

A study of Strategies for developing the Reading Skills of Key Stage 1 Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the structural use of integrated cognitive reading strategies to address the language-literacy gap faced by Key Stage 1 learners in English-medium private schools in Sri Lanka, using an action research model. Young multilingual learners often master automated phonetic decoding, whereas a lack of understanding of meaning is enormous under traditional rote learning. Building on an intervention in a primary classroom with 30 pupils that took place over six weeks. Data collection instruments were teacher questionnaires, pre- and post-test student literacy assessments, and student decoding scores, oral fluency percentage, and text comprehension. The descriptive statistics showed a significant positive transformation. The average reading fluency for the cohort was from 37.33 WPM to 52.20 WPM, and the average reading comprehension score improved from 3.73 to 7.47 (out of 10). The author concludes that applying strategies early in the learning process is effective in moving beyond mere word calling to independent meaning construction.

Keywords: *action research, key stage 1, reading comprehension, strategies, multilingual learners*

INTRODUCTION

Reading and writing are the first milestones of formal education and human cognitive growth. Reading can be viewed not only as a passive reception of visual information but also as an active, complex and multifaceted psycholinguistic process in which a learner decodes characters, processes the structural signals of written language and builds meaning from a written text (Loew, 2006). Children aged five to seven years (Key Stage 1) undergo rapid brain adaptations, from simple phonetic sound recognition to processing words as a whole. Instruction should focus on balancing automatic skills and strategic planning or awareness that reading will be the main mode of transferring knowledge from one learning area to another, as reported by Paris (2005), at this very important phase of language acquisition. The basic literacy skills acquired during these formative years will determine their academic performance in the years to come and shape how they view the world.

The consequences of basic reading ability permeate a variety of social and economic domains, and directly impact the design of public education policy, national economic

productivity, and even global measures of human capital. Earlier studies on simple statistical models consistently demonstrate that literacy levels in early life, before starting secondary school, predict secondary school leaving, long-term employment outcomes, and adult civic engagement (Almsbhiheen et al., 2023). English has become the language of technology, international business and academic publishing in the modern globalized economy. Thus, the desire to develop high-level English reading at the grassroots level in developing countries in the context of globalization is no longer merely an aesthetic cultural aspect but must be considered inevitable in policy-making processes for economic and structural development (Amin, 2019). Failure to understand early on can lead to systemic learning challenges; in a country where English is the primary language of instruction or commercial interaction, such failure can be a systemic barrier that perpetuates educational inequities and limits youth upward mobility.

The world of literacy research emphasises the importance of shifting from passive, rote-knowledge forms of reading to active, metacognitive and self-regulated forms of learning (Langan, Peek, & Mundry, 2011). Based on comparative studies, it has been determined that teachers who explicitly model text comprehension strategies, including predicting the text's trajectory, visualisation, semantic mapping, and structural self-questioning, enhance text comprehension (Küçükoğlu, 2013). In modern cognitive science, the idea that, when reading, a skilled reader constantly checks their understanding of the text and adjusts their reading and comprehension strategies depending on the difficulty and purpose of the reading has been established (Şen, 2009). International research objectively confirms that systematic instruction in cognitive reading strategies helps prepare young learners from slow, effortful word-decoding tasks to efficient, automatic word-decoding skills (Manoli & Papadopoulou, 2012). This shift creates a larger cognitive space for students, allowing them to focus less on letter sounds and more on deeper questioning of the theme's meaning and context (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Teachers face the challenge of striking a balance between establishing automatic decoding mechanisms and applying high-level comprehension strategies to enable students to develop fluent comprehension (Manoli & Papadopoulou, 2012).

