Elements in the teaching of reading

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Introduction

This article is intended for teachers in both private and government school teaching reading in English classes where the child’s first language is other than English.

Reading, a critical element of literacy, is essential in today’s constantly changing world since reading competence is foundational, not only for school based learning, but also for children’s behavioral and psychological wellbeing, further education and training, occupational success, productive and fulfilling participation in economic activity, as well as for a country’s social and economic future (National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy, 2005). Continuously improving computer based technologies and global communications means that competence in complex multiliteracies is now more than ever essential for success.

Reading is a part of the way we use language in daily life to gather information, communicate with others and also for enjoyment. Reading always occurs in context, that is, what we read is part of a broader situation or an extended text (Hood, Soloman and Burns, 2002). Text here refers to a complete piece of language which is related to a particular context. Texts can be extended pieces of language such as a novel or single words such as Exit.

The nature of reading

Current research tells us that reading is a complex cognitive process dependent on an interaction between information processing/decoding skills (bottom up skills) and background knowledge (top down skills) combined with social experiences. Thus the reading process involves much more than decoding from print to sound. It also involves cultural, social and personal knowledge, and the ability to map this knowledge to our understanding of a text.

In becoming readers we are socialized into different kinds of literacy practices within our cultural, social and educational communities depending on the role that literacy plays in those communities. In the United Arab Emirates oral communication has historically assumed a more important role than written communication and as such less emphasis may have been placed on the use of written text, especially in the home.
Approaches to teaching reading

Typically a child enters school with varying degrees of competence in speaking their language. However, they usually have little knowledge about how to read and write. Teaching reading then involves helping students masters the challenges of linking written and spoken language. For students to link their knowledge of spoken language to written language they first need to master the alphabetic code, that is, the system of grapheme-phoneme correspondences that link written words with their pronunciations.

For more than forty years there has been ongoing debate about how reading, especially beginning reading, should be taught. At one end of the continuum are those who advocate whole language approaches (instruction is context and meaning centred with symbol-sound correspondences taught incidentally in context) and at the other are those who favour systematic phonics approaches (direct and explicit instruction in orthographic-sound correspondences and rapid whole word recognition). With this in mind many approaches have been advocated over time and include bottom up approaches, top down approaches, interactive approaches and more recent integrated approaches to the teaching of reading.

Bottom up approaches to the teaching of reading take the view that readers learn to read by decoding. Difficulties can be remedied through development of phonic skills and skills development is at the level of word recognition, with little connection to context or readers’ background knowledge. Top down approaches place less emphasis on decoding. Reading is rather viewed as a process of guessing meaning from context with background knowledge support. Reading difficulties can be remedied by focussing on better reading strategies. Interactive approaches view reading as a process of interaction between top down and bottom up skills. Taking this view then, difficulties can be remedied through a combination of language development, decoding and strategy development. More recent literacy approaches emphasize situating reading within a broader social and cultural context. In this view reading difficulties stem from a person’s inability to access meaning of texts and can be remedied by focussing on a combination of decoding skills, cognitive processes and social experiences. Recent research findings (See Camilli et al, 2003; Coltheart, 2005a; 2005b; Lahoud, 2000) suggest that integrative approaches which combine approaches to teaching reading and incorporate systematic, explicit phonics instruction are significantly more effective than non systematic ones.

An integrated approach to teaching reading

Research and experience tell us that the foundations of literacy are laid in the early years and that reading programs should be student centered. Reading for meaning is paramount and reading should be rewarding for the reader. Students learn to read by reading meaningful and motivating texts and the best approach to teaching reading is a systematic and integrated approach.

The Australian Government’s National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy Report (2005) also advocates early, systematic, integrated and explicit teaching of reading as the most effective way of teaching all children to read. An integrated approach to teaching
reading is a process that should involve collaboration with school communities and parents and should teach the following:

I. Phonemic awareness: the ability to hear and manipulate sounds in oral language;

II. Phonics: the relationships between letters and sounds;

III. Vocabulary: new words and what they mean;

IV. Text comprehension: understanding what is being read and developing higher-order thinking skills; and

V. Fluency: the ability to read quickly and naturally, recognize words automatically, and group words quickly

(National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy Report, 2005).

