Teaching literacy: the foundations of good practice

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A literacy teaching revolution

September 1998 will be remembered as a significant turning point in the educational history of England and Wales. The National Literacy Strategy officially began operations and primary teachers now have been given strong (if not quite yet compulsory) guidelines not merely on what they should teach in literacy but on the ways they should go about teaching it. This is a radical departure even from the highly centralised approach of the previous government, who instituted a national curriculum but stopped short of a national pedagogy.

Two major reasons have been advanced for this initiative:
1. that literacy teaching and, more particularly, pupils' literacy achievements are in a state of crisis,
2. that there is a wealth of evidence now available from research into the teaching of literacy to enable confident statements to be made about the kind of literacy teaching which works best.

As with all such issues, of course, there is an alternative way of viewing each of these claims. Although the 'long tail of underachievement' (Brooks, Pugh and Schagen, 1996) suggested by pupils' scores on standardised tests of reading appears now to be a common feature in surveys of literacy standards, several commentators and researchers have pointed to other evidence which suggests that the rumoured calamitous fall in literacy standards is either not true, or has since been retrieved (Brooks, Schagen and Nastat, 1997; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998; Dombey, 1998). The crisis may not be real, which nevertheless does not preclude a government taking strenuous steps to improve literacy standards.

To be fair, the present government have been much less prone to falling back on the 'crisis' argument than their predecessors - mutterings about teacher inadequacy have been largely, and perhaps cleverly, left to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools. Instead they have tended to place more weight on the second of the two points listed above - the argument that we now know with some certainty what effective literacy teaching looks like. "The National Literacy Project has developed a detailed framework for teaching reading and writing based on the evidence of inspection and research" (Literacy Task Force, 1997, p.17). This is often followed by the very positive statement that it would be negligent not to ensure that all teachers were informed of, and trained in, teaching approaches which have been demonstrated as effective by research (e.g. Barber, M., 1998).

This claim that an evidence-based approach to literacy teaching underpins the Literacy Strategy is obviously one that needs some scrutiny. A full and critical account of just what this evidence consists of is urgently needed. There have been, as far as I am aware, only two attempts so far to approach this, neither of them comprehensive and both, for reasons beyond the control of their authors, inadequate to the task. Henrietta Dombey (1998) covers a great deal of the relevant ground in a very critical way in her analysis of what she terms as 'a totalitarian approach to literacy education', but the nature of her paper precludes a detailed treatment of many of the insights to be gleaned from research into literacy teaching. David Reynolds (1998) unsurprisingly, as an international expert in the school effectiveness field (and as an academic closely implicated in the drawing up of the Literacy Strategy), makes an attempt to review the literature on generic teaching effectiveness and to use it to support the approved pedagogy of the Strategy, yet fails to pull out the specific relevance of this literature to the teaching of literacy. It has recently emerged (September, 1998) that a prominent educationalist (Roger Beard, of the University of Leeds) has been commissioned to produce a review of the research evidence underpinning the Strategy. External observers of the current literacy teaching situation in this country might be forgiven, however, for concluding that a Strategy which requires such post hoc justification cannot really make the claim that it was founded on solid evidence.

Yet, one should not be too negative about this. A review (admittedly still not comprehensive) of extant research into effective literacy teaching can provide some support for aspects of the Literacy Strategy. It can also, however, highlight some areas of concern in what is currently being attempted. In this article I shall, as briefly as I can, explore some of the major issues under both of these headings. I shall begin, perhaps unfashionably these days, by looking at the other side of the teaching coin - what we know about learning. I will then go on to discuss the implications of this analysis for literacy teaching and examine how this maps onto the teaching implied by the Literacy Strategy. I will then look at some of the key teaching practices of the Strategy and discuss their foundation in research evidence.

Insights into learning

Four basic insights into the nature of the learning process have come from research over the past decade or so. Each of these has important implications for approaches to teaching.

(i) Learning is a process of interaction between what is known and what is to be learnt.

It has become quite clear that, in order to do any real learning, we have to draw upon knowledge we already have about a subject. The more we know about the subject, the more likely it is that we shall learn any given piece of knowledge. Learning which does not make connections with our prior knowledge is learning at the level of rote only, and is soon forgotten once deliberate attempts to remember it have stopped.

