

Enhancing Reading Skills in Young Learners: Strategies and Approaches in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract: *Developing reading proficiency in young EFL learners is vital for communicative competence, academic success, and lifelong literacy. This article reviews research-based strategies such as interactive read-alouds, shared reading, phonics instruction, comprehension training, extensive reading, and multimodal resources. It explores pedagogical frameworks including Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Learning (TBLT), storytelling, and Content-Based Instruction (CBI). Grounded in theories by Goodman, Krashen, Nation, Grabe, Stoller, Cameron, and Harmer, it highlights the importance of meaningful input, vocabulary development, and motivation. The article concludes with practical recommendations for lesson design, assessment, and teacher professional development to enhance reading instruction effectiveness.*

Keywords: Young learners, EFL, reading strategies, phonics, extensive reading, scaffolding, vocabulary, communicative approach, shared reading, fluency

Introduction.

Reading in an English as a Foreign Language context for young learners extends far beyond the mechanical process of decoding printed words on a page. It constitutes a complex, multifaceted cognitive activity involving the active construction of meaning from text through the integration of linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing skills, background knowledge, and social-cultural understanding. Young learners approach reading with inherent curiosity, developing emergent literacy skills, and highly variable first language (L1) literacy experiences that teachers must carefully assess and thoughtfully consider when designing instructional sequences and selecting appropriate materials (Cameron, 2001).

Effective reading programs for young EFL learners must strategically combine sustained exposure to rich, comprehensible input with carefully sequenced, targeted instruction addressing multiple dimensions of reading competence. These dimensions include phonological awareness and phonemic sensitivity, systematic vocabulary development across high-frequency and academic word families, explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies, and the cultivation of reading fluency through repeated meaningful practice (Krashen, 1982; Nation & Macalister, 2010).

Foundational research in reading pedagogy has fundamentally reframed our understanding of the reading process itself. Goodman's seminal work (1967) reconceptualized reading as an interactive, hypothesis-testing process rather than a passive, linear decoding activity. According to this psycholinguistic perspective, proficient readers actively make predictions based on textual and contextual cues, continuously sampling from the text to confirm or revise their hypotheses, and constructing meaning through the dynamic interplay of graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic information systems. This theoretical framework has profound implications for classroom instruction.

For EFL teachers working with young learners, these research insights suggest that effective lessons should provide carefully selected texts that fall within what Krashen terms the "i+1" zone—materials that are slightly beyond learners' current independent proficiency level but remain accessible and comprehensible with appropriate instructional scaffolding and support. Additionally, instruction must create abundant opportunities for extensive reading practice, allowing for repeated encounters

with vocabulary and structures in varied contexts. Furthermore, effective programs integrate meaningful social interaction and collaborative learning experiences to motivate sustained engagement, build reading communities within the classroom, and develop positive reader identities among young learners.

This article synthesizes theoretical frameworks with practical classroom applications to outline concrete, research-grounded strategies and comprehensive pedagogical approaches designed to strengthen and accelerate young EFL learners' reading development across multiple dimensions of literacy competence.

1. Strategies for Enhancing Reading Skills in Young Learners.

Improving reading in young EFL learners requires a multi-faceted strategy mix addressing decoding, vocabulary, strategic processing, and motivation. Below are evidence-based strategies with theoretical grounding and classroom implications.

1.1. Interactive Read-Alouds and Shared Reading.

Interactive read-alouds position the teacher as a model reader who makes predictions, asks questions, and highlights language features. Cameron emphasizes that read-alouds build comprehension, discourse patterns, and interest in stories while allowing teachers to simplify or expand language in real time for young learners. By verbalizing thought processes (think-alouds), teachers demonstrate metacognitive strategies such as predicting and inferencing, which children can internalize. Shared reading also creates a low-anxiety context for repeated exposure to vocabulary and syntax.

1.2. Phonics and Phonological Awareness Integrated with Meaning.

While whole-language insights stress meaning, phonics instruction remains crucial for alphabetic languages. Systematic phonics—teaching grapheme–phoneme relationships—supports decoding and word recognition, especially when introduced alongside meaningful texts. Harmer and others advocate blending phonics drills with contextualized reading tasks so phonological skills transfer to comprehension and oral reading fluency. For young EFL learners, short, frequent phonics sessions combined with decodable readers yield strong gains in accuracy and confidence.

