

The Development of Reading Skills in English Language Teaching

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Abstract

Reading is a fundamental skill in English language teaching (ELT) that plays a crucial role in both academic achievement and real-world communication. The ability to read proficiently enables learners to access vast amounts of information, engage with diverse perspectives, and develop critical thinking skills essential for success in both educational and professional contexts. In ELT, reading is not just about recognizing words on a page; it involves complex cognitive and linguistic processes that facilitate comprehension and meaning-making. This article explores key aspects of reading skill development, focusing on the interplay between cognitive and linguistic factors that influence learners' ability to process and understand texts. It examines pedagogical approaches that enhance reading proficiency, including phonics instruction, extensive and intensive reading, and task-based learning. The discussion also highlights the challenges learners face in developing strong reading skills, such as limited vocabulary, lack of background knowledge, and difficulties with comprehension strategies. Moreover, this article presents evidence-based strategies that have been proven effective in ELT classrooms. It underscores the importance of motivation in fostering a positive reading culture and the role of metacognitive strategies in helping learners monitor their own comprehension. The integration of digital resources, including e-books, online reading platforms, and adaptive learning technologies, is examined as a means to support reading development and engagement. Grounded in theoretical perspectives and empirical research, this article provides valuable insights into best practices for teaching reading in ELT. By implementing effective instructional strategies, educators can equip learners with the necessary skills to become confident and independent readers. Future research should explore innovative methods to further enhance reading instruction and address the evolving needs of diverse learners in an increasingly digital world.

Keywords: reading skills, English language teaching, comprehension, pedagogy, literacy development.

1. Introduction

Reading is an essential language skill that enables learners to acquire information, expand their vocabulary, and develop critical thinking abilities. It serves as a gateway to knowledge, allowing students to engage with academic texts, literature, and various forms of media. In the context of English language teaching (ELT), reading proficiency is not only a fundamental component of literacy development but also a crucial determinant of success in both academic and professional settings. Whether learners are preparing for standardized tests, pursuing higher education, or navigating global work environments, the ability to read effectively in English enhances their opportunities and overall communication skills.

The process of developing reading proficiency involves a combination of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors. Linguistic aspects, such as vocabulary size, grammatical knowledge, and phonological awareness, directly impact a learner's ability to decode and comprehend texts. Cognitive processes, including working memory, inferencing, and analytical thinking, are essential for interpreting meaning and engaging with complex ideas. Socio-cultural influences, such as exposure to print-rich environments and prior literacy experiences, further contribute to reading development. Despite its importance, many learners struggle with mastering reading due to limited exposure to the target language, insufficient instructional support, and the complexity of academic texts.

To address these challenges, educators must implement effective pedagogical approaches that facilitate reading skill acquisition. This paper explores the key factors influencing reading development, examines research-backed instructional strategies that enhance reading proficiency, and discusses the integration of digital resources in ELT classrooms. By focusing on these critical aspects, educators can design engaging and effective reading instruction that equips learners with the skills necessary for lifelong learning and real-world communication.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Reading Development

The development of reading skills has been explained through various theoretical models that clarify how readers acquire, process, and understand written material. These models offer insights into the complex cognitive mechanisms underlying reading.

One of the foundational theories is the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), which argues that reading comprehension is the product of two key components: decoding and linguistic comprehension. Decoding refers to the ability to translate written symbols (letters and words) into sounds and meanings, while linguistic comprehension involves understanding the meaning of words and sentences within context. According to this model, both components are necessary for successful comprehension; a deficiency in either one can impair overall understanding. This theory thus underscores the importance of developing both decoding skills (e.g.,

phonics, word recognition) and comprehension skills (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) to achieve effective reading.

Another influential perspective is schema theory (Anderson, 1984), which emphasizes the crucial role of prior knowledge. Readers do not approach a text as a blank slate; instead, they activate existing knowledge structures, or schemas, to interpret, organize, and remember new information. For instance, a reader's background knowledge about a specific topic, genre, or cultural context can significantly influence how they engage with a text. This interaction between prior knowledge and new information reinforces that reading comprehension is an active construction of meaning.

