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## The concept of shared reading

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The concept of shared reading can be implemented in the second language classroom, writes Fiodhna Hyland. When continued throughout the primary school years it can help establish reading as a life-long and meaningful habit. It can be implemented in the second language classroom, writes Fiodhna Hyland. When continued throughout the primary school years it can help establish reading as a life-long and meaningful habit.

*"The desire to read is not born in a child. It is planted by parents and teachers."*

— J. Trelease in *The Read Aloud Handbook*

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 to literacy and learning. Planting a desire to read 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.

### 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 cooperative reading, which later became known as Shared Reading. By greatly enlarging the size of a storybook, the teacher creates 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 has shown 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 which they might be able to do on their own.

The relaxed, supportive atmosphere of shared reading allows children to experiment as they develop strategies for predicting and self-correcting. Holdaway (1979) writes 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 English as a Second Language context**

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

### **Key 1: Shared reading is fun**

Many teachers will argue that learning is most effective when it is fun, but others — particularly those using more traditional approaches — may counter this by saying "How much good can it be doing if the student is enjoying it?"

But, 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. 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.

If children don't read much, they can't get much better at it. In fact 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.

### **A Gulf context**

In a study I conducted in a primary school in Kuwait, a year one class of ESL (English as a second language) learners was exposed to daily shared reading over a six-month period. The teacher had modelled the "why" and "how" of reading, and in doing so inspired her students to try the experience of reading for personal enjoyment.

In the study, I discovered 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 at the school 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 lies in its simplicity. The teacher scaffolds the reading experience through modelling, so the learners 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.

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.

Paired/peer reading 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.

## **A Gulf context**

The Kuwait study introduced a peer-reading programme in the second language curriculum. Fifth-grade student volunteers shared books twice a week with grade one students. "The response was unbelievable", reported a grade one teacher.

After a while, the younger reader began to join in the reading, where possible. Said the grade one teacher: "We initially thought boys would feel too sophisticated to assist the lower grades, but we were wrong!"

I also observed a significant improvement in reading attitudes. 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 Kuwait study also noted that sharing books on a higher level whets second language children's appetites. I frequently noted that after hearing and participating in the last paragraph of a big book, a child would ask the teacher, "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.

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," writes Mooney (1994).

Shared reading is therefore a practice that should be continued throughout the primary school years 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. Learners must be able to share, perform and experience the power and joys of reading. Participation and prediction should be encouraged.

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).

Shared reading provides social opportunities, enabling the young second language learners to gain confidence, share knowledge, self-correct and construct meaning cooperatively.