

Reading Redefined: A Michigan Reading Association Position Paper¹

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— Nancy Seminoff, President (1983-84)

INTRODUCTION

Students lack of critical reading skill is one of the most frequently commented upon problems in education today. Consistent with its tradition as a leader in the field of reading education, the State of Michigan is taking positive steps to deal with this problem. Recognizing the complex nature of the problem, the state has initiated a comprehensive evaluation of current policies in light of recent theory and research in reading and reading instruction.

This paper has been prepared by the Michigan Reading Association (MRA) to provide information on the new definition of reading that has resulted from the first step of this evaluative process. This definition was approved by the governing body of MRA on October 29, 1983 and will soon be brought before the State Board of Education for its approval. This new definition has far reaching implications for every area of educational practice including policy making, curriculum development, local and state assessment, instructional methods and materials, and teacher training. Therefore, it is essential that educators at every level of involvement including state department personnel, school board members, superintendents, curriculum coordinators, principals, teachers, and teacher educators, begin to consider the impact this definition will have on future educational policies and procedures. The intent of this paper is to provide an overview of the definition, its back-

ground, rationale and assumptions, and to consider generally its implications in four areas — professional development, evaluation, instruction, and policy making.

Background and Rationale

During 1982-83 the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) asked the Michigan Reading Association (MRA) to undertake an examination of the state performance objectives for reading as the starting point for the revision of the current state assessment test. The initial step in this process was a consideration of the present definition of reading in light of recent theory and research in the area of reading. The present definition clearly recognizes comprehension as the ultimate goal of reading, as can be seen from the excerpt below.

The Department's definition of reading is based upon the assumption that the only legitimate, final outcome of reading instruction is comprehension. That is, although certain enabling word attack skills may be related to comprehension skills, mastery of these skills, in and of themselves and in the absence of comprehension is not a sufficient terminal objective for reading instruction.

In many respects this statement still holds true today. However, in 1977 when the present definition was adopted, our understanding of reading in general and comprehension in particular was more limited than it is today. At that time reading was conceptualized as a series of skills that were viewed as sequential

and hierarchical (e.g., literal, inferential, and applied comprehension). Consequently, the objectives and the reading tests were aimed at proficiency in component skill areas such as contextual analysis, dictionary usage, literal and inferential comprehension. While this view of reading was appropriate for that time, it no longer adequately reflects our knowledge of reading.

In the six years since the present definition was adopted significant advances in fields such as anthropology, cognitive psychology, education, linguistics, and sociology have made it possible to broaden our view of reading. Recent research holds that reading is a dynamic process that involves the reader's ability to construct meaning through the interaction between information suggested by the written language and the reader's existing knowledge. In other words the reader is an active participant in the process. This interactive dimension focuses on how the reader derives meaning from print; what the reader brings to the reading situation in terms of experience, knowledge, skills and ability; how the information is presented in written text; and what effects context has on reading. As a result, difficulty is no longer viewed as an absolute property of a particular reading skill or task, but rather as a relative property of the interaction among specific reader, text, and instructional factors.

Given this theoretical focus, the new definition must respond to factors such as how one's prior knowledge influences comprehension, how one structures that

¹ Bibliographical references were intentionally omitted from this paper for ease of reading. However, a reference list is included for those who are interested in further reading.

knowledge, what strategies the reader uses to construct meaning, what skills the reader needs to perform a particular reading task, the type of methods and materials being used, as well as the setting in which reading occurs. While these are not new concerns, it has not been until recently that reading research and theory have enabled us to integrate these issues in instructional practice.

The Definition

Existing Definition: Reading must be defined as...the process of transforming the visual representation of language into meaning. Thus,...an idea is being transferred from the written page to the reader's mind.

New Definition: Reading is the process of constructing meaning through the dynamic interaction among the reader's existing knowledge, the information suggested by the written language, and the context of the reading situation.

The existing definition implies that reading is a static process and that the reader is a passive recipient of meaning that is contained in the text. In contrast, the new definition emphasizes the **interactive, constructive, dynamic** nature of the reading process:

1. **interactive** — The term **interaction** is used in the new definition to indicate that reading is an act of communication that is dependent not only on the knowledge and skill of the author, but on the knowledge and skill of the reader as well.

2. **constructive** — The term **constructing** is used to indicate that meaning is something that cannot simply be extracted from a text, but rather that it must be actively created in the mind of the reader from the integration of prior knowledge with the information suggested by the text.

3. **dynamic** — The term **dynamic** is used to indicate that the reading process is variable, not static, adapting to the specific demands of each particular reading experience (e.g., to a particular type of text, or reading assignment).

This new definition recognizes that reading skill will vary from situation to situation, and that skilled reading is the ability to tailor one's activities to the demands of each reading situation. Thus, within this context, skills are viewed as a means to an end, rather than an end unto themselves.

Assumptions

The assumptions underlying the new definition provide the basis for its translation into practice — i.e., objectives, tests, curriculum guides, instructional procedures, etc. They are as follows:

Assumption -1. Reading is one component of communication: oral language (speaking/listening) and written language (writing/reading).

Although unchanged from the existing definition, this assumption takes on new meaning in light of the new definition. The basic premise of this assumption is that reading is a medium of communication and that the basic components of communication are the sender, the receiver, and the message. Reading, then, involves the communication of a message between an author and a reader. Thus, the meaning that is constructed by a reader is dependent to a large extent on the relationship between the author's purpose for writing the text and the reader's purpose for reading. Consider, for example, differences in meaning a reader might construct regarding information on the solar system as presented by the author of a poem, an encyclopedia entry, or a science fiction story.

Assumption -2. Characteristics of the reader (e.g., psychological, physical, social, cultural, linguistic) interact with characteristics of the reading task (e.g., purpose for reading, reading assignment, characteristics of the reading material, setting in which reading occurs, nature of reading instruction) to influence the process.

The existing definition implies that reading is static; that it remains the same for all readers and for all

types of reading tasks. The new definition describes a dynamic interaction that varies as a function of many factors both internal and external to the reader. Therefore, reading performance can be expected to vary as well. For example, the process of understanding the main idea of a text and a reader's consequent performance can be expected to vary considerably depending on the interaction among factors such as the reader's familiarity with the topic, interest in and purpose for reading, and the content and structure of the text.

Assumption -3. The ultimate goal of reading instruction is the development of readers who can flexibly and independently process written language for meaning. Skill mastery is a means to this end, not an end in itself.

A. Knowledge of the reading process should determine the content (what you teach) and the delivery system (how you teach) of reading instruction.

B. Interrelated components and subcomponents of the reading process can be identified for specific reader-text-context interactions and used as the basis for reading instruction.

The existing definition implies the existence of a discrete set of skills that, when mastered, add up to reading. In contrast, the new definition implies that the goal of instruction is to develop in students the ability to apply reading skills and strategies in a manner that is: 1) internalized — can be applied independently; 2) flexible — can be applied with or without conscious effort as the situation demands; and 3) generalized — can be applied to a variety of reading situations. For example, the objective for teaching a student to comprehend a fable is not merely to answer the questions correctly. Rather it is to understand what makes a fable a fable and how best to go about reading this type of literature. Thus, the goals of instruction are determined by the specific reader-text-context interaction, and skills become a means to achieve

these goals rather than the goals themselves.

Implications

The definition and its assumptions suggest several important implications for instruction, evaluation, professional development, and policy making. Although the process of translating the definition has just begun, the following may provide some insight into the direction this process is taking; a more detailed description of each of these areas will be forthcoming in other documents as each phase of this process is completed.

Professional Development. If the new definition is to direct instruction, then teachers must have a full understanding of how this reconceptualization of reading affects instructional decision making. In other words, teachers must become decision makers; applying the principles implied by the definition to a variety of methods and materials and in a variety of reading situations. Specifically, teachers must be able to identify (1) **WHAT** — the nature of the materials the student is reading (e.g., a poem, a short story, an editorial, a social studies text) and the information to be learned (e.g., concepts, facts, literary themes); (2) **WHY** — the purpose for which the student is reading (e.g., for enjoyment, to write a report, to answer certain questions); and (3) **HOW** — the skills and strategies the reader must utilize in order to perform the assigned task (e.g., to skim, to categorize, to rehearse). For example, if teachers were planning a unit on the American Revolution, they would have to identify the **WHAT** or the content to be learned (e.g., concepts, ideas, principles), and the variety of material to be read (e.g., textbook chapters, documents, diaries, newspapers); and **WHY** or purpose for reading. Teachers must also consider how the **WHAT** and the **WHY** influence the **HOW** or the skills and the learning strategies (e.g., identifying comparative, or superordinate/subordinate relationships among ideas) students use to perform the required

tasks. This means that professional development programs will have to train teachers to translate the **WHAT**, the **WHY**, and the **HOW** into instructional programs that are predicated on the principles that are inherent within the new definition.

Evaluation. The new definition implies that our performance objectives and assessment instruments must also focus on the what, why and how of reading. That is, our evaluation procedures need to take into consideration factors such as the nature of the materials to be read, the assigned reading tasks, student interest in and familiarity with a topic, and the context in which the reading occurs. This means that the focus of the new objectives and test items must be on students' knowledge about the interaction among different texts, tasks, and strategies and their ability to apply that knowledge, rather than the mastery of a set of isolated skills. For example, presented with material from a science text students might be asked to identify: 1) its organizational structure and/or the relative importance of text features such as headings, italicized vocabulary, or charts; 2) the various purposes for reading this text (e.g., to remember for a test; to provide information for a report); and 3) how they would vary their reading strategies in accordance with the text characteristics and the purposes for reading. Thus, what the students' responses reveal with respect to their knowledge about reading and their ability to apply this knowledge effectively becomes just as important as obtaining the correct answer.

Instruction. Again, the new definition implies that reading instruction should focus on developing in students an understanding of the what, how, and why of reading and the ability to apply this knowledge in a variety of reading situations. Thus, for the purpose of instruction, each reading situation would be considered as representative of one class, of reading situations and students would be taught about the characteristics that

distinguish one situation from another and how to tailor their reading activities to the demands of each particular situation. So, for example, students would not only be taught about the different types of stories (e.g., fairy tale, mystery, science fiction, myth) that exist in their basal readers or literature anthologies, but also the reasons for reading each type of story (e.g., to appreciate the author's use of figurative language), and the specific skills and strategies that are appropriate for reading each type (e.g., identifying temporal vs. causal story structure).

Policy Making. In order to provide a leadership role with respect to the implementation of the new definition administrators must also be conversant with the implications it has for such areas as professional development, materials selection, curriculum development, and test selection. For example, what criteria would a principal use to ascertain the extent to which teachers require students to use a variety of text processing strategies or the extent to which teachers apply the principles inherent in the new definition to other subjects they teach, e.g., science, math, and social studies? How would curriculum developers be affected by the new definition, i.e., what are the developmental considerations; how does one's knowledge of text structure change; what role does the adequacy of text structure assume in the evaluation and adoption of curricular materials? Given the importance of such questions, it will be impossible to implement the new definition adequately unless policy makers have a thorough knowledge of the new definition and its implications.

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