Teaching reading: lessons from the experts

David Wray, Jane Medwell, Richard Fox and Louise Poulson

How best to teach reading has been a subject of 'great debate' (Chall, 1967) for most of the post-war period. All sides in this debate have generally tried to back up their cases by using the findings of research into children's learning and the effects upon it of various teaching practices. Yet in all this extensive debate, one source of information has been comparatively neglected: the approaches to the teaching of reading typically used by teachers who are known to be effective teachers of reading. A study of the teaching approaches used by teachers who are very successful in developing children's abilities to read might well turn up some important lessons about teaching approaches.

We recently carried out such a study as part of a wider research project commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency to examine the factors underpinning effective teachers of literacy. A full report of our research findings is available elsewhere (Medwell, Wray, Poulson & Fox, 1998) but in this article we will describe the approaches to the teaching of reading we found to be characteristic of teachers known to be effective at literacy teaching. It should be recognised that we have space here to report only a small part of the research findings of the project, with a consequent risk of these being taken out of context, but we hope that this limited account might be of interest to readers of this journal.

Effective teaching of reading – research insights

There have been numerous previous attempts to establish the nature of effective teaching of reading. Most of these have begun by analysing the processes involved in reading and then argued from this analysis to put forward a model to guide instruction (for example, Chall, 1967; Flesch, 1955; Goodman & Goodman, 1979). The argument has been that effective teaching of reading is that which produces effective reading behaviour in learners. This sounds like an eminently sensible position but its main problem has been the difficulty researchers and teachers have found in agreeing on what exactly should count as effective reading behaviour. The major disagreement has centred around the relative importance given to lower level, technical skills such as word recognition and decoding or to higher order skills such as comprehension. Such lack of agreement has led to proponents of radically different approaches to the teaching of reading claiming superiority for their suggested programmes, but using very different criteria against which to judge the success of these programmes.

A good example of the difficulty caused by the use of such different criteria can be seen in the so-called "first-grade studies" carried out in the USA during the 1960s (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). These studies were designed to test the effectiveness of different approaches to the teaching of beginning reading. Most commentators now agree that there was no clear overall winner (Barr, 1984). An interesting divergence did emerge, however. It appeared that

children's reading of words (fluency and decoding) was improved by teaching programmes that specifically targeted decoding skills and knowledge of letter-sound consistencies in words. Their vocabulary knowledge and comprehension were, however, not improved to the same degree. In programmes centred on meaning, the reverse picture tended to be found: children's decoding and phonic knowledge were not improved whereas they tended to get better at comprehension.

Since the 1960s there has been a significant shift in the nature of the debate about reading teaching. Less attention has been given to the content of what is taught in reading lessons and rather more to the nature of the contexts in which reading is taught. The whole language approach, for example, emphasises language processes and the creation of learning environments in which children experience authentic reading and writing (Weaver, 1990). Whole language teachers stress that skills instruction should occur within the context of natural reading experiences rather than as decontextualised exercises. The development of literacy tends to be seen as a natural by-product of immersion in high quality literacy environments.

In contrast, other researchers and teachers argue that learning the code is a critical part of early reading and that children are most likely to become skilled in this when they are provided with systematic teaching in decoding (e.g., Chall, 1967). There is growing evidence that such teaching increases reading ability (Adams, 1990), especially for children who experience difficulties in learning to read (Mather, 1992; Pressley & Rankin, 1994).

Naturally this shift in the terms of the debate has led to a switch in the research agenda and there have been several studies comparing the effectiveness of teaching programmes using a whole language approach and programmes emphasising traditional decoding. The evidence is growing that teaching based on whole language principles (i.e. the use of whole texts, good literature and fully contextualised instruction) does stimulate children to engage in a greater range of literate activities, develop more positive attitudes toward reading and writing, and increase their understanding about the nature and purposes of reading and writing (e.g. Morrow, 1990, 1991, 1992; Neuman & Roskos, 1990, 1992). However, evidence has also emerged that, compared to teaching which emphasises decoding skills, whole language teaching programmes do not seem to have much of an effect on early reading achievement as measured by standardised tests of decoding, vocabulary and comprehension (Graham & Harris, 1994; Stahl, McKenna, & Pagnucco, 1994; Stahl & Miller, 1989). Teaching which explicitly focuses on phonemic awareness and letter-sound correspondences does, on the other hand, seem to result in improved performance on standardised tests (Adams, 1990). The picture emerging from research is, therefore, somewhat confused and we do not yet seem to have a completely satisfactory answer to the question, "What is the nature of effective teaching in reading?"

