

## **Reflections on the Development of an EFL Reading Programme for Middle School Students of Varied Levels of English**

**Reflexiones acerca del desarrollo de un programa de lectura para estudiantes de educación media con diversos niveles de Inglés**

**Randall Barfield \***

Universidad Nacional de Colombia  
booksdavis@yahoo.com

This personal-experience article attempts to share with the reader an EFL reading and grammar programme that was designed in 2002 for a group of 12 to 14-year-olds (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders) whose English levels varied from almost nil to semi-conversational. Multi-levels of English in any given group present a considerable challenge to either the EFL or ESL teacher, needless to say. More than one of these students exhibited evidence of a learning disability, not only in L2 but in L1 as well. For instance, transposition of letters (b instead of d and vice versa) in both languages, poor spelling in L1 and L2, and in L2, writing on the level of a second or third-grade native speaker. A considerable number of these students had been forced to leave other, larger schools for academic and/or disciplinary reasons. So, this teacher swallowed then rolled up his sleeves to go to work (in fear of what the year would bring?). In other words, the teacher accepted the challenge.

**Key words:** English-Teaching High School-Programs, Reading-Teaching-Programs, Books and Reading for Children-Teaching High School-Programs

Este artículo de experiencia personal tiene como objetivo dar a conocer al lector un programa de EFL sobre lectura y gramática que fue diseñado en 2002 para un grupo de niños entre los 12 y 14 años de edad (grados 6 y 7), los cuales tenían niveles de inglés que variaban entre cero conocimiento del idioma y semi-conversacional. Los multi-niveles en inglés en cualquier grupo presentan un desafío considerable para el profesor de EFL o ESL. Adicionalmente, más de un estudiante demostró tener problemas de aprendizaje no sólo en L2 sino en L1. Por ejemplo, la transposición de letras (b en vez de d o viceversa) en ambos idiomas, pobre ortografía en L1 y L2 y en L2 la escritura en un nivel igual al de un estudiante nativo que cursa segundo o tercero de primaria. Un número considerable de estudiantes han sido obligados a abandonar otros colegios grandes por razones académicas y/o disciplinarias. Así que me alisté para ir a trabajar, remangándome la camisa (¿quizá con el miedo de pensar qué traería el nuevo año?). En otras palabras, acepté el desafío.

---

\* **Randall Barfield**, B.A. from Georgia State University and M.A. from the University of Alabama, has been teaching EFL for about 15 years in various well-known primary and secondary schools in Bogotá as well as 2 universities and the Centro Colombo-Americano.

**Palabras claves:** Inglés-Enseñanza secundaria-Programas, Lectura-Enseñanza-Programas, Libros y lecturas para niños-Enseñanza secundaria-programas

## GETTING STARTED

First, the main textbook needed to be decided on. “Real” bilingual schools seem to prefer texts that are designed for native speakers and that is what the small school where I work prefers. Small schools with this preference are actually copying the biggest, most prestigious schools in Bogotá, whose students are exposed to a minimum of six to seven hours of L2 per day. This is a lot of exposure. Moreover, the students travel a lot and most of their parents are bilingual.

The situation is quite different for students in other, less-bilingual schools (in every sense of the term). The students’ parents, for the most part, not only do not speak L2 but the students are not usually exposed to more than two or three hours of L2 per day, if that much. These “semi-bilingual” schools would do better to use EFL materials, in my opinion. It is a common practice here in Colombia, though, and I can cite at least three very large (more than 1,500 students), “semi-bilingual” schools who engage in it. Anyway, the textbook choice has never been mine at the school in reference; however, as a trained teacher, I did not have an enormous problem with such a preference because I felt the teacher should be able to “adapt” practically any text to fit her or his students’ needs. Consequently, the text assigned was Scott Foresman’s *Literature and Integrated Studies for Grade Seven* (1997).

