

Improving the teaching of reading comprehension



Professor Jane Oakhill's research has helped to shape the content of the National Curriculum (English), and in the development of national and international training programmes to improve the teaching of reading comprehension.

Literacy is a key life skill that, in the modern age, is directly correlated with success. Reading comprehension is, however, much more than a simple exercise in recognising words and involves the ability to infer and to understand text and story structure. The work of Sussex researcher Jane Oakhill on the importance of such skills to fluent reading comprehension has had direct impact on educational practice, influencing England's National Curriculum, English Programmes of Study, Key Stages 1 and 2, and the training of educators, both nationally and internationally, responsible for teaching reading to young children.

Overview

Writing is one of our species' most widely used forms of communication. Being able to read and comprehend the written word is one of the fundamental pleasures of being human; it imparts factual knowledge and opens up a world of artistry and imagination for the reader. Reading comprehension goes well beyond simply recognising and understanding written words and it has long been recognised that children can become competent word readers without necessarily developing the equivalent levels of skill in reading comprehension.

The work of Jane Oakhill, Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Sussex, has identified the problems faced by children with 'specific comprehension difficulties' when learning to read. While such children may have average or good word reading skills, they have substantial issues in understanding

connected text. Oakhill has conducted numerous studies to provide a very detailed understanding of such problems and the particular cognitive skills that such children lack in comparison to 'good comprehenders'. This work has identified specific areas of difficulty in poor comprehenders, including problems with inference making, understanding story structure, and comprehension monitoring – that is, the ability to monitor and appraise one's own understanding. She has shown that each of these skills is important in the prediction of reading comprehension over and above the contributions of word reading, vocabulary and verbal ability.

More recently, Oakhill has focused on the causal implications of these skills on longer-term success in the development of reading comprehension. Using a 'comprehension age match' study design and in a separate longitudinal study, she has shown that these three core skills – inference and integration, understanding of text structure, and comprehension monitoring – are all likely to be causal factors in the development of comprehension skill rather than just by-products of extensive practice in reading. In particular, she has demonstrated that these skills contribute independently, directly or indirectly, to reading comprehension across time, suggesting the potential to improve reading comprehension skills both developmentally and in children who are experiencing difficulties.

Such skills provide excellent candidates for training educators in improving reading comprehension, and Oakhill's work has inspired revisions to relevant sections of England's National



Oakhill's research has directly underpinned the development of the LEE Comprensivamente training programme. To date, around 550 teachers and educational professionals in South America have been trained in its use and an estimated 2,200 children have benefited from the programme.

Curriculum, English Programmes of Study, Key Stages 1 and 2, and the development of two new training programmes, Inference Training (UK) and LEE Comprensivamente (Argentina).

Achieving impact

Jane Oakhill's work has had impact in two main areas, in helping to shape the content of the National Curriculum (English), and in the development of national and international training programmes to improve the teaching of reading comprehension. The influence of her work was recently recognised when it was selected by the Research Board of the British Psychological Society (BPS) to be one of a handful of case studies used to launch the BPS's Impact web portal.

Using the findings of Oakhill's research, recent revisions of the National Curriculum (English) have put a greater emphasis on reading comprehension skills, inspired largely by the *Independent Review of Teaching Early Reading*, a government-commissioned review which cited her research findings. This review emphasised the particular skills needed by teachers to foster comprehension in the early stages of learning to read, making substantial reference to Oakhill's findings on the development of reading comprehension and on the problems faced during that development. The Review's recommendations fed into subsequent revisions to the 2008 and 2013 National Curricula to give guidance on specific skills that should be taught to children to enable the development of good reading

comprehension, including fostering of the three core skills outlined above. As part of this process, Oakhill was formally involved as consultant to the Department of Education's National Curriculum team for Primary English.

The second major impact of her work was to directly underpin the development of two recent training programmes – Inference Training and LEE Comprensivamente – for teachers of primary school children. Inference training, which builds on the work on inference making in particular, currently has around 40 accredited trainers and is used in approximately 500 schools in the UK with usage expected to rise substantially due to high demand. The LEE Comprensivamente programme comprises a training manual and teaching book, devised and written by a group of Argentinian educational psychologists, that teaches the three key skills outlined in Oakhill's research. To date, around 550 teachers and educational professionals in South America have been trained in its use and an estimated 2,200 children have benefited from the programme since its inception.

Future impact

Although primarily in use in Argentina, the uptake of LEE Comprensivamente is spreading across Spanish-speaking South America, including Uruguay and Chile, and its translation and publication rights into Portuguese are being negotiated in Brazil. In addition, the LEE Comprensivamente programme is currently being developed for children of a younger age range (6 to 7 year olds).

Funding and partnership

The research was funded by six grants from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the EU and the British Academy. Much of this research was conducted with Professor Kate Cain (now at Lancaster University), beginning when she was a postdoctoral researcher on a grant from the ESRC (Oakhill as Principal Investigator). Professor Peter Bryant (University of Oxford) was a collaborator and co-Principal Investigator on the same grant. Oakhill and Cain (together with Carsten Elbro) have recently published a new book which is based to a large extent on their joint research: *Understanding and Teaching Reading Comprehension: A Handbook*. In addition, Dr Nicola Yuill (Sussex) collaborated on an earlier ESRC-funded project grant, and co-authored a book with Jane Oakhill (*Children's Problems in Reading Comprehension: An Experimental Investigation*).

Working with us

If you are interested in working with us, please contact:

Dr Ian Carter
Director of Research and Enterprise
Sussex House
University of Sussex
Falmer, Brighton BN1 9RH
E impact@sussex.ac.uk
T +44 (0)1273 877718
www.sussex.ac.uk/research

For more information about research in cognitive psychology: www.sussex.ac.uk/psychology/research/cognitivepsychology