

Marijana Matić
Filološko-umetnički fakultet, Kragujevac

LEARNING TO READ, READING TO LEARN (Reading in grades 2 and 3 of primary school)

“Reading is a complex developmental challenge that we know to be intertwined with many other developmental accomplishments: attention, memory, language, and motivation, for example. Reading is not only a cognitive psycholinguistic activity but also a social activity.”¹ Snow, C., M. S. Burns, and P. Griffin, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, National Academy press, 1998)

To me, it is true and so much more. The moment I think about reading in English in the second and third grade of primary school and onwards, I picture the atmosphere in the classroom that equals the early childhood when you were sitting in your Mum’s lap leafing through a picture book. The feelings of joy, challenge, security, effort and support were all there to make it an unforgettable experience. I believe that it is possible to create such an atmosphere in the classroom and, indeed, teachers should create it.

Teaching learners learn how to read cannot be achieved in one lesson. But if you create the positive atmosphere and focus on different smaller goals on the way to literacy, you will surely reach your main goal together with your learners. What joy!

I will not be the first one to tell you that children love stories and that we adults love them too. How else would you explain so much time per day that children spend stuck to the TV, the renting of videos and reading books? So you don’t need to go out of your way to make your learners interested in stories. The interest is already there to be used. The only thing is to find a good story that children can relate to. It is a story with a sequence of events, interesting characters and most often a problem to be solved. Some of the stories are funny, too.

As you know, there are two types of reading: silent reading and reading aloud. In teaching children in lower primary classes how to read I strongly believe that it is important to combine both, and use them

1 Snow, C, M.S. Burns and P. Griffin, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, National Academy Press, New York, 1998, 67.

with storytelling and vocabulary exercises. I believe that the mixture of all of these is necessary to make learning to read work.

Before starting to teach reading the teacher should first make sure that the children have *sufficient amount of vocabulary* to understand the story. The story which is too difficult will not be understood, the story which is too easy will send the wrong message to the learners and make them feel bored. Without being able to understand the meaning of not only words but also chunks or whole lexical sets, learners cannot move to the reading exercises. And I mean active vocabulary that they can pronounce and use in context. I include spelling to some extent too. This phase lasts until they have these stabilized and firm. So when choosing a story, you need to take into consideration the difficulty of the language and vocabulary included, its frequency and age appropriacy.

As the teacher sets out to this great adventure, she should first induce learners to gain interest in the story and the characters. It is possible to discuss it all in mother tongue. The best way to do so is to get them familiar with the title and have them predict what the story is going to be about and what the characters are like.

Before reading the story with her class the teacher should *first tell* it or a part of it a couple of times to learners with a lot of acting and picture prompts and then ask them to tell it together. When the teacher tells the story for the second time, she stops at certain places to see if the learners can fill in the gaps. The more learners grasp the story the more they will participate in telling it, but don't expect miracles at the spot too soon. After working on storytelling the teacher should have some word recognition exercises. In this way she checks if the context was clear and also reinforces it. When she is to a large extent sure that the learners understand the story and can partly tell it themselves, or know chunks, expressions and words, only then does she get to move on to reading and listening. I strongly believe in the longish oral phase before reading or writing, especially for learners in elementary school. The lower the grade, the more importance it has.

When learners are already familiar with the story, the *reading aloud* comes into play. Learners open their books and the teacher reads the part of the story to them and have them follow the text with their finger in their books. She should do it a couple of times with variations making sure they are not bored. I would here make a big deal of the fact that they are reading their first book in English. Wow! Let them move their lips as you read. Read in an exaggerating manner and at a slow pace but bear in mind that the pace is not too slow to impede the comprehension of the text. You must decide and know in advance which words to say

in an exaggerated way or a couple of times or work on more later on. Those words may have sounds which are difficult for Serbian children or the spelling and pronunciation differ, or there are some silent letters in the word, or it is a function word or it's a sentence marker or an abstract term difficult to grasp...

