

READING: THE NEW DEBATE

Wray, D. (1989) 'Reading: the new debate', in *Reading*, Vol. 23, No. 1

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In an influential book published almost exactly twenty years ago, Jeanne Chall (1967) referred to "the great debate" about reading. At the time this meant the debate between adherents of approaches to reading which either emphasised whole words or stressed sound - symbol correspondences. Arguments about the relative merits of the "look and say" and the "phonics" approaches to the teaching of reading have raged over the intervening twenty years, and, indeed, are still being fought in many quarters. Controversy in the field of reading has begun, however, to shift, and a new battlefield has been defined. "The great debate" now receives less attention in the research and literature on reading, and a new debate has begun to take its place. For defendants of one of the positions in this new debate the differences which have been emphasised in the past between phonics and look-and-say approaches are now less important than their similarities. They are both seen as approaches which concentrate children's attention on minor aspects of reading, that is on letters, groups of letters and individual words, and distract attention from what reading is really about: the understanding of whole meanings, involving the intricate relationships between groups of words, phrases and sentences. The new debate is between those who see reading as best taught in a 'bottom - up' manner, with children being taught first to decipher words or parts of words and then to put these words together to make meaning, and those who prefer a 'top - down' approach in which children begin with meaningful units of language, either sentences arising from their spoken language or whole stories, and only later have their attention focussed on the individual elements of these units. Both phonics and look-and-say are essentially 'bottom - up' approaches, and the new element in the debate about reading is the growth in adherence to 'top - down' approaches.

This article will describe some of the major contributions of recent years to this debate, from both sides. Although it is too early yet to attempt a thorough evaluation of the somewhat polarised positions in the debate, it is hoped that this review may prove useful to teachers and others as they respond to the new developments in the reading field.

Towards a meaning-based approach

There can be little doubt that the major impetus towards a revision of many traditional ideas about reading has come from the field of psycholinguistics. Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman in their writings have popularised many of the key theories of this relatively new science and, each in their separate ways, have had major influence upon many teachers. Smith's work (1978) is characterised by its attack on the teaching of phonics which, Smith claims, is unhelpful to the learning of reading, and also by a succession of extremely quotable phrases which have become almost slogans in the debate. "Children learn to read by reading." "The only way to make learning to read easy is to make reading easy." Smith paints a picture of reading as a meaning-getting process and claims the essential ingredients for success are materials that a child will consider worth reading, and an adult who will help by making the process easy for the child. This idea of the role of the adult foreshadows the so-called apprenticeship

approach which has more recently been described by Waterland (1985).

Goodman has argued from a wide range of empirical evidence to a general theory of the role of anticipation and guessing in the reading process (Gollasch, 1982). From an analysis of children's reading errors or miscues he and his colleagues produced evidence that children try to make sense of what they are doing when they read. He sees miscues as a window on the reading process and characterises this process as, in a much-quoted phrase, a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1967).

Both Goodman and Smith argue for what Cambourne (1979) has called an Inside - out theory of the reading process. This, broadly speaking, views the act of reading as beginning inside the reader's head with a whole series of expectations about what will be perceived. The reader approaches the text to test out these expectations by sampling enough of it to either confirm or reject them. On the basis of this sampling fresh expectations are engendered, and the process proceeds in this interactive way. This theory is contrasted by Cambourne with more traditional, Outside-in theories which see meaning as residing purely on the page, and the reader's task as to decode the symbols which contain this meaning into spoken language.

The psycholinguistic emphasis on reading as a meaning-getting, predictive and interactive process, and the awareness that this kind of approach makes more sense if reading is taught using materials which are meaningful to children has led to a good deal of writing about particular teaching techniques. One of the major techniques, however, was being written about some time before the popularisation of psycholinguistics. Ashton-Warner (1963) describes her method for teaching reading to young Maori children by using their spoken language as a basis. The procedure she describes has come to be known as the language experience approach (Goddard, 1974). Its most famous manifestation has been through the set of teaching materials known as 'Breakthrough to Literacy', although this is by no means a unique means of operating the approach. The approach in whatever form it is done is characterised by its beginning with language which, because it comes from the child as an accompaniment to experience, is inevitably meaningful. Attention to its surface manifestation as words to be read and written comes afterwards.

Other techniques are more recent, although it is possible to find antecedents for most practices in the teaching of reading. Holdaway (1979) describes an approach which has found a good deal of favour with educational publishers: that of the 'Shared Book'. This involves the use of 'Big Books', through the sharing of which teachers can eventually lead children towards attention to words and sentences. Holdaway recommends the following up of the shared book experience with an approach known as 'Individualised Reading', which itself has a respectable history, from Veatch (1959) to Moon (1986), in which children read from books which are at a level appropriate to their developing expertise, but in the choice of which they have a great deal of say.

Donald Moyle (1982) describes an approach to teaching reading he calls Story Method. This again sets the teaching of reading skills within a context of meaning. In its beginning stages it involves children being read stories until they are sufficiently familiar with them that they can read them themselves with every expectation of success. Subsequent focus upon the constituent parts of the stories may help them develop generalisations which they can apply to other books and then to other reading

tasks. Moyle has produced a reading scheme ('Language Patterns') which he claims uses Story Method, which sets him apart from others who have advocated the same approach of teaching reading through stories. Writers such as Liz Waterland (1985) have recommended that children who cannot read for themselves can be helped to do it alongside a competent, sympathetic adult. This apprenticeship approach seems a natural corollary of Story Method, but Waterland goes one step further in recommending the use of so-called 'real' books instead of a reading scheme. The 'real books' movement has certainly received a great deal of attention, especially through such widely-read writers as Jill Bennett (1979) and Margaret Meek (1982), although one of the most notable features of Cliff Moon's early work on Individualised Reading (Moon B. & C., 1986) was its inclusion of 'real' books among the books used to teach reading. Interestingly enough Moon himself has recently seemed to move away from the grading recommendations of his extremely influential Individualised Reading pamphlets to a more unstructured approach. (Moon, 1985)

Finally, the movement towards meaning-based approaches has coincided with the growth of programmes for the involvement of parents in the teaching of reading (Topping & Wolfendale, 1985). Both movements have influenced each other and a definite shift in emphasis has taken place in terms of the techniques recommended for parental programmes (Bloom, 1986). From early recommendations to parents to be simply 'a listening ear' the most common advice now seen is for parents to be fully involved in sharing books with their children (Branston & Provis, 1986).

It is possible to set the ideas just described into the context of a movement which has its adherents worldwide. In the 'Whole Language' approach (Goodman, 1986) all the language arts including reading and writing are treated as one and developed together in meaningful situations. The approach is the antithesis of the hierarchical, skill-based model often employed as a guide for language arts teaching. As Wells (1986) demonstrates, the most meaningful language situations for many children seem to involve stories. The whole language approach is characterised therefore by its insistence on immersing children in stories (Newman, 1985).

Contrary views

This approach to the teaching of reading has not been without its critics. Criticism has tended to come from advocates of phonics approaches. Chief amongst these has been Dr Joyce Morris who, in a series of articles, has consistently attacked the idea implicit within meaning-based approaches that reading is "a natural process" (Morris, 1979). Morris has argued that "anti-phonetic" theories have been accepted uncritically by teachers and educationalists (Morris, 1983), largely because of misunderstandings as to the true nature and use of phonic knowledge. She puts forward what she describes as a "linguistics-informed type of phonics" (Morris, 1984) around which her 'Language in Action' reading scheme has been designed (Morris, 1974). She does, however, tend to contrast phonics approaches with whole word approaches, claiming that "the so-called Chinese method of look-and-say continues to be dominant in English-speaking countries and, no doubt, contributes to the problem of functional illiteracy among their respective populations" (Morris, 1984). This argument, it was suggested earlier, is rather out of date, but tends to resurface in the writing of several defenders of phonics methods.

