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# ESTABLISHING AND DEVELOPING READING SKILLS IN BLACK PRIMARY SCHOOLS

**J V RODSETH**

*Molteno Fellow & Senior Research Officer, Institute for the Study of English in Africa, Rhodes University.*

In this paper I will present a brief, general view of a curriculum development project in which I am involved, of its reading component in particular. I will also consider what lies ahead of us, ahead being after standard two, where we are busy at present.

The project (generally known as "The Molteno Project") falls within the administration of "The Institute for the Study of English in Africa", Rhodes University, and because of its great size (over 6 000 teachers and 1/2 million children have been reached) it has a second base in Johannesburg - where I am employed. The project was begun in 1975 and since then has produced a report (Rodseth, 1978), and, following the recommendations, a mother-tongue literacy course for Grade I called "Breakthrough", a "Bridge to English" course for Grade II, a "Bridge Plus 1" course for Std. 1 and a "Bridge Plus 2" for Std. 2. The materials developed comprise course books for pupils, manuals for teachers, and materials (including video programmes) for teacher- training.

Early research into English teaching revealed a severe neglect of reading - due to two main factors. Firstly, the English programmes in popular use tended to employ audio-lingual methodology with a consequent neglect of reading, and what reading was done tended towards types of choral reading which often obscured many pupils' inability to read with understanding. Secondly, a sound mother-tongue literacy base was lacking - a large number of pupils were entering Grade II with precious little vernacular reading ability to transfer.

The starting point chosen was thus a vernacular literacy course. This was a controversial decision for some, as vernacular tuition requires separation of groups and is associated with "Bantu Education". We believed that the great potential for learning to be literate in the mother tongue outweighed other considerations and that in a post- apartheid society educationists with good sense would probably accept the case for a mother tongue start. Our argument has always been: the quickest route to English is via the mother tongue.

A careful examination of reading theories and research guided our development of both vernacular and English reading systems. From the Great Debate on the relative merits of phonics and look-and-say grew the conviction that look-and-say proponents had built their case on a false theory of reading, false largely because of a misunderstanding of Gestalt psychology. We opted for a strongly phonic approach - but not a mindless chanting of syllables methodology. The challenge was to put phonics into a meaningful context. A marriage between the vernaculars and Breakthrough to literacy methodology provided the means to meet this challenge in a mother tongue course.

Breakthrough to Literacy is a realization of the language-experience approach: reading material is generated by pupils who convert oral expressions of experience into the written form. Thus a first sentence might be "I love my mummy", rather than "See Rover run. Run, Rover, run." A language experience approach has as its greatest strength pupil motivation, and in the "Breakthrough to Literacy" system an efficient system of storing the printed cards which pupils use to express themselves in writing. (sic) The system facilitates motivation by providing an easy means for expression.

Breakthrough to English, while good, does have a problem - the English spelling system. A core vocabulary consists of socially-charged, high-frequency words and these tend to be irregularly spelled. Think of the spelling and pronounciation problems in "I love my

mummy". English learners do have difficulties with the Breakthrough core vocabulary and with developing phonic skills, the main reason why the system has had limited success in England and elsewhere.

But Breakthrough to Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Tswana, etc. is a very different situation indeed. Here we have languages, unlike English, recently written down and therefore enjoying a high degree of regular spelling. Added to this is the great advantage of the syllabic nature of our black languages - the total for each is in the region of 270 syllables. By the time a child has learned 40-50 of the high- frequency syllables, he is well on the way to reading.

Breakthrough to the vernaculars has been remarkably successful: the combination of a task-based learner-centred system and a language which, through its consistency, allows pupils to generalize correctly from discoveries they make, is a powerful one. Pupils have been released from the oppression of teacher-centredness and allowed to reveal their true learning capacities - quite remarkable in many cases. Fast learners are becoming fully literate with ease and writing pages of compositions in only a few months.

The Breakthrough class with its small-group, learner-centred, problem- solving character has radically changed Junior Primary education on a very large scale. It has the look of healthy future South Africa (sic) and is seen in such political terms by many leading educators. There is often a missionary zeal at courses, where it is believed skilful, energetic, and enthusiastic problem-solving South Africans are being trained for a better future. There is great joy in the discovery that children are infinitely cleverer than it was previously believed.

Building on a good mother-tongue foundation and establishing English-as-second-language literacy skills present different and very difficult challenges. We decided that the combination of pupils' minimal English and irregular English spelling

ruled out a language- experience approach like "Breakthrough to English". We wanted a strongly phonic approach which allowed pupils to move easily from vernacular and not be immediately confronted by words like "eight" (which appears on the first page of a well-known reader). Our solution was the "Bridge to English" reader which engineers consistency in the following ways:

