



RAISING STANDARDS IN LITERACY
Ros Fisher, Maureen Lewis and Greg Brooks

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY IN ACTION SERIES

Also available as a printed book
see title verso for ISBN details

Raising Standards in Literacy

Raising Standards in Literacy represents the best of current thinking and research about literacy. The book is the outcome of a high-profile series of seminars on raising standards in literacy, and includes contributions from an impressive group of international researchers and policy makers. By offering a rich and unique mix of contemporary perspectives, this book provides an invaluable source of study into the latest research and developments in the teaching of literacy.

It includes sections on:

- how research into literacy teaching can inform new approaches found in England, the USA and Australia
- the issues involved in assessing progress in literacy and the validity of research claims made about standards of attainment
- the ways in which literacy education is developing in England, the USA and Australia.

The book celebrates the apparent success of current initiatives at the same time as raising questions about the feasibility and relevance of such initiatives to the literacy needs of the twenty-first century. It is essential reading for literacy co-ordinators and consultants and for all those undertaking further study or research in literacy education.

Ros Fisher is Reader in Literacy Education at Rolle School of Education, University of Plymouth.

Greg Brooks is a Professorial Research Fellow at the University of Sheffield.

Maureen Lewis is a Senior Lecturer in Language and Literacy at the University of Plymouth.

Language and Literacy in Action Series

Series Editor: David Wray

Teaching Literacy Effectively in the Primary School

David Wray, Jane Medwell, Louise Poulson and Richard Fox

Raising Standards in Literacy

Edited by Ros Fisher, Greg Brooks and Maureen Lewis

Boys and Literacy

Exploring the Issues

Trisha Maynard

Raising Standards in Literacy

Edited by Ros Fisher, Greg Brooks
and Maureen Lewis



London and New York

First published 2002
by RoutledgeFalmer
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by RoutledgeFalmer
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2004.

RoutledgeFalmer is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

© 2002 selection and editorial matter, Ros Fisher, Greg Brooks and
Maureen Lewis © individual chapters, the contributors

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or
reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical,
or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including
photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or
retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record has been requested for this title

ISBN 0-203-16622-1 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-26081-3 (Adobe eReader Format)

ISBN 0-415-26350-6 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-26351-4 (pbk)

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xi
<i>Series editor's preface</i>	xv
DAVID WRAY	

Introduction	1
ROS FISHER, GREG BROOKS AND MAUREEN LEWIS	

PART I	
Research into the teaching of literacy	7
1 What does research tell us about how to develop comprehension?	9
COLIN HARRISON	
2 What does research tell us about how we should be developing written composition?	23
MARY BAILEY	
3 As the research predicted? Examining the success of the National Literacy Strategy	38
ROGER BEARD	
4 What do effective teachers of literacy know, believe and do?	55
DAVID WRAY AND JANE MEDWELL	
5 Developing literacy: towards a new understanding of family involvement	66
CLARE KELLY, EVE GREGORY AND ANN WILLIAMS	

6	The words in basal readers: a historical perspective from the United States	82
	JAMES V. HOFFMAN	
	Discussion: research into the teaching of literacy	98
	MAUREEN LEWIS	
 PART II		
	What counts as evidence?	103
7	The irrelevancy – and danger – of the ‘simple view’ of reading to meaningful standards	105
	VICTORIA PURCELL-GATES	
8	Understanding national standards in reading	117
	SUE HORNER	
9	Validity in literacy tests	125
	MARIAN SAINSBURY	
10	Trying to count the evidence	136
	GREG BROOKS	
	Discussion: what counts as evidence?	151
	GREG BROOKS	
 PART III		
	Developing teacher practice	155
11	Textbooks and model programmes: reading reform in the United States	157
	ELFRIEDA H. HIEBERT	
12	Teacher education programmes and children’s reading achievement	175
	NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN ELEMENTARY TEACHER PREPARATION FOR READING INSTRUCTION	

