NCTE National Council of Teachers of English

A Professional Association of Educators in English Studies, Literacy, and Language Arts

On Reading, Learning to Read, and Effective Reading Instruction: An Overview of What We Know and How We Know It

by the Commission on Reading of the National Council of Teachers of English

There is an ongoing debate about reading. What is it? How is it learned? How is it most effectively taught? The Commission on Reading of the National Council of Teachers of English has compiled the following overview of what the profession knows about reading, learning to read, and effective reading instruction and referenced some of the large body of research that has given rise to this view. It then outlines policies that promote learning to read.

Reading and the Reading Process

Reading is a complex and purposeful sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic process in which readers simultaneously use their knowledge of spoken and written language, their knowledge of the topic of the text, and their knowledge of their culture to construct meaning with text. [1] Each of these types of knowledge impacts the sense that readers construct through print. Readers easily comprehend text with familiar language but are less successful at comprehending text with unfamiliar language. [2] Readers easily comprehend text on familiar topics but are less successful at comprehending texts on unfamiliar topics. [3] At the same time, the interpretations readers construct with texts as well as the types of texts they read are influenced by their life experiences. [4]

The sociocultural, cognitive, and linguistic systems readers use to make sense of print are largely intuitive. For example, few are aware that they use their life experiences to interpret text, and that as life experiences differ from reader to reader and from community to community so, too, do interpretations of a given text. Similarly, few are aware that when they are reading about statistics they understand the phrase *all the figures on the right hand side of the table* means numerals in rows and columns, but when they are reading about crafts they understand the same phrase means figurines on a piece of furniture; [5] nevertheless, they do.

The systems readers use to make sense of print are interrelated and partially redundant. For instance, in the sentence *There are some books on the table*, the words *some* and *are* and the letter *s* in *books* signal that there is more than one book. This redundancy permits readers to sample print, using only what they need to construct meaning effectively and efficiently. [6] Readers also use these interrelated systems to make predictions concerning what the print says, to confirm or disconfirm their predictions, and to connect these meanings to form a coherent understanding of the text.

Readers read for different purposes. Sometimes they read for pleasure. Sometimes they read for information. Their reason for reading impacts the way they read. They may skim or read carefully depending on why they are reading. Throughout this process, readers monitor the meaning they are constructing. When the text does not meet their purposes they may switch to another text. Readers expect what they are reading to make sense. They use a repertoire of strategies, such as rethinking, re-reading or reading on to clarify ideas, to make sure they understand what they read in order to accomplish their purposes.

Writers also contribute to how well readers are able to read a text. The writer's language and knowledge of the topic as well as skill in using written language influence the reader's ability to construct meaning. The degree to which readers and writers share the same understanding of the language and the topic of the text influences how well they communicate with each other.

Learning to Read

Learning to read is a life-long process. People begin developing knowledge that they will use to read during their earliest

interactions with families and communities. In their pre-school years, children learn to understand and use spoken language and learn about their world through meaningful interactions with others.

Children also learn about written language as more experienced readers provide meaningful demonstrations of reading and writing. [7] Some of the earliest demonstrations they receive include reading environmental print (such as the word stop on a stop sign), making and using grocery lists, writing and reading notes, and reading and discussing children's stories and letters from friends.

Through these demonstrations by others, children learn the pleasures and purposes of print. They also learn to read and write their names and the names of family members. In addition, they learn vocabulary typical of written language, such as how different types of texts such as grocery lists, personal letters, and fairy tales are structured. They also learn basic concepts of print such as the message of print in books continues across pages. The more children interact with spoken and written language, the better readers they become. [8]

As children learn to read continuous text, they use their intuitive knowledge of spoken language and their knowledge of the topic to figure out print words in text. [9] For example, if a more experienced reader reads *Catch me, catch me, if you can.* to young children while pointing to the print, children use their memory of what was read to them to help them to figure out which words in the sentence represent *catch* and *me*.

