

HOW HAVE WE APPROACHED TEACHING OUR SON TO READ ENGLISH?: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

Afdal Ade Hendrayana¹, Epi Stiyo Pujowato²

¹Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan, Institut Agama Islam Negeri Kerinci Jambi

²SD Negeri No.82/VII Sei. Benteng 2 Sarolangun Jambi

¹ *afdalade14@gmail.com*, ² *epi.stiyo@gmail.com*

Abstract

This autoethnographic study explores the process of teaching English reading to a young child, starting at the age of two, in a non-native English-speaking family. The study aims to understand the nuances and effects of early literacy interventions, highlighting the importance of systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. Through detailed personal experiences, the study illustrates the progression of learning stages from alphabet recognition to the development of sight word recognition and orthographic mapping. By integrating education theories with longitudinal personal experiences, this study provides insights into effective teaching practices and child-centered learning approaches that can significantly influence early literacy development. The findings suggest that early, structured reading education is critical in fostering reading proficiency, offering a blueprint for parents and teachers in similar educational settings.

Keywords: *literacy acquisition; reading development; reading English; autoethnography research, early years; foreign language*

INTRODUCTION

The literacy journey is a pivotal part of early childhood development, laying the groundwork for a lifetime of learning and interaction with the world through text. Seeing the importance of literacy skills for the future of children, The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) assesses the abilities of 15-year-olds worldwide including in reading aiming to ensure students are well-prepared for future challenges, and can fully participate in a globalized society. Unfortunately, Indonesia's Pisa 2022 report recorded its lowest reading literacy score since participating in the program, a reduction from 371 points in 2018 to 359 points in 2022 (PISA, 2022).

We need to understand that early reading development is a multifaceted process that sets the foundation for future learning and literacy. Research shows that learning to read is the cornerstone of education which is not only the skill most critical for academic success; it is also a fundamental determinant of lifelong opportunity (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Chall believes that learning to read is a developmental process, highlighting the need for phonics in early reading and comprehension skills in advanced stages (Chall, 1983). Moreover, the intricacy of acquiring reading skills involves multiple areas of study, such as the coordination of numerous cognitive functions including attention, memory, and linguistic comprehension (Dehaene, 2009). In terms of phonemic awareness and decoding, it involves forming connections between letters and sounds, leading to the development of sight word recognition through a process of phonological recoding (Ehri, 1987 & 1998). Thus, to raise successful literacy development, some individual differences such as cognitive abilities, motivation, and learning styles need to be taken into account (Snowling & Hulme, 2011).

Responding to the impact of literacy development on children's lives, this article explores ideas on how to teach literacy competence to children based on my experience in teaching our son since the age of two years. By understanding the early stages of literacy development and systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies (National Reading Panel, 2000; Ehri, 1995: 2014), our son has performed very well in reading English sentences and short texts at the age of four. This article also examines how introducing reading at the beginning of foreign language education helps young learners progress faster in understanding and speaking the new language (Długosz, 2000; Jingga, 2022) and teaching English proficiency to children at an earlier age can lead to better outcomes in language learning, taking advantage of cognitive and neurological factors unique to early childhood (Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley, 2003).

The Theoretical Framework and Review of Literature

Reading is a complex cognitive process of decoding symbols to derive meaning from text. It is not just about recognizing words but also about comprehending and interpreting them within the broader context of the text and the reader's own experiences and knowledge (Rayner et al, 2001). All children have the tools they need to become successful readers (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Yet, children who receive systematic and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, and other reading skills from a young age are more likely to become proficient readers (Adam, 1990). Concerning this, early exposure to reading enhances cognitive skills, including vocabulary expansion, improved memory, and critical thinking abilities, which these skills contribute to overall intellectual growth and problem-solving capabilities (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). The emphasis on early literacy instruction in this report is based on substantial research indicating that the skills acquired in the early years form the basis for later reading proficiency, impacting children's academic trajectory and overall success.

