

Comprehending the Text: Aesthetic to Critical

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Abstract

Recent research studies on reading inform us that children's comprehension abilities must be nurtured from aesthetic and critical stances. The transaction theory and critical literacy perspective are theoretical frameworks to examine the teaching of reading in classrooms. The present paper examines the situation of literature teaching in elementary grades in two studies (Sah, 2009, Ongoing) and notes that the way reading is taught nurtures an efferent stance. The paper ends with a suggestion for promoting aesthetic-critical comprehension.

Keywords: Transaction theory, critical literacy, comprehension, aesthetic stance, literature teaching

Introduction

One crucial aspect of literary instruction should be developing students' abilities to take an aesthetic stance while reading literature (Rosenblatt, 1976). Equally important is developing students' abilities to read literature critically (Freire, 1996; Freire & Macedo, 2001). The National Education Policy 2020 (Government of India, 2020) emphasizes nurturing children's appreciation for literature and critical thinking abilities. Both aesthetic and critical stances make reading an aesthetic, reflective, thoughtful, and liberating experience. The aesthetic-critical stances of reading literature redefine the act of literary reading from a solitary act to a social act. (Luke & Freebody, 1997). The first section of this paper engages with transaction theory and critical literacy framework, the second describes the nature of comprehension instruction that prevails in many Indian classrooms, and the third describes the classroom environment, the role of a teacher and the pedagogy that supports comprehension situated in an aesthetic-critical continuum.

Dimensions of Comprehension

Rosenblatt (1976), in her seminal work *Literature as Exploration*, argued that literature is neither merely a source of historical and moral education nor a report on life; it is a mode of living. Her theory talked about a transaction between the reader and the text. While reading literature, the reader and text are essential and flexible enough to work on each other to make the reading an intensely personal experience. Different readers respond to the text differently due to differences in their individual experiences. Rosenblatt claims that readers transact with the text through aesthetic and efferent stances. Aesthetic reading nurtures emotions, and efferent reading deals with extracting information. In efferent reading, the reader and the listener can be different. In contrast, in aesthetic reading, the reader is the listener because no one can make the other experience a literary text. These two reading stances run on a continuum, as no reading experience can be entirely aesthetic or efferent.

Critical literacy is the contribution of Freire's transformative and emancipatory education. Freire talked about praxis, dialogue and problem-solving. Praxis implies reflection and action. Reflective action can be achieved by identifying and critically questioning the problems in social structures. Reality can be decoded and remade through dialogue (Au, 2009). Freire (1996) and Freire and Macedo (2001) viewed literacy as a tool by which a person can gain social consciousness and transform his/her life. Reading is comprehending meaning by situating the text in the social context. The selection of the texts should be thoughtful, as texts are never neutral and reflect a particular ideology, primarily the dominant mainstream ideology. Therefore, there is a need to understand the critical literacy framework as an extension of Rosenblatt's transactional framework for reading literature.

Reading Comprehension in the Indian Context

Sah (2009) observed the pedagogy of Hindi literature in six randomly selected elementary government schools in Delhi and interviewed twenty Hindi teachers. She found that an efferent stance dominated literature teaching. Reading a story in language classrooms involves learning specific facts such as the story's moral, difficult words, the author's message and the grammatically correct language. Teachers' views on teaching reading confirmed the efferent stance.

After reading a story, we should motivate the students to cull out moral values.

While teaching poems, we focus on helping students learn their essence and the central message.

The objective of teaching literature is to acquire good and sophisticated language, and children should learn good words and use good language in their daily lives.

She also found that the approach to teaching was text-dominated, with no space for multiple interpretations of the text. Responses of the teachers such as:

I start each chapter by reading it and then explain its main points. After this, I ask answers to the questions at the chapter's end. At the end, students read the chapter to improve their reading skills.

Whatever I teach in the classroom, I usually give the same for the home task. For example, if I teach a lesson, I tell the students to learn something from the lesson I have taught, or I ask them to memorize the questions and answers.

These views of teachers show that this reading pedagogy creates passive readers who accept the meaning explained by the teacher, thereby becoming the receivers of literary instructions. Consequently, readers' voices, feelings, doubts, and reflections remain unheard and unaddressed. Students neither value nor use their interpretations, social knowledge, and experiences to make sense of literary texts. Data also reveals teachers' low expectations of the students. Teachers constantly reported that they intend to bring improvement in students' reading abilities and language. They confine their role to transmitting the contents of the text.

Reading and enjoying literary texts at initial grades develop children into lifelong readers. However, the teaching practices shared above potentially create a reluctance to read among students. Excessive focus on facts destroys the pleasure of reading literary text. The reluctance to read prohibits them from acquiring comprehension abilities, resulting in low performance in other subjects.

