

Reading

Just as listening is the main source of language when pupils start to learn a language, print is the second main source. As pupils become better and better in the foreign language, the printed word becomes the main source of expanding and strengthening the language. Reading is also the language skill which is easiest to keep up - many of us can still read in a foreign language that we used to be able to speak as well. Books open up other worlds to young children, and making reading an enjoyable activity is a very important part of the language learning experience.

Approaches to reading

Many five to ten year olds are in the process of learning to read in their own language. Whether or not they have mastered the skill in their own language, and whether or not their own language is written in the Roman alphabet, will have an effect on the initial stages of teaching reading in English. Children whose mother tongue is not based on the Roman script have more stages to go through when they are learning to read in English.

There are a number of different ways to approach the introduction of reading in a foreign language.

1. Phonics - This approach is based on letters and sounds. Basically, we teach the pupils the letters of the alphabet, and the combination of letters, phonically – as they are actually pronounced – so that the letter a is pronounced /æ/, the letter b is pronounced /b/ and so on. Phonics can be a very useful way into reading for those learners who are not familiar with the Roman alphabet or who do not have a one to one relationship between letters and sounds in their own written language. It is not to be recommended as the main way into reading for those pupils who are already reading in their own language using the Roman alphabet, and it should not be taught to pupils who are learning to read using phonics in their own language - this could lead to great confusion in pronunciation.

2. Look and say - This approach is based on words and phrases, and makes a lot of use of flashcards. It is usual to start by teaching everyday words which are already familiar to the children. The teacher shows the children the word and says it while pointing to the object. The children repeat the word. This happens several times with each word. The introduction of the words only takes a short time, and goes quite quickly, so the teacher may spend five minutes of a thirty minute lesson on four new words.

3 Whole sentence reading - The teacher teaches recognition of whole phrases and sentences which have meaning in themselves. This often means a story which the children read for the first time themselves after the whole text is familiar to them. The words are not presented in isolation, but as whole phrases/sentences.

4 Language experience approach - This approach to reading is based on the child's spoken language. The teacher writes down a sentence for the child to read which is based on what the child has said. This is a good, pupil-centred approach to reading.

Which method to choose?

If there was one correct method for teaching all children to read, then only one method would exist. There is an approach which concentrates on meaning from the beginning. If your pupils have a mother tongue which is not based on the Roman script, you will probably find that you will have to spend quite some time teaching phonics and word recognition first. No matter which approach to reading you take as your basic approach, you should remember that all these approaches are a way in to reading and are not an end in themselves.

Five to seven year olds

Five to seven years olds are likely to take longer to learn to read in a foreign language than eight to ten year olds. Some children starting school are not familiar with books or what they are used for. They have to go through the process of doing reading-like activities first - 'reading' from left to right, turning the pages at the right place, going back and reading the same pages again, etc. Picture books with and without text are invaluable at this stage. If your pupils have not learnt to read in their own language, many will not yet have understood what a word is, nor what the connection is between the spoken and the written word. Decoding reading - making sense of what we see on the page - is a very involved process, and adults make use of all sorts of clues on the written page - punctuation, paragraphing, use of special words, references to things which have happened, hints as to what can happen. What five to seven year olds have instead is often a visual clue and this clue is vital to meaning. The illustrations in a book for young children matter almost as much as the words themselves.

Eight- to ten-year-old beginners

The majority of eight to ten year olds will already be able to read a bit in their own language and most seem to have little difficulty in transferring their reading skills to English. This means that you can spend much less time teaching the mechanics of reading, and concentrate more on the content. Children whose mother tongue is not based on the Roman alphabet will still have to spend more time on the mechanics of reading, but they know what reading is about, and this speeds up the process.

Starting off

1 Reading a story from a book - Some of the stories which you read aloud will become the stories that your pupils read. Read the book so that all the pupils can see it, and point to the words as you say them. This is

important if your pupils are to understand the connection between the spoken and the written word. Read at just under normal speed the first time, keeping your intonation correct.