13 The implementation of the National Literacy Strategy in England, 1998–2001	190
LAURA HUXFORD	
14 Examining teaching in the literacy hour: case studies from English classrooms	204
ROS FISHER AND MAUREEN LEWIS	
15 The literacy block in primary school classrooms, Victoria, Australia	216
BRIDIE RABAN AND GILLIAN ESSEX	
16 Globalisation, literacy, curriculum practice	231
ALLAN LUKE AND VICTORIA CARRINGTON	
Discussion: developing practice	251
ROS FISHER	
<i>Index</i>	257

Illustrations

Figures

6.1	The words in first grade texts	84
8.1	Progress towards government target for achievement in literacy	118
9.1	The span between construct and performance	126
13.1	The searchlight model of the National Literacy Strategy	196
15.1	Early Years Literacy Program Literacy Block: teaching readers	222
15.2	Early Years Literacy Program Literacy Block: teaching writers	223
15.3	Early Years Literacy Program Literacy Block: teaching speakers and listeners	223

Tables

3.1	Approaches to the teaching of writing	49
10.1	Pre-school intervention studies affecting literacy development	139
10.2	Classification of studies used by National Reading Panel	141
11.1	Reading/language arts reform models	166
13.1	Percentage of children attaining level 4 and above in KS2 test	200
16.1	Uses of literacy in globalised conditions	246

Contributors

Mary Bailey is Lecturer in English Education in the Centre for Literacy Studies at the University of Nottingham School of Education. Prior to taking up this post she researched cognitive processes in writing, before teaching English in secondary schools for ten years.

Roger Beard has taught in primary schools and a college of higher education and is now Reader in Literacy Education at the University of Leeds. In 1998 he was commissioned by the Department for Education and Employment to write the Review of Research and Other Related Evidence for the National Literacy Strategy.

Greg Brooks is at the School of Education, University of Sheffield. He has worked full-time in educational research for over twenty years, and directed many literacy-related projects and evaluations. His most recent report is *Progress in Adult Literacy: Do Learners Learn?* (G. Brooks *et al.*, London: Basic Skills Agency, 2001).

Victoria Carrington is a Lecturer in Education at the University of Queensland. Her research interests include sociology of literacy, Middle Years of Schooling, and globalisation theory.

Gillian Essex has taught in many settings, most recently as head teacher of a primary school. She is currently a Manager in the Learning and Teaching Innovation Division of the Department of Education, Employment and Training in Victoria. She co-ordinated the Early Literacy Research Project and is the co-author of a number of components of the Early Years Literacy Program.

Ros Fisher has taught in primary schools in the north-west of England and in the USA. She is now Reader in Literacy Education at Rolle School of Education at the University of Plymouth working with initial training students and teachers. She writes widely about the teaching of early literacy and is currently researching the development of teachers in the NLS. She has recently written *Inside the Literacy Hour* (Routledge 2002).

Eve Gregory is Professor of Language and Culture in Education, Goldsmiths College, University of London. Her books include *Making Sense of a New World: Learning to Read in a Second Language* (Sage 1996), *One Child, Many Worlds: Early Learning in Multicultural Communities* (Fulton and Teachers' College Press 1997) and *City Literacies: Learning to Read Across Generations and Cultures* (joint author, Ann Williams) (Routledge 2000).

Colin Harrison is Professor of Literacy Studies in Education at the University of Nottingham. He is a former President of the United Kingdom Reading Association. His main research interests are reading comprehension, curriculum evaluation and new technologies.

Elfrieda H. Hiebert is a professor in the School of Education at the University of Michigan. Hiebert has worked in the field of reading education for more than thirty years as a teacher and as a teacher educator and researcher. Her research on how instructional and assessment practices influence literacy acquisition, especially among low-income children, has been widely published and cited.

James V. Hoffman is Professor of Language and Literacy Studies at The University of Texas at Austin and is an affiliated scholar with CIERA (The Centre for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement). His research interests are focused in the areas of beginning reading, texts and reading teacher preparation. Jim is Past President of the National Reading Conference and former editor of the *Reading Research Quarterly*. He currently serves as editor of *The Yearbook of the National Reading Conference*.