This book would suffice for the 2 grades I was assigned—sixth and seventh, I had decided. The book has more than 45 short stories and articles in it, both fiction and non-fiction. Most of the stories (fortunately, it proved) are 2 and 3 full

pages long; therefore, while not easy for the majority who had a sort of “intermediate” level, the stories were not too burdensome either. The “light” at the end of the tunnel could be seen by the students. This meant that the weaker students did not feel completely overwhelmed by the task of reading and understanding a story of such length.

The academic year consisted of 4 bi-monthly marking sessions so I chose 7 stories for each one. The last session’s required reading was more flexible since I was not sure about timing, year-end activities, etc. (It turned out one group completed 6 stories and the other 5.) Have most students ever enjoyed reading? I suspect not—in any language—and more so nowadays with all sorts of videos and other visually-challenging entertainment vying for their time and attention (not to mention spending money). This crisis meant that much encouraging, motivating, rewarding, and reasoning had to be resorted to on my part. I would say, “*C’mon, guys. Good reading skills are a necessity nowadays,*” or “*Who’s definitely planning to go to university?*” Sixty to seventy percent would raise their hands. “*You see?*” I said, “*and what do you think you are going to do there? Yes, read, read, read!*” (Students’ smiles and giggles). Additionally, in an attempt to identify students who would experience the most difficulties, I periodically gave them checks on vocabulary by having them listen to and spell (in pairs or small groups of three) COMMONLY-USED words (25 words each check). Those who achieved 14, 16, and 18 correctly-recognized and correctly-spelled words were the students who could usually manage the readings with little or no teacher

assistance (other than the reading activities carried out in the classroom in which every student participated). This situation put to use their previously-acquired/learnt vocabulary. Those students scoring fewer than 14 correct words were found to need assistance and received priority when timing became “tight” (close to the end of the session and close to grade-reporting day).

### **STRUCTURING THE READING PROGRAMME**

Many classes were centered on the stories, although, ultimately, a lot of the reading was done at home, especially in those homes in which parents were actively involved in their child’s learning (such as enforcing consistent study habits). Also, the reading was done partly at home because some of the weaker students had tutors who could help them, some weaker students worked at the home of a stronger student (classroom friend), time was needed for the grammar portion of the programme, and, in the case of the “large” sixth-grade group (23 students), classroom discipline was not the best while we tried to read aloud. (The problems with discipline are another story/article and involve not only a school’s administrative philosophy, but solid parental support as well. In my school, the administrative philosophy was fairly normal but sometimes lacking in enforcement—again, due to the school’s size and dire need of each student—but parental support both for the older child and teacher was, if anything, sporadic).

Some days we read parts of the stories aloud in class. On the board we almost always listed the main events in a story. These events included some of the characters and some of the stories’ special vocabulary. Teachers will note that when students are given the freedom, they will consciously and unconsciously help

each other with unknown vocabulary. This help is a natural result of the presence of many levels of the second language in the classroom. It is a natural result of two students’ enjoyment of working together (brother/sisterhood?) as well. Also, the stronger student is oftentimes proud of his/her previously-acquired knowledge of the language and likes to be a “star” while helping the weaker student, with whom she/he gets along well socially. I, personally, found this activity quite moving. It convinced me that this was the way we humans were actually meant to work and or play together from the beginning. In 2 or 3 stories students had to work in pairs to list the story’s nouns or verbs under the corresponding letter of the alphabet. For instance, one story had 4 verbs that began with B, two with C, etc. This activity served to get the students more involved in the BODY of the story. Of course, some days we did not want to think about reading at all. We needed a deserved rest!

### **EVALUATION OF READING**

Since I was mainly interested in ascertaining whether the student did the required reading, I devised 3 True-False quizzes for each reading—versions A, B, and C. Each quiz had 12 sentences regarding main events or main characters in the story. For the first and second marking sessions, students could pass the quiz with 8 correct answers (66%). For the third and fourth marking sessions, 9 correct answers were required to pass (75%). Many students failed on version A then passed on versions B or C. The strongest and best students passed on version A. However, when an able student (as in having already evidenced ability to comprehend the readings without special teacher assistance) did not pass any of the 3 versions, a new story had to be read.

