

國小五年級英語學習落後學童在平衡閱讀 教學教室中的個案研究

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本研究描述二個英文程度落後的五年級學童在平衡式閱讀教學教室中的讀寫發展。透過分析學生的個別朗讀紀錄以及書面作業與作品，研究者探索學童在解碼與拼寫以及意義建構二方面的表現及發展。本研究有二個主要研究發現：1) 在解碼方面，二個學童已有一些英文形音對應的知識，但仍然不完整。透過不斷的文字探索、嘗試錯誤、及讀寫練習，二人逐漸能掌握英文字的形音對應關係。2) 在意義建構方面，二人主要是依賴由上而下、以意義為中心的閱讀策略，以及圖像的線索來建構意義。在閱讀有情境的圖畫書或自製書的時候，二人的閱讀比較流暢、投入；但是在閱讀缺乏情境的文本時（如作業單、考卷等），其意義建構則較不順暢。最後，根據研究結論，本文提出教學及研究建議，以供參考。

關鍵字：程度落後，平衡式閱讀教學、解碼、意義建構

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Introduction

In Taiwan, there has been an increasingly urgent call for improving the quality of English education. The urgency is due in part to the trend of internationalization and globalization which brings Taiwan into closer contact, and tougher competition, with other countries. As the most important language for international communication, English is needed by all citizens who wish to join the international community. In parallel to the call for a better English Education in Taiwan, there has been an increasingly louder criticism on the low English proficiency level found in many students in schools across all levels of education. Particularly the bi-modal phenomenon in the English scores of national exams has been a great concern of many parents and educators. It is a saddening fact that most of the low-achieving students come from rural areas where children have very limited exposure to English and insufficient sociocultural resources for learning.

This study offers a close look at struggling readers' second literacy learning processes in an EFL classroom located in a rural community. The researchers and the teacher adopted the balanced reading instruction tenets in designing and implementing the English literacy instruction program. Our conception is based on a research-informed assertion—that beginning and struggling readers benefit most from a reading program that emphasizes both the meaning and form of the language. Much research on beginning reading and struggling readers has shown that literacy instruction that provides balanced emphasis on meaning and code is most effective for developing their reading fluency (Cunningham, 1998; Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002; Freppon & Dahl, 1991; Moustafa, 1998; Weaver, 1998; 柳雅梅、黃秀霜, 2006、2007). This study is guided by the following two research questions:

How do struggling English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners deal with the written codes of the English language?

How do struggling EFL learners construct meanings in reading English texts?

It is hoped that the findings of this study would not only enhance the understanding of the processes in which low-achieving children learn to read in the second language but also provide curricular and instructional guidelines for English teachers.

Literature Review

The Characteristics of Struggling Readers

The term “struggling reader,” though frequently used by literacy educators, has not been clearly defined. It is often used to refer to the “low achieving” student (e.g., Strickland, Ganske, and Monroe, 2002, p. ix). In terms of reading, Guthrie and Davis (2003) observe that the struggling reader has been traditionally viewed as a low achiever, a student who lacks cognitive competencies (weak in word recognition, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and study skills, etc.). However, they believe that such an understanding is insufficient. They believe that reading educators need to go beyond the cognitive view to recognize the importance of motivation in learning to read. The struggling reader does not only mean the individual who cannot read fluently but also one who is “unmotivated” to read and is “disengaged from literacy” (p.60). The struggling readers are likely to have low confidence (or low “self-efficacy,” Linnenbrink, 2003) in reading, and, when they read, they are more likely to read for grades and for meeting teachers’ requirements. In the words of Guthrie and Davis (2003), “they are unlikely to read for their own enjoyment, seek satisfaction of their curiosity through books, or enjoy the challenge of a complex plot or intricate knowledge in books.”

Many factors can contribute to the low English level of struggling readers. Among them, low confidence and low motivation have been identified by researchers (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). However, it is much more difficult to determine the cause-and-effect relationship between the impeding factors and reading performance, especially the relationship between low motivation and low reading level. The effect of low motivation on learning to read is quite clear; however, it is also likely that repeated poor performances in reading may also cause the reader to become even more unmotivated. Thus, there seems to be a vicious downward cycle in the struggling reader’s reading acquisition. To help them, it is very important for reading educators to find out ways to break the vicious cycle. To improve their interest and confidence in reading may be the first step toward such a solution.

Helps Prescribed for Struggling Readers

Valencia and Buly (2004) analyzed the problems with readers who failed the

standardized reading test and identified six clusters of failures—automatic word callers, struggling word callers, word stumblers, slow comprehenders, slow word callers, and disabled readers. The problems of these six clusters of failing readers can be grouped into three strands: word identification, meaning, and fluency. Valencia and Buly suggest that different remedial programs should be prescribed for different struggling readers; any one-size solution for all students just wouldn't work.

Duffy-Hester (1999) believes that supporting struggling readers in the regular classroom deserves special attention. She offers four reasons for such urgency: First, many struggling readers do not qualify for special or compensatory education support services. Second, even if compensatory programs exist, the regular reading classrooms are usually dominated by teacher-directed reading activities. Third, most remedial and special education support programs have not proven to be effective in accelerating the literacy growth of struggling readers. And finally, effective support programs (e.g., Reading Recovery, Clay, 1993) are usually not available to students in the regular classrooms.

To provide reading teachers with ideas and strategies for supporting struggling readers, Duffy-Hester (1999) reviews the literature and finds six exemplar programs that support struggling elementary school readers. Table 1 below, which is based on Duffy-Hester's descriptions and constructed by the present authors, presents a summary of those exemplar programs:

Table 1 Exemplar Literacy Programs Supporting Struggling Readers

Program	Components	Context	Theoretical Base / Features
Book Club Program (BCP)	*Community share *Reading *Writing *Book club	*Used primarily as the organizing structure for the entire program in elementary and secondary schools *Involves both	*Sociocultural perspectives *Discursive practices *Reader response theories

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Program	Components	Context	Theoretical Base / Features
		independent and group reading on authentic literacy tasks	
Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI)	*Observe and personalize *Search and retrieve *Comprehend and integrate *Communicate to others	*Used mainly in thematic units integrating science, reading and writing *Uses trade books extensively for developing science and literacy engagement	*Conceptual learning *Reading strategies *Motivation theories *Integrated instruction
Fluency-Oriented Reading Instruction (FORI)	*Redesigned basal reading lesson *Home reading *Free-choice reading period	*Implemented in 14 diverse second-grade classrooms *Uses story basal readers to help students become fluent readers.	*Contains some research-based elements of effective reading instruction
Four Blocks Approach (FBA)	*Guided reading *Self-selected reading *Writing *Working with words	*Implemented mainly in primary grades *Designed to teach multi-leveled	*Combines various methods of teaching reading into a

