Barbara Struk, Anna Sawczuk

Akademia Bialska Nauk Stosowanych im. Jana Pawła II

TEACHING POLISH LEARNERS EARLY READING IN ENGLISH: TRADITIONAL VS. CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

NAUCZANIE POLSKICH UCZNIÓW CZYTANIA POCZĄTKOWEGO W JĘZYKU ANGIELSKIM: PODEJŚCIE TRADYCYJNE I WSPÓŁCZESNE

Learning to read in English usually poses a challenge for early EFL learners because the language represents a deep orthography, which is manifested by the irregularities in the relation between the written and spoken form of words. Teaching learners to read amid such irregularities requires advanced linguistic knowledge and appropriate didactic solutions on part of the teachers. The research concerns in–service teachers' knowledge of the fundamental subcomponents of early reading, their familiarity with some linguistic terms necessary in teaching early reading and use of appropriate didactic applications. The current study is quantitative and qualitative in nature; a survey was conducted among primary school, Polish EFL teachers working in and around Biała Podlaska. The research indicates that the knowledge teachers have regarding the development of early reading is considerable, however, in some cases the basic linguistic terminology, i.e. *phonological awareness*, seems to be misunderstood. Also, in some cases, the choice of early EFL reading instruction in early literacy does not follow the current recommendations. The results suggest that in–service, primary school, Polish EFL teachers might need additional, supplementary training in early reading development. It can also be concluded that university courses aimed at pre-service EFL teachers should devote more time and resources to early reading development in English.

Keywords: EFL teacher knowledge, teaching early EFL reading, early reading subcomponents, early EFL reading instruction

1. Introduction

When an EFL learner strives for educational success, achieving the level of maturity in reading in English seems to be fundamental. Grabe (in Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 153) for instance, expresses an opinion that the reading skill might be considered the one most crucial L2 skill while in education.

In the Polish context, leading EFL learners towards mature reading remains largely at the hands of the EFL educators. Teachers are the ones who, initially, guide early reading learners towards effortless word recognition. If appropriate instruction is provided further, learners have a chance to become fluent, independent and self–motivated readers in English. Ideally, they gradually learn to view target language texts as an invaluable source of both the language and conceptual knowledge, and make a progression from *learning to read in English* to *reading to learn in English,* or even choose to regularly *read for pleasure in English.* Therefore, it can be concluded that reading success in the EFL depends on the formal instruction in early reading. This, in turn, depends on: 1) the teacher's knowledge of components in early reading and the necessary linguistic terms, and 2) the employment of the appropriate methods and techniques in developing early reading, that are rooted in scientific developments and research (Moats, 2009).

The following paper aims to investigate in–service Polish EFL teachers' familiarity with the fundamentals of early reading in English as a Foreign Language, that is basic terminology in English linguistics and quality literacy instruction. The research discussed here concentrates on in-service teachers because, having gained experience in teaching early EFL reading, they have had a chance to confront their teacher–training at university with their observations of how their pupils learn to read in English. They are also able to reflect upon the established patterns of classroom instructions they have been using and the learners' progress in reading texts in English, as well as assess their level of satisfaction with their learners' progress. Based on the current research, conclusions will be drawn whether additional teacher support should be provided in extending the knowledge in early EFL reading development.

2. Traditional approach to teaching early EFL reading in Polish schools

The current EFL didactic guidelines for Grades 1-3 of Polish primary schools suggest that teaching early reading should be organized in accordance with the global methods, that is getting to the meaning of a sentence or text, thus paying less attention to decoding and word recognition (Studzińska, *et. al*., 2017). During reading lessons, learners are usually requested to read a given text along with the

teacher or to repeat after them or a recording. As Rapacka and Wójcik (2017) suggest, familiarity with the grapheme-phoneme connections is expected to be acquired while learning the language and with increased exposure to print, thus direct teaching of grapheme-phoneme relations is not recommended. Unfortunately, such instructions do not seem to follow either the best practices of literacy teachers of native early reading learners in English, or the recommendations of early reading researchers (Lems, Miller, Soro, 2010), who advocate giving equal attention to teaching comprehension and decoding. It can therefore be concluded that the traditional approach to teaching early EFL reading to Polish learners may carry high-stakes consequences.

