Nurturing Emergent Readers

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Students' reading interest and habit are best nurtured when small and prefer-ably before they reach six or seven years old. Children have the potential to become independent and competent readers — appropriate support from parents and teachers would help realise this potential. In this article, relevant theories linking learning and reading will be discussed, as well as practical approaches arising from a reflection on such theories. Since there is no one-size-fits-all formula, this paper will explore a flexible combination of strategies, especially from the perspectives of parents and teachers. A number of practical strategies based on relevant personal experiences of a parent and common ele-ments of good practices would also be examined.

Introduction: An Early Start to Reading

Reading makes sense of the printed words. The printed words are one of the most common media to transmit and preserve knowledge, informa-tion and human experience. To be a lifelong learner without being able to read is unthinkable. In addition, by allowing the readers to adjust their pace

of reading, the printed words enable reflective connections to be made to the values and experiences in the writings. Hence, reading not only facilitates knowledge acquisition; it also enriches lives by enabling critical connections to be made with the richness of human civilization expressed in the written form.

Good reading habits and reading skills are best nurtured when young. The earlier a child is induced to the joy of reading, the more likely he or she will be able to develop a positive attitude to reading and become a self-regulated lifelong learner. Brain studies suggest that a person's cognitive development is greatly influenced by the density of his or her neural connections. Such connections are fastest growing before the age of six (Carter, 1998). Empirical observations also suggest that between birth and Primary 2 appears to be the most rewarding time to give children extensive exposure to quality readings.

The sections to follow will first start with a brief survey of some of the relevant theories and their application implications. These implications are then translated into practical means for nurturing emergent readers, based on reflections of personal experience of one of the authors, Cherry, in particular, who in recent years has paid special attention to assisting her two toddler daughters to learn to read.

Learning / Reading Theories and their Application Implications

Many of today's literacy development practices are based on the theories of Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget considers cognitive development the outcome of children's interaction with the environment, as they "assimilate new information within existing knowledge structures, accommodate the knowledge structures to new situations, and move between assimilation and accommodation as necessary" (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2004, p. 15). In order for learning to occur, Piaget believes that stimulation from the environment must be related to the prior knowledge of the learner, so young

children learn best through first person exploration and experiences. In order to prime their interest, Piaget suggests that it is better to begin with concrete experience rather than abstract learning. Vygotsky stresses the important link between language and thought, and emphasizes that the two are inseparable. Language influences thought, and thought can affect language. Thus early exposure to literacy can help shape children's thoughts and understanding of concepts.

Both Vygotsky and Piaget see interaction with the world and children's active engagement as important elements of cognitive development. Vygotsky goes further and highlights the fact that social interaction prompts children to explore new ideas and eventually to internalize them. He coins the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), being "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky as quoted in Gunning, 2000, p. 5). The adults' role is to help children navigate through the ZPD (Harrison & Coles, 1992).

The following implications for nurturing emergent readers can be deduced from an integration of Piaget's and Vygotsky's work:

a. The need for experiential learning and discovery opportunities
b. The need to provide developmentally appropriate learning materials and activities
c. The need for ample interaction with adults and with peers
d. The need for appropriate feedback and sensitivity to children's response and individual differences
e. The desirability of making connections to children's prior knowledge and experience

If we look at theories of reading, the bottom-up approach which stems from behaviorists' belief in conditioning state that if skills are explained, repeated and reinforced, students will then acquire them. Therefore, skills are taught first rather than in the context of the "natural engagement of the

whole texts" (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2004, p. 18). This implies the orderly teaching of letters, sounds, words and sentences before meaning. Psycholinguists, on the other hand, subscribe to a whole, or top-down approach. Making sense of the whole text holistically is seen as the primary role of meaning. The transactional theory posits that reading is a transaction between the reader, the text and the social context. What the critical theory offers is to go beyond the surface meaning of the text, involving evaluating the stance of the author and the possible bias and limitations of the text.