The interactive model (Rumelhart, 1977) offers a more integrated view by proposing that reading involves simultaneous bottom-up and top-down processes. In the bottom-up process, readers decode individual words and phrases based on phonics and syntax. In the top-down process, they employ background knowledge, predictions, and contextual cues to anticipate upcoming content. Rumelhart's model emphasizes that these processes interact continuously during reading, with prior knowledge guiding decoding and decoding skills refining predictions.

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the cognitive processes involved in reading development. The Simple View of Reading highlights the necessary components for comprehension, schema theory underscores the role of prior knowledge, and the interactive model illustrates their dynamic interplay. These theoretical foundations inform instructional practices aimed at enhancing reading proficiency.

2.1 Cognitive and Linguistic Perspectives

Cognitive and linguistic perspectives emphasize the intricate relationship between mental processes, language development, and textual interaction. Both perspectives converge on the idea that reading is an active process whereby the brain constructs meaning by integrating textual input with prior knowledge.

From a cognitive standpoint, reading involves activating various functions—such as memory, attention, and problem-solving—to process and comprehend text. Cognitive theories assert that as readers engage with a text, they continuously construct meaning by decoding words, integrating new information, and making predictions based on existing knowledge. This dynamic process is fundamental for effective comprehension and the overall development of reading proficiency.

In cognitive linguistics, Chomsky's theory of language acquisition (1965) posits that an innate universal grammar underlies language development, enabling children to learn to read more readily once exposed to written material. This theory emphasizes the importance of syntax and grammar in reading, suggesting that internalized language structures are crucial for decoding and understanding sentences.

In contrast, Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (1978) highlights the importance of social interaction in language learning. Vygotsky argued that children learn language and reading skills not only by internalizing linguistic rules but also through interaction with more knowledgeable individuals. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) underscores that guided reading practices, such as one-on-one tutoring or small group discussions, can elevate learners' comprehension and critical thinking by building on their existing knowledge.

Thus, while Chomsky's model focuses on the biological underpinnings of language, Vygotsky's framework stresses social influences. Combined, these perspectives offer a robust understanding of how both innate abilities and social interactions shape reading development.

2.2 The Role of Phonological Awareness and Decoding Skills

Phonological awareness and decoding skills are fundamental to reading proficiency, serving as essential building blocks in understanding and processing written language. Phonological awareness—the ability to recognize, manipulate, and work with sounds at various levels (from phonemes to larger units like syllables and rimes)—is critical for grasping the relationship between sounds and letters.

According to Ehri (2005), phonological awareness, which includes skills such as phoneme segmentation, blending, and rhyming, is a key early predictor of reading success. Children with strong phonological skills can break down and manipulate sounds in words, thereby connecting spoken language with its written form. For example, recognizing that the word "cat" consists of the sounds /k/, /æ/, and /t/ enables more efficient decoding. This early skill is a strong indicator of later reading success.

Decoding skills, which involve applying letter-sound knowledge to translate written words into speech, are closely linked to phonological awareness. As an essential component of early reading development, decoding not only contributes to reading fluency but also to overall comprehension. Without adequate decoding skills, readers struggle with unfamiliar words, which in turn hampers comprehension.

Phonics instruction, as confirmed by the National Reading Panel (2000), significantly improves both decoding skills and reading fluency. By systematically teaching the predictable relationships between letters and sounds, phonics instruction allows students to apply these rules to new words, thereby increasing reading accuracy and efficiency. Moreover, as children become more proficient decoders, they can devote more cognitive resources to understanding the meaning of the text.

Additionally, phonics instruction fosters the development of reading fluency—the ability to read smoothly and quickly with comprehension—through repeated practice, ultimately reinforcing the connection between sounds, letters, and meaning.