In a few cases for very slow students, I allowed the students to read aloud at my side during a recess or lunch break (the mutually-agreed upon time slot). A lot of coaching had to be done, but, as the student obviously read the whole story at my side, no test was needed to “prove” it. Comprehension (or the lack of) was evaluated orally during the reading session(s) since the language level was so low. (The language level was low for these students because they had been admitted to the school in spite of their level. It is a practice that larger, more prestigious schools do not usually engage in, especially when economic times are better than they are at present. Of course, finances are much less of an issue for larger schools.) So, we would read a paragraph or two, and I would ask the student questions to gauge comprehension.

When we saw we were getting behind, I occasionally gave the whole class an “open-book” or “investigative” quiz. After all, I was not interested in the students’ capacities for memorization; quite the contrary. The weaker students were so happy and excited about these quizzes. Of course, many of them worked in pairs or in threes. I did not mind this method. Instead, I considered it quite appropriate for foreign-language learning. Seeing “real” learning take place in which stronger students were teamed with weaker ones gave me considerable satisfaction. Not only that, I realised the students were reading not only the stories, but the one, two or three versions of the stories’ quizzes at test time. To encourage individual responsibility (something not plentiful at their ages!), I often allowed students to make an “appointment” to take a certain quiz during a recess or lunch break. When requests got too heavy to handle, I would slack off and make the students wait a while. This method works in a small school where a teacher has, say, 30 to 40 students maximum

throughout the year. However, in big schools, in which some English teachers have as many as 200 to 300 students, this method of evaluating is practically, not to mention physically, impossible.

## READING RESULTS

At year’s end, five of the six students in seventh grade had completed all required work and were excused from school on the days in which make-up work (“recuperaciones”) took place. Sixth grade was a different matter. Of its 23 students, about 13 owed either reading or grammar points’ achievements (“logros”). Fortunately, most of those 13 students owed only 1 or 2 stories or the same number of grammar points as opposed to 6 stories or 8 or 9 grammar points. Basically, making the work up was a matter of reading that one story or learning that one grammar point. No grave danger.

## IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the programme pleased me, especially my attempts, although imperfect, to encourage reading responsibility among the students. Next year I plan to concentrate on portions of a story for the weaker students, as opposed to a complete story. This approach will lessen some of the pressure on those students as well as foment productivity. Most of the students not only reinforced previously-acquired knowledge, but learned a lot of new vocabulary as well as sentence structures and punctuation, among other items.

Critical analysis took place when the students asked questions about the story (aloud in class—some time before the day of the quiz) or faced one or more of the quiz versions and had to decide whether a particular sentence

could be applied to the story or not. For example, in reading the sentence, "Mr Shaw's wife worked in the factory five years." on the quiz, the student must work her/his knowledge of the characters in the reading and not only conclude that Mrs Shaw was or was not part of the story, but choose also to respond (True or False) to the part about place of work as well as length of time at that place. It was seen early on that the biggest part of the "bilingual" burden (which is the learning of not only traditional subjects such as math and science, but learning them in the foreign language as well as learning the language itself as an additional subject) for the weakest students lay with the parents, who had taken the decision to enrol the child in a "bilingual" school (in one or two cases, it was the child's first experience in such a school!) in the first place. The message

was conveyed to the parents that it was their responsibility to hire a tutor to work with the child at home and to try to bring the child's level up to that level constituting the group "average" (which meant a level that was functional and enabled the child to complete the work we were doing). Unfortunately, we also witnessed a few cases (even a few are too many) in which the parents were uninvolved almost completely in their child's education, and the child suffered—usually in bitter and humiliating silence.

### REFERENCES

*ScottForesman's Literature and Integrated Studies for Grade Seven.* (1997). ScottForesman and Company: Glenview, Illinois.