Reading Intervention in Year 1: Different Strategies and Their Effectiveness on Supporting EAL Learners

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Abstract
This study intended to determine whether guided reading is an optimal approach to improving reading levels for students learning English as an additional language (EAL). Two approaches to reading instruction: (1) guided reading and (2) teaching reading by assigning reading comprehension worksheets were compared through intervention groups. Twelve Year 1 students aged five or six from an international school in Shanghai were randomly stratified into two groups with Group A receiving guided reading instruction, while Group B received comprehension worksheets with limited teacher guidance. After eight weeks, a pretesting and post-testing data analysis indicated that more progress in reading can be witnessed in the guided reading group where students improved their reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. In addition, five teachers from three international schools were interviewed about their preferred strategies to support reading development for EAL learners. The results of which indicated that interviewees were in favor of guided reading as the more effective approach to EAL students’ reading instruction.

Keywords
Reading intervention, guided reading, reading comprehension worksheets.; EAL students

The achievement gap among students’ reading abilities, especially speakers of English as an additional language (EAL) is a pressing issue facing educators at international schools. This becomes especially problematic when such students are being educated through a curriculum designed for native speakers in which great deal of formal education depends on students’ ability to read with a secure level of comprehension. Therefore, helping students to close this ever-widening gap becomes a top priority within educators at an early age.

The researcher taught Year 1 at an international school where English is the medium of instruction. Therefore, the ability to read effectively and comprehensively is the key to unlocking the curriculum, without which students could encounter challenges related to content-specific academic studies, risking lagging behind in progress. In recent years, student enrolment has also witnessed a higher proportion of students from an Asian background who may speak English as an additional language, as a result, a clear disparity can be found within the achievement gap among pupils in reading.

Numerous recent research indicates that a child who lags in reading rarely catches up in later schooling (Lentz, 1988; Neuman & Dickinson, 2001; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Torgesen, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2001, as cited in Iaquinta, 2006). Thus, all teachers were aware of the need to develop more meaningful approaches to reading instruction, specifically for learners who speak English as an additional language. Therefore, the efficacy of two reading instruction approaches: 1) guided reading and 2) reading comprehension worksheets were compared in this study to ex-
plore a more optimal method in accelerating growth in EAL students' reading levels.

1. Literature Review

1.1 Guided Reading

Guided reading, as an instructional approach has been developing since the 1940s. In 1946, educator Betts proposed directed reading activities and stressed giving directions to students on how to read. Following this, Gray and Reese (1957) echoed Betts (1946)' methodology, using 'guided reading' as a step in a reading lesson. Then, Bond and Wagner (1966) designed a nine-step daily reading lesson plan: Guided Silent Reading. Next, two scholars, George and Space (1986) designed a five-step model as a primary school reading lesson, including: introduction of vocabulary, silent reading, oral reading, skill-building, and supplementary activities. The second step concerns guided reading (Ford & Optiz, 2008).

In the 1990s, Mooney mentioned guided reading as a teaching method that meets students' instructional needs. After this, Fountas and Pinnell (1996) made guided reading a method for defining small-group education (Ford & Optiz, 2008).

As Fountas and Pinnell (1996) explained, guided reading is “an instructional setting that enables you to work with a small group of students to help them learn effective strategies for processing text with understanding” (p. 2). According to Iaquinta (2006), it is a teaching approach for struggling and independent readers with three purposes: 1) meet students’ diverse needs; 2) instruct students in reading increasingly difficult texts; 3) apply problem-solving skills when encountering unfamiliar words and structures.

According to the National Reading Panel (2000), a guided reading model that incorporated support from teachers, peers, or adults benefitted learners' word recognition, fluency, and comprehension across all grades. Thus, Fountas and Pinnell (1996)'s definition of guided reading will be applied to this research.

1.2 Guided Reading and English Language Learners

Avalos et al. (2007) argued that English-language learners (ELLs) also benefit from guided reading. ELLs have more practical opportunities when this model’s language is modified. Those modifications include teaching of vocabulary and linguistic structures (semantics, syntax, morphology, culture). This research emphasizes teachers who modify guided reading lessons by incorporating features including modeling comprehension to help EAL learners.

1.3 Reading Comprehension Worksheets

This study’s alternative method gives students reading comprehension questions, a traditional method for practicing reading skills. Spor and Schneider (1998) surveyed 435 teachers on their views of teaching materials, with results indicating 17% reported using worksheets or workbooks during classes. Increased literacy indicates that children spend up to 70% of reading instruction on worksheets (Anderson et al., 1985, as cited in Reutzel & Cooter, 1991). Traditional worksheets and frequent accessible text reading may help children to practice letter recognition and phonemic awareness (Afflerbach et al., 2008). Therefore, worksheets are utilized in this study.