Clearly, each of the above theories is a necessary but not sufficient element to developing an adequate approach to teaching reading. Knowing all constituent structures of a text is not a prerequisite to, nor does it guarantee, understanding of the text. Students can use semantic, syntactic and graphophonic cues to predict the contents of a text. Nevertheless, knowledge of rules is important as otherwise, students cannot become proficient readers nor later be able to express themselves intelligibly in writing. The transactional theory reminds us of the value of invoking children's prior knowledge and experience in developing children's reading literacy. Without nurturing students' critical approach, students can easily become submissive readers vulnerable to bias and manipulation, and "may accumulate information without accommodating it into the schematic structure of existing knowledge" (Wallace, 1992, p. 46). Effective deployment of transactional and critical approaches should help nurture the analytical, integrative and lateral thinking abilities of students.

For practitioners, the value of theories lies in their appropriate application. What would likely be appropriate would be a combination of the above theories, with the precise combination dependent on the style of the teachers as well as the age, current level of language proficiency and learning style of the children. Insofar as emergent readers are concerned, developing an interest and a good habit in reading is far more important than knowing the intricacies of grammatical rules. Hence, an appropriate combination would probably be an emphasis on the top-down approach;

sprinkled with the bottom-up approach where appropriate and in increasing proportion, as the children mature and develop a growing sense of sensitivity to language forms; and interspersed, should the texts so permit, with transactional and critical approaches to guiding reflection and discussion on the texts.

Motivation-related theories can help us understand how children can learn more effectively. But motivation is not immutable and hereditary; it can be enhanced if appropriate strategies are employed (Cole, 2002; Man, 2002). The attribution theory helps explain motivation. Four attributes are considered relevant to achievement-related behaviour, viz. innate ability, amount of effort, task difficulty and luck. Each has three characteristics: stability, locus of causality and controllability (See Weiner's theory on attribution as explained in Almasi, 2003):

a. Stability: Innate ability and task difficulty are relatively difficult to change. But one can adjust one's level of effort invested into the task. Luck is by nature precarious.

b. Locus of causality: The source of an attribute can be internal (within oneself, e.g., innate cognitive ability and effort) or external (e.g., task difficulty and luck). People who attribute success to internal factors are likely to have high self-esteem and vice versa. (For example, people who feel that they did well because they were smart or tried hard enough would likely have higher self-esteem than those who feel that they did well because it was easy or they were just lucky.)

c. Controllability: This refers to whether the attribute is within one's control. Since the only attribute that we can change consciously is effort, it is no coincidence that successful students are those who tend to believe that effort matters.

So what then is the implication for the promotion of reading? Nurturing the right attitude on the part of the learner is the key. The only attribute over which an individual has control is effort. It has an internal source of causation meaning that a person can change it and it can impact on self-

esteem. Effort is unstable as the amount of effort invested in different tasks can vary. What these imply is that teachers and parents must do everything they can to impress upon students that their efforts will be recognized, and to help students to accurately assess the causes of their success or failure. A sense of helplessness on the part of the students must be forestalled. The classroom atmosphere and interaction must be so designed that children feel safe to take risks and are encouraged to believe that it is their efforts which determine the extent of improvement that they can make. A belief in the efficacy of one's efforts plus evidence of the efficacy would certainly help motivate children to become self-regulated readers.

To go one step further, what are the implications for nurturing emergent readers? Finely discriminating marks and grades are inappropriate feedback for emergent readers. Rather, feedback should be designed to help students become more motivated and effective learners. Children at a tender age are self-centered, immature cognitively, have a short attention span, crave for personal attention, and have an urge to talk. Hence, overly analytical feedback should be avoided. Questions and feedback should be framed at a level and in a form that they can comprehend. Teachers should motivate them to talk about their learning and long monologues should be avoided (Halliwell, 1992). Expressions and voice should show that the adults enjoy reading with them and approve of their engagement in reading. Eye contact is important. Compliments should be made generously if children make an appropriate response, especially if the response demonstrates improvements or effort (e.g., able to pronounce a word that they previously could not). We should also attribute the improvement made to their efforts and participation in class and express confidence in their continued improvement.

