
CHAPTER 1

Investigating Our Own Literacy

What Makes a Good Teacher of Reading?

If you are reading this book, you are—or will become—a teacher of reading. Anyone who uses any text to teach children any subject teaches reading. Our primary goal in writing this book is to *show* you, as best we can, what good reading instruction looks like and sounds like. Throughout this text, you will find many lessons, activities, and suggestions. We have used all of these with children in public school classrooms, so we have had the benefit of modeling everything we present to you. Through your interaction with this text, we hope to give you a clear picture of effective reading instruction.

Good instruction is ultimately defined by its goal. Our goal as teachers of reading is to prepare students to be independent, strategic readers in real life. Let us begin this book by looking at what this goal means.

PREPARING STUDENTS TO BE INDEPENDENT, STRATEGIC READERS IN REAL LIFE

It is not enough that our students do well in our classrooms; the true measure of good teaching is our students' reading performance when they are on their own. Johnston (2002) gives this sage advice: "Set your gaze on the endpoint." Our endpoint consists of students who can independently read and understand any text.

Readers become independent when they can read *strategically*—that is, when they learn strategies for decoding and deciphering unknown words and can monitor their comprehension in a variety of texts and situations. In other words, we are preparing students for reading in real life outside the classroom. This goal has implications for the way we teach.

In Real Life, We Do Not Read Something Aloud Unless We Have Read It Silently First

In many classrooms, children are expected to read aloud a great deal of the time, and too often they must do so without having had the chance to read the text silently. We

know many people, including ourselves, who have been asked to do readings at weddings or other public occasions. After the initial panic, we agree to do it, but we request a copy of the text before the event. We want to practice reading it before we must read it aloud under “high-stakes” circumstances. We do not want to make mistakes because we would be embarrassed. It is not fun to make a mistake in public.

Children who are good readers (and some who are developing readers) love to read aloud. There are many ways to foster this love for reading. Chapter 3 gives several examples of fluency-building oral reading activities that are fun and motivating, but they provide for silent practice first. In the real world, most of the reading our students will do will be silent reading. So, if we are preparing our children to be readers in the real world, we should trust them to read silently, give them substantial practice in being fluent, and check in as often as we need to with one-on-one assessment of their oral reading.

In Real Life, Texts Are Not Read to Us First

It would be ideal if we woke up every morning and had someone read the newspaper to us while we went about our morning routine. But, of course, that’s not *reading*. That’s *listening*. In order to read the newspaper, we have to contend with the text on our own, reading it silently. Teachers who read everything to their students are doing them a great disservice. We think it is better to ask ourselves these questions: What texts can our students read on their own? (Let them.) What texts do they need help with? (Help them.)

Every Content-Area Text Is Different

Students encounter a wide range of texts during the school day. Reading a fictional story (narrative text) is different from reading a text about rocks and minerals (expository text). The two types of texts are set up differently. Their text structures and text features vary. So it makes sense that each teacher has a responsibility to teach his or her students how to read the text they will be using. In most elementary classrooms, one teacher teaches all the content areas. In some of the upper elementary grades, teachers may departmentalize their instruction so that one teacher teaches language arts and social studies, for example, and another teaches math and science. Nevertheless, the premise is the same: Each must teach the students to negotiate the text. Dispensing with a text in a content area is not a good practice; it does not help students who will have to read and understand text in every content area in real life.

Reading a Lot Really Matters

Reading has many benefits, and these benefits increase as we increase the amount of reading our students do in a variety of texts and contexts. Their background knowledge increases, and their knowledge of text structures and complex syntactic structures improves.

Good readers often choose to read; conversely, struggling readers often avoid it. So good readers get lots of practice getting better, and struggling readers often do not. Stanovich (1986) refers to these outcomes as the *Matthew effects in reading*. The term *Mat-*

the effects is a reference to a verse in the Biblical gospel of Matthew (Matthew 25:29), the gist of which is that “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.” Using this analogy, let us imagine two cycles in reading. As illustrated in Figure 1.1, good readers are likely to be ones who have had the benefit of rigorous instruction in decoding and comprehension. They are given opportunities for sustained practice; they get better at reading; they choose to read more; “the rich get richer,” and the cycle continues. On the other hand, struggling readers may have received less-than-optimal instruction when they started to learn to read; they have limited skills in reading; they do not choose to read on their own; their reading does not improve; “the poor get poorer,” and the cycle continues.

