



The Guided Reading Approach

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*Theory* *and*  
*Research*



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P.O. Box 2723, Huntington Beach, CA 92647-0723  
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Published 2002 by Learning Media Limited,  
Box 3293, Wellington 6001, New Zealand  
[www.learningmedia.com](http://www.learningmedia.com)  
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Printed in New Zealand  
ISBN 0 478 26475 5  
PL-9819

# Guided Reading: Grounded in Theoretical Understandings

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## ***How this aligns with the guided reading process***

- 1. Guided reading enables teachers to provide very effective support for students' literacy learning.**
- 2. The teacher's role in guided reading is to actively enhance students' understanding.**

## **Introduction**

Guided reading is an important approach in literacy education. Used in conjunction with other approaches (such as shared reading, reading aloud, and independent reading), it enables teachers to provide very effective support for students' literacy learning.

How does guided reading provide such support? What is involved in using a guided reading approach? A teacher using a guided reading approach

- selects a text that is appropriate for a particular group of students (usually of similar reading ability),
- introduces that text by talking to the students about relevant experiences that they may have had,
- provides sensitive support for the students to "talk, read, and think their way purposefully through" the text (*Reading for Life*, 1997, p. 80).

The reading is done silently (or "quietly, to yourself" if the student is an emergent reader). Discussion of the text before, after, and sometimes during the reading is central to the approach because the fundamental purpose is to enhance each student's understanding of what they are reading.

The teacher's role in guided reading is to scaffold literacy learning, that is, to actively enhance students' understanding. This is in marked contrast to the practice of merely checking or testing comprehension after a text has been read by the student. The distinction is critical because, as Dowhower (1999) reports, there is evidence that many teachers unwittingly assume the role of interrogators because they tend to confuse assessment with direct teaching of comprehension. Guided reading is an approach to literacy education that can help overcome that confusion. It can help teachers refocus on the vitally important teaching role.

For guided reading to be used effectively, however, teachers need to be aware of and appreciate the basic understandings or underlying theoretical perspectives on which the approach is based. Sometimes the view is expressed that teachers do not need to concern themselves with theory, but this is not so. Whether teachers (or curriculum developers or curriculum writers) recognize it or not, all their work has a theoretical basis. From a professional point of view, it is important to identify and acknowledge the theoretical perspectives (understandings) that underpin such work. This paper endeavors to do this with respect to guided reading.

## Basic Understandings That Underpin a Guided Reading Approach

The theories that underpin guided reading are complex and varied, and a full discussion of these is well beyond the scope of this paper. Braunger and Lewis (1998, p. 5), for example, have identified thirteen “core understandings about learning to read,” all of which have a basis in research and theory and are significant for classroom literacy programs in general and relevant to a consideration of guided reading in particular. This paper considers the six basic understandings that are most directly relevant and meaningful to a classroom teacher using guided reading at grades 3–5.

### 3. Readers build their own understandings of the author’s message.

#### ***1. Reading is a construction of meaning from written text – it is an active, cognitive, and affective process***

Reading is an interactive process in which readers actively engage with texts, building their own understanding of the author’s message. The meaning they make is at the heart of the reading process (Braunger and Lewis, 1998; Clay, 1991, 1998; Learning Media, 1997; Pressley, 1998). However, as Pressley points out, although the development of comprehension is a widely agreed-upon goal of literacy instruction, it “rarely is offered as systematically as it could be in the elementary grades” (1998, p. 222). Dowhower (1999) also expresses concern that discussions of text content and teaching of strategies to enhance comprehension have been rare in classrooms. Such strategies, Dowhower suggests, should include:

- (i) activating background knowledge,
- (ii) predicting,
- (iii) generating visual images,
- (iv) summarizing,
- (v) self-questioning,
- (vi) analyzing text for story grammar (or story structure) elements (including narrative story parts, such as character or events, as well as the ways that content-area texts are organized),
- (vii) making inferences,
- (viii) distinguishing important information,
- (ix) synthesizing,
- (x) monitoring, and
- (xi) learning to repair faulty comprehension.