2.3 Summary

Phonological awareness and decoding skills form the foundation of reading proficiency. By enabling readers to recognize and manipulate sounds and teaching the systematic relationships between letters and sounds, phonics instruction ensures that learners can decode words efficiently, read fluently, and ultimately comprehend text effectively.

3. Factors Affecting Reading Skill Development in ELT

The development of reading skills in second-language learners (L2 learners) is influenced by a range of factors—including linguistic, cognitive, motivational, and socio-cultural elements. Understanding these factors is essential for designing teaching strategies that enable learners to overcome challenges and improve their reading proficiency.

Linguistic Competence

Linguistic competence encompasses a learner's vocabulary, grammar, and overall language proficiency. According to Nation (2001), limited vocabulary not only hinders word recognition but also affects the comprehension of entire sentences or paragraphs. Insufficient grammatical knowledge further complicates the understanding of complex sentence structures, especially in L2 contexts where learners may encounter unfamiliar constructions. Strengthening both vocabulary and grammar is therefore vital for enhancing reading comprehension and supporting overall language development.

Cognitive Factors

Cognitive factors, such as working memory, attention, and inferencing skills, are crucial for processing and understanding complex texts. Grabe (2009) emphasizes that the ability to retain multiple pieces of information simultaneously is fundamental for linking ideas and drawing conclusions. In L2 reading, the added demand of processing a non-native language makes these cognitive skills even more essential.

Motivation and Engagement

Motivation plays a central role in reading development. Research by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) shows that learners with intrinsic motivation—who view reading as both enjoyable and valuable—tend to develop stronger reading skills. Factors such as the relevance of reading tasks and a sense of achievement further enhance engagement and persistence in reading.

Socio-Cultural Background

A learner's socio-cultural background, including prior exposure to reading materials and established literacy practices, significantly impacts reading development

(Bernhardt, 2011). Learners with robust reading experiences in their first language often transfer these skills to L2 contexts, whereas those with limited exposure may struggle with unfamiliar genres or cultural references.

Teaching Approaches as a Contributing Factor

Instructional methods are also influential in shaping reading development. Although this factor overlaps with later discussions, it is important to note here that approaches such as phonics-based and whole-language strategies play a role in a learner's overall reading ability. (A more detailed exploration of pedagogical approaches is provided in Section 4.)

In conclusion, reading development in L2 learners is shaped by interconnected factors that include linguistic competence, cognitive abilities, motivation, socio-cultural background, and teaching methodologies. Addressing these factors holistically can help educators create more effective learning environments.

3.1 Vocabulary Acquisition and Reading Comprehension

A broad vocabulary is essential for successful reading comprehension, as vocabulary knowledge directly influences a reader's ability to understand and engage with texts. Learners with rich vocabularies can more easily grasp the meaning of words and phrases in context, while those with limited vocabularies often struggle to decode unfamiliar terms.

Vocabulary acquisition enables faster word recognition and deeper connections between words and their meanings. According to Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013), learners with larger vocabularies are more fluent, allowing them to focus on comprehending the main ideas and underlying themes of a text.

To facilitate vocabulary growth, educators should employ both direct and indirect instructional strategies. Direct instruction involves explicit teaching of new words, their definitions, synonyms, antonyms, and usage examples through techniques such as word mapping. Indirect instruction occurs through extensive reading, where learners are repeatedly exposed to new vocabulary in varied contexts, thus inferring meanings from surrounding text. Combining these methods ensures a balanced and comprehensive vocabulary acquisition process, catering to diverse learning styles and cognitive abilities. This dual approach, as evidenced by Beck et al. (2013), reinforces vocabulary retention and enhances overall comprehension.

Another vital component is context analysis, which encourages learners to use surrounding text as clues for understanding unfamiliar words. This method not only helps in deciphering word meanings but also in recognizing word patterns and morphological structures, thereby strengthening comprehension skills. Additionally, it fosters critical thinking by prompting learners to make inferences and connections based on textual cues.

