

## IMPROVING PUPILS' READING PROFICIENCY VIA INNOVATIVE TEACHING METHODS

**Hayitaliyeva Farzonakhon**

Uzbekistan State World Languages University

English Philology Faculty

E-mail: [farzonahon004@icloud.com](mailto:farzonahon004@icloud.com)

**Abstract.** Reading proficiency occupies a central position in language education, yet many pupils continue to struggle with the transition from decoding written symbols to constructing genuine meaning from text. This paper examines the potential of innovative teaching methods — including digital storytelling, collaborative reading strategies, gamification, and project-based learning — to address the persistent challenges of reading development in school-age learners. By analysing current pedagogical research, the paper identifies the mechanisms through which these approaches stimulate reading motivation, build comprehension strategies, and improve overall reading fluency. The findings suggest that innovation in reading instruction is not merely a matter of introducing new technologies, but of fundamentally rethinking the relationship between the reader, the text, and the learning environment.

**Key words:** reading proficiency, innovative teaching methods, reading comprehension, digital storytelling, gamification, project-based learning, EFL pupils.

### Introduction.

Reading is far more than a technical skill. It is the gateway through which learners access knowledge, develop critical thinking, and build the linguistic resources necessary for academic and social participation. For pupils learning English as a foreign language, the challenge of reading is compounded: they must simultaneously decode an unfamiliar writing system, manage an expanding but incomplete vocabulary, and construct meaning from cultural and pragmatic contexts that may be remote from their own lived experience. When reading instruction fails to meet this complexity, the consequences extend well beyond poor test scores — learners lose confidence, disengage from the learning process, and develop what researchers have termed "reading reluctance": a deeply ingrained resistance to engaging with written texts (Gambrell, 2011).

Conventional approaches to reading instruction — centred on silent reading, comprehension questions, and vocabulary exercises drawn from a textbook — have proven insufficient for many learners, particularly in contexts where English is encountered primarily in the classroom. The growing availability of digital tools, the insights of sociocultural learning theory, and the documented motivational benefits of game-based and project-oriented pedagogy have opened new avenues for reading instruction that deserve serious scholarly attention. The present paper maps these developments, examines the theoretical rationale that underlies them, and draws conclusions relevant to teachers working in primary and secondary EFL settings.

### The Challenge of Reading Proficiency in EFL Contexts

Reading proficiency is a multi-dimensional construct. Researchers distinguish between lower-order reading processes — letter recognition, word decoding, and syntactic parsing — and higher-order processes such as inferencing, text structure awareness, and critical evaluation of authorial perspective (Grabe, 2009). Fluent reading requires that lower-

order processes become sufficiently automatised to free cognitive resources for higher-order comprehension. In EFL pupils, this automatisisation is frequently delayed by limited vocabulary knowledge and insufficient exposure to written English outside the classroom, creating a bottleneck that prevents comprehension from developing at the pace required by the curriculum.

A particularly significant barrier is reading motivation. Studies in both first- and second-language contexts have consistently demonstrated that motivation to read is a stronger predictor of reading achievement over time than any single instructional variable (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997). When pupils experience reading as a duty rather than a discovery — when texts are chosen for them, when tasks are uniform, and when success is measured solely through comprehension tests — intrinsic motivation erodes. Innovative teaching methods address this motivational dimension directly, by repositioning the learner as an active participant in the meaning-making process rather than a passive recipient of pre-interpreted content.

### **Innovative Methods and Their Application to Reading Instruction**

Among the most widely researched innovative approaches to reading development is digital storytelling. Digital storytelling involves pupils in the creation of short multimedia narratives that combine written text, images, audio, and video. Its relevance to reading proficiency lies in what Ohler (2013) has called the "narrative bridge": when learners construct stories themselves, they develop an intuitive understanding of narrative structure — problem, event sequence, resolution — that directly transfers to their comprehension of stories they subsequently read. Studies in EFL primary classrooms have demonstrated that pupils who engage in digital storytelling projects show significantly greater gains in reading fluency and narrative comprehension than peers receiving conventional instruction (Robin, 2016).

