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TEACHING READING TO CHILDREN WITH DIFFERENT RATES OF DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. Teaching reading to children with different rates of cognitive, linguistic, and academic development requires flexible, differentiated, and developmentally appropriate instruction. Children enter educational settings with unequal levels of phonological awareness, vocabulary, oral language, attention, memory, motivation, and previous literacy experience. Therefore, the use of a single instructional pace may support some learners while creating persistent difficulties for others. This article examines the theoretical and pedagogical foundations of teaching reading in heterogeneous classrooms. Particular attention is given to differentiated instruction, phonological awareness, systematic phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, comprehension, multisensory learning, individual support, formative assessment, and cooperation between teachers and parents. The article argues that effective reading instruction should combine explicit teaching with opportunities for independent practice and meaningful communication. A supportive classroom environment, regular assessment, and individualized scaffolding can help children progress without creating anxiety or negative attitudes toward reading.

Keywords: reading instruction, literacy, children, developmental differences, differentiated instruction, phonological awareness, phonics, reading fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, individual learning, early literacy, inclusive education.

Learning to read is one of the most important achievements in a child's educational development because reading provides access to knowledge, communication, independent learning, and participation in academic and social life. However, children do not acquire reading skills at the same speed. Some children recognize letters and sounds quickly, begin reading simple words with confidence, and gradually develop fluency through independent practice. Others require considerably more time to establish phonological awareness, remember letter-sound correspondences, combine sounds into words, or understand the meaning of what they read. These differences are natural consequences of variation in children's previous experiences, language development, cognitive characteristics, motivation, attention, and learning opportunities. Consequently, effective reading instruction cannot depend exclusively on a uniform pace. Instead, teachers need to recognize individual differences and create instructional conditions in which every child can make meaningful progress. The central principle of such an approach is not that all children should achieve identical results at the same moment, but that every learner should receive appropriate support, sufficient practice, and opportunities to experience success. Research on early literacy has consistently emphasized the importance of systematic instruction in foundational

reading skills while also recognizing the significance of oral language, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation in the development of competent readers (National Reading Panel, 2000).

One of the most important factors influencing reading development is phonological awareness, which refers to the ability to recognize and manipulate the sound structures of spoken language. Before children can read efficiently, they need to understand that spoken words consist of smaller sound units and that these sounds can be represented by written symbols. Children who develop phonological awareness rapidly may find decoding relatively accessible, whereas children who struggle to distinguish, blend, segment, or manipulate sounds may need additional explicit instruction. Teachers can support this development through oral activities involving rhyming, identifying initial and final sounds, blending sounds into words, segmenting words into phonemes, and comparing words according to their sound structures. Importantly, these activities should be adapted to children's current levels of development. A child who has difficulty identifying individual sounds should not immediately be expected to complete complex written decoding tasks. Instead, the teacher can begin with oral activities and gradually introduce letters and written words. Such progression reduces unnecessary cognitive demands and provides learners with a secure foundation for subsequent reading development.

Systematic phonics instruction is another essential component of effective reading education. Phonics helps children understand the relationship between graphemes and phonemes and provides them with a reliable strategy for decoding unfamiliar words. However, children with different rates of development may require different amounts of repetition, modeling, guided practice, and independent application. A rapidly developing learner may master a particular sound-letter correspondence after several examples, while another child may need repeated exposure through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities. Teachers should therefore avoid interpreting slower acquisition as a lack of ability. Instead, they should examine which part of the learning process creates difficulty and modify instruction accordingly. For example, a child who can identify letters but cannot combine sounds may need additional blending practice, whereas a child who can decode accurately but very slowly may require repeated reading and fluency-building activities. This diagnostic perspective makes instruction more precise and prevents teachers from simply increasing the amount of work without addressing the underlying difficulty.

Vocabulary development is equally important because reading involves much more than decoding written symbols. A child may successfully pronounce every word in a sentence while understanding very little of its meaning. Children who have richer oral vocabularies often have an advantage when they encounter texts containing unfamiliar concepts or more complex language. For this reason, reading instruction should be integrated with conversation, storytelling, discussion, explanation, and exposure to a wide range of words. Teachers can introduce new vocabulary before reading a text, discuss meanings in context, use illustrations and real objects, encourage children to create sentences with new words, and revisit vocabulary during subsequent lessons. For children developing more slowly, repeated exposure is particularly important. Instead of presenting a new word once and expecting immediate mastery, teachers can incorporate it into different classroom

conversations and activities. This approach strengthens both word knowledge and the child's confidence in using language.

Reading fluency represents another area in which developmental differences become especially visible. Fluency involves accurate, sufficiently rapid, and expressive reading that allows the reader to focus cognitive attention on meaning. Children who read slowly may spend so much effort decoding individual words that they lose track of the overall message of a sentence or paragraph. Fluency can be developed through teacher modeling, repeated reading, paired reading, echo reading, choral reading, and short texts that correspond to the learner's current ability. It is important that fluency practice does not become a source of embarrassment. Publicly comparing children's reading speeds or requiring less-developed readers to perform difficult texts before classmates may create anxiety and reduce motivation. Instead, teachers should emphasize individual progress. A child who reads more accurately and confidently than before should be recognized for that progress even if the child's reading speed remains below the classroom average. Such an approach encourages persistence and establishes a positive relationship between effort and achievement.

