

Books

What Is Reading?

An Excerpt from *Reading for Understanding*

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It is probably self-evident that the conceptions educators hold about the nature of reading shape their approaches to helping students improve their reading abilities. Some current approaches to supporting adolescent reading improvement address students' word-level reading problems as a precondition for working on other levels of reading improvement. Our reading apprenticeship approach is different because our understanding of the nature of reading is different. Here is a brief outline of what we have learned from existing research and our own observation.

Reading is not just a basic skill.

Many people think of reading as a skill that is taught once and for all in the first few years of school. In this view of reading the credit (or blame) for students' reading ability goes to primary grade teachers, and upper elementary and secondary school teachers at each grade level need teach only new vocabulary and concepts relevant to new content. Seen this way, reading is a simple process: readers decode (figure out how to pronounce) each word in a text and then automatically comprehend the meaning of the words, as they do with their everyday spoken language. This is not our understanding of reading.

Reading is a complex process.

Think for a moment about the last thing you read. A student essay? A school bulletin? A newspaper analysis of rising conflict in another part of the world? A report on water quality in your community? A novel? If you could recapture your mental processing, you would notice that you read with reference to a particular *world* of knowledge and experience related to the text. The text evoked voices, memories, knowledge, and experiences from other times and places—some long dormant, some more immediate. If you were reading complex text about complex ideas or an unfamiliar type of text, you were working to understand it, your reading most likely characterized by many false starts and much backtracking. You were

probably trying to relate it to your existing knowledge and understanding. You might have stumbled over unfamiliar words and found yourself trying to interpret them from the context. And you might have found yourself having an internal conversation with the author, silently agreeing or disagreeing with what you read.

As experienced readers read, they begin to generate a mental representation, or *gist*, of the text, which serves as an evolving framework for understanding subsequent parts of the text. As they read further, they test this evolving meaning and monitor their understanding, paying attention to inconsistencies that arise as they interact with the text. If they notice they are losing the meaning as they read, they draw on a variety of strategies to readjust their understandings. They come to texts with purposes that guide their reading, taking a stance toward the text and responding to the ideas that take shape in the conversation between the text and the self (Ruddel & Unrau, 1994).

While reading a newspaper analysis of global hostilities, for example, you may silently argue with its presentation of “facts,” question the assertions of the writer, and find yourself revisiting heated debates with friends over U.S. foreign policy. You may picture events televised during earlier wars. Lost in your recollections, you may find that even though your eyes have scanned several paragraphs, you have taken nothing in, so you reread these passages, this time focusing on analysis.

Reading is problem solving.

Reading is not a straightforward process of lifting the words off the page. It is a complex process of problem solving in which the reader works to make sense of a text not just from the words and sentences on the page but also from the ideas, memories, and knowledge evoked by those words and sentences. Although at first glance reading may seem to be passive, solitary, and simple, it is in truth active, populated by a rich mix of voices and views—those of the

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author, of the reader, and of others the reader has heard, read about, and otherwise encountered throughout life.

Fluent reading is not the same as decoding.

Skillful reading does require readers to carry out certain tasks in a fairly automatic manner. Decoding skills—quick word recognition and ready knowledge of relevant vocabulary, for example—are essential to successful reading. However, they are by no means sufficient, especially when texts are complex or otherwise challenging.

Yet many discussions about struggling readers confuse decoding with fluency. Fluency derives from the reader's ability not just to decode or identify individual words but also to quickly process larger language units. In our inquiries into reading—our own and that of our students—we have seen that fluency, like other dimensions of reading, varies according to the text at hand. When readers are unfamiliar with the particular language structures and features of a text, their language-processing ability breaks down. This means, for example, that teachers cannot assume that students who fluently read narrative or literary texts will be equally fluent with expository texts or primary source documents.

Fluency begins to develop when students have frequent opportunities to read texts that are easy for them. Multiple rereadings of more difficult texts help broaden a reader's fluency (Pikulski, 1998).

Perhaps most important for adolescent readers, fluency grows as they have opportunities, support, and encouragement to read a wide range of text types about a wide range of topics.

Reading is situationally bounded.

A person who understands one type of text is not necessarily proficient at reading all types. An experienced reader of dessert cookbooks can understand what is meant by "turn out on a wire rack to finish cooling" but may be completely unable to make sense of a legal brief. A political science undergraduate can understand that the phrase "on the other hand I will argue" leads into the author's main point and that the main point will be in contrast to the earlier discussion. But that same undergraduate may feel lost when trying to read the poetry recommended by a friend. A good reader of a motorcycle repair manual can make sense of directions that might stump an English literature professor, but may be unable to comprehend her son's chemistry text. And a chemistry teacher may feel completely insecure when trying to understand some of the original source history materials on a colleague's course reading list.

In other words, reading is influenced by situational factors, among them the experiences readers have had with particular kinds of texts and reading for particular purposes. And just as so-called good or proficient readers do not necessarily read all texts with equal ease or success, a so-called poor or struggling reader will not necessarily have a hard time with all texts. That said, researchers do know some things about those readers who are more consistently effective across a broad range of texts and text types.

Proficient readers share some key characteristics.

Different reading researchers emphasize different characteristics of good or proficient reader. However, despite contention in many other areas of reading research, when it comes to proficient readers, widespread agreement has emerged in the form of a set of key habits of proficient readers. This consensus could be summarized as follows (Baumann & Duffy, 1997):

Good readers are . . .

- Mentally engaged,
- Motivated to read and to learn,
- Socially active around reading tasks,
- Strategic in monitoring the interactive processes that assist comprehension:
 - Setting goals that shape their reading processes,
 - Monitoring their emerging understanding of a text, and
 - Coordinating a variety of comprehension strategies to control the reading process.

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