



READING PROCESS AND PRACTICE

from socio- psycholinguistics to whole language

CONSTANCE WEAVER

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FROM SOCIO-PSYCHOLINGUISTICS TO WHOLE LANGUAGE

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Heinemann Educational Books

Portsmouth, NH

HEINEMANN EDUCATIONAL BOOKS, INC.

70 Court Street Portsmouth, NH 03801

Offices and agents throughout the world

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Acknowledgments begin on page *xxii*.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Weaver, Constance.

Reading process and practice.

Rev. ed. of: *Psycholinguistics and reading*. c1980.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Reading. 2. Psycholinguistics. 3. Language awareness in children. I. Weaver, Constance.

Psycholinguistics and reading. II. Title.

LB1050.22.W43 1987

428.4

87-12114

ISBN 0-435-08444-5

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

With a chapter on whole language
by
Dorothy Watson and Paul Crowley
University of Missouri—Columbia

and a chapter on reading in the content areas
by
Marilyn Wilson
Michigan State University

and a concluding chapter
by
Dorothy Watson
University of Missouri—Columbia

*For my son John
without whom this book
and my life
would be much less lively*

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

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 and procedures are more defensible than others, given what we know about the process of reading. The purpose of this book is to help preservice and practicing teachers better understand that process and better grasp some of the implications for teaching. The book is intended particularly for those with little or no prior study in the nature of the reading process. Thus the style of the text and also most entries in the end-of-chapter bibliographies are generally directed toward newcomers to the field, though references in the text itself can often provide a valuable starting point for more in-depth study.

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. Using your lifetime of knowledge and experience, and without even seeing the word, you can narrow it down to a few likely possibilities: *water, well, lake, pond, hole, vat*, and so forth—but probably not *chair, glass, or dog*, much less *crowded, investigate, or cleverly*. Having narrowed the possibilities, you would need to look at only one or two of the letters, or at only parts of some of the letters, in order to identify the word. And you could confirm (or correct) your tentative identification by seeing if that word made 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 a transaction between the mind of the reader and the language of the text. Equally important, this transaction occurs

within a particular social and sociolinguistic context: for example, the expectations about reading that children bring with them to the classroom form one kind of social “context,” as do the classroom itself and the expectations of the teacher. These and many other social factors contribute to making reading not only a *psycholinguistic* process, but a *socio-psycholinguistic* process of incredible complexity. It is this process and some of the implications for teaching that are explored in the pages that follow. Psycholinguistic aspects of the reading process receive the most attention explicitly, but various social and sociolinguistic factors affecting reading and learning to read are implicit throughout the book, particularly in the last six chapters.

As indicated, one of the most important observations about reading is that it is an active process: the reader must actively construct meaning, rather than passively soak it up from the page. I have endeavored to encourage such active, participatory reading of this book itself, in several ways:

1. By including “Questions for Journals and Discussion,” some of which can be profitably discussed prior to reading the chapter.
2. By including a number of end-of-chapter activities that anticipate the following chapter.
3. By including numerous participatory activities in the chapters that focus on the reading process.

I myself often lead classes through several of the activities within a chapter before assigning the chapter to be read, and I would encourage teachers to consider doing likewise. The “List of Activities” in the front of the book should assist in locating such activities. Another way to encourage purposeful reading is to ask students to respond to some of the “Questions for Journals and Discussion” before reading the chapter, either in a journal or in classroom discussion—or both. Chapter 9 on reading in the content areas includes a number of valuable suggestions that can be used to encourage active reading and understanding of this text.

This text was originally intended as a second edition of my earlier *Psycholinguistics and Reading: From Process to Practice* (1980), but it grew far beyond the scope of the original edition—so much so, that we decided to give it a new title, *Reading Process and Practice: From Socio-Psycholinguistics to Whole Language*. Unlike the earlier text, this one is not divided into two parts, the first dealing with the reading process and the second dealing with implications and applications for the teaching of reading. Though the differing emphases remain, they no longer seem so neatly divisible. This is partly because topics occur and reoccur throughout the book: the teaching of phonics and the use of context in reading are two topics dealt with repeatedly, particularly in the early chapters but also in most later chapters. A whole-language approach and research on the effectiveness of differing approaches to beginning reading are two topics that also reoccur, particularly in the later chapters but also in earlier ones. Such incremental repetition resembles the “spiral curriculum” advocated by Jerome Bruner in *The Process of Education* (1960): a topic is addressed repeatedly, at increasingly higher levels of sophistication, each time deepening the learner’s understanding.

Another reason for not separating the book into parts is that I firmly believe that our understanding of the reading process and our understanding of effective approaches to the teaching of reading enhance one another: the whole is somehow greater than the mere sum of the parts. Thus the totality of this book is something like a fabric, with various threads—such as phonics, or a whole-language approach—woven throughout. Remove any of the major threads, or divide the whole into parts, and you have destroyed the basic nature of the whole cloth.

Of course this book differs from *Psycholinguistics and Reading* not only in overall form, but most crucially in content. Chapter 1 and Chapters 3 through 6 are similar to the originals, though with considerable clarifying and updating. Chapter 2 has been almost completely rewritten, to clarify the nature of schemas and transactions in reading, and to focus more clearly on contrasting models of the reading process. Chapter 7 on miscue analysis has become Chapter 10, with considerable revision. Chapters 8 and 9 and the grammatical appendix of the original have been omitted to make room for four new chapters: Chapter 7, on the acquisition of literacy; Chapter 8, on a whole-language approach to the teaching of reading; Chapter 9, on reading in the content areas; and Chapter 11, on preventing reading difficulties and assisting readers with special needs. The text concludes with Chapter 12, a coda titled “Coming Whole Circle.” The Table of Contents further suggests the nature of these changes. In addition to revising and adding chapters, I have included appendices and more bibliographies that should be useful to teachers and students, and enhanced many of the sets of end-of-chapter activities. Also, I think the text organization offers flexibility: one might, for example, cover Chapters 1 and 2, then go to Chapter 7 before returning to Chapter 3. All of these changes should, I think, make this book even more teachable than its predecessor.

