

Fundamentals of the Rostock concept of literacy

Reading is commonly understood as an act of information gathering. Based on the written text, the reader has to be able to infer the intended meaning which is determined by the context. This presupposes the reader's knowledge about the characteristics of the text in question. This is the only way for the reader to draw the correct pragmatic and semantic conclusions from a text.

Information gathering is an aspect of reading which is restricted to the individual assimilation of what is expressed. As long as the text is restricted to the individual assimilation, the ability to decode symbolic functions and drawing conclusions is restricted to previous knowledge and the reader's own interpretation of the meaning. Yet the moment the information gathered from the text as well as its contextual meaning serve as a basis for communication, interactive implications have to be considered. As the text is part of a communication it sets pragmatic conditions. Without the knowledge of these pragmatic conditions there is an immanent danger of an inappropriate reception.

The reader needs strategies to ensure the correct understanding of the text, since the reception of many texts can not rely on the reader's previous knowledge on how to assimilate them correctly with respect to the discourse. The reader has to know various suitable patterns of action, or rather algorithms, which allow him or her to clarify in a communication with others to what extent the information, he or she extracted, carries the meaning which is valid in the sense of the intended pragmatic context.

When thinking about teaching reading, especially to students with reading difficulties, it has to be considered how to develop the skill of ensuring a correct understanding, i.e. the learner has to acquire and master techniques of gathering information and methods of extracting the meaning of a text.

In principle two areas can be differentiated, which are related to the management of understanding:

a) Clarifying what the text refers to

The readers come to an understanding about the objects and their implementation in a model. This can only be successful if both readers associate the same context with the text. If assumptions about the context are missing, readers have to come to an understanding about the text and its presuppositions.

b) The text as part of the context in which it was written

This context necessitates specific assumptions about what is expressed by the text. The expressions gain their meaning through such a correlation. Plots are subordinated to more complex conventional patterns, which also influence the meaning of an expression. Often the knowledge about these patterns is not sufficient, as they may date back in history or come from a different culture. They are part of a collective knowledge of a cultural epoch and thus they possess their own rules of constructing meaning.

The common reader usually does not see these correlations and insinuates that the text provides signs with a naïve reference to the reader's well-known and familiar reality. This leads to the reader's conclusion that the text claims to be truthful; thus it becomes based on an ontology of materiality, and what is said has to be believed true. Therefore, the reader is desperate to find referential points in the world known to him or her.

Such assumptions are no problem as long as the text is indeed based in the socio-cultural context the reader presumed. In this case, the reader would use rules for constructing meaning which support the originally intended construction of the fraction of reality.

Students with reading difficulties face yet another problem: for them it is particularly difficult to assign referential points to the text, they can do this only partly and sometimes only fragmentary. They hardly find any reference to subjects in their known world or come up with associations which the text does not provide. To compound matters, they are not aware of their misinterpretation. They even tend to insist on their constructed model, due to the aforementioned strategy of ontology.

Therefore, reading has to be taught as a skill, which is trained as a discussion with an opponent. A text is a semiotic product of a communication partner, even though this partner may not be visible. A text is never an autonomic product, which can be broken away from the writer/author. Therein lie severe difficulties in developing reading skills of slow readers. Reading is an act of dealing with your own mental world; continuously securing that this world is indeed the one the writer intended is part of that act.

He, who is to be taught reading, has to learn to talk about any given text. This requires the acquisition of communication techniques, which have to be developed parallel with the development of information gathering skills.

When learning how to read, you also have to learn to ask questions. If you infer referential points in reality from a text, you have to secure the correctness of your conclusions. One form of securing conclusions is to ask a communication partner: Is this really what is meant?

During the reading process hypotheses are formulated, which try to explain which points in reality are meant and where they are. In an interactive act the reader ensures that another reader has identified the same points. If their ideas are different, they try to find reasons, which underpin the other idea. These reasons will then serve as an aid to decide which interpretation is more plausible.

The "Rostocker Lesedidaktik" has developed a method, which sees the acquisition of texts as a joint reconstruction of what is said in and meant by the text. The act of reading is bound to acts of communication about what is read. Through exercises the reader learns how to talk about any topic in any given text with other readers. Furthermore, the reader learns how to ask questions, which can clarify the identification of the fraction of reality the author refers to, and strives to evaluate interpretations.

This approach to reading is especially helpful when working with students with reading difficulties. It is particularly tailored for them. Many tests in schools have shown this. A reader is always at the same time a speaker. He or she reads only as much as is necessary to ask questions about the part he or she has read. The reading process is a joint action. This trains the step-by-step understanding of texts. During the first phase the communication partner need not be able to read as well as the other. It is rather crucial to experience the step-by-step construction of what is read.

Reading is constructing fractions of reality. This act corresponds to gathering information. Reading is reconstructing a reality. This act is examining if what is said, corresponds to what the writer intended.

Texts as part of action patterns gain their meaning through these patterns. Therefore, it is vitally important to illustrate this aspect. Readers have to learn to include many things which are connected with the text. They have to take metaphors in a text into account. They have to be aware of where it was printed. They have to take the kind of typeface seriously.