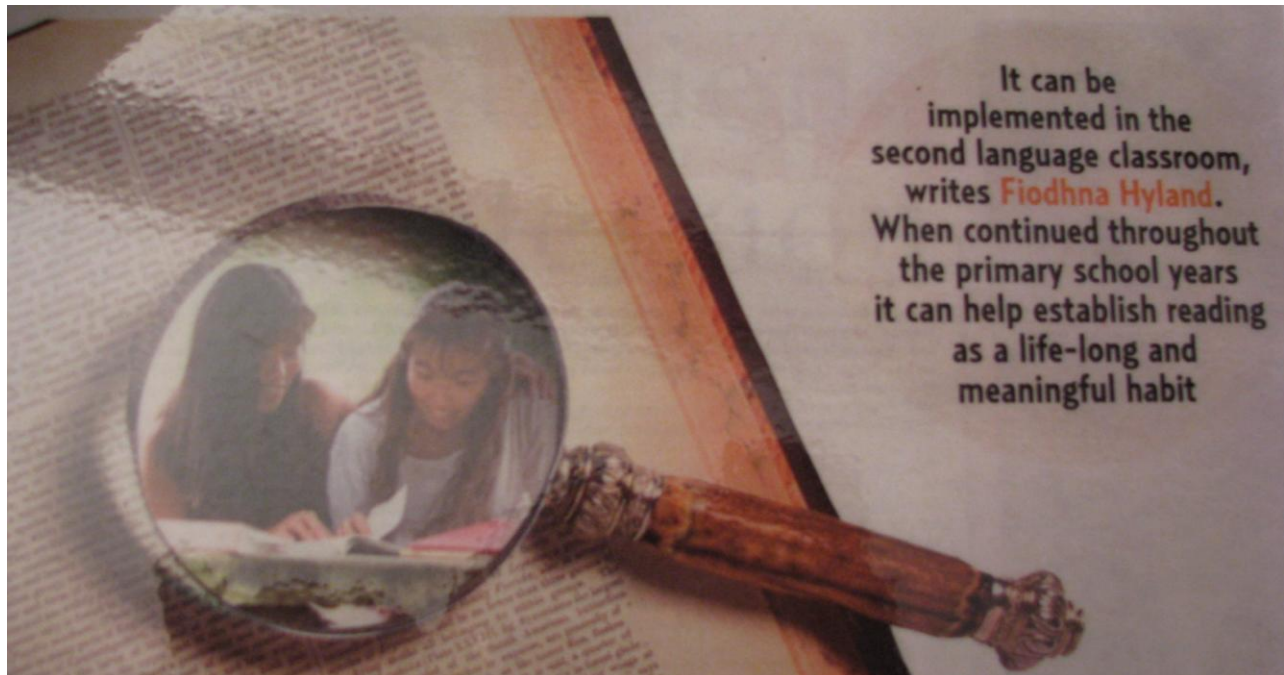


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Shared Reading: The Concept of Shared Reading

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Abstract

The development of reading skills through shared reading is well-documented in a first language setting. However, this article argues that teachers should consider shared reading as a method of promoting reading in a second language. It aims to underly five keys to the success of Shared Reading in a second language environment. They are fun, simplicity, interactivity, efficiency and skills-based. Data has been generated from a study set in Kuwait, using Arabic

second language learners of English. It is suggested that shared reading is not only a viable means of promoting reading in a second language but that reading skills can also be increased. It is argued that these findings could have important implications for reinforcing reading development in a second language context, if it is made a regular and integral part of the teaching and learning process.

Introduction

It is rare that a child does not enjoy stories. Research has long supported the view that enjoying and participating in stories is a sure way into literacy and learning (Elley 1989; Robbins & Ehri 1994). However “The desire to read is not born in a child. It is planted by parents and teachers” (Trelease 2001). Planting that desire can be born through shared reading. This type of reading has been shown to be an important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading (Holdaway 1979). While the daily practice of shared reading is on the rise in first language classrooms, there has been limited research on its use by second language teachers of English.

