

Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Reading: The three S's

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A great deal of emphasis has been placed upon the need to involve parents more fully in the process of teaching reading. In addition to the strong evidence that parental involvement can make a significant difference to children's achievements in reading and can bring about positive changes to children's and parent's attitudes to reading (Topping & Wolfendale, 1985), it has also, quite rightly, been argued that a school which fails to take its parents along with it in the process of implementing innovative teaching procedures in reading risks significant problems in this implementation (Bloom, Martin & Waters, 1988). The force of these arguments has led many schools to institute parental involvement programmes in reading, many of which have included some significant education of parents concerning the reading process and strategies for developing and encouraging reading with their children. One of the positive developments arising from this has been the lessening of the professional mystique surrounding the teaching of reading. It is now much less common for parents to receive from their children's schools the message that teaching reading is too complicated for their efforts to have much effect – in other words, "leave it to the professionals".

Indeed, so demystified is the process of teaching reading, with countless pamphlets, brochures and books now produced to help parents do it, that it is possible that a certain counter-productivity has begun to emerge. After all, it is possible to argue, if parents can, by following simple guidelines, teach their children to read, what is special about teachers? It is the purpose of the present article to begin to explore what might be established as professional knowledge about teaching reading: that is, knowledge which we would not necessarily expect even the most informed parent to have, but which teachers, as fully equipped professionals, need to have. This knowledge is classified under three headings: structure, support and strategies – the three S's.

Structure

Innovative approaches to the teaching of reading, exemplified by the so-called "real books" approach, have often been caricatured as being unstructured. It

may indeed be true that, on the occasions when these approaches have been introduced into schools for reasons more to do with fashion than a clearly understood and coherent philosophy, the removal of previous structuring principles has taken priority over coming to terms with new ones. But, in general, the charge of lack of structure has stemmed from a misunderstanding of the nature of such structure and the fact that there are different ways of providing it in teaching reading.

So what does structure mean? There are at least three distinct ways of thinking about structure in terms of introducing children to reading – each with its own distinctive teaching procedures.

Structuring the introduction of print features

It is possible to structure the introduction to children of the significant features of print and advocates of a 'phonics first' approach to teaching reading take this line. Their argument usually involves a claim that there are some sound-symbol correspondences which are 'simpler' than others and these should be taught first. More difficult correspondences, and exceptions to basic phonic rules, should be left until children have mastered the simple rules. In practice this usually means that children will be introduced to single consonant sounds (*t, d, p* etc.) and short vowel sounds (*a* as in *cat*, *e* as in *pen* etc.) early in the teaching programme, with consonant blends (*pr, st, bl*) and digraphs (*sh, ch, ph*), and long vowel sounds (e.g. magic *e*) being left until later.

If learning to read were simply about learning to pronounce printed symbols, this approach could be seen to have some logic to it. It seems like common sense to suggest that children be taught simpler things before more difficult things, although in the case of phonic combinations it is not always obvious how decisions are made about simplicity and difficulty. Why are short vowels supposed to be easier than long vowels? Many children arrive at school more familiar with the long vowel sounds because they have been taught letter names at home, perhaps using the ubiquitous alphabet books.

The problem with this approach to structure is that reading is about much more than pronouncing symbols. It is a process of deriving meaning from these symbols and it would seem rather odd for this fact not to be made apparent to children early on in their encounters with these symbols. Two difficulties arise from this. One is the tendency for meaningful combinations of printed symbols to include sequences (words) which are not simple in the way this is conceived in a phonic-led approach. Words such as *the, of, was, is* etc. are the glue which holds meaningful sequences of words together. It has been claimed that these, and eight other words like them, make up a quarter of the total words in print (McNally & Murray, 1968) and it is quite difficult to think of meaningful sentences which do not contain one or other of them. Even the most rigidly structured phonics-based texts tend to be forced to include these words, e.g. "The big pig can dig in a wig." (It should be noticed also in this sentence that an apparently 'simple' letter, *a*, is in fact pronounced two ways – as its standard short vowel sound in *can*, and as an 'uh' sound in the word *a*.)

The second difficulty arising is that there is a severe risk that children who undergo approaches to teaching in which phonic structure is stressed above all else will become convinced that pronouncing words is all there is to reading. It has been well documented that many young children, especially those who find reading difficult, concentrate all their efforts on 'sounding out' words because that is what they believe reading is about (Johns, 1986; Medwell, 1990). In order to ensure that children are allowed to develop more rounded ideas about reading it seems logical to suggest that meaning should receive equal stress from the very beginning. It is difficult to see how an approach which tightly structures the introduction of phonic combinations might achieve this.