The message of the various theories on learning, reading and motivation is a simple one. To nurture emergent readers, how children learn should guide how adults should teach. With a view to helping children navigate and expand their ZPD, parents and teachers should enhance their motivation to learn as well as enrich and capitalise on the interaction between the

children and all people and things around them. It is within this overarching child-focussed approach that adults should select developmentally appropriate reading strategies for emergent readers. The sections to follow will illustrate some practical approaches emanating from the application of these theories.

Practical Approaches to Promoting Reading

A. *Selection of Reading Materials*

The following captures some common principles for selecting reading materials. To always choose interesting and appropriate reading materials is half way to successfully promoting children's interest in reading. Adults have to adopt a child-like perspective when selecting reading materials for emergent readers. Materials for beginners should be colourfully illustrated. Stories which require more than 10 minutes to read through aloud should preferably be avoided for children before three. Reading materials should contain simple story lines rather than just speech bubbles. Devoid of substance, the latter are bound to be uninteresting. Stories with short conversations are good choices as they allow adults to deploy voice-play to enhance children's sense of involvement. Nursery rhymes, stories and pictures about animals and children's everyday experiences are obvious choices as children are by nature curious about things around them (Bromley, 2001). Prints should be large. Sentences should be simple in structure, with occasional alliteration, rhymes and repeated words.

As children's reading proficiency grows, materials selected can contain more words, fewer pictures, slightly more elaborate plots, more characters and more conversations. When children reach the age of four or five, different genres of reading materials should be introduced. Apart from fiction, simple non-fiction (e.g., change of caterpillars to butterflies, how chickens are hatched and the flow of seasons) should be selected to expose children to content-reading. Exposure to literature such as *Andersen's Short Stories, Aesop's Fables*, short plays and children's poems should be provided so

that children can feel the power and beauty of the English language (Donoghue, 2001). While adults should choose materials with new words to help develop children's guessing strategy and enlarge their vocabulary, the expansion of vocabulary should be pursued patiently. An overdose of unknown words may make children feel inhibited in challenging a new book.

Children should also be given the occasional freedom to choose the books that they want to read. This is especially so for one-on-one reading as it can help enhance reading engagement. Many a time, adults may find that some children are particularly fascinated by certain stories. Children should not be discouraged from reading and re-reading the same book or indeed reading different books on the same story. Stories can be told, read, or created again and again with children, teachers and parents playing a part (Wright, 1995, 1997). Fontaine, my four-and-a-half year-old daughter, was very attracted to *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Boody the Great Goblin* (one of Enid Blyton's short stories) around a year ago. She started with the simplest versions of the former two until she could almost recite them. This helped reinforce the connections made between the spoken language and the printed words. She now has no problem recognizing every word in the stories even if they are featured in other contexts.

In fact, children's intense interest in certain stories may unconsciously open the door for transactional and critical approaches to reading and help them make connections with prior knowledge and experience. Discussion on Boody made me realize that she had thought about ethics, e.g., selfish actions would hurt others. After reading many different versions of *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, Fontaine started to compare the different twists in the storyline in different versions of the same story and how they led to different plot development subsequently. She also initiated a comparison between these two Disney stories. I distinctly recall my exchange with her some months ago, which went as follows –

Fontaine : Are *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* the same?
Me   : They are different. The stories are different.

Fontaine : No. They are the same. Both are princess (sic) and both wake up after a prince's kiss.

Me : Yes. You're right. They are the same.

Fontaine : No. They are not the same. Snow White has short hair and Aurora (i.e., the protagonist in *Sleeping Beauty*) has long hair. Aurora has "hair of sunshine gold and lips that shame the red, red rose". (Note: This description is her recall of the exact words used in one of the versions of the story that she read.)

Me : Well done. You certainly understand *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* more than Mommy does.

Her fascination with *Boody* (over 20 pages with over 100 words on each) meant that she was undaunted by relatively long stories and marked her forays into long and original stories. She now readily reads a book with few pictures if its first few pages convince her that it is going to be an interesting story.

