

BOOK REVIEW

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Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever

Author: Mem Fox

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Focusing on pre-literate children in English-speaking environments, *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever* by Mem Fox is a book intended for parents and adults caring for young children; however, I believe this book can be used as a valuable tool for teachers of English as foreign/second language for young children. Providing much insight into how children acquire literacy skills, this book not only explains the importance of reading aloud to children but will assist teachers in developing techniques that are most appropriate for young students. In all, the book presents useful methods for enhancing a child's language learning experience.

Ranging from personal stories and testimonials to expert advice on the effects of reading aloud to children, this book is comprehensible with fifteen insightful chapters. The book itself details Fox's career-start in the field of literacy and continues with her explorations into the effects of how reading aloud to children actually works. Besides sharing her experiences, this book supplies useful information on how parents should approach reading aloud to their children. In addition to the book content, readers will find a useful list of other books written by Fox, which includes both children's books and books for adults.

Through Fox's lighthearted yet smart writing style, she manages to explain why reading aloud is so vital for young children. In Chapter One, *The Foot Book Miracle*, she describes first-handedly how her daughter was able to learn how to read by the early

age of four. At first, Fox assumed that her daughter's teacher had gone to extraordinary measures. It was only after a brief, but eye-opening discussion with her daughter's teacher, that she realized why her daughter was able to read—she could read, because she had been read to. Because of this pivotal moment as a parent, Fox redirected her teaching career from being a drama professor to becoming a literacy advocate.

As an example of how she promotes literacy, in Chapter Two, *The Magic in Action*, Fox describes her successful demonstration of the effects of reading aloud on a national television program in Australia. In the show, she worked with the parents of a three-year-old boy. In this miraculous televised event, Fox taught the boy to read a line from a book within fifteen minutes of the read-aloud session. Humbly, she describes how this feat was accomplished. By carefully selecting books containing simple rhymes, rhythm and repetition, the boy was able to comprehend and begin to read. Using rhymes is well known as a useful tool for developing reading skills. Because of their repetitive nature, rhymes provide a natural rhythm which children find enjoyable (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 27; Walter, 2004, p. 40). Additionally, Fox (2001) discusses how the read aloud experience helps create conditions conducive for reading; she describes the exchange between the two of them as being "a frenzy of silliness and excited game playing..." (p. 8). That is, by making an activity fun, reading aloud can be an unforgettable and importantly, an enjoyable event for a child (Phillips, 1993, p. 6). According

to Fox (2001), reading aloud needs to be an interactive experience based on the relationship between the child, the book and the adult, such that it is a bonding experience that can enrich the lives of both parent and child (p. 10).

In lieu of discussing the problems associated with literacy, Fox optimistically discusses how reading problems can be easily prevented in Chapter Three, *Birth, Brains, and Beyond*. Because reading issues can be addressed in early childhood, Fox (2001) stated that “prevention [should happen] long before a child starts school” (p. 13). In support of this argument, Fox provides data explaining the brain development of a child—“only twenty-five percent of a child’s brain is developed at birth” (2001, p. 13). Fortunately, parents and teachers can work with young individuals to help continue this growth by routinely talking, reading, and singing to the children in their lives.

In discussing the many benefits of reading aloud to children in Chapter Three, Fox suggested that “children need to hear a thousand stories read aloud before they begin to read for themselves” (2001, p. 17). If possible, a child should be read aloud three stories a day—“one favorite, one familiar, and one new, but the same book three times is also fine” (Fox, 2001, p. 17). Fox also reminds us that the book should not just be read, but the reader and child should interact; ‘talking back’ to one another encourages children to participate actively even when they can’t yet talk (Fox, 2001, p. 18; Walter, 2004, p. 49). To illustrate the helpfulness of ‘talking back’, Fox (2001) wrote

A friend of mine with an eleven-month-old son has picture books lying around the house for him to look at alone anytime, as well as treasured autographed hard-cover copies that she keeps out of reach. When she says, “Ryan, shall we get down the special books? he’s beside himself with anticipation. He almost trembles because he knows that when the special books come down, he and his mother will read them together, and he’ll have his

mother’s full attention as they talk about this and that in the stories they’re reading (pp.18-19).

Before describing when and how to read aloud in Chapter Five (*Keep It Regular*) and Chapter Six (*And Do It Like This*), Chapter Four, *The Power*, discusses the ‘power’ of reading aloud. By sharing experiences teaching professionals have had with reading aloud, Fox illustrates how schools can help promote literacy especially for children who have not been read to at home.

