

TEACHING READING FOR YOUNG LEARNERS IN EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract: All young children are highly motivated to learn language. Millions of EFL children are learning reading as part of learning English, and thousands of EFL teachers are searching for an approach to teaching reading that will work most effectively. The concern of this paper is finding the effective way of teaching reading to young learners in EFL context. The content of children's literature can motivate the interest of students to learn a new language. Good, effective, and suitable approaches are for helping the students in their development. However, there is no one best approach to teaching reading, because one that works for one child may not work at all for another child. Good teachers have to recognize that children learn in different ways and require different strategies. Teachers need to draw on ideas from a number of different approaches and add ideas that come from their own experience. Therefore, the role of the parent or teacher in supporting reading progress is crucial. In conclusion, there are three important points for children reading success, namely: (1) innovative and suitable approach, (2) effective material, and (3) parents or teachers' role. All these three elements are critical in order to teach all kids to read.

Keywords: *Reading, young learners, approach, children's literature, teachers and parents' role.*

Reading is one of the most important skills in language learning. It is a crucial skill for students of English as a Foreign Language (Debat, 2006:8). Being able to read, as well as to write, enables the students to speak more communicatively, which is the main goal of language learning. One of the milestones in children's education is how and when they learn how to read.

Millions of EFL children are learning reading as part of learning English, and thousands of EFL teachers are searching for an approach to teaching reading that will work most effectively. Teaching and learning reading are not easy. However, teaching

and learning reading are not difficult, either. Reading requires specific instruction and conscious effort (Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, 2007, p.522).

The problem is how to find and decide the good, effective, and useful approach for teaching reading, especially for teaching reading to children or young learners. Teaching children or young learners is not easy because they have their unique characteristics in learning.

The concern of this paper is finding the effective way of teaching reading to young learners in EFL context. The writer will discuss some

important aspects that need to be considered in relation to find the suitable and effective way of teaching reading to children. The discussion of this paper is expected to be useful for English teachers in order to develop the process of teaching English for young learners.

TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS

Teaching young learners is different from teaching adults. According to Klein (2005, p.12), young children tend to change their mood every other minute, and they find it extremely difficult to sit still. On the other hand, they show a greater motivation than adults to do things that appeal to them. In addition, Ashworth and Wakefield (2005, p.3) claim that all young children are highly motivated to learn language.

Harmer (1985; cited in Sosiowati, 2003) says that young learners are curious, like to seek teacher approval, tend to be bored very easily, and do not like sitting and listening for a long time.

However, the curiosity and sufficient notices and appreciation from their teacher will motivate them to do something. Furthermore, they require constant changes of activities; and they need to be involved in something active and appreciated by their teacher.

Students will be more successful if teachers match the teaching style to their learning style. Verster, cited in Sosiowati (2003) says that young learners may prefer either visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), kinesthetic (moving) or tactile (touching) way of learning. These learning styles will then lead to different approaches or methods used by teacher in the classroom.

Furthermore, in order to support English language teaching in the classroom, teachers should have some competencies, especially the

competencies to teach English to young learners.

Linse (2006) mentions three characteristics of competent EYL teachers. The characteristics are as follows:

- 1) YL teachers need to have a very good language skills because they provide the main language input for children who may have limited exposure outside the classroom. They need good interaction skill in order to use the kind of activity based and interactive methods which seem most suitable for young learners. They also need a flexibility to be able to adjust their language to the children's level. Knowledge of English so they can provide feedback, and a rich knowledge of the culture so as to get children interested,
- 2) YL teachers need a knowledge of how children learn foreign languages and appropriate teaching strategies for teaching English so as to create interest in learning English and
- (3) YL teachers need to have knowledge of children's cognitive, linguistic and emotional development as these impacts on their foreign language learning.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO TEACHING READING

Reading is central to the learning process. To access critical information from enormous data banks, students will need to be able to read complex material with a high degree of comprehension (Parkay and Stanford, 1998, p.445).

