

Enhancing Reading Skills in Young Learners: Strategies for Structuring Engaging Literacy Lessons

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Abstract: This study explores the effectiveness of structured and engaging reading lessons in improving the reading skills of young learners in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context. Using an action research methodology over a six-week period, the research was conducted with a group of primary school students aged 6–7. The study integrated interactive read-alouds, multisensory phonics games, story retelling activities, digital storybooks, and small group reading circles, all within a consistent lesson structure. Data were collected through classroom observations, learner interviews, and teacher journals. Findings indicate that students demonstrated marked improvements in decoding, fluency, comprehension, and reading motivation. Strategies that incorporated visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements were especially effective. The research highlights the importance of balancing creativity with structure and demonstrates how reflective teaching practices can lead to more responsive and effective literacy instruction. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for teachers and curriculum designers working with early readers in similar contexts.

Keywords: *early reading, young learners, ESL, literacy instruction, phonics, interactive teaching, lesson structure, action research, motivation, engagement*

Reading is one of the most fundamental skills acquired during early childhood education, forming the foundation for future academic success and lifelong learning. The early years of schooling are a critical period in which learners begin to decode text, build vocabulary, and develop comprehension abilities. However, teaching reading to young learners presents unique challenges, particularly in maintaining attention, fostering motivation, and addressing varied levels of language proficiency. These challenges are even more pronounced in diverse classrooms, where learners may come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds or exhibit differing levels of readiness.

In recent years, educational research has increasingly emphasized the role of learner engagement in the development of reading skills. Engaged learners are more likely to persist in learning tasks, retain information, and apply new knowledge in meaningful ways. Therefore, the design and delivery of reading lessons must go beyond traditional textbook-based instruction and incorporate interactive, playful, and differentiated strategies that appeal to the developmental needs and interests of young children.

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This article explores effective methods for structuring reading lessons that both improve literacy outcomes and enhance learner engagement. Drawing upon current pedagogical research and practical classroom strategies, it aims to provide educators with evidence-based approaches for designing lessons that are not only academically effective but also enjoyable and motivating for young learners.

The development of reading skills in early childhood has been extensively studied, with a strong consensus on its importance for long-term academic achievement (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, vocabulary acquisition, and reading comprehension are typically developed during the early years of schooling, and their mastery is essential for more advanced literacy tasks (Ehri, 2005; National Reading Panel, 2000).

One major theoretical framework in reading instruction is the **Simple View of Reading** (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), which posits that reading comprehension results from the interaction between decoding and language comprehension. This model highlights the need for instructional balance, where both code-related skills (e.g., phonics) and meaning-based strategies (e.g., story comprehension) are integrated into reading lessons.

Another influential perspective comes from **Vygotsky's sociocultural theory** (1978), which emphasizes the role of social interaction and scaffolding in learning. According to this theory, children learn best within their **Zone of Proximal Development** (ZPD), where tasks are slightly beyond their independent ability but achievable with guided support. This underscores the value of interactive reading activities, such as shared reading and guided group work, in promoting literacy development.

In terms of lesson design, **engagement** has emerged as a critical factor influencing young learners' reading outcomes. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) define engaged reading as a combination of motivation and cognitive strategy use, supported by a stimulating learning environment. Research shows that young children are more likely to engage with reading when lessons include multisensory materials, relatable content, storytelling, and opportunities for creative expression (Morrow, 2009; Fisher, Frey & Lapp, 2008).

Technological advancements have also introduced new tools for engaging young readers. Interactive storybooks, phonics games, and multimedia applications have been found to support early literacy by making reading more appealing and accessible (Neuman & Roskos, 2007). However, the effectiveness of these tools depends largely on how they are integrated into the classroom and whether they are used as part of a broader, pedagogically sound strategy.

Taken together, these studies highlight the need for a **holistic and engaging approach** to reading instruction that addresses cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning. The following section will outline practical strategies for structuring reading lessons that respond to these insights and foster both skill development and learner engagement.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employed a qualitative classroom-based action research design aimed at exploring the effectiveness of specific lesson structuring strategies in improving the reading skills of young learners.

