

RAK REPORT

RAK Chapter Newsletter

October 2006



Welcome to the New School Year!

The RAK Report wants to welcome everyone to the 2006 – 2007 school year. We hope that it is full of new ideas and learning opportunities.



This month we will take a closer look at reading and phonics. We want to thank everyone who has contributed to this important issue. If you would like to donate materials to future editions, please e-mail Darcy at:

Darcy.harris@HCT.ac.ae

and include **RAK Report** in the **subject line**



A great way to be involved in TESOL Arabia is to join a special interest group (SIG). Why not get involved in TESOL Arabia's Literature SIG? For those of you who would like more information on literature or joining the SIG, contact **Naziha Ali Jafri** by e-mail at:

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"ISN'T IT AMAZING ALL THE GREAT BOOKS WE CAN READ! OF COURSE, FIRST WE HAVE TO LEARN TO READ, DON'T WE?"



Do You Have the Right Reading Environment?

Creating a literacy-rich environment in UAE government schools

Many English language educators believe that a literacy-rich environment is the foundation of literacy development. This is because a literacy-rich classroom can motivate students to explore literacy through reading and writing activities in their daily lives. However, teachers in UAE classrooms often focus on finishing the curriculum in the planned time more than creating a literacy-rich environment for teaching English.



The basic principles of a literacy-rich environment are to:

- Give learners the chance to engage in a variety of reading and writing activities while working in groups or individually
- Give learners reasons to read and write
- Highlight reading and writing activities- e.g. teachers listening to students reading and working with learners in writing time



- Provide the learners with many opportunities to participate and communicate in reading and writing in English

The main purpose of creating a literacy-rich environment is to give learners opportunities to read and write with their peers, their teachers or by themselves. This approach helps learners to use their knowledge in a meaningful way. For example, when reading a story, a learner can combine his background knowledge with what he reads to respond to the reading text, such as a story, nursery rhyme or song. A literacy-rich classroom involves the teacher collecting materials to provide language and literacy opportunities. Print is displayed and a variety of writing materials are used. Teachers in primary schools need to build classroom libraries to provide children with easy access to a wide range of quality, diverse reading materials. In this way teachers can create both independent and directed activities to enhance understanding of print and word among young learners. Teachers in UAE schools should create an environment where students can enjoy reading in a comfortable setting to motivate them to read more. Creating a literacy-rich environment in the classroom helps in broadening students' understanding of literacy.



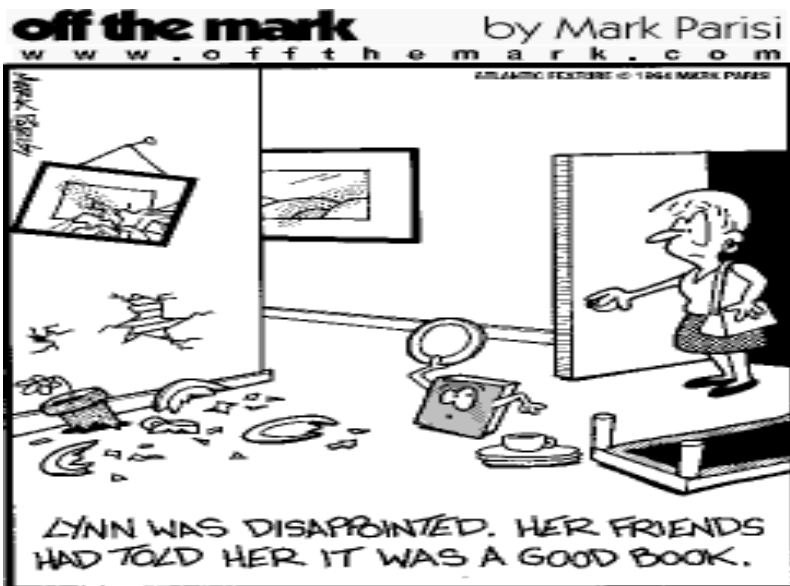
Here are two useful web sites with classroom ideas:

http://www.k8accesscenter.org/training_resources/literacy-richenvironments.asp

<http://www.prel.org/toolkit/plan.htm>



**Shamma, Raja, Hayat and Omayma
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RKWC students in AE5 BEd ELTS
Edited by: Teresa Thiel**



Why Phonics?

