The Teaching Practices of Effective Teachers of Literacy

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ABSTRACT   *The nature of effective teaching has been widely explored in the past, using a number of methodologies. There have, however, been few studies which have specifically attempted to apply the insights from effectiveness research to an under- standing of the nature of effective teaching of literacy. This article reports some of the results of research, commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency, into the characteristics of teachers who could be shown to be effective in teaching literacy to primary pupils. The findings are based on a close study of a sample of teachers whose pupils make effective learning gains in literacy and of a sample of teachers who were less effective in literacy teaching.*

Effective Teaching and Effective Teachers

The literature on effective teaching has provided a range of insights concerning the effects of teachers' classroom behaviour, teachers' subject knowledge and teachers' beliefs on pupil learning. Research has explored the importance of features such as classroom management, task setting, task content and pedagogic skills. It has also investigated the role of teachers' content knowledge in a subject, their understanding of how children learn in that subject and the belief systems which interact with and enable such knowledge to be put into operation in the classroom. From this research a number of common characteristic features of effective teaching have emerged.

The Provision of Opportunity to Learn

Silcock (1993) argues that the chief finding of research into effective teaching is that effective teachers are those who provide pupils with maximum opportunity to learn. The importance of the quantity of instruction which children receive is the most consistently replicated finding in effectiveness research (Brophy & Good, 1986). Care must be taken, however, in suggesting that learning can be judged by time allocation alone. Teachers are likely to be different in the ways they use similar amounts of time. Leinhardt and Greeno (1986) noted that the efficiency of experi- enced teachers allowed them to perform complex procedures in a fraction of the time taken by novices. Also, time allocated to learning does not necessarily equate exactly with time spent on learning. Rosenshine (1979) demonstrated that during the average 85 minutes' lesson time allocated to reading, primary pupils were engaged with the task for an average of only 63 of those minutes. Research has confirmed (Brophy &

Good, 1986) that the features of classroom life most consistently linked with pupils' achievement are those which ensure maximum pupil engagement in academic activities and minimum time spent unengaged, such as during transitions.

Classroom Organisation

There is some evidence that pupil achievement also relates to effective classroom organisation. Pressley *et al.* (1996), in investigating the teaching of literacy teachers nominated as effective, found that they used a combination of whole class, group and individual teaching. About half their time was spent in whole class teaching, with the amount of group teaching varying according to the age group taught. Of the 83 teachers studied, 55 used ability groups in their teaching. A similar picture emerges from British research (Alexander, 1992; Bennett & Dunne, 1992) and suggests that effective teachers make decisions about the grouping of children in their classrooms according to the needs both of the children and the tasks in which they are involved. Classroom organisation patterns are chosen for their fitness for the teacher's purpose at the time.

Task Setting (Match)

The level of success pupils achieve appears to be related to the tasks they are set. Bennett *et al.* (1984) found that, in infant classes, number and language tasks were matched to the pupil's abilities in only about 40% of cases. In the first term of junior schooling this fell to around 30%, with three-quarters of the tasks set for high attainers being badly matched to their abilities. In these cases the children could succeed at the tasks, but were unlikely to gain new knowledge or skills. Brophy and Good (1986) stressed that effective teachers demand engagement with the task, prepare well, and match tasks to the abilities of children.

Task Content

The nature of the tasks that are set for children may also be related to achievement. Hiebert (1983) reports that lower ability groups tend to spend more time on decoding tasks whilst higher ability groups are more likely to engage in critical reasoning tasks. In the classes studied by Bennett *et al.* (1984), 75% of language tasks demanded practice of existing knowledge, concepts or skills rather than revision, extension of existing knowledge or acquisition of new knowledge. The nature of the tasks planned also suggested that the teachers offered large amounts of revision and practice to the high achievers and a high level of knowledge acquisition to the low attainers, who might very well have needed more practice. This suggests that teachers need to ensure that the type of task, as well as the task content, is matched to the needs of the pupil.

Teaching Skills

The skills underpinning effective instruction have been investigated in a number of studies. Westerhof (1992) found that direct teaching involving questioning and teacher feedback correlated positively with achievement, although this was found to be true only in Mathematics lessons and not for other subjects. Powell (1980) also

found that the largest gains occurred in those classes where teachers maximised instruction time (and minimised preparation) and spent most of their time instructing the children and monitoring their work.

The pace of introduction of material must depend on the capabilities of the children in the class. Brophy and Good (1986) report that in classes where children succeeded with relative ease the pace could be brisker, whereas in classes where children started at a lower ability level, slow introduction of material was necessary. Brisk pace has been associated with high achievement in reading by a number of researchers.