Sue Horner is the leader of the English, literacy and communications team at the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in England. The Authority is responsible for the National Curriculum and its assessments, and for the regulation of public examinations. The English team focuses on provision in the English Language Arts for those from age 3 to adults.

Laura Huxford was appointed director of training of the National Literacy Strategy in 1998. Her teaching career spanned primary and special education and she spent ten years in teacher training.

Clare Kelly was an Assistant Director at the Centre for Language in Primary Education before she took up her present post as co-ordinator of Primary English courses at Goldsmiths. Her main areas of research and publication are early literacy, the teaching of reading and social and cultural literacy practices at home and school.

Maureen Lewis is a Senior Lecturer in Language and Literacy at the University of Plymouth. She is an experienced teacher and researcher and was co-director of the influential Nuffield *Extending Literacy*

Project. She has published widely on many aspects of literacy but is best known for her work on reading and writing non-fiction texts and the development of 'writing frames'. She has previously published *Extending Literacy: Children Reading and Writing Non-fiction* with Routledge.

Allan Luke teaches literacy education, sociology and policy studies at the University of Queensland, Australia. His work on language and literacy includes: *Literacy, Textbooks and Ideology* (Falmer 1988), *Towards a Critical Sociology of Reading Pedagogy* (Benjamins 1990), *The Social Construction of Literacy in the Classroom* (Macmillan 1994) and *Constructing Critical Literacies* (Hampton 1997). He recently completed the 'New Basics' Curriculum Reform, *Literate Futures: The Queensland State Literacy Policy* and is currently Chief Advisor to the Minister of Education.

Jane Medwell is a former primary school teacher, currently Lecturer in Literacy Education at the University of Warwick. She has carried out a number of research projects into aspects of literacy education and has written numerous books and articles on topics ranging from the use of electronic books with young children, to classroom contexts for writing.

The National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction is a Commission of the International Reading Association. The charge of the Commission is to conduct research on the impact of reading teacher education programmes on beginning teachers' reading instruction. The International Reading Association is a network of over 350,000 reading professionals who are members, institutions, councils and affiliates. The purpose of the Association is to improve reading instruction and reading achievement. **Cathy M. Roller** is Director of Research and Policy for the International Reading Association. Prior to 1998 when she assumed this post she was a reading teacher educator and researcher at the University of Iowa for 19 years.

Victoria Purcell-Gates is Professor of Literacy at Michigan State University. Her research covers literacy development across the ages and much of it is located in community literacy practice. She has taught struggling readers for over 30 years, serving as director at several university-based literacy clinics.

Bridie Raban is the Inaugural Mooroolbeek Chair of Early Childhood at the University of Melbourne, Australia, where she is also Director of the Early Education Research Unit. She is keenly interested in the literacy development of all children and currently trains the Reading Recovery tutors in Victoria and Tasmania, Australia.

Marian Sainsbury is a Deputy Head of the Department of Assessment and Measurement at the National Foundation for Educational Research. She is currently director of the projects developing the national tests in English at Key Stages 1 and 2 for England and Wales.

Ann Williams is a research fellow at Goldsmiths and Kings Colleges, University of London. Having worked as a language teacher in a variety of contexts, her research interests lie in literacy and the phonological and grammatical aspects of modern British English. She has carried out many funded projects and is the author, with Eve Gregory, of *City Literacies: Learning to Read across Generations and Cultures*.

David Wray taught in primary schools and is currently Professor of Literacy Education at the University of Warwick. He has published 40 books on aspects of literacy teaching and is best known for his work on the *Extending Literacy (EXEL) Project*, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, which was concerned with helping pupils at all levels read and write information texts effectively.

Series editor's preface

David Wray

There can be few areas of educational endeavour which have been more controversial than that of teaching literacy. Perhaps because, in an increasingly information-dense society, the ability to make sense of and to produce text is self-evidently crucial to success, even survival, literacy has assumed the major burden as a litmus test of 'educatedness'. With such a critical role in the process of becoming educated, it is inevitable that there will continue to be major debates about exactly what it means to be literate, and about how such a state might most effectively be brought about – that is, how literacy is taught. A proportion of the energy behind such debates has come from the diverse findings of research into processes and pedagogy. Yet much of the debate, especially in the popular media, has lacked a close reference to research findings and has focused instead on somewhat emotional reactions and prejudices.

