

What the teacher must remember: the basis of reading

1. Reading is the ability to get meaning from black marks (that is, letters, words, sentences) on paper. To begin with, the reader follows the sequence:

reading word → spoken word → meaning

But a good reader learns to do without the middle stage and proceeds reading word → meaning.

This is the quicker and more efficient way of reading. Therefore, we must not confuse reading practice with speech practice, and we must encourage the skill of silent reading from the earliest possible moment. But of course, reading aloud is essential at the beginning to enable the child to see the connection between speech and reading from texts, and to help the teacher assess the child's progress.

2. If we say a child can 'really' read we mean:
 - (a) He can recognize familiar reading-words in unfamiliar combinations.
 - (b) He can 'attack' unfamiliar reading-words by means of:
 - (i) Intelligent deductions from the context (including pictures);
 - (ii) Breaking longer words into syllables he can already read;
 - (iii) Using phonic skills (These 'word-attack' skills can and must be taught).
 - (c) He can correctly relate reading words (or rather, the sentences made up of them) to the situations they refer to — that is, he understands the meaning of what he reads.
3. In order to read, a child must perceive *similarities* and *differences* between the *forms* of sentences, phrases and words in their spoken form, and in their written form. He must associate these forms with their *meanings*. Spoken language is a necessary pre-requisite for learning to read, but we cannot deal fully with it here. As far as written language is concerned, the important things to remember are:
 - (a) We must make use (right from the pre-reading stage) of *matching* and *sorting*

activities to develop the children's ability to detect similarities and differences in form and arrangement.

- (b) We must from the start make sure that reading is meaningful:
 - (i) We never ask a child to read a word or sentence that he does not understand (and preferably use himself) when spoken;
 - (ii) We always take care by pictures, classroom situations and plenty of talk and questions, to make sure that the meaning of everything read is fully brought out.
4. Remember the requirements for reading:
 - (a) VISUAL discrimination: (The usual pre-reading and early reading exercises for matching, sorting, arranging etc.).
 - (b) ORAL fluency (including oral discrimination): The child must have a good control of the sounds, vocabulary and sentence patterns employed.
 - (c) UNDERSTANDING of the language used. Unless the child learns to speak and read with understanding, he is merely learning to *parrot*.

These skills can to some extent be trained separately but IN READING THEY ARE ALL BROUGHT TOGETHER.

Stages

1. It may be useful to consider the stages through which a child learning to read must progress:
 - (a) PRE-READING: Training of eye-movements, perception of sequencing, discrimination of similarities and differences between pictures, shapes, words, letters, etc.
 - (b) EARLY READING: Sentence and word recognition. Association of written sentences and words with meaning through pictures, situations. Commutation (see below).
 - (c) DEVELOPING READING: Word attack skills: phonics, word-building (morphology), context.
2. The child moves gradually from one stage

to the next. For example, he will need to continue the matching and sorting activities of stage (a) for a considerable time after he can recognize and attach meaning to some words or sentences (stage (b)).

3. Stage (c) is perhaps the one most commonly neglected in our schools, and is vital to the development of the ability to read independently. As the child masters the phonic and word-building skills, attention will be concentrated increasingly on context and interpretation — that is, the intensive reading skills that all of us continue to develop for as long as we continue to read.

Organisational approaches

1. Reading is an individual skill. Children develop it at different rates. The good teacher will therefore make use of group and individual work at every stage of reading development. So we shall have various kinds of reading activity:
 - (a) Individual child working alone
 - (b) Small group working alone
 - (c) Children working with teacher.
2. When (a) and (b) are used, the simple fact is often not understood: that materials should where possible be *self-correcting or designed to produce a visible result* so that the teacher can check progress. (We all know what happens — or rather, what *doesn't* happen — when children are merely told to read the reader.)
3. The 'visible result' could be, for example, correctly arranged materials (matching cards, dominoes, etc.), sentences produced by the child and built up with word cards or, at a later stage, very short written answers (one word if possible) to written questions. Anything will do that gives the child a purpose for what he is doing and that lets the teacher satisfy himself that the child has been working successfully.
4. Teachers unfortunately make little use of approaches (a) and (b) at present. We shall here suggest a few ways in which (c) (the commonest approach and therefore most urgently in need of improvement) can be made more effective.

Teaching, Practising and Testing

1. A lot of reading lessons fail because the teacher uses them as testing sessions instead of teach-

ing ones. If a child isn't able to read a word, we must never say 'No. Go back to your seat' as if he had failed a test. Instead we must help him to read it, if possible in such a way that other children with the same problem will also benefit. Flash-card work (dealt with below) is an important aid to reading, but its value is chiefly for revision and testing. We must therefore think first of more positive ways of *teaching*.