This study directly responds to directions and issues in the private education arena. Due to the increasing demand for parents to enroll their children in private English-medium primary schools to ensure they have an international edge, there is growing pressure on these schools to achieve higher levels of literacy (Zakaria et al., 2019). At present, however, many of these institutions still use traditional teaching methods, such as reading aloud and memorising texts, as well as simple question-and-answer worksheets (Dwiningtiyas et al., 2020). This emphasis on vocabulary and verbal dexterity often obscures more significant deficiencies in understanding and word knowledge. This study examines structured strategy frameworks in this context and proposes practical solutions to help schools transition from passive memorisation to active, strategic reading comprehension (Okasha, 2020).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

One of the major challenges in Sri Lanka's private education system, highlighted by this study, is the high levels of reading comprehension difficulties and reading fluency problems at Key Stage 1. YMLs in these English-medium environments function in different linguistic settings where English is the language of instruction for all subjects in school and their home language (HML) is a local language (Zakaria et al., 2019). This creates a large discrepancy between the primary students who excel at reading aloud and those who excel at decoding individual words phonetically. However, a majority are unable to interpret or explain the significance of what they read (Almsbhiheen et al., 2023).

This is a real deficiency in contemporary primary school teaching practices. Passive, rote reading aloud and a simple worksheet memorisation format are very common in classroom reading instruction (Amin, 2019). This traditional strategy gives children in the

early years little to no way to check their own mastery level or find a solution when they do not understand. Moreover, there is a gap in the educational literature that may be described as empirical, as the educational literature prioritizes adult university students or secondary language learners (Cubukcu, 2008). This indicates that there remains a substantial gap in the adaptations for five- to seven-year-old primary school students during metacognitive strategy instruction in South Asian private schools (Şen, 2009). This instructional mismatch is critical not only from a theoretical perspective in education but also because of its potential impact on children's ongoing development. Without such conscious comprehension, primary school students are at risk of developing deep reading impairments that undermine their achievement across all curriculum disciplines (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). On a larger scale, failing to address early literacy and reading proficiency restricts students' opportunities for further academic training and their professional mobility in an increasingly globalised economy that requires a high level of English proficiency (Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014). This study directly confronts this gap by designing and testing a structured, strategy-based reading model that can be used by school administrators, curriculum designers, and teachers as empirical data to improve traditional learning models by integrating evidence-based literacy models to benefit their learners. In that, this study is designed to address the gap directly by creating and testing a structured, strategy-based reading model that can be used for the replacement of the outdated classroom habits by school administrators, curriculum designers, and teachers to be implemented as an evidence-based literacy instruction for their learners (Pratiwi, 2020; Sari et al., 2019).

OBJECTIVES

1. Examine which English teaching strategies are used to support students' reading development.
2. Examine the most beneficial strategies for key stage 1 students' reading development.
3. Identify, implement and design programmes for teachers and parents for children's reading development.
4. Propose new reading strategies for the key stage one students.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

At the theoretical level, it can contribute to a better understanding of the process of learning to read in children, especially in multilingual environments. It is not simply the application of traditional models developed for monolingual students. In practice, it can serve as a useful guide to effective instructional methods that have been tried and tested for supporting multilingual learners, helping teachers be more proactive. Furthermore, it offers insights to Sri Lankan school administrators and those designing Sri Lankan curricula on how to choose and adapt a more suitable reading method for the Sri Lankan cultural context.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

There is a scope limitation to this research project, which focuses only on early reading in KS1. That is, the restrictions include a limited number of students (30) and teachers (10), as well as a limited intervention period (6 weeks). Also, the study was conducted at a private English school in Sri Lanka. Therefore, results cannot be extrapolated to other age cohorts nationwide or to larger public schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous research papers from around the world consistently indicate that a balanced approach to teaching reading is the most appropriate method for developing reading skills (National Reading Panel, 2000). Nevertheless, the available world evidence and the ensuing school plans are primarily based on research conducted in the West, where the student

population speaks a single language. Based on regional and local research, specialists are beginning to understand that the case is quite different for children learning English as a second language. Multilingual students experience additional mental pressure when reading and comprehending texts intended for native speakers (Bialystok, 2001). In Sri Lanka, students are known to use Sinhala or Tamil at home and to attempt to learn English in school. This creates a language barrier, so a standard phonics drill does not improve overall comprehension.

BARTLETT'S SCHEMA THEORY

This means that human understanding is based on pre-existing "nets of meaning" and knowledge about the world (Loew, 2006). In literacy learning, a student builds meaning by successfully bridging the text clues to what they already know. Perhaps the major gap in the theoretical assessment is the lack of attention to schema models in non-Western English as a Second Language (ESL) settings, where limited exposure to English is available outside the school. This study aims to fill this gap by using pre-reading Picture Talks that intentionally activate background knowledge prior to reading tasks.

