

DOI: 10.53555/ks.v12i1.3001

Read Ahead- An Indigenous Reading Program And Its Theoretical Underpinnings

Maria Fatima Dogar^{1*}, Dr. Syed Kazim Shah²

^{1*}PhD Scholar, Department of Applied Linguistics, Government College University, Faisalabad.

Lecturer, Department of ELT and Linguistics, IER, University of the Punjab. maria.ier@pu.edu.pk

²Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Linguistics Government College University, Faisalabad.

Abstract

The paper presents an indigenous reading program- Read Ahead and its theoretical underpinnings. Read Ahead is proposed as an alternate to extensive reading program since it fails to work in indigenous/ESL contexts majorly because of lack of resources and infrastructure. Read Ahead states that, if a quick echo reading of the textbook is done after teacher for fifteen minutes, four times a week, it leads to an improvement in reading skill. At philosophical level, Read Ahead is based on constructivism where the learner constructs the new language by reading text books scaffolded by the reading teacher. At psychological level, it works on schema theory by building schemas for new language input through top-down processing. At linguistic level, it addresses two strands of 'the four-strand principle'; meaning-focussed input and fluency through repetitive readings. It is proposed that Read Ahead with its strong theoretical underpinnings may prove beneficial in developing reading skill of the learners in ESL contexts.

Introduction

Nation and Waring (2019) and Grabe and Stoller (2019) advocate extensive reading for developing the reading skills of ESL learners in non-English speaking contexts (L2 from here onwards). Extensive reading is based on input hypothesis (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989) and relies on implicit learning, incidental vocabulary acquisition, fluency and automaticity, and overall improved comprehension (Grabe, 2010; Grabe & Stoller, 2019). During the last three decades, several studies have been conducted in L2 contexts to demonstrate the effectiveness of extensive reading. However, extensive reading programs have not been adopted in any L2 contexts apart from the research projects. As also recognized by Nation and Waring (2019) themselves, this disinterest could be owed to insufficient availability of the resources and expertise required for its implementation (Nation & Waring, 2019). Grabe and Stoller (2019) further the discussion by claiming that the studies conducted in extensive reading had flaws in their research designs.

The only extensive reading research on the Pakistani ESL learners was conducted by Hafiz and Tudor in 1989. Performed using experimental interventions on 15 ESL learners and spread over 12 weeks, the study produced promising results as the experimental group out-performed the control groups in the study in writing and comprehension tests. However, the interventions developed by Hafiz and Tudor have not been implemented to date. Once again this could be owed to factors such as dearth of competent ELT practitioners vis-à-vis L2 reading, and possible disinterest on the part of policy makers as well as the different provincial and federal Departments of Education in Pakistan.

The aforementioned discussion highlights a key aspect vis-à-vis the development of programs for teaching a component of L2 such as reading: feasibility. Although an effective methodology for teaching reading to ESL/L2 learners, extensive reading is not feasible to be implemented in public schools of Pakistan because of the following main reasons. Firstly, extensive reading requires self-motivated, independent learners whereas learners in the Pakistani schools are essentially systematic learners who depend upon teacher and school for their learning. Secondly, extensive reading requires the involvement of school, teachers and parents in reporting reading logs. Thirdly, learners enrolled in the public sector schools of Pakistan belong to low-income households and their parents (themselves often barely educated) are not fully appreciative of the importance of education. Fourthly and lastly, extensive reading requires an extensive library with hundreds of graded readers at learners' instructional level so that they could read for enjoyment at their own pace. The current infrastructure of public sector schools in Pakistan is largely lacking on this count. Given this lack of resources as regards the teaching of reading to ESL/L2 learners, we decided to pilot a new ESL reading program "Read Ahead" which is based on interventions involving extensive reading. This paper presents Read Ahead as a reading program for teaching ESL/L2 reading without requiring extensive infrastructure and other such resources. The paper first lays out the proposal of Read Ahead and then elaborates its theoretical underpinnings.

Read Ahead

Read Ahead is a reading program emerging from our own reflective practice as second language learners, and guided by insights from theories on language learning. The technique, i.e., Read Ahead, is as follows: if a quick echo reading of the textbook is done after teacher for fifteen minutes, four times a week, it leads to an improvement in reading fluency. The timeframe of fifteen minutes has emerged from our own experience as ESL teachers. In our experience two to three lessons

of the textbook can be read after the teacher in fifteen minutes. Read Ahead requires three things from the teacher; 1) to read with expression, 2) not to ask for output from the learners and 3) to take correct phrase breaks. To illustrate this, let us present the following example. The sentence, *Ali lived in Lahore all his life*, can be read as

- Ali / lived/ in Lahore/ all his life.
- Ali / lived in Lahore/ all his life.
- Ali lived/ in Lahore/ all his life.
- Ali lived in Lahore/ all his life.
- Ali / lived in Lahore all his life (the slash indicates the pause)

This example is explained next.

