

Teaching Reading to Children: Methods and Techniques

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Abstract

The essential role of reading can be overlooked neither in the native nor in the second or foreign language. Reading skill is an important asset in the process of literacy as well as a means of extending one's knowledge. However, teaching reading involves unique problems and challenges at all conceivable levels of instruction. Focusing on teaching English to children, practitioners complain of deficiency of children in reading. This can be due to the method applied, materials, techniques, and procedures. This article reviews the different methods of teaching reading to children and tries to highlight the shortcomings of each one of them, while the main concern is to introduce some of the techniques that are useful for teaching reading to children at different age groups in an EFL situation.

Key words:

phonemic awareness, alphabetic method, phonics method, look and say (whole word) method, sentence method, kinesthetic method, literature-based method, Montessori method

Introduction

Teaching reading has undergone changes in the same way as the swinging of the pendulum has continued in the domain of language teaching. However,

during the last few years it has been realized that past methodologies have been too narrowly based and more than one cornerstone is necessary for the development of a type of teaching which will be both flexible enough to meet the different language needs of the modern society in general and to conform to the specific requirements of each language teaching setting in particular. Therefore, sticking to one method of teaching reading will be of little use and children according to their age level should benefit from different methods of teaching reading. A review of the historical timeline developed by Halford (1997) shows that shift in method of teaching dates back to the nineteenth century when practicing sound-letter correspondences and memorization of spelling lists of the eighteenth century was attacked by the advocates of the phonics approach. Phonics method, in turn, was attacked some time later and lost its place in teaching reading from 1930- 1957 when the publication of Rudolph Flesch's famous book "Why Johnny Can't Read" urged a return to phonics. The controversy that still dominates the field of language teaching forces us to move towards an age-oriented and setting-oriented method.

Methods of teaching reading

Reading has been taught in all sorts of ways. Hughes (1972) proposes five methods of teaching reading namely the *alphabetic* method, the *phonics* method, the *look and say* or *whole word* method, the *sentence* method, and the *kinesthetic* method. The alphabetic method teaches children the names of the letters and spells the names into words. The emphasis in this method is on the names and shapes of letters and this helps the learning of letter sequences, left

to right word attack and spelling. According to this method, if children come across letters in their normal order in words and if the letters are called out enough, children would learn to read as the names of many consonants suggest their sounds. However, since the names of many letters are often different from the sounds they represent in words, it is difficult for children to relate certain symbols to certain sounds.

Phonics method is teaching reading by phonetic method in a way that no special symbol or terminology is used; that is, it is simplified phonetics for teaching reading. The key strategy in teaching through phonics method is developing children's phonemic awareness in learning reading, writing, spelling, and structure. Moreover, the child is taught to recognize phonetic regularities in written pattern or spelling of English words and to associate these spelling patterns with particular sounds. However, it should be noted that too much emphasis on phonics would encourage children to use sounding out as their first and possibly only independent strategy for dealing with problem words. The best way to utilize phonics is to introduce the sounds of language within the context of meaningful reading and writing and language play.

On the contrary, whole word or look and say method is based on the conception that children see words as whole patterns. Children, therefore, memorize the look of words and learn to associate the printed word with its meaning. However, the main problem with this method is that children may see the particular details before the whole word. Besides, individual letters may be overlooked and indiscriminate guessing may result. It should be noted that memorization plays a major role in the process of word recognition involved in

this method, and this implies rote rather than meaningful learning. Whole word method could be partially used in teaching some of the English words but not as the sole reading method.

The logical evolution of look and say method puts emphasis on whole sentences and phrases. The proponents of the sentence method believe that words cannot be informative in themselves, and their combination of words in short sentences can be more meaningful. Sentences are considered as units of thought and children should learn words in sentences. Thus, using attractive materials for children can result in rapid and fluent reading. However, as Hughes (1972) points out, utilizing this method may cause the exclusion of individual letters and thus leading to indiscriminate guessing.

The kinesthetic method, as Hughes (1972) argues, involves the visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic modes of learning. The child is asked to choose a word he thinks is difficult. The teacher writes the word in a large handwriting on a piece of paper, saying each syllable as she writes, and the child traces the word with his forefinger and pronounces the syllables of the word. The tracing and vocalization of the word are repeated until the child feels that he can reproduce it without looking at it. It is worth mentioning that using the different senses of children is a very useful technique in teaching the shapes of the alphabet and some of the function words without which reading sentences would be postponed; however, utilizing kinesthetic method as the only method of teaching reading is inadequate in the sense that a long time will be required to teach the most frequently used words to children.