The questions she raised about the *Boody* text also marked my first awareness of her attention to English grammar. She raised questions about the use of certain words which in fact related to tenses, prepositions, verbs and comparatives. (Examples of questions raised are whether one of the "be's" in "*would be bewitched*" should be crossed out, the use of hyphen when one word is separated into two lines, and why *ran* and *hugged* and not *run* and *hug*.) She was eager to know words that caught her attention and reacted receptively when I suggested that she and I would join hands to look up the words in the dictionary. Therefore, what started as top-down reading ended up with lots of bottom-up and critical follow-up just because her choice of reading materials was respected. It was also clear that her early reading development has helped her focus on language form, meaning and use (Man, 2000).

Reflections of Fontaine's reading experience suggest that children may focus on different levels of a text as their familiarity with the text grows (Harris, 1992). Provided that the reading materials are healthy, adults should refrain from holding children back from re-reading the same texts. While it

has yet to be established if this learning experience of Fontaine is generally applicable to other children, one thing seems certain to me. To motivate children to read and to reflect on what they have read, we need to respect their interest and choices. We need to try to see things from their perspective if we want children to be motivated and be receptive to our attempts to extend their ZPD.

B. Value of Reading Aloud and Shared Text/Reading

For emergent readers who barely know how different letters of the alphabet are put together to form words, read-aloud and shared text/reading are essential. In read-aloud, the teacher helps students associate spoken words with print, and construct meaning from illustrations and words. Shared text refers to a process whereby the whole group participates together in reading materials such as over-sized books, poetry or songs. Shared reading takes place when the teacher invites the students to join her in reading the texts, either individually or in groups. Read-aloud, shared text and shared reading all provide rich interaction between teacher and students and among students. They also demonstrate how books should be read and induce students, in a non-threatening manner, to join the reading process. Furthermore, the social interaction helps enhance the joy of reading and students' recollection of the reading experience, including the pictures and prints in the texts as well as teachers' and peers' utterances on them.

C. Need for Calibrated Flexibility

While initial readings need to be highly interactive, time should be allowed for children to read on their own silently as the children become more sophisticated in their ability to read, have a bigger vocabulary and are better able to assimilate new information into their own existing schema. In other words, children's progress should be monitored to calibrate the level of support given.

Reading aloud used to be the approach I used with Fontaine. From myself being the only one reading, we started to take turns to read, on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis, when she was about four. Nevertheless, from

around four-and-a-half, I noticed that she has been reading aloud less and less. My conjecture is that she is now so hooked on reading that she finds reading aloud too slow. I notice from her eye movements that she is now reading words or phrases in groups. She would voluntarily come to me when she is puzzled by certain word forms, when she finds certain unfamiliar but frequently-appearing words frustrating her understanding or when she wishes to engage in discussions of books that she has read. However, taking turns to read aloud is still conducted when she wishes to attempt a long book with small print (e.g., the original version of *The Wizard of Oz*) or books and articles with more difficult and abstract concepts (e.g., content books on earthquakes, places and people in different countries and occasional articles from *Reader's Digest*).

D. Making Connections Through Reading

For a manageable presentation of the interrelated facets of reading, this section will adopt a procedural structure — things to note before reading and during reading, and post-reading follow-up. Where appropriate, examples from both reference books and my personal experience will be used to illustrate the above-mentioned theories of learning, reading and motivation.

i. Things to Note: Before Reading

If possible, we should know the book before introducing it to the students. This should also apply to parents save for occasions when children and parents come across the books for the first time together, e.g., in bookshops or libraries. For books intended to be read aloud, we should read it aloud beforehand so that we can have a prior feel of how the students may hear it and consider how different parts can be read differently to enhance the dramatic, emotional and aesthetic impact of the text.

It would be useful to show the cover of the book, read the titles and invite the children to make predictions about what the book might be about. No suggestions should be considered as rubbish. Instead, open-ended and encouraging remarks or questions such as "What makes you think so?", "That's interesting" and "That's a good guess" should be deployed. After

making predictions, children should also be invited to share their prior experience related to those suggested by the title. A brief description of the plot and the main characters can be given to enhance interest and comprehension. However, details should be left out in order not to detract from the suspense of seeing the story unfold.

