

Review of the literature:

What does it take to teach reading? Where does one start? What does research inform us about teaching reading in general? Where do ESL learners stand? What does it take to improve the reading skills of ESL learners?

What does research inform us about teaching reading in general?

For a better understanding of the subject matter, given the fact that reading is inherently related to literacy, an exploration of the historical background of literacy instruction and its development in the US would establish a sound basis for this study. During my research, though, I could only go as far back as the beginning of the last century, which implies that any literature prior to this period will not be recorded in this paper.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, almost half a century before the emergence of cognitive psychology, which surfaced only in the 1960's, Huey, E. B. shared his observations and stated his point of view about reading in his work *'The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading'* (1908). While his contemporaries were supporting the use of oral reading as the way to teach reading, Huey held the view that the fundamental goal of learning to read is to get the meaning of what is being read. Although he acknowledged that phonics has a role to play in learning to read, he stated the reserve that 'too often the line between phonics and reading is not drawn.' His work also features some aspects of teaching reading that were not yet acknowledged in his time yet proven to be instrumental for reading instruction later on. For example, his work clearly testifies his cognitive perspective on reading instruction and early on, he shared his insight into the notion of metacognition. Among other points that he made is the

importance of the facilitative role of prior knowledge in reading which eases the way to understanding meaning. One last aspect worth mentioning about his work is his perspective into second language reading. Having worked and observed foreign researchers, he acknowledged that reading in a foreign language is quite different from and more arduous than reading in one's own native language. He wrote: 'This is especially noticeable in the case of someone reading in a foreign language which he does not pronounce easily but which he comprehends rather rapidly' (Huey, 1908). This very statement reinforces his point in differentiating reading aloud from silent reading; the first one involves more work on pronunciation which adds to the load of reading and can be impeding the process of reading for meaning. Silent reading, on the other hand, puts more focus on reading for meaning even when it implies that the students do not necessarily read the words "easily" when asked to sound out the words. The implication is that getting to the meaning of what being read gets priority over sounding words out loud correctly. The value of fluency in reading is being stressed in the same statement. In brief, all the points that Huey was making flowed from one philosophy: reading for meaning.

In the late 1920's, most schools used the 'look-and-say' instructional method in order to teach reading. The philosophical foundation behind this method was supposedly 'reading for meaning' and the term 'functional literacy' was used to describe 'a very basic level of literacy needed to function in all but the most menial jobs' (Glasgow & Farrell, 2007). Although phonics was sporadically used at school, repetitions took precedence over any other instructional methods in order to achieve 'reading for meaning'. But with the absence of teaching word

attack skills, the method 'look-and-say' was more of a 'look-and-guess' because learners could not handle decoding and deciphering new words (Glasgow & Farrell, 2007).

In the 1930's, another method, the Non-Oral reading method, in the same vein as Huey's, was developed. Non-oral reading is defined as a method of getting meaning from the printed symbols which involves only the eyes and the central nervous system. 'Children taught non-orally never used to stop to say the words. Their limit [in speed of reading] is the speed of eye and brain' (Rohrer, 1943). This method persisted but eventually it was abandoned in the 1940's (Mc Dade, 1950).

In the 1950s, there was a growing number of the student population due to the high birth rate after the war and in conjunction with that did the number of students with reading problems become more noticeable. Flesch's (1955) publication of his controversial book *Why Johnny can't read?* magnified this problem and he held the "look-and-say" method to be responsible for the students' difficulty to read. Instead, he presented the argument that a phonics-based approach to teaching reading would be their way out. As a result, decoding gained importance as an instructional strategy: phonics, word attack strategies, and flashcard drills were at the center of instruction. Comprehension was believed to flow naturally from there (Glasgow & Farrell, 2007).

