

Becoming a
Teacher of Reading

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CHAPTER 1

KNOWING ABOUT THE READING PROCESS

Chapter objectives

When you have read this chapter you should have:

- considered your own reading behaviours and how you make sense of a text
- appreciated what different theoretical perspectives can offer to the classroom practice of teachers of reading
- developed an understanding of the theories underpinning practice
- begun to develop the skill of listening to children read analytically.

Introduction

In order to become an effective teacher of reading it is important to be absolutely clear about what it is that we are teaching, and to ask ourselves the questions,

‘What is reading?’ and ‘What happens when we read?’. The answers to these questions are not as straightforward as you might first imagine and many books, learned papers and carefully constructed research projects have been devised in order to find out the answers. There are several aspects to both of these questions. First we need to consider *what* we can find out about the reading process and *how* we can find it out. In recent years, the development of neuroscience as a discipline has enabled researchers to look at what is physically happening in the brain when we read. Other researchers look at what readers actually say when they read aloud, arguing that analysis of the errors made will give some insight into the thought processes. Psychologists look at experimental designs which show either the development of skills over time or the causes of reading success, or more often, of reading failure. Yet other researchers consider the social, cultural and historical expectations on readers and how this impacts on reading behaviours or what readers actually do.

All of these approaches can offer interesting insights into the reading process and how people can best be helped to become readers. This chapter puts forward perspectives on the reading process from a variety of different theoretical viewpoints and considers them from the point of view of an intending teacher of reading. It is important to understand these approaches but even more important to understand how they can help the professional decision making of a teacher. As we will go on to consider in the next chapter, being a teacher is about being able to consider, reflect on and make judgements about policy and research in order to make informed decision about pedagogy. This chapter aims to give teachers of reading an informed basis for those pedagogical decisions about the teaching of reading that they make many hundreds of times each day.

At the outset, it is important to know that each perspective has something to offer the teacher of reading but none can give the whole story. There is much that we do know about the reading process but there is much more that we do not know and it is as important to ask the questions as it is to provide clear answers. Many answers are not clear but lead on to more questions.

Reflecting on your own reading

As a reader, there will often be times when you need to read a text which you find challenging. Remembering those times, it is useful to consider what it is that makes a text challenging to read. Sometimes it is because there are words you have never seen before and do not know how to pronounce, or it may be that you do not understand what the text is about or it may even be that you would prefer to be

doing something completely different at the time! The following activity will help to understand what is happening when you read.



Reflective activity

Read the following text (Milsom, 1969:114) and try to work out what it means:

In the essentially non-feudal world of the thirteenth century and later, the assize affords what may be described as a possessory protection for heirs. The demandant in mort d'ancestor is indeed an heir claiming as such, but not, as in a writ of right, basing his claim upon the seisin of a remote ancestor: it was one of his parents, or their or his brother or sister who has died. The question for the assize comprises three points: had this relative been seised on the day that he died; had he died within a limitation period; was the demandant his nearest heir? If yes to all these, the demandant was put in seisin. The principle was later extended to relations more remote by the writs known as aiel, besaial and cosinage.

I am sure there are no words in that passage which you are not able to read out loud. Some of them might cause you to pause and think a while but for the most part you are able, I imagine, to decode that text fairly well. I wonder how you managed to comprehend it? Most of the words are fairly simple and I imagine that you have an idea of what they mean. Some words, however, will be outside your experience. I do not know what 'seisin' means and so what it means to be 'seised'. I do not know if it has any connection to the word I do know – 'seized'. The word 'affords' in the second line is also rather confusing; in my vocabulary the word 'afford' is something I use when I am going shopping and considering if I should buy something. That does not seem to relate to the way the word is used here and so confuses my meaning-making of the whole text.

As I was reading that text for most of the time the focus of my thinking was on how to make sense of it. The decoding element, for the most part, was subconscious. I was asking all the questions I suggested above and more, and was desperately trying to make connections between what was in the text and what I already know. Finally, I think I have the general gist of what the text is about but could not be very detailed and specific about it. The text was challenging for me to read because it was outside my sphere of experience and knowledge and so I did not have the strategies to make sense of it. Occasionally, what I did

know actually hindered my sense-making processes. I could decode it but not understand it.

Making sense of the text

Goodman (1969) believed that the way to understand the reading process is to look at what readers actually do when they read, and so argued that examining the errors or ‘miscues’ children make when reading aloud will offer a ‘window’ to their thinking processes. Through this he identified three main sources of information that are drawn on when attempting to make sense of a written text. These are:

- Semantic knowledge. If we know the topic of the text, we can draw on our experience and understanding to make sense of what we are reading. We can also use the illustrations and the context of the text to help us understand.
- Syntactic knowledge. This means that, as fluent users of spoken language, we use our knowledge of the patterns and structures of language to predict and work out what comes next. We might not know grammatical terminology but we know what sounds right and have an empathy with the rhythms of natural language. This, so it is argued, is why it is easier to read texts written in longer natural sentences than short simple sentences.
- Graphophonic knowledge. In order to read at any level, we need to have an understanding of the relationship between the marks on the page and the sounds of spoken English.

