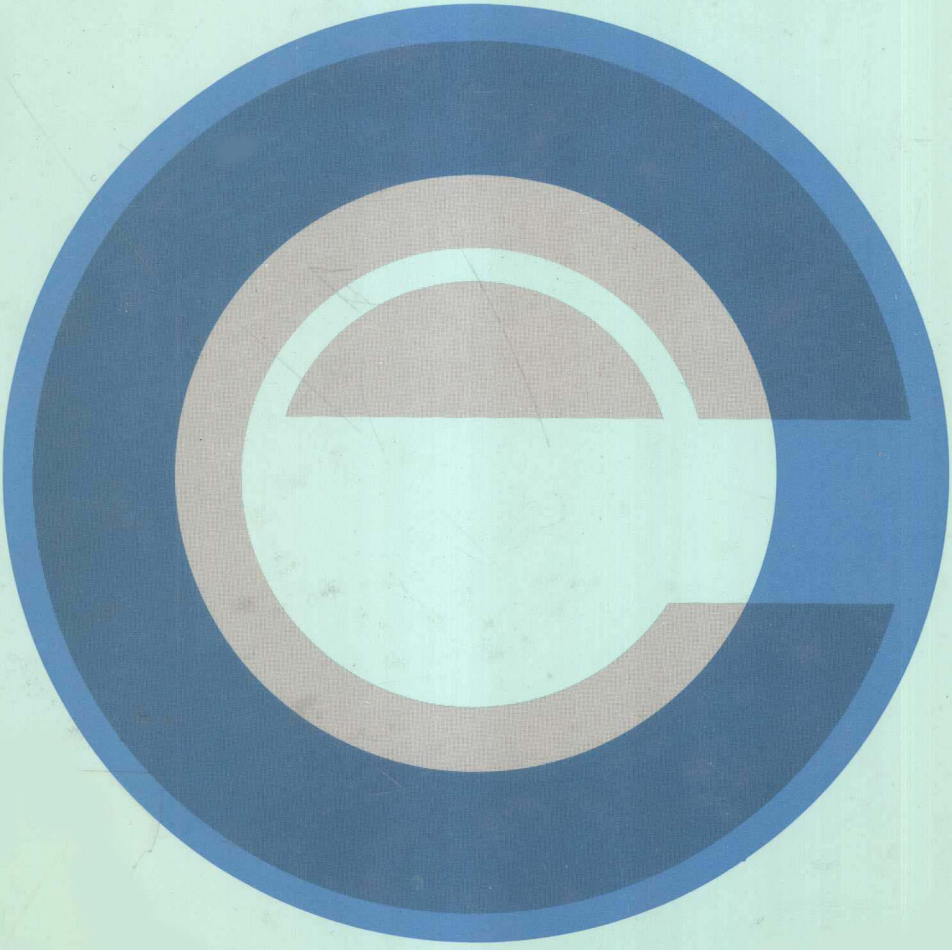
Psycholinguistics and Reading: From Process to Practice

CONSTANCE WEAVER



and reading

FROM PROCESS TO PRACTICE

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And psycholinguistics can help to assert the right of children to learn to read with the aid of people rather than procedures.—Frank Smith

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preface

And reading itself, as a psycho-physiological process, is almost as good as a miracle.—Edmund Burke Huey

As experienced teachers know all too well, there is no magic formula for teaching reading. But some approaches are more defensible than others, given what we know about the reading process. The purpose of this book is to help teachers better understand that process, in order to make sound instructional decisions.

The first part of the book is concerned with the reading process and reading instruction: with the nature of proficient reading, and the implications for beginning reading instruction in particular. The second part is concerned with reading in the classroom: with how we can determine readers' instructional needs, how we can help them develop good reading strategies, and how we can design (for any instructional level) a reading program that reflects an understanding of the reading process.

The book is intended primarily for preservice and inservice teachers who are concerned with reading and reading instruction. More broadly, the book is appropriate for anyone interested in exploring the nature of the reading process. No special knowledge is required, because the technical terms are defined in the text itself or in the summary of English grammar presented in the appendix.

The basic thesis of this book is that reading is not a passive process by which we soak up words and information

from the page, but an active process by which we predict, sample, and confirm or correct our hypotheses about the written text. Suppose, for example, that you are reading the sentence **The cruel giant fell into the . . . .** What do you know about the word that follows **the**? First, you know it is likely to be a noun, a "thing" or substance (or a word that modifies an upcoming noun). Second, you know that this word probably denotes something that one can fall into. Without even seeing the word, you can narrow it down to a few likely possibilities: **water, well, lake, pond, river, hole,** and so forth. Thus you would need to look at only one or two of the letters in order to identify the word. And you could confirm (or correct) your tentative identification by seeing if the word makes sense with the following context. Such, in fact, is what proficient readers normally do.

In brief, then, this example illustrates the "psycholinguistic" nature of the reading process, the fact that reading involves an interaction between the *mind* of the reader and the *language* of the text.[1] It is this view which is explored in the pages that follow.

Over the course of several years, many people have helped to shape this book. First, I want to acknowledge and thank those who have contributed most to my understanding of the reading process: Kenneth and Yetta Goodman. Although they do not agree with everything said here, their influence clearly permeates the entire text. Without their research, a book like this could not have been written. And without Yetta's encouragement and inspiration, this particular text might never have come to fruition. I am especially grateful for her kindness and patience in commenting on two drafts of the manuscript. Naturally, however, I alone am responsible for the remaining errors and for the limitations of my knowledge and understanding.

Various colleagues have influenced my thinking and in some cases contributed directly to the text: Dorothy Bladt, Jim Burns, Michael Clark, June Cottrell, Ruth Heinig, Nancy Stone, Nancy Thomas, and especially Maryellen Hains and Theone Hughes. To all of these people I am deeply grateful.

[1] The term "psycholinguistics" comes from **psyche** (meaning 'mind') and **linguistics** (having to do with language).

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Thanks go also to my students, to the many preservice and inservice teachers in my classes. Their questions, their reactions, and their experiences have contributed greatly to my own understanding. I would like to thank those among them who have provided some of the materials in the text: Martha Bond, Elizabeth French, Kayleen Hill, Cathy McCabe, Mary Sue Piper, Patricia Reeves, Mary Singleton, Kay Spade, Mary VanLangevelde, and Priscilla Weaver. Special thanks go to Candy Black and Victoria Pachulski for their extensive help with chapters 8 and 9, respectively. Without the contributions of these people and of my son John, the text would be barren indeed.

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C. W.

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