3.2 The Role of Background Knowledge in Reading Development

Background knowledge provides the essential cognitive framework that enables readers to make sense of new information encountered in texts. When learners approach a text, their preexisting knowledge and experiences serve as reference points for interpreting and integrating new content.

Anderson and Pearson (1984) emphasize that readers with extensive background knowledge on a topic can better understand and retain new information because they can connect it to what they already know. For example, familiarity with the historical context of World War II can enhance comprehension of texts set during that period.

Moreover, background knowledge supports inferencing by allowing readers to fill in gaps and predict outcomes when details are not explicitly stated. Without this foundation, learners may struggle with idiomatic expressions, cultural references, or specialized terminology, which in turn hampers full comprehension. In addition, background knowledge strengthens long-term memory by organizing new information into a coherent network of related ideas, making it easier to retrieve later. For second-language learners, who may lack sufficient background knowledge in the target language, educators can bridge the gap by using pre-reading activities and multimedia resources that build relevant context before engaging with a text.

3.3 Summary

In summary, reading development in L2 contexts is significantly influenced by factors such as linguistic competence, cognitive abilities, motivation, socio-cultural background, and teaching methods. In particular, vocabulary acquisition and background knowledge are critical components that empower learners to decode, understand, and retain textual information. Addressing these elements through targeted instruction can foster more effective and confident readers.

4. Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching Reading in ELT

Effective reading instruction in ELT requires a variety of approaches that accommodate diverse learner needs. Reading is a complex skill involving both decoding and comprehension; thus, effective pedagogy must balance these components to promote literacy development. Several key approaches contribute to successful reading instruction in ELT classrooms:

4.1 Bottom-Up and Top-Down Processing

Reading involves both bottom-up processes—decoding words and recognizing their meaning at the lexical and syntactic levels—and top-down processes that utilize background knowledge, contextual clues, and strategies such as predicting and summarizing (Grabe&Stoller, 2011). Integrating these processes enables learners to develop both decoding proficiency and deeper, conceptual understanding.

4.2 Extensive vs. Intensive Reading

Extensive reading involves large amounts of material for general comprehension, fostering fluency, vocabulary growth, and motivation (Day & Bamford, 1998), while intensive reading focuses on close analysis of shorter texts to develop critical thinking and text analysis skills. Combining these approaches ensures that learners build both automaticity and analytical skills.

4.3 Task-Based Learning (TBL)

Task-Based Learning (TBL) integrates reading into meaningful, real-world tasks, encouraging learners to extract information, summarize content, and interpret texts as they would in authentic contexts (Ellis, 2003). TBL promotes engagement, practical literacy skills, and learner autonomy.

4.4 Use of Authentic Materials

Using authentic texts—such as newspaper articles, blogs, short stories, menus, and travel guides—exposes learners to naturally occurring language and diverse cultural contexts. Gilmore (2007) argues that authentic materials enhance engagement, cultural awareness, and comprehension by reflecting real-world linguistic complexity.

4.5 Reading Fluency Development

Fluency, the ability to read smoothly and accurately, is critical for comprehension. Instructional techniques such as repeated reading, choral reading, and guided oral reading (Rasinski, 2012) help learners develop automatic word recognition, thus freeing cognitive resources for understanding the text's meaning.

4.6 Scaffolding Techniques

Scaffolding provides the support necessary for learners to move from assisted to independent reading. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) define scaffolding as gradually reducing support as learners gain confidence. Techniques include modeling reading strategies, questioning to stimulate thinking, and providing corrective feedback, all of which help refine comprehension skills.

4.7 Summary

A comprehensive approach to teaching reading in ELT involves balancing bottom-up and top-down processing, combining extensive and intensive reading, incorporating task-based learning, using authentic materials, fostering fluency through repeated practice, and employing scaffolding techniques. Together, these methods create a dynamic learning environment that enhances reading proficiency and instills a lifelong appreciation for reading.

5. Strategies for Enhancing Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted process requiring active engagement before, during, and after reading. Effective strategies help learners develop cognitive, linguistic, and metacognitive skills necessary for understanding, analyzing, and retaining information.