Program	Components	Context	Theoretical Base / Features
		students	cohesive framework
The Kamehameha Early Education Program Whole Literacy Curriculum (KEEP)	*Six aspects attended: ownership, comprehension, writing process, language and vocabulary knowledge, word-reading strategies and spelling, voluntary reading *Readers' workshop *Writers' workshop *Portfolio assessment *Explicit skill and strategy instruction	*Worked with Native Hawaiian grades 1-6 students *May work with other non-mainstream students	*Social constructivism *Culturally responsive teaching
Success For All (SFA) Sub-program A: Preschool/Early kindergarten Program	*Storytelling and retelling *Emergent writing *Rhyme with reason *Shared book experience *Peabody Language	*Thematically based curriculum *Learning center activities	*Students should

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Program	Components	Context	Theoretical Base / Features
	Development Kit *Alphabetic activities		be prevented from
Success For All (SFA)	*Showtime (reading rehearsal and letter formation review)	*Implemented in kindergarten	experiencing reading difficulties
Sub-program B: Beginning Reading / Reading Roots	*Thinking about reading *Presenting the story *Sound, letter and word development activities *Story activities	*Leveled reading instruction (children are grouped across grade levels, according to their reading level)	*Students should receive support they need to become proficient readers.
Success For All (SFA)	*Story-related activities	* Usually implemented in elementary schools	
Sub-program C: Beyond the Basics / Reading Wings	*Direct instruction in reading comprehension *Independent reading *Listening comprehension	with large proportions of students living in poverty *Leveled reading instruction *Students work with cooperative learning group or partners.	

Duffy-Hester's review of classroom reading programs supporting the reading growth of struggling readers reveals several guiding principles for program design and instructional methods. 1) A reading program should be balanced, should draw on multiple theoretical perspectives, and should be informed by and based on meaningful reading assessment. 2) Explicit skill and strategy instruction may be conducted in conjunction with authentic literacy tasks. 3) Teachers should read aloud to students from a various genres and students should have opportunities to read texts at both the instructional level and the independent level. Reading programs should be designed to support the reading growth of all children, struggling or not struggling.

Balanced Reading Instruction

In the North America at least, the reading war between the skill-based approach (such as phonics instruction) and the meaning-based approach (such whole language) on how to best educate beginning readers seems to have finally come to an end and advocates from both sides have finally agreed to compromise with a seemingly self-contradictory but wise resolution—the Balanced Reading approach. There are still some naysayers as well as some disagreements as to what constitutes a “balanced” reading program, but it seems most reading researchers and educators have taken Balanced Reading to be the most important consensus on beginning reading education in decades that is likely to hold the pendulum of reading education in the United States.

Weaver (1998) is among the first literacy researchers to acknowledge the strengths of both phonics instruction and whole language and the limitations of each and to propose a balanced approach to reading. Weaver's extensive review of research on teaching phonemic awareness, decoding, phonics, skill-oriented instruction with whole language, and reading assessment and diagnosis leads her to proposing a “balanced” kind of reading instruction. A balanced reading instruction program, according to Weaver (1998, pp. 60-61), is one that

1. sees that all children have rich literacy experience in preschool;
2. always keeps meaning the major focus;
3. develops phonemic awareness, letter/sound knowledge, and word knowledge in the process of becoming an independent reader;

4. sees that assessment does not focus on skills apart from their use in deriving meaning from texts; and
5. sees that “at risk” readers and those who need extraordinary help with strategies and skills receive additional help and additional opportunities to engage in individual and assisted reading.

As can be seen from the above recommendations, the balanced reading instruction proposed by Weaver is geared toward a “skill in context” or “embedded skill instruction” method, an approach which is also recommended by other literacy educators (e.g., Cunningham, 1998; Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002; Freppon & Dahl, 1991; Moustafa, 1998; Pressley, Gaskins, & Fingeret, 2006; Williams & Blair-Larsen, 1999).

To prevent reading difficulties in young children, Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) offer the following recommendations. Based on their findings of a major national research project on reading education for children with special needs, Snow and her colleagues conclude that adequate initial reading instruction requires a focus on at least the following elements: using reading to obtain meaning from print; the sublexical structure of spoken words; the nature of the orthographic system; the specifics of frequent, regular spelling-sound relationships; and frequent opportunities to read and write. In addition, adequate progress in learning to read English beyond the initial level depends on the following conditions: having established a working understanding of how sounds are represented alphabetically; sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency with different kinds of texts written for different purposes; and control over procedures for monitoring comprehension and repairing misunderstanding.

Picture Story Books and Storytelling for ESL Readers

Stories are frequently recommended by educators as a powerful resource for classrooms. Raines and Isbell (1994) suggest that stories have at least the following six educational values (pp.164-167):

1. *The power to remember*: Folktales, legends, and myths are organized as easy-to-remember stories which are told again and again and help mankind remember their past.

2. *The power to entertain*: A well told story often contains humor, good-natured teasing, gestures and pauses which present much enjoyment to the listener.
3. *The power to teach*: Educators could use story as “a means to teach descriptive language, visual imagery, cultural appreciation, effective communication and emotional understanding.”
4. *The power to inspire*: Stories of persistence, cooperation and bravery may inspire students and teach morals in an entertaining and memorable format.
5. *The power to create*: Stories are in and of themselves creative ventures. They may refine our observations, change our perceptions of the world and develop our sensitivities. They are an important tool for developing an educated imagination.
6. *The power to know*: Stories provide students a way of knowing themselves, a means of exploring the world, and a tool for structuring their experiences.

Many other literacy educators have expressed similar views and recommended the inclusion of story books in the language and literacy classrooms as an invaluable resource for enriching children’s language and life experiences (Goodman, 1986; Huck, 1992; Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer, & Lowrance, 2004; Kowalski, 2002; Morrow, 1985; Ralston, 1990; Ruddell, 1999). It is suggested that children can gradually figure out the mapping between print and meaning and eventually between the sound units and letters when their attention is directed to print in story books during shared story reading. Brewster (1997) further suggests that teaching young children to make picture books provides a powerful vehicle with which children can record and share their personal experiences and thoughts in both linguistic and visual modes of expression. The picture bookmaking process not only increases the beginning literacy learner’s understanding of how words and images work together to create meanings but also increases their self-confidence.

In the ESL classroom, picture storybooks have also been recommended to be an important instructional and assessment resource which allows English language

learners to think in the target language and offers viable criteria for assessing language learning progress without relying on the English learners' native languages while teaching reading or on standardized tests designed for English speaking students (Murphy, 1980). According to Murphy, through children's literature, which are rich in visual information, repetitions of language structures, and engaging characters and plot lines, second language learners are able to gain experience in language uses, increase their vocabulary and syntactic knowledge, and exercise their critical thinking skills. Such positive view of an ESL reading classroom rich with language experience and activities based on children's literature such as reading aloud, sentence making, spelling, and storytelling has been widely shared among reading researchers (Amer, 1997; Fassler, 1998; Hu & Commeyras, 2008; Ng, 2000; Urzua, 1992).

