AWARENESS AND LITERACY

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Introduction

In the far off days when I was a teacher of upper junior children I recall having an involved discussion with the swimming teacher as I accompanied my class to the local swimming baths. I complained that the upper junior stage was too late to begin swimming instruction; rather it should begin in the infant school before children's attitudes to and fears of the water had had time to harden. The swimming teacher argued vehemently that it was far easier to teach swimming to eleven-year-old children than to five year olds because "you can tell them what to do and they can understand how to do it". This was my first introduction to the idea that an awareness of what one is trying to learn might help the learning.

This idea, since given 'scientific' names such as "metacognition" and, applied to language, "metalinguistic awareness", seems like common sense. One would surely not expect effective learning in anyone who was not sure what it was he was trying to learn. Yet learners may vary so much in the extent and the depth of their understanding of what they are trying to learn and why, that the issue merits further investigation, particularly with regard to the development of literacy. Questions arising include the following:
- what does this awareness consist of?
- what kinds of awareness do children learning to read and to write seem to have of these processes?
- what effects may this have upon their learning of the processes?
- what implications does this have for the teacher of literacy?

This chapter will attempt to suggest some possible answers to these questions, although it should be stated at this point that research into these issues is still in a state of rapid development.

The concept of awareness

This concept seems to have two aspects: a knowledge dimension and a performance dimension (Baker & Brown, 1984). To illustrate this with the example of swimming, as used above, we can see that, in order to swim effectively, a person needs to know what swimming involves, what its purpose is and that not all movements in water count as swimming. These are knowledge components. It is actually possible for someone to know all these things well but still not be able to swim. He requires in addition a degree of performance awareness. He needs to know what his body is doing as he attempts to swim, an understanding of how to tailor his movements to the requirements of the moment and

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some awareness of how his performance matches an ideal.

These two dimensions apply to any skilled behaviour, of which reading and writing are complex examples. The reader needs to understand the purpose of the act of reading, what the process involves and what forms it can take. He also needs some awareness of how his reading is proceeding and what steps to take if problems are encountered. The writer similarly needs knowledge of what the process of writing consists of and also an on-going awareness of how he is performing at it.

The role of performance awareness has received considerable investigation both in reading (Garner, 1987) and writing (Humes, 1983; Gregg & Steinberg, 1980). The knowledge dimension has also been extensively investigated and it is upon this aspect that the rest of this chapter will focus. As suggested above, knowledge about the processes of literacy is a necessary but not a sufficient element in the successful performance of them. I shall argue that knowledge and performance awareness interact to a considerable extent and the teacher can have a significant impact upon both by the implementation of a set of teaching strategies.

What do children know about literacy?

For convenience I shall discuss children's knowledge about reading and writing separately before looking at the common points between them.

Reading

A great deal of research energy has been expended on establishing the concepts and knowledge about the process of reading which very young children appear to lack. Three decades of research has produced the following areas of concepts about print about which many young children seem rather hazy: book orientation, directional rules, letter and word concepts (Yaden & Templeton, 1986). Although some children may develop an understanding of several of these concepts before they begin schooling, many will know little about them until they begin reading instruction.

Such research findings, however, while producing information vital to teachers of reading, may also cause these teachers to underestimate the understandings about reading that children may have. The concepts listed above are, in fact, those which children are most likely to acquire through reading rather than as prerequisites for reading. They are technical concepts about the way print works. There is a strong suggestion also that the extent of children's knowledge about them is disguised by the testing situations used to elicit this knowledge (Goodman, 1983).

Other research suggests that there are other kinds of knowledge about reading that children often do bring to school with them. This seems to be centred on the functions (rather than the precise workings) of print and the way written language works as writing. There are two major areas of evidence: children's abilities to recognise and act upon print in their

environments, and children's awareness of the language of books and stories.

A large number of studies have found that pre-school children are clearly aware of and interested in the print around them (Hall, 1987; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984). It is not really surprising that this should be so as print is such a prominent feature of modern society. Children grow up in an environment that is saturated with print, from food packaging to telephone directories, from newspapers to electricity bills and from television advertisements to T-shirt logos.

