Raising Literacy Levels in Third World Countries

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Millions of children in Third World schools are expected to become literate in a language different from that of their home. For such children, the usual problems a lack of resources and lack of well-qualified teachers are compounded by insufficient exposure to the target language. There are typically few books or reading materials in their homes or their schools, and pupils are frequently taught for a few hours each day, in programmes which find little role for reading, by teachers whose control of language is seldom good enough to provide good role models. Moreover pupils' motivation to acquire another language is itself quite fragile. Language specialists stress the importance of frequent exposure, and genuine motives as key variables in language acquisition, so it is not surprising that there are few success stories in raising literacy levels in such countries. Yet the urgency of the problem cannot be denied.

One style of literacy programme that has been tried and evaluated in at least six such countries, has in fact been shown to work. This is the book-based approach, sometimes referred to as "Book Flood". It is based on the assumption that pupils will learn to read and write most effectively in a second language when they are exposed to a wide range of high-interest, illustrated story books, and their teachers are trained in simple ways of ensuring that pupils interact with these books every day, These methods are quite unusual in many of the countries investigated, but are very common in New Zealand primary schools. The methods include shared writing, and lots of discussion about the books read. With such approaches, pupils' exposure to and active use of the language is greatly increased, and pupils are found to learn the language of the books, willingly, under pleasant, non-threatening conditions, at the point of interest.

The examples given below are those in which the author was directly involved. They all used English as the target language, but there is no reason why the method should not work in other languages, provided that there are enough suitable reading books available.

Examples

1. **Fiji Book Flood (1980- 1981)**

Eight rural disadvantaged schools in Fiji were given 250 books (mostly fiction) per classroom, and their teachers, in grades 4 and 5, were trained to use the shared reading method. The pupils had already learned to read in their mother tongue, and were just beginning to use English as the medium of instruction. After 8 months, the pupils' English reading was improving at twice the rate of control groups. After 20 months,their gain had increase in all areas of language - reading, writing, listening, grammar, vocabulary, and were found to spread in all areas of the curriculum. (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983) Improved reading meant improved science, social studies and mother tongue as well.

2. **Singapore REAP Programme (1985-1988)**

The REAP programme was designed for Grades 1-3, by the Singapore Ministry of Education, following the Fiji Book Flood model. Teachers received 60 books for shared reading, plus 150 books for silent reading later, and were given short courses in using the books. Again, the rich diet of reading, with associated activities, produced large learning gains. The programme was adopted nationally in 1988, and recent international surveys of reading-literacy show that Singapore pupils are good readers, in English, in spite of the fact that they learned to read in their second language from Grade 1. (Elley, 1992)

3. **Sri-Lanka "Books in Schools" Programme (1995-1996)**

During 1995, the National Institute of Education instituted a book flood of 100 books per school in 20 schools at Years 4 and 5. Half the schools were urban (in Colombo) and half rural (in Kegalle). The

books were donated by Wendy Pye, Ltd, New Zealand. Teachers were given four days of workshops,mostly on the shared reading method, and story reading techniques. They were restricted to reading books for only 15 minutes per day. Yet after only 5 months, and after a long break caused by the Civil War, language test showed that the pupils in the project had progressed in reading at three times the rate of the pupils who were working on the national textbooks in English. There were similar gains in writing, listening and improvements in attitudes to reading. (Elley and Foster, 1996). The teachers were very enthusiastic about the approach. The Government of Sri Lanka plans to extend the porgramme to all schools. It was significant that no pupil was able to write well who could not also read well.

4. South African READ Programme (1979- 1996)

READ Education Trust is an NGO which has been operating in South African black schools since 1979, and has now donated over 4 million books to schools, and trained 7000 teachers in methods similar to those in other book floods. Each class receives 60 high-interest books, which are stored in the book box in the classrooms, plus other sets of 60 for group reading. There is widespread agreement that the programme is very effective. Enrolment increases and improvements in attendance are healthy indicators of success. In March 1996, a series of surveys of reading and writing in five provinces, confirmed these signs. Comparisons of the achievement means of READ pupils in Std 3, 4, and 5, with those of NON-READ pupils in similar schools showed large gains in reading and writing, which increased as pupils moved up the schoo'. READ pupils were typically two years aheac by mid-primary school. READ officials are using these data to encourage Government to use a book-based approach.

Conclusion

Several more book-based programmes have been reported in other countries, and in other languages. For instance, studies similar to those summarised above have been evaluated and found successful in Niue, Brunei, Israel, New Brunswick, Arizona, Fiji, and Thailand. (See Elley 1991, Walker et al 1992).

Traditional methods of teaching in a second language in Third World schools, with a single text-book and rote learning are very ineffective. They allow virtually no role for reading as a source of new language. A book-based approach has the potential to turn this around. With only two books per pupil, and opportunities for regular reading, and associated activities, pupils do learn to read and write fluently in the target language. They can then become independent learners, capable of reading texts, reference books, and fiction, and thus learn much by themselves.

What about cost? For a class of 40 pupils, 80 different titles and a teacher handbook would achieve a great deal, and would cost no more than 40 standard text-books. Moreover, the potential for durable learning is much greater. The training of teachers can be done in short workshops with occasional training in the schools. Most teachers catch on quickly, even when their own educational levels and fluency in the language are only modest. Other programmes, which require higher levels of general education in teachers take much longer to implement.

Another benefit of book-based programmes is that a large pool of local people becomes available, capable of writing locally relevant literature for children. At present, most books need to be imported. While few are relevant to the local culture, and many more are universal favourities, there is a clear need for indigenous literature in most of the countries listed above. In many of these cases teachers get their pupils to rewrite popular books from overseas, modifying the content, plot, characters, etc. to make them more appealing and to give the pupils a feeling of ownership of the books produced. Some teachers express a desire to become writers themselves, when they see the benefits that good children's books provide. Several experienced authors from countries where a vital children's literature exists, have helped by participating in workshops set for this purpose.

Book floods will not solve all the problems of third World education, but they can have a key role in raising literacy levels in situations where pupils are learning in a second language. For national policy-makers, the solution may seem expensive, but the cost of doing nothing is surely greater.

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