

18 Parental Support in Learning to Read English

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1 INTRODUCTION

“The possibilities of strengthening the links between homes and schools have been discussed for many years but recently they have taken on a new significance because of the great interest created by the research into involving parents more directly in their children’s reading development” (Beard, 1987: 102). This quote captures the spirit of this study; it focuses on understanding how parents can support children in learning to read English. In particular, I will concentrate on parents whose own proficiency in English is limited. My interest in this topic was sparked by my own experience as a teacher, where I noted differences in the reading abilities of children with different home backgrounds; an important factor here seemed to be parents’ proficiency in English. This study allowed to me to examine this issue more closely.

2 L2 READING DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Arab Learners Reading English

There are differences between Arabic and English which need to be addressed in helping Omani children learn to read in English. The issue of directionality is a major one. Children have to acquire an awareness that English and Arabic writing systems operate in opposite directions. Arab children need to accustom themselves when holding an English book to open it from right to left and not to turn its pages in the same direction as Arabic books.

2.2 Learning to Read

2.2.1 *Whole Word Recognition Approach*

This approach, also called look and say (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990), is used in the new Basic Education English curriculum in Oman. According to Wray (1991), this

method is organized around the word as a unit of print. Thus, word recognition needs flash cards in order to help learners look at words and try to say them. Children then need to repeat the words when their teachers say them while pointing to the objects, in order to make connections between words and their meanings.

2.2.2 *Phonic Approach*

Phonemic awareness can be defined as “the ability to hear and identify sounds in spoken words”(National Reading Panel, 2000). Phonemic awareness is an important aspect of reading ability (Griffith & Olson, 1992). According to Adams (1990) and Griffith (1992), learners with more phonemic awareness can achieve better development concerning literacy awareness. We must remember though, as Beard (1987) notes, that in English there is “no complete one to one letter sound correspondence”.

2.2.3 *Parental Involvement in Learning to Read*

According to Faulkner (1995), children can make progress towards learning if they are given appropriate support. This support is called scaffolding. Scaffolding for learners can be provided through interaction with parents or teachers (Maybin, Mercer & Stierer, 1992). The important role of parents has been widely noted. Beard (1987) and Morse & Brand (1995) report that parents can make active contributions towards children’s learning progress because they can diagnose their strengths and weaknesses more effectively than anyone else. Here my focus is on how parents whose proficiency in English is limited can help their children learn to read English.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

My main research question here was: can parents with no proficiency in English help to improve their Grade 2 children’s reading? I addressed this question through a number of sub-questions:

1. What support for reading can non-English proficient parents give?
2. How can I help parents to assist their children’s reading development?
3. Do parents’ attitudes towards their children’s reading development change during a reading programme?
4. Do pupils’ attitudes towards reading development change during a reading programme?
5. Do children improve in reading during a reading programme?

3.2 Context & Participants

The learners in this study were in Grade 2. This is the first year that they are introduced to reading in English. They are taught reading using the whole word recognition approach. Two focal learners, a boy and a girl, were chosen, both who came from families in rural areas where the parents had low levels of literacy. These children’s mothers were also central participants in this study (though only one of them ultimately participated as I suggested).

3.3 The Reading Programme

This study focused in detail on two individual learners and thus reflected elements of a case study approach (Johnson, 1992). As part of the study I created a reading programme for these learners. It supplemented the word recognition approach to teaching reading in the curriculum by adopting a phonic approach.

In planning my teaching for the second semester of the year, I examined the vocabulary that was introduced in each unit of the course book in order to identify the most common words. I also reviewed the course book objectives to see which words the children were supposed to be able to read by the end of each unit. I noticed that most of words started with “c, d, s, b, r, m, and h”. In addition, there were some occasional encounters with words that began with other letters “w, k “ or “u”. On the basis of my analysis of the words in the course book I drew up a plan for focusing on specific letter-sound correspondences through the semester (see Appendix for the plan).