In order for shared reading to be universally accepted in the second language classroom, teachers must be firmly convinced of its legitimacy and be able to defend it to sceptical parents, supervisors, and administrators. Once convinced shared reading is a legitimate teaching practice, teachers will be more comfortable with it and free to be more creative in their reading lessons.

What is Shared Reading?

In the late 1960s, teachers and developers began to trial and research the value of using an enlarged text as a method of co-operative reading, which later became known as shared reading. Shared reading is an enjoyable, cooperative, interactive reading activity based on the bedtime story experience (Fisher and Fisher 2000). By greatly enlarging the size of a storybook, you can create a comfortable atmosphere of bedtime story reading with an entire class. This allows children to enter a three-way partnership with the author and the teacher.

Research by the Russian linguist Vygotsky 1962 has proven that learning is most effective when it is collaborative. Shared reading enables children, especially second language children to engage in genuine reading at a level beyond they might be able to do independently. It is a step between reading to children and independent reading by children – the step where children learn to read by regularly reinforcing their skills co-operatively. It supports and respects ESL children as co-readers who feel their ‘mistakes’ go unnoticed. It eliminates any notion of failure and emphasises success in the early stages of reading. The relaxed, supportive atmosphere allows children to experiment as they develop strategies for predicting and self-correcting. Holdaway 1979 says that “from the child’s point of view, the situation is among the happiest and most secure in his/her experience’.

Keys to the success of Shared Reading in an ESL Context

The present research has found the following keys to the success of shared reading in a second language context: it is fun, simple, interactive, efficient and skills based.

Key 1: Shared Reading is fun

It has been argued that learning is most effective when it is fun (Fisher and Fisher, 2000). However, this generates the Victorian suspicion: “How much good can it be doing if the student is enjoying it?” Like it or not, the human species is pleasure orientated. We learn to speak a language because it gives us the pleasures and things we want: milk, comfort and food. What we teach children to love and desire will always weigh more heavily than what we teach them to learn. In this way, Shared Reading can be an effective advertisement for the pleasures of reading. In a study conducted in Kuwait over a six month period, researchers observed a Year One class who were exposed to daily shared reading. The teacher had modelled the why and how of reading, and in doing so she inspired her ESL students to try the magical experience of reading. Getting children to pick up a book is one thing, but helping them to discover the pleasure learning to read can bring is another story altogether.

Reading is an accrued skill: The more you do it, the better you get at it; the better you get at it; the more you like it; and the more you like it, the more you do it. This is nothing more than the concept of automaticity in reading (Samuels 1998). If children don't read much, they can't get much better at it. And they will not read by choice if they dislike it. Shared Reading works directly on converting negative attitudes to positive ones. Teaching children how to read is not enough; we must also teach them to want to read. Since awareness must come before desire, shared reading can be used to expose children to the idea that reading is fun, which in turn serves as a springboard to their enjoyment of later independent reading.

In this study, it was reported that children always looked forward to their Shared Reading period and enjoyed it thoroughly. In view of the importance of motivation for language learning, this finding is encouraging. In addition, teachers were impressed with the quality and persistence of children's attention while participating in an absorbing story – surely an important ingredient in any learning context!

Key 2: Shared Reading is simple

Another factor in the success of shared reading for second language learners is its simplicity. The teacher scaffolds the reading experience through modelling, so you don't even need to be able to read fluently to begin with. The more often a teacher is seen and heard reading for pleasure in a meaningful way, the greater the chances of the listener modelling that behaviour when they join in – as opposed to hearing only your fellow mumblers in the turtle reading group! Serving as a model, the teacher is able to illustrate 'skills in action' by directing attention to letters, word patterns and conventions of print. There is visual intimacy with print. The teacher's enthusiasm demonstrates the joys of reading and what a skilled reader does with the text. Peer learning can take this concept a step further: parents reading with children, older siblings reading with younger siblings and more aware children helping their peers in the classroom.

