Extensive reading for primary in ELT

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CONTENTS

Reading and young learners

The most efficient methods for teaching young learners to read remain hotly debated[1]. However, there is very compelling evidence that the teaching of phonics – the systematic instruction of how sounds match to letters and letter combinations – should be part of any reading programme. However, while phonics instruction is essential in developing reading skills, most would also agree that it is important to help young learners develop a love of reading. In order to do this, young learners need to experience texts and different genres of text, particularly stories, so that they see that the ultimate purpose of reading is meaning-focused, rather than simply a matter of 'breaking the code' (as purely phonics-based instruction might suggest). Several academics[2] have pointed out that reducing reading instruction to a binary choice between phonics and more 'whole-language' approaches does a disservice to young learners because they benefit from both.

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1 Bourke, 2018
2 e.g. Cameron, 2001

Extensive reading and its benefits

The role of extensive reading (ER) in the reading curriculum is clearly to provide opportunities to read for meaning and pleasure. ER involves learners reading relatively large quantities of material that are comfortably within their linguistic range, and there is therefore a focus on reading fluency. It is clear that before learners can move onto such text-level reading that they must already have sufficient vocabulary to deal with the texts with which they engage, and be able to decode frequent words with a good degree of automaticity. One key assumption of ER is that reading will be a pleasurable experience.

There is plenty of research, conducted across a number of countries, which demonstrates the effectiveness of ER as a means of improving second language (L2) learners' overall reading abilities[3] (not just their reading fluency). There is also evidence that ER leads to vocabulary gains[4], and this supports the performance of other language skills, as well as reading. ER appears to have a positive impact on grammar, with the most probable explanation for this being that ER is a valuable source of the input necessary for language acquisition. Those learners who engage with ER programmes also commonly report increased motivation and, of course, have the opportunity to increase their knowledge of the world and other cultures in particular. While there is no one teaching practice that can guarantee success with all language learners, there is strong evidence that those learners who engage and persevere with well-designed ER programmes will see improvements in their L2 learning. See Watkins[5] for a brief overview of ER.

The benefits outlined above are based on findings from research carried out with high school students, university students, and adults. ER research carried out with L2 young learners is scarce to say the least. Indeed, Nakanishi (2015) found no such studies in his meta-analysis of L2 ER research. However, we do know that young L2 readers will go through similarly predictable stages of reading development as their L1 counterparts[6] and this suggests that we can infer some likely benefits for young L2 readers from successful practices in the teaching of L1 reading. For example, we know from studies carried out by Klauda and Guthrie that reading fluency correlates with reading performance and comprehension in L1[7], and it is reasonable to expect similar results in L2. Although specific L2 studies would obviously be welcome, we can draw on relevant and robust L1 studies to inform L2 practices.

In their purest form, ER programmes would see learners themselves choosing the material they want to read and then reading that material independently before selecting the next text. The reading would be done almost exclusively outside of class time and there would be no, or at least very little, traditional assessment of comprehension (through multiple choice questions and so forth). Learners would be trusted to select texts that were at a linguistic level of comfortable intelligibility, thus promoting reading fluency and increasing the likelihood that the reading experience will be pleasurable.

We can easily see that this model is some way from how reading is generally taught in classrooms, where there is often an emphasis on using short, demanding texts and then testing comprehension. While this traditional intensive reading model remains useful, learners are likely to benefit from access to a broader reading curriculum, with ER as a component of that.

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3 Nakanishi, 2015
4 For example: Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985; Horst, 2009
5 Watkins, 2018a – part of this series of Cambridge Papers in ELT
6 Geva and Ramírez, 2015
7 cited in Grabe and Stoller, 2011

The design of L2 extensive reading material

In most L2 ER programmes, and virtually all programmes at primary level, the reading material will need to be graded in some way, and this typically takes the form of both lexical and syntactic grading. In early primary years it may be that additional support can come from using L2 versions of stories with which the learners are already familiar in L1. Familiarity reduces the cognitive load required to process the events of the story and may also reduce anxiety. If teachers feel it is appropriate, they can further exploit this by reading the story (or sections of a story) in L1 prior to L2 reading.

Designers of ER material (typically graded readers) have several options to consider. For example, the selection of images will be important, particularly at primary level because pictures have a dual function in that they contribute to making the material attractive and engaging and they also give support to comprehension (for example, through illustrating particular objects). Glossaries can also be used (in either L1 or L2) and the words included in glossaries could be highlighted in order to ensure that they are noticed[8].

