Home > Early Years Reading: from hornbooks to electronic texts

Early Years Reading: from hornbooks to electronic texts

Article Author:

Margaret Mallett [1]

150 [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Margaret Mallett on how children have been taught to read.

How are children taught to read today? Throughout 2005 **BfK** will be publishing a series of articles in which specialists in the field explain current practice and discuss the resources ? picture books, stories, non-book print, non-fiction and electronic texts ? that support the initial teaching of reading. In the first article of the series **Margaret Mallett** puts today's issues into an historical context. <!--break-->

If you had been a child learning to read in medieval times you would probably have had a hornbook primer. This was a printed sheet with the alphabet in upper and lower case, the five vowels and, by the seventeenth century, The Lord's Prayer, mounted on wood and protected with a layer of transparent horn. You learnt by the *alphabetic method* , saying out loud the letters of the alphabet singly and in simple combinations. One of the most interesting accounts of the development of children's reading in these early times is given in Gillian Avery's ?The Beginnings of Children's Reading'. Her article is richly illustrated with pictures of horn books and the ?battledores' which had developed from them by the beginning of the eighteenth century and which, thankfully, included pictures of animals and landscapes (Avery, 1995).

Phonics and ?look and say' Fast forwarding to the mid nineteenth century we find a growing interest in the *phonic method* . Here children are taught to decode by learning the sounds of letters and linking these sounds with written words, rather than saying the names of the letters as in the alphabetic method. In the elementary schools children learnt sequences of sounds of increasing complexity and then applied this phonemic knowledge to reading simple texts. At around this time a third method of teaching reading was also gaining popularity ? *look and say* . While phonic practice built up knowledge of sounds, ?look and say' strategies helped children become familiar with the appearance of ?key' words. Old time versions of this method involved rote learning and drills. Words were carefully graded and presented on charts and flash cards, and then reinforced by reading books. As you might guess, these vocabulary controlled readers were no more riveting than were the phonic primers. Both phonic and ?look and say' methods lent themselves to a class based approach to cope with large numbers.

Language experience and whole language approaches

While there are only three basic ways of teaching reading ? the alphabetic, phonic and ?look and say' methods ? there are many programmes and approaches. From the 1970s two approaches were favoured in the ?child centred' classroom. The *language experience* approach saw children's own spoken language as the basis for early reading. The best known resources, including word banks, sentence makers and readers were the ?Breakthrough to Literacy' materials. ? *Whole language* ' approaches also recognized the role of children's spoken language as a bridge to literacy. And proponents preferred to use ?real' books (trade books) rather than reading scheme books.

In their more extreme form both these approaches marginalized phonics teaching almost into non-existence. This

infuriated those who believed phonics skills needed systematic teaching. Passionate debate still rages about the place of phonics in the reading programme and what kind of phonics ? synthetic or analytic ? is best taught to young children. In a nutshell, the synthetic group argue that children need to sound out all a word's phonemes separately (there are 44 units of sound in English) e.g. l-i-ck while the analytic group insist that differentiating three or more phonemes is too much for many young children. Far better, urge those in this camp, to encourage children to sound the initial ?l' (the ?onset') followed by the rest of the word ?ick' (the ?rime').

Born again phonics

The National Literacy Strategy's framework in **Progression in Phonics** uses both synthetic and analytic strategies and provides a systematic course in seven stages (DfEE, 1999b) . At key stage 1 (5-7 years) phonic teaching takes place mainly in the 15-minute whole class work slot in the Literacy Hour, but is followed up by related tasks in the ?guided' and ?independent' group reading slots. No-one now denies that controlling the phonological cue system is part of learning to read, but today playful rhymes and games and often the magic of Dr. Seuss books both entertain and reinforce phonic knowledge.

A new vision, the psycho-linguistic model

The way children are taught to read today is based on new understandings about the reading process, understandings which come from psycho-linguistics. All three methods ? alphabetic, phonic and look and say ? play a part but there is recognition that children bring a great deal of implicit knowledge to their reading. So the mechanistic decoding methods of the early twentieth century have been replaced by an approach that puts the search for meaning at the centre of learning to read. The recognition that spoken language can be a bridge to literacy and that children need quality resources to make learning to read inviting are the continuing heritage of the ?language experience' and ?whole language' approaches. At the centre of the psycho-linguistic model are the cue-systems to decipher print.

