Developing Young Learners’ Reading Skills in an EFL classroom

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Introduction

In the history of education, the teaching of reading has been a principal focus for many years. Numerous research efforts are evidence of widespread interest in all aspects of the reading process, especially in the beginning stages of learning to read. My own interest in this area was sparked while working with young learners and conducting classroom-based action research during my teaching practice placement in a school for girls in the final semester of my B.Ed degree.

Mills (2003) states that action research aims to gather information in order to gain insight, and develop positive change in schools. Thus, this research was designed to investigate a suitable reading approach that develops and promotes students' reading skill in the EFL classroom. This report describes my classroom-based action research which was carried out over the course of sixteen weeks during my final year teaching practice. This research began in the first semester when a preliminary investigation was carried out into the current situation regarding the teaching of reading in English in a Grade Three classroom.

At that point, I observed that the teaching of reading could be described mainly as follows:

- Reading activities are restricted to the teacher reading everything, including instructions, short stories, and rereading what was written on the board.
- Students’ reading is confined to imitating flash cards and reading very simple sentences after the teacher.
- Students begin every day with a new letter, learning the shape and memorizing words that start with the same letter.
- Students decode unfamiliar words using letter names instead of sounds.
- Activities are all teacher-centered, and students memorize letter shapes and words.

Based on these observations, and because of the limitations that I could see in this approach, I decided to implement, investigate, and develop a strategy to improve students’ reading skills using a balanced reading approach where phonics is taught combined with whole language.

On the surface, reading has not been much favoured either by teachers or students in the English classroom in Emirati government schools, and consequently, students do not seem interested in reading, and often find difficulties with this skill. The reason behind this lack of interest could be related to the challenges for Arabic learners of learning to read in the different script of English. Besides, other factors limit students’ interest in reading, such as limited access to English texts at home, lack of parental support, the lack of community support for English, and, most importantly, the inappropriate teaching approaches that are often used by teachers. Specifically, I observed that students used letter names instead of sounds when decoding print, and I thought that this might limit their ability to decode new words. Therefore, I decided to
focus on developing reading using phonics as a basis for improving students’ reading ability, combining it with the whole language approach to increase students' motivation and comprehension.

My preliminary research findings, based on observation of the teaching of reading in the Grade Three classroom where I was practising teaching, revealed the limitations with regard to the teaching of reading in our government schools. I found that there was a need for different reading approaches to enhance students’ reading ability, and I therefore decided to try to implement a more balanced reading approach: phonics combined with the whole language approach.

**Research Questions**

Specifically, my research project sought to answer the following two questions:

- Does teaching phonics in context motivate students to read?
- What are the effects on students’ reading ability of the teaching of phonics combined with a whole language approach?

**Literature Review**

Authors and writers often debate reading issues, such as the development of early reading, the best approaches to teaching reading, and how to motivate readers. This literature review examines some suggested reading approaches, especially the use of phonics in context.

**Teaching Reading through Phonics**

There are two basic views of reading instruction: the skills-based approach and the meaning-based approach. A skills-based approach emphasizes the use of phonics. Phonics is an instructional strategy that is used in order to teach letters and sound relationships by having the young readers sound out the words. This approach was influenced by the work of Chall (as cited in Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) who identifies reliable and substantial advantages to programs that include systematic phonics teaching. In fact, there has been extensive research on the effects of using phonics in teaching reading. In a recent study it has been declared that phonemic awareness is the key element of early success in reading where it was found that children's phonological awareness and phonological abilities play a vital role in learning to read (Anderson, 2005).

In this approach, emphasis is placed on intensive phonics instruction that is highly sequenced, and where phonics is taught with the expectation that meaning will follow at a later stage. Skills-base approaches have received considerable attention, and somewhat less attention has been paid to comprehension. However, other researches reject the idea of teaching phonics with an emphasis on drills and rote memorization. In fact, intensive sequenced phonic instruction was widely used in the 1960s and 1970s, until some researchers attacked this approach and started to raise questions about using phonics in isolation. It is likely, then, that using phonics alone is not the answer to
Improve reading skills and will not cure all reading problems.

In later studies, educators were influenced by Goodman who asserted that readers count more on the structure and meaning of language, rather than on the explicit information from the content or text (cited in Samuels & Kamil, 1988). He also developed a reading model that is known as the whole-language approach. As opposed to those supporters of phonics, meaning-based approach supporters emphasize meaning and comprehension in texts. In this case, students focus on the wholeness of words, sentences, paragraphs, and entire books to get the meaning through the context.

