



## The Best of Times, the Worst of Times?

*Yetta Goodman, Ken Goodman, and Bess Altwerger*

Celebrating the rich history of *Language Arts* and NCTE's 100th birthday, we invited three internationally recognized scholars—Dr. Kenneth Goodman, Dr. Yetta Goodman, and Dr. Bess Altwerger—to share their thoughts about the history of reading theory and instruction, how their views of the reading process have evolved, and how literacy theory and instruction have become of interest in public arenas. These devoted educators have been involved in literacy education for a number of decades and their work has informed the field greatly.

Ken Goodman is Professor Emeritus at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and a former president of both NCTE and the International Reading Association. This Reading Hall of Fame inductee is a practical theorist, researcher, and teacher educator whose work has informed our understanding of literacy processes, how they are learned, and how best to teach them. His Whole Language, research-based theory demonstrates that reading is a unitary process in which readers actively construct meaning—that is, they make sense of print. Goodman's theory is a macro view, which is solidly built on linguistic, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic concepts. It is a practical theory because teachers who come to understand this view of reading and the related view of writing can understand what it is that learners are doing as they develop literacy.

Yetta Goodman is Regents Professor of Education at the University of Arizona, Tucson, and a former president of NCTE. She consults with education departments and speaks at conferences throughout the United States and in many nations of the world regarding issues of language, teaching,

and learning with implications for language arts curricula. In addition to her research in early literacy, miscue analysis, and reading and writing processes, she has popularized the term *kidwatching*, encouraging teachers to be professional observers of the language and learning development of their students. She is a spokesperson for Whole Language, and in her extensive writing shows concern for educational issues and research with a focus on classrooms, students, and teachers.

Bess Altwerger is a professor at Towson University in Maryland and a member of the Save Our Schools Steering Committee. Bess is a teacher educator, literacy researcher, and author/editor of several books focused on the theory, practice, and politics of reading instruction. She has been an outspoken critic of NCLB and other federal policies that have resulted in high-stakes testing, one-size-fits-all curriculum mandates, privatization of public schools, and the de-professionalization of teaching.

**This excerpted conversation was recorded on September 1, 2011, and has been edited for publication. A longer edited version is available as a podcast ([www.ncte.org/la/podcasts](http://www.ncte.org/la/podcasts)).**



**Yetta:** It might be a good idea to talk a little bit about the reading process itself, and how over the last 50 years, views of the reading process have evolved and helped us to understand *why* constructivist teaching and progressive education really are

important concepts to sustain as we're involved in reading instruction.



**Ken:** We have learned so many things—and some of them are still not understood—but there is still a preoccupation with reading as reading *words*. The one thing that has become almost universally understood is that if kids aren't making sense of read-

ing, they're not learning. You have teachers that are given an instrument that doesn't even test comprehension, and they keep saying, "but what about meaning?" Eventually, in spite of all the politics that are involved, I firmly believe that we're going to win out because teachers have this important understanding. It's one of the reasons why I think teacher education gets attacked. I think the people who are trying to impose these insufficient instruments sense the resistance of teachers who are knowledgeable.

**Yetta:** Ken, talk more about what brought you to your view of reading to help language arts teachers understand the power of making meaning.

**Ken:** When I started out, I was only interested in *what can I learn about reading that can help teachers to teach?* What I discovered was that the simple thinking of reading as language wasn't really in the literature. We somehow had thought of it, as some of the Brits say, as an autonomous process that could be learned outside of its use. What we had to realize was that the *reading* of language is learned very much like any form of language. When we started listening to kids read, they were acting like they were users of language. They were using the grammatical forms, they were finishing sentences that weren't in the book in ways that made sense. The miscues that they were making, looking at the things they were doing—it all gave us insights into the process.