In some ER material there is explicit vocabulary testing after reading. This shift towards the explicit teaching of vocabulary may not be in keeping with the purest forms of ER, but it may be motivating for those who do not see reading as a pleasure but want to use reading as a way of supporting language development. A language focus, such as is provided by vocabulary exercises, may also help to make ER a more acceptable practice in those learning and teaching contexts which place value on the achievement of explicitly stated linguistic goals.

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8 Noticing is a crucial element of second language acquisition (SLA), according to cognitive learning theory.

Perhaps one of the most crucial questions in the design of ER material is whether to include comprehension questions. It could be argued that such questions ensure a reasonable level of comprehension and, where they are well-designed, also guide readers towards the most important parts of the text. On the other hand, such tests of comprehension can be anxiety-raising and may detract from the core principle of ER that reading should be a pleasurable experience. The expectations of the stakeholders in any given learning and teaching context may determine whether comprehension questions should be included with the reading material.

As well as including standard questions that test comprehension, designers could also include questions which focus more on the process of reading and engagement with the ER programme overall. Such questions might include:

- Did you enjoy the story?

- Would you recommend the story to your friends?

- Did you find the story easy to read?

- Will you choose a similar book next time?

Graded reading material often comes with an audio recording of the text. This can be a useful feature as it encourages reading fluency through pushing the reader to follow the text at the rate of the recording. A recording can also be useful in helping learners recognize the correspondences between written and phonological forms, and this is particularly important where the L1 uses a different script system.

Did you enjoy the story?

Would you recommend the story to your friends?

Did you find the story easy to read?

Will you choose a similar book next time?

Extensive reading and young learners

Teachers have an important role in the setting up and implementation of all ER programmes, but it could be argued that the part they play in programmes for young learners is even more crucial than in other contexts. First, teachers must ensure that there is a plentiful supply of appropriate material for the learners to choose from. Not only must the material be appropriate in terms of linguistic level (i.e. learners should be able to read it comfortably), but it should also focus on topics that genuinely interest the learners. Obviously, within any primary class there is likely to be a range of both L2 proficiency and interests, and teachers need to be aware of this diversity so that they can direct learners towards appropriate material for individual reading, and also make appropriate selections for texts that are read by the whole class.

Moreover, teachers should act as motivators for an ER programme and part of this includes acting as a role model for reading, which is one of Day and Bamford's key principles[9] for implementing ER. Arguably, this becomes even more important at primary level because, as Richards[10] says, primary teachers 'will help shape attitudes to learning at a most sensitive period in children's development'. With this in mind, teachers need to take time to both share what they themselves are reading in L2 and to convey a sense of enthusiasm for this reading.

The degree of learner autonomy usually associated with ER programmes is probably an unrealistic goal for young learners, at least in the early stages of learning. Instead, programmes need to assist learners in moving from dependence on others to being maximally independent as they both become more proficient in reading itself and develop the ability to reflect on the success of what they are doing. As learners move through age groups, we may expect to see the degree of autonomy increase.

So although ER is often associated with reading outside of class time, primary teachers will almost certainly need to create time in class to establish and encourage reading. Typically, teachers will exploit stories (rather than non-fiction texts) when introducing text-level reading in a primary classroom because, as Cameron[11] says, 'stories offer a whole imaginary world, created by language, that children can enter and enjoy, learning language as they go'. Therefore a well-chosen story can be highly motivating to learners, and can engage emotions at a deep level, making it more likely that learners will want to participate and interact with both the text and their peers. Some examples of the forms that this interaction may take will be discussed more fully below.

9 Day and Bamford, 2002
10 Richards, 2014
11 Cameron, 2001

stories offer a whole imaginary world, created by language, that children can enter and enjoy, learning language as they go

Let's assume that a first step on the way to encouraging individual silent reading[12] is promoting a love of stories via the class engaging with a shared story selected by the teacher. The teacher may introduce the story and read it aloud to the class, gently checking understanding by asking questions to the class as a whole, rather than nominating any individual. The teacher is likely to show accompanying pictures to the class and ask learners to comment on how they relate to the story, or the learners can be invited to speculate on what will happen next in the story. Such activities provide a potentially memorable, shared experience for the learners, which can help enhance class rapport.

