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DEVELOPING EARLY READING SKILLS OF GRADE 3–4 PUPILS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES: A GRADUAL RELEASE MODEL FOR A TRANSPARENT-TO-OPAQUE ORTHOGRAPHY TRANSITION

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Abstract. Primary school pupils in Uzbekistan begin reading English after they have learned to read their native language in the Latin script, an orthography in which letters map onto sounds in a largely one-to-one way. English, by contrast, has one of the least consistent spelling systems among alphabetic languages. This paper examines how reading skills in English can be developed in Grades 3 and 4 when learners move from a transparent to an opaque orthography. Drawing on theories of word reading development, the simple view of reading, scaffolding and the gradual release of responsibility, the study proposes a methodological model in which letter–sound work, decoding, fluency and comprehension are layered across two school years, and teacher support is planned to decrease systematically within each reading cycle. The paper describes a four-step lesson routine for a short text, a weekly reading cycle, a planning guideline for the withdrawal of teacher support and a set of classroom-observable indicators of progress. It argues that the familiarity of Latin letters is both a resource and a source of systematic error, and that reading instruction for young learners of English in Uzbekistan should address this transfer explicitly rather than leave it to chance.

Keywords: early reading; young learners; English as a foreign language; orthographic depth; phonics; reading fluency; scaffolding; gradual release of responsibility; Uzbekistan.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning to read in a foreign language at the age of eight or nine is a different experience from learning to read in one’s first language. The child already knows what reading is, can hold a book, follows lines from left to right and expects written words to make sense. What the child does not yet have is the oral vocabulary and the knowledge of the spelling system that make reading in the new language possible. In English language classes for young learners this gap is often bridged by memorisation: pupils repeat a text after the teacher until they can say it by heart, and the appearance of reading replaces reading itself.

In Uzbekistan, English has been taught from the first grade of primary school since the Presidential Resolution PQ-1875 of 10 December 2012 (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2012). Oral skills dominate the first two years, and Grades 3 and 4 are the period in which written texts become a regular part of English lessons. Interest in primary reading has also grown with the country’s participation in international assessments of reading literacy, whose framework treats reading as both the construction of meaning from text and a source of enjoyment (Mullis & Martin, 2019).

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The Uzbek context adds a specific feature. Pupils in Grades 3–4 read fluently in Uzbek written in the Latin alphabet, an orthography with highly regular letter–sound correspondences. When they open an English book they see familiar letters and, quite reasonably, read them with their Uzbek values. Research on orthographic depth shows that the consistency of a spelling system strongly affects the speed with which children acquire basic decoding (Seymour, Aro, & Erskine, 2003), and that English is an outlier among alphabetic orthographies in this respect (Share, 2008). Uzbek learners of English therefore move not only into a new language but also from a transparent orthography to an opaque one.

The aim of this paper is to propose and substantiate a methodological model for developing the reading skills of Grade 3–4 pupils in English language classes that takes this transition into account. The paper addresses three questions: (1) which components of reading should be developed at this age and in what order; (2) how the transfer of native-language reading experience should be handled; (3) how teacher support can be planned so that pupils move from assisted to independent reading.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is theoretical and design-oriented. Four procedures were used. First, a review of theoretical work on reading acquisition was carried out, focusing on the simple view of reading, which describes reading comprehension as the product of decoding and linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986); the phase theory of word reading development (Ehri, 2005); recent syntheses of research on reading instruction (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; National Reading Panel, 2000); and second language reading from a cross-linguistic perspective (Koda, 2005).