1.4 Previous Research

In the past, several studies compared guided reading's efficacy with other reading instruction approaches for native English speakers and primary English learners. Tobin and Calhoon (2009)'s study compared two reading programs’ effects on Year 1 native English students with the first group receiving guided reading, while the second group being explicitly taught phonics and comprehension strategies. The results demonstrated that the guided reading group outperformed the other group on phoneme segmentation. On the other hand, Nayak and Sylvia (2013) stratified Chinese students in Hong Kong to conduct reading intervention. Group A received guided reading, Group B read the same material as an e-book, and Group C received no intervention. Although students in the intervention groups performed significantly better than the no-treatment group in reading accuracy and comprehension, no significant difference was seen between the guided reading and e-book groups. These studies demonstrate that guided reading can more effectively improve native and non-native young English learners' reading competencies. In contrast, Denton et al. (2014) compared explicit teaching and guided reading on two groups of Year 1 students, with the results indicating that the explicit instruction group significantly outperformed the guided reading group in phonemic decoding and comprehension.

Reviewing the studies above revealed that no previous research has been conducted in the context of international school with EAL learners being the participants, and nor have previous studies compared the use of guided reading and reading comprehension worksheets.
1.5 Research Question

The research question for this study was: To what extent does guided reading help Year 1 EAL students make accelerated progress in their reading levels?

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design and Rationale

A quantitative method was adopted for this study. First, reading tests results before and after the intervention were compared and analyzed then five teachers at three Shanghai international schools were interviewed about their perceptions of approaches to EAL learners’ reading instruction.

2.2 Setting and Participants

This research was conducted in a Year 1 class at an international school where British national curriculum is adopted. Reading instruction is incorporated into the curriculum with each class being assigned eight literacy lessons weekly. Twelve student participants from one Year 1 class with evenly distributed gender groups, six girls and six boys and similar PM Benchmark reading levels were selected. They were around six years old and are Mandarin speakers learning English as an additional language. Semi-structured interviews were conducted of five primary teachers at three Shanghai international schools.

3. Data Collection

3.1 Instruments and Materials

The instrument utilized in this study was the PM Benchmark Reading Assessment, which is a reading assessment tool widely used in international schools which evaluates students' reading levels and tracks their reading progress.

The guided reading materials for both groups were from Oxford Reading Tree (ORT) which is a 20-level book series used in British schools for 4- to 11-year-olds including fiction and non-fiction with age-appropriate and educational content.

3.2 Procedure

Before the research started, students’ baseline reading level was evaluated by administering a pre-test based on the PM Benchmark assessment. Afterwards, twelve students were stratified into two groups for reading intervention lessons: Group A (guided reading lesson) and Group B (reading comprehension worksheets) (see Table 1). For eight weeks, each group met twice per week for 30 minutes during which both groups read an identical ORT story. After eight weeks, post-intervention assessments were conducted by different teachers.

Table 1. Grouping Information

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<th>Group A: Guided Reading</th>
<th>Group B: Reading Comprehension Worksheet</th>
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Expected PM Assessment levels for Year 1:

- Below: Pink
- Just Below: Red
- On track: Yellow; Blue;
- Above: Green, Orange
- High (Exceeding grade expectations): Turquoise and above

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Group A: Guided Reading Group: The researcher’s lesson structure for the guided reading group followed Fountas and Pinnell (2012)’s guided reading lesson structure, which incorporated specific components.

- **Step 1: Text Selection:** A book’s level is crucial for EAL students therefore fiction and non-fiction books from the right band were chosen.
- **Step 2: Text Introduction:** Before reading, the teacher discussed the story’s context to help EAL learners with scaffolding the topic and enhancing their background knowledge.
- **Step 3: Text Reading:** During reading, the teacher first read aloud to students to model reading fluency and decoding skills, and to ensure they could accurately learn new vocabulary. The teacher then asked students to read in pairs or individually
- **Step 4: Text Discussion:** After reading, during teacher-student discussions, the teacher shared pre-prepared questions to check students’ understanding of the story. Then during student-student discussions, students discussed the stories and shared ideas.
- **Step 5: Teaching Points:** The researcher summarized the reading strategies that the teacher taught during their lesson.

Group B: Reading Comprehension Worksheet Group: The storybook and worksheet were provided for the comprehension worksheet group with the following steps:

- **Step 1: Reading the Book:** Students read the text individually.
- **Step 2: Completing the Worksheets:** Students independently completed the worksheets, and teachers provided differentiation as advanced students were given extension tasks.
- **Step 3: Marking and Reviewing the Worksheets:** The researcher marked the worksheets and reviewed the answers with students while explaining and modeling.

