TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION AND VOCABULARY

A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

MARVIN L. KLEIN

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Preface

Reading instruction has come a long way in the past two decades. In the last decade alone it has advanced perhaps more than in all those preceding in this century. Especially important are advances in the areas of reading comprehension and vocabulary development. We have learned more about the reading act, the processes of reading, and the relationship of reader and text than ever before.

In addition, reading educators have given increased priority to reading comprehension and vocabulary development as critical components of the reading program. During the past eight to ten years a number of major studies in the area of comprehension have been completed and reported. During that same period a number of specialized books on reading comprehension have been published. Most of these books have been concerned with elaborating newer theories of reading comprehension and providing analyses and summaries of the research. A few have suggested possible activities which derive from that body of literature.

In the early days of this book's inception, it was seen as a similar publication on reading comprehension and vocabulary. However, it became increasingly clear with the appearance of a number of excellent books which did that sort of thing, that another was not warranted. Instead, what was needed was a guide for teachers, a guide whose roots

were in reading comprehension and vocabulary research and theory, but whose primary goal was to provide teachers with both a summary of key theory and research in these areas and a selection of strategies, techniques, and activities that could serve as instructional models for any reading program and at most grade levels.

It is hoped that this book can serve a useful role in teacher preparation programs, teacher in-service, and other similar settings. It is intended to be an ongoing resource handbook which should wear well with time and which can serve as a companion in a variety of teaching contexts and conditions.

Chapter One examines briefly some of the contemporary history of reading instruction development, some of the conceptual and definitional issues which have plagued reading educators over the years, and some of the key research and theory that have been central to the development of approaches to reading comprehension and vocabulary instruction.

Chapter Two focuses upon questioning and its role in improving reading comprehension. Discussion of the nature of questioning strategies is followed by an elaboration of selected questioning strategies and suggestions for their exploitation.

Chapter Three addresses reading vocabulary as an instructional component in the reading program. Identification of vocabulary *dictionaries* and their various roles precedes an elaboration of different direct instructional strategies and an array of techniques and activities for improving reading vocabulary instruction.

Chapter Four explores *self-monitoring* as a metacognitive operation. Its importance to the reading program is discussed and a wide selection of techniques and activities for incorporating self-monitoring approaches into the reading program are presented.

Chapter Five focuses upon the reading/writing connection. It considers the relationship of the two and makes a conceptual distinction between writing-as-supplement and writing-as-integral to the reading program. A number of approaches for incorporating writing into the reading program are offered.

Chapter Six is devoted to the structure and organization of the text. Techniques and activities presented here are designed to get students directly involved with the structure of text so that they control it more than it controls them.

Chapter Seven examines the role of basal readers in the teaching of comprehension and reading vocabulary.

Chapter Eight concludes the book with a brief treatment of key ideas important for a total reading program in order to have effective reading comprehension and vocabulary development.

The Preface remains one of the few places where an author can offer proper gratitude to a few of the people who were helpful in a book's

production. Because the list is typically substantial, singling out only a few of those who played an important role is very difficult.

My wife, Kay, played a dominant professional role serving as ongoing critic and editor. Her helpful ideas for both content and format have made this a better book than it would have been without her. Her love, care, and understanding, however, were the most critical elements to the completion of the project. Thanks to Meredith for her patience and tolerance. The project robbed the family of some time together. She understood. Thanks to George Lamb, friend and professional critic, for his assistance in developing this book. Judy Kramer and others in the Bureau for Faculty Research at Western Washington University worked hard in the preparation of final manuscript. Thanks to all of them.

As usual, Shirley Chlopak and others at Prentice Hall have provided necessary professional guidance and direction. Candace Demeduc assisted tremendously as an excellent copy editor. And I must also thank Susan Willig for her support of this project as well as others at Prentice Hall with whom I have been fortunate enough to be involved.