Learning has been defined as "the expansion and modification of existing ways of conceiving the world in the light of alternative ways" (Wray & Medwell, 1991, p. 9). Such

a constructivist approach to learning places great emphasis upon the ways in which prior knowledge is structured in the learner's mind and in which it is activated during learning. Theories about this, generally known as schema theories as they hypothesise that knowledge is stored in our minds in patterned ways (schema) (Rumelhart, 1980), suggest that learning depends, firstly, upon the requisite prior knowledge being in the mind of the learner and, secondly, upon it being brought to the forefront of the learner's mind.

(ii) Learning is a social process.

Ideas about learning have progressed significantly away from Piaget's purely 'lone scientist' view of learners as acting upon their environments, observing the results and then, through reflection, modifying or fine-tuning their schema concerning these environments. Modern learning theory gives much greater recognition to the importance of social interaction and support and posits a view of the learner as a social constructor of knowledge. In collaboration with others, learners establish:

- shared consciousness: - a group working together can construct knowledge to a higher level than can the individuals in that group each working separately. The knowledge rests upon the group interaction.
- borrowed consciousness: - individuals working alongside more knowledgeable others can 'borrow' their understanding of tasks and ideas to enable them to work successfully. Vygotsky has termed the gap between what a learner can do in collaboration with others and what he/she can do alone, the "Zone of Proximal Development" and suggests that all learning in fact occurs twice in the learner: once on the social plane and once on the individual.

(iii) Learning is a situated process.

We learn everything in a context. That is not controversial. But modern learning theorists also suggest that what we learn is the context as much as any skills and processes which we use within that context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Psychologists have sought in vain for 'generalisable skills' and all teachers are familiar with the problem of transfer of learning. Why is it that a child who spells ten words correctly in a spelling test, is likely to spell several of these wrongly when writing a story a short while afterwards? The answer is simply that the learning of the spelling is so inextricably bound up with the context of learning that it cannot easily be applied outside of this context.

(iv) Learning is a metacognitive process

A good deal of interest has been aroused by the notion that the most effective learners are those who have a degree of awareness about their own levels of understanding of what they are learning. The term metacognition is used to refer to the deliberate conscious control of one’s own cognitive actions (Brown, 1980). Numerous research studies have examined the operation of metacognition in the reading of children and adults, that is, how successful readers are at monitoring their own comprehension. Overall, there has been a remarkable

consistency in the findings of these studies and the two most replicated results have been that:

a) ‘younger and poorer readers have little awareness that they must attempt to make sense of text; they focus on reading as a decoding process, rather than as a meaning-getting process’ (Baker & Brown, 1984, p.358)
b) ‘younger children and poorer readers are unlikely to demonstrate that they notice major blocks to text understanding. They seem not to realise when they do not understand’ (Garner & Reis, 1981, p.571).

Arising from such work there has been a strong suggestion that learning can be improved by increasing learners' awareness of their own mental processes.

Principles for teaching

Some clear principles for teaching emerge from these insights.

- We need to ensure that learners have sufficient previous knowledge/understanding to enable them to learn new things, and to help them make explicit these links between what they already know and what they are learning.
- We need to make provision for group interaction and discussion as teaching strategies, both in small, teacher-less groups and in groups working alongside experts.
- We need to ensure meaningful contexts for learning, particularly in basic literacy skills. This implies some kind of negotiation of the curriculum for learning. What is a meaningful context for teachers cannot be assumed automatically to be a meaningful context for learners.
- We need to promote learner's knowledge and awareness of their own thinking and learning. This might be done by, for example, encouraging them to think aloud as they perform particular cognitive tasks.

Towards a model for teaching.

Palincsar & Brown (1984) have describe a teaching procedure which begins from the principles just outlined and which is based upon the twin ideas of 'expert scaffolding' and what they refer to as 'proleptic' teaching: that is, teaching in anticipation of competence. This model arises from the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), who put forward the notion that children first experience a particular cognitive activity in collaboration with expert practitioners. The child is firstly a spectator as the majority of the cognitive work is done by the expert (parent or teacher), then a novice as he/she starts to take over some of the work under the close supervision of the expert. As the child grows in experience and capability of performing the task, the expert passes over greater and greater responsibility but still acts as a guide, assisting the child at problematic points. Eventually, the child assumes full responsibility for the task with the expert still present in the role of a supportive audience. Using this approach to teaching, children learn about the task at their own pace, joining in only at a level at which they are capable - or perhaps a little beyond this level so that the task continually provides sufficient challenge to be interesting. The approach is often

referred to as an apprenticeship approach and most primary teachers will be familiar with its operation in the teaching of reading (Waterland, 1985). In the apprenticeship approach to reading, the teacher and child begin by sharing a book together with, at first, most of the actual reading being done by the teacher. As the child develops confidence through repeated sharings of the book, he/she gradually takes over the reading until the teacher can withdraw entirely.

There appear to be four stages to the teaching process implied by the model:

(i) Demonstration

During this stage, the expert models the skilful behaviour being taught. There is some evidence that learning can be assisted if this modelling is accompanied by a commentary by the expert, thinking aloud about the activities being undertaken (e.g. Tonjes, 1988). One relatively simple procedure is that of the teacher modelling how he/she tackles the skills he/she is teaching, that is, reading or writing in such a way that the learners have access to the thought processes which accompany these activities. Shared reading and writing fit perfectly into this stage of teaching.

(ii) Joint activity

The expert and the learner share the activity. This may begin by the expert retaining responsibility for the difficult parts while the learner takes on the easy parts, while in some teaching strategies prior agreement is reached that participants will take turns at carrying out sections of the activity. The expert is always on hand to take full control if necessary. One of the best examples of this joint activity is that known as 'paired reading' (Morgan, 1986) in which the teacher (or parent) and the learner read aloud in unison until the learner signals that he/she is ready to go it alone. The teacher withdraws from the reading but is ready to rejoin if the learner shows signs of difficulty such as prolonged pausing or reading errors. Guided reading fits well into this stage as, although children do operate independently as part of this activity, they are also given plenty of support by working alongside the teacher.

(iii) Supported activity

The learner undertakes the activity alone, but under the watchful eye of the expert who is always ready to step in if necessary. In our work on the reading and writing of non-fiction (Wray & Lewis, 1997) we have found that this is the stage in the process which is most often neglected and teachers tend to move too rapidly from heavily supporting the children's work to asking them to work without support. Consequently, this is the stage at which most of our practical teaching strategies, such as writing frames, were aimed. Such scaffolding strategies play a key role in the teaching approaches implied in the Literacy Strategy.

(iv) Individual activity

The learner assumes sole responsibility for the activity. Some learners will, of course, move much more rapidly to this stage than others and the teacher needs to be sensitive to this. It is, arguably, equally as damaging to hold back learners by insisting they go through the same programme of support and practice as everyone else as it is to rush learners through such a programme when they need a more extensive programme of support.

Teaching in the Literacy Strategy

From the above analysis, it seems that there is some justification for several of the teaching approaches implicit within the Literacy Strategy. Shared and guided reading and writing, in particular, can readily be seen to have support from research into the nature of effective learning and teaching in literacy. They are contextualised teaching activities - they begin with a text and derive the teaching of levels of literacy knowledge (phonic knowledge, spelling, use of grammar, punctuation) from within the context of this text. They build upon children's previous knowledge as particular texts are returned to several times with different focus points. They incorporate opportunities for teachers actively to demonstrate literate behaviour and the thinking that underpins it. They promote children's awareness of their own literacy and thinking as they are encouraged to talk explicitly about their reading and writing.

These key points about literacy teaching were also those we found to be characteristic of teachers identified as effective teachers of literacy (Medwell, Wray, Poulson and Fox, 1998), especially the contextualisation of literacy teaching. We found that effective teachers of literacy tended to teach phonics etc. through the context of a shared text and were at pains to help their pupils make connections between the levels of literacy knowledge, text, sentence and word. They thus tended to 'coerce learners to draw on more than one sub-system of language' in the way that Cambourne (1997) found was also true of classrooms where children were engaged in productive literacy learning.