While vernaculars enjoy a close match between the 5 vowel letters and 6 or 7 vowel sounds, English has to stretch the 5 vowel letters to cover 20 sounds. An easy start therefore is with those letter-sound combinations which work in English nearly as they do in the vernaculars. By choosing these combinations initially, we present the child with reading units (the first four) which can be read with mother tongue reading skills alone. Thus:

e as in 'leg' or mother tongue 'Emdeni', not as in 'me'
o as in 'log' or mother tongue 'imoto', not as in 'go'
a as in 'car' or mother tongue 'dlala', not as in 'hat'
u as in 'bush' or mother tongue 'nkukhu', not as in 'hut'
i as in 'pig' or mother tongue 'sisi', not as in 'time'

Moving on to other vowel sounds, we employ diacritical marks around the vowel letters to stretch the 5 letters towards the 20 needed.

o = log o = go o = to o = mother oo/o = book, woman
o = or, for
a = hat a = day a = car a = hall a = a hen
e = leg e = me
i = pig i = time
u = bush u = cup
i-r e-r u-r o-r = bi-rd he-r chu-rch wo-rd

(Rodseth & Lanham, p. 9, 1985)

A consistent use of these for a period of some months provides the learner with the kind of consistency he was used to in the mother tongue.

If one looks at spelling patterns of English the regular aspects of the language can be seen. We thus group the vocabulary of each unit around a vowel to form a phonic family. So a unit round the 'ay' sound will include many words such as day, say, play, may, enabling the learner to discover the a-y spelling pattern for this sound.

By these means near-consistency is achieved and pupils are able to develop the phonic skills needed to attack new words. Mindless phonic chanting exercises are avoided as every word is assigned meaning through pictures. Parroting is also avoided through constant testing of understanding - pupils are not able to 'bark at print'. Testing on an on-going basis is done through picture and number matching, multiple choice, picture and sentence matching, true and false statements about pictures, gap-filling exercises, and, following stories, standard comprehension questions.

The emphasis on individualized evaluation of pupil progress, a basis for which was established in Breakthrough, is continued in "Bridge". This development is a significant contributor to the strong movement away from the bad old tradition of rote-learning, chorussing and chanting, towards individualized use of communicative, conversational English. Bad old traditions die hard, but this one is certainly on its way out.

Pupils who have achieved strong phonic skills through the Bridge reader read with some confidence and are able to tackle supplementary readers which, in the past, have tended to go unread. This means that a start can be made with silent reading and the weaning process from word-by-word reading.

In "Bridge-Plus-One" (for standard one) higher-order reading skills receive a lot of

attention. The Bridge Box Library (with its teacher's manual) is a developmental reading course of its own and can be detached from the main ESL course. Reading development is promoted in the following ways:

Firstly, the box contains 6 copies each of 34 titles, plus single bonus books and a dictionary. A greater range and volume of reading is provided than is possible with one-copy-per-pupil of a traditional reader. Most of us here are skilled, rapid readers, and able to change speed appropriately for different purposes. We have, with very few exceptions, achieved this fortunate state through reading volumes of print and not through reading-development courses. Our skill advancement has come naturally, and particularly when reading material of great interest. Just having opportunities to read what really interests you can make the break from painfully inefficient word-by- word reading. The Book Box system increases the possibilities of pupils reading more, or reading what interests them and thus of developing faster, more efficient reading strategies.

Secondly, the manual and teacher-training sessions feature some elementary theory and practice on developing higher-order skills: a few excerpts from the manual give some indication of what is being attempted:

> "Not all unknown or difficult words and structures need to be explained. Children should learn to struggle a little in getting the meaning of the whole story, chapter, etc. This leads them to the important skill of working out the meanings of unknown words from the meanings of sentences which come before and after the word. The teacher reads to guide children into working out unknown meanings from the context. Here is a simple example:
>
> "Good readers take the ideas they are getting from the words and sentences in the text and combine them with what they already know about the topic .. Every text has something to be filled in by the reader. A good reader does not begin reading with an empty mind; he has ready the background of knowledge he already has. What is new to him in the text combines

with what he already knows as he goes forward."

"Before going straight into reading a text, build up a background of understanding to the story or passage."

"A technique which helps to build up a background of understanding is to guess what the story or passage is about .... Get the children to read the title of the story or passage, looking at the pictures and the first two or three sentences."

"Good readers are always guessing ahead what is coming. Because they are guessing ahead they do not need to read every word - they 'jump over' words and sentences which a good reader predicts are there:

'Guessing what is to happen next in a story' means that the reader fully understands and remembers what has already happened in the story. As he reads on and finds that his guess is correct, the fullness of his understanding and his ability to remember is strengthened.

'A good reader gets facts and ideas from the text he is reading and "makes them his own". (Conelly et al (1987), pp.26-29).

These simple statements directed at Junior Primary teachers are attempts to put difficult and complex theories into workable practice. What is being attempted is often described in applied linguistics terminology as the "schema theory of reading".

Neisser defines the theory well:

"In my view the cognitive structures crucial for vision are the anticipatory schemata that prepare the perceiver to accept certain kinds of information rather than others and thus control the activity of looking. Because we can see only what we know how to look for, it is these schemata (together with the information actually available) that determine what will be perceived. At each moment the perceiver is constructing anticipations of certain kinds of information, that enable him to accept it as it becomes available." (Neisser, 1976, p.224).

