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Reading to Learn

SHEILA HARRI-AUGSTEIN
MICHAEL SMITH AND
LAURIE THOMAS

SAMPLE

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Foreword

Reading to learn

Reading to learn is something that we nearly all do. The point of teaching reading in school is partly to develop the ability to learn from books. One learns to read in order to read to learn. Of course, there are many other reasons for reading; but reading to learn enters so deeply into our general intellectual growth that it is a crucially important skill to acquire.

In this book we are not really concerned with young children's reading patterns, although some of the techniques described later have in fact been tried out fairly extensively with primary school children and seem to have proved helpful. Our concern is rather with the new kinds of demand on our reading ability made by the reading we undertake for A level, or in college, or at university; or, indeed, at work.

It might be thought that if someone has reached this level then their reading skills can be taken for granted. We can only say that is not our experience. Nor, it appears, is it the experience of lecturers in an increasing number of colleges and universities, many of whom are arranging reading courses for their students. There is considerable support, not least among students themselves, for the view that the kind of demand upon reading ability made by higher education requires new skills, new strategies, a new approach altogether.

Even if that were not true, there might still be a case for looking at our reading skills. Donald Bligh, in his book *What's the Use of Lectures*, puts the point well:

If we imagine a student on a three-year course who reads 11 hours per week during ten-week terms but never during vacations nor at any time in the rest of his life, he would need to make less than 3% improvement in reading efficiency after 30

hours' tuition before we could say that the time training him to read faster was not saved by increased efficiency.

Bligh adds the comment 'The failure of most colleges to provide training in reading to learn is, in my opinion, little short of a disgrace. '

It is a failure which many institutions are seeking to remedy. What is often lacking, however, is adequate materials for such training. The object of this book is to provide such materials.

Who is the book for?

The book, then, is for people who already possess fundamental reading skills but who are being obliged to use them in situations which make new, more complex demands on them. Many of these people will be students at colleges, polytechnics and universities making the difficult transition from sub A level work to work at degree, diploma or certificate level. An increasing proportion of these will be relatively mature people returning to study after a break and understandably feeling diffident about the capability of their somewhat rusty learning skills. Some may not be students at all but just people anxious to improve their reading ability for perfectly good reasons of their own. The approach developed in this book has been tried out with many people of this sort, with undergraduates of many disciplines, including engineers, sociologists, biologists, and chemists, with students of art, education, architecture and music, with sixth formers and with adults working in a variety of occupations. It is the outcome of a great deal of work in the field, stretching now over ten years.

How to use the book

The book is addressed directly to the individual reader. This is deliberate. We shall argue later that unless the individual takes responsibility for his own reading, it will not improve. However, in compiling this book we have had in mind not so much the lone reader as a course for a group, such as Bligh envisages and so many institutions are beginning to provide. The book is written as a self-tutoring workbook and so should be suitable for an individual

working alone. However, we assume that the reader will normally be part of a group, and so we have built in some exercises which are best performed in pairs. There is a real pedagogic advantage in this since another person can often provide the monitoring of reading performance which is hard to do for oneself. Nevertheless, having someone else to work with is not essential, and such exercises can be omitted. The reader is not expected to work religiously through all the exercises we have included. This is a workbook not a programmed text. We have tried to provide an abundance of material and the learner (or tutor) is expected to select according to his perception of his needs.

What we have provided is a number of exercises together with an interleaving commentary. This material should not, definitely not, be read straight through as if it were an ordinary book. The reader should read the relevant part of the commentary, think about the points made, and then turn to the exercises both for help in understanding the points and for practice in the techniques suggested. The reader should then re-read the commentary asking questions about every point of difficulty. The text may not answer them, or the answer may not become clear until later in the book, but if you are asking the questions right from the start you will be beginning to emancipate yourself from print, and from us, and starting to assume responsibility for your reading performance. Another point: you will have to add material of your own, taken from your own reading. That will be good. The book is only a point of departure. If you seriously intend to alter and improve your reading you will need to become more aware of your reading performance whenever you read. What you learn from the book has to be applied outside it. That is part of what we mean by the reader taking responsibility for his own performance. Confining yourself to the book, and trying to improve your skill only when you are reading the book, is not enough.