The present study introduced a peer-reading programme into the second language curriculum. Fifth-grade student volunteers shared books twice a week with Grade One students. After

selecting an appropriate book and rehearsing it with a teacher or assistant teacher, the peer reader introduced himself or herself to their younger partner, said a few words about the book and author and began to model the reading experience. “The response was unbelievable”, reported a Grade One teacher. After a while, the younger reader began to join in the reading, where possible. “We initially thought boys would feel too sophisticated to assist the lower grades, but we were wrong!” There was also a significant improvement in reading attitudes as a result of the peer-reading programme. Subsequent parent interview data revealed that these first-grade beginning readers of English could be heard in their bedrooms modelling the shared reading experience of school with a teddy bear or sibling.

This study also noted that sharing books on a higher level whets second language children’s appetites. It was frequently noted that after hearing and participating in the last paragraph of a big book like “Walking Through the Jungle”, a child would ask the teacher, “Have you got any more books like that?” In contrast, what child ever finishes a workbook and asks, “Have you got any more books like that?” Moreover, in watching and hearing the competent reader aloud, the child sooner or later yearns to imitate, looks to the day when he or she will be able to work such magic with words and books. And thus are planted the seeds of desire that can spring from Shared Reading. “Children who share books with an adult are on the threshold of a lifelong love of reading” (Mooney 1994). Shared Reading is therefore a practice that should be continued throughout the grades to establish reading as a life-long and meaningful habit.

Key 3: Shared Reading is interactive

Demonstration of the reading process is not sufficient on its own to complete the shared reading process. Participation and prediction should be encouraged but not to the detriment of the storyline. The children are not passive recipients of information but are full participants in reading through questioning, labelling, elaborating and by joining in the reading as they wish (Hayden 1986). If as Christie and Misson (1998) claim that language learning is most effective

when it is interactive, then what the child can do in co-operation today, can do alone tomorrow (Bruner 1978).

It was observed in this study that second language learners participate while negotiating meaning cooperatively. However, their initial attempts to read, while often including gross approximations, must be tolerated. The teacher induces active involvement. During re-reading, there should be opportunities for children to participate in the reading, recall vocabulary, ideas and information, observe and demonstrate reading strategies and language conventions. The teacher should gradually lower his/her voice to allow the children to dominate. Occasionally the teacher may disengage completely and rejoin as soon as the children begin to struggle or lose confidence. In this way, learners practice reading co-operatively while simultaneously gaining personal competence in the skills of literacy. Learners share, perform and experience the power and joys of reading.

Shared reading provides social opportunities, enabling the young second language learners to gain confidence, share knowledge, self-correct and construct meaning co-operatively. It is a social routine in which a book has meaning as part of a social situation where the interpersonal dimension dominates. Meaning is constructed through negotiated co-operation and social interaction. As a methodology set in a non-competitive learning environment, second language children are less likely to be afraid to take risks in class, leading to a growing awareness about print. What's more, they begin to realise that they're not alone in the reading process!

Key 4: Shared Reading is efficient

Another key to the success of shared reading with second language learners is efficiency. As a teacher, you don't need to increase your resources dramatically. All you need is the ability to make time for shared reading. And in an already overcrowded curriculum, time is money! You do need the time to do this, (a minimum of fifteen minutes a day), but it is not additional time. Balance what you would accomplish in fifteen minutes with a class workbook against all that is achieved during fifteen minutes of sharing a book like "We're going on a Bear Hunt" to Grade One children. It exposes the second language learner to:

- A positive reading role model;
- The pleasure of reading;
- A secure reading environment;
- Rich vocabulary;
- New information;
- A book he or she might not otherwise be exposed to;
- Experiences outside the student's own experiences;
- Familiarity with book language beyond the children's level of independent reading.

Simultaneously the second language student's imagination is being stimulated, attention span stretched, listening comprehension improved, reading fluency increased, the reading-writing connection established, and, where they exist, negative attitudes reshaped to positive ones.

