

## READING ENGLISH TEXTS IN PRIMARY SCHOOL – CHALLENGES AND SHARED EXPERIENCE

Desislava Petkova<sup>1</sup>  
e-mail: [DesislavaPetkova128@gmail.com](mailto:DesislavaPetkova128@gmail.com)

### **Absract**

*Reading is one of the basic skills that each child have to cover while in school. But there are some other skills that each child has to master before starts reading. In this article I will focus on the pre-reading skills ,how to use them and how to make reading fun and easy for the children in primary school .They are all easy and fun to use, but I will focus on the problem that we do not have enough time to use them in state schools and what we can do to implement them in our classes.*

**Keywords:** reading, learn to read, primary school, literacy, texts, primary

**JEL:** I20

Reading is one of the basic skills that each child has to master while in the primary school. But reading, as a process, is not that simple. Some children have the ability to read naturally, but for others it is a real struggle. In this article I will focus on the pre-reading period and how to help the children to learn to read without stress and with fun. The methods are well known around the world, but still not implemented in our educational system. For a long period of 10 years, I have focused on using these methods in a private primary school, and as a result I can say they work. The last two years I am trying to use them in the state school, although it is not a simple process. Still there are results and I am optimistic about them. Some children have shown progress in reading, so I can say that it works!

### **Reading english texts in the primary school – challenges and shared experience**

#### **What is reading?**

There are a lot of different definitions of what exactly is reading. According to Grellet (2004, p. 7) “reading is a constant process of guessing, and what one brings to the next is often more important than what one finds in it. In reading the students should be taught to use what they know to understand unknown elements, whether these are ideas or simple words”. As for Day and Bamford (1998) “reading is the construction of meaning from a printed or written message.

---

<sup>1</sup> Senior teacher AE, 128 Secondary school “Albert Einstein”

It means the construction of meaning involves the reader connecting information from the written message with previous knowledge to arrive at meaning and understanding“.

Reading is central to the learning process, and as Ghosn (1997) points out “... carefully chosen children’s literature allows children to develop their receptive language in entertaining, meaningful contexts and naturally invite them to repeat many of the predictable words and phrases, which children gradually take ownership of and add to their receptive and productive language”.

Reading is defined as a cognitive process – an active process of constructing meanings of words. Reading is the process of looking at a series of written symbols and getting meaning from them. When we read we use our eyes to receive written symbols and we use our brain to convert them into words, sentences and paragraphs. Reading is one of the four language skills, but is as important as the other three, which are listening, speaking and writing. Reading can be silent / in our mind / or aloud / so that the other people can hear.

Reading is a receptive skill – we receive information through it. But the complex process of reading requires also speaking, so that we can pronounce what we have read. This shows us that reading is also a productive skill – we are both, receiving and transmitting information (Grellet, 2004).

According to Mandeva and Kuneva, reading means “to know language elements in the text we read. But it also is an active, interactive process in which the reader constructs meanings by using his /her previous knowledge about the world and builds and checks hypothesis about the meaning of the text he / she reads” (Mandeva, Kuneva, 2019).

It is not mandatory to read in foreign language in order to be able to speak that language. Reading is something you can do on your own, helps to broaden your vocabulary and makes you more confident when speaking. But how can we learn to read? And what can we do as teachers to teach young children to read?

### **How to teach reading?**

What is literacy and how can we achieve it?

Literacy is the base that each person needs if he / she wants to start reading. Today’s world is defined as “Civilization of knowledge” (Draker). One can master an evolving part of knowledge and know how, which are fundamental for the present and the future. One of the main parts of this “Civilization of knowledge“ is literacy. When thinking about literacy, there are different points of view. Moving in that way, literacy is seen as “... a process of acquiring basic cognitive skills and how to use them in a way that contributes for the social –

economic development for creating new opportunities for social awareness and critical analysis as a base for personal and social alteration“ (Radev, 2015, p. 13).

Developing literacy skills in a foreign language can as start as early as possible. Several researchers have proven that one can build literacy in both, L1 and L2 at the same time. Remember that “One only has to become “literate” once (Shin and Crandal, 2014, p. 160), so English as a foreign language (EFL) can tap into students’ understanding of print and strategies for making meaning from text that originate in their L1 as a starting point for building literacy in English. “Even further, researchers say that literacy skills can be transferred bidirectionally – that is, both ways between L1 and L2 – and the language of initial literacy does not necessarily need to be L1” (Dlugosz, 2000; Lenters, 2004/2005; Verhoeven, 1994).

### **The pre-reading period**

There is something I usually use with my students in this pre-reading period. I call it PICTURE SENTENCES. I use them before presenting the alphabet. These are sentences made by pictures, according to the vocabulary I am teaching at the moment. After I have presented the vocabulary to the children, they try to verbalize the picture sentences I have prepared for them. It is a fun and easy way not only for revising and practicing vocabulary / new and old, but also a way to introduce the sentences structures to children (figure 1).

