TEACHER RESEARCH ON READING IN TRINIDAD & TOBAGO: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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Teachers as researchers are an important resource in the field of education. They are, at least theoretically, in the best position to know the classroom situation, to be able to experiment, observe and follow-up various strategies and behaviours unobtrusively. This report critically reviews teacher-researched studies by certificate and postgraduate level students at the Faculty of Education, UWI, St. Augustine. It summarizes the studies under the following headings: Definition of reading, Methodology—sampling, procedure and testing, Findings, Teaching strategies and Implications. The findings of these studies were not statistically significant. It is suggested that a longitudinal study, as well as alternative research methods and perspectives, teaching strategies and materials, and more extensive training as researchers may generate more substantial findings.

Background

From the early 1980s to the present, there has been much preoccupation with literacy, specifically reading, in schools in Trinidad and Tobago. This may be deduced from the number of research papers produced by teachers at the St. Augustine Campus of the Faculty of Education, UWI. During this period, approximately 54% of the studies focused on reading or reading related topics. Approximately 50% of the research papers available for review were conducted by students reading for the Certificate in Education (Teaching of Reading) which ran for two years from 1985 to 1987. The other 50% comprised two master's theses, dissertations and curriculum studies submitted for the Diploma in Education. Ten of the curriculum studies available for the academic years ending 1990 and 1991 focused on reading. These figures exclude

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All of the enquiries are based on the premise that reading is one of the fundamental tools of formal learning. Wood (1988) recognized that the development of higher order cognitive skills, such as the ability to derive meaning from print, to deduce and infer, requires command of language and literacy. According to Narinesingh and Watts (1991), reading is "firstly a language based process" (p. 1). It is an important mode of language communication through which the transmission and interpretation of information, thoughts, ideas, opinions and emotions expressed by a writer can be understood by a reader. Consequently, it is easy to comprehend the concerns of teachers who depend on printed matter to complement their verbal explications.

Although work is still in progress, this paper makes some general observations on this previously untapped data base and offers some suggestions for future work in the area.

**Definition of Reading**

Many of these studies which attempted to define the nature of reading have suggested that it involves the acquisition of a particular motor skill or set of skills, which can and must be taught. Consequently, much of their attention focused on oral, visual, and auditory skills like pronunciation and the identification of letters, words and sounds. Little focus was directed to the abstract cognitive processes like understanding, inference, deductive reasoning, logic and sequencing of ideas and the drawing of conclusions. This is not surprising since standardized tests are more readily available or can be more easily constructed, quantified and validated for the basic and more obvious motor skills.

Current discourse on reading, however, suggests that definitions and measures which operate at the level of identification of certain skills or categories of skill may be too narrowly focused, since the ability to read involves more than mechanical or motor skills. Reading is a much broader concept. McLane and McNamee (1990) claim that:
like the performance of a symphony, reading is a holistic act...while reading can be analysed into subskills such as discriminating letters and identifying words, performing the subskills one at a time does not constitute reading. Reading can be said to take place only when the parts are put together in a smooth integrated performance...It is a lifelong endeavour...[and] there may be more than one interpretation of a text. The interpretation depends upon the background of the reader, the purpose for reading and the context in which reading occurs. (p. 63)

Using this definition as a yardstick, it is obvious that none of the teacher as researcher studies under review actually examined or defined reading as a whole. There is nothing wrong with identifying weaknesses in, individual subskills in, or deficient subskills of reading and treating them, however, the studies project a false perception that reading ability includes mainly two components—word recognition and vocabulary skills. While these basic skills are important, there is a danger that too much emphasis on these alone could produce mechanical word identifiers and not the skilled, interpretive, critical readers which should be the end product of learning to read.

Methodology of the Studies

The Sample

The studies under examination were conducted as compulsory components of courses being read for particular academic qualifications. It is, therefore, not surprising that they were casualties of the obvious constraints of time and funds. Observation has also revealed that these studies were based on the following assumptions: The first is that the language of the children is the same as the language of instruction; secondly, that interest in reading is directly related to the ability to read well; thirdly, that pupils can express themselves in writing and fourthly, in some cases, that reading is a skill which can be taught in a short period of time and without much practice (i.e., approximately 10-14 sessions in 3-4 weeks). The implications of these assumptions will be discussed below.
The corpus comprised all the research papers available in the Faculty of Education Library, which focused on the teaching of reading, reading acquisition, testing of reading proficiency, reading difficulties and so on. Much of the work can be incorporated under one major category—the teaching of reading. This category may be sub-divided into the teaching of reading as a subject in its own right and the teaching of reading in content areas such as mathematics, chemistry, agricultural science and Spanish. The sizes of the samples for the studies were generally small, especially among the certificate studies where the number of subjects ranged from one to three pupils. At the diploma and masters levels, some studies tended to focus on a class of pupils while others dealt with individuals. Many of the subjects of the diploma studies were junior secondary school pupils while the certificate students focused on primary school pupils.