Goodman claimed that as we read a text we draw on all of these areas of knowledge in varying degrees, according to the text being read, in order to understand. The reading process could therefore be described as a ‘problem-solving activity’ or as Goodman (1967) said, a ‘psycholinguistic guessing game’.

Another proponent of this psycholinguistic view of the reading process is Frank Smith. He (1971) argued that meaning is the driving force in our development of reading. As readers, our first priority is to make sense of the text and so we will use all cues in order to do this. He claimed that fluent readers predominantly use context in order to make meaning.

The key issues of this view of the reading process are that there is essentially no difference between the way in which experienced and beginner readers approach texts, and that learning written language is a similar process to learning spoken language. There is a continuum with spoken language at one end and written language at the other and we move along that continuum in a sense-making process. Reading is constructive; it is the reader who constructs both the text and the meaning so what the reader brings to the text is as important as what lies in the text itself.

For Smith reading is not something that is taught but something that is learned and it is learned because of membership of a literate society. Readers draw on what they already know and make predictions about what the text says. He argued that readers give minimal attention to the visual information of the words on the page (Smith, 1973: 190) and do not use the alphabetic nature of print to decode or sound out unknown words. This was highly controversial, even at the time; reading is seen not as a linear process but a problem-solving one.

It is from these views of reading that the term 'whole language' came, seeing the process of learning to read as best happening through the experience of using whole texts for authentic purposes. The isolation of skills was seen as a way of making life harder for the learner. Smith (1978) identified two essential requirements for learning to read: interesting materials that make sense to the reader and an adult who can guide the learner through the process. This led to an emphasis on the texts that are given to early readers; they should use natural language rather than be written solely for the purpose of teaching using words which can easily be decoded. Waterland (1988) described these as 'free-range' books as opposed to the 'battery books' of many reading schemes.

The 'whole-language approach' was hugely popular amongst teachers and had much impact on pedagogy, although, as is usually the case, not all teachers adopted the approach in its purest form. During this time (the 1980s and 1990s) the teaching of reading became highly political and there was great debate in the media. The key turning point was the publication in 1990 of Martin Turner's claim that a perceived fall in reading standards could be directly attributed to 'whole-language'. Ofsted (1996), reporting on the teaching of reading in central London schools, claimed that practice in schools did not include the systematic teaching of phonics. Were these criticisms justifiable? The psycholinguistic approach to reading, or the whole-language approach, put strong emphasis on the motivation of the reader and the response of the reader to the text and so it is difficult to make a direct link between that and quantifiably measured reading standards. I will say more about the response of the reader to the text in Chapter 3, but the emphasis that Goodman, Smith and others put on the value of meaningful literacy experiences is an important one and should not be marginalised in any consideration of the reading process.

Many cognitive psychologists, however, criticised the psycholinguistic approach for its descriptions of what happens when we read, claiming that they were not based on verifiable data. Our understanding of the reading process develops over time as more and more research is done; as we consider new evidence it is important not to throw the baby out with the bathwater but to consider carefully what can be added to our pedagogical knowledge. Harrison (2004: 35) wrote:

the evidence suggests that for fluent readers the visual processing of text is both fairly complete and very fast, and that, most of the time, engaging in hypothesis-testing behaviour seems to play a minimal role in word recognition.

Rayner and Pollatsek (1989) argued that the reading process follows mainly a 'bottom-up' model but brings in 'top-down' processes when necessary. Technology allows us to record eye movements more accurately and to know where a reader is fixating. It would appear that fluent readers fixate nearly all words and access the meaning of the word that is being fixated before moving on to the next word. This happens, of course, extremely rapidly and the length of the fixation depends on the relative frequency of the word. This appears to contradict the views of Smith and Goodman and places the focus back on individual words rather than whole texts.



Reflective activity

Think back to your own journey towards becoming a reader. Who taught you? How did you learn? What did you read in those early days?

Can you relate your story to anything of the psycholinguistic approach that has been described so far? It is likely that some things will ring bells but other things will not apply to your experience. Many people will say that they did learn from books that were not part of real schemes but still had regular phonic lessons. Others will have followed a reading scheme but had lots of opportunities to play at literacy, for example in the role-play area.

Reading the words

Think back to the activity at the start of this chapter. Whatever issues you identified, you will have spent some time reading the words which together formed the whole text. How did you go about doing that? Look carefully at this page in the book you are reading and consider what it contains. You will notice that it is full of words which are comprised of letters; there are 26 letters and the words on the page are made up of those letters put together in various combinations. Those 26 letters are known as the alphabet and so our system of print in English is alphabetic – it consists of the letters of the alphabet. The written language or the orthography of English is alphabetic. This is not the case for all languages. You are probably aware that other written systems, for example that of China or Japan, are not alphabetic but for now we will focus on the English alphabetic system.

