

Techniques in Teaching Reading and Writing Thai Braille To Visually Impaired Kindergarten 3 Students

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Abstract: *This paper explores on different teaching techniques and materials I use to teach reading and writing to beginning-level learners at Kindergarten 3 with almost zero reading and writing skills in Thai Braille. Before teaching them how to read Thai Braille, these students had already gone through the Pre-Braille stage and have memorized the Braille codes. However, they have not experienced the tactile form of the Thai alphabet at this stage yet. Before proceeding to reading, the students were taught about the basics of navigating the book such as locating the page number and the hand movement when reading the Braille text on the book. They were also taught the basics of writing Braille such as the proper way of holding the stylus and navigating the slate before giving the first writing task. To aid their learning and make it interesting for them, I created four Braille textbooks tailored according to my techniques in teaching reading and writing Thai Braille to beginners. The textbooks focus more on reading but writing Thai Braille is also integrated. The first textbook is used for students to identify the target letter among other letters in a sentence. The teacher read the sentences while guiding the hand of the student to trace the sentence in Braille. The teacher then asks the blind students to look for the target letter in the sentence. This gives a thrill to the blind students. They get so excited to hunt the letters in sentences. The second textbook has pairs of consonants and the students are asked to look for the target consonant. The 3rd textbook is about combining Thai consonants with Thai vowels. The 4th textbook has basic words used in daily conversation. Most of these are five-letter words. CFBT Educational Technological Center for the Blind (ETCB) had included helpful marks in printing the textbooks. One of these is enclosing the group of words or sentences in a box made of dots. To make learning fun, I named each box after a student, an animal or anything that can make learning interesting for the students. Fun activities like guessing games and group work to encourage cooperative learning were also integrated to make learning more engaging for the blind students. After using these techniques, I have observed that the blind students get excited to read whenever they have a book on their hand. CFBT Educational Technological Center for the Blind (ETCB) has also produced handy books (210mm x 148.5mm) for KG3 blind students to easily carry around. The combination of these teaching techniques and effective materials for learning enables our KG 3 blind students to read and write in Thai Braille and creates a culture of reading among them.*

Keywords: teaching techniques, language literacy for the blind, reading and writing Braille

INTRODUCTION

Meaningful learning experiences in early years of literacy define the learning expectations of children and motivate them to

further develop their reading and writing skills. These experiences enable them to see the value of reading and writing in improving their lives.

For the visually impaired, learning Braille is the key to literacy. It is through the combination of these six dots that visually impaired children are able to read and write. The literacy of visually impaired persons comprises of different methods of acquiring, storing and accessing information. Being able to read and write Braille, visually impaired persons can access to information that they can use to further learn and improve their lives. Therefore, exploring on different methods on how to teach reading and writing Braille is essential in shaping the future of the visually impaired children. Braille is adapted into different languages, providing the opportunity for the blind in different countries of different languages to enter the world of literacy.

Ms. Genevieve Caulfield, the founder of the first school for the blind in Thailand known as Bangkok School for the Blind, made it possible for the blind in Thailand to access literacy by adapting Thai Braille with her knowledge of English and Japanese Braille.

The Thai Alphabet is composed of 44 consonant letters, 15 vowel symbols that combine into at least 28 vowel forms, and four tone diacritics. These are adapted into Braille. Through this adaptation, visually impaired students like my Kindergarten 3 students are able to read and write Thai.

This study explores on resolving the problem that hinders the progress of beginners in learning how to read and write Thai Braille. The visually impaired (totally blind) Kindergarten 3 students of Khon Kaen School for the Blind are the participants of this research. These students have passed the process of Pre-Braille learning and have memorized the Braille codes. They can't read and write at this stage yet, since they are not familiar of the tactile form of the Thai alphabet.

In teaching these students, I had observed a slow progress in learning. After deliberating the students' responses to the lessons, I have observed that this slow progress is caused by students' disinterest to learn Braille. There are some negative attitudes about Braille, like the complex nature of Braille codes and the lack of standardized Braille teaching methods,

often slows down the teaching and learning of Braille (Ianuzzi, 1999; Wittenstien, 1996; Blake, 2003). It is therefore important to use an approach in teaching reading and writing Braille that creates learning and at the same time encourages the student to love learning. Based on my assessment of the problem, there is a need to explore on two things that will resolve this slow progress in reading and writing Thai Braille.

First, there is a need to use teaching strategies that will suit the needs of my visually impaired Kindergarten 3 students. According to Glasser (1998), in developing the lessons, it is essential for teachers to ensure that classroom activities are designed to satisfy the students' needs.

Second, I see the need of textbooks and other learning materials that will support my lessons and in coherent with my teaching strategies. Textbooks are essential to learning. They are useful guides for teachers and provide stable orientation for students (Tanner & Tanner, 1975). It is used by teachers in motivating and providing full understanding to the students regarding a topic or problem (Marsh,1992).

Process and Teaching Strategies

Preparation for Reading: The students were guided to familiarize the physical layout of the Braille book by locating the page number and trace through their fingers where the text starts and where it ends. They were also guided to trace the text from left to right. I also integrated teaching the hand and finger movement to prepare them for our first reading lesson using the new strategies.

Preparation for Writing: To prepare the students for writing, I teach them the step-by-step manipulation of the stylus and slate, the proper grip of the stylus and using the bifold typing paper. I also explain the right to left movement in writing which is opposite in reading Braille. Selecting the appropriate slate is also very important. I selected the slate with curve Braille boxes.

Memorizing the Dots: To help students master the Braille patterns, I used the Peg Slate from APH. The students were asked to

read the combination of dots that corresponds to the letters of the Thai alphabet using the Pegs Slate. After that the students use their own slate to write Braille.

Listen and Repeat: In the past, the teachers read for the students and then the students just listen. I see this as a traditional way of teaching reading that needs to be modified. In my case, I recognize the importance of supported reading where the students read along with me. The students trace the Braille text while we read together.

Generating Motivation through Fun Learning:

To motivate my students, I incorporated learning through play. To quote Charles E. Pascel, "Play is serious business for the development of young learners". I gave the name to each box (made of dots) in the book that enclosed the group of words or sentences. I named them after an animal, a student, a car or any fun names. I also included fun activities like guessing games. To encourage cooperative learning, I created pair work activities and group activities. The students were also asked to bring their favorite baby powder in our reading class and put baby powder on the page before we start reading. This makes them really excited and the fragrance makes them feel relaxed while reading. The powder does not only give fragrance but also prevents the students to experience discomfort while reading due to sweaty fingers.

Textbook Design

In cooperation with CFBT Educational Technology Center for the Blind (ETCB), I incorporated innovation on the textbook design such as boxes made of dots framing the words so that the student can easily locate them. This also enabled the student to practice reading following the straight line.

Volume 1: The first textbook is used for students to identify the target letter among other letters in a sentence. I read the sentences while guiding the hand of the students to trace the sentences in Braille. I also asked the blind students to look for the target letter in the

sentence. This gives a thrill to the blind students. They get so excited to hunt the letters in sentences.

Volume 2: The second textbook has pairs of consonants and the students were asked to look for the target consonant.

Volume 3: The 3rd textbook is about combining Thai consonants with Thai vowels. In this stage, the students learn about combining the consonant sounds with the vowel sounds.

Volume 4: The 4th textbook has basic words used in daily conversation. Most of these are five-letter words. I also included some short sentences in this textbook. In teaching the words in this book, the proper tones and meaning were also taught to the students.

Handy Books (210mm x 148.5mm) These books contain words, phrases and short sentences in Thai. They are very helpful to reinforce what the students learned their Thai class. The students can carry them around and can read even after our Thai reading and writing class.

CONCLUSION

Using the approaches that suits the students, carefully selecting the instructional materials to be used in teaching reading and writing to Kindergarten 3 students led to achieving great results. In one academic year, the students Kindergarten 3 students were able to read simple words, phrases and sentences. They were also able to write simple words. Through the use of well-thought techniques the students became more interested to learn and curious of the lesson which I believe is very essential in learning. The students' curiosity makes their learning enjoyable. Because of their curiosity, teaching the next lesson which requires higher skill is not as difficult or boring as when they are not motivated.

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