Learning to read can begin from text level; from sentence level; from word level; or from letter level. Each starting point has produced approaches to teaching reading that can be used in the foreign language classroom.

In this paper, there are only four main approaches which are going to be discussed in deep, as can be found in Cameron (2001, pp.145-150) that explains about “*Emergent literacy*”, *Language Experience approach*, *Whole words/key words approach*, and *Phonic teaching*.

Emergent Literacy

“Emergent literacy” describes the phenomenon in which children seem to learn to read without any teaching, gradually, and through exposure to text and to reading (Hall, 1987; cited in Cameron, 2001, p.145). When children spends lots of time being read to from interesting and appropriate books, some will begin to work out for themselves the patterns and regularities that link spoken and written text.

Cameron (2001, p.146) mentions the features of emergent literacy that are most relevant for foreign language teaching. They are:

- (1) children choose the books they want to hear and read;
- (2) children are motivated by choice and by the quality of the writing they encounter;
- (3) children often choose to read the same book many times, and this is a valuable learning experiences;
- (4) meaning comes first because the child understands the story as a whole;
- (5) from this overall meaning, attention moves to whole words and letters, beginning with initial consonants, then final consonants, then vowels in the middle;
- (6) the link between reading and oral skills is very strong because children adopt and play with the language of the story;
- (7) parents can be involved with their children’s language learning through reading aloud with them.

Coopers say, “Read aloud to your children every day.” This is probably the most important daily activity parents can do in teaching children to read. Reading to children increases their knowledge of the world, their vocabulary, their familiarity with written language (‘book language’), and their interest in reading.

Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience approach (LEA) starts children reading at sentence level, and its key feature is the child’s use of his or her own experience as the topic of the texts. This approach builds upon the notion that if children are given material to read that they are already familiar with, it will help them learn to read.

Ediger (2001, pp.158-159) summarizes that typically a class of LEA would follow a series of steps like this:

- (1) The student or class dictates a “story,” usually based upon an experience they have had, that the teacher writes down on a large sheet of paper;
- (2) the teacher then reads the story to the class (this “reading” may be repeated several times until the children are familiar with what have been written);
- (3) depending on their level of ability and needs, the class will the engage in various extended activities based upon the original story, including focusing on individual words, letters, or meanings of various parts;
- 4) finally, the children are expected to move from the stories they have dictated toward being able to read those written by others.

Because the children have “composed” the stories themselves,

there is a close match between their knowledge or experience and the texts they read.

There is an approach called *Whole Language approach* which has almost the same characteristics as the Language Experience Approach. Advocates of the Whole Language approach believe that reading is part of general language development, not an isolated skill students learn apart from listening, speaking, and writing. Teachers in whole-language classroom seldom use textbooks; instead, young students write stories and learn to read from their writing, and older students read literature that is closely related to their everyday experiences (Parkay and Stanford, 1998, p.364).

In addition, the Whole Language approach is a philosophy of learning. This approach stresses that language should be learned in a natural and meaningful context. Words should be learned as complete words, and sentences and whole stories should be learned with as little analysis as possible. Wherever possible, the children are expected to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from the context or from hints.

Therefore, the children need a lot of exposure to words orally before they read or write them. They can guess how to read words from context without breaking the words down phonically. That is why getting the children to listen to and say many words is important. Reading aloud for children can be one of the best ways to give exposure of words for children.

In addition, Cameron (2001, p.141) suggests teacher (or other adult) to read aloud to young children because it has an enormous range of benefits. She says that from listening or watching an adult read aloud, children can see how books are handled, how texts

encode words and ideas, and how words and sentences are set out on a page. Affectively, reading aloud can motivate children to want to read themselves.

The Whole Word / Key Words Approach

It starts from word level, with children looking at single words on cards to encourage rapid whole word recognition (Cameron, 2001, p.148). In the Whole-word approach, the children learn words such as *cat*, *dog*, or *ship* as whole, independent words.