The 26 letters of the alphabet are used to represent the sounds of spoken English. Immediately you will realise that this makes for complications as there are more sounds in spoken English than there are letters, but we will return to this in Chapters 6 and 7. The English language is not transparent: there is no straightforward correspondence between the letters and sounds and so processes are followed to make

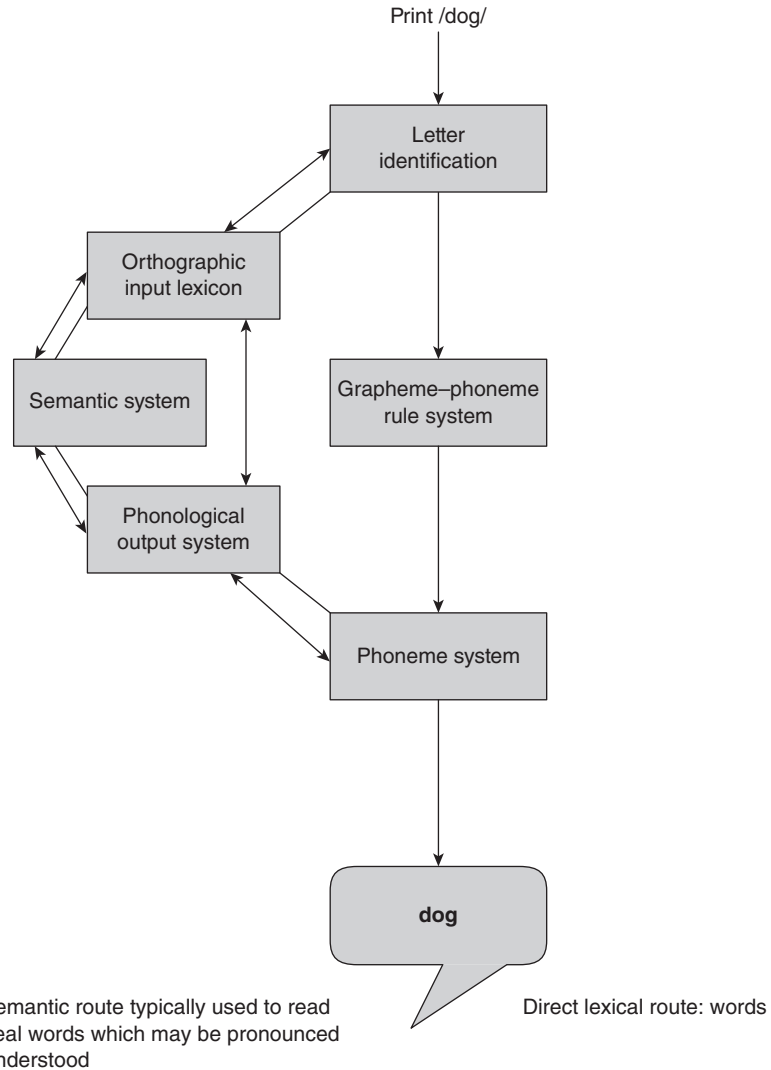


Figure 1.1 Dual-route cascade model of word recognition

Source: adapted from Coltheart et al. (2001)

sense of the complexity of the written word. Cognitive–psychological approaches to the reading process believe that the starting point for readers are those individual letters; readers relate those to the sounds of spoken language, blend the sounds together to make words and so come to the meaning. This is in direct contrast to the starting point of the psycholinguistic approach described above.

Psychologists (Coltheart et al., 2001) refer to what is described as the ‘dual-route cascade model’ of reading; this identifies two routes or processes that we follow in order to work out what a word says.

The direct lexical route means that we focus on the letters and use our knowledge to relate those letter shapes to the sounds of spoken language. We put those sounds together and come up with another sound unit which gives us a phonological identity of the word; this means we can pronounce the word because we have access to the orthographic representation. However, in order to understand the word we need to relate it to our bank of known words and understand what it refers to by using the semantic system. The second route is the ‘non-lexical’ one where we use our phonic knowledge to translate a string of letters into a spoken, or pronounced word. This is when children ‘sound out’ words. The word may be enunciated but not necessarily understood.

These routes are not in competition; they complement each other and the route that the brain follows in the reading process depends on what is being read and how it relates to previous knowledge. Flynn and Stainthorp (2006) consider this a useful theoretical framework for investigating the processes children need to develop in order to become skilled word-readers. It is important to remember though that this model comes from analysis of skilled readers, and that beginner readers may not have access to all aspects of knowledge assumed in this model. The teacher of reading needs to evaluate the model and see if and how those ‘knowledges’ can be taught or learned.

Consider how the model relates to pedagogy. It is clear that for it to work in practice, children need to know certain things:

- the relationship between the written letter shapes and the sounds of spoken language
- a bank of known words
- the experience of relating word to objects, events, feelings etc. and the understanding of the symbolic nature of language
- the ability to hear sounds and to see visual patterns
- the motivation and interest to engage in the process, for example realising that the written symbols have an interest or a purpose.