**Interviews:** Five teachers at international schools joined a semi-structured Skype interview about their perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies in EAL students’ reading instructions including 1). Teacher reading aloud 2). Student reading aloud 3). Teacher-student discussion 4). Student-student discussion 5). Modeled reading 6). Comprehension exercises

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Data Analysis

An analysis of pre-test and post-test results showed that all students from both groups progressed by moving up at least one level in the PM Benchmark (see Table 2). However, accelerated progress was observed in the guided reading group. On average, the guided reading group’s students increased by approximately 1.7 reading levels while the comprehension worksheet groups moved up by approximately 1.2 reading levels.

Table 2. Comparison of PM Levels: Pre-test and Post-test

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4.2 Teacher Interviews

Five teachers at international schools participated in the semi-structured interview and shared their perception of these six reading strategies that helped EAL students to progress in reading. All five teachers expressed positive
thoughts about the first five strategies in supporting EAL students’ reading development. When discussing the first strategy, ‘teacher reading aloud’, all teachers mentioned its positive aspect of allowing them to “expose students to vocabulary and build their language”. Responding to ‘student reading aloud’, most teachers mentioned this “gives students opportunities to apply vocabulary and phonics skills.” These teachers expressed similar responses to ‘teacher-student discussion’, as almost all pointed out its function as “assessing and offering feedback, while ‘student-student’ discussion helps students to build confidence.” Finally, commonalities were found in teachers’ perceptions of ‘modeled reading’, as all mentioned: “teacher modeling [can mimic] the steps or strategies a proficient reader would use.” All but two teachers expressed concern about using the last strategy (comprehension exercises) with Year 1 students: This would only work if they had sufficient knowledge and skills, and could have a limited impact on students’ learning.

Conversely, two teachers expressed an opposing view, rating comprehension exercises as “useful in assessing students and preparing students for tests.” The first five strategies mentioned in the interview were incorporated in the guided reading lesson.

4.3 Discussion

This research was intended to ascertain the extent to which guided reading can accelerate progress in Year 1 students’ reading levels. The results from the PM Benchmark, and teacher interviews indicated that guided reading may have a more positive effect on Year 1 EAL students’ reading development, specifically their accuracy, fluency, and comprehension.

4.4 Reading Accuracy

More students in the guided reading group improved their reading accuracy, possibly related to a guided reading lesson’s unique feature. When the teacher read aloud, they modeled word decoding by blending and segmenting sounds. This may seem inconsequential for native English speakers, but EAL students may find linguistic features potentially difficult since they may not exist in their mother tongue (L1).

Compared with the guided reading group, students in the comprehension worksheet group worked independently when reading and completing exercises. Subsequently, they had minimal chances of exposure to ‘teacher reading aloud’ and ‘modeled reading’, making them less prepared when encountering unfamiliar words. This entails students not simply seeing letters and internalizing sounds but forming sounds. Students can confirm their reading accuracy by trying this with a proactive teacher.

4.5 Reading Fluency

More students in the guided reading group displayed higher progress levels in reading fluency, potentially relating to a guided reading lesson’s component. Firstly, during ‘teacher reading aloud’, teachers modeled while emphasizing punctuation and reading with expression. Then, in ‘student reading aloud’, students could instantly apply these skills. In contrast, students in the worksheet group mainly worked individually on their reading and completed worksheets. They may have had limited or no exposure to their teacher’s modeling.

4.6 Reading Comprehension

The third finding emphasized students’ reading comprehension improvements. Guided reading components such as ‘modeled reading’ and ‘teacher-student discussion’ may have contributed to these improvements. Teachers applied modeled reading to demonstrate how proficient readers implement strategies to read and understand texts, which is essential for EAL learners.

Students can apply those skills during ‘teacher-student discussion.’ Teachers can assess students’ understanding and provide feedback while students interact with the teacher. These interactions helped students think actively while quickly internalizing those strategies. In contrast, the comprehension worksheet group had less modeling and teacher-student interaction.

4.7 Pedagogical Implication

The positive effects of guided reading indicate that this study’s pedagogical implication was that teachers can adopt guided reading to teach young EAL learners to improve their reading skills. However, while the reading comprehension group showed less reading progress, comprehension exercises can be an effective technique for assessing reading understanding. However, this may be more useful for older students with advanced skills and knowledge in reading and writing. In this instance, writing could be another barrier to students’ success.
5. Conclusion

The results and analysis show that compared with comprehension worksheet exercises, guided reading, which involves more teacher support, guidance, and interaction, more effectively helps Year 1 EAL students to improve their reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. The interview of five teachers at Shanghai international schools revealed that they view guided reading as an approach for developing EAL students’ reading skills. This reading gives students more modeling and interaction, which are necessary to become independent readers. Teachers’ guided reading applications to teach EAL students give these students knowledge for developing their English skills.

References


