



International issue

Beginning Literacy: an interactive and creative approach to literacy learning

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Beginning Literacy is an approach to literacy education in the first two years of primary education in Iceland (children aged 6 and 7), developed over the last ten years in a collaboration between the Centre of School Development (CSD) at the University of Akureyri and a number of primary schools around Iceland.

Beginning Literacy (BL) is implemented in schools through a two-year contract between each school and the CSD. The professional development of the participating teachers and development leaders is an integral part of the implementation. A development leader is appointed in each school who participates in a professional development program for leaders, works in close collaboration with a consultant from the CSD, and advises colleagues, runs workshops and visits classrooms to give feedback on teaching.

Beginning Literacy

BL is built on an interactive model of literacy learning which assumes that effective reading depends on interaction between the reader and the text, where readers engage with texts to make meaning of them based on their experience and background knowledge, and their decoding skills for fluent reading. BL further emphasises the development of writing skills and the integration of reading, writing, oral expression and listening into a literacy curriculum where these aspects of literacy are balanced (Beginning Literacy 2014; Eggertsdóttir 2009). The approach also draws on learning theories of constructivism and inclusive education, where every child is meant to learn within her or his class community by means of interdependent collaboration, scaffolding, active learning and other means of adapting learning to the various needs of children (Beginning Literacy 2014; Eggertsdóttir 2009).

In BL the interaction and balance between the various aspects of literacy is achieved by moving pupils' learning through a sequence of three phases. In the first phase the teacher reads an authentic text to the pupils. He or she introduces and explains new vocabulary and encourages discussion about selected words and the text as a whole where pupils predict and draw conclusions in order to deepen their understanding and establish a common experience. In the second phase pupils deal with technical aspects of literacy such as phonetic awareness, decoding,

word recognition and spelling. In this phase pupils' tasks are derived from the text introduced to them in phase one. In phase three the focus is on whole texts and the reconstruction of meaning. In this phase pupils build their own texts using the vocabulary and reading skills they learned in phases one and two. Here pupils are encouraged to express their own ideas, compose their own texts, write stories, plays or poems, draw a concept map or interpret a text by means of drawing (Beginning Literacy 2014; Eggertsdóttir 2009).

In BL there is heavy emphasis on lesson planning for each learning cycle. A lesson plan should explicitly state the organisation, aims and learning tasks of each phase of the learning cycle, and describe methods of assessment and feedback, and how learning is adapted to the individual needs of children. Ideally, the lesson plans should also include ways of integrating literacy learning with other school subjects. Active collaboration with parents is an integral part of BL. Therefore an upcoming lesson plan, and the book or text on which it is based, is introduced to parents via e-mail, and there is also close collaboration with parents to oversee pupils' home reading.

The teacher builds each lesson plan on an authentic text of their own choice, such as children's books, poems, informational texts or illustrations. There is no limit to the variety of texts, but the main requirement is that the text reflects explicit learning aims, is interesting and meaningful for the children, links with their background knowledge and experience, and is responsive to their cultural and social diversity, their readiness for learning and their learning profile.

The teacher, therefore, constantly has to ask whether the text:

- is responsive to pupils' experience and background knowledge and their interest and learning needs
- offers rich and meaningful vocabulary to pupils

- conveys messages of ethics, equity and justice
- belongs to a genre that is familiar to the pupils or whether it needs to be introduced to them.

It is imperative that pupils are made aware of their learning aims and effective strategies to reach them, to build their meta-cognition and learning competences. To that end aims are displayed on classroom walls and regularly discussed with pupils. There is an emphasis on varied teaching methods and learning tasks, active learning and a learning environment that encourages reading and other literacy activities and pupils' access to a variety of reading material for independent reading (Beginning Literacy 2014; Eggertsdóttir 2009).

An insight into Beginning Literacy in action

This example of a lesson plan (CSD 2017) from Síðuskóli, a compulsory school in Akureyri, Iceland, is built on the book *Aren't I Handsome?* by Mario Raoms (2007). Two teachers of primary year two implemented the plan for a two week learning cycle.

The literacy aims for the two weeks were:

- to increase vocabulary focusing on words that describe persons and personality
- to enhance pupils' skills in retelling a story and engaging in dialogues
- for pupils to know the following concepts: setting, main character, secondary character, and storyline
- for pupils to gain skills in retelling a story, e.g. by creating a storyline to display as a 'story road' on a sheet of paper (see Picture 8)
- to exercise vocal reading and recitation.

