CHAPTER I

TEACHING INITIAL READING WITHOUT REASONING

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

The problem of learning to read is at the very heart of education. In spite of the 'electronic age', literacy is still the single most important tool for getting a grasp of all experience other than the immediate. Fashionable theories which claim that "the word" is somehow played out are mere intellectual fantasies. There is nothing that makes a more crucial difference to the entire life of a member of our society than his reading capabilities and habits.

Society progresses to its zenith when its members communicate freely among themselves. For social communication, or at best any kind of communication, requires the legitimate use of the language. The acquisition of language is ensured in the social milieu. Language is a single phenomenon consisting of both receptive and productive modes. When the oral code is used, the receptive mode is listening and the productive mode is speaking. When the graphic mode is used, the receptive mode is reading, and the productive mode is writing.

All four modes - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - are different, but closely related to aspects of language. The relationships, however, are not static.
In infancy, listening precedes intelligible speech, and reading and writing are nonexistent. During the early childhood language growth is rapid; the level of spoken language begins to approximate that of oral reception. Around the age of six reading instruction begins, with writing coming somewhat later. Some educators believe that reading and writing should be taught concurrently, or even that writing instruction should precede reading instruction. There have also been attempts to teach reading at the age of two, when language development is most concentrated.

Although such attempts may be misguided for other reasons, they do show an appreciation of the unitary nature of language. The common root, and hence the reason for interdependence among the four aspects of language, lies in the search of meaning. It is the nature of the human beings to expect things and events in the world to conform, to follow certain patterns, to make sense. When they do not, persons seek further explanation to satisfy their need for order and consistency, or they force the information into a form they can deal with. We are constantly bending information to suit our predilections much more than we care to think. It is this realization that has led psychologists to form what is known as the cognitive movement.
The basic premise of cognitive psychology is that knowledge is not a simple reproduction of what is experienced, but an active construction embodying elements of what is previously known, what is believed, and what is expected. This constructive nature of experience carried over into our dealings with language, both oral and written. Language has a cognitive basis, which is the same whether the activity is listening, speaking, reading or writing. The cognitive basis makes use of symbols and, in due course, of what Piaget calls "operational thought".

Reading has a cognitive basis. It is an activity that involves extracting meaning from print and assimilating that meaning to one's existing store of information. This is so with the adult readers. But what about a child who is initiated into the task of learning to read?

High rate of illiteracy has roots in the beginning reading. The children encounter reading disability at the critical stage of learning to read. Reading involves basically a set of abstract sounds represented by a series of abstract signs. The alphabet is an abstraction, a defined series, and to really understand it the child must be able to take the point of view of those who defined it. This may be asking too much of a child whose egocentrism is strong; according to the empirical
data upon which the Piagetian model is based, a preoperational learner is not able to perform intellectual operations. The common practice in vogue is to admit child who has completed five years in first grade. From the first grade children are taught reading and writing without taking into consideration their cognitive level. The wastage and stagnation in education has the direct relation with this early entry of child into the school.

The faulty procedure of school entry of the child when its cognitive apparatus cannot grasp reading and its various uses lead to wastage and stagnation. In the very first two years of primary school, the drop-out rate of children from school is as high as 84 percent. This is ascribed to the reading disability of the children.

1.2 CONCEPTUAL BASIS OF BEGINNING READING

More than two decades have passed since "Educational Research" published the innovative article 'Learning to thing about reading' by Reid (1966). Her report of research on five-year-olds' thought about the task of learning to read has stimulated several other investigators to study conceptual factors in learning to read.

The 'commonsense' view that visual perception must be the chief factor in the initial stage of learning to read still seems to prevail. Perceptual difficulties
also are often proposed as an important cause of reading disability - for example, in so-called 'reversals' in the perception of letters.

That these difficulties of beginners and of retarded readers may have a conceptual rather than a perceptual basis is suggested by a comment by Vernon (1981)³.  

"The employment of reasoning is almost certainly involved in understanding the variable associations between printed and sounded letters. It might appear that certain writers suppose that these associations may be acquired through rote learning. But even if this is possible with very simple letter-phoneme association, the more complex associations and the correct application of the rules of spelling necessitate intelligent comprehension."

Reasoning is involved in understanding between associations between printed and sounded letters. Thus Vernon indicates the importance of reasoning processes in learning to read.

Reid's research discovered that young children's conceptions of reading and writing were very different from those of adults. The children show a general lack of any specific expectancies of what reading is going to be like, of what the activity consists in, of the purpose and use of it. They also have a great poverty of linguistic equipment to deal with the new experiences, calling letters "numbers" and words "names" and so on.
From various studies it seems clear that it is normal for most beginners to enter the task of learning to read in a state of cognitive confusion about the characteristics and purposes of reading activities.

