

'Mind-Linking'

Using Head and Heart to Teach Reading

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'How do children learn to read?' is a perennial question. In some ways it seems straightforward, but when we see how many children across the world actually find it difficult to read, perhaps it is not so simple after all. In this two-part article, therefore, I have tried to capture the key aspects that will help us support children in making this crucial breakthrough.

By 'reading' you mean...?

To start with, we need to agree on what 'reading' is. For someone who does not know reading, what they confront looks like a few scratchy shapes on paper.



If you are not able to make out what they are, this is what they will look like to you – just some marks. However, if you know reading, something remarkable happens. They don't look like scratches any more but contain something of worth for you!



Now, it feels like something else.

Think over this for a minute. There is something in my mind – something imagined or experienced or felt or thought – and I'm able to reproduce the same something in *your* mind, with nothing more than shapes / symbols very much like these! Amazing and magical, isn't it?

However, it would be a mistake to think that this is a one-sided process, where the one making the marks is doing all the work. The role of the person reading these symbols is to convert them, not only into sounds but also meaning. In order to be able to re-create the same picture or thought or emotion in her own mind she needs to connect it with some part of her *own* experience, by recalling it or comparing it. She thus breathes life into those symbols, and converts them into meaning for herself.

To get a sense of how it works, take a look at an example. If someone says, 'I was at a state bus stand...', you immediately start thinking of the scene, the buses, the water on the ground,

the litter and the smell. But if the person completes the sentence thus, 'I was at a state bus stand in America,' – pouf, the image in your mind vanishes! This is what we also do when we read, we start *supplying* experience and meaning from our side, and learning reading is as much about this as about the symbols and their sounds.

Reading, therefore, is actually an extraordinary process of establishing connection between people's minds. And when we move away from this essence of reading to split it into parts in a mechanical manner, put pressure, or give 'scores', we teach it like a burdensome chore – its very soul, its magic, is lost. If the learner's mind is bound by limiting instructions and isn't given the freedom / liberty by which she can create her own meaning, this is reduced to a superficial activity. And we get to see that children are unable to develop an interest (and curiosity) in reading – they certainly do not learn as fast as we know them to be capable of. Later, these students may be able to read for 'use' (say, for acquiring information) but are not seen to be reading for interest (that is, for their mind).

Before teaching reading

If we want children to learn in this 'mind-linked' manner, what will this involve? Naturally, this will require practice in connecting minds – orally, that is. Children need repeated opportunities to indicate the same kind of meaning-making orally that an active reader does while reading. If children get to listen to a variety of stories and poems and songs, get to think about them, share their daily experiences and concerns – their range of experiences increases greatly. Some of these may be their own experiences, some those of others. And because meaning making requires being able to connect with experience, this prepares them for learning reading. (As you would have gathered, this kind of work becomes much easier if you are fond of children and enjoy working with them – after all 'mind-linking' is an emotional kind of work.)

Before formally teaching reading, if a fair number of oral activities are done with children, they also become familiar with different aspects of language. Their repertoire of words and structures used in language increases greatly and they progressively become aware of the different ways in which language is used in different contexts. By the time they start learning to read formally, they are able to anticipate what words are likely to follow a few words they have learnt to recognize. And this helps them greatly in learning to read.

Where the home language is different from school language

Where children's home language is different from the school language, this becomes even more important to ensure. If we are not able to link minds orally, it is but natural that it will be difficult in the written form. And then if we try to compel them to learn by focusing only on the alphabet and *matras* and spellings, the effort tends to disconnect rather than link minds.

Beginning to teach reading formally

Before teaching reading, if children get the opportunity to handle books – especially picture books, they will learn many things – such as reading goes from left to right (in our context), from top to bottom, and that there is a connection between the pictures and the written words (that is, they express or take further whatever is captured in the pictures). If you read these aloud, it will help them even more.

