Looking Through an Adolescent Literacy Lens at the Narrow View of Reading

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Alan Kamhi’s (2007) concept of the narrow view of reading is a provocative one and not without merit. It is his hope that this view will lead to more focused and successful efforts at addressing reading problems in schools. That indeed would be a great result! On the other hand, the narrow view of reading may not lead us to where we need to go. The lens through which I see this view is an adolescent literacy one because my focus is on struggling readers in middle and high school. The unique demands and features of reading in secondary schools and the conditions that exist in these settings may propel us to consider a broader view of reading.

Complexities of Reading Comprehension

Looking at adolescent literacy sheds light on the complexities of reading comprehension and, with them, the advisability of considering reading narrowly. Experts in adolescent literacy have pointed out the unique features of reading in middle and high school, where students encounter different academic discourses in each of the subjects they study. Experts contend that reading different subjects requires different reading approaches (Alvermann, 2001; Best, Rowe, Ozuru, & McNamara, 2005; de La Paz & MacArthur, 2003; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Moje et al., 2004). It is not just a knowledge base in a domain that students need, but facility with the specific discourse used to convey that knowledge. Take, for example, the literacy of science. Graesser, Leon, and Otero (2002) noted that science text is difficult to comprehend at a deep level. Science includes complex mechanisms with multiple components, attributes of components, relations between components, and dynamic processes that flow throughout the system, and it employs a mathematical language that is difficult to ground in everyday experience. For example, reading about the concept of alternation of generations in plants, related to sexual reproduction, requires the reader to understand the two alternating processes of meiosis and fertilization in order to comprehend meaning. The literacy of science requires coherent explanations for generating inferences, solving problems, making decisions, integrating ideas, synthesizing new ideas, and decomposing ideas in subparts.

Although the narrow view of reading does not discount these complexities, it would consider them part of domain knowledge and parse them out of the essential definition of reading. What practical effect might this have in schools? First of all, in secondary schools, what something is called largely determines who deals with it. Calling comprehension "reading," at least up to now, has meant that it is not viewed as the job of secondary teachers, who take their titles as “history teacher,” “algebra teacher,” and so on quite literally. In my experience, secondary teachers think of themselves as subject area teachers, without necessarily acknowledging their role in explicitly teaching reading comprehension of their text material. Therefore, construing comprehension as part of domain knowledge may mean

ABSTRACT: Purpose: This commentary is a personal reaction to A. G. Kamhi’s (2007) article on the “narrow view” of reading and his suggestion that this view be adopted as a way to address the reading problems of children and adolescents. Method: In this article, I consider the narrow view of reading from an adolescent literacy perspective and discuss the practical implications of adopting this view in the schools. Discussion revolves around the complexities of reading comprehension, comprehension as a teachable set of complex processes, and the speech-language pathologist’s role in reading comprehension. Conclusion: Although I acknowledge that the narrow view of reading may have merit, I opine that it may create more problems than it solves.

KEY WORDS: adolescent literacy, reading comprehension, reading

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that teachers would attend to the complexities of teaching it as part of their academic instruction. Score a point for the narrow view if that occurs!

However, I question the likelihood of that happening. It would require that secondary teachers define domain knowledge more broadly to include the underlying language skills needed to manipulate meaning as well as the effective strategies needed to apply knowledge and skills to understanding subject area text. It would also require them to spend time actually embedding these areas in their content teaching. Given the current preparation of secondary teachers, it is unlikely that most of them will have the necessary knowledge of language skills and strategies to include these elements. These concerns are echoed by the Alliance for Excellent Education, a national policy and advocacy organization (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007). Furthermore, in my experience with secondary teachers, given the present climate of accountability to curriculum standards, they are reluctant to do anything they view as detracting from the teaching of the content that will appear on high stakes tests. Therefore, the complexities of comprehension in a discipline would likely get lost in the shuffle. My fear, then, is that the narrow view of reading would make it easier for teachers to divorce reading from domain knowledge. I can hear secondary teachers now—“See, I told you I’m not a reading teacher!” If this were to occur, reading comprehension would belong to no professional. I would rather retain the positioning of comprehension within reading and continue to argue for collaboration among professionals in schools (Wallach & Ehren, 2004).

At best, even if teachers include comprehension in content area instruction, it would not be possible for them to address this area at the level of intensity that is needed by some struggling readers. I am assuming that these struggling students would need more than just a shored-up knowledge base, an opinion that is shared by many researchers (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001; Hock, Brasseur, & Deshler, 2008; Mastropieri, Scruggs, & Graetz, 2003; Pressley, 2000; Snow, 2002). Who then will serve students who need more than can be provided in content area classes, if comprehension is not part of reading? It would no longer be part of the role of reading teachers.

