

Developing reading in EAL

We now know quite a lot about what fluent first language English readers do when they read in their first language. Before we turn to what EAL pupils may need to know and do when learning to read, it would be instructive to see what fluent first language English readers do.

For fluent first language English readers:

- reading is purposeful - having a reason to read, whether for enjoyment, for learning or for information, is important; the perceived purpose also influences the way a text is treated, for instance, the level of attention to detail is probably greater when one is reading the instructions for a science experiment than when one is reading an in-flight magazine for entertainment
- reading is multi-speed - the processing of information in print is generally fast in order to make connections between different parts of a text possible; where necessary the speed may be adjusted for reasons such as identifying details or skimming ahead searching for main ideas; readers can slow down or speed up to suit their purpose
- reading is interactive - readers do not just decode print and assign fixed meanings to words and sentences; words often have several possible meanings (an obvious example is the word 'table'), readers draw on their background knowledge to interpret the words in a text and generate meaning in context; in this sense, readers bring meaning to the text
- reading is multi-layered - readers do not just read off meaning at a surface level, they also synthesise, evaluate and compare the text with other information or texts to form an overall interpretation or to understand the 'sub-text'; readers make active use of their experience and knowledge to 'place' a text (e.g. a genuine news report or a spoof or parody)
- reading is multi-modal - apart from reading the printed word, readers take the physical lay-out, graphics, images and information structure (the way the content information is organised into separate sections and sequences) into account to form an overall interpretation.

Five areas of knowledge and skills

All this means that a fluent reader in English has to have a high level of:

- automatic recognition skills at letter and/or word level; these skills include both visual processing of letter strings (as words) and phonological recoding of sounds (requiring a working knowledge of symbol-sound correspondence which does not necessarily mean sounding words out loud); for instance, for a fluent reader the letter string 'car' represents a known word referring to a real-life object and a sound; this is a rapid process occurring at the rate of approximately four words per second
- clause or sentence-level grammar knowledge (which is often tacit); the different components of the grammar system indicate meaning and help the reader to see whether the text is maintaining a topic or signalling a shift, for instance:
 - nouns indicate things, e.g. *train*, and states and concepts e.g. *hunger*
 - verbs indicate actions or processes, e.g., *run*, *sing*, *organise* and relations, e.g. 'He *is* my brother'
 - prepositions indicate direction or location, e.g. 'at the bottom of a page' and relations between different words, e.g. '... made *of* wood'
 - conjunctions indicate connections between different parts of a sentence or different sentences, e.g. 'The situation was bad *but* they didn't give up'
- knowledge of information selection, structuring and presentation for different types of text; while there are no fixed rules, it is possible to recognise some broad tendencies, e.g. the instructions for emergency procedures on an aircraft are worded and presented spatially and graphically differently from a poem; the former are more likely to contain strict instruction for action in the form of bullet points and to use the imperative (e.g. 'Remove high-heeled shoes') than the latter; this kind of knowledge is sometimes referred to as genre knowledge

- relevant content and background knowledge in context; the fluent reader does not simply follow a text, they actively interpret it with reference to different salient aspects of their background knowledge and expectations
- knowledge and skills in using different strategies, such as checking understanding and adjusting reading speed; the effective reader checks understanding against the perceived purpose of reading; if, for instance, the purpose is to extract detailed information from a text to do a multiple-choice type of question, then the reader may slow down or do repeated reading of the text to find the necessary information.

These five areas of knowledge and skill are interactive. Effective reading requires all of them to be available and to be on-line. They are important for all readers (including those who are engaged in the process of learning to read in EAL).

Perhaps at this point it is important to point out that there has been a popular belief among some educators that reading is a psychological guessing game, i.e. a fluent reader does not read every word, they simply sample the text to confirm (or not) their prediction of what might come next. This belief is not supported by current research. Recent eye movement studies have shown that fluent readers actually focus directly on 80% of the content words (words that have meaning, e.g. *book, music, quickly*) and over 50% of the function words (words that help to show grammatical relationships within and between sentences (e.g. *to, and*) and they do so at speed. (Grabe, 1991 and forthcoming; Rayner and Sereno, 1994) This suggests that fluent readers do not guess or sample texts; they are fluent because they have developed a high level of automatic processing of words and other text features which allows them to use the text for meaning construction and interpretation in context. Indeed, it would be more plausible to suggest that the ability to sample meaning from a text is an outcome of fluent reading.

Some specific EAL concerns

Pupils with EAL come from a range of background experiences. The way they learn to read in English will be partly influenced by their previous learning, partly by their individual learning style and partly by their response to the current learning situation. The developmental pathways for pupils learning to read in EAL, particularly from a teacher's standpoint, are likely to be highly individualistic and variable. This is because these pupils, as individuals and as groups, may have different levels of English language knowledge and skills at any one time, first (and other) language competence (parts of which may be transferable to the new language), motivation, maturation and different kinds of background knowledge and life experience. Nevertheless, given that reading is primarily a language and text-based activity, it is possible to suggest the following teaching concerns are particularly germane to EAL learners. Each of the concerns will be briefly discussed and it will then be followed by a teaching focus (in italics and bold):

1. The development of a high capacity for automatic word recognition. Since automatic word recognition operates at the level of both visual and phonological processing, it is part of a wider language development in English. First language speakers of English would have heard, orally used and perhaps even seen many of the words in print by the time they start to learn to read. They are already familiar with the sounds and meanings of many of the words that they may encounter in print. Pupils with EAL, particularly the very young children from minority language backgrounds entering school at Reception or Year 1, may not have had similar experiences in English.