For those children who are fortunate enough to have parents that are able to read aloud to them, Fox suggests that the earlier reading aloud begins, the more beneficial it will be for the child (Fox, 2001, p. 31). Besides reading frequently, it is recommended that reading should be a routine, which is done at approximately the same time every day and in an atmosphere that is comfortable (Fox 2001; Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 54). By creating a secure environment that is conducive to listening, students will be better equipped to pay attention and thus get the most out of the experience (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 28).

Regarding how one should read aloud, Fox believes that reading should be done expressively through body movement, facial expressions, and voice (Fox, 2001, p. 40). According to Fox (2001), if children “love the sounds of the words, they’ll understand them better when they come to read them later. That’s another benefit of reading aloud: familiar words—words heard often previously—are always easier to read than unfamiliar words” (p. 47).

In the second half of the book, the author presents the linguistic aspect of reading aloud to children. Beginning with Chapter Seven, *Getting the Most Out of It*, Fox highlights what I feel would be the most valuable aspect of reading aloud for teachers of ESL/EFL to children. Because young language learners may not be able to read English, Fox’s suggestions in this section, about the importance of providing a language-rich oral and aural environment, are especially helpful (Fox, 2001, p. 62). Although Fox addresses concerns such as the use of contextualized reading as opposed to the use of

phonics to develop literacy skills, she still manages to meet the reader somewhere in the middle of this contentious issue. By discussing the use of both top-down and the bottom-up approaches, this book will most likely appeal to those advocating an interactive approach to ESL/EFL reading who say “reading [can be] seen as bidirectional in nature, involving the application of higher order mental processes and background knowledge as well as features of the text itself” (Hudson, 2007, p. 34).

Even though this book addresses both approaches to reading, Fox seemingly sides with the top-down approach when it comes to developing literacy skills; however, she is not completely closed to the idea of phonics. When discussing the bottom-up approach, she shares similar views to Scott and Ytreberg, believing that it should be used sparingly and in association with reading (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 51; Fox, 2001, p. 63). Because the bottom-up approach consists of building “meaning in a linear manner...that proceeds in a fixed order” (Hudson, 2007, pp. 33 - 34), Fox favors the use of contextualized reading. By using what she refers to as the “back-to-front-to-start” method, this book describes to the reader how she believes reading should be taught. Beginning with full stories and not with single letters or words, the teaching of reading should eventually “advance again to individual letters and their sounds,” but should never start with phonics (Fox, 2001, p. 62; Walter, 2004, p. 48). In addition to the use of whole language strategies, the author discusses the significance of using books that are well illustrated. In fact, she would probably agree with the sentiment that the illustrations are as important as the words in books that are read to young children (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990, p. 53; Fox, 2001, p. 58).

In Chapter Eight, *The First Secret of Reading: The Magic of Print*, Chapter Nine, *The Second Secret of Reading: The Magic of Language*, and Chapter Ten, *The Third Secret of Reading: The Magic of General Knowledge*, the book informs parents and teachers that there is more to reading than just having a child sound out written words on a page of a book (Fox, 2001, 75; see also Walter, 2004).

Fox vehemently believes that reading goes beyond the pronunciation of words. She describes reading as “complex,” adding that actual reading requires decoding and assigning meaning to print (Fox, 2001, p. 75; Walter, 2004, p. 46). Fox suggests exposing children to as much print as possible will help them become familiar with the way letters, words and phrases sound (2001, p. 77).

For teachers of young children who are also English language learners, in addition to assisting children in recognizing print, it is necessary to help them learn the characteristics of the English language, including punctuation, sentence and paragraph structures, and so forth (Fox, 2001, p. 84). Fox includes suggestions for these teachers in Chapter Nine, *The Second Secret of Reading: The Magic of Language*, including using songs and rhymes to help students learn the rhythmic pattern of the English language (Fox, 2001, pp. 24-25). According to Fox, “rhymers will be readers: it’s that simple” (2001, p. 85). She further provides information from literacy experts who say that children who know a minimum of eight nursery rhymes by the age of four have been known to be above average readers by the age of eight (Fox, 2001, p. 85).

The third and final ‘secret of reading’ according to Fox is explained in Chapter Ten, *The Third Secret of Reading: The Magic of General Knowledge*. This element of reading requires the reader to have “background knowledge, experience and understanding” (Walter, 2004, p. 48). Fox’s idea of using schema is not stated explicitly, but is clearly understood as a supported theory that is recognized in the field of literacy development (Hudson, 2007, p. 47; Richard-Amato, 2003, p. 248). Because applying previous notions to new information can either “help or hinder understanding,” in many cases, it is necessary to guide language learners through this process (Richard-Amato, 2003, p. 248). For that purpose, parents and teachers should help language learners connect old knowledge with new knowledge in an effort to avoid the possibility for a reader to be able to “understand the language—yet not be reading” (Fox, 2001, p. 97). Fox explains that some ‘readers’ have the ability to

pronounce printed words, but are unsuccessful comprehending what is being read (Fox, 2001, pp. 99-100).