When a teacher and a group of children spend unhurried and uninterrupted time viewing, reading and sharing a book together, the unspoken messages about reading and about books are as important, and perhaps longer lasting than any part of the actual content. The enjoyment of listening and reading, viewing and thinking, remembering and wondering their way through a book with an enthusiastic teacher can convince children that books and reading offer satisfaction, knowledge, comfort and delight – and that reading is for them! This desire to be a reader, along with the assurance of a supportive climate where time is made for important activities, encourage children to become more involved in reading.

Key 5: Shared Reading is skills based

The final key to the success of shared reading with second language learners is that it is skills based. Shared Reading helps children build bridges between the abstract and the concrete. It stimulates reading development, especially for ESL children who have not had a rich literacy experience in their second language at home. Skills and strategies previously taught in isolation can be practised in a meaningful context. Their eyes are watching what their ears are hearing what their tongues are saying. Through voice, eye and gesture, the children are drawn into the

story. Children begin to recognise through shared reading that language works in chunks of meaning not only while speaking but also on the printed page.

In Shared Reading the teacher creates conditions for opportunities to learn, ways of taking meaning from decontextualised language, for getting to know intimately, a number of stories, for learning reading skills to do with book handling and early concepts of print. Not least, children learn to take on the language and conventions of literacy texts in the form of rhymes and word play. Such acquired skill plays a large part in further independent reading.

Implications for Effective Implementation

School systems, teachers and parents all vary considerably in the emphasis they place on shared reading to second language children. However, as the Kuwait research indicates, there are clearly good linguistic grounds for increasing this activity over and above the social reasons for doing so.

Shared reading has definite implications for planning the curriculum for second language learners of English. With the aid of a shared reading programme, initiated as early as possible, (Kindergarten or Grade 1), children should be able to develop a love for reading along with opportunities for reading development.

As long as research demonstrates shared reading to be a critical factor in the creation of second language readers, it is incumbent upon second language educators to ensure its success by convincing parents of its importance. No education programme can survive without the support of parents. We can accomplish this in two ways: (a) by selling its importance to tomorrow's parents who are sitting in today's classrooms; and (b) by showing today's parents how simple and important shared reading can be in promoting their children's reading abilities.

Most parents are interested in their child's reading and many parents already engage in shared reading as based on the bedtime-story model. However, teachers of English have immense power to enhance the shared reading process in many second language homes. This may be done by setting up home-based programmes to assist parents in Shared Reading procedures.

Additional help may be delivered through the provision of leaflets, information packs, sample lessons and open days for parents to attend.

Along with everything else, shared reading can be considered as planting 'seeds' in reaching tomorrow's parents. The second language student who rarely reads with an adult for pleasure is unlikely to grow up and read with his/her own children. Shared reading, however, improves the chances that the listener/participant will someday read with his or her child and thus strengthen the possibility of future education being a true partnership between parent-teacher and classroom-teacher.

Concluding Thoughts

With the rapidly increasing number of second-language learners in primary school classrooms and difficulties associated with learning to read, educators need to respond with programmes that focus on enhancing motivation as well as achievement. To develop reading expertise, students must have opportunities to gain knowledge, feel successful, acquire strategies, monitor their learning and be motivated to practice (Meichenbaum & Biemiller 1990). Teachers of Shared Reading may foster this reading expertise in a non-threatening environment.

Results from the present study showed impressive reading gains in skills such as comprehension, vocabulary recognition, grammatical awareness and fluency, following the intervention of a shared reading initiative for second language learners. Promising results from a study such as this, may inspire other second language teachers to embrace shared reading wholeheartedly in the pursuit of reading development.

Learning to read in a second language is the job of a lifetime. Children who share books begin their reading career early. They find joy and power in the pages of a book, knowing subconsciously, if not consciously, that they can decode print. Reading in a second language should be taught through a meaningful context. Shared Reading can provide that context in a fun, simple, interactive, efficient and skills based environment. If children associate reading with feelings of security, comfort and enjoyment, they are on the road to success. Reading is no longer a task but a pleasure.

(2,840 words)

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