



67th IFLA Council and General Conference

August 16-25, 2001

Code Number: 178-113-E
Division Number: VII
Professional Group: Reading
Joint Meeting with: -
Meeting Number: 113
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Reading research: an international perspective

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I should like to thank the Reading section of IFLA, and specifically John Cole of the US Library of Congress, for inviting me to give this paper, and Alida Cutts of the International Reading Association for having recommended me to John Cole as a suitable person for the task.

Reading is probably the most researched aspect of education. It has recently been estimated that 100,000 research studies on reading were published in English alone in the period 1966-99, with at least 15,000 before 1966 (National Reading Panel, 1999). In this paper I can therefore only state some main trends and categories and give a few highlights.

The main aim of reading research is to ensure that as many people as possible can read to their full potential, and have their lives enriched through their reading. In the pursuit of that aim, **libraries have a key role and value:** 'A good public library service can make a unique contribution to reading. Book lending is still perceived to be the major function of the public library, and libraries are seen as natural places for those who want to develop as readers' (Toyne and Usherwood, 2001).

Two major concerns of librarians everywhere are who their readers are, and what texts they read - roughly speaking, the sociology of reading - and in several countries of former eastern Europe (e.g. Croatia, Estonia, Hungary, Poland) the national reading or literacy associations have strong representation from, indeed in some cases were founded by, staff of the national libraries with just these concerns. However, I need not expand on those concerns to an audience of librarians.

An aspect of what might be called the linguistics of reading focuses on the question: **Texts – what are they like?** This topic has been especially influenced by genre theory, as developed particularly in Australia. And there are various research groups which specialise in the analysis of textbooks, for example Paradigm in the UK, and Internationale Schulbuchforschung/International Textbook Research, which has its base in Germany.

Within the psychology of reading, I have space merely to note that a vast amount of work has been done on the cognitive processes underlying reading, and then to mention that another rich research vein in this area is **attitudes to reading**: What do readers like/not like reading? What are their reading preferences and habits? Large-scale studies of school students' attitudes to reading and reading habits were carried out in the mid-1990s in England and Portugal. A rather depressing finding came out of a separate study in England and Wales in 1995: about 25 per cent of 8-year-olds were already turned off reading, and the average score of that group on a reading test was significantly lower than their peers' (Brooks *et al.*, 1997). Of course, this is a chicken-and-egg situation: were they failing in reading because they didn't enjoy it, or did they not enjoy it because they were not good at it? The answer is probably a vicious cycle of underachievement and rejection.

I turn now to several topics within the pedagogy of reading. One aspect of particular relevance to librarians is the exponential growth of **new media** and the reading that they entail. Here, although not nearly enough research has yet been done, a consistent finding appears to be that computers do not substitute for teachers or librarians: learners still have to be tutored in how to make best use of the new sources of information, as they had to with the old.

The major question within the pedagogy of reading is **How is reading taught?** Within that very broad area, the greatest focus of interest for many years, especially in North America, has been on initial instruction, and on 'code emphasis' (roughly, approaches within which phonological aspects are stressed, the best-known being phonics) versus 'meaning emphasis' (roughly, approaches within which meaningful encounters with text are most valued; parents sharing books with their children would be a familiar example). The report *Teaching Children to Read* (National Reading Panel, 1999), to which I have already alluded, is the most recent and comprehensive analysis of the research in this area. It reaches two key conclusions, among others:

- phonological/phonemic awareness (the ability to identify, segment and manipulate sounds within words) is crucial to almost all children in learning to read and write;
- systematic, explicit teaching of phonics gives the best results in early instruction, provided it is embedded in a programme which also emphasises meaningful encounters with text.

Some crucial research leading to the conclusions about phonological awareness have been carried out in Australia by Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (Byrne, 1998).

A pedagogical area that is attracting increasing interest is the relationship between **preschool experience and early literacy development**. A few of the relevant studies are:

- in England: the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project which studied about 3,000 children from age 3 to age 7. It established that attendance at a good-quality preschool (nursery, kindergarten, playgroup) was influential in boosting children's early literacy at ages 5 and 7, even when pre-existing differences such as socio-economic status were allowed for;

- in Malta: the first national survey of literacy attainment in that country (Mifsud *et al.*, 2000), carried out in 1999, studied 6-year-olds, who in that system are in their second year of compulsory schooling. This survey produced a very similar finding to the EPPE study;
- in Sweden: a longitudinal study of 2,500 children tested at age 3-4 and now in grades 2-3 is finding much the same thing;
- in Norway: Bente Hagtvet has been researching the relationship between emotional development and literacy, and establishing that early trauma impedes learning, but that enabling children to cope undoes the damage.