This might seem to be a daunting list, but each is an important strategy and, as Fielding and Pearson (1994, p. 67, cited in Dowhower, 1999) point out, students are more likely to make these comprehension strategies their own when they have frequent and systematic opportunities to read and discuss whole text with a teacher and peers.

The challenge for teachers is to provide these opportunities frequently, thereby facilitating the development of effective strategies for comprehending both narrative and expository texts of many kinds (Braunger and Lewis, 1998; Caswell and Duke, 1998; Flippo, 1998). Guided reading is an approach that is concerned with the development of comprehension.

4. **Guided reading is an approach that is concerned with the development of comprehension.**
5. **Ongoing analysis of individual students' strengths and needs is important.**
6. **Students are more likely to make meaningful connections with new information if they already know something about it.**
7. **When using guided reading, teachers need to consider the extent to which their students' existing knowledge matches the ideas in the text.**
8. **Guided reading enables teachers to become aware of and cater effectively for the diversity of understanding that students bring to their readings.**

It is specifically designed to enable comprehension strategies to be taught systematically and used by students across a range of texts. The emphasis is on silent reading because it is more authentic and relevant to real life than oral reading, and it is also more effective for learning than oral reading, especially "oral round-robin" reading, which has been shown to decrease comprehension (Dowhower, 1999).

Because teachers work closely with relatively small groups for guided reading, they are able to monitor carefully each student's processing of texts and adjust further teaching and text selection in the light of their responses. The importance of this ongoing analysis of individual students' strengths and needs is emphasized by various writers (see, for example, Flood, Lapp, Flood, and Nagel, 1992).

## ***2. Background knowledge and prior experience are critical to the reading process***

The crucial role of prior knowledge in reading is widely recognized (Anderson and Pearson, 1984, cited in Braunger and Lewis, 1998, p. 28; Caswell and Duke, 1998) and is often discussed in terms of "schema theory." Schema theory attempts to explain how meaning-making occurs and how knowledge is stored and organized in the brain. According to Henk (1993), schemata represent the knowledge structures in readers' minds, and these structures allow readers to connect new information with what they already know. In his view, "incoming" information either fits into existing knowledge structures or forces the emergence of new ones. When readers encounter new examples of things for which they have an existing schema, they are more likely to make meaningful connections with that new information than they are if relevant schemata are lacking. Pressley (1998) also discusses the concept of schema activation, noting that activation can "dramatically affect" (p. 201) comprehension, attention allocation, and memory of what is read.

When planning and implementing guided reading sessions, teachers are encouraged to consider the extent to which their students' existing schemata match the ideas embedded in the text. Readers must draw from their existing knowledge in order to understand text (Braunger and Lewis, 1998), and the meanings they construct will vary somewhat from reader to reader (Pressley, 1998). Multiple interpretations are generated amongst readers because their responses to literature are both personal and grounded in text (Spiegel, 1998).

It is therefore important that teachers develop an awareness of the range of background knowledge that students bring to school, including their "overall" prior knowledge and the specific prior knowledge required to read particular texts (Braunger and Lewis, 1998). Guided reading enables teachers both to develop this awareness and to cater effectively for the diversity that is usually revealed. For example, where there seems to be a close match between the schema of the student and that embedded in the text, teachers can consciously "activate" students' relevant schema during the introduction to guided reading and extend that knowledge during the reading and the discussion that follows. However, when students' existing schemata for a text appear to be limited, judgments need to be made about

whether that particular text should be used for guided reading with those students or whether an alternative text that is more relevant to their background knowledge should be sought. In situations where students are required to read texts for which they have limited schemata, special teaching strategies are required to develop the background knowledge that the students bring to the text. Teachers may, for example, provide introductory activities (such as discussions of photographs, video clips, or maps) to enhance the students' background knowledge before they read and as they guide the group through the text. Alternatively, teachers may decide to read the text aloud to the students if they think that more teacher support is required to make the text accessible to the group.