Reading comprehension should be developed from the earliest stages of literacy instruction rather than postponed until children become fluent decoders. Even beginning readers can predict what a story will be about, identify characters, sequence events, describe pictures, answer simple questions, and connect events in a text with their own experiences. As reading abilities develop, teachers can gradually introduce more complex comprehension strategies, including summarizing, making inferences, identifying main ideas, comparing information, and evaluating characters' actions. Children with different developmental rates can work with the same general topic while receiving different levels of textual and instructional support. For example, one child may independently read a short passage and answer inferential questions, while another may listen to the same passage, examine illustrations, and answer orally with teacher guidance. This does not mean that one child is receiving a less valuable educational experience. Rather, the instructional pathway is being adjusted to ensure access to the same broader learning objective.

Differentiated instruction provides an effective framework for addressing these differences. Differentiation involves modifying content, learning processes, materials, expected products, or levels of support according to learners' needs. In a reading classroom, differentiation can be implemented through flexible grouping, leveled texts, individual reading conferences, additional visual support, audio materials, vocabulary scaffolds, and tasks of varying complexity. Flexible grouping is particularly useful because children do not necessarily develop at the same rate in every aspect of reading. A learner may have strong comprehension but weak decoding, while another may decode accurately but have limited vocabulary. Therefore, grouping should not permanently label children as "strong" or "weak" readers. Groups can change according to the specific skill being practiced. Such flexibility helps avoid stigmatization and allows students to benefit from different forms of collaboration.

Multisensory instruction can also be valuable for children who require additional support. Reading involves visual, auditory, linguistic, motor, and cognitive processes, and combining

several modes of learning can strengthen children's engagement with new information. For instance, a teacher may ask children to look at a letter, say its sound, trace its shape, form it with manipulatives, and then use it in a word. Such activities can make abstract symbols more concrete and memorable. However, multisensory instruction should not become an accumulation of entertaining activities without a clear instructional purpose. Every activity should contribute to a specific literacy objective. The teacher must be able to explain what skill is being developed and how the activity supports its acquisition.

Formative assessment is essential when teaching children with different developmental rates. Assessment should not be limited to periodic tests or grades. Teachers need continuous information about how children are progressing, where they experience difficulty, and which instructional strategies are effective. Short reading observations, phonological awareness tasks, word recognition checks, comprehension questions, writing samples, and individual conversations can provide useful evidence. Based on this information, teachers can adjust the pace of instruction, provide additional practice, or introduce more challenging material. Formative assessment also allows children to recognize their own progress. When learners understand what they can already do and what they are currently working toward, they can become more active participants in the learning process. Assessment therefore functions not only as a measurement tool but also as a mechanism for improving instruction.

The emotional dimension of reading development deserves particular attention. Children who repeatedly experience failure may develop the belief that they are "bad at reading," which can reduce their willingness to participate and practice. A slower developmental rate should never be treated as a reason for humiliation, comparison, or negative labeling. Teachers should establish a classroom culture in which mistakes are considered a normal part of learning and effort is valued. Encouraging comments should focus on concrete progress, such as improved accuracy, successful decoding of a difficult word, or a thoughtful interpretation of a story. At the same time, praise should be meaningful rather than excessive. Children benefit when teachers identify the specific strategy or behavior that contributed to success. This helps them understand that improvement is connected to purposeful practice and effective strategies.

Family involvement can further strengthen reading development. Parents and caregivers can create regular opportunities for shared reading, storytelling, discussion, and independent exploration of books. Importantly, home reading should not become an additional source of pressure. Children can benefit from being read to even when they cannot yet read independently. Discussing illustrations, predicting events, asking questions, and connecting stories to everyday experiences all contribute to literacy development. Teachers can support families by providing simple recommendations about appropriate texts and explaining how adults can encourage reading without completing tasks for the child. Cooperation between school and home becomes particularly valuable when a child requires sustained support, because consistent expectations and communication can help prevent confusion and frustration.

Ultimately, teaching reading to children with different rates of development requires a balance between common educational goals and individualized pathways. All children need access to high-

quality literacy instruction, but they may require different amounts of time, repetition, scaffolding, practice, and encouragement. The most effective teacher does not simply move through the curriculum at a predetermined speed but continuously observes learners and adapts instruction to their needs. Systematic phonics, phonological awareness, vocabulary development, fluency practice, comprehension instruction, differentiated activities, formative assessment, multisensory techniques, and emotional support should function as interconnected elements of a comprehensive literacy program. When children are given appropriate challenges without being overwhelmed, they can gradually develop both competence and confidence. The ultimate goal of reading education is therefore not merely to teach children to pronounce written words, but to help them become motivated, independent, strategic, and thoughtful readers. Recognizing differences in developmental pace is not a reduction of educational expectations; rather, it is a way of making high-quality education accessible to a wider range of learners. A flexible and supportive approach enables children to progress according to their individual needs while maintaining a strong sense of belonging, curiosity, and confidence in their ability to learn.

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