Top-Down or Whole Language Reading Instruction

In the world of EFL (particularly adult EFL), there does not seem to be much of a debate about the best way to go about teaching learners how to read. Teacher training courses, student books, international English exams and academic papers overwhelmingly suggest that there is just one approach to reading. We go into classrooms armed with exercises to practise skimming, scanning, reading for gist, reading for specific information or inferring the meaning of new words from context. We also encourage our students to read more – graded readers, magazines, newspapers – anything that will engage students and motivate them to continue reading.

This approach, which is often characterized as top-down or whole language approach, seems to be backed up by research in the field of which measures the short eye movements (called saccades) of proficient readers. These studies show that our eyes move quickly back and forth across a page when we are reading. We do not focus on every word, but often take in groups of words, and sometimes we do scan the page when we are looking for specific information. According to schema theory, skilled readers predict what they are going to read and then quickly check

their predictions with the text. Reading then is a knowledge-based process that requires an interactive process between a reader and a text for meaning to be created. It is not a mechanical process. We read different kinds of materials differently and for different reasons, sometimes for pleasure, sometimes to simply find out a single piece of information. If these are the reading strategies that proficient readers use, then it seems natural to encourage our student to use the same strategies.

This approach has been the dominant force in reading instruction for the last 40 years. It does seem to work with EFL learners from many countries, particularly those whose L1 uses the Roman alphabet. Yet for many Arab learners, reading remains a very difficult skill, and many fail to become proficient readers. Our current approach doesn't offer weak readers any hope other than to do more of the same. Those who can not read need to read more, read faster, and have more practice answering exam questions. When learners fail, the blame seems to lie with the students and not with our methodology.

Phonics-based Approaches to Reading

When it comes to teaching English-speaking children to read, there is a lively debate between top-down or whole language approaches and **phonics-based** or **bottom-up approaches**. Here, learning to read is seen as a two-step process. First, instruction must deal with the mechanics of reading such as recognizing letters or sounding out new words. Only once these have been mastered should top-down reading activities be introduced. The taxonomy of skills emphasized by phonics-based approaches implies a developmental process from oral language, through print skills to silent reading comprehension. In other words, each stage in the acquisition of literacy builds on the previous one.

There are six key concepts in phonics-based approaches that appear regularly in the literature:

1. Phonemic Awareness

This is the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds in spoken language. Interestingly, this is a skill that can be developed before the learner starts to read as there is no print involved at all. This is often practiced through *blending* and *segmenting*. In blending, the student takes individual sounds uttered by the teacher and combines them to make a word e.g. /h/ + /e/ + /d/ = /hed/ or 'head'. *Segmenting* involves taking a spoken word and breaking it down into its constituent sounds e.g. 'tell' = /t/ + /e/ + /l/. Studies have shown time and time again that learners (both adults and children) with poor phonemic awareness make poor readers. Evidence for poor phonemic awareness can often be found in student writing. For example, if a student writes 'barther' when spelling 'brother' it suggests an inability to discriminate sounds in context or to order them correctly.

2. Phonics Knowledge

Once students are good at recognizing and manipulating individual sounds then students can begin working with print. Phonics knowledge is simply a knowledge of how letters and sounds map onto each other. It is phonics knowledge that allows us to pronounce or sound out words we have not seen before. In the early stages, teachers work with sounds and show how they can be represented by letters or combinations of letters.

A key aspect of phonics knowledge is accuracy. Students are expected to read individual words aloud without mistake. At this stage, all errors are corrected and students are actively discouraged from skipping words and instead, must sound them out. It may turn out the student does not know the word. On the other hand, he or she may only realize they know the meaning of the word after sounding it out and hearing it.

3. Automaticity

Students with a reasonable degree of phonics knowledge will begin to develop automaticity, or the ability to decode words quickly and without effort. In other words, decoding isolated words becomes a fast and unconscious process. Analogies are often made with other skills such as driving, typing or playing a musical instrument. For example, a would-be touch typist starts by practicing a limited number of letters, usually a, s, d, f on the left hand. When a certain level of automaticity is achieved, more letters are added until the whole keyboard is covered. Finally, a point is reached where the typist no longer needs to focus on their fingers and can focus on the higher order skills of composing a text. If students are to read longer texts successfully, then it is clear they must be able to decode words not just accurately, but with automaticity.

4. Fluency

Reading fluency brings together all the components previously mentioned. Students who possess reading fluency are able to read aloud longer sentences and passages quickly, accurately and with appropriate intonation. Without reading fluency, students may remain wordbound. In other words, students will be using so much mental processing power on decoding individual words that they won't be able to concentrate on the meaning at the whole text or sentence level.

While the top-down approach to reading does not encourage reading aloud, for phonics-based approaches it is a key bridging stage to silent reading as it reveals to the teacher how well the student's reading skills are developing. Only once the student has demonstrated the ability to decode text appropriately are they encouraged to practise silent reading. In this way, teachers can be sure that students gain maximum benefit from independent reading.

To give a simple example, when reading aloud, many students fail to pronounce the 's' on plural nouns and third person verbs in the present simple. If students are encouraged to do extensive reading before this problem is addressed, they will simply reinforce the error.

Reading fluency is usually assessed by measuring the reading rate (correct words per minute) and accuracy (% of correct words).

5 and 6 Vocabulary and Comprehension

Vocabulary and comprehension are identified as important factors in reading development. Here we have an overlap between bottom-up and top-down approaches. Clearly a student who can decode words very accurately but who doesn't know what they mean cannot become a proficient reader. Such a student needs to build up their vocabulary.

Finally, comprehension must be the ultimate goal for both top-down and bottom-up approaches. It is also worth noting that comprehension in this sense does not simply mean the ability to understand all the words in the passage, but also the ability to infer information that may not be explicitly stated in the text.

Assessing Reading

In ESL, reading has traditionally been assessed through comprehension tests. While this is clearly useful for assessments that aim to measure proficiency, when we need to find out what students can do with language, it may not be the best way to assess the development of reading skills. In English-speaking primary schools, standardized tests of discrete skills are often used to find out if learners need additional help.



These tests are usually administered one-to-one and include:

- letter recognition – naming letters (lower and upper case)
- word decoding – sounding out regularly spelled words
- word recognition – reading aloud irregular sight words
- vocabulary – giving the correct meaning of individual words, often orally
- comprehension – demonstrating a deeper understanding of the whole text



The results of these tests quickly build up a reading profile that clearly identifies which reading components require extra work. For example, a student who has very poor letter recognition skills is unlikely to benefit from comprehension tasks. It is a simple matter to diagnose students with poor reading literacy using these tests. This allows teachers to intervene quickly before poor reading strategies become ingrained.

Evidence

There is mounting evidence to show that both children and non-reading adults can benefit greatly from phonics-based instruction. A recently published study in Scotland followed the progress of 300 primary school age children who were given 16 weeks of systematic phonics training when they first learned to read. At the end of this period the experimental group had made so much progress it was considered unethical not to use the same approach with the control group. The study followed all of the children for another seven years and found that the effect of this initial training increased rather than diminished over time. At the end of Primary

7:

- word reading was 3 years 6 months ahead of their age group
- reading comprehension was 3.5 months ahead of their age group
- spelling was 1 year 8 months ahead of their age group



Interestingly, boys performed better than girls despite the fact that girls were found to have far better literacy skills than boys in all English speaking countries that were reviewed in the study. The results were so compelling that they prompted a change in government policy so that all children in Scotland are now introduced to print via phonics.

Many see top-down and bottom-up approaches to reading instruction as being in opposition to each other as though teachers should either use one or the other. However, this view is erroneous. Even purists argue that phonics-based approaches should only be the first step in reading instruction, but one that all students should ideally take.

Some issues of phonics in EFL

Can phonics-based approaches to literacy be used in the UAE with EFL learners? There is evidence to suggest that it works well with second language learners. However, a number of issues need to be addressed:

Arabic-speaking learners will not have the same inventory of sounds in their L1 – they will need to be taught the sounds as well as discriminating them.