If possible, the classroom setting should be changed to reflect the mood of the texts to be constructed. For example, the classroom can be decorated with things which suggest an ocean setting if Little Mermaid is read. For stories which are rich in emotions, e.g., The Match-Selling Girl and The Happy Prince, children can be asked to sit in a horse-shoe shape around the teacher to reinforce the need for mutual support and care among human beings.

ii. Things to Note: During Reading

Lenski, Nierstheimer and Gunning have provided an excellent list (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2004, p. 75 and Gunning, 2000, p. 34–35). With some adaptation and addition, the list reads as follows:

- Read at a good pace.
- Read with feeling and expression. During read-aloud, teachers should use different voices for different main characters. For shared reading, if the children's reading proficiency allows, different children can be asked to assume the role of different characters. Teachers can guide the students to feel the mood of the characters at different points of the story.
- Occasionally stop to ask questions to check understanding. Also invite children to predict what will happen next.
- Rephrase when children have difficulty with words or phrases used.
- Encourage children to comment on and react to the story and the illustrations or pictures.
- Where appropriate, elaborate on the text to help children understand the written language used in the story and the story components, such as the main characters' problems, attempts to solve the problems and the resolution.

- If reading non-narrative texts, help children grasp unfamiliar concepts by identifying pictures related to the concepts, commenting on the pictures and raising questions to prompt thinking.

iii. *Things to Note: After Reading*

Lenski and Nierstheimer (Lenski & Nierstheimer, 2004, p. 75) suggest the following:

- Invite children's response, e.g., tell how they feel about the book.
- Lead discussion on the book, e.g., ask children to recall the sequence of events.
- For non-fiction, invite children to review and summarise what they have learnt from the reading.
- Help children make connections to their lives, prior experience and knowledge.
- Consider a follow-up activity such as an art work or short writing task related to the book. However, do not overdo extension activities and never test children on a read-aloud text.

To this, I would add two suggestions, as follows:
- For fiction, invite the children to think which characters they would and would not want to be, or like and do not like and why. Empathy and analytical skills can be nurtured as a result.
- For books which contain a fair amount of alliterated, rhymed or frequently-used words, one of the possible follow-up activities could be a few linguistic practice games to expose children to simple phonics and word formation. But never overdo phonics, word formation or indeed other hardcore linguistic things to children.

E. *Identifying Individual Differences*

Children develop at different paces. So, teachers and parents should endeavour to identify and tackle children's individual differences. Class size in Hong Kong may pose a difficulty but not an impossibility. The following suggestions are adapted from class observations during visits to schools:

a. Morning reading: Many primary schools have instituted a 15- or 20-minute DEAR programme (Drop Everything and Read Programme) in the morning. This is consistent with the promotion of USSR (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading) advocated by some educators. During such DEAR segments, teachers can ask children to take turns to sit next to her or him (if possible on a huge cushion on the floor) and read individually with the teacher.

b. Project work/group discussions during class: Many teachers like to ask students to form small groups for post-reading discussion or project work. Again, teachers can invite students individually to read with her or him for a few minutes while the rest of the class is engaged in group work.

c. Post-composition/individual assignment in class: I have seen a teacher inviting a student who finished her composition well ahead of her peers to select a book from the class library to read with her. It was no surprise that this student was at the top of the class.

Some teachers in Hong Kong use after-school hours to help students with low reading ability. This is commendable but care must be exercised to avoid labelling. Therefore, between after-school reading tutorials for slow learners and the suggestions in (a) to (c) above, I prefer the latter. In particular, (c) can help remove the stigma of individualised reading with teachers. By establishing individual reading as a routine, a teacher opens the way for occasional focus on the slow learners without the students feeling that they are targetted because of their poor performance. Nevertheless, it is important that the teachers make a simple log of the progress of the students and be generous in complimenting students for their efforts and encouraging them to continue to make progress.

