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Conceptualising Reading Fluency: A pre-requisite for effective reading Comprehension

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Abstract:

Reading is one of the important components of literacy and reading fluency is an important sub-skill of reading. It is a bridge for effective reading comprehension; however, this skill has not been given much attention in the gamut of teaching-learning process. Therefore, this conceptual paper attempts to shed light on this skill. This study has the following aims: Firstly, to explicate the theories underpinning oral reading and secondly, to look at the strategies that enhances learners oral reading: Repeated reading, reading practice, modelling, assisted reading, choral reading, and readers theatre.

Keywords: *Reading, reading comprehension, repeated reading, reading practice, modelling, assisted reading, choral reading, and reader's theatre.*

Introduction:

The quality of a country's human capital rests on literacy. The current literacy rate in India showed that our country has come out of the "low literacy trap" (Chandra, 2019). According to the latest available data of National Statistical Office (NSO) the average literacy rate of India is 77.70%. In the context of school education, our country has made good progress in accessibility, quality, school enrolment and drop-out-rate. This advancement in literacy can be attributed to the effective implementation of key laws, policies and programmes. These include Mid-Day-Meal Scheme (1995), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001), Right to Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE act, 2009), the National Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE, 2013) and so forth. Despite these accomplishments, persistent challenges do exist in school education. A survey carried out by Social and Rural Research Institute-Indian Market Research Bureau (SRM-IMRB) in 2009 and 2014 reported that 29 percent of girls and boys discontinue elementary education, without completing the full cycle. Further, Ministry of Women and Child Development survey (MWCD, 2013-2014)

reported that approximately 50% adolescents do not complete secondary education and 20 million children do not attend pre-school.

According to Palmer (2003), “literacy is the ability to use language to communicate one’s ideas expressively, through speaking and writing and receptively, through listening and reading”. Literacy is the core part of education; learning is impossible without four the components of literacy. The components are listening, speaking, reading and writing and these are considered as skills. Knowledge acquisition does not happen without these skills. This indicates that age-appropriate literacy must be attained before any kind of learning. However, the term literacy is often related to language and teaching literacy is the onus of language teachers. This misconception should be removed from the education system and we must realize that educators should act as facilitators of literacy learning. Literacy is considered as a linchpin for child’s development, be it cognitive, social, emotional and language development.

Reading fluency and text comprehension have received increasing attention in academic literature (Bigozzi et al. 2017). Reading fluency is considered as a path to effective reading and comprehension. One of the reasons for poor reading is lack of fluency in reading, which is also a reliable predictor of problems in reading comprehension (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). Learners in the elementary stage who are poor readers face difficulty in accurate decoding and comprehending words given in print form. In essence, reading fluency “refers to accurate and automatic decoding of the words in the text, along with expressive interpretation of the text, to achieve optimal comprehension” (Rasinski, 2004, p.2). Thus, while reading along with accurate decoding of words learners should decode these words automatically.

Language can be roughly categorized (Berninger, 2000) into two: oral and literacy forms. Abilities such as phonological, grammatical, and vocabulary are included in oral language skills, whereas literacy skill comprises reading and writing. According to Robinson-Riegler and Robinson-Riegler (2008), reading is a cognitive activity in which “the processing of information begins when the eyes take in printed page” (p. 403). Reading skills fall under two categories: reading decoding and reading comprehension. To decode or translate into understandable language, learners must develop fluency (Rasinski, 2004, p. 2). Thus, reading fluency refers “to accurate and automatic decoding of the words in the text, along with an expressive interpretation of the text, to achieve optimal comprehension” (ibid).

Reading becomes effective when learners can manipulate the sound structure. For example, “readers at the beginning stage convert printed letters into sounds sequentially that need to be carried in a correct order until the final letter in the word is converted, and the full sequence of sounds is blended into a complete word” (Palmer, 2000; as cited in Navitha, 2021, p.10). In short, fluency act as a bridge between the two components of reading: word decoding and comprehension. This

conceptual work has two aims: Firstly, it aims to shed light on theories of reading fluency, and secondly, looked at the reading strategies to enhance oral reading fluency among children.