There are, then, two opposing views on the teaching of reading, and this opposition could be related to the common but mistaken view that whole language and skills-based instruction are divided into two sharply distinguished parts (Samuels & Kamil, 1988). Therefore, recent studies have focused on using a combination of phonics and the whole language approach in order to provide a balanced reading program. Snow, Burns and Griffin (1998) confirm that the teaching of reading needs solid skills instruction that includes phonics and phonemic awareness, along with whole texts to assist the construction of meaning. All in all, it seems that "Neither approach by itself is effective all the time, but both approaches possess merit" (Cromwell, 1997).

**Letters and Sounds**

Starting with the very basic of teaching reading, Anderson (2005) asserts that many parents and teachers believe that learning the letters of the alphabet is the key toward the process of acquiring literacy skills. In his study, he argues convincingly that teaching the names of letters to young learners who have just started to read and write can only lead to confusion, at the point where comprehensibility and cleerness are crucial. He believes that problems arise when learners realize that letter names always differ from the sounds they typically stand for. Therefore, Anderson (2005) suggests using phonics, and yet there are problems related to misconceptions of teaching phonics where phonics is taught via the drill method. It reflects the belief of some parents and educators that young readers need to memorize the sound-symbol relationships of letters and letter combinations through repetitive drilling. In spite of these reservations, phonemic awareness is the key element of early success in reading.

**Combining Phonics with Other Methods**

Researchers have pointed out that motivational problems might affect reading in the EFL context. Nuttall (1996) refers to readers who cannot develop good reading skills. She assumes that slow readers do not read much, and this affects their comprehension skills. If they do not understand, then they cannot enjoy reading. Therefore, foreign language researchers have focused their efforts on finding effective methods that increase students’ enjoyment and reading rates as well.

Jackson advocates the use of extensive reading to motivate readers. Brown (2000) defines extensive reading as an approach which involves reading widely, reading long texts, and reading for global understanding, and not for details. Thus, he claims, if students develop the habit of reading widely for enjoyment and interest, they gain increasing confidence and fluency and most develop the life long habit of reading in a...
foreign language. However, this strategy was disputed by Jackson himself in a later study where he reported that a majority of students had a low level of motivation to read extensively; the challenges related to reading slowly due to the new words and the lack of time which discouraged students to read. Yet, we cannot generalize this research outcome to all second language learners, but what we can say is that in order to develop students’ reading skills, there is a need to seek a balanced literacy program.

**Teaching Strategy**

In order to implement a balanced approach, I first taught my students two phonemes per lesson for a period of eight weeks in the first semester. During the first few weeks of the second semester, students were taught consonant and initial digraph sounds. Later, I taught students to blend (taking sounds and blending them together to make a word) and to segment (being able to hear a word and then say the individual sounds in the word) during the internship weeks (Johnson & Miner, 2005). As students mastered the sound of the letters and digraphs, a whole language approach was combined with teaching phonics to move them on to a more advanced level. In addition, reading aloud and shared reading were put into practice at a later stage, once students started successfully decoding prints through sounding out the letters.

The development of positive attitudes towards reading is often overlooked; therefore, teaching phonics was combined with the whole language approach in which I sought to focus the students’ attention on the wholeness of words, sentences, paragraphs, and entire books, to get the meaning through the context (Samuels & Kamil, 1982). Therefore I introduced the young learners to Dr. Seuss’s rhymes, and read many different types of stories for them, as Brown (2000) claims that using extensive reading can develop highly motivated readers.

**Research Methodology**

Johnson (1996) states that action research is characterized by "spiraling cycles of problem identification, systematic data collection, reflection, analysis, data-driven action taken, and finally, problem redefinition." Accordingly, the process of researching my own teaching of phonics with whole language involved a four step spiral process of planning which involved reconnaissance, taking actions, fact-finding about the results of the action, reflecting and developing revised action based on what had been learned (Ryder, n.d.).

**Data Collection**

I collected data from several sources in order to analyze the effectiveness of my introduction of phonics teaching combined with a whole language approach. Briefly, I sought to "Practice triangulation, whereby a variety of data sources and different methods are compared with one another to cross-check data" (Mills, 2003, p.80). For instance, observations as well as interviews were used to collect information on the effectiveness of teaching phonics on the students’ reading progress.
**Observations**

According to Bell (1999), observing enables documentation and reflection on classroom interactions and events as they actually happen, rather than what we think occurs. Although this method may be time consuming, in fact it gave a holistic perspective on the situation being observed. In this study, observational checklists were used to answer questions related to the reading progress noted as the action plans were implemented. I also recorded an audio clip of students decoding unfamiliar words to support my observations.

**Interviews**

Interviews provide very different data from observations. Macintyre (2000) defines an interview as getting information from the respondents through face to face interaction, and for this study an in-depth interview was conducted and tape recorded with the class teacher to provide information on students’ reading ability, and also to find out her perception of the value of teaching phonics.