The above section provides some examples of how a child-focussed approach should guide adults' actions. Interaction between children and adults, between children and their peers, and the switch from practising one reading theory to another are all guided by what is appropriate in context given the overriding considerations of nurturing children's motivation to

read and, through enjoyable reading, to discover and develop their language skills.

Nurturing Progressive Independence

Parents and teachers must facilitate children's transformation from being dependent readers requiring a lot of support to independent readers. Hence, while helping students develop an interest in reading and a holistic understanding of the text, simple linguistic skills such as phonics, word and sentence structure awareness can also be taught when suitable opportunities arise. However, this must be done in context and in an enjoyable rather than a direct and didactic manner.

A. Phonic Awareness

It is counter-productive to be too precise and detailed in teaching emergent readers phonic rules. For example, it suffices for children to be able to read the short a in cat but knowing that there are long a and short a and different sounds of the letter a is unimportant at this stage. Phonics should be introduced in context, e.g., related to a book read, a song sung or a game played. Based on the reflections of my various references on phonics, I have tried three ways to teach phonics to my two daughters (Fontaine and Fion who is now two-and-a-half).

a. First, they were taught to recognise the 26 letters of the alphabet. Using the song "ABC" and the plastic alphabet mat commonly available in shops in Hong Kong, we sang that song while playing hip-hop on the alphabet mat. Afterwards, I made up a very simple song which introduced the most commonly used sounds of each of the 26 letters of the alphabet, e.g., a æ- æ, b ba-ba, c ca-ca-ca-ca, d da-da, e ?- ?, f fa-fa-fa-fa, ... This song was sung to them when we were waiting for the bus, walking in the street, etc. Children are receptive to songs. Both my daughters could master the song after a few days and when I said b, they would say ba-ba, etc.

b. Second, after reading a book or singing a song with alliteration or rhyme, I would start a substitution game with them. For instance, I would say, a-t /æ/ and b-a-t /bæt/. Then they knew that it was time for a phonic game. I would say, a-t /æ/ and c-a-t. They would respond with /kæt/. Following that will be a-t /æ/ and f-a-t. They would then respond with /fæt/ until all possible combinations are exhausted. Only when the girls initiated the game would we conduct the game not in context, i.e. not after we have done some reading or some songs related to the sounds in question.

c. Third, with Fontaine but not yet with Fion, I would reverse the second game above and ask which letter of the alphabet /fæt/ begins with. Recently, I have increased the level of difficulty slightly by merely saying /fæt/ and invite her to guess the spelling. As House (1997) suggests, young children should physically play with letters and words as part of learning to read.

No doubt there are numerous ways to teach phonic awareness to emergent readers. But one thing seems to be immutable — we must not bore the children and induce them to memorise other than through fun.

B. *Word Recognition*

Seven principles proposed by Gunning (2000, p. 150–153) have been tried out on Fontaine and were found to be generally effective. These seven principles are

a. *Building experiential background through talking over experiences and learning the concepts rather than just the labels of the words:* Gunning uses the example of taking students to the zoo. The same applies to Fontaine. After a trip to the Ocean Park, Fontaine never fails to recognise the words *shark, dolphin, stingray, seahorse, parrots and dinosaurs* and the appearances of the animals concerned. We read books on some of these animals and through such readings, enhance her knowledge not only of the animals concerned but also words related to the habits and habitats of these animals. On concepts, I recall that Fontaine once asked

what *Tse* in her name *Fontaine Tse* meant. I then used the names of her classmates to explain the concepts of first names and surnames. After a while, she used other examples to demonstrate that she had understood what first names and surnames were. As a result, her understanding now goes far beyond *Tse*.

b. *Relating vocabulary to background*: Gunning suggests that it is essential to "relate new words to experiences that students may have had" (p. 151). For Fontaine, her way to learn the word *jealous* was through reference to the behaviour and feelings of the stepmother in *Snow White*.

