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Interactive reading in primary education: A case study in Iranian EFL context

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Abstract

Teaching English to young students has become especially important in recent years. The present study attempted to address the question whether Iranian primary school children can learn English with a reading based approach to teaching. To this end, 26 girl primary school students in grade 5 were taught English with an interactive reading model for 12 months. To check overall achievement, three tests were administered at the end of the program. The tests tapped word meaning recognition, sentence meaning comprehension, short text comprehension. Analysis of the data demonstrated that students were at the good level of achievement in word meaning recognition and sentence meaning comprehension tests with reference to the criteria of achievement success applied by the Organization of Education. Finally students' performance in the short text comprehension test was at the acceptable achievement level. In the quest for finding effective ways to teach English as a foreign language in primary education contexts and to provide a motivating and engaging instructional tool in language learning, interactive reading through Phonics and Look-Say is suggested to be employed in foreign language classes offered to primary school children.

Keywords: Phonics, Look-say, Primary education, Interactive reading, Teaching reading.

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1. Introduction

In today's world there is an overwhelming interest in learning and teaching foreign or second languages. In the past, learning a foreign or second language was restricted to special groups of children, but today in the world of technology, the recurrent idea is that foreign language learning should be part of every child's education. Therefore, in the profession of language teaching, several methods have been devised as practical means for teaching foreign languages to children. Regarding children's educational development, the study of foreign languages has been shown positive effects on improving communication skills and explicit impacts on memory and listening skills. English is an important language in the world, and in many countries the most emphasis is on learning English as a second or foreign language. According to Brewster, Elis and Girard (2004), foreign language at a young age gains its importance from following reasons: "children are full of physical energy, are developing literacy in their first language, are developing conceptually and are good mimics". Therefore, there is a strong belief among experts that children learn languages without any problem better than adults. Because of the fact that teaching of reading has been the center of attention over the past twenty years, there have been different approaches to teaching reading to children. Some say reading is mastery in phonics (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974), that is, in learning reading, children at first translate letters into sounds and then use their comprehension skills to recognize what words are made by the sounds. Regarding another view, known as look-say or whole word, children's reading is primarily visual. Smith (1971) argued that children can read words as visual 'wholes' without any prior translation of symbols into sounds.

English is a compulsory course in primary education in many countries worldwide. Unfortunately in Iran children do not enjoy such an opportunity in primary school curriculum; and it is an unjustifiable weak point for the educational system in Iran in comparison to other system around the world. Therefore, this study tries to investigate the possibility of teaching English at primary school intentionally with a reading orientation so that the integration of such a program into the primary education curriculum can be carried out as smoothly as possible. To this end, the present study seeks to address the following research question:

1. Is it possible to initiate English teaching at primary school based on the interactive model of early reading?

2. Literature Review

The two major approaches to reading instruction in a foreign language are phonics and look-say. Phonics is based on the recognition of letter and sounds relationship, that is, the link between graphemes (printed letters) and phonemes (their associated sounds). In a report by Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson (1985), phonics was considered as one of the essential ingredients in early reading instruction. Investing how the best schools teach reading, Ofsted (2010) found support for synthetic phonics in primary schools. Moreover, it was found that concentrated and systematic teaching of phonics played a central role in attaining success in school subjects. According to (Macmillan, 1997), learning to read requires understanding the fact that print is a code for representing speech sounds. The look-say method offers another angle to look at reading instruction to children. The fundamental characteristic of this method, according to Campbell (1995), is that language is taken as a whole and, accordingly, it is best learnt as a whole provided that meaningful and relevant text is presented. Goodman (1975) stated that the common controversy between the two approaches to reading simply could be boiled down to talking about the two sides of the same coin, that is, both approaches seem to deal with words as "ends in themselves". Taking account of these insights, it seems that what we need in teaching early reading is an approach to combine bottom-up and top-down reading sub-processes associated with phonics and Look-say respectively. This is what is known as the interactive model of reading. As Rumelhart (1985) elaborated, reading could be thought of as both a "perceptual and cognitive" process, that is, it is a process which phonics is based on the interaction between text and reader. Bamford and Day (2004) pointed out that decoding of the word in reading is the prior factor for meaning-construction; subsequently, the reader decodes

the massage that a writer has encoded into a text. Successful word-decoding gives rise to the activation of reader's information and prior knowledge so that comprehension is finally achieved. Chall's (1967) study showed the effectiveness of early phonics instruction and illustrated the point that dome focus on phonics for developing decoding skills was necessary but not sufficient. She argued that as children learn how to read, they need instruction that focuses on both decoding and comprehension.