Action research was selected as it enables teachers to systematically investigate their own teaching practices in real-world settings (Burns, 2010).

PARTICIPANTS

The research was conducted with a group of 18 students aged 6–7 years, enrolled in the first grade at a NSU International Cambridge School. All participants were beginner-level readers and part of an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. The class consisted of a mixed-ability group, including students with varying degrees of exposure to English at home.

Parental consent was obtained, and the anonymity of all participants was maintained throughout the study.

INTERVENTION AND LESSON STRUCTURE

Over a period of six weeks, the teacher-researcher implemented a series of structured reading lessons that incorporated the following features:

- **Interactive read-aloud sessions** with frequent questioning and prediction tasks
- **Phonics-based decoding games** using flashcards and letter tiles
- **Story retelling activities** with puppets and drawing
- **Digital storybook reading** using age-appropriate applications
- **Group reading circles** to encourage peer interaction and cooperative learning

Each lesson was designed following a consistent structure:

1. **Warm-up** (5–7 minutes): Phonics or sight word game
2. **Main activity** (15–20 minutes): Guided reading or storytime
3. **Follow-up task** (10–15 minutes): Creative activity such as drawing a scene, retelling, or sequencing events
4. **Reflection and sharing** (5 minutes): Children shared their favorite part or new words they learned

Data Collection Tools

Multiple data sources were used to triangulate findings:

- **Teacher observation notes** documenting student engagement, participation, and behavior during lessons
- **Pre- and post-assessment of reading fluency and comprehension** using a checklist of reading indicators
- **Student work samples** (e.g., story retellings, drawing-based reflections)

- **Short semi-structured interviews** with students to gauge their attitudes toward reading before and after the intervention

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed thematically. Observation notes and interviews were coded for recurring patterns of behavior (e.g., motivation, attention, interaction). Assessment results were compared to determine progress in reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Work samples were reviewed to assess the depth of story understanding and vocabulary use.

Based on the six-week intervention, several key strategies emerged as effective in improving young learners' reading skills while maintaining their engagement. The following subsections outline these strategies and illustrate how they were implemented within a consistent and supportive lesson structure.

Interactive Read-Alouds with Predictive Questioning. Interactive read-alouds were used in nearly every session to model fluent reading and develop listening comprehension. The teacher paused at key points in the story to ask predictive and inferential questions such as “What do you think will happen next?” or “Why do you think the character is sad?” These questions prompted active participation and helped learners make connections between the text and their own experiences.

Observation data showed increased student focus and engagement during read-alouds, especially when expressive voice and visual aids (e.g., big books, story props) were used.

Multisensory Phonics Games. Young learners responded particularly well to phonics-based games that involved movement and tactile materials. Activities such as “Find the Sound,” in which students matched letter tiles to corresponding sounds in pictures, and “Jump to the Word,” where they physically jumped on word mats on the floor, made phonics instruction dynamic and memorable.

Students demonstrated improved decoding skills over time, as measured by weekly mini-assessments of sight words and simple CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words.

Story Retelling with Visual and Kinesthetic Tools. After reading a story, students were asked to retell it using picture sequences, puppets, or drawings. This helped them internalize the structure of a narrative (beginning, middle, end) and improved their ability to recall key vocabulary and events.

Story retelling proved especially effective for English language learners, as it allowed them to practice speaking in a low-pressure, creative context.

Structured Group Reading Circles. Students were divided into small reading groups based on their reading level. Each group read a short, level-appropriate text with the teacher or independently, followed by a discussion. This approach supported peer learning, allowed for differentiation, and gave all students the opportunity to read aloud in a safe environment.

Group reading circles helped increase fluency and confidence, especially among quieter students who were more reluctant to speak in whole-class settings.

Lesson Consistency and Routine. A consistent lesson structure — warm-up, main activity, follow-up task, and reflection — created a predictable learning environment. Students quickly adapted to this rhythm, which supported smooth transitions between tasks and maximized instructional time. The reflection phase, where students shared what they learned or enjoyed, also reinforced a positive attitude toward reading.