These are the required areas of knowledge which underpin much pedagogy of reading and they can be simplified into two broad aspects of reading: decoding and comprehension. The two are interdependent and neither can work alone. If readers

cannot decode a text independently they will never be able to understand it and I am sure you have had the experience of being able to decode a text without understanding its meaning at all. I hope that is not your experience as you are reading this! This relationship between decoding and comprehension is often expressed in the following way:

$$\text{Reading Comprehension} = \text{Decoding} \times \text{Language Comprehension}$$

Behaviour as a reader is determined by our ability in both of those components. We can be very good at comprehending but not so good at decoding; we can decode almost perfectly but not understand much; we can decode and understand or we can do neither. Both decoding and comprehension work on a continuum and readers can be placed at different places on both of those. This is demonstrated in the 'Simple View of Reading' (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). Decoding is 'efficient, context-free word recognition' and comprehension is 'the ability to access word meanings and produce sentence and discourse interpretations' (Cain, 2010: 214). Notice that in this model reading comprehension requires that both decoding and language comprehension are present; reading does not occur when one is not present. In practical terms, this means that the very young child who reads along with an adult and enjoys a story is not reading and neither is the student who reads a challenging academic article but does not understand a word! This contrasts with other models of reading which will be discussed later in the chapter.

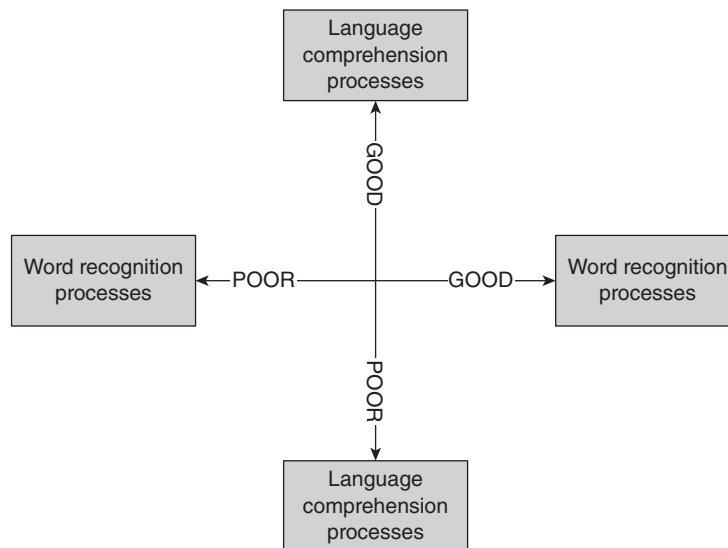


Figure 1.2 The simple view of reading

Source: DfES (2006a: 53)

The simple view of reading provides a useful framework for teachers to identify where children are on the continuum of both aspects of reading and as such provide appropriate interventions. In Chapter 12 we will discuss these further.

Staged models of reading

It is clear that becoming a reader does not all happen at once but that efficient word-reading is both fast and automatic. There has been much theoretical work on creating staged models of reading development which identify the different stages that readers go through as they become readers. The important question is: do all readers go through the same stages of development? You will have seen that the models of reading described above use the behaviours of skilled readers to construct the model; staged models argue that there are real qualitative differences between beginner and experienced readers. These differences are in the processes that are used rather than the control readers have over the processes. Stage models see word identification as the key to comprehension, and so knowledge of orthography (written symbols) is more important than knowledge of syntax (grammar) or semantics (meaning).

There are many stage models of reading development but we are going to focus on just two: Ehri and Adams. Ehri (1999) was intrigued by the way in which experienced readers can just look at a word and know its meaning without any need to decode it and asked how beginner readers developed that ability. Her research is her attempt to find the answer to these questions. For Ehri, the term 'sight word-reading' was crucial and she defined that as the process of accessing words in memory. It is important to remember that the term 'sight word-reading' does not relate to flash card teaching or the learning of words by their shape.

The key to sight word-reading, so Ehri believed, was a process she described as 'connection forming'. These connections link the written form of the word to the sound and meaning and the connections are stored in the reader's word memory or lexicon. Different types of connection take precedence at different stages of reading development, thus the notion of a staged theory. Ehri identified four phases through which readers go as they become skilled readers and these stages will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

So far we have seen that models of reading acquisition have placed an emphasis on autonomous processing through connection-making and that context does not have such a great effect on word recognition. You may also have noticed that the theorists we have discussed so far talk about *word* reading. Stanovich (1995) broadened out this idea when he said that the main purpose of reading is comprehension, although word recognition is central to this. Stanovich argues that the process whereby a word activates the lexical memory, as described above, is the first process

and following this comes the second process of comprehension of the text. However, because this is dependent on the first process it is a 'constrained reasoning'; the reasoning is constrained by the ability to recognise the word quickly.

You may remember that Smith, the psycholinguist, argued that fluent readers pay little attention to the visual features of text and how that has been contradicted by recent research. Research by Juel (1991) showed that in fact skilled readers can only predict accurately from the context about 25 per cent of words and these words tend to be very high-frequency function words such as 'is' or 'the'. Only about 10 per cent of content words (those which carry the meaning such as nouns, adjectives and verbs) are predictable and so need to be decoded. This means that rather than seeing the reader as constructing the meaning of a text, the text itself limits the meaning (Perfetti and McCutcheon, 1987).

