

Enhancing Reading Fluency during the Pandemic

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Abstract

The pandemic situation that we are facing today has been a major challenge for teachers particularly in the context of English medium schools in multi-lingual settings. Most children lack any opportunity to read and learn together, and interaction with teachers and peers is almost non-existent. This paper focuses on the importance of reading fluency and its relation to comprehension and suggests *readers' theatre* as an instructional strategy to encourage and strengthen reading and promote oral reading skills. It highlights the development of a *virtual readers' theatre* that schoolteachers can take up to bring children together during the Covid-19 lockdown. Although, inaccessibility is a major concern for most children particularly in the rural sectors, we cannot help but continue to encourage teachers to adopt strategies that create virtual reading platforms for students.

Keywords: pandemic period, readers theatre, reading fluency, comprehension

Introduction

During the Covid-19 lockdown period, many parents complained about their children's lack of reading, particularly, with young learners. A vast majority of students especially at the primary level are still unable to read simple text and sentences. Teachers faced various issues in promoting reading skills due to students' lack of comprehension and lack of motivation to read which may be related to the nature of online classroom transactions and the curricular materials. A major reason for learners' reluctance to read is that the content of the prescribed materials are drawn from unfamiliar contexts which alienates them. Perhaps textbooks should portray the personal situations of the children at home during the pandemic. The lack of a 'normal' schooling system has hampered not only the motivation to read but also fluency, particularly in those who have just started a few years of schooling. Many teachers reported the need to restart the development of reading skills from the most basic level. Several media reports have shown a decline in enrollment and even decline in reading skills in the Indian school education during the pandemic¹.

Before discussing the term 'fluency in reading', it must be noted that studies have been conducted on aspects of fluency, literacy and reading achievements. 'Fluency' is generally

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-58281442>

concerned with speed and accuracy rather than comprehension. Several researchers have shown that oral reading fluency correlates to comprehension and reading competence. Research conducted by Cotter (2012) reveals that fluency is an important aspect of reading comprehension. Practice with fluency along with direct instruction and modeling allow students to be more fluent readers and have more overall success in reading. This entails that incorporating fluency strategies and activities into the daily curriculum is necessary to increase students' overall reading fluency. While working on reading fluency, students are also increasing their overall reading comprehension because they are unlikely to focus only on reading the words, but they are also able to find meaning from the text. In order for students to make sense of the text, they need to reach a level of fluency that allows them to read with ease. According to Laberge and Samuels (1974), automaticity of reading words allows the reader to spend less effort decoding, and allows for comprehension processes to occur (p.48). The true meaning of fluency is often misunderstood, thereby affecting both the teaching and learning of reading. Fluency has evolved to be known as speed reading by many teachers and students, which is not the true intent of fluency (Marcell, 2011). Samuels (2007) made the case that fluency involves simultaneous decoding and comprehending (qtd in Marcell, 2011). Rasinski and Hamman (2010) defined fluency as “reading at an appropriate rate in meaningful phrases, with prosody and comprehension” (p. 26). Both definitions highlight the synergistic means by which the facets of fluency interact. (Marcell, 2011, p.6).

Studies reveal the importance of practice reading and repeated readings in achieving fluency. Instructional strategies vary from reading aloud, to interactive reading programs which largely focus on speed and accuracy. *Readers' theatre* is one of the instructional strategies and approaches to enhance reading fluency despite different types of learners. During the pandemic situation, it felt necessary to create a space for active interaction between the teachers and the students as online classes were difficult to get students' attention and active involvement. The adaptation of *Readers' theatre* in a virtual mode was prepared and carried out in one school in Shillong in an attempt to improve reading habits and reading skills. Students were contacted through the school² and a script from a chapter (English, NCERT) was prepared and sent through email for the students to prepare with the help of their parents. A zoom meeting was arranged with the students and clear instructions were given on how to go about reading the scripts with no formal teaching.

The *Virtual Readers' theatre* aims at encouraging reading culture in young students. Its objective is to promote students reading skills and confidence by having them practice reading with a purpose.

- It is a strategy that combines reading practice and performance
- It is a tool to promote reading skills, particularly fluency in reading

What Really Matters Here?