Phonological Awareness and Decoding Skills for EFL Readers

Much of the reading research and instructional methodology reviewed above is on or for L1 learners or English language learners in English speaking communities. How can L1 reading research and instruction inform L2 reading researchers and teachers? Koda (2005) suggests that while L1 reading research can provide fertile ground from which L2 reading research departs and evolves, L2 reading researchers must recognize the fundamental differences between L1 and L2 reading. Similarly, L2 reading teachers must take the major differences between L1 and L2 reading into consideration when borrowing theories or methods from research and practice on L1 reading instruction. Koda further suggests that there are three essential distinctions between L1 and L2 reading. First, L2 learners have already developed L1 literacy competency, which can facilitate their L2 reading. Further, L2 reading instruction usually begins before sufficient L2 linguistic knowledge has been acquired, making it necessary to focus L2 reading instruction on "linguistic foundation building." Finally, L2 reading necessitates "dual-language involvement" (p.7). For beginning literacy learners who are applying their cognitive and linguistic resources on breaking the written codes of the language, Koda believes three elements to be essential: 1) understanding of "how phonological information is mapped onto individual symbols;" 2) meaning extraction "incorporated as an integral part of decoding;" and 3) symbol-to-sound mappings practiced in meaningful context (p.255).

Koda's concern with the sound, meaning, and letter-sound mapping in early L2 reading is reflected in many English curricula in East Asia. A comparative study of the English curricula of Japan, Korea, China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan conducted by Chu (2006) reveals that, as far as instructional objectives are concerned, conventions of print, letter knowledge, and grapheme-phoneme correspondences turn out to be the most commonly included components in early EFL reading education, while sight words, decoding, and contextual guessing are the most prevailing word recognition strategies, and predicting with picture cues is the most dominant comprehension strategy. These dominant curricular objectives can be sorted into two categories—bottom-up, code-centered objectives (print and letter knowledge, phonics, sight words, decoding, etc.), and top-down, meaning-centered objectives (contextual guessing and predicting with picture). Although further information about the EFL syllabus design, instructional approach and methods, and classroom practices is needed to ascertain to what extent the balanced reading instruction principles are adopted by the English curricula, it is fairly safe to say that at the curriculum policy level at least, both code-centered and meaning-centered reading skills and strategies receive more or less equal attention by the English educators in the East Asia region. Furthermore, Chu's study revealed a gap between the existing English curricula examined and the curricular standard generally proposed by reading researchers—the lack of phonological awareness training in early reading instruction, which has been repeatedly confirmed to be essential for either L1 or L2 reading development (e.g., Adam, 1994; Hu, 2002, 2004). Chu thus recommended the inclusion of phonological awareness training in the early EFL reading curriculum.

Given the fundamental role and importance of phonological awareness in learning to read, in Taiwan there has been a growing body of research investigating the role and effectiveness of phonological awareness training in improving children's EFL literacy learning and development. Studies on EFL children's awareness and learning of the English sound system made the following important findings: Taiwanese children's English phonological awareness not only affected their nonword repetition ability (Hu, 2002) but also their reading comprehension and pronunciation (Lee, 2005), spelling (Hu, 2004), as well as their L1 phonological processing (Chiang, 2002) and vocabulary acquisition (Yang, 2002). However, inconsistent research findings existed. Chu and her colleagues (2007) investigated the effectiveness of phonics training and phonics plus phonological awareness training in improving poor EFL readers' word reading (real words and pseudowords)

and phonological awareness. Their research results didn't show significant difference in word reading scores among the treatment groups and the control group, nor in improving phonological awareness. The insignificant results might, according to the researchers, be due to the redundant learning task of phoneme counting, which failed to add new knowledge to the children's existing phonological awareness. Nevertheless, as suggested by the authors, the unexpected result from the specific treatments and subjects should not be interpreted as implying the general ineffectiveness of phonological awareness.

Summary of literature review

In this literature review section, we've cited various researchers' points of views to depict the cognitive and affective characteristics of struggling readers, and presented programs and strategies prescribed by literacy educators for facilitating literacy development. Based on the recent development in the reading education and on some consensus documents in the field of reading research in the United States, we've also briefly describe the balanced reading instruction approach, which is deemed to be helpful to beginning readers, especially struggling readers. To take the L2 context of this study into consideration, we've included literature on L2 reading research and instructional practices. In most of the literature reviewed, two areas of reading instruction are frequently emphasized: developing the beginning L2 reader's knowledge of the codes (in sound or writing) and comprehension strategies for getting meaning from texts.

The literature review offers us some valuable implications in implementing this study. Given the different EFL context in Taiwan and the limited English learning resources available to students in elementary schools located in rural areas, two special considerations have to be taken in conceptualizing and implementing the EFL literacy instruction program we have in mind. First, the upper-grade EFL learners, to whom this study is intended, are much older kids, though they are only beginning readers of English. They have developed more mature metalinguistic awareness and L1 (Chinese) reading skills and are more mature in cognitive development and in world knowledge. L2 (English) teachers should try to take advantage of their L1 competency and their cognitive maturity in delivering L2 instruction (Commins & Swain, 1986; Romaine, 1995). Furthermore, students in this study have very little exposure to English in their normal course of life. Thus it will be a great challenge for us to try to provide them with rich and meaningful input in English. Unfortunately, improving the English learning environment of the

whole school and students' homes lies far beyond our capability, so reading aloud and other English learning activities provided by the instruction program would become the most important L2 input for the EFL learners. We are aware of the limitations of the L2 context in which we are conducting our research and will take these challenges into consideration in implementing our instructional program.

Methods

In this section we describe the school from which we collected our data, the participants in this study, the balanced reading program we designed and implemented, and our methods of data collection and analysis.

Data Sources

The school. The site of this study was a six-class elementary school located in a rural community in the southwest plain of Taiwan. The school was about 30-40 minute driving from the nearest major city. There was only one class in each grade, and in most classes there were fewer than 20 students, a size much smaller than the 35-student national average. As the only educational institution in the rural community, the principal and the teachers managed to provide as much learning resource and opportunity as possible. Despite its small size, the school, like most elementary schools in Taiwan, was outfitted with modern technological equipment, including LCP projectors, visualizers, digital camcorders, computers, CD players, and so on. The school put a great emphasis on English education, and managed to acquire 120 English picture books to promote the students' English learning. And, as a gift from an alumnus, the school had multiple copies of the Alphakids series readers to be used by interested English teacher and students, such as Pam and Class 5A (see below).

The students. There were 16 children (9 boys and 7 girls) in the fifth grade class chosen for this study (Class 5A hereafter). We chose the fifth grade class mainly because students in that class, according to the teacher of the previous year, had shown great differences in their English proficiency levels, with those students not attending after-school cramming school lagging far behind. In addition, according to information provided by the home room teacher and the school administrators, most children were from farming families with poor literacy environment at home. As a matter of fact, many of the parents held low academic

expectations of their children and usually didn't attend to their children's homework. To understand how struggling students learned to read in English, we chose two struggling readers, Alison and Jake (see details below), as the focal children for more thorough data collection and analysis. These two students were among the lowest or lower cluster in terms of learning achievement, and neither was taking extra English lessons in cramming schools.