Cue-systems

The *semantic cue-system* helps the young learner find meaning from the broader context drawing on their knowledge of the text, on illustrations and on their wider experience of the topic. So reading stories and narratives with their familiar overall shapes makes good use of semantic cues. The *syntactic cue-system* brings into gear a child's sensitivity to what sounds right grammatically and what is likely to come next. ?They' signals that the following verb will be plural for example. The *grapho-phonic cue-system* keys into the reader's knowledge of sound-symbol correspondences, visual understanding of letter combinations and sight vocabulary. In spite of many exceptions in English spelling there are quite a lot of times when this cue-system will help a child work out a new word.

Orchestras and searchlights

The child's use of the cueing systems has been compared to a conductor directing an orchestra. The ?orchestra' metaphor emphasizes the harmony achieved when all systems blend together. In the **National Literacy Strategy Framework** we find the fiercer metaphor of ?searchlights' to help decode print. Teaching reading involves helping children acquire competence in judging which cue-system they should blaze into action at a particular time.

Recording progress

Teachers assess children's reading attainment at age seven according to the criterion referenced levels of the National Curriculum. For example, to reach level 2 a child must use more than one cue-system in reading unfamiliar words and establishing meaning. Teachers use a ?running record', a form of ?miscue analysis'(a diagnostic reading test useful for judging the progress of newly independent readers). This reveals which strategies the young learner controls well and where some support is needed (Graham and Kelly, 2000). Progress can be recorded using a format like **The Primary Language Record** (Barrs et al , 1988) which shows a rich profile of a young learner's language and literacy progress in contrast to the one dimensional result of an old time single word reading test.

Schemes or teacher built resources?

The books in the best schemes are written by quality authors and the old accusations of linguistic poverty and social stereotyping no longer apply. Characters and settings are varied and schemes include media texts ? posters, flyers and so on ? and of course video-film and electronic texts. Inevitably the demands of the National Curriculum and the National Literacy Strategy (now subsumed under The Primary Strategy) have shaped the design and content of current reading schemes and packages. A welcome change is the boost given to non-fiction titles ? now included by all the well known publishers ? Cambridge Reading, Oxford Reading Tree, Heinemann, Ginn, A & C Black, Collins and Longman. But there is an issue about the possible effect on a teacher's professionalism and self-esteem of having to follow a comprehensive scheme, particularly at a time when the teaching of reading is more controlled than ever before by statutory requirements. Shouldn't teachers be experts on children's books and resources, able to select those with enough substance and quality to support children's development as readers? And shouldn't teachers choose titles which will inspire by linking with children's reading at home and with their culture and interests?

Rather than becoming locked into one programme, many schools use parts of more than one scheme, as well as trade books and resources chosen for different ages and stages by the teachers. Useful guides to building structured resources for the reading programme are found in Cliff Moon's **Individualised Reading** and The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education's **The Core Book** and **The Core Booklists** . And The Young Booktrust provides booklists for different stages and interests (www.booktrust.org.uk [3]).

Important choices

Early years collections include picture books, ?big books', stories and early information texts for newly independent readers, electronic texts and non-book print in the form of charts, posters and labels. ABC picture books reinforce learning about letters and there is a huge variety to choose from, ranging from Dorling Kindersley's books with clear uncluttered pages and photographs to books with exciting art work like Robert Crowther's **My Most Amazing Hide and Seek Alphabet** and Satoshi Kitamura's **What's Inside? The Alphabet Book** which amuses, teases and links from page to page in interesting ways. Something black emerging from a dustbin on one page turns out, on the next, to be a cat chased by a dog ? taking care of ?c' and ?d'. I find **Dr. Seuss' ABC** with its delightfully bizarre humour is much enjoyed. A Reception teacher remarked to me that its availability in different media ? print, CD-Rom and audio-cassette ? reinforces learning letters and sounds in enjoyable ways.

Some of the most visually exciting picture books have sophisticated paper engineering creating pop-ups and flaps. By their very nature these ?movables' encourage interaction and talk with the sharing adult. Children like to see their own activities reflected in the books ? **In Wibbly's Garden** does this well. It has sensibly robust flaps and exploits the narrative drive of the Jack in the Beanstalk story. It is important that print and image connect as they do in two new books ? **Duck's Key, Where Can It Be?** and **Poppy Cat's Happy Day** which both invite talk about hidden objects.