c. *Building relationships between words*: This is especially useful for segmenting long words, e.g., *improve* and *improvement*. Words such as *lion* and *lioness, duck and duckling, fat* and *small, tall* and *short* and *boys* and *girls* can also be learned in pairs to reinforce understanding of the words.

d. *Developing depth of meaning*: Gunning suggests using connotations of abstract words to help students grasp the meaning of a word. Examples cited are *republic* and *democracy*. Gunning also suggests using semantic mapping of related words and concepts. With Fontaine, I have not used semantic mapping yet. But through comparing the situation of animals in Africa that we saw on *Discovery Channel* and in the zoo, Fontaine learns the words and concept of *freedom, prison* and *captivity*.

e. *Presenting several exposures*: Gunning suggests that seeing a word in different contexts would help comprehension since students can also experience the different shades of meaning. It would be ideal if different texts using the same word differently are available. However, even if they are not available, adults can make up examples of different sentences. For instance, I have used different sentences to teach Fontaine the different meanings of *poor, can* and *bow*.

f. *Creating an interest in words*: Gunning relates the successful experience of two teachers in creating a Word Wizard Chart and encouraging students to note in the Chart and report to the class examples of a taught word used outside of class. The award of "Word Wizard" would be awarded to any child who made such a contribution. (Gunning, 2000, p. 153)

g. *Teaching students how to learn new words*: Successful vocabulary in-
struction must go beyond the acquisition of words taught directly.
Obviously, teaching emergent readers dictionary skills would be
inappropriate. But simple strategies such as segmenting long words into
familiar parts and guessing the meaning of new words in context are
possibilities which Fontaine has benefited.

With Fontaine, another game which I have started recently is filling in
the blanks. I would occasionally write her a letter about my impression of
her behaviour (invariably more compliments than blame) and of the books
that we have read together. One letter is deliberately left blank in a few
words and she is challenged to fill them in. Fontaine seems to enjoy this
though I regret that due to time pressure on my part, this game has not been
played as often as I would like.

C. Sentence Structure

For emergent readers, it would be premature to introduce concepts such
as subject, object, verb, noun, preposition, adjectives, etc. However, play-
ing games and singing songs can introduce children to how sentences are
structured without even the need to deploy the linguistic labels of the differ-
ent constituents. Over time, children will learn how to manipulate words to
form different sentences.

My first attempt was to use the tune of *Clementine* and made up the
little song of –

> Mommy's darling
> Mommy's Fontaine
> Mommy's darling Fontaine Tse
> Mommy loves you, mommy loves you
> Mommy loves you very much.

This was frequently sung to my two girls even before they were able to
walk. Interestingly, Fontaine joined the singing and without prompting,

was able to substitute Fion for Fontaine when it was time to sing it to Fion. Now, as part of the family game, my girls and I often substitute words in familiar tunes such as *Clementine, Mary had a Little Lamb* and *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.* Substitute words are invariably selected impromptu, depending on things that catch our attention then. For instance, we would sing about dogs if we come across dogs while walking in the streets or about the moon if the moon that night seems particularly bright or beautiful.

Sometimes, with Fontaine and not yet with Fion, games on word substitution are played not with songs but with simple written sentences. However, this game should be limited to just a few minutes as the last thing that we should do is to bore small children.

Nevertheless, even with the best phonic, word and sentence instruction strategies in the world, nurturing reading independence will have limited success if the students are not exposed frequently to lots of good texts. Hence, extensive and regular reading must be the key. In particular, without extensive reading, it is difficult to internalise frequently used words such as *of, from, if, at, can, the, may and would,* etc. The usage and meanings of these words defy easy explanation but yet understanding them is crucial to text comprehension. This brings me to the importance of creating an environment conducive to nurturing emergent readers.

D. A Conducive Reading Environment

There is no shortcut to mastering a language. There is also no shortcut to grooming reading competence. Nevertheless, frequent and enjoyable exposure to a quality and rich language environment does have a positive catalytic effect on both the process and the outcome. Parents and teachers must therefore create such an environment for the children. The findings of the first Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) suggest that children who have easy access to books and who read for pleasure for at least half an hour a day have a significantly higher reading proficiency (Hong Kong Institute of Educational Research, 2003).