It is, however, not just the fact of this print's existence that makes it so significant, but that its primary purpose is to carry meaning. Print in the environment is there to tell people things. Children encounter it in social situations in which people react to the messages from print and so, not surprisingly, they begin to react to these messages too. This happens long before they come to school and the literature is full of examples such as 3 year olds who can read 'Corn Flakes' and 'Macdonalds', 4 year olds who 'read' newspapers and telephone directories, and so on. If reading is defined as 'getting meaning from print', then clearly these children are reading, even if they are not doing it in precisely the way that adults do, relying a good deal more on the context of the print than its precise features for their assignation of its meaning (Marek, 1990). As Halliday (1975) argues, awareness of function precedes that of form and this knowledge is an important start for them in their acquisition of literacy.

Knowledge about story structure and language is an equally important facet of reading ability. When children have this experience before school begins they seem much more likely to be able to 'talk like a book' (Clay, 1979), which in turn seems to be of critical value in becoming a competent reader (Smith, 1977; Wells, 1987). Again there are several examples in the literature of young children who show awareness of the features of stories, from their stylistic conventions to the complex narrative rules around which they are based. As an example of this, the following spoken narrative was produced by a five year old boy (Fox, 1988).

> *but then he went out in the middle of the night*
> *and there was this sound going - dooo-dee doo-dee [child sings]*
> *he looked all around*
> *nobody was there in a small street where it had lots of holes*
> *he looked down one of them*
> *he looked down the other*
> *they were all alike*
> *but he looked down the next one and what was there?*
> *just a surprise thing*
> *his Daddy was there*

Clearly there is much more here than the simple narrating of an event. The child uses the story technique of building tension to engage his audience and he phrases his narration in particular ways that owe more to written language rules than to spoken. The ability to do

these things is evidence of a great deal of knowledge of the way stories work and of the rules of written language.

Research into the concepts of reading held by older children produces very different but quite uniform conclusions. Children of seven years upwards seem to give much more attention to the deciphering of words in reading (Southgate et al, 1982). Many of them seem to abandon the functional, meaning-based concepts about reading they bring to school in favour of narrower form-based concepts, although this is related in some degree to ability (Medwell, 1990). To an extent this may be a fairly natural progression that represents an increasing awareness of the full nature of the reading process. Younger children may not focus on words simply because they do not realise that reading requires this level of detail in perception. Yet teachers may exacerbate this narrowing of focus by continually drawing children's attention to words, sounds or letters in reading instruction without giving sufficient emphasis to meaning and function.

Writing

Anyone who has ever watched young children, say three year olds, 'write' will have been struck by the seriousness with which the task is often tackled. The resulting 'writing' may often be dismissed as 'mere scribble', but a closer look might reveal something rather different.

When examining such pieces of writing, it is tempting to concentrate first of all upon what the children producing them do not know about writing. What they produce does not conform to adult standards of writing, and will likely be deficient in several ways, for example, letter formation, letter group to word correspondence, uniformity of letter size and shape. There are ways, however, in which such children can demonstrate in their writing that they have an understanding about the nature and the production of writing.

They often show quite clearly that they understand that the purpose of writing is communication. They begin with a need to communicate and something to say. They know that an appropriate way of achieving this aim is to produce a series of marks on a page of paper. They often also know that these marks have to bear a relationship to a spoken message, and have no hesitation in 'reading' what they have written.

They may also show an awareness that writing requires a particular organisation. This knowledge is so familiar to adults that we tend to take it for granted. While watching youngsters write, however, it can be very noticeable that they approach the task in an organised manner, which they must have learnt from somewhere. Firstly, they may begin the writing in the top left hand corner of the page, and then proceed to make marks from left to right and top to bottom. These marks may follow clear line-like patterns. These features are clearly culturally specific (Chinese or Arabic children would presumably begin to write differently), but it is most unlikely that they will have been deliberately taught to such young children. Yet they know their importance.

Children may also demonstrate a feature that is very common in young children's first attempts at writing: a willingness to play with letter shapes, to experiment. They will often not have at their command all the letters that they require for a message, so they do the best they can with what they have.