The National Literacy Strategy has brought ?big books' to the fore as a major resource in the ?shared reading' portion of the Literacy Hour. The teacher, working with either the whole class or a group, points out the features of particular kinds of text and their illustrations. Above all ?big book' work helps demonstrate the pleasure and satisfaction that come from reading a whole text. Two favourite books ? Frances Lincoln's **W is for World** and **One Child One Seed** ? have recently appeared in ?big book' format.

Stories for newly independent readers have a major role in creating eager readers. The shape or ?story grammar' ? an introduction to the setting and characters, a central section of events and challenges and a resolution ? becomes familiar and helps children use the semantic or contextual cue-system. Early information texts work best when linked to children's work and role play so that their purpose is strongly established.

ICT texts ? talking books, software and CD-Roms ? are increasingly used in the Literacy Hour. Advice on using these to promote reading is available on the Becta site (curriculum.becta.org.uk/literacy/index.html). Young readers who like down to earth tales will appreciate Oxford Reading Tree's **Talking Stories** .

Choosing the best books and resources with colleagues is one of the pleasures of teaching. Wise Primary School English co-ordinators involve all the teachers in making these important choices.

Margaret Mallett is Visiting Tutor in Primary English in the Education Department at Goldsmiths' College, University of London .

References

Avery, Gillian (1995) ?The Beginnings of Children's Reading' in **Children's Literature, an Illustrated History** , edited by Peter Hunt, Oxford University Press.

Barrs, Myra et al (1988) **The Primary Language Record Handbook for Teachers** , London: CLPE.

DfEE (1998a) **The National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching** , London : The Stationery Office.

DfEE (1999a) **English: The National Curriculum for England : key stages 1-4** , (2000), London : The Stationery Office.

DfEE (1999b) **The National Literacy Strategy, Phonics: Progression in Phonics** , London : The Stationery Office.

Ellis, Sue and Barrs, Myra (1996) **The Core Books** and **The Core Booklists** , London : Centre for Literacy in Primary Education.

Graham, Judith and Kelly, Alison (2000, second edition) **Reading Under Control** , London: David Fulton.

Moon, Cliff (published each year) **Individualised Reading: A teacher guide to readability levels at key stages 1 and 2** , Reading: Reading University Reading and Language Information Centre.

Children's books and resources

My Most Amazing Hide and Seek Alphabet , Robert Crowther, Walker , 14pp, 0 7445 6170 1, £12.99 pop-up (out of stock)

What's Inside? The Alphabet Book , Satoshi Kitamuru, Andersen, 32pp, 0 86264 756 8, £4.99 pbk

Dr. Seuss' ABC , Dr Seuss, Collins, 64pp, 0 00 715848 3, £4.99 pbk

The Dr. Seuss Collection (includes **Dr. Seuss' ABC** with sound effects and music), read by Rik Mayall, Collins, 0 00 102524 4, £5.99 audio cassette and pbk, 0 00 715705 3, £5.99 CD-Rom

In Wibbly's Garden , Mick Inkpen, Hodder, 16pp, 0 340 80572 2, £6.99 pop-up

Duck's Key, Where Can It Be? Jez Alborough, Collins, 20pp, 0 00 717764 X, £9.99 hbk

Poppy Cat's Happy Day , Lara Jones, Macmillan, 12pp, 0 405 02155 1, £6.99 hbk

W is for World , 1 84507 026 7, **One Child One Seed** , 1 84507 032 1, Kathryn Cave (in association with OXFAM), Frances Lincoln, 32pp, £15.99 each big book

Talking Stories Stage 2, Oxford Reading Tree, Sherston, £65.00 triple format CD

How do you organise the teaching of reading in the early years classroom? **Alison Kelly** of the University of Surrey, Roehampton explains in the next instalment of ?Early Years Reading' in **BfK** No. 151.

This article is part of a series about Early Years Reading. Click on these links to read companion articles:

[curtainhair.jpeg](#) [8]

[curtainhair.jpeg](#) [9]

[typeboard.jpeg](#) [10]

[vbook.jpg](#) [11]
Page Number:
4

Links:
[1] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/margaret-mallett
[2] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/150
[3] http://www.booktrust.org.uk
[4] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/../151/145
[5] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/../152/134
[6] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/../153/115
[7] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/../154/102
[8] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/curtainhair.jpeg
[9] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/curtainhair_0.jpeg
[10] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/typeboard.jpeg
[11] http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/vbook.jpg