Students of literacy and literacy education who want to move beyond the superficiality of mass media debates need access to reports and discussions of key research findings. There is plenty such material, yet it tends to suffer from two major problems. First, it can be rather difficult to locate as it has tended to be published in a diverse range of academic journals, papers and monographs. Secondly, research reports are usually written for an academic audience and make great demands on practitioners and others who wish to understand what the practical classroom implications are of what the research reports.

It is to address both these problems, but especially the latter, that this series has been developed. The books in the series deal with aspects of the teaching of literacy and language in a variety of educational settings. The main feature of all the contributing volumes is to provide a research-grounded background for teaching action in literacy and language. The books either, therefore, provide a review of existing research and theory in an area, or an account of original research, together with a clear résumé and/or set of suggestions as to how this background might influence the teaching of this area. The series acts, therefore, as a bridge between academic research books and practical teaching handbooks.

Raising Standards in Literacy

This is the third volume in the series and is the first edited collection. The chapters in this book originated, in the main, as presentations at a series of seminars organised by the editors, along with Colin Harrison, and sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council. These seminars involved a number of researchers and educationalists from both the UK and the USA and focused on the somewhat vexed issue of standards in literacy and current strategies for raising these.

Raising literacy standards is, of course, the subject of intense debate and interest internationally. In the twenty-first century, no country with aspirations for economic and intellectual success can afford to take for granted increasing literacy in its population. Accordingly, most governments have instituted, or are about to institute, major changes in curricula, pedagogy and teacher preparation for literacy development in schools. These developments are under way now, and the pace of change promises only to accelerate.

One kind of voice which has not always had the impact it perhaps might have had on the nature of these changes in literacy curricula and pedagogies is that of the researcher, or academic. The present book attempts to redress this somewhat by presenting material written from a research perspective. It includes papers on teacher preparation, effective teaching of literacy, insights into reading comprehension and approaches to assessment, to mention just a few topics. It will find a ready readership not only among fellow researchers but also among teachers who wish to probe beyond received wisdoms in teaching literacy.

David Wray
University of Warwick
January 2002

Introduction

Ros Fisher, Greg Brooks and Maureen Lewis

This book arose out of an Economic and Social Research Council (UK) funded international research seminar series entitled 'Raising Standards in Literacy' that was held during 1999–2000. The issue of literacy standards has been a topic of heated debate for many years. Closely tied to this debate have always been concerns about whether different teaching methods and teaching styles impact upon the standards of literacy children achieve and how these standards can be measured. This is an international debate. Different paradigms of literacy teaching are under review worldwide.

The seminar group was set up at the same time as the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) was launched throughout England as a key UK government strategy to raise standards of literacy. There has never before been such a far-reaching government initiative to influence directly the teaching and learning of reading and writing. Many of the teaching methods and the organisational structure of the NLS are based on research and practice from other parts of the English-speaking world, but in 1998 they represented new ways of working for many teachers in the UK.

The seminar series aimed to gather together key researchers, policy makers and invited international experts in the field of literacy teaching in order to offer a forum for examining and laying open to scrutiny, within the academic community and beyond, the tacit and explicit assumptions which underpin the National Literacy Strategy. The seminar series was focused on both cognition and pedagogy. It aimed to encourage a debate that was necessary, but which had only just begun to take place at that time within the research community, in order to identify and make available for policy-makers, teachers and other academics an analysis of the current strategy and recommendations for development which draw upon the best of current international research.

Three seminars took place, each over two days, and were held at the University of Plymouth, Rolle School of Education (May 1999), National Foundation for Educational Research (November 1999) and the University of Nottingham (May 2000). Researchers from England and the United States met with policy makers from the English National Literacy Strategy,

the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to discuss recent research and policy initiatives. This book contains most of the papers given at the seminars and all of these have been updated in 2001. In addition, the book contains two contributions from Australia that are also concerned with the question of literacy standards.