**General Procedure**

Sample surveys and case studies were the two main categories of research into which the studies fell. All of the studies utilized a test to measure the degree of proficiency of individual students on the specific reading subskills of word recognition, vocabulary and location of details from the text. They appeared to be experimental in design although many failed to exploit the power of this approach. The reason for this may lie in the choice of problem statements, and/or data collection procedures which were not applicable to an experimental study.

The studies followed the general pattern of: (1) identification of weak pupils, (2) administration of a bio-questionnaire, (3) diagnosis of the general area(s) of weakness, (4) pre-testing as a basis for comparison and confirmation of diagnosis, (5) exposure and practice in these particular skills by teaching a unit of approximately 10 lessons using mainly the Language Experience Approach (LEA), and (6) the administration of a post-test identical to the first so that scores could be compared. Some studies have also included evaluations (usually verbal feedback) of the entire exercise.
The Tests

Among the standardized reading tests commonly used were the Slosson Oral Reading test, Informal Reading Inventory, Detwiler Word Analysis and La Pray-Ross Word List. These were often scored and analyzed according to the Betts scale of competence which identifies three levels of ability—frustration, instructional, and independent. In some cases, a standardized readability scale was also used to assess the degree of difficulty of a text for a particular age group. The Fry's Readability Graph was usually favoured.

Some studies also employed non-standardized tests. While these may be more consistent with the student’s level of knowledge, as teachers should know exactly how to pitch questions for all their pupils, difficulties of evaluation, objectivity, and questions of reliability and validity still arise. It may also be noted that, although these were constructed by the teachers themselves, the language and content of the tests were not necessarily related to the language environment. Many of them were also of the multiple choice type which, according to Cairney (1990), are not necessarily accurate measures of reading and comprehension since they tend to encourage pupils to guess and/or, to match answers with the text. Structured comprehension passages share similar problems. Griffin (1978) warns that comprehension tests of this type may emphasize pupils’ general verbal ability over their ability to understand content. Also, this type of test may be biased towards the teacher’s assessment of the correct answers in, or meaning of the text. In this way, there is no control over the form and complexity of the questions asked.

Cloze tests were another popular means of testing. These tests measure comprehension based on content and structure which provide the clues for completing the full sense of the passage. However, the key to success also lies in knowing the vocabulary of the particular topic and being able to write in the missing words. Pupils may be able to understand the text and fill in the appropriate words for the blank portions quite easily if the test were administered orally. However, if it is to be written and the pupils cannot write, it could be construed that they cannot read when, in fact, the problem is with writing. Researchers should always assess their subjects’ capabilities and never assume that children can write because they can perform the tasks orally.
Language is an important variable which, though recognized, is not accounted for in great detail in the studies being examined. Regarding foreign reading tests, it is questionable whether these can be fair, given that the language controlled by the examinees is neither standard American nor English but an English-based Creole. Even the teacher-devised tests share similar difficulties because the language of instruction is standard English. It is possible that differences in language may create problems for students in certain testable areas such as phonics, vocabulary and comprehension. Recognizing this potential problem, Carrington (1980) advocates that children should first be made literate through their own language, which in this case is Trinidad Creole. Once acquired, the skills of literacy could be applied to achieve literacy in standard English. It would be, therefore, useful in the future to study the relationship, if any, between Creole language and reading proficiency.

Findings

This review reveals that primary school teachers pursuing the faculty courses were particularly interested in developing and improving reading readiness skills. Secondary school teachers, on the other hand, were inclined to focus more on comprehension at the literal and, to a lesser extent, inferential levels, in addition to reading readiness skills like word recognition.

The studies used largely descriptive statistics and suggested that there was no significant improvement in any one skill using any particular method. This is not surprising given that the field work for these studies covered only about three to four weeks, during which time a single reading subskill such as word recognition, phonics, vocabulary or literal comprehension was supposed to be taught and evaluated. Another reason may be that the pedagogical approaches selected were not stimulating enough. It is also possible that the validity of the test procedures needed to be examined more closely, since in some cases, the skills tested were not necessarily those being employed. For example, one of the teachers pursuing the Certificate in Education taught reading comprehension using the Language Experience Approach (LEA). However, when it came to testing the children, standardized foreign tests such as the La Pray-Ross Word List and the Informal Reading Inventory for word recognition
were used. Several of these studies fell victim to one or more of these inconsistencies, particularly those testing the LEA. Thus, the weakness of these results may also be reflective of difficulties arising from language differences between the speech of the pupils and the language of instruction.