In the late 1930s through 1960s, there was a big emphasis on using 'leveled' texts. The texts used to literacy instruction featured contrived stories, carefully controlled vocabulary, repetition of sight words, and inclusion of high frequency words. In the 1960s, reading instruction was equated to decoding print and the most used approach was teaching sound-

symbol relationship and word recognition. The 'initial teaching alphabet' was introduced to provide learners with a phonetically regular alphabet. These 44 characters that would theoretically transfer to conventional English were presented and practiced principally through controlled and contrived stories (Palincsar & Duke, 2004).

Toward the end of 1960s, Goodman introduced the social constructivist perspective of literacy as he viewed literacy as a social practice. Reading was seen as a process that relied on holistic examination of words and from there the concept of "whole-word" saw the light. He stated that pronouncing individual words would involve the use of letter clues (graphophonemic system), meaning clues from context (semantic system), and syntactical structure of the sentence (syntactic system) (Goodman, 1967). The concept of literacy broadened and the idea of learning by experience and exposure gained importance, encouraging time spent on reading and more independent reading.

In the early 1970s, decoding and phonics were still commonly used as leveled readers were deployed for basal reading programs. Comprehension instruction was supported by practice in a number of comprehension skills such as identifying the main idea, drawing inferences from text, and using text structure (Palincsar & Duke, 2004). But the concept of reading developed and took another turn as more emphasis was put on the automaticity in reading through the use of memory (Gough, 1972; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974). The 1970's marked the emergence of information – processing era. Permanent knowledge, permanent memory (schemata), short term memory became the beacons of reading instruction. It has been acknowledged that permanent knowledge affects the way incoming information is

processed and permanent memory (schemata) is used for active processing of information at any given moment (Norman, 1976).

In the 1980s, the role of prior knowledge has been emphasized more than ever. Research established the interaction between students' prior knowledge and their comprehension, interpretation, and recall of written and oral text (Alverman, Smith & Readence, 1985; Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert & Goetz, 1977; Bransford & Franks, 1972). In the same way, research also showed that the use of reading strategies helped students to better process the information they read in the text. (Alexander & Judy, 1988; Garner, 1987). More research was done on the organization of knowledge in the mind (Anderson 1977; Rumelhart, 1980) and this organization showed the distinction between beginning and advanced readers (Paris & Myers, 1981). The most significant construct expressed during this period was the schema theory, which Rumelhart identified as the building blocks of cognition (Rumelhart, 1980). The implications of these research results in the field of reading instruction were the activation and deployment of all the students' knowledge: their background knowledge (schema) of the topic, their linguistic knowledge (nature, structure, and variation of language), their cognitive as well as metacognitive reading strategies. In practice, reading instruction featured more emphasis on the direct teaching of reading strategies such as predicting and confirming, reading and re-reading, and the use of visual context, on top of the necessary sound-symbol relationships reading strategy. On the elementary side of the literacy instruction, during the period from 1980s to 1990's, instructional materials included stories and texts that were not written specifically to teach reading and were not contrived or controlled for vocabulary difficulty or readability. Readability was assessed in terms of the enjoyment, meaningfulness, and interest

that the text can bring to the readers. Reading materials were characterized by text and language structure, predictability, and patterns of language (Palincsar & Duke, 2004).

In the **1990's**, a new discovery altered the accepted positive role of prior knowledge in reading. The conclusion was that knowledge was not always a constructive force in students' learning and development. As a consequence, a more careful and accurate role of knowledge has been determined as research has shown that an individual or groups' inaccurate or inadequately grounded knowledge could impede or interfere with their future learning (Chinn & Brewer, 1993; Perkins & Simmons, 1988). There was a mounting distrust in the formal and individual knowledge and the process of learning was valued more than the products of learning. This period was marked by the wind of social and cultural learning in which social and contextual forces prevail in education, including literacy learning and reading instruction (Greeno & Moore, 1993; Sfard, 1998).

