

How Do Children Learn to Read Story Books in an EFL Setting?

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Abstract

This paper explores the reading development of 4 EFL young learners who learned to read through story books. The author reviews the reported history of the 4 cases and examines how these young learners gained the access to the oral language to which the written language is connected and recognized. This linkage in turn leads to the emergence of literacy. Though each case adopts slightly different approaches at some point, there are key elements through which these young learners find their entry point to literacy. It is found that in an EFL environment (a) auditory input is the primary source to offer access to oral language which is the basic requirement for learning to read. (b) the acquired oral language, either at word, phrase, or sentence level, if repeatedly linked to its written form, will have a great contribution to the development of early reading. (c) books extensively used are the best teaching materials for learning to read in an EFL setting. (d) teachers and parents who know when and where to intervene and provide needed scaffolds play an important role in the development of early reading.

Key words: teaching EFL young learners, emergent literacy, book-based learning,
parental help in learning to read

INTRODUCTION

Compared with the other language skills--speaking, listening and writing--learning to read in Taiwan is probably the skill that is least confined by the learning environment (Chen, 1996, 2003). Nevertheless, the author found most students who have studied English for at least 6 years do not read for pleasure. Of 50 students investigated in the author's class, there are 28 students who never voluntarily read any story book before freshman year. This finding is consistent with the study of Liaw (1998) which finds that the majority of Taiwanese students are not trained to read independently. Lee (2005a) and Huang (2006) also find students who are non-active readers have difficulty dealing with simplified graded readers or reading authentic materials. All these findings point to the conclusion that English reading education in Taiwan does not take the advantage of reading to create a language learning environment, nor does English reading education reach the point of independent reading, an important language skill for EFL learners who desire to achieve academic success.

The fact that years of colossal investment in English teaching produce functional illiterate or non-active readers is a serious issue that all of the English teachers in Taiwan have to deal with. Most experts contend that the goal of a good reading program should be to promote students to read independently in their early school years (Elley, 2000). In most of the L1 teaching curriculum, book-based reading is incorporated in the early reading program. It starts right from the beginning when teachers or parents read books aloud to children or assist them to read. But it wouldn't take long before they begin to read independently, when, as Krashen (2004) argues, the book-based self-teaching process takes over. Students at this point learn to read for meaning without relying on classroom teaching. (Goodman, 1982; Flurkey & Xu, 2003; Smith, 1994b) Given that this is how literacy happens in L1 reading development, what components of a successful early reading program are missing from the reading program in Taiwan?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading Books as an End and a Means to Improving L1 Reading Skills

Perfetti, Landi, and Oakhill (2005) claim there are two major elements in reading comprehension processing: the identification of words (Stanovich, 1992) and the engagement of assembling these words into messages. In a word, comprehension can not be successful without the identification of words and the retrieval of their meanings. However, the development of high-quality word representations is reflected in fluent reading and must be acquired in large through reading itself (Perfetti, 1985;

Perfetti & Bell, 1991; Stanovich, 2000) because reading is a self-teaching process which provides children with access to “prolonged practice” at decoding (Share, 1995; Nell, 1988). In a word, we learn to decode words through the act of reading. Besides, Krashen (2004) and Anderson (2006) both argue that extensive reading (ER) is the basis to acquiring academic and complex language. There are conclusive findings that show the effectiveness of ER on learners’ language development and attitudes toward language learning: positive attitudes (Dupuy et al., 1996), vocabulary acquisition (Cho & Krashen, 1994; Nation, 1997), grammar (Elley, 1991; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989), reading comprehension (Elley, 1991; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Lai, 1993), and reading strategy (Hayashi, 1999). These findings all point to one variable which is the continuous exposure to print. In contrast, in his study of practiced and unpracticed non-native readers of English, Cooper (1984) finds that unpracticed readers can’t deduce word meanings from context, understand lexical cohesions or understand the semantic relationships between sentences.

Book Reading and L2, FL Reading Skills

Elley is probably the one who initiated the most comprehensive studies of the effectiveness of extensive reading in third world ESL countries. Elley’s studies (1991, 2000) investigated book-based projects in several developing countries from the 1970’s to 1980’s. He points out that, in these developing countries, the English curriculum mostly consists of audio-lingual programs with drills for new words and sentence structures in which he found little room for reading as a way of acquiring the new language. The intervention of the Book Flood Project does better by extensively introducing the vocabulary and structures and increasing the time spent interacting with the language. In addition to providing a large quantity of books, the project introduces the books to beginners, using the Shared Books Method; some even use the Language Experience Approach (Singapore) to cater to the needs of younger learners, such as grade 1 students.