Reading is a complex process that may follow different strategies, activities, and purposes. HelleKjar (2007) defined the relationship between the cognitive and interactive processes as 'reading comprises decoding of the written text on one hand, and efficiently processing the information gained on the other' (p.23). Also in another view reading involves two main processes: word recognition and comprehension. Word recognition is defined as understanding the way written symbols are related to one's spoken language, and comprehension is the process of making meaning of words, sentences, and connected text. For understanding written text readers usually require their background vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge and being familiar with text (Bernhardt, 1991). Improving reading skill is an important end for both children and adults because the ability to read open new world, experiences and opportunities for reader. Gaining new knowledge and enjoy everything of new life to some extent depends on being able to read, and many people learn to read in their native language without more difficulties (Hulstijn, 1991).

Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) stated that reading needs learning about writing system and use it for representing speech. They reported that there is a close relationship between oral vocabulary and early reading ability. Also the ability to blend individual sounds within words which is an oral skill has a close connection with reading skill. Adams (1998) state that phonological awareness is closely associated with reading skill and it is important for alphabetic language because the link of alphabet letters on to individual sounds. They reported that children who can make the individual phonemes in alphabetic language learn more about alphabetic principles and they can identify the printed words quickly and accurately.

Block and Pressley (2002) discussed that in developing reading skill, readers use their knowledge and reasoning to know the texts. Comprehension strategies Such as, flow charts, story structure, and focusing on vocabulary are useful for students to deal with comprehension difficulties. Turner and Paris (1995) argued that sometimes readers' motivation affect their reading comprehension, that is, motivation can affect the way a book is read by readers and teachers.

A good strategy for developing reading skills is writing. The process of writing guides children to write what they say and have experienced. It helps to make connection between oral and written language (Clay, 2001). Texts for reading practice should be specified based on the level of the learners. Texts which are not difficult and include interesting points will encourage children to read and enjoy what they are reading. Authentic texts facilitate the process of reading comprehension for both children and adults (Carver, 1994). Reading assessment in beginning levels should be done by listening to students reading aloud. In high levels of reading, assessment should focus on text comprehension, and teachers' reading assessment is necessary to provide feedback to students (Caldwell, 2002).

In reading comprehension, children require their prior knowledge. Topics that are familiar in one culture may be unsuitable in another, as children in rural communities have different experiences from urbanized Children. Therefore, cultural knowledge will affect reading comprehension (Gee, 2001). Reading more is an important factor to make progress in reading comprehension. By reading more students can increase their knowledge and vocabulary, and become more fluent in reading. Encouraging students to read different types of texts helps them develop their reading proficiency (Shany & Biemiller, 1995).

Phonemes which are represented in the spellings of words are different from graphemes that are units of written language (Venezky, 1999). Williams (1980) taught students how to use graphemes and phonemes to blend the words. This is word decoding. Ehri and Wilce (1987)

taught learners to use graphemes and phonemes to segment words. They said this program produced more motivation on children learning a language.

In some correlational studies, researchers assessed children's capability to manage phonemes and their reading ability and they reported that there is a strong relationship between phonemic awareness and learning to read (Ehri, 1979; Stahl & Murray, 1994). Phonics instruction by spelling programs teach learners to change sounds into letters to write words. In Look–say approach, children learn to read words as wholes, and they should acquire between 50 to 100 words, then when this program is completed after their first grade phonics instruction start for them (Aukerman, 1984).

Hoover and Gaough (1990) explained that reading skill has two main processes. One process includes learning to change the letters into identifiable words. The other involves comprehending the meaning of the print. In reading skill children learn to preform both of these processes, and they acquire comprehension skill to arrive at learning to speak. For developing reading skill readers should learn to read words in different ways. The first step to build a sight vocabulary is to apply some decoding strategies to read unknown words. These caused the words become familiar to the learner. Decoding of words through the process of letter-sound relations also lead to make alphabetic connections. These alphabetic connections record the words in memory as sight words (Ehri, 1992; Share, 1995).

