

# THE TEACHING OF READING

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**“The child’s ability or inability to read affects learning in all other school areas”**

**T**he ability to read is an essential skill for all who live in societies where print can be seen ; that is, in most societies of the world. In everyday life, reading is vital for us to get around and understand where we live. At school, knowing how to read is the basic tool for all other academic learning. The child’s ability or inability to read affects learning in all other school areas, such as: arithmetic, social studies, Maltese, English and science in the primary school. As Stones (1976) put it, “When a child becomes a fluent reader s/he is no longer directly dependent upon the teacher or other adults for language experience. Through reading s/he extends his/her knowledge of the physical world, of society, of human relationships, and of his/her cultural heritage.”

So how does one go about teaching reading? Many people ask this question. However, the answer is not simple because there are many methods one can use and which method/s to adopt depends on a number of factors. Teaching reading methods depend on the person being taught and his/her mental ability, the age, the level one has reached and difficulties already encountered in trying to read and the learner’s interest in books. As Hall

(1976) suggests accordingly, “before any formal instruction in reading is begun, it is important that children develop a desire to read.” This is called Reading Readiness.

Therefore, getting to know the child’s likes and dislikes is fundamental and only books from within his/her areas of interest must be used. There would be no sense in giving a book of trees to a child who has no interest in them. This will only make the learner hate books even further.

## Intervention study

**F**or my intervention I chose to teach Paul, a ten-year old, energetic boy who liked cars and animals very much. I did my best and supplied him with a number of car books and Spot the dog story books (see list of childrens’ books) with lots of colourful pictures and flaps to open and close whilst reading.

Apart from adapting the right book to the reader, another task is to establish the approximate level of reading competency reached by the individual. In other words, how far has the pupil progressed on the road to becoming a fluent reader?

For this purpose I based myself on Reason & Boote’s (1984) approach which covers two aspects of learning, namely Visual Word Recognition (VWR) and Phonics. The term VWR refers to the reader’s constantly increasing number of words recognised automatically at sight, while phonics is the global heading for the ability to work out the pronunciation of words from a knowledge of sound/symbol relationships. I chose this approach because I

**Table 1 :  
Stages in  
Learning to  
Read**



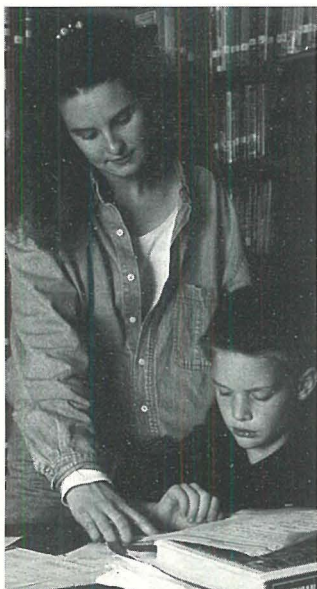
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| Stages                                       | Visual Word Recognition  | Phonics   |
|--|--|---|
| I. Pre - Reading                             | a) Matches sight words.<br>b) Matches letters.<br>c) Points at letters or words on request.                | a) ' I - Spy '<br>b)Auditory sound blending.<br>c) Rhyming words.<br><br><b>PAUL: STAGE III</b>                             |
| II. Beginning to Read                        | Reads at least 100 words fluently from initial books of reading schemes.<br><br><b>PAUL: HIGH STAGE II</b> | Reads and spells :<br>a) Single letter sounds<br>b)Consonant - vowel - consonant words, e.g., cat.                          |
| III. Intermediate                            | Extensive sight vocabulary from the middle sections of reading schemes.                                    | Reads and spells :<br>a) Consonant blends.<br>b) Consonant digraphs.<br>c) Vowel digraphs.<br>d) Silent ' e '.              |
| IV. Basic Reading Skills Have Been Mastered. | Reads all commonly used words. Has completed reading schemes.  | Reads and spells more advanced phonics :<br>a) Silent initial letters.<br>b) Longer word endings.<br>c) Polysyllabic words. |

(adapted from Reason & Boote, 1989).

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**“Shared reading involves hearing a story read aloud while the child focuses on the printed word. This technique provides children with the opportunity to enjoy any books which interest them even those which are too difficult.”**



felt it was systematic and organised in structure and so very simple to follow.

Table 1 (based on Reason & Boote's approach) presents a framework for assessment of reading competency and places the two main headings across the top of the page. These aspects of reading are then subdivided into four rough stages. The reason for having two separate headings is that a child may have developed one aspect at the expense of the other. There may be an over-reliance on phonics so that a higher stage, say Stage III, has been reached in the other area. Thus, the purpose of the assessment is to pinpoint the level reached by the child under each of the two main headings.

The skills to be acquired under the two main headings are summarised in Table 1.

## Analysis

Using Reason & Boote's (1989) strategies, Paul proved to be at a high Stage II with regard to VWR, but was still stuck between Stage I and Stage II on a phonics level. He was able to recognise familiar/sight words from easy readers such as rat, gas, sat, wed, pig, six, on and dog. However, he was not a fluent reader in these either. Paul paused to sound out words which were not in his sight vocabulary, such as fen, dam, kin, lop, dun, clem, cram, trap and twig. He did not have an extensive enough vocabulary to enable him to be placed in Stage III but on the other hand he was well above the level for Stage I. He could match some letters, show me a word, and even most letters without hesitating.