EFL learners will have a much smaller vocabulary than English speaking children. This will make the sounding out of words more difficult.

Arabic is also an alphabetic language, and so learners should have developed levels of phonemic awareness from learning that language. However, learners may also try to transfer skills useful for decoding Arabic script which may interfere with the decoding of English script.

Finally, there is the important issue of teacher training and the development of materials appropriate for the teaching situations in the UAE. This is no small task!

Basic Literacy Benchmarks

What aims should a bottom-up approach to reading instruction have? Below is a checklist of skills that can be used to ensure that learners have reached an acceptable level of basic literacy. If these sub-skills of reading are in place, then we give our students the best chance of developing into genuinely proficient readers. Students should be able to:

- correctly recite the alphabet in order
- quickly and accurately name letters of the alphabet written in random order
- quickly and accurately sound out regular words taken out of context
- quickly and accurately read aloud common irregular (sight) words
- read aloud simple texts with appropriate intonation and pauses.

Useful Web Links

Background

http://www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/MC_Reading_Components.htm - This site provides a very useful mini course on the basic components of reading skills and how they can be used to create reading profiles.

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/4794696.stm - Here you will find the a BBC overview of the seven-year study of synthetic phonics conducted in Scotland. The full research is here:
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/02/20688/52449>

Creating Tests

<http://www.interventioncentral.org/htmdocs/tools/cbaprobe/cba.php> – This site can be used to create reading tests of letters and basic vocabulary based on Dolch word lists.

<http://www.jwor.com/FreeLTKReadingAssessment.pdf> - This file is an example of a placement test that requires learners to read aloud words of increasing difficulty.

<http://www.interventioncentral.org/htmdocs/tools/okapi/okapi.php> – This site can help you create your own reading fluency tests. You submit a text, and the site will calculate readability statistics and create a student copy.

Materials/Activities

<http://www.tampareads.com/phonics/whereis/index.htm> – There are a number of free worksheets on this site that can be used to develop phonemic awareness and basic phonics knowledge.

<http://www.joewitt.org/Reading%20Grade%20levels.htm> – This site has a series of placement tests and huge amount of material to practice reading fluency. Material is broken down into 5 rooms that correspond to Grades 1-5 (USA).

<http://www.starfall.com> – This site introduces letters and common sound-spelling patterns in a fun, multimedia environment. Many of the stories can also be printed from the “Download Center”.

<http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/toftwood/lcwc.swf> – Here students can practise the spelling of common words (links on the left) and common letter patterns (links at the bottom).

David Anderson



Top 10 Book List

1. ULYSSES by James Joyce
2. THE GREAT GATSBY by F. Scott Fitzgerald
3. A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN by James Joyce
4. LOLITA by Vladimir Nabokov
5. BRAVE NEW WORLD by Aldous Huxley
6. THE SOUND AND THE FURY by William Faulkner
7. CATCH-22 by Joseph Heller
8. DARKNESS AT NOON by Arthur Koestler
9. SONS AND LOVERS by D.H. Lawrence
10. THE GRAPES OF WRATH by John Steinbeck



These are the top ten books recommended by the Modern Library. To see the list of the top 100 books visit the link below.

<http://www.randomhouse.com/modernlibrary/100bestnovels.html>

Send us your top 10 book list and we'll compile a top 10 in RAK list for our next edition!



THRASS

THRASS is a program which teaches any age, including ESL, the building blocks of reading and spelling. It includes teaching the 44 phonemes of English and their spelling choices or graphemes of written English. These skills are interrelated and build on each other to increase a student's knowledge and understanding of the relationship between the 44 phonemes and the 26 letters of the alphabet, which are the key to successful reading and literacy.

For more information, look at the THRASS website at:

<http://www.thrass.co.uk/>



Joanne Rowe



Top Ten 19th Century Gothic Novels

WELL-READ

There are, of course, a huge number of ways to teach reading, the standard comprehension exercises using reading from context, true or false, jig-saw, re-writing phrases and sentences being the most obvious. However, there is one strategy much neglected in reading skills which, when employed, seems to work for the student, this being getting the student to – READ.