Adams (1990), after reviewing much of the current research on the reading process, argued that through their exposure to words, children build up a network of relationships between letters and sounds. As they sound out words, so they focus on the order of individual letters in words. For Adams children cannot learn to read until they can recognise individual letters. However, for Adams it is vitally important that this 'bottom-up' learning is done in a context which gives understanding of the forms and functions of text. She says.

Phonological awareness, letter recognition facility, familiarity with spelling patterns, spelling-sound relations, and individual words must be developed in concert with real reading and real writing and with deliberate reflection on the forms, functions and meanings of texts. (Adams, 1990: 422)

In Adams' words we are beginning to see a view that both perspectives have something to offer the teacher of reading, and the work of Bussis et al. (1985) can make further contribution to this.

This research looked at 26 children in different classes in America and found that the children read in one of two different ways. Some children read for speed or momentum and others read for accuracy. Consider how you would go about assembling a bookcase: some people would lay out all the pieces carefully and read through the instructions; others would just dive straight in and start putting different bits together, keeping in mind the final product of a bookcase. The difference in reading styles of children is a little bit like that. Neither approach is perfect: children reading for speed would misread a word and that would make them go off on a tangent, reading something very different from what was actually on the page. Those reading for accuracy would read word-by-word with little expression or fluency and so would often fail to appreciate the story at all. In order to be an effective reader, there needs to be a balance of both approaches.

The idea of different approaches to reading was developed by Barrs (in Dombey et al., 1998) who identified the 'big shapes' and the 'little shapes'. Big shapes are

things like syntax, semantics and also knowledge of the type of text that is being read. Little shapes are letters, sounds, spelling and punctuation. Barrs described reading as ‘a multi-level process in which the reader attends to both the big shapes and the small shapes, confirming at each of these levels hypotheses that have been set up at the other’ (Dombey and Moustafa, 1998: 2).

This definition draws together several of the ideas that have already been proposed. The use of the word ‘hypotheses’ immediately relates back to the psycholinguistic notion of a ‘guessing game’, but in Barr’s model the guessing is much more explicitly informed. It is almost like a jigsaw where the little shapes fit inside the big shapes; the merging of the shapes is always easier when there is a clear picture of the whole. Think back to Adams’ view that it is important to place the teaching of phonics and alphabet skills within authentic reading experiences.

Review and reflect

I hope that you are now beginning to understand that there is no single model that fully explains reading processes. Both of these theoretical positions discussed so far have something to offer the teacher of reading and both have weaknesses as well as strengths. Consider all that you have observed in schools which might be described as the teaching of reading and try to place each activity within a theoretical framework, justifying your position. It might be helpful to create something like Table 1.1:

Table 1.1

Classroom activity	Theoretical perspective	Justification
Reading a story out loud to the class	Psycholinguistic	Giving the children the opportunity to hear written language and to become attuned to its rhythms
Building a collection of words with the long vowel phoneme /ow/	Cognitive psychological	Part of systematic phonic teaching of grapheme–phoneme correspondences to develop skill of decoding

The purpose of this activity is not just to attach a theoretical label to classroom practice but to help you, as teachers of reading, to understand why certain pedagogies are useful and how they contribute to the teaching of reading. If teaching is to be recognised and valued as a profession, all teachers need to be able to explain why they carry out certain practices in their classrooms and how those activities are supported by research.

More than words

You may have noticed in the discussion so far that the role of the text has played an important role within each theoretical perspective and each of them views the text slightly differently. For the psycholinguist the text is crucial as it supports the problem-solving meaning-making role of the reader. As each reader makes sense of a text and responds as an individual so the text is constructed in a way which holds meaning for that reader. Knowledge and understanding of the big shape of not only the single text but also the whole genre is vital to that reading process.

In the cognitive psychological perspective the text is more of a static entity and it is the reader's task to access the meaning hidden within the text. This is done by decoding each word and coming to an understanding of the words before putting the words together to see the text as a whole. Cognitive psychologists talk about 'word-reading' rather than text-reading and much of what they discuss is related to the 'small shapes'. In fact, at the start of the twenty-first century, it is government policy that synthetic phonics should be taught as the first strategy to be used when attempting to read an unknown word. We will return to that in later chapters but I mention it now to make the point that word-reading through phonics is the current dominant pedagogical strategy.

Davis (2013) argues against this current policy and disputes the claim that phonics alone can be used to teach reading. All phonic schemes claim to teach grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) and the skills of blending for reading and segmenting for writing. Miskin (1999) says, 'The synthetic approach teaches children to blend phonemes ... into words for reading.'

Davis questions the use of the terms 'sound' and 'phoneme' as synonyms of each other, arguing that linguistically the phoneme is a more abstract concept. In phonic teaching it is usually said that a phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that can affect a change in meaning but that is not always the case. When my children were young they were used to having a 'bath' (long vowel sound) with Mummy but a 'bath' (short vowel sound) with Daddy. The sound was changed but the meaning stayed exactly the same and was understood completely by my children. In Davis's terms the ideas expressed by the word 'transcend the acoustic characteristics of the sounds we hear when people speak' (2013: 21). Thus, Davis argues, the use of the term 'word' is problematic. We can blend sounds together and make another composite sound but this is not necessarily a word because the meaning of a word is not necessarily found in its pronunciation. Several examples are given when the sound of a word is exactly the same but the meanings are very different, for example, mints and mince, paws and pause, nun and none. The meaning cannot be understood without reference to a context. The implication of Davis's argument is that a reader frequently needs to know the meaning of a word before they know how to pronounce it. We will return to this argument in Chapters 5 and 6 but for

now it is enough to say that in attempting to define the reading process it is necessary to go beyond the word.