Surround children with books, so that they have easy access to books

whenever they want to read. I have seen some schools making cotton pockets and having them lined up on tuck-shop walls and playground benches. Inside each of these pockets are a few books. These books are used and old ones discarded by the school library or donated by parents or other institutions. Children are free to take these books to read both at school or at home. No borrowing procedures are needed. According to the school, lost books are rare.

Measures which help nurture joy in reading should be adopted. School and class libraries must contain books of different levels of difficulty to suit the needs of different students. When selecting reading materials for individual students, teachers should select those which are appropriate to the students' level so that they feel challenged but not overwhelmed. While reading with the children, parents and teachers should be sensitive to the mood of the children and be receptive and responsive to suggestions from children even if it necessitates deviation from the originally planned reading plan or lesson. After all, we adults cannot possibly anticipate all the reaction of children.

For assessment purposes, some schools require students to write reports on every book they read. This may not be appropriate for emergent readers. Attempts to groom a good reading habit will fail if students regard reading a chore. While students at a tender age should be encouraged to read as much as possible, it would be desirable to limit the number of book reports to say, no more than 10, in an academic year. They should be given the freedom to write reports on their selected books rather than every book that they have read. They should also be allowed to substitute drawings for words if they get stuck. To do so can reap several benefits: cater for student learning diversity, help unleash students' creativity and sustain students' interest in reading and in reporting on books read. When marking the book reports, teachers' focus should be on communication with the children rather than grammatical accuracy. Interest in reading cannot be developed in a high-risk and high-fear environment. An alternative form of feedback that can be used occasionally is to ask students to tell their peers the stories that

they have read.

Parents should also do their fair share of reading with children and take their children regularly to public libraries. The television should not be allowed to be the centerpiece of family interaction. Instead, parents can discuss with children the books that they have read.

Lastly, parents and teachers should be role models. They should demonstrate by their action that they enjoy reading and do read regularly. They should, above all, make children feel loved and secure.

Nurturing emergent readers should aim ultimately to transform the children into self-motivated, self-regulated, competent and independent readers. Linguistic skills need to be learned but they must be taught in context and in an enjoyable, game-like and interactive manner, and above all, in a conducive environment where the adults provide good role models, where there is rich exposure to quality language and where children feel encouraged and loved.

Conclusion

Different books on reading may recommend different reading strategies. Different teachers and parents may have different good practices to share. Nevertheless, irrespective of the strategies or good practices recommended, underlying all theories, strategies and suggestions of good practices are the notions of motivation and appropriateness. Motivation because children learn better when motivated. When motivated, they would be willing to invest effort into learning to read and reading to learn. No two teachers, no two parents and no two children are identical. Hence, no single learning or reading strategy and no single approach to teaching phonic, word and sentence awareness would be effective without taking into consideration the style and characteristics of the children, parents and teachers concerned. Therefore, appropriateness implies the need for adults to consciously help children expand and realize their cognitive potential through carefully considered yet flexibly and situationally-applied strategies appropriate to the

children's development. The goal is a common one — to groom children to become self-motivated and competent readers progressively. Irrespective of the strategies and practices adopted, what is required of parents and teachers is the same — devotion, of both the mind and the heart, which would go a long way towards helping children develop into self-regulated competent readers.

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幼童閱讀潛能的培育

文綺芬、謝凌潔貞

摘 要

培養學生的閱讀興趣和習慣適宜在幼年時便開始,最好是在六、七歲以前。
如父母和師長懂得恰當的引導,每個孩子皆可成長為有能力獨立閱讀的人。
本文探討有關學習與閱讀的理論,以及從理論引申而來的實踐途徑。正如
世上沒有一服即妥的萬靈丹,本文要探討的,是不同策略的靈活搭配,特
別是從家長與教師的角度取材。這包括一位家長源於親身體驗而設計的一
些實用策略,還有是一般良好做法的共通元素。

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