3. Currently recommended solutions in EFL early reading instruction

Regardless of the linguistic context, reading is usually learnt and not acquired. As stated by Flores (2021), learning to read is a complex process and requires careful guiding on part of the teachers. The author carries on to say that "literacy teachers should keep in mind that reading involves brain activation, not being a mere activity of *the mouth out*, as many teachers seem to believe. This kind of belief/attitude needs to be retired for good" (Flores, 2021, p. 2, italics in the original). Likewise, Polish learners require all the help they can get in learning to read in English, and effective instructional solutions ought to be based on the most recent scientific developments and research findings.

Many researchers view reading as a predominantly psycholinguistic ability, where comprehension is conditioned by two knowledge domains: cognitive and linguistic (Dakowska, 2005; Koda, 2004). Both domains play an important role in the activation of the lower- and higher-level reading processes responsible, respectively, for decoding print and comprehending meaning. Reading experts suggest a balanced approach to teaching early reading, that is getting information simultaneously from the text (through *decoding* and *word recognition*) and from the reader's knowledge of the subject and the language (Roe, Smith, Kolodziej, 2019). Integration of data obtained from these two sources facilitates reading comprehension. Teaching early reading, therefore, requires extensive knowledge regarding both deciphering the code and reaching for the meaning of a text. According to Moats (2020), "[f]or best results, the teacher must instruct the majority of students directly, systematically, and explicitly to decipher words in print, all the while keeping in mind the ultimate purpose of reading, which is to learn, enjoy, and understand" (p. 5).

Each Roman alphabetic language has its own orthography, that is a unique system of connections between graphemes (individual letter or letter clusters) and

phonemes (individual sounds). Initial reading requires the learner to master the unique system characteristic of the target language. In some cases, the orthography seems straightforward (*shallow orthography*), which means that the relationship between graphemes and phonemes is regular and easy to master. English orthography (considered *deep*) is rather complicated as the grapheme-phoneme connections are frequently irregular. This can be observed in the following example words: *book* (4 graphemes but 3 phonemes), *air* (3 graphemes but 1 phoneme), or *queue* (5 graphemes but only 2 phonemes). Another irregularity lies with the possibility of matching one graphemes to few phonemes, for instance the grapheme *g* can be read in three ways: as /g/, /dʒ/ or /ʒ/ as in words *girl*, *gem* or *genre*. Learning to read in such deep orthography requires carefully designed, high-quality reading instruction (Lems, Miller, Soro, 2010). As Lems, Miller and Soro (2010) state: "adjusting to the English writing system is important and too often overlooked in designing instruction for ELLs" (p. 64). According to the current EFL early reading didactic guidelines for Grades 1–3 of Polish primary schools discussed above, no necessary adjustments seem to be recommended.

4. Teacher knowledge in early reading – research

Success in early reading depends largely on formal instruction, therefore it is worthy of looking at the discussions on teacher knowledge found in literature. Roberts (2017), for instance, stresses the importance of teacher preparation, particularly in case of ELLs. The author states that such learners "can ill afford to try to learn from a teacher who may not fully understand the very linguistic foundations they are trying to understand" (p. 88). Among the knowledge and skills teachers should possess are the following: 1) knowledge of the difference between graphemes and phonemes, 2) clear pronunciation of English phonemes and words, 3) identification of the number of phonemes in words, 4) understanding different spelling units, digraphs, letter blends, silent letter rules, etc., 5) division of words into syllables, 6) familiarity with the sentence structure, 7) ability to diagnose learners' problems in phonological, orthographic and syntactic/ morphological processing, and 8) seeing the connections between printed text, speech and decoding (p. 88). Moats (2020, p. 6) suggests that reading teachers should be familiar with: 1) the psychological aspects of reading and learning to read, 2) the linguistic elements important in both word recognition and reading comprehension, 3) the design of effective instructional practices, and 4) the usage of appropriate assessment to adjust teaching to learners' needs. As can be seen, the knowledge required of early reading educators is extensive.