These three features of communication, organisation and experimentation are commonly seen in the writing of young children, and demonstrate that, in fact, they have already probably learnt more about writing than they have left to learn. What is left is really refinement upon the basic features they have already mastered (Newman, 1984).

As they get older, however, children's concepts about writing seem to get narrower in focus (National Writing Project, 1990). Many learn to focus upon the technical aspects of writing such as punctuation, spelling and handwriting, and downplay the communicative aspect of writing. As with reading the development is away from functional considerations and towards greater attention to form.

Again, this development may be a natural part of all-round development in writing. Young children may not concentrate so much upon technical aspects simply because they are unaware of their importance or difficulty. A growth in concentration upon these aspects may indicate a move towards a rounded concept of writing. Yet teachers may make this shift in conception more exaggerated than it need be by over-emphasising technical aspects.

The pattern of development in terms of children's knowledge about processes seems to be broadly similar for both reading and writing. Children begin by acquiring insights into the functions and workings of the processes by being immersed in literate environments and experiencing literacy being used purposefully. When they arrive at school there are new things to learn which are inevitably more technical and involve more detailed concentration. In the process of teaching these features teachers seem often to de-emphasise the functional and meaningful aspects of literacy and this can result in a narrowing rather than a broadening of children's concepts about literacy.

The effects upon learning

It seems logical to suggest that children learn what they are taught. This may not, of course, be exactly what their teachers think they are teaching. Curricula are often hidden rather than overt but have no less pronounced an effect. If children learn in an environment where concentration is placed upon the technical aspects of literacy, upon words and letters, spelling and letter formation, it should not be surprising that they come to believe that these are important things to learn. This would not in itself be a problem. These aspects do, after all, have to be learnt. The problems occur when one considers the effects of this learning upon subsequent learning. Children who receive the message that reading is about deciphering words may give all their concentration to pronouncing these correctly and, especially when reading is not an easy process for them, may have little attention left to give to deriving meaning from these words. The act of reading becomes essentially meaningless for them and is unlikely to be the source of much pleasure. Similarly with

writing, where an over-emphasis on spelling and handwriting can produce children who worry so much about these things they actually write as little as possible and check almost every word with their teacher. This learned helplessness is unlikely to lead to a fully meaningful use of writing later in life.

It appears that teachers need to give some consideration to the messages they give to children about literacy as they teach it. Of course, it is necessary to teach the technical aspects of reading and writing, but it is also essential to develop children's understandings of the essentially meaningful nature of these processes. How can teachers satisfy both these demands?

Implications for teaching

There seem to be three major practical implications each relating to the teaching of both reading and writing. These can be expressed in terms of teaching strategies.

Teach whole processes rather than only parts

The main emphasis in the teaching of reading and writing needs to be placed on the functions of these processes in terms of the communication of meaning rather than on the various sub-processes which constitute them. Only in this way will children be convinced that their teachers really believe that function is more important than form. There are several strategies that might be beneficial in this.

In reading:
(i) Rather than the ubiquitous 'hearing reading' session, which, evidence suggests, almost inevitably emphasises word decoding (Campbell, 1981; Arnold, 1982), an extended use of a conferencing approach (Hornsby et al, 1986), with its emphasis upon discussion of meaning, may have beneficial effects.
(ii) More use of group activities centred around reading may shift the emphasis towards meaning. Research by Sandby-Thomas (1983) has suggested that group teaching of reading has a beneficial effect upon children's comprehension, and studies by Filer (1989) and Davies (1989) have shown that extended experience with group reading-thinking activities, such as cloze and sequencing, can change infant children's reading strategies from grapho-phonic dominant to meaning centred.
(iii) Ensuring that the material available for children to read is primarily meaningful rather than written to repeat certain word combinations or phonic groupings may convince children that it is worth adopting a meaning-based approach.

In writing:
(i) The use of writing conferences (Graves, 1983) focussed around what children have said and wish to say in their writing may shift the emphasis towards meaning.
(ii) The provision of a wider range of audiences for children's writing than simply the teacher may broaden children's concepts of writing functions (National Writing Project, 1989).