Allington and Cunningham (2007) also remind us that reading a lot really matters. They advocate *wide reading*—an abundance of reading in a great variety of texts and contexts—and describe the many benefits students obtain from this practice, ranging from increased vocabulary knowledge to achievement in high-stakes circumstances.

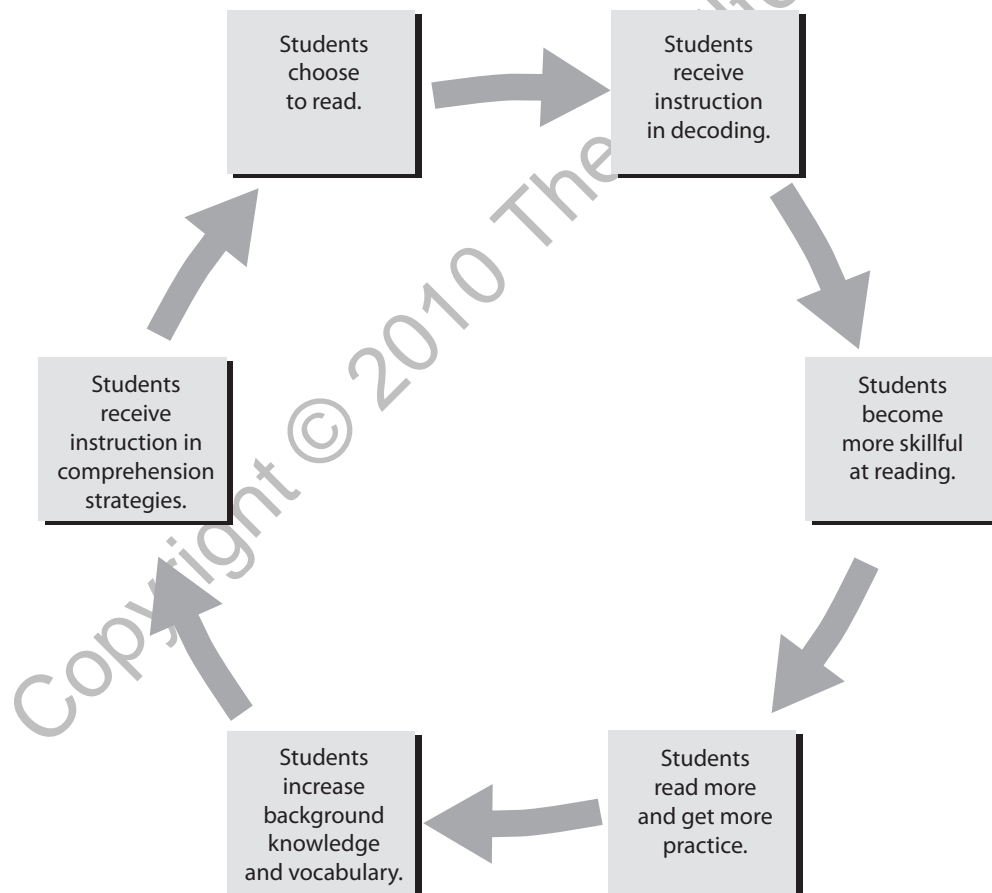


FIGURE 1.1. One of the Matthew effects in reading (“the rich get richer,” for good readers). The converse of this effect (“the poor get poorer”) occurs for struggling readers. Based on Stanovich (1986).

Work done by Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding (1988) provides further evidence of the effects of wide reading on achievement in reading. In their study, they investigated the independent reading habits of fifth graders in and out of school. What did they find? The students who typically scored at the 98th percentile on state tests read approximately 65 minutes independently per day (both in and out of school), which translated to about 4½ million words a year. These were the “rich” students, in Stanovich’s analogy. However, the students who typically scored at the 50th percentile read about 4½ minutes independently per day, which translated into approximately 200,000 words a year. These were students who might hardly, if ever, get a chance to read silently. These were students who went home and did *not* choose to read. These were the “poor” students, in Stanovich’s analogy. The more able students—the ones who probably didn’t need it as much—were reading 20 times more words than their less able peers. These two groups of students had unequal access to learning simply because of the amount of text they read on a day-to-day basis.

Not All Reading Situations Are the Same

As adults in the real world, we read for many different reasons. The way we read is determined by the type of text and our purpose (or the purposes others set for us). So it is reasonable to say that each and every act of reading we do is different.

Look at the chart in Figure 1.2. In the first column, we list several different types of texts. The second column is for noting the purposes for reading the texts. In the first row is a real-life reading situation: reading an entertainment magazine while waiting for an appointment with the dentist. We often read this kind of text while waiting for the dentist to call us into the office. It helps pass the time. If we are anxious about the appointment, it helps get our mind off the procedure. If we happen to have many choices for reading material, we choose to read something that is easy, informative, and of interest to us. We do not choose to learn something difficult or to read something lengthy. We also know that the dentist is not going to ask us questions about the magazine to assess our comprehension. So the text (entertainment magazine) and the purpose we set (passing time while we wait to be called) determine our reading behavior (skimming the text and choosing things to read that are of interest).

The second row of the chart offers a very different situation: reading directions for a task. The stakes are very different now; carefully reading and thoroughly understanding the text are necessary to get things done. The text (directions to assemble a bookcase) and the purpose (successfully assembling the bookcase) have a direct effect on the way in which we read. We will have to reread sections many times as we do the assembling, particularly if this is the first bookcase we have assembled. We may employ other strategies, such as reading aloud to purposefully slow down our reading. We may have to ask someone questions about a term or tool or technique. The reading may be interactive and collaborative. We keep the directions close at hand. Reading directions to assemble a bookcase differs greatly from reading while waiting for an appointment, but they are both examples of ways we read in the real world.

On the chart, we have suggested other situations in which adult readers use text to get things done or for pleasure. Take a few minutes to jot down what you, as a reader, experience in each of these situations. You will see that every reading situation is different and puts different demands on you.

| TEXT + | PURPOSE = | BEHAVIOR |
|--------------------------------------|---|---|
| Entertainment magazine | To pass time while waiting to go into the dentist's office. | I skim the magazine and find articles of interest. I know I'm not accountable for remembering the information. I am merely reading for pleasure. |
| Directions for assembling a bookcase | To guide me through the task of assembling. | I read the text over once and see which parts of the task I can do without help. I get started and reread the directions that need careful attention. I may have to read the directions several times. I keep the directions close to me. |
| Course text | | |
| Novel (for a book group) | | |
| Novel (for pleasure) | | |
| Recipe | | |

FIGURE 1.2. Text + purpose = behavior.

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The concept of *text + purpose = behavior* is a crucial one to teach, especially to our developing and reluctant readers. Those students are the ones who often think that they have to remember everything they read after reading aloud once, because that is the way they do most of their reading. Consequently, they often dislike reading, and their dislike escalates as they get older. These students, in particular, need to know that there are low stakes as well as high stakes in reading. They need to get experience and practice in all kinds of reading, so that they will choose to read more outside of school and when they are adults. However, they will not choose to read if the stakes are always high. When students' reading is oral, their mistakes are always public. They may rarely, if ever, get to choose their own purposes and texts. They may rarely, if ever, get a chance to solve problems privately. It is no wonder to us that there are large numbers of adolescents and adults who never read.

Learning to Read Well Is Really Hard, So We Need as Much Help as We Can Get

One of our revered professors began her classes on teaching reading with this saying: "Let them in on the secret: Learning to read is hard work." We always remember this advice, and we pass it on to our own students. Our more able readers make reading look easy. Our developing readers think there is something wrong with them if they have to read something more than once, or if they have to decipher an unknown word they encounter in the text, or if they have to stop for a while and think about what they read. What they don't know (and we don't always tell them) is that *good* readers do those things—that good readers encounter problems while reading, and good readers fix them up. Learning to read well in a variety of situations is hard, and we are always developing more skills as adult readers.

We Cannot Improve as Readers Unless We Are Willing to Step Outside Our Comfort Zone

Learning something new involves taking a bit of risk and stepping out of our initial comfort zone. We learn this from Vygotsky (1978), a Russian psychologist who first described a concept known as the *zone of proximal development*. Vygotsky asserted that a task a child does in collaboration with a "more knowledgeable other" *today* will be accomplished independently *tomorrow*. In order for this to happen, learners have to take the chance of trying something difficult, but know that there is someone available to help them achieve success. The zone of proximal development is wide; in fact, it is probably wider than their initial comfort zone. By presenting students with an appropriate level of challenge within their zone of proximal development, and giving them the appropriate amount of support, we can guide all students in their attempts at learning to be excellent readers.

