

1988

Learning to read: a cognitive approach to reading and poor reading.

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Recommended Citation

Sloan, P. (1988). Learning to read: a cognitive approach to reading and poor reading.. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.1988v13n2.6>

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BOOK REVIEW

Title: *Learning to Read: A Cognitive Approach to Reading and Poor Reading*. 146pp.

Author: John R Beech

Publisher: Croom Helm, London and Sydney, 1985.

Price: \$19.95, \$34.95

I find it very hard to recommend the above book for a number of reasons and despite the fact that I am sympathetic towards the intentions of the writer.

The title suggests that the text is about 'Learning to Read', but this is not its main thrust as it deals more with a discussion of dyslexia rather than the act of learning to read. In addition the title suggests that the book deals with 'reading and poor reading', yet most of the book, that is six out of the seven chapters deal with 'Reading Problems'.

The single chapter on 'Learning to Read' is an uninformed comment or description of three traditional approaches to the teaching of reading in which a 'look and say' approach using flash cards is somehow seen as a 'language experience approach'. The 'phonics' and 'linguistic' approaches are also outlined with the latter approach described as one which uses word families such as *cat, mat, fat, etc.*

The heavy emphasis placed upon the phonics and linguistic approaches in a book supposedly dealing with a cognitive approach is a contradiction. The author indicates that it doesn't make any difference which approach is used, although he does not actually analyse any of the approaches in theoretical terms nor describe them in any formal way. He merely describes some of the teaching practice in reading he has observed which, hopefully, is not typical of the teaching of reading in Britain. Even in addressing the topic of how children are taught to read the author digresses from his stated purpose.

The disturbing feature of this book is that it has no clear theoretical framework. I contend that it is a hotch-potch of impressions, opinions and references to computer searches. The central theme or focus of the book is 'Dyslexia' and even this theme is treated in an uninformed way using only selected and somewhat esoteric references to studies done some time ago. Generally the book ignores the huge amount of research and its related literature which has come from the mainstream North American investigations into the teaching and learning of reading and into Reading Theory.

Another disturbing aspect of the book is the distinction between 'comprehension' and the 'basic reading skill'. Since the whole purpose of text processing (reading) is the making of meaning, comprehension must surely be the basic skill. The author does not actually define what he means by the 'basic

skill' although it may be inferred from the repeated references to 'phonemic awareness' that it is the 'basic skill'.

In summary at \$19.95, for a poorly printed paper-back edition, with a narrow and confused presentation of what is known about reading and learning to read, I feel that the book is unlikely to become a useful text for the serious student of the subject.

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