The Shared Book Approach (SBA) (Holdaway, 1979) consists of several elements in which the teacher introduces the story by discussing the author and the illustrations and then encourages students to predict the content of the story. The teacher next reads the story with expression, pausing occasionally to check understanding or to encourage predictions. The story is reread several times over the next few days. Follow-up activities may consist of drawing, acting out the story, reading in pairs, or even rewriting the story, which puts more emphasis on reading for meaning and enjoyment than as a means of language teaching. The examples of the SBA approach include several countries, for example Niue and Fiji, two small islands in the south Pacific. A report on the Fiji study caught the attention of the Administration of Education in Singapore that called for a revision of the approach to English teaching in 1984. The Reading and English Acquisition Program (REAP) was

then introduced in 1985 with a sample of 512 children in grade 1. The program incorporates three elements. In addition to the Shared Book Approach and the Book Flood project of high-interest illustrated story books, the program introduces the Modified Language Experience Approach (MLEA), which requires students to engage in an interesting experience that gives rise to a class discussion, followed by writing up their response, and reading aloud this self-written text to others. Students gain the privilege of creating something to be read to others. This method owes much to Lee and Van Allen (1963) and Ashton-Warner (1963). It was also used by REAP, particularly for beginning grade 1 students in Singapore. Encouragingly, of the 65 language test comparisons, REAP pupils showed significant superiority in 53 improvements, including reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, composition, and listening. There were more than 30 schools involved, with students aged between 6 and 9 for one to three years. The results were so encouraging that the Ministry of Education of Singapore has since adopted REAP on a nationwide basis.

Elley's studies are especially significant because they show that high-interest reading materials rapidly improve reading and listening comprehension in a second language in developing countries where teachers are not highly educated. Salyer (1987) and Janopoulous (1986) also find that L2 learners who read more also write better. Day, Omura and Hiramatsu (1991), Dupay and Krashen (1993), and Pulido (2003) all confirm that L2 learners improve vocabulary with ER. Actually, more such studies in L1 and L2 are summarized in Krashen's study (2004).

There have been few examinations of the effects of ER on EFL learners. Elley's study (2000) and Kuruppu's study (2001) on Sri Lanka are two of them. In Sri Lanka, English is introduced in the third grade. The book-based study of grade 4 and grade 5 students was undertaken in 1995. Twenty schools were selected for the project while 10 schools matched on mean reading achievement served as a control group. The experimental group teachers were asked to use books to perform shared book reading and reading aloud for 15 to 20 minutes each day. After 10 months the project groups showed significant gains in reading achievement: approximately 3 times that of control groups. This "Books in Schools" project was most impressive because the subjects were primary EFL learners who had been learning English for only one or two years. However the design of the project didn't stay at the level of individual words or sentences. Another extensive reading study examines the effects of recreational reading on older EFL children. Cho and Kim (2004) conducted a study of 140 6th grade low-level EFL students in Korea. Both the experimental group and control group had 70 students. For 16 weeks, students in the control group followed the regular textbook-driven curriculum for two 40-minute periods per week, while the experimental group followed the regular curriculum for one 40-minute period but read English story books from the internet during the second weekly period. Those who spent time reading story books made superior gains in reading, vocabulary, spelling

and writing and showed superior attitudes and confidence toward reading and writing in English. Wang and Lee (2007) report a group of 10 to 11-year-old Taiwanese EFL learners whose instructors had read them stories twice a week for more than 3 years had developed the ability of independent reading and a love for silent reading. Except for these studies, few of the studies of voluntary reading have focused on beginning EFL children. They tend to look at older subjects. Mason and Kreshen's study (1997) in Japan fits this catalogue. In this study, the researchers asked an experimental group of university students to read graded readers both in class and for homework. After one semester, these students who had previously failed English made larger gains than the control group and nearly caught up with them. Most impressively, the study found that many of the once reluctant EFL university students became eager readers. Lao and Krashen (2000) report similar results for university EFL students in Hong Kong who participated in a popular literature class that emphasized reading for content and enjoyment. The popular literature group made far greater gains in vocabulary and reading speed than the control group. Also, in a case study of a low proficient learner at a university in Taiwan, Shih and Lee (2006) found that the participant's attitude toward English learning and reading became more positive after one semester of an ER program.

The Threshold of Extensive Reading in EFL Setting

Since language is symbolic, either in spoken or written form, most researchers (Goodman, 1982; Flurkey & Xu, 2003; Smith, 1994b) contend there exist perceptual dimensions of reading/listening and the decoding of linguistic symbols which beginning learners need to acquire. In the case of reading, it is more than understanding what is written down. Reading is linked to speaking, as written words are "decoded" into spoken words. In short, reading brings together visual information from written symbols, phonological information from the sounds of the written symbols, and semantic information from the meanings associated with these written and spoken symbols. All three types of information are used while reading. The problem is that the skills required to acquire the three types of information each take time to learn.