The book is set out in three sections. Part I, 'Research into the teaching of literacy', discusses how research about all aspects of the teaching of literacy can inform new approaches to be found in England, the USA and Australia. The collection of chapters offers both research reviews and descriptions of specific research studies.

Colin Harrison and Mary Bailey, both from the University of Nottingham, begin by offering research reviews that summarise evidence in answer to important questions related to literacy. In his chapter 'What does research tell us about how to develop comprehension?', Harrison argues that there has been an enormous amount of research activity in this area in the last decade or so and that a characteristic of this has been an emphasis on collaborative or interactive approaches to reading. He claims there is a consensus view emerging of how to develop reading comprehension, which is firmly based on research.

Mary Bailey considers 'What does research tell us about how we should be developing written composition?' from several research perspectives. From these differing perspectives she identifies pedagogical themes that are common to all but points out that within this consensus there are differing emphases on the role of explicit teaching and the teaching of metalanguage.

Following these overviews into two major aspects of literacy, Roger Beard of the University of Leeds argues that, because the National Literacy Strategy was based on research into what works, it was always likely to be successful in its stated aim of raising standards. He makes the point that it is the combination of research from the area of school effectiveness with research about effective literacy practices that is one of the distinct features of the creation of the strategy.

Following these three research overviews, David Wray and Jane Medwell of the University of Warwick offer us a report on a specific research project that was commissioned to enquire into the characteristics and practices of effective teachers of literacy. Their findings show that effective teachers do display common characteristics and literacy teaching practices. Although this study predates the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (with its extensive in-service programme for all primary teachers), it offers us useful indications as to what it is teachers need to know and understand – not least of which is their finding that effective teachers of literacy have an extensive knowledge of texts.

Clare Kelly, Eve Gregory and Ann Williams, from the University of London Goldsmiths' College, move our focus from teachers and schools to

children and their community literacy practices. Their research gives us a timely reminder that literacy practices are aspects not only of culture but also of power structures, and that school-sanctioned literacy is just one of a multiplicity of literacies which take place in peoples' lives. They raise the question of how far classroom-based literacy practices acknowledge and value children's community literacies. This theme is taken up in the following two sections.

The final chapter of Part I describes an analysis of the words used in basal readers (reading schemes) in the USA over the last few decades. Jim Hoffman of the University of Texas suggests that these reflect the prevailing ideology. He argues that, rather than reflecting the growing consensus on how to teach reading (as reflected in Colin Harrison's chapter), basal reading schemes in Texas have continued to reflect a divide between literature-based texts to improve content and interest and texts with increased decodability. This has led to a decrease in predictable text features as well as a decrease in text quality.

Maureen Lewis from the University of Plymouth concludes Part I with a reflection on its chapters. She argues that, with the major government educational agencies in the UK, the USA and Australia increasingly stressing the need for educational reform to be driven by research findings, the kind of research and research reviews offered in this section give a powerful rebuttal to claims that much educational research is irrelevant, 'pseudo-academic obfuscation' (Woodhead, 1998). The importance of well-founded data is an issue that runs through the whole book, and is explored in Part II through the theme of assessment.

The second section of the book, 'What counts as evidence?', looks at the issues involved in assessing progress in literacy and considers the validity of the research claims made about assessment of literacy, and about whether standards are being raised.

Vicky Purcell-Gates of Michigan State University raises strong concerns about the trend in the United States towards (back?) to simple definitions of reading and the dangers she sees in this, especially the neglect of the socio-cultural aspect.

Sue Horner of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority for England describes some of the complexity of the construct of reading underlying the national tests for 7-, 11- and 14-year-olds in England.

Marian Sainsbury of the National Foundation for Educational Research in England analyses the problems inherent in devising any half-decent (valid and reliable) test, and gives detailed examples of processes involved in doing so.