According to Hawkins (1991), there is still another method of teaching reading to children namely the literature-based method, which uses children's literature as the starting point for teaching reading. Reading is taught holistically without dividing language into words, sentences, or sounds and for this purpose it uses children's storybooks. It is very much like look and say method but uses authentic literature rather than isolated words. Whole language educators propose that children learn to read naturally from exposure to lots of reading just like they learn to speak by being surrounded with speech from birth (Hall and Moats, 1998). The underlying assumption is that the child figures out the rules of the language on his own. Comprehension, it is argued, takes priority over technical skills such as spelling. Students learn phonics in the context of reading children's literature. The main goal is to understand that writers use language to communicate and the reader should try to comprehend what the author has written. As Hawkins argues, the literature selected should include picture books, folk tales, fables, myths, epics, modern fantasy, poetry, modern fiction, historical fiction, and biography. For the beginning reader, the literature books are often story-picture books, which is the common technique of whole language teaching. Using children's literature as a basis for reading instruction helps the child move to published texts easily. The illustrations that accompany text help contextualize the literature for the student. The method encourages children to guess from context and picture clues. Children may read for the gist of meaning of the whole text rather than analyzing unknown words. However, there is one fact that shouldn't be ignored. Literature-based method would not be effective for non-native beginners, because this method invests on "guessing

from the context” and though the method can help native beginners who know the language and want to learn reading, non-native beginners cannot benefit from the method very much.

In our country teaching speaking usually is of primary importance to the extent that teaching reading is almost neglected. Series such as *Let's Go*, *Chatter Box*, *Get Set Go*, and *Parade* do not pay so much attention to systematic teaching of reading to foreign language learners. It should be taken into consideration that these books are primarily developed for an ESL situation regardless of the fact that EFL settings have their own peculiarities. In an EFL setting, exposure to spoken language is very limited and reading can serve as a source of comprehensible input. Besides, when our learners get to high intermediate and advanced levels need to read books, newspapers, magazines, and use reference books. Therefore, the major form of communication is in written form of language rather than in its spoken form and overindulgence in conversation courses would impede the achievement of academic goals. Hence, a systematic approach towards teaching reading would be of great help in this regard.

In order to meet the language learning needs of all Iranian students the author of this article believes teaching procedure must include phonemic awareness, letter names and shapes, systematic and explicit phonics, spelling, vocabulary development, comprehension, and appropriate instructional materials.

How to begin?

Phonemic awareness is a powerful predictor of success in learning to read. Lack of phonemic awareness, as Adams (1990) argues, is the most powerful determinant of the likelihood of failure to learn to read because of its

importance in learning the English alphabet system. Children as foreign language learners should be given the opportunity to attend to rhyming songs, and be persuaded to repeat them. Listening to a group of words (usually three) and detecting those words that begin with a specific initial phoneme can be used as a simple activity which serves the purpose of familiarizing children with the spirit of the language they want to learn. Teaching children colors, shapes, and some most frequently used words such as body parts through using flash cards is recommended at this stage.

Moreover, children, at early stages of learning how to read should learn the alphabet. Knowing the name of each letter is not enough. They should be taught the shape and the sound of letters. For teaching the English letters the A-Z order doesn't seem to be useful. For children some letters look very much alike. Letters such as b and d, p and q cannot be easily recognized. The result of a survey in thirty English classes at preschool, first, and second grades of schools located in Tehran show that students have letter recognition and letter differentiation problem. Therefore, the order that is recommended is as follows:

[b, c, h, a], [f, s, l, i], [g, m, p, o], [j, r, k, e], [d, n, q, u], [v, t, w, x, y, z]

As it is shown, after teaching three consonants, a vowel is introduced. For consonant/vowel recognition color-coding is a very useful technique. For example, in Montessori method (see Polklillard, 1972) consonants are usually represented in red while vowels are shown in blue. Like phonics method, the name of each letter should be followed by its sound, so for letter c the name is /ci:/ and the sound is /k/; the other sound of the letter (the /s/ sound) which is relatively rare as compared to /k/ sound can be presented at later stages.