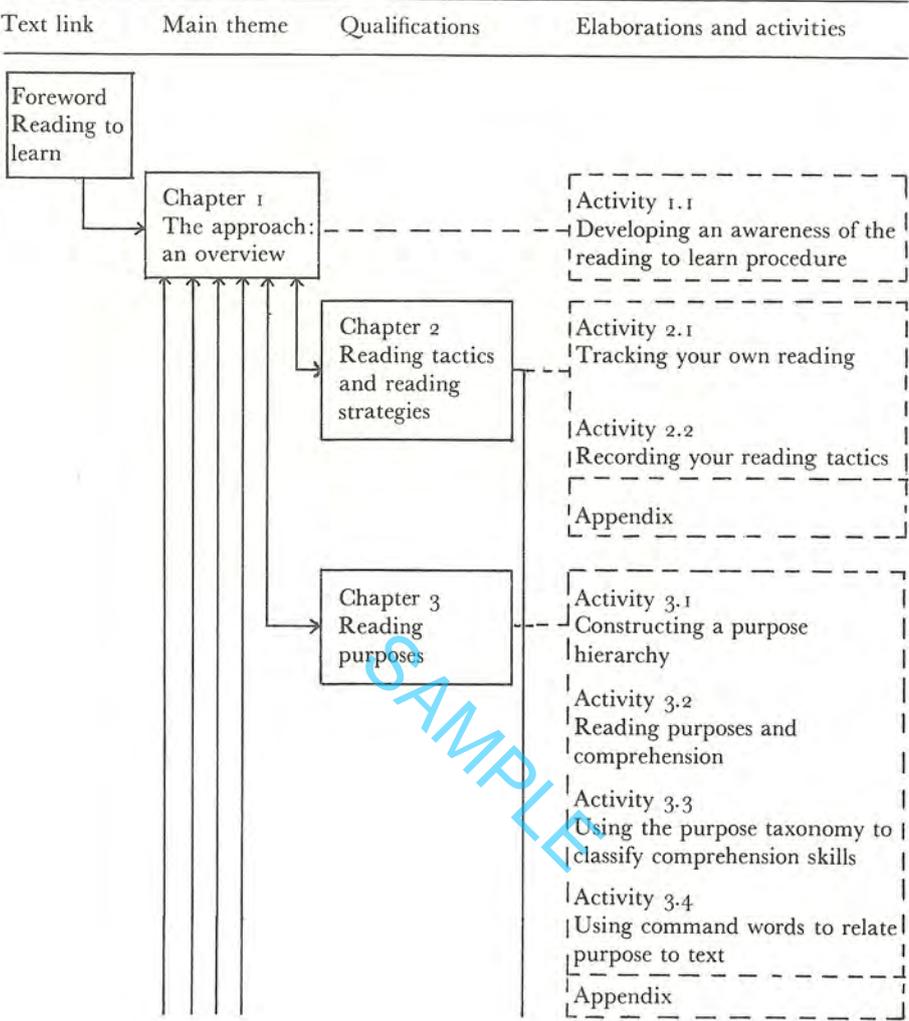
How much time, then, should the reader be expecting to spend? We have taken as a basis the notion of a course extending over fifteen two-hour sessions, i.e. thirty hours in all. This is a fairly standard length for courses in advanced reading techniques. It represents a considerable investment in time and energy on the part of the reader, but if he or she is genuinely seeking a permanent improvement in reading efficiency such a commitment is necessary. After all, as Blish points out, an investment on that scale is likely to