Alexander & Fox (2004) captured the last amendments to key elements in reading instruction from the mid 1990's to present. The conceptions of text, the reader, and learning with and from text have much evolved. Text no longer refers solely to linear, printed materials. Any materials that can be conveyed via audiovisual media also constitute texts. Those alternative texts can be non-linear, interactive, dynamic, and visually complex (Wade & Moje, 2000); they can also appear under the form of discussions that occurred around these new different forms of text (Alvermann, Commeyras, Young, Randall & Hinson, 1997; Wade, Thompson, & Watkins, 1994). Readers' motivation or affect have been taken into consideration and readers have been recently perceived as engaged or motivated based on their interest,

goals, and active participation in text-based learning (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Engaged readers, instead of being passive receptacles of information, actively participate in their learning by interacting with others inside and outside the classroom (Guthrie, McGough, Bennett, & Rice, 1996). Reading instruction has taken a bigger scope and has involved readers of all abilities and ages. It has gone beyond the initial phase of acquisition and seeks to foster the readers' lifelong engagement in varieties of reading- related and goal-directed activities (Alexander, 2006). This endeavor to engage readers in a constant involvement in reading- related and goal-directed practice is justified by the continuing emergence of various forms of texts and genres of text which are nothing else but socially constructed language practices which are the responses to social needs and contexts (Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau, 2007). Keeping abreast to and staying literate in these new forms and genres of text are not sheer fads but life skills that anyone should have to function in an evolving society with evolving socio-cultural needs and contexts. Readers are expected to grow in their linguistic knowledge, subject matters knowledge, strategic capabilities, and motivations throughout their lifetimes (Alexander, 1997).

As we come into the 21st century, reading instruction is oriented to a new direction. Researchers are talking about a reconditioning era as the emerging idea relates to the behavioral model of instruction. It concerns the identification, teaching, and remediation of the reading subskills or components underlying reading acquisition (Foorman, Francis, Fletcher, Schatsneider, & Mehta, 1998). Research syntheses (Adams, 1990; national Reading panel, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998) suggested that explicit teaching of phonics and reading practice with the use of texts that feature a high percentage of decodable words appear to

benefit most learners who had poor reading performance. The same research syntheses implied that most learners get advantage from the use of such a behavioral method because learning to read is not a 'natural process'. A perfect illustration of this new orientation in reading instruction is the Read 180 Program which aims at identifying, teaching, and remedying reading subskills such as spelling, sounding out of words, and reading comprehension per se.

How has the definition of reading evolved and what does research tell us about teaching reading?

The websites of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory provide records of evolution and details about the definition of reading which has been used for literacy programs. They (NCREL) also came up with the concept of an interactive, or strategic, approach to reading in response to the needs of having alternative approach to reading instruction because of growing evidence that skills-based curricula were not sufficient in helping students learn reading comprehension. These sections are added here for the sake of reference.

For many years, three basic definitions of reading have driven literacy programs in the United States (Foertsch, 1998). According to the first definition, learning to read means learning to pronounce words. According to the second definition, learning to read means learning to identify words and get their meaning. According to the third definition, learning to read means learning to bring meaning to a text in order to get meaning from it.

Although these definitions reflect long-standing views of reading, current literacy research supports a more comprehensive definition of reading. This new definition includes all of the above definitions and places learning skills in the context of authentic reading and

writing activities. It recognizes the importance of skill instruction as one piece of the reading process (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Maryland State Department of Education, n.d.; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). It also supports balanced reading instruction for all students (Allington & Cunningham, 1996; Au, 1993; Foertsch, 1998; International Reading Association & National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Retrieved from: <http://www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/content/contareas/reading/li7lk1.htm>

The NCREL also came up with the idea of developing an interactive or strategic approach to reading instruction. An interactive or strategic view focuses on reading not as the application of a set of skills, but as a process of constructing meaning. Constructing meaning begins before the reader actually engages in sustained reading, and it continues after the sustained reading stops. The reader links information in the text to his or her prior knowledge, then uses a repertoire of strategies to construct meaning.