Greg Brooks, now at the University of Sheffield in England but previously for 20 years at the National Foundation for Educational Research, presents a 'counting of the evidence' on whether standards are rising/being raised in four spheres: the link between pre-school experience and early

literacy development, initial literacy learning, helping struggling readers and adult literacy. Apart from some aspects of initial teaching and learning, he finds the field underdeveloped.

Finally, Greg Brooks considers the issues raised in this section and suggests that the chapters represent a logical sequence – from deciding how literacy is to be defined, through the development of good instruments to measure it, and on to findings. He claims that the first two of these are in better shape than the third.

In Part III, ‘Developing teacher practice’, the ways in which the issue of raising standards of literacy is being addressed in England, the USA and parts of Australia are explored. The first two chapters in this section focus on issues related to raising standards in literacy in the USA: the first looks at initial teacher education and the second at state- and school-based initiatives. In both these chapters the diversity and different approaches current in the USA are discussed.

Elfrieda Hiebert from the University of Michigan reviews the predominant means by which American states and schools are addressing the drive to meet the literacy needs of the twenty-first century: reading textbooks and model programmes. She argues that none of the initiatives or mandates are supported by untainted research evidence and suggests that the two types of initiative should be considered together, and evidence as to their efficacy sought and attended to.

Cathy Roller, director of research and policy with the International Reading Association, reports on the work of the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction. She describes what appear to be effective in teacher education programmes in the USA.

The two chapters that follow consider the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy in England. This initiative (together with the National Numeracy Strategy) has been described by the international team from Ontario, Canada under Michael Fullan as ‘among the most ambitious large-scale educational reform strategies in the world and, without question ... among the most explicit and comprehensive in their attention to what is required for successful implementation’ (Earl *et al.*, 2000: 1).

Laura Huxford, deputy director of the National Literacy Strategy in England, reviews the introduction of the NLS and explains the supporting programmes that have underpinned its implementation. She argues strongly that the strategy is successful in raising standards despite early claims that it was over-ambitious.

Maureen Lewis and Ros Fisher from the University of Plymouth consider how the NLS has impacted on individual classrooms. From a small sample of classrooms in the first two years of the strategy, they argue that whereas some considerable changes have been made in the organisation of literacy teaching, change in pedagogy is not so well established in all classrooms.

Australia, like the United States, adopts different approaches according to individual state or school policy. However, the literacy block that is widely used in this country shares many features of literacy programmes elsewhere.

Bridie Raban from the University of Melbourne and Gillian Essex, manager in the Learning and Teaching Innovation Division of the Department of Education, Employment and Training in Victoria, describe the Victoria Early Years Literacy Programme. This programme, with its two-hour literacy block, has many similarities to the National Literacy Strategy, but also many differences. The authors claim that large gains in reading achievement have been achieved, and that the programme has ‘raised the status of teachers as professionals’.

On the other hand, Allan Luke and Victoria Carrington from the University of Queensland describe an initiative that rejects current pre-packaged literacy programmes that stand alone in favour of adopting, they claim, an over-simplistic and reductionist view of literacy. They argue that current ways of literacy teaching are based on anachronistic views of literacy and a deficit model of children and teaching, and suggest that literacy learning should be based within broader curriculum and cultural contexts.

Conclusions

The varied themes and issues that are picked up and explored in this book indicate many agreements and some differences in the three countries represented here. The recognition that there is a need to educate children for the literacy demands of the twenty-first century is undisputed, whether seen as resulting from previous low standards or as a concern to improve on existing practice. There is a sense that we need to learn from each other – both from research and from policy initiatives in other parts of the world. Differences lie in the extent to which raising standards is seen as an issue with many possible solutions and the freedom to choose different solutions, or an issue with a single externally prescribed approach. And, allied to this, is the extent to which the local context can be trusted to implement and evaluate its own solutions. Underlying all sections of the book is a plea for education to recognise the diverse and rich backgrounds of the pupils whose needs are the focus of our endeavour.

A striking difference that arises from these chapters is the extent to which writing is seen as an integral part of literacy. Writing is foregrounded in nearly all the chapters written by English authors, whereas the terms ‘reading’ and ‘literacy’ seem to be used almost synonymously by Australian and American authors. It was interesting to discover that when results from writing assessments were requested for the Victoria Early Years Literacy Programme, none were readily available.