The teacher. The English teacher of Class 5A was Pam (a pseudonym). Pam graduated from a national university with a BA degree in English and had had 7 years of teaching experience prior to joining this study. At the time of the study, Pam was also a graduate student majoring in elementary and secondary education in a national university. She was also a member of the research team and played the role of a teacher research. Pam was an enthusiastic teacher who liked to work with children. Unsatisfied with the mostly skill-based instruction in her early years of teaching career, she became interested in whole language and balanced reading instruction in her graduate studies and decided to take the challenge of implementing the balanced English reading program.

Program Design and Implementation

The English teaching program were developed by the research team, including Pam, the teacher-researcher. The central ideas and principles of the program based on the balanced reading approach described above. The lesson plans were prepared and implemented by Pam. In general, the day to day routines of English teaching in Class 5A were controlled by Pam, who was an experienced English teacher and knew the goals and methods of balanced reading instruction quite well. Other researchers in the team regularly observed Pam's class. The team members met regularly to discuss curricular and instructional issues and improvement strategies.

The English learning materials used in Class 5A mainly included pictures books, 16 in all, including *Good Night, Gorilla, Silly Willy, The Crocodile and the Dentist*, and the like, leveled readers from the Alphakids series, and the mandatory English textbook *Kid Castle*, which Pam used mainly for oral communication practice.

Class 5A's English reading program in the first semester mainly consisted of reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading, which were suggested by reading educators with experiences in balanced reading instruction (Blair-Larsen & Williams, 1999; Hill, 1999). Most of the instructional time was

spent on guided reading (in homogeneous groups) and student-centered literacy tasks. While the teacher was working with individual groups for guided reading, other groups could choose to read the assigned leveled readers (Alphakids, Levels 1-6), making posters, unscrambling sentences, re-writing texts of the readers, doing word family worksheets, or reading story books brought in and introduced by the teacher. Whole class instruction occurred only irregularly when the teacher noticed some teachable moments during students' presentations of their group work. Group activities, in either heterogeneous or homogeneous groups, depending on the purposes and needs of a particular activity, were the center of Class 5A's English program in the first semester.

However, implementing instructional strategies that were commonly employed in balanced reading programs in the West into a classroom in Taiwan was not without problems. For one thing, throughout the semester, the researchers observed Pam's English classes once a week and worked with her closely in adjusting the curriculum design and modifying instructional methods and strategies. The constantly changing curricular designs prevented the formation of useful routines in the classroom. Without familiar activity structures, Pam frequently found herself busy explaining what was to be done and how to do it, while students had little chance to familiarize themselves with what they had been doing. More steady, long-term instructional organization was needed. Another major issue we observed in Pam's classroom was that the teacher was not playing a strong enough "instructional" role. It was concluded that Pam, to follow the principles of balanced reading instruction, needed to structure her instruction in such a way that would allow her to explicitly and systematically explain the orthographic patterns, demonstrate decoding skills and comprehension strategies, and provide opportunities for skill practice and feedback through meaningful literacy tasks.

Based on our experiences in the first semester, we revised the instructional program in the second semester. The teacher was now more frequently seen in the central stage, conducting instructional activities, while student-centered group work took only a minor share of the time. Authentic storybooks, with which Pam had been familiar prior to the study, became the core learning material, while the leveled readers were used as supplementary material. Furthermore, the structure of the lessons was more stable now, so that language and literacy routines gradually appeared in the classroom and the teacher and students were able to build on what they have done before and develop higher order, more complex skills.

The revised English literacy lessons generally included the following activities:

1. Book talk: Students look at the cover and make guesses about the story and talk about their relevant experiences.
2. Read aloud: The teacher reads through the story page by page and responds to students' comments, if any.
3. Shared reading: The teacher leads students through reading the sentences and demonstrates the use of phonics rules in decoding words. Questions are presented to check students' comprehension and flash cards are used to assist and check word recognition.
4. Phonics practice in context: The teacher helps students to read the text aloud, applying those phonics rules they have learned before.
5. Follow-up activities: These usually include worksheets which emphasize both decoding and comprehension skills, group discussion, and writing activities.

The length of each unit was dependent on the content of each story and the nature of the follow-up tasks, but all the units were organized in accordance with the whole-part-whole principle advocated by reading researchers (Goodman, 1986; Weaver, 1998; Hill, 1999).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected from Class 5A consisted of various kinds of documents generated from the instructional program—lesson plans, worksheets and assignments, quizzes, test papers, self-made picture books, and oral reading records, the last of which may need more explanation. During the program, students of Class 5A had a lot of opportunities to deal with English words and sentences, many of which were done with peers or with the guidance of the teacher. However, to facilitate our understanding of the reading development of the students, individual oral reading sessions were arranged for each student. Twice a semester, students were pulled out, with the permission of their English teacher, from their English classes one by one to a nearby classroom for the oral reading session conducted by a trained research assistant. Each student was given reading sheets containing typed texts from the Alphakids readers. While they read the texts aloud, the assistant recorded their reading with a digital audio recording device. The recordings were

later played back for further analysis.

In the end, students' written works and oral reading records were scanned and stored on DVD's, which were then organized in chronological order and sorted by each individual student. Over the year, the study generated a rich array of data which enabled the researcher to understand how the EFL readers' knowledge and use of the written codes of the English language developed over time and how they made sense of texts in reading English.

To analyze the data, the researchers examined the focal students' written works to look for evidence of their reader roles as "code-breaker" and "meaning-maker" (Hill, 1999). We examined both the oral reading and written data to fathom the EFL learner's understandings of the written codes, assuming that both the decoding and encoding processes would reveal the learner's internal knowledge and rules of the English writing system. The results of the examinations were then checked back with Pam, who, as their English teacher, had deeper and more comprehensive understandings of the students and their learning. When necessary, we would also check the videotapes of the recorded class meetings for confirmation. In the end, profiles of the focal students as EFL readers were generated.

Findings

In this section we present the profiles of two struggling EFL readers, Alison and Jake, situated in a fifth-grade EFL classroom adopting balanced reading instruction principles, which are followed by a brief discussion of their decoding and meaning-making behaviors.

The Case of Alison

Alison's parents owned a small store in the village. All of her family members seemed to be of optimistic and happy nature. To her parents, having fun appeared to be more important than school lessons. Such an attitude was observable from her parents' decision to throw a barbecue party on the eve of a monthly exam. Influenced by her parents' attitude and home environment, Alison was a simple and naïve girl. She liked to stick around the teacher to offer small helps or just to chat. She was of such a happy nature that she once wrote down a joke on the exam paper (what a casual and unconventional way to use the test paper!)

just to entertain the teacher. Her naivety in personality was paralleled with a passivity in learning. In class she was easily distracted. It was typical for her to murmur along with the teacher while casting glances at scenes outside the window. At home she spent little time on homework and got little attention from her parents.