Issue a graded reader to each student and allocate one period to get them to read it to themselves. The teacher would simply facilitate this process by answering any questions arising from the reading.

“Teacher! What’s an Umbrolliousbrellmaker?”

Although, it may go against all that has been taught on our TEFL courses, I think this idea is still a useful activity. It is a simple concept but I think students benefit greatly from reading that is unfettered from having to follow it up with an exercise. A comprehension exercise tagged on reading forces the student to lose the enjoyment of getting lost in the story and, after all, the aim of the teacher is to get the student to read not just for the lesson but for all times and reading for pleasure promotes independent reading and studying. The argument that the students can read at home is, in the UAE at least, a non-starter. It is a rare student indeed who takes time at home to open a book. However, they will once they are hooked.

I am not insensitive to those who worry about the idea of leaving a student to his/her own devices. As an addition to the reading session, why not follow it up with a writing session whereby the student can summarise the story they just read or write their own ghost story.

What to read? Well, I am a fan of 19th century novels and any books from that era will always be a good read. What appeals to my students in the IAT are ghost stories, horror stories or gothic tales. Here is a top ten list of 19th century gothic novels which may or may not be found as graded readers, but are a good introduction to the pleasures of reading. The more students read, the more likely they are to engage in further experimentation in L2 reading.

1. Frankenstein...Mary Shelley
2. Dracula...Bram Stoker
3. The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde...Robert Louis

Stevenson

4. The Castle of Otranto...Henry Walpole
5. The Woman in White...Wilkie Collins
6. The Turn of the Screw...Henry James
7. The Phantom of the Opera...Gaston Leroux
8. The Picture of Dorian Gray...Oscar Wilde
9. The Fall of the House of Usher...Edgar Allan Poe
10. The Mummy...Jane Webb Loudon

Ian Taylor



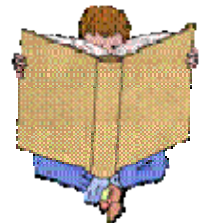
Useful Websites

Here are some really good phonics links:

<http://www.magickeys.com/books/>

<http://dibels.uoregon.edu/dibelsinfo.php>

<http://adwcintranet.adwc.hct.ac.ae/adwweb/getreading/index.htm>



Janice Coats



Book Review

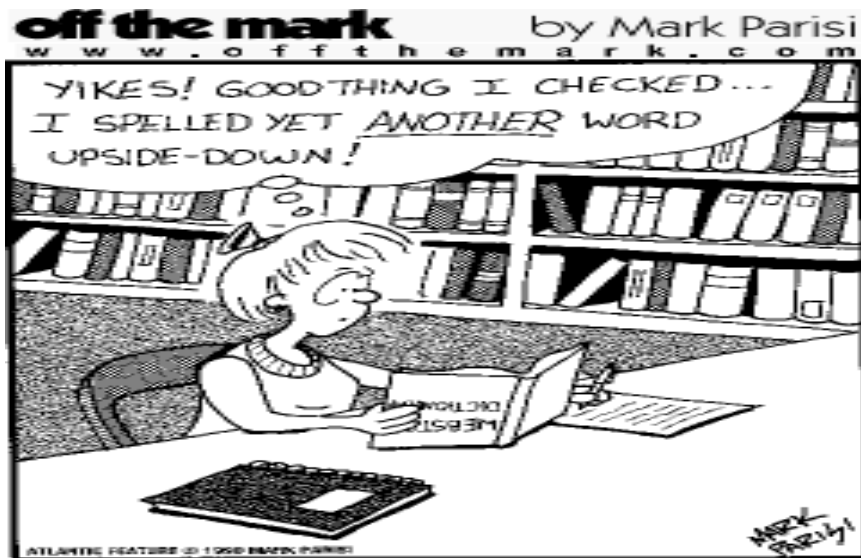
'Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language'

This is RAK Chapter's book of the month. Selected by Darcy Harris, it is by Julian Bamford and Richard R. Day and is written in clear, plain language. It offers plenty of practical and adaptable suggestions for using extensive reading.