Burns and De Silva Joyce’s (2000: xi) four related roles of a reader provide a useful typology for teachers to consider when teaching students to become effective readers. Throughout the reading process effective readers are code breakers (How can I make meaning of this?); text participants (What does this text mean?); text users (What do I do within this text?); and text analysts (What does all this do to me?). Table 1.1 below highlights the implications for teaching reading using Burns and De Silva Joyce’s roles of a reader.

The related roles of reading suggest that teachers need to help their students develop strategies for approaching the reading process. This involves helping students to:

- Understand that reading is an active process involving comprehension of meaning
- Appreciate that reading involves evaluating and confirming predictions, using our social knowledge
- Recognize that we use different reading strategies depending on the text type and our purpose for reading
- Identify different text structures, sections of text and the kinds of language used.

(Hood, Solomon and Burns, 2002:12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Related Reader Roles</th>
<th>Tasks Required to Help the Reader</th>
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<tr>
<td>Code Breaker (How can I make meaning of this?)</td>
<td>Providing explicit instruction in code-breaking techniques which include phonological awareness, letter recognition, letter-sound correspondences, sight word recognition, punctuation, marking of paragraphs etc. Encouraging invented spelling to help children develop understanding of phoneme identity, phonemic segmentation and sound-spelling relationships, with strategies to facilitate the transition to conventional spelling. Using phonological awareness activities for blending and segmenting, initially with alliteration and rhyme, later with phonemes and, at appropriate stages, linked to the explicit teaching of phoneme identity and sound-letter knowledge. Combining visual/orthographic and phonological approaches.</td>
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Table 1: Teaching Reading Using Four Related Roles of a Reader (adapted from Burns and De Silva Joyce’s (2000:xi)).

**Effective reading lessons: Before, during and after reading**

When primary schools use an integrated approach with phonics then it is easier for students to respond to texts more accurately and efficiently. When teaching reading you need to decide on your intended learning outcomes for reading and select appropriate texts in terms of motivating and interesting content and the level of difficulty of the text. Once you have done this you need to select or design suitable activities to help students achieve the learning outcomes.

We suggest grouping activities into the following categories:

- **Before reading activities**
- **While reading activities**
- **After reading activities.**
These activities are suitable for whole class, small group and individual instruction.

**Before reading activities**

Preparing students for what they are going to read can make comprehension much easier. The preparatory activities below aim to help students understand the kind of text they will read and the overall meaning of the text. To do this the activities activate background knowledge, draw on students’ experiences, develop interest, encourage students to make predictions and teach essential vocabulary for an understanding of the text. The following activities provide just a few examples which may offer you some ideas for designing your own activities:

- Brainstorm learner’s feelings / experiences of ideas/themes linked to the story in some way
- Introduce essential vocabulary using visuals, sketches and realia
- Discussion
- Focused questions to check understanding of key concepts
- Prediction activities using key vocabulary, visuals, realia
- Sequencing pictures
- Sequencing a series of key words

**While reading activities**

The main aim of these activities is to help students develop reading strategies that effective readers use while reading. This involves focusing on the micro-skills of reading such as skimming or reading for gist, using prediction skills, reading for the main ideas, reading in detail, scanning for specific information, using reference skills, and inferring the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Set reading tasks before giving the students the text; students need a purpose for reading. Consider the nature of the tasks in relation to the before reading activities. What do the learners need to be able to do in order to complete the task? How challenging is the task? Depending on the length of the text and the nature of the tasks, students will probably need to read the text more than once. For example, they first read the text for gist, then they read for the main ideas and they read it a third time in detail or for specific information.

