

## **Modeling the use of Electronic books to engage young EFL Readers in a Teacher Education Methodology Course in the U.A.E.**

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### **Abstract**

Teaching “Reading” has traditionally focused on using conventional printed books. However, there is a growing shift towards interactive reading approaches, some of which may incorporate digital media. This article discusses the use of electronic books to engage young EFL learners, as part of a larger study which shaped a teacher education reading methodology course in the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) B.Ed. program in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Teacher educators model a variety of interactive strategies such as animation, sound effects, hyperlinked vocabulary, hidden hotspots and gradual revelation of text for involving young EFL learners in the reading process. Through course evaluations, focus group discussions and Teaching Practice observational analysis, perceptions of the impact of multimedia rich reading lessons on EFL Emirati students are explored. These findings could have important implications for the effective delivery of teacher education in the UAE. It is suggested that performance modeling using e-books may maximize opportunities for student teachers to enhance children’s English literacy and language development.

### **Why use Electronic Books in the EFL Classroom?**

Technology has the potential to enhance reading teaching (Lefever-Davis & Pearman, 2005). Traditional simplistic notions of literacy as involving only the reading (decoding and comprehending) and writing (encoding and communicating) of print based texts are no longer adequate (Love, 2005). There is a growing sense that reading teaching needs to be more interactive(Lefever-Davis & Pearman, 2005) supported by multimedia modes that provide visual and sound representations (de Jong and Bus, 2003).

In addition to the written text and drawings that can be found in a conventional printed book, a digital media equivalent, often referred to as a talking book, CD ROM storybook, interactive book or ebook employs multimedia effects. Accompanied by written text, audio,

background music, sound effects, animations, hyperlinks, related activities and games, stories become more lifelike and appealing. As such they represent a reading format that combines video, sound and motions with exposure to written text and the option to act on these possibilities (Shamir & Korat, 2006). The lively and attractive features of e-books are a possible medium for supporting young EFL children's literacy and language development (de Jong & Bus, 2003; Lefever-Davis & Pearman, 2005). By catching and holding sustained interest, e-books are a visually attractive, resource, providing children with concrete reinforcement of the storyline. This has the potential to motivate and excite children about reading.

In order to take advantage of the interactive features of electronic books and their ability to establish a context or promote a mood, the teacher can engage EFL students in shared reading of the story with an entire class (Labbo & Kuhn, 2000). A projector can be used to enlarge the image onto a screen while the teacher reads the story aloud. This digitized book can provide the teacher with dynamic visuals to represent parts of the story, highlighting text or vocabulary while the story is initially being read aloud by the teacher or narrator (Lefever-Davis & Pearman, 2005). Using a laser pen, the teacher can track each word/sentence and encourage children to join in where possible. Unlike a conventional shared reading experience, the teacher's arm is not blocking illustrations or additional text. Optional hotspots can be activated which elaborate on the illustrations, characters or vocabulary. For example, when the teacher clicks on a character, this figure starts to talk. Sometimes clicking on a glowing word might give the children an explanation of the word. More advanced learners might discuss which story elements the reader can infer from electronic features and which are stated in the text itself. This sharing of an electronic book with an entire class has the potential to foster children's understanding of the story events, increase their vocabulary knowledge, phonological awareness and story recall abilities (Underwood & Underwood, 1998; Labbo & Kuhn, 2000; Chera & Wood, 2003). Subsequent re-readings can occur with individual students in a listening centre.

