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# ON TEACHING READING AND WRITING FOR FUNCTIONAL LITERACY\*

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## *Introductory Remarks:*

The teaching of reading and writing can be approached from various angles, and with varying degrees of emphasis. Teaching reading and writing to primary school children is not the same as teaching reading and writing to illiterate adults, minimally literate adults, secondary and college students, and university students. True, certain fundamental principles have to be observed in all these teaching-learning situations but there are basic differences in aims, in ability to learn and so forth, which have to be taken into account. In this article, the teaching of reading and writing will be discussed with particular reference to the achievement of functional literacy.

William Gray has correctly stated that "a person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group" (*The Teaching of Reading and Writing*, Unesco 1969 p. 24). One might be tempted to ask what those activities are. In my view, these are well summed up by Eve Malmquist in the following statement:

If we want to conquer poverty, hunger, and disease in the world, we have to conquer illiteracy first. Illiteracy is the most serious handicap for economic, political, social and individual development that we know. In fact, illiteracy is becoming more generally recognized as the most irreconcilable hindrance to development and progress everywhere in the world and furthermore, as a grave block to international understanding and cooperation. (E. Malmquist: *Reading: A Human Right and A Human Problem* IRA 1968 p. 3)

In brief, a functionally literate person is a person who does not merely know how to read and write, but is able to use this knowledge effectively in understanding or coping with the basic issues (economic, political, social, personal and others) that crop up in the society. The teaching of reading and writing is certainly a necessary, though by no means a sufficient, task in the development of functional literacy.

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*Stages in Teaching Reading For Functional Literacy:*

The task of teaching reading for functional literacy is no less challenging than that of teaching children to read. Experience and research evidence suggest that the task can be accomplished in four sequential stages (vide William Gray, 1969).

Stage one is the preparatory stage when the educator/teacher tries to ascertain the reading readiness of the adults, helps to remove handicaps in learning to read, and uses various strategies to promote increased readiness to learn to read, on the part of the adults. Adults who enroll in literacy programmes tend to differ widely in their rate of progress. Factors that account for such variations include: innate ability to learn, background of experience, command of language, and the functioning of their senses (particularly visual and auditory senses). These and related factors need to be investigated by means of tests, interviews and/or informal question-and-answer sessions, and necessary remedial measures should, where possible be applied to ensure increased reading or learning readiness. This is particularly necessary in second language situations where the problems of learning to read in an unfamiliar language, or in a language in which one has a minimal working knowledge, can be quite enormous.

As Gray (1969) rightly points out, most young people and adults who enter literacy classes are usually much more mature mentally than children, because of their greater chronological age and their wider experience. The programme of instruction at this first stage should be designed to achieve the following objectives, among others:

1. A compelling interest in learning to read. This can be achieved through friendly and purposeful discussion of the possible values of reading in various situations.
2. A clear recognition of the fact that printed or written words represent meanings. The discussion referred to earlier should also be designed to create in them an awareness of the interdependence of the spoken and the printed or written word.
3. A fairly wide range of information, and familiarity with the things and activities that will be referred to in early reading lessons. The point here is to encourage group and individual discussions to the point of familiarizing them with new ideas, concepts, issues, and activities which may later feature in their reading exercises.
4. A wide speaking vocabulary and the ability to speak with sufficient accuracy and clarity. Learning to read is known to be a much less difficult task if it is carried out in a language that one can speak and understand with a reasonable degree of accuracy.
5. Ability to think clearly and to make use of what the reader knows in grasping meanings, seeing relationships, making choices and solving simple problems. This ability is also enhanced by oral language activity (vide Carroll 1970, pp. 31-32).
6. Ability to discriminate between different sounds and forms, well enough to be able to distinguish one word from another.

7. Ability to interpret pictures well enough to use those that appear in assigned reading materials as aids in understanding what is read, and in recognizing different words.
8. Ability to work with others, to follow directions, and to adjust oneself readily to various learning situations.

The second stage involves the development of basic reading comprehension skills and greater interests in reading fairly easy materials. The main goal should be ability to read appropriate materials with relative ease, and to focus attention on meaningful information, including notices, signs, brief news items, and simple directions.

The specific aims of the teacher at this stage should include the following:

1. Deepening interest in learning to read.
2. Promoting increased readiness for reading.
3. Developing a thoughtful reading attitude, with appropriate emphasis on the comprehension of meaning.
4. Development of a sight vocabulary of carefully selected words which meet the simplest reading needs of adults.
5. Development of word recognition skills.
6. Stimulation of interest in reading for pleasure and information.

These aims imply that the teacher should build on or consolidate what was achieved in stage one, employ other motivational devices (including persuasion, praise, encouragement) to ensure more devotion to and continued interest in the reading tasks, and introduce appropriate instructional materials which will aid the achievement of these aims.

The third stage should be devoted to further deepening of reading interests and developing reading efficiency. To that end, attention should be focused on the achievement of a number of specific aims, such as:

1. Extending the sight vocabulary in reading to include most words commonly used in personal correspondences, news items, notices and simple bulletins, and books written for popular use. According to Gray (1969, p. 170) the size of the essential sight vocabulary varies from 1,500 to 2,500 for different languages. The teacher must try to remedy obvious deficiencies in this regard by consciously helping them to increase their stock of new ones.
2. Provision of the training needed for effective development of word-attack skills, which will enable the adults to recognize independently any word in their oral vocabulary. In this connection it would be necessary for the class to be taught the origin of certain words, the identification of the root, the stem, the prefix, the suffix and such aspects of words.
3. Development of increased understanding of what is read, including ability to recognize literal, related and implied meanings to re-act thoughtfully or appropriately to the ideas acquired through reading, and to recognize their value in solving personal and group problems.
4. Promotion of skill in reading various kinds of materials and in reading for various purposes. This will necessarily involve prolonged exposure to

appropriate reading materials under proper guidance by the teacher.

5. Development of speed of reading comprehension. As better reading habits are formed and reading comprehension skills are developed, speed of reading can be improved. However, the use of appropriate drill books can facilitate the whole process.

The fourth and final stage should be devoted to the task of helping the adults to acquire more mature reading habits. It is essentially the stage when the literate adults are encouraged to achieve a high level of functional literacy, so that they can feel truly literate and not just minimally literate.

The specific aims of the training programme during this final stage should be:

1. Completion of the training needed to ensure accuracy and independence in recognizing new and unfamiliar words which are likely to be met in the course of reading, including training in the use of dictionaries and other reference materials related to the interests and needs of members of the class.
2. Encouragement of growth in ability to understand printed materials relating to things and ideas outside the range of familiar experience; these include: new ways of doing things; descriptions of people and activities in other lands; new practices, procedures and standards, concepts and ideals in one's own country as well as in other countries.
3. Development of increased capacity to react thoughtfully to what is read, to recognize its values and limitations, and to make use of new ideas in solving personal or group problems, and in modifying one's ideas and behaviour if and when desirable.
4. Extension of reading interest, and acquaintance with various kinds and sources of reading materials—including materials relating to current events, bulletins focusing on practical problems of daily living, magazines, articles, and books of different kinds.
5. Development of curiosity about books, and a tendency to effectively use books and other written or printed materials for self-education, for the enjoyment of leisure, for guidance in solving certain problems, and for acquiring vicarious experiences.

*Methods of Teaching Reading to Adults:*

Current methods of teaching reading (to both children and adults) can be conveniently divided into three main categories: analytic, synthetic and analytic-synthetic. The synthetic method is based on the assumption that the teaching of reading should begin with the mastery of the basic elements of words (letters or syllables and their sounds). When these are mastered they are then combined into larger units (words, phrases, sentences and stories). This assumption has given rise to an initial emphasis on the teaching of the letters of the alphabet (i.e. the alphabetic method), followed by a combination of letters into syllabic units (i.e. the syllabic method) and a focusing of attention on the sounds of the letters and the syllables (i.e. the phonic method).

The analytic method (also called the global method) is based on the assumption that the teaching of reading should begin with the larger and

more meaningful units (viz. story, sentences, phrase and word) which could then be analyzed into smaller and less meaningful units (syllables, letters and phonemes). There is no unanimity on the question of whether a story, a sentence, a phrase or a word should be the starting point in the analytic method. However, the basic assumption is that the teaching of reading may start with the so-called “story method” by focusing attention on interesting stories followed by analysis of the story into various sentences (the sentence method), then into constituent phrases (the phrase method) followed by the last of the meaning-bearing units or the word (i.e. the “word method”).

The analytic-synthetic method, which is eclectic in nature, entails the selection of carefully graded words, sentences and simple passages for analysis, comparison and synthesis, almost simultaneously, right from the beginning. It is an attempt to make use of the methods which emphasize elements (alphabetic, phonic, syllabic) *and* those that emphasize meaning from the beginning (word, phrase, sentence and story).

For reasons of space we will not enter into a detailed discussion of the merits and demerits of these methods. It will suffice to point out that the analytic or global method is in keeping with the Gestalt principle that learning should “proceed from whole to parts.” The methods discussed here (synthetic, analytic and analytic-synthetic) can be effective for both children and adults. The so-called alphabetic, syllabic, phonic, word, sentence and story methods are better regarded as steps, stages or approaches within these methods than as methods in themselves, since none of them constitutes a complete method of teaching reading. Adult educators, or teachers in adult literacy classes, should be aware of the variety of approaches to the training of reading, and should feel free to experiment with one method or the other, until desired results are achieved.

As a general rule, whether the method is analytic, synthetic or analytic-synthetic, it should accord with the specific aims of instruction at the various stages outlined earlier. Instruction should be based on appropriate instructional materials, which may be devised by the teacher to reflect the interests of participants in the literacy class. As far as possible, instruction should be so highly individualized as to make allowance for differences in rate of learning. As the ultimate goal of reading is comprehension or communication of facts, information or ideas conveyed by larger units of expression (sentences, paragraphs, longer selections and books) the teaching of reading should not be limited to decoding letters, syllables, sounds and words.

*On Teaching Writing For Functional Literacy:—*

The teaching of writing is, in my view, a less controversial topic than the teaching of reading. At least, there is far less debate on how to teach writing than there is on how to teach reading. Because of this fact and the reason of space, I propose to deal with it very briefly. Moreover, the skill of writing is so dependent on that of reading that some of what has already been said about the teaching of reading is relevant to this discussion of the teaching of writing.

As in the case of teaching reading, four sequential stages can be

identified for instructional purposes. The four stages, which roughly correspond to the four stages discussed in connection with the teaching of reading, are:

1. The preparatory stage;
2. The stage when the basic skills of writing are mastered;
3. The stage when writing is used in meeting practical needs; and
4. The stage of acquiring more mature writing skills and habits.

During stage I, the main aims of the teacher should be to get well-acquainted with the basic needs, problems or characteristics of members of his class, and to provide the preliminary experiences which will not only provide the motivation but also give them the attitudinal, mental, physical and emotional readiness to learn to write. The teacher should also find out what the adults would like to write at the initial stages. Very often they would want to write their own names, the names of friends, relatives and so forth. As a starting point, such names should be written out for them to copy or trace, while the teacher provides personal supervision and encouragement. Several hours of instruction and practice should be devoted to such preparatory work, and to the teaching of handwriting without forcing them to write "cursive" or "joint script." Emphasis should be on legibility and accuracy. In this, as in other learning situations, nothing succeeds like success, so it is necessary to praise and encourage them for any writing "feats" they may accomplish at this stage as in other stages.

During the second stage, the writing activities should focus on larger units of expression, such as, phrases and short sentences or statements. The teacher should write the phrases and simple sentences, such as, "good books" and "Bola reads good books"; and the class should be encouraged to copy these legibly. Better still, phrases and short sentences encountered in the reading classes may be used for such exercises. Practice should be continued until the adults are able to copy whatever is written, and to write down whatever is dictated, with a reasonable degree of speed and accuracy.

The third stage of instruction in writing may be devoted to using writing to meet practical or personal needs. Attention should be focused on writing out larger units (longer sentences, connected paragraphs and short stories), which may be read or listened to in class. These should preferably be based on topics of general interest to the literacy class. Individual desires to be creative, or to use language creatively, should be encouraged. Errors of grammar and syntax should be noted, and tactfully corrected, but they should not be unduly emphasized or penalized, as this could be counterproductive. Emphasis should rather be on getting the class to participate actively in the excitingly new experience of expressing in writing the numerous ideas, experiences, thoughts and activities that they had listened to, discussed verbally or felt like discussing verbally in many situations.

In all probability, adults will at this stage be most anxious to use their newly acquired writing skill in meeting their personal needs. They may wish to write brief personal letters to friends and relatives; to apply for advertised posts, or to write short petitions about some acts of injustice. Practice exercises should be based on such felt needs. In short, the adult trainees

should be encouraged to write about the things they feel like writing about. They should also be encouraged to use the vocabularies, expressions and ideas they have gained from their reading practice in writing about their personal needs, practical problems and other issues of interest to them.

The fourth and final stage in the teaching of writing should be devoted to teaching them to write more creatively, accurately and extensively. While it would still be necessary to encourage them to write about the things and events that interest them, they should be exposed to different forms of composition writing (descriptive, expository, imaginative, etc.) The teacher should suggest a variety of topics for practice in writing. Even though writing for functional literacy should normally have been achieved during the third stage, this final stage is needed for consolidation, for the development of more mature writing skills, and for learning to use the skill of writing in earning a living, and in meeting more complex demands in society, such as those mentioned by Malmquist (1968, p. 3).

*Concluding Remarks:*

To conclude: It has been suggested in this article that the teaching of reading and writing to adults is a difficult but not an impossible task. It has also been suggested that a high degree of functional literacy in reading and writing can be achieved if the training programme is carefully planned and faithfully executed. Four sequential stages, with clearly defined objectives for each stage, and possible methods of approach, have also been suggested.

Ideally the teaching of reading and writing should go on concurrently along the lines suggested. The adult learner should be encouraged to write down whatever he has successfully learned to read, particularly at the early stages. In this way the skills acquired during the lessons on reading will be used in developing and re-inforcing the skills acquired during the lessons on writing and vice versa. Furthermore, instructional materials should be learner-centered and should, as far as possible, reflect the various occupational, social and other interests of members of the literacy class. This makes the choice of appropriate instructional materials a crucial factor in successful instruction at the various stages indicated.

In the final analysis, success in the difficult but exciting task of helping adults to achieve a high degree of functional literacy will depend, not on a rigid adherence to the guidelines and suggestions derived from this and similar articles, but on the teacher's resourcefulness, his flexibility in using methods and materials available to him, his willingness and ability to tackle the peculiar learning difficulties that the adults might have; and his ability to arouse and sustain the interest of the class at various stages in the course. Even if some teachers forget or disagree with the details of what has been said here, they must not forget this important statement about the proper roles and functions of teachers in functional literacy courses.

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