We worry about our most fragile students a great deal. We worry about the effects that challenges might have on their self-esteem. And so we feel that we should not encourage them to step outside of their comfort zone; this zone is very narrow. This is the reason why we may read everything to them and explain everything in detail. Ironically, attempting to make them feel good about themselves may take away their opportunities to think, take chances, set goals, stumble, and get themselves back up

again. Another revered professor used to chastise us when we argued in support of this practice: “You want to build their self-esteem? Teach them to read!”

Every Child Has the Rights to Excellent Instruction by Qualified Teachers of Reading

The International Reading Association (2000) has published a position statement that includes a set of reading rights to be honored for all children. See www.reading.org for a list of these rights. As teachers, we have a responsibility to prepare our students for the reading demands they will encounter as adults. The demands on today’s readers are far greater and the stakes are higher than in the past. This is why we need to prepare students for the real-life demands they will encounter in reading. That is what this text is about: preparing teachers to prepare students for these demands. If you are still reading, we have accomplished what we set out to do. We are confident, if you have come this far, that you will find this text useful and informative.

From what you have read so far, and from your own experience, what do you think makes a good teacher of reading? Record your ideas in the space below. We have started it for you.

An excellent teacher of reading does the following:

1. *Provides many opportunities for students to read.*

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

In Chapter 2, we begin the process of guiding you through an interactive investigation of research-based reading instruction. We describe the physical environment for delivering reading instruction and supporting literacy learning, as well as the routines that should be part of the everyday instruction in teaching reading to children in grades K–6.

Before you read the next chapter, take a few moments to assess your comprehension of this chapter by referring to the Key Terms Chart in Figure 1.3 (page 8). Try to write definitions for the terms in your own words.

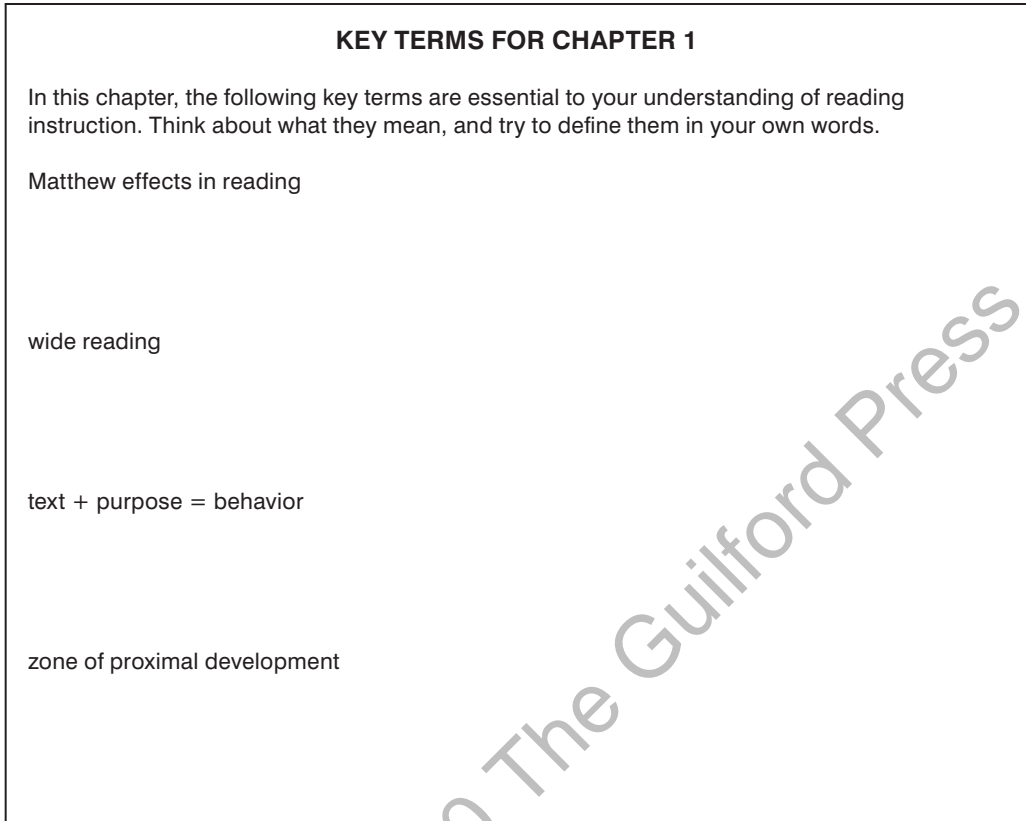


FIGURE 1.3. Key Terms Chart for Chapter 1.