(a) Oral language as an entry point to literacy

Krashen (1997) argues that comprehensible-based input is the central consideration in any FL curriculum. Beginning level learners may acquire aural comprehensible input with the Total Physical Response Approach (Asher, 1994) or Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). These approaches put no pressure on students to use the language production beyond their capacity. The lesson plans are based on activities students will find interesting and comprehensible. Krashen (1997) suggests beginners at this stage like listening to teachers reading aloud from

interesting, comprehensible texts, and like stories. He also contends that given enough comprehensible input, all aspects of skills will be present in the input and the acquisition of grammar will take care of itself if the presented message is interesting and comprehensible.

Since listening is rather important at beginning levels, Krashen (1997) suggests beginning learners may self-collect brief recordings of topics they find interesting, then listen to the recordings as many times as they like (Dupuy, 1999; Rodrigo & Krashen, 1996). In fact, Krashen's emphasis on comprehensible narrow listening or conversational language input in the early stage of language acquisition is consistent with the opinions of many reading experts. Anderson et al. (1985), Hall (1987), Steinberg (1993) and Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) all contend that sufficient auditory input and oral language competence are basic requirements for the development of reading because oral vocabulary acquired is a predictor of reading proficiency later on (Snow et al., 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998, 2001). Except for building larger vocabularies and greater understanding of spoken language, Krashen (1997) does not explicitly explain how oral language is connected to text reading. He does mention a three-stage plan for ER. He suggests that students read artificially constructed text at stage one which will bring the students to a level of competence where easy authentic texts (light reading) are comprehensible.

From what Krashen has argued, it appears that he hypothesizes that beginners' reading ability is built on conversational language, both in its listening and written forms in stories. In other words, the acquired conversational language is the source of comprehensible input and a basis on which to begin a large exposure to reading, starting with children being read aloud to in order to introduce the written language in its listening form. Krashen's emphasis on using conversational language in the beginning reading is consistent with the natural development of L1 readers. The question now is how beginning EFL readers learn to read through conversational language which is not provided in the EFL environment.

(b) Conversational (oral) language and word recognition

In the first place, L1 language learners build the lexicon through oral communication with people around them. Reading starts to happen when a child successfully decodes written words into speech sounds in order to associate them with the acquired listening/speaking vocabulary for comprehension. This means beginning readers need to establish strong links between orthographic forms and the sound of the language in order to phonologically process oral and written information. At this point, phonological awareness, word recognition proficiency and vocabulary knowledge are good predictors of successful reading for beginning readers (Bowey, 2005; Perfetti, Landi & Oakhill, 2005; Wagner et al., 2006). However, Moustafa (1993) contends that these skills, even for L1 learners, are acquired through extensive exposures to whole,

meaningful texts. The exposure may not be deemed to be “reading”; it is a gesture of reading. Reading books in this sense is performed through being read aloud to, guided oral reading, echo reading, paired reading, repeated reading and extensive use of rhyme books. Words are sounded out to make associations with word meanings and orthographic symbols (Barchers, 1998). The more they read, the more phonic patterns and generalizations they absorb, which helps them to decode words even better.

(c) FL setting and word recognition

If conversational language (either in listening or written form) is the prerequisite for learning to read, FL learners have more problems acquiring oral target language than L1 or L2 readers. L1 readers acquire their conversational language through oral communication. L2 learners are immersed in the target language environment in school, and the language is also put to use in settings other than schools. In contrast, FL learners painstakingly “learn” the conversational language in the classroom setting and do not have the chance to practice oral vocabulary in a social context. The quality and quantity of oral lexicon acquired is less likely to be immediately put into use in reading stories. Moreover, oral vocabulary has to be associated with its written representatives in order to make the first step toward reading.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

From the previous literature review, we know book-based researches have confirmed the effectiveness of books used in developing reading skills. However, these studies do not explicitly explain how oral language is learned and connected to early reading. Their subjects tend to be older learners who have passed beyond the level of word recognition but do not have book reading experience. Their process of learning to read through the use of books is unclear to most EFL reading teachers. This study will involve a close investigation of 4 young EFL learners who learn to read extensively. Four questions will be examined:

1. how oral language is learned in an EFL environment;
2. how acquired oral language is connected to text reading;
3. how extensively books are used to learn to read books extensively;
4. what teachers/parents do to help children learn to read.

CASE STUDY OF FOUR SUCCESSFUL YOUNG LEARNERS

METHOD

Participants

The 4 subjects are the author's daughter Alice (freshman student, class of 2006), a female student Betty (class of 2007), who is a neighbor of the author, and two female students Carol and Donna (classes of 2006 and 2007) in the author's English novel classes.

Instruments and Procedures

Except for Case 1, which is a review of a long-term observation, the other three cases are reports of the interviews. This study focuses on how the subjects build their reading abilities before they can read extensively. The patterns of their reading behavior and attitudes toward book reading are also analyzed.

RESULTS

Case 1 (Alice)

Although the subject is the author's daughter, it is claimed that this report is not a pre-prepared experiment but a review and analysis of the subject's previous language development. In fact, the author did not have the notion of EFL early reading process when the subject was in contact with the new language. The purpose for reading aloud with the subject was merely to help her explore English picture books. It was not until she could read extensively that the author started to trace back and analyze this particular process.