Those who lament the loss of something from *Psycholinguistics and Reading* are hereby granted permission to photocopy those materials for educational use. However, I cannot be legally responsible for your photocopying anything that includes copyrighted material for which I originally obtained permission; that responsibility must be yours. Permission is also hereby granted for photocopying the blank miscue analysis forms in Chapter 10.

I scarcely know where to begin in thanking the various people who have contributed, directly and indirectly, to this text. In addition to those individuals acknowledged in *Psycholinguistics and Reading*, I would thank, of course, my many students whose experiences and questions have further challenged my thinking, and the students and colleagues elsewhere who have expressed appreciation for the first text and made suggestions for improving it.

Many who have used the text will also be grateful, I think, for the wonderful new chapters contributed by others: the chapter on whole language, contributed by Dorothy Watson and Paul Crowley of the University of Missouri-Columbia; the conclusion, contributed by Dorothy Watson; and the chapter on reading in the content areas, contributed by Marilyn Wilson of Michigan State University. As I use this text myself, I know I will continue to be thankful for their fine contributions. I particularly want to thank also those who have read and commented on part or all of the text: Sharon Rich, current editor of the *Canadian Journal of English Language Arts*, and Kathryn Mitchell Pierce, of Webster University. Having read the entire

manuscript, Kathryn made several suggestions that have clearly enhanced the book. But of course, I alone bear responsibility for the remaining limitations of the text, and it cannot be assumed that any of the contributors or readers necessarily agrees with everything I have said.

Thanks to financial support from my university, in May of 1986 I had the privilege of attending the Fourth International Conference on the Teaching of English, held in Ottawa, Ontario. It was, quite simply, the most professionally rewarding conference I have ever attended. There I met a number of people, literally from around the globe, who generously shared their expertise and their research. Among the many teachers and scholars who contributed to this book, then, are many people with whom I became acquainted at this conference: Jon Cook (and through him, Libby Charnock), David Doake, Lee Dobson, Henrietta Dombey (and through her, Katharine Perera), Warwick Elley, Martha King (and through her, Marie Clay), Julie Kniskern, Moira McKenzie, Adrian Peetoom (and through him, Jane Baskwill and Margaret Phinney), Sharon Rich, and Charles Temple. Together, these individuals have made major contributions to this text.

Continuing to pervade this new book is the work of other prominent scholars and friends: Yetta and Ken Goodman, Dorothy Watson, Jerry Harste, Carolyn Burke, Don Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Frank Smith. I have been fortunate to serve with several of these people on the Reading Commission of the National Council of Teachers of English. Other Commission members I want particularly to thank for their influence and assistance are Paul Crowley, Bob Carey, Karl Koenke, Judith Langer, Gordon Pradl, and Margaret Stevenson. I particularly thank these people not only for their contributions to this text but for the model they provide in their humanistic approach to education.

Others in the reading field who have contributed materials and ideas include Diane DeFord, Lynn Rhodes, Terry Smith, Marie Carbo, and Sue Miller. Even professionals in other fields have helped: these include Lon Jones, Gary Ruoff, and Jeanne Hartenstein. My thanks to them all, as well as to colleagues—Maryellen Hains, Nancy Stone, Anne Szalkowski—and students—Lisa Black, Richonda Radom—who have contributed materials new to this book.

I particularly appreciate those who helped with research and with preparing the final manuscript: Barbara Myers, Kathy Neidlinger, Susan Heyse, and John Weaver. They lightened the burden considerably. So did the Honors College at Western Michigan University, by awarding Kathy Neidlinger a scholarship to assist me.

I am grateful also for two fellowships from the Faculty Research and Creative Activities Fund of Western Michigan University, one to study “Parallels Between New Paradigms in Science and in Reading and Literary Theories” and one to study “Reading as a Whole Brain Process.” These fellowships enabled me to pursue research that has contributed substantially to Chapters 2, 7, and 11, thus considerably enhancing the quality of the book.

The people at Heinemann have been wonderful to work with. I particularly appreciate the wisdom, humor, patience, and support of Philippa Stratton, Editor-in-Chief. When the task of finishing this manuscript seemed hopeless, she was always there to make it seem possible again. In addition, I would like to thank Donna Bouvier of Heinemann, for overseeing the production of this text; Claire

McKean, Joanne Davidson, and Michael Hodges of G&H SOHO, for carrying out the details of production; and Winifred M. Davis, for her careful and helpful editing of the text. I would also like to thank Nancy Sheridan of Heinemann for her invaluable assistance with the Acknowledgments.

In *Psycholinguistics and Reading*, I expressed gratitude to my friend and former teacher, Owen Thomas, who “had faith in me long before I learned to have faith in myself.” But long before he became my mentor, my mother encouraged me to a degree that I have only begun to realize. There was no such word as “impossible” in her vocabulary; she led me to believe that anything I wanted to do, I could do. And I have. So this book is not only for my son but for my mother, who believed in me long, long before anyone else. Thank you.

Acknowledgments

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