

Reviewed work:

Reading Comprehension and Text Organization. (2003). Alastair Sharp.
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In *Reading Comprehension and Text Organization*, Alastair Sharp analyses the interaction between psychological and cognitive processes involved in reading, and cultural and educational values. The book is essentially a research report, detailing an experiment by Sharp which investigated whether Hong Kong Chinese high school students, reading in English (their L2), find certain text organisations harder to comprehend than others. In Chapters 1 to 5, Sharp contextualises his study. Chapter 1 provides insights regarding the complex nature of bilingualism in Hong Kong, particularly in the teaching of reading. Chapters 2 to 5 review the literature regarding reading and text difficulty, cultural rhetorical differences and learning styles and lastly, the testing of reading. These chapters and the bibliography provide a wealth of sources for those interested in further detail. In Chapters 6 to 9, Sharp presents his methodology, results and discussion.

Sharp states that his book is for "those interested in multicultural education (and) those interested in the practical methodological problems of studying and researching reading behaviour" (p. 1). The book focuses more on how to conceptualise and research reading behaviour than on how to teach reading; nevertheless, Chapters 1 to 4 and the discussion in Chapter 8 do offer fascinating and valuable insights for teachers involved in foreign or second language education, especially those teaching young Hong Kong students.

Chapter 2 opens with a systematic literature review of theories of reading, comparing 'process' ('bottom-up', 'top-down' and 'interactive') models with 'componential' or skills models. Sharp then considers what makes a text difficult to read, considering aspects of the text and how these interact with the reader, particularly with his or her purpose for reading and background knowledge (schema). He provides a clear summary of evidence supporting and refuting schema theory (p. 45-47), and presents Carrell's (1983) distinction between content schemata (knowledge of the topic) and formal schemata (awareness of text organisation), the latter being of particular significance for his own research. Sharp then reviews a wide range of experimental evidence suggesting that text organisation (and awareness of this) affects reading comprehension, and that "more tightly structured texts" (such as problem-solution texts) appear to lead to better comprehension than "more loosely organized" texts (such as those in which ideas are more randomly organised, sometimes termed description texts) (p. 62). Sharp concludes this chapter with his research questions. Formulated as null hypotheses, these state that four different text organisations (description, cause-effect, listing, problem-solution) will *not* affect reading

comprehension, nor will gender, language proficiency or the experimental measure used (p. 68-69). Of particular value in this and other chapters is Sharp's explanation of inconsistencies in the findings of previous research. Because he gives relevant details of experimental design, the reader is able to see where direct comparisons of past studies can (and cannot) be made.

In Chapter 3, Sharp discusses the controversial area of contrastive rhetoric (CR), that is, cultural differences in rhetorical preferences. After a critical review of the ideas of Kaplan (1966, 1987), Sharp concludes that although there appear to be some differences in rhetorical structure, these may be determined as much by genre or discipline and social context as by culture (p. 76-77; 86). He then relates CR to reading, drawing attention to the close connection between reading, knowledge of genre, and effective writing (p. 83). Of particular interest is the section "CR and pedagogy," in which Sharp points out that, at the time of writing, Hong Kong English classrooms appeared to concentrate on "giving grammatical knowledge without any instruction in rhetorical organization" (p. 85). (He notes that this may change in the future, with the inclusion of 'text analysis' in the revised 1999 Hong Kong English syllabus.) As do other chapters, this chapter concludes with a valuable summary of key concepts as well as an explanation of their relevance to his research.

The existence of a Chinese learning style, and how this is influenced by the values of Confucianism, is the topic of Chapter 4. It is of interest that, in contrast to western views, Chinese students value effort and memorisation as being more important for success than ability. Particularly interesting was the discussion of Hong Kong students' use of survival strategies when reading (p. 92; Johnson and Ngor, 1996). Sharp explains that as students' English proficiency is often inadequate (and usually remains so due to a relative lack of production and interaction in the classroom), students use survival strategies to compensate. These involve slowly deciphering a text word by word, finding and memorising key content words "without adequate consideration of the meaning relationships between those content words," thus encouraging only a surface understanding of a text (p. 94). Understanding what strategies these students may use, and why, clearly has direct implications for teachers involved in teaching Hong Kong students.

Chapters 5 to 7 are more of interest to researchers than teachers, although Chapter 5 is noteworthy for its informative critique of methods of assessing reading, including multiple choice questions (pp. 117-120), and thorough literature review of the two methods Sharp uses: recall protocols and cloze (pp. 130-147). In Chapter 6, Sharp outlines his methods in detail (see Sharp's article in the October, 2002 issue of this journal for full details of texts and tests used). Sharp first reconstructed one text into four texts, each with a different organisation (description, cause-effect, listing, problem-solution). His subjects, 490 Hong Kong high school students, were each given one of the four texts to read; after reading, students completed two tests: a recall (scored quantitatively and qualitatively) and cloze (scored quantitatively). A one way ANOVA was used to compare texts. Chapter 7 gives a comprehensive but dry statistical analysis of his results; a summary concisely lists the results for each of his null hypotheses (pp. 236-238). There are some surprising findings: firstly, analysis of cloze scores revealed that the more loosely structured text was significantly better understood; secondly, the measure used yielded different findings (in fact, the quantitative recall showed no significant differences).

Interestingly, the rankings with respect to text comprehension were not affected by gender nor proficiency level.

One concern with Sharp's methodology is the confounding effect of memory, a potential problem with both measures used. Indeed, it is unclear why students were not allowed to see the reading text while completing the cloze, which might have reduced the effect of memory. Another question is to what extent the cloze test format can assess not only reading comprehension but also grammatical knowledge and productive skills. Sharp does address the issue of productive skills in a discussion of how different experimental designs may lead to contradictory findings between and even within studies. In fact, he suggests that the difference in production required by the recall protocol (full sentences) compared to the cloze (single words) may be one reason for the apparently inconsistent findings in his own study (p. 242). However, Sharp does overcome a weakness of previous experiments by specifying scoring procedures, including the handling of difficult-to-score responses (see for example pp. 178-181). Sharp aimed to control for variables such as educational level, background knowledge (content schemata) of students, and difficulty of text such as lexis and word length, and analysed for the effect of gender and language proficiency. All of these factors will enable easier comparison of Sharp's findings with those of future research.

In Chapter 8, Sharp discusses his findings in the light of issues raised in Chapters 2 to 5, outlining how such issues may have influenced his results. After discussing factors related to experimental design (referred to above), Sharp provides an interesting discussion of potential influences from differences between Chinese and English linguistic features (p. 251 onwards). For instance, he postulates that the loosely organised text (without explicit signalling words) may be easier for Hong Kong students because Chinese may be more indirect, relying less on and using fewer cohesive devices (p. 255; see also pp. 49-50). This proposal is of direct relevance to teachers, providing insight into potential difficulties for Chinese students in reading and producing texts in English.

Sharp also postulates that culture and schooling may have led to a lack of significant differences between quantitative recall scores for each text. Students' use of survival strategies (identifying and memorising content words) may be one explanation (causing Sharp to raise serious doubts about the validity of using quantitative recall protocols with students whose schooling encourages such survival strategies and fails to encourage writing skills). Another explanation is that the inability of students to recognise particular organisational patterns in English (which Sharp relates to the lack of training in text structure in Hong Kong high schools) means that students see text as a series of unconnected ideas rather than "using text organisation as a retrieval cue" (p. 261).

In an otherwise worthwhile book, it is unfortunate that the reader is distracted by a large number of typographical errors, particularly in several chapters. Nevertheless, this book is commendable for its insights into the complex nature of reading and the interactions of language, culture and education, as well as the complexity of investigating reading behaviour. Sharp concludes with suggestions for further research, and also with implications for teaching reading, including the need to explicitly teach text structure, and to move away from "lexically based strategies described as common in Hong Kong" (p. 272). This book also reinforces the need for reading to

be accompanied by writing. This research thus lends further support for text-based teaching approaches, which include explicit classroom analysis of text organisation, and integrate the teaching of reading and writing (see, e.g., Feez, 1998). It will be interesting to see whether the 1999 Hong Kong English syllabus does result in more emphasis in the classroom on text organisation and writing, and what the effects of this are.

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