A significant body of research investigating the level of teacher knowledge in early reading has appeared, however, the results are not optimistic (Bos, *et al*., 2001; Cunningham, O'Donnell, 2015; Cunningham, *et al*., 2009; or Hindman, Wasik, 2011). In research by Cunningham, *et al.* (2009) the findings suggest that early reading instruction conducted by professional teachers seems incomplete and does not always match the recommended policies. Also Joshi *et al*., (2009) have found that teachers' knowledge of the linguistic building blocks, important in early reading, may be incomplete. What is more, the majority of the teachers seem to be unaware of the fact that synthetic phonics might be the answer to early reading problems, a conclusion calling for supplementary training. Synthetic phonics involves learners breaking a word into individual letters and their corresponding phonemes, practicing the grapheme-phoneme connections, and finally blending the phonemes together to form a word.

Teacher knowledge in the field of early reading in English as a second language has also been investigated. Calderón, Slavin, and Sánchez (2011), for instance, examined Hispanic literacy learners in American schools and arrived at the conclusion that additional training for all L2 educators is not an optional extra, but a must. The authors claim that "staff development must be intensive and ongoing, with many opportunities for both peer and expert coaching and information exchange (…) either in professional discussions in a school or with professionals from other schools" (p. 109). The researchers go on to state that equal attention should be assigned to both word recognition and text comprehension. When an ELL student manages to master automaticity of decoding, it is the understanding of a text that should be given priority (Calderón, Slavin, Sánchez, 2011, p. 111).

5. Relevant components of early reading

The National Reading Panel (NICHD, 2000) issued a report that seems to have clarified what early reading components need to be developed at the early stages of reading in English to help the learners overcome potential difficulties. The report has become widely respected and its findings have since been followed by researchers and early reading practitioners alike. After analyzing the findings of fifty previously conducted studies, the authors of the report selected those components which seemed to have appeared most often as highly correlated with early reading success. The list includes: **phonemic awareness**, **phonics**, **fluency**, **vocabulary** and **comprehension**. Without phonemic awareness and experience with phonics young readers would not be able to decode the text, that is read a word by matching its orthography with the sounds. Lack of satisfactory fluency would be an indication

of little or no automaticity of the decoding process and results in the slow pace of reading and poor comprehension. Furthermore, without vocabulary knowledge and comprehension, readers are unlikely to understand what they are reading.

Phonemic awareness can be defined as the ability to recognize individual *phonemes* (sounds) and to manipulate them if required, for instance, to delete or replace them in words (Wang, 2015, p.418). Recognition of individual phonemes is essential in word decoding, that is when learners match the graphical form of letters with their corresponding sounds, and then assemble the phonemes together to form words. Phonemic awareness is part of a larger construct referred to as **phonological awareness**, that is some form of sensitivity towards the phonetic properties of a language and segments of language such as phonemes, syllables, or word onsets and rimes.

Another component of early reading instruction considered vital by the National Reading Panel is **phonics**. It can be explained as the instructional approach where learners are taught how to match the visual symbols on a page with sounds (Goswami, 2007). Polish language represents a rather shallow orthography since the grapheme-phoneme ratio is mostly one to one, but the situation is particularly complicated in the case of English, where 26 letters of the alphabet must accommodate 44 sounds. That is why using the phonics approach in teaching decoding in English seems indispensable.

A number of English language coursebooks used with Polish learners have phonics practice incorporated, for instance *Full Blast*, published by MM, *Macmillan English*, published by Macmillan, or *Brainy* by Macmillan Education. These phonics tasks, however, seem to be introduced only once per chapter. Additionally, some of the tasks seem too simple. For instance, in Chapter Two of the *Brainy 5* learners are taught the correspondence between the letter *w* and the phoneme /w/, which does not pose any challenge for 5th graders who have been learning reading in English for at least three years. In other chapters the phonics task includes teaching the relationship between: *oo* and /u:/, *-ing* and /Iŋ/, *-er* and /ə/, *ar* and /ɑ:/, or *th*and /θ/. As can be seen, the authors of the coursebook recommend the introduction of such grapheme–phoneme correspondences that are most probably already familiar to the children and seem to have been more appropriate for younger learners in Grades 1-3.