**Yetta:** You like to talk about the first time you heard a kid say "of" for "the."

**Ken:** That was a victory for me, because it wasn't phonics, it was language that was in-

involved. It took me a long time to realize how complex that was. This kid was changing a definite to an indefinite noun phrase, and it showed an emerging use of language. What's very gratifying is work that Bess's husband Steve Strauss is doing. He's a neurologist and a linguist, and his work shows that the reading model that we have is very much an expectation, an explanation—that the brain function is developing. Early on, we realized that prediction was so important; the whole genre of literature and developmentally predictable books emerged. Brain researchers are also saying that a major factor in intelligence is the ability to predict, and we're constantly predicting. We can't get through life without predicting—even insects have to predict. We just have to know which way to run, how to get away from the danger.



**Bess:** I think that we're almost at a renaissance in our understanding again of the fundamental elements of reading—or the fundamental, underlying strategies of reading, because we have so many new sources of information that are

confirming Ken's model. For instance, we can now see in the literature on how we construct meaning in digital environments that it's very strategic, involves prediction, it's very selective, and it's very much a meaning-constructing process. So we have confirming information coming from the research in new literacies and comprehension in online environments. Then we have all that confirming information, as Ken mentioned, coming from the field of neurology, where we are beginning to see that reading is not just an isolated cognitive and social act, but it's part of how we're wired as human beings to make sense of the world around us. And that we, in fact, are guiding our brains, our transactions, and our interactions in every aspect of our lives.

**Yetta:** The other thing that I have also been so impressed with is how the information that you've just discussed, Bess, relates to the work of both Piaget and Vygotsky to help teachers understand that the human brain does its own learning. It chooses what to remember. It selects

the important things for its own learning. But we still seem to have this notion that *somehow, if we divide the bits of reading into little pieces, kids will learn it a bit at a time*. And of course, learning is done by the learner, not by a teacher imposing a specific bit of knowledge. The teacher's role is a supportive role; a teacher must respect and value the power of the learner in coming to build schema around what written language is for, how it's used, how it's organized. That the brain can do these kinds of things when reading is exciting and authentic, and really provides a long history of support for this notion that reading is indeed a meaning-making process.

**Ken:** Yes, we've known for a long time that reading is meaning construction, but when we began to add eye movement research to our miscue analysis, we could see what the eyes were doing in relation to the voices. The eyes aren't processing where they were; the eyes are skipping around sampling and selecting, as our hypothesis suggested. When you see that, you realize that the notion that we see every word and every letter is an illusion, like many of the illusions that the brain creates. The brain constructs a framework of the world and fills it in. Readers are making sense of a text and constructing meaning; in the process, they are constructing their own text. So we called it *constructive* for a long time, and now we can prove that it is construction and that meaning is so important. The brain constructs evolutions of meaning because it's very efficient in how it samples the text and constructs meaning.

**Yetta:** And of course, the miscue research we've been involved in for so long has shown that kids do understand how language works. Miscues very often are the same parts of speech and fit into the meaning of the passage, even when the word or phrase itself is quite different. So miscues can frame the concept of error in a positive way.

**Bess:** When I show teachers in my graduate classes an example from the EMMA research, the Eye Movement Miscue Analysis research, it is absolutely stunning and hard to argue against. Research that looks at children actually reading really brings us to conclusions that are almost indisputable. When I first learned about Miscue Analysis as a young teacher myself, and then

studied with Ken and Yetta, we saw the miscues, and we were pretty sure it was representative of the fact that children are definitely constructing meaning. They're selective, they're intentional, they're predicting and so forth, but to actually see it in action is remarkable. And I think EMMA research has resulted in the confirmation of what we've known for a while about the reading process.

**Yetta:** I think the other thing I'd like to add in relationship to teacher education is that teachers themselves need to discover the process. You can do it, any teacher, anybody, can discover it themselves when you ask a kid to read out loud. If you have an eye-tracker, that adds to the information, but even miscues by themselves—the *aha* that teachers get as they see what kids can or cannot do—really makes a big impact on the teacher's knowledge about the reading process. An important thing we have to be vigilant about is providing all kinds of opportunities for the teachers to inquire themselves into how the reading process works.

**Bess:** I agree.

To listen to the full conversation, please go to the podcast at <http://www.ncte.org/journals/la/podcasts>.

**Yetta:** We probably should talk at least a little bit about how the reading process itself helps us understand why aspects of progressive education or Whole Language have been so powerful for teachers who understand the reading process, understand the writing process, and, at the same time, understand how to use that knowledge to support kids as they learn.

**Ken:** Bess, you've dealt with this in that wonderful paper you did where you challenge some people who are saying the reason that kids are good at literacy online is it's a different kind of literacy. But the kids are demonstrating what we've been saying all along, language is easy to learn when it's emotional and it belongs to you. Kids who are still not doing well on reading tests in school are text messaging each other. It's very interesting to me that in countries like the Philippines, not all kids are in school but text messaging is universal there. There's a fairly high

rate of national literacy. Phones are cheap and kids don't have to be taught texting; they learn it from each other, which is the natural way that language should be learned.

**Yetta:** What that says to me about pedagogy and literacy itself is that reading and writing are best learned when they're part of the whole curriculum that's developed as children move forward.

**Bess:** I was going to also mention how important function is. When children have a purpose beyond literacy itself, a purpose for their use of literacy, then language is easily learned. When kids are engaging in text messaging and other forms of social media, they're not doing it to learn to read, they're doing it to communicate and to engage with others and with knowledge out there in the world. I think it's critical to couch all forms of literacy in larger inquiry projects, much like the theme cycles we developed many, many, many years ago, and the inquiry cycle. The whole idea is that children are learning to read and write using all forms of new

literacies in the service of learning—something that's important to them, something larger.

**Yetta:** Yes. And learning to read and write is a result of being embedded in literacy experiences, never a prerequisite. That old adage of *first you learn to read and then you read to learn* needs to be set to rest. It's dead because we learn most when we're learning in real and authentic settings for real purposes.

**Language Arts:** When you think about how people 50 years from now will view this time in reading history, what do you think they will say about it?

**Ken:** I have a name for what they're going to call this period in time; they're going to call it *the pedagogy of the absurd*. People are going to look at materials and say *how could anyone have stood still for that? How could anybody have imposed that on kids?* Because I have a strong view that good ideas do eventually take out bad ones, people will come to the things that we've discovered about the reading process. The reading pro-

## EYE MOVEMENT RESEARCH

For over a century, eye movement research has been used to understand how perception in reading provides the brain with sensory input. Eye movement has been studied by scholars Rayner (1981), Just and Carpenter (1987), Paulson (2000), Duckett (2002), and Flurkey (2008). Rayner found that between 20% and 30% of words are skipped while reading, while Just and Carpenter found that only 68% of words are fixated (the eye only focuses in on 68% of the words). In 2008, Flurkey combined *eye movements* and *miscue analysis* to study reading processes (EMMA research). Using a computer timing program, Flurkey was able to monitor a reader's speed as s/he read texts in combination with miscue analysis. He found that readers sped up or slowed down, both of which were dependent on what was happening in the text. Proficient readers, he found, actually showed more variations in their reading patterns than less proficient readers. The eye, he suggested, flows more like water over a river bed than through a smooth pipe.

Duckett, P. (2002). New insights: Eye fixations and the reading process, *Talking Points*, 13(2), 16–21.

Flurkey, A. D. (2008). Reading flow. In A. D. Flurkey, E. J. Paulson, & K. S. Goodman (Eds.), *Scientific realism in studies of reading* (pp. 267–304). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Just, M., & Carpenter, P. (1987). *The psychology of reading and language comprehension*. Newton, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Paulson, E. (2000). *Adult readers' eye movements during the production of oral miscues* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Arizona, Tucson.

Rayner, K. (1981). Eye movements and the perceptual span in reading. In F. Pirozzolo & M. Wittrock (Eds.), *Neuropsychological and cognitive processes in reading* (pp. 145–165). New York, NY: Academic Press.