Even as learners develop greater reading proficiency, teachers will need to provide time in class for sustained silent reading[13] in order to instil good reading habits and increase the likelihood of learners reading outside the classroom[14]. The success of ER programmes, particularly with young learners, is likely to depend on the investment of classroom time.

We should remember that non-fiction texts will also have a part to play in reading programmes. As learners move from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' they will need to become familiar with the conventions of non-fiction writing, and well-chosen non-fiction texts can potentially support both reading development and the assimilation of content from other parts of the school curriculum. Some learners may also simply prefer reading non-fiction texts.

1 Shared reading in class

2 Silent reading in class

3 Reading outside the classroom
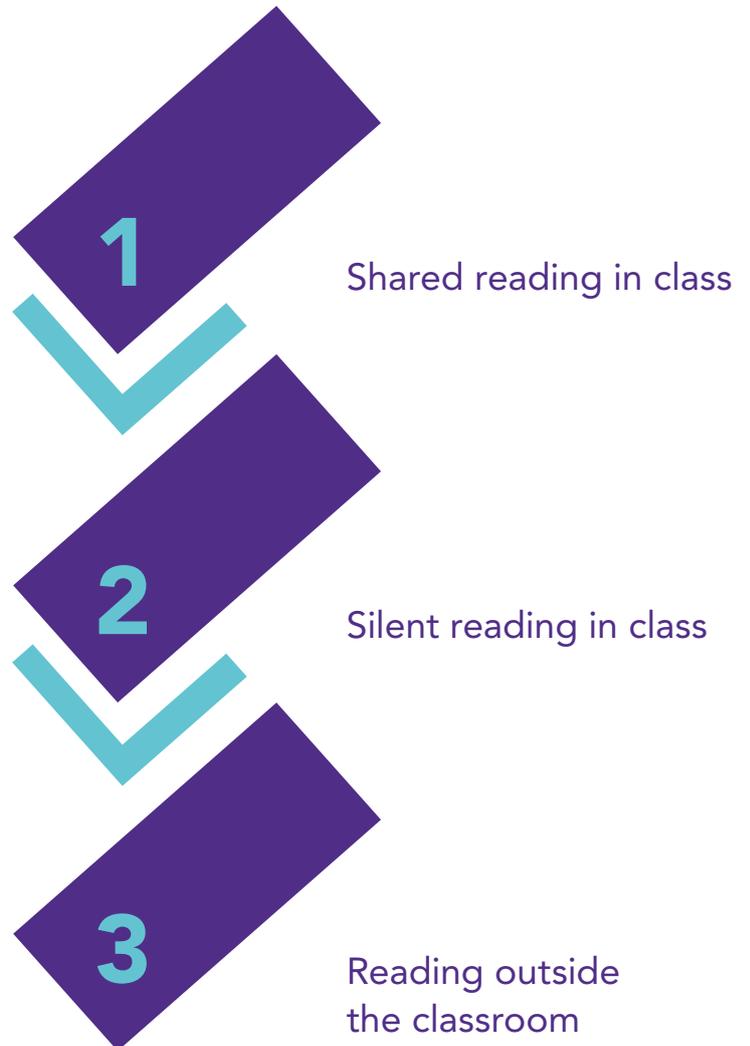
12 This is the ultimate goal of just about all reading programmes.
13 Individual, silent reading is principle 8 of Day and Bamford's (2002) 10 principles for ER
14 Grabe, nd

Reading outside the classroom

In the longer term there is no substitute for learners doing substantial amounts of reading if they are to become proficient readers[15] and, given the pressure on classroom time, much of this will need to happen outside the classroom. Just how much reading is required will depend to some extent on where the learning is taking place. Where learners are exposed to incidental examples of English writing (such as on advertisements, notices and packaging) the need to read books may be reduced a little, but, as a rule of thumb, the more reading learners can do the better.

At primary level this will require teachers to enter a partnership with a parent or other caregivers so that there is the best chance possible of creating a positive and encouraging environment for reading at home.

This partnership may be created in several ways. For example, there may be initial meetings with parents to explain the rationale for L2 reading at home and the benefits it is likely to bring. Targets may be set for how much reading should be undertaken over the course of a week, or some other appropriate time period, and after each session of reading, the responsible adult may be encouraged to write (in either L1 or L2) a brief note in a record book, commenting on what was achieved. There may be opportunities for this communication to take place

15 Eskey and Grabe, 1988

online in many teaching contexts. Guidance on how best to exploit reading at home could also be supplied (see below). Guidance can be given in L1, and where parents do not speak English themselves they might enjoy the opportunity to learn with their children. Any support that a school could give in this endeavour would obviously be useful.