More studies offer a comparative view of reading education globally, emphasizing the need for instructional practices that are grounded in scientific research to effectively support children's reading development. Drawing on scientific research, McGuinness (2004) advocates for evidence-based teaching practices that include systematic phonics as part of a comprehensive reading program, for instance, in the United Kingdom with the introduction of the Synthetic Phonics program which significantly improves children's reading accuracy and fluency. The United States and Canada have explored a range of methodologies, with an emphasis on balancing phonics-based instruction with whole-language approaches, evolving into what is commonly referred to as balanced literacy (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Conversely, Finland, known for its high literacy rates, emphasizes play-based learning in the early years, with formal reading instruction starting later than in many other countries. Finnish methods stress the importance of children's language development and motivation for reading, supported by a rich literacy environment (Sahlberg, 2011; McGuinness, 2004). Moreover, Scandinavian countries are notable for their emphasis on child-centered learning, play-based pedagogy, and the integration of reading into daily activities rather than through formal instruction at an early age (Hansen & Gustafsson, 2016).

Knowledge about reading development stages allows teachers or parents to nurture a love for reading, build a strong foundation for academic success, and contribute positively to their children's cognitive and language skills (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). The pre-alphabetic phase in teaching reading is the earliest stage in the process of learning to read (Ehri, 1995). This stage is pivotal for moving towards fluency and literacy by

memorizing sight words and achieving a basic understanding of the text (Blackwell and Laman, 2013). In terms of phonics instruction, which makes the alphabetic principle explicit, it is essential for helping beginning readers learn new words and become skilled, independent readers (Rayner, Foorman, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2011). However, during this phase, children may only form partial connections because they cannot yet segment the word's pronunciation into all of its phonemes (Muller, 2020). For late kindergarten or early first grade, the next process of learning to read is a full alphabetic phase in which learners have acquired the ability to understand and utilize the relationship between letters and sounds comprehensively, enabling the decoding of unfamiliar words through the knowledge of letter-sound correspondences (Ehri & McCormick, 1998). Consistent encounters with words that illustrate the grapheme-phoneme relationships they have learned are essential for advancement in this stage in which such encounters enhance orthographic mapping, which strengthens the links between graphemes and phonemes to form connections between the spellings, sounds, and meanings of particular words in memory (Beech, 2005; Ehri, 2014). Orthographic mapping progresses as these segments become immediately identifiable, enabling readers to more effortlessly self-learn new associations (Share, 1995).

METHOD

Our investigation adopts the form of an autoethnography, succinctly defined as a blending element of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010) to utilize the author's personal experiences as a foundation for analysis or interpretation (Hill and Knox, 2021; Taylor, et al., 2021; Adams, et al., 2015, 2017). This qualitative research method emphasizes the importance of the reflexivity, theoretical engagement, and methodological rigor in conducting autoethnographic research that goes beyond personal storytelling to make substantive scholarly contributions (Anderson, 2006; (Canagarajah, 2012; Ellis, 2004, Hill and Knox, 2021) and narrative writing, as a qualitative method of inquiry, has aided me in this endeavor by centering on the exploration of "...into an experience..." (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Moreover, the purpose of this method is to acknowledge the inseparable link between the personal and the cultural and to create space for nontraditional forms of inquiry and expression (Wall, 2006). Similarly, autoethnographers aim to create engaging stories that illuminate specific phenomena observed during the research process (Hill and Knox, 2021; Canagarajah, 2012) and to reflect deeply on their own experiences and biases, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the analysis (Méndez, 2013).

Autoethnography as a research method allows researchers to incorporate longitudinal factors into their studies to capture the complexity of personal narratives (Bochner, 2000). Moreover, Wall (2006) emphasizes the transformative potential of longitudinal autoethnography in which researchers can engage in continuous self-reflection over an extended period and gain a deeper understanding of their own experiences and identities, leading to personal and scholarly growth. From dominant narratives and social structure sites, by documenting changes in the researchers' experiences over time, they can disrupt static, monolithic views of identity and culture (Adams, 2015). Thus, this study allows us to explore longitudinal elements in ethnographic research methods to examine the process of learning to read English of our son from the age of two years.