The effective teachers in our study also tended to teach literacy in focused lessons which came fairly close in structure to the literacy hour model which has become strongly associated with the Literacy Strategy. They used a mixture of whole class, group and individual teaching; they opened their literacy lessons with periods of whole class work usually involving work on a shared text, they closed these lessons with periods when pupils' work was reviewed in a whole class session. There is some other research backing for the efficacy of this literacy hour structure (Sylva, 1997), although there is also some evidence to suggest that other organisational approaches (e.g. three 10-15 minute periods of literacy instruction spread through the day) might also be effective (Solity, 1998).

Word level work

The aspect of the Literacy Strategy which has generated the most controversy is also the aspect which is the least well grounded in research findings. Word level work ought ideally

to include attention to such aspects of language as vocabulary extension, word derivations, spelling, the morphemic structure of English words and so on. In reality, although there are references to all of these aspects in the Framework of teaching objectives and in the Strategy training materials, the major focus of word level work is the teaching of phonics.

There is, of course, substantial evidence available of the importance of developing children's awareness of the ways in which letters represent sounds in English (Adams, 1990). Yet the way in which the teaching of phonics is treated in the Literacy Strategy exhibits a clear tension between two distinct theories of how such phonemic awareness is learnt and taught.

There are references in the framework of teaching objectives and in the Strategy training materials to the key concepts of modern research and theorising in the teaching and learning of phonics - onset, rime and analogy. Yet the major emphasis in the teaching of initial phonics seems to be given to a phoneme-based approach. As Dombey (1998) points out, "the chief focus of attention is the spelling of individual phonemes and the chief means of instruction is the setting out of explicit rules and facts for children to learn" (p. 39). The view apparently taken in the Strategy is that children learn phonics incrementally, accumulating over time facts about letters and letter clusters. There are two problems with this approach.

Firstly, it does not fit well with our current understandings about the constructive nature of children's learning. It is rather more likely that children learn by actively constructing successive theories about how systems work. As Chomsky (1979) suggests, "Learning to read .... surely involves forming hypotheses about the relations (direct and indirect) of spelling to pronunciation, changing these hypotheses as new evidence is added, and eventually arriving at a system of interpretation that is in accord with the facts. This hypothesis construction is an active process, taking the child far beyond the 'rules' that can be offered by the best of patterned, programmed, or linguistic approaches" (p.49). Such active construction is most readily seen in the development of young children's writing, where, given the freedom to explore the ways words can be represented on paper, they tend to go through what have been termed the pre-phonetic, phonetic, transitional and correct stages of spelling knowledge (Beers and Henderson, 1977).

Secondly, the Strategy approach to phonics pays little heed to Adams' (1990) warning about the dangers of bottom-up teaching. "Finally none of these programs embodies the misguided hypothesis that reading skills are best developed from the bottom up. ..... In both fluent reading and its acquisition, the reader's knowledge must be aroused interactively and in parallel. Neither understanding nor learning can proceed hierarchically from the bottom up. Phonological awareness, letter recognition facility, familiarity with spelling patterns, spelling-sound relations, and individual words must be developed in concert with real reading and real writing and with deliberate refelction on the forms, functions and meanings of texts" (p. 422). Teaching approaches which do reflect this research-based recommendation include Marie Clay's Reading Recovery (Clay, 1979) and Irene Gaskin's Benchmark School programme (Gaskins et al, 1988), but these seem to have

had little influence on the approach laid down in the Literacy Strategy, which appears to follow precisely the bottom-up model which Adams criticises.

Conclusion

In many ways it is a pity that the phonics teaching element of the Literacy Strategy has received so much of the attention so far. As I hope I have begun to show in this brief review of the underpinnings of the initiative as a whole, overall there is much to commend in the approaches recommended, many of which do have a sound basis in research on literacy teaching and learning. Hopefully, as the Strategy 'beds down', teachers and schools will interpret and adapt its requirements. It is a major responsibility of those with access to relevant research information, and time to read it, to do their utmost to give research findings a significant role in this adaptation. I hope this short article has helped begin this process.

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