

NEW PUBLICATIONS ... NUWE PUBLIKASIES

Catherine Wallace

Reading. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. (Paperback, 161pp.)

This is the latest title in the OUP series: *Language teaching: a scheme for teacher education* in the sub-series : Modes of behaviour.

In this particular book, Catherine Wallace, a principal lecturer in the English Language Teaching Department at the Polytechnic of West London, has not set out to provide a comprehensive account of reading research or of teaching approaches, but focuses instead on aspects of research and practice that involve social interaction. In order to do so, she has drawn on the insights of a number of people in the field, ranging from Ecco to Widdowson to Freire.

The book powerfully demonstrates an alternative to the 'traditional' approach to reading which tends to see the purpose of reading as answering the questions which follow it (Barnett 1989, 134), and the level of successful interpretation as reflected by the mark students obtain for correctly answering these questions (Belanoff, 1987, 102). The main thrust is towards reading as 'meaning-making', with reading having as much to do with what the reader brings to the text and how (s)he interacts with it, as the text itself (Barnett 1989, Carrell *et al* 1988, Wallace 1988).

In Section One, the writer covers some very complex territory in defining her view of reading and the reader. In the last twenty years or so attempts to define the nature of the reading experience have taxed researchers from a variety of different theoretical perspectives, with very different purposes. Ms Wallace does not attempt to provide a comprehensive picture of this research, or indeed to explore all the possible teaching approaches which have emanated from it. She has chosen instead to confine herself to a social-interactive orientation. In developing her view of reading as the construction of meaning, she deals very economically with complex concepts like the relationship between text and discourse, the factors which influence literacy development, schemas of genre and topic (what Carrell (1983) refers to as formal and content schemata), and the contrast between a psycholinguistic and a sociolinguistic view of the reading process. She also highlights the factors which will play a key role in reading as a social process, such as the reader's and the writer's social role and experience, their respective purposes, as well as the context in which the text is produced and interpreted (p. 50).

Two particularly useful insights emerge. The first is the need for readers to be neither too submissive nor resistant if accommodation and not mere accumulation or distortion is to occur (Widdowson 1979: 226). The second relates to the 'one interpretation is as good as another debate'. The effect of response and reception theory has been to focus on the validity and importance of the individual's personal opinion and judgement. Ms Wallace reminds us of the importance of locating the individual within a social context, always bearing in mind that 'the text exerts its own constraints to do with the conventionally accepted meanings of the words which constitute it' (p. 47). Text draws on communal property (de Saussure 1966) and the reader is then logically (along the lines of a 'speech community' (Gumpertz 1972)) a member of a reading community. She sums up her argument in this way:

Some readers are in a stronger position than others to provide a well-informed interpretation because they have a greater experience of the genre and understanding of the circumstances in which the text was composed. Readers are also helped by an

awareness of the ways in which a particular text relates to other texts within or across the genres (p. 47).

Perhaps understandably, those who are hoping for a detailed treatment of the various aspects of the reading process will be disappointed. The discussion on metacognitive strategies, for instance, is lucid, but there are no concrete examples of the ways in which these could be 'taught'.

In Section Two, there is a careful progression from early reading, to the situation of the second language reader and the role of text in the classroom, to the kinds of tasks which facilitate interaction with texts. The exploration in these areas is complex and covers a number of important issues, such as the criteria to employ when selecting a text. The discussion on 'authenticity' is particularly useful, offering practical hints on the ways in which material can be assessed. However, it is in the range of material provided to illustrate classroom reading procedures (10 and 11) that the strength of the book lies. Not only are new ideas presented, but useful ways of reviewing established patterns of teaching are provided. One such concerns the practice of dividing reading into pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities. The tasks which require a critical evaluation of pre-reading activities are a particularly good means of analysing how salient pre-reading activities are.

She also introduces a number of new reading procedures. One worth paying particular attention to is her adaptation of Kress (1985) to explore ways in which students can be encouraged to challenge certain features of both texts and tasks. The four questions (Why is the topic being written about? How is this topic being written about? What other ways of writing about the topic are there? Who is the text's model reader?) are designed to demonstrate the need to draw on contextual knowledge, partly on textual knowledge and partly on schematic knowledge in reconstructing the text.

The final section of the book is in line with the current trend for reflective teaching practice. It is perhaps unfortunate that, while some of the tasks which aim at 'investigating reading in your own classroom' are aimed at all readers, most of them are intended for more advanced students.

The book is undoubtedly a valuable contribution. Teacher educators, curriculum designers and materials developers will all find it has much to offer. Its aim of 'involving teachers in their own professional development' will be less well served. Although HDE or B.Ed students, or even teachers with native or near-native proficiency will find it useful, for most teachers in the field it does not constitute 'self-access' material. Its very economy and stylistic sophistication which make it so attractive to the former group would make it inaccessible to the majority of students training as second language teachers in South Africa, or the majority of ESL classroom teachers. Nevertheless it does provide concrete and practical examples which teacher-trainers or subject specialists could incorporate in teacher education programmes. Unlike some of the other authors of the series, Catherine Wallace has scrupulously glossed the terms she uses and has provided the possible 'answers' to the lines of enquiry a particular task sets in motion. Being able to read English in the interactive way she advocates, provides a powerful means of freeing students from the 'reductive assumption that reading is a matter of identifying and retrieving a set of ideas that reside in and are transmitted by a text, a set of ideas that all readers can agree on' (Zamel 1992 : 463), making it possible for them to become active and critical readers. It would seem to offer seminal material for South African main language curriculums.

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References

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