The most widely used autoethnography form is biographical autoethnography, as a style of academically informed autobiographical writing that analyzes the researcher's personal experience as an exemplar of social life, doing so in a way that is simultaneously

evocative and analytical (Besio, 2020). As a result, evocative and analytic are known as the main types of autoethnography. Evocative autoethnography and analytic autoethnography differ in their approaches and objectives within qualitative research. Evocative autoethnography, as described by Ellis and Bochner (2006), is a form of autoethnographic writing that focuses on emotional experiences and seeks to evoke strong feelings or emotions in the reader. It emphasizes personal experiences and emotions as primary sources of data and also aims to evoke emotional responses from readers by vividly recounting the researcher's subjective experiences and reflections. This approach often prioritizes storytelling and narrative techniques to convey lived experiences authentically. Unlike evocative autoethnography, which focuses more on emotional expression and storytelling, analytic autoethnography focuses on critically analyzing cultural phenomena or social issues (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). It involves applying theoretical frameworks and rigorous analytical methods to interpret personal experiences within broader socio-cultural contexts. Analytic autoethnography aims to generate new insights, theories, or understandings by systematically examining individual experiences through a critical lens. In addition to this, analytic autoethnography has characteristics in which the researcher actively participates as a full member within the research group, clearly identifiable as such in the researcher's written works, and commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson, 2006). This study focuses on analytic autoethnography by examining how the learning process of reading English for our son since the age of two. To generate a new understanding of reading acquisition, this study involves the theory of reading acquisition and analyzes cultural values to reveal the success of reading learning patterns.

In teaching English as a foreign language context, autoethnographic studies have been widely used to examine students' emotions and their influence on learning motivation (Méndez, 2012; Peña and Méndez, 2013), teaching English syntax using communicative approach for undergraduate Students (Abdullah, Noni, Basri, & Djirong, 2023), self-aware participation, learner diaries and peer debriefing (Clark & Gruba, 2010), foreign language proficiency, cultural competence, and cross-cultural interaction (2018), teacher cognition and teaching practices on online learning resources (Alm & Ohashi, 2020). One of the advantages of autoethnography studies, researchers are permitted to utilize their personal experiences to comprehend a specific phenomenon or cultural context as emphasized by Méndez (2013) that "Telling my personal story made me reflect on my language learning history and empathize with my students' emotional experiences and reactions" (p.280). It is also in line as stated by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) "In telling their stories of experience teachers necessarily reflect on those experiences and thus make meaning of them; that is, they gain an understanding of their teaching knowledge and practice" (p. 374). As parents, we are fully engaged in the learning process of teaching our son to read English so this type of research is very helpful to share our experiences by committing to theoretical analysis in reading acquisition.

ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH ALPHABET KNOWLEDGE

Alphabet knowledge encompasses the ability to recognize, name, write, and associate the sounds of the letters in the English alphabet (Treiman, 2005; Ehri, 2005). It is a strong predictor of later reading success and serves as the foundation for understanding the alphabetic principle (Adams, 1990; Ball & Blachman, 1991; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998;). Due to the significance of it, we had already introduced the English alphabet to our son at the age of one. Moreover, introducing the alphabet is the initial phase we undertake in the process of learning to read (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Foulin, 2005; Doe &

Johnson, 2018; Brown, & Lee, 2019). To introduce 26 letters of the English alphabet to our son, we provided colorful alphabet puzzles with various variations and colors and also large-sized alphabet brochures that are pasted on the wall. Hence, the letters had become everyday toys.

As our son turned 1,5 years old, we began introducing the letter names. In this phase, we utilized paired-associate learning techniques by pairing spoken words with printed letters (alphabet puzzles). While holding the letter A, we pronounced /ei/ with the English pronunciation and asked him to repeat. *Say /ei/*. Then he pronounced /ei/. Initially, whenever we mentioned some letters in English, he tended to mimic them with Indonesian sounds. This occurred due to the influence of his native language on foreign language learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Corrections to the letter names were made and then reinforced, followed by asking him to repeat. Acquiring reading skills entails paired-associate learning, where individuals link the letter names and sounds that consistently match with written letters, solidifying these connections in their long-term memory (Ehri, 2005; McBride-Chang, 1999). The next phase after all letters were learned, we proceeded using English questions. Short question was introduced, such as: *"What letter is this?"* by holding letter A and we pronounced /ei/. We told him *A makes the sound /ei/*. We repeated the question and then asked him to say /ei/. The same went for the other alphabet letters as well.

In addition to facilitating our son in recognizing and naming the letters, a fun activity diversified in the form of games was sticking 26 large-sized letters on the floor using large black tape. Our son was placed at one point, for instance, then given instructions to find one letter as *"Where is the letter A?"*. Upon reaching letter A, we asked again, *"What letter is it?"*. The forms of questions were also varied by asking *"Can you find the letter A?"*. This fun alphabet creation allowed him to recognize and name letters. Knowing the names of letters strongly predicts both the acquisition of reading skills and future reading success, which encompasses comprehension (Roberts, Vadasy, & Sanders, 2019; Foulon, 2005; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

In teaching sounds to letters, which these sounds refer to phonemes, we also facilitated our son with an English alphabet song. The video was played using a device specifically created for kids, ensuring a secure monitor display. The purpose of playing the alphabet song was to introduce phonemic awareness. We noticed that our son responded positively to music accompanied by audio and video, enjoying it by swaying and eagerly following along with each lyric sung. Music instruction improves children's academic achievements, fosters their creativity, and enhances their social interactions (Smith & Johnson, 2018). In addition to playing music, we also provided alphabet puzzles beside him. While listening to the alphabet song, we took a letter from the alphabet puzzle to match the lyric of the song being sung, and then we showed him the letter. We did this to introduce the alphabet letters and observed his response to what he heard. We continued such activities, and even at the age of two, he already mentioned 26 English alphabet letters according to the song's rhythm, although the letters were not pronounced clearly. Furthermore, he was also able to respond when he heard the letters mentioned in the song by immediately taking the letters (alphabet puzzle) nearby. In brief, understanding the sound-letter correspondences, coupled with phonemic awareness, is essential for grasping the alphabetic principle, which is the understanding that written language consistently represents spoken language (Byrne & Fielding-Barnsley, 1989; 1990).

In terms of the alphabetic principle, it has been one of the vital steps in literacy development which refers to the understanding that written letters are systematically and predictably linked to specific spoken sounds (Adams, 1990; Baker, Santiago, Masser, Nelson, & Turtura, 2018). In teaching the alphabetic principle, phonic instruction enables children to understand the connections between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001; Moats, 2010). We employed phonic instruction through watching videos. After being observed, entering the age of 2.5 years, our son greatly enjoyed alphabet videos that are dynamic and rhythmic in nature. When given access to watch videos, alphabet dance was his interest at this age. He imitated the movements of the letters accompanied by certain rhythms. Then, we searched for moving alphabet videos accompanied by the pronunciation of each letter to introduce the sounds of English letters. What he did at this age aligns with articulatory learning which involves the process of mastering the physical gestures required to produce the sounds of a new language (Strange & Dittmann, 2015). These gestures involve the coordinated movement of the speech organs, such as the mouth, tongue, lips, and vocal cords, to create the distinct sounds associated with each letter (Lieberman & Mattingly, 1985).

English vocabulary enrichment

After our son learned the sounds and could pronounce 26 letters of the alphabet, we proceeded to introduce English vocabulary. The introduction of vocabulary started sequentially from the letter A. *What letter is this?* (We point to the letter “A”). We told him this letter makes the sound /eɪ/ like in Apple. Then we said *A for Apple*. We asked him to repeat. We asked again *Do you know Apple? This is Apple*. (We showed him an apple flashcard). We requested that he repeat it. *Please, repeat after me. A for Apple*. We did the same thing for other letters as well.

After each letter was presented within a word, for practice, we simply stated the letter and then asked him to mention a word with the initial letter we mentioned sequentially. We said *A is for...*, then he responded with *Apple*. *B is for...*, and he answered *Ball*. This continued until the letter Z. To enrich vocabulary, we added one more word to each letter. For example, *A is for Apple*. *A is for Ant*. Thus, the number of words he currently knew was 52. In addition to introducing new English vocabulary, we attempted to explore topics that he found more interesting. We discovered that our son has a preference for things related to different types of vehicles. Therefore, we had been searching for books related to vehicles, toys featuring various kinds of vehicles, and children's videos about different types of vehicles in English. Children tend to remember vocabulary better when it relates to their interests and encounters (Nation, 2013).

By knowing his interest in vehicles, we grouped the names of vehicles in English and then determined their first letters to align with the alphabetical order. For instance, *A for Ambulance*, *B for Bus*, *C for Car*, etc. Additionally, we matched the names of vehicles with their corresponding pictures and listened to the names of vehicles being mentioned while looking for their pictures. This activity engaged various senses including visual aids, auditory stimulation, and hands-on activities to boost vocabulary acquisition. As a result, at the age of three, he was already capable of naming more than 25 English vocabulary words related to vehicles. Furthermore, our daily routine involved repeatedly encountering new words in everyday situations, learning words within their contexts, and motivating him to actively incorporate new vocabulary into his speech.

Immersing our son in an environment abundant with language, where they are motivated to engage in English word exploration and utilization. Each object in our house

was labeled using English words. On the door, for instance, we wrote *DOOR* with large capital letters and it was also colored. Similarly, on the window, wardrobe, TV, fan, table, chair, book, pen, and so on. When entering the house, he saw the word *DOOR* and we read it aloud, then asked him to read it again. After that, we asked, *What is this?* (While pointing to the door). After introducing several objects, we proceeded to ask by mentioning the object's name in Indonesian language and he responded in English. *How do you say JENDELA in English?* He answered, "WINDOW". Repetition and correction were done regularly. Enhancing the English vocabulary of young learners entails employing a variety of methods tailored to their developmental level and individual learning styles including reading aloud (Wasik & Bond, 2001), doing repetition and review (Nation, 2013), and creating a language-rich environment (Dickinson, & Porche, 2011).

Enhanced English vocabulary acquisition has had a positive effect on our son's ability to arrange alphabet letters. Labeling objects provides an opportunity for him to see how letters are arranged to form a word, allowing him to imitate each letter arrangement. We provided our son with three sets of alphabet puzzles featuring various colors and sizes. Through these puzzles, we guided him in arranging alphabet letters corresponding to objects labeled in English. This activity brought him joy, as he observed a word and then assembled each letter to match the object he observed. By the age of 3.5 years, he could already arrange letters to form words based on the object names he saw, reading them effortlessly without needing to spell them out. Since he interacted with the alphabet daily, we were pleasantly surprised one day when he demonstrated his ability to recall the color of each letter from each set of puzzles. Each set had letters of distinct colors, alongside variations in size: large, medium, and small. We once tested his memory by having him face away while we selected a letter and asked him *What color is the letter E with the large-sized?* His response was accurate. Consistently, he responded correctly during such experiments. His capability to identify the color of 78 different letters is indeed an impressive feat. As adults, we had assumed such proficiency would be challenging to attain. Consequently, we concluded that his daily engagement in alphabet activities also contributed to his subconscious retention of each letter's color. A study conducted by Radvansky, Gibson, & McNerney (2011) explores that utilizing color-coded systems is a visual learning approach that proves highly beneficial for improving children's learning and memory retention. They claim that assigning distinct colors to various categories or types of information, children can better structure and remember the material.