5.1 Pre-Reading Activities

Pre-reading activities—such as activating prior knowledge, introducing key vocabulary, and setting reading purposes—prepare learners for engagement with the text. According to Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), schema theory suggests that connecting new information with existing knowledge improves comprehension. Strategies include predicting content from titles and images, brainstorming related ideas, pre-teaching vocabulary, and asking guiding questions.

5.2 During-Reading Strategies

During reading, learners benefit from techniques that foster active interaction with the text. Brown (2007) emphasizes the importance of skimming to gain a general overview, scanning for specific details, and self-questioning to monitor comprehension. Annotating, highlighting key points, and using graphic organizers further assist in structuring ideas and consolidating understanding.

5.3 Post-Reading Activities

Post-reading activities reinforce comprehension through summarizing, discussion, and critical analysis. Koda (2005) highlights that tasks such as summarizing main ideas, engaging in debates, evaluating the author's perspective, and creating alternative responses help consolidate knowledge and develop higher-order thinking skills.

5.4 Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies enable learners to monitor and regulate their reading. Pressley and Afflerbach (1995) advocate for training students in self-questioning, monitoring comprehension, and periodic summarization to build autonomy and confidence in their reading process.

5.5 Inferencing and Predicting

Inferencing involves drawing conclusions from contextual clues, while predicting helps anticipate future content. Cain and Oakhill (2006) note that these skills are crucial for deep comprehension. Strategies include encouraging students to “read between the lines,” use context to deduce meanings, analyze textual structure for predictions, and identify cause-and-effect relationships.

5.6 Summary

Enhancing reading comprehension in ELT requires a systematic approach that integrates pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading strategies with metacognitive training and inferencing techniques. These methods empower learners to become active, independent, and critical readers, thereby improving overall academic success.

6. Challenges in Teaching Reading in ELT

Despite the critical importance of reading instruction in ELT, educators face numerous challenges that can hinder student progress. These obstacles arise from individual learner differences, classroom dynamics, resource limitations, and pedagogical constraints.

6.1 Diverse Proficiency Levels

ELT classrooms typically include learners with varied proficiency levels, making a one-size-fits-all approach ineffective. Some students struggle with basic decoding while others need support with higher-order comprehension tasks. Tomlinson (2014) emphasizes differentiated instruction through leveled materials, scaffolding techniques, and flexible grouping to address these diverse needs.

6.2 Limited Access to Resources

In low-resource settings, the lack of textbooks, libraries, and digital tools limits exposure to authentic reading materials. UNESCO (2017) notes that insufficient access hampers students' opportunities for independent reading and engagement with age-appropriate texts. Over-reliance on teacher-created materials may further reduce instructional quality. As a result, students may develop limited literacy skills and struggle with comprehension, ultimately affecting their overall academic performance.

6.3 Reading Anxiety

Many learners experience reading anxiety, defined by Horwitz (2001) as the fear of making mistakes, mispronouncing words, or struggling with comprehension in a second language. Factors such as low confidence and fear of negative evaluation can discourage engagement. Creating a supportive environment with collaborative reading activities and structured support can help mitigate this anxiety.

6.4 Over-Reliance on Translation

Excessive reliance on translating from the first language (L1) can hinder the development of inferencing skills and slow reading fluency. Nation (2013) warns that such dependence reduces exposure to English sentence structures and limits autonomous comprehension. Teachers can counteract this by promoting extensive reading, paraphrasing exercises, and context-based guessing strategies.

6.5 Lack of Reading Habits

Many learners do not engage in reading outside the classroom, which negatively affects fluency, vocabulary acquisition, and comprehension. Krashen (2004) argues that the absence of self-selected, enjoyable reading materials stifles the development of regular reading habits. Encouraging extensive reading through graded readers, incentive programs, and digital tools can foster a lasting love for reading.