- c) Let pupils point and ask questions if they want to, but not so much that it interrupts the flow of the story.
- d) Encourage the pupils to talk about the story. Ask them questions in their own language.
- e) Leave the book in the book corner. Tell the group they can read it on their own if they want to.
- f) The next week, read the story again. Let them give you some of the words.
- g) Give all the pupils their own copy if possible and tell them to follow it while you read to them. Encourage them to point to the words as you read, but don't slow down.
- h) If you see pupils pointing to the wrong words, sit with them and point with them.
- i) Let them read the book silently for themselves,
- j) Tell them they can read the book whenever they have time.

2 Reading a class story - Instead of reading from a book, you might want to use a class story as your starting point for reading. This has the advantage that you can photocopy freely, making sure that everyone has a copy, and the pupils can colour their own copies.

3 Reading texts based on the child's language - When working in the foreign language, it is important that the teacher does not set the pupil a task which he or she does not have the words for in that language. For example, there's no point in pupils bringing in a picture of the place where they live, if they have no words to talk about it. This type of reading is often based on a picture, but can be about something which has happened, or just about how the pupil is feeling today. It is easiest to start off with a picture. (Ask the child to tell you about the picture. If he or she gets stuck, ask either/or questions. 'Is she tall or small?' If this still doesn't work, let the child tell you what he or she wants to say in his or her own language). If this translates into something familiar, talk about it, make sure the child understands. Do not write words which are new or unfamiliar.

- Write a sentence in the child's book based on what the child has told you. It can be very simple.
- Let the child see you writing the sentence, and say the words as you write them.
- The child repeats the sentence after you, pointing to the words as he or she says them.
- This is now that pupil's reading task, which he or she can read aloud to you,
- It shouldn't take more than a couple of minutes to do this - you have a lot of pupils in your class.
- This sentence can gradually be built on. This is me at home. It's my bedroom. I have fish in my bedroom.
- As the child's vocabulary increases, you can gradually build up stories.

The same technique can be used for making up group/class reading books. This technique of writing down what your pupils say or the stories they tell you helps the five to seven year olds to see that print is a means of communication, and that there is a relationship between the amount of talking that is done and the amount of writing on the page. It is important that the pupils see themselves as writers with something to say.

4 Reading familiar nursery rhymes or songs - Most children learn nursery rhymes in their mother tongue and in English without having a complete understanding of what they're saying. Some nursery rhymes are produced as books, so the children can 'read' what they already know off by heart. While you might say that this isn't real reading, the pupil can behave like a reader, and it helps to build up confidence. As we have said before, there is also a very narrow dividing line between knowing something off by heart and actually reading the words.

Reading aloud

Reading aloud is not the same as reading silently. It is a separate skill and not one which most people have that much use for outside the classroom. But it can be useful, especially with beginners in a language.

Traditionally, reading aloud is often thought of as reading round the class one by one, and although many children seem to enjoy it, this type of reading aloud is not to be recommended: It gives little pleasure and is of little interest to the listeners. It encourages stumbling and mistakes in tone, emphasis and expression. It may be harmful to the silent reading techniques of the other pupils. It is a very inefficient way to use your lesson time. However, reading aloud is a useful technique when used slightly differently: Reading aloud to the teacher should be done individually or in small groups. The reader then has the teacher's full attention. Reading aloud from a book lets the teacher ask about meaning, what the pupils think of the book, how they are getting on with it, as well as smooth out any language difficulties which arise. High priority should be given to this kind of reading aloud, especially at the beginner stage for all ages. By the time pupils progress to level two, this kind of reading is not so necessary. The teacher can use it as a means of training and checking rhythm and pronunciation. The teacher can read a sentence or a phrase and the class or parts of the class can read in chorus after. This is particularly useful if the text is a dialogue, but should only be done for a very short time. Choral reading can become a chant if there are a lot of children in the class.

Reading dialogues aloud in pairs or groups is an efficient way of checking work. The pupils can help each other with words they find difficult to pronounce, and you should try to get them to be a little critical about what they sound like: 'You don't sound very friendly, Michelle' or 'Are you angry, Heinz?'