(iii) Teachers need also to consider the type of audience they themselves provide for their children's writing. Responses which are primarily in terms of form (spelling, presentation, accuracy) may teach children that these aspects are of prime importance in writing, and need to be countered (or outweighed) by responses to the sense of what children write.

Teach details in the context of wholes

Of course, the technical aspects of reading and writing need to be learnt. But they need to be learnt without children getting the idea that they are the most important things about reading and writing. To ensure this, setting their teaching firmly into whole, meaningful contexts should be more effective than teaching them as discrete elements and expecting children to 'bolt together' these elements into holistic acts of literacy. This 'parts within wholes' approach has wide applicability across areas of literacy teaching. It has been argued that the teaching of the skills of reading for information is more effective if embedded within the context of children's project work (Wray, 1985), and that "the learning ... of skills, specific rules and conventions of English ... are more effectively taught when based on children's own language" (D.E.S., 1978). Even in the area of phonological awareness in which the benefits of regular context-free teaching seem to have been demonstrated (Bryant & Bradley, 1985) it is possible to read an alternative interpretation. Bryant and his colleagues (MacLean et al, 1987) have found a strong positive relationship between knowledge of nursery rhymes and phonological awareness, and it may be that a context-embedded means of developing this awareness is simply to immerse young children in rhymes.

Teach strategies for handling technical demands

Most children will probably need to be taught strategies for dealing with the technical demands of reading and writing and, as long as the suggestion in the previous section, to embed this teaching in meaningful contexts, is adhered to, there is no reason why such teaching should not be done in direct ways. It should also be made as 'aware' as possible, that is, during its course children's attention should continually be drawn to what they are doing and why. Two powerful areas of this teaching are teacher-modelling and the organisation of collaborative work.

Stemming from renewed interest in social-cognitive theories of learning and the work of Vygotsky (Wertsch, 1985) the 'apprenticeship' approach to the teaching of literacy has generated a great deal of interest (Waterland, 1989). An important element of this approach is the modelling of reading and writing processes by the teacher, during the course of which he/she can demonstrate not only how to go about effective reading or writing but also the thoughts and decisions which accompany these.

The benefits of teachers writing in front of children have been discussed by Graves (1983), who states the objective as "to make explicit what children ordinarily can't see: how words go down on paper, and the thoughts that go with the decisions made in the writing." By accompanying the writing with an oral monologue the teacher can open for explicit

consideration the strategies used (and rejected) and assist the children to develop knowledge and awareness of the process.

Similarly in reading, the teacher can model his/her attempts to understand a text by giving an oral commentary as the reading proceeds. Tonjes (1988) describes this 'metacognitive modelling' in operation as a means of teaching reading-for-learning strategies, but there is no reason why a teacher cannot use it to teach skills such as handling books, decoding words or the use of context and picture clues.

Collaborative work can also be used to get children to explicitly consider their reading and writing strategies. As Styles (1989) argues, "Collaboration [in writing] inevitably leads to talking about writing" and, "collaborative ventures lead quite naturally to consideration of the style, content and technical features of writing". While working together on a piece of writing, or discussing each other's pieces, children are compelled to make their thoughts explicit so that not only is attention drawn to content but also to technical features. The activity is thus awareness-enhancing. Likewise to listen to a group of children collaboratively solving the puzzle of a cloze text, or simply a difficult text they are motivated to read, is to be struck by the way they make explicit reference to their own reading strategies and difficulties (Haywood & Wray, 1988).

Conclusion

While the precise nature and role of awareness in the development of literacy is, as yet, disputed territory, it does seem that enough is known to suggest that this is a profitable area for classroom concentration. This paper has tried to suggest parallels between the awareness children seem to have of the reading and writing processes, and also that there are teaching strategies which can be adopted which should have the twin effects of enhancing children's awareness of what they are doing when engaged in literate behaviour, and of ensuring this awareness is helpful to them as they pursue this behaviour. In an area of some uncertainty one conclusion which can be drawn with some confidence is that, whatever the role of awareness in enhancing literacy performance, it can only perform this if it is awareness of the right things, and not of half the story.

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