As children learn to read new text independently they continue using their intuitive knowledge of spoken language, their growing knowledge of written language, and their knowledge of the topic of the text to construct meaning. Consequently, beginning readers read words in the context of a story with familiar language on a familiar topic better than they read words out of context, as in lists or on flash cards. [10] For example, a beginning reader may read *horse* as *house* when encountering it in a list but read it correctly in a story about cowboys. Beginning readers also comprehend stories with familiar language better than stories with unfamiliar language such as unfamiliar "book" language [11] or contrived language such as the language in decodable texts. [12]

At the same time, as children learn to read more and more words in context, they use their developing knowledge of patterns of letter-sound correspondences in familiar words to figure out how to pronounce unfamiliar words. [13] For example, children who have learned to read *small* and *smile* and *cart* and *part*, can figure out that *sm-* is pronounced */sm/* and *-art* is pronounced */art/* and then figure out how to pronounce *smart*.

The more children read, the better readers they become. [14] Children read more when they have access to engaging, age appropriate books, magazines, newspapers, computers and other reading materials. They read more on topics that interest them than on topics that do not interest them.

Reading supports writing development [15] and writing supports reading development. [16] For example, through reading readers learn the power of a strong introduction and eventually use such knowledge as they write their own pieces. Conversely, writing develops awareness of the structures of language, the organization of text, and spelling patterns which in turn contributes to reading proficiency.

Learning to read in one language accelerates learning to read in other languages. [17] When readers learn to read text written in a language they understand, they transfer an intuitive understanding of what reading is and how to read when reading in other languages.

Children vary in the experiences they bring to learning to read, including different cultures, background knowledge, oral and written languages, experiences with print, [18] and access to print. [19] Nevertheless, all readers use their life experiences, their knowledge of the topic, and their knowledge of oral and written language to make sense of print and all learners benefit from instruction that helps them make sense of print. [20]

Readers continue to grow in their ability to make sense of an increasing variety of texts on an increasing variety of topics throughout their lives as they learn more spoken and written language, acquire more knowledge on an ever-expanding variety of topics, and have more and more life experiences.

Effective Reading Instruction

Effective reading instruction helps learners make sense of written language. [21] It builds on what learners know at any given time to help them learn more. Effective instruction is grounded in a professional knowledge of how we read and how we learn to read. It is best provided by knowledgeable, caring teachers who organize instruction to meet the varying needs of all their students. [22]

Teachers provide effective reading instruction when they:

- Expect all students to achieve. [23]
- Know their students as individuals, including their interests, their attitudes about reading, and their school, home, and community experiences.
- Carefully observe each student's reading in multiple contexts in order to provide appropriate instruction and monitor progress.
- Create a risk-free environment that supports social interaction, open discussion of ideas, and multiple perspectives.
- Teach students about reading within the context of authentic reading using texts with authentic language.
- Read to students daily using a variety of text types, including various types of fiction and non fiction and multicultural literature, on a variety of topics to build their students' familiarity with written language and their background knowledge on a variety of topics.
- Use a variety of instructional groupings, including whole group, small group and individual instruction, to provide multiple learning experiences. [24]
- Use multiple instructional methods such as shared reading [25], guided reading, and literature discussion circles, as appropriate for their students.
- Focus on the ideas represented by written language rather than the words on the page. [26]
- Build background knowledge of topics and language that enables students to understand what they read. [27]
- Teach before-, during-, and after-reading strategies for constructing meaning of written language, including demonstrations and think alouds.
- Encourage students to use effective reading strategies such as self-monitoring for meaning and self-correcting when meaning breaks down. [28]
- Provide specific feedback to students to support their reading development.
- Provide opportunities for inquiry and language study, including vocabulary, word and text structures, and spelling patterns, that emerge from authentic reading experiences. [29]
- Provide regular opportunities for students to respond to reading through discussion, writing, art, drama, storytelling, music, and other creative expressions.
- Provide daily opportunities for students to read books of their own choice in school. [30]
- Provide daily opportunities for students to write on topics of their own choice in school. [31]
- Provide regular opportunities for students to work together to learn through reading and writing.
- Build partnerships with families to read and write regularly at home. [32]
- Provide regular opportunities for students to engage in a variety of authentic literacy experiences in social studies, science, math, and other curricula areas. [33]
- Provide regular opportunities for students to reflect on their learning. [34]
- Provide ongoing support to students who need additional instruction.
- Gradually release instructional responsibility to support independent reading. [35]
- Reflect on their students' progress and their own teaching practices in order to make changes that meet the needs of students.

