

Frank Smith: A tribute

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Frank Smith, who died on 29 December 2020 at the age of 91, was internationally recognised for his contribution to linguistics and his unique insights into the development of reading in young children. His initial experience as a reporter for a local newspaper in England was so different from others researching reading and clearly shaped his views.

Frank was born in London and during the Second World War was evacuated to the country, joining the Royal Navy at 16. He worked as a journalist in a number of countries and only as a mature student with a family to support did his first degree in Psychology in Australia where he had worked on a sheep farm. He won a scholarship to Harvard then worked in Canada. In the 1960s he wrote a novel. Frank went to Australia with his family, where, as a mature student, he gained a degree in Psychology. He moved to the USA where he studied under Jerome Bruner. He then worked in Canada in the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, and later at the University of Victoria.

In 1971 my attention was drawn to Frank's book *Understanding Reading*. It immediately appeared on my reference lists for students and I frequently quoted his thought-provoking insights. Two quotations from 1971 are still pertinent:

"The 'decoding' that the skilled reader performs is not to transform visual symbols into sound, which is a widely held conventional view of what reading is about, but to transform the visual presentation of language into meaning." (222)

"Two things are perhaps surprising about the skills and knowledge that a child brings with him when he is about to learn to read: the sheer quantity and complexity of his ability, and the small credit that he is usually given." (223)

Decoding and synthetic phonics now dominate many courses on early reading, and the focus has become so narrow that little time is devoted to the purpose of reading for understanding, and in a variety of settings in the modern print-filled environment. It is time to redress the balance, and the writings of Frank Smith and his contemporaries could contribute to widening our understanding of literacy.

In 1975 a *Horizon* BBC television programme, *How do you Read*, in which I took part, showed Frank in Canada walking around with a boy as he illustrated the variety of print with which young, even pre-school children, are now surrounded. I showed the DVD of the programme to my students.

I first met Frank Smith in Canberra at the Australian Reading Conference in 1981 where we were both presenting papers, (and watched Keith Nettle of Heinemann persuade Frank to allow Heinemann to publish his forthcoming books). That year Frank also spoke at the UKRA conference in Edinburgh. In 1982 I was invited as one of 14 international participants to attend a symposium at the University of Victoria organised by Frank. For four days we had the stimulating experience of sharing our views on early literacy with other participants, including Emelia Ferrerio from Argentina, David Olson from Canada and Yetta Goodman and Jerome Bruner from USA. We were treated to a sail on Frank's yacht on the final day and I remember thinking what a loss to literacy, had that yacht sunk! In 1984 the proceedings were published as *Awakening to Literacy*.

Over his career Frank Smith contributed so much to widen and enrich our thinking on reading. It saddens me that few of today's students are made aware of these insights or even know his name. Written language is so much more complex than speech written down. Children from an early age need to see purpose and enjoyment in written language in a wide variety of contexts. We can only hope that reading courses will again come to be enriched by the insights of Frank Smith and his contemporaries.