KRASHEN'S INPUT HYPOTHESIS

According to this principle, a learner can learn a language quickly if he/she receives comprehensible input that is one notch higher his/her current productive level, which is represented as $i+1$ (Amin, 2019). The challenge currently emerging in school practice is that teachers rely on conventional, uniform, standardized textbooks, thereby restricting natural exposure to a variety of languages. This study addresses this by selecting graded readers at the exact right level ($i+1$) to support faster language development.

VYGOTSKY'S SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

This theory posits that cognitive development is a socio-dependent process that occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) through artful scaffolding (Channa et al., 2015). Traditional classrooms in Sri Lanka suffer greatly from a practice gap, as teacher-centred pedagogy leaves no room for peer or group interaction. This research addresses this gap by designing collaborative partner-reading practices that build reading confidence through social scaffolding.

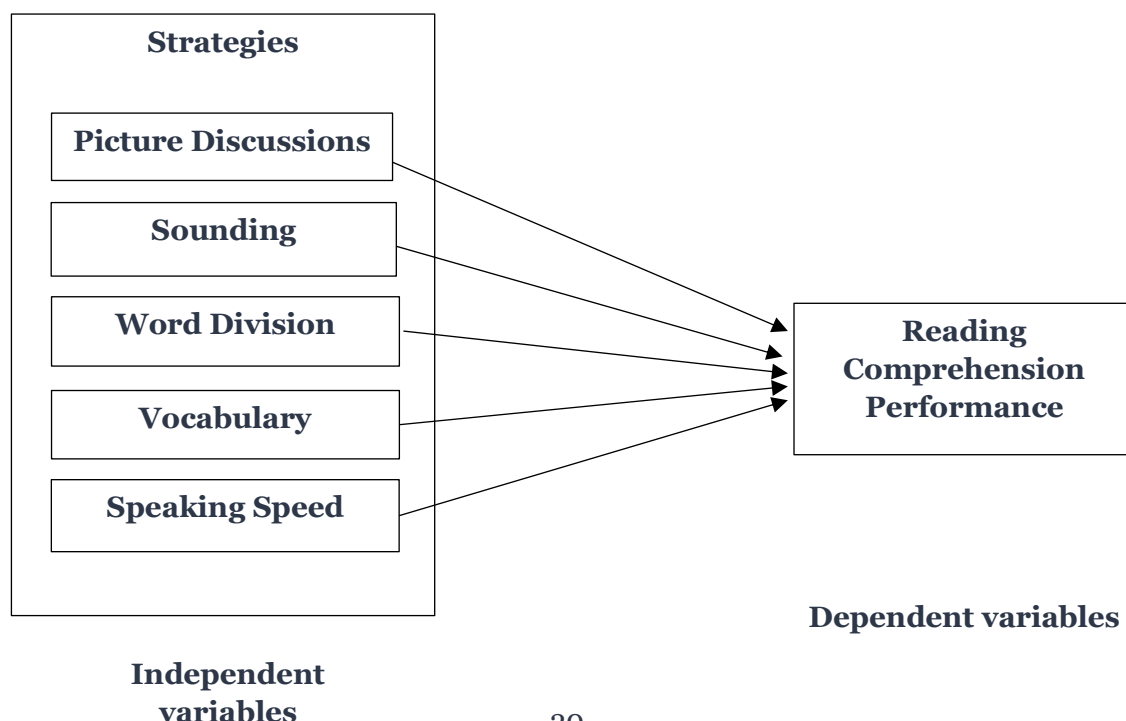


Figure 1. *Conceptual Framework*

RESEARCH GAP

To establish a valid conceptual foundation and address the journal reviewer's concerns, this study selects exactly three foundational theories. These frameworks illuminate the exact gaps between abstract literacy models and the practical realities of bilingual primary classrooms in Sri Lanka. The following structural matrix provides a direct overview of the empirical gaps and practical needs that this action research framework addresses.