However, despite an international move towards interactive reading methods that incorporate aspects of technology (Korat and Shamir, 2008), and national aims to reform educational practices in Emirati government schools (Za'za, 2007) models of reading teaching in the United Arab Emirates still focus on traditional memorization approaches (McNally et al, 2002; Salama, 2007). Therefore, government school classrooms echo with their "Teachers

shouting and instilling fear in them rather than a love of learning” (Taha-Thomure, 2003). The reading curriculum is prescriptive, void of challenge, creativity and individuality. Accuracy of choral reading is emphasized to the detriment of making meaning accessible. In a study conducted by Clarke (2005) in the present research setting, he found that the majority of primary school teachers recalled by Emirati student teachers from childhood memories were remembered with resentment, rather than for any pedagogical inspiration they provided:

Your issue made me really sad because it reminded me of the days where in some subjects *we* memorized things without having any idea or understanding of these things...some teachers think that students are machines...they don't think of the students as humans who have needs and interests. (Clarke, 2005, p. 146)

It is memories such as this which Emirati student teachers bring to their teacher education course - years of exposure to traditional behaviorist reading instruction including a focus on reading comprehension, direct translation and intensive reading skills. The quality of this instruction has a lasting impact on how they define themselves as readers and developing reading teachers (Taha-Thomure, 2003).

While the powerful influence of former school teachers on the professional formation of teacher behavior cannot be dismissed, the potentially powerful effects of teacher educators' teaching styles on student teachers' practices have mostly remained unrecognized and unexamined to date, (Korthagen et al, 2001, Kane, 2002; Russell, 2001; Lunenberg et al, 2007), let alone in an Arabic context (other studies include McNally et al, 2002; Taha-Thomure, 2003; Richardson, 2004; Clarke, 2005).

### **Teacher Educator Performance Modeling using Electronic Books**

The growing penetration of technology into schools in the last two decades has a significant effect on the changing role of the teacher (Shamir & Korat, 2006) and as a consequence the education of teachers is gaining much attention (Goodlad, 1999; Lunenberg et al, 2007). By creating opportunities for student teachers to observe, practice and problematize teaching using modeling of electronic books, it may offer an additional means of accessing reading for young EFL learners in UAE government schools.

In teacher education, how lecturers teach is as important as what they teach (Wilson, 1990). Student teachers may learn about teaching by example as much as through the content and

activities presented, “particularly in methods classes, where the subject matter and pedagogy most closely resemble that which students in the class will most likely someday teach” (Jay, 2002). While practical experience, including performance modeling has long been a part of most language teacher education programs, these experiences are often too few and not sufficiently focused on the realities of the classroom (Crandall, 1996), including an Arabic context (Eilam, 2002; Mahmood, 2005). “The importance of modeling is magnified when pedagogy contradicts the images formed in pre-service teachers’ minds from years of schooling” (Lortie, 1975, in Jay, 2002). Because student teachers rely on their previous knowledge to inform their learning as teachers, learning new or complex ways of teaching can be a challenge (Grossman, 1991; Clarke, 2005). Student teachers are unlikely to have experienced as learners instructional reading strategies, incorporating technology they are taught to use as teachers. For example, as Emirati student teachers are a product of teacher-directed rote learning, (McNally et al, 2002), incorporating technology into their teaching practices may be a challenge. Additionally, if ‘best practices’ are not modeled in the college classroom, then how are they expected to shift their reading practices from behaviorist to constructivist?

However, if student teachers are to learn and become confident with new ways of teaching, including the explicit use of e-books in reading lessons, they must be able to accommodate new images and understand them in meaningful ways. By providing student teachers with greater opportunities to link theory to practice and to receive support from and learn from experienced teacher educators, they may develop the confidence to ‘try out’ unfamiliar methods of teaching, including the use of technology during reading lessons. Positive modeling influences may “change observers’ behavior, thought patterns, emotional reactions, and evaluations” (Bandura, 1986 in Jay 2002). In the context of this study, lesson demonstrations of constructivist EFL reading approaches including technology, may create “images of the possible” (Shulman, 1987) for Emirati student teachers who have not been previously exposed to such methods. The teacher educator may discuss his/her thinking behind the lesson, using the example e-book as an opportunity to connect the approach back to reading theory or to expose the underlying rationale. However Jay, (2002) alerts us that demonstration lessons are only a starting point for designing lessons and shouldn’t be “a blueprint”. “When students are ready, they should teach in personalized ways”.