You can find a copy of ***Extensive Reading Activities for Teaching Language*** in the RAK Men's College library.

For more information on how you can become a community borrower at either of the RAK college libraries, call the RAK LRC Help Desk at (07) 2026250.





Classroom Discipline

Effects of School and Societal Changes on Classroom Discipline

Rapid changes in society and in educational systems within the UAE can be exciting but these changes can also create challenges within schools and classrooms. Even in the best of schools, sudden changes can have adverse effects.



School or college admissions policies often change. For instance, a school or college that previously turned away lesser qualified applicants may decide to admit most or all applicants for the first time. This can result in acceptance of a large number of students with poor English or Maths skills, and students who have been unsuccessful in the past due to behavioural problems or learning disabilities. Students with poor skills or with learning difficulties can easily become frustrated while those with behaviour problems can be continually disruptive. Together, these can create disastrous learning environments unless proper steps are taken to deal with the changes in student population and the effects these can have in the classroom.

The programmes offered by an educational institution can also change. Converting from a modular course or a semester system to a yearly course (or vice versa) can cause vast changes in the classroom environment. Students who are able to succeed in a semester long course or a modular course may not easily succeed in a year-long course and may become frustrated as a result. Similarly, a change in the examining body can have huge effects in the way teaching and learning take place.



Even without considering particular changes in the school environment, there are rapid social changes occurring in the UAE. In many ways the UAE is becoming westernized. As a result, young people tend to be more confident and more likely to question authority. Meanwhile, satellite T.V. and the Internet promote values and behaviours that are not necessarily appropriate for the classroom. These changes will continue to occur so we as educators should recognize that there will likely be an increase in

discipline problems within educational institutions in the future.

We must recognize the effects that sudden changes can have on even the best of institutions. A school, or even a college, with perfect student discipline one year can rapidly degenerate to one with discipline issues the next. Probably the best way to deal with this is to anticipate problems before they occur. We can anticipate that if there is a relatively open admission policy to a school or college that students with behavioural problems or inappropriate classroom behaviours will be admitted to the institution. This means that the institution must develop clear, fair and easily enforceable rules for students and faculty to follow. Teachers, meanwhile, have to establish classroom rules that fit within the guidelines of the institution and which are recognized by the students as being fair. If these rules are made clear and enforced from the beginning of the year, discipline issues in many cases can be avoided and the few cases that must be dealt with can be dealt with immediately.



If the programme or examining body has changed, students, parents and teachers should all be aware of exactly what effects these changes will have on school policy, student options, the expectations the school has of its students, and the manner in which students will be taught. If there is clarity from the beginning, it will limit misunderstandings in the future.

Occasionally, a larger than normal number of students enter an institution without the minimal skills needed to succeed. These students will certainly become frustrated in the classroom environment and measures have to be in place to accommodate them and to help them gain the basic skills required. This may mean placing students in special basic skills or remedial classes in English or Maths in which they are brought up to the appropriate level at their own pace and perhaps awarded for each skill accomplished.



Most secondary schools have a well established discipline policy but even so changes in the institution may mean that the policy must be updated from year to year. At the college level, students are normally assumed to be mature enough that strict discipline policies are not required. In many cases this is true, but sudden changes can cause problems if the college does not anticipate them and act pro-actively to prevent them.

If institutions are aware of the changes in society and the make-up of their student bodies, they can evolve to accommodate these changes in order to maintain a healthy learning environment for everyone.

R. F. Cook

RAK Representative

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The next edition of the RAK Report will come out on **November 1, 2006**. It will focus on **Independent Learning**.



To contribute articles, ideas or suggestions, please contact Darcy at:

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and include **RAK Report** in the **subject line**

The RAK Report will come out on the following dates and feature the following topics:



November 1: Independent Learning

December 1: Problem, Project and Task Based Learning



January 1: Vocabulary

February 1: Exam Classes

March 1: Grammar

April 1: Study Skills

May 1: English for Special Purposes



June 1: Distance Learning