



Reviewed work:

*Understanding Reading* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). (2004). Frank Smith.  
Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. <http://www.erlbaum.com/>  
Pp. xii + 374. ISBN: 080584712X. \$35.00

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This invaluable contribution to literacy studies is the sixth edition of Frank Smith's *Understanding Reading*, which first appeared in 1971. Obviously taking sides with the whole language view, the author presents thoughtful discussions on psycholinguistic aspects of reading as well as on interconnections between the act of reading and higher order understanding, thinking, and learning. As stated in the preface, the book is intended to serve as a resource for language arts teachers, a text for courses on psychology of reading, a guide to research literature on reading, and as "an introduction to reading as an aspect of thinking and learning" (p. xii). This new edition is different from the previous ones in three major aspects: a new Chapter One has been added, the extensive notes on the chapters have undergone major changes, and two hundred new references have been added while five hundred of the older ones have been removed.

In a splendid first chapter, depicting the general standpoint underlying later chapters, Smith discusses "the essence of reading" as a natural human activity reaching far beyond understanding the print. Rejecting the idea of unnaturalness of reading, he states that reading printed materials is as natural as making sense of any other phenomenon. In his own words, reading "is the most natural activity in the world" (p. 2). Definitely not in line with phonics views, the author disapproves of prioritizing letter-sound relations in reading. This prioritization as a key aspect of attempts for unnatural reading *instruction*, makes reading difficult to cope with. Another major hindrance Smith refers to is undue reliance on metaphors. Metaphorical concepts such as *reading process* and *reading skills* make understanding reading complicated. This introductory chapter would help readers distance themselves from restricted perceptions of reading as a decoding process and would enable them to view it in a broader framework of thinking and learning which is the recurring theme throughout the book.

The next three chapters deal with reading in light of general issues of comprehension, knowledge, language, and experience. Chapter Two focuses on cognitive aspects of sense making. Introducing the notion of personal *theory of the world*, the author discusses the structure of knowledge in terms of the categorization and organization of information. With a brief reference to the notions of prior knowledge, schema, and script, he emphasizes the interconnection between prediction and comprehension: prediction is asking questions and comprehension is the attempt to answer them. This process of seeking and solving questions contributes to thinking as an integral component of sense making in general, and reading the print in particular. In the third chapter, Smith attempts to make three general points about language: what counts in language is not letters, sounds, words, or sentences but *meaning* in its broad sense; spoken and written language are different; and far beyond vocabulary and grammar, "language is social in all its aspects" (p. 51). Chapter Four presents a view of reading as experience rather than as mere source of information.

This view of reading as experiencing is a rich perspective that allows for an understanding of reading as a practice beyond mere letters, words, and sentences. From this generative standpoint, reading can be perceived as the constructive and meaningful practice of experiencing that brings together readers' personal world theories and the texts they explore, that is, reading both *world* and *word* (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Smith devotes two chapters specifically to psychological and physiological aspects of handling visual information by the brain. In line with the broad perspective developed in the previous chapters, he discusses the limitations of visual perception and disapproves of the priority of the printed material in reading. Reading is asserted to be "only incidentally visual" (p. 75). Primarily, it is the reader's experiencing and meaning construction attempt that shapes reading. Moreover, the author's discussion of sensory store, short term memory, and long term memory shows that memory limitation does not allow readers to rely primarily on visual information received from the print. To overcome limitations of memory, readers may rely on their personal theories of the world. Reading is less likely to be hindered by limitations of memory if it is based on prior knowledge and thinking, and if the material is relevant.

Letter and word identification is elaborated in three chapters, from the very beginning of which the author states in a straightforward manner that "fluent reading doesn't normally require the identification of individual letters or words" (p. 110). Throughout his discussion on identification, then, based on sound reasoning and numerous examples he makes a strong case for the view that identification of letters and words are ancillary to sense making. Discussing theories of pattern recognition, Smith proposes a *feature analytic* model of letter and word identification but he makes it clear that learners do not need to be taught how to identify words. In a detailed discussion of immediate and mediated word identification, he denounces phonics-based strategies of word identification and presents alternative strategies of identification of words that can not be recognized on sight. In a brief section on how these strategies can be taught and learnt, the author once more relies on the leitmotif of his discussions, that is, *sense*. Learners will easily learn words if they are provided with the opportunity to have enough experience of reading texts that are relevant and make sense to them. "Reading is easiest when it makes sense" (p. 154), as Smith concisely and fascinatingly puts it.

The author's prioritization of meaning over identification of individual letters and words is more evidently elaborated in Chapter Ten in which he explores issues of mediated and immediate identification of meaning. The crucial role Smith considers for readers' prior knowledge, expectations, predictions, and active meaning construction is a significant aspect and a major strength of the view of reading he presents; a view that does not appear in many books on reading. To further probe this unrestricted perspective, in the last three chapters of the book, the author presents extended discussions on the experience of reading and how it is interconnected with learning and thinking.

Reading "can never be separated from writing or thinking" (p. 178), and this is what Chapter Eleven deals with. Asking questions and finding answers are discussed as the base of reading with predictions at different levels playing a key role in readers' experiencing with texts. As to the relationship between reading and thinking, the author goes on to assert that reading *is* in fact thinking. Chapter Twelve focuses on reading as part of a broader agenda of learning. Reading and learning to read as experiencing is to be viewed not as a specifically accomplished unnatural process but as an aspect of ongoing natural attempts to learn, that is, to construct a theory of the world. In the thirteenth and final chapter, reiterating the meaningfulness of print and the difference of written language and speech, Smith briefly discusses some instructional issues. He refers to the critical role of autonomous teachers in facilitating learning and mentions the vital significance of active meaning construction on the part of learners in learning to read. He also reminds teachers that no specific instructional *method* can take care of aspects of teaching reading.

Following the thirteen chapters of the book, the author presents extended notes on issues discussed in each chapter. They include illuminating elaborations on key concepts referred to throughout the chapters shaping a major aspect of what this new edition has to offer, as the author mentions in his preface to the book. Referring to numerous related publications, Smith places his discussions in a wide range of literature as evidence which strongly supports his already solid claims. Following the notes, and before the references and index, appears a glossary of the main concepts with brief accounts of how they are employed in the book.

*Understanding Reading* presents profound discussions supporting a meaning-based account of reading. It is at the same time a critique of phonics based atomistic views. Although the book is based on psycholinguistic analyses, it admirably provides its readers with an understanding of reading as the socio-cultural practice of world-word exploration (Freire & Macedo, 1987). It establishes a psycholinguistic basis for a deeper and broader understanding of reading as a social and critical practice (Wallace, 2003). The book is specifically concerned with reading in the mother tongue, but it may be equally illuminating for foreign language reading. The precious insights presented in the book would highly benefit teachers of language arts and first or foreign language reading as well as students and researchers in literacy studies and language education.

## References

Freire, P. & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. London: Routledge & Kegan Press.

Wallace, C. (2003). *Critical reading in language education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

### **About the Reviewer**

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