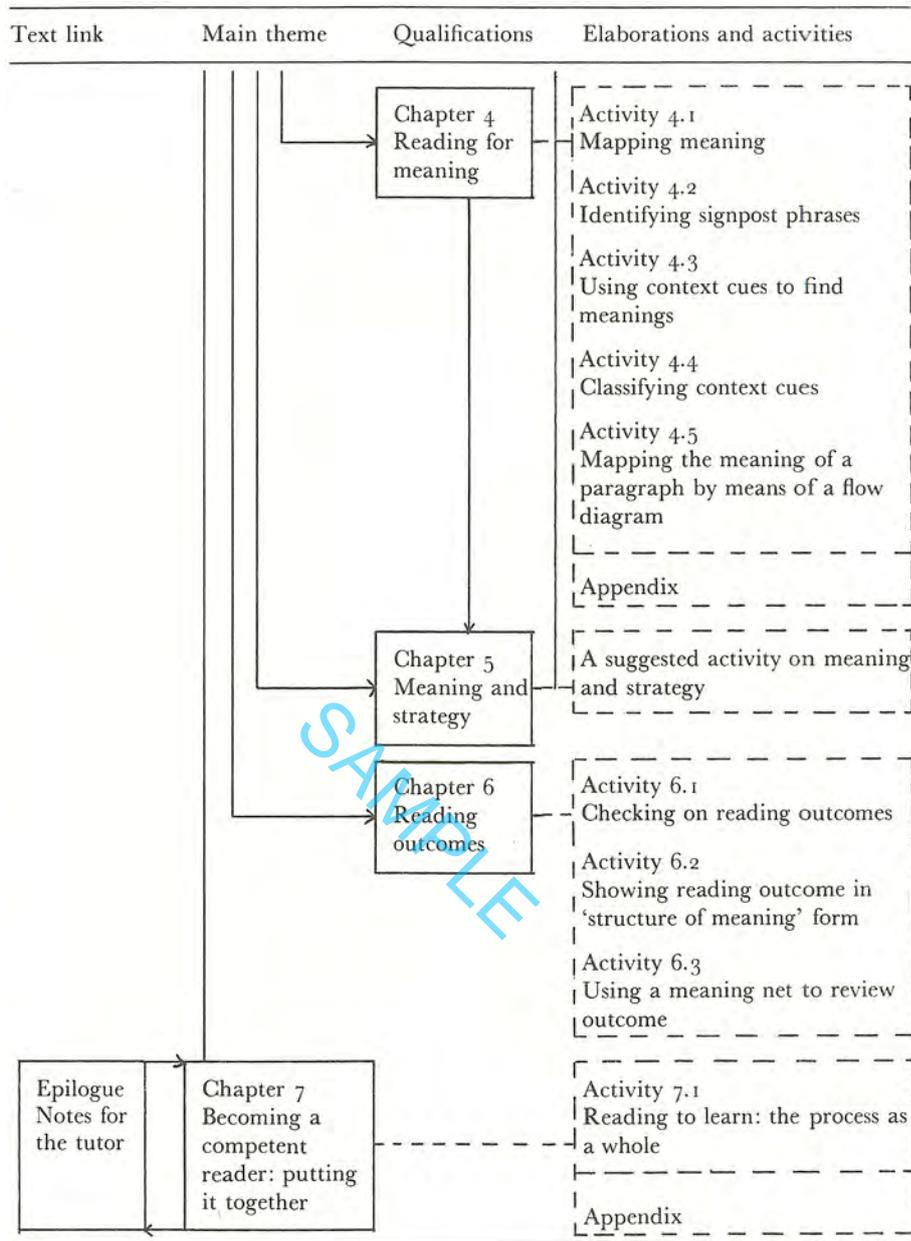
pay for itself reasonably quickly given even a modest improvement in reading efficiency. Our results indicate that people can develop their reading competence very significantly given the commitment we suggest. In fact we have found it possible to convey the general lines of the approach effectively in six two-hour sessions. The more time available for practice and consolidation, however, the better.

Learning to learn

Finally, let us briefly point forwards to skills other than reading which are important for intellectual growth. In this book we are concerned with helping people to improve their abilities to use the printed media as resource for learning. We have developed a model of the process (Chapter I and Fig. I. I) and a battery of techniques for raising awareness and encouraging reflection and review of how, why and what people learn by reading. We have successfully applied this approach to writing, listening and discussion as learning skills. For example, the flow diagram and structures of meaning techniques can be usefully applied to help people improve their essays, project work, personal notes and examination answers. Again, listening effectively in lectures and participation in seminars and tutorials can be considerably improved by the adoption of a purpose - strategy - outcome - review approach. Readers who take on the responsibility for developing their reading to learn skills might usefully consider how they can apply this approach to other areas of learning skill.