How does it work

Typically, in an ESL reading class of fifteen minutes duration, a learner is exposed to two or three lessons right from the first day of his term. When he reads the third lesson, usually one month later in the English language class, the learner would already have schemata of the language that he had read in the reading class, 4 times during the last month. These schemata help him understand the contents of his/her lesson better when the teacher teaches.

Let us understand the above from another angle. Reading of textbook is used for language learning in the technique because the textbook approved in any country for a grade is always above the current level of the learner and aims to expose the learner with language, one needs to learn in one year's time. It is essentially an input technique that works to expose the learner with language above his level in a systematic way, fifteen minutes a day, four times a week. This means an exposure of 320 minutes of reading per month. This exposure time is very close to Young, Mohr, and Rasinski (2015) who dedicated 400 minutes to reading in their intervention-Reading Together. They had derived 400 minutes as an average of previous researches exposure time i.e., maximum 720 minutes and minimum 200 minutes, dedicated in previous researches.

According to Dulay and Burt (1974), one of the features of input include the length of exposure. Read Ahead works on this length of exposure, by exposing the text four times a week in 15-minute readings instead of 60 minutes once a week. Stevick (1976) while elaborating the cognitive theory about the working of memory to vocabulary learning, claimed that repetition is important and distributing repetition over a period of time is more effective than mass practice. He showed that six ten-minute sessions over a week's time will be more effective than one sixty-minutes session. One reading class of 60 minutes once a week is mass practice where the reading material can be read and reread two to three times just like repeated readings but splitting 60 minutes into four sessions of 15 minutes each over four days increases the length of exposure (over time) that is more effective. Nunan (1991) endorses that length of exposure helps in making new learning move from short term memory to long term memory.

Read Ahead versus Extensive Reading – A Comparison

There are five key differences between Read Ahead and Extensive Reading as enumerated ahead. One, Read Ahead diverges from extensive reading in its intensive implementation. Extensive reading relies on incidental repetitive exposure to vocabulary and structure with graded readers, while Read Ahead intensively exposes the new vocabulary by echo reading the text beyond student's capability with the teacher. Hence, it uses repeated readings and its benefits for language learning (Blum & Koskinen, 1991; Samuels, 1979; Therrien & Kubina Jr, 2006).

Two, Read Ahead does not demand a trained English language teacher to echo read in the class. In Pakistan, all public-school teachers are graduates and there is a compulsory English language paper in all under-grad degrees. This is sufficient for the reading teacher in Read Ahead program. Hence, there would be no issue of availability of reading teacher in all public-schools. A teacher with specialisation in humanities or sciences is equally good as a reading teacher in Read Ahead. Extensive reading on the other hand demands an expert English language teacher for its implementation (Nation, 1997; Nation & Waring, 2019).

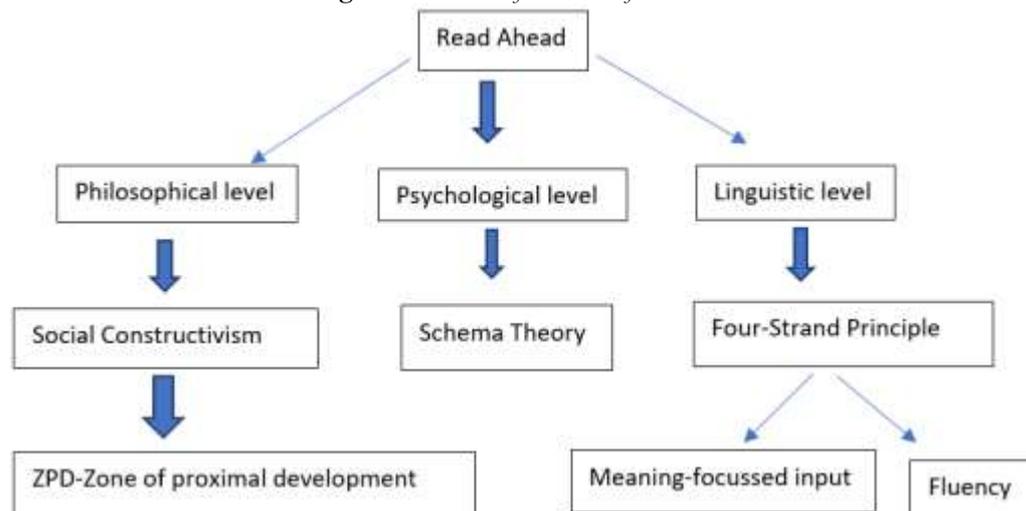
Three, extensive reading demands independent learners who take responsibility of their learning and complete their readings and maintain reading logs. It requires involvement of parents and teachers along with the learner (Nation & Waring, 2019). In Pakistan learners in public-schools belong to uneducated families mostly and parental involvement is simply impossible. The learner too is highly structural who demands spoon feeding and depends upon the teacher for his learning totally (Behlol & Anwar, 2011) and this is a typical feature of ESL contexts (Kang & Shin, 2019). Therefore, Read Ahead puts no demands on learners other than attending the reading class for fifteen minutes and echo reading after the teacher.