Second, a contrastive analysis of the Uzbek Latin and English spelling systems was conducted at the level of grapheme–phoneme correspondences in order to identify where positive and negative transfer of decoding skills can be expected. Third, methodological literature on teaching foreign languages to young learners (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017), on teaching reading skills (Nuttall, 2005), on extensive reading (Day & Bamford, 1998), on storytelling (Ellis & Brewster, 2014) and on fluency (Rasinski, 2010) was analysed, alongside the Uzbek methodological tradition (Jalolov, 2012). Fourth, the principles of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) were used to design the instructional sequence. The output of the study is a model, a set of classroom routines and a system of indicators intended for subsequent experimental testing.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Components of early reading and their sequence. For a young learner of English, reading can be described through five interrelated components: phonological awareness, knowledge of letter–sound correspondences, word decoding together with a stock of instantly recognised words, fluency (accuracy, rate and appropriate expression) and comprehension. A sixth, motivational component — the wish to read and the habit of choosing books — determines whether these skills are used outside the lesson. In first language reading, comprehension rests on a large oral vocabulary built over years; in a foreign language at the age of eight it rests on a few hundred words learned orally in Grades 1–2. The simple view of reading predicts that, under these conditions, weak decoding will block comprehension even of familiar words, while strong decoding of unfamiliar words will produce reading without understanding (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). The practical consequence is a staged sequence: in Grade 3 the emphasis falls on letter–sound work and decoding of words already known orally; in Grade 4 it shifts to fluency and comprehension, while decoding work continues in short reviews.

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3.2. Transfer from Uzbek Latin script. The contrastive analysis showed that transfer is uneven. Most consonants and the digraphs *sh*, *ch* and *ng* have the same values in both languages, so pupils read *ship*, *chin* and *sing* correctly from the start. Difficulties concentrate in three areas. The first is vowels: Uzbek *a*, *i* and *u* each correspond to one sound, whereas in English each has several values (*cat*, *cake*, *car*; *sit*, *time*; *cup*, *cute*, *put*). The second is letters that exist in both scripts but stand for different sounds: Uzbek *x* is a uvular fricative, while English *x* in *box* is /ks/; Uzbek *q* is a uvular stop, while English *q* appears only in *qu* as /kw/. The third is letters and digraphs that do not exist as independent units in Uzbek Latin script, such as *c*, *w* and *th*. These findings support Koda's (2005) view that second language decoding is shaped by the first language system and suggest that letter–sound instruction should not follow the alphabet evenly but concentrate on the points of negative transfer, using positive transfer as an anchor. The teacher states the principle openly — "the same letter, a different sound" — and invites pupils to compare how a word would be read in Uzbek and in English.

3.3. A four-step routine for reading a short text. The core of the model is a lesson routine in which responsibility for reading moves from the teacher to the pupils within one lesson and across several lessons on the same text (Table 1). It adapts the gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) to the needs of young foreign language readers.

Table 1

Gradual release routine for reading a short text in Grades 3–4

Step	Who reads	What happens	Focus in Grade 3	Focus in Grade 4
1. Modelling ("I do")	teacher	teacher reads aloud, pointing to the words, and thinks aloud about one decoding or meaning decision	how a vowel or digraph is read; where a word begins and ends	how phrasing and intonation follow punctuation; how a prediction is checked
2. Shared reading ("We do")	teacher and class	class reads together; teacher's voice gradually drops out on known words	blending sounds in word families (-at, -en, -ig)	echo reading and choral reading of dialogue
3. Collaborative reading ("You do together")	pairs or small groups	pupils read to each other, help with difficult words, complete a simple frame	word-picture matching; reading word cards to a partner	paired reading, reading in roles, story map in pairs
4. Independent reading ("You do alone")	individual pupil	pupil reads a new but similar text and shows understanding	reading a short caption or a four-line text aloud to the teacher	reading a levelled mini-book and retelling it with pictures

The routine is not completed in a single lesson for every text. In Grade 3 a pupil may stay at steps 2 and 3 for several lessons before reading a comparable text alone; in Grade 4 the cycle is shorter,

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and step 4 increasingly involves texts the pupil has chosen. The decisive point is step 4: a word or text that a pupil reads only with the teacher's voice beside it has not yet been mastered.