But when you are teaching reading formally, what kind of writing or printed material would it be better to start with? It would have been clear by now that it would be most helpful to start with that material that children feel closest to and relate with the most. This is why I always try to start with written material that is essentially what has been said by children themselves. If I ask children their names and write them on the blackboard, they will recognize not only their own name but also those of their friends. Some of the other things that can be written in this way include:

- a. Lists that have emerged from discussions (names of things that are round, what you like to eat, etc.)
- b. Lines of poems that they are very fond of
- c. Words from stories they know and like to repeat

This kind of material, which emerges from conversations and interactions with children and which is written on the board or a chart in front of them, would be called – ‘learner generated text’.

With the help of such learner generated texts, children learn to recognize words or sentences, that is, units of meaning. (Please note: ‘recognize’, not read.) Because they already know what is being written from before, they are able to connect the sounds and the symbols and move towards recognizing letters of the alphabet. And once you show them how to connect the different letters, they really pick up the pace.

What should material be like?

It is over here that the role of the library and the textbook becomes really important. But here also, it should be material that can attract children and which includes patterns- that is an interesting kind of repetition which helps anticipate or estimate what is to come. And children are experiencing success (in guessing what is written) and therefore move forward. Attractive material is that which takes into account the age and interests of its readers and whose first objective is to connect with them, rather than making them learn something. This kind of ‘mind-link’ material typically has three qualities.

It raises curiosity: There is something in these materials that from the very first word or pictures makes you want to know more about it. It produces *kutuhah*- it intrigues you. Perhaps

the first picture of a boy looking at a plate of laddus with greedy eyes, or a first line that says, 'Duno the deer was sure he was forgetting something, but he could not remember what it was that he was forgetting...' or a poem begins with the statement 'If only a fan had legs, it would...'. So you will feel like knowing what comes next, isn't it? It is not necessary that the child should be able to read this by herself – if you read it out aloud to her even once, it will be enough to hook the reader in her. And if the beginning has been narrated, you will find the child is ready to struggle with the rest and try to figure out herself as much as possible –and this is what takes students towards learning.

Of course, in all this we assume that the rest of the text or the textbook will continue to have this element of producing interest throughout.

Liveliness: What we consider 'easy' language is not necessarily easy for children. It can be so boring that the child (that is, her mind) simply cannot connect or relate with it. For example, a line such as '*amar uth, ghar chal, pani pi*' is not as useful a line as '_____ ' or '_____'. Even if we are only giving instructions ('How about reading this?') instead of the dry 'Read the following') or describing something ('He was bouncing along like a ball trying to move around on its own / He hopped and he jumped and bounced along the way) liveliness is that aspect in which children will take delight, and will engage with. Very often we are under the mistaken notion that 'short phrases, short words should be used'. In fact, what is far more important is whether the child can connect with it or not, and whether it is lively or not. (Take for example, the word 'aeroplane' compared to a word like 'was' – which do you think is easier for the child?)

Engagement (and even a sense of struggle): If our material presents only a clear black and white world, if our characters get everything easily (a fairy comes and makes everything OK) and if the readers can go through it without much effort, it will soon become tedious. This happens especially in those stories where we are trying to 'impart a lesson' and where the characters don't achieve anything due to their own hard work or intelligence, but mainly due to a set of circumstances and coincidence, or where they conform to adults' expectations of 'good' children. (Do you think this applies to the well-known stories that are commonly used?)

It is not necessary that every material will have all these qualities – but if at least some of them are not dominant, you can be sure that the 'mind-link' will not happen.

Apart from this, the other aspect is that of 'pattern' – that is, an attractive repetition of sound, shape and the structure of language and meaning. This repetition makes it easy for the reader to anticipate or gives a sense of which words /sounds and shapes are coming next. The use of rhyming words in poems (and stories too), the repetition of a phrase or sentences is often heard in folk tales or showing the same scene but from different points of view – are

some ways we are all familiar with. Can there be patterns other than this too? And if you are teaching children, how will you use these patterns?

Going ahead

With all this, we are still only at the beginning of reading. What direction should the journey take now? How will the process of linking minds continue? Do write and let me know your views.

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