

How Meaning-Focused is Reading Pedagogy in Grade-Two Classrooms?

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Abstract

This paper discusses the disconnect in teaching reading in schools from the recommendations and guidelines outlined in the policies and programmes of the Government of India. I collected data on reading pedagogy by observing second-grade teachers in six government schools teaching the Hindi textbook *Rimjhim*. I used semi-structured interviews to learn about teachers' beliefs on reading pedagogy. Significant policy and programme recommendations are discussed and contrasted with two reading events to show that teachers primarily use a decoding approach and do not view students as capable readers and meaning-makers. They believe in teaching fluent, accurate reading and adhering to punctuation. Meaning-making does not enter their definition of reading. In conclusion, pre- and in-service programmes need to address this gap.

Keywords: Print-rich environment, National Curriculum Framework 2005, National Education Policy 2020, National Curriculum Framework for School Education, 2023, *Padhe Bharat Bade Bharat*

Introduction

Reading is making sense of what is read through interaction between the text, the reader and the context (Ruddell & Unrau, 1994). Reading comprehension involves interpreting the text and not reproducing it. Engaging reading materials and rich discussion are prerequisites of early-grade reading comprehension (McMunn & Matthew, 2009; Sinha, 2012; Wilkinson & Son, 2011). The notion of discussion as a staple instructional activity has generated some discussion. Literacy specialists argue for

redefining discussion as a dialogic classroom occurrence where students and teachers engage actively, jointly, cognitively, socially and affectively in constructing meaning and exploring different interpretations of the text to reach fresh insights (Almasi & Garas-York, 2009; Wilkinson & Son, 2011).

Conceptualizing reading as meaning-making is a critical recommendation of the policies and programmes in the Indian context. This paper aims to unpack the divergences of teaching reading in early grades from the recommendations of the Government of India (GOI). The study focuses on grade two because, in this grade, children move from alphabets to longer texts, raising issues for reading pedagogy. This paper aims to unpack the divergences of teaching reading in early grades from the recommendations of the Government of India.

Recommendations

The recommendations in this section are taken from the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) (Government of India [GOI], 2020), The National Curriculum Framework 2005 [NCF 2005] (NCERT, 2005), and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 [NCFSE 2023] (NCERT, 2023) and from two initiatives, The Mathura Pilot Project 2012-13 (NCERT, 2012-13), and *Padhe Bharat Bade Bharat* (GOI, 2014). Henceforth, together these will be referred to as recommendations. This section intends to show how recommendations for more than two decades have consistently viewed reading as reading with understanding and emphasized a print-rich environment for promoting reading.

The NCF 2005 asserts that reading is reading with understanding; readers do not just read the written text but make meaning of it based on their experiences. The document underlines that children come to school with a capital in the form of knowledge of their mother tongues, and schools should use this to develop literacy skills.

The Mathura Pilot Project 2012-13 emphasized meaning-focused reading and writing pedagogy in early years with a print-rich environment to motivate children and make reading enjoyable. The intervention highlighted how children look for meaning in a text by taking cues from contexts, pictures, using their background knowledge and self-correcting their reading. The interactions among students in the classroom and

teachers' beliefs play crucial roles in creating a meaningful literacy environment.

The *Padhe Bharat Bade Bharat* defines reading as meaning-making and adds that the interaction between the text and the reader is "shaped by the context—the reader's prior knowledge, experience, attitude, and language of community which is culturally and socially situated" (GOI, 2014, p. 1). This initiative mandates that at the foundational level, 2.5 hours per day be allocated for reading and writing, and children should have access to a print-rich environment with a variety of reading materials.

The NEP 2020 reiterates this view of reading and stresses thinking critically about what is read. NCFSE 2023, developed to facilitate the implementation of NEP 2020, outlines the curricular goals for different stages of reading.

To sum up, the recommendations address three issues—reading is an interactive meaning-making process, the essentiality of a print-rich environment to promote it and training of stakeholders. With this understanding, I examine the classroom processes to explore reading pedagogy.

How is Reading Taught

To know about the reading pedagogy and print-rich environment in the classroom, I observed the following: (a) six second-grade language teachers teaching reading in three government schools in Delhi for 60 hours, (b) the classroom displays, (c) presence of various kinds of reading materials and their use by students, (d) nature of reading activities, pre and post reading discussions, and (e) the hours allocated for reading. Data on reading pedagogy was obtained by observing the classroom transactions while teaching *Rimjhim*, the Hindi textbook. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to understand their beliefs about reading.

Divergence of Practices from Recommendations

I use two reading events for interpreting reading pedagogy.

Reading Event 1- Lesson Bulbul

The teacher asked students to open the lesson and read aloud the title

Bulbul. She asked them to open their practice notebooks as well. The transaction that followed is presented below:

Teacher (T): *Chalo hum pehla paragraph padhenge- 'kya tumne kabhi bulbul dekhi hai.'*

(Let us read the first paragraph—have you ever seen a nightingale?)

She read aloud the first line of the text one word at a time and asked students to read in chorus after her. Then, she went on:

T: *Ab hum mann me yeh line padhenge. Ab sabhi bacche book band karke copy me 'kya' likhenge. Ab check karte hain, /k/ pura hai ya aadha? /y/ pura hai? Matra* kaun si hai- /aa/.*

(Now, we will read this line in our minds. Now close your books and write the word 'kya' (*what*) in your copies. Now let us check the spelling. Is /k/ full or half? Is /y/ full? Which matra is there- /aa/.)

T: *Chalo sabhi ko pehli line padhne aa gai na?*

Students (Ss) (in chorus): Yes, Ma'am.

(T: *Now you have all learnt how to read the first line, haven't you?*)

Ss: Yes Ma'am)

She read aloud the next line; students followed her

T: *'Bulbul ko pehchane ka ek saral tareeka hai.'* *Saral mane kya?*

(There is an easy way to identify a nightingale.' What is the meaning of 'sara'?' [easy])

S (Student): *Aasan* (A synonym of the word easy)

T: *Sahi, tareeka ka matlab kaun batayega?*

(Correct, who will tell me the meaning of *tareeka*? (method))

S: Ma'am main, *tareeka hota hai ki pata lagana.*

(Ma'am me, *tareeka* means to find out.)

T: *Tareeka tarkib shabd se nikla hai, matlab iss tarah se pehchano.*

(*Tareeka* is derived from the word *tarkib*, which means identify using a method.)

In this way, she read aloud a portion of the paragraph. Students followed her.

The teacher proceeded further.

T: *jaha 'chididya'aya hai usse gola kare. Ab ye bataye /ch/ pe kaun si matra*

hai? /d/ pe kaun si matra hai? /y/ pe kaun si matra hai? Ab isse rough notebook pe likho. Acha bataaki /ch/ bana ya /chee/.

(Wherever you find the word 'chidiya' (bird), circle it. Now tell me which *matra* is attached to the letter /ch/, /d/, and /y/. Now, write it in your notebooks. Tell me if it sounds like /chi/ or /chee/.)

She discussed the meaning and spelling of a few more words like *saral*, *poonch*, *tareeka*.

She then asked a child to read the paragraph.

T: (Indicating student A), A *padegi aur uski galti pakadni hai*.

(A will read aloud, and you must pick out her mistakes).

***Matra—is a vowel diacritic**

Reading Event-2: Lesson - Meethi Sarangi

First, the teacher told the meaning of the word *sarangi* (a musical instrument). Then, she read aloud the text, breaking words into letters and sounding out each word. Then, she stopped reading and asked questions.

T: *Saarangivaale ka matlab kya hai? Vo aadmi jo saarangi bajata hai. Saarangivaala kaun hoga?*

(What does *saarangivaala* mean? The man who plays *saarangi*. Who would be *saarangivaala*?)

Ss: *Baba*

(Old man).

T: *jo sarangi bajata hai. Saarangi ke /g/ pe kaun si matra hai- /ee/ ki. kaun si, Badi /ee/ kyunki hum jyada saans kheench rahe hain. Ab dekho dusri line puri ho gai ab isse fir padheneg*

([*Saarangivaala*]. The man who plays *saarangi*. In the word *saarangi*, the letter /g/ has the *matra* /ee/. We hold our breath longer on long vowels (compared to short vowels). Let us reread the second line).

After reading three lines this way, the teacher explained the entire paragraph in her own words. Then, she identified difficult words and told students to circle them.

The two reading events show that teachers take a sequential approach to reading pedagogy (See also Sinha, 2010) in contrast to the

recommendations. There are two significant mismatches between the reading pedagogy and the recommendations, which are as follows:

- Reading Pedagogy
- The Role of Students in Reading

Reading Pedagogy

Despite the recommendations, the teaching of reading in the six classes was essentially through decoding. First, teachers read the text, followed by choral reading, and then teachers explained the text. Allington (2013) puts forth two arguments against choral reading. (a) A single student reads mechanically. Others merely follow along, and (b) Teachers interrupt every time the chorus makes a mistake.

The pedagogical strategy explicitly followed was that of identifying the *matras* (Event 2: *Now tell me which matra is attached to the letters /ch/, /d/, and /y/?*), blending it with letters, (Event 1 - *In the word 'kya'(what) - is /k/ full or half?*) and pronouncing the blended words correctly and explaining the mechanical aspect of the *matras* (Event 2: *In the word -saarangi, letter /g/ has the matra /ee/. We hold our breath longer on long vowels*). Another issue was the circling of difficult words. Here too, the teacher decided which words were difficult for students, not the students. Word meaning also received some attention (Event 2: *What does saarangivaala mean?* Event 1: *Tareeka is derived from the word tarkib, means identify using a method*). This kind of pedagogy runs counter to the meaning-making process articulated and reaffirmed by the recommendations.

There is little scope for interaction between the reader, word and world. The meaning is limited to word or phrase level; students get a fragmentary reading experience as they do not get to enjoy reading a complete story / poem. Interpretations, which lie at the heart of meaning-making, remain outside the realm of reading pedagogy. Explaining the text cannot be regarded as a meaningful activity as it falls short in acknowledging a child's active agency in constructing meaning.

Another point worth noting is the focus on errors. Recommendations from programmes stress that excessive pointing to errors demotivates or instils anxiety in students and curbs their interest in reading. In reading event 1, the teacher prompts students to point to errors made by the student engaged in reading (*A (name of a student) will read aloud, and you will have to pick out her mistakes*).

Role of Students in Reading

There is a mismatch between the recommendations and the classroom realities in students' role in reading. The students listen to explanations, answer factual questions or the meaning of difficult words and engage in choral reading. Students seldom got the experience of engaging in independent reading. Sometimes, the teacher would call one or two 'bright students' to read a selected portion of the text aloud. Here, too, teachers provided the explanations. These practices suggest that teachers believe young children cannot read complex words, lengthy texts and sentences. They are treated as passive receivers of meaning instead of constructing the same through dialogues or discussions. The student's agency as a thinking being, capable reader and meaning maker is missing.

Contradictions in Print-Rich Environment

A print-rich environment is a requirement for reading to develop, contribute to literacy, and become a life-long skill.

In the six schools, there were a few charts displayed like *kaam apne apne* (our professions), *Aakar* (shapes), *Mahino ke naam* (names of months), *Yatayat ke sadhan* (Means of transportation). The charts were above and beyond the reach of children. They did not engage with the displays. The language textbook was the only print available to students in five schools. There were no reading-related activities.

There were a few children's books in one school, and the teacher conducted storytelling sessions. Here too, she (and not students) selected the book, read it aloud, and narrated it. Studies have shown that students are motivated to read when they select books based on their interests (Krashen, 2004). Students were rarely shown prints and illustrations in the storybooks.

In the storytelling sessions, I observed that the teacher constantly shifted her focus from storytelling to teaching spellings and word meanings. The storytelling sessions replicated the reading events 1 and 2.

On the other hand, the NCFSE 2023 argues for providing large picture books, storybooks, and colourful graded readers. The Mathura Project provided about ninety books to the project schools, created and used reading corners and space for group work. None of these were available

in the six schools. Reading occurred occasionally in the second-grade classrooms despite the recommendations in *Padhe Bharat Badhe Bharat*. Under these circumstances, the meaning of a print-rich environment is contravened.

Overall, the language classes I observed were a print-poor environment, not at all conducive to developing interest or motivation in reading. To conclude, the ground realities on how reading is taught diverge from the recommendations. One reason for the persistence of traditional decoding is the teachers' beliefs. The subsequent section provides an understanding of what teachers believe about reading.

Teachers' Beliefs About Reading

Semi-structured interviews with teachers helped to know about their underlying assumptions about reading. Teachers believed that good reading is fluent and error-free.

Bina ruke ache se padhna pathan hai, bina atke padh rahe hain, purna viram pe ache se ruk raha hai.

(Reading is reading without stopping, reading without halting, stopping only at full stops.)

Bacha ache se pehchan karke shabd sahi se pronounce kar sake. Ye tabhi ayega jab akshar gyan hoga.

(The child should identify words and pronounce them correctly. This can happen only after getting knowledge of letters).

Pathan jaise path ki reading hai, pehle usse bacho ko samjhana ki hum kya padh rahe hain."

(Reading is reading the lesson; first, letting students understand what they are reading).

For teachers, reading is decoding. Teachers believed that in the second grade, *matras* must be taught as students learn letters in grade one. The two reading events are witnesses to this belief. Teachers also believe that this reading pedagogy is appropriate for the young minds, incapable of being agents of their learning.

Implications

The quality of reading instruction in the schools is a matter of concern. The decoding approach is teachers' pre and in-service training (Bahuguna,

2016; Sinha, 2010). These programmes should address the teachers' beliefs about reading by redefining reading pedagogy aligned with the recommendations. Teachers must be made aware of the importance of meaningful engagement with reading and motivating readers by setting up reading corners that include children's literature, providing a variety of books and opportunities and space for children to select books of their choice, making reading an enjoyable experience and developing a sustained reading habit. It is imperative that the teaching of reading be aligned to the recommendations for children to contribute to literacy development and become lifelong learners.

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