The building of sight vocabulary should be preceded and supported by the experience of meaningful exposure and use of its spoken form. A classroom example, particularly for early stage EAL pupils, is the use of word cards/labels to show the key vocabulary when reading; asking pupils to match word cards to pictures (depicting key content) may reinforce learning. Drawing attention to salient environmental print, as part of the wider classroom communication, is another example.

2. The development of clause/sentence level grammar knowledge. First language speakers of English generally have developed a tacit knowledge of how the language works by the time they start school. This knowledge includes, for instance, how different words are put together in sequence within a clause/sentence (word order), how time is marked (tenses) and how events and actions are sequenced (conjunctions, e.g. *before, after*). It is important to stress that this knowledge is not necessarily conscious and the individual, at whatever age, may not be able to give an explicit account of the rules and conventions involved. (For instance, sometimes even well-educated adult first language speakers of British English cannot explain in grammatical terms why a construction such as *'If you will be late, you will be disqualified'* is not comfortable.) The important point here is that a fluent first language speaker of English can use this knowledge to slot words into meaningful units as part of the rapid processing. Learners of EAL may have little or a limited knowledge of the English grammar of this kind. For these pupils reading comprehension may be held up at the clause or sentence level, even if the individual words have been recognised.

The teaching of reading for meaning includes the explicit teaching of how different parts of a clause or sentence combine to give meaning; this does not necessarily mean the teaching of formal grammar rules; the focus should be on the relationship between pattern and meaning. Asking pupils to reorganise jumbled up words and/or phrases

into sentences in sequence to reconstitute a story which they have followed is one way of reinforcing this kind of learning.

3. The development of a knowledge of text types or genres. The conventionally established ways of selecting and structuring information, presenting it in specific formats for different purposes (e.g. *a narrative, instructions for games, a letter of complaint, a technical report*), and expressing it with specific features of language (e.g. *the use of slang in a play dialogue or technical terms in a report*) often seem natural to some fluent and experienced first language readers. So, for instance, one may reasonably expect a unit in a Key Stage 3 science text book to be quite different from a set of informal notes of an experiment, and a personal letter to be quite different from an official letter giving details of different bands of council tax. This kind of knowledge, however, is not readily available even to the novice first language reader, partly because it is a matter of exposure and induction into established practices and partly because formatting/layout features of a text are a property of written communication. EAL pupils with limited exposure to different types of text in English are at a disadvantage in this aspect of text processing, especially if the practices in their first language are quite different.

The teaching of reading includes an explicit focus on the (types of) information to be expected, the organisation and formatting of the information used for different presentational purposes, and the language features used for different types of text. Any DARTS (directed activities related to texts) activities asking pupils to sort or group information in a text, presented separately on cards or strips of paper, into different categories and/or patterns (e.g. *facts or opinions, giving information or giving instruction, science or everyday words*) can be useful in highlighting this aspect of understanding written texts. It may also be useful to work with pupils to highlight selected sections of a text to draw their attention to the salient features of information organisation and formatting. Working on a concept map together with pupils is another potentially useful classroom activity to make explicit text organisation.

4. The development of curriculum and other relevant background knowledge. Fluent readers do not simply follow the text to recover meaning in the words and sentences in all cases, they have to know how to make use of the information for different purposes. This is important for all pupils. For instance, for young pupils some knowledge of the idea of Father Christmas is essential to the reading of *Good Old Mum*. This point is made explicit in the Programme of Study for Key Stages 3 and 4 English where it is stated that pupils should be taught to 'extract meaning beyond the literal' (DfEE and QCA, 1999:34). This ability to go beyond the text, as it were, cannot be cultivated by just studying the language itself, it has to be supported by increasing familiarity with culturally established ways of seeing, knowing and understanding. In other words, fluent readers tend to have a non-explicit but ready-to-use sense of what to do with different types of texts. So, in all probability, for fluent readers of English the text of the operating instructions of a fire extinguisher or the text of the rules of a computer game is to be understood literally whereas an idiomatic expression or a poem invites interpretation and/or personal response. The choice of a particular interpretation from a range of possibilities reflects a reader's perspective and relevant background knowledge. EAL learners with a limited experience of dealing with written texts may find this aspect of reading an invisible but constant problem.

The teaching of reading includes an explicit focus on the status of the literal meaning of the different types of text (e.g. the operating instructions of a fire extinguisher versus the text of a fantasy story) and the opportunity to give relevant information for interpretation where necessary. Using speech bubbles to show the literal meaning of an idiomatic expression such as 'cart before the horse' in pictorial form may help pupils see the need to attend to the difference between the word meaning and the intended message. Reading books such as *Strawberry Jam* offer a rich opportunity to explore the difference between literal and literary meaning in text with young pupils.

Author

Constant Leung

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