More recent characterisations of teaching have stressed the importance of teachers demonstrating, or modelling, the learner behaviour they wished to encourage. Pressley *et al.* (1996) for example, when investigating the teaching of literacy teachers deemed to be effective, found that all of them reported overt modelling of reading for students on a daily basis. This included reading aloud to students, the modelling of comprehension strategies, modelling writing processes and demonstrating their own love of writing and reading.

Teacher–Pupil Interaction

Teacher–pupil interaction in classes has also been a major focus of interest. Appropriate pace, interaction with children, monitoring of children at work and feedback all appear to be features of effective teaching and play a part in ensuring high levels of task engagement. More recently the metaphor of 'scaffolding' has been used to explain the nature of effective teacher–pupil interaction (Bruner, 1986). Scaffolding suggests that by careful support the teacher can enable children to operate at higher levels of cognitive functioning than they could achieve on their own.

The Design of the Research

In this research, we aimed to compare the teaching practices of a group of teachers identified as effective at teaching literacy with those of a group of teachers not so identified. To do this we identified two main sample groups:

(1) the main sample of 228 primary teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy;
(2) the validation sample of 71 primary teachers not so identified.

Both groups contained a mixture of teachers of Key Stage 1 (ages 4–7) and Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11) children.

The effective teachers were chosen from a list of teachers recommended as effective by advisory staff in a number of areas. The key criterion for this choice was whether we could obtain evidence of above-average learning gains in reading for the children in the classes of these teachers.

Teachers in both groups completed a questionnaire designed to enquire into their beliefs about literacy and literacy teaching approaches, their feelings about children's needs in literacy development, their reported use of a range of teaching techniques and their professional development experience in literacy.

We then selected sub-samples of the two main groups:

(1) 26 teachers from the group of teachers identified as effective in the teaching of literacy;
(2) 10 teachers from the validation group.

Again, both sub-samples contained a mixture of teachers of Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2 children.

The teachers in both these sub-samples were twice observed teaching and then interviewed about each of these teaching episodes. The observation data were, therefore, gleaned from 52 lessons taught by the effective teachers of literacy and 20 lessons taught by teachers in the validation group. Summaries of the focus points of each observation can be found in Appendix 1.

Studying Literacy Teaching Practices

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 draw conclusions about aspects of teaching practice. The questionnaire was used to obtain information about the literacy teaching activities which teachers reported having used during a normal school week. This teacher self-report was checked against our observations of classroom practice. The subsequent interviews allowed teachers to describe their practices and offer reasons for their use.

Main Findings

The Range of Literacy Activities Used

One section of the questionnaire aimed to generate a snapshot of the types of reading and writing activities used by these teachers. A number of reading and writing activities were listed and teachers were asked to indicate which they had used during the previous week.

The percentage of respondents in the various categories who reported using the reading activities listed is summarised in Table I. The results showed that use of reading activities was, perhaps not surprisingly, related to age phase. 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; and
• used phonic exercises.

In the subsequent observations, all the Key Stage 1 teachers were observed doing all these activities with classes or groups of children, whereas none of these activities were observed in the Key Stage 2 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

TABLE I. The percentage of teachers reporting the use of particular reading activities

Teaching activity	Effective teachers (Key Stage 1)	Validation teachers (Key Stage 1)	Effective teachers (Key Stage 2)	Validation teachers (Key Stage 2)
Teaching letter sounds/names	92.1	100	43.0	47.8
Used cloze activities	39.2	32.3	55.0	52.2
Used flashcards to teach particular words	40.8	51.6	11.0	19.6
Used sequencing activities	72.8	74.2	52.0	54.3
Read to the class	97.6	96.8	97.0	97.8
Used comprehension activities	36.8	41.9	53.0	71.7
Used a big book with a group of children	73.6	41.9	19.0	21.7
Involved other adults in reading with children	92.8	90.3	80.0	65.2
Heard children read/read with children	98.4	100	97.0	100
Used reading scheme books	87.2	83.9	62.0	69.6
Used phonic exercises	60.0	77.4	45.0	52.2

effective teachers and by teachers in the validation sample. A greater proportion of effective infant teachers reported using big books than did the validation infant teachers. There were also some complex inter-relationships between patterns, which became clearer when teachers' self-reports and their actual practice were compared. For example, more teachers in the validation sample (at both age phases) reported using phonic exercises and flashcards than did the effective teachers, although both groups were roughly similar in their reported use of teaching letter sounds. Observation of lessons revealed a different pattern. The effective teachers that we observed were more likely to be teaching letter sounds (observed in 35 of the 52 lessons observed) than the validation teachers (11 of the 20 lessons observed), but there were differences in the ways the two groups approached this. 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 offer 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, thus assisting their pupils to make connections between these levels. The validation teachers, on the other hand, were more likely to use activities which involved work at only one of these levels, thus limiting the explicit connections their pupils were encouraged to make.

As with reading, the writing activities reported in the questionnaire by both the effective teachers of literacy and the validation teachers differed according to the age group they taught.