Finally, thanks to my many colleagues and to outside reviewers who helped make this a far better book than it would have been otherwise. I appreciate their helpful comments and advice along the way and, of course, burden none of them with any faults that might remain.

Marvin L. Klein

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Reading Comprehension

AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME

New teachers might find it difficult to believe that our current interest in reading comprehension instruction did not always exist. Yet, prior to the 1970s, many educators wondered whether something like comprehension could even be taught. Comprehension was so global in nature that it defied our ability to identify its most salient features with enough specificity and confidence to include it in our curriculum.

This is not to suggest that the ability to comprehend what we read was viewed as unimportant, for it clearly was. We simply could not get a good enough grip on the idea to design instructional approaches which assured its development.

Even by the 1930s and 1940s there was substantial interest in a variety of factors which were related to reading comprehension. For example, studies in text readability were done by Gray and Leary in 1935 and by Lorge in 1939. Factor analytic studies by Davis et al. in the 1940s and beyond attempted to resolve some of the disputes about whether there

were, indeed, *specie-specific* factors characteristic of reading comprehension.* And, as most reading scholars know, as early as 1908 Huey introduced important ideas about comprehension as a product and, more importantly, as a process.

However, for whatever reasons, from the 1950s through the early 1970s most of our attention in reading instruction focused upon decoding and its role in the reading program. Possible impetus for this focus came from a variety of sources. The comparative ease of identifying critical decoding skills as opposed to identifying comprehension skills was one reason. Another was the arrival on the scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s of linguistics as a science—old and respected in the traditional academic world of the humanities, but relatively new and intriguing to reading educators. Beginning in the 1960s, *linguistic readers* began to gain part of the basal reader market, and they warranted considerable attention in the well-known "First Grade Studies" (Bond and Dykstra, 1967). Premised primarily upon the assumptions of structural linguistics rather than the brash young linguistic baby-on-the-block—transformational grammar—these linguistic readers focused almost entirely upon sound-symbol relationships in a tightly ordered fashion. Often even pictures were discouraged since they distracted the reader from the text itself.

Also, in 1967 Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* appeared. Many interpreted Chall's analysis of the contemporary condition of reading instruction to advocate that more attention be paid to phonics.

All of these factors converged at a time in our history when there was a national decline in test scores and a major push at the federal level for emphasizing basic skills in the schools—how these skills were defined changed quite dramatically through the 1970s.

The emphasis on decoding was reinforced by commercially published basal reading programs during this period. It must be remembered that basal reading series command the overwhelming majority of all school reading programs. Reasonable estimates suggest that they serve as the base for the reading program in 90% to 95% of all schools, K–6. We also know that of all textbooks sold for education in kindergarten through college, basal readers constitute just under 40% of the total. Estimates place total K–8 basal reading textbook sales for 1985 at over $314 million. Basal readers clearly play an important role in our reading programs throughout the United States.

Through the latter 1970s these programs reflected a continued emphasis upon phonics instruction, especially in the early grades, although in some programs this instruction continued through the intermediate and

*Word difficulty and reasoning were the two independent factors that appeared to surface consistently.

middle school years. We can note differences in both degree of emphasis, from nearly total to more moderate, and in methodology of instruction, from synthetic to analytic. Regardless of difference, however, we can find certain commonalities in these programs. They clearly placed a fundamental emphasis upon phonics instruction in the K–2 grades with little or no attention given to comprehension at those levels. These programs were based on the belief that comprehension does not or cannot take place until decoding skills are mastered. In fact, it was commonly asserted during this period that an orderly sequence of skill categories was from decoding to comprehension to study skills to reading to enjoyment.

The issue of whether basal reading programs are at the forefront in implementing new ideas or whether they simply reflect the ongoing demands and practices of the market is a moot one. They certainly do substantially reflect the practical translation of reading research and theory.