—The Editors

cess happens because of the way language works, the way people learn, the way the human brain works. So just as Galileo was ridiculed in his time, eventually everybody realized that he was right. It wasn't that he changed the world, he just helped us understand it. I think the understanding that we have now about the reading process will surely dominate 50 years from now. I hope sooner than that. People will understand that the things we're saying aren't all that complicated, but there are ideas that get in the way. We still think of reading as something that's difficult to learn because some kids have problems at school. We still think of words as being what kids learn, and we have to get the grasp of *language*. But once people understand how reading works, it will become obvious to them.

**Yetta:** I think that we all need to know more about language itself because the text itself, which is the final product of the composing process, is not isomorphic with what the reader does. So the relationship between text and readers is another big area. We've done some research in that area but I think that's another big place where we're going to be learning a lot more.

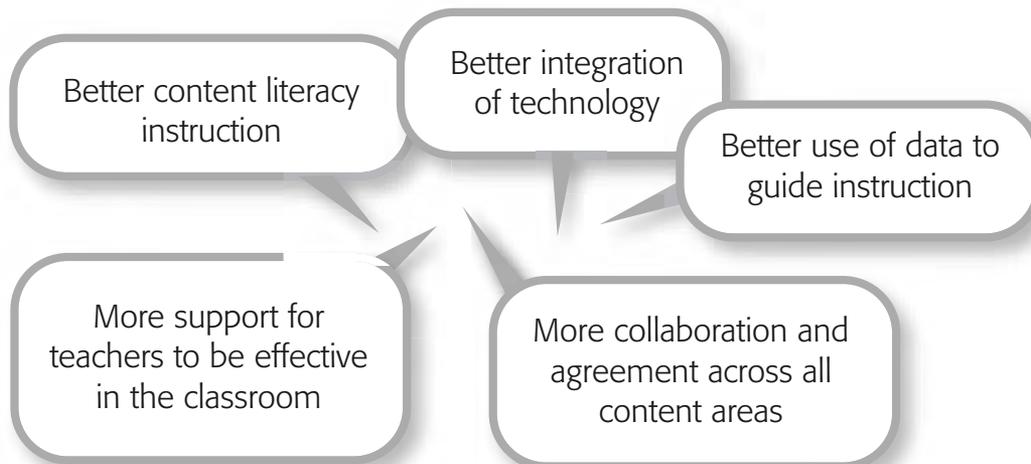
**Bess:** I am hoping that 50 years from now when people look back at this period of time, they will really have a clearer understanding of the relationship between the political scene and the way we do school and the kind of research that we do. I'm hoping that they will say, "Look what happened during late-stage capitalism when there was an assault on all public spheres—public institutions—and we almost lost public education as we know it and professional education. We almost lost our handle on how important it is that new knowledge is honored, that research is respected, and that politicians and corporate executives should not be making decisions about education." What we will rely on are people who are doing authentic and well-meaning work to come to a better understanding about how children not just read, but learn and grow and develop as human beings. I'm hoping we'll be in a much better place in this society 50 years from now, in a good solid public school system that embraces all of what would be then new technologies for the best possible purposes for the safety of humanity and of the global environment.

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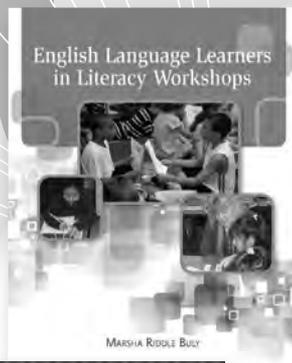
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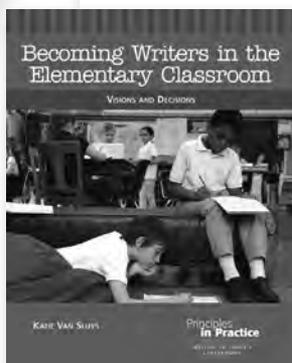
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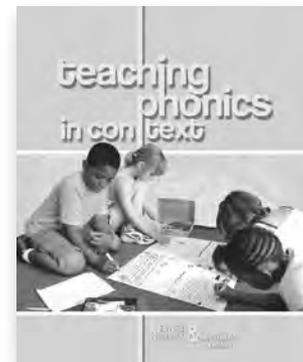
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