Another slippery slope in the disassociation of comprehension and reading is the notion that once students can recognize words, reading instruction is over and domain knowledge acquisition takes over. This is not a message we want to send to educators or the students themselves. Adolescent literacy professionals are trying to counter the popular and oft-quoted idea that before fourth grade, children are learning to read and after that they are reading to learn (Torgesen et al., 2007). We know there is much to learn about reading past fourth grade (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000; Moore, Bean, Birdshaw, & Rycik, 1999); adolescents are still learning to read, especially as it relates to discipline literacies.

An additional point is that in addressing reading comprehension complexity, it would be a serious omission to ignore motivation. “Motivated students usually want to understand text content fully and therefore, process information deeply. As they read frequently with these cognitive purposes, motivated students gain in reading comprehension proficiency” (Guthrie, Wigfield, & Perencevich, 2004, p. 56). For adolescents, especially struggling readers, engagement and persistence are major concerns. It does not appear that motivation would be sufficiently addressed in the narrow view of reading. Even if motivation for word recognition were to be considered, the notion of full engagement in the cognitive processes of comprehension would be omitted as part of reading.

Comprehension—A Teachable Skill?

What about the contention that is implicit in the narrow view of reading that comprehension is not a teachable skill? I agree that it is not a skill, but rather a complex set of processes, as discussed above. However, there is ample evidence that these complex comprehension processes can be taught, although it is not a simple matter (Alfassi, 2004; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Dole, Brown, & Trathen, 1996; Kamil, 2003; Lysynchuk, Pressley, & Vye, 1990). Teaching comprehension to adolescents is largely a matter of teaching strategies. The findings of the National Reading Panel (2000), the RAND Report (Snow, 2002), and many other analyses of the research (e.g., Gersten et al., 2001; Torgesen et al. 2007) highlight the teaching of reading comprehension strategies as a key component in comprehension instruction. “A comprehension strategy can be defined as any activity a student might engage in (including mental activities, conversations with others, or consultation of outside references) to enhance comprehension or repair it when it breaks down” (Torgesen et al., 2007, p. 1). Although I agree that attention to strategies without a substantial focus on domain knowledge is not likely to result in academic gains, I also think that undervaluing the teaching of reading comprehension strategies is a mistake. Doing so flies in the face of a substantial body of research.

Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) and the Narrow View

Where do SLPs fit into this content/process picture? For years, I have been advocating that SLPs engage in “curriculum-relevant therapy” (Ehren, 2000, 2002, 2006, 2007); that is, that they use curriculum as context for language therapy but not try to teach curriculum per se. In this approach, an SLP would focus on language processes, or “underpinnings.” For example, in a section of a biology text on symbiotic and parasitic relationships in living things, the SLP might work with a student to answer the following questions: Does this section of text compare and/or contrast symbiotic and parasitic relationships or does it have another purpose? What words are used to express likenesses and differences in the text? How do I use this knowledge of language to identify how symbiotic and parasitic relationships are similar and different?

Using curriculum as context does not imply that SLPs need to be expert in curriculum, nor that they have a role in building background knowledge. SLPs are not content experts and will be out of their element quickly if they go in that direction. As an SLP, I may remember enough science to do a decent job of teaching photosynthesis to fifth graders as long as I have the teacher edition of the text in front of me. However, as a secondary person, the thought of trying to teach the content in high school biology could make me very nervous indeed! Furthermore, teaching content would take the focus away from the area that I am uniquely qualified to address—language. Placing comprehension under the domain of knowledge would take it out of the SLP’s bailiwick. I would like to keep SLPs in the reading arena by focusing on the language underpinnings of comprehension.

The Bottom Line

In summary, I would say that (a) although comprehension is knowledge dependent, it is not skill and strategy independent;
CONCLUSION

It is intriguing to consider the narrow view of reading. In the best of worlds, practices emanating from it may hold promise for improving reading, as Kamhi (2007) suggests. However, it may have the opposite effect and make matters worse by putting comprehension in no-man’s land, where neither content area teachers nor other specialists (e.g., reading teachers, special education teachers, and SLPs) own it and where key components are not addressed. And last, but certainly not least, is the concern that if funders adopt the narrow view of reading, financial support for reading research will be allocated to investigate word recognition alone because funding follows definitions.

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