Sah (2009) asserts that teachers are unprepared to teach lessons that do not contain concluding messages or moral values. The poem *Chadhaai Pe Rickshewalla* (Rickshaw Puller Moving Uphill) dwells on the lack

of sympathy for the plight of the rickshaw puller. While teaching this poem, teachers shared

It is unclear why the poet has written this poem, Chadhaai Pe Rickshewalla; when it is unclear to us, then what do we teach the students? We cannot teach the students what does or doesn't the poet want to say.

Such views question our pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes.

Sah's doctoral work (Ongoing) also reflects such parallels. The focus of teaching reading is on teaching proper pronunciations, meanings of difficult words, and question-answers of the chapters. In teaching writing, the emphasis is reproducing the text in neat handwriting. Teachers continue to be uncomfortable with errors in spelling and sentence formations. The pedagogy follows a text-dominated approach. The findings from the two studies lead to the conclusion that the reading pedagogy remains unchanged, making reading and writing instructions a matter of concern and a priority for teacher education. The existing pedagogy must nurture the children's meaning-making abilities and critical thinking.

Promoting Aesthetic-Critical Comprehension

The classroom learning environment should be dynamic, aesthetic, dialogic, reflective, and critical to promote aesthetic-critical comprehension. A significant goal of both reader response and critical literacy perspectives is to diminish the hierarchy of the teachers' interpretation of text on behalf of the students that prevails in the classrooms. The goal can be achieved through negotiated pedagogy, collaborative learning, and students' control over their choices of text selection and creation (Morgan, 1997). In this way, the teacher, the text, and the reader mutually influence and work together to foster dialogic and thinking traditions in a reading classroom (Behrman, 2006).

The learning environment will further be strengthened by having a literature section for children. The teacher can nurture reading with an aesthetic-critical stance by exposing the students to authentic and multicultural literature. Literature can be a constructive medium for children to develop a critical understanding of society, its diversity, and its hard realities. Poverty, exploitation, death, and discrimination at the level of gender, caste, class, and religion are realities of children's

concerns. Children need to be informed about these issues to develop a deeper understanding. Considering the significance of literature in fostering aesthetic and critical comprehension, the books selected should be original, of varied themes, written from a child's perspective, enjoyable, challenging, representing diversity, and providing diverse critical perspectives without any overt teaching or moral (Sinha, 2010).

Pedagogy must provide opportunities to read for pleasure, promote flexibility and diversity in thinking, use multiple texts on the same issue, make students construct multiple text meanings, and nurture multiple perspectives (Purves & Monson, 1984). Establishing a corner for children's literature is one of the most vital factors to promote reading for pleasure. During the class observation of pre-service teachers, Sah (Ongoing) found that the regular use of children's literature positively enhanced reading comprehension among the children. Children were excited to read books of their choice by picking them up from the class library. The growth in children's reading is very prominent in the classrooms where pre-service teachers could set up a class library and read books to the children. Reading aloud a diverse range of literature with a critical stance is an effective teaching practice to develop an aesthetic and critical mind (Freese, 2018). Creating spaces for talking about the literary text will serve the purpose of aesthetic-critical reading. Sah (Ongoing) also observed a pre-service teacher asking follow-up questions related to the story:

- What do you think about the story's main idea / protagonist / central theme / themes?
- How do you find the characters of the story?
- Do you agree with the representation of the gender / caste / language / religion in the story?
- Which experience of the story do you find yourself close to?

Such questions and prompts encouraged the students to read from a resistant perspective and form their interpretations by peeling the layers of the meaning embedded in the text. This approach to teaching reading enables the students to gradually understand that text can be approached from the perspectives of different identities based on caste, class, gender, language, sexuality, and religion (Foss, 2002). A classroom where students are made to create countertext, especially from marginalized and non-

mainstream perspectives, is an effective way to nurture critical thinking and give legitimacy to unheard voices (Freese, 2018). These teaching practices inform the students that reading is an interpretive and social act where the text is given meaning instead of containing meaning.

Conclusion

The opportunity to experience the text aesthetically and critically helps students to develop as open-minded, active, and strategic readers capable of appreciating, problematizing, and questioning. They learn the art of transacting with the text. The need of the time is that our classrooms must have space for aesthetic-critical reading to achieve comprehension goals by enabling the readers as code breakers, text participants, text users and text analysts (Freebody & Luke, 1990). Equally important is to revisit our teacher education programmes and equip our teachers with updated theoretical lenses to address comprehension issues.

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