SPECIAL ISSUE OF L1-EDUCATIONAL STUDIES
IN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE
READING: A CRITICAL CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

COMMENTS ON FIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

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1. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

In this issue there are five contributions concerning decoding ability, linguistic competence and its implications for reading instruction and reading research. I want to begin by stating that I am not an expert in this specific area of reading research. However, that being said the main focus in my research has been reading comprehension. I do think this circumstance may be an advantage since on one hand I am not involved in the particular debate on different positions regarding reading instruction. On the other hand I do have a fair share of experience from reading research. My comments will focus on the *structure* and the *consistency* of some of the arguments made.

Since the *Simple view of reading* (SVR) is central in most of the five articles and the fact that there is a large body of research in this particular area I would like to start by highlighting some relatively recently published studies not mentioned by the authors Conners (2009); Wilson and Lesaux (2001), Parrila, Georgiou and Cor-

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kett (2007) , Birch and Case, (2004), Georgiou, Das, and Hayward (2009) and Høien Tengesdal (2010).

According to the Simple View of Reading (SVR), suggested by Gough and Tunmer (1986) reading comprehension is the product of word decoding ability and linguistic comprehension ($R = D \times C$). However, there is also evidence showing that an additive model ($R = D + C$) explains just as much or even more of the variance in reading comprehension than the product model. Thus, e.g., Conners (2009) argue that an additive model (R= D+C) yields a better estimate of reading than the product model suggested by Gough and Tunmer (1986). The product model conceptually assumes both D and C to be strictly necessary, but neither individually to be sufficient for reading comprehension, while the additive model suggests that D and C is sufficient , but not necessary for reading comprehension. Thereby, the researchers argue, the additive model allows for the possibility of either D and C being bypassed and a reader still achieving adequate reading comprehension. This implication is interesting as re- cent research findings suggest that some adult dyslexics have acquired adequate reading com- prehension despite having deficits in decoding ability (Wilson & Lesaux, 2001, Parrila, Georgiou & Corkett, 2007, Birch & Case, 2004).

Georgiou, Das, and Hayward (2009) examined what would be the best way to combine decoding and listening comprehension, to predict reading comprehension in a small group of children with poor reading comprehension skills. According to this study both models had equal explanatory power on reading comprehension.

Høien Tengesdal (2010) has evaluated the SVR model and the additive model. 467 Norwegian six-graders participated in the study. She measured reading comprehension, decoding ability, listening comprehension, phonemic awareness, and rapid digit naming. The preliminary hierarchical regression analyses were replicated among Swedish students. According to Høien Tengesdal the additive model explains more of the variance in reading comprehension than the product model, and only rapid naming contributed significantly to explain variance in reading comprehension, above and beyond that explained by the SVR. Høien Tengesdal concludes that components as language orthography, student's age and level of reading ability may be important contributors to explain variance in reading comprehension. Høien Tengesdal also suggests further research to investigate the relationship between the different components among various groups of reading disabled students, such as those with dyslexia, hyperlexia, and – garden-variety – poor readers. Here I agree with her: There is a need for further research in this particular area.

2. THE FIVEARTICLES

It is always refreshing when researchers have the courage to challenge *currents paradigms*. However, thinking out of the box, which is often recommended by researchers, is easier said than done (Hofstadter, 2007; Kuhn, 1981). Before I start with the specific arguments made I would like to make a general comment about one thing that struck me during the reading of these diligently written contributions. There has been a tremendously lot of articles written about reading instruction. Thus there is a risk for problems and solutions to repeat themselves (Kuhn, 1981). Hence

when reading about this subject I sometimes get the impression that the argumentation is caught up in a strange loop on which it does not seem to be able to get out from. Thus I am a bit worried about the similarities among some of the articles and the titles of those articles. From my view of science it is important that we not only challenge the current paradigms but also each other. With reference to Vygotsky (1978) it is important that we as researchers challenge each other to reach the proximal zone of our research. My impression is that the researchers who have written the articles do not challenge each other or themselves enough.

In the article *The ABC of Reading – Perspectives on the Alphabetical Principle*, Uppstad and Tønnesen argue that there is a need to define more precisely what kind of phenomena reading is. The authors refer to Popper (1972) and use him to argue that one valid objection is sufficient to make a general statement invalid. Uppstad and Tønnesen argue that the alphabetical principle and phonemic awareness become problems in reading education and reading research, with the lack of definition as background. Phonics and Whole Language have, according to Uppstad and Tønnesen, too dogmatic views partly due to the unclear definition of reading. A definition of reading has to be a fundamental hypothesis, and this hypothesis will determine how to best define and treat the alphabetical principle and phonological awareness.