Although each chapter can be read separately, in its entirety the book provides a snapshot of the state of play in literacy research and reform from three continents. It also presents a picture of academics and policy makers engaging in debate in an endeavour to ensure that children learn to use and enjoy the possibilities that literacy offers in the twenty-first century.

References

- Earl, L., Fullan, M., Leithwood, K. and Watson, N. (2000) *Watching and Learning: First Annual Report of OISE/UT Evaluation of the Implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, January 2000.
- Woodhead, C. (1998) 'Academia gone to seed', *New Statesman* 11 (20 March): 51.

Part I

Research into the teaching of literacy

1 What does research tell us about how to develop comprehension?

Colin Harrison

Introduction

It is easy to make the assumption that we know about reading comprehension. It's the part of reading that's beyond word recognition, it's about understanding what we read, and it develops gradually and 'naturally', as a reader becomes more fluent, and more experienced, and more confident. This is the common sense view, but I want to challenge it and to suggest that reading comprehension does not develop 'naturally', that it can be helpful to consider separately the development of reading fluency and the development of reading comprehension and that, broadly speaking, current research suggests that reading comprehension is harder to get at, harder to develop, and even more complex than we had realised.

In advancing this argument, I want to give attention to four questions:

- What do we know about comprehension?
- What do we know about how people learn to improve their comprehension?
- What do publishers, the National Curriculum and the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) in England have to say about developing comprehension?
- In the light of the answers to the first three questions, what should we be doing to develop comprehension?

What do we know about comprehension?

If we want to begin at the beginning, it's never wrong to begin with definitions, and the dictionary. But in the case of comprehension, we hit a difficulty. Definitions of the word *comprehension* are sometimes vague and mostly problematic, one way or another. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) has:

the action of comprehending; the action or fact of comprehending with the mind; understanding. The ability to understand a passage of text and answer questions on it, as at school or psychological exercise.

The first part of this definition is circular, and even the reference to a synonym, *understanding*, does not carry us very far forward. The second part of the definition is tautological: *comprehension* is what a comprehension test tests. Similarly, *Chambers Dictionary* defines *comprehension* as the *power of the mind to understand*, and then goes on to define to *understand* as to *comprehend*. *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* gives *the act or action of grasping with the intellect: understanding*, and then works hard to avoid circularity in its definitions of *understand*, putting an emphasis on the very different ways the verb is used in context, but finally noting that the words *comprehension* and *understanding* are often used interchangeably.

The International Reading Association's (IRA) *Dictionary of Reading* (1982, subsequently revised) takes us further and gives:

the process of getting meaning of a communication, as in a personal letter, speech, sign language; the knowledge or understanding that is the result of such a process.

This is a fuller definition, and while it gives more exemplars, it also turns primarily on our interpretation of the word *understanding*. The IRA dictionary does, however, give much fuller definitions of *reading*: definitions which are complex, and which include not only comprehension, but also notions of *behavioural adaptation* in the light of what is read. The IRA dictionary defines *reading comprehension* just as fully, and its multiple definitions include:

- understanding what is read
- understanding in relation to a presumed hierarchy of comprehension processes
- interpreting
- evaluating
- reacting in a creative, intuitive way.

The IRA dictionary definition of reading comprehension (Harris and Hodges, 1981) also quotes two definitions from authoritative sources, researchers who conducted classical studies in the field:

Comprehension involves the recovery and interpretation of the abstract deep structural relations underlying sentences (Bransford and Johnson)

Comprehension is a process of integrating new sentences with antecedent information in extrasentential structures (P. Thorndyke).

We can discern two strands within these approaches to definition:

- Definitions which talk about the *products* of reading
- Definitions which attempt to get at the *processes* of reading.

It is not easy to get at the processes that underpin reading comprehension, but it is much easier to get at the products, or at least some of them, and so it is understandable that some definitions should define comprehension in relation to test data, since such definitions are at least based on evidence and practice rather than theories. However, I want to argue that we can't develop comprehension unless we have a deeper understanding of what it is about, and to do this we have to consider the processes.