Stott (1981), in a rather vitriolic attack on what he terms 'the psycholinguistic invasion', argues that the over-stressing of the context as a cueing system for reading is, in fact, unhelpful for beginning readers who do not have the wide background understanding and word knowledge of fluent readers. He argues that readers should be taught to apply both phonic knowledge and understanding of context to the reading task. He also suggests, in a similar way to Morris, that the chief reason for the mistrust of phonic methods is an assumption that phonics must be taught through drills and rules. He defends the teaching of phonics and claims that, "intelligently done, it is a matter of guiding the child's 'self-induction' of the phonic correspondences".

Nugent (1984) also argues strongly for the effectiveness of a "pre - planned, finely graded and cohesive sequence" of phonic instruction, whilst attacking many of the established propositions he claims to be at the heart of psycholinguistic theories of learning to read. Support for the effectiveness of phonic instruction has also come from reports such as that published in the Times Educational Supplement (10th April, 1987), describing the successful methods in one school, based on the use of the Initial Teaching Alphabet, a controlled phoneme-grapheme correspondence system. We have even had the spectacle of a candidate standing in the latest General Election on a 'back to phonics' platform (Times Educational Supplement, 5th June, 1987). Attacks on the efficacy of the whole - language approach have also come from Jeanne Chall herself, who is quoted as calling the movement "shocking" (Times Educational Supplement, 16th January, 1987).

Evaluating the debate

It is clearly far too early yet to evaluate this debate, which is still being fiercely fought, often in the columns of the national press (Times Educational Supplement, 8th January, 1988). A tentative evaluation of the evidence at present available does, however, seem to favour meaning - based approaches. Studies of adult readers suggest that they tend to read for meaning rather than attend too much to surface representations (Kolers 1973). It has indeed been pointed out (Cambourne, 1979) that, given the speed at which most adults read, letter by letter, or even word by word processing is a mathematical impossibility. Studies of young readers have shown that when they read they appear to try to make sense of their reading (Clay, 1969, Weber, 1970). They tend to use cues from syntax, and substitute words of similar meaning (house/home, Mummy/Mother etc.) Many recent studies on 'emergent readers' have suggested that young children immersed in a literate environment absorb lessons about the nature and the functions of print inevitably founded upon its role as a conveyor of meaning (Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984, Hall, 1987)

This evidence suggests that approaches to teaching reading which focus on elements other than meaning pull children away from what they almost instinctively try to do in reading. A popular analogy among writers about this area is the likening of learning to read to learning to talk. Frank Smith (1984) compares children joining the 'literacy club' with anyone joining the 'language club', which takes place, he argues, not through the correct behaviour being taught in a direct way, but in the potential joiner observing what is going on in the club, wanting to join it, and being given models of how members behave which he then tries to copy. His attempted membership will, of course, not be helped at all if the models he is given are incorrect. Thus for adults to teach children that to read they need to build up words by sounding them out, or to

recognise and pronounce each individual word before they can understand sentences or stories, will actually hinder children's moves into the literacy club since this is in fact not how fluent members of the club behave.

No doubt the debate in reading will continue for some time yet. As with many educational debates its resolution may have more to do with swings of the educational pendulum than any rational examination of the issues involved. The key criterion for success for each side is, of course, the behaviour of the teachers who teach children reading. There is no doubt that there are many powerful arguments and many influential supporters on the side of meaning-based, whole language approaches, and some evidence that this influence is beginning to have effect where it matters, on educational publishers, almost all of whom now make claims that their new reading material is meaningful, interesting and 'real'. It may be that this will be sufficient in the end to sway educational practice behind these approaches. In the meantime the immediate future in the reading field promises to be very interesting indeed as the new 'great debate' runs its course.

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