Reflective activity

Read the first verse of the poem 'Jabberwocky' by Lewis Carroll.

Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

After reading reflect on your understanding of the poem by considering the following questions:

- What do you think this text is about? Explain to somebody else or draw a picture of what it means to you.
- What helped you to understand?
- How did you know how to pronounce each word?
- What difference did reading the poem aloud make to how much you understood it?

Compare your answers with those of a friend and discuss the similarities and differences. What does this tell you about the reading process?

Sociocultural perspective

It may well be that when you compared responses to the activity above with a friend there were some differences in what you came up with. What sort of differences were they? Which one of you was correct? You might feel rather indignant at that last question, feeling that there was no correct response because it is such an individualistic thing. You would, of course, be right but children are not always given the luxury of giving individualistic responses, particularly in formal assessment tasks. Why do you think this is?

So far in this chapter we have broadened out our considerations from the letter to the word and then to the text. The sociocultural perspective widens the lens even

more to focus on the community within which the reading is taking place. Moll (2000) defines culture as a set of practices which are adopted by a group of people and in this theoretical framework the attention moves from the individual reader to the social and cultural context. The culture in which each of us operates is so completely a part of us that it is challenging to step aside and attempt to recognise what it is that shapes our thinking and our behaviour. This is what we are going to try and do in relation to the way reading is viewed and practised.

Those researchers approaching the study of the reading process from a sociocultural perspective tend to adopt a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on the fields of anthropology, sociology and sociolinguistics. Reports of research tend to be ethnographic accounts or 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of individual or group reading behaviours (for example, Solsken 1993; Au 1997; Gregory and Williams, 2000). The implications of this perspective for the teacher of reading is that learning to read becomes more of a process of acculturation rather than just about learning a set of skills.

Bruner (1996) used the ideas of 'subjectivity' and 'intersubjectivity' to explore this issue. 'Subjectivity' is our personal take on a situation or event and 'intersubjectivity' is the way in which we know the minds of other members of our community. Children learn to become readers in almost an apprenticeship model; it is through being members of a community that is located in a social, cultural and historical place that they learn what reading is used for, how it is valued and what it can offer them. Children learn what it means to be a reader by seeing readers within their own cultural context. This will impact on their motivation and emotional responses to reading and also on the intellectual and academic demands that reading places on them. Research by the Booktrust (Gleed, 2013) showed that a significant minority of adults had negative attitudes to reading: 56 per cent of 18–30-year-olds preferred the Internet and social media to reading books and 64 per cent of them thought the Internet will replace books in the next 20 years. An interesting aspect of this research was that the higher the socio-economic group that someone was in, the more likely they were to read. There was also a significant link between reading history; those whose parents encouraged them to read as a child are more likely to read as an adult and those who enjoyed reading at school were more likely to read more as an adult than those who didn't. What an important role the teacher of reading has! Hall (2003: 135) says: 'As literacy educators we are hugely interested in improving our learners' human capacity to use that symbol system. But we must recognise that symbol system as constructed historically and culturally'.

Language, both spoken and written, is the means by which meaning is constructed and shaped and that meaning is determined by the culture within which it is formed. The work of Vygotsky (1978) foregrounded this view and it is developed further in the work of Bruner. Bruner (1996) argued that mind and thought are shaped by culture, and indeed, could not exist without it. The implication of this is that the focus on the

individual found in both the cognitive psychological and the psycholinguistic perspectives is superseded by the view that learning is a social process. How does that work when we relate it to the process of learning to read? When I read a book I am using a symbolic system which has developed and been refined over many many years and I am encountering ideas which similarly have been formulated, defined and recorded over many years. I am entering into the ways of thinking of others. The American author, Joyce Carol Oates, once said, 'Reading is the sole means by which we slip, involuntarily, often helplessly, into another's skin, another's voice, another's soul'.

In this way, children assimilate the reading behaviours and attitudes of those around them as they grow up. Through a sort of apprenticeship model of learning, children come to appreciate what reading is for and what it can offer them. They experience reading through other people – reading to them, reading with them or just reading. They become part of what has been described as a 'community of practice'.

The issue is that for some children the literacy they find, and in which they are assessed, in school is different from that which they have encountered at home. It may be that this is an explanation for the findings of the Booktrust research. Cole (1990) supported this view when he argued that some children have difficulties with reading at school, not because of the acquisition of cognitive skills but because of the nature of the tasks and activities they are required to do in the classroom. For Freebody and Freiberg (2001) it was an even stronger issue, for they argued that 'school literacies' have come to define what we mean by 'literacy'. The work of Au (1997) defined the classroom as a culture and a context for learning and, as such, a community of practice. This means that within the classroom there are reading behaviours and attitudes which are particular to that classroom or school. In order to be an effective reader within that classroom, children need to adopt the values and behaviours of that cultural context. The essential consequence of this argument is that there are many different definitions of reading and ways of being a reader.

The next chapter will look at the work of Shirley Brice Heath (1983) and Eve Gregory (1996) in more detail but for now it is enough to say that both pieces of research found evidence to support Freebody and Freiberg's view. They found that reading in school, despite being in many ways more limiting, was the expected and so validated reading. Freebody and Freiberg go on to criticise those adopting a cognitive psychological perspective (such as Adams discussed earlier) for being prescriptive about reading behaviours rather than starting from where the children are. Duke (2000) found that there were significant differences in both the reading environments and the experiences offered to children between different socio-economic groups. She carried out a quantitative analysis of American schools and found that not only were the resources less plentiful in low socio-economic status classrooms but also pupils were given less rich opportunities for reading. The research by the Booktrust cited above bears this out in an English context, finding

that children in lower socio-economic circumstances are less likely to see either the value or the pleasure of reading books.

Moll (2000) coined the term ‘funds of knowledge’ to identify the underlying knowledge of everyday activities in the home. In articulating these he argues that the gap between home and school may be narrowed as schools and teachers become more aware of the skill and knowledge base of children from different cultural and social backgrounds. He argues that if classroom activities are devised which draw on these ‘funds of knowledge’ pupils will be more empowered. Au (1997) adopted these principles in developing a project with elementary schools in low-income communities in Hawaii. Adopting familiar practices, Au aimed to increase the sense of ownership of reading so that pupils saw that reading could be an important part of their everyday lives. The consequence of this would be that pupils would be empowered to reach higher levels of reading because the reading behaviours they encounter in school are similar to those they encounter at home.

Mark wanted to be a lorry driver like his dad and was marking time at school until he could do this. At the age of 11 his reading was way below age expectations. Using the Highway Code and the regulations for transport of freight Mark became a fluent reader. It was because the reading behaviours he was now experiencing in school paralleled those he saw his dad engaging in at home and at work that he saw reading as a relevant and necessary skill, and so reached higher levels than when he was following numerous intervention schemes and reading texts which were at his reading level but below his interest level.

Consideration of the sociopolitical perspective gives teachers of reading a greater awareness of the value of beginner readers knowing the purposes that reading can hold for them personally and its relevance to their lives and experiences. It is apparent that at the start of the twenty-first century this theoretical perspective does not hold much significance. However, the importance of authentic activities and the centrality of meaning remain crucial to the development of readers.



Reflective activity

Talk to as many people as you can who are part of the community of a local school. You might like to talk with parents, teaching assistants, lunchtime supervisors and children. Ask them about the sort of reading they do. It might be helpful to ask them to list everything they have read in the past 24 hours. Don't forget to include all sorts of texts and not just printed books.

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Look at your list and consider the type of texts that are being read, the types of reading and the contexts in which reading takes place.

Now think about all the reading that pupils are asked to do during one day in the class where you are currently based. Again consider each reading activity in relation to the type of text, the type of reading and the context of the reading. Identify the similarities and differences.

How could the reading activities in school be modified to reflect more closely the reading of the community?

Sociopolitical perspective

There is no doubt that the written language plays an important part in the way decisions are made in the world today. Communication takes place digitally and through print and as news is transmitted and values and beliefs conveyed, this communication can be nuanced by the means of communication. Since the very beginnings of literacy this debate has raged; there were those who thought that if people were able to read they could be controlled more easily because those holding power could control what was read by the people. There were others who argued that enabling all people to read would be a liberating force as they would encounter different perspectives and opinions.



Reflective activity

List all the sources of news that you can think of – television channels, newspapers, tweets, blogs and websites. When there is a major news item emerging where would you instinctively go to find out information? Which source of information would you consider to be the most ‘reliable’? Is this because you trust that source to be telling the ‘truth’? Look at all those sources and try and articulate what particular perspective each might put on a news story. How do you know this? How would you discern that perspective?

Reflections such as those above soon make it apparent that reading is much more than decoding the symbols on the page into sound, more than using existing knowledge to make meaning of a text and more than reading texts which are socially and culturally authentic. Reading, and particularly learning to read, is a highly political

activity. That might seem a very strange thing to say, especially when you try and relate it to a typical primary classroom but let's consider that point a little further.

Powell et al. (2001: 780) said that teachers of reading can either teach reading as a series of skills and codes or they can teach it 'as if the words matter'. A sociopolitical perspective on the reading process argues that no text is neutral but carries a significance that is dependent on a particular perception of reality and of what is important. Learning to read involves learning that texts have power and exercise that power over knowledge, belief, attitudes and values. The words matter because of the values they convey. I am writing this on the day after the London Marathon. Mo Farah, an Olympic and world champion for track events, ran the marathon for the first time ever and came eighth. In my mind, that was a great achievement. One newspaper, however, reported that his 'debut in the race proved a step too far as he trailed home in eighth place' (Mail Online, 2014). The words used in that short remark serve to impose a particular negative judgement of the race and can make the reader view Farah's achievement as a failure. The words chosen by the writer of that article mattered a lot in the influence put to bear on the reader's understanding of the situation.