User guide to this workbook: a flow diagram of the chapters





Note. The flow diagram technique for text analysis is described in detail in Chapter 4.

1

The approach: an overview

Introduction

In this chapter we set out our approach in general terms. We introduce the reader to a number of ideas which will be more fully developed in later chapters. Our intention here is merely to give the reader a provisional working framework within which to fit particular ideas as they come up. We begin by asking exactly what is going on when a person is reading. We suggest that as you read you predict meanings and check against textual cues whether they are correct or not. A sort of conversation goes on with yourself though you are probably not aware of it. The 'conversation' is mostly concerned with the meaning of the text, i.e. with what we call 'product' or 'content'. What is needed, we argue, is to develop techniques for having a 'conversation' about process, about the ways you read. We then go on to sketch a preliminary language for that conversation by suggesting that we talk about reading in terms of purpose, strategy, outcome and review.

What is going on when a person is reading something?

Opinions differ, but one view which we find attractive has been gaining ground in recent years. This sees reading as essentially a continuing series of predictions about the text. Here, for instance, is a record of a relatively proficient young reader reading a passage aloud. A stroke through a word with a word written in above indicates a mispronunciation or substitution. A curved arrow indicates a repetition.

So education it was! I ^{hoped a} ~~opened~~ the dictionary and picked out a word
s Ph
that sounded good. Phil/oso/phi/cal I yelled. Might as well study
what it means 1. Phizo 2. Phiso-soophical
~~word meanings~~ first. Philosophical: 'showing calmness and
his
courage in ~~the~~ face of ill fortune'.

We see that in the second sentence the reader substituted 'hoped' for 'opened' and 'a' for 'the'; and he had to have several tries at the word 'philosophical' in the third sentence, repeating it syllable by syllable. What is interesting is that the substitutions are nearly all perfectly sensible ones; they accord, that is, with what the reader could expect the next word to be having read so far. In the fourth sentence, for example, it looks as if the child registered the 'w' of the word after 'study' and then guessed ahead to what followed. Actually, the guess was quite a good one. 'What it means' fits in perfectly well with the sense. To take another example: in the second sentence it looks as if the child correctly identified the word 'sound' but predicted the ending wrongly. 'Sounds' would, however, have been correct grammatically and would also have made sense.

Since the predictions are not random but fit in with the requirements of sense and grammar it seems likely that they are made as part of a pattern of continuing response to cues in the text. Cues encountered after prediction help the reader to check whether the prediction was correct. In the second sentence, for instance, it might be that the reader responded to the 'o' sign in 'opened' but predicted - wrongly - the word 'hoped'. When he had read a little further he saw that 'hoped' would not do; it would not fit in with the rest of the sentence. Accordingly, he abandoned the prediction, went back and made another, correct, one.

It seems that as the reader reads he or she is predicting meanings that will be symbolised by the words on the page. The reader's eyes scan the words to discover whether they are compatible with his or her expectations. This scanning process continues evenly unless the reader's expectations are not met. If that happens the process falters. A mismatch occurs between expectation and meaning. Such a mismatch can occur for many reasons. The reader may have predicted wrongly the meaning of a single word or phrase, or perhaps the whole drift of his expectation is wrong. What then happens is that he has to search the text more carefully for cues which will help him to find the right meaning. He then returns to the high-speed scanning which characterises the normal flow of reading.

Obviously this is a very curtailed and over-simplified description of a highly complex process. The example was taken from an article by Goodman and the reader may wish to refer to his writings for a more detailed account. There are other views of the reading process

but the predictive model which we develop later in the chapter seems to us especially helpful for thinking about the reading behaviour of experienced readers, of undergraduates or students taking A level, whose reading skills are already well advanced.

For one thing, the process of prediction, of attributing meaning to the marks on the page, depends to a great extent on the use the reader is able to make of context, both the context provided by the text and the wider context provided by the reader's own experience, knowledge, interests and purposes. An experienced reader brings a great deal to the act of reading. Such a reader has, indeed, a considerable advantage over younger, less experienced readers, and an approach to reading which starts from that fact is likely to prove particularly fruitful for present purposes.

Another feature of the approach which attracts us is that it does not present reading as a passive process of deriving meaning from the text. Instead, it sees the reader as constantly taking initiatives, as continually proposing meanings to the text. We shall argue that it is this reader initiative which opens up the possibility of improving one's reading ability. If one can nurture the process of reader initiative then one can operate consciously upon one's reading patterns. The first thing we need to do, then, is to become more aware of ourselves as readers.

Reading self-awareness

If we ask someone about the way they read they will not reply, of course, in terms anything like those we have put forward above. Usually people volunteer statements like the following:

I read word by word.

I read from the beginning to the end.

I can read all right, but I cannot remember afterwards what I've just read.

I can't concentrate for long. My mind wanders.

Surprisingly often replies reveal personal superstitions about reading:

I need to smoke.

I must be alone.

I must have the radio on.

Such knowledge is at the level of sympathetic magic. Even when the replies are more to the point there is usually very little awareness of their implications.

I always read the same way.

I make different sense from an article if I read it again.

I read the important bits usually.

People's knowledge of the way they read tends to be fragmented. They have several bits of information but they do not know how to bring the bits together into a coherent explanation. They lack, in our terminology, the tools for a satisfactory conversation about reading.

The reading conversations

Goodman describes reading as a kind of 'psycholinguistic guessing game'. Efficient reading, in his view, results from skill in selecting the fewest and most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right first time. We prefer to think of reading as a kind of conversation between the reader and the text. The reader puts questions, as it were, to the text and gets answers (what we have called 'cues'). In the light of these he puts further questions, and so on.

For most of the time this 'conversation' is inaudible. It goes on below the level of consciousness. At times, however, we become aware of it. This is usually when we are running into difficulties, when mismatch is occurring between expectations and meaning. We sometimes catch ourselves saying to ourselves things like 'What on earth is he talking about?', 'Where have I got to?', 'Hallo, I've missed something' or 'I'm completely lost. I shall have to go back and start again'. It is then that the conversation becomes audible. Significantly, it is when mismatch is occurring. When successful matching is being experienced our interrogation of the text continues at the unconscious level. There is no need to bring the process into the foreground of our consciousness.

Different people converse with the text differently. Some stay

very close to the words on the page; others take off imaginatively from the words, interpreting, criticising, analysing and extrapolating. The former represents a kind of comprehension which is 'literal' (i.e. as written in the text). The latter represents higher levels of comprehension (i.e. as interpreted by the reader). Actually, the reader is always doing both to some extent. You cannot take off imaginatively unless you have first understood the words at some kind of literal level. However, we have found in practice that people often tend to one extreme or the other. They are either over-conformist as readers (and don't take off critically enough) or undisciplined as readers (and don't pay sufficient regard to what the text actually contains). The balance between these is important, especially for advanced readers. The kind of reading required in further or higher education places considerable emphasis on both.

The conversation that we have been so far concerned with has been to do with meaning, with the content of the text. But there is another kind of conversation which from our point of view is equally important, and that is to do not with what is read but with how it is read. We call this a 'process' conversation as opposed to a 'content' conversation. It is concerned not with meaning but with the mechanics of our reading, with the strategies we employ and with appraisal of their effectiveness. If we are an advanced reader our ability to hold a content conversation with a text is usually pretty well developed. Not so our ability to hold a process conversation. It is precisely this kind of conversation that is at issue when we are seeking to develop our reading ability to meet the new demands being placed upon us by studying at a higher level. Before we can have a conversation about process, however, we need some kind of language for conducting that conversation.

Some preliminary vocabulary for a process conversation

We would like to introduce at this point four terms which we shall use a great deal later on. They are *purpose*, *strategy*, *outcome* and *review*.

