

Teaching English, Language and Literacy (Second Edition)

Dominic Wyse and Russell Jones, Routledge 2008, £17.99 ISBN 978-0-415-39980-7

When David Wray decides to accord to any work the status of "an impressive achievement" (Wyse and Jones 2008: xvi), it bears some serious scrutiny. Written for "all primary education students and their teachers" (Wyse and Jones 2008: xviii), this is the second edition of a book first published in 2001 and its authors can lay claim to some substantial revisions. Having sought to address the National Literacy Strategy in 2001, Dominic Wyse and Russell Jones now offer a critique of the Primary National Strategy Literacy Framework and set that out in a much wider and ambitious context as "an essential guide to the teaching of English" (Wyse and Jones 2008: xviii). I found myself in the interesting position of assessing that claim from a tangential Scottish perspective, hoping to mine some generic gems. With the usual reservations about the inevitable limitations of any such guide, I believe that this book offers a great deal of interest and value, not only to primary teachers but to a wider audience. Without doubt, it has a distinct voice which dissents very audibly from some current practice where that has its roots in reactive policy initiative rather than research evidence.

Essentially, the book is in five parts with a significant Introduction, key sections on Reading, Writing, Talking and Listening and concluding with some uncomfortably "bitty" General Issues. To be fair, the last of these is a laudable attempt to sweep up matters which, if omitted, would leave the book open to criticism and I intend to leave it untouched by further reflection. Within these five parts detailed chapters explore key issues. I found the overall structure helpful and the conceptual glue which holds it together surprisingly robust enough to deliver the authors' twin key intentions of "comprehensive coverage" (Wyse and Jones 2008: xviii) and a "critically reflective approach to practice, research, theory and policy" (Wyse and Jones 2008: xvii). Each of the key sections is framed by a consideration of how development occurs in children's learning about that mode. A simple coding system offers some useful cross-referencing, each chapter ends with an annotated bibliography and there are built-in glossaries of key terms. Each chapter also ends with some "Practice Points" which flag key implications for teaching arising from the preceding discussion. Embedded in the book is a consistently detailed matrix of information about how national systems of curriculum and assessment work and, though a little uneasily at times, this information is interwoven with discussion about the tensions between "modern educational practice" and the research which does or does not inform it. The depth and breadth of research reference is a key strength of the book and the authors unashamedly locate their thinking in the often competing theoretical frameworks of the last forty years. For the emerging primary teacher, these provide a crucial foundation on which to build the practices advocated by the authors.

The Introduction begins by offering some "big-picture" thinking about the history of "English, language and literacy". Oddly in such an impressive work, this was a rather uncomfortable beginning. I suppose that to review the history of the language in just over a page and a half was simply an acknowledgement of the impossibility of the task; the focus is inevitably arbitrary and deals almost exclusively with spelling and borrowings. Perhaps for the intended audience of primary teachers in training, the underpinning concept that language is ever-changing offers enough of a taste to prompt further reading. In fairness, this little meander through history is set against a more consistently robust conceptualisation of language in its social context which permeates the work. The description of the history of teaching English in England, and the development of "literacy" as a part of that process, is more satisfying and offers genuinely helpful and contextualised insights into an ever-evolving curriculum. Firmly asserting the views of Cox (1998) in questioning mechanistic and

utilitarian approaches to the teaching of English, especially reading, the authors offer a refreshing and liberating challenge to the strident orthodoxy which decries "falling standards", especially when evidence for such a perception is so largely rooted in statutory test results. Perhaps we can all recognise the myth of a lost golden age of universally literate generations, most recently experienced by this reviewer when, during interview for a place on a PGDE course, a prospective teacher of English in his forties bemoaned the fact that "standards have fell". The Introduction concludes with a helpful critique of the development of theories of learning which reinforces the efficacy of constructivist pedagogies.