### ***3. Social interaction is essential when learning to read***

Interaction with others (both adults and peers) in a wide variety of settings is an essential part of students' language and literacy learning (Braunger and Lewis, 1998; Spiegel, 1998; Wiencek and O'Flahavan, 1994). In fact, classroom studies show that the amount and breadth of students' reading is strongly related to social interaction as well as strategy teaching (Guthrie, Schafer, Wang, and Afflerbach, 1995).

In Vygotsky's (1978) view, learning is a "social occurrence" that can be fostered when teaching is focused in the learner's "zone of proximal development." This zone has been described as the area between the level at which the student is currently achieving and the level at which the student can achieve if there is assistance from a more knowledgeable person or, in Braunger and Lewis's terms (1998, p. 29), a "more sophisticated other."

Because literacy develops best through social interaction and dialogue with others (Dowhower, 1999), teachers are advised to "scaffold" or support students' learning by collaborative means to help them make sense of literature and become actively engaged in meaning-making more generally (Dugan, 1997). This is a "social constructivist" view of teaching. It involves the teacher making a shift from asking predetermined questions designed to ensure that the students arrive at the "right" meaning to facilitating conversations that encourage students' exploratory talk as they arrive at a deeper meaning (Gavelek and Raphael, 1996).

These understandings about literacy learning are highly relevant to guided reading because guided reading is essentially a carefully managed "social occurrence." During guided reading, the teacher works to extend the students' literacy development by responding sensitively to their efforts and providing appropriate, ongoing guidance and support as they read (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). Within these learning experiences, teachers are developing not only students' ability to understand more fully the particular texts being read but also their ability to use a range of reading and thinking (metacognitive) strategies when processing other texts they encounter.

Further understandings about the social interaction involved in learning to read and the need for the "more sophisticated other" to respond sensitively to the learner are detailed by McNaughton (1995). Drawing on his research with New Zealand families and the ideas of writers such as Vygotsky, Heath, and Bronfenbrenner, he discusses students' early literacy

**9. Literacy develops best through social interaction and dialogue with others.**

**10. Guided reading is essentially a carefully managed "social occurrence."**

learning in terms of a theory of "co-construction." He stresses the significance of constant interaction between a student's own mental constructions and those of his/her family and cultural group. He argues that these constructions are a joint outcome of personal and social activities, which vary considerably from family to family or one community to another. The effect is that students develop particular kinds of expertise, for example, some become expert at memorising, some at reading aloud as a "performance," and others become skilled at asking questions. According to McNaughton, the students' concepts are continually constructed and changed as a result of their own personal behavior and that of others, hence the notion of co-construction.

The implications of social constructivist understandings for teachers at all levels of the school are significant, especially for those supporting the literacy development of students whose language/cultural backgrounds differ from their own. To implement guided reading effectively, teachers need to be fully aware of the nature and impact of the diversity among their students and seek strategies for catering for this diversity. For example, extra care is needed to ensure that the texts selected for guided reading and the processes employed throughout the approach connect with and build on the students' existing expertise. When discussing texts, teachers should be aware that students from diverse backgrounds may not necessarily respond to questions in ways that teachers expect, not because they "have limited language" or "lack concentration," but because their experiences to date have not yet enabled them to develop the particular forms of expertise and ways of responding that teachers tend to expect. It is widely acknowledged that teachers' expectations can result in judgments about students' educational potential on the basis of how they behave and talk, thereby setting up self-fulfilling prophecies that lead to the anticipated differences in levels of achievement. Wood (1988) says "Crudely, because some teachers expect less of students from some social backgrounds, these students are taught and learn less." Gaining adequate awareness of diversity and then responding appropriately to that diversity is not an easy task for teachers. Cazden (1988 and 1992) and Lindfors (1987) explore in detail the difficulties that arise for students when the language competencies and expectations they bring to classrooms are not adequately recognized, understood, or catered for by their teachers.