Her grades before the fifth grade were generally poor, and this included the English subject. However, in the fifth grade, as part of the new English literacy program we introduced to the classroom, the main learning material of the English course was changed from textbooks to picture books and leveled readers. Alison was very much attracted to the picture books and she showed a greater interest in English. For example, in the first semester of her fifth grade, she once checked out a picture book, *The Big Red Dog*, from the school library and asked the teacher to read it aloud to the class. In the spring semester, she left a note for the teacher saying that she had found an English book about fruit and would like to bring it to class for sharing. It was clear that she had developed a stronger interest in English learning, and her grades in English tests were also slowly improving.

The code breaker. In her fourth grade year, Alison had difficulty recognizing the alphabet, not to mention mapping letter names with their sounds in words. In class, she depended on the teacher and other classmates to know the sounds and meanings of English words; written codes appeared to be meaningless to her. When requested by the teacher to read something from the textbook, she would pretend reading, but she was actually reading from memory, not from print. When the teacher asked her to point at the words she was reading, she was usually not able to identify the words she just said.

In the first semester of the fifth grade, she was now able to write out all the 26 letters from memory, in both upper and lower cases, but was still at the beginning stage of exploring the letter-sound correspondences. When she came to unknown words in individual reading, she didn't try to actively identify the letters or to apply her phonics knowledge, however limited it was, but would instead wait for help. When assisted by the teacher, however, she could sometimes successfully sound out and recognize words.

For instance, in the final month of the fall semester, Alice was reading a picture book, *At the Zoo*, for the first time with the help of Pam, the English teacher. The repeating sentence pattern of this level-one reader is "I like this _____" and the vocabulary words include "monkey," "elephant," "snake," "lion," "zebra," "giraffe,"

and “zoo.” On each page there is a picture showing the animal being presented, and there is a one-line caption. According to our video and audio recordings of the oral reading session and our analysis, Alison’s code-breaking strategies can be summed up as Table 2 below.

Table 2 Alison’s Code-Breaking Strategies in Reading *At the Zoo*

Phrase /Word	Strategy	Note
Repeated pattern: I like this ____.	Recognizing as sight words	Alison was able to recognize and read the pattern; however, she always read “this” as “the.”
Partially familiar words with sounds known: monkey, elephant	Using the picture clue	“Monkey” and “elephant” are two words that had appeared in many earlier lessons. Alison called the two words correctly probably not by breaking the letter-sound codes but by using the picture clues.
Unfamiliar words: snake, lion, zebra, giraffe, zoo	Waiting for help	Alison always stopped reading when she encountered unknown words and waited for the teacher to help.

In the above example of Alison’s code breaking strategies, the interaction between Alison and the teacher is worthy of further analysis. For less frequent words like “snake,” “zebra,” and “giraffe,” Pam told her the sound directly. For more frequently encountered words, such as “lion” and “zoo,” Pam tried to teach Alison to sound them out. The following excerpt from the transcription (originally in Chinese and translated by the present researchers) reveals Alison’s dependence on the teacher’s scaffolding to sound out the two words.

EXCERPT 1

Alison stopped at the word “lion” when reading the sentence “I like this lion.”

(T=Teacher; A=Alison)

T: This is “l.” What does “l” sound?

A: (looking at the teacher)

T: (pointing at the “l” in “like”) /l/*, /l/. (pointing at the “i” in “like”) /a0/

A: /la0/

T: /la0Dn/

A: /la0Dn/

. . . .

A: (stopped at the word “zoo” and tried to produce the initial /z/ sound but was unable to sound out the following digraph “oo”)

T: So, what is this? (pointing at the z letter)

A: Z

T: Z is pronounced as what? What sound does it make?

A: /z/

. . . .

T: Good. Now blend them together--/z/ /u/

A: /u/

T: Blend /z/ and /u/. . . .

A: /zu/

T: /zu/ Good. Now the whole sentence.

A: I like the zoo. (replacing “this” with “the”)

(Oral Reading-Alison-060109)

In the second semester of her fifth grade, Alison’s code breaking strategies

* K.K. phonetic symbols are used for transcribing the English sounds, which are put in slashes.

were still dominated by the “waiting for assistance” strategy when dealing with unfamiliar words, but she was now more knowledgeable about the relationship between sounds and more ready to independently sound words out. We will use Alison’s oral reading record of *Face Painting* to demonstrate her progress in dealing with the written codes of the English language.

Face Painting is one of the level-one picture books of the *Alphakids-Plus* series. It is about children in the costume of animals or characters. The basic sentence structure is “I am a ____.” The vocabulary words include “clown,” “cat,” “rabbit,” “dog,” “lion,” and “pirate.” Alison was able to recognize “I,” “am,” and “a,” probably as sight words, and aided by the picture clues, she was able to read “cat,” “rabbit,” and “dog” out loud correctly. For the remaining words, she either depended on the teacher to sound out the words (for “face” and “pirate”) or simply repeated after the teacher (for “clown,” “lion,” and “painting”). Alison seemed to be applying similar code-breaking strategies as in the first semester. However, as shown in the following excerpt, she had made some progress in her phonics knowledge and skills.

EXCERPT 2

Alison was looking at the title of the book, trying to sound out the words but no sounds came out.

(T=Teacher; A=Alison)

- T: Try to sound out. What sound does “f” make?
A: /f/ (without any hesitation)
T: And “a” is pronounced as . . .
A: /\$/
T: “c” is pronounced as . . .
A: /k/ /k/ /k/
T: Any other sound except for /k/?
A: . . . (pause for about 16 seconds, while looking at the word “face”) /f/
T: Louder. It’s okay to be mistaken. Say it out loud.
A: /fek/
.

(Oral Reading-Alison-060327)

In Excerpt 2, Alison might not yet be a fluent code-breaker in sounding out words, but she was aware of the correspondence between letters and sounds, and she knew the sounds of some of the letters. Her pronunciation of “face” as /fek/, though mistaken, was indicative of her knowledge of the sounds represented by the individual letters in the word “face.” She was actually partially right in mapping /k/ to the letter C, except that was not competent enough to know that the “CE” ending always makes a soft C sound /s/, not the hard C sound /k/.

In the first monthly exam of the second semester held on March 23, around the same time when she did the oral reading of *Face painting* cited in Excerpt 2 above, part of the test was to write out the missing letters of some vocabulary words read aloud by the test giver, that is, the teacher. In one of the sound-to-letter questions, she was asked to fill in two missing letters in the word “help” read aloud by the teacher (as in h_ _p). She wrote “haop.” Here Alison was using the letter names of A and O to represent /g/ and /l/ sounds. A pretty good shot actually.

The meaning maker. As a beginning reader of English, Alison set her first priority on getting meaning from reading, and she relied heavily on contextual clues to get the meaning she sought. She adopted a primarily top-down model in making sense of texts. For example, in a dictation quiz in the early part of the first semester (that is, October 2005), she was supposed to spell out five words which were read out loud by the teacher, including “cake,” “party,” “fun,” “friend,” and “grandpa.” She didn’t spell out any words--not even a letter--but she wrote down the Chinese meaning of all the five words correctly. The test score might indicate a very poor speller, but in fact she knew all the words in their spoken form, that is, she was able to correctly connect the sound of each word to its meaning.