This exercise is quite easy to use and I often use it with 1st graders (once we have learned enough words), but I can use it with the 2nd graders in the beginning of the school year in September. Teachers can use it for revising vocabulary or for presenting new one. As you can see from the chart I have presented, you can print these worksheets, make the children colour them, especially if you use colour words, and ask them to verbalize the sentences. They do not have to read words, they only have to use what they already know. As some of the vocabulary in the course books evolve, you can always change the pictures and revise the words from each unit, or even lesson.



**Figure 1:** Picture sentences

In the beginning it is important to teach the children the alphabet. Letter by letter, and when we present a letter, we have to present the sound it makes. Each child has to know the letter as a graphic symbol and the sound it makes when standing alone. Usually there are a lot of ways to present letters, but in my classes I often use “Body alphabet”. It is a simple way to use your body and try to represent the letter as a symbol with it. For some letters one child will be enough, but for others you may need two or three or more children to represent the letter with their bodies. It is a simple way for some of them to remember the way the letter looks and to identify it with the name and the sound it makes. It is mandatory to present the letter in the lines and the way you have to write it down in the lines of the notebook, presenting the upper case and the lower case letter. Sometimes I use dough – a way for the children to make the letters with their hands, because for some of the children it is easier to work with their hands. Sometimes we make the letters of the alphabet by using every kind of materials as pasta, sticks, leaves etc. Once they have mastered the alphabet, we move to the next level – present the digraphs.

### **Digraphs**

Digraphs are two letters that make one sound. Digraphs can contain vowel and consonant or even two consonants. There are 7 basic digraphs which are part of the educational system (scope and sequence) of countries around the world – CH, CK, NG, PH, QU, SH, TH, WH. These are so called basic digraphs. As the children are aware of the letters of the alphabet and their sounds, I usually present these basic digraphs to them, so they can recognize and say their sound at the

same time. I do this by using some charts, worksheets and colouring pages, which are part of my lessons (figure 2).

BENCH	BACK	BRING	PHONE	QUEEN	FISH	WHAT	BATH
CHAIR	LUCK	SING	PHOTO	QUICK	SHIP	WHALE	THANK
CHOP	STUCK	RING	LYMPH	QUILT	SHOP	WHEN	MATH

*Source:* The Measured mum

**Figure 2:** Digraphs

Children are introduced to vowel digraphs, such as (oa), (oo), (ee), (ai). Afterwards they can move onto sounding out words like deer, book, boat, hair, bee, etc. and can be teach about “magic e” rule. In the end they will be able to read words combining vowel digraphs with consonant blends (figure 3).

OA	OO	EE	AI
BOAT	FOOT	SEE	SAIL
GOAT	BOOT	BEE	MAIL
LOAF	HOOT	FEE	TAIL

*Source:* The Measured mum

**Figure 3:** Vowel digraphs

### Phonics

Phonics is a method of teaching children to read by linking sounds and the symbols that represent them. Phonics is a well known method used in the schools in the UK and USA. But not only these countries use phonics to teach children to read. As for Bulgaria this method is not well presented. The schools in Bulgaria use the so called “Holistic approach“. To use the Holistic approach is not the best for students, on my opinion, but we can clearly see that is the most common approach used in our schools. A holistic approach means to provide support that looks at the whole person, not just the specific part of the educational need. As said by Shin (2014) EFL literacy instruction should be meaning – focused and balanced. One important thing when using phonics is that “teachers should try to embed phonics instruction within a realistic context to help young learners

use the bottom-up skills in conjunction with top-down reading strategies” (Shin, 2018) (figure 4).

s	t	p	n	m	a	e	i	o
g	d	ck	r	h	u	ai	ee	igh
b	f	l	j	v	oa	oo	oo	ar
w	x	y	z	qu	or	ur	ow	oi
ch	sh	th	th	ng	ear	air	ure	er

*Source:* The Measured mum

**Figure 4:** Phonics

In my experience I have implemented phonics in my classes and it seems like this is the easier way to teach children to read. It all depends on the curriculum – If we can afford 10 hours per week for teaching English, the children can become good readers in no time. The problem comes in the state schools in Bulgaria, because here we do not have the opportunity to teach English 10 hours a week. Following the educational plan, 1<sup>st</sup> graders have 1 hour (35 min) per week. The 2<sup>nd</sup> graders have 2 hours (2 x 35 min) a week. 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are supposed to be able to read, but we can say that some of them still struggle when it comes to reading.

Using phonics, for the past 10 years, have shown me that it is not impossible to teach children to read, but it takes time. We do not have enough time to teach them phonics and then practice the phonics with the students, so that we can achieve good results.

Developing decoding and encoding skills is essential for a solid understanding of reading. Decoding is the process of reading words in text. When a child reads a text, it is necessary to understand which are these letters, part of a word, what sound they make and how they blend together to form the words. Decoding involves thinking about what sound the word starts with, saying the sound out loud and then recognize how that sound is represented by a letter. If the children can see the letter and then say what sound it makes, they can decode. This is what a decoding is.

### ***Encoding***

Some phonics programmes start with learning the letters s, a, t, n, i, p first. The researchers say that once the children are aware of these letters and their sounds, they can be arranged in short words and the children will be able to read them (sat, tip, pin, nit, tan, sip, etc.).

