

Revisiting a Classic: A Book Review of *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning*

Chris Sclafani - Hofstra University

Abstract

Often, the teaching profession spends a great deal of time looking towards the future, or considering what might be the next big trend that will help students. However, it is sometimes important to reflect back upon the texts and ideas that set the tone for the profession. *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning* by Frank Smith is a classic text that laid the foundation for teachers of literacy to move from an existence of teaching rules and exceptions to becoming an actively involved participant in the process of building and facilitating comprehension in students of all ages. This crucial book must not be overlooked as educators forge ahead in the educational climate of today.

Key Words: literacy, reading, teaching

Introduction

There are times when books become classics, and theorists become true pioneers. Frank Smith is clearly one of those trailblazers in the field of literacy, and his book *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning* has become a highly esteemed educational text. In a single text, Smith fully rejected the former, dominant views on reading that reduced it to a simple, mechanical function of alphabet and word identification, rooted centrally in the letters and their corresponding sounds. Instead, he embraced reading as a “state of being”, linked to a complex connection of prior knowledge, prediction, and very intricate psycholinguistic theorizing.

Content Review

In the early chapters, Smith lays out the basics of schema theory. “Our theory of the world seems ready even to make sense of almost everything we are likely to

experience in spoken and written language - a powerful theory indeed” (Smith, 2004, p.15). The inherent need to build or call upon prior knowledge is derivative of this concept. Another key teaching point is also discussed in these opening chapters, and that is the comprehensive usage of prediction. “The basis of comprehension is prediction, the prior elimination of unlikely alternatives” (Smith, 2004, p. 30). This brought forth the idea that teachers of literacy are well-served to elicit both focal and global predictions before reading, and also revise and allow for new predictions during reading. Smith (2004) furthers this point, “Predictions are questions that we ask, and comprehension is receiving relevant answers to those questions” (p. 30). It becomes rather clear why many colleges use this work as a textbook for graduate programs related to reading and/or literacy studies.

Chapters six through nine are artfully utilized to slowly build a case against a phonics-first or phonic-only approach to reading instruction. Smith (2004) begins by talking about the concept of becoming “perceptually parsimonious” (p. 96). This term represents the idea that readers truly do not read every single letter of every single word on a page. They will use a varied portion of a word, sentence, or paragraph to obtain what they feel is needed to gain a workable conception of the reading, and discard (or skip over) what they do not see as vital. They will then repeat this process until the page or pages have been completed. After explaining this ideology, *Understanding Reading* turns to the limitations of the memory to assist the author’s cause. Smith (2004), in his dialogue regarding the 166 rules of phonics-first/phonics-only instruction, cites the inefficiency of the memory to recall items that do not occur in a logical or timely fashion, “Working memories don’t have an infinite capacity, and reading is not a task that can be accomplished at too leisurely a pace” (p.146). This is all punctuated with a very serious

nod towards employing the reading strategy of working with context clues as a means for positive word identification as well as for the preservation of a comprehension-based approach to learning and instruction.

In the final chapters of the book, reading is positioned as an act that is rooted in what comes naturally to learners. Cambourne's (2002) writing in "The Conditions of Learning: Is Learning Natural?" bears commonalities to this instinctive view of learning. Additionally, Ken and Yetta Goodman (1976) mimic this naturalistic perspective on literacy in "Learning to Read is Natural." Smith then quickly transitions into railing against breaking reading instruction down solely into a series of mechanical systems that reduce it to a mere connection of sounds as a guiding ideology, and even propagates the idea that this type of instructional view might be harmful. "Children may also be confounded by instruction that is as unnecessary as it is futile, often as a consequence of a theoretical vogue among specialists" (Smith, 2004, p. 224). He argues that this might possibly detract from the overall goal of gainful comprehension of a particular text. However, although he does not advocate phonics as a centralized approach, he tempers his phonics opposition to possibly avoid being painted as unrealistic or overly idealized. "I am not saying that it is not useful for children to know the alphabet, to build up sight vocabularies, or even to understand the relationships between the spelling of words and their sounds (more importantly) their meaning" (Smith, 2004, p. 225). This approach is not dissimilar to the work of Eldridge (1991) with "modified whole language", where phonics is woven in for very brief learning blocks during the school day (p.21). Ken Goodman's (1993) *Phonics Phacts* also touches upon a concurrent ideology of instruction, where comprehension is the premier goal of instruction and phonics is integrated in a limited fashion, but is not ousted entirely from the curriculum. Smith