When the information provided by the printed words seemed to be conflicting with the meaning indicated by the picture, Alison was likely to give more weighting to the picture in getting the meaning. For example, after reading the picture book *At the Zoo*, she was asked by the teacher to tell the meaning of each sentence. The picture on the last page shows a boy standing in front of a zoo with some animals in it. The caption says, “I like this zoo.” The excerpt below shows a confused Alison and at the same time reveals a very interesting meaning-making strategy.

EXCERPT 3

(A=ALISON; T=TEACHER)

A: I like this . . . (hesitates for about 5 seconds) person . . .

T: I like . . . ?

A: I like . . .

T: T-H-I-S means this.

A: I like this . . . (pauses for 2 seconds) . . . animal.

T: I like this . . . what?

A: Animal.

T: Zoo. (correcting Alison)

A:

(Oral Reading-Alison-060109)

In Mandarin Chinese, in which the interaction between the teacher and Alison took place, “animal” is pronounced as *dong-wu*, while “zoo” is pronounced as *dong-wu-yuan*, which literally means “animal garden”). As the two sounds are very close, the teacher requested Alison to clarify what exactly she thought the word “zoo” means in Mandarin. Alison said it means *dong-wu* (animal). The teacher then corrects her, saying that “zoo” means *dong-yu-yuan*.

What might have prompted Alison to think that “zoo” means animal? We believe that Alison was not very sure of the letter-sound mapping of the word “zoo,” so she turned to the picture for the meaning. Seeing that there are some animals in the picture and that the whole book has been about animals, Alison might have inferred that the sentence must mean “I like this animal.” If this is the case, can we say that to Alison meaning was more picture-governed than print-governed (Sulzby, 1994), a characteristic displayed by emergent readers who haven’t developed firm control over the written language? As an eleven-year-old fifth grader who had been reading Chinese text for about five years, Alison must have had the awareness that meaning the teacher was asking for should come from the printed text. Thus, a more probable interpretation is that Alison was aware that meaning is print-governed, but she could not recognize the word “zoo” so she had to infer the meaning from the picture and the context of the book to come up with an answer for the task.

Alison's strategy to turn to the picture for meaning was not always effective. In one section of the second monthly exam of the second semester in early May, there were four pictures to be matched with four English sentences, whose meanings were to be further given in Chinese. Alison matched all the pictures and sentences correctly. Thus, Alison seemed to be able to recognize some of the words in each English sentence. Her knowledge of the words, though partial, was enough to help her figure out the corresponding picture. However, when asked to specify the meaning of the English sentences, she was far off the target in two of the four sentences. Her translation of the sentence "This is the bird's tree" was 盪鞦韆 (*dang-qiu-qian*, playing the swing, which she represented in Chinese phonetic symbols and homonyms). Her misinterpretation was probably caused by her inadequate reading competency to make accurate sense of the English text and by the presence of a swing in the picture, which tipped her off to the meaning she chose. Her interpretation of the sentence "The moon belongs to the man in the moon" as 黃昏 (*huang-hun*, twilight) is another example in which Alison used the picture clue to access the meaning, as the picture shows a rising moon, which is very similar to a setting sun, over some landscape. In either case, Alison seemed able to recognize some words in the English sentences and to match them to their corresponding pictures. But when she was forced to give exact meaning of the sentences, she tended to rely on the picture clues for the meaning, which was sometimes inaccurate.

The Case of Jake

Jake's parents ran a small business at home and did not much attend to his homework or learning. Jake was a care-free boy who liked to do things he enjoyed and would avoid things he disliked. In learning, this often meant he would do only tasks which interested him and would ignore or neglect those that were not interesting to him. If he was asked to redo poorly done homework, he would often lose temper. In his fourth grade year, Jake usually scored between 70 and 80 in the school-administered monthly exams, which was below the average. With his low motivation in learning and unwillingness to memorize vocabulary words and sentences, he was often considered a slow EFL learner. However, Pam discovered that he was actually very interested in the picture books she brought to the English class. Once Jake even volunteered to be the leader of his group and worked with his members in sounding out the words in the picture books. Although Jake opted out later after realizing that it was too much trouble to be the leader, his love of stories kept him concentrated in literacy tasks involving storybooks. In particular,

he enjoyed story books with many new and complex vocabulary and sentence patterns much more than leveled picture books with controlled and repeated words and sentence patterns. He once reassured the teacher that he believed the former kind was easier than the latter. His belief confirmed Goodman's (1986) suggestion that longer and contextualized texts are easier to understand than short but decontextualized sentences.

The code breaker. At the beginning of the fifth grade, Jake was able to write out the alphabet from memory. And from our analysis of his reading records and writings throughout the year, we found that he also knew the sounds of many consonants, including (in the K.K. phonetic symbols) /b/, /c/, /d/, /f/, /g/, /j/, /k/, /l/, /m/, /p/, /r/, /s/, /t/, /w/, but he had not controlled /h/, /n/, and /ŋ/ or /M/ which he usually mispronounced as /tN/, /l/, and /f/ respectively. Vowels were more troublesome, as their mapping to sounds is not as consistent as consonants are. Jake's reading and spelling of words suggested that he employed a substitution strategy in dealing with vowels. The following are some examples that we observed in his reading records and writing samples:

Table 3 Jake's Letter Name Substitution Strategy for Vowel Sounds

Letter Name	Sound Substituted	Words Spelled by Jake (intended word in parenthesis)
e	/i/, /O/	"setr" (sister)
		"rwed" (read)
		"merror" (mirror)
a	/e/, /G/	"wak" (wake)
		"yas" (yes)
		"naxt" (next)
r	/Q/, /D/	"setr" (sister)
		"slpr" (sleeper)

In an individual reading occasion toward the end of the first semester, Jake was reading the text of *I Like to Play (Alphakids-plus, Level 2)*. He was asked to identify the sound /o/ in the word "bridge." And he repeatedly pointed at the letter "e" at the end of the word. He might have mistaken /d/ as containing an /o/ sound

and thought the corresponding letter was “e” as he did in many of his writing samples. Jake’s letter-sound mapping for both consonants and vowels suggested that he, though more advanced than Alison, was still in the partial alphabetic phase (Ehri & McCormick, 1998) in which the emergent reader shows an awareness of the relationship between print and sound but is not in full control of the correspondences, especially vowels.

However, with timely scaffolding from the teacher, Jake was able to spell out some words studied in class. In one class in mid December in the fall semester, Pam and her students were reviewing the famous *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See* picture book. After some choral and individual oral reading activities and word identification games, Pam asked some students to try to spell out some words from the picture book. Excerpt 4 illustrates the interaction between Pam and Jake in which Jake attempted to spell out the word “duck” with finely tuned assistance from the teacher.

EXCERPT 4

(J=JAKE; T=TEACHER)

....

T: Jacky, what is this? (pointing at a picture) What is this?

J: A yellow duck.

T: A yellow duck. Good. Yellow duck. Duck. Can you try to spell the word *duck*? /d/ /d/ /d/ /k/

J: /d/ /k/ /dkk/

T: Right. But how to spell the word?

