

NEW PUBLICATIONS

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NUWE PUBLIKASIES

Neate, B. 1999 (1992). *Finding out about finding out: A practical guide to children's information books*, Winchester: Infopress. 207 pp

Bobby Neate's book *Finding out about finding out* is a rare combination of coherent theory and practical suggestions. It is not surprising that it is recommended by the National Literacy Strategy in England.

In South Africa, equity in education remains an elusive ideal. One of the reasons is that few of the texts available either as reference material or as core learning material are designed to enable children/learners to develop their reading skills while they are involved in accessing or comprehending information. The experience Neate recounts of her attempts to teach 7 or 8 year olds to access information will resonate with that of many teachers in South Africa. Simple recipes such as getting the children to close the book once they have read it and then write down what they have remembered, or getting children to write what the author said in their own words, produce disappointing results. Children tend to copy chunks of the book rather than either to select salient information or to reorganise the original text to meet a particular purpose. South African learners, most of whom work through the medium of a second language, find it even more difficult to access and reshape information for particular purposes.

Before the first chapter, there is a list of the technical (Hallidayan) terms which are used. This facilitates reference to them while reading the book. Her explanations of the terms are clear and crisp and include concrete illustrations. Her rich account of the process through which she discovered why learners have difficulties and they can be helped 'how to find out' is exemplary. Readers of this text are engaged throughout in dialogic interaction. Neate demonstrates through her own writing the importance of producing texts that are easily accessible to the specific audience involved.

In her reflective practice, Neate soon discovered that children's failure to produce good notes lay not so much in the inability to make notes as in the nature of the books themselves. She found that the books in use did not have good quality structural guiders; that they were either above the level of the children or too simplistic for children to be able to extract information from them; and that they were often poorly organised (p. 21). On the other hand, she found that if appropriately written books were used, even young children could be taught to be selective and to develop the kind of flexible reading habits that make it possible to learn and to extract information. In order to make it possible for the readers of this book to have a full understanding of the process, Neate begins by outlining how children learn to read. For her it is important for children to be involved in the process of interpreting text from a young age. For her, Jansen (1987) is seminal:

The distinction between reading and comprehending is merely semantic because without comprehension reading is just following the marks on the page.

Children have to read for meaning rather than merely decode. Expository reading depends in addition on whether or not the young readers have had particular background experiences. At

each stage in her discussion she sets activities so readers can gain a deeper understanding of the process she is describing.

In Chapter 2, Neate discusses non-fiction books in general, stressing some of the aspects of expository texts that make them difficult to understand. On the one hand, they are seen as decontextualised and requiring considerable background knowledge. These aspects make expository text more demanding than narrative text and mean that it must call on very different reading strategies. In pages 49 to 57, she outlines some of the differences between the nature of narrative and expository texts. For instance, narrative texts follow a standard and therefore predictable sequence known as a story grammar. There are also particular linguistic features, such as direct speech which characterise narrative text, but do not generally form part of expository texts. On the other hand, global coherence and clear links between sentences are essential in expository text.

In her discussion of textbooks and information books specifically written for the first six years of formal schooling, Neate highlights a number of problems. One is that the text of textbooks is generally too difficult for the intended readers. She argues that the use of worksheets in an attempt to enable children to work independently from information or text books introduces another problem: worksheets tend to focus on discrete pieces of information. It would be interesting to see to what extent Bloom's criticism of textbooks, which she quotes on page 57, would relate to books currently in use in South African schools:

Textbooks often do not contain the balance between the main idea and details that other reference books have. Most books make a statement, reformulate it in a different way and pad out round it to make the information clear and digestible. In most textbooks each short paragraph is made up of sentences/statements which are really a paragraph in themselves. This information is thus very dense and makes for difficult reading.

Neate's of information books reveals many shortcomings in the content of the books as well as deficiencies in the way in which they are structured. She provides a succinct yet clear account of the role structural elements such as an appropriate title, a preface, a table of contents, indexes, glossaries and footnotes, can play in enabling children to use books without teacher support.

I found Neate's use of the term 'structural guiders' to describe the organisational and flagging devices used in well-scaffolded books valuable. Unfortunately, her research showed that at that stage few books contained appropriate structural guiders. For her there are important roles for each of the guiders:

- Book covers should have a well-chosen title and the font, layout and picture should suggest to the reader what the book is likely to be about. The back cover should provide the gist of the book or give key information.
- Indexes should provide sufficient detail and be arranged alphabetically to make it easy for learners find and access particular information sections. Keywords should be used to make cross-referencing as easy as possible.
- Introductions/prefaces/forewords should be written for the intended audience and provide important signposts. An 'advance organiser' is a more sophisticated form of introduction.

It tells readers what they will be reading, what they will know at the end. It might even suggest which approach to take. Neate quotes Tonjes (1986) who points out that 'the purpose of an advance organizer is to provide a scaffolding or framework prior to reading' (p. 66). She also refers to Rowntree (1988) who emphasises that for open learning purposes a book must have a list of aims and objectives and a flow chart showing how the ideas in the various chapters connect with each other. He also suggests that a list of new concepts to be introduced is included, together with clear statements as to the relevance of what is being presented (p. 67).

- Tables of contents must give as much infrastructure as possible, and be logically ordered.
- Headings must be closely related to the text beneath them.
- Illustrations should complement the text.
- Bibliographies should allow learners to refer to other resources and emphasise the fact that authors obtain their information from other sources.
- Glossaries should explain or define unfamiliar words.
- There should be summaries or reviews of sections or the whole book.

Other aspects that are important are that there should not be a conceptual overload and that authors should not assume that their readers will have prior knowledge of historical events or technologies. The content should be logically ordered and the page layout should make the text accessible. Neate highlights the importance of not distracting the reader's attention. The page should have a clear focus and the information and pictures provided should be clearly mapped.

Just as others have done (e.g. Kress 1982), Neate is concerned to point out that the conventions of writing have to be learnt. It is unfortunately true that though children are given a large number of opportunities to write narratives, even this genre is not well developed. Expository writing, particularly important because of its key role in later schooling, is given very little attention in the primary school. It is vital that children should be given systematic training in the ability to interpret and produce a variety of registers.

The last two chapters offer clear guidelines to publishers and members of book selection panels. All those involved in selecting and using information texts for children will find them invaluable. A word of advice though: it would be a mistake to use these chapters without working through the rich context on which they are built.

This book represents an important contribution to the development of empowering literacy.

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