goes on to state that these aforementioned ideas should really occur simply within the greater context of a child actively progressing as a reader. They are primarily thought to be “by-products of reading” or tertiary skills, not the centerpiece of instruction. Smith concludes the book with a strong piece about the value of teaching and inspiration. Teachers are not only seen as imparters of knowledge, but also as invaluable sources of guidance, reaching far beyond a packaged program or set of curriculum objectives.

Modern Relevance

Teaching (and the regulations that surround it) often finds itself moving with various passing trends or ideas, of which many are not generated or proposed by those within the profession itself, but rather by political and social forces that Smith also references at many points in the early part of this book. A major strength of a text such as *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning* is that it honors the autonomy and expertise of educators. Smith notes that classroom decisions ultimately must fall upon the instincts of these educators in the end. "The first responsibility and right of all teachers and students must be to exercise independent thought" (Smith, 2004, p.xi). Highly qualified teachers are urged by Smith to find the time to step away from the potentially overwhelming modern demands of state or national standards, program sequences, and even administrative pressure, in order to make key instructional choices that are rooted in both what should be covered and the students being taught. "We live in a world where no final answers are guaranteed, and must make profound decisions for ourselves" (Smith, 2004, p. xi). This acts as a call to arms for the educational community to defend and expand the area of professional choice and discretion for those in the field. More specifically, vital items such as reading comprehension assessment must hinge upon the professional opinion of those directly

supervising a group much more so than a singular pen and paper test. "And a high score on a test certainly would not convince me that I had really understood a book or speaker if my feeling is that I did not" (Smith, 2004, p. 26). In a way, Smith's ideology intimates that students must be seen through the eyes of multiple measures. This is also a nod to the teacher-researcher aspect of the career. The book suggests that teachers must see the whole and consistent performance of the class or individual over the course of time, as opposed to being blinded or sidetracked solely by the proverbial siren's song of numerical exam scores. This correlates well with the basic philosophy of fellow educator and author, Daniel John (2015) when he states "Keep the goal the goal" (p.37). This goal is not purely the administration of fancy tests or so-called literacy toolkits, but rather a high level of literacy instruction based upon the breadth and depth of knowledge of those in the field. The aforementioned points introduced by Smith regarding professional decision-making, as well as the concept of possessing a more holistic view of individual learners allows *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning* to retain its relevance into the world's current pedagogical settings.

Critical Review

Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning has undoubtedly become a must-read for those looking to expand their knowledge of reading theory and practice. Trends in education might change over given eras and administrations, but the information that teachers can gain from this lauded publication are still as accurate as the day they were first committed to paper. Smith's writing style is straightforward, yet palpably intense. He rarely diverts into anecdotes and wordplay, opting to instead continue his barrage of research and points. Though this can be a bit

overwhelming for a beginner, it is notable that the ideas appear to fit together rather seamlessly, and bolster the author's larger, overarching points about comprehension and instruction. This would be far from the last time Frank Smith would make a widespread impact on the field of literacy studies. His follow-up efforts such as *Reading Without Nonsense* and *Joining the Literacy Club* would further cement his place in the pantheon of reading theorists. *Understanding Reading* is one of those uniquely rare chances for teachers to connect with the thoughts of a legendary reading forefather who sought to validate and expand horizons in their shared professional world.

References

- Cambourne, B. (2002). The conditions of learning: Is learning natural?. *The Reading Teacher*. 55(8), 756-762.
- Eldridge, L. (1991). An experiment with a modified whole language approach in first-grade classrooms. *Reading Research and Instruction*. 3(30), 21-38.
- Goodman, K. (1993). *Phonics phacts*. Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann.
- Goodman, K., Goodman, Y. (1976) Learning to read is natural. University of Pittsburgh, Learning and Research Development Center: Proceedings from the Conference on Theory and Practice of Beginning Reading Instruction. 1-48.
- John, D. (2015) *Can you go?*. San Francisco, California: On Target Publications.
- Smith, F. (2004). *Understanding reading*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers.