

Reading for Meaning Making: A Case for Graded Reading Series *Barkhaa*

Meenakshi Khar

Abstract

Reading is an everyday activity; human beings get interested in reading whatever they see in print or visuals. A lot of print material is skimmed and scanned by non-literates too, in their everyday lives. Children begin reading in the same fashion: interestingly, there is no answer to the question—how they learn to read. Children begin reading before getting into school and develop a sense of the reading and writing conventions; the emerging literacy skills must be nurtured for enhancement. Children’s literature, accompanied by conversations based on books and everyday experiences, plays an important role in paving the way for the emerging process of reading independently. Developing reading skills is crucial and demanding, as it requires a humanistic understanding of language development and the need for child-centric literature for sustained reading. This paper discusses *Barkhaa*, a graded reader in promoting meaningful reading.

Keywords: Graded reading material, reading, co-reader, assessment, sustained reading.

The skill of reading acquires significance in academia when ‘Reading as a skilled activity’ becomes indispensable for academic achievements, scholarly innovations and lifelong learning in everyday life.

The larger question is how to begin reading? For many, oral communication is considered the stepping-stone for beginning reading. A substantial amount of time is spent on teaching oral skills to young children; the focus remains on the premise that children first speak.

This idea absorbs the time and energy of classroom teaching and denies children opportunities to read and write on their own. A common view of reading that emerges from this approach is that reading is a procedure of learning to identify letters and decode the words, acquire appropriate pronunciation and access the meaning. This bottom-up approach teaches to fragment the elements of language into parts, and in the process, the meaning is lost, an uncared aspect of existing practices of reading. Following the traditional methods of teaching reading, children work their way through texts word by word, or letter by letter (e.g. C-a-t) laboriously and do not benefit from the knowledge they have for reflection.

A profound understanding of reading says it is a process in which the information from the text and the knowledge possessed by the reader act together to create meaning. Good readers skilfully integrate what they receive from the text with what they already know.

However, in addition to obtaining information from the letters and words in the text, reading involves selecting and using knowledge about people, places, things, and a sense of how a story proceeds. The acquired knowledge determines the efforts of the reader to get the intended meaning for forming ideas.

The skill of reading is associated with reading in school textbooks. The reading environment of the school does not recognise reading and reading materials beyond it. The idea of reading with meaning has found space in language education. National Education Policy reinforces the idea with mechanism of assessment and mother tongue-based learning.

There have been a few highlights during the last few years, specifically the pandemic and the post-pandemic periods. The report on learning loss in the early years of schooling is reported by a research study by the Azim Premji University. It says “on average, 92 per cent of children have lost at least one specific language ability from the previous year across all classes. These abilities include describing a picture or their experiences orally, reading familiar words, reading with comprehension and writing simple sentences based on a picture” (Azim Premji University, 2021, p. 4). But, the ASER has shown improvement in the reading skills of the children in the primary stage (ACER Centre, 2024).

However, the concern persists regarding how to improve the engagement of children with books, other than textbooks. There is a need to widen

the scope of the reading assessment, which considers the child's ability to process unfamiliar and abstract information for expression based on continuous language acquisition. Here, it is important to mention the relevance of children's literature and authentic materials in primary classes.

Children's Literature: A Helping-Hand in Reading for Meaning

It is important for learning to read with meaning that children read independently and immerse themselves in authentic literature at an early age. Their efforts to read silently should be acknowledged along with their reading-time in the classroom. Children who begin reading a book before going to school are more likely to read print in their surroundings and gather information about the conventions of writing. Hence, the idea of an occasional library period in the timetable is not valid because reading is an everyday activity.

Having a substantial amount of varied knowledge is essential for reading with meaning. The crucial question is how to build this knowledge in children. It is firmly established that children's literature plays an important role in developing skills in reading and familiarising children with the world around them. Reflective and independent reading of literature introduces them to people, situations, conflicts, values, nature, and many more things. Literature aids in understanding human nature; the reader comes to see himself in relation to others. The skilled readers of literature become familiar with the variety and veracity of life experiences and set standards of quality for themselves.

What Makes Reading Literature an Authentic Experience

Reading books does not automatically lead to literacy. The real link lies in the verbal interaction that occurs between the text and the child during reading. The beginning of the development of literacy skills lies in the social construction of meaning around print by engaging children in scaffolded conversations as they discuss print and its meaning. The consciousness raising about the content of the text depends on the contents' relatability with the reader and opportunities to share their voice by narration, drawings, writing and reading more.