Policies That Promote Learning to Read

Schools, school districts, and governmental and non-governmental agencies promote reading achievement when they:

- Respect teachers as professionals, value their knowledge of the students and community they serve, and encourage them to develop and adjust lessons according to the instructional needs of their students.
- Establish and maintain an instructional materials selection policy through which educators with knowledge of the reading process, how readers learn to read, and effective literacy instruction guide the selection of reading instructional materials, including trade books and technological resources, for the schools for which they are

responsible. Those involved in the process should have no commercial interests in the outcome of the process.

- Provide learners with a wide variety of engaging, age-appropriate reading materials, free of stereotypes and compatible with community values, to read for pleasure and information.
- Provide learners with a rich curriculum in social studies, science, math, fine arts, and other subject matters so they can comprehend reading materials on an ever-expanding variety of topics.
- Provide learners who have not yet learned to read in any language with beginning reading instruction in a language in which they are competent.
- Provide teachers with a wide variety of reading materials with authentic language, free of stereotypes and compatible with community values, to use for instruction.
- Provide opportunities for teachers, parents, educational leaders, and the public to continue growing in their understanding of how we read, how we learn to read, and effective reading instruction.

Research Cited

The Reading Process

1. Kucer, S.B. (2005). *Dimensions of Literacy: A conceptual base for the teaching of reading and writing*. (2nd edition) Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

2. Ruddell, R.B. (1965). The effect of oral and written patterns of language structure on reading comprehension. *The Reading Teacher* 18, 270-275.

   Tatham, S. (1970). Reading comprehension of materials written with select oral language patterns: A study at grades two and four. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 5, 402-426.

3. Bransford, J.D. and Johnson, M.K. (1972). Contextual prerequisites for understanding: Some investigations of comprehension and recall. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 11, 711-726.

   Chiesi, H.L., Spilich, G.J., and Voss, J.F. (1979). Acquisition of domain-related information in relation to high and low domanin knowledge. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 18, 257-273.

   Lipson, M.Y. (1983). The influence of religious affiliation on children's memory for text information. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 18, 448-457.

   Pearson, D., Hansen, J., and Gordon, C. (1979). The effect of background knowledge on young children's comprehension of explicit and implicit information, *Journal of Reading Behavior*, 11, 201-209.

   Spillich, G. J., Vesonder, G.T., Chiesi, H.L., and Voss, J.F. (1979). Text processing in domain-related information for individuals with high and low domain knowledge. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior* 18, 275-290.

   Taylor, B. (1979). Good and poor readers' recall of familiar and unfamiliar text. *Journal of Reading Behavior* 11, 375-388.

4. Bloome, D. and Green, J. (1985). Looking at reading instruction: Sociolinguistic and ethnographic approaches. In C.N. Hedley and A.N. Barratta (Eds.) *Contexts of Reading* (pp. 167-184). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

5. Rumelhart, D.E. (1985). Toward an interactive model of reading. *In Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading*. 3rd edition. In R. Barr, M.L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, and P.D. Pearson (Eds.) Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

6. Goodman, K. (1996). *On Reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

   Kucer, S. and Tuten, J. (2003). Revisiting and rethinking the reading process. *Language Arts*, 80 (4), 284-290.

Smith, F. (2004). *Understanding Reading*, 6th Edition. Mahwah, N.J.: Earlbaum.

Learning to Read

7. Ferriero, E. and Teberosky, A. (1982). *Literacy Before Schooling*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

   Goodman, Y. (1986). Children coming to know literacy. In W. Teale and E. Sulzby (Eds.) *Emergent Literacy*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Publishing Company.

   Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with Words*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

   Wells, G. (1986). *The Meaning Makers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

8. Feitelson, D. and Goldstein, Z. (1986). Patterns of book ownership and reading to young children in Israeli school-oriented and nonschool-oriented families. *The Reading Teacher*, 39, 924-930.

   Feitelson, D., Kita, B. and Goldstein, Z (1986). Effects of listening to series stories on first graders' comprehension and use of language. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 20, 339-356.

   Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with Words*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

   Wells, G. (1986). *The Meaning Makers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

9. Ferreiro, E. and Teberosky, A. (1982). *Literacy Before Schooling*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

   Manning, M., Manning, G., Long, R. and Kamii, C. (1993). Preschoolers' conjunctures about segments of a written sentence. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 8 (1), 5-11.

10. Goodman, K. (l965). A linguistic study of cues and miscues in reading. *Elementary English*, 42, 639-643.

    Nicholson, T. (1991). Do children read words better in context or in lists? A classic study revisited. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 83, 444-450.

11. Ruddell, R.B. (1965). The effect of oral and written patterns of language structure on reading comprehension. *The Reading Teacher*, 18, 270-275.

    Tatham, S. (1970). Reading comprehension of materials written with select oral language patterns: A study at grades two and four. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 5, 402-426.

12. Allington, R. and Woodside-Jiron, H. (1998). Decodable text in beginning reading: Are mandates and policy based on research? *ERS Spectrum*, 16, 3-11.

    Bridge, C, Winograd, P. and Haley, D. (1983). Using predictable materials vs. preprimers to teach beginning sight words. *The Reading Teacher*, 36, 9, 884-91.

    Cunningham, P. (2000). *Phonics They Use: Words for reading and writing* (3rd Ed.). New York: Harper Collins.

    Kucer, S. (1985). Predictability and readability: The same rose with different names?" In M. Douglass (Ed.), *Claremont Reading Conference Forty-Ninth Yearbook* (pp. 229-246). Claremont, CA: Claremont Graduate School.

13. Goswami, U. (1986). Children's use of analogy in learning to read: A developmental study. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 42, 73-83.

Goswami, U. (1988). Orthographic analogies and reading development. *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 40A, 239-268.

Moustafa, M. (1995). Children's productive phonological recoding. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 30, 3, 464-476.

14. Anderson, R.C., Wilson, P.T., and Fielding, L.B. (1988). Growth in reading and how children spend their time outside of school. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 23 (3), 285-303.

Elley, W.B. and Mangubhai, F. (1983). The impact of reading on second language learning. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 19, 53-67.

Feitelson, D., Kita, B. and Goldstein, Z (1986). Effects of listening to series stories on first graders' comprehension and use of language. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 20, 339-356.

Mullis, I., Campbell, J. and Farstrup, A. (1993). NAEP 1992 *Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics.

15. DeFord, D. (1981). Literacy: Reading, writing, and other essentials. *Language Arts*, 58, 652-658.

16. Smith, F. (1994). *Writing and the Writer*. (2nd edition). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

17. Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. *In Schooling and Language Minority Students: A theoretical framework* (pp. 3-49). Los Angeles: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University, Los Angeles.

18. Feitelson, D. and Goldstein, Z. (1986). Patterns of book ownership and reading to young children in Israeli school-oriented and nonschool-oriented families. *The Reading Teacher*, 39, 924-930.

Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with Words*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Purcell-Gates, V. (1996). Stories, coupons, and the TV guide: Relationships between home literacy experiences and emergent literacy knowledge. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 31, 4-6-428.

Purcell-Gates, V. L'Allier, S. & Smith, D. (1995). Literacy at the Harts' and the Larsons': Diversity among poor, inner city families. *The Reading Teacher*, 48, 572-578.

Purcell-Gates, V. McIntyre, E. and Freppon, P. (1995). Learning written storybook language in school: A comparison of low-SES children in skills based and whole language classrooms. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, 659-685.

Taylor, D. and Dorsey-Gaines, C. (1988). *Growing Up Literate: Learning from Inner City Families*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Taylor, D. (1998). *Family Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Wells, G. (1986). *The Meaning Makers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

19. Smith, C., Constantino, R. and Krashen, S. (1997). Differences in print environment for children in Beverly Chills, Compton, and Watts. *The Emergency Librarian* 24 (4), 8-9.

Neuman, S.B. and Celano, D. (2001). Access to print in low-income and middle-income communities: An ecological study of four neighborhoods. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36 (1), 8-26.

20. Anderson, R.C., Wilkinson, I.A.G. and Mason, J.M. (1991). A microanalysis of the small-group guided reading lesson: Effects of an emphasis on global story meaning. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 26, 417-441.