Performance modeling is not commonly practiced in teacher education and therefore inconsistent models of best practice are expected from student teachers (Anderson & Armbruster, 1990, Hudson-Ross and Graham, 2000; Lunenberg et al, 2007). Little research exists that describe its use, especially in an Arabic context (Davies, 1999). However the literature that does exist (Bass & Chambless, 1994; Payne & Manning, 1991; Stover, 1990; Jay, 2002; Putnam and Borko, 2000) suggests that it is an effective strategy in teacher education and should closely reflect that of practitioners. The time has come to give modeling a reading lesson using electronic books its rightful place within teacher education.

### **Electronic Books in Action - The Emirati Teacher Education Context**

The research setting for this study is in a large Middle Eastern Immersion Bilingual college system called the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT). The need for reform in UAE schools and classrooms led to the development of the Higher Colleges of Technology's (HCT) first teacher education program, which commenced in 2000. It was designed with a Social Constructivist model in mind, emphasizing the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society, and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (McMahon, 1997; Derry, 1999). A key understanding in the development of the program is that schools and schooling are the social and cultural contexts for teacher learning, and are crucial to establishing an effective teacher education program. Therefore the B.Ed. program is a catalyst for change in the Emirati education system as more and more U.A.E. national women take up positions as English teachers in local government schools.

### **The curriculum context: Outline of the Reading and Vocabulary course**

The course "Working with Learners" is a second year Education (B.Ed.) course which focuses on the teaching and learning of Reading and Vocabulary. Developed in 2000, course designers were guided by the question: what do student teachers need to know about reading to teach it effectively in the context of language learning in UAE schools? The course aims to develop students' own reading abilities as well as providing them with the skills and understanding necessary to teach reading to school-age ESL/EFL learners.

Course evaluations revealed that student teachers know what reading is, but not necessarily how to teach it effectively in the context of an EFL Emirati environment. Comments included

students having “limited knowledge or practical experience on how to teach reading”; “students need to be more aware of the differences between reading approaches” and “be able to maximize the reading experience using technology” (Faculty course evaluation feedback, 2005-2006). Students requested that more time be given to the analysis of reading approaches and evaluating their application to the EFL classroom in a UAE context. As one student commented “more practice is needed on teaching reading itself” (Student course evaluation feedback, 2005-2006).

To help address these concerns, course curricular and delivery revisions were designed and developed by the curriculum leader/researcher stemming from the need to improve student teachers’ teaching abilities in EFL reading. The new course aimed to address how B.Ed student teachers could successfully teach reading to EFL learners in a UAE context? One area that was included in the restructure of the course was modeling the use of electronic books as a medium for sharing stories with young EFL children. It is on this aspect upon which this paper focuses. To achieve this aim, modeling by the teacher educator using electronic books was incorporated into the course work plan.

### **Teacher Educator Performance Modeling**

Unlike previous studies which highlighted the impact of using CD-ROM storybooks for independent learning purposes (Reinking, 1997; Leu, 1997) in this study the teacher educator modeled a whole class shared reading approach in the college classroom. This began the process of accommodation (Piaget, 1970) or deep level processing for student teachers, without developing initial feelings of anxiety and fear of teaching in front of their peers. In order to model alternative ways for making a reading lesson interactive in the EFL classroom, three media were used including the Internet, Microsoft PowerPoint and the interactive whiteboard. The additional features of interactive whiteboards over Microsoft PowerPoint were highlighted, including an electronic whiteboard for note making, a magnifier to enlarge pieces of text, a recorder, and spotlight. Student teachers were not only exposed to the features of this technology but to how its use could enhance the teaching of reading in an EFL context.

The teacher educator modeled the use of e-books using various reading approaches such as shared reading, choral reading and reading aloud in a variety of a genre. Through modeling, a

message was communicated to student teachers about what is important in EFL reading teaching, when using technology. Particular attention was given to interactive strategies such as animation, use of sound effects, pointing using a laser pen, hyperlinked vocabulary, hidden hotspots in images to elaborate on the setting or character and gradual revelation of text. Some conventional strategies were also emphasized including intonation, questioning in the three stages of pre, while and post-reading stages and how to involve and maintain students' interest in the interactive process. Sometimes the teacher educator asked student teachers to write a sketched lesson plan for a lesson demonstrated. Afterwards, it would be checked against the original and compared.