One of the most interesting points Fox makes in Chapter Ten addresses reading assessment. She feels that reading aloud for children should not be used as a measure of their literacy abilities; when a child reads aloud in a class or in front of a parent, it does not permit the interaction that is necessary for comprehension (Fox, 2001, p. 103). This agrees with Scott and Ytreberg, who stated that having students read aloud as an assessment technique “is a very inefficient way to use your lesson time” in an educational setting (1990, p. 57).

Fox nicely ties all three ‘secrets’ together in Chapter Eleven, *What Happens When the Three Secrets of Reading Come Together*, by including suggestions for readers who may be having problems getting their child to read. Fox recommends using books to play games with the child. Additionally, it may be helpful if the child learns how to skim in order to speed up the rate at which they read. Furthermore, it may be beneficial if the adult reads to the child the pages that were difficult instead of having them read aloud.

Chapter Twelve, “*Book! Book! Book!*” is helpful for parents and teachers in that it answers questions about which types of books are best for specific age groups, for example e.g. babies, toddlers, and younger children. Obviously, Fox advocates owning as many books as possible and visiting the library as often as possible. She refers to ‘good books’ as being ones which “children can read them over and over again, thereby gaining all the benefits of the repetition of the stories” (Fox, 2001, p. 123). Other notable qualities of a ‘good book’ typically involve a plot, which revolves around some type of trouble—“problems arising from the things that really matter to us” (Fox, 2001, p. 130). Another genre of books that helps develop well-rounded literacy skills are fairy stories and tales. Because fairy tales rely on the mental imagery of the children and use few pictures to help tell the story, the child is required to pay attention and anticipate the story’s plot (Fox, 2001, p.

134). Although Fox takes the time to discuss varieties of books for children, it would be even more beneficial for the reader if she had included the comprehensive list of recommended books that can be found on her website at www.memfox.net.

In Chapter thirteen, *Television: The Good the Bad, and the Ugly*, Fox makes an interesting point about television by comparing it to reading. Although she is a literacy advocate, Fox in no way denies why children might be drawn to television over books. Surprisingly, Fox validates her view of watching ‘good television’ by stating that “hundreds of unknown worlds and different experiences are revealed to [children]” who are learning how to read (p. 140). Since Fox does not clarify what she means by ‘good television’, I am hesitant to promote this as an ideal method for developing literacy skills in an ESL/EFL reading environment. Despite this, she clearly and sensibly states that children are attracted to experiences that are enjoyable, exciting and stress-free. Often times, children who are not being read to, who are not reading in a situation that is ideal, or who lack a comfortable environment will be less likely to see the enjoyment of reading. For that reason, they may turn to the television instead of to books. Fox writes that it is the job of parents and teachers to make reading as exciting and relaxing as watching television (Fox, 2001, p. 143).

In Chapter fourteen, *Troubleshooting*, the book offers more recommendations for addressing reading problems for school-aged children. Fox explains that there are many reasons why a child may not be making progress. Most importantly, she says that poor progress is typically not the child’s fault. I think this a very important point for parents and teachers to be aware of; the situation needs to be evaluated on a whole before placing blame on the child. According to Fox, the problem may be caused by the relationship between the teacher and student or even the teacher and book (Fox, 2001, pp. 145-146).

In the last chapter of the book, Chapter fifteen, *The Proof*, Fox recounts a story from a parent who began reading aloud to

her child from birth. This brief story demonstrates how reading aloud really does work. Additionally, this last chapter leaves the reader feeling empowered and confident about having the ability to one day help develop reading skills for children in their lives.

In all, Fox, as an authority on literacy, does an excellent job educating the reader about how literacy skills are acquired without using complicated jargon. Through her experiences, personal stories, and expert advice, the reader can easily go away with enough general knowledge of how to go about reading aloud for personal or professional situations. However, it should be kept in mind that this is a book geared to-

ward the general audience (e.g., parents and teachers), and as such may not be suitable for an academic audience. The book does not provide careful documentation of information that might interest an academically minded reader. Despite this small limitation, I feel that this book can still be used very effectively in an academic setting to supplement a university-level literacy course or a course related to this topic. Importantly, *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever* will not only enlighten, but will inspire the reader to learn more about the benefits of reading aloud to children.

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