- The preschool years are crucial for children's language and literacy learning; what happens during those years has a lasting effect on all

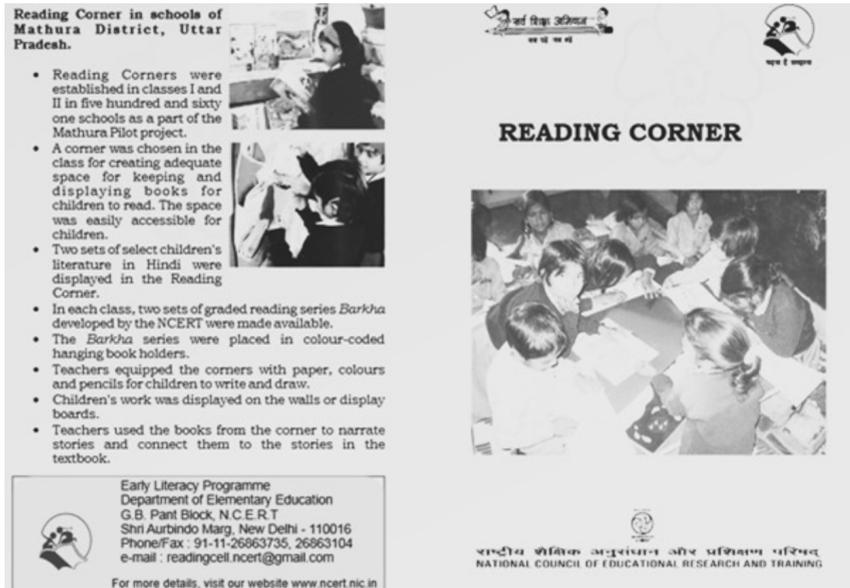
learning. Early experiences with language through conversations, stories, and print are formative and become determinants of children's academic, social and vocational abilities.

- The crucial point after ensuring access to children's literature is mediation by the teacher, parent, sibling or others who could help them bridge the two, i.e. the child's language and the language of the text. The mediation also confirms the child's constructed meaning or may redirect to another reading of the text without a sense of failure. Even silent readers who are not active speakers benefit from classroom conversations.
- Functional classroom libraries and reading corners in foundational and primary stages are crucial for exposure to books since the availability and easy access to books are two important ingredients of beginning reading and forming lifelong reading habits.

Why and Why Not a Graded Reading Series

The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) initiated the Early Literacy Programme in five hundred schools of Uttar Pradesh spread across five blocks of Mathura district in 2007. The Reading Programme (Early Literacy Programme now) used the philosophy of the whole language approach to develop reading skills. Along with academic support, administrative machinery was also oriented towards promoting reading in schools. The Graded Reading series *Barkhaa* was developed for children to read independently. The classrooms were transformed with opportunities for sharing, talking about pictures and books, and giving voice to ideas and thoughts through drawings and scribbles. Classrooms for I and II were equipped with reading corners (See picture 1). New titles were added to racks and shelves and books placed open-faced, to show their fronts instead of the spines to encourage browsing. The classroom literacy-based collections included picture books, short chapter books, humorous stories, informational books, and magazines. As a result of the exposure, children gained autonomy in reading with their understanding and expression.

Picture 1: About Reading Corner



(NCERT, 2008a)

There has always been an unresolved dilemma over what children should read. The classroom processes are faulty on account of not acknowledging individual skills, ideas and potential; and they stifle the expressions of the reader as these are supposed to be 'out of syllabus'.

Graded readers is a generic term referring to reading material that is written in a simple way to facilitate reading comprehension. There are pros and cons to using graded reading series for language learning, and particularly for the first language. The major argument is that children should begin their literacy learning with authentic literature, whereas graded series are said to be contrived texts meant for achieving predetermined desired goals.

- One of the drawbacks of grading is that writers of graded readers reduce the cognitive demand of the reading process by using simple high frequency vocabulary, simple grammatical structures, and a linear, easy-to-follow plot line.
- Most of the writers of graded readers follow an intuitive method in the absence of an understanding of reading pedagogy. An experienced instructor or author writes a text according to what he

or she thinks potential readers might know (generally structures and vocabulary) or be able to do at a particular level.

- Publishers use their lists of structures, vocabulary, and even sets of beliefs about what should be known or should be done at certain levels.
- The endeavour is to teach language and not what language can do.
- The text is oversimplified, leaving no scope for triggering the reading mechanism.