Effective readers are consciously aware of this impact of the text and the term 'critical literacy' is used for the way in which readers make this explicit. Morgan et al. (1996: 9) said that:

Critical literacy is concerned with enabling us to take particular texts and explore the ways in which these texts are implicated in making the world the way it is; in helping us to keep the world the way it is; and in coercing us to see the world in certain ways rather than others.

In other theoretical perspectives the relationship between the reader and the text is implied or constructed in the way in which reading is defined, and this was discussed earlier in the chapter. This relationship is crucial within the sociopolitical perspective for it is this which determines the nature of the reading act. Bloome (1993) explores the social relationship that is set up between the author of the text and the reader. Let us try and understand that by considering the relationship I, as the author of this text, and you, as the reader, have. In order to do this there are certain aspects of this text which need to be looked at more closely.



Reflective activity

- Look at the language I have chosen to use – the pronouns, the tense, the choice of vocabulary, the tone and the style of writing. How would you describe this? Is the text including you or excluding you?

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- What sort of identity am I establishing for myself? If you do not know me, what assumptions could you make about me? What clues are there about that?
- What sort of identity am I establishing for you as a reader? Are there any clues about the sort of person this text seems to be written for?

I would love to know the answers you give to those questions but I hope that in answering them you are beginning to see that the author of a text constructs a particular relationship between the text, the writer and the reader. That relationship can be challenged and changed by different readers. One reader might find this text simply written and clear but another might find it simplistic and patronising. The role I create for the reader may be changed by the reader's interpretation of particular linguistic and stylistic features.

In this chapter I have written about four different theoretical perspectives on the reading process. Do you, as the reader, have any idea which of those perspectives is closest to my own views? If you think you know, what are the clues in the text that lead you to believe that? Would another reader agree with you? This text is also being written within a particular social and political context where there are many different views expressed on the teaching of reading. Consider this sentence from earlier on in this chapter:

If teaching is to be recognised and valued as a profession, all teachers need to be able to explain why they carry out certain practices in their classrooms and how those activities are supported by research.

How am I positioning myself within the current political situation in relation to the teaching of reading? Consider the choice of words I made and how those words relate to each other; reflect on the structure of the sentence and so the emphasis placed on the first word of the sentence; look at the verbs and the tenses used and think how those portray a perspective on the present reality.

Reading in that way is critical reading; it is reading with an awareness that texts are constructed within a context and from a particular perspective. It is an awareness that language can, and usually is, used to manipulate attitudes, beliefs and feelings. Effective readers, argues the sociopolitical view, are those who understand that texts can construct certain effects. It is apparent, however, that many readers do not read in such a way. Have you ever heard somebody say to you, 'It must be true – I read it in a book'? Readers such as this are disempowered in a modern democratic world. It is not the ability to read that is empowering but the ways in which reading is used (Scribner and Cole, 1981). Within a sociopolitical perspective reading is as much about

learning to decode or to comprehend as about learning about identities and values. This has implications for classroom practice which will be returned to in Chapter 4.

Conclusion

Why has this book begun with a consideration of these four theoretical perspectives? Why is it important for teachers of reading to know about this?

I believe it is important because teachers of reading need to know exactly what it is they are teaching and the impact that the way they teach reading will have on children's lives as readers. Print is a devised system and so has to be taught. It has evolved and come under many influences over the years and readers need to be aware of how and where these changes arise. The very act of reading defines the relationship between the text and its author and also between the ideas and values embedded within the text. Reading is not a neutral act and so cannot be taught in a neutral way. Teachers of reading need to know what it is they are teaching and what reading can offer children both as inheritors of culture and creators of meaning.

In order to be effective teachers of reading, teachers also need to be conscious of what reading means to them and how they perceive and use reading in their own lives. This is the focus of the next chapter.

The key messages of this chapter are:

- the reading process is very complex and multilayered
- understanding the reading process can be approached from a variety of different perspectives and each offers a particular viewpoint
- the teaching of reading is a value-laden activity and teachers need to be aware of their own positioning within the value systems
- teachers of reading need to understand the theoretical underpinning of their pedagogical choices and so be able to justify those choices
- political decisions on policy do not always stem from an awareness of all theoretical positions.

Further reading

Hall, K. (2003) *Listening to Stephen Read; Multiple Perspectives on Literacy*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

In this book Hall gave a transcript of a child's reading to several different reading 'experts', who each approach reading in a different way. She uses their analyses to provide a commentary on the different theoretical perspectives on reading. In contextualising theory, she makes it much easier to understand.

Clay, M.M. (1991) *Becoming Literate: The Construction of Inner Control*. Auckland: Heinemann.

This is an old book but a classic and important for a deep understanding of the reading process. Clay draws on her observations of children to construct a theory of reading in which children build on past experiences to become readers.

Cain, K. (2010) *Reading Development and Difficulties*. Chichester: Blackwell.

This book lies firmly within the cognitive psychology approach but aims to provide an overview of reading for those wishing to study it.