

Assisting Struggling Early ESL Readers. What Can English Teachers Do?: A Review Paper

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ABSTRACT

The teaching and learning of reading to struggling readers have become a distinguished area to be researched recently. Past studies discovered the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process involving early struggling readers in foreign countries. However, in Malaysia, the study of intervention in the teaching of reading to ESL readers is scarce. Hence, this paper reviews interventions and the findings of the effectiveness of the interventions in teaching reading to struggling ESL readers to provide the framework for Malaysian researchers and English educators dealing with struggling early ESL readers. This paper addresses issues that will help the struggling reader succeed. Several themes have emerged from research on identifying teaching strategies that support struggling readers in the classroom. Increased student engagement occurs when pairwork, reading with a reading specialist and playing reading games took place during the reading interventions to assist struggling readers. Moreover, explicit instruction in phonological awareness and ample opportunities to practise reading, both at home and at school, improve reading skills.

Keywords: English as a second language (ESL), Reading strategies (RS), struggling readers, reading intervention

INTRODUCTION

Reading skill is imperative for any learner to acquire enabling him or her to master the language. However, early readers who struggle with reading may have a negative impact on their academic performance, potentially leading to disaster if children do not develop strong reading skills (Slavin et.al., 2011). According to Shaywitz & Shaywitz (2004), we must take advantage of the available resources in the attempt to learning to read. They posited that a reader must know the meaning of symbols in print so they would chain them and construct meaning. The importance of reading literacy is not merely essential for the acquisition of literature and languages but also to learn other subjects (Geske & Ozola, 2008).

In the Malaysian context, English is learnt as a second language and the deficits in reading English as a second language (ESL) will be a great barrier for the early readers to grow and learn the language. The current implementation of the Common European Framework of Resources (CEFR) cuts across multiple levels of institutions in the Malaysian curriculum. As in preschool and primary school Year 1, the centre of developing reading skills revolves around the development of sounds and letters, understanding a variety of texts and linear and non-linear prints using appropriate strategies, and developing independent reading for information and enjoyment [Standard-Based PreSchool English

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Curriculum (SBPEC); Standard-Based English Language Curriculum (MOE, 2001)]. In the attempt to grasp the reading skills and be able to read ESL texts, struggling early ESL readers need to be exposed to and equipped with the knowledge and skills of reading as affiliated by the Ministry of Education so the learners could achieve both national and individual aspirations.

2.1 THE THEORIES OF TEACHING READING

English Language Learners (ELLs) should be exposed to infinite opportunities in oral language development to help diminish the potential of having struggles in reading at a later age (Kieffer, 2012). In this study, ESL readers are given emphasis because, in Malaysia, English is taught and learnt as the second language. This corroborates the definition of ESL as English to Speakers of Other Languages while ELLs are English Language Learners (ELLs) who are students of any nationality, age, or immigration status who do not speak English at home (Top Education Degrees, 2023). As a result, educators must take note and pay close attention to providing adequate exposure and scaffolding, particularly for ESL learners, at an early age, so that they can be assisted and can develop their reading ability to avoid difficulties later. The aspects of oral language development which include phonology awareness and word recognition supported the ELLs to start reading aligned with the cognitive foundation of learning to read, the knowledge of decoding and language comprehension, which are the pillars of reading comprehension (Wren, 2002) These aspects are believed to support ESL struggling readers to acquire the reading skills.

Reading interventions for early readers with the focal attention on children aged eight and below should assimilate the social constructivism approach. This approach benefits the students both ways socially and cognitively while learning to read as the knowledge is shaped through experiences with the environment (Akpan *et al.*, (2020)). Indirectly, learners will be motivated, scaffolded and supported by the engagement with the community involved, for instance their peers and teachers. Previous interventions assisting early struggling readers put into practice activities highly related to decoding and word recognition to increase reading fluency. Recommendations are given to also accentuate the construction of meaning and vocabulary so that the learners could concurrently build comprehension of the texts read.

In the journey of reading mastery, learners need to be acquainted with the environment and people around them. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) proposed by Vygotsky (1978) paves a great effect on social constructivist theory. It is suggesting that the level of performance of a learner is capable when there is support from interaction with a more advanced interlocutor (Lightbown & Spada, 2004). Social interaction is a necessity for a child who is attempting to learn another language (Mckenzie, 2011) and unavoidably, for a struggling ESL early reader, the learner needs scaffolding to develop their reading ability.

Central to the Component Model of Reading (CMR), the model highlighted three areas that constitute reading development; cognitive, psychological, and ecological components (Aaron, 2008) as illustrated in Figure 1.0. The cognitive domain of this model revolves around the development of word recognition and comprehension. It is also found that decoding fluency was important in the early grades but declined with age, implying that fluency is important for all beginners. (Joshi, *et al.* (2012). The psychological domain in this model can be associated with the study of the mind and the collection of behaviours, traits, and

attitudes which characterize an individual (American Psychological Association, 2023). In this model, attention was given to motivation and interest, learning styles, locus of control, teacher expectation, gender differences, and learned helplessness as the factors affecting individual reading development. Aside, the ecological component plays an important role in developing reading skills as proposed by CMR. This model highlights the relationship between individuals and their physical and social environments in the development of reading such as home environment, culture and parental involvement, classroom environment, peer influence, dialect, and English as a second language.

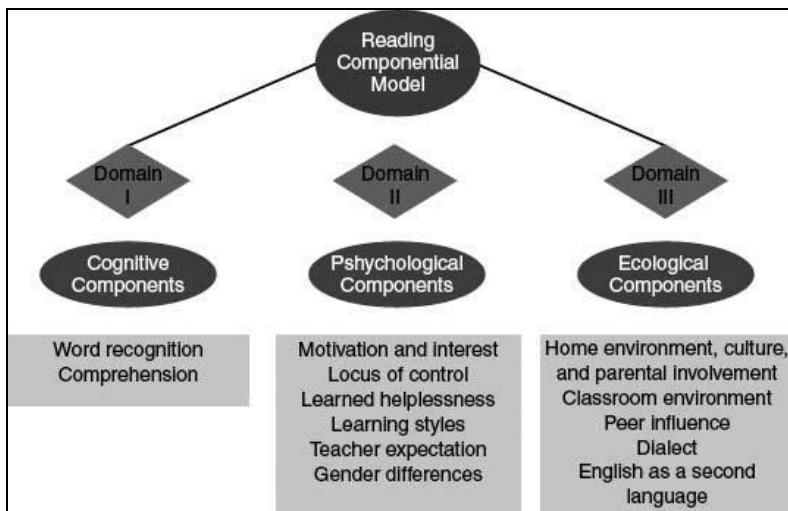


Figure 1.0 The Component Model of Reading (CMR)

The CMR is closely related to social constructivism theory which highlights the significance of other individuals in shaping a learner's understanding and learning development. The impact of learning and understanding can be rendered through socializing and contact with teachers or other learners. Children's understanding is shaped not only through adaptive encounters with the physical world but through interactions between people in relation to the world that is not merely physical and apprehended by the senses, but cultural, meaningful, and significant, and made so primarily by language (Akpan, *et al.*, 2020). Most importantly, this paper highlights the focus on ESL-struggling early readers where interactions and assimilation with society and environment have become prime influences in the development of reading skills.

In an attempt to assist struggling readers, especially ESL learners, there are intervention programmes developed and employed named Response to Intervention (RtI) and Multi-Tier Interventions. The RtI is the process of early screening of struggling students in reading and commonly practising a few tiers of reading interventions. (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). Tier 1 intervention programme revolves around providing reading instruction to all learners in a class, while Tier 2 interventions are focusing on students who display reading issues based on early detection. Tier 3 intervention programmes are providing assistance and activities to students who do not progress after the considerable amount of time given during Tier 2 interventions. A close connection to this paper, an intervention programme which

focuses on sounds and words activities, text reading and storybook reading, called the MiniLit intervention, was reported as yielding effective results among young struggling readers by Reynolds *et al.* (2021). MiniLit is proposed to be useful as a Tier 2 intervention programme.

2.2 PHONOLOGICAL AND VOCABULARY INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES

The relationship between these areas is highlighted by effective interventions to assist struggling early readers. In a pilot study of Reading by Design, a strong effect on oral reading fluency could be observed after the intervention of LWR (Listening While Reading) activities, separated phonic activities and the practice of immediate error correction procedure (Mendez, Petzmann & Frank, 2015). The participants were engaged in pairwork, read with a reading specialist and played reading games with the teacher. (Madhumathi & Ghosh, 2012; Zare & Moomala, 2013, Kiu & Yamat, 2020). In support of that, struggling early readers' reading performance can be improved through interventions involving reading strategies. (Salleh & Yamat, 2020; Barwasser, Urton, Grunke, Sperlign and Coker D.L, 2021). These findings suggested that these learners should be given opportunities at the very crucial stage; the beginning of schooling age to develop their skills in reading so they would not be left behind as they advance in school years.

The elements of reading include orthographic, phonological, morphological, semantic, and syntactic and early readers are suggested to learn the basic elements in promoting their reading development (Hairston, 2011). Similarly, the cognitive component in the reading model, CMR, lists word recognition and comprehension as one component that constitutes the reading development of ESLs. Hairston (2011) explained that the orthographic system is concerned with the visual appearance of a word or string of letters, followed by the phonological system, which is concerned with the sounds of language known as phonemes. The basic units for developing learners' reading skills are phonology and phonemic awareness. For instance, toddlers learn the sound they heard and then initiate them into meaningful words. Phonological awareness will form the building blocks of reading and spelling development (Brunswick, 2009). In addition, another vital skill in reading skill, which is decoding, is defined as the ability to transform the written text into spoken words to understand the meaning of words and text as a whole. (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2022).

In assisting struggling readers with phonology and word recognition, repeated reading (RR) has been successfully practised to increase fluency (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2004; Lee & Yoon, 2015). Both orthographic and phonological systems are essential in the reading development of ESL learners and they work similarly to word recognition aligned by CMR. Apart from phonology and decoding, vocabulary is core to reading comprehension (Kiew & Shah, 2020; Chua & Sulaiman, 2021). Henceforth, exposure to vocabulary building is vital and should be given priority. There was a reading intervention program conducted by Foorman *et al.* (2016) which employed the teaching of academic language skills including the use of inferential and narrative language, and vocabulary knowledge as foundational skills to support reading for understanding in kindergarten through 3rd Grade. This study provided an overview and awareness of the importance of teaching language skills to early readers so they will be able to develop their reading ability and grow in language learning specifically in ESL.

Effective interventions to assist struggling early readers highlight the relationship between these areas. In a pilot study of Reading by Design, a strong effect on oral reading fluency could be observed after the intervention of LWR (Listening While Reading) activities, separated phonic activities and the practice of immediate error correction procedure (Mendez, Petzmann & Frank, 2015). The participants were engaged in pairwork, read with a reading specialist, and played reading games with the teacher.

Following, the morphological systems include the meaningful units of language and can help children understand what words mean. (Hairston, 2011). Semantic systems, on the other hand, are the process of learning new words and increasing the pool of vocabulary among language learners while syntactic systems are the process which arranges the order of the phrases and provide the practice and ability to understand the various meaning of a similar word. These three areas can be linked to the comprehension element in the cognitive domain listed in CMR which assists in the reading development of ESL learners.

2.3 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH IN INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES

A multicomponent tier-2 intervention integrated phonics instruction with listening-while-reading (LWR) activities, strategies for increasing motivation and engagement, and parent involvement in reading at home. These elements are concurrent to the domains suggested in the CMR which is the psychological and ecological components of the reading model. This intervention was a pilot study named Reading by Design, was proposed to serve as a Tier 2 intervention activity listing LWR, reading with a specialist, and playing reading games with the teacher. These programmes focus on phonics, decoding skills and word recognition where positive result was observed in oral reading (Mendez, Petzmann & Frank, 2015).

Experiencing Reading By Design as a Tier 2 intervention (Mendez, Petzmann & Frank, 2015), participants are exposed to paired reading, choral reading, reading with a specialist and also reading games. Throughout the intervention, participants were undergoing a series of synchronized readings and got connected with people around to help develop reading. The focus is on decoding, reading fluency, and comprehension. Peer support, enrichment through tutor support and games are the strategies aiding struggling readers which highly embody the theory of social constructivism.