Another pedagogical area that is attracting increasing interest is **adult literacy**, whether in learners' first language - there are research and development projects under way on this in England (see Brooks *et al.*, 2001a, b), Ireland, Scotland, Slovenia and the USA - or their second language - again there are research and development projects under way on this in England, Sweden and the USA.

In at least two important countries there is **increasing attention to reading in second languages more generally**. In Russia, there is an Institute in Moscow entirely devoted to this topic, and in the USA the International Reading Association (though it is broadening the topic out internationally) has made second language literacy its current research focus. The IRA has embarked on a series of meetings and initiatives on this topic which will culminate at the 19th World Congress on Reading in Edinburgh in July 2002.

Within the pedagogy of reading, another key topic is remediation, or **How can struggling readers be helped?** Several countries have researched this question and concluded that screening and early intervention are essential if struggling readers are to be given effective help. Screening and early intervention are provided nationally at age 6 in New Zealand (in the form of the world-renowned Reading Recovery intervention programme) and in Iceland, and in grade 2 in Norway. In England a recent research review of this topic, using only UK research, resulted in the report *What Works for Slow Readers?* (Brooks *et al.*, 1998). One of its key findings was that leaving struggling readers alone to catch up (perhaps on the mistaken assumption that they are 'late developers') is useless - they just get further behind - thus reinforcing the case for early intervention.

I return finally to another aspect of the sociology of reading, namely **How well can people read?** Many countries have long-established curricula, or 'standards' in the sense of criteria by which to judge achievement, which attempt to ensure that teaching has a clear aim; others have developed such instruments in recent years, for example Russia, Ukraine and the UK.

In the other meaning of 'standards', namely levels of achievement, there are many examples of initiatives which have the aim of raising standards. Almost certainly the largest of these is the National Literacy Strategy in England. This has the aim of raising levels of attainment in reading and writing in all the public-sector schools in the country with students in Years 1-9 (kindergarten to grade 8). In principle, this initiative is targeted at all 20,000 primary and 5,000 secondary schools in the country, and therefore at a total student body numbering 5.5 million. A strong research programme evaluating the initiative is being conducted by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto, Canada.

Many countries also take a research interest in monitoring standards of achievement in reading and writing over time. Pre-eminent in this regard are the various series of **international surveys**:

- PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment), under the aegis of OECD, carried out its first survey, of students aged 15, in 2000, and is planning a series of surveys at 3-year intervals, all to contain a reading element though not always as the principal focus;
- PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), overseen by IEA, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, is conducting a survey of 9-year-olds this year, 2001;
- ALL (Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey), again under the aegis of OECD, is planning a survey of adults aged 16-64 to take place in 2002.

The results of all three international studies are keenly awaited.

Some countries opt instead for **annual national testing** of students' achievements:

- in England and Wales, for students aged 7, 11 and 14
- in Estonia, in grades 3 and 6
- in Israel, in both Hebrew & Arabic in grades 1, 4 and 6
- in Malta, in both Maltese and English in Year 6 (age 11).

A further option chosen by some countries is **monitoring systems**, that is, regular surveys of representative samples of students of particular ages, again intended to detect changes over time: the USA (in the form of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, NAEP), Hungary, Scotland and France all have such systems.

Within all these systems of teaching and assessment it is possible to detect a constantly **widening concept of literacy**:

- it is no longer considered sufficient to concentrate solely or even heavily on narrative fiction - literacy must also encompass non-fiction and non-continuous texts (where non-continuous texts are, for example, graphs, tables, and lists of all kinds);
- literacy is no longer concerned just with word recognition, and with comprehension as information-retrieval;
- it is also, and strongly, concerned with inference, reader response, knowledge of text types, values and attitudes, and understanding of the writer's craft.

All of this represents an ever greater challenge to all who love reading and seek to nurture it, in the name of greater understanding and enjoyment.

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