Cantrell, S.C. (1999). Effective teaching and literacy learning: A look inside primary classrooms. *The Reading Teacher*, 52, 4, 370-378.

Freppon, P. (1991). Children's concepts of the nature and purpose of reading in different instructional settings. *Journal of Reading Behavior* 23, 2, 139-163.

Milligan, J.L., and Berg, H. (1992). The effect of whole language on the comprehending ability of first grade children. *Reading Improvement* 29, 3, 146-154.

Mullis, I., Campbell, J. and Farstrup, A. (1993). *NAEP 1992 Reading Report Card for the Nation and the States*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics.

Sacks, C.H. and Mergendoller, J.R. (1997). The relationship between teachers' theoretical orientation toward reading and student outcomes in kindergarten children with different initial reading abilities. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34, 4, 721-739.

Effective Reading Instruction

21. See the references in the previous endnote.

22. National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction (2003). *Prepared to Make a Difference*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

23. Cambourne, B. (1995). Toward an educationally relevant theory of literacy learning: Twenty years of inquiry. *The Reading Teacher*, 49 (3). 182-190.

    Taylor, B., Pearson, P.D., Clark, K., and Walpole, S. (1999). *Beating the Odds: Teaching All Children to Read*. CIERA Report #2-006. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

24. Anderson, R.C., Hiebert, E.H., Scott, J.A. & Wilkinson, I.A.G. (1985). *Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the Commission on Reading*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.

25. Bridge, C, Winograd, P. and Haley, D. (1983). Using predictable materials vs. preprimers to teach beginning sight words. *The Reading Teacher*, 36, 9, 884-91.

    Eldredge, J.L., Reutzel, D.R., and Hollingsworth, P.M. (1996). Comparing the effectiveness of two oral reading practices: Round-robin reading and the shared book experience. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 28, 2, 201-225.

26. Anderson, R.C., Wilkinson, I.A.G. and Mason, J.M. (1991). A microanalysis of the small-group guided reading lesson: Effects of an emphasis on global story meaning. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 26, 417-441.

27. Steven, K.C. (1982). Can we improve reading by teaching background information? *Journal of Reading*, 25, 326-329.

28. Duke, N. and Pearson, P.D. (2002) Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension. In Farstrup, A. and Samuels, S.J. (Eds.) *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, 3rd edition, Newark, DE: IRA, pp. 205-242.

29. Cantrell, S.C. (1999). Effective teaching and literacy learning: A look inside primary classrooms. *The Reading Teacher*, 52, 4, 370-378.

    Elley, W.B. (1989). Vocabulary acquisition from listening to stories. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 24, 174-187.

Freppon, P. (1991). Children's concepts of the nature and purpose of reading in different instructional settings. *Journal of Reading Behavior* 23, 2, 139-163.

Goodman, Y. (2003). *Valuing Language Study in Elementary and Middle School Classrooms*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

30. Elley, W.B. and Mangubhai, F. (1983). The impact of reading on second language learning. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 19, 53-67.

Neuman, S. B. (1999). Books make a difference: A study of access to literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 34 (3), 286-311.

Taylor, B., Pearson, P.D., Clark, K., and Walpole, S. (1999). *Beating the Odds: Teaching All Children to Read*. CIERA Report #2-006. University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

31. Zaragoza and Vaughn (1995). Children teach us to teach writing. *The Reading Teacher*, 49, 1, 42-47.

32. Gambrell, L.B. (1996). Creating classroom cultures that foster reading motivation. *The Reading Teacher* 50 (1), 14-25.

33. Guthrie, J.T., Van Meter, P., Hancock, G.R., Alao, S., Anderson, E., and McCann, A. (1998). Does Concept –Oriented Reading Instruction Increase Strategy Use and Conceptual Learning From Text? *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 90:2, pp. 261-271.

34. Cambourne, B. (2002) Holistic, Integrated Approaches to Reading and Language Arts Instruction: The Constructivist Framework of an Instructional Theory. In Farstrup, A. and Samuels, S.J. (Eds.) *What Research Has to Say About Reading Instruction*, 3rd edition. Newark, DE: IRA, pp. 25-47.

35. Pearson, P.D. & Gallagher, M.C. (1983) The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8. 317-344.

May 1, 2004

This document was printed from http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/onreading.