Both definitions of the IRA *Dictionary of Reading* say helpful and illuminating things about the processes. Bransford and Johnson's definition emphasises the fact that comprehension is not simply about vocabulary, and it's not about surface meaning. It is about getting under the surface and gaining some understanding of the relationships between the structural elements – whether these are words, concepts or propositions. Thorndyke's definition takes the theme of processing and integrating chunks of information two stages further. It first emphasises the importance within comprehension of the reader's integration of new information with that which has gone before (we could characterise this as creating internal cohesion); at the same time, the reader is also relating new information encountered in a text to their own model of the world, and these are the extrasentential structures to which Thorndyke's definition refers. (We could characterise this as creating external cohesion.) Taken together, these two definitions go a long way towards clarifying for us how challenging, complex and individual are the processes of comprehension.

Historically, debates about the nature of reading comprehension have been something of a battleground, and these debates have been particularly vociferous around the theme of the supposed sub-skills of reading comprehension. The basic issue has been a twofold one: first to identify the sub-skills of comprehension, and second to establish whether or not they form some sort of hierarchy. Such debates flourished in the post-war period, and we might have forgotten them by now were it not that their legacy has been so enduring, and this legacy has taken the form of reading comprehension exercises based on such models.

With hindsight, it is reasonable to ask why on earth generations of schoolchildren have been required to spend time doing comprehension exercises. After all, we don't have children doing sentence composing exercises to improve their writing, or oral presentation exercises to improve their speaking. Why should readers spend time doing comprehension exercises? One possible answer might be in order to prepare for high-stakes tests involving a similar instrument, but, in reality, most teachers who give comprehension exercises do so with the expectation that doing them is worthwhile in its own right, and that some general improvement in reading might be the result. Unfortunately, this expectation may be little

more than an assumption based on teachers' custom and practice, and the research evidence to support it is weak. There has been a good deal of research into the presumed hierarchy of comprehension processes, mostly based on a series of factor-analytical studies conducted in the period 1945–80 (see, for example Davis, 1944; Lunzer, Waite and Dolan, 1979). Many of these studies were essentially attempts to enlist support for what we may call a prescription model of comprehension skills development.

In the prescription model, the student takes a comprehension test, and is given a score on each of the sub-skill areas. The teacher then decides in which of the supposed sub-skills the reader is deficient, and then gives additional skills practice in the form of comprehension exercises focused on the individual sub-skills, until the reader's deficiency is remedied. The following is an example of the type of sub-skills list used in these studies:

- Vocabulary
- Literal comprehension
- Inferential comprehension
- Locating the main idea
- Evaluation.

However, this approach is flawed in a number of ways. First, it only works if the skills are indeed in some sense independent – but the consensus view from the research studies is that they aren't. Certainly the tasks, and therefore the products of different 'sub-skill' areas, look different, but this does not mean that the cognitive processes involved are different. The different 'sub-skill' scales tend to correlate with each other very highly, with correlations in the range 0.6–0.7. This suggests that the supposed sub-skills are essentially measuring the same thing. Second, the prescription approach only works if giving students comprehension exercises is effective in developing reading comprehension, and here again the research evidence is problematic. The Effective Use of Reading Project (Lunzer and Gardner, 1979), in a landmark study of comprehension development, found that students doing comprehension exercises actually did very little reading. Children who were focused on a reading comprehension task actually spent less than 5 per cent of their time reading, but used 65 per cent of their time in writing. In other words, the skill that was being practised was answering comprehension questions in writing, rather than reading. So even if reading comprehension scores went up, this could be attributable to a practice effect in writing comprehension test answers, rather than in improving the construct of reading itself.

An even greater problem, from a pedagogical viewpoint, is that comprehension exercises provided little or no feedback from which students might learn how to improve. This was felt by the Effective Use of Reading team to be crucial, since without feedback students might have improved in terms of fluency, but were much less likely to improve in terms of comprehension.