**Strategies Used in the Teaching of Reading**

The methods used in the teaching of reading seemed to follow the traditional *bottom up* approach. This strategy advocates starting the learning process from the most basic component (identification of letters), gradually moving to more complex units (the identification of words, clauses, sentences in order to derive meaning). It has been suggested by Cairney (1990) that a holistic or *top down* approach may be a more effective method. This technique is based on the premise that pupils learn to read best by searching for meaning as this drives the reader to sample text-based, contextual information and knowledge which is then used in concert with prior knowledge and experiences to construct meaning. It also allows for the utilization of different sources of knowledge, for example, using grapho-phonetic information to decode an unfamiliar word. On the other hand, Narinesingh and Watts (1991) argue that an integrated model of these two strategies may be best. These propositions are yet to be tested in our environment.

The students' approaches have also tended to be conspicuously teacher-dominated. Teachers identify weak pupils, decide on the skills they are going to teach, and the methods of teaching and testing. Pupils' perceptions of their own abilities and weaknesses, and the methods they prefer to work with have not been considered.

**Implications**

Although inconclusive, the results emerging from these studies suggest either one or both of two conclusions: (1) that the current perspective and methodology may be inappropriate, and that there is need to explore the problem from other research perspectives and experiment with other methodologies which may yield more significant results; and (2) that
current teaching strategies and materials do not seem to be effective in producing better readers. This suggests that there should be: (a) closer scrutiny and perhaps, change of teaching methods and, test conditions and administration, and (b) greater insistence on teacher training so that teachers would be able to confidently and efficiently coordinate the reader, text and contextual factors involved in the teaching of reading.

Discussion and Conclusion

Attempting to pinpoint trends is not an easy task when the purposes, foci and target populations of the units of analysis vary. A sense of control comes from the procedure, tests, and the fact that the subjects diagnosed as poor readers, in all age groups, formed the basis of the target population.

All of the researchers bemoaned the short time allotted to conduct the studies. The unimpressive results also suggest that perhaps a longer period for study is required. The striking bias towards the measurement of concrete and quantifiable indicators of reading and the neglect of the abstract features, show further weaknesses in the methodology and conceptualization of reading as a whole. In addition, almost all the studies applied descriptive statistics to the data. While the findings of these teacher studies are valid for their peculiar situations, they cannot be used for making useful inferences or generalizations to the population. Overall, more representative sampling and more attention paid to the application of the scientific method and statistical analysis are required. There is need for a longitudinal study of current teaching methods and their effectiveness in the acquisition of reading.

Despite their limitations, which arise largely from an attempt by the teacher-researchers to produce a study of manageable proportions, the projects reviewed are valuable to research. The research questions, foci and findings of these studies emphasize the gravity of the perceived reading problem plaguing our schools and the ineffectiveness of some current teaching strategies to resolve it. They also indicate the most common weaknesses among pupils and therefore suggest where to start the remedial process. Just as important, they point to the necessity for diagnostic tests for which norms can be locally developed. Further, they
clearly demonstrate that the degree of reading ability is the product of the influence of a combined number of variables. Isolating these factors is the challenge of follow-up and future research in reading.

Notes

1. This figure represents studies that are available at the Faculty library.

2. The Fry’s Readability Graph (1968) attempts to predict the average age group of the readers who would best be able to read and understand a piece of writing or text on the basis of two quotients: the average sentence length and the average length of syllables per 100 words. To find the average reading age, quotient scores for three samples must be plotted on a grid. The average number of syllables per 100 words forms the x axis while the average number of sentences per 100 words forms the y axis. The value at the point of intersection is added to 5.5 to give the average age for reading the particular document. Don Foster (1979) points out that one of the major problems associated with this and other measures of readability, is that they are empiricist. Only those features which can be counted are taken into account. Abstract elements like the communication of meaning and the understanding of concepts are difficult to quantify and therefore not included. Second, these measures do not take into account the impact of visual presentation in communication, for example, the typeface, layout and use of illustration in the way the material is displayed.

3. The LEA is a strategy designed to teach reading using the language and vocabulary with which the pupils are most comfortable. This strategy may be summarized as follows: (i) it begins with conversation with the pupils so that (a) they can become comfortable with the teacher, and (b) the teacher can become familiar with the extent of their vocabulary and their interests; (ii) phonetics—pupils learn the sound-symbol relationship orally and visually and later, written down; and (iii) reading—the children’s speech is written down by the teacher or the pupils themselves and finally read out loud by them. This method caters to the differences in child language and reading acquisition by using the language to which the children have ready access.
References


Appendix

Unpublished Studies
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Diploma in Education, Certificate in Education and Master's Degrees
The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine


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