Four, Read Ahead is an echo reading class where all the learners read after the teacher regardless of the class size as there are 50-70 students in a typical public-school classroom. The technique does not demand individual attention for learners unlike extensive reading as giving individual attention to all students in such big strength is nearly impossible.

Five and last, the most non-practical feature of extensive reading is establishing a library in each public-school from where the learners can choose graded readers of their interest. Read Ahead resolves this by using textbooks in English as reading materials i.e. English text book, science textbook and computer textbook.

Theoretical underpinnings

Read Ahead has its theoretical foundations in three main theories; Vygotsky's social constructivism at philosophical level, the schema theory and the automaticity theory at psychological level, and the Four Strand Principle at linguistic level. A discussion of these theories and how they provide scholarly bases to Read Ahead is presented next.e

Figure 1 *Theoretical framework of Read Ahead*

Vygotsky's Social Constructivism

The idea of zone of proximal development (ZPD) was presented by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky during 1920s. In their book Vygotsky and Cole (1978) describe ZPD as “the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peer” (p. 86). In other words, ZPD is conceptualized by Vygotsky as the gap between the present development level of the learner and the next attainable level.

The next level according to Vygotsky can be attained by exposure to the learning environment. He believes that the social learning of the concept precedes the psychological learning. As regards the latter, factors such as environment and the social structures around the learner play an important role as outlined ahead. A new concept is first learnt socially through exposure to the society and then it can be learnt formally. In the area of language teaching, several scholars have used this idea to develop activity-based techniques which expose the learners to new forms of language, techniques like WCRR- Whole class repeated readings and WCRR- whole class choral reading (Monobe, Bintz, & McTeer, 2017; Paige, 2011).

Vygotsky affirms the role of skilled person or peer in the form of scaffolding for grasping the new concept. The idea is that a learner learns better in collaboration with a more skilled person, or with peers where they try to learn and internalize the new language through mutual interaction/practice. Roosevelt (2008) holds that going by the Vygotskian perspective, the role of education is to keep learners in their own ZPDs. This can be done by giving them interesting and meaningful learning with problem solving task at a level slightly higher than their own; to provide them space for constructing new knowledge. The task or in the case of second language learning, the exposure to the language being learnt must be at a level that they, i.e., the learners cannot handle independently thus necessitating their working with peers or teachers. This is where the foundations of Read Ahead lie.

Read Ahead is based on the philosophy that with a repetitive exposure to the same text for a longer period of time coupled with inter-learner and learner-teacher interaction could be a helpful way of learning the language. This is supported by Roosevelt (2008) who claims that such a reading-based approach can help the learners develop the skills to independently read the text next time. Extending the argument made by Roosevelt, we propose Read Ahead on the premise that the textbook for any grade is the ZPD of the learner that he needs to achieve in a year's time. This premise is based on the assertion that in an ESL/L2 learning context, text book is the social site where the learner interacts with the language (s)he is learning

In an ESL/ L2 learning context, the focus on literary skills surpasses the oral skills because the L2 learner needs English for education/literacy and not for communication. As in Pakistan, English enjoys the status of language of education and official communication. Hence the learner encounters English in written form in society more than in oral form. If any strata of the society, may be elite class is privileged to have oral existence of English language, we can't call it the ZPD for the language as it is limited to very basic communication. The Pakistani learner meets the language ahead of his level, only in the written form, in the form of a textbook. This is why in this paper our proposal is to extend Vygotsky's idea of ZPD to include the textbooks used for teaching English language. The variables included to make textbooks a rich ZPD for the ESL learners are: the language in the textbook, the pictures, the teacher who reads in Read Ahead, the intonation and stress pattern of the teacher, the peers. These are the social objects ESL learners in Pakistan (or anywhere else in the L2 context for that matter) interact with.