1.3. Extensive and Graded Reading (Power of Reading).

Krashen's "power of reading" argues that large quantities of comprehensible, enjoyable reading drive language development (comprehensible input + volitional reading). Extensive reading programs—where learners choose graded, interest-appropriate books—boost vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and reading speed more effectively than isolated exercises. Teachers should curate leveled libraries and allocate time for silent independent reading, monitoring engagement rather than policing exact comprehension.

1.4. Vocabulary Instruction: Wide Coverage + Depth.

Nation's work highlights that vocabulary breadth and depth underpin reading comprehension. Effective instruction mixes incidental acquisition through wide reading with deliberate focus on high-frequency words, morphology, and multi-word expressions. Pre-teaching essential words before a text, recycling target vocabulary across activities (games, songs, visuals), and teaching word-learning strategies (guessing from context, using word parts) help young learners access texts more independently.

1.5. Strategy Training: Prediction, Skimming/Scanning, Monitoring.

Explicit strategy instruction—teaching how to predict, skim for gist, scan for details, and self-monitor comprehension—transfers across texts. Guided practice with teacher modeling, followed by scaffolded group work and independent tasks, helps students internalize strategies. Goodman's psycholinguistic view supports training learners to use contextual cues and background knowledge rather than relying solely on bottom-up decoding.

2. Approaches to Enhancing Reading Skills in Young Learners.

Approaches refer to the broader pedagogical frameworks and philosophies that guide classroom design, curriculum sequencing, and teacher roles. Below are prominent approaches with implications for young EFL readers.

2.1. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).

CLT centers meaning and interaction; reading tasks should therefore be communicative and purposeful. TBLT places reading within real tasks—finding information, following instructions,

or creating a product—so learners use reading as a tool rather than an isolated skill. Harmer and others argue that embedding reading in communicative sequences (pre-task, task, post-task) promotes both comprehension and language use, while preserving motivation by linking texts to meaningful outcomes. For young learners, tasks must be developmentally appropriate—games, story-based projects, and collaborative information hunts are effective formats.

2.2. Content-Based and Theme-Based Instruction (CBI/TBI)

Content-based approaches teach language through subject matter (science, social studies, thematic units), offering rich contexts and repeated exposure to target vocabulary in meaningful frames. Cameron highlights that young learners benefit from thematic cycles—units around animals, family, or weather—that integrate reading, listening, speaking, and writing. CBI supports comprehension because content knowledge reduces cognitive load; when children know about dinosaurs, texts about them become more comprehensible and engaging. Teachers should sequence texts from highly supported to more independent as familiarity with both language and topic grows.

2.3. Balanced Literacy.

Balanced literacy marries meaning-centered approaches (shared reading, literature circles) with explicit skill instruction (phonics, decoding, strategy teaching). This synthesis respects Goodman's emphasis on meaning while retaining systematic skill work advocated by phonics proponents. In young EFL classrooms, a balanced program might include daily interactive read-aloud, short focused phonics lessons, guided reading groups with leveled texts, and time for independent reading—ensuring all components reinforce one another. Grabe & Stoller's synthesis of research supports integrated curricula that address fluency, vocabulary, and strategy instruction in tandem.

Conclusion.

Enhancing reading skills in young EFL learners requires a balanced, research-informed program that combines meaningful input, explicit skill instruction, strategic training, and motivational classroom design. Foundational theories—from Goodman's psycholinguistic perspective to Krashen's emphasis on comprehensible, volitional reading—underscore that comprehension is an active, hypothesis-driven process supported by language knowledge, vocabulary, and repeated meaningful exposure. Practical strategies include interactive read-alouds, systematic phonics integrated with meaningful texts, extensive graded reading, explicit vocabulary teaching, and fluency practice.

Crucially, teachers must assess and scaffold continuously—using formative measures to adapt difficulty and support—while fostering choice and enjoyment to sustain reading habits. For implementation, curricula should provide leveled libraries, training in strategy modeling, and time for guided and independent reading. When teachers synthesize evidence-based strategies with child-centred approaches, young EFL learners develop not only decoding and comprehension skills but also positive identities as readers—setting the foundation for lifelong language growth. Continued teacher reflection and action research will ensure approaches remain responsive to learners' evolving needs.

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