When the subject was 2 years old and could communicate in Chinese, the author would read her bed-time English stories. The stories were read aloud in a mixture of Chinese and English. Since the author used the oral vocabulary learned from the books in daily life, the subject gradually acquired the meaning and sound of the words. The author also read aloud on a variety of topics (such as people, animals, culture, science, society) for 30 minutes a day, three to four days a week. The subject was allowed to choose the books she liked to read. Conversations from Disney videos were also sources from which she learned the oral language. Moreover, the movie-related Disney picture books were also her favorites.

The subject went to America when she was three years and ten months old and attended an American preschool for 8 months. She rarely spoke English in class, but her listening ability was more than enough to make her quite happy to go to school. Activities in school were mostly sports, games, and social interaction. There were no formal language lessons, but the teacher would read aloud one or two picture books every day before the school was over. English bedtime stories read by the author at

this time were also her favorites. The author found that because the subject had repeatedly listened to some of the stories, she could join in with reading aloud, spotting words, or finishing the sentences. One particularly interesting thing was the subject started trying to write the words she could understand by ear. The spelling might not have been correct, but the attempt showed her phonological awareness of written words. At this time, she was also eager to read books that play with sounds, e.g. Dr. Seuss's books, at this time. The subject came back to Taiwan at the age of four years and ten months old and started to attend a Chinese kindergarten. There were still bedtime stories read to her until the age of 6 after which a lot of her favorite books were not repeatedly read for her. Therefore, the subject started to read on her own half a year before she attended elementary school. Most of the books she read during this period had already been read aloud, but she also read a lot of new books on her own. The author found that she focused on stories and ignored unknown vocabulary. When she wanted to know the story in detail, she would repeat it again and again. The subject did not ask for explanation when she couldn't understand, nor did the author add any Chinese translation in her books.

When the subject reached elementary school and picture books no longer satisfied her, she started to try half-picture books. This stage lasted for 2 years. By grade 3, the subject started reading chapter books. At the beginning of this stage, the reading was mainly of narrow reading because the subject focused on book series, such as *The Box Car Children*, *Little Apple Series*, *Magic School Bus*, *Full House*, and *Sweet Valley Junior High*. Also, listening input was crucial to the effects of reading. At that time, the subject listened to tapes of English plays, *Adventures in Odyssey*, when the author took her to and from school every day. The content of the tapes included Bible stories, moral teachings, stories of friendships, family relationships, and so on. They served both educational and entertainment purposes, with characters and plots full of mystery and intrigue. The subject would listen to the tapes for about 40 minutes a day and repeat each story until she fully understood it. It may be that her acquired conversational language helped her understand the initial reading of the chapter books in which the text was full of dialogue. The tapes also provided background cultural knowledge necessary for reading the chapter books.

Apart from independent reading, the subject did not take any English lessons before or after middle school, nor did she listen to English lessons on the radio. She learned to read extensively since grade 3. In grade 7, she passed the first stage of the High Intermediate Test of GEPT (General English Proficiency Test).

Case 2 (Betty)

The subject is a neighbor of the author. The author met her at her school English recitation contest when the author was one of the judges. The subject's oral reading performance convinced the author that she had the ability to read independently and

this was confirmed.

The subject started taking private English classes twice a week with an ESL speaking teacher in grade 2. The teacher introduced letters and sounds. After several weeks, the teacher applied word cards with pictures, making sounds and showing words to help students connect the semantic, phonological and orthographical information. In addition to teaching with word cards, the teacher also used picture books, reading one small book each semester and focusing on one or 2 sentences each class. A lot of time was spent explaining and practicing these sentences. Actually, this is an audio-lingual approach used in most English classes in Taiwan.

After a year, the subject's mother decided to add an English language broadcast *Let's Talk in English*, and began listening to this broadcast with her daughter every day. At that time, the content of *Let's Talk in English* mainly consisted of children's stories. There would be a story read aloud and explained from Monday through Friday. The teachers in the broadcast used both Chinese and English to tell the stories. The knowledge of letter-sound correspondences was promoted on Saturdays. In addition to *Let's Talk in English*, the subject's mother bought her a lot of books to read. Since the mother was not confident about her own pronunciation, she did not read to her daughter. However, she asked her daughter to read to her in order to check her comprehension of the oral reading. By grade 5, the subject had progressed to listening to *Studio Classroom* and reading half-picture books. She started reading chapter books in grade 7 and has continued reading books and listening to advanced English broadcasts ever since. Although she took English classes between grade 2 and grade 4, the subject did not go to English cram schools while at middle and high schools.

Case 3 (Carol)

This subject is one of the students in the author's reading class. The subject appeared to be an ER reader, since her performance in writing assignments was far better than average students in the class. It was confirmed that she was an ER reader. She had been reading books since grade 8.

The subject went to the same private school from grade 1 to grade 12. Even though private schools tend to focus on English learning, the subject's mother was worried that she was not improving as quickly as her classmates and decided to send her to an English cram school in grade 2. In the cram school, conversational language and activities were the main focus of the class. The school streamed students by levels. The subject began attending this cram school at grade 2 and achieved the highest level by grade 8. However, the cram school never required book reading.

It was not until the subject took on an intensive winter English course in the US and saw the *X-Files* novels in a book store that she started reading extensively. The *X-Files* stories were the subject's favorite movie series, and the books were written with a lot of dialogue. Although the subject was familiar with the stories, she admitted

to using a dictionary while she first started reading the novels. After some time, though, she changed her strategy, focusing on what she understood and forgoing the use of a dictionary. She then started reading detective novels in grade 9. From then on, the subject was engrossed in novels. She gradually added science and general fiction to the list. To this day, she always carries a book wherever she goes and even has her own English blog to share the stories she has read.

Case 4 (Donna)

The subject was a student in the author's English novel reading class. At the beginning of the semester, the class had to answer a survey and the subject indicated that she had read quite a lot of books since elementary school.

The subject entered a private English class in grade 3 where the native English teacher played games, sang songs, and created a lot of activities to provide comprehensible listening input for his students while bearing teaching story reading in mind. The class met 5 days a week and the teacher would read a book a day. The author was told this teacher focused on content rather than language, pausing a few times to explain the key words with word cards. With this approach, students might not understand every word or sentence in the book, but the affective aspects of the shared book reading encouraged students subsequently to view the book voluntarily. In this way, students were motivated to borrow the books to read and savor the illustrations and at the same time engage in guessing the language from the context, as well as from pieces of semantic information revealed from the teacher's reading aloud. The subject said the teacher would repeat the book several times during the next few days, which gave students more opportunities to confirm their guesses. They were thus encouraged to read what had been read to them.

When the students had been in the class for a year, the teacher divided them into several groups and assigned each group a book each week which they would read and use to role-play the story. This activity integrated the skills of listening, reading and speaking and sometimes the re-writing of the story. The subject said she had formed the habit of independent reading since then. In the interview, when asked how she dealt with language difficulties, she replied that since she read for meaning and content, language difficulties were not her primary concern. She would share her thoughts with someone who had read the same book and discuss the story or go back and read the book again. She reported that she took this class in grade 3 and started to read half-picture books at grade 4. Though she left the class in grade 5 and joined a conversational class at a cram school, she continued to read half-picture books until grade 7 when she met a fellow student from the US who introduced chapter books to her. She has been in the habit of reading English books ever since.

DISCUSSION

Language Development Features of the Four Subjects

In Case 1, English oral vocabulary, including both semantic and phonological information, was gained through Chinese translation and pictures. These words were put into daily use to reinforce their meanings. At the same time, the words were encountered and recycled in further reading. In addition to reading stories, there were subject/topic matter book readings, which catered to Alice's interests and cognitive development. Like her L1, English provides Alice with a tool for collecting information through the use of English words.

In contrast with Alice's learning-centered perspective of language learning, Betty's new language was introduced in grade 2 with simultaneous phonological, visual, and semantic information. Her first teacher used a small book as the source of text. The concept behind the teaching approach was that words are learned to build up sentences, while grammar teaching can help recognition of sentence structures, which in turn improves reading comprehension. This concept of language learning is very different from that of Case 1, where Alice tried to understand whatever she got interested through the new language, which is from content learning to language learning.

However, Betty did not only take this private English class but also started listening to stories. The phonological, orthographical and semantic information of the words was learned through explanation of the stories, using both English and some Chinese. Though this was not a face-to-face or one-on-one interaction between teacher and learner, the quantity and quality of the model language input was quite high for an EFL environment. Moreover, the continuous exposure to print ensured the repetition of previously learned words. Unfortunately, Betty's mother did not provide scaffolding during the period of word recognition. Betty took more than 5 years to move from picture books to chapter books which is a little longer than Alice (Table 1).

In this case before the age of 5, it was easier for Alice to learn by listening than by recognizing written text, which is a heavy demand for children before this age. Alice's learning of the new language before the age of five concentrated on oral vocabulary, phrases, and conversational discourse patterns. As more books were read, and along with her cognitive development, Alice was getting aware of the relationships between letters and sounds. In rhyming or poetic language books, though lacking the intricate plots of stories, it was fun to play with the sounds, which thus helped word recognition at that time. She got a sense of achievement by actually "reading" words in terms of sounding out the written symbols. The spoken forms learned by heart were connected to the written forms at this point. In paired reading, Alice could spot some of the words or even finish parts of the sentences in the text.