**Reading for gist**

When we read for the gist we skim the text quickly to get a general idea of what the text is about. The following activities should be completed in a very short space of time; 30 seconds to one minute depending on the length and level of difficulty of the text. They aim to help students decide if they want to or need to read a text or to show students that understanding a few words is sometimes sufficient to get an idea of what the message contains:

- Choose the appropriate title/headline for the text
- Choose the best picture for the text
- Do you think it’s a true story?/Is it a happy or sad story?/ What is the problem?
- Which of the class predictions was right/closest

**Reading for main ideas**

When we read for the main ideas we read the text carefully enough to identify the main points of information without being concerned about the details. The following activities aim
to encourage students to identify the main points in a text:

- Answer true/false questions
- Answer multiple choice questions
- Predict the ending
- Sequence the pictures/check before reading sequencing
- Sequence events
- Summarizing a text

**Reading in detail**

When we read in detail we read carefully and sometimes more slowly to make sure that we have understood the meanings of the text. The following activities aim to show students that careful reading is sometimes required and to equip them with strategies for understanding important details in a text:

- Identify the following vocabulary/realia sequence them
- Follow written instructions
- Complete a cloze activity
- Categorizing texts
- Skeleton texts
- Retelling the story
- Working out the meaning of unfamiliar words, for example by matching synonyms; tracing vocabulary chains; identifying word collocations
- Scanning for specific information

When we scan for specific information we are looking for particular information in a text while ignoring the rest. We use reference skills when we rely on some systematic organization of a text or a number of texts to locate information we want. The following activities aim to encourage scanning and/or the use of reference skills by exposing students to different ways information is organized; to show them that we do not read every word of a text to get the information we want; to highlight that how we read a text is determined by our purpose for reading and to help students to find information they need quickly:

- Using a television guide
- Using a bus timetable
- Using a dictionary
- Reading the classified advertisements
- Using a phone book
- Using a text book

**After reading activities**

The main aim of after reading activities is to give students the opportunity to react to the text in a personal way and to go beyond the text itself:

- Offering personal opinions about the text
- Completing the sentences e.g. I think Maria is . . . . e.g. In my country, elderly people . . . .
- Choosing characters from a set of visuals. Which one is Maria? Why?
- Telling the story from another perspective; another character, another observer, with a change of attitude etc
- Retell/comprehend the story in another language form e.g. written narrative form, newspaper story, from narrative to third person, change in register, changed vocabulary, in a dialogue form
- Who said what? A series of statements that link to particular characters
- Read similar texts independently and silently. An effective way to encourage such reading is through the use of a reading ‘corner’ or areas in the room where children can read independently.
- Another extremely effective strategy to encourage ongoing reading is to ensure children are in a 'print
saturated’ environment in the classroom where they have to use their reading skills in real contexts e.g. reading the daily schedule, reading class ‘rules’, or sharing poems or stories written by others.

Supporting the teaching of reading in schools

Effective support for teaching reading requires collaboration between the whole school community and the wider community. Recent research suggests that important support features include:

- Systematic procedures for identification, planning, teaching and monitoring progress in reading
- Systematic records that are regularly updated
- Experienced and qualified staff to coordinate whole school support
- Community involvement that includes parent-family programs, parent classroom helpers and peer tutoring or buddy systems to create a school culture of cooperation and acceptance
- Creative use of resources in terms of flexible use of staff to provide a range of regular classroom and withdrawal teaching contexts that are appropriate for individual student needs
- Ongoing professional development for teachers in the form of on-site professional learning programs including classroom based inquiry and the development of professional learning communities (See Chapter X in this volume for more information on Zayed University’s Center for Professional Development of UAE Educators)
- Teacher education programs that prepare student teachers to teach

reading and that the content of course work in primary literacy education focus on best practice understandings of evidence based findings and an integrated approach to the teaching of reading; child and adolescent development and inclusive approaches to literacy teaching.

Conclusion

Reading is a critical element of literacy. In our ever changing world competence in multiliteracies is essential for personal well-being and such ability enables individuals to contribute to society in meaningful ways.

This article has aimed to help teachers understand more about the process of reading and implement strategies to develop essential micro-skills of reading. Teaching quality has strong positive effects on students’ experiences of language learning and schooling. Students want teachers who care and encourage them; know and understand their subject; treat each student as an individual; make learning the core of what happens in the classroom and manage distractions that disrupt and prevent learning (Ramsey, 2000: 12; Slade, 2002). We believe that teachers who believe that all students can learn to read and write well and who engage in professional learning and also learn from each other are already well placed to teach students to read. In addition, establishing teaching standards, the certification of highly accomplished teachers and strategic teacher professional development will encourage sustainable educational effectiveness and continuous professional learning in the area of teaching reading.
References