The findings of this study demonstrate that structured, engaging literacy lessons can significantly enhance both reading skills and motivation among young learners. The multi-faceted approach used in the intervention — combining interactive reading, phonics games, visual storytelling, and routine — proved effective in supporting diverse learners at the early stages of their reading journey.

One of the most consistent observations throughout the study was the **positive effect of interactive instruction**. Activities such as read-alouds with predictive questioning and group discussions helped learners become active participants in the reading process rather than passive listeners. These interactions not only improved comprehension but also fostered oral language development, a critical component of early literacy, especially for ESL learners.

The use of **multisensory phonics games** was another crucial factor in improving decoding and word recognition. As supported by prior research (Ehri, 2005), engaging multiple senses — visual, auditory, and kinesthetic — strengthens phoneme-grapheme connections and builds reading fluency. In the current study, students not only became more confident in recognizing sounds and patterns but also demonstrated increased enthusiasm during phonics-based tasks.

Furthermore, **story retelling and creative tasks** offered opportunities for learners to process and personalize the content they had read. This aligned with Vygotsky's (1978) theory that social interaction and scaffolded tasks support cognitive growth. Story retelling allowed learners to rehearse language in meaningful contexts, reinforcing their comprehension and expressive language skills.

While **technology integration** was limited to a few sessions, its use proved highly motivating. Students responded well to digital storybooks that combined narration, animation, and visual cues. This supports previous findings that technology, when used purposefully, can enhance reading motivation and scaffold early literacy (Neuman & Roskos, 2007). However, the teacher's role remained central in ensuring that these tools were not used passively but integrated meaningfully into the lesson structure.

Lastly, the importance of **lesson routine and predictability** cannot be overstated. Having a consistent structure helped young learners feel secure and focused. It reduced transition time between activities and allowed students to anticipate what was coming next, which in turn promoted autonomy and responsibility in learning.

Taken together, these results suggest that early reading instruction is most effective when it is structured, interactive, and adapted to the developmental and emotional needs of young children. The success of the intervention further highlights the potential of classroom-based action research in helping educators refine their instructional strategies in real time.

This study explored how structured and engaging lesson designs can support the development of reading skills among young learners in an ESL classroom. The findings underscore the importance of a holistic, interactive, and consistent approach to early reading instruction. When lessons incorporated elements such as interactive read-alouds, multisensory phonics games, storytelling, technology, and peer collaboration, students showed notable improvements in decoding, fluency, comprehension, and motivation.

The use of a clear and predictable lesson structure contributed to a sense of security and focus, helping students transition smoothly between tasks and internalize the learning routines. Furthermore, creative and social tasks such as story retelling and group reading circles fostered meaningful use of language, deepened comprehension, and encouraged learner autonomy.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are offered for educators and curriculum designers working with early readers:

1. **Integrate engagement-driven strategies:** Use interactive storytelling, hands-on activities, and visual supports to maintain learner interest and facilitate comprehension.
2. **Apply multisensory methods in phonics instruction:** Activities that involve movement, touch, sound, and sight reinforce phonological awareness and support various learning styles.
3. **Use consistent lesson frameworks:** A predictable structure helps young learners stay focused and confident while building routines that support independent learning.
4. **Incorporate learner reflection:** Allowing students to express what they enjoyed or learned reinforces positive reading attitudes and provides valuable feedback for the teacher.
5. **Balance traditional and digital resources:** When used purposefully, technology can enhance reading instruction and offer varied experiences for learners, but it should never replace teacher interaction.
6. **Engage in reflective teaching practices:** Action research allows teachers to continuously adapt their methods based on student responses and learning outcomes, making instruction more responsive and effective.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that with careful planning and thoughtful execution, early reading lessons can be both academically effective and genuinely enjoyable. By creating lessons that respect the developmental needs and interests of young learners, educators can lay a strong foundation for lifelong literacy and learning.

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