Ending the Great Debate in Reading Instruction

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For decades, reading educators have put forth various definitions of reading and theories related to processes which occur during the reading act. Classroom teachers must understand what reading is if they are to teach effectively, yet it is easy for confusion to set in because of conflicting views of the reading act. Depending upon which speaker is heard, or which article is read, or in which professor’s class they were enrolled, teachers may be exposed to many differing views of reading.

The confusion which can arise as a result of the heavily promulgated and conflicting views of the reading process may result in the desire to throw up one’s hands and hope that a particular program ensures that children will become proficient readers. However, we believe that teachers must know more than their programs in order to become effective teachers of reading. Teachers need to recognize that an overemphasis on any one view of the reading process is likely to produce problem readers (Riley and Shapiro, 1987). Teachers should also be familiar with the characteristics of readers who are proficient so that they may determine which areas of difficulty their problem readers are encountering (Shapiro and Riley, 1989).

Our ability to analyze what takes place during the reading process is severely hampered because the reading act
involves complex functioning of the human mind (Huey, 1908). Over the past two centuries educators have tried to define the process and their efforts have continued to fuel the Great Debate over various instructional methodologies (Chall, 1983) and cause teachers to feel “caught betwixt and between” the conflicting views (Mosenthal, 1989).

This Great Debate has usually pitted proponents of a “code-breaking” emphasis point of view against those who believe that meaning should receive instructional emphasis from the very beginning of the schooling process. We have characterized the first view as data-driven or text-driven because the focus of instruction falls on the visible surface structure of the passage. There have been two branches of this school of thought. In the first, reading is seen merely as the pronunciation of words. In the second, the identification of words and their meaning are of paramount importance.

Examples of this school of thought can be found in the work of a synthetic phonics advocate, Rudolph Flesch, who defined reading as “...getting meaning from certain combinations of letters” (1981). Advocates of what are known as “subskill” theories also contend that reading is a process of mastering small units of printed data before integrating them into larger units (Laberge and Samuels, 1974). Whether the unit of instruction is a letter or word, these definitions are reflected in instruction which initially and rigorously emphasizes the data on the page rather than the meaning of the passage.

Holistic definitions of the reading process, on the other hand, maintain that reading is but one of the language arts and therefore should not be taught in isolation from its counterparts. Holistic definitions emphasize that readers
must bring concepts to written material if they are to comprehend the material. That is, readers utilize deep structure, or their personal knowledge, to understand surface structure, or the words (Smith, 1982a). We have labelled this view as concept-driven reading.

Concept-driven views of the reading process are most clearly represented by psycholinguistic and whole-language perspectives of reading instruction (Goodman, 1976; Harste, Woodward and Burke, 1984). Proponents contend that data-driven instructional strategies can distract readers from actually reading. Frank Smith (1982a) argued that beginning readers should not memorize letter names, "...phonic rules, or large lists of words all of which are... taken care of in the course of learning to read, and little of which will make sense to a child without some experience of reading" (p.179). Kenneth Goodman (1976) maintained that proficient readers utilize their prior knowledge to reconstruct an author's message; thus the processing of print begins with hypotheses or predictions about meaning rather than with small units of language -- the letter and word.

A modest proposal to end the Great Debate

We propose that it is time to end the Great Debate between the proponents of data-driven approaches and the proponents of concept-driven approaches. The demise of this debate is advocated for two major reasons. First, neither group perceives the negative effects of overemphasizing one aspect of reading. Children may acquire strategies as a function of instruction that have a negative impact on reading performance (Dank, 1977; DeFord, 1981; Rasinski and DeFord, 1988). The proponents of data-driven approaches may tend to focus on the short term improvements in word recognition that are produced by data-emphasis programs. While
it is true that such programs may produce impressive gains in some children, these gains may be at the expense of the development of effective reader strategies aimed at comprehension (Riley and Shapiro, 1987).