1.3 NATURE OF READING DISABILITY

The study of reading disability suffers from the great disadvantage that the disability seldom becomes apparent in the early stages. But for the child with real reading disability, the correspondence between a symbol and sound causes confusion. It appears that he may indeed have learnt that printed words have some relation to spoken words; and, with a few simple words, he has memorized the spoken word that corresponds to a particular printed shape. But he does not seem to understand why; it might be quite an arbitrary association. He appears hopelessly uncertain and confused as to why certain successions of printed letters should correspond to certain phonetic sounds in words. To make this association demands a particular type of reasoning process as suggested by Vernon. Although there may be some failure to perceive all the details of printed words accurately, or to hear word sounds correctly, yet the fundamental trouble appears to be a failure in development of this reasoning process.
Learning to read requires the development of new concepts of linguistic elements, such as 'word', 'phoneme', 'letter', etc. It also requires reasoning and problem-solving operations in developing the skill of decoding the written form of language back into its primary spoken form.

In general, children at the time at which they begin learning to read seem to be capable of discriminating shapes with sufficient accuracy to enable them to perceive the shapes of letters and words, provided that they make an adequate use of this ability. The children at this stage are preoperational in Piagetian term. They look at any object using its one prominent dimension leaving aside its other dimensions i.e. they are centred at one dimension only. This tendency of preoperational child is called centration and because of this centrality-oriented behaviour, these children are egocentric in nature. This interferes in reading and causes reading problem. It should be noted that this is not a reading disability, but the way of treating the objects with idiosyncratic attitude. This behaviour of looking the objects with minimum of dimensions is due to lack of conservation ability. According to Piaget, conservation ability is the precursor of intelligence. In short, what Vernon calls, a reasoning process is lacking in the children.
Many researches in the past reported that the lack of auditory discrimination and visual discrimination causing reading disability in the children have taken a fresh view of looking at the reading problem.\

The current view fortified by the recent researches is that the lack of conservation ability among children would inhibit them for doing intellectual work. Reading is a cognitive act and without cognitive apparatus in the preoperational children, the reading cannot be initiated successfully.

1.4 METALINGUISTIC ABILITY AND THE PRESENT PROBLEM

Before reading is initiated, the children should have certain prerequisites by means of which the reading act is facilitated. The concept of reading readiness is particularly gaining ground among the reading psychologists. In nursery schools and Bal Mandirs, the programme of reading readiness is being pursued. But Piaget again warns us. He says, that conservation takes its own course of development and it comes in the individual spontaneously. It cannot be induced by training. Many western psychologists, particularly American psychologists, tried to induce conservation by rigorous training and they have been successful in doing so. But children failed to conserve again when a similar task of conservation
was given to them. The acid test of the presence of conservation is the cognitive act of the children. So one thing is certain and that the reading child must be a conserver. The conserver would pay proper attention to alphabet, phonological, syntactical and the semantic aspects of the language, though the child has learnt the spoken language very well earlier.

The awareness of word, the phonological awareness, the syntactical awareness and the pragmatic awareness are all covered by the umbrella term "Metalinguistic Ability".

Before children are initiated to learning reading, the presence of these metalinguistic ability must be present in them. They should know alphabet, word, sentence, sound, the use of reading and writing, concept of print etc.

Many researches have been reported in western countries on relationships of metalinguistic abilities and learning to read. Most of the researches are on English language. They have used their own tests. Some of the tests have been constructed by the researchers themselves. They have established that all metalinguistic abilities have an impact on learning to read. Some have a major role while others have minor role to play in the successful learning of reading. Because of this impact of researches, they could envisage a scientific
programme and policy for initiating learning to read for early readers.

The present investigator has worked with the young children. She has seen them learning to read. Many unsuccessful children who could not be induced to reading had to leave the school. She felt at that time that not all children can learn to read. But having come to know the concepts of reading readiness, conservation ability and the metalinguistic ability, and their impact on initial reading, she now evaluates her own judgement and believes that the most of the children may have reading problems but not reading disability. None has endeavoured in this field in India as can be seen from the Survey of Educational Researches in India. Perhaps, our children might be lacking in these prerequisite abilities of reading. The scope of this research is national and global. Because of this, she has selected a research problem the title of which is as under:

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE IMPACT OF METALINGUISTIC ABILITIES UPON THE READING OF FIRST GRADE CHILDREN

1.5 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS OF THE PROBLEM

Certain words require proper explanation and definitions. They are given underneath.
(i) **Metalinguistic Ability**

Metalinguistic ability enables child to reflect on and manipulate the structural features of spoken language. Unlike normal language operations, which involve automatic processing, metalinguistic operations require control processing. Language users do not normally notice such thing as the individual phonemes and words comprising an utterance, the grouping relationships between its constituent words, or whether the utterance is structurally ambiguous or synonymous with another utterance, unless they deliberately think about it; that is, unless they invoke control processing to reflect on the structural features of the utterance.