PURPOSE

People read for different purposes. Sometimes they are reading in

order to locate a single item of information ('What was that name?'); sometimes they are reading to acquire several items of a fairly factual nature; sometimes the facts do not matter much but the general argument does, and the reader is trying to grasp a theory. There are, we shall find, very many different purposes for reading.

Now purpose is very important to reading. First, we shall see that the way you read, your reading strategy, can and should vary according to purpose. If your purpose is to locate a single item an appropriate strategy, for instance, is to scan the text quickly. If you are reading to acquire several items scanning will not do. In order to develop your reading, therefore, the first thing you have to do is to be very precise about your reading purpose. Secondly, in order to be able to measure how effective your reading is (and that is certainly essential if you want to improve it) you have to check it against something, and that can only be purpose.

Purpose may seem an easy concept to grasp, and the tendency is to pass quickly over it. In fact, it is in many ways the most difficult of our terms and we shall find that the chapter devoted to it is by no means a simple one. Many problems in the development of advanced reading skills begin here.

STRATEGY

Strategy is the way in which the reader approaches the text. The first thing to understand is that the text may be approached in various ways, according to one's reading purpose: that is, there is more than one strategy available to the reader. Thus the person who replied that he always reads in the same way, whatever the text and whatever the purpose, is unlikely to be reading well. At the very least he is restricting himself severely in the way he approaches the text. The mark of good reading is to vary one's strategy appropriately. To do that it helps to know what strategies are available. That will be the subject of our next chapter. Logically, perhaps, we should consider purposes first, but, as we have said, the concept is more difficult to handle than might be supposed, and there is much to be said for beginning with reading strategies, since they are relatively easy to grasp and knowledge of them bears fruit immediately for one's reading.

An example of a reading strategy is given in the Purpose section

above. We have identified it simply as a scanning strategy, which is satisfactory as a verbal label but does not go very far towards helping the reader to recognise it as behaviour in himself, to know when he is doing it and when he is not. In the next chapter we shall outline some techniques which will help him to do this and, of course, to recognise other reading strategies.

OUTCOME

By outcome we mean the result of our reading. Thus, if our reading purpose was to find the name of a particular author, possession of the name after reading would be a satisfactory outcome. Broadly, outcomes can be defined as the changes which take place in what we know, think and feel as a result of a particular piece of reading. It is as well to be precise about outcome. If we are vague about it then our reading tends to become ineffective and we are left making, perhaps, the dissatisfied comments upon ourselves of two of the people quoted above: 'I make different sense from an article if I read it again', and 'I can read all right, but I can't remember afterwards what I've just read'. (If he had been able to read 'all right' the outcome would have been less unsatisfactory.) It is, in the end, the outcome of our reading that provides the criterion of its effectiveness. For it to do that we must be able to measure outcome, or at least specify it precisely, and we must be honest about it.

REVIEW

By now it will have become apparent that the concepts we have been discussing are all related to each other. Purpose affects strategy; strategy affects outcome; and outcome, when related to purpose, provides the measure of the effectiveness of the strategy. Taken together they define the key features of reading to learn. If we want to improve our reading ability the things for us to concentrate on are clarifying our purposes, choosing the right strategies, and identifying precisely the outcomes of our reading. There is one thing more. In order to be sure that we have chosen the right strategy and carried it through successfully we have to check outcome against our original purpose. It is this operation that we have in mind when we talk about review.

Review extends more widely than simply checking outcome

against purpose, for once we start on the operation we find that it involves us in a wholesale appraisal of all phases of the reading process. If outcome does not accord with purpose it could be that the purpose itself was wrongly formulated. Were we precise enough? Has our purpose changed as we have grown to know more about the subject? Or perhaps the purpose was correctly defined but the outcome imprecisely measured? Or possibly the relationship between outcome and purpose needs thinking about? Maybe the strategy was wrong anyway? All these, and a host of other questions, should come up during the review phase.