3.4. A weekly reading cycle. Because English lessons in primary school are limited in number, repeated encounters with the same text are organised across the week. Table 2 shows a cycle built around one short text of 40–80 words. Repeated reading is a well-established way of building fluency (Rasinski, 2010), but repetition only works when each reading has a new purpose; otherwise it turns into the rote chanting the model is meant to replace.

Table 2

Weekly reading cycle around one short text

Lesson in the cycle	Purpose of reading	Typical tasks
1	first encounter: meaning and key words	picture walk and prediction; teacher reads aloud; pupils find three known words
2	decoding	word family work on words from the text; shared reading; pupils underline a target sound
3	fluency and expression	echo and paired reading; reading in roles; "read it as the character would say it"
4	comprehension and transfer	story map or sequencing pictures; reading a new text with the same words; choosing a mini-book to take home

3.5. Planned withdrawal of teacher support. Scaffolding is effective only when it is removed in time (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). To make this removal visible in planning, a guideline was developed for the share of reading tasks in which pupils receive direct teacher support (modelling, prompting, choral support) over an eight-week cycle. Figure 1 presents the guideline for Grades 3 and 4. The values are a planning recommendation derived from the model, not empirical measurements.

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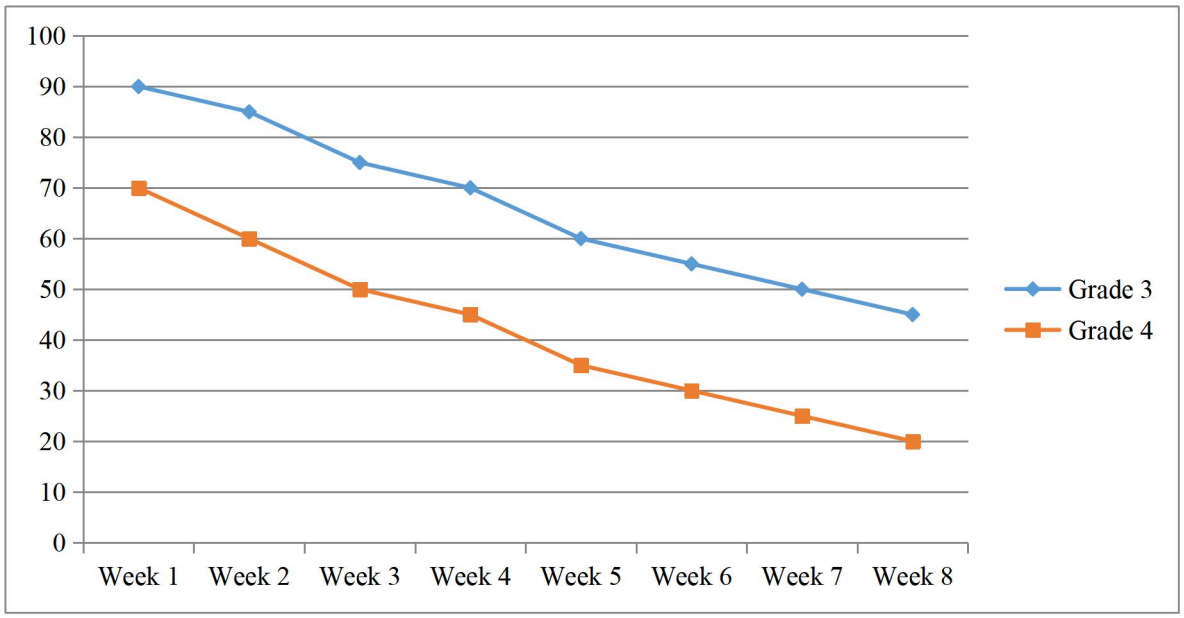


Figure 1. Planned share of reading tasks with direct teacher support, % (author's planning guideline)

Two features of the guideline are important. Grade 3 starts higher and ends higher, because decoding in an opaque orthography requires longer assisted practice. In both grades the decline is gradual rather than abrupt, which leaves room for a temporary return to stronger support when a new text type or a new spelling pattern is introduced.

