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Title	Read to the children!
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Source	<i>Teaching and Learning, 15(1),76-80</i>
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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# Read to the Children!

CHRISTINA HVITFELDT

'A Book Should Be Like A Ball Of Light In The Hands.'

EZRA POUND

Over the past two years I have visited many primary schools in Singapore and observed many language arts lessons. I have seen lower primary reading lessons based upon language experience and the shared book approach. In the middle and upper primary grades, I have observed lessons based upon the students' coursebooks, directed reading/thinking activities, and the completion of innumerable worksheets. What I have not seen is teachers reading aloud to their students.

The value of reading aloud to children is indisputable. Michener's review of research (1988) concludes that reading aloud to children improves their listening skills, increases their abilities to read independently, expands their vocabularies, improves their reading comprehension, and increases both the quality and the quantity of their independent reading. Reading aloud to children is especially important in the Singapore context because many children are not proficient in English. Reading aloud on a regular basis can help them to develop competence in English language as well as to improve their reading skills.

There is no question that primary school teachers often struggle to get through the language arts syllabus and are generally pressed for time. But making time for reading aloud – even at the expense of other language arts activities – fulfills so many purposes that it is well worth the effort.

## **Selecting books to read aloud**

When selecting books, consider the children you will be reading to. Your selections should be books the children will find of interest and they should be at an appropriate level of difficulty. Very easy books that can be read by the children independently should be avoided, as should books that are too difficult to get through without a great deal of explanation and support. Variety is also important, so your selections should include a range of genres and subjects.

## **Preparing to read aloud**

Read the book to yourself before you read it to the class. Consider editing the selection if there are sections that you feel are inappropriate for your students. Decide what questions you might ask to get the students to respond to the reading. (Why do you think that the princess behaved as she did?)

## **Preparing the children for the reading**

First, make sure they are ready to listen. Introduce the book by discussing the title or the author, explaining why you chose the book, or telling the class how it relates to earlier reading. You may want to introduce the book by talking about the main characters and the setting.

## **Reading aloud to children**

Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson (1993) make a number of recommendations for reading picture books, chapter books and poetry aloud. Their suggestions include:

## Reading picture books

1. Have the children sit as close as possible to you so that they can see the pictures. You may want to have the children gather on the floor at the front of the room.
2. Show the pictures to the children as you read. You may want to hold the book to your side as you read or, if you can manage it, read the print upside down while holding the book in front of you.
3. Try to vary the expression of your voice as you read the parts of different characters. Varying your voice pitch (high for the mouse but low for the elephant) and the pace of your reading (fast for excitement but slow for suspense) will give a more interesting dramatic effect.
4. Use body movements and facial expressions to convey meaning and emotion. (Sit up very straight and use a stern expression when reading the words of the terrible giant, but crouch down a bit and look frightened when reading the words of the little boy).
5. Keep eye contact with your listeners. Watch for non-verbal responses to the reading.
6. Once you begin reading, try to continue without interruptions to the end of the story. If an illustration or word needs explanation, do so and then move on with the reading. Too many interruptions interfere with both understanding and enjoyment of the story.

## Reading chapter books aloud to older children

Many of the suggestions for reading picture books aloud also apply to reading chapter books to older children. In addition:

1. Before you begin, orient the children to the book by discussing the author, title, time and place of the story.

2. Read the first few chapters, one each day. Pay careful attention to the students' nonverbal responses which may indicate a lack of understanding. Supply any information for clarification that may be needed. You may want to summarize the story events at the beginning of each session, at least for the first few days.
3. Continue reading to the end of the book. Encourage the children to extend their understanding of the book by keeping a chart of the characters, designing a map of the story setting, or developing a time line of the story events.
4. When the reading of the book is completed, encourage the students to discuss their responses to it and to make connections between the story and their own lives. Keep their comments in mind when choosing the next chapter book for reading aloud.

### **Reading poetry aloud to children**

Many of the earlier suggestions apply to the reading of poetry, too. But in addition:

1. Read short poems aloud to your class on a regular basis. Try reading just one or two at a time, as your listeners may lose interest if you try to do too much at once.
2. Read each poem for its meaning. Try not to be distracted by the form of the poem. (If the meaning of the first line continues into the second, avoid pausing at the end of the first line.)
3. Don't overdo the stress on the beat of the poem. This can result in a kind of sing-song chant that detracts from the poem's meaning. Let the meaning and the rhythm of the poem guide you.

Reading aloud to children on a regular basis improves their reading and listening skills and their overall language competence. It also stimulates and expands children's interest in reading, motivating them to read independently. Reading aloud should be a

part of every language arts class, even if we have to find ways to 'squeeze' it in!

## References

Lynch-Brown, C. & C.M. Tomlinson. (1993). *Essentials of children's literature*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon

Michener, D.M. (1988). Test your reading aloud IQ. *The Reading Teacher*, 42 (Nov), 118-122.