Dulay and Burt (1974) have elaborated that ESL learners reconstruct the L2 language system that is dependent upon the language input they receive. Read Ahead works on exposing the learner with language in their ZPD's repetitively through the textbook. In Read Ahead, the learner echo reads the lessons in the textbook several times after the teacher. This repetitive exposure scaffolded by the reading teacher leads to creation, and activation of schema for comprehension. This is backed up

by Richards and Schmidt who say that “when encountering a topic in reading or listening, the reader activates the schema for that topic and makes use of it to anticipate, infer, and make different kinds of judgements and decisions about the language”(Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 514). Likewise in Read Ahead, each iteration walks the learner through the meaning making process whereby (s)he might use clues, e.g., the pictures in the book, or discussions with peers or teachers to scaffold his/her learning.

Schema Theory

The psycholinguistic model of EFL/ESL reading skill remained dominated by the schema theory in the 1980's and 90's. The origins of schema theory can be traced back to Immanuel Kant who claimed that new learning is possible when it can be related to something that the learner already knows and this was probably the first clue to the constructive nature of learning. The human mind constructs reality on the basis of already existing knowledge. This background knowledge is termed as the schema in the Schema theory (Bartlett & Bartlett, 1995). The schema are considered important factors in the comprehension of second language reading (Richards & Schmidt, 2013). The theory stipulates that meaning does not reside in the text. Rather, the learners draw meanings out of the new language using their schema. Hence, reading is an interactive process between the readers background knowledge and the text.

Schema theory shifted the focus from the text to the learner. As opposed to the previously held scholarly view according to which meaning resides in the text, schema theory locates it in the mind of the learner. Correspondingly, the focus of ESL teaching-learning paradigm has shifted towards learner centred approaches; from structuralism to constructivism and from Audiolingual to communicative language teaching (Berns, 2010; Nunan, 1991, 2015; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The learner is no longer a passive entity but an active participant interacting with the text and making meaning out of it.

The way schema theory addresses the reading comprehension, a brief and complete explanation is given by Richards and Schmidt (2013) as follows:

in comprehending language, people activate relevant schemata allowing them to process and interpret new experiences quickly and efficiently. Schemata serve as a reference store from which a person can retrieve relevant existing knowledge and into which new information is assimilated. (p.510)

The significant advantage for L2 readers from the schema-theoretical point of view is that schemata are repeatedly accessed and further expanded and refined, resulting in increasing comprehension (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). Read Ahead through repetitive exposure fosters schema building, access, expansion and refinement.

According to schema theory, comprehension means that every input is mapped against an existing schema, and the input interacts with the schemas at two levels of processing called bottom-up processing and top-down processing. The two processes occur simultaneously for the new language input but quite differently from each other (Rumelhart, 2017). Schemata are organised hierarchically, with the most general at the top and the most specific at the bottom. In bottom-up processing, the input interacts with the bottom level schemata of the language such as pronunciation of the word, spellings, grammatical structure etc. whereas the top-level schemas are more general in nature. In the top-down processing, the input interacts with the schemata at the meaning level. The bottom-up processing is data driven whereas top-down processing is concept driven.

Bottom-up approach is associated with behaviourism that focuses habit formation for new learning. In the area of second language reading, phonics is based on bottom-up approach that considers reading as a linear process wherein letter sound combinations are formed that lead to decoding of text word by word, linking words into phrases and then sentences. The meaning of sentences is made from the meaning of smaller units. This is bottom-up working, starting from the smallest unit of language and working towards larger units (Anderson, 1994). This approach formed the basis of Audio-lingual method where drill and practice focussed second language instruction (Villanueva de Debat, 2006).

With the cognitive shift in psychology and the schema theory, the focus shifted from rote learning to meaningful learning. It was proposed that the learning happens only when the material is presented in the context, and is related to what the learner already knows. This led to the concept of top-down processing in reading comprehension that meant “reading is not just extracting meaning from a text but a process of connecting information in the text with the knowledge the reader brings to the act of reading” (Villanueva de Debat, 2006). Just like extensive reading, Read Ahead relies on top-down processing, where the learner constructs meaning from the context and schemas related to context. The context is the language text, the pictures in the textbook, the teacher, the stress and intonation patterns of the teacher while reading, and the peers. In the nutshell, Read Ahead works on developing schema for the language that the learner is supposed to learn in the course of six months.

