

REVITALIZING THE ART OF READING ALOUD TO CHILDREN

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Abstract

If reading would come naturally, teaching would be a much easier job. Children would learn to read as readily as they learn to speak and teachers would only need to give students the chance to practice their skills. But in truth, learning to read comes more easily to some children than to others and there are many factors contributing to a child's success in reading such as exposure to oral and written language. My paper explores the relationship between books and reading aloud in the early years of second language acquisition and learning. According to Stephen Krashen (2000), children learn to read by reading and other languages skills will follow eventually, especially for a second language learner. To add on, Brian Camborne (1988) proposed eight conditions of literacy acquisition. Immersion is one of the conditions which emphasizes that children need to be surrounded by interesting, high-quality children's books and different kinds of text (e.g. , charts, labels, newspapers, magazines) and reading aloud every day to children will generate lively engagement in language, literacy, and stories. Thus, this paper explores the advantages and disadvantages of reading storybooks aloud at early stages of learning English as a second language in primary schools.

Key words: Reading aloud, Read-Aloud, Second Language Acquisition, Second Language Learning, Immersion, Children's books, ESL, Pedagogy.

1. Revitalizing the Art of Reading Aloud To Children

Literacy gains from Reading storybooks aloud at early stages of learning English as a Second language in Primary schools

If literacy is bone then literature is the flesh of any language system. In Fiji, English language teaching and learning at the primary level focuses on literacy - the ability to read and write basic instructions and communication; the purpose of reading is for enjoyment and to get and use information. The focus, no doubt, provides the basic language skills: to listen, speak, read and write. What is amiss is the intrinsic or aesthetic use of these skills. Intrinsic or aesthetic appreciation of any language is a result of literary studies, metaphorically, adding 'flesh to the bone'. The teaching of literature has always been a vital component of English language teaching. The claim that "the study of literature is fundamentally a study of language in operation" (Widdowson, 1971) is based on the realization that literature is an example of language in use, and is a context for language use. Thus, studying the language of literary texts as language in operation is seen as enhancing the learner's appreciation of aspects of the different systems of language organization (O'Sullivan, 1991). Literature generates creativity in language and imagination and should feature in any education system that regards discovery and enjoyment as essential components of the learning process; a process where learners use language at a proficient, sophisticated, creative, and scholarly level; an indication of a true literate society.

The author has used mixed-method approach and described the state of affairs as it exists. Therefore, the nature of his work is theoretical to some extent. The author has been a primary school teacher from 1996 to 2007, a lecturer at the Lautoka Teachers' College teaching language and literacy units from 2008 to 2010. Currently, he is a lecturer teaching English language, literacy, and literature at undergraduate level at the Fiji National University. The author has used his observations, experience, school assessment visits, literature review and a survey from his existing research work on "Children's books in Fiji" to write this paper.

Benefits of teaching Literature in primary schools

Literature exposes students to different genres and has numerous benefits. One benefit is that literature provides opportunity to read. According to Krashen (2000), children learn to read by reading and other language skills will follow eventually, especially for second language learners. However, learning to read does not come as naturally as learning to speak. Learning to read comes more easily to some children than to others, and there are many factors contributing to a child's success in reading such as exposure to oral and written language. Such meaningful exposure is called Immersion in Brian Camborne's seven conditions of literacy acquisition. Immersion means literally surrounding children by interesting, high-quality children's books and different kinds of text (e.g., charts, labels, newspapers, magazines) and reading aloud every day to children, singing to them, playing word games, and using movements and dance to generate lively engagement in language, literacy, and stories. With the above premise, I believe that if children are to read aloud high interest storybooks, they will discover the joy of reading and eventually bridge the gap between literacy and the literary.

In the past children's literature played a supplementary role in most classrooms and it still does in some places. Excerpts and adaptations of adult literature were sometimes used to teach reading (Pearson, 2002) and teachers read from children's books to their students (Ellis, 1968). However, within the past 30 years many educators have come to acknowledge the critical role children's literature plays in teaching literacy (Rasinski & Padak, 2000). Changes in pedagogy during the 1980s and 1990s, from using specially written literacy materials to using literature written for children, has given children's literature new status in the teaching of reading (Williams, 1999; Galda, Ash & Cullinan, 2000).