J: /d/

T: Which letter makes the sound /d/?

J: D

T: D (writes D on the small white board) /k/

J: U, U

T: U, U /k/ /k/ /k/ (writes U on the small white board) /k/ /k/ /k/

J: K

T: Okay. Here it is. CK is also pronounced /k/ (writes CK on the small

white board) DUCK. That is it.

....

(English Class-051212)

Unlike sounding out words, which involves decoding letters into their corresponding sounds, spelling is an encoding process which requires the child to represent the sounds with letters. In the above example, Jake didn't seem to understand the meaning of "spelling out" the word at the beginning. With Pam's rephrased, and more clear, question, Jake understood the meaning of the task and came up with "duk" for the word—very close actually. His spelling indicated again his partial knowledge of the mapping between the sound /k/ and its corresponding letter or letter strings. Nonetheless, we hoped that after this spelling task—with the teacher's assistance of course—Jake would add this "ck" for /k/ relationship into his letter-sound mappings.

The meaning maker. Like Alison, Jake was an obvious top-down reader who relied heavily on picture clues for meanings. He didn't distinguish differences in print and would sometimes largely ignore print. For example, in the second monthly exam in the second semester, one section of the test asked the students to match a picture to its corresponding sentence and then write out the meaning in Chinese. For the first picture with a cat sleeping on a chair, the corresponding sentence is "This is my cat's chair." However, Jake's Chinese translation reads *you yi zhi mao zuo zai yi zi shang* (有一隻貓坐在椅子上 There is a cat on the chair), gave a somewhat different meaning which was exactly expressed by the text. Jake's picture-based interpretation was actually the more obvious and intuitive one, but it was incorrect according to the text. In this case, Jake's meaning making was governed by the picture, not by the print. He employed the same strategy in the remaining three questions, and, unfortunately, scored very low in that section.

Jake's contextual guessing strategy failed him again in the third monthly exam in the second semester, where a question asked, "Do you like your pencil?" and students were supposed to answer "Yes, I like my pencil." or "No. I don't like my pencil." Jake's answer was slightly different: "Yes. I like tis [for this] pencil." His Chinese rendering of the question also pointed to the same understanding of "your" as "this." If Jake had been careful enough, he should have noticed the apparent differences in sound and spelling between "this" and "your," but somehow he took

the liberty of ignoring the difference. Semantically and pragmatically his response was acceptable, but his answer was not completely correct, and that usually would cost him a couple of points in his test score. As a result, wherever accuracy is required, Jake's flexibility and willingness to take risk in guessing the meaning of text does not help him a lot.

Discussion

Cross-case comparison

Some commonalities can be found between the reader profiles of Alison and Jake. First, both children were from low home literacy environment where reading was not valued nor frequently practiced. For both children, the school, especially the teacher, became the principal, if not the only, motivator toward reading, and the main facilitator of reading development. This was true for both their first and second language literacy learning.

Second, as a code breaker, both children displayed a phonemic awareness of the English sound system, especially at the lexical level, and showed partial graphophonemic knowledge of the English alphabet in their oral reading of familiar and unfamiliar texts and in dictation and translation tasks. Although Jake seemed to be more able in grasping letter-sound correspondences and more fluent in oral reading than Alison, both children underwent an approximation process in which they made attempts at breaking the codes of the written language, sometimes mistakenly, and gradually became more competent code-breakers.

Third, as a meaning maker, both Alison and Jake were a meaning-centered, top-down reader, who frequently relied on visual cues and story context to access meanings, especially when meaning was not accessible via the printed text. With their high interest in story books, both children displayed traits of a fluent and engaged reader when reading picture story books or self-created books. However, when reading or responding to decontextualized text, such as questions in a written test or exercises in worksheets, their reading performance suggested a much poorer reader who was uninterested and was slow and imprecise in working with the written language.

Some differences did exist between Alison's and Jake's decoding and meaning-making behaviors. In terms of readiness to take risk in dealing with unfamiliar words or texts, Alison was comparatively less willing to take risk. In

oral reading tasks where the teacher was around, she usually adopted a waiting strategy when encountering unknown words, that is, she would stop and wait for the teacher to tell her or to help her sound out words. In comparison, Jake seemed to be more ready to take risk and make mistakes. Such an attitude gave him the appearance of a fluent reader. However, Jake's strategy was not without problems. It seemed to be the case that once Jake formed rules for vowel-sound relationships, he was quite comfortable with the rules. He didn't constantly test and revise his rules, and this led to a slow development toward the full alphabetic stage (Ehri & McCormick, 1998) or the conventional spelling which requires orthographic accuracy.

Significance of the case study data

Although the data reported in this case study of two struggling EFL literacy learners in a fifth grade classroom in a rural community in southern Taiwan are somewhat limited and unsystematic, the findings about the code-breaking and meaning-making patterns of the two focal children are meaningful as they support some earlier research findings regarding beginning readers' literacy learning and development. To begin, the ways in which Alison and Jake deal with the English written codes, to some extent, supports the earlier observation that learning to read is a gradual approximation process (Cambourne, 2000) in which beginning readers grow from initial awareness of the alphabetic principle of the English language, to partial grasp of the letter-sound correspondences, and later, hopefully, to fuller control of the conventional orthographic graphophonemic relationships (Ehri & McCormick, 1998; Gunderson, 1990). As He and Wang (2009) also observed in their analysis of primary grade EFL children's invented spellings, beginning EFL writers' grapheme-phoneme mappings may be unconventional and inaccurate, that is, by a mature speller's standard, but they are certainly systematic and consistent, revealing an inner understanding of the underlying rules that govern the letter-sound relationships.

Potential benefits and pitfalls of balanced reading instruction

In what way was the balanced reading program implemented in Class 5A beneficial to the two struggling EFL learners? According to Guthrie and his colleagues (Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala, & Cox, 1999; Taboa, Tonks, Wigfield, & Guthrie, 2008), motivation is an essential element in learning to read, which has been found to be a significant predictor of reading amount for both elementary and

middle school students in the United States. Given their strong motivation toward reading story books and picture books, we could expect they would have more and more opportunities to engage in meaningful encounters with texts, which are beneficial to the children's language and literacy development. Harste, Burke, and Woodward (1994) suggest that "reading and writing are sociopsycholinguistic processes and, as such, children develop models of written language from natural, ongoing encounters with print" (p. 65). They believe that children, in their encounters with the written language, would apply what they know about the world, as well as strategies for finding out, to discover how the language process works. Specific language information may include how the graphophonemic, syntactic, and semantic systems of language operate in relation to one another and in relation to their knowledge about the world. In other words, higher motivation toward reading would lead to richer experience with print and text, which would in turn lead to maturity in linguistic knowledge and reading skills.

This seemed to be the case for the two focal children examined. As observed in this study, Alison began with very limited English abilities and skills, but her interest in the picture storybooks and leveled picture books brought her into more frequent encounters with print in English. She was twice observed to bring storybooks from the library to class and ask the teacher to share them with her classmates (see p.12 above). Similarly, Jake was observed to have a strong preference for storybooks. In an interview, he once reassured Pam (the English teacher) that he liked the storybooks Pam shared with them and enjoyed authentic storybooks much more than the simplified level readers. As a matter of fact, the higher lexical and syntactic complexity level of the texts in the storybooks didn't discourage him in any way. So the motivational benefit of stories and picture books seemed quite clear for both students.