² Pearly Dew Higher Secondary School, Shillong

- It is not simply just reading the text aloud
- It is a PROCESS in which children practice to READ and PERFORM while promoting an in-depth understanding of what they are reading
- The PROCESS also helps children to understand and acquire knowledge of not only pronunciation and vocabulary, but also provides a platform for them to learn how to use these words not only accurately, but also appropriately
- It provides a space for active involvement of the learners
- It promotes fluency in reading
- It inspires and encourages reluctant readers
- It offers readers an experience of different genres, roles, characters, etc.
- Above all, it enables children an active engagement in meaningful reading

Designing and Conducting the Virtual Readers' Theatre

Scripts can be developed from any aspect relevant to everyday life. Considerable care needs to be taken to ensure that all themes related to a child's life can be incorporated in the scripts. Some of them have been adapted from textbooks from poems and prose and some have been created to relate to contemporary themes that are designed to develop and motivate creativity and imagination in young readers. Educational themes such as health, hygiene, environmental issues, culture integration, national integration, local tradition, and knowledge, etc. however in this activity, a chapter from a textbook was adopted³.

Date and time were set for the virtual reading performance where the students' active involvement would be seen. The activity started with a welcoming note from the teacher. The cast included 6 casting roles and the teacher. While the students were reading the script, the teachers would observe and look for each student's weak points and errors in order to provide appropriate support and guidance. After the reading, the teacher would not only summarize the entire reading process with questions, but also provide tips and strategies to improve on such errors. Hence, teachers are required to prepare few questions prior to any reading activity as part of the assessment.

Outcome of Readers' Theatre

From this session, it can be seen, that the strategy adopted here to promote interest in reading was successful. Children did not only learn how to read with understanding, but also increased their rate of speed and fluency in reading. Further, the ability to act out each script enabled learners to improve their skills and strategic use of language while communicating. Such tools promote communicative competence in young learners

The online classroom had different types of learners and not all were fluent in reading and speaking. But the *virtual readers' theatre* promoted confidence of every learner. All learners developed a feeling which made them feel included. It was found that even the introverts

³ Script: The Fun they Had (Textbook-Beehives, NCERT)

gradually developed confidence. This process of practicing allowed learners to correct each other and help each other as a team. Students showed teamwork, comprehension of the text, and made improvements in their speaking skills when they learned the appropriate expressions. Further, they also learned to grasp meaning of new words within the context and not simply through memorization. The most interesting part about this *virtual readers' theatre* was that it motivated the students to read more, and they even asked the teacher to prepare more scripts. The learning process involved was effortless which made the teaching aspects also effortless.

The entire reading session was recorded and developed into an e-content with instructions to the teachers on how to go about conducting this activity in a virtual mode. Tips and strategies for teachers include:

- The easiest way: Scripts can be downloaded online. However, careful selection of appropriate materials, for instance, the themes, topics, issues, familial context may be taken into account before handing the scripts to children
- It can be conducted in pairs/groups
- Teachers can develop similar scripts related to themes in the textbooks which are closely related to children's experiences and their environment
- Begin with very easy scripts, they are the best in the beginning. Students need to learn to listen to the readers' theatre script just as much as they need to learn to read the script
- Scripts are simply handed down to students to read together and discuss. They can decide on their own, on the roles and characters
- Provide each student with script, highlighting his or her part with a marker/pen
- Give the students the opportunity to read the script to themselves silently, and to read their own parts.
- The use of costumes, props, etc. are NOT necessary
- Provide opportunities for students to practice
- Students do NOT memorize their parts; they can always read from their scripts
- Combine roles if there are too many and cut out scenes and characters that aren't important. Scripts are not fixed. Change them if they work in better in another way.
- Guidance for new vocabulary and for understanding the different characters prior to reading.
- For assessments, teachers can also ask questions to students regarding word meanings, and guide them in their pronunciation, expressions etc.
- Time taken for each script should not be more than 20-30 minutes.

This activity cannot be considered as something new, it simply an adaptation of the readers' theater by Young and Ransinki, (2009) into a virtual mode. During the pandemic situation, we can see many virtual readers' theatre performed by many well-renowned actors and stage performers, therefore, to keep our young learners active and engaged during the gloomy days of lockdown, this activity was adopted.

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