Structuring the materials the child reads from

A second approach to structure is that exemplified by many reading schemes, which involves deliberately sequencing the materials provided for children to read. Typically a reading scheme will begin with 'simple' sentences such as "Jack and Jill went to the shops" and only later introduce more involved sentence structures. Sometimes (although this is less common in modern reading schemes) the scheme will adopt a deliberate policy of systematically introducing particular words which will then be frequently repeated, and tested, to make sure the child knows them.

Again there is a deceptively obvious logic to this approach. It seems to make sense to provide children with text which is 'easy to read' in the early stages and to gradually increase the difficulty as they become more competent and practised. There is some

support for this argument from studies of children's spoken language development, which indicate that there are some sentence structures which children do not become fully competent at using until a relatively late stage. Crystal (1976) focuses particularly upon the late development of an extensive range of sentence connectives (beyond the familiar 'and then . . . ' pattern). Reid (1970) has shown that seven year old children have problems interpreting several grammatical structures in their reading and suggests that this might be because these structures are not yet an established part of their spoken language.

The approach does raise problems, however, and these are twofold. Firstly, for all that it is possible that some sentence structures might be classed as easier than others, this can never be done infallibly. When we class sentences as 'easy' what we tend to mean is 'easy to understand' and, as this suggests, grammatical complexity is only part of the judgement. For example, you might try to select the easiest of the following two extracts.

One is, and then one is not. That is man's problem.

The princess, beautiful and kind as ever, planted a tiny kiss on the frog's head.

Most people will agree that the second is much easier in spite of the fact that, grammatically, its use of an adjectival phrase makes it more complex than the first. In reading it, however, we are able to bring to bear a great deal of background knowledge and interpretation. Our understanding of the sentence structure is only part of the process we go through in reading.

This means that structuring texts according to their difficulty is fraught with problems. Nobody can predict with safety exactly which types of structure individual children will find more difficult than other types, nor the extent to which each reader will possess the background knowledge, of the world as well as of language, which will enable understanding. This difficulty leads us on to the second problem with this approach to structure, which is that in concentrating attention on the texts we provide for children to read we are in danger of forgetting that reading is an interaction between reader and text. Meaning does not reside in the words on a page but rather in what a reader makes of these words. An approach to teaching which structures the texts for reading works only on one side of the equation.

Structuring the support given to the child in reading

An alternative approach to structure is that advocated in apprenticeship approaches to reading (Waterland, 1985; 1989). In these approaches a child attempting to read a text is given progressively lessening levels of

support by the teacher until he/she is able to read it entirely unaided. Such shared reading might begin with the teacher doing all the reading him/herself with the child listening and this may happen once or several times. Eventually the child will begin to follow the read text with more confidence and begin to join in with the teacher's reading, even predicting or identifying some of the text without help. The process continues with the child gradually taking over the reading more and more until it is done without prompting from the teacher. Naturally some children, with some texts, will go through this process very quickly and some will take much longer, perhaps reading a book four, five or even more times. The structure given to the child will depend upon that individual's needs.

This approach to structure is rooted very firmly in a powerful theory of learning, as advanced initially by

the Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978), which recognises the social nature of most learning. Vygotsky's work claims there are two levels of mental activity: that which operates at an entirely individual level and that, typically much more advanced, which operates during cooperative activity. The gap between these levels, the famous 'zone of proximal development', is the area in which apprenticeship approaches to reading operate. During the initial stages of shared reading the child is being enabled to read a text with the help of a more experienced reader – a text which he/she could not manage alone. As the need for this help decreases, the child begins to move to the individual level of cognitive functioning in the task of reading that text. The teacher's thus structures the child's move across the zone of proximal development. In Vygotsky's words "What a child can do with assistance today, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow" (p. 87).



Perhaps the major advantage of this approach to structure is that it makes no distorting demands upon the nature of the texts with which children can learn to read. Because it is not based upon any notion of text difficulty, the criteria for text selection can be simply interest and 'child-appeal'. In an environment in which there are so many excellent picture books being written for young children, this approach to structure allows this superb resource to be placed firmly at the centre of young children's first encounters with print.

Support

The second 'S' follows neatly from the previous section and stands for the support which all learners need as they learn complex processes such as reading. An apprenticeship approach works by structuring this support in a way which concentrates upon children learning to read by actually reading. It is important that this holistic approach is maintained.

