tomorrow) or नल *nal* (tap), then three-letter-words such as कमल *kamal* (lotus) or मगर *magar* (crocodile), and

finally four-letter-words such as थरमस *tharamas* (flask), बरगद *bargad* (banyan tree). Finally, in the same fashion, they practice and memorize different *matra* combinations. The language is therefore dissected as deeply as possible in the name of teaching reading in a simple way.

If we accept that abstract concepts are difficult for young children, then it must be accepted that there is nothing more abstract than our reading pedagogy style. What sense can a child draw from the *varna va* or *kha* or *la*? What meaning can the active mind of a child derive from these units? Nothing. However, unfortunately, this “nothing” becomes the basis of our reading pedagogy in the initial years.

Sinha (2000) analysed 10 Hindi primers used in the initial grades as reading material to understand the nature of early reading instruction. She highlighted their absurd nature. She found that these primers were loaded with absurd sentences, unnatural language, and boring and disconnected texts. These primers lacked “meaning” completely, and hence were difficult and uninteresting for children.

As our definition of “simple” means “breaking language to the smallest unit”, such miserable primers still rule our classrooms in the early grades despite the introduction of the interesting *Rimjhim* series. Following is an example of a primer which I recently observed being religiously used in grade I by teachers:

‘*kamal, kalam pakad kar tahal* (Kamal, hold a pen and walk)

kalash sadak par rakh (keep the pot on the road)

behen ki khabar rakh (keep track of your sister)

harad ragar kar chakh (rub *harad* and taste)

namak ragad kar rakh (rub salt and keep it)

bhadak mat, bhajan kar (don’t get angry, take god’s name)

shahar chal, namak chakh (go to the city, taste salt)

It is important to reflect about the meaning that a five-year-old child will derive from this text. If we believe that children are “active constructors”, what construction or prediction can a child attempt in this artificial text? Sinha (2010) highlighted the inherent problems of such reading material as:

These texts actually teach ‘not’ to seek meaning while reading. If one reads these texts for comprehension, then the experience will be bizarre because there is no coherent text to comprehend in the first place. If a child depends on these texts exclusively to learn to read, she will get the message that reading is meaningless, mysterious and rather absurd process (p. 122).

However, these primers are religiously followed in grade I with a lot of dedication and rigour. In fact, our young children are taught reading through such restricted texts.

So our “complicated simple pedagogy principle” shapes readers like this:

- Introduction to absurd isolated units, i.e. *varnas* through rote memorization
- Learning the *varnas* in different combinations, i.e. two-letter, three-letter and four-letter combinations
- Memorizing different *matras*
- Learning the combinations of *varnas* and *matras*
- Focus - Decoding
- Result - A dependent reader

Teaching Writing

Writing is a skill that involves expressing one’s feelings, emotions and ideas. It is a common sight to find preschool children leaving their writing imprints on the walls, notebooks and newspapers in the form of drawing or scribbling. It is also interesting to note that children can tell the meaning of their scribbles or drawings quite

easily. In addition to that, they even manage to express what they want to convey through that attempt.

However, when these young expressive minds enter schools, their “expression” is expected to be left outside the rigid classroom space. This is because in the initial years, writing in classrooms is mainly limited to practicing meaningless patterns. The argument given in favour of such exercises is that it will help young children to hold their pencils properly and develop motor skills. Surprisingly, our teachers completely forget that these same children already have the required motor skills, which is why they have probably covered the walls at home with their writing imprints.

The strict patterns and forms of writing are focused and are practiced as a ritual. Different types of writing drills are given on standard five-line notebooks to give the students unlimited practice in isolated units. The sequence of writing practice is as follows: joining dots, standing and sleeping lines, various cursive strokes, isolated letters of the alphabet, two-letter words followed by three-letter words and so on. Mistakes are punished with more drill and practice worksheets and tasks. The little hands that required space and freedom are restricted within the boundaries of the four or five-line notebooks.

It is really unfortunate to see that children who earlier had something to share in every simple drawing or mark made by them, now get restricted within the framework of traditional writing where neither does the need for “sense” exist nor is it valued. The school clearly communicates that writing only involves following “standards”. Graves (1986), traced this conflict in the initial lines of his book as:

Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school. This is no accident. Before they went to school they marked up walls, pavement, newspapers with crayons, chalk, pens or

pencils...anything that makes a mark. The child’s marks say, “I am.”

“No, you aren’t,” say most schools’ approaches to the teaching of writing (p. 3).

By restricting children with “rights” and “wrongs”, we make them writers who are more fearful of mistakes than concerned about expression.

Hence, as per our “complicated simple writing pedagogy”, steps for writing development are as follows:

- Practising “standing lines”, “sleeping lines” and “joining dots”
- Practising all *varnas* one by one. The pattern to be followed is isolated *varnas*, then two-letter words, three-letter words, four-letter words and then sentences.
- Special focus on
 - Perfect drawing of *varnas* within lines
 - Beautiful handwriting
 - Sharpened pencils
 - Ability to copy accurately from blackboard
 - Reward for error-free work, i.e. perfect “copy”
- Result - A Dependent Writer

Discussion: A Reflection

We have looked at how our students are first introduced to literacy in formal schools. With our “complicated simple pedagogic approach”, we convert literacy into a meaningless maze for young children. We make them undertake senseless drills and routines which carry no immediate meaning or purpose for them. Saxena (2010), describes this hopeless literacy introduction as, “this was their entry into the world of literacy—boring, unchallenging and much of it meaningless too”. (p. 135). Kumar (1992), also highlights the status of our young learners in this traditional routine as:

...we would know how frustrated the child must get after he has spent a few days at an average primary school. He would find out that the school is not the place where he can 'make sense' of the world (p. 59).

It is indeed a sad situation where we are making all possible attempts to convert our young minds into blind followers. The search for meaning is the basis for every act and surprisingly, all our efforts are directed to keeping this search outside of the boundaries of the classroom. It is worth reflecting on the value that such literacy experiences provide to children. Should the introduction to literacy be so boring and absurd?

We as teachers need to reflect on what we are teaching and what our students are learning. If we agree that language learning is a meaning making task, then there are no boundaries for the meaningful literacy activities we can design. Some suggestions are offered as follows:

- Reading material for young children has to be interesting and appropriate. Good story books are excellent teaching aids to introduce students to reading.
- Authentic activities such as journal writing, message boards, letter writing should be used in the class with a clear sense of purpose and audience. Experiences from their lives should be the biggest resource for teaching writing to students.
- Function/purpose should be the focus of language learning; form/structure can be acquired later.
- Errors are not failures. They are indicators that the child is attempting to learn. These attempts should be nurtured with sensible adult support.

These suggestions can be translated by the teacher into different creative practices for making literacy an engaging sphere for students and for changing our young minds from "dependent" readers and writers to "competent" readers and writers.

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