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Early Reading in EFL Contexts Deserves More Attention from ELT Community

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Abstract

Reading is the main language skill in English as a Foreign Language (EFL)contexts, and the key to the reading skill is the knowledge of the alphabet. Although there are various approaches to teaching early reading and the alphabet in L1, such as whole language, language experience, literature-based, whole word, alphabetic method, and analytic and synthetic phonics, the topic of teaching alphabet and early reading is almost missing in language teaching methodology textbooks, and the few sources which deal with the subject seem to be mainly concerned with English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts where the learners' mother tongue also uses a Latin alphabet. Early reading and alphabet teaching in EFL contexts has also received little research attention, and many aspects of literacy teaching in these contexts such as the effectiveness of different approaches for different age groups are still a mystery. ELT community, hence, needs to pay more heed to the needs of teachers and learners in EFL contexts. This paper intends to sensitize the international ELT community, including the researchers, teachers, and publishers to the importance and necessity of taking early literacy in EFL contexts into account.

Keywords: alphabet, reading, literacy, phonics, EFL

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1. Introduction

Literacy is a broad term that can be defined differently, but a basic definition that suits the purpose of this paper is "the ability to read and write in a language" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010: 345). In this sense, literacy is the main and the first objective of education systems which aim to enable learners to read and write in their mother tongue. In second and foreign language contexts, the literacy of the learners in the L2 is also an important goal for those involved in education. Reading as the first component of literacy depends on the alphabet knowledge and skills of the readers. In other words, the alphabet is the key to literacy.

Early reading and literacy, and teaching the alphabet to native children have received enormous attention from material developers who provided textbooks and supplementary materials, teacher educators who suggested and offered various approaches and methods for the teaching of the alphabet, and researchers who evaluated and assessed the effectiveness of these suggestions. Early literacy and reading of children in second language contexts have also received some attention from material developers who have produced textbooks and supplementary materials for such contexts, but they have been almost ignored by teacher educators and researchers. Foreign language contexts are totally different because none of the parties have paid ample attention to the peculiarities of such contexts especially where the mother tongue does not use a Latin alphabet, and adults who are already literate in their L1 are going to learn English. This paper, by reviewing the available approaches and methods for teaching early reading in L1 contexts and the shortcomings of these in the EFL contexts, aims to sensitize the international ELT community, including material developers, teacher educators, and researchers to the needs of learners and teachers in EFL contexts.

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2. Approaches to teaching early literacy in L1

There has been a long debate even since the 15th century on the appropriate approach to teaching early reading and alphabet skills to learners (Alexander & Fox, 2013). Ediger (2001) classifies these approaches into two broad categories of socio-psycholinguistic or meaning-focused, and part-centered or code-focused approaches. The former category which takes a gestalt top-down approach to reading includes approaches such as the whole language approach, language experience approach, literature-based approach, and whole word approach; the latter category includes approaches and methods such as alphabetic method, analytic phonics, synthetic phonics, and analogy phonics.

2.1. Meaning-focused approaches

The whole language approach (WLA) is a top-down approach to reading which emphasizes the background knowledge of the readers and their ability to infer meaning. This approach believes that reading and writing should develop naturally through communication, the same way listening and speaking do (Campbell, 2020). The whole world approach begins with motivating learners to read, exposes them to meaningful interesting texts, and arouses the need to read the text independently in them. Then it helps readers to recognize the words in the text, and finally, the letters and sounds are taught. In other words, it contains too little systematic letter-sound instruction and relies too much on incidental or natural learning. Similar to meaning-focused approaches to L2 teaching and learning which believe there is no need to directly instruct the language, and the best contribution teachers can make to second language learning is the provision of comprehensible input to learners, the whole language approach also emphasizes the importance of comprehensible reading texts. However, this approach was not welcomed by teachers and practitioners, and even in the 1980s and 90s when it was in its heydays, the concept of whole language was vague to many practitioners, and even researchers did not have a unique understanding of its procedure.

The language experience approach (LEA) is another meaning-focused approach that believes background knowledge and schema are the essential requirements for understanding a text, and therefore, reading is best learned through a text that is constructed by the learners themselves (Ediger, 2001). In this approach, the teacher encourages learners to dictate a story, and s/he writes the sentences on the board, and learners, subsequently try to read that text. Since the language experience approach was

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originally developed for reading in L1, it raises several challenges in other contexts. For example, in elementary levels, EFL learners cannot even talk to the teacher in L2, and if their L1 does not use a Latin alphabet or the teacher does not share the same L1 with them, the use of this method becomes almost impossible.

The literature-based approach is still another meaning-focused approach, which similar to the whole language approach, believes that reading is learned through reading. However, it believes literature is the best and most appropriate authentic material for learning reading, and learners should choose stories that are appropriate to their levels. In this approach, stories and storytelling are among the foundations of teaching literacy in the classroom (Rogow, 1997).