Table 1

Empirical and Practical Gaps

Theoretical / Data Dimension	Previous Findings	Literature	Identified Research Gaps	Present Development	Study
Unit Demographics	Overwhelming focus on university-level or tertiary language learners (Cubukcu, 2008).		Extreme lack of empirical data on Key Stage 1 (Grades 1 & 2) learners.	Restricts the investigation to five-to seven-year-old primary cohorts.	
Methodological Approach	heavy reliance on opinion-based surveys or teacher questionnaires (Tharumaraj & Noordin, 2011).		Absence of classroom-based experimental interventions tracking actual scores.	Employs a quantitative pre-test/post-test action research design.	
Instructional Focus	Systemic focus on technical grammar rules, sentence corrections, and spelling mechanics. Traditional studies use single data streams without matching viewpoints (Dwiningtiyas et al., 2020).		Reading fluency and active metacognitive strategies remain underexplored.	Investigates the impact of explicit word division and processing pacing models.	
Data Triangulation			Lack of combined data to fully cross-verify strategy success.	Connects a 10-teacher survey with raw test metrics from 30 students.	

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The quantitative study design used in this study is action research, with a class-action design. Action research is a cyclical process involving systematic teams of educators to implement focused instructional interventions that address practical educational challenges and to statistically quantify performance improvements in educational outcomes (Amin, 2019). This methodology was chosen to observe and record natural cognitive-behavioral changes in normal school and cultural contexts, rather than in the clinical laboratory. Planning, action, observation, and reflection were carried out recursively across the four stages, and the observation results were used as indicators for every pedagogical change, which should be based on objectively collected baseline data (Sari et al., 2019).

The starting point for the Planning phase of the diagnostic was to map the baseline literacy and uncover the challenges students face when learning to read, using a teacher survey and a student pre-test (Rraku, 2013). This initial enquiry highlighted quantitative data that

removed the need for "lessons of the opportunity," and it revealed vital areas of learning: pupils could read phonics aloud but did not understand basic details in a paragraph.

In the next stage of the study, the commonly used approach of rote memorization to learn texts and simple reading repetition was replaced by a cognitive reading strategy intervention for six weeks (Okasha, 2020). The student group was taught to develop active text-processing skills (story previewing, syllable division and tracking the contents of a paragraph with a graphic organiser) through explicit modelling.

Observing: the data-tracking process was carried out continuously and systematically, with standardized weekly data recorded on a data sheet displaying the strategy's adoption rate (Dwiningtiyas et al., 2020). This ongoing monitoring process translated changes in children's performance from mechanical word calling to independent meaning construction into raw, unbiased numeric indicators, capturing the precise rate at which the children progressed.

Lastly, in the Reflecting phase, a descriptive statistical tool in Microsoft Excel was used to assess the overall effectiveness of the instruction by directly comparing the pre-test and post-test averages of students' results (Banditvilai, 2020). This final analytical move provided the study results with the empirical validation necessary to test the study's major hypotheses and to generate proven, long-term literacy strategies to guide early childhood primary administrators.

Data collection involved a dual-vantage selection approach to collect data from both primary and secondary groups: the learner group and the educator group, to get comprehensive information about the instructional environment. The participant sample consisted of 30 Key Stage 1 primary students (N=30) learning within an English-medium environment (Zakaria et al., 2019), alongside a professional group of 10 primary school English language teachers (N=10) who provided insight into current school methodologies (Tharumaraj & Noordin, 2011).

Data collection relied on three specific instruments designed to track practices and performance before and after the six-week program. Teacher Questionnaire: A mix of multiple-choice and scalar questions used to document traditional classroom reading practices and systemic learning barriers (Tharumaraj & Noordin, 2011). Student Pre-Test: Administered in Week 1 to measure raw baseline skills across three dependent areas: independent decoding accuracy, oral fluency speed (Words Correct Per Minute), and literal text recall. Student Post-Test: Administered in Week 6, utilising the same structural format, difficulty level, and text parameters as the pre-test to ensure all measured performance changes were accurate.

To address the weaknesses identified in the teacher survey trends, the researcher implemented five targeted reading strategies over a strict six-week action research process.