After years of research, it is known now that:

- Reading is a process of constructing meaning in which the reader connects information in the text to what he or she knows.
- To construct meaning, the reader actively interacts with the text and the context (including the task or purpose for reading).

- The reader uses a repertoire of strategies to understand the information in the text and to connect it to what he or she knows.
- The reader is aware of his or her repertoire of strategies and is in control of how he or she uses those strategies to construct meaning.
- The reader uses the strategies not only during but before and after reading the text.

It is also known that

- When using a strategy, the reader stops to reflect on what has been read, thinks ahead to what will be read, and knows when to resume reading.
- While reading, the reader's prior knowledge and experience constantly interact with the particular characteristics of the text. The purpose or context for reading helps readers construct meaning.

Retrieved from : <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/triedandtrue/strat.html>

Based on these findings, reading instruction needs to address core five strategies which are the use of prior knowledge, text structure, word meaning, and inferencing, with metacognition integrated throughout the process (Keene & Zimmermann, 1999; Mikelucky & Jeffries, 2004).

Where do ESL learners stand? What does it take to improve the reading skills of ESL learners?

Research has shown the importance of the role of both the text and the readers in the reading process as meaning does not lie solely in either the text or the reader but in the

interaction between the two – the text provides a potential meaning and the reader brings his own particularization of that potential meaning (Spiro, 1980, Anderson & Shifrin, 1980).

Other research has also shown that in making sense of a text, readers make use of a complex process involving the interaction of cognitive and psychological functions of different levels.

The meaning making process in reading, which all readers use, either they are native speakers or not, is interactive rather than simply going through linear stages from lower to higher.

Readers of all ages, of different backgrounds, and of different levels of proficiency simultaneously utilize these multiple sources of information to compensate for any deficiency of any level at any other levels (Rumelhart, 1977; Garner, 1987). This implies that ESL learners are not so different from any other learners when it comes to reading as reading is the same in all languages. ESL learners, just as their native English peers need to be taught to construct meaning by actively interacting with the text and the context (including the task or purpose for reading). They also need to be instructed to use a repertoire of strategies to understand the information in the text and to connect it to what they know. Their reading instruction also needs to incorporate the instruction of five core strategies which are the use of prior knowledge, text structure, word meaning, and inferencing, with metacognition integrated throughout the process of reading (Keene & Zimmermann, 1999; Mikelucky & Jeffries, 2004).

But what distinguish ESL learners from their native English counterparts are mainly their linguistic ability, and their background knowledge. While the aspect of the linguistic ability of the ESL readers is addresses by the choice of materials and activities used in ESL classes, the question referring to their background knowledge has to be directly addressed before each

text. Teachers have to make sure ESL learners' prior knowledge is not in the way of the processing of the text and the background knowledge assumed of the reader with each text should be discussed before each reading activity. Effective reading strategies should also be directly taught and practiced so that ESL learners can monitor their comprehension and repair faulty comprehension with the use of appropriate thinking strategies.

Another aspect of reading that cannot be ignored in ESL reading instruction is the connection between the L1 reading and L2 reading. Several studies show that both the reader's L1 reading ability and L2 language proficiency contribute to L2 reading comprehension (Carrell, 1991, Bosser, 1992) and evidence supports Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis and the Linguistic Threshold Hypothesis (Bernhardt & Kamil, 1995; Bristois, 1995). Kong (2006) conducted a research about the connections between L1 and L2 readings where she investigated the reading strategies used by four Chinese adult readers and she concluded that while a higher L2 proficiency may make it easier for the participants to transfer the higher level cognitive and metacognitive knowledge across the task of reading the two languages, a low L2 proficiency seem to hinder the participant from using the more top-down strategies even when they were used in L1 reading. A threshold level of English is required before ESL readers can transfer their L1 reading ability into L2. Evidence also shows that the literacy activities done in L1, in conjunction with the amount of exposure of L2 in situated practice, and the way the ESL learners learn L2 are influential in shaping and in cultivating how they read in L2 (Kong, 2006). Mikulecky & Jeffries (2004) stress the importance of developing a literacy practice by encouraging pleasure reading outside classroom, which aims at extensive reading, and faster

reading, which in turn targets reading fluency, which are both determining factors in helping a learner become a proficient reader.