By the latter 1960s and early 1970s, new ideas were shaping the direction of reading instruction. The new transformational grammar and so-called *case grammars* enticed reading researchers into the arena of sentence meaning; bands of hearty followers eager to expand the boundaries of reading interests searched for research approaches using these new linguistic tools. Reading educators found themselves in the company of cognitive and developmental psychologists, linguists, psycholinguists (those studying the relation of language to thought and its development in children), sociologists, and even anthropologists. The role of cognitive processes present in the act of reading gained more attention. The structure and sound of the language *per se* seemed of less importance than did the role of language as an abstracting system important in comprehension.

After at least a decade of attention, decoding instruction was not significantly improving overall reading scores. In the latter 1960s, the first nationwide assessments began, and by the mid-1970s there were indications from the data of the National Assesment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that basic skills in reading—word-attack skills generally—were improving in the lower-level achievers. Unfortunately, throughout the decade of the 1970s, scores in reading comprehension—especially in areas requiring higher-level inferential skills—declined or failed to improve. The most significant declines took place in the top 25% of learners. In the 1979–1980 assessment, NAEP reported that any improvements in comprehension were restricted to younger students, and the declines in comprehension continued in older and more academically talented students. Whatever else was going on in our reading programs, comprehension was not being developed.

There were two major research shifts during the 1970s that brought us into the 1980s on a significantly new note. One was the development of

approaches to text analysis based upon the larger *grammars* or structures underpinning text longer than sentences.* An example of this sort of textual analysis can be seen in Halliday and Hasan's "cohesion theory" (1976). Halliday and Hasan showed how text coheres in a variety of ways. More common cohesive ties are pronouns, their referents, and their system of reference. Other ties are made through grammatical structures. Semantic or meaning ties are made through word collocations, i.e., topic and descriptive words establish a *word family context* whereby the presence of one word or word type attracts others to the text. For example, if we had a text about life in a pond, it is quite likely that words such as *water, sand, lily-pad, shore,* and so on are going to appear somewhere in the text.

The Halliday and Hasan model was *text-bound* in the sense that its focus was not on the reader but on language in print. As linguists, Halliday and Hasan logically brought a language-centered perspective to their work. During the latter 1970s considerable research in reading comprehension was conducted using the cohesive-ties model. Typically, two near-identical contrived texts were presented to subjects with alterations made in the cohesive ties of one version only. For example, the basic content of a short passage was held constant in the control text while the distance between referential ties, such as pronouns, was manipulated in the altered experimental text. Findings suggested, among other things, that the greater the referential-tie distance, the more difficult the comprehension of the text.

During the same period, Nancy Stein developed a variety of *story grammars*—the hierarchy of structural and content relationships which hold within well-formed stories (Stein and Glenn, 1979). For example, Stein observed, along with many anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers such as Claude Levi-Strauss, that there appear to be universal elements such as setting, initiating event, character development, problem, problem resolution, climax, denouement, and so on that recur in all well-formed stories. One might even postulate that this universality suggests characteristics innate to authors of stories and is, therefore, implicit in readers—a tacit set of literary structures, if you will.

Conceptual and psychological arguments aside, most of the story grammar approaches started as text-bound models, and, some would assert, they remain as such. Stein's work in the mid-70s represented an effort to find some kinds of correspondence between story structure and reading processing.

In some respects, this was the same driving imperative that was behind the interesting theoretical model proposed by Walter Kintsch (1974). His *propositional networks* model attempted to formulate the relationships that drive the structure and content of certain kinds of nonfiction text and which give the researcher an indication of the processing properties involved during the reading act (Kintsch and Van Dijk, 1978).

*Sometimes called *text macrostructures.*

The work of Kintsch and Stein in the mid-70s represents the transition of reading scholars from the examination of the complexity of language and its components in text to an increasing interest in the reading process, i.e., what goes on in the reader during the reading act.

This interest was reflected also in research in communications theory expansion, artificial intelligence, and computer-assisted approaches to reading research. Several theory and research-directed models were developed during the 1970s (Rumelhart, 1977).*

By the latter 1970s, however, contemporary reading scholars increasingly moved away from the text *per se* and towards the reader as processor of text.