Reading comprehension depends on **reading fluency**, which can be explained as "[t]he ability to recognize words automatically, accurately and rapidly" (Wang, 2015, p. 414). Other researchers name prosody as yet another aspect of reading fluency (i.e. Fuchs, Fuchs, Maxwell, 1988; Hasbrouck, Glaser, 2012). **Automaticity** of word recognition guarantees that complex processing of the printed text is carried out subconsciously and that conscious control can be freely allocated to comprehension (Hudson, 2007, p 299). **Accuracy** of word recognition is no other than

precise identification of the printed words, that is their phonetic, orthographic and semantic properties. However, accurate identification of words can be particularly difficult in deep orthography languages, like English. If reading is automatic and accurate, there is no reason why it should not be fast. Slow reading usually hinders comprehension and leads to dissatisfaction and loss of motivation for reading, thus developing the speed of reading is crucial. The final component of reading fluency mentioned in the literature is **prosody** in reading aloud, that is reading with the right intonation, pronunciation, word stress and pitch. Prosody plays an important role in reading fluency and comprehension and some of the most effective fluency building techniques include: repeated, paired, echo, or choral reading, rereading using a distinctive voice (i.e. the voice of a powerful king), but also sight word reading and extensive reading for pleasure (Blamey, Beauchat, 2016; Hicks, 2009).

Since "language is formed of words" (Hudson, 2007, p. 227), and reading is considered a linguistic ability, it is only natural that **vocabulary knowledge** plays a paramount role in reading comprehension. While learning to read in one's native language requires a simple matching of the written form of a vocabulary item with its spoken equivalent, for the majority of EFL learners it is more complicated. Naturally, some of the words in a text will be familiar and matching print to oral form will not be cognitively demanding, however, some other words will be new. That is why teaching vocabulary in an EFL classroom cannot be incidental, but conducted during both direct and indirect instruction.

Among the most recommended direct vocabulary teaching techniques Roberts (2017) enumerates: 1) **clarifying the meaning** to avoid confusion by providing child–appropriate definitions, by using pictures, gestures or demonstrations, by providing opportunities to use new words, by using new words in different contexts, and by relating new words to familiar ones; 2) **facilitating remembering new words** by frequent repetitions, ensuring correct pronunciation, practice in reading new words, and frequent revision; 3) **inspiring learners to use new words** by frequent oral and written production; and 4) **deepening and extending word knowledge** by providing definitions, context, demonstrations, etc. It should be remembered, however, that with early readers the breadth of the vocabulary expansion rather than its depth seems more desirable (pp. 98-105). Indirect vocabulary acquisition, on the other hand, will be greatly facilitated "during conversations and discussions (…), when children are read texts with challenging and many vocabulary words, and during independent reading" (Roberts, 2017, p. 103). Guessing the meaning of new vocabulary items in the EFL context is not encouraged (Chodkiewicz, 2016).

Finally, the last early reading component that the National Reading Panel (2000) pointed to as of key importance is **reading comprehension**. Hudson (2007) defines it as "the ability to use context and knowledge to derive meaning from

what is read" (p. 79). Comprehending a text involves: 1) recognizing sequence of events, 2) recognizing words in context, 3) identifying the main idea in a text, 4) decoding details, 5) inferencing, understanding the causes and effect relations, and 6) comparing and contrasting (Rosenshine, in: Hudson, 2007, pp. 80-81). Another suggestion regarding developing reading comprehension is interactive reading aloud, during which learners are asked to 1) predict the content from title and pictures, 2) visualize the events in the story, 3) clarify if what they understand makes sense, 4) answer inferential questions, 5) use background knowledge to aid comprehension, 6) can retell a story, and 7) evaluate the text, recommend it, and/or respond in oral or written form (Wallpole, McKenna, 2004, p. 109).