This section does not give an exhaustive account of the learning cycle, but offers an insight into how the cycle unfolded, by highlighting some main events with the help of pictures taken of the pupils working on their activities.



Picture 1: the book used in the learning cycle – overview and aims

Phase 1: whole text, reading aloud, summarising and shared reading

The book was shown to the pupils, and the teachers led them into predicting the story from the cover of the book. Then the teachers read the book to the pupils, and discussed the main character, the secondary characters, and storyline. They drew the pupils' attention to the adjectives that

describe the characters' appearance and traits, and discussed their meaning, for example, *handsome, ravishing, marvellous, resplendent, dreadful, and pale.*

When the teachers read the story a second time, the pupils listened for the words discussed before and waved their hand when they recognised them. Then the teachers went deeper into the story, discussing, for example, *What is the smell of the forest like? Is it dark or light around us? Are we aware of some small animals moving around? Do we hear birds singing or frogs croak? Is anybody afraid of the wolf? And more.*

The last activity in this phase was choral reading, where one of the teachers acted as a storyteller, the first half of the pupils recited the words of the wolf and the second half recited the rest of the characters in the story. The teacher raised cards to indicate who was supposed to read each time.



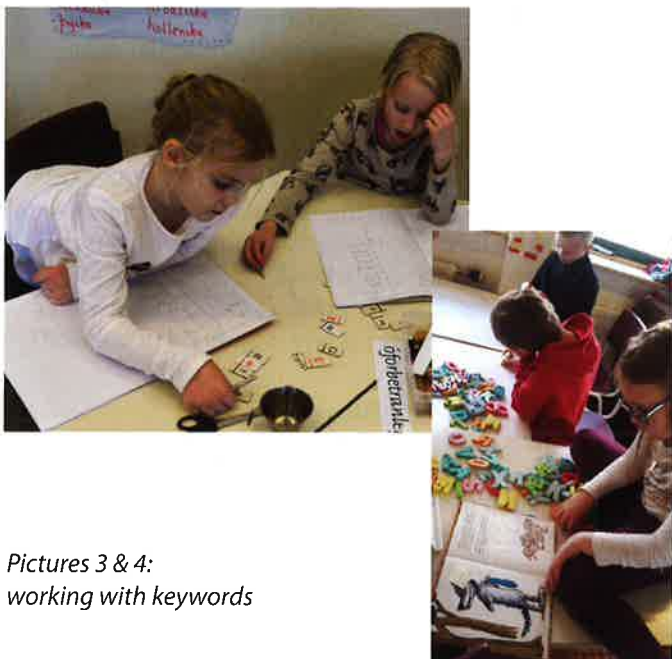
Picture 2: choral reading – reciting the characters of the story

Phase 2: technical aspects of literacy – analytical and synthetic phonics tasks

Phase two set out with the teachers and the pupils discussing questions such as: *The wolf is a bit boastful, isn't he? Do you know more words about his behaviour? Are these words positive or negative? Do we know any positive words about the wolf's behaviour?* Using these questions the teachers tried to elicit words such as *arrogant, self-centred, proud, happy, pleased, satisfied, delighted* etc.

After the discussion the teachers presented the keyword – *handsome* – chosen for this lesson plan. They explained the meaning of the word and introduced the analytic activities based on the word. The teachers had planned activities at three difficulty levels, taking account of the children's individual needs and prior knowledge, for example:

- pupils put separate letters in order to create the keyword and then write it in their books
- pupils find words within the keyword and make new words by rearranging letters, and write the words in their books
- pupils find related words, synonyms or similar words, e.g. by adding different stems to the same prefixes or suffixes
- pupils classify words based on their own ideas
- pupils make word collections to display on a wall.



Pictures 3 & 4:
working with keywords

Next the teachers set up a number of parallel work stations with different activities built on the vocabulary of the story. The pupils could choose where to start and who to work with. Each station had instructions about how to work on the activity and how many pupils could be there at one time. These were:

1. **Reciting:** two groups of three read the book as demonstrated in phase one. In each group one pupil acts as the storyteller, the next as the wolf, and the third represents other characters. The pupils use cards to help them remember their role.



Picture 5: reciting



Picture 6: working with pictures and sentences from the story

2. **Pictures and sentences from the story:** the pupils reconstruct the story by putting pictures from the story in the right order and attaching cards with sentences to

the right pictures, or writing their own sentence if they like.

3. **Acting out words:** pupils draw a card with a word from a pile and act out the word. The other pupils try to find out what the word is.
4. **Bingo with words or sentences:** groups of four play bingo with words or sentences describing characters' appearance and traits. Pupils can choose between words or sentences according to their reading ability.