Another kind of benefit of the balanced reading instruction program might have come from the direct instruction of decoding skills and comprehension strategies provided by the teacher, Pam. Our EFL literacy program was aimed to provide students with both rich and engaging reading experiences and explicit teaching of phonics rules and decoding skills in the context of sentences or texts. Such embedded skill instruction and practice could be found in instructional activities such as read aloud, shared reading, guided reading, phonics lessons, phonemic awareness raising activities, individual oral reading, and follow-up reading and writing exercises. Excerpt 1 (p. 13) and Excerpt 4 (p. 17) above provide good examples for how the teacher would gauge the reading ability of the student and

then provide necessary online support for the student to perform the reading task (sounding out words, in this case) on her own. We believe such explicit instruction of decoding skills at teachable moment is effective in helping students move forward in their literacy development.

Our findings of the code-breaking and meaning-making patterns of Alison and Jake in this case study, however, also revealed some potential pitfalls in the adaptation of balanced reading instruction for accelerating struggling EFL learners' reading development. Despite Jake's interest in authentic storybooks, he seemed to continue to commit the same decoding or spelling errors over a long period of time; while the explicit teaching and practice of letter-sound mapping during whole class instruction did not seem to be very helpful to him, as he was not interested in doing drill oriented exercises and tended to ignore details in print. To ensure literacy learning for every child, some kind of individualized reading instruction focusing on specific skills or areas of reading seemed necessary for struggling readers like Jake.

In addition, despite the motivational and comprehension benefits of picture books and story books for beginning readers, using picture storybooks is not without problems. In the case of Alison, who tended to rely on the visual cues for meanings, pictures were not always her best friend in developing her reading competence because they might provide her a false sense of security for getting meanings. As described in her section above, she suffered whenever she was demanded to derive exact word meanings or sentence meanings from contextless or pictureless text. Although we understood that pictures in the level readers and storybooks were helpful to her in performing reading tasks, we also expected her to gradually pay more attention to the printed words, so she could practice word recognition and word analysis more frequently. Unfortunately, Alison's heavy reliance on pictures seemed to slow her down on her way to becoming an independent and mature reader. As a matter of fact, many reading researchers (Adams, 1990; LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Pressley, Gaskins, & Fingeret, 2006) have suggested that competent readers read all the words in text fluently and accurately, so they can concentrate on comprehension. For a struggling reader like Alison, developing fluent word recognition is more important than defaulting back to the visual clues for meaning.

Conclusion

In this study, we designed and implemented an EFL program based on the principles of balanced reading instruction (Weaver, 1998), and examined how two struggling readers, Alison and Jake, learn to read in the English language in the program. Our findings about the two case study students can be briefly summed up as follows: First, as a code breaker, the struggling readers showed partial graphophonemic knowledge of the English alphabet and both children underwent an approximation process in which they made attempts at breaking the codes of the written language, sometimes mistakenly, and gradually became more competent code-breakers. Second, as a meaning maker, the two struggling readers demonstrated mainly a meaning-centered, top-down reading strategy and frequently relied on visual cues and story context to access meanings. They displayed traits of a fluent and engaged reader when reading picture story books or self-created books. However, when reading or responding to decontextualized text, such as questions in a written test or exercises in worksheets, their reading performance suggested a much poorer reader.

Pedagogical Implications

We offer a couple of pedagogical implications for EFL researchers and teachers interested in promoting the literacy development of beginning EFL learners:

First, it takes time for the beginning EFL reader, especially one who is struggling with learning to read, to develop his/her phonological awareness and graphophonemic knowledge. Reading teachers should offer opportunities for students to explore the codes and meanings of texts in the target language through balanced reading instruction, and give slower readers time to grow through the various phases of word learning (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). Second, when working with familiar texts contextualized in story or picture books, those struggling readers appear to be quite fluent in reading. However, in literacy tasks where accuracy is required and few contextual clues are provided, the same readers would suffer a lot from their partial knowledge of the letter-sound correspondences and appear to be rather poor in reading. The instructional implication from this discrepancy in reading fluency is that teacher should provide more contextualized reading and writing tasks in the EFL classroom, so struggling readers adopting a meaning-centered, top-down approach would be able to demonstrate literacy skills at a higher level, which would in turn increase their confidence and competence in

reading. This, however, should not prevent the teacher from expecting the struggling readers to develop fluent and automatic decoding skills through repeated oral reading, sight words, and phonics lessons.

Limitations and Further Research

As L2 reading researchers have suggested, L2 readers cannot leave their L1 literacy knowledge and skills behind when reading L2 texts. In this study, we describe the struggling EFL readers' code-breaking and meaning-making behaviors without integrating factors such as L1-L2 orthographic distance (Koda, 2005) and role of L1 literacy competence (Cummins & Swain, 1986). Further cross-linguistic research may be conducted to identify specific mechanisms in which students' Chinese literacy knowledge and skills interfere with or facilitate their English reading and writing developments. Some recent research (Hong & Chen, 2009; Wang, Koda, Perfetti, 2003; Wang, Perfetti, and Liu, 2005) has opened up a fertile ground for such cross-linguistic and biliteracy studies.

Furthermore, in this study, we relied mainly on students' written materials and oral reading records to depict the EFL readers' roles and behaviors as code-breaker and meaning-maker, and had not been able to establish clear connections between the balanced reading program design and the struggling EFL learners' literacy development. Further qualitative data obtained from interviews and classroom observations should be able to offer more insights into the teacher-student and peers interactions, and reveal the processes in which struggling readers' L2 literacy development is facilitated by the literacy instruction.

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Case Studies of Two Struggling EFL Learners in a Fifth-Grade Balanced Reading Program

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This paper depicts the English literacy learning of two fifth-grade struggling readers in an EFL classroom which embedded skill learning in meaningful language and literacy activities focusing on story books and leveled picture books. Through examining the child readers' oral reading records and written works, the researchers tried to understand and depict the struggling readers' literacy development as a code breaker and a meaning maker. Major findings include the following. Firstly, as a code breaker, the struggling readers showed partial graphophonemic knowledge of the English alphabet and both children underwent an approximation process in which they made attempts at breaking the codes of the written language, sometimes mistakenly, and gradually became more competent code-breakers. Secondly, as a meaning maker, the two struggling readers demonstrated a meaning-centered, top-down reading strategy and frequently relied on visual cues and story context to access meanings. They displayed traits of a fluent and engaged reader when reading picture story books or self-created books. However, when they were reading or responding to decontextualized text, such as questions in a written test or exercises in worksheets, their reading performance indicated a much poorer reader. Pedagogical implications for teaching struggling EFL readers are also provided in this study.

Keywords: struggling reader, balanced reading instruction, code-breaker, meaning-maker

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