According to Montessori method, teaching the lower case precedes teaching the upper case. Using the tactile sense of children, recommended by kinesthetic method, can serve as a good starting point. Sand papers can be used to give children the sense of how each letter goes on the paper while touching the letters is accompanied by their sound and name. Children should be taught to move their two fingers (their forefinger and middle finger) in the correct direction each letter is written down. The important factor regarding the presentation of the letters to children at this age is the size of the papers. In Montessori method (see Polkillard, 1972) it is recommended to have the letters on 13 x 20 cards, so that they can easily attract children's attention. When each letter is taught, the card should be attached to the wall. This gives the students the opportunity to be exposed to what they have already learned. Teaching sounds of language should proceed in three successive phases. That is, after presenting three sounds, the teacher utters the sound of each one of the three letters and children are asked about the sound each symbol represents. The last sound is always asked first because children's memory span does not let them to remember the first letter.

In the next stage, Children can also participate in coloring the letters while repeating their sounds and names. The coloring activity for each letter should be in the direction the letter is written down. Using flash cards, letter blocks, magnetic letters, and rods can also be of great help in teaching the English alphabet.

Teaching reading systematically

In teaching reading systematically, phonics method can be of great help. The role of effective phonics is to help children understand, apply, and learn the alphabetic principle and conventions of written language. What is meant by phonics here is not rote drilling of spelling-sound correspondences and phonics rules. In teaching reading systematically, phonics method is used to gradually build from basic elements to more subtle and complex patterns. Initial phonics instruction is best conducted with a relatively small set of consonants and short vowels. These spelling-sound relationships should be developed progressively. By using limited set of letters in teaching reading, children will gain the experience of reading from left to right and also will understand the role of each letter in a word and in a sentence. It is worth mentioning that not all words are open to decoding. Although, in the earliest selections of reading materials for children the words should be decodable, some short words of high frequency such as *the, of, are, is, and you* should be introduced at the beginning because texts cannot be written without these words. As Look and Say method advocates, children are able to have a holistic picture of words and are easily able to recognize some words only by looking at their shape as a whole. After teaching the consonants and short vowels of English, the focus should be extended to more complex spelling patterns and words. Moving pattern by pattern from basics through consonant blends, long vowel spellings, inflections, the primary goal is to instill the larger logic and regularities of the system and its conventions. The points that should be covered step by step and during proceeding grades can be summarized as follows:

Consonant blends such as br, cr, dr, fr, gr, tr, wr, bl, cl, fl, and scr can be practiced. Although Iranian children do not have much problem with pronouncing blends but it could be used as a means for increasing children's lexical knowledge.

Silent e

Long vowels

Y as a vowel, when it acts as a vowel it usually has the long sound of e or i.

Consonant digraphs ch, sh, wh, ck, th, tch, kn, wr

Double vowel sounds ai, ay, ea, ee, oa, oe, ie ,ow

Diphthongs ou, ow, oi, oy,

Hard and soft c and g

R controlled vowel sounds ar, er, ir, or, ur

As mentioned earlier, teaching the phonics rules should be accompanied by meaningful sentences and associated with relevant pictures. The reading procedure can begin with very simple sentences such as:

- The bat is on the mat.
- An egg is in the nest.
- A pig is in the bin.

Later on, as students learn more, the sentences can change into simple passages with interesting content an example of which can be:

Mat and Tom are Pals. Tom chops with an ax. But Matt chats.

“Do not chat, Matt!” says Tom. “We need to chop!”

“Ok,” says Matt. “Let's chop!” Matt and Tom chop the logs.

WAP! BAM!

“We did it!” Now Matt and Tom can chat.

The goal of all reading sessions is to support students’ interest and capacity for independent reading. Decodable texts serve as good starting points for learning to read, most new words in these texts should be wholly decodable on the basis of the phonics that students have been taught’. Sight words should be familiarized ahead of time so that they will not divert the purpose of reading. As soon as children can read such basic decodable texts with reasonable comfort and fluency, less controlled texts such as trade books can be introduced to them.

Therefore, what is recommended is manipulation of a combination of methods, which is highly affected by the age of the learners and the level of proficiency gained through instruction. Teaching reading is a process that moves from sound-letter recognition to phonics, from phonics to Look and Say and to literature-based method.

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