The importance of success

Building the necessary links to the home environment is essential because without support at home, young learners are less likely to engage with ER. This in turn leads to a lack of progress in reading, with weaker readers soon falling behind – a so-called 'Matthew effect', whereby the strong get stronger and the weak get weaker very quickly. As children become weaker in relation to their peers, they withdraw from the learning process further and read even less, leading to big differences in reading ability emerging quite quickly.

In contexts where the L2 is the medium of instruction, such as where Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is practised, any lack of achievement in reading can have very significant consequences, particularly when learners reach the stage of reading in order to learn about other subjects. At this point, a lack of basic reading skills begins to impact the learning of other subjects and that will hold back progress across the curriculum as a whole. With this in mind, it is clearly essential that teachers monitor the progress of young readers so that support can be given immediately should they start to fall behind.

Throughout school years and across countries there are differences between girls and boys in terms of reading performance, with girls tending to read more than boys[16] and also outperforming them in terms of achievement[17]. This is important because it suggests a need to take active measures to reduce the attainment gap through such measures as ensuring that material which appeals

to all members of a class is used. However, we should also be careful in reading too much into simple binary distinctions because differences across groups may mask big differences that also exist within groups.

Dialogic reading

As we noted above, as reading moves towards the home rather than the classroom, it is important that caregivers are supported in encouraging their children to read. Dialogic reading[18] draws on sociocultural learning theory to suggest that scaffolded interactions between children and adults during reading will result in language gains, particularly with regard to vocabulary development, oral complexity and narrative skills. There is also evidence that the experience of dialogic reading correlates with future literacy skills[19]. We should remember that this research was not carried out with L2 learners, but it is likely that the benefits seen in L1 contexts would also apply to L2 situations.

In order to facilitate appropriate scaffolded interactions within the zone of proximal development[20], Zevenbergen and Whitehurst researched how parents could be trained in the use of prompts when reading picture books with their children in the home environment through the use of recorded models of practice. They developed two sets of prompts – one set for 2-3 year olds and the other for 4-5 year olds. In L2 contexts it may be, depending on the precise L2 context, and particularly the place of the L2 in education, that the prompts suggested could be used for slightly older children than stated here.

The table below is a summary of the prompts suggested by Zevenbergen and Whitehurst. For each age group there were two sessions introducing the key points to the parents. In order to help the parents remember the prompts, the suggestions for 4-5 year olds follow two acronyms, CROWD and PEER.

16 Boffey, 2016
17 Brown Centre Report, 2015
18 This term was coined by Whitehurst et al, 1988
19 Zevenbergen and Whitehurst, 2003
20 As described by Vygotsky, 1978

2–3 YEARS	4–5 YEARS
Ask *what* questions, e.g. point to an object in the picture and ask *What is this?*	Completion prompts – fill in the blanks, e.g. *'We all put on our….'*
Later, move to more open-ended questions, e.g. *What can you see here?*	Recall prompts – *Can you remember…?*
Follow answers with questions, e.g. *Yes, that's a dog – what colour is it?*	Open-ended prompts – *Now, you tell me about this page.*
Repeat what the child says, e.g. *Child: It's a clown. Adult: Yes, it's a clown, isn't it?*	Wh- prompts – *Why did she do that?*
Help the child. If the question proves difficult, answer it yourself.	Distancing prompts – *Have you ever done anything like this?*
Praise and encourage.	Prompt the child to talk about objects in the book.
Follow the child's interest, so if their attention moves to another part of the page, follow that lead.	Evaluate the child's responses *and give feedback. For example,* praise the child and only offer the gentlest of correction through giving the right answer.
Expand what the child says, e.g. *Child: Big dog. Adult: Yes, the big dog is red. Can you say that?*	Expand what the child says.
Have fun.	Repeat – encourage the child to repeat the expansion.

The interventions in Zevenbergen and Whitehurst's research proved successful in promoting dialogic reading. It may be that in some cases primary schools could consider providing similar simple training opportunities for parents so that more children can benefit from such positive early reading experiences.