This word recognition stage was critically important since it was the first sign of

attempting to read. However, it was not until Alice went beyond this stage that the emergence of literacy was detected. After Alice moved toward reading half-picture books, the reliance on word recognition to get semantic information was more obvious than her use of picture cues to predict the content. As the skills of fast recognition of words, phrases and sentence structures were required at this stage, the pictures in the half-picture books were simply used to support or confirm her comprehension. The stage of reading a large amount of half-picture books thus serves as a prerequisite to reading chapter books.

Different from the cases of 1, 2, and 3, Donna's first English teacher was an experienced native speaker who developed tasks, activities, and theme-based activities around story reading. This activity-based language teaching approach, though effective in providing model language, is extremely demanding on teachers in both planning and implementation in an EFL setting. The oral language is gained through the use of the new language as a tool in the activities, tasks and games. Like the effect of the Total Physical Response (TPR) used in the early FL curriculum, these activities demand heavy listening to the key words and use what is comprehended to make a response to the activities. The story telling in this context is like a guessing game, with listeners solving language comprehension problems. Though the teacher did not expect every sentence to be understood, he did care if students got the gist and enjoyed the content by guessing the meaning from his vivid, impressive, and expressive story telling. The approach was so successful that students were enthusiastic about borrowing the book and "reading" the pictures to review what they had guessed from the story telling. After Donna had acquired enough oral and written vocabulary, she began to read not only pictures but written words in the books, and tried to find meanings through the visual, phonological and semantic information. The emergence of literacy was found at this point.

In addition to everyday story telling routines, Donna's teacher created a lot of literacy events in his EFL classroom. He would ask students to draw pictures of their own stories and explain their stories to the teacher. The teacher would then help them put a simple text to these pictures. This approach is similar to the Modified Language Experience Approach used in Singapore (Elley, 2000). These students got the chance to practice writing so that sounds, reading, and writing mutually reinforced each other. Actually, it is also a meaningful phonics self-teaching approach which is much more meaningful than the abstract and unconnected chanting of the words.

Betty learned to read simply by listening to stories and reading books. This phenomenon is, to some extent, similar to the language development that tends to occur in an L1 situation where children seem to learn to read without any formal teaching but through exposure to text and to reading (Hall, 1987). Children may find their own entry point and begin to work out for themselves the patterns that link spoken and written texts. However, emergent literacy only works for some children in

an EFL situation. In retrospect, Betty's success owes much to the multiple skills built up through listening to storytelling and her mother's support of further book reading. This "book-flood" practice is consistent with Elley's studies, showing that highly interesting materials rapidly improve reading and listening comprehension even where teachers are not highly educated.

Carol did not start reading books until 8th grade. However, from this time, she read chapter books full of dialogues. It was found the oral language she acquired in cram school helped her find an entry point into dramatized texts. Also the *X-Files* books are similar to the half-picture books used by Alice, Betty, and Donna. All four subjects reached a point where they were quite capable of word recognition and were working toward learning discourse patterns. Carol may use her previous knowledge and images obtained from the television series as the cues to help her look for meaning in the printed text while Alice, Betty, Donna relied on the pictures in books. As Carol's reading fluency improved, she did not have to rely on oral language. She then tried other novels, like detective stories and science fiction.

The reading history of Carol indicates that there are both disappointments and hopes in the teaching of reading in Taiwan. Reading teachers seem to have less confidence in the power of reading than the power of directly teaching vocabulary and grammar. They are still waiting for their students' competence and confidence to read books. This lack of confidence is revealed in the arrangement of the syllabus because book reading is not incorporated in the curriculum, except a very few graded readers during the summer or winter break. However, the success of the 4 subjects indicates that students of various levels and stages of language ability can find their home-run books as the entry point to literacy and teachers and adults bear the responsibility to help them find these books.

Table 1
Comparisons of Four Cases

Source of conversational language input	Alice	1. Picture books read aloud 2. Daily use at home 3. <i>Adventures in Odyssey</i> (drama listening) 4. Disney Movies
	Betty	1. ESL English teacher 2. Story listening from <i>Let's Talk in English</i> radio program
	Carol	1. Conversation classes at school 2. Conversation classes at cram school
	Donna	Games, storytelling, activities, drama
Parental involvement	Alice	Reading aloud between age 2 and 6 Paired reading at age 5 and 6

	Betty	1. Listening to <i>Let's Talk in English</i> 2. Parent checking oral reading comprehension 3. Help finding books to read in glade 3
	Carol	None
	Donna	None
Starting age of language contact	Alice	Age 2
	Betty	Grade 2
	Carol	Grade 1
	Donna	Grade 3
Age vs. language development	Alice	Half year before glade 1: picture book Glade 1: half-picture book Glade 3: chapter book
	Betty	Glade 3: picture book Glade 5: half-picture book Glade 7: chapter book
	Carol	Glade 8: chapter book
	Donna	Glade 3: picture book Glade 4: half-picture book Glade 7: chapter book

Auditory Input in an EFL Fashion

Oral reading directly from a text is merely incomprehensible if the young learners have not acquired sufficient oral lexicon. However, in an EFL environment like Taiwan, children are not prepared with the oral English lexicon that native speakers have acquired before they go to school. Nevertheless, this study found all of the 4 subjects used various ways to learn auditory language before learning to read (Table 2).