**Surveys**

Burns (1999) defines surveys as a form of data collection where the same questions are asked to obtain information from a representative selection of respondents. This tool aimed to investigate students’ attitude toward reading, and was used to conduct a self-evaluation of their reading ability, before and after using phonics in their classes. In getting feedback from the students in the class, the use of surveys had more advantages than using individual interviews, because using surveys was less time consuming and allowed me to gain responses from all the students in the class. To decrease the chance of bias and to increase the reliability of the tool, students were asked not to write their names, so that their answers could become more trustworthy.

**Ethical Considerations**

During the process of collecting data, ethical issues were considered at every stage. When implementing the research, questions of access, power, harm, deception, and confidentiality were carefully considered. Permission was sought from both the SST and students’ parents to carry on with the classroom observations thereby, ensuring that ethical issues were considered. Subjects’ identities were protected so that information collected does not harm or embarrass in any way. To decrease the amount of bias and to lower the amount of unreliable data, an attempt was made to increase the trustworthiness of answers from respondents. This was achieved by informing them before collecting the data that my main aim was to gain information, not to judge them. As mentioned previously, informing respondents that their identities would be protected also increased the reliability of the answers they gave.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

My initial observations before I started to implement phonemic awareness showed that most students in the class had the same reading difficulty, which was not being able to
decode words phonetically. The results were consistent with Anderson’s claim that teaching students only the letter names when introducing print causes problems in later stages when students start to decode print without realizing that letter names always differ from the sounds they typically stand for (Anderson, 2005).

However, after teaching the sounds of the letters, my observations of the learners in my class revealed a gradual disappearance of this. Before implementing my action plan, 90% of the students called out letter names when trying to pronounce words, especially unfamiliar ones. During the third week of the implementation of the teaching of the sounds of the letters, students started to realize that they could use the sounds when decoding, and thus they began to develop an ability to read unfamiliar words. Finally, by week eight, the percentage of students in the class using the letter names, rather than sounds, to decode words reduced to just 10% of the class.

To make sure students were not memorizing the shape of the words, a test was given before and after implementation of the strategy. The group had to decode a list that included familiar words, some unfamiliar words, and some nonsense words. An observational checklist revealed some interesting facts about two students in particular from the group. Before implementing the strategy, student X was already considered to be a good reader, while student Y was considered to be a poor reader. However, a transcript of an audio clip I recorded as they tried to decode the words aloud showed that although Y struggled, she was in fact trying to decode exactly as student X did.

In later stages, students’ reading ability significantly improved. Feedback from the class teacher revealed enhancement in reading at sentence level which helped them to move toward reading at text level. An audio clip was recorded while students were decoding an unfamiliar whole text with many unfamiliar words. It showed that students used a phonemic approach to decode as the following transliteration of one student’s decoding attempts demonstrates:

**Student:**  
I liky bananas, kokes and oranjes,  
Tomatos, apis and sundwishs,  
bef birgars, letoocees, barad and kaarots,  
yame, yame, I liky to et.

**The original text:**  
I like bananas, cookies and oranges,  
Tomatoes, apples and sandwiches,  
Beef burgers, lettuces, bread and carrots,  
Yummy-Yummy, I like to eat.

It is clear that the student here was trying to sound out the letters, and to read and enjoy the song. In fact, the class teacher declared during the in-depth interview that “It was quite impressive observing students’ progress from being unable to read unfamiliar words to trying to read at text level.”

All in all, the analysis revealed that teaching phonics seemed to produce significant benefits for students in Grade Three. By contrast to the other Grade Three sections in
the school, students in the examined class enhanced their ability to read and spell words. The examined class was better able to decode and spell, and showed significant improvement in reading.

Furthermore, it seemed that when students mastered the skill of sounding out letters, fear of reading difficult or unfamiliar words seemed to decrease. An answer to a question in a questionnaire I completed by the classroom teacher revealed that: “They were able to read words; even if they don’t have meaning, students started to read difficult words.”

To check students’ evaluation of the whole process of learning phonics in content, a survey was conducted with those involved in the program. The survey results revealed that fewer students were interested in learning phonics in isolation, but they liked learning phonics when it was combined with rhymes and stories. Generally, students’ were most interested in decoding nonsense words.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the findings showed that teaching children phonics in context was effective and that teaching phonemic awareness seems to significantly improve students’ reading. Although teaching phonics with a whole language approach does not represent a complete reading program, it provided students with essential foundational knowledge of the English phonemic system. The findings of this research provide evidence that raising phonemic awareness is a valuable and essential part of a successful classroom reading program. Data collected during the implementation of the action plan revealed that teaching phonics should be a key component of the UAE elementary schools’ English curriculum.

**References**