The percentage of respondents in the various categories who reported using the writing activities listed is summarised in Table II. The teachers of Key Stage 2 classes were more likely than the infant teachers to report that children wrote for audiences other than the teacher, wrote up after research and edited each other's work. A greater proportion of infant teachers reported children doing handwriting practice, copying out words, sounding out spellings and doing letter-string exercises. This pattern was also evident in the classroom observations and may reflect several things: a developmental assumption about the sort of work children are capable of,

TABLE II. The percentage of teachers reporting the use of particular writing activities

Teaching activity	Effective teachers (Key Stage 1)	Validation teachers (Key Stage 1)	Effective teachers (Key Stage 2)	Validation teachers (Key Stage 2)
Letter formation/handwriting	97.6	90.3	79.0	76.1
Copying words written by the teacher	52.0	54.8	23.0	39.1
Sounding out spellings	66.4	71.0	47.0	45.7
Children doing letter string exercises	46.4	35.5	40.0	30.4
Writing news/personal views	68.8	67.7	65.0	54.3
Writing on topic chosen by children	65.6	45.2	40.0	47.8
Writing for an audience other than the teacher	80.0	64.5	86.0	73.9
Writing frames	26.4	25.8	36.0	28.3
Writing after a piece of research	34.4	29.0	69.0	71.7
Peer group editing	12.8	22.6	56.0	39.1
Using published English materials	25.6	45.2	41.0	43.5
Interactive writing	41.6	32.3	44.0	34.8

the need for younger children to focus on a range of basic skills to enable them to make a start with reading and writing or the ability of older children to write more sustained texts.

The effective teachers of literacy reported more often than the validation teachers that they had used letter-string exercises, interactive writing and writing for an audience beyond the teacher. Classroom observations confirmed this. The effective teachers also reported less use of published materials and of children copying out words written by the teacher. In the lessons observed, the effective teachers at Key Stage 1 tended to use published materials to consolidate points already taught (observed in 39 of the 52 lessons), whereas the validation sample were more likely to use them as an introductory session (observed in 14 of the 20 lessons).

In both reading and writing the effective teachers of literacy were able to provide a wider range of literacy teaching activities which emphasised using whole texts as a setting for learning about literacy. They were also less reliant on decontextualised exercises, deriving most of their teaching of sentence and word features from these whole texts.

The questionnaire results suggested a low usage among both effective and validation teachers of teaching activities at sentence level. However, evidence from the classroom observation suggested that it was not the case that the effective teachers were ignoring sentence-level work, but rather that they preferred to teach about sentences and aspects of grammar through an initial focus on reading or writing a whole text. Although the effective teachers were teaching about sentence structure, they were less likely to highlight it as the overall aim of a lesson.

An example of this is Mrs G, who taught a poetry writing lesson to a year 3 class. A major focus of this was the use of adjectives to describe images of winter, which was the focus of the poetry session. To define these she drew up lists of things you might see on a winter day (nouns) and words that described these things (adjectives). When asked about the literacy content of the session she said it was a session to teach adjectives in the setting of writing a poem. She had chosen to do this to build upon work on nouns which the children had completed and intended this session to clarify the difference between the roles of nouns and adjectives. However, the aim

of her lesson as indicated in her planning was 'Poetry writing'. Like the majority of the effective teachers (21 of the 26), she had embedded teaching of specific language features within a wider writing activity. This embedding was less noticeable in the teaching of the validation teachers (observed in the lessons of only three of this group), who tended to teach language features directly, without providing children with a clear context in which these features served a function.

The picture again emerges of effective teachers of literacy actively assisting their pupils to make connections between the text, sentence and word levels of literacy work. They were able to draw upon their knowledge of language to plan deliberately for these connections.

Task Presentation and Lesson Structure

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

The effective teachers of literacy acted in ways that refocused children's attention on the literacy task at regular points in the session. They frequently made checks on children's progress and asked children to provide examples of writing in progress, either for the teacher to comment on, or for the whole class to hear or comment upon. Behaviour such as this was observed in 46 of the 52 lessons, but was observed much less often (in only five lessons) in the validation classes.

The use of time in effective teachers' classes was closely monitored, with teachers setting time limits for particular sub-tasks, such as planning, within the larger task, such as writing the beginning of the story. It was notable that this behaviour characterised not only the Key Stage 2 classes but even the reception classes, where the children were unlikely to have a well-developed sense of time. We concluded that in this way the effective teachers of literacy were inducting their reception children into patterns of working which included focusing on a task and pushing themselves to complete it. They thus engendered a pressure to work in their classrooms.