Listening to a pupil reading aloud should be a treat for the whole class. If pupils are going to read aloud for the rest of the class, they must be well prepared and the others should want to hear what is going to be read.

Silent reading

-Reading aloud can be a useful skill to have in the classroom, and one which teachers make good use of, but silent reading is what remains with most people for the rest of their lives. Nobody can guarantee that all your pupils will love books, but a positive attitude to books and reading from the beginning will help. Make as much use of your English corner as possible: have print everywhere, put up jokes on the notice board, give your pupils messages in writing, try to give them their own books, even if it is only a sheet of paper folded over to make four pages, make books available to them, and listen to what they are saying about their reading. Use the textbook to concentrate on conscious language development, but let your pupils read books for understanding and for pleasure.

Building up confidence - Some children are natural readers and will want to read books as soon as they can, but you should spend some time building up confidence with the whole class about silent reading. Give them all a story that they have listened to before and give them, say, two minutes to see how far they get. Talk about the story with them in the mother tongue after they've read it. Clear up any difficulties. The emphasis is on the content and the language shouldn't be a stumbling block. Let them finish the story at their leisure. Give pupils only half the story, and discuss what happens next in the mother tongue. See how many different endings are possible, then let them read the rest of the story to see if they were right. From the beginning encourage this type of anticipating. Good stories put the reader in the mood of wanting to know what happens next. For the eight to ten year olds who are beyond the beginner level, you might want to use silent reading as the starting point for role play for the whole class or for a smaller group. If the book is written in dialogue form, then they may want to act some of it out for the rest of the class. If the book is a story, then the pupils will have to work out their own roles and what they say.

Different reading materials Once your pupils are on the road to reading, it is important that there is as wide an individual choice of reading materials available to them as possible.

Reading cards - You may want to start off with reading cards in a box or a book pocket. It is very simple to make a collection of reading cards which tell a story and can be read quickly. A one-page story still gives a sense of achievement. You might have different stories with the same characters either from the textbook you're using or characters which your pupils have invented during class story time. Some of the reading cards can have nursery rhymes on them, but try to choose the easier ones. These may be questions about the story in the child's first language to begin with, but in English later.

Home-made books - These may be different verses of a song the children are already familiar with. Or they may be class stories written down by you. In addition to teacher-made materials, you also have pupil-made books, which are an essential part of any class reading corner/library.

Books for native speakers of the language - Children with English as their mother tongue are learning to read at the same time as your pupils and so there is a wide choice of books available. This is particularly true if your pupils start early. If your pupils start learning English at ten, then you should make sure that the books at their level of language are not too childish.

Easy readers for foreign language learners - Most of the major publishing companies publish series of easy readers. The age range and the word level is often specified in the publisher's catalogue.

Picture dictionaries - Pupils can just look at picture dictionaries in the same way as they look at picture books. Later on, they will learn to use them to find words, check spelling, expand their vocabulary, etc.

Books with tapes - Some books for native speakers of English and some easy reader series have accompanying tapes. These can provide useful listening and reading material both for slow readers and for those who progress quickly. You should encourage pupils to try reading without the tape as well. Some pupils become lazy readers if they listen to too many 'speaking books', and stop trying to become real readers.

Introducing new books - At the five to seven stage you should read all new books to the whole class, but there isn't usually time for this. However, a new book should not just appear. You can: show the pupils the new book and tell them what it's about, look at the cover of the book and try to work out with the pupils what it might be about, read them an amusing or interesting bit from one of the books, put the title of the new book on the notice board.

Book reviews - It is always a good idea to find out what pupils thought of a book, even if they stopped half way through. Book reviews help you to decide on the suitability of a book, give you some indication as to the progress the pupil is making, help other pupils to decide about the book, help pupils to develop a critical approach to reading matter and show that you are concerned about what your pupils are reading.

(Taken from 'Teaching English to Children',
by W.A.Scott and L.H.Ytreberg)