The whole word approach (WWA), also called the sight word or look-and-say approach, is another approach to teaching early reading and literacy to children in their L1. Of course, Ediger (2001) classifies this approach as a code-focused or part-centered approach, perhaps because it is sometimes combined with the phonics approach; however, I believe, as the term speaks for itself, the whole word approach is also a meaning-focused approach which predominantly concentrates on the whole word, not its parts. In this approach, learning, in the beginning, occurs through the association between the written form of a concrete content word and a picture that shows the meaning of that word. For example, to teach the word "bag" to learners, first, the written form is associated with the picture of a bag. After some associations, only the written form is presented to learners and they are expected to read the word. Here, the learners do not decode the letter sounds, rather they read the whole word and it is in fact a kind of picture reading (Ehri et al., 2001). Later, function words are taught through multiple encounters in the context of use. After children can read about 100 words through the association between the written forms and the pictures, teaching letters and sounds begins, and words, which have already been read as a whole, are analyzed into letter sounds.

2.2. Code-focused approaches

Part-centered or code-focused approaches, which take a bottom-up approach, concentrate on the small units that are combined to form reading texts. Depending on the unit of emphasis, a part-centered approach can be an alphabetic approach or a phonics approach.

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The alphabetic approach begins with teaching the letter names and believes since the names of many English letters are close to their sounds if learners know the names of letters, they will be able to read words. In this approach, after learners master the names of letters, their task is to read two-letter and three-letter syllables and then progress into reading short words, and finally sentences (Samuels, 1972).

The most notable code-centered approach is the phonics approach. This approach views the alphabetic principle, i.e., the one-to-one correspondence between the majority of alphabet letters and their sounds, as the cornerstone for learning reading words and sentences (Campbell, 2020). Phonics programs can be carried out in a variety of ways. Analytic phonics begins with the whole words and immediately focuses on the sound-letter relationship, and hence it is sometimes called the mixed method. For example, the teacher writes the words **b**all, **b**ook, **b**asket, and **b**ag on the board, and draws learners' attention to the initial /b/ sound and the letter that shows this sound (Ehri, 1987). This method can work well in second language contexts where learners often know the oral form and meaning of the word, and the focus of the class is mainly on learning the written form. In foreign language contexts, however, it may overburden the learners because they need to learn the meanings and oral forms of the words, and immediately focus on the written forms, and the initial letter sounds, too.

The second variety of the phonics approach is the synthetic phonics. In the synthetic phonics, the focus is on the letter-sound associations. Children first learn the shape of each letter and the sound associated with it. Names of letters are not often taught immediately. Names can be introduced after children master the letter sound associations. After children learn the letter-sound associations, they learn how to blend these to pronounce words. For example, after learners learn c /k/, a /æ/, and t /t /, they blend the letter sounds to read the word cat /k æt/. For letters with more than one sound, teaching begins with the most common sound, and when the association between this common sound and the letter is consolidated through sounding out and blending practice, the other sounds of the same letter are taught. Irregular words or tricky words, such as he which is pronounced as /hi:/ not as /he/, are also taught after learners gain some mastery over the sound-letter relationships. These words are taught as sight words or whole words, and students are not encouraged to analyze the words into their letter sounds nor are they asked to sound them out.

Another variety of phonics approach is analogy phonics or linguistic approach, as sometimes called. This variety engages learners in the study of word families or word parts. Learners need to use parts of words they already know to identify new words. For example, children who already know the

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words b**at**, c**at**, and m**at** can be asked to use their knowledge of the /at/ cluster to identify the words such as **fat**, **rat**, and **sat**. Or, after the teacher reads words, such as t**ake**, b**ake**, l**ake**, and c**ake**, learners are expected to be able to read new words such as **make** and **sake** (Ehri et al., 2001).

3. What about learning the alphabet in L2 contexts?

All the aforementioned approaches have developed in L1 reading and literacy contexts, and there is a multitude of research studies that have investigated the effectiveness of each of these approaches in L1 contexts (e.g., Johnston, McGeown, and Watson 2012; Wyse and Styles 2007). These approaches developed in the L1 context often assume that prior to attending school, learners meet six early literacy requirements including phonological awareness, print awareness, narrative awareness, print motivation, lexical knowledge, and letter knowledge (Albright et al., 2009). Many beginning learners who learn English in EFL contexts, however, do not meet at least two early requirements of lexical knowledge and letter knowledge. In L1 contexts, in addition to official support for teachers, and material preparation based on these approaches - for example, the Letter and Sound Program which is a phonics instruction program is endorsed by the Department of Education and Skills in England (Department of Education and Skill 2007)- there are commercial programs such as Jolly Phonics (Lloyd & Wernham, 1998) and TRASS (Davies & Ritchie, 2003) to promote these approaches.