Orthographic mapping activities

Orthographic mapping is the cognitive process of connecting the sounds of familiar words (phonemes) to their written forms (orthography), aiding in the acquisition of new words (Ehri, 2014) and facilitating the storage of words in the brain's long-term memory (Kilpatrick, 2015). Therefore, we may call this a process of linking what a child has already known and using it to something new he is attempting to learn.

Before activating orthographic mapping, phonemic awareness skills and phonics knowledge have been trained first. In phonemic awareness, our son had been able to hear, identify, and manipulate phonemes in spoken words. For instance, when he was able to separate the word "car" and spell it into three phonemes: /sɪ:/, /eɪ/, and /ɑ:r/. Similarly, with phonics knowledge which he was able to form words based on spelling rules and letter sounds. Like the letter "T" pronounced as /ti:/ for "truck".

In developing orthographic mapping ability, we introduced sight words or words by sight first like *you, they, are, he/she, is, the, can, and*, etc. Sight words are terms that children are expected to recognize immediately, without the need to phonetically decode

them each time. We listed high-frequency words to use as sight words, as our son frequently encountered these words while reading. Then we gave him a picture book with short sentences and asked him to identify the sight words that had been learned. Some sight words were marked and asked to be read. Any incorrect word pronunciation was corrected.

Following the introduction of sight words, we explored him with vocabulary related to his interests. As our son is fond of vehicles, we expanded his vocabulary to include not only names of vehicles but also associated terms like road, street, drive, station, bus stop, etc. He was then encouraged to read some words before being introduced to short sentences in a picture book of vehicles. Furthermore, we also wrote some new words on a small whiteboard to be read. Then a word was developed into a phrase, and a short sentence to be read such as: *Ball. Basketball. I like basketball. My hobby is playing basketball.* In all, repeated exposure to new words and simple sentences has been a pivotal element for vocabulary development and reading acquisition as well.

Further, at the end of each activity in orthographic activity learning, we consistently encouraged our son to write out the entire word on a whiteboard or paper. We are convinced that concluding an activity by writing out the complete word helps enhance his understanding and continue his learning progress. A study about functional magnetic resonance imaging has indicated that self-generated action like handwriting is fundamental in developing the brain systems for reading acquisition (James & Berninger, 2021) and it plays a crucial role in activating brain areas involved in processing letters, which are essential for proficient reading (James & Engelhardt, 2012). Thus, practicing handwriting might support the development of reading skills in young children. Supporting our son in developing orthographic mapping ability, as a result at the age of four, our son has been able to read English sentences and short texts found in elementary school textbooks.

CONCLUSION

This article has recounted our experience as parents in teaching our son to read English, even though it is not our native language. However, having earned a master's degree in English Language Education, we are well-equipped to teach English as a foreign language to young learners. Our experience indicates that teaching children to read effectively from a young age is crucial. Acquisition of English alphabet knowledge has been the initial step we explored in the acquisition of reading skills. In fact, by the time he was two years old, through the activities of recognizing, naming, writing, and associating the sounds of the alphabet, he had successfully learned 26 letters and how to pronounce them in English. The subsequent stage involved enriching his vocabulary, where the expansion of his English vocabulary positively influenced his ability to organize letters of the alphabet. The final strategy we implemented to teach our son to read English involved enhancing his ability to perform orthographic mapping. We focused on phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge to successfully activate his orthographic mapping skills in early literacy teaching strategies to enhance our son's reading development.

This autoethnographic study is intended to guide all parties, including parents, childcare assistants, and educators, in teaching the process of reading acquisition, particularly for English as a global language used in various aspects of life. Research in early childhood literacy consistently shows that effective practices in teaching literacy to young children can significantly influence their overall educational trajectory.

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