TACTYC, Birmingham November 4th 2006

KEYNOTE: Henrietta Dombey, University of Brighton

Most of the evidence on successful teaching of early reading in the U.K. comes from three sources:

•   A study commissioned by England's Teacher Training Agency (TTA)

•   A study by Dr Graham Frater, (formerly Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of schools for English) carried out for the Basic Skills Agency

•   A study by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted).

1. Effective Teachers of Literacy (Medwell et al. 1998) S1

Aims of the research project
Principal aims to:
•   "identify the key factors of what effective teachers know, understand and do which enables them to put effective teaching of literacy into practice in the primary phase;
•   identify the strategies which would enable those factors to be more widely applied". (p.4)

Method
Collection of qualitative and quantitative data from 228 teachers identified as effective (on the basis of a range of data), and a comparison group of numeracy co-ordinators through:
•   a questionnaires survey of qualifications, experience, reported beliefs, practices and preferences in teaching literacy;
•   Observations of literacy lessons taught by 26 of the sample;
•   interviews with the same 26;
•   a 'quiz' designed to test teachers' 'subject knowledge' about literacy.

2. Observed in Practice (literacy teaching effective with boys) (Frater, 2000a and 2000b) S2

Aims of the research project
to identify the features appearing to contribute to successful literacy teaching to boys.

Method
Inspection of 15 schools where there was little or no gap between the literacy scores of boys and girls on KS 2 SATs..

3. Reading for Purpose and Pleasure (Ofsted, 2004) S3

Aims of the research project
Principal aim: to identify reasons for the wide range in attainment in reading among primary-aged pupils and to describe key features of successful practice in the teaching of reading

Method
•   45 primary schools were studied – a national sample in terms of size and socio-economically

•   The schools were selected mainly for their particularly high or low attainment, when compared to schools in similar socio-economic contexts

•   the schools were visited for one day each by experienced inspectors who observed a number of lessons in each school, held discussions with headteachers and other senior staff and examined documentation, including reading records and test data.

Findings
At school level:
•   "High standards in reading were underpinned by a whole school commitment to ensure that all pupils could read." (S3, Ofsted, 2004, p.4)

•   Effective schools identified pupils' difficulties early on, tracked progress well and used intervention wisely. (S3)

- "Rapid, early coverage of phonic knowledge and skills ensured that pupils had a strong foundation for decoding." (S3, Ofsted, 2004, p.4)

- They taught "a broad range of strategies early on, including the use of words recognised on sight, context and grammar." (S3, Ofsted, 2004, p.4)

- "The headteachers of the effective schools were knowledgeable about how to teach reading and involved themselves actively in improving it", showing strong leadership and management. (S3, Ofsted, 2004, p.4)

- There was high quality leadership, including:
  – strong leadership from the headteacher
  – a language co-ordinator who was an expert professional
  – the early identification and targeting of weak readers
  – intensive teaching for targeted pupils
  – close attention to book selection
  – parental involvement
  – high expectations of behaviour and learning
  – positive reinforcement as a consistent feature of all teaching
  – pupils made books for other classes
  – book posters were widely displayed, including posters showing men reading
  – new books were prominently displayed
  – 'book weeks' were regularly held
  – handwriting was actively promoted, with special 'booster' classes
  – all literacy materials were audited, updated and developed, including library and classroom collections   (S2)

- "Connections [were] constantly made between learning and experiences, especially the experiences of language in the world of books that they were bringing alive for their children." (S2, Frater 2000b, p.107)

- In early years classes, plentiful concrete links were made between
  - familiar objects and experiences
  - the words children already used when talking about them
  - the written code they were acquiring (S2)

- There were many lively initiatives for promoting literacy, including:
  – a school reward system
  – colour-coded bookmarks, signalling stages in the child's progress
  – a visiting poet (male)
  – a poetry day, when the normal timetable was suspended
  – investigative reading in preparation for a residential visit
  – drama and performances linked with books (S2)

- A number of innovative approaches to promoting language and literacy were observed
  – the use of 'story sacks'
  – 'Teddy goes home' to encourage writing by younger children (S2)

- Effective schools recognised their weaknesses honestly and tackled these, knowledgeably and strategically. (S3)

- They had specific initiatives to involve parents actively in reading with their children. (S3)

- Most had well organised libraries and encouraged the children to borrow books. (S3)

- Although some were successful in raising reading attainment, "few were successfully engaging the interest of those who, though competent readers, did not read for pleasure." (S3, Ofsted, 2004, p.4)

At classroom level, effective teachers:
- were confident in their use of the National Literacy Strategy, as they:
  – "drew upon its framework without being unduly distracted by its analytical layout."
  – "were not pre-occupied by covering the termly content of the framework."