All in all, teaching early reading in English requires a systematic approach and a balanced combination of code– and meaning–based instruction (Struk, 2020). On a more specific note, the instructional key aims should include: 1) providing explicit instruction in word recognition and text comprehension, and strengthening motivation for reading literature; 2) developing phonemic awareness; 3) providing learners with regular and direct instruction in matching spoken and written English; 4) exposing Ls frequently to various texts both as independent and shared reading; 5) enriching learners' vocabulary in a variety of ways; 6) training learners in successful and varied reading comprehension strategies, for instance: predicting, summarizing, or questioning; and 7) writing practice, as reading and writing complement each other (Moats, 1999, pp.7-8). As underscored by Hudson (2007, p. 103), efficient reading instruction must be based on the balanced combination of instruction in both lower-, and higher-level processes, that is word recognition and comprehension, as well as fluency and critical reading. Using the whole language method only is likely to deprive the learners of the opportunity to develop decoding skills, while putting excessive stress on decoding and phonics might lead to the loss of interest in reading.

6. The study

6.1. The aim of the study

The main objective of the study was to analyse the in-service EFL teachers' perception of the early reading skill, its development and effective instructional approaches. Bearing in mind that the current English language teaching programs in early school education in Poland still offer teaching early reading based largely on global methods, there is a need to investigate the current teacher knowledge in that field. Based on the results of the study, conclusions will be drawn whether there is a justified need for additional training among the in-service English teachers in grades 1-3.

6.2. Participants and materials

This study employed an anonymous questionnaire distributed to 30 teachers of English in primary school, grades 1-3, in Biała Podlaska and the neighbouring areas. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers and distributed to teachers in electronic version (via email) and as a Google form questionnaire to ensure the anonymity of all the respondents.

The questionnaire was comprised of 14 questions concerning the teachers' knowledge of the basic linguistic terminology necessary in early reading pedagogy, key early reading subcomponents, as well as methods and instructional approaches towards reading. The teachers were also required to give information about their university degree, years of experience in teaching English, and the number of students in the group they teach. In the instructions to the questionnaire teachers were informed that should any uncertainties regarding the used terminology arise, the respondents were invited to clarify their doubts with the researchers. Additionally, answers to questions 9, 10 and 11 were not displayed in form of a table because these were open questions, where the teachers' own answers were required.

6.3. Results and findings

The results of the current study were obtained through the questionnaire. The study revealed that 73% of the respondents held their Master's degree whereas the remaining 27% were Bachelor's degree graduates. As for the teacher's experience, the average length was 16 years. 16 is also the average number of students in the groups teachers had in mind when answering the questions. Moreover, 80% of the respondents admitted that they were satisfied with their learners' progress in reading.

Questions 1-4 (see: Table 1) examine the teachers' knowledge of basic linguistic terminology. From the answers submitted by teachers it may be concluded that there is no consistency in the teachers' knowledge. When asked about the definition of *phonological awareness* (Question 1) only 7% of teachers provided the correct definition, which is *the understanding of how spoken language is broken down and manipulated*. Providing definition of the term *phonemic awareness* (Question 2) also seemed quite challenging as only one third of the questioned (34%) indicated the correct answer, which is *the ability to break down and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken language*. However, answers to Questions 3 and 4 revealed that 87% of teachers do understand what a *phoneme* is and 67% of the respondents chose the answer *consonant blend* as the term for *a combination of two or three consonants, where all the letters are pronounced with distinguishable phonemes (i.e. br, bl,* or *cr).*

Table 1. Teachers' knowledge of the basic linguistic terminology important in early reading

1. Phonological awareness is:	**Number of teachers' responses (n=30)**	**Percentage of teachers' responses**
a) the ability to use letter-sound correspondences to decode words	22	73%
b) the understanding of how spoken language is broken down and manipulated	2	7%
c) a teaching method for decoding skills in reading	4	13%
d) the same as phonics	2	7%
e) unsure	0	0%
Total	30	100%
2. Phonemic awareness is:		
a) the same as phonological awareness	4	13%
b) the understanding of how letters and sounds are put together to form words	8	27%
c) the ability to break down and manipulate the individual sounds in spoken language	10	34%
d) the ability to use sound-symbol correspondences to read words	4	13%
e) unsure	4	13%
Total	30	100%
3. Term phoneme refers to:		
a) a single letter	0	0%
b) a single speech sound	26	87%
c) a single unit of meaning	4	13%
d) a morpheme	0	0%
e) unsure	0	0%
Total	30	100%
4. A combination of two or three consonants, where all the letters are pronounced with distinguishable phonemes (i.e. br, bl, or cr) is called:		
a) silent consonant	2	7%
b) consonant digraph	4	13%
c) diphthong	4	13%
d) consonant blend	20	67%
e) unsure	0	0%
Total	30	100%