Following modeled 'images of the possible' for teaching reading using electronic books, student teachers formed discussion groups. Using a tick sheet, students categorized features of electronic books into desirable, possible and not recommended. Similar to Underwood and Underwood's (1998) findings, student teachers agreed that the same interactive e-book elements that support children's literacy may also potentially become distractions. Some children's focus on the storyline was distracted by appealing pictorial options. Also highlighted were potential contextual challenges, such as lack of relevant electronic resources in order to address particular pedagogic difficulties. For example, it was agreed that in the absence of the internet or smart boards in some primary schools, an electronic book could either be pre-downloaded or composed in Microsoft PowerPoint. Students further discussed and reflected on such things as the suitability of technology for a chosen reading methods in an EFL context, and suggestions to enhance their teaching techniques in future lessons. Suggestions made were recorded in the student teachers' teaching journals. This in turn helped them to "integrate the larger theoretical ideas with their practical knowledge by reflecting on practical situations" (Oonk 2001).

Finally, the teacher educator further highlighted the successful implementation of electronic books into an Early Years curriculum from a previous case study in Kuwait. Involved in a paired reading project, conducted with Year Six and Year Two Kuwaiti children (Gardiner, 2002), the older children had the responsibility of composing fiction for their younger counterparts. By adding audio, animation, sound effects and background design to their PowerPoint stories, they successfully engaged Year Two students in a shared reading session. The enthusiasm, animation and participation of the students was at a level of intensity and confidence that had not been witnessed previously during reading lessons for this group of

students (Gardiner, 2002). Student teachers discussed issues of practicality in becoming involved in a similar project in government Emirati schools.

### **Faculty Course Feedback (InTouch Article – Here)**

The new course was taught for the first time in 2006-2007. Teacher educators have responded positively to the new course design, and to the inclusion of electronic books as an additional component. The organization, relevance and modeling of technology chosen was seen as significantly aiding the development of student teachers' reading styles (Faculty course evaluation feedback, 2006-2007). The role of the teacher educator as an important and necessary part of the socialization process of becoming an interactive reading teacher was highlighted by the course team. The following statement exemplifies this:

Our T.P. school settings do not necessarily fulfill what the students need to see as far as a model reading program; in fact some of the schools don't have reading programs and therefore modeling interactive reading lessons in the college classroom filled a great gap. Without adequate teacher education preparation, student teachers are in greater danger of teaching the way they were taught themselves. (Faculty course evaluation feedback, 2006-2007)

It was felt that student teachers' ICT skills were of a good standard due to an increased requirement of the college to integrate technology into every aspect of the course, including a complementary studies ICT course initiated in Year One of the B.Ed. programme (Faculty course evaluation feedback, 2006-2007). As a result faculty felt that it was a positive move for student teachers to utilize these skills in their teaching of reading while on Teaching Practice. In fact, faculty wanted to emphasize that student teachers' competence in how to teach reading was greatly enhanced with the use of electronic books:

The student teachers have increased knowledge on how to use electronic books in the EFL classroom. They appear confident not only in using technology but in maximizing its use during the reading process. They are not afraid to take risks with technology. (Faculty course evaluation feedback, 2006-2007).

### **Teaching Practice Observations**

Students on teaching practicum are regularly visited and observed by college faculty while on their placements. In a typical three week block in a school, students will be visited a

minimum of twice by one or more of the college faculty, who observe lessons, provide feedback and offer support and advice.

It was an observation of supervising college faculty that many Year Two Education students had effectively integrated the use of technology into their reading lessons (Faculty lesson observation notes, 2007). Displaying confidence in their own ICT abilities, they were not afraid to choose an unconventional route for reading teaching. An analysis of student lesson planning provided additional evidence of a good understanding of how technology could be effectively integrated into a reading lesson. Many students detailed the purpose of interactive functions for enhancing student learning in the pre, while and post reading stages. Some students successfully presented their own homegrown stories using Microsoft PowerPoint and used interactive features to enrich the story's meaning. One recommendation made by college mentors was to enlarge the font size of the text and also to reduce the amount of text on each screen so as to make the narrative more vivid.