– "constantly made connections between text level work, and word and sentence level study." (S2, Frater, 2000b, p.109)

- "in general, placed a greater emphasis on children's recognition of the purposes and functions of reading and writing and of the structures used to enable processes." (S1, Medwell et al., 1998, p.76)

- although "more likely to be able to pick out word types such as adjectives, adverbs etc., …[were] less able to identify such units as phonemes, onsets and rimes and morphemes". (S1, Medwell et al., 1998, p.76)

- "Despite this apparent lack of explicit, abstract knowledge of linguistic concepts, these teachers were observed to use such knowledge implicitly in their teaching, particularly that connected with phonics." (S1, Medwell et al., 1998, p.76)

- "centred much of their teaching of literacy around 'shared' texts which the teacher and children either wrote or read together." (S1, Medwell et al., 1998, p.8)

- had "developed strong and coherent philosophies about the teaching of literacy which guided their selection of teaching materials and approaches." (S1, Medwell et al., 1998, p.8)

- had "well developed systems for monitoring children's progress and needs in literacy and use[d] this information to plan future teaching." (S1, Medwell et al., 1998, p.9)

- "had a greater level of awareness children's authors". (S1, Medwell et al., 1998, p.16)
- encouraged children to take a more active part in classroom discussions and in determining the direction of activities. (S4)

The quality of interaction matters too:
Donna, a highly effective teacher of literacy:
"You've got to prepare. You've got to have a starting point. But what I always hope is that the children will take me somewhere I hadn't thought of going." (S4 Dombey 2003, p.48)

Now for a bit on English Orthography.

The twenty commonest words in English, in order of frequency									
the	of	and	a	to	in	is	you	that	it
he	for	was	on	are	as	with	his	they	at
The next thirty commonest words									
be	this	from	I	have	or	by	one	had	not
but	what	all	were	when	we	there	can	an	your
which	there	said	if	do	will	each	about	how	up
And the next fifty commonest words									
out	them	then	she	many	some	so	these	would	other
into	has	more	her	two	like	him	see	time	could
no	make	than	first	been	its	who	now	people	my
made	over	did	down	only	way	find	use	may	water
long	little	very	after	words	called	just	where	most	know

Table from: The 100 Commonest Words in Written English (Carroll *et al.,* 1971)

The orthography of English is not nearly as straightforward as the writing system of Spanish, Finnish or Kiswahili. The letter 'a' stands for quite different phonemes in 'cat', 'cast', 'call', 'cake' and 'career'. We need to be fully aware of this when we teach children to read. Teaching children synthetic phonics does not open the gate to reading in English as easily or as completely as it does in these other languages. Many of the commonest words listed above, which are essential for any connected text, cannot be decoded through single letter/phoneme matching. Try this out for yourself.

However, a number of these words are not just 'one-offs' but instead part of a rhyming pattern, as are four of the five 'ca' words listed above. This means that unfamiliar words can be identified through the analogy of similar words that are already known. So if the child knows 'my' she can use that knowledge to identify 'by'. Similarly with 'me', 'he', 'she' and 'we'. Other words, such as 'call' and 'ball', 'cast' and 'fast', also form rhyming families, where the sound represented by the vowel letter depends on the consonant letters that follow it.

But there remain a number of very common words that have to be learned as wholes. So, to help our children become fluent readers of meaningful text we need to give them more than one strategy, from the beginning. In addition to 'sounding out' and 'blending', we need to teach them to look for rhyme patterns, to recognise key irregularly spelled words on sight, and, to guess. We wouldn't have to teach them to do this if we were teaching them to read in Spanish, but we're not.

References

Carroll, J.B., Davies, P. and Richman, 1971) *The American Heritage Word Frequency Book.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Dombey, H. (2003) 'Moving forward together'. in E. Bearne, H. Dombey and T. Grainger (eds) *Classroom Interactions in Literacy*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill/Open University Press

Frater, G. (2000) 'Observed in practice. English in the National Literacy Strategy: some reflections.' *Reading,* 34(3): 107-112.

Medwell, J., Wray, D. *et al.* (1998) *Effective Teachers of Literacy.* Exeter: the Teacher Training Agency.

OfSTED (2004) *Reading for Purpose and Pleasure.* London: OfSTED Publications.

Wray, D. and Lewis, M. (1996) *Writing Frames.* Reading: The University of Reading, Reading and Language Information Centre