Protocols for interaction during reading can be very useful, particularly for parents who want reassurance that the reading they do with their children is maximally useful. However, these protocols are not designed to be followed slavishly. The overall aim should be that both parent and child have a joyful, bonding experience (notice the explicit reference to 'have fun' in Zevenbergen and Whitehurst's list). If some prompts are not used this is not a cause for concern.

Dialogic reading need not be limited to reading at home. Teachers can also use prompts such as these when reading with children in class. For example, if the teacher is reading a text to the class, with the learners following, the teacher can stop to ask questions of the type outlined above. Alternatively, the questions could be supplied and the learners could then write their responses (in L1 if appropriate) and they could use these as a basis for a discussion. The types of prompt described above are also very useful where there are opportunities for teachers to work with learners either individually or in small groups.

Continuing extensive reading in the classroom

As we have said, there is likely to be a progression from whole group reading in the classroom and the establishing of basic reading principles towards making ER as autonomous as possible and a focus on silent, individual reading. Even when much of the reading is being done at home, it is important that teachers continue to monitor what children are reading and the progress they make. Children need to feel that their efforts are being valued and they can develop self-esteem from being given opportunities in lessons to talk about what they have read[21]. This can be done either as a whole class, or in groups, or individually with the teacher, if time allows.

> ### Children need to feel that their efforts are being valued and they can develop self-esteem from being given opportunities in lessons to talk about what they have read

Some teachers boost children's desire to read by giving rewards for reading, such as points or stickers. This idea is controversial to some extent as some would argue that reading should be its own reward and that learners should not need such external motivation[22]. For some children, however, such external validation may increase their desire to read. Where a reward system is used, it is important that it should recognize effort and commitment to reading rather than simply proficiency.

Teachers can also link ER to other aspects of the curriculum. For example, art classes could involve drawing a character from the books that children are reading and having them describe the character and their creation to others. ER therefore becomes a starting point for communication and collaboration in the classroom.

We will now go on to look at some ideas for reading activities in the classroom.

Readers Theatre

Young and Rasinski (2009)[23] outline the practice of 'Readers Theatre' in which a suitable text is divided into sections and each section is then allocated to a small group of learners. Each group practises their allotted section before coming back together as a whole class to perform the complete text. The learners are not expected to learn the script (as an actor in a play would) but instead read the script with the dramatic effect (the 'theatre') coming from the appropriate use of intonation, stress and expression. The texts used often include plenty of dialogue in order to facilitate this.

21 Bourke, 2018
22 Watkins, 2018b
23 Reported in Geva and Ramírez, 2015

Geva and Ramírez point out that performing well requires practice and this will involve the purposeful rereading of the same section of text. Such rereading leads to enhanced reading fluency, which is itself linked to gains in overall comprehension[24]. Moreover, weaker readers work in groups with stronger peers and this is likely to lead to their improvement[25].

The texts used in Readers Theatre need not be limited to fictional works. There is scope for readings to cover a variety of non-fictional topics and to link with other parts of the curriculum, such as history or science, but it is highly likely that the texts will still need to be adapted (or written) to suit the level of primary learners of English.

Activities such as Readers Theatre promote opportunities for reading to become highly collaborative and can enhance group cohesion. They clearly focus on using reading as a communicative skill and involve creativity on the part of the learners as they experiment with how best to read their lines. However, the teacher will need to monitor and support each group, and this could mean that the activities are most likely to succeed with groups that are already comfortable with a degree of autonomous learning, or where there are teaching assistants ready to help the class teacher. To help overcome such obstacles, teachers can

ensure that the text is first introduced to the whole class and that there is thorough preparation, or even have the groups practise in front of each other, with one group listening and providing feedback before the groups swap over.

Examples of other activities

Once teachers are familiar with Readers Theatre it can be used with little preparation, other than selecting appropriate sections of text. There are, of course, plenty of other activities that could be used to promote peer interaction based on shared reading. Here are just a few examples:

- supply 10 words, most of which are relevant to the text in some way, and ask learners to choose, and then compare, which five are most relevant, or most important, to the story

- provide some discussion questions, based on the text

- develop role play cards so that scenes from the story can be re-enacted

- have learners draw and describe a picture based on the text, or complete a picture which has been partially drawn

24 Klauda and Guthrie, 2008
25 Following the principles of sociocultural learning theory.

Implications for teachers and materials designers

- Invest classroom time in preparing for, promoting, and monitoring ER.