The Reading section explores the positions taken by the various armies in what are termed the "reading wars" (Wyse and Jones 2008: 39). As they do with their treatment of the two other language modes, Wyse and Jones structure their thinking here around notions of the developmental milestones children reach in their language development, offering these very prominently as models which should influence teachers' practice. They lay just claim to a strong research base for these models, though perhaps a little too earnestly in the book's only appendix which outlines Wyse's own research on the reading milestones reached by his own two children. These models also strongly influence later thinking in the book about how reading can be assessed, again a feature of their discussion about Writing and "Speaking and Listening". In discussing how reading might be taught, the authors lean heavily on the US National Reading Panel Report (2000) which supports the use of systematic phonics. They dub the current trend to adopt synthetic phonics, driven by the Rose Report (2006), as indicative of "policy thrusts that lack a sufficient evidence base" (Wyse and Jones 2008: 47), a charge with which many have sympathy and one which should not confuse the student primary teacher. It would be a very uncritical eye which simply accepted unchallenged the undoubtedly impressive results of the Clackmannan experience of synthetic phonics: it is worth remembering that authority is the smallest in Scotland, with only 19 primary and 3 secondary schools. Regardless of which camp you belong to, this exemplifies a further strength of the book: it encourages beginning teachers to challenge and explore the received wisdom of the day.

In considering the teaching of Reading, the authors are also critical of the conveyor belt which has produced new reading schemes in response to ongoing changes to national strategies and policies. It is an inevitable feature of such a book that it cannot offer detailed exemplification of learning and teaching strategies, yet I thought the section on Children's Literature could have offered more specific guidance to its target audience. A brief look at how youngsters may access "Skellig" provides an opportunity for student teachers to see how to enable children to access texts. More encouragingly, in discussing assessment it exhorts teachers to place children's learning needs before the demands of the assessment system, promoting ways of engaging children in deeper thinking and exploratory talk about what they are reading rather than using inappropriate assessment instruments to generate evidence of reading "success".

In considering Writing, beginning teachers are very firmly nudged towards the "Process" tradition. I thought that there was over-eagerness on the authors' part to attack some of the weaker flanks of thinkers such as J R Martin et al (1987) while ignoring some of the strengths of the Genrist tradition. Similarly, in condemning Genrist pedagogies simply because they have been too slavishly implemented through recent policy developments, they discourage student teachers from the critical thinking which is so evidently promoted elsewhere: it's a rare case of what may be called a "silo" mentality in this book.

There is helpful discussion about the effective use of Writing Frames and this section also addresses a range of ways to teach spelling. However, if I were to identify the one glaring retreat in the book it would be from genuine engagement in how to enable teachers to address the KAL issue. I know that the research indicates that the explicit teaching of grammar has next to no impact on children's writing but the matter merits more attention than it gets here, where I sense an almost apologetic acceptance of its problematic nature. In contrast, through an exploration of the long established LINC project, there is a very strong and valuable steer

given towards the need to address KAL in the context of children's own reading and writing and away from the notion that understanding of how language works is acquired on a linear line of progression.

In the final key section on Speaking and Listening, a comprehensive examination is offered of various conceptualisations of language acquisition, this time founded in key staging posts as postulated by Peccei (2006). It is helpful to see such a strong emphasis on supporting children not only in learning to talk but also in talking to learn. This is further underpinned by interesting discussion around the diversity and richness in spoken language and the essentially social nature of talking. Guidance is offered about how to plan for talking and considerable attention devoted to the importance of exploratory, supportive and hypothetical talking, with a brief selection offered of activities which could be used to develop these. This is the shortest section in the book and I did wonder a little about that, given what we know about Speaking and Listening being at the heart of effective learning across and beyond the curriculum.

Any book with aims as ambitious as this one leaves itself open to criticism as being light on detail. In many respects this book is, but it had to be if it was to remain accessible. It unashamedly locates itself in the curriculum as currently structured in England. That too is fine and will offer the key context for beginning primary teachers there. In fact, in its accessibility and straightforward structure, and in the writers' extensive and contextualised use of reference to further and more specific reading, this book offers a great deal to the primary teacher in training. However, as an exercise in "big picture" thinking, this is an even more valuable book which frames concisely and, thankfully, contentiously on occasions, the "stuff" of English teaching. Like David Wray, I am pleased to have it on my bookshelf and look forward to taking it down from there to share with those studying in both primary and secondary teacher education courses.

References

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