Systematic phonics facilitates the process of learning to read words in different ways by teaching the alphabetic system. Alphabetic knowledge for decoding words, saving sight words in memory, and using sight word, memory to read words by analogy is useful and suitable for students. Also, it helps the process of predicting words from context. Word prediction gains more importance when readers mix the context cues with letter–sound cues in guessing unknown words in text (Tunmer & Chapmen, 1998).

Designers of phonics program want children's parents and teachers to start these programs when they are in kindergarten or first grade, as they have no reading skill. To understand the effect of age and grade, two groups of children were recognized: the younger children in kindergarten and first grade; and the older student's in second through sixth grades. The finding of the study showed that, in both groups, systematic phonics had an important impact on children's growth as reader, and both groups were equal (ChalI, 1992).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were twenty six girls studying in the fifth grade of primary school. They were checked for homogeneity regarding knowledge of English and it was ascertained that none of them had any familiarity with English. These students were living in Izadkhast, one of the regions of Abadeh. It is about 60 kilometers from the town, so it was also definite that they had no access to any kind of exposure to English in regular classes. The socioeconomic condition of the participants' families was also checked by means of the data gathered from the school officials and it was found to be almost the same for all participants, an issue that further contributed to the homogeneity of the sample members. The age range for the participants was between 11 and 12.

3.2. Instruments

Teaching reading in English to primary school students following an interactive model was the objective of this study. To this end, some materials were prepared by the researcher for teaching with Phonics and Look-say methods. The materials included a series of flashcards for teaching English sounds and 15 units designed by Abdorahimzadeh (2005) incorporating reading practice with the help of both Phonics and Look-say in each unit. As for the second step in the

teaching process, the first half of another text book was covered. It was entitled Programmed Reading 1 authored by Buchanan (1973).

Tests of word meaning recognition, sentence meaning comprehension, and short text comprehension test that was separately developed and validated by the investigator were used to measure achievement as a result of reading training with a mixture of Phonics and Look-say.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Participants in this study were to be taught how to read English through both Phonics and Look-say approach in the first place. This study was divided into three phases. In the first phase the training with a mixture of Phonics and Look-say methods lasted for six months. During this period, students had four 30-minute class sessions per week. In the second phase which lasted for three months, twelve 60-minute sessions were allocated to working with Programmed Reading 1. The purpose of this phase was to help learners develop comprehension of individual sentences and combination of them. The third phase lasted three months; the participants took part in two 60-minute class sessions per week. In this phase, the participants were given a chance to further expand their reading ability with the help of attractive themes in short stories. In the first phase, learners were directed to phonemic awareness through phonics instruction investing in associating the printed letters with sounds. The treatment started with short vowels such as: /a/, /e/, /i/, /o/, /u/. The students were provided with some flash cards holding the pictures of an “apple”, an “egg”, an “ink bottle”, an “orange”, an “umbrella” each signifying a word featuring a short vowel in focus. The short vowels that went with each picture were written under each picture and shown to the students. For teaching vowel /a/, for instance, the participants were shown the pictures of "apple", "ant" and "alligator". The teacher (the researcher) pronounced /a/ sound in these words and acted as a model for producing sounds to students. At the same time, she instructed learners how to write the letters. As for the second step in this phase, the participants experienced reading words as a whole with the Look-say method. The goal of this step was to enhance learners’ ability to recognize the selected words by sight without trying to decode the words. To this end, new words were systematically introduced to the students with the help of pictures associated with words. To better manage teaching, some flashcards were used with individual words written on them. Flash cards were shown several times to the students until they keep in mind the selected word. As a last step, a text containing short sentences and featuring the worked-on sound segments prepared by Abdorahimzadeh (2005) based on both Phonics and Look-say, was taught in this stage. After students learnt to recognize words by using phonics and look-say, the focus was shifted to teaching individual brief sentences and combinations of them. Therefore, the first half of an elementary reading text book (Buchanan, 1973) was chosen for the second phase.

3.4. Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was teaching interactive reading through phonics, Look-Say. The mean scores obtain from students on different tests were subjected to check the success and suitability of such a teaching program against the norm index (According to the experts in charge of the Organization of Education, class mean scores at or above 85% of the total possible score indicate the excellent level; those at or above 70%, represent the good level, and mean scores at or above 50% of the total score, show the acceptable level).

4. Results

Q1: Is it possible to initiate English teaching at primary school based on the interactive model of early reading?

To answer the question of present study, learners performed three tests, in order to find their understanding of words, sentences, and short text. Table 1 presents the statistical description for the word meaning recognition test.