For example, one of the authors recently conducted an assessment of the reading performance of an 8-year-old boy. His performance on the pronunciation of isolated words indicated that he could pronounce 80 percent of the words on a second-grade level word list. In addition, his miscues (words misread or omitted while reading connected text) placed him at approximately the second-grade level in oral reading. But his oral reading was laborious. He rarely self-corrected any of his miscues.

Typical of his decoding strategy was his approach to the following portion of text: "...without his flower shop, Tony would be unhappy..." (Bader, 1983). He read, "...ou ...out ...ou ...out ...wa ...wa ...wa ...his fl ...floor ...To ...Tommy ...would be unhappy." He was only able to pronounce correctly the word his and the phrase would be unhappy.

For this reader, reading appears to be a ritual of attempting to pronounce words — a ritual devoid of meaning. During his first-grade experience, he had been taught with an intensified phonics program popular in the school district. A part of this particular program provides extensive practice in writing and pronouncing the ending parts of words first. Then the reader is asked to attach the first part of the word to the appropriate word ending. The program teaches the necessity of sounding out every letter sound according to the corresponding rule. Because of the difficulties which this student was having, the school’s prescription was to place him back in this program to make up the skills in which he was deficient!
In reality, his application of acquired phonics knowledge is quite skilled as seen from the brief example provided above. Almost all of his original miscues were phonic approximations even though his miscues do not make sense within the context of the passage. One might reflect that his reading performance is a result of an overemphasis on data-processing and a lack of emphasis on meaning or concept processing.

This interpretation was partially confirmed through diagnostic teaching. As a part of the instructional program, he was guided to ask “Does it make sense?” whenever he produced a miscue. With the change of focus of the reading lesson to producing meaningful responses, this student began to self-correct his miscues spontaneously by supplying words that made sense within the context of the passages he read.

The proponents of concept-driven approaches, or those who advocate an emphasis on meaning, may tend to focus on short term improvements in reading attitudes and the aesthetic quality of student reading behaviors. Such programs may actually mask readers’ deficiencies. This overemphasis may also mask deficiencies in the school program. For example, one new first-grade teacher was recently criticized by some of her colleagues for producing “happy creative children who can’t read.” The colleagues were the second grade teachers in her building who apparently perceived many of her students to be non-readers.

The first grade teacher had labored very hard to create a classroom in which students were involved in creative writing, chart stories, and reading and listening to children’s literature. She believed that immersion in a language and concept-rich environment would produce gifted and literate children.
Unfortunately, her students received no instruction in the application of decoding skills. While the stories they dictated were creative and interesting, the children lacked the strategies which would have helped them engage in accurate data-processing in order to comprehend what they were reading.

One of her students read “...without his flower shop, Tony would be unhappy...” as “...without his warm coat, Tony would be unhappy...” Another part of the story had mentioned “snow;” the reader apparently made a meaningful connection but one which was an inaccurate representation of the text. The second grade teachers were able to supply evidence that indicated that this approach to reading was typical of many of the other students who had received instruction in the first grade teacher’s classroom. One might speculate that students’ inaccurate representation of the meaning of printed text was a result of the overemphasis on concept processing.

Despite the difficulties produced for these students by the overemphasis on a single aspect of the reading process, neither of the two teachers was aware of the negative effects of this overemphasis because the effects did not appear until after the children had left their respective first-grade classrooms — when they encountered instructional expectations which differed from their initial experiences.

The second major reason for our proposal to end the Great Debate relates to the lack of conclusive evidence supportive of either of the opposing positions in the debate (Stanovich, 1980). Neither group of proponents has definitive evidence that their approach produces proficient readers in the long term, readers who comprehend what they read. Actually, there is simply no way to collect empirical evidence that
proves the efficacy of either approach over a long period of time. Attempts to do this, such as the massive First Grade Reading Studies during the 1960's (Bond and Dykstra, 1967), have not yielded support for any particular approach. Most readers are exposed to many programs and approaches throughout their school careers. Typically, most of the students with whom we come into contact have attended more than one school in the first three years of their school life or they have received instruction in more than one program.