3.3.1 Handouts

I supported this reading instruction plan with handouts which were designed for use in class and by the learners at home, with the support of their parents. I created these handouts for two main reasons. First participants could refer to them any time, not only in our usual lessons. Second, they were a way of involving parents in helping their children to read – the parents could see what exactly the learners were reading each day. There was one handout for each of the letters to be covered in the reading programme (so 26 handouts in total) and in each case the handout contained two or three words starting with the same letter and sound. According to my plan, every week parents received two handouts.

3.3.2 Parental Support

Although the boy’s family did not show interest in this project I gave him handouts because I hoped he might find someone to support him. The girl’s mother agreed to participate though. Here is a description of what I asked this mother to do:

I agreed with the mother that she would sit with her daughter for about half an hour every day and ask her about the meaning of words when she heard her reading. If she noticed that her daughter was able to read all what she can do is non-structured responses like, nod her head or smile at her to show her interest or she can give her simple rewards like (balloons or sweets). If the daughter fails to read that can be noticed from her hesitation when reading she can tell her “ask your teacher and read it tomorrow” and not rush her or shout at her. The mother can contact me any time either at school or even at home if she wants to ask about any areas concerning her daughter’s learning.

3.3.3 Using the Reading Programme in Class

I used the phonics handouts in my regular classes with all learners, even though this study focused on only two. At the start of every lesson I spent 10 minutes on

reading before I started the actual lesson for that day. I started by writing the letter we were working on that day on the board. Then I read its sound and after that I showed children some words starting with that initial. When reading the word I focused on the onset (as sound) and I traced under the whole word when I read it (as sight reading). Then I gave participants time to read the words by saying the sounds and reading the words. At the end of lesson I gave them a handout for the taught letter. I followed this procedure for every letter and sound.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through observations, interviews and a test.

3.4.1 Observation

In order to find out what each child was able to do regarding reading, I decided to start with observing the participants. As Richards & Lockhart (1994) point out observation can include watching different aspects of teaching and learning. I supported my observation through a diary, in which I reflected on the focal learners' experiences of learning to read. I also video recorded two lessons (early in the project and at the end) because, as Harmer (2001) and Richards & Lockhart (1994) claim, video recording can capture many details of a lesson which may not be noted by the observer making field notes. Also, we can replay the recording again and again.

3.4.2 Tests

After my initial observation I decided to give pupils a test. In this test they had to match words (e.g. chicken, fish, potatoes) with the corresponding pictures. I wanted to find out how well they could read words from Unit 1 of their coursebook. I sent the results of this test to the parents, hoping it would motivate them to take part in this study (especially if they saw that their children could not read well). There was no feedback from the parents, though and the boy's family was especially uncooperative. The second test was based on words from the reading programme. The learners did this test after completing the reading programme (i.e. working through the extra phonics handouts in class and reading to their parents).

3.4.3 Interviews

I also did interviews. Early in the study I interviewed both children and their parents to find out about their views about reading in English and about the support for reading the children received from their parents. The second interviews only involved the girl and her mother. With the girl, I showed her words from the reading programme and asked her to read them. With the mother, I asked about her reaction after the cooperation done between the home and school and her thoughts about the reading programme.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Observation

My initial observation was at the beginning of semester one where I noticed that both participants were not able to turn the pages of the book in the correct direction. They held the book back to front, as if it was printed in Arabic, and were turning the pages from left to right. Moreover, when I asked them to write their names both failed. When I wrote their names for them I noticed that the girl copied it but she wrote it from right to left. However, the boy took a long time to try to formulate some letters; he failed and wrote letters from right to left.

Concerning semester one day to day observations, I noticed that participants started to turn pages in the correct direction. However, they faced great difficulty to sight read words although they encountered some of them nearly everyday (e.g. days of the week).

My observations for semester two showed that the boy's ability to read some sounds like initial /b/ started to improve about a month after I started the phonics programme. He could also read short words with three or four letters when he was given time. The girl's ability to read words with pictures also started to improve, some two weeks after the start of the programme. Unlike the boy, she received support from her mother.

The first time I videoed the children, neither could read the words they were showed. First I showed the boy "cow" he could not read it until he heard someone say it. I asked him to match it with the picture but he failed. I showed the girl word "dog" but she couldn't read it until she heard her peer. I asked her to match it with a picture and she could not.