A good parallel, to make this point clear, is to consider what might be involved in teaching someone to ride a bicycle. One way of doing this might be to break down the skills involved in riding and teach these systematically before actually putting the learner on the bicycle. Thus, you could isolate skill areas such as pedal-turning, handlebar-steering and balancing on two wheels. The learner could be taught to turn pedals, then, when this had been mastered, to steer the handlebars, and then finally to balance on two wheels. When all these had been achieved he/she could then be placed on a bicycle and asked to ride.

The problem with this approach would be that it could only result in the learner falling off the bicycle! This would happen because the skill areas identified above are not, in fact, the most important features of riding a bicycle. What a rider has to do is operate all these skills simultaneously, with the operation of each one dependent upon the rest. Steering and balancing, for example, have to be done at the same time and adjustments to the one made according to the dictates of the other. What learners have to do is to learn the complete act of riding a bicycle, which is much greater than the sum of its constituent skills.

The approach which is actually used to teach someone to ride a bicycle in fact recognises this. It usually involves putting the learner on the bicycle and encouraging him/her to begin riding while giving adequate support (by holding the saddle) to ensure disasters are avoided. In this way the learner practises the complete act of riding but is given sufficient support to enable success.

An equivalent approach can be adopted in teaching reading since, like bicycle riding, the skills which make up the act of reading only ever operate in conjunction. Support in reading, as described in the previous section of this article, is the equivalent of holding the saddle when a child rides a bicycle, firm at first, then gradually less and less until, almost without the child realising it, support is withdrawn and the child reads alone.

Strategies

The third 'S', perhaps the most 'professional' of them all, refers to strategies. Reading successfully demands the orchestrated use of a range of strategies and teachers need to know how these strategies operate in the successful reader and how to develop them in those not so successful. This knowledge depends firstly upon understanding what the strategies are, and there appear to be four major kinds of strategies to consider. These are the use of:

Grapho-phonics cues

An important part of reading is the use of the details of the actual print on the page. Although prediction and anticipation are important activities in fluent reading, evidence suggests that successful readers actually pay a great deal of attention to letters, words and their associated sound equivalents (Rayner & Pollatsek, 1989). They tend to fixate (look at) the majority of words in a text and identify these on the basis of a combination of instant whole-word recognition and parallel processing of the letters in the word.

Syntactic cues

Readers are also aware of the 'flow' of language, that is, the way in which combinations of words work together to produce meaning. There is good evidence that an awareness of grammatical appropriateness begins to emerge at a fairly early stage in young children's development. The work of Clay (1969) and Weber (1970) suggests that young children tend to substitute words of the same part of speech when they make mistakes in oral reading. This awareness is carried on by fluent readers who, it has been shown by Kolers (1973) and others, tend to preserve the grammar of sections of text in which they make word-recognition errors.

Semantic cues

Fluent reading also involves the perception of meaning. Indeed, it is arguable that the phrase 'reading for meaning' is tautologous – after all, why else would you read? As we read we process meaning in such a way as to make it unnecessary to remember details of the individual words in a text. This processing of meaning involves coming to terms with the information in the text in the light of what we already know, and feel, about its subject. This process has been described as an interaction with text (Rumelhart, 1985) and it is based upon the treatment of meaning.

Pragmatic cues

Reading also relies upon knowledge which is wider than the text itself. This knowledge can be called pragmatic in the sense that it involves knowledge about the particular demands and features of different forms of communication. Fluent readers do not expect to read a poem in the same way as a train timetable and neither of these in the same way as a newspaper. Sensitivity to these features is required if readers are to participate adequately in the various forms of discourse which reading involves.

Given this range of strategies it is fairly clear that, as teachers of reading, we need to make sure that children develop expertise in applying all of these to the task of reading. To concentrate upon one set of strategies at the expense of the others would be to deprive children of a full picture of what reading involves. This suggests that the search for 'simple' answers to the problem of teaching reading is doomed to disappointment. 'Simple' approaches which have been suggested range from that of 'put children in a room full of wonderful books and they will learn to read' to that of 'teach children to recognise and pronounce letters and they will thereby learn to read'. Reading is much more complex than this so neither of these 'solutions' are likely to be successful.

Conclusion

The kind of knowledge about reading which has been outlined in this brief article, especially in the latter section, is knowledge which teachers need to have at their professional fingertips. An extensive knowledge of the reading process is essential, not only so that teachers can offer sensible guidance to non-professionals such as parents who may wish to help in the teaching process, but also so that teachers may resist the uninformed 'fads and fancies' which are put forward as solutions to the reading problem. The key point, and a suitable conclusion to this article, is that reading is a complex process and therefore requires complex, professional knowledge in those whose responsibility it is to teach it.

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