Table 2

Strategy Implementation Process

Target Framework	Strategy	Core Activity	Classroom	Weekly Frequency	Operational Structure	Pacing
1. Picture Discussions		Visual talk before reading to activate schema		5 times	Administered during the first 10 minutes of every reading lesson.	
2. Phonics Blending		Joint letter-sound merging exercises		4 times	Conducted as a rapid opener from Monday through Thursday.	

3. Word Division	Splitting long terms using syllable slash marks	3 times	Practised explicitly on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.
4. Contextual Clues	Guessing definitions using surrounding sentences	3 times	Handled mid-week (Tuesday through Thursday) during analysis.
5. Fluency Pacing	Stopwatch-timed partner repeated readings	2 times	Executed every Tuesday and Friday to build smooth speed.

DATA ANALYSIS

The empirical link between pedagogical and measurable literacy gains is the focus of the data analysis. Using a model of action research, descriptive statistics were used to determine the effectiveness of a cognitive reading strategy framework in a Key Stage 1 cohort of learners (N=30) and a professional teaching group (N=10). This analysis relies on Microsoft Excel to compare teacher surveys, pre-test scores for baseline performance, and post-intervention scores to identify key gaps in operations. The ultimate goal of data evaluation in this study is to systematically translate mechanical literacy practices into some objective, numerical evidence to support the hypotheses of the study

TEACHER CURRENT READING PRACTICES

The data, processed with descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel, revealed a significant operational mismatch between teaching inputs and students' actual performance.

Table 3

Teacher Instructional Practices vs Perceived Student Barriers

Measurement Parameter	Always (5)	Often (4)	Sometimes (3)	Rarely (2)	Never (1)	Mean Score
Instructional Phonics Focus	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.60
Instructional Word Division	0 (0%)	1 (10%)	2 (20%)	5 (50%)	2 (20%)	2.20
Instructional Pacing Speed	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (30%)	4 (40%)	3 (30%)	2.00
Barrier: Reads Accurately, Fails Meaning	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.60
Barrier: High-Performance Anxiety	4 (40%)	5 (50%)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4.30

Table 3 indicates that, although phonics blending is practised consistently (Mean = 4.60), word division (Mean = 2.20) and reading pacing (Mean = 2.00) are severely underdeveloped. This can account for the comprehension paradox: while pupils can routinely use verbal word-calling skills, 90% of teachers report that pupils experience high emotional anxiety during reading-aloud activities and difficulties with routine understanding tasks on texts (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016).

PRE-TEST VS POST-TEST STUDENT PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Data from the 30 primary students who comprised the numeric growth-tracking cohort confirm a significant shift in children's performance on each dependent measure post the 6-week strategy intervention.

Table 4

Student Performance

Dependent Metric Evaluated	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Net Mean Differences	Final Strategy Impact
Part 1: Decoding Score	6.93 / 10	8.13 / 10	+1.20	Word division directly reinforced basic letter-sounding patterns.
Part 2: Fluency Speed	37.33 WPM	52.20 WPM	+14.87	Pacing exercises reduced the Slow Speed group to 0.00%.
Part 3: Comprehension Mark	3.73 / 10	7.47 / 10	+3.74	Clear strategic integration doubled the class mean score.

The performance data organized in Table 4 proves that explicit strategy instruction yields superior literacy outcomes. The cohort's baseline means decoding score advanced from 6.93 to 8.13, indicating that teaching advanced syllable division directly reinforced basic letter-sound mechanics (Paris, 2005). More importantly, the collective fluency tracking accelerated by 14.87 WPM, lifting the class mean speed to 52.20 WPM and eliminating the slow-speed category below 30 WPM, which originally accounted for 23.33% of the cohort (Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014). Finally, the group's reading comprehension mean score doubled, rising from a failing baseline of 3.73 to a highly successful 7.47 out of 10, demonstrating that the intervention enabled students to construct deep textual meaning (Okasha, 2020).

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrated the inequity in the classroom, whereby many young children were taught to read (phonics) but not to understand (Tharumaraj & Noordin, 2011). The study accurately identified a crucial balance issue in current practice. Data showed that teachers have been using uniform activities for phonics and wordwise reading, and seldom use the active comprehension system. At the same time, students' word-calling ability is quite high. However, their comprehension of the text is limited, as stated by Tharumaraj and Noordin (2011).