Use of Read Aloud as a strategy

Read Aloud is when children listen to an adult read different types and genres of texts (Franzese, 2002) and then engages in talk about the book. The materials can vary from fiction to non-fiction and one genre to another. Reading aloud establishes a mutual relationship between the teacher and the students through encountering the same stories and characters and experience common reactions towards the events (Queini et al., 2008). It develops children's concept about print, story structure, and the functions of written language (Rog, 2001). It develops children's attention span and listening skills (Dragon, 2001) and improves the precision of recall, sequencing ability and ease of writing (Reed, 1987). When a teacher reads to the class, students' reading skills are strengthened in at least three areas: vocabulary, comprehension, and decoding (Morrow & Gambrell, 2000). A unique advantage of Read Aloud is the increased vocabulary to which students are exposed. Children encounter a greater variety of words in books than they will ever hear in spoken conversation or on television (Galda & Cullinan, 2003). Brett, Rothlein and Hurley (1996) in their study where they examined the effects of three conditions on children's vocabulary acquisition, found that when a teacher read aloud to the

students and provided explanations of targeted vocabulary words, the experimental group of children learned more words than the control group children whereas Leung and Pikulski (1990) in their study of incidental learning of word meanings by kindergarten and first-grade children through repeated read aloud events, showed that repeated reading aloud of the same book by a teacher resulted in increased vocabulary acquisition for children in the early elementary grades.

Reading aloud from children's literature, especially in conjunction with discussion and other activities, can have a positive effect on students' comprehension (Morrow & Asbury, 2003). McKeown and Beck (2003) in their study of advantages of Read Aloud to help children found that asking questions and discussing the book have proven to be effective strategies in developing comprehension when reading aloud to students. Read Aloud improves students' decoding skills. Stahl (2003) explored the effects of reading aloud to children and their acquisition of decoding skills, finding that the decoding aspects of reading relate closely to hearing and seeing text—what happens when a book is read to a child. Stahl concluded that reading aloud to children plays “a small but crucial role in developing children's word recognition skills” (p. 163). The above arguments indicate that Read Aloud is a widely accepted classroom practice that leads to reading and other literacy skills.

Read Aloud is one of the oldest strategies to instill joy of reading and love of storybooks. In the past, literate families and friends read aloud to each other as a matter of habit. In those days, books were relatively scarce and expensive. Nonetheless many children grew up listening to adults reading to them and their friends. Even in this modern era, many researchers, as well as teachers, acknowledge that reading aloud from a wide selection of well-chosen books helps children learn to love literature (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996). Adams (1990) in her book, *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print*, identified reading aloud as an important means of preparing children for entrance into the world of literacy. It is well established that reading aloud to children supports learning to read.

Some significant work in the area of language and literacy

The status of children's literature grew during the literature-based curriculum movement that took place in many countries during the 1980s and 1990s. The research community in Fiji responded with interest in examining children's literature, how children respond to the books they read and hear, and how children's literature is used in the classroom. In 1980, Warwick Elley and Francis Mangubhai carried out a research project called “The Book Flood” of which the result was very positive in Fiji. The evidence is strong that it is possible to double the rate of reading acquisition of Third World primary school pupils with a “Book Flood” of about 100 high-interest books, per class, and short teacher training sessions. The project was replicated in several developing countries such as Niue, Singapore, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and the Solomon Islands. This research project proves that the benefits of reading skills and enthusiasm are consistent across diverse cultures, mother tongues and age levels and they appear to generate corresponding improvements in children's writing, listening comprehension and related language skills. Evidence from another investigation, “*The Effects of Listening to Stories on Comprehension and Reading Achievement*”, by Jane Ricketts in 1981 strongly suggest that listening to stories and sharing books is educational because it improves language, as well as increase comprehension. One of the hypotheses tested by the researchers is that regular, pleasurable experience with children's literature is of the educational benefits to children in an institution. However, the researcher claims that some children in the South Pacific do not get the opportunity to enjoy many books. Barbara Moore's *The Reading Recovery Project* (1981),

claims that reading is the foundation for success in schools, now that literacy is valued and necessary in South Pacific societies. According to Moore, finding a supply of the 'right' books can be a big problem. She further recommends one of the most effective methods of helping any child to read is *listening to a story*. Apart from these few studies, no other large scale research project has been carried out to ascertain the status and progress of literacy in Fiji. This means there is potential for further investigation or even a follow-up study.