Widdowson puts it differently, and also well:

"The reader applies a schematic frame or scenario to the textual object, samples the information it presents, and makes whatever modification is

necessary to incorporate information not previously accounted for into the structure of his knowledge." (Widdowson, 1984, p.225).

The importance of having a schema of appropriate background knowledge as necessary apparatus for reading is well established. What is not so well established, but equally important is the need to activate this knowledge in the teaching/learning situation.

There have been attempts to promote the idea of activating background in reading development courses - for example in the S Q 3 R technique which calls for survey and question (S Q) before reading, but only recently has any substantial empirical research confirmed its effectiveness. Very significant and exciting research over the last few years - reported by Bransford, Stein and Shelton - shows clearly that reading efficiency increases significantly when readers use background schema and that learners can be taught to improve the quality of their attempts to integrate text schemas with their own. The three researchers sum up their findings as follows :

"The ability to understand linguistic messages is not simply a function of 'knowledge of language'; language comprehension depends on the availability of relevant knowledge to fill in the gaps in messages. However, even the availability of knowledge is not sufficient; it must be activated in order to facilitate people's ability to learn." (Bransford, Stein & Shelton, 1984, p.42).

From all this come three important implications for education. One, text simplification needs to be re-examined as activating background knowledge is a means to simplifying texts.

Two, teachers need to acknowledge more the role of the reader's contribution to text meaning, they need to focus more on process and less on product.

Three, classroom reading-teaching methodology needs to accommodate readers' needs in

this regard. The traditional system of pupils reading aloud in turn round the class will have to go and something better found.

The "something better" we are trying out has been given the label "Shared Book Reading", a system pioneered by Elley in Fiji, on Ni?e island and in New Zealand with remarkably good results. (Elley, 1984, p.296).

The activity involves the teacher reading aloud to a small group of children who follow the text. The teacher uses the intimate group formation to do several things:

1. to create a sense of pleasure and excitement about what is being read and what will be read;
2. to build up a backround of understanding to the story by discussing the title and illustrations, guessing what might happen, using pupils' own experiences relating to topic, filling in information necessary to understand the text.
3. to encourage anticipation by occasionally stopping and asking "What do you think happens next?" "Look up. How do you think this sentence ends?"
4. to raise awareness of vital linguistic points in the text.
5. to allow some good pupils a chance to read sections.
6. to test understanding.
7. to help pupils make use of what has been read by asking for their opinions on characters and events, by letting pupils use facts in the story to solve a problem outside the story, by asking pupils to use their imaginations to carry on a story. (Points 1-7 adapted from Bridge Book Box Manual. Connelly, 1987).

Looking at practice in America (where reading teaching is a full-blown industry) I can't help wondering if what Elley and his associates are getting excited about is significantly different from what the Americans have been doing for decades under the label "Directed Reading Activity". It is perhaps wise therefore to note the counter- movement in America

towards "U.S.S.R.", or "Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading". In a "HIP" session ("High Intensity Practice"), U.S.S.R. happens throughout the school - from the principal through all the teachers to the janitors. A leading spokesman for the cause of undirected reading of self-selected books is Marvin E. Oliver, who cites numerous research studies confirming the substantial benefits of undirected silent reading practice. He warns against the over-use of exercises to develop reading sub-skills and notes that the desire to read is often overlooked in reading development programmes. In a paper "Influencing Attitudes Towards Reading", he concludes: "Research, observation and logic suggest that the direct instructional reading program should be supplemented with activities that will increase the desire to read in a well balanced reading curriculum." (Oliver, 1973, p.17).

In the training of teachers we will have to work hard at developing positive attitudes among young readers. Two principles must govern shared book sessions - first the teacher's style must be one which stimulates the desire to read and not one which makes reading a 'grind'. Second, lessons must lead to opportunities for undirected practice - if possible with a good range of books covering a wide range of interests.

In black education pupils change over to English medium in Std. 3. This presents at least three major challenges relating to the reading skill:

First, English courses prior to Std. 3 ought to feature material from key conceptual areas in the content subjects and the teachers trained to help pupils develop reading skills for these areas.

Second, content subject teachers from Std. 3 onwards need training in developing reading skills for their subjects. At Rhodes University, this is being attempted in a new development involving the I.S.E.A. and the Education Department.

Third, text-book writers who are not language specialists and their publishers are going to need help to improve the readability of their texts.

Every solution creates a problem. If we move successfully towards reading as a cognitive activity and as a process, the other language skills will be brought into play far more than is usually the case. Pupils will have to demonstrate in their listening and speaking to the teacher and in their writing that they are able to read for main points by summarising, that they can connect text schemas with their own by speaking about the connections. Reading development needs to take place in an integrated curriculum featuring strong listening, speaking and writing components.

Curriculum development for our future will have to pay far more attention to reading - the dominant learning mode in our education systems. We will have to produce substantial numbers of reading specialists, trainers and teachers who will in turn produce skilful readers able to pass through school and not in need of remedial reading instruction. We have a very long way to go.

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