This provides the basis for a definition of metalinguistic awareness as the ability to use control processing to perform mental operations on the products of the mental mechanisms involved in sentence comprehension.

**Types of Metalinguistic Ability**

The various manifestations of metalinguistic awareness can be classified into four broad categories:

- Phonological awareness
- Word awareness
- Syntactic awareness
- Pragmatic awareness
Phonological awareness and word awareness refer to the ability to reflect on and manipulate the subunits of spoken language, the phonemes and words.

Syntactic awareness refers to the ability to perform mental operations on the output of the mechanism responsible for assigning intrasentential structural representations to groups of words.

A pragmatic awareness refers to the ability to perform mental operations on the output of the mechanism responsible for integrating individual propositions into larger sets of propositions through the application of both pragmatic rules and inferential rules. Thus pragmatic awareness can be seen as awareness of the relationships that obtain between a given sentence and the context in which it is embedded, where context is defined broadly.

Hence it could be presumed that metalinguistic ability has some specific relationship with children's ability to learn to read.

(ii) Reading of First Grade Children

First grade children are those pupils who are being admitted in the primary school for the first time. Most of them have not yet initiated learning to read. The children of some elite groups might be reading when they first get admission into the first grade of the primary
school. By and large, for the purpose of this investigation it is presumed that the entering children in primary school have yet to start reading act.

1.6 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following pertinent objectives were kept in mind for this study:

1. to construct the metalinguistic ability tests such as Phonological Awareness Test
   Word Awareness Test
   Syntactic Awareness Test
   Pragmatic Awareness Test

2. to prepare a test to measure Conservation Ability of the children.

3. to prepare a test to measure Reading Achievement for the first grader.

4. to find the relationship between the Metalinguistic Ability and Conservation Ability of the first graders in the context of their parents' education.

5. to assess the effect of Metalinguistic Ability upon the reading achievement of the first graders.

6. to assess the effect of Conservation Ability upon the reading achievement of the first graders.
to assess the interaction of the variables upon the reading achievement of the first graders.

to make suggestions regarding the feasibility of teaching reading in earlier years.

1.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Any research study, whether small or large, cannot cover all the aspects. Therefore it has certain limitations inherent in it. The present study is not an exception to this. The following limitations of this study are prominent:

1. The universe of the first graders is very, very large which is spread over the nook and corner of Gujarat. Therefore, the investigator had restricted her research activity to the small sample taken from the metropolitan city of Ahmedabad. For this reason, the conclusions derived from this study would be tentative in nature.

2. The research study taken up by the investigator may best be regarded as the "spade work" into the reading problems of the early readers in the context of their metalinguistic abilities, as there was no previous study done in Gujarat or in India. Therefore she had no idea regarding the selection of various independent variables for the study.
Still however, she had attempted to select such variables as would influence the reading achievement. The selection of the research variables had been made on the basis of theoretical considerations.

3. Number of tools to measure the variables had to be constructed by the investigator. Such tools are very rare for the children of Gujarat. Some are unique in that they would appear novel to adults who in turn may even laugh at the simple things required to do for their children. Yet their children do not know all of them. These tests required lot of thinking, time and testing in constructing them. Inspite of these, the investigator is of the opinion that the conclusions derived are reliable and valid only to the extent of the reliability and validity of these tests.

4. The research study was mainly concerned with the first graders. The tests, therefore, had to be administered individually. Looking to the number of tests to be administered individually, it was found physically impossible for the investigator to go for a very large sample. Nonetheless, she had taken adequate sample so that she could use proper statistical technique for the analysis of the data.
1.8 **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

As explained earlier, the reading disability is the major problem faced by the primary school children. The root cause of reading ability is the reading problems encountered by the early readers. These reading problems are not explained by any scientific evidence so far. Therefore, the present research is important particularly for Gujarat and generally for India, because it has been presumed that the empirical evidence would throw some light on the reading problems of early readers.

1.9 **SCHEME OF CHAPTERIZATION**

The research report would consist of the following chapters.

The first chapter deals with the importance of the problem and the objectives and limitations.

The second chapter consists of the conceptual basis of metalinguistic ability, conservation ability and early reading process.

The third chapter would critically examine the researches done in the past.

The fourth chapter would deal with planning and procedure of the research.
The fifth chapter would devote to the constructional methodology of the various tests to measure different variables.

The sixth chapter consists of the analysis and interpretation of the data.

The seventh chapter summarizes the whole research activity together with the relevant conclusions derived from analysis of data.

The thesis contains number of tables, graphs, figures and appendices and bibliography.
REFERENCES