The second time I videoed the children, the girl was able to read words like village and police station. The boy's reading ability remained, in contrast. low. For example, I showed him "clinic" and asked him to read it; he tried but he failed.

4.2 Tests

On the initial matching test, the boy scored one out of five while the girl scored zero. These were words that they had had sight of many times in class. In the second test, administered after the reading programme, the girl scored five out of five while the boy scored zero.

4.3 Interviews

From what the mother said I noticed that she realized the importance of learning English to her daughter's future. She said, "I do not sit with her but sometimes when she came to ask for my help I told her I don't know English go and ask your brother if he can help you". Moreover, I have noticed that she was ready to assist her daughter and when I explained the project to her she said "if this will help her I will do it". In terms of the children, I noticed they both wanted to learn but they needed real help. The girl told me that her mother shouts at her when she cannot read. The

boy said “no one asks me to study. No one knows English”. He seemed to have much less support for his learning at home than the girl.

In the second interview with the girl I asked her to read the following words: fish, cat and grass. I noticed that although the visual support was not available (pictures) she was able to read them. From her responses I noticed that her mother spent more time listening to her reading and she said, “I like this”. In addition, she said, “Now I feel I am better in English, even now I watch some cartoons in English”.

Overall, then, the girl made much more progress than the boy did in reading ability over the course of this project.

5 DISCUSSION

There is some evidence in this study that non-structured parental support can support children’s reading in English. The girl’s mother agreed to sit with her daughter while she was reading English and, although she admitted not always doing this, she was clearly supportive of her child’s efforts to read. This seemed to be noticed by the girl and in turn it may have influenced her own attitudes to reading. Her mother too subsequently said she was happy that her child was making more of an effort to read English words. Similar processes were not evident in the case of the boy, where no parental support was provided. As Al-Abri (2006) notes, “parents of young children with limited English proficiency may need extra encouragement to support children’s reading progress”. This study shows that even when such encouragement is provided not all parents will necessarily respond positively.

In terms of the children’s actual reading ability, comparisons of the two video recorded instances of them reading in class and of their two tests suggest that while the boy may have made some progress, however minimal, the girl clearly did seem to improve, both in recognizing words and in handling the different direction of English reading compared to Arabic. The girl’s attitudes to English also seemed more positive at the end of the study, when she said she was now watching cartoons in English.

5.1 Limitations

The findings of this study are I believe valuable, but I recognize some serious limitations in the conclusions I am able to draw. The video recordings (done by a colleague) did not always focus on the children under study, and thus I did not have much data about their reading in class to analyze. The interviews with the children did not generate much data either, as they were shy and reluctant to say much. The tests I used, also, do not measure reading ability in any broad sense; they contained a small number of items and involved one type of matching task. The participation of only one parent in the study is also a limitation, as is the fact that I was not able to observe what this parent did in supporting her child’s reading; I thus had to rely entirely on what the mother reported in the interview.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has been a valuable learning experience for me. It allowed me to explore an issue of personal interest but more importantly provided me with first-hand experience of the research process and the challenges this presents if our goal is to conduct high quality studies. As a result of this work I feel much better prepared to carry out research in future and I look forward to exploring the issues examined here and others, perhaps with like-minded colleagues.

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APPENDIX: PLAN FOR TEACHING LETTERS AND SOUNDS

Week	Month	Letters taught as sounds
1	17/2/07 – 21/2/07	b & c
2	24/2/07 – 28/2/07	s & h
3	3/3/07 – 7/3/07	d & f
4	10/3/07 – 14/07	k & m
5	17/3/07 – 21/3/07	t & l
6	24/3/07 – 28/3/07	n & r
7	31/3/07– 4/4/07	w & y
8	7/4/07 – 11/4/07	p & z
9	14/4/07 – 18/4/07	g & v
10	21/4/07 – 25/4/07	q & j
11	28/4/07 – 2/5/07	x & a
12	5/5/07 – 9/5/07	o
13	12/5/07 – 16/5/07	e
14	19/5/07 – 23/5/07	i
15	26/5/07 – 30/5/07	u