Surprisingly, despite all this enormous scholarly attention to early reading and literacy in the English L1 context, the topic of teaching the alphabet and early reading in foreign language contexts is almost missing in the methodology textbooks, teacher education and training programs, and English language teaching and applied linguistics journals. It seems it has been taken for granted that teachers of English in EFL contexts should know how to teach early reading and literacy in their L1, and thus be able to generalize the same knowledge and skill to their English class. However, the reality is that teaching the alphabet and early reading skills are serious challenges for teachers who teach English in a foreign language context where the first language of the learners does not use the Latin alphabet.

Reviewing the major English language teaching and methodology textbooks published in different decades reveals that this important topic is absent in the books published since the turn of the century (Brown, 2015; Burns & Richards, 2012; Carter & Nunan, 2001; Farr, 2015; Gebhard, 2017; Harmer, 2007, 2012, 2015; Nunan, 2003; Richards, 2015; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Scrivener, 2011;

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Watkins, 2014). The methodology and teaching textbooks published in the 20th century also turned a blind eye to teaching literacy, early reading, and alphabet (Bowen et al., 1985; Celce-Murcia, 1991, 2001; Celce-Murcia & McIntosh, 1979; Chastain, 1988; Doff, 1988; Finocchiaro & Bonomo, 1973; Lewis & Hill, 1985; Paulston & Bruder, 1976; Rivers & Temperly, 1978; Rivers, 1981; Willis, 1981). All these books include a chapter on teaching reading, but early reading has been ignored and the content of these chapters mainly concentrates on the teaching of reading comprehension skills and strategies. There are few books that have addressed the issue of early literacy (Celce-Murcia et al., 2014; Linse, 2005; Ur, 2012). Authors of these books or book sections, however, focus on second language contexts and offer just general guidelines for teaching early reading in the second language context. The approaches explained and offered in these books, such as the language experience approach or whole word approach, and the guidelines these authors offer, mainly assume that learners have a kind of oral ability and lexical knowledge in the L2, however, a prerequisite that, as already said, does not exist in a beginning reading class in a foreign language context where reading is often the main language skill for the learners.

Not only methodology and teaching textbooks have excluded the topic of early reading and alphabet teaching in a foreign language context, but books that have been specifically written for teaching reading (Nuttall, 1998; Watkins, 2017) (See Appendix: Part D for examples of such books), and teacher training programs such as CELTA (Watkins et al., 2023), which drive at teaching adults, have also taken it for granted that reading begins with reading comprehension, and adults who intend to learn a second language are already literate and know the alphabet.

There are some international commercial textbooks for teaching the alphabet to the L2 (Nakata et al., 2018; Schwermer et al., 2013; Simmons, 2019) learners which have taken a phonics approach, but they also mainly focus on young learners i.e., kids in second language contexts, who have a vocabulary knowledge in the L2. Most of the keywords in these books, i.e. words used to introduce the new letters and sounds (such as apple, alligator, bear, elephant, etc.) are irregular or sight words, and learners only learn the sound of one letter, and do not read words in reality even up to the end of the book. Moreover, these words might not be familiar or of urgent need to a learner in a foreign language setting. And even more importantly, there are no sounding or blending exercises in these books. Despite these shortcomings, we should still be thankful that an approximately synthetic phonics approach which reportedly is more effective for teaching early literacy and alphabet knowledge (Ehri et al., 2001; Johnston et al., 2012) has been adopted by the developers of these textbooks. Nevertheless, there is

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another group of foreign language learners that have been marginalized by these textbooks: teenagers and adults. These books are appropriate for children who learn the English alphabet. They include songs, actions, and drawings which are disdained by teenagers and adults.

The ignorance of teaching literacy and early reading in EFL contexts by the ELT community is not limited to textbook authors and material developers. Researchers have also turned a blind eye to the topic of the effectiveness of different literacy approaches in foreign language contexts, and there is little research on the topic (Amirian & Sadeghi, 2014). Accordingly, we do not actually know which approach works best in teaching early literacy in a foreign and even a second language context where the L1 does not use a Latin alphabet system, or if there are any differences between the effectiveness of these approaches for teaching L2 early literacy to young learners who cannot read in their L1 yet, and teenagers, and adults who are already literate in their L1.

4. Conclusion

If applied linguistics by definition investigates and tries to improve language-related problems people face in the real world (Conrad et al., 2020), ELT material developers, teacher educators, and researchers are expected to pay more heed to this basic serious problem for literacy in EFL contexts. Alphabet and early literacy are the keys to reading comprehension, and reading comprehension in turn is the main means of receiving compressible input in EFL contexts, by a rule of thumb, learners who learn English in foreign language contexts are far more than those who learn it either in second language contexts, or as their mother tongue. Therefore, this huge number of learners, their teachers and their basic needs cannot and should not be ignored. Arming teachers with evidence-based knowledge and skill is the step that should be taken, because as (Westwood, 2008) puts it: ‘there are many possible reasons why a learner experience difficulty to read, write and spell, … teaching method is one of the most powerful’ (p. 4).

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