**11. Guided reading helps students to understand particular texts and to use a range of reading and thinking strategies on other texts.**

Guided reading is an approach that provides many opportunities both to support students' language/literacy development sensitively and carefully and to develop greater awareness of the particular forms of expertise that individual students bring to language and literacy experiences. Often there are subtle but significant differences in the ways in which different students respond during discussion of texts, and this is evident to the sensitive listener/observer, particularly during the discussions that follow the guided reading of a text. Some may respond confidently to teachers' questions, but others may have difficulty when "interrogated" or questioned directly by teachers. Such students may engage more readily and learn more effectively if the discussion takes the form of a genuine conversation (Wiencek and O'Flahavan, 1994), especially one in which their questions are encouraged. In group instruction where students feel safe and secure, they are willing to take risks, to become more involved, and therefore they gain more experience and confidence in exploring and articulating their own

**12. Guided reading enables authentic, ongoing monitoring of students' literacy development.**

**13. Assessment that emerges from the classroom rather than being imposed upon it is integral to guided reading.**

interpretations of material. In teacher-student discourse, Tierney (1998, p. 389) notes the need for spaces where "students and teachers connect or transact with each other, rather than pass by one another. The key is finding ways to involvement and transaction rather than detachment and monolithic responses."

Ongoing observation and monitoring of students' responses in a range of learning contexts (including guided and independent reading settings) is of critical importance to both student and teacher. In fact, it could be argued that this form of assessment is one of the most "authentic" and valuable of those available to teachers and that guided reading is an approach that provides frequent opportunities for such authentic monitoring to take place. Tierney (1998) suggests that teachers are in a better position to know and learn about an individual's development than outsiders because they are with the student over time and they become aware of the "subtle changes and nuances of learning within and across learning activities" (p. 377). Assessment that "emerges from the classroom" rather than being "imposed upon it" is particularly valuable (Tierney, 1998, p. 375), and this is the form of assessment that is integral to guided reading. When implemented effectively, a guided reading approach provides an excellent example of assessment and teaching operating as integrated processes, each informing the other to meet the individual needs of students (Braunger and Lewis, 1998, p. 53). It is an approach that also provides opportunities for students to assess their own learning because they are encouraged, in a supportive context, to reflect on and articulate what and how they are learning, thereby building their abilities in metacognitive functioning.

#### ***4. Engagement in the reading task is a key to successfully learning to read***

When students want to read, have authentic purposes for reading texts that are relevant and meaningful to them, and are supported in their reading, their motivation is usually high (Au, 1997; Johnston, 1997; Spiegel, 1998). Under such conditions, they will engage much more readily and successfully in the reading task and associated activities (Cambourne, 1988, 1998; Flippo, 1998). Cambourne (1998) analyzed the "teaching-learning activities" that, in his view, lie "at the heart of literacy teaching." He suggests that "teaching-learning activities 'worked' if

- (i) they actively engaged the learners,
- (ii) learners learned that which the teachers considered to be important, and
- (iii) they promoted collaboration and independence in the learners, thus providing opportunities for teachers to work one-to-one, or with small groups, as needed."

The nature and extent of students' engagement in literacy learning is critical because those who enjoy their learning experiences and participate fully in them are likely to become competent, enduring readers and writers. One of the important aims of reading programs therefore is to create in students a positive attitude towards reading (Smith and Elley, 1997), and Tierney (1998) argues that one focus of literacy assessment should be the extent to which a student's interest and engagement are maintained across a range of materials for different purposes.

- 14. Guided reading ensures that the reading experiences of students are meaningful, purposeful, and non-threatening.**
- 15. Guided reading ensures that students experience success and enjoyment so that they will gradually develop greater independence and competence.**
- 16. Guided reading requires that comprehension strategies be modeled by teachers and that students be encouraged to use them independently before, during, and after their reading of a text.**
- 17. Written language relies on four cueing systems.**

Meeting these conditions is possible in guided reading sessions because care is taken to ensure that the reading experiences of students are meaningful, purposeful, and non-threatening. Groups are small enough to allow each student to participate fully, and each session provides opportunities for self-reliance, self-evaluation, and interaction with others. Guided reading both challenges and supports students. It is designed to ensure that they experience success and enