Pre-Reading and Early Reading Experiences in a new language

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What are the skills and processes involved in reading in a new language?
Reading is a complex cognitive skill requiring interplay between several inter-related sources of information: it involves two basic processes:
- Decoding the script
- Deriving meaning or comprehension of the text

Why is it important for children to ‘read for meaning’ right from the beginning?
Reading for meaning must form part of instruction from the very beginning. When children read with comprehension, this opens up a window onto a whole new exciting world of stories, fun-filled activities and acquaintance with a new cultural world. But this window will remain shut if children are asked to read things that have no meaning for them. And this can happen very easily when they read in a language that is unfamiliar to them. If children are asked to read texts that they cannot understand they soon lose the motivation to read for they see it serving no real purpose.

What is the place of adults reading to children in the development of language?
Many children - even those coming from literate homes - miss out on the experience of having been read to in their first language too, let alone in the new language. This has often been replaced by T.V. watching. Being read to is a primary source of rich language inputs and familiarity with the sounds and words of a new language. Teachers thus need to create, on a priority basis, a space for reading out books aloud in the classroom. A minimum of 15 minutes reserved for reading aloud a story by the teacher over a two-week cycle is a must in any new language class, especially one intended for very young children.

What are some criteria for selecting appropriate texts for reading out in a new language?
There is place for a range and variety of books to be read aloud to the child. There is also place for the same book to be read over and over again to the child. The criteria for selection of stories and texts to be read in the new language class will thus include not just the fact that it is enjoyable and age-appropriate but also how the text is visually presented. For in the absence of sufficient supportive illustrations (in addition to the teacher’s actions and intonations), the text will not be of much use to the child.

What are some ways of reading out that are meaningful and enjoyable for young children?
One thing that young children love is having the same story read aloud to them again and again. In a new language, this is definitely time well spent, for this permits the vocabulary and syntax of that story to become well imprinted in the child’s mind. After a few readings, the teacher can read out part of the sentence and encourage the children to complete it on their own in unison – this is ideal when the story has a repetitive structure.

There are many other ways in which teachers can make reading aloud to the children a thoroughly enjoyable experience.
What are the ways in which one may prepare children for reading independently?

A: Whole word recognition

A print-rich classroom environment helps children in developing a curiosity for print and an interest in the printed/written word. It also helps in developing connections between sound and script. Thus children start recognizing whole words even before they begin to recognize individual letters. In general, this movement from the concrete (whole word and the meaning it stands for, along with the emotional value the child attaches to the object/person it signifies) to the abstract (the letter) is a healthier introduction to the art of reading. In this way, the child is brought in contact with the Devanagari script in its natural communicative form. Some ways in which this may be accomplished are the following:

- The child sees his own name and that of the other children written on lockers, notebooks, desks etc.
- The child sees print around him in the form of ‘labels’ of things in his room (Puzzles, Doll house, Books, Objects etc.)
- The child starts noticing and distinguishing the different scripts in his environment (English, Tamil, Hindi, Kannada): on the road, in front of buildings, on shopping bags etc.

B: Analytical reading: Beginning to decode the Devanagari script involves the following processes:

1. Learning sound-symbol correspondence of letters
2. Becoming familiar with the shape of consonants
3. Becoming familiar with the shape of vowels and their matras
4. Learning to combine consonants with matras
5. Learning to blend the sounds of successive consonants and matras to form meaningful words
6. Learning about ‘half-letters’ and special symbols

What kinds of texts should one select for children to practice reading on their own?

- The text to be read should be short – little text in a large font on a single page is an asset
- The text should have a high pictorial content to enable meaning making
- It is helpful if the text is about a familiar situation

What are the stages and processes by which development of reading skills is encouraged?

- An expert reader reads the text aloud once;
- Through context, pictures, familiar words, the child is helped to make sense of the text;
- The child is given time and space to practice reading the text alone or in pairs;
- Individual help is provided when the child faces difficulties in decoding the script;
- The child reads the text aloud to a small group of children.

In what ways can one encourage as well as assess a child’s comprehension of a text that he reads?

- The child could be asked to illustrate what he reads
- Children could act out a story they have just read, using simple props, masks etc.
- Make lists of characters in the story
- Where did the story take place? What could have been the objects in that setting?
- Add to the illustrations of the printed book (adding labels).