Another set of questions presented to the teachers in the questionnaire (Questions 5 and 6) aimed to analyse the teachers' knowledge of early literacy instruction (see results in Table 2 below). The respondents were asked to indicate the five main subcomponents of literacy instruction. The vast majority of teachers

selected the correct options such as *phonics* (93%), *vocabulary* (87%), *comprehension* (80%), *phonemic awareness* (73%) and *fluency* (67%). However, when asked about the practices which have support in the literacy research, the teachers only partially managed to list the correct answers, for example using phonic-based readers in the early grades was selected by 80% of the respondents and more than half of the questioned chose the systematic teaching of phonics (53%). Only 27% of the respondents understand the need to ensure that all children have good phonemic awareness skills and 20% of them chose using a direct instruction approach for the teaching of reading. These results suggest that there is a need for additional training in appropriate didactic solutions in developing early EFL reading as the teachers are not fully aware of the correct practices.

Table 2. Teachers' knowledge of five key subcomponents of early reading in English and literacy building practices

5. Which of the following are the five main subcomponents of literacy instruction?	**Number of teachers' responses (n=30)**	**Percentage of teachers' responses**
a) vocabulary	26	87%
b) fluency	20	67%
c) comprehension	24	80%
d) context	13	43%
e) phonics	28	93%
f) spelling	5	17%
g) phonemic awareness	22	73%
h) accuracy	12	40%
i) unsure	0	0%
6. Which of the following practices have support in the literacy research?		
a) teaching invented spelling	7	23%
b) the systematic teaching of phonics	16	53%
c) ensuring that all children have good phonemic awareness skills	8	27%
d) encouraging the use of picture cues in early reading	26	87%
e) using phonics-based readers in the early grades	24	80%
f) providing a rich language environment rather than systematically teaching component skills (like the alphabet, sight word reading)	17	57%
g) using a whole-language approach for students who are having difficulty learning to read	10	33%
h) using a direct instruction approach for the teaching of reading	6	20%
i) unsure	0	0%

With reference to the question addressing the teacher awareness of the least effective fluency building technique (Question 7), the vast majority of the surveyed (74%) stated correctly that it is silent reading for gist of a new text. As a response to Question 8, 63% of the respondents consider reading out loud to students as the least effective vocabulary building technique, whereas guessing the meaning of a new word seems to be the least effective. It can be deduced therefore that the teachers' knowledge of practices to be avoided when building fluency and vocabulary knowledge is only partially correct (see: Table 3 below).

Table 3. Teachers' knowledge of the least effective fluency and vocabulary building techniques

7. The least effective fluency building technique is	**Number of teachers' responses (n=30)**	**Percentage of teachers' responses**
a) repeated reading	4	13%
b) silent reading for gist of a new text	22	74%
c) paired reading of familiar text	2	7%
d) echo reading of familiar text	2	7%
e) rereading a text using different voices, i.e. the voice of a powerful king or a tiny mouse	0	0%
Total	30	100%
8. The least effective vocabulary building technique is		
a) showing the word in a variety of contexts	2	7%
b) reading out loud to students	19	63%
c) asking students to guess the meaning of the new word	7	23%
d) playing with words in form of rhymes and chants	0	0%
e) creating a non-linguistic representation of the word (a picture, or symbolic representation)	2	7%
Total	30	100%

Question 9 focused on the preferences of the surveyed teachers regarding the development of their learners' reading comprehension skills. It was satisfactory to observe a number of strategies revealed in the survey. The most frequent choice made by approximately 30% of the questioned was using visual aids, mainly flashcards accompanying the reading material. 13% of the teachers believe that exposing learners to reading and listening in the target language, thus limiting the usage of the Polish language to minimum, works best. The same number of respondents value using songs during lessons and asking comprehension questions before, during and after reading short stories. Among other ideas the teachers suggested is: encouraging the learners to do their best by implementing a variety

of tasks such as projects, board games, word games, role play, or word banks. The remaining practices listed include developing students' comprehension strategies adjusted to the learners' age and abilities as well as providing learners with different types of reading tasks, mainly concentrating on the vocabulary which is familiar to the students. Additionally, the teachers mentioned the task of reading texts in small groups, often reading aloud, as well as emphasizing the need to provide the students with varied reading tasks, e.g. ordering text extracts or finding links to the text.