Table 1. Word Meaning Recognition Test

N	Range	minimum	maximum	mean	Std. deviation	variance
26	6.00	13.00	19.00	16.42	1.79	3.24

As Table 1 shows, scores on the word meaning recognition test ranged from a minimum of 13 to a maximum of 19, with a mean score of 16.42 and a standard deviation of 1.79. The variance of the scores on the test is 3.24. The mean score represented 82.25% of the total possible scores and it represented that students were at the good level of achievement on the basis of the success criteria.

The frequencies of individual scores are given in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Frequency scores of Word Meaning Recognition Test

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
13.00	1	3.8	3.8	3.8
14.00	4	15.4	15.4	19.2
15.00	4	15.4	15.4	34.6
16.00	3	11.5	11.5	46.2
17.00	5	19.2	19.2	65.4
18.00	6	23.1	23.1	88.5
19.00	3	11.5	11.5	100.0
Total	26	100.0	100.0	

With reference to the criteria for achievement success applied by the Organization of Education, Table 2 indicates that 3.8% of the participants had achievement at the acceptable level. The performance of 42.3% of the participants was at the good level of achievement and 53.8% performed at the excellent level.

Table 3 presents the statistical description for the sentence meaning comprehension test.

Table 3. Sentence Meaning Comprehension Test

N	Range	Minimum	maximum	Mean	Std. deviation	Variance
26	7.00	11.00	18.00	15.15	2.30	5.33

As Table 3 shows, scores on the sentence meaning comprehension test range from a minimum of 11 to maximum of 19, with a mean score of 15.15 and a standard deviation of 2.30. The variance of the scores on the test is 5.33. The mean score represented 75.75% of the total possible scores and it represented that students were at the good level of achievement according to the criteria established by the Organization of Education. As seen in above Table, there is a slight difference in the mean score of this test with previous test.

The frequency table below shows the frequency of individuals' scores on the test.

Table 4. Frequency scores of Sentence Meaning Comprehension Test

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
11.00	3	11.5	11.5	11.5
12.00	1	3.8	3.8	15.4
13.00	3	11.5	11.5	26.9
14.00	2	7.7	7.7	34.6
15.00	4	15.4	15.4	50.0
16.00	3	11.5	11.5	61.5
17.00	6	23.1	23.1	84.6
18.00	4	15.4	15.4	100.0
Total	26	100.0	100.0	

As regards the criteria for achievement success applied by the Organization of Education, Table 4 indicates that 26.8% of the participants had achievement at the acceptable level. The performance of 34.6% of the participants was at the good level of achievement and 38.5% performed at the excellent level.

Table 5 presents the statistical description for the short text comprehension test.

Table 5. Short Text Comprehension Test

N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation	Variance
26	5.00	4.00	9.00	6.69	1.31	1.71

As Table 5 shows, scores on the short text comprehension test ranged from a minimum of 4 to maximum of 9, with a mean score of 6.69 and a standard deviation of 1.31. The variance of the scores on the test is 1.71.The mean score was equal to 66.9% of the total possible scores and it indicated that students were at the acceptable level of achievement on the basis of the success criteria.

A frequency table was also used to show the frequencies of individuals' scores as depicted in Table 6

Table 6. Frequency Scores of Short Text Comprehension Test

Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
4.00	1	3.8	3.8	3.8
5.00	3	11.5	11.5	15.4
6.00	5	19.2	19.2	34.6
7.00	6	23.1	23.1	57.7
8.00	9	34.6	34.6	92.3
9.00	2	7.7	7.7	100.0
Total	26	100.0	100.0	

With respect to the criteria for achievement success applied by the Organization of Education, Table 6 indicates that the performance of 3.8% of the participants was at the unacceptable level of achievement. 11.5% of the participants had achievement at the acceptable level. The performance of 42.3% of the participants was at the good level of achievement and 42.3% performed at the excellent level.

5. Discussion

5.1. Research Question

Is it possible to initiate English teaching at primary school based on the interactive model of early reading?