A failure of reading comprehension is attributed to the non-activation of the schemata. ESL reading research is ripe with exploring schemata, their activation and their role in comprehension. But the focus on how do these schemata develop in the second language learner has to the best of our knowledge received limited scholarly attention. There is scant research on the origin of schema for the second language learner. What if a certain schema does not even exist both for bottom-up and top-down processing? Such a question is not valid for a native language learner, as when natives approach the literacy skill of reading, they already have an adequate grasp of the language vocabulary and structure. Second language readers attempt to provide schemata to make sense of texts, and they do so persistently.

For second language readers, to access the schemata, general language processing skills are very important (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983) and sometimes, failure of schema activation is due to less proficiency in the language processing skill. Textual cues, visuals, pictures and graphic display are used for accessing schemata by second language learners for comprehension. Hence, the reader would fail if he cannot access the appropriate schemata or if the reader does not possess the appropriate schemata necessary to understand a text. For this reason, readers are encouraged to develop vocabularies and syntactic structure to improve reading comprehension through excessive repetitive exposure to language in Read Ahead. The

point that the second language learner cannot use background knowledge because of missing schema is overcome by Read Ahead. When the learner remains interacting with the text for a month, s/he develops enough schema for the text by the time it is taught formally in the language class. This helps in better output as compared to those who interact with the text for the first time in the language class. As the reader constructs meaning based on the schemas, hence developing schemas of the language in ZPD's is a crucial factor for comprehension. This applies to both native as well as ESL reading comprehension.

The four-strands Principle

Read Ahead finds its linguistic theoretical foundations in 'the four strands' principle for a language course by Nation (2007). The principle states that a successful language course has four equal strands; meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused input and fluency development. Reading Ahead covers the first and the last strand. It offers meaning focused input of language in the zone of proximal development of the learner where the learner interacts with the text independently and draws meaning of the text by his repetitive interactions of the text over a period of time through top-down processing. During repetitive input sessions the reader develops and alters his schema for comprehending the text better. Repetitive exposure of the language beyond students' proficiency level leads to fluency development as the learner requires repetitive exposure of the unknown vocabulary to build its schema; phonological, morphological, syntactical and semantic.

Nation (2007) defines meaning-focused input as a text that is at the level of the learner, to read independently due to his inclination for extensive reading programs. We are expanding the definition provided by Nation (2007) to include difficult texts too, because in Read Ahead the learner is not left on his own. In fact, the input is scaffolded several times in the form of echo reading by the reading teacher. Though the teacher does not teach explicitly, the intonation and expressions of the teachers while reading convey the meaning too. Read Ahead also prepares the learner for language-focused input that he receives in the language class in the form of explicit teaching of grammar, lexicon and comprehension. As stated in section (provide section number), text is the social world of the learner in Vygotsky's term with which the learner interacts time and again to reach a meaning on his own that is later confirmed or explained by the language teacher in the language-focused input class. Therefore, it can be stated that Read Ahead finds good support from the four-strand principle.

Nation and Waring (2019) define fluency development under the umbrella of extensive reading, where the text contains no unknown vocabulary or grammatical features and there is a pressure on the learner to read faster. In Read Ahead, the text contains unknown vocabulary and structures but the learner is not on his own. The text above his present level is exposed by an experienced teacher, after which he reads and learns new vocabulary and structures. Several interactions with the text let him draw meanings of his own depending upon his schema.

Conclusion

The aim of this theoretical article was to present the layout of Read Ahead and develop its theoretical underpinnings. In fulfilment of this aim, we have presented that Read Ahead works like extensive reading but differs in its implementation meeting the needs of ESL learners and utilising the available resources and infrastructure in ESL contexts. Then, the philosophical, psychological and linguistic foundations of the Read Ahead program were elaborated. Read Ahead is a language input technique based on Vygotskian theory of social constructivism where the textbook extends as the social environment and the reading teacher scaffolds learning in a stress free Read Ahead class. The repetitive readings of the text not only develop schema for comprehension but fosters their activation. It makes the learner grasp meaning of the text by top-down approach and prepares the learner for bottom-up processes (grammar and vocabulary) in the English class. At linguistic level, Read Ahead addresses meaning focussed input and fluency development strands of 'the four strands principle.' Read Ahead proposes at least four repetitions of the same text across four consecutive days; these spaced repetitions develop fluency by automatizing the lower-level processes of reading skill, i.e., decoding etc. Therefore, it is claimed that Read Ahead is a well-grounded technique with solid philosophical, psychological and linguistic foundations in philosophy, psychology and linguistics.

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