Other experts call this approach as *sight word* or *look-say method*, which teaches children to recognize whole words or sentences rather than individual sounds. Flash cards with individual words written on them (which are often accompanied with related pictures) are used for this method.

Many children actually memorize the spelling. Whether or not the children picture the word as a whole or memorizing the spelling, the important point is that they are learning independent words and are not focusing on the connections between one word and another. The children may practice reading by drawing pictures next to words, by coloring the pictures, and even putting the words in puzzles, and these methods certainly do a lot to increase the children's retention of the words. But the children are still focusing on independent items of knowledge rather than underlying patterns (Paul, 2003, p.85).

The term "key words" was used because the sight words taught were taken from the most frequently used words in English. This can help children quickly identify such common function words as *of*, *and*, *for*, and *the*. These words do not have clear lexical meanings but create meanings when

they are used with content words. In learning to read, these words are probably better, and more easily, learnt through multiple encounters in contexts of use, rather than separated from other words on a card.

The Phonics Approach

The phonics approach is probably the best known and widely used method to teach reading and writing in the English language. This approach generally emphasizes teaching children to match individual letters of the alphabet with their specific English pronunciations, with the idea that if children can “sound out” or decode new words, they will be able to read independently. They then will be able to blend two letters together to make simple words then three letters, then four and so forth. Decoding is the process of identifying the written words using the alphabetic code to determine pronunciation and meaning (Riley, 1999, p.45).

Phonics generally involves teaching children the sound-letter relationships used in reading and writing. A related type of knowledge, *phonemic awareness*, involves children understanding that speech is made up of individual sounds, including such things as the ability to tell if two words begin or end with the same sound, and the ability to focus on the form of speech apart from focusing on its meaning or content (Strickland, 1998; cited in Ediger, 2001, pp.157-158). Phonemic awareness is also important for literacy development and frequently taught with phonics.

Phonics is often taught in a rather mechanical way with the children memorizing a lot of rules, doing a lot of repetition, and reading and writing sentences that have little personal meaning for the children. It can be very

dry, boring, and demotivating, if done in isolation, so it is probably preferable to incorporate five or ten minutes of concentrated phonics work inside other activities, such as story reading, class joint writing, song and rhymes, and others (Cameron, 2001, p.149).

Moreover, when phonics is introduced in a more child-centered way, it can be a wonderful tool for giving the children a confident, positive, and adventurous approach to reading. Paul (2003, p.88) introduces “active phonics”, which involves a lot of games, as follows.

The children play and play, moving through a phonic sequence which fits together and makes sense, discovering and linking each stage of the sequence as they go along. This can give children the confidence to take risks and learn from mistakes. It can make words in the Roman alphabet much more approachable, encourage the children to notice patterns they can use to read and write new words, and most important of all, active phonics can help the children smile and have a lot of fun.

According to Gagen (2005), direct systematic phonics programs are the most effective way to teach children to read. The programs effectively build the essential foundation for higher level proficient reading skills. Paul (2003, p87) claims that learning phonics can give EFL learners the confidence to try and read words that would otherwise feel alien and distant, and it can give them the motivation to approach a book with a positive attitude.

What is the Best Approach?

Which kind of approach works best for teaching reading has been a topic of considerable debate for many

decades. It is natural to feel that all approaches to teaching have strong and weak points, and that standard approaches may not fit teachers' particular teaching situation, so they need to draw on ideas from a number of different approaches and add ideas that come from their own experience. However, the approaches teachers choose need to fit together coherently (Paul, 2003, p.2).

Specifically, according to Paul (2003, p.85), learning to read can be wonderful adventure for children, if only teachers use appropriate approaches. However, the teaching techniques used in one kind of situation may be very different from those used in another situation.

It is a mistake to rely on one approach to teaching reading, because one that works for one child may not work at all for another. Good teachers have always recognized that children learn in different ways and require different strategies. In his 2001 article for Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, "What Does a Balanced Literacy Approach Mean?" Sebastian Wren suggests that teachers should focus not on approaches or even a balance between approaches, but on what the teacher has learned about individual students. The best way to teach kids to learn is to find out what each child knows and how that child learns best.

Gordon Wells cited in Ashworth and Wakefield (2005, p.3) says that knowledge cannot be transmitted in isolation, but must be reinvented as the learner brings to each new situation his own previous experience and background and interprets new information from that perspective.

In addition, children learning to read English need to develop knowledge and skills at the different

scales. Cameron (2001, p.134) claims that no "right" way of learning to read has been found, and when we consider the complexity of what has to be learnt, this should not be surprising. What is clear, is that children need to progress within each scale or level. Good, effective, and suitable approaches are for helping the students in their development.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

The content of children's literature can motivate the interest of students to learn a new language. Bringing in children's literature into English language class can also create opportunities for language learners to practice language in purposeful ways, and the experiences of reading children's literature encourages language learners to construct meaning and to engage in active reading (Rigg & Allen, 1989; cited in Liu, 2000, p.189).

Among types of children's literature, the picture book is the one that has been suggested and used often by teachers because both the pictures and the text work interdependently to tell a story, and the language-rich illustrations create a rich contextualization (Spangenberg-Urbschat & Prtichard, 1994; Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2002; cited in Liu, 2000, p.191)

It is important to select books to support student learning from every genre of children's literature (Popps, 2005, p.85). A literary genre is a specific kind of literature, such as biography, poetry, or historical fiction, and each genre has certain characteristics that distinguish it from the others. Moreover, there are certain characters that can be learn from each of the story.

Teachers and Parents' Role

Children gradually become literate over many years and through many thousands of exposures to texts and signs (Riley, 1999, p.142). However, effective materials sitting alone will not "teach" the children how to read. If there is no actual caring competence person doing a good job of teaching, the effective materials are worthless. The parent or teacher must still teach the effective program to the children (Gagen, 2005). Pay attention on the word "competence" that should refer to the teacher and parent's good ability for teaching reading in English to EFL students.

Gagen (2005) adds that reading is best taught one-on-one by a parent or other caring adult. The individual attention can maximize the child's learning. Sitting next to a child, parent or teacher can focus instruction down to the details and maximize learning. Furthermore, Gagen (2005) says that teaching a child to read in this ideal arrangement only requires a caring literate adult, a little time, and effective instructional materials.

In addition, Riley (2001:41) claims that the role of the adult in supporting reading progress is crucial, scaffolding the child's attempts to read through; (a) modeling mature reading behavior, (b) enabling the sampling of text, (c) supporting the prediction of a word, and (d) conforming the prediction through the use of the available cues, and correcting miscues.

Furthermore, in relation to teaching young learners, the teacher should be at least as energetic as the students. Sosiowati (2003) says that the young learners teacher should be enthusiastic, patient, creative, positive, relax, and innovative because she is dealing with curious young people who are very eager to learn something new.

In addition, teacher of young learners should not damage the students' motivation because it can affect their future performance.

According to Coopers, parents lay a foundation for success in reading by reading books to him. They say "The more books you read, the bigger you child's vocabulary becomes." A bigger vocabulary allows him to recognize lots of words while he reads.

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CONCLUSION

Children should bring each new situation of their own previous experience and background and interpret new information from that perspective. Approaches, methodologies, or techniques in the teaching and learning are used to support it. To develop good reading abilities, all approaches should be considered. However, there is no one best approach to teaching reading, because one that works for one child may not work at all for another child. Good teachers have to recognize that children learn in different ways and require different strategies.

High-quality and interesting book can be the most valuable and effective material or resource for the teacher to enhance the children's reading ability. The stories from the book which are read aloud by adult can be the source of language exposure for

children. That is one of the proofs that the role of the parent or teacher in supporting reading progress is crucial. In addition, research shows that reading to children has many other positive outcomes.

In conclusion, there are three important points for children reading success, namely: (1) innovative and suitable approach, (2) effective material, and (3) parent or teacher. All these three elements are critical in order to teach all kids to read.

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