However, he had more weaknesses, which was why he had not moved beyond Stage I. When he was asked to read out particular single letter sounds he was not always very confident and correct. He confused the letter m with n and b with d. Paul read lan instead of lam, and an instead of am. He found further difficulty in reading initial consonant blends that contained the letters m, n, b and d. For example, sm, sn, dr, and br. So, smog was read as snog, smot instead of snot, dred instead of bred, brip instead of drip. For final consonant blends ld, nd, mp, weld was read as welb, temb instead of tend, bump instead of dump. Nonetheless, Paul did not confuse the four letters m, n, b and d in sight words, namely end, and, land, bad, good, mad, dog and lend.

After detecting Paul's reading difficulties I immersed myself in the actual task of teaching reading.

As a qualitative piece of work it comprised thirty individual sessions of twenty minutes spread over a period of three months. The teaching methods I adopted were a mixture of phonics and paired/shared reading.

In other words, phonics refers to the method of recognising new words by relating a sound (phoneme) with the equivalent written symbol



(grapheme). It emphasises the fact that words are made up of letters and that letters in various identifiable combinations symbolize sounds, either words or part of words. At the beginning, words would be monosyllabic to simplify the task for the child (Kirk, 1978, p.109). Later on, combinations of syllables and more complicated phonic rules which are essential for the composition of interesting material would be introduced. The number of these complicated rules and phonic irregularities need not be very great in the early stages but as the child's vocabulary grows then s/he can be introduced to more and more of these words. Eventually, when the child becomes really fluent, s/he will read words at a glance stopping only to analyse words that are unfamiliar (Stones, 1976, p.204).

The paired/shared techniques consist of the parent or helper and the child reading aloud from a book of the child's choice. They read in chorus and the helper does not stop to correct the child's mistakes. They continue to read together, the helper or child pointing at each word as it is read, even when the child can manage only a few words in the text. The helper adjusts the pace of reading according to the child.

Paired reading involves two sets of instruction. In the first, reading together, the parent and child read each word aloud together. If the child struggles or hesitates for more than five seconds with a particular word, the helper says the word, and the child repeats it. The second set of instructions is followed when the text has sections that are easy enough to be read independently. Then the child signals to the helper to remain quiet and reads alone until a difficult word is encountered. The helper again models the word for the child and they continue to read together until the child feels ready to read alone.

Shared reading involves hearing a story read aloud while the child focuses on the printed word. This technique provides children with the opportunity to enjoy any books



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which interest them even those which are too difficult. (Reason, 1989, p.109)

Teaching reading proved to be not only a laborious procedure, but also a time-consuming process (though not time-wasting!). Even though progress was not immediately felt, results were positive. Paul did improve especially on the phonics level. From a stage I level he progressed to a lower stage II level and this is because he started recognizing more letter sounds involving the letters **b** and **d**, **m** and **n**, and also managed to read consonant blends such as, **bl**, **br** and **dr**.

With regard to visual word recognition since Paul was already at a high stage II level, I do not think he can be placed at stage III. This is because his amount of vocabulary in his lexical store cannot be called ‘extensive’.

The ‘paired/shared’ approach was fundamental to the boy in order to practise WITH words from his lexical store (i.e. words they have already come across) and to build-up this lexical/semantic store. Also, the ‘whole-word’, ‘paired/shared’ approach was vital in order to move the

child closer to ‘real’ reading. In real reading situations children are presented with books with paragraphs made up of words and sentences. After all, when we read we do not have words split into phonemes and onsets or rimes.

Research suggests that people assume that all children who are making steady progress will have reached a similar level in both columns (i.e. phonics and visual word recognition). However, as we have already observed this was not so with both cases. Paul whose phonic skills were weaker tended to rely excessively on guessing from the context or on waiting for me to supply the words he could not read.

As much of written English does not fit the phonic rules, I felt it was important to encourage flexible guesswork and I usually did this by pointing at the picture which related to the written word. In addition, immediate visual recognition of words was received by continued practice through paired/shared reading.

### Limited projects roles

It must be made clear that children with reading difficulties will not suddenly make miraculous progress as a result of a short reading project, like the one I implemented over three months. Limited projects can be used as a starting point to harness resources but, in order to make lasting gains, the children will need to receive help over a longer period of time.

Learning to read may be likened to climbing a mountain; there are several possible routes to the top. Some learners need to take a slow and laborious route while others, more fortunate, can take the quickest one. Our task, as teachers or facilitators, is to guide the learner along the route which we think suits him/her best. We must do this by making the journey as natural and as enjoyable as possible and should aim to help him/her pick up reading without artificial drills whenever possible. I found the mixture of ‘phonics’ and ‘paired/shared’ methods to be successful in the improvement of reading for Paul.

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### The children's books

- The Hungry Puppy (Bitmax Books)
- Hop on Pop by Dr. Seuss (Collins)
- Cars - Do You Want to be My Friend? - The Very Hungry Caterpillar - Where's Spot? - Spot's Birthday Party - Spot's Baby Sister - Spot Goes to the Park - Spot's First Walk (Puffin Books)
- Big Bad Barney Bear - Simpkin (Red Fox Books)
- Little Lion (Brown Watson)