Question 10 aimed to find out which methods are used by the respondents to teach their learners early reading in English. 20% of the teachers chose the global method as the one prevailing in their practice. The same number of teachers mentioned listening to the text first before the learners are asked to read it, thus making it easier for the learners, especially the weaker ones, to increase their reading comprehension. Another group of teachers (20%) emphasized the necessity to focus on presenting new words using different techniques such as pictures, objects, gestures, or pantomime when preparing for reading a new text. As many as 13% of all the respondents use repetition, echoing and drills as well as teaching pronunciation by splitting new words into syllables instead of focusing on single letters. The same number (13%) selected acting out and reading aloud.

The remaining responses given by individual participants of the study included constant practice by means of role plays, songs, games, mind maps, all based on context. The teachers also mentioned multi-sensory activities which provide needed scaffolding to beginning and struggling readers or the keyword method, a mnemonic device, such as an image or rhyme used to help memorize the needed word or piece of information. Other methods involved the tasks concentrating on checking understanding by means of comprehension questions, retelling the story or finding information in the text, often in the form of online tasks, quizzes or memory games, which is by no means an attractive way of learning practice.

The purpose of Question 11 was to find out techniques teachers use before reading a text. Nearly 40% of the respondents selected pre-teaching vocabulary items and more than 30% of teachers chose using pictures or illustrations to describe and then discuss the topic related to the text. 26% of the surveyed teachers value asking questions as well as guessing the content of the text usually by being shown the key characters or objects used in the text. Revising the vocabulary and discussions were chosen by 20% of the teachers and doing a short listening task, preferably with pictures, is a task practiced by 13% of them. The remaining techniques mentioned by teachers included interpretation of the meaning of the title, using guessing games or a story sequence.

In the subsequent question (Question 12) the teachers were asked to state the type of techniques they use to help the learners develop their reading skills in terms

of decoding and reading comprehension. The predominantly used technique during every lesson is reading aloud to the learners (selected by 60% of the respondents) as well as teaching new words and supporting the learners with understanding new vocabulary (67% and 73% of the questioned respectively). When it comes to implementing the techniques once or twice a week, 53% of the teachers declared that it is important to read aloud to the class and 40% of the questioned maintained that they explain strategies and the reading rules to the learners. The techniques involving reading aloud in small groups and silent reading were attributed little value by the questioned group. Nearly half of the teachers stated that they hardly ever use silent reading and another 40% read aloud in small groups only once or twice a month (see Table 4 below for the teachers' responses to Question 12).

Table 4. Techniques teachers use to help their learners develop their reading skills (decoding and reading comprehension)

12. What type of techniques do you use to help the learners develop their reading skills (decoding and reading comprehension)?	**during every lesson**	**once or twice a week**	**once or twice a month**	**less frequently or never**
a) I read aloud to the learners	18 / 60%	5 / 17%	6 / 20%	1 / 3%
b) The learners read aloud to the class	8 / 27%	16 / 53%	6 / 20%	0 / 0%
c) Reading aloud in small groups	2 / 7%	8 / 27%	12 / 40%	8 / 27%
d) Silent reading	1 / 3%	10 / 33%	5/ 17%	14 / 47%
e) I explain strategies, i.e. how to find the information quickly in a text	8 / 27%	12 / 40%	8 / 27%	2 / 7%
f) I explain learners the reading rules	6 / 20%	12 / 40%	4 / 13%	8 / 27%
g) I teach new vocabulary regularly	20 / 67%	10 / 33%	0 / 0%	0 / 0%
h) I support my learners in understanding new vocabulary	22 / 73%	8 / 27%	0 / 0%	0 / 0%