As well as the usefulness of the pre-reading picture discussion and contextual guessing and paragraph mapping as valuable tools for key stage 1 learners, with their scores doubling compared to the class mean score (Okasha, 2020). This research intervention demonstrated that the gains in literacy from processing pictures prior to reading, paragraph mapping, and contextual guessing (all cognitive strategies) are most significant when all are incorporated. The use of these methods helped disempower students' passive repetition in the learning process. It increased students' average reading comprehension score by 2 times, which was consistent with the findings of Okasha (2020).

When providing planned lessons, discarding grammar worksheets and introducing home reading logs for parents to monitor (Channa et al., 2015). It has successfully replaced traditional, repetitive Worksheets with Active classroom modeling and incorporated the supportive framework of Channa et al. (2015) in the form of a home reading log to actively engage parents in following their child's progress daily. Lastly, we identified by proposing and validating innovative word-splitting and pacing models that increased students' processing speed. The study presented and implemented new word-processing systems, such as visual syllable slash-marking for word division and timed partner repeated-reading systems. The proposed models have directly contributed to students' fluency and to improving this group's reading speed by 14.87 words per minute, a result similar to that reported by Abdelrahman and Bsharah (2014).

CONCLUSION

This study successfully achieved all four of its primary research objectives through a structured six-week action research cycle. To achieve this objective 1, the first objective examined current teaching strategies and revealed a significant imbalance in classrooms. The data showed that traditional practices are limited to uniform phonics drills and reading aloud. This year's students are to become good at calling out words, but it does not enable them to understand paragraphs or explain what they have read.

A review of the most suitable tools was performed for the second objective with regard to Key Stage 1 learners. The results showed that active cognitive approaches (pre-reading picture discussion, paragraph mapping, and contextual guessing) are very effective. The class average for reading comprehension was doubled by using these techniques, which interrupted the passive repetition pattern. As in the third objective, structured programs have been successfully designed and implemented for educators and parents. Depending on the classroom, the boredom of traditional, repetitive worksheets was eliminated, and active modelling was introduced. The daily reading log was implemented to help parents at home to monitor and encourage their children's reading habits.

Finally, for the fourth objective, innovative reading strategies such as visual syllable slash-marking for word division and timed partner reading were proposed and tested. As a direct result of these new models, the students' processing speeds increased, and the cohort's average reading fluency increased by 14.87 words per minute, while the slow-speed category was removed altogether.

This study offers significant implications for the field of education regarding early childhood literacy development in bilingual private schools. One is that oral reading accuracy and beautiful verbal pronunciation can be deceptive and cannot indicate whether a person comprehended what they are reading. Traditional learning mechanisms engage the brain in memorizing words mechanically, with minimal effort on the part of the young brain, and fail to equip them to analyze or evaluate their meaning (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Secondly, primary students aged 5-7 years and gifted secondary school students show cognitive maturity in managing the meaning of the texts they read when applying text comprehension strategies (Şen, 2009). If teachers introduce and consistently scaffold these gradual release tools, such as context clues, syllable division line marks, and visual organizers, children can easily learn to monitor and self-correct when they have cognitive difficulties with comprehension.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the primary courses, the private school boards should choose the learning materials that meet and follow the guidance of learning materials given by the Department of Education, that is, to use the colour-coded storybook that can be used in various types of learning, level $i+1$, which is the difficulty of the book that is higher. Private school boards should update their primary learning resources to align with the Department of Education's guidance, namely the use of storybooks in various colours and difficulty levels that are one level up ($i+1$) from the main course materials. Administrators will be needed to ensure regular PD sessions to teach primary teachers the importance of explicitly teaching active comprehension systems, such as the CPQS framework (Okasha, 2020).

The teacher must use picture discussions in the first 10 minutes of each lesson to generate students' mental schema before their interaction with the text (Loew, 2006). Visual slash marks are recommended for use on the whiteboard to model syllable breakdown, and timed partner-reading blocks are recommended to develop speedy reading (Abdelrahman & Bsharah, 2014; Manoli & Papadopoulou, 2012). At home, parents should encourage children

to talk about the pictures in English storybooks for 15 minutes each evening, using simple reading log sheets.

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