Even without going any further it can be seen that we have equipped ourselves with the beginnings of a vocabulary for conducting a conversation about the reading process. We are already able to refer some of the fragmentary remarks offered by people as descriptions of themselves as readers to one or other of the concepts we have introduced. 'I read word by word' and 'I read from the beginning to the end' are obviously strategies. While we cannot comment on their appropriateness until we know something about their relation to purposes, we probably do know that the person who replied 'I always read in the same way' is locked into a single strategy. 'I read the important bits usually' is a description of a strategy, too, and a much more sensible one. However, 'important' begs a lot of questions. It takes us at once to purpose. More subtly, it takes us to outcome. How do we know that what he thought was important was important? And so on with the other replies. We are beginning to be able to analyse our reading.

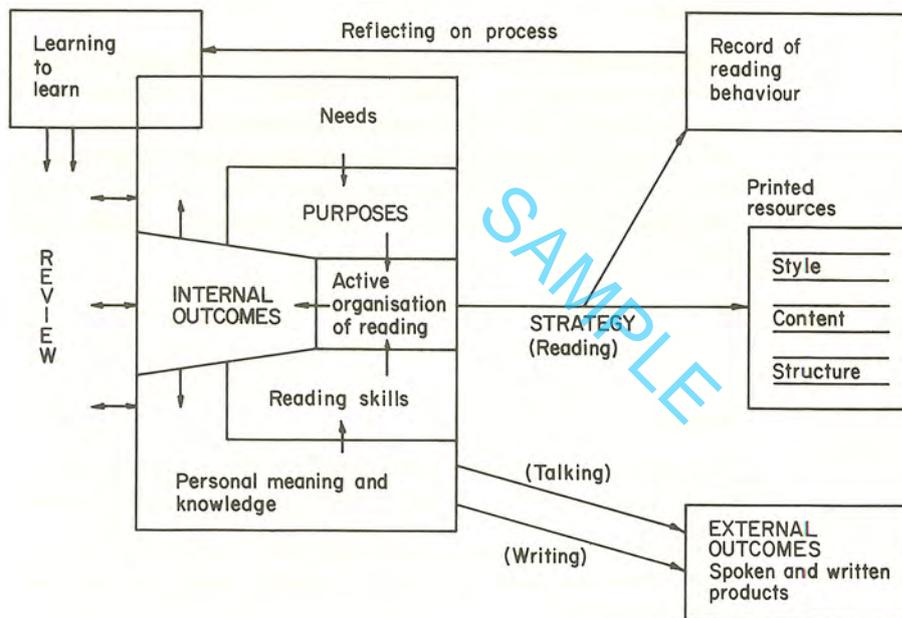
A model of reading to learn

What we have been doing is introducing a model of the whole process of reading to learn. The four concepts that we have just identified are the key components of the model. Separately, they identify parts of the reading process where we can intervene if we wish to develop our reading ability. Together they offer an opportunity for bringing the whole process of reading under more conscious control.

The process needs to be seen as a cyclical one. When you approach a reading task you clarify your purpose, choose an appropriate strategy, specify and assess the outcome of your reading, and then check back to see that your purpose is

accomplished, i.e. review the whole operation. Review, however, may lead you to reassess your purpose. Purpose is never finally clarified until the final outcome is achieved and reviewed. Reclarification of purpose may lead to a different choice of strategy, and so on. Especially when you are a beginner several cycles of purpose-strategy-outcome-review (P-S-O-R) may be necessary. This may seem a formidable investment of time, and so it is. But it is an investment which in the long run will be repaid. It is better to go slowly at the beginning and build up the right habits than to skim the basics and so never really know them. In time the process will become second nature, i.e. almost subconscious and quite speedy.

Purpose, strategy, outcome and review are the principal components of the model, but other things can be fitted into its framework too. It was suggested earlier that the prior knowledge and experience possessed by the advanced reader is an important advantage to him, and they should certainly be brought into the model. Similarly, features of the text, its structure, style and vocabulary, are important too, and must be taken into account. We shall see later how these and other things can be fitted into the model (and see also Fig. 1.1).



P-S-O-R

What is important at this stage, however, is to be clear about purpose, strategy, outcome and review. Our first Activity is a very simple one but it may help the reader to confirm his understanding of the terms. At the same time it will, we hope, start the reader on the long process of self-evaluation with respect to reading.