Uppstad and Tønnesen want to define reading as a skill and calls for further empirical investigations to clarify how the alphabetical principle and phonemic awareness should be used in reading education and reading research. When reading this article some questions came up: Uppstad and Tønnesen believe definitions should be treated as hypotheses that should be adjusted and challenged. However, is that not what for instance Conners et al. (2009), Georgiou et al. (2009) and Høien Tengesdal (2010) also do? All researchers more or less have hypotheses – especially the quantitative approaches – common criticism against Popper is that although most statements may be reduced to a set of hypotheses it is not necessarily the case that all the premises of theories may be testable. Thus there are some assumptions that if were to reduce them into hypotheses we would reduce the theory and thus its explanatory power to a degree where it becomes rather trivial or meaningless. It is not necessarily the case that we have the necessary tools to investigate the problems at hand (Lakatos, 1978, Gilje & Grimen, 2007: 96ff).

I would also like to raise a minor question: Uppstad and Tønnesen argue that "The virtual absence of criticism in mainstream literacy research has given the Alphabetic Principle the status of a universal basic assumption". I am curious to know who the – mainstream of reading research is.

In the article *Coding and Comprehension in Written Language - Considering Limitations in the Simple View of Reading*, Uppstad and Solheim argue that they want to maintain Gough and Tunmer's (1986) original purpose of the SVR. The original model was used to predict reading comprehension by means of two factors: decoding and linguistic comprehension. The authors find potential problems in the contemporary use of the SVR model since it has gained status in contemporary research as a definition of reading.

It is a very interesting article. However I have two major concerns. The first concern is with the structure of the arguments. Thus I find it from time to time difficult to follow the sequential logic of the argumentation which is far from linear. The second concern is with what we as researchers are to do with the authors´ proposals? If I make a thought experiment of how I would have designed a study based by the arguments made by the authors I feel like I would have great difficulties in such an undertaking because of the lack of clarity in some of the arguments and their interrelations. My concerns may be seen as a consequence of the general theses in the article, namely Uppstad`s and Solheim`s concern for lack of clarity among current reading researchers.

Tønnessen´s article *What are skills? Some fundamental reflections* elaborates upon the distinction between reading as an automatised and potential (awareness) skill. He settles for a *both/and* distinction while rejecting the *either/or* distinction. Several dimensions are discussed in the article with reference to classic philosophy. What strikes me is that there is a growing body of research on skills as contextually bounded (specifically learned) which has attempted to challenge the conception of skills as general (Lave & Wenger:1991; Perkins & Salomon: 1989). However, this distinction probably also has the property of *both/and*. If Tønnesen really has a wish to dig deeper into reading as a skill then he would probably make good use of discussing the tension between general and specific skills with reference to reading.

Two articles brought a different argument to the table, namely those by Skaftun *Minding metaphors. Rethinking the ecology of written language* and *Understanding reading development: a phenomenological perspective*. Skaftun`s first article Minding metaphors illustrates an important issue. Half of the research process is providing accurate methods, the other half is being creative and using one´s imagination in the research process. Metaphors play a highly important role in the second half. Thus metaphors may be used as heuristic devices for both discovering creative research problems and surprising explanations. However, Skaftun also attempts to remind us about the potential problems of borrowing metaphors across scientific systems. In doing so, he specifically discusses three key metaphors in reading research ecology (biology), eventness (social turn) and involvement (psychology). The idea of linking the three seems troublesome but still it is an important project. Thus metaphors are important for posing creative research problems. Consequently I look forward to an interesting further discussion not only about metaphors as heuristic devices, but also their implications for design and analytical methods in reading research.

In the second article *Understanding reading development: A phenomenological perspective*, Skaftun highlights the phenomenology of the experience of (a) learning to read and (b) reading instruction. In a friendly way Skaftun criticizes Alexander´s and Fox´ (2004) attempt at integrating the cognitive and socio-cultural perspective for failing to take phenomenological aspects into account. Reading instruction is a skill he argues, which is learned partly by experience. Polanyi's (1974) distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge has been important in other fields such as the study of the teaching profession. Skaftun further argues that when we e.g., identify

teachers as experts it is easy to forget about the non-taxonomical aspects of the craft of reading instruction, for instance staying focused on the specific text, finding concrete examples of abstract words etc. seems to be a craft learned within the specific situation. This type of *knowing how* is not something that can be taught explicitly nor specified as a stepwise recipe. Teacher competence does matter. This fact is an experience I do have from my own field based interventional research.

I would like to conclude that I hope that the five articles will contribute to an elaborated discussion on an integrated view on reading research where we may look upon different research programs as complementary rather than only conflicting.

I would also like to pose a friendly challenge to the authors, namely how to take into account reading and reading instruction with reference to (a) students with mild intellectual disabilities (b) general issues of special education.

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