## Blending

After the children are aware of the letters and their sounds, they can move to blending. Blending is linking the letter sounds in a word. Before they can blend, they are able to spell words. When it comes to blending, they will no longer have to say the words letter by letter, but they will be able to read the word as one all (figure 5).

bring	cry	dry	fry	green	pray	track
brake	crawl	drink	frog	grey	proof	truck
brother	crock	drip	frame	great	prove	train

**Figure 5:** Blends

### *CVC words*

CVC words are short, three letter words made of consonant / vowel / consonant. It is an easy way for the children to start to read, because they already know the letters and their sounds. Usually children are given letter cards to arrange words they hear, later they can start writing down the words in their notebooks. The children are also given reading sheets with CVC words as a practice (figure 6).

mat	rat	mat	fat	met	red
bat	pot	jug	fan	vet	bed
hat	pat	mug	man	pet	med

**Figure 6:** CVC words

### *CCVC and CVCC words*

These are words combining consonant clusters, followed by vowel and a consonant. Children get a wordlist for practicing reading clusters, and CCVC words. The clusters can be in the beginning, or in the end of the words /CVCC words/ (figure 7).

CCVC	CVCC
brat blog plus plot step sled brag slam twin	Bald balk band bang camp can't cast cent colt cost cult cusp

**Figure 7:** CCVC and CVCC words

## **Sight words**

Teaching Sight words is another important step when it comes to reading. Sight words are common words that children recognize instantly without sounding them out. Once they remember the word, they can sound it out /read it. There are a lot of different ways to teach sight words, by using worksheets and educational apps. Recognizing words by sight, helps children become faster, more fluent readers. That is why it is important to teach sight words in the primary school. Many sight words are tricky to read and spell – they are not spelled the way the sound.

## **Short sentences and texts**

After all this is done, we can slowly move to reading sentences and later on move to short texts too. When giving sentences, we have to be sure that they are made of short and easy to read words, at least in the beginning. Afterwards we can present short texts, that include short words and use drills to make them easy to read.

At the end we can sum up the given information in a few sentences.

It is important to follow some steps if we want to be sure that we can teach students to read. Each step is important and it is a part of the process of reading. They have to know the letters, their sounds, have to recognize and sound out blends, digraphs and clusters.

If a teacher is eager to teach children to read, it is possible, but it is important to be devoted, the children have to be devoted too, and you will need a helping hand from the parents. It is important to get more time for practicing, more classes in the curriculum, we need some help and understanding from our government and Ministry of Education too, so that we can complete our goals and make children more confident and fluent in reading.

There is a chart with simple steps I use in my work and I can share that it works great for me and my students. The only problem is the time that is not enough. No matter how hard you try, it is almost impossible to achieve excellent results while teaching in the state schools. But still we can keep trying and persuade achieving great goals. Reading is important skill that has to be mastered while the children are in primary school. Teaching them to read is an important part of our work as teachers. Learning to read is one of the skills that children have to master to be fluent, no matter the language they learn. The issues that we as teachers face, are inevitable, but if we have the will to achieve it, we can be more successful, as will be our students.



## References

- Мандева, М, Кънева, П. (2019). Овладяване на четенето за социални цели – българското и английското начално училище, Педагогика. (Mandeva, M, Kaneva, P., 2019, Ovladyavane na cheteneto za sotsialni tseli – balgarskoto i angliyskoto nachalno uchilishte, Pedagogika).
- Радев, П. (2015). Научна употреба на понятието „грамотност“, Грамотността в началното училище Велико Търново: Унив. изд. „Св. Св. Кирил и Методий“, с. 13-25. (Radev, P. (2015). Nauchna upotreba na ponyatiето „gramotnost“, Gramotnostta v nachalното uchilishter Veliko Tarnovo: Univ. izd. „Sv. Sv. Kiril i Metodiy“, s. 13-25).
- Day, R., Bamford, J. (1998). Extensive reading in the second language classroom, RELC Journal 29(2), pp. 187-191, DOI: 10.1177/003368829802900211
- Dlugosz, D.W. (2000). Rethinking the role of reading in teaching a foreign language to young learners, ELT Journal, Vol. 54, Issue 3, pp. 284-290, <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/54.3.284>
- English Club, available at: [www.englishclub.com](http://www.englishclub.com)
- Ghosn, I. (1997). ESL with children's literature: The way whole language worked in one kindergarten class, Forum 35, 3.
- Grellet, F. (2004), Developing reading skills: A Practical Guide to Reading Comprehension Exercises, Cambridge University Press.
- Lenters, K. (2004 / 2005). No half measures: Reading instruction for young second-language learners, International Literacy Association, The reading teacher, Vol. 58, No4, pp. 328-336.
- Shin, J. K., Crandal, J.A. (2014). Teaching young learners English: From theory to practice, National Geographic Learning.
- Shin, J. K. (2018). Literacy instruction for young EFL learners: A balanced approach, National Geographic Learning.
- The Measured mum, available at: [www.themeasuredmum.com](http://www.themeasuredmum.com)
- Verhoeven, L. T. (1994). Transfer in bilingual development: The linguistic interdependence hypothesis revisited, Language learning, Vol. 44, issue 3, pp. 381-415.