A second prominent approach is collaborative reading, operationalised through strategies such as Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) and Literature Circles. In Reciprocal Teaching, small groups of pupils take turns leading discussion of a shared text, assuming roles — predictor, questioner, clarifier, summariser — that scaffold the deployment of the four core comprehension strategies identified by reading research. The social dimension of this approach is theoretically grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development: learners accomplish with peer support what they cannot yet achieve independently, gradually internalising the comprehension strategies modelled in group interaction. Empirical evaluations of Reciprocal Teaching have reported consistent and substantial gains in reading comprehension across diverse learner populations (Rosenshine & Meister, 1994).

Gamification — the application of game design elements to non-game learning contexts — represents a third avenue of innovation in reading instruction. Points systems, progress visualisation, competitive leaderboards, and narrative quest structures have all been applied to reading programmes with the aim of increasing pupil engagement and reading volume. Research on gamified reading platforms such as Reading Eggs and Classcraft indicates that gamification is most effective when game elements are intrinsically connected to reading tasks rather than used as external rewards layered over unchanged instructional content (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). When pupils earn points by completing genuinely challenging reading tasks — answering inferential questions, identifying authorial purpose, connecting texts to personal experience — gamification leverages competitive and achievement motivation in the service of genuine comprehension development.

Project-based learning (PBL) offers perhaps the most integrative framework for innovative reading instruction. In PBL, reading is not an end in itself but a tool for inquiry: pupils read to answer a driving question, to gather evidence for an argument, or to inform the creation of a tangible product — a poster, a presentation, a short documentary, a class magazine. This purposeful orientation to reading addresses one of the most persistent problems of reading instruction in EFL contexts: the perceived irrelevance of the texts assigned. When reading serves a meaningful communicative goal, the cognitive effort required to extract information from an imperfectly understood text becomes purposeful rather than arbitrary (Thomas, 2000). Research on PBL in EFL settings has reported positive effects on both reading motivation and the development of reading strategies, particularly for learners at intermediate proficiency levels.

### **Technology as an Enabler of Reading Innovation**

The digital transformation of education has expanded the toolkit available to reading teachers considerably. E-readers and interactive digital texts allow for the embedding of glosses, audio support, and comprehension questions directly within the reading experience, reducing the interruption caused by dictionary look-up and enabling scaffolded reading of texts that would otherwise exceed the learner's independent reading level. Research on text glossing has demonstrated that vocabulary glosses embedded at the point of encounter are more effective for both word learning and reading comprehension than end-of-text glossaries (Ko, 1995).

Automated reading assessment tools, including readability analysis software and AI-driven comprehension platforms, offer teachers rapid and reliable data on pupil reading level and comprehension patterns, enabling more responsive differentiation of reading instruction. Rather than assigning the same text to an entire class, teachers equipped with such tools can match pupils to texts at their optimal challenge level — texts that are difficult enough to stimulate vocabulary and strategy development, but not so difficult as to produce frustration and disengagement. This principle, known as the "instructional reading level," has a long history in reading education (Betts, 1946) but has historically been difficult to operationalise in large classrooms; digital tools now make it practically feasible.

### **Conclusion.**

The improvement of pupils' reading proficiency is one of the most consequential challenges facing language educators today. The evidence reviewed in this paper demonstrates that innovative teaching methods — digital storytelling, collaborative reading strategies, gamification, project-based learning, and technology-enhanced differentiation — offer genuinely effective responses to this challenge, provided they are implemented with clear pedagogical purpose and grounded in an understanding of what reading proficiency requires. Innovation for its own sake, without attention to the cognitive and motivational demands of the reading process, is unlikely to yield lasting results.

What unites the most effective innovative approaches is a common orientation: they treat the pupil as an active, motivated maker of meaning rather than a passive decoder of text. They connect reading to purposes that learners recognise as genuine and valuable. They embed comprehension strategy instruction within authentic reading experiences rather than reducing it to decontextualised skill drills. And they use technology not as a replacement for thoughtful pedagogy, but as an amplifier of it. Teachers who adopt this orientation — and who are supported by school leadership in doing so — are well-positioned to transform reading instruction in ways that produce durable improvements in proficiency, motivation, and the lifelong reading habits that both ultimately depend upon.

Further research is needed to examine the long-term effects of innovative reading instruction on reading proficiency in EFL primary and secondary settings, particularly in post-Soviet educational contexts where traditional instructional norms remain influential. Longitudinal studies tracking the reading development of pupils exposed to innovative versus conventional instruction from an early age would provide valuable evidence for curriculum policy decisions at the national level.

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