

**DIAMOND Hunt: A Reading Teaching Approach for EFL
Beginners' Reading Skills Development**

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ABSTRACT

Phonics and whole language (WL) are two major approaches to teaching beginning reading, and skills and meaning are their respective emphases. However, because of children's learning styles and diverse English abilities, neither phonics nor WL efficiently improves the development of beginners' English reading skills. This study focused on a reading teaching approach, which I have called DIAMOND hunt, and its use with Taiwanese first graders as EFL beginners. DIAMOND hunt consists of two main components: Dual Interactive Approach, which keeps phonics skills and meaning-based reading together, and Mixed-ability coOperative Novices Design, which groups beginners with diverse English abilities in a learning group. It aims to guide the beginners to treasure reading abilities and successfully develop the reading skills. By DIAMOND hunt, children were first grouped heterogeneously based on their English abilities. Then they were asked to collaboratively accomplish given tasks that aimed at encouraging students to use their phonics and word recognition skills in meaning-based reading. The results showed that this teaching approach, DIAMOND hunt, was helpful for children's English reading skills and could stimulate their motivation for learning to read. Future research directions were also addressed in the conclusion.

Keywords: DIAMOND hunt, heterogeneously cooperative grouping, whole language, phonics, meaning-based reading.

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to globalization and internationalization, English has achieved the status as the world's *lingua franca* because of its wide use in academia, business, commerce, and technology [1]. In addition, because of a global increase in the numbers of children who are

learning English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL), and a growing recognition that reading provides important opportunities for second language (L2) development in second language learners [2], especially for the learners in an EFL setting in which sources of L2 input are limited [3], the teaching of English reading has been drawing increased attention from EFL/ESL teachers. In contrast to the worldwide focus on English reading teaching, the elementary level in Taiwan English reading teaching has received scant attention because of the common reading teaching method.

According to Weaver [4], the approaches to teaching beginner reading can be divided into two larger categories: part-centered approaches, which emphasize rapid recognition and "decoding" skills, and socio-psycholinguistic approaches, which emphasize the process of constructing meaning from written text. Phonics and whole language (WL) are the representatives of the two categories respectively. The common method of teaching reading adopted by EFL teachers in Taiwan is based on sequential phonics instruction. The teaching sequence is as follows: first alphabet recognition and the corresponding sounds, then long vowels, next blending sounds and finally special combinations are taught step by step throughout the elementary school years.

However, because of children's learning styles and diverse English abilities, the long term instructional approach that strongly advocates teaching phonics skills was less effective to improve the development of beginners' English reading skills. Moreover, when facing this heterogeneous reality of children's English abilities, EFL teachers in Taiwan do what teachers in many countries do: take a homogeneity bias and teach tied to the concept of one-size-fits-all and a teacher-centered instruction approach [5]. The teaching approach failed to deal with the differences between individuals. As a result, the learning reality is that some students struggle with alphabet recognition and some feel bored at the same time. Unfortunately, this is a common situation in which we lose both the beginning and

advanced learners simultaneously.

Recent research shows that an effective reading teaching should be a more “balanced approach” which includes a focus on both parts (phonics) and wholes (context meaning) [6]. And it is important to introduce meaning-based reading, and not simply decoding, right after the pupils have some basic knowledge of the spoken language [7]. The results of five successful early reading intervention programs (Successful for All [8], the Winston-Salem Project [9], the Boulder Program [10], Reading Recovery [11], and the Early Intervention in Reading Program [12]) support a balanced teaching approach. In these five programs, reading for meaning and word learning activities were both emphasized. Besides that, add-on regular and frequent duration of reading instruction, very small pupil-to-teacher ratio, and extended activities completed at home are another three characteristics common to these programs.

The question is: could these common characteristics be applied to Taiwanese elementary EFL settings in which the pupil-to-teacher ratio is high, about 30:1; teaching time is limited, 80 minutes a week; and children with diverse English abilities are placed in a same EFL class, most children are beginners and some are advanced learners? In this study, a reading teaching approach, DIAMOND Hunt, was used with EFL first graders to try to conquer the above shortages that exist in EFL environment in Taiwan and then to improve children’s reading skills development. The approach DIAMOND hunt consists of two main components: Dual Interactive Approach, which keeps phonics skills and meaning-based reading together, and Mixed-ability coOperative Novice Design, which groups beginners with diverse English abilities in a learning group. It aims to guide the beginners to treasure reading abilities and successfully develop the reading skill.

2. DIAMOND HUNT

The teaching approach includes three stages (before teaching, during teaching, and after teaching) and is described as the three phases of a journey of the DIAMOND hunt. The first is equipment preparation, then is going on the hunt, and finally is the treasure collection and trip refinement. The whole hunting journey is described briefly as follows.

Hunting equipment preparation

Teaching material design and material delivery activities arrangement were the main parts of this phase. The teaching materials included four components: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and meaning-based reading texts. Moreover, the materials of each component were organized into different units. When delivering those materials, a multi-sense input and output of L2 was the most encouraged style of activity.

The materials and the corresponding delivery activities are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The teaching materials and delivery activities

Teaching materials		Delivery activities
Phonemic awareness	alphabet story	read along, act out the words, charade
	picture books	story listening, reading alone
	theme-based song and action rhymes	singing and dancing
Phonics skills	picture/word flash cards	sounding out the word and its beginning sound, matching game (picture and beginning sound, picture and word, pictures with the same beginning sounds)
	alphabet cards	Decoding and encoding, encoding elevator
Vocabulary	Sight word cards	matching game, vocabulary bingo
	picture-word flash cards	pair work, dialog bingo
	picture-sentence flash cards	pair work, dialog bingo
	mini book	reading aloud, listen and draw
Text comprehension	chose reading text	Picture guessing, picture discussion, word searching, reading along, repeat reading

Hunting trip: DIAMOND

In this phase, the corresponding units of the four components were combined together into a teaching package, and each package integrated phonics skills training and meaning-based reading together. In every eighty-minutes EFL classes, a teaching package was delivered as the following process. First was the phonemic awareness activities, second was phonics skills (encoding and decoding practices), next was the vocabulary buildup activities, then was the showing of the text cues, and finally was meaning-based reading. That was Dual Interactive Approach (DIA), *i.e.*, in the first three steps children learned specified phonics skills that were needed in the following meaning-based reading and then they were asked to accomplish challenging reading tasks by applying the sight words and phonics rules that they just learned. In addition, because of children’s diverse English abilities, before meaning-based reading children were heterogeneously grouped, and each group included both advanced learners and beginners. Then each group was asked to accomplish challenging reading tasks through picture guessing, decoding and encoding, word searching, and whole text reading collaboratively. While reading, the advanced learners

were encouraged to provide a language model that could be mimicked by those beginning teammates. In addition, the grading criterion was based on both the extent of progress of beginners and the performance of whole group. Furthermore, when their beginning teammates made a substantial progress, the advanced learners would earn an extra reward, such as a grade promotion or public praise. That was Mixed-ability coOperative Novice Design (MOND).

Treasure collection and trip refinement

In order to strengthen the learning effect, extended activities according to a weekly teaching plan were assigned every week. This homework asked children to play the same in-class activities with parents and read the text to their families. And parents were asked to sign their names after they accomplished the assignment. In addition, both parents' feedback and in-class observation by the EFL teacher were collected to be the references for the further refinement of the teaching plan.

3. METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 101 Taiwanese EFL first graders. They entered the elementary school with diverse English abilities. Seventy-seven of them were beginners, without the experience of English learning, and the other twenty-four of subjects had the experience of English learning from one year to three years. Table 2 shows the subjects' numbers of different periods of preschool English learning time.

Table 2. The subjects' numbers of different periods of preschool English learning time

preschool English learning period (years)	0	1	2	3
number	77	9	5	10

Those children who had the English learning experience were called advanced learners in this study. And their English abilities were as follows: they could recognize the entire 26 capital alphabet and say both letters' names and the corresponding sounds; they could say the English names of pictures included in the word list of the textbook but could not read the words without pictures; and they could understand basic classroom English, like "stand up", "sit down", "raise your hands", and "hands down", *etc.* Other children without the English learning experience were called beginners and they could not do the same things as the advanced learners in an EFL class.

Teaching process

The teaching process was as follows. First, a communication note with weekly teaching plan, homework assignments and extended family activities that asked parents to play with their children was given to parents and homeroom teachers. Then, a DIAMOND hunt journey was proceeded a teaching package a week or two depending on the actual teaching situation. And finally, children were asked to do the extended activities assigned in the communicated note with parents and read the texts to their families.

Data collection

The duration of this study was a year, and the research data was collected through in-class observation, the feedback from parents, and the reading test.

4. RESULT

In-class observation

The observation focused on students' behavior and learning situations in the teaching process of DIAMOND hunt. In the DIA process, especially the phonics skills training, among the learning activities listed in Table 1, students expressed a much greater preference for those activities that allowed them to operate the target language, such as pair work, acting out the words, flash card related activities, and dialog bingo. Most of the students were shy and nervous about reading out in front of the class, but they showed lower anxiety and more confidence when involving these learning activities. In addition, individual competition was more effective than group competition in decoding and encoding activities. The former attracted most of the students, not only the advanced learners. At the same time, the blame for losing points that went on the beginners disappeared. And after the phonics skills training, students paid more attention on the ending sounds and spelling differences while proceeding meaning-based reading.

Since the grading criterion was based on both the individual's progress and the whole group's performance, peer tutoring took place in the MOND activities. In order to push each member to pass the assigned reading tasks, the advanced learners and their beginning teammates read together in and after class. The reading record of every student was good, *i.e.*, they accomplished each assigned reading tasks, but there were some disadvantages need more consideration. Some advanced learners complained that it took them a lot of time to train their teammates how to read. And some of them expressed that their beginning teammates were so dependant that they needed to read with them most of the time. Besides this, most of the advanced learners expressed a desire to read more challenging texts. On the other hand, the beginning learners expressed that their advanced teammates were so eager to push them to

accomplish the assigned reading tasks that the fore part of meaning-based reading, *i.e.*, picture guessing, picture discussion, and word searching was easily skipped. As a result, they were usually asked to directly repeat after their advanced teammates.

The feedback from parents

Parents' opinion and questions about ESL teaching and learning were welcome any time. They used to ask their questions via their kids' homeroom teachers. Moreover, forty-six of those parents gave their written feedback at the end of the school year.

Those feedback could be classified into two main categories, cheerful and gloomy. The cheerful feedback (the number is 31) included that they (1) were willing to follow the EFL teacher's teaching plan to help their kids' English learning, (2) found that their kids had more interest in English learning and reading to their family, (3) found that their kids have more confidence in English reading than before, (4) found that their kids were interested in doing English activities (English homework) with their family, and (5) expressed that they had a lot of fun with learning English with their kids (they thought that they had learned more than their kids did). On the other hand, the gloomy feedback (the number is 15) included that they (1) expressed their inability in helping their children's English learning because of the lack of their own English abilities, and (2) could not catch the English learning progress of their children due to the lost of communication note and the very confusing interpretation of their kids.

Reading test

The reading test was given at the end of the school year. Three components were included in this test: word analysis (letter recognition and beginning sound), vocabulary (word reading and picture vocabulary) and reading comprehensions (picture comprehension and sentence comprehension). The average and the standard deviation of the test score are 80.79 and 19.17, respectively. Besides, in order to understand whether the preschool English learning experience and parents' feedback would affect students' reading achievement, a further statistical analysis was computed. The respective numbers of advanced learners and beginning learners are 24 and 77. The means and standard errors of the reading test score of the two kinds of learners (advanced and beginning) are 83.11 and 4.54, and 83.24 and 2.10 respectively. On the other hand, the number of the cheerful type of feedback is 31, and it is 15 for the gloomy type of feedback. The respective means and standard errors of the reading test score according to the two type of parents' feedback (cheerful and gloomy) are 92.77 and 2.80, and 68.80 and 4.02. The summary of the analysis of variance in the reading test score is presented in Tables 3 and 4. As can be seen from the

tables, the *F* for preschool learning experience was 0.00, which is not statistically significant, indicating no appreciable difference in reading test score among advanced learners and beginners. On the other hand, the *F* for parents' feedback was 23.91 and was statistically significant at the $p < 0.00$ level, resulting from the difference in the performance of those two groups of students with different parents' feedback.

Table 3. The ANOVA of reading scores for students with different prior experiences.

Source	Sum of squares	d.f.	Mean square	<i>F</i>
experience	0.2	1	0.2	0.00
Error	37105.0	100	371.1	
Total	37105.3	101		

Table 4. The ANOVA of reading scores for students with different parents' feedback.

Source	Sum of squares	d.f.	Mean square	<i>F</i>
feedback	5810.1	1	5810.1	23.91*
Error	10691.8	44	243	
Total	16501.9	45		

Critical *F*-value for $\alpha = .001$: ${}_{.001}F_{1,44} = 12.61$. * $p < 0.001$

5. CONSLUSIONS

The key idea in this study is known as the DIAMOND hunt in EFL reading teaching. The question is whether this approach is a suitable one to improve the EFL beginners' reading skills development in present EFL reading teaching reality of high pupil-teacher ratio, limited teaching time, and heterogeneous students' association.

According to the in-class observation, inter-pupil learning activities could lower students' learning anxiety and boost their reading confidence. In addition, the phonics skills training activities were helpful in meaning-based reading, accurate reading, and word recognition. The MOND activities were also helpful in students' reading achievement, however these activities need more consideration in the cooperative learning process to assure that the beginning learners can have the opportunities to apply the phonics skills in meaning-based reading, and accelerate the transition of beginners' reading abilities, from dependant readers to independent readers. Furthermore, the MOND activities also need to take more care of the learning requirement of the advanced learners.

Based on the parents' feedback and the reading test result, DIAMOND hunt was helpful for most of the

students in English reading skills development, regardless of preschool English learning experience. The students without prior learning experience caught up with their peers at the end of the first grade. This result is consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Leppanen, Niemi, Aunola, and Nurmi [13]. However, students' reading skills development could be influenced by the learning support provided by their parents. The result suggests that not only the school system should take the responsibility for students' achievement of EFL learning and teaching, but also the parents could do their kids a favor.

In brief, the results show that DIAMOND hunt is useful for EFL beginners' reading skills development. Future research will focus on two directions, the developing of parents' supporting scheme to promote the efficiency in the extended home learning activities and the adapting of the DIAMOND hunt approach to meet the learning requirements both of the advanced and beginning learners in an EFL class, to supervise the cooperative learning process to ensure that the reading process is followed properly, and to have a better understanding of the transition of beginners' reading ability.

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