Picture 7:
playing bingo

5. **Give and take:** a learning game where pupils give or take cards with single words and pair them with pictures on a game-board, according to certain rules.
6. **Spelling:** pupils work in pairs. One draws a word or a sentence from a pile and the other writes in his or her book.
7. **Reading for pleasure:** pupils choose a book to read for themselves or in pairs.
8. **Words on cards:** pupils arrange cards with single words into sentences.
9. **The story in Puppet Pals:** pupils work together in pairs or groups of three, and use iPads to retell the story.

Phase 3: reconstructing text

To start phase three the teachers led a discussion about the story's setting and storyline asking questions such as: Where does the story take place? Could it take place in Akureyri? Or in Síðuskóli? After that they showed examples of various books with pictures and prepared the pupils for creating their own 'story road' displayed on a sheet of paper.



Picture 8: a storyline demonstrated as a 'story road'

The teachers demonstrated a 'story road' from the story about the arrogant wolf to scaffold pupils' work. They focused on the vocabulary from the first and second phase

to show how pupils could use it to construct their own story, possibly by stepping out of the original text.

Working on A3 paper, the pupils drew their own 'story roads' individually or in pairs, either retelling the story of the arrogant wolf or composing a new story built on their own ideas. When the 'story roads' were ready the pupils retold their stories in small groups, and one pupil in the group recorded the storytelling on a tablet.

'My own fairy tale wood' was an activity for those children who could take on more of a challenge. The pupils got the opportunity to browse books or the internet for pictures or words regarding fairy tales, adventures and woods. They were given words/sentences to search for: amazing photos in the world, amazing pictures of fairy tale forests, or my own fairy tale. When they saw the pictures that came up, the pupils wrote all the words they could think of. They were encouraged to brainstorm about different environments and surroundings and collect words to display on a wall and use them to make a picture or a description of their own fairy tale world.

Some concluding remarks

This brief insight into Beginning Literacy and its implementation bears witness to a thoroughly planned learning cycle carried out by experienced and enthusiastic teachers. They have sound knowledge of literacy education and excellent classroom management skills, where pupils are interested and engaged in their learning. Their school, Síðuskóli, exemplifies a school where BL has flourished for a number of years with the active support of the school leaders. When the head teacher of Síðuskóli was asked to comment on BL she said:

'Beginning Literacy means a lot to our school. The teachers who use the method apply a variety of teaching methods that enable them to adapt their teaching and learning materials to the diverse needs of children. They find their teaching more interesting, and the pupils happier and better motivated than before. BL opens opportunities for increased cooperation of pupils and the methods of BL can be integrated into other subjects.'

When asked to reflect on BL as a teaching approach one of the class teachers said:

'We learned this method several years ago. Both of us had considerable prior experience of teaching at the early stage of the primary school, but BL opened up a new world of teaching strategies and learning opportunities. The teaching became more enjoyable and alive and it provides me with a whole range of strategies we can use as teachers. We have much more resources and opportunities to meet the individual needs of the pupils. Another positive outcome of BL is that the pupils are well motivated and engaged in their learning, and seem to appreciate the diversity of activities inherent in BL. We hardly ever hear from pupils that they are bored or do not feel like doing things.'

The preliminary results from an ongoing study of BL (Sigþórsson 2017; Sigþórsson *et al.* 2014) indicate that the development of BL has moved the literacy education of the participating schools from a narrow emphasis on decoding, fluency and reading comprehension to a more holistic literacy curriculum where reading, writing and oral expression are integrated. It has also helped to build a clear vision for literacy and literacy teaching, leadership, collaboration and shared responsibility for pupils' learning. The majority of teachers and development leaders in BL schools who answered a questionnaire (N = 332) said that their school's participation in BL had improved literacy education in Years 1 and 2 (ages 6 and 7).

In interviews, teachers who have experience of literacy teaching before their participation in BL maintained that they put more emphasis than before on lesson planning and effective strategies to meet the individual learning needs of pupils, and are better equipped to cater for the different needs and dispositions of boys and girls. They also reported that they use fewer simplified texts and workbooks than before, and put more emphasis on using authentic texts and balancing various aspects of literacy, such as oral expression, listening, reading and writing. The change in their teaching and learning arrangements has increased pupils' motivation and engagement, autonomy, self-regulation, meta-cognition and cooperative skills (Sigþórsson *et al.* 2014).

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Children's book

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