Based on The Book Flood, the Ministry of Education of Fiji espouses the 'Whole Language Approach' to teach English in primary schools. The programme for lower primary includes Morning Talks, Speech Training and Phonics, Rhymes, Songs and Jingles, Reading stories to children, Shared, Guided, Independent reading, Vocabulary, Spellings, Grammar, and Writing (Primary English Teachers Handbook). The above components are to be practiced daily. This approach involves instilling a love of literature, problem-solving and critical thinking, collaboration, authenticity, personalized learning, and much more (Goodman, Bird & Goodman, 1991). Elley (1996) advocates this approach on providing students with high interest books where teachers ensure that students interact with the books frequently and productively. High interest story books are a key element to the success of The Book Flood and Whole Language Approach. Ironically, this key element poses a core challenge in implementation. The challenge is two fold: first the availability, secondly the high cost associated with purchasing high interest story books in Fiji.

Challenges of implementing Read Aloud as a strategy

For a reading enthusiast, a bookshop is a well where one can draw classics, modern, and pulp fiction. Unfortunately, one may seldom find a well-stocked bookshop in Fiji. I have been to all major towns and cities in Fiji. It is very hard to find a fully-fledged bookshop. What one can find is a stationery shop and few higher end shops with a small collection of popular fiction to cater for tourists and locals. The stationery shops have a collection of prescribed school texts and a small collection of well-known fairy tales and children's literature. The prices of the books vary according to their genre and publication, but in most cases are quite expensive for most locals. Lack of good bookshops as well as poor sales of storybooks indicate an impoverished reading environment in our country where most people have not developed a habit of reading storybooks.

The situation in primary schools in Fiji is far from an ideal literary environment. The Education Commission 2000 report highlighted that many schools face difficulties in providing enough reading materials in primary schools, as well as, many rural schools not possessing the text recommended by the Curriculum Development Unit of Fiji. The situation has improved to a certain extent now. Many urban schools have a library but most classrooms do not have a library corner. A library corner provides a temptation to read storybooks as soon as they finish their work. The Commission's report also states that many teachers do not take the act of reading to children very seriously. These teachers believe that reading aloud is not teaching. Read Aloud is considered a reward activity when a teacher has time to spare. It is an activity that does not require written follow-up activities; therefore it is not taken seriously. The available selection of children's books also contributes towards the motivation to read. Teachers tend to read from a nucleus of very well known or traditional authors/classics such as *Cinderella*, *Jack and the Bean Stalk*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. Read Aloud is not noted in weekly teachers' workbooks or in the timetable. All these observations points out that Read Aloud is a marginalized practice in primary schools.

I carried out a survey amongst 80 in-service teachers at Fiji National University. These teachers taught year 1 and 2 in the western division of Fiji. All respondents claimed that they used Read Aloud strategy to their class but the frequency differs. Only 37.5% read aloud daily as prescribed. 12.5% read aloud thrice a week, 20% twice a week, 25% once a week and 5% read aloud occasionally. Their main source of storybooks is their school library. 80% of teachers indicated they have a library corner whereas 20% do not. It is interesting to note that only 47.5% have more than 20 storybooks in their classroom, in contrast to 35% who have 5 to 10 storybooks. 60% claim that they change/rotate the books every month indicating a high reading turnover, but in contrast 12.5% say they change once a year and another 12.5% say they never change the set of books in their classroom. The storybooks that are mostly read to the class are: Cinderella, Snow White and the seven dwarfs, Three little pigs, and Alice in Wonderland. Apart from these fairytales, teachers mostly use basal readers prescribed by the Curriculum Development Unit of Fiji for Shared reading instructions. What I gathered from this survey is that not much has changed in terms of Reading Aloud. Secondly, the recommendations of Education Commission 2000 have been sidelined. There is still a scarcity of good storybooks in Fiji lower primary classrooms. To add on, most teachers still do take Read Aloud as a strategy very seriously.

2. Conclusion

Educators in Fiji have always looked at ways to promote literacy. While considering new ideas, we have relegated some longstanding but proven ideas. One such idea is reading aloud to children. Reading Aloud requires a great deal of attention to the rhythm of a language as it recaptures the physicality of words. To read with your lungs and diaphragm, with your tongue and lips, is very different than reading with eyes alone. Reading aloud is reading more than words; they are breath, mind, and perhaps the soul, of the person who is reading. At the literacy level, reading aloud helps a child develop in at least three areas: vocabulary, comprehension, and decoding.

Reading is incomplete and impoverished, unless we read a story book aloud. Books, either fiction or nonfiction, have provided immense knowledge, information, pleasure, joy and have added meaning to life. Nandan (1978) writes that reading novels set in other places and time periods can give children a deeper understanding of others through identification with individual characters and their plights. At the same time, reading provides children with endless hours of fun and entertainment. Stories can free up imaginations and open doors to exciting new world of fantasy or reality. Such is the power stored in books and the act of reading aloud.

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