The critique of Lotherington-Woloszyn (1987) of Hetherington's article "Assessing the suitability of reading materials for ESL students" (1985) informs us about what research says regarding the types of text that is suitable for ESL learners. Lotherington-Woloszyn states that the way educational publishers simplify texts for L1 learners to produce books such as basal readers and special education materials is different from the method used to simplify texts for ESL learners. When simplifying reading materials for ESL learners, Educational publishers take into account the features of the text, the characteristics of the ESL learners, and the educational market conditions. She also advises teachers wanting to simplify texts to facilitate L2 reading to follow the principles of clear, organized writing rather than attempting to abridge the content or to structurally simplify the language. A specific notice was given that the background knowledge assumed of the reader with each text should be discussed before the text is read, and effective reading strategies should be made explicit and practiced in intensive reading classes. In the same article, Lotherington-Woloszyn reports research findings which have shown that background knowledge and cultural expectations (Johnson, 1982), a breakdown in schema processing (Hudson, 1982), different internalized models of reading process (Devine, 1984), and syntax and discourse features of text (Pholsward, 1984) contribute more to text difficulty than knowledge of vocabulary. Another interesting issue she raises is the disadvantage of the extensive use of simplified texts with ESL learners. She backed her point with research findings which made clear that ESL learners bred on simplified readers do not deal effectively with authentic college-level texts (Eskey, 1970). Instead of inducing ESL learners

into developing reading strategies unsuitable for the requirements of unsimplified texts (Honeyfield, 1977), she suggests that ESL teachers opt for “easification” (Bhatia, 1983) in order to develop appropriate and efficient reading strategies to cope with unsimplified texts. Next, she proposes approaches to ESL reading which focus on the reading process rather than on the text difficulty. For that, she suggests the use of reading strategies mapped by Hosenfeld (1977) which make use of think-aloud protocols. She also recommends Carrell’s idea on concentrating on “top-down” or schema-processing skills for readers who depend too much on the linguistic information in the texts, and “bottom-up” or linguistic decoding skills for readers who rely too heavily on overall information and fail to notice the text detail (Carrell, 1984). Finally, she encourages ESL learners to choose materials that are personally motivating to them given that motivation facilitates L2 reading as it potentially reduces difficulty in L2 reader-text interaction.

Purcell-Gates and her team of researchers conduct extensive research on literacy both in young children and adult. Even though her research has not been geared specifically towards ESL learners and deals in good part with the early phase of literacy instruction, the results of her findings are of significant value for ESL teachers and by implication ESL learners. In fact, ESL learners especially those whose native language makes use of writing systems different from the English writing system can benefit from the types of literacy instructions discussed in Purcell-Gates studies as they discuss ways to support learners in their reading process and reading development while seeking to “create literate beings who can and will use print for many and varied purposes.”

In the paper “What oral/written language differences can tell us about beginning instruction” (1989), Purcell-Gates straightens out the misconceptions people have about the relationship between speech and writing. One important point she makes is the distinction that “written language is not oral language written down.” This point is illustrated by the difference in registers, style and syntax between speech and writing. She also points out that “well-read-to children develop knowledge of the language of written narrative and that prepares them for eventual reading because they will be looking for this type of language in books.” This implies that reading aloud to children lays the foundation for their future reading experiences.