It must be noted that while the integration of technology was mainly successful, the student teachers' delivery abilities varied considerably. It was also observed that some of the weaker students presented a series of interactive activities, unrelated to the overall approach being demonstrated. Also, despite modeling of a variety of e-books in the college classroom, some students' story content was less supported by the electronic version than a regular book due to an overuse of distracting interactive features that impeded effective delivery of the lesson. It was felt that these fundamental skills needed to be re-taught in the methodology course to ensure that these students understood that the purpose of technology was merely to enhance the delivery of the reading process, rather than a core focus in itself.

### **Focus Group Interviews**

Student teacher alike reported that their reading lessons involving the use of an electronic book were extremely successful. Learners were mainly engaged in the story and student teachers were able to sustain their interest for longer periods of time.

My students were so interested in the electronic version of 'The Hungry Caterpillar story' by Eric Carle, that when the lesson ended, they asked if I could read it again with them (Focus Group interviews, 2007)

As I revealed only one sentence of the story at a time using a wireless mouse, it not only held their attention throughout the story but created suspense.

(Focus Group interviews, 2007)

A few students further highlighted that young EFL learners could easily access the meaning of unfamiliar words if they were hyperlinked to an explanation in the dictionary. This also increased their confidence and tendency to take risks with new words. Consistent with Matthew's, (1996) research, one student commented that if students were exposed to the e-book more than once, they seemed to have greater recall of the story line and many of the key words. However, similar to faculty feedback, some students who composed or adapted an e-book admitted to the fact that their overuse of animation not only prolonged the reading time required to complete the story but seemed to distract some children and encourage them to shift from an active listening mode into an "observation mode". However, the group agreed that passivity was less likely to happen when using the shared reading approach as children were participants at varying levels throughout the story. Other students felt that the weaker EFL children became over reliant on the electronic support, hindering their use of independent reading strategies when tackling unknown words (Pearman, 2003). On reflection, they said they would reduce the number of electronic features when teaching again and select CD-ROM storybooks with features that simply promoted their lesson intentions.

Although many of the government schools do not contain a library, ironically laptops and projectors are common resources in each classroom. However, student teachers noted that they were rarely used during reading lessons. A few student teachers felt proud when their school mentor teachers learned about the added value of technology, from observing students teach an interactive reading lesson. Their mentors' positive comments on the benefits of using e-books with EFL students further encouraged them to use e-books as an additional medium of delivery. In schools which lacked electronic resources such as a projector and screen, some students decided to use an overhead projector as an alternative medium. However, although the visual impact was preserved, it didn't provide the same level of interactivity.

Another issue highlighted by student teachers involved the lack of published e-books that are culturally and linguistically appropriate for Arabic learners of English. As one student put it "more needs to be done in creating culturally specific e-books for sharing with young Arab learners" (Focus Group interviews, 2007). Another student said that "designing software that

gives students a more authentic shared reading experience and less repetition and comprehension exercises will be an invaluable tool for promoting language development in an Arabic context” (Focus Group interviews, 2007). This resonates with findings of a study conducted by Korat & Shamir, (2004) in which most e-books available were not satisfactory as tools for supporting literacy in a foreign language. However, unlike their study, this study aimed to incorporate e-books into whole class interactive approaches, rather than using e-books for independent reading purposes.