There is, however, one issue to explore which may, in fact, be the focal point around which apparently conflicting research findings may be synthesised. This concerns the near impossibility of finding, and thus testing, 'pure' approaches in teaching reading. Close examination of many studies which appear to support the explicit teaching of decoding and comprehension suggests that embedded in these programmes there are often many elements of

what could be described as whole language teaching, including, for example, the reading of high quality children's literature (Pressley et al., 1991, 1992). Similarly, when the programmes described by whole language advocates are examined closely, it is quite apparent that they do contain a good deal of systematic teaching of letter-sound correspondences, for example (cf. Holdaway, 1979). These teaching approaches, in fact, are tending to become more and more alike and commentators such as Adams (1991) have suggested that there is no need for a division between teaching approaches styled as whole language or explicit teaching in orientation. What has emerged in recent years is a realisation that explicit decoding and comprehension instruction are most effectively carried out in the context of other components.

Such rapprochement between previously contrasting positions brings a new hypothesis which suggests that the effective teaching of reading is multifaceted rather than based on one approach or another (e.g., Adams, 1990; Cazden, 1992; Duffy, 1991; Stahl et al., 1994). That is to say that effective teaching often integrates explicit letter- and word-level teaching with explicit instruction of comprehension processes and sets these within a context meaningful to the children.

This integrative view of effective teaching still, however, begs several questions about the precise features of such teaching. How do effective teachers of reading bring together their teaching of literacy skills and understandings? How do they ensure children understand the purposes and functions of reading and go beyond simple competence in particular skills to the appropriate use of those skills? What is the basis in terms of teaching skills upon which effective teachers build their practice? It was to pursue these questions further that we carried out the research reported in this article.

The design of the research

In this research, we compared the teaching practices of a group of teachers identified as effective at teaching reading with those of a group of teachers not so identified. We worked with two main groups: a group of 228 primary teachers identified as effective in the teaching of reading and a validation sample of 71 primary teachers not so identified. Both groups contained teachers of Key Stage 1 and 2 children.

The effective teachers were from among teachers recommended as effective by advisory staff in a number of LEAs and they were chosen on the basis of whether we could obtain evidence of above-average learning gains in reading for the children in their classes. We thus used both subjective and objective measures of teacher effectiveness.

Teachers in both these groups completed a questionnaire, part of which asked them about their use of a range of teaching techniques in reading. We then selected two sub-samples of 26 teachers from the group identified as effective reading teachers and 10 teachers from the validation group. The teachers in both these sub-samples were twice observed teaching and then interviewed about each of these teaching episodes. These observations/interviews focused on their teaching strategies and classroom organisation patterns.

Having elicited at the outset information about the learning outcomes of children in these teachers' classes, we used a range of sources of data to explore their teaching practice. The questionnaire was used to obtain information about the reading teaching activities which teachers reported having used during a normal school week. This self-report was checked against our observations of their classroom practice. The subsequent interviews allowed the teachers to describe their practices and offer reasons for their use.

The range of reading activities used

A section of the questionnaire aimed to generate a snapshot of the types of reading activities used by these teachers. A number of reading activities were listed and teachers asked to indicate which of these they had used during the previous week. The results showed that use of reading activities was, not surprisingly, related to the age of children taught. Whilst almost all the teachers read to their classes and heard children read, a greater proportion of teachers of infant classes reported that they had:
- taught letter sounds and names
- used flashcards
- used sequencing activities
- used big books
- involved other adults in the teaching of reading
- used reading scheme books
- used phonic exercises.

In the subsequent observations, KS1 teachers were observed using all of these activities with classes or groups of children, whereas few of these were observed in the KS2 classes. This suggests a clear age phase differentiation in choice of teaching activity.

There were some differences between the use of reading activities reported by the effective teachers and by the validation teachers. For example, among the KS1 teachers a greater proportion of the effective teachers reported using big books than did the validation teachers. Some complex inter-relationships also emerged when teachers' self reports and their actual practice were compared. For example, more teachers in the validation group (at both age phases) reported using phonics exercises and flashcards than did the effective teachers, although both groups were roughly similar in their reported use of teaching letter sounds. Observation of their lessons revealed a different pattern. The effective teachers we observed taught letter sounds much more often than the validation sample, but there were differences in the ways the two groups approached this teaching. The effective teachers were more likely to spend time looking at letter sounds in the context of reading a big book or a text written by the teacher and to do short, regular, modelling sounds activities. The validation teachers were more likely to use paper-based exercises about sounds.

We found in general that the effective teachers tended to report using activities which involved work at more than one of text, sentence and word levels. They were thus actively trying to help their pupils to make connections between these levels. The validation teachers, on the other

hand, were more likely to use activities involving work at only one of these levels, limiting the explicit connections their pupils were encouraged to make.

Task Presentation and Lesson Structure

The lessons of the effective teachers were characterised by a brisk pace of work. A single school session (approximately a quarter of a school day) usually contained two or more tasks. They were generally teaching a daily literacy hour, even if this was not always of the exact format recommended by the National Literacy Project.

The effective teachers acted in ways which refocused children's attention on the reading task at regular points in the session and made checks on their progress. This was not so frequently observed in the validation classes. The use of time in effective teachers' classes was closely monitored, with teachers setting time limits for particular tasks. It was notable that this behaviour was found not only in KS2 classes but also in reception classes, where the children were unlikely to have a well developed sense of time. We concluded that in this way the effective teachers were inducting their reception children into patterns of working which included focusing on a task and pushing themselves to complete it.

The beginnings and conclusions of sessions taught by the effective teachers had a number of distinct characteristics. In addition to clear focus and functional discussion, the effective teachers were observed using modelling extensively. They were observed to write dialogue, to skim and scan texts whilst describing their own thought processes, to write letters and collect words beginning with those letters, to demonstrate intonation in reading aloud, to sing nursery rhymes, emphasising rhyme, to select words from Breakthrough folders, to punctuate text and many other examples of modelling. These acts offered children insights into how reading tasks could be successfully carried out as well as what the aims of these tasks were.

Both the effective teachers of reading and the validation teachers used a wide range of questions. However, the effective teachers more frequently asked children how they accomplished tasks, what reading cues they used and to explain conclusions and comprehension decisions. For instance in Mrs J's lesson she asked:

Teacher: *"How do you know he doesn't mean it?"*
Child: *"It says so in the book."*
Teacher: *"What part? What tells you that?"*
Child: *"It says here. (points to the book) "...he said, laughing wickedly". It means that he says so, but he doesn't mean it. And he's like that, isn't he? I mean, from what sort of person he is. He isn't going to help really I don't think."*
Teacher: *"So you think that it's the way he laughs as he says it and what you know about him that tell you he doesn't mean it."*
Child: *"Yes."*
Teacher: *"He's lying then?"*

A teacher referring to a choice of word for a cloze passage asked:

Teacher: *"Why did you put in "tumbled" there then?"*
Child: *"Well, it fitted."*
Teacher: *"How did you know?"*
Child: *"I read the whole bit. To "...right by the shore line." and then went back and thought "a something down shack right by the shore line". It might be fallen. But it might be tumbled down, like in fairy stories. It's a bit like that."*
Teacher: *"So reading over the gap you found a word to fit in. Well done. I like it."*

These types of questions in whole class or group lessons were largely confined to the effective teachers and emphasise their concern for raising children's awareness of their own literacy use and comprehension. The use of these questions in whole class and group sessions led children into thinking about what they were reading at a very high level and offered them models of strategy use and comprehension. All the effective teachers we saw reading individually with children asked these types of question during individual reading interactions. Such questions are referred to in current learning theory as 'scaffolding' and act as supports which help children think at a higher level than they would be capable of if left entirely alone.

The lessons of the effective teachers of literacy were most likely to be concluded by review of the tasks accomplished or the teacher asking the children to present a report or extracts of their work. Such 'plenary' lesson conclusions are, of course, characteristic of the National Literacy Project literacy hour structure.

