

READING

Frank Smith
Cambridge University Press, 1978

The techniques of teaching children to read have long been of interest to those involved in education. The actual reading process, however, seems to have been somewhat less highlighted. Frank Smith's Understanding Reading published in 1971 focussed attention on what processes are actually involved when we read and he was careful to stress that his intention then was not to tell teachers or parents how to teach children to read. In Reading, however, he appears to be committing himself to at least telling us what we should not do when teaching reading.

Although there are always new techniques and texts coming out on the subject, it is a fact that there are also many children who fail to learn to read. Why is this so? The answer does not lie in more techniques, neither is it the fault of "lazy" children. He suggests that it could possibly be related to what those involved in teaching reading don't know about the process of learning to read. It appears that many involved in teaching children, actually make reading a more difficult and hazardous enterprise than it need be, often without being aware of doing so. And although most children learn to read in spite of the well-intentioned efforts of teachers and adults, some children never achieve fluency in reading. This difficulty may be labeled as dyslexic or as having some brain defect because of this inability, although, as Smith says, "there is no evidence whatsoever that children who have difficulty in reading but exhibit no other symptoms suffer from a brain defect or dysfunction." Rather it is a matter of approaching the learning process from a different angle.

Reading does not give all the answers to specific teaching problems nor does it specifically propose new techniques. As the author states "it is not what the teacher should do (teach children to read) but what the teacher should know" that makes learning to read easier.

The book covers a wide range of the technicalities involved in these processes, such as reading and its relation to the brain. Smith looks at the role of vision in reading and says that paradoxically, comprehension in reading depends on using the eyes as little as possible. He also mentions that the more non-visual information a person has on a certain subject, the less visual information he needs from the print. Too much emphasis on the eyes in reading can make the reader functionally blind (tunnel vision).

Another chapter is concerned with the different kinds of memory and the great handicap that memorization represents for the comprehension of a text. He highlights the danger to comprehension when the reader tries to put too much new information into memory.

An important point is made when the author explains that meaning is not something that a reader or listener gets from language, but something that is brought to it. Reading must not therefore be seen as a passive activity but a complex intellectual process which the reader initiates and directs. The role of prediction as a vital and indispensable part of reading is also discussed.

In the last part of the book the skills necessary to be able to read fluently and the insights that children must achieve in order to learn to read are dealt with. Finally Smith switches emphasis from the factors and skills relevant to reading, to the teacher's role. The last chapter covers the factors that may determine whether learning to read will be easy or difficult for a child, as well as other more specialized topics as dyslexia, learning disability, remedial reading, readiness, dialect differences and spelling.

This is an excellent introduction for "anyone interested in the topic of reading - primarily teachers and trainers of teachers... to parents and to others who perhaps may be concerned about their own reading ability." It is therefore intended to reach a very wide audience, who should find this fascinating reading. Hopefully, many insights about the process of reading can be gleaned from these chapters and applied both to the teaching of reading in the student's native language and in EFL classes.

Ma. Teresa Bruner Iturbide
Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana
Xochimilco