The beginnings and conclusions of sessions for groups and classes taught by the effective teachers had a number of distinct characteristics. In addition to clear focus and purposeful discussion, the effective literacy teachers were observed using modelling extensively. They used blackboards, flip charts, posters and whiteboards to demonstrate not only what was to be produced in a lesson, but also the processes involved. All of these teachers were observed to do at least one of the following:

- write dialogue;
- write letters to fantasy characters;
- skim and scan texts whilst describing thought processes;
- write letters and collect words beginning with those letters;
- make notes;
- demonstrate intonation in reading aloud;
- sing nursery rhymes, emphasising rhyme;
- select words from vocabulary lists or banks;
- model formal and informal speech; and
- punctuate text;

and many other examples. These acts offered children insights into how literacy tasks

were achieved as well as what the aims of the tasks were. Models of thought in planning, drafting, correcting writing, making decisions, sounding out words and using dictionaries also punctuated the lessons of the effective teachers. One reception teacher told us a little about why she modelled writing for her class.

Researcher: I noticed when you demonstrated writing you talked about the capital letters, the pronoun I and exclamation marks. Why?

Teacher: It's something I do from the day they arrive at school. I demonstrate writing. I talk about what is happening on the flipchart and they begin to pick up adult conventions without a 'formal' lesson. It's our everyday approach.

Researcher: Do you do it often?

Teacher: Oh yes, whenever I am demonstrating, not just in writing. I am always talking about the conventions of writing and what I am doing and I feel they are learning an awful lot more if they realise that it is just part of writing and reading. When they are reading to me we discuss where the full stops come and commas and speech marks. I am trying to train them to an awareness of everything so that if they question they will learn. But if no one points things out to them they might not even ask.

Both the effective teachers of literacy and the validation teachers used a wide range of questions. However, the effective teachers more frequently asked children how they accomplished tasks, how they made literacy decisions, what reading cues they used and to explain conclusions and comprehension decisions. Such questions were observed in 48 of the 52 lessons taught by the effective teachers of literacy.

An example was seen in Mrs J's lesson, in which 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?

Questioning of this type was largely confined to the effective teachers and reflects 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 or writing 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.

Of the 52 lessons of the effective teachers of literacy, 50 were concluded by a review of the tasks accomplished or by the teacher asking the children to present a report or extracts of their work. Such 'plenary' lesson conclusions are, of course, characteristic of the literacy hour structure.

Conclusion

Our research suggests that it is possible to discern some common characteristics in the literacy teaching practices of effective teachers and that several of these appear not to be uniformly present in the literacy teaching of teachers in general. Perhaps the most salient of these characteristics is the teaching of a range of literacy skills and knowledge, at word, sentence and text levels, within the context of work on shared texts. Contextualisation of teaching appeared to make it possible for pupils to make active connections between these levels of knowledge.

Another distinctive feature of the literacy teaching of these effective teachers might be termed explicitness. These teachers made the purposes and processes of literacy explicit for their pupils, through modelling and demonstration as well as through their explanations and exemplifications. We felt they were encouraging a 'mindful' approach to the learning of literacy in their pupils.

One fascinating feature of these findings about the teaching practices adopted by these effective teachers of literacy is the extent to which these were consonant with those implicit within the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998). The research reported here was carried out before this strategy was made public and the fact that this group of effective teachers were already teaching in a manner sympathetic to it implies that the strategy itself may be on quite firm ground in trying to increase the use of these teaching approaches.

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Appendix 1

Observation focus points

Observation 1

Record evidence gleaned from observation under the following headings.

1. **Nature of the task and the context in which it was done**
   What were the children asked to do?
2. **Differentiation**
   How did the teacher differentiate literacy activities for children of different abilities?
3. **Literacy environment**
   Describe the environment for literacy in the classroom.
4. **Texts used/produced**
   What texts were children invited to read/write?
5. **Teacher modelling**
   Give examples of any ways in which the teacher modelled or demonstrated reading/writing.
6. **Motivation/enthusiasm**
   Give evidence of the level of excitement/enthusiasm generated among the children.
7. **Task engagement**
   Give evidence of the level of children's engagement with the task(s).
8. **Monitoring/assessment**
   Give examples of the teacher's monitoring and/or assessment of children's progress in literacy.
9. **Teacher response**
   Give examples of the responses that the teacher made to children's reading/writing.
10. **Questioning**
    Give examples of the kinds of questions the teacher asked the children.
11. **Codes**
    How did the teacher draw children's attention to the codes of reading/writing?
12. **Independence**
    Give examples of ways in which the teacher was able to encourage independence in the children.
13. **Classroom assistance/home–school links**
    Were there any other adults working in the class? Any evidence of home–school links?

Observation 2

Record evidence gleaned from observation under the following headings.

1. **Content of the lesson**
   What content was presented?
2. **Differentiation**
   Was the content different for different children?
3. **Representation**
   Was the content represented in any way, e.g. metaphors, analogies?
4. **Response**
   How did children respond to this content?
5. **Follow through**
   In what ways was the content signalled for revisiting?