Conceptual Framework:

The three terms which are inevitable in reading fluency are accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. Firstly, accuracy talks about the “ability to decode words precisely” (Aldhanhani and Abu-Ayyash, 2020, p. 379). To be accurate in reading, learners must recognize individual words, which includes learning the alphabetic principle. This comprises letters (graphemes) and sounds (phonemes). Along with the decoding of isolated words such as sight words, high-frequency words, and irregular words, learners’ former knowledge also enables them to identify the word accurately and instantaneously (Rasinski, 2014).

The second term linked to reading fluency is automaticity. It deals with “recognising and decoding words effortlessly” (Rasinski, 2014; Samuels, 2007; as cited in Aldhanhani&Abu-Ayyash, 2020). Automaticity rests on the learners’ knowledge of alphabetic and vocabulary. Automaticity and accuracy are closely related and these together foster learners reading process. Research studies have proved that readers’ cognitive load or amount of information being held by the working memory gets reduced when automaticity and accuracy are increased (Samuels, 1974). It was stated by (Lahamnn, Steinkrauss & Schmid, 2027) that when learners are less accurate in reading, they grasp less textual information. Thus, it can be interpreted that both accuracy and automaticity facilitate effective reading comprehension. Nevertheless, it has been reported (Rasinski, 2014) that “automaticity or accuracy alone is not a sufficient condition to determine students’ oral reading fluency” (as cited in Aldhanhani and Abu-Ayyash, 2020, p. 380). For example, in some cases, learners read the word accurately and quickly, however, when presented the same in the form of a text they find it difficult to read with accuracy and speed. This in a way, indirectly hinders the learner’s ability to comprehend the text and reading the text swiftly also impedes their comprehension. In a nutshell, students should need accurate word recognition to reach a proper level of comprehension (Samuels, 2007).

The final component of reading fluency is prosody. This term refers to “reading smoothly with expression and intonation that presents the meaning and comprehension of connected text” (Rasinski, Riki, & Johnston, 2009). Prosody also includes reading with proper pitch, intonation, volume, and rhythm. In essence, reading aloud with expression assists the learners to develop comprehension skills, this underlines the importance of prosody in reading. Thus, based on the above discussions on three components of reading fluency, and also taking the support of studies it is an admitted fact that learners in early years should be fine-tuned in reading fluency. When the learners get training in these components, their reading fluency will gradually progress, which will help them to read numbers fluently. Also, this kind of tuning parallelly helps in their cognitive development and further fosters their academic development.

Reading fluency theories:

This study looked at three theories closely related to reading fluency: Ehri and McCormick's Word Learning Theory; Perfetti's verbal efficiency theory; and LaBerge and Samuel's theory of automaticity.

Ehri and McCormick's theory talks about four phases of reading that the learners go through to achieve reading fluency. The four stages delineated by Ehri (1995) are “pre-alphabetic (preschool), partial-alphabetic (kindergarten), full-alphabetic (first grade), and consolidated-alphabetic (second grade)”. However, in 1998, Ehri and McCormick added one more phase called “automatic-alphabetic”. This stage is meant for beyond second grade. Learners reading fluency in the above five stages happen in the following way: Firstly, in the pre-alphabetic phase, the learners should be trained on letter identification and sound structure of the word or phonics awareness. In the next phase, the partial-alphabetic, where the facilitators should emphasize blending sounds in words or also called phonemic blending. The partial-alphabetic phase is followed by the full-alphabetic. In this phase, learners should be in a position to encode by re-reading the text multiple times and pronouncing the various sounds. The fourth phase is consolidated-alphabetic, where the learners move towards the advanced stage. In the automatic-alphabetic phase, “learners develop automatically and speed in reading familiar and unfamiliar words” (Ehri, 2005, as cited in Aldhanhani and Abu-Ayyash, 2020, p. 382).

It was further pointed out by Ehri, 2002; Pikulski & Chard, 2005 that learners should be assessed and closely observed during the early learning period to ensure that learners move from one to stage to another. Thus, learners who have difficulty moving from one stage to another, need scaffolding. This scaffolding or assistance can be offered by knowledgeable teachers, who can provide a foundation in reading skills. It was further claimed by Ehri that “classroom environment with printed words is significant to improve students' vocabulary knowledge” (Cardoso-Martins, Rodrigues & Ehri, 2003; as cited in Aldhanhani & Abu-Ayyash, 2020, p. 380). This reading theory has comprehensively explained the various phases of reading and how it helps the learners to read fluently and effortlessly with teachers' assistance (Lahmann, Steinkrauss & Schmid, 2017; Pikulski & Chard, 2005; Rasinski, 2014). To sum up, to develop the reading skills of learners, skilled and trained teachers have a crucial role.

Verbal Efficiency theory proposed by Perfetti (1985) ascertained that learners' who have difficulty in identifying words possess difficulty in comprehension as well. Relating it to working memory, learners who are slow in reading need to rely more on working memory and subsequently, restricts them to think about the text while reading. On other hand, dependence on working memory is less in the case of other readers or good readers. In addition, reading a long sentence creates another problem to slow readers, as the probability of forgetting the first ones already read by a

reader is more when they finish with the last words of the sentence. In short, learners who are quick in reading a text can devote time to comprehending the text with the help of attentional resources.

Reading fluency as reflected in the theory of Automaticity:

Another theory closely connected to reading fluency is automaticity theory, which stresses word recognition. This theory was proposed by LaBerge and Samuels in 1974. It is rightly pointed out by Samuels in 2007 that “for the automaticity theory, reading fluency is identified as the ability to decode and comprehend a text at the same time” (as cited in Aldhanhani& Abu-Ayyash, 2020, p. 381). Talking about reading a text, there are several sub-skills learners should be well-versed with, which include letter identification, sound-letter recognition, blending sounds within words, segmenting words into sounds, chunking, and skimming and scanning (Tracey & Morrow, 2012). Further pointed out by Samuels (2007) that decoding, comprehension, and attention are the three basic processes readers must go through while reading. In simple terms, decoding is the process of interpreting the encoded data or information whereas comprehension deals with how we learn and understand a text or content. The last process of reading, attention, which is mandatory for both decoding and comprehension, talks about how much heed and energy readers put on while interpreting the data and comprehending the content.

The theory of automaticity as introduced by LaBerge and Samuels “is a bottom-up serial stage model of reading” (Aldhanhani& Abu-Ayyash, 2020, p. 382). This means that for appropriate reading, attaining the mastery of lower-level processes such as letter recognition at an early stage is needed. This gradually assists the child to focus on higher-level processes such as sounds of each letter, blending sounds, and segmenting words based on sounds. It was rightly stated by LaBerge and Samuels (1974) that teachers should use various strategies for enhancing reading fluency such as repeated reading, drilling, readers theatre, paired reading, choral reading, and assisted reading by recorded audio texts. Supporting this theory, (Pikulski& Chard, 2005) stated that “automaticity theory helps to find those who have problems in reading speed” (ibid). Connecting automaticity theory to memory, this theory stated that less fluency cannot be attributed to a deficit in memory, at times, their lack of attention could also be one of the reasons for less fluency. Thus, as an alternative, this theory suggested the use of easy texts to foster reading fluency which further induces their automatic reading (Samuels, 1979). It was further recommended by Samuels that teachers should use a rubric, self-assessment, and peer-assessment techniques to evaluate learners reading fluency. In a nutshell, the theory of automaticity emphasizes techniques that improve learners' reading speed. These techniques require a lot of class time that in a way increase the workload of teachers in addition to syllabus completion on time.

Strategies to develop Oral Reading Fluency:

A brief description of reading strategies to foster oral reading fluency among the adolescent

group has been briefly described in this section. This includes repeated reading, reading practice, modeling, assisted reading, choral reading, and reading theatre.

Repeated Reading:

Studies carried out by Rubin 2016; Rasinski 2014; Al-Kharusi 2014; Berg & Lyke 2012; and Samuels 1979 reported repeated reading as an effective strategy to increase oral reading fluency among learners. This technique is suitable for learners who possess initial reading skills but display reading fluency inappropriate to their age levels. In this technique, a student along with a teacher sits in a quiet room and reads the passage selected by the teacher of about 50 to 200 words in length aloud at least thrice. The teacher checks whether the student misreads or is reluctant to read the passage longer than 5 seconds. The scaffolder extends the assistance by reading the word aloud and the learners repeat the word after the teacher. Additionally, learners receive feedback on the errors. On the other hand, if the student faces any difficulty in reading a word or understanding the meaning of the same, the teacher reads the word aloud or provides the definition. This repeated reading continues until the learner obtains a satisfactory fluency level. In essence, this technique “increases accuracy, word recognition (sight words), and speed” (Samuels, 1979, as cited in Aldhanhani & Abu-Ayyash, 2020, p. 383). In a way, when students read the same content many times, this helps them to identify the similar words present in other texts which further assists them in mastery learning. However, this method is suitable for learners who have fully acquired the knowledge of alphabets and sounds (Ehri, 2002; Pikulski & Chard, 2005).

Reading Practice:

A technique, not only enhances learners reading fluency but also a mode of gaining knowledge is reading practice. This practice is not only meant to practice reading the same content again and again but it is more about reading different varieties of text. Through this reading practice, the teachers indirectly instill the habit of reading among learners, which is not just limited to school but also, should be extended to home as well. This is a technique, which has dual advantages: upgrade students' fluency in reading and build up their knowledge (Rasiniki 2009; DiSalle & Rasiniki, 2017).

Modeling:

Modeling, is an explicit teaching strategy that is vital and effective in improving learners' reading fluency (Calo, Woolard-Ferguson & Koitz, 2013; Rasinski, 2009). As the name implies, in this technique the learners listen to a fluent reader, which could be a teacher or a highly enabled person (in the words of Vygotsky). This gradually strengthens learners' “phonological awareness and helps them to understand the meaning of text” (Berg & Lyke, 2012, as cited in Rupley, Blair & Nicholas, 2009, p. 127). This oral fluency technique enhances the learner's conceptualization of ideas.

Assisted Reading:

Resembling modeling technique, assisted reading also happens in the presence of a proficient reader. In this technique, the learner while listening to a fluent reader gets an opportunity to read the same text. This method enables (Meeks & Austin, 2003) “the readers to decode words successfully, which later helps them in word recognition and automaticity” (as cited in Aldhanhani & Abu-Ayyash, 2020, p. 383). Assisted reading happens in different forms: the teacher orally read the text to the whole class; the usage of pre-recorded content; and read by a fluent reader inside and outside the classroom. These forms of reading techniques improve students’ comprehension, sight word recognition, phrasing, and expression.

Choral Reading:

Choral is also called “unison reading” or “reading along”. In this technique, the teacher read a text or a poem aloud in the class, and students were instructed to follow the text by pointing their fingers over it. Teachers can discuss the content and ask questions in between to enable learners better learning. Subsequently, learners in a group of three or four were instructed to reread the content in unison along with the teacher, and the teacher pay attention to learners’ fluency, expression, and pacing. This reading-along procedure boosts learners’ confidence and most importantly, reduces their shyness and fear of making mistakes. Eventually, learning specifically, reading becomes a joyful and independent activity. In short, this technique is a culmination of modeling, practice, and repeated reading.

Readers Theatre:

Another strategy to develop reading fluency among children as readers theatre. In this technique, the students independently or under the guidance of teachers act or read a script or scenario or poem or play in front of an audience. This formal or informal procedure continues until the children can perform reading fluently and expressively. Remarkably, the reading theatre approach involved “repeated reading, modeling, and practice which help students in achieving oral reading fluency” (Black 2016; Faatz 2009; Sovitsky 2009, as cited in Aldhanhani & Abu-Ayyash, 2020, p. 383).

Conclusion:

This conceptual study set out to explicate the theories rooted in oral reading and strategies to foster reading fluency among learners. The recent National Educational Policy (2020) rightly pointed out the need for foundational literacy in early childhood. One of the main objectives of early childhood learning is to teach children how to read fluently and comprehend a text with appropriate reading strategies. In other words, reading fluency and subsequent comprehension are closely interrelated and are important indicators not only for school achievement but also for effective communication. To gain more insights into the matter of reading fluency, future research papers

should address the factors that influence oral reading fluency and subsequent text comprehension.

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