Read and Act for Meaning and Enjoyment

Students enjoy listening to stories. The intonation, gestures and facial expressions of the storyteller always attract their attention, arouse their interest and help them understanding the content of the story.

Students also like reading stories aloud and acting out the characters or events. However, many of them lack the confidence to read aloud with fluency and feelings, probably due to their weaknesses in pronunciation, poor identification of the key words, inadequate understanding of the story and vague concept of the right intonation to be used. They often feel depressed when holding up the book to read. They need teacher support and adequate time to practise before they are well-prepared to read and act. But what sort of support will teachers need to provide? How can teachers make good use of students’ curiosity and imagination to achieve pleasurable learning?

In order to motivate the students to read and act, a book with a clear storyline is preferred. Adventure story and mystery story will satisfy and heighten students’ curiosity. The danger and the problems that the characters encounter can stimulate students’ imagination and thinking. Besides, teaching steps drawing on the semantic, syntactic and graphophonic strategies have to be systematically planned and conducted so that students can build up the knowledge and skills to make sense of the story and respond to the characters and events through dramatic activities.

The P 4 teachers of Wanchai School gained some experience of this sort in teaching the story ‘Danger on the high seas’. The teaching procedures (also see Appendix) were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading activities</th>
<th>Language practice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predict from the book cover and the book title</td>
<td>What was happening---warship, octopus, dark clouds, bad weather, high seas, danger, cannons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Predict the development of the story through questioning</td>
<td>What happened next?/ What would happen if ….?/ Do you think the people will ….?/ How did they do that?/ Why did they do that? etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study the pictures in detail for more information about the story</td>
<td>Names of toys, names of weapons, relationship among the characters, the emotion of the characters when danger was ahead</td>
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Work out the plot of the story | Sequencing the different events of the story using content knowledge and linguistic knowledge
---|---
Read the story aloud by the teacher to demonstrate intonation, stress, rhythm and reading the sentence in meaningful chunks | (1) Stress pattern: □□□□□(I 'wonder if this box 'opens)
(2) Read in sensible groups: (rhythm, intonation and meaningful chunks of words)
The 'ship 'rolled from 'side to 'side, 'up and 'down in the 'stormy 'sea.

Students join reading aloud (reading the dialogues/ exclamations with feelings, creation of gestures and sound effect) | Swoosh! (a gesture of falling)
Boom!Boom!Boom! (imitating the sound of cannon fires--- onomatopoeia)
side to side, up and down (body movement)
This is really the best toy in the world! (have the thumb up and read in a tone of appreciation)
Giant octopus ahead! (read in a fearful voice)
Get the canons ready! (giving an order)

Remarks:
Out of the 38 sentences of the story, 21 of them are exclamatory expressions. They show different feelings and attitudes of the people when danger came to them.

Before the students joined the teacher to read aloud the story, echo reading was practiced. First, the teacher read a sentence or phrase to the students, showing them how to
- read in meaningful chunks
- read with fluency—intonation, stress and rhythm
- read with feelings—showing excitement, shocks or joy
- read with understanding—using appropriate gestures and facial expressions

Then the students imitated until they managed to read with fluency and feelings. The practice helped the students gain confidence in reading the story aloud. After that, the students formed groups to practise acting out the story. They played the roles of narrator and the major characters. The following episode showed how a group of students performed according to their own interpretation:
Standing in front of the class, the students read out the title of the story ‘Danger on the high seas’ together putting stress on the word ‘Danger’. Then one of them turned the window blind to make some terrifying light effects of a storm. The whole class became very excited and watched attentively. The narrator moved a step forward and started telling the story. He read the lines clearly and fluently making right stresses on the key words. The students who played the roles of the old shopkeeper and the small boy read the dialogues with the correct intonation. When the narrator read “Swoosh! He felt something strange happening to his body. Then…”, the other students pretended to fall, scream and look frightened. Finally, the students hummed a short tune to end their show. The audience in the class was delighted and clapped their hands to express their appreciation.

The group and the whole class enjoyed the show. A sense of achievement was reflected when the students reviewed their performance:

S1: I do not feel shy. I am not afraid of being laughed at. I like to be the narrator. I think I am the best in my group in speaking English.

S2: I think I am quite fluent. I often read aloud ‘Danger on the high seas’ and now I can memorize the whole story.

S3: I like speaking in front of the class very much. My performance is good. I am not afraid of making mistakes because my classmates would not laugh at me. The teacher would correct my errors too.

S4: Chan does better than Wong and me in reading aloud. We learn a lot from him.

The teachers had the following comments on the students’ changes in their learning attitudes after trying out ‘read and act’:

- Without much teacher help and support in the first term, the students did not have a good start in reading stories. After trying out ‘read and act’ in the second term, the students enjoyed reading very much.
- There was less chanting because guidance on pausing, intonation, and expression of feelings was provided.
- Reading aloud in meaningful chunks and supported with gestures and facial expressions helped the students understand the content of the story.
- Although there were sometimes different opinions in the group, the students were willing to take part in the read and act activity. After much practice, most of the groups could recite the story ‘Danger on the high seas’. They sometimes asked, “Will we have the chance to read and act?”
**Conclusion**

Teacher support in preparing students to read and act provides a non-threatening experience for the students. The enjoyable learning process and the sense of achievement in the students’ actual performance can foster students’ interests and positive attitudes in reading. With the incorporation of the semantic, syntactic and graphophonic elements in the ‘read and act’ activities, the students will acquire the language knowledge easily through meaningful practice. The generic skills of creativity and collaboration are also developed in the students when they are encouraged to act out the characters and events. The gestures, the facial expressions and the sound-and-light effect which match well with the special scene in the story add extra interest to their performance. Without thorough understanding of the story, the students can hardly read and act so impressively.
Appendix

Procedures for the read and act activities:

Shared reading

Understanding the Story
- Plot of the story
- Characters

Vocabulary activities
- names of toys
- names of weapons
- emotions/feelings

Grammar practice
- use exclamations to express feelings

Speech flow practice
- intonation, stress and rhythm

Read and act
- Echo reading
- Gestures
- Facial expressions
- Group practice