One of the reading interventions, The Reading Racetrack (RR), recorded an improved students' ability to automate the reading of trained words significantly. (Urton, Grunke, Sperlign & Coker, 2021). Barwasser *et al.* (2021) reported the Reading Racetrack intervention had effectively increased the reading fluency of the participants in the experimental groups. The intervention assisted the learners and it was noted that the effect of the activities was still apparent after 10 weeks. The intervention which involved third graders, had them paired as tutors and tutees. Feedback and the construction of correct pronunciation were practised among the tutor and tutee as well as reading aloud and repeated reading. These strategies reinforce the building of word recognition and were found to be effective and economical as the learners engaged naturally and organically with the other learners and built up their knowledge and reading ability.

Likewise, Reading by Design highlighted the importance of reading with social connection with peers, teachers and specialists. Creating reading partnerships is essential to assist struggling readers (Hall, Burns & Greene, 2013) to understand the student's current abilities, providing opportunities to discuss with the partner and help them learn about their goals and ways of working towards them.

A reading intervention was induced by the theory of social constructivism implemented by Solari, Denton & Haring (2017). They posited the implementation of the Reading RULES! Framework as a reading intervention to successfully support struggling readers aiming for the main provider; the general education teacher in first grade. The framework entails whole–group and small–group instructions which offer flexibility for teachers to amend or adapt the framework to suit the needs of the students. This study steered the effects of learners’ assimilation with the teacher and the great impact it could have on struggling ESL learners in language learning.

As the effects of the study, Solari *et al.* (2017) insist that teachers be responsive to student’s needs, especially the struggling ones in producing fluent readers and in promoting the student’s success in reading. There are three key essentials in classroom reading teaching practice to support struggling readers as the followings:

- (1) teach direct word identification with the accompaniment of listening and reading comprehension,
- (2) provide modelling and practice of key strategies required for comprehension of written text,
- (3) provide scaffold practice with the word- and text-level skills as well as connecting to strategies to fluently read and understand the text.

2.4 RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION (RtI)

Notably, a few areas need highlight to assist the ESL struggling early readers in developing their reading skills. The instruction of English reading involving young struggling readers should concentrate on phonology, decoding and word recognition. As proposed by Wren (2000), these areas; phonology, syntax, semantics, phoneme awareness, and concepts about prints become the base in the cognitive foundation of learning to read. The educators dealing with struggling readers need to address the deficiencies faced by the ESL learners by providing suitable activities or interventions to assist them.

RtI Tier-2 is given more focus because, at this level, students who are diagnosed with struggling to read will be given treatment in a smaller group. The suggested activities underneath Response to Intervention (RtI) Tier 2 highlight the vital elements needed to be in an intervention such as the followings:

- Use systematic and explicit instruction with modelling, multiple examples and feedback.
- Use academic language and vocabulary instruction with multiple opportunities to practice.
- Provide frequent structured opportunities to develop oral language.
- Focus on specific reading and math skills as determined by assessment data.
- Teach vocabulary across content areas.
- Teach high-utility academic words and teach word-learning strategies.
- Offer reading, writing, listening, and speaking in authentic contexts (e.g., reading books, writing for authentic purposes, and role play to develop oral language).
- Provide reinforcement, repetition, practice and redundancy of vocabulary, skills, and strategies taught in core reading.
- Use sheltered instruction to support students’ content learning.
- Use peer–supported instruction/peer-assisted learning strategies.

- Teach explicit comprehension strategies.
- Provide instruction and/or instructional support in the primary language.

CAPELL (2012)

The exposure of reading strategies to assist struggling early readers should be based on the learners' needs as well as upheld by the theories of CMR, cognitive and social constructivism. English teachers must essentially understand the appropriate and fitting strategies ministering to the needs of the learners because different strategies are implied to different groups of learners based on their abilities.

All in all, the examination of past studies in reading interventions associated with the theories of teaching reading and model of reading carved the path for English teachers to plan for future activities or lessons in assisting the struggling early readers in mainstream classrooms.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, the findings provide a direction in which teachers can associate and evaluate the strategies and interventions to suitably be adapted in assisting struggling early ESL readers in the classrooms. Apparently, there are no one-size-fits-all approaches or methods that successfully could work for every struggling reader. Nonetheless, the selection of specific activities, centralizing on the basic elements of reading presumably could benefit the learners and improve their reading ability.

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