In 2002, Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler oriented their studies towards the “Impact of authentic adult literacy instruction on adult literacy practices.” The results shows that literacy instruction is more effective when teachers engage students with texts and purposes for reading and writing those texts that are known to the students – real-life, authentic texts such as reading the newspaper to learn the news relevant to the students’ lives and interests, writing letters that get sent to real people in the lives of the students, reading books and discuss them as readers who respond... All these types of activities can lead to substantive changes in the way that students create literate lives outside of the classroom. This compensates for the questionable success of literacy instruction whose recipients can read and write but do not. The literacy practices of adult learners change in nature or in frequency when they start doing these activities in class. What is highly encouraging about the results shown in this study is the fact that there is no reading ability threshold at which this type of practice is inappropriate. This implies that even low performing students can benefit from this type of instruction while working on improving their reading and writing practices. Findings have also

been reported that those adult students who either adopted new literacy practices or read and wrote more frequently with different types of text began to do this with more complex texts – complex in the sense of linguistic features that render texts more written than oral in nature (Chafe & Danielewicz, 1986).

Palincsar and Duke (2004) investigate “the role of text and text-reader interactions in young children’s reading development and achievement.” Their findings suggest that children learn to value and use various features characteristic of informational text when they use these texts in ways that are consistent with everyday and meaningful uses. Investigations of how texts can be used to enhance subject-matter learning suggest that efforts to integrate content-area and reading instruction promote general literacy knowledge and skill as well as subject-matter knowledge, even for primary-grade students. In this study, they also reinforce the point that was previously made by Menon and Hiebert (1999) who proposed that texts be described in terms of engagingness, accessibility, and generalizability. Generalizability (related to decodability) has long been the main focus for text evaluation, yet these three features – engagingness, accessibility, and generalizability ‘interact with another in dynamic ways; for example, a child may persist in reading a text that is highly engaging, even though it may pose challenges in terms of its accessibility.’ As a result, learners’ reading achievement can be improved by taking into account the other features of a text – accessibility and engagingness – when choosing reading materials.

Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower (2007) explore the role of authentic literacy activities for developing comprehension and writing. The authenticity theory is based on the notion that

language is best acquired within functional contexts (Gee, 1992; Hymes, 1974) and that students learn language not in abstract, decontextualized terms but in application, in a context that language is really for. Lastly, the theory about authenticity is based on the knowledge that language learning occurs best when the learning context matches the real functional context. A clear explanation of what is meant by authentic is provided as well. "To be authentic, a 'text' must be like texts that are used by readers and writers outside of a learning-to-read-or-write context." "To be considered highly authentic, a literacy activity must include an authentic text read or written for an authentic purpose." This article delineates practical ways to conduct authentic reading and writing of both informational and procedural texts. The common points of all the proposed strategies are the requirement that the questions about the text are initiated and stated by the students (not the teacher) and the necessity of help or cooperation from an audience from outside the classroom or within the classroom (not the teacher). Students learn to read and write while they read and write and the use of authentic literacy activities are related to greater growth in the ability to read and write new genres.

Purcell-Gates, Duke, & Martineau (2007) cleared through the result of their findings the question addressed in the long-held debate whether language forms such as reading and writing are best learned through experience by participating in situated use of particular language forms or through explicit instruction in its structure and forms. Their research has proven that no relationship is established between the teacher's degree of explicitness and the students' growth in genre-specific reading and writing abilities. However, it has been reinforced that there is a strong correlation between the degree of authenticity of reading and writing activities and the students' growth in reading and writing abilities. Another interesting finding is

the fact that children from homes with lower levels of parental education grew at the same rate as those from homes with higher levels, and findings regarding explicitness and authenticity also did not differ by level of education.

Burt, Peyton, & Duzer (2005) present their review of research on adult literacy and reading instruction in adult basic education in a brief entitled “how should adult ESL reading instruction differ from adult basic education reading instruction?” They discuss their research findings about four components of reading: vocabulary, alphabetic and word analysis, fluency, comprehension. In each section, they define the role of each reading component and address issues for English Language learners. Afterwards, they propose ways to teach adult ELL with regard to that specific element.

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