3.6. Observable indicators of progress. Assessment of reading in primary English classes often checks only whether pupils can translate a text or answer literal questions. The model proposes indicators that correspond to each component and can be observed during a short individual reading of two to three minutes once a term: (a) the pupil gives the English rather than the Uzbek value of target letters; (b) the pupil reads an unfamiliar but regular word by blending its sounds; (c) the pupil reads a short text without word-by-word pauses and with intonation that follows punctuation; (d) the pupil retells the text in sequence or completes a story map; (e) the pupil chooses a book independently and records it in a simple reading diary with the title, a favourite character and a drawing. The indicators are described at three levels — emerging, developing and secure — and do not require specialised testing instruments.

4. DISCUSSION

The model takes a position in the long debate between phonics-based and meaning-based approaches to early reading. Recent syntheses argue that the two are not alternatives: systematic teaching of letter–sound correspondences is necessary for learners of an alphabetic writing system, while comprehension and the enjoyment of books develop through extensive exposure to meaningful text (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018). In the proposed model the tension is resolved over time. Grade 3 places the emphasis on decoding, Grade 4 on fluency and comprehension, and in both grades all components are present in every reading cycle.

The foreign language context requires one adjustment to approaches developed for native speakers. A child reading in the first language can recognise the meaning of a word as soon as it is decoded, because the word is already in the oral lexicon. A young learner of English can decode a word correctly and still not know what it means. For this reason, words chosen for decoding practice

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should come from vocabulary that pupils already know orally. This principle is consistent with the general recommendation that written work with young learners should grow out of spoken language (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017).

The issue of transfer deserves particular attention in Uzbekistan. In the national methodological tradition, the influence of the native language on foreign language learning has mainly been discussed in relation to pronunciation and grammar (Jalolov, 2012). The present analysis suggests that it is equally visible in reading. Because Uzbek and English now share the same alphabet, the letters look familiar to pupils, and this familiarity invites them to read English words with Uzbek values. The same situation turns letter shapes into a resource and letter values into a source of systematic error. Explicit comparison of the two systems, rather than silent correction of individual mistakes, allows pupils to understand why their reading goes wrong and to correct it themselves.

Motivation is the component most easily lost in a skills-oriented model. Extensive reading research shows that reading large amounts of easy, interesting material supports fluency and vocabulary growth (Day & Bamford, 1998), and storytelling prepares young learners for the structure of written narratives (Ellis & Brewster, 2014). In schools where English picture books are scarce, a class library can be built from mini-books made by the teacher and the pupils themselves. The reading diary, which records what a child has chosen to read, serves both as a motivational tool and as evidence for assessment. In Grade 4, a simplified form of reciprocal teaching, in which pupils take turns to predict, ask a question and summarise, can prepare the transition to more demanding comprehension work in lower secondary school (Palincsar & Brown, 1984).

The study has a clear limitation: the model, the weekly cycle, the support guideline and the indicators are the result of theoretical design and have not yet been tested experimentally. The next stage of research should involve an experimental and a control group of Grade 3–4 pupils, a pre- and post-test of decoding, fluency and comprehension, and statistical comparison of the results.

5. CONCLUSION

Developing reading skills in English in Grades 3–4 in Uzbekistan means guiding pupils across two transitions at once: from oral to written English and from a transparent native orthography to an opaque foreign one. The paper has proposed a methodological model that responds to both. It sequences letter–sound work, decoding, fluency and comprehension across two school years while keeping all of them present in each reading cycle; it concentrates letter–sound instruction on the points of negative transfer from Uzbek Latin script and uses positive transfer as an anchor; it organises reading through a four-step gradual release routine and a weekly cycle of purposeful re-reading; and it plans the withdrawal of teacher support explicitly. The proposed indicators allow teachers to observe progress in each component without specialised instruments. The model can serve as a basis for lesson planning, for the design of primary English reading materials and for further experimental research.

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