I also strongly believe that it is much better to have a teacher read aloud to learners than just play the tape / CD and have them listen and read, especially when you read for the 1st time. The teacher has eyes to check if she's going too quickly or not, the CD doesn't. On the other hand, the CD has different voices and stage effects that can be hard on the teacher to produce. I do use CDs both in the "storytelling" and reading phase on other occasions but not with the first reading. I believe in a live, steady, correct version offering present model which can build confidence better than a tape. Especially when you're starting off.

The next thing to do is have *a choral reading repetition* of the text. It is to be done for different reasons. It gives students confidence and a sense of minimal achievement, it practices rhythm and intonation, it loosens them up. Finally, for the first reading class, learners read aloud individually different bits of the text in turns. The teacher should go gently about correcting the errors with a lot of encouragement.

It's time to round off with setting out homework for the next class: Read at home the specific part of the story 3 times aloud and 3 times in silence. Be aware all the time of what you are achieving with each type of reading.

Silent reading is used for learning real *reading skills* that refer to finding out information, meaning, understanding context... and *Reading aloud* practices mechanics of reading like when to stop, what to pronounce with greater effort and significance, characters taking turns and so on, so more or less, it practices pronunciation of words and sentence rhythm.

The next class begins with learners asking the teacher things they are not sure how to read before class. This is followed by learners reading bits of assigned text in turns *in pairs first* and then we do it in different ways as a whole class. The teacher's job aside from giving a lot of support and encouragement is also to *make notes* which words, phrases, sentence constructions are difficult and should be worked on and what each child is mostly struggling with. This is then followed by more word recognition exercises which the teacher makes into games to give a relaxed frame to this rather strenuous atmosphere.

When the teacher has made sure that the storytelling and reading of the particular part of the story is achieved, she moves to the next part

of the story starting again with the storytelling. Or if the teacher chose a very short story, she moves on to the next one.

What should be born in mind all the while is that reading is hard for the learners of this age in itself, and especially in the foreign language. There are two things that can kill the joy of reading in a foreign language: the classes that turn into drills and the indifferent or strict teacher.

As you can see from all of the above it is not easy either to teach or to learn reading in the foreign language in lower grades of elementary school. But it is crucial that learners start to do so and your role as a teacher is vital. If you fail, and if learners come to the opinion that reading is hard, boring and something they cannot do, it will stay with them for a lifetime. Learning to read cannot be achieved overnight and there will be many sighs along the way, but as long as you know what you are doing, when and why, and always give a lot of support and praise there are bound to be smiles. Enjoy!

Suggestions for further reading:

1. Beards, R. ed. 2004. *Rhyme, Reading and Writing*. London, Hodder and Stoughton.
2. Cameron, L. 2002. *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge, CUP.
3. Fergusson, V., P. Durkin and Sperring, H. 2003. *Rhyme, read and write-Starter*. Melbourne, OUP.
4. Fergusson, V., P. Durkin and Sperring, H. 2003. *Rhyme, read and write-Book 1*. Melbourne, OUP.
5. Fergusson, V., P. Durkin and Sperring, H. 2003. *Rhyme, read and write-Book 2*. Melbourne, OUP.
6. Moon, J. 2000. *Children Learning English*. Oxford, Macmillan Heineman.
7. Reilley, V. and S.M. Ward. 1997. *Very Young Learners*, Oxford, OUP.
8. Slattery M., and J. Willis. 2003. *English for Primary Teachers*. Oxford, OUP.
9. Snow, C., M. S. Burns, and P. Griffin. 1998. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. New York, National Academy Press.
10. Trelease, J. 2001. *The Read-Aloud Handbook*. New York, Penguin.
11. Wright, A. 1995. *Storytelling with Children*. Oxford, OUP.
12. Wright, A. 1996. *Creating Stories with Children*. Oxford, OUP.