2. Three major principles must govern our approach:
 - (a) We don't try to teach children to read sentences they cannot understand when spoken.
 - (b) We always relate reading to meaning, preferably to a classroom situation or to a picture; or to the children's own lives.
 - (c) We concentrate on helping children to recognize similarities and differences in the written forms of words, sentences, etc, and to understand how these are associated with similar and different meanings — the principle of commutation described further below.
3. Principle 2(a) implies a *thorough basis of oral work*, preferably at least a few weeks before the reading takes place. Now that initial teaching of reading is in Bahasa Malaysia, we ought perhaps to spend the first few terms on exclusively *oral* English, so that the children have a good speaking knowledge before they start to read at all. We cannot here go into the organization of oral practice, though it is obviously crucial.
4. Principle 2(b) is absolutely central. It has been found that children learn to read much more easily when the reading material has meaning for them. A major source of material for early reading should be the sentences *produced by the child himself*. These can be assembled into a reading book of his own. For class lessons, the idea of *using real objects and situations in the reading lesson* (as well as in the structure lesson) may be new to some. What follows will explain the approach.
5. The principle of COMMUTATION is crucial in the teaching of reading and, once grasped, is very simple to apply. It has something in common with the principle of the substitution table. It demands no expensive aids,

though its effectiveness is greater and its use easier if a flannelboard at least can be used. Stated simply, it is the principle that *a difference in the choice or arrangement of words (or letters or sentences) is accompanied by a difference in meaning.*

6. This may sound obvious to us, but it is not self-evident to a young child. When it becomes obvious to him, he is well on the way to learning to read. All our early teaching of reading should be directed towards precisely this.
7. Notice what is involved:
 - (a) The child must be able to perceive that two sentences (words, etc) are the same or different. This is a matter of *visual discrimination*.
 - (b) He must also associate them with the same or different meanings. This is a matter of *relating the written to the spoken language, which must in turn be related to actual situations.*
8. *Visual discrimination* must be trained by conscious efforts on the teacher's part. It is not very difficult but it does need constant attention. Here are some of the ways of doing it when the child is past the pre-reading stage:
 - (a) 'Come and point to the word THE' (in a sentence on the blackboard that has been read).
 - (b) 'Can you see THE anywhere else on the blackboard?'
 - (c) 'Find the flashcard THE on my table. Tell the class what it says. Put it on the flannelboard.'
 - (d) 'Put the card HAT on the hat. Is that a hat? No, *this* is the hat — that's right.'
 - (e) 'Who can be first to find the little card HAT?' (Children — perhaps in groups — have small cards on their desks. Not too many! Maximum 10.) (You hold up flashcard to help them.)
 - (f) 'Who can read this word? Can you see the word anywhere else? Come and hold this card near the same word' (on the blackboard, flannelboard, etc.). 'Is that the same? Look again. That's right!'
 - (g) 'Who can point to the word HAT in the reader? Everybody, put your finger on it. How many times can you see it on page —?)
 - (h) Building up sentences on the blackboard or flannelboard (children perhaps copying

with their small cards and later in writing) — reading each word or phrase as it is added and seeing how it contributes to the growing sentence.

- (i) (The sentence on the flannelboard says *The bottle is on the table.* Teacher writes on the blackboard. *The bottle is on the chair.*) 'Who can read them? What's the difference? Let's make the sentence on the flannelboard the same as the one on the blackboard. What shall we change? Come and find the right card. Put it in the right place. Let's read the new sentence.'
9. Similar work can be done with phrases (*on the table, in the box, etc.*) and sentences. In fact, many teachers prefer to begin with sentences, gradually helping children:
 - (a) First to discriminate between different sentences as wholes.
 - (b) Then to perceive where the difference lies. It may depend on:
 - (i) Choice of words: for example, the difference between *Ali is running* and *Ong is running* depends on the difference between *Ali* and *Ong*.
 - (ii) Arrangement: for example, the difference between *Ali is running* and *Is Ali running?* depends on a different arrangement of the same words.
10. *Using situations* can now be seen to be important. Example 8(i) above indicates the way in which we can help children to grasp the fact that a changed situation demands a changed spoken sentence *and* a changed spoken sentence demands a changed written sentence. Obviously the good teacher will have a bottle in front of the class and will change its position, getting the new sentence from the children orally and then helping them to build the new sentence in its written form.
11. We want our children to be able to see the similarities and differences between situation and sentence as in:

The bottle is on the table.
The pen is on the table.
The ball is on the table.
and in:
The bottle is on the table.
The bottle is in the box.
The bottle is under the chair.