However, except for Carol, who learned the oral language in a classroom setting, the source of the oral lexicon of the other subjects was in large part from story listening. This approach has several features. First, there is no planning as to the extent of how many or what words are to be learned before book listening. The teaching materials mostly cater to the young learners' needs or cognitive development. Since children use new vocabulary as a tool to collect information or to fulfill their needs, either for curiosity or for pleasure, the vocabulary is learned in a meaningful context. Second, the oral lexicon is incidentally learned through bilingual story listening in which children concentrate on story content. This meaning-driven listening approach helps children focus on key words, either at the word, phrase or sentence level. The story listening, in this context, is more like a guessing game than a language learning process. Since the learned oral lexicon is encountered in more story listening, new vocabulary is further accumulated on a reciprocal basis. As more oral

language listening take place, more complex oral language is comprehended, along with more discourse patterns which improve the reading of more complex written language.

Table 2

Source of Oral Lexicon Learning

Subject	Source of oral lexicon learning
Alice	1. bilingual translation in English story telling 2. story language used in daily life 3. further storytelling, encountering the words previously learned 4. Listening to tapes: <i>Adventures in Odyssey</i>
Betty	1. native ESL teacher as a source of beginning listening input 2. listening to English radio programs
Carol	Conversation classes both in and out of the school from grade 1 to grade 8
Donna	1. games, activities, drawing, and writing their own stories 2. contextualized story book telling (e.g. stage props, visual aids, rich body language) 3. group-reading & replaying the story.

From Listening to Reading and Shared Books to Reading Books

In the cases of Alice, Betty and Donna, books were the primary source and site for oral listening and oral lexicon. The acquired oral lexicon, if put to extensive exposure to text reading in books, would gradually be linked to intensify the relationships between sounds and letters. This link manifested itself in the phenomenon where children are enthusiastic about sounding out words while reading. Experienced teachers or parents, like Donna's and Alice's, are knowledgeable about providing more picture books or artificially constructed small books, for example nursery rhyme books or Dr. Seuss's books. Adults at this period play a critical role in providing scaffolds for these readers using guided reading, paired reading or echo reading. They may as well take this opportunity to pass on meaningful chunks, thought groups, or even discourse patterns of the written language through their meaningful oral reading.

This study found that as the subjects accumulated more reading lexicon and increased the reading fluency, they were less likely to rely on pictures than on words. Afterwards, they would begin reading half-picture books. This phenomenon is a significant and reliable indicator of progress toward more advanced reading, which is chapter book reading.

However, most of the subjects in this study took longer period of time to reach chapter book than from picture books to half-picture books. A self-access strategy was noticed among these beginning chapter book readers, who would start with narrow

reading in which they either choose meaning-centered home-run books or book series with familiar background knowledge.

From the above analysis, the book-based approach not only provides a natural environment for language acquisition. It is also based on the comprehensible input theory. The arguments are as follows. First, meaning is encoded through dual-code input, picture and language symbols, where pictures offer cues to guess the language. Secondly, the story or content of the book is predictable and related to life experience. Thirdly, children's books contain carefully controlled language patterns and deliberately regulate vocabulary size and vocabulary knowledge which match children's cognitive development. Fourthly, story-based books intend to attract children to focus on the story rather than on language. In the long run, book-based children tend to focus on what is comprehensible and ignore what is incomprehensible. Gradually, their concept of reading is focused on meaning, which is similar to the reading strategy of advanced proficiency readers (Devine, 1984; Carrell, 1989).

Also self-teaching started to happen once the subjects had learned to read independently. The self-teaching phenomenon was more manifest because these subjects did not have to stay in the classroom to learn. For example, Betty attended a private English class in grade 2 and grade 3. After she listened to *Let's Talk in English* and began to read picture books in grade 3, she left the class in grade 4 and never attended any English classes outside school. Donna attended a book-based class in grade 3 and learned to read in grade 5. She never joined any language class outside school after grade 7. This self-teaching phenomenon is consistent with what 蘇復興 (1999) and 曹逢甫 (2004) recommended: English teachers should help students to bring them to a level where they can read independently so that they are not confined to the classroom to learn the language.