Graded Reading Series *Barkhaa*: An Initiative for Sustained Reading

The development of the Graded Reading Series *Barkhaa* was initiated after studying various factors indicative of the delays and lack of interest of the learners in reading. Graded Reading Series, originally developed in the mother tongue Hindi, provides foundational skills for language acquisition after capturing the nuances of reading and meaning-making in their first language.

- The majority of children in schools, as well as at home, do not have self-reading materials.
- Teachers believe that oral skills (listening and speaking) are necessary and that teaching language is a linear process, i.e., it should be learning to listen, speak, read and write. The stories of *Barkhaa* ensured faith in a child's abilities to read and acquire language in natural ways of learning.
- The methods of teaching and learning of language are rote-based, far from the natural ways of acquisition of language for young children.
- Textbooks are the lone source of teaching reading and meeting the demands of the examination.
- The time for reading books is substituted with remedial teaching or language learning lessons in schools.
- Lack of opportunities for teachers to develop familiarity with children's literature and its integrated use in the curriculum and textbooks to read and develop language proficiency.
- Reading stories benefits readers at affective and cognitive levels and has a positive effect on affective variables such as attitude towards reading and learners' self-confidence in their language abilities.

Graded Reading Series Barkhaa: A Window on Inclusive Learning

The need for inclusive learning has been explored through *Barkhaa*: Reading Series. The forty stories provide daily accounts from children's lives in the Indian context. These are designed with a focus on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) that allows greater reading accessibility to numerous individuals across diverse needs.

- The storybooks have braille, tactile components, word-pictures, and flashcards for children with learning difficulties.
- Another initiative for inclusive learning is a translation of the stories originally written in Hindi into other Indian languages.
- Visual language, like illustrations is a pedagogical tool in the stories. The expressive and text-aligned illustrations provide cues for understanding the story. Children with minimal text-reading abilities will also get interested in reading the story with the help of the illustrations.

Processing Texts for Enhancing Reading Skills

Children who come to school are intelligent users of language. They have multiple sources for language acquisition. The more they engage in activities and get exposed to language use, the more consciously they will select vocabulary and nuances of grammar in their expressions. Entry into school is a crucial stage in terms of how the school(s) and the language policy recognise children's already acquired language proficiency.

Barkhaa has forty thematic stories with a fixed number of characters. The stories revolve around incidents familiar to children. The narration involves children's participation in the situations, engaging the readers with one of the primary and essential skills of reading, that is, prediction/guessing for comprehending the text. The stories are written accounts of the situations children have encountered and dealt with verbally. The processing of the text is like a talk/conversation/dialogue processed for understanding and response. There are several opportunities for prediction while reading the graded stories. The connection between speech and writing is understood, giving children the confidence to write what they speak.

Barkhaa Graded Reading series is an insightful initiative for beginning reading in the first language.

- Children as young readers learn to read the meaningfully contextualised and visually synthesised textual inputs.
- The story, in the form of visual and written text, is the medium for beginning to read independently, similar to their attempts to speak on their own.
- Stories are created by including elements and rhythm, such as, characters, interactions between the characters and situations, points of conflict, and action by the characters leading to a meaningful and reflective end.
- The Graded Reading Series is about the living experiences of children. Therefore, it curtails the rate of failure in reading with comprehension, a common phenomenon prevailing in schools among readers in the primary years of education.
- The reading initiatives of children encourage them 'to write' their voices, establishing linkages between reading and writing.
- The time of the reading span is longer, and the association with the characters who stay and act in the stories facilitates an intensive reading experience at this stage and enhances literary competence.
- The series is for reading independently in terms of selecting books, self-assessing reading experience, and their abilities to negotiate and resolve issues in the given situations.

***Barkhaa* Graded Reading Series: Implicit Complexity**

The complexity of the plots in the forty stories increases as readers move upwards across the levels. There are two central characters in every theme, and the stories revolve around them, showing their understanding and handling of situations. For example, in the stories of Jeet and Babli, we learn about children's indigenous games and the interesting strategies they use to play them. Tosia and Mili are friends who are curious about their surroundings, love to explore and become adventurous, as all children wish to do.

The grading of the stories is not based on mathematical formula. The stories become substantive, with main and minor supporting stories increasing the reading span and improving syntax.