Classroom literacy environments

The notion of providing an optimum environment to support literacy activity in schools has been popular in recent years. During our classroom observations for this project, we made notes of the features, use and children's response to the literacy provision in the classes observed. Three main qualities characterised the literacy environments of the effective teachers: presence, function and use by children.

Although most of the classes contained evidence of efforts on the part of teachers to provide appropriate resources for literacy learning, there was clearly much more priority given to this in the effective teachers' classes. In addition, the effective teachers had made efforts to draw the children's attention to features and functions of literacy.

These classes featured resources such as alphabet friezes, word banks, displays of books at an appropriate age level, displays of books related to the topic under consideration, listening centres, reference books, reading scheme books, language master machines, word games and computers (although only one instance of computer use was seen). These resources were not always new and teachers clearly drew on a range of sources, including school resources, materials brought in by children, schools library services and a museum service.

The classes were labelled with the names of areas, drawers and containers, and instructions for looking up words, revising text, editing text, selecting books, changing library books, using

dictionaries, and using mnemonics. Work by pupils was displayed, usually, but not always, at child eye level.

Whilst many of these items are a normal part of the primary classroom at KS1 and 2 they were very much more in evidence in the classes of effective teachers than in the classes of validation teachers. However, the functions and use of these items also particularly distinguished the classes of the effective teachers.

Many more of the items in the effective teachers' classes had a clear function. For instance, posters instructing children about aspects of writing, posters and leaflets about using dictionaries or libraries, labels to assist children in finding resources, "flashes" with notices attracting attention to new materials or displays and suggestion boxes. These were in sharp contrast to the much less functional displays in the validation classes where it was more common to see displays of children's work used purely to decorate classroom walls with no obvious link to current reading and writing work being done in the class.

The effective teachers were regularly observed directing children's attention to the items around their classrooms and using them as a support strategy for particular groups of children undertaking tasks. Children were observed using instructions to perform reading tasks such as using "the five finger" test from a wall poster to select a reading book, using an index of the Dewey library system to select an information book, looking through a "mini-beasts" word-bank for a word to use in writing, and using a "language master" machine to check an unknown word. This may, of course, be a reflection of purely organisational strategies to allow primary aged readers a degree of independence. However, the effect was to necessitate children's reading and use of text to perform reading and writing tasks.

Conclusion

The major findings emerging from our research concerning the teaching practices of effective teachers of reading can be summarised as follows:

- There were some differences between the reading activities likely to be employed by the effective teachers and the teachers in the validation group. The effective teachers made more use of big books in their teaching; they were also more likely to use other adults to assist their classroom work. The validation teachers made more use of phonic exercises and flashcards, although both groups were similar in the extent to which they reported and were observed to teach letter sounds. The difference was in the ways they went about this. The effective teachers tended to teach letter sounds within the context of using a text (often a big book) and to use short, regular teaching sessions, often involving them modelling to the children how sounds worked (by, for example, writing examples of letter groups on a flip-chart). The validation teachers were much more likely to approach letter sound teaching through the use of paper exercises.

- The effective teachers were generally much more likely to embed their teaching of reading

into a wider context. They tended to use whole texts as the basis from which to teach skills such as vocabulary, word attack and recognition and use of text features. They were also very clear about their purposes for using such texts.

- The effective teachers of literacy, because of their concern to contextualise their teaching of language features within shared text experiences, made explicit connections for their pupils between the text, sentence and word levels of language study.

- The lessons of the effective teachers were all conducted at a brisk pace. They regularly refocused children's attention on the task at hand and used clear time frames to keep children on task. They also tended to conclude their lessons by reviewing, with the whole class, what the children had done during the lesson.

- The effective teachers used modelling extensively. They regularly demonstrated reading to their classes in a variety of ways, often accompanying these demonstrations by verbal explanations of what they were doing. In this way, they were able to make available to the children their thinking as they engaged in literacy.

- The classrooms of the effective teachers were distinguished by the heavy emphasis on literacy in the environments which had been created. There were many examples of literacy displayed in these classrooms, these examples were regularly brought to the children's attentions and the children were encouraged to use them to support their own literacy.

References

Adams, M. J. (1991) 'Why not phonics and whole language.' In Ellis, W. (ed.) *All Language and the Creation of Literacy*. Baltimore, MA: The Orton Dyslexia Society

Adams, M. J. (1990) *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Barr, R. (1984) 'Beginning reading instruction: from debate to reformation'. In David Pearson (ed) *Handbook of Reading Research*. New York: Longman.

Bond, G. & Dykstra, R. (1967) 'The co-operative research program in first-grade reading instruction' *Reading Research Quarterly* 2 (4), pp 1-142

Cazden, C, (1992) *Whole Language Plus: Essays on Literacy In The United States and New Zealand.* New York: Teachers' College Press

Chall, J. (1967) *Learning to Read: the Great Debate*. London: McGraw-Hill.

Duffy, G. (1991) 'What counts in teacher education? Dilemmas in educating empowered teachers'. In, J. Zutell and McCormack, S. (eds.) *Learner Factors / Teacher Factors: Issues In*

Literacy Research and Instruction: Fortieth Yearbook of The National Reading Conference. Chicago: NRC

Flesch, R. (1955) *Why Johnny Can't Read.* New York: Harper Row.

Goodman, K. and Goodman, Y. (1979) 'Learning to read is natural'. In Resnik, L. B. and Weaver, P. A. (eds.) *Theory and Practice of Early Reading*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Graham, S. and Harris, K. R. (1994) 'The effects of whole language on children's writing: a review of the literature'. *Educational Psychologist*. 29, pp. 187-192.

Holdaway, D. (1979) *The Foundations of Literacy*. Auckland: Ashton Scholastic.

Mather, N. (1992) 'Whole language reading instruction for students with learning abilities; caught in the crossfire'. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice.* 7, pp. 87-95

Medwell, J., Wray, D., Poulson, L. & Fox, R. (1998) *Effective Teachers of Literacy: a report of a research project commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency* Exeter: University of Exeter

Morrow, L. M. (1990) 'Preparing the classroom environment to promote literacy during play'. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. 5, pp. 537-554

Morrow, L. M. (1991) 'Relationships among physical design of play centres, teachers' emphasis on literacy play, and children's behaviours during play'. In Zutell, J. and McCormack, S. (eds.) *Learner Factors/Teacher Factors: Issues In Literacy Research and Instruction: Fortieth Yearbook of The National Reading Conference.* Chicago: NRC

Morrow, L. M. (1992) 'The impact of literature based programmes on literacy achievement, use of literature and attitudes of children from ethnic minority backgrounds'. *Reading Research Quarterly*. 27, pp. 251-275.

Neuman, S. B. and Roskos, K., (1990) 'The influence of literacy enriched play settings on pre-schoolers engagement with written language'. In J. Zutell and McCormack, S. (eds.) *Literacy Theory and Research: Analyses From Multiple Paradigms.* Chicago: NRC

Neuman, S. B. and Roskos, K., (1992) 'Literacy objects as cultural tools: effects on children's literacy behaviours at play'. *Reading Research Quarterly*. 27, pp. 203-225

Pressley, M. and Rankin, J. (1994) 'More about whole language methods of reading instruction for students at risk for early reading failure'. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*. 9, pp. 156-167.

Pressley, M., Gaskins, I., Cunicelli, E. A., Burdick, N. J., Schaub-Matt, M., Lee, D. S. and Powell, N. (1991) 'Strategy instruction at Benchmark School: a faculty interview study'. *Learning Disability Quarterly*. 14, pp. 19-48.

Pressley, M., El-Dinary, P. B., Gaskins, I., Schuder, T., Bergman, J., Almasai, L. and Brown, R. (1992) 'Beyond direct explanation: transactional instruction of reading comprehension strategies'. *Elementary School Journal.* 92, pp. 511-554.

Stahl, S. A. and Miller, P.D. (1989) 'Whole language and language experience approaches for beginning reading: a quantitative research synthesis'. *Review of Educational Research.* 59, pp. 87-116.

Stahl, S. A., McKenna, M.C. and Pagnucco, J. R. (1994) 'The effects of whole language instruction: an update and reappraisal'. *Educational Psychologist.* 29, pp. 175-186

Weaver, C. (1990) *Understanding Whole language: From Principles To Practice*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.