The Role of Teachers and Parents

This study finds oral lexicon is not the only prerequisite for successful early reading. Teachers and parents need to intervene and help at some points. All 4 successful readers prepared their oral lexicon before they really engaged in book reading. However, Carol took English conversation classes both in and out of school for 8 years before she got interested in book reading. In contrast, Betty's mother accompanied her in listening to *Let's Talk in English* in grade 3 and bought her picture books to practice decoding the words at the same time. Donna's teacher and Alice's parent also play an important role in creating an oral language environment and reading to them at the same time. From this study, we conclude how teachers or parents intervene to help beginning readers is very critical to early reading development (Bush & van Ijzendoorn, 1995; Powell-Smith, Stoner, Shinn & Good, 2000). However, parents do not have to be reading experts in order to help their children. For example, Betty's mother used a listening medium to build up her oral

lexicon and bought her story books to read. Though she hesitated to read stories to her child, she knew how to use a good medium and a good strategy to help her child to learn to read. We can conclude that as the child's first language teacher, the parent's concept of learning is very important for their success in reading.

This finding is also consistent with the study by 張顯達 (2006), which finds that among the 5 institutes in which English is taught (bilingual kindergarten, cram school, individual tutor, parents and church), those children whose parents are involved in teaching their children make the best gain in English learning. Their achievement was far beyond the second best of those who had individual tutors.

CONCLUSION

For young learners, spoken language is a medium for cognitive development through which the new language is naturally encountered, understood, practiced and learned. With this concept in mind, teachers or parents can identify the particular opportunities of a task or activity and then develop them into a learning experience for children. The tasks or activities in turn create an environment for learning the foreign language.

As the teacher uses task to construct an environment for the use and learning of the spoken language in a foreign language situation, it seems non-native teachers or parents may not be ideal models of the new language. Nevertheless, in this study, it is discovered that spoken language practiced at word, phrase and sentence level still has an enormous impact on building discourse skills which are essential to early reading.

However, while prolonged direct teaching of vocabulary and grammar may never lead to the competence and confidence necessary for extensive reading if book reading is not emphasized in time, this study finds that young learners are helped by extensive use of interesting stories which lead to reading extensively.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

Since the conventions and rules of the written language take time to learn, young foreign language learners need to be provided with opportunities for literacy events, the social activities that involve reading and writing, to connect oral language to written forms. For example, students may draw pictures to make their own picture books in which the written form of their oral language is practiced. While reading their favorite books to them, teachers may encourage them to spot certain words or finish part of a sentence.

For children from the age of 5 and up, spoken forms should have priority, but the

written forms of the acquired oral vocabulary can be introduced soon after. Children at this age are capable of finding the literacy entry point and connecting the written form to the spoken form. They are eager to read books with rhymes or chants and have the ability to sense the relationships between written and spoken forms.

As children move from picture books toward half-picture books, it is shown that they recognize more words and gain reading speed. Exposure to a large amount of print is extremely critical to the emergence of literacy during this period. Once they find they are able to read one or two books on their own, they will be confident enough to find more books to read.

It should be noted that the design of the class does not have to stay at the level of individual words or sentences when EFL learners have been studying the language for less than one or two years. As long as students are eager to *guess* the story from the book, teachers may begin to challenge them to write and present a play, for example, based on the book they choose to read. In the process, students read the book, discuss or share the content, rewrite the story and then use the story to role-play. This approach, which integrates the story telling, actually creates a language ecosystem for EFL young learners.

As the first person to introduce English to Alice, the author did not understand the importance of phonological awareness at that time. There was no particular plan to teach her rhyming, segmenting, or blending. As long as children acquire sufficient oral lexicon, they would gain more from being read aloud to, paired reading, echo reading or guided reading than from formal teaching of phonological processing for sound awareness and letter-sound correspondence. Also, the involvement of parents or teachers may eliminate the frustration sensed by beginners when they try to decode words through sounds. Best of all, oral reading by parents presents the structure of the language (semantics, morphology and syntax) and narrative discourse in a meaningful context, which children will meet in more advanced reading later on.

A good reading program in the early school years would reduce the tremendous cost of educational investment. Given that the market of English teaching to children is like a war zone, it is not surprising to find that the earlier children begin their language lessons, the sooner they give up learning. The government should provide parents and teachers with guidelines for the preparation of early literacy.

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兒童如何在英語為外語的環境下學習閱讀故事書

摘要

本論文透過 4 位案例之學習過程的回顧資料，分析這些案例在英語為外國語言之環境下如何經由書籍接觸學習口說語言，以至將口說語言連結至書寫語言及至最後成功地獨立閱讀書籍。他們成功的路徑雖然個別稍為不同，然而此研究結果顯示：1. 初階外語閱讀教學極為依靠聽語來源以取得口說語言。2. 已習得之口說語言，不管其內容是單詞、單語或單句，只要能大量接觸並對照、連結至書寫語言，都會對早期閱讀學習有一定程度之貢獻。3. 書籍是英語為外語環境下用來連結口說與書寫語言，以至使閱讀發生最好的教材。4. 父母及教師在兒童外語學習的每一階段，及時正確的介入並給予足夠的輔助是這些兒童成功的最重要關鍵。

關鍵詞：英語為兒童外語之教學 初階閱讀 以故事書為主之閱讀學習
家長對閱讀學習之幫助