The authors of the questionnaire were also willing to explore the practices of the teachers as for the post reading tasks so in Question 13 they focused on the choice of tasks implemented by the teachers after their learners have finished reading. The results presented in Table 5 below display the teachers' preferences in this matter. Nearly half of them chose responding orally to teacher's questions (47% of the teachers use it during every lesson) as well as using a multiple answer task and retelling what the text was about (again 47% of the teachers opted for the techniques once or twice a week). The respondents were allowed to exhibit their own ideas and thus suggested using true/false statements, with justifications included, gap filling exercises and finishing the sentences concerning the text. Individual answers also included the tasks which involved drawing pictures of new non-abstract words,

arranging pictures in a chronological order, making students read aloud as well as correcting false statements and doing tasks in Activity books.

Table 5. Post-reading tasks used by teachers in the classroom

13. What types of tasks do you assign after reading?	**during every lesson**	**once or twice a week**	**once or twice a month**	**less frequently or never**
a) A multiple answer task	11 / 36%	14 / 47%	5 / 17%	0 / 0%
b) Responding orally to teacher's questions	14 / 47%	12 / 40%	4 / 13%	0 / 0%
c) Retelling what the text was about	4 / 13%	14 / 47%	6 / 20%	6 / 20%
d) Other ……				

The focus of the last question of the questionnaire (Questions 14) was on the choice of reading materials and the amount of time which the teachers devote to the development of reading skills in English. The opinions of the respondents revealed that the teachers spend approximately 30 minutes every week on developing the students' reading skills in English on average. When it comes to using the reading materials to develop learners' reading skills (see Table 6 for the results), a substantial number of teachers (73%) use coursebooks during every lesson. Nearly half of the teachers declared using Internet materials once or twice a week and children's books in English (which 53% of teachers claim to have the access to at school) are used once or twice a week by 27% of teachers and less frequently or never by 47% of them. Regrettably, texts written by learners themselves and children's magazines are rarely or never used by 53% and 60% of teachers respectively.

Table 6. Classroom time allocated to reading in English using different reading material

14. How often do you use the following reading materials to help your learners develop their reading skills in English?	**during every lesson**	**once or twice a week**	**once or twice a month**	**less frequently or never**
a) Coursebook	22 / 73%	8 / 27%	0 / 0%	0 / 0%
b) Internet materials	4 / 13%	14 / 47%	10 / 33%	2 / 7%
c) Children's magazines	0 / 0%	0 / 0%	12 / 40%	18 / 60%
d) Children's books	3 / 10%	5 / 16%	8 / 27%	14 / 47%
e) Texts written by learners themselves	0 / 0%	2 / 7%	12 / 40%	16 / 53%
f) Other……				

7. Conclusions

The comprehensive analysis of the data collected for the study revealed some interesting outcomes regarding the current teacher knowledge of the teaching of initial reading in English. The findings of the study imply that the teachers may need some further training in terminology and processes that play an important role in the literacy instruction.

As far as the teachers' approach towards developing comprehension and reading skills is concerned, it can be concluded that there is a tendency to emphasise the usage of visual aids and tasks requiring integrating both reading and listening skills. It can be assumed that such integration may substantially facilitate both learners' understanding of English and learning to read in a foreign language. Moreover, the learners need extra activities to make reading more enjoyable and effective. Such activities should first and foremost include questions to answer about the text and discuss it in detail. It was also found out that the majority of the study participants stressed the usage of vocabulary instruction as an important factor when teaching learners to read. The learners should be able to come across different vocabulary items in varied contexts, and vocabulary development ought to be treated holistically and not as a set of individual letters.

According to the questionnaire, it has been revealed that extra materials such as children's books or magazines are rarely, if ever, used during the lessons which focus on reading practice. The situation may be due to limited access to authentic materials. Another reason could be the challenge which the teachers have to face when adapting the materials to meet the demands of a particular group of young learners. The teachers might need further guidance in this matter as they could lack confidence or skill when dealing with authentic literature. Therefore, it would be advisable to experiment with texts coming from different sources as it would enable young learners to have a real taste of foreign literature. It is also reasonable to provide learners with basic strategies to help them deal with different text genres.

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