12. It is infinitely more useful to get the class to read five different sentences (all the same except for, say, one word in each, like the examples in 11 above) than to get them to say repeatedly one sentence only. And it is very little more trouble for the teacher.
13. It should now be clear how this principle relates to that of the substitution table (changing only one part of a sentence at a time) and, indeed to that of minimal pairs. We ask him to look at sentences in different media (the blackboard, flannelboard, reading book, writing book, etc.) so that he learns to discriminate between differences that matter and differences (such as size and colour) that don't. And we show him that a change in form goes together with a change in meaning.

Flash-card work

1. Use also flash-boards (plywood or cardboard strips painted black to take chalk writing) if shortage of money prevents you from buying card, paint, etc. Clean and re-use.
2. It is not much use holding up a flash-card and getting children to repeat the word many times (the commonest method). Why?
 - (a) Reading involves *visual* attention. Watch the children's eyes. Where are they looking?
 - (b) Reading involves visual *attention*. Watch expression on their faces. How many are thinking about what they are doing?
 - (c) Reading is not in essence an oral art. Admittedly we can't separate reading from oral work in the early stages, but it is important to see the distinction. The reading lesson should not be a pronunciation lesson. (Quick correction of mispronunciation is of course necessary, but most serious pronunciation work should be done in the oral English 'conversation' lesson.)
Chanting a word while looking out of the window or dreaming about dinner never taught any child to read!
3. What do we do instead? Here is a suggested method for practising the current flash-cards. By 'current' we mean cards bearing recently-learned words or sentences.
 - (a) Have the cards neatly arranged on a convenient table.
 - (b) Take the first card and flash it (see below).
 - (c) Children who were able to read it raise their hands (*not* call out). Then you can see roughly how many recognized it and thus check progress.
 - (d) When a child has told you the word, show the card again. This time do not flash, but *show* it, as you want to give the others a chance to assimilate the word.
 - (e) Get two or three children *briskly* to say the word *while looking at it* (not at you) and perhaps one or two chorus repetitions (NOT MORE). The card must be visible and all eyes fixed on it. Otherwise you are teaching speech, not reading.
 - (f) Go through all your current cards systematically in this way. Be sure to include also some revision cards, both as reminders and as encouragement for the slower readers. Don't use any chorus repetition of cards everyone can recognize.
 - (g) Then put the cards on one side and go on to something else. Return to them later in the lesson and repeat the above procedure. You could repeat it two or three times during the day. If you are doing it well, more hands will be going up the third time.
 - (h) Repeat with the same cards (perhaps using different revision cards) next day and on subsequent days until most children are recognizing all the words. Then it is time to move on to some of the new words they have been learning.
4. Footnote on flashing:
 - (a) Flashing is not the same as showing. Find out by flashing very familiar words how fast you can go while still enabling most of the children (not just the best few) to catch the word. Slow flashing removes the stimulus and excitement; quick flashing greatly increases attention. Make an exciting game of it.
 - (b) Get a friend to help you rectify a few common errors. He should sit at child-level in different parts of the room. The commonest errors are:
 - (i) Too quick. (Speed is important but it can be overdone. However, too slow is actually commoner.)
 - (ii) Upside down! (Mark back of card as guide.)
 - (iii) Fingers covering word. (Practise in front of a mirror. Hold card with straight fingers by its edge.)

- (iv) Vertical angle wrong. (Especially if you're tall. Remember where the children's eyes are — not on the ceiling!)
- (v) Horizontal angle wrong. (Children can't see round corners. Did the children at the sides, especially at the front, have a chance to see it?)

5. Silent reading with flashcards.

Don't forget to use cards showing commands and questions, which can be obeyed or answered *before reading the card aloud*. Thus even in the early stages children learn that reading does not have to be an oral art. Even Standard One children can respond silently to simple commands like *Stand up*.

Reading their own ideas

1. As soon as you have established a reasonable sight vocabulary (that is, words the children

recognize on sight in any context), allow children to make their own sentences using small word cards.

2. When they have produced a good sentence, get them to copy it into a book and illustrate it with a drawing if they wish.
3. Let them play around with the word cards, producing similar sentences by means of commutation, for example:
This is my mummy.
This is my house.
This is my cat.
4. This activity can easily lead to cooperation. Children may be able to help one another and will enjoy reading each other's books.
5. Once you have reached this stage, the breakthrough has begun.