- Provide varied material, ensuring learners can find texts that they are interested in and are of an appropriate level.

- Build links to the home environment so that learners will be encouraged to read at home, as well as in the classroom.

- Explain the benefits of ER to all stakeholders.

- Provide guidance for teachers and other users (e.g. parents) on how to select material.

- Provide guidance for teachers and other users (e.g. parents) on how best to use the material.

- Include activities that promote collaboration and sharing.

- Avoid the overt testing of reading, which can be anxiety-raising.

- Consider placing any comprehension questions or activities for language development (e.g. vocabulary exercises) at the end of the book, where they will not distract from the pleasure of reading.

- Consider including questions that focus on the process of reading, as well as comprehension (e.g. *Did you enjoy the story? Did you find it easy to read?*).

- Consider enhancing input to aid vocabulary acquisition (e.g. highlighter effects for new items).

- Consider building in repeated exposure to key items.

- Consider providing audio material with texts.
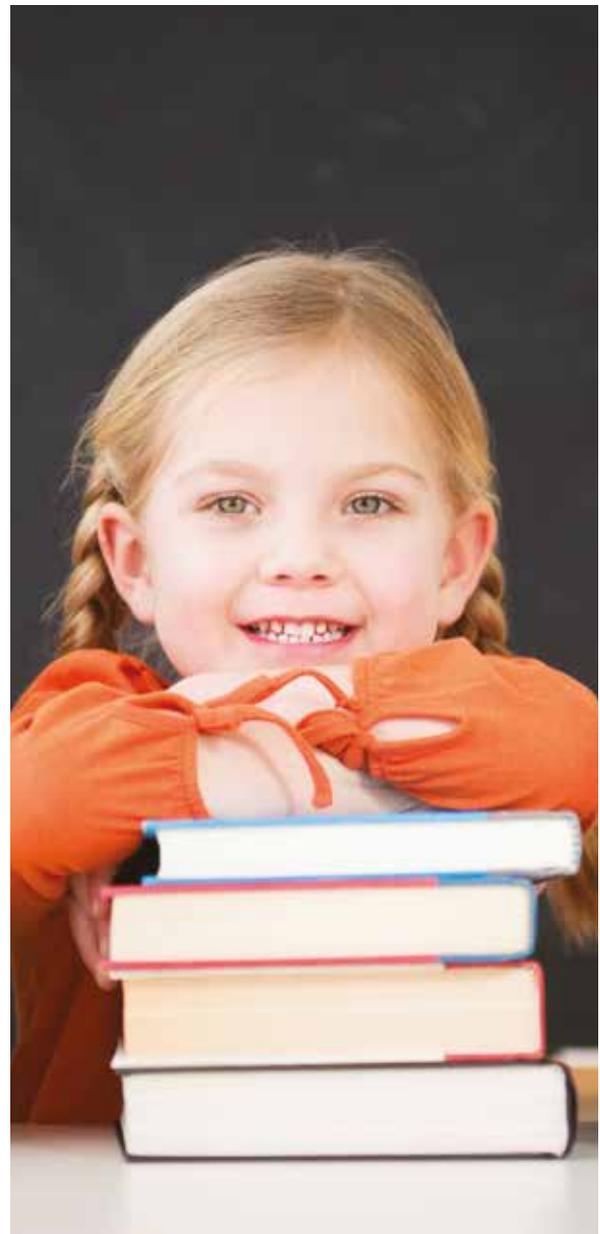
Suggestions for further reading

Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This book has numerous examples of classroom activities taken from Europe and Asia. It includes sections on developing literacy skills and using stories to support language learning.

Day, R. and Bamford, J. (2002). Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14, 2.

This short article sets out the nature of extensive reading and the conditions that are likely to lead to successful programmes. It is available at: http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/October2002/day/day.html

Geva, E. and Ramírez, G. (2015). *Focus on Reading*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This book outlines key research studies on children learning to read and also provides concrete examples of classroom practice.

Puchta, H. and Elliott, K. (2017). *Activities for Very Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is part of the Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers series. The book includes an outline of the learning characteristics of 3-7 year olds and also includes activities for developing early literacy skills.

Watkins, P. (2018). *Teaching and Developing Reading Skills*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is part of the Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers series. It briefly reviews the literature on reading and uses that literature to inform around 140 practical classroom activities. It includes a dedicated chapter on extensive reading and has many activities that are appropriate for young learners.

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