**Incorporating Electronic Features into a Shared Reading Lesson, as modeled in the Teacher Education Classroom**

Features	Pre-Shared Reading	While Shared Reading	Post-Shared Reading
<b>Electronic version of Fiction Book e.g. ‘The Hungry Caterpillar’ by Eric Carle</b>	Discuss the cover, title, author, illustrator and picture.  Ask students to predict what the story will be about.	<b>Demonstration</b> The teacher reads the story aloud. The pace should be lively with few stops. Point to each line as you read to reinforce left-to-right orientation, using a laser pen. <b>Participation</b> Ask the children to join in when they can and to predict how the story will develop.  <b>Practice</b> Read parts of the story and take turns reading. Allow the children to dominate.	Reread children’s favourite parts.  Reread direct speech with expression.  Highlight key words and children can invent suitable alternatives.
<b>Gradual Revelation</b>	Introduce key vocabulary, one by one	Reveal the text line by line/page by page.	<b>Performance-</b> Encourage students to act out the story. Each line is revealed one by one using the laser pen.
<b>Design/ Use of colour</b>	Introduce and describe the setting for the story.	Use different backgrounds when moving from scene to scene.  Children can describe the backdrop using adjectives.	Recall the different settings in the story.  Create a new setting for the story.

		During group reading, students read a particular line of text, depending on the colour.	
<b>Graphic Animation</b>	Introduce main characters.  Describe the characters.	Animation assigned to different characters throughout the story dialogue. When the teacher clicks on a character, this figure starts to talk.	Describe the character, based on the animated icon.
<b>Hotspots</b>	Hidden hotspots in images can be activated to introduce the setting, character.	Can be activated which elaborate on the illustrations, setting or characters.	To recall parts of the story, text can be searched automatically.
<b>Hyperlinks</b>	Introduce key vocabulary or target language by clicking on them one by one.	Stop throughout the story and draw their attention to difficult words. Highlight key words. Explanation of word pops up.	Recall key vocabulary by clicking on highlighted words.
<b>Audio/C.D. ROM</b>	Listen to the beginning of the story and predict the storyline.	As a whole class, listen to the story and read along.	Individual children can listen to/reread the story following the lesson or during extension time Make your own audio tape of the children reading.
<b>Sound Effects</b>	Introduce each character with a different sound effect.	Where appropriate, introduce sound effects throughout the story e.g. chime bells for a princess to create excitement; specific sound such as a bell ringing to remind student of a key word.	Retell the story in sequence using sound effects to represent main characters.
<b>Games</b>	Complete a jigsaw puzzle of the front cover of the story – then guess the title!	* <u>Note:</u> The integration of games may disrupt the storyline at this stage and could be done in the post-reading stage instead.	Sequencing games – reorder the story.  Vocabulary games - bingo, word searches, information gap.

To support the introduction of the revised reading course in each of the six colleges, teacher educators were supplied with activities for the pre, during and post-reading stages suitable for use during modeling sessions. An online learning site was also set up as a course management tool to archive relevant resources to support each goal in the form of

PowerPoint presentations, guided readings, sample reading lessons for different approaches, electronic stories, leaflets on the teaching of reading, summary sheets, vocabulary banks, recommended websites and extended readings. The 'suggested work plan' including content, methodology, readings and details of assessments were updated. As highlighted earlier, to enhance the delivery of the course, modeling by the teacher educator was recommended, along with suggestions for implementation in the college classroom.

## **Conclusion**

It could be argued that e-books provide a lesser reading experience than physical books as many readers prefer paper and print to a computer screen. However, if e-books are an additional, rather than an alternative means of providing a fun, interactive reading experience in the foreign language classroom, then more possibilities exist for embracing their potential and using them to the teachers' advantage. As teacher educators, it is important to model best practice approaches when using e-books so that future reading teachers maximize opportunities to enhance children's English literacy and language development. This study has highlighted that the lively and attractive features of e-books, including voices, sound and dynamic visuals, are a powerful means of supporting second language literacy development. Training Emirati student teachers who are a product of teacher-directed rote learning, (McNally et al, 2002) to incorporate technology into the primary school classroom is a challenge and a necessary part of keeping up with international trends. What better way to enjoy reading with young EFL learners, than through sharing e-books?

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### **Recommended Electronic Book Resources**

- <http://www.coxhoe.durham.sch.uk/Curriculum/Literacy.htm>  
<http://eduscapes.com/tap/topic93.htm>