In order to answer the first question, tree tests were administered, and the performances of students were considered. The outcomes of the study revealed that in teaching English with an interactive model, students can learn a foreign language more effectively and fluently. Results obtained separately from the analysis of various tests including, word meaning recognition, and sentence meaning comprehension indicated that students were at the good level of achievement in these tests but in short text meaning comprehension test students' mean scores reveled that they were at the acceptable level of achievement, and they did not perform successfully in this test. Their weak performance may be resulted from the fact that the selected text book, Programmed Reading 1 (Buchanan, 1973) was taught in the second phase was not based on students' interest. In this text book, the concentration was on reading comprehension with simple individual sentences and combination of very short sentences. Each item accompanied one simple illustration. Students' weakness in this test may be linked to the nature of the text book. The illustrations and framework given in the text book might not have been attractive enough for students to develop their understanding of short texts.

Comparing the findings of this test with Abdorahimzadeh's (2005) study in which participants performed successfully in short text comprehension test may reveal that some factors such as families' socio-economic condition and living in different areas had impact on students' learning as students with higher socio-economic condition who were living in Shiraz were successful in this test. The general conclusion drown from other related studies show that teaching English through interactive model improved learning to read (Day, 1993; Dechant and Emerald, 1991; Burns, 2003). The National reading Panel (2000) reported that phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension are the five components to be included in reading instruction. Chien and Chen (2002), Liaw (2003), and Leou and Huang (2006) studied elementary school students in Taiwan, and one finding they shared in common is that by using explicit instruction on phonological awareness and phonics in classroom; students made great improvements on their vocabulary and reading comprehension.

Teaching English as a foreign language at primary level has a significant role in children education. As Curtain (1990) claimed, children in elementary schools are eager about the ideas of global understanding. In other words it can be said that elementary school education is a suitable time to expand the students' intercultural views and enhancement of cognitive skills.

Park (2002) reported that students believed their elementary school English had a positive effect on their English learning at middle school in the domains of reading, speaking and listening. Similar results were found in Lee, Choi, Boo, and Lee (2001). In teaching beginning reading, phonics puts great concentration on the gradually introduction of and intensive practice on performing sound-symbol relationship at different successive stages. According to Cunningham (1995), children benefit most when phonics instruction begins in kindergarten in Grade One. This instruction needs to be clear and done in sequence. Bradley and Bryant (1983) stated that regardless of children socio-economic status, explicit phonics instruction is more beneficial for them. Also children who have difficulty in learning to read gain the most benefit. The results of the Thompson's (1999) study showed that phonics instruction help children with word recognition, spelling and reading. When children become more fluent in decoding and reading words, they are capable to concentrate on building their comprehension.

Look-say helps children associate whole concepts in their mind with their symbolic representations in the form of whole words. Flash cards with individual written words on them are used for this method usually accompanied with a related picture. Wern (1999) mentioned that one reason to start teaching early reading through look-say is that children tend to learn individual concepts as wholes rather than a combination of separate parts, or whole concepts should be represented by whole symbols. Zakaluk (1996) proposed that beginning reading was

thought to be facilitated by making children memorize effective words in terms of meaning; words that are quickly remembered at sight are also easily stored in mind.

Nikolov (2009) mentioned that there is a strong relationship between parents' level of education and students performance in language learning in Hungary. According to Munoz (2008), socio-economic condition and improvement are related to each other. As students with strong social background have access to different kinds of schools and also have opportunity of exposure to the language. For example they can use private tuition and learning resources. Gardner (1985) observed the important effects of parental encouragement and rewards on students' behavior and their language learning. Lamb (2002) investigated three Indonesian learner groups, and he found that those living in provincial areas had a strongest instrumental purpose on language learning in comparison to those living in rural areas. Hornsby (2000) reported that a good reader has basic sight vocabulary of at least 50 words, and not only recognizes a word but also knows the meaning of the word. So, learning to read through Look-say approach is an effective wary for learners to record the new words in their minds. Barnett, (1989), and Carrell, Devine and Eskey (1998) claimed that effective reading is the combination of both phonics and look–say approaches and for developing reading skill learners need to learn both of them appropriately. As Lee and Vanpatten (2003) mentioned in reading comprehension, readers retrieve a general knowledge about topic by using relevant information from memories, and at the same time they consider details such as, letters, words, and illustrations. So, using interactive model in teaching reading leads to a better learning of this skill.

6. Conclusion

Teaching reading in English to primary school students following an interactive model was the objective of this study. This study was conducted in Abadeh, Iran. The results obtained through the given tests confirmed that in teaching English, learners require both phonics and Look-say approach to be able to learn language successfully. Thus, learners' performance also supported the research hypotheses.

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