Activity 1.1 Developing an awareness of the reading to learn procedure

Ask yourself:

Why are you reading this book? (Purpose)

How have you read this chapter so far? (Strategy)

What have you learnt? (Outcome)

Could you have approached the chapter differently? (Review)

Commentary

At this stage your answers will probably be rather general. You will probably have said something like 'I want to learn to read better' and 'I started at the beginning and read through'. No matter. As you proceed your answers will become more precise. Meanwhile, at least you are beginning to get an idea of what purpose, strategy, outcome and review are, and are starting to see how you can apply them to your reading.

Summary

The point that we hope we have made in this chapter is that people fail to become effective versatile readers for three basic reasons:

- 1 They are unable to formulate adequate operational purposes and therefore read in a rather vaguely orientated and non-specific way.

- 2 They are unaware of the ways in which they read. At best they have a crude idea of 'sometimes skimming', 'scanning', 'sometimes reading carefully', and 'sometimes going back and looking at something'. But many people are unable to control such strategies and believe that the process of reading is something that happens to them as they try to get at the meaning of the text, rather than being something which they can develop and use as a versatile learning skill.
- 3 They are unable to assess the quality of the learning outcome which is achieved during reading. Many readers, on putting down a book, can give only very vague and evasive answers to questions about exactly what they have learned.

Let us put this positively so that we know what we are aiming at:
The effective reader is able to:

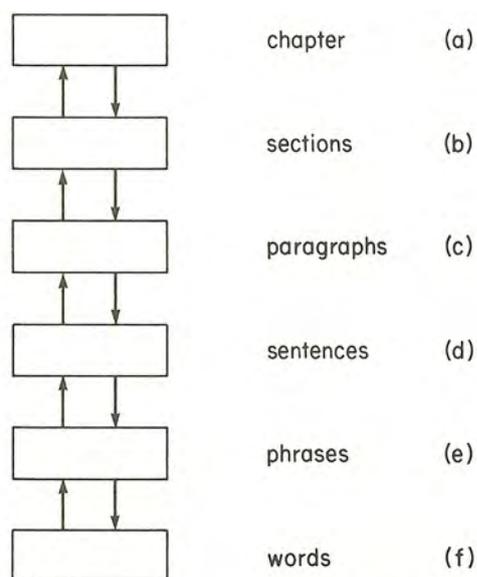
- 1 articulate a wide variety of realistic purposes;
- 2 choose from a wide variety of strategies in order to achieve specified purposes;
- 3 assess the quality of reading outcomes within the context of specified purposes;
- 4 review the whole process (purpose-strategy-outcome) in personal terms and systematically.

The hierarchical organisation of reading

There is one final general point to be made in this chapter before we move on to examining each of the principal components in turn. That is, reading is organised hierarchically. During reading one's awareness moves up and down through different levels or size of meaning unit. Sometimes one is concentrating on an individual word (when, say, unfamiliar letter clusters obtrude). At other times one can be skimming the words on a page in such a way that one isn't even aware of sentences or paragraphs. Sometimes, indeed, the relevant unit of meaning is the chapter. We can see these units as arranged in a hierarchy running from word to phrase to sentence to paragraph to section to chapter and so on (see Fig. 1.2).

The important thing for us to bear in mind is that the concepts we have introduced can also be arranged hierarchically. For example, we can think of purposes as arranged in a kind of

Figure 1.2 The hierarchical organisation of units of meaning



descending order. Our overall purpose in reading a chapter might be to find out about monetary policy (level (a) in Fig. 1.2). In particular we might want to know about how to define the supply of money, and we would formulate a purpose in those terms. This might correspond to a section in the chapter (level (b)) or to one or two paragraphs (level (c)). When we start reading the section we might be hung up over the meaning of a particular sentence. We would re-read the relevant part, adjusting our purpose to the more specific level (d) - 'to find out what the sentence means'. Or we might be puzzled by one particular word (e.g. 'bimetallism') and our concern would be to discover its meaning (level (f)).

If after reading we looked back over our purposes we would find it possible to arrange them in an ascending order, each level being part of the one above it. The same is true of strategies and outcomes.

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