

The relationship between written and spoken language: important distinctions for learning to read

By Margaret M Clark OBE

“Learning to read is learning to comprehend language expressed through a different medium.”
Margaret Donaldson and Jessie Reid stressed this as early as 1982, also the need to recognise the decontextualised nature of written language and that it is not merely speech written down. Similar views were expressed by other contributors to my edited book which includes a reprint of their article from 1982 also one from John McInnes from 1973, Marion Blank from 1982 and Emelia Ferreiro from 1980, *New Directions in the Study of Reading* (Clark, 1985).

As early as the 1970s and 1980s, Frank Smith in the United States, Marie Clay in New Zealand, Emelia Ferreiro in Argentina and many others were publishing research stressing the importance of appreciating that print is not merely speech written down (Smith 1971; Clay 1972; Ferreiro 1980 (reprinted in Clark, 1985; see also *Awakening to Literacy* 1985 editors Goelman, Oberg and Smith).

Fluency and sounding out words, rather than making sense of a written form of language, currently seems to dominate early instruction in England. Thus, many young children assume that the purpose of reading is to transform print into sound rather than to understand language in a different medium, whether out loud or silently. This may be particularly confusing to the many young children learning to read in English for whom it is not even their first language. Many young children questioned shortly after taking the phonics screening check showed a lack of appreciation that reading is not merely sounding out symbols (See Carter J, 2020).

Learning to Read: relevant research

Focusing only on phonics in the early stages of learning to read, particularly in a language such as English, whose orthography is not phonically regular, limits children's initial experience of print. Were children's experience of written language in the early stages also to include the hundred key words in written English, which are not phonically regular, this would enable children's initial experience of written language to include more meaningful interesting text. A hundred key words account for fifty percent of the total words in written English (see Clark, 2016 chapter. 9). Phonics instruction helps the children to read the ninety percent of different words in written English. Without this instruction many children would tend to guess at these other words. For children learning to read in English their early experience of written language should involve both phonics and learning speedy recognition of the 100 key words. Young children would then appreciate that the purpose in reading is to make sense of a different form of language, not to speak words out loud.

Even within a single age group young children possess very different skills when they start school. Some children are already on their way to reading, a few are even reading silently with understanding (Clark, 1976). Such children's progress may indeed be set back by preparation for the phonics check. Some parents did express this concern in our independent research (Clark and Glazzard, 2018). My research as early as 1976 revealed that not all children did need formal instruction to learn to read and raised the issue as to whether some children's failure might be as a consequence of the age at which they were taught to read, or the methodology (Clark, 1976, *Young Fluent Readers*).

Stories as a first step

Stories read and reread to young children coupled with dialogue as the stories are shared with adults helps young children to appreciate the features of written language. If young children follow the story on the page they begin to appreciate the different significance of letters, words and punctuation. Some children come to school with a rich background from stories shared with parents and with a plentiful supply of illustrated children's books. Other children come to school with few such experiences.

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In 2017 the results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, PIRLS 2016, were published, and England's improved performance was attributed by the government to the new insistence on synthetic phonics. Cautions about such claims were made in the international report on the study where the influence of home background on the PIRLS results of the ten-year-olds in the study was stressed.

Parents are the students' first teachers and 39 per cent of the students had parents who reported often engaging their children in early literacy activities. These students had higher reading achievement than students whose parents engaged them less frequently in early literacy activities (see Clark, 2018 chapter 5 page 35).

Students whose parents reported that their children performed early literacy activities when beginning primary school illustrated the important influence of home environment on later attainment. One contributory factor to high scores in the phonics screening check in England might have been experiences in children's homes, an aspect that has not been investigated.

As early as 1980s there was a Granada Television Series, *Time for a Story*, for children from four years of age which introduced young children to a range of fascinating stories each of about 500 words written by well-known children's authors for the series. No constraints on language, or punctuation were put on the authors. During each ten-minute programme a story was introduced to the children, the key words and phrases shown on screen and explained, then the story read. Little books with illustrations from the television series and teachers' handbooks could be purchased. Wendy Dewhirst and I were the consultants for this series. The short stories enabled young children to hear written language and contrast it with spoken language. Current government policy may allow very little time for story reading as part of reading instruction in schools, thus widening the gap between more and less advantaged children (see Clark 2016: chapter 10). Such stories could stimulate young children to retell a story orally in language similar to the original. Some children reproduced the story in writing, a few even invented their own parallel stories. For examples of just how creative some young children can be when given the opportunity see *Young Literacy Learners* (Clark, 1994 and Clark 2016).

Only if the early years curriculum is creative enough will teachers appreciate the wide range of knowledge and skills even within a single age group of young children and plan experiences to meet all their needs. While some young children may not yet appreciate the difference between drawing and writing or words and letters, others are able to retell a story orally in similar language. A few children under seven years of age are able to compose and illustrate their own parallel stories. It is important that teachers appreciate the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing (Clark 2016 chapter 10).

School Libraries in England

Many young children starting school have had a rich experience of written language in the form of stories, others have had very limited experience of books and own few if any books. It is to be regretted that in England school libraries are not mandatory, and such libraries as do exist are not therefore likely to be inspected by Ofsted. In some areas public libraries may not be able to compensate for this lack. An All Party-Parliamentary Group for Libraries reporting in 2014 recommended that school libraries should become mandatory, but their recommendation was not accepted. In 2015 the National Literacy Trust published a report on School Libraries (Teravainen and Clark, C, 2017). It was stated that: "There are no official figures on the number of school libraries in UK."

There is no statutory requirement for schools in England to have a school library, and often the decision to have one depends on the head teacher. "Fast developing technology and the new opportunities it offers for school libraries means that new research is needed to capture the impact of these technological developments." "It is crucial that up-to-date figures are collected to determine the state of school libraries." (page 4).

Improving on previous best

A comprehensive review of Education in England was published in 2021 by Tim Brighouse and Mick Waters.

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The importance of family members reading with young children. Adults across three generations read to the fourth generation. Baby Lewis Nairn enjoying books with his great grand-mother (and author of this article), grandfather and father.

About our Schools: Improving on previous best, examines in detail the policy and practice from the late 1970s to the present day in England and sets out what policy-makers and education leaders can do to enable schools in England to improve the learning environment and broaden the horizons for all pupils. Those interviewed included fourteen Secretaries of State, four heads of Ofsted and many other key players in education.

Nearly all the Education Secretaries claimed to base their policies on evidence, but it is as the authors comment, where they get their evidence and the importance they place on certain elements that is important. When considering whether politicians do make a difference there are several references to Nick Gibb who worked with five secretaries of state, and who became a Minister of State in 2010 serving almost continuously until 2021. It is claimed that he led a crusade for traditional approaches to teaching, including the use of synthetic phonics in early reading.

In 2021, with the appointment of Nadhim Zahawi as secretary of state Nick Gibb was replaced by Robin Walker. It is not yet clear to what extent this will change the Government's policy on early reading. However, in two written answers by Robin Walker to literacy questions on 28 February he does seem to set a rather different tone. One was on the importance of World Book Day, the other on children's communication skills. He was asked what steps the Government was taking to ensure that supporting children's spoken language development is part of what was then the forthcoming Schools White Paper. His reply included the following: "The Schools White Paper will consider the links between early years and primary education as critical stages to children's development in oracy and spoken language. We expect to publish the Schools White Paper in early 2022." Giving greater prominence to spoken language in the early years was one of the recommendations in *About Our Schools*.

We are reminded on page 107 that education in England is very centralised and that central government decides on education policy and enacts legislation. Schools are required to work within the framework set down by government. We do not have any comments from Nick Gibb on his role as on page 85 the authors state that Nick Gibb declined to be interviewed by the authors!

The authors propose that a Schooling Framework Commission be established to overcome the twin dangers of a lack of clarity and overcentralised power. They recommend a wide membership for the commission.

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They argue that formalised approaches to schooling should not be until age 6 with excellent child-care and in a rich social and educative setting beforehand. They state that evidence from other nations indicates that a later start accelerates progress especially in reading and particularly when spoken language is a strong focus in the early years (page 588).

Among their recommendations are the following:

- “Through universities and our network of expert consultant teachers and the infrastructure of the Chartered College of Teaching and the EEF, we should be able to establish the agreed processes for helping children to learn to read and the alternative processes for those children who struggle initially.” (Page 588).

They recommend that the power of Ofsted should be reviewed.

Of particular relevance to the theme of this article are the following proposal:

- “There should be professional learning and CDP entitlement for all staff with details recommended by the Schooling Framework Commission in consultation with the teacher unions, Chartered College of Teaching and Chartered Institute of Educational Advisers. They would gain their status after 5 to 7 years part time study for a master’s degree at a university.”

Were the proposals in this book, or even some of them, to be accepted this would represent a major shift in power from the current centralised control on the curriculum and assessment by central government.

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A reference list, a recent research report and further articles can be read and downloaded from the Newman University website:

www.newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/impact-of-the-systematic-synthetic-phonics-government-policy-on-literacy-ite-courses/