6.6 Summary

Teaching reading in ELT involves overcoming challenges such as heterogeneous proficiency levels, limited resources, reading anxiety, over-reliance on translation, and insufficient reading habits. Effective strategies—ranging from differentiated instruction to fostering a supportive environment—can help educators mitigate these obstacles and promote enduring reading skills.

7. The Role of Digital Resources in Reading Development

The integration of digital resources into reading instruction has transformed how learners develop literacy skills by offering interactive, engaging, and personalized experiences. Digital tools—ranging from e-books to adaptive learning technologies—support reading development by enhancing fluency, vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, and overall motivation in ELT contexts. Moreover, these resources facilitate differentiated instruction, allowing educators to tailor reading materials to individual learners' proficiency levels and needs.

7.1 E-Books and Online Texts

Digital reading materials such as e-books, online articles, and interactive texts provide numerous benefits over traditional print materials. Mangen and Kuiken (2014) note that features like adjustable fonts, hyperlinked glossaries, and embedded multimedia enhance engagement and comprehension. Despite potential challenges like screen fatigue and distractions, e-books increase accessibility and support vocabulary learning.

7.2 Reading Apps and Platforms

Mobile learning and educational platforms extend reading practice beyond the classroom. Godwin-Jones (2018) explains that apps offer personalized recommendations, interactive vocabulary exercises, and gamified reading experiences that boost motivation. Tools such as Quizlet, Newsela, and Epic! provide diverse opportunities for vocabulary practice and fluency development.

7.3 Multimodal Texts

Multimodal texts that combine visual, auditory, and interactive elements cater to diverse learning styles. Gee (2003) argues that such texts help students develop critical

literacy skills by requiring interpretation across multiple modes. Features such as images, audiobooks, and video-enhanced materials provide scaffolding that bridges comprehension gaps.

7.4 Adaptive Learning Technologies

Artificial intelligence (AI) and adaptive learning systems personalize reading instruction by customizing content based on individual performance. Chapelle and Sauro (2017) highlight that AI-driven tools adjust text difficulty, offer real-time feedback, and track progress to ensure optimal learning pathways. Examples like ReadTheory, LingQ, and SmartReader AI illustrate how technology can individualize support for all learners.

7.5 Summary

Digital resources have revolutionized reading development by offering engaging, interactive, and personalized learning experiences. E-books and online texts enhance accessibility, reading apps bolster vocabulary practice, multimodal texts accommodate varied learning styles, and adaptive technologies tailor instruction. A balanced integration of traditional and digital strategies is essential to maximize learning outcomes in ELT classrooms.

8. Conclusion

Developing reading skills in English Language Teaching (ELT) is a multifaceted process that integrates theoretical frameworks, pedagogical strategies, and technological innovations. Reading comprehension is influenced by cognitive and linguistic factors, phonological awareness, vocabulary knowledge, background knowledge, and instructional methodologies. Effective reading instruction requires an in-depth understanding of how learners decode, process, and engage with texts while considering their individual linguistic backgrounds and proficiency levels.

To enhance reading proficiency, educators must adopt a balanced approach that includes explicit phonics instruction, both extensive and intensive reading, metacognitive strategies, and task-based learning. Strategies such as pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities help learners develop critical reading skills, while scaffolding techniques build confidence and fluency. Moreover, fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement is crucial for developing enduring reading habits.

Incorporating digital resources into reading instruction has transformed learner interactions with texts. E-books, reading apps, multimodal texts, and AI-driven adaptive learning technologies offer personalized, interactive, and accessible experiences that enhance comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and overall engagement. However, educators must remain mindful of challenges such as screen fatigue, digital distractions, and unequal access to technology.

Future research should further investigate the long-term impact of digital literacy tools and adaptive learning systems on reading development in ELT. Additionally, exploring how artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning can provide personalized reading support and feedback may offer new insights into improving literacy instruction. By continuously adapting to emerging educational trends and technological advancements, educators can ensure that learners develop strong, lifelong reading skills in English.

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