Even in those programs which purportedly are based on one philosophical approach, there are often elements of the opposing philosophy. For example, in one of the basal programs which purportedly emphasizes a synthetic phonics approach (emphasizing the sounding out of individual letter sounds), there are as many memory words presented in the introductory portion of story reading as there are in other basal programs.

The potential for undesirable long term consequences for the reader is the foundation for our call to reassess the utility of the Great Debate. We see approximately the same percentages of reading problems arising regardless of the approach taken, and therefore we propose that the proponents of opposing points of view end their Great Debate. We further propose that proponents in both camps consider two major principles and their related minor principles:

1. Basic characteristics of proficient readers can be identified.
   a. They can apply their prior knowledge to the printed page — they can engage in effective concept processing (Duffy, Roehler and Mason, 1984; Meyer, Brandt and Bluth. 1980; Vernon, 1971).
b. They can apply their knowledge of language structure, including the phonic, syntactic, semantic cueing systems, and they can engage in effective data processing (Adams, 1980; Goodman, 1976; Gough, 1972; Smith, 1982a; Vernon, 1971).

c. They monitor their own reading; they can adjust their reading strategies when they do not comprehend (Brown, 1978; Garner and Kraus, 1982).

d. They can adjust their reading strategies to the demands of a variety of situations and a diversity of text (Riley and Shapiro, 1987; Vacca and Vacca, 1986).

e. They possess a "cognitive clarity" about what reading is (Bobrow and Norman, 1975; Downing, 1984).

f. They learn reading and comprehension strategies by applying them in reading which, in turn, encourages them to read more (Stauffer, 1975).

2. Basic principles of effective reading instruction should be based on the characteristics of proficient readers and such instruction should:

a. present reading strategies in a meaningful context (Harste, et al., 1984; Stauffer, 1975);

b. provide students with a variety of strategies for reconstructing a representation of the message of the author (Duffy, et al., 1984; McNeil, 1984; Smith, 1982a);

c. provide instruction that links reading and writing (Graves, 1983; Harste, et al., 1984; Shanahan, 1984, 1988; Smith, 1982b; Stauffer, 1975);

d. provide opportunities for readers to enjoy reading without direct skill instruction (Fox and Allen, 1983; Lamme, 1981);

e. provide direct instruction in decoding skills when such instruction is aimed at improving comprehension (Leu and Kinzer, 1987; Spache and Spache, 1986);
f. provide opportunities to apply strategies in a variety of situations including independent reading (Richek, List and Lerner, 1983);

g. be grounded in the teacher's ability to understand reading through the eyes and mind of the child (Harste, et al., 1984; Tovey and Kerber, 1986).

It is evident from these principles that reading is essentially a communication process between the writer and the reader, albeit an imperfect one. It must be noted, however, that the research and literature underlying these basic principles are not applicable in all situations. Research into processes of reading will never prove the absolute truth relative to any principles or principle. Research can only suggest the strong likelihood of the utility of principles. However, adhering to these principles may avoid too narrow an approach to reading instruction. Consciously ignoring specific principles may reflect the biases of the proponent more than the conclusions in the body of literature.

An adherence to these principles will allow an end to the Great Debate. As those responsible for developing literacy, we must be aware of the impact of instructional decisions on producing mind-sets, in our students, about how reading occurs. Data-driven techniques, which do not encourage readers to utilize their own knowledge, can produce readers so intent upon decoding that comprehension does not occur or is incomplete. Concept-driven techniques which encourage readers to guess, without using their knowledge of language structure to minimize alternatives, can produce readers who cannot read independently if prior knowledge is not sufficient to reconstruct the author's message. Moreover, failure to provide the environment where students gain a sense of the multiplicity of strategies and the need to match
these strategies with the situational context will impede reading development for some readers. Adherence to the principles we have listed will prevent the development of inaccurate perceptions which lead to biased, distorted styles of processing text, which in turn leads to faulty comprehension and ultimately to reading difficulties.

References


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