The 1970s saw the incorporation of ideas from the newer linguistics, which suggested at least that it could answer questions not only about the structure and semantic character of text—in both sentences and in longer text—but could also provide some insight into cognitive operations of the reader during the reading act.

The major *reading comprehension paradigm* of the 1970s was keyed in limited senses to both text and reader.

Limitations of these models, however, became clearer. First, they failed in many cases to account for nonverbal aspects of the reading act. In many ways, they were too *discourse-type specific* to suggest the richness and elegance of models needed to govern research directions as complex as reading comprehension. And, finally, they became extremely complex and cumbersome in application; enough so to discourage many researchers from using them.

Their impact was clear, however. Reading research would never be the same again for many reasons, not the least of which was that the walls of the older, traditional reading scholar's domain had been irreparably breached. Linguists, philosophers, psycholinguists, sociologists, and others had moved in. Also, the most obtrusive of the new reading comprehension theory and research types —the developmental psychologists—now led the development of the latest research paradigm for reading. This represented a significant change, since behaviorist models had to be set aside.

The impact of behaviorist psychology on reading research had been significant. This particular learning theory had served as a strong assumptive base for reading research and, more importantly, for the development of theoretical models of reading, which serve as the generating sources for research design. It shaped the character of reading for decades. That is, not just research, but theoretical conceptions of what reading was and how best it should be taught were derived from the behaviorist perspective.

*The directions of research discused here are still being pursued by many researchers, so this discussion should not suggest that these models are no longer serving fruitful roles for reading research or theory development.

The movement to developmental psychology and a developmental approach to learning generally did not happen suddenly. In fact, one can trace the movement back to the later 1950s when Noam Chomsky wrote a detailed, blistering review of noted behaviorist B. F. Skinner's work on language (Chomsky, 1959). Chomsky's theories of language reshaped both theory and research in language acquisition and development and, subsequently, reading theory and research. The later 1960s and early 1970s abound with doctoral dissertations exploring the role of *deep structure* and other transformational grammar notions in reading comprehension, all of which derived from Chomsky's work.

About the same time, educators in this country were beginning to examine the work of Jean Piaget, the developmental psychologist, well-known throughout the rest of the world but little known here. And somewhat later the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky and students of his, such as Alexander Luria, became accessible.

Their posture on how learning and knowing generally occurred came at a time propitious for change in reading. A scattering of studies appeared through the 1970s reflecting the impact of Piaget and his counterparts. However, their initial thrust, though counter to the behaviorist orientations, tended not to reveal, at least overtly, Piaget's impact. Gradually, though, interest in the *nontext* factors which shaped reading comprehension represented a significant departure from behaviorism as a defining psychology of learning. Developmental psychologists explored the less observable and more abstruse ideas central to comprehension. Words such as *consciousness, mind, cognitive processing,* and others began to appear in the reading literature.

By the later 1970s additional changes could be seen, as reading comprehension research turned increasingly toward the reader and away from what was being read. In addition, new language used by reading scholars reflected the impact of Piaget and other developmentalists such as Vygotsky. For example, *schema, assimilation,* and *accommodation* are key Piagetian concepts which moved into reading comprehension research in substantive fashion. Although their use is now specialized for reading, their roots are in more general learning theory and the epistemological drives of earlier developmental psychology.

Piaget had discovered that learning develops through stages, each stage having a generalized set of cognitive characteristics that determines how and what kind of learning can take place. Of critical importance to his theories is the concept of *schema*. One's schemata are essentially the mental maps of the various features and constructs of reality that he or she possesses. Learning takes place for the individual not simply by accruing more details or facts and piling them up in the mind, but rather by fitting new information into one's schema, i.e., assimilating it into the schema. Or, if the new information is dramatically new or different, one then adjusts the