First Level: There are ten stories at this level. Every theme has two stories supported by meaningful illustrations and text on every page. The story is about an event and its resolution (Picture 2).

Second Level: There are ten stories, two on each theme, with illustrations and more words.

Third Level: At this level, there are ten theme-based stories. The text density related to the illustrations increases. Two to three smaller events or sub-plots develop within the main plot to increase the reading span.

Fourth Level: The fourth level is also based on the story's narration, with the increased complexity of the text and illustrations. Grammatical awareness and vocabulary input increase as stories are woven in two to three plots.

Picture 2: Stories of Barkha Graded Reading Series

Stories of Graded Reading Series-Barkhaa					
Theme	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Characters
Relationships	<i>Ranee Bhee Munmun aur Munnu</i>	<i>Oon Ka Gola Hich Hich Hichki</i>	<i>Mansee ke Moje Mere Jaitee</i>	<i>Peelu ki Gulli Nani ka Chashma</i>	Rama and Rani
Birds-Animals	<i>Tota Mitthare</i>	<i>Moni Tuti</i>	<i>Koodte Juraabein Talab ke Maje</i>	<i>Chunni aur Munni Mimi ke Lije Kya Loon?</i>	Kajal and Madhav
Musical Instruments, Games and Toys	<i>Gilli-Danda Chhapan- Chhapare</i>	<i>Jeet Ki Peepnee Out</i>	<i>Babli ka Baja Jhoola</i>	<i>Chalo Peepne Banayen Tabla</i>	Jeet and Babli
Around Us	<i>Majaa aa Gaya Mili ka Gubbara</i>	<i>Hamaree Patang Sharbat</i>	<i>Mili ke Baal Tosia ka Sapna</i>	<i>Mili ki Cycle Pakao-Aam</i>	Tosia and Mili
Food	<i>Meehe Meehe Gulgule Pboolee Rati</i>	<i>Pattal Chaanul</i>	<i>Chai Golgappe</i>	<i>Geboon Bhatta</i>	Jamaal and Madan

(NCERT, 2008b)

For children, reading is a personalised experience. The stories in the Barkha graded reading series are about the children's everyday lives,

hence providing context for reading. The graded reading series presents subtle and implicit gradation in the levels of stories and lets children select the books depending on their judgement.

Engaging with *Barkha* Graded Reading Series: A Shared Reading Experience

Teachers who themselves are readers and writers create an environment for reading. They participate in reading stories with children. The selection of children's reading books will also create a democratic environment, diversifying classroom activities.

A story is a puzzle that may not have a linear progression or a single conclusion. Teachers can create familiarity in the children with different story elements, i.e. storyline, situations, characters, messages, etc., phonemic cues, and guessing, without deviating from the story's core. This exercise should continue until children connect the puzzle or take cues to understand the meaning of the story, thereby sustaining the process of meaningful reading. Children may alter the story in the process of meaning-making because the focus is not on recall or reproduction. In this participatory process, teachers become co-readers of the story. Teachers' dialogue with children will give them insights into their reading behaviour and interests. They give children ample time to read and think, followed by drawing/writing opportunities, because children, as readers, have something to say!

Children often desire to re-read the same story; there may be several reasons, such as, interest, revisiting to confirm the derived meaning or re-examining their interpretation in the light of different explanations by the teacher and other children. Teachers may plan re-reading sessions by enacting the story or involving them in other activities. However, the focus should be on the long-running text of the story, and not teaching about the language for some time, because doing language exercises does not account for meaning-making endeavours, which is the prime goal.

Assessment of reading experience is a crucial area. Children explore the world when they read meaningfully, even at the foundational stage. Teachers' assessment lies in eliciting young readers' thoughts to further their explorations. The teacher's diary will give cognisance and an appreciation of children's creative language skills. This may give children a fair view of their reading experience/skills. Teachers'

suggestions for reading, more for the pleasure of reading, play a vital role in promoting reading. After all, children are exploring the world.

References

ASER Centre. (2024). *Annual status of education report (Rural)*. Pratham Education Foundation.

Azim Premji University. (2021). *Loss of learning during pandemic. Field Studies in Education*.

National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2008a). *Reading corner. (Brochure)*. NCERT.

National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2008b). *Barkhaa graded reading series (Brochure)*. NCERT.

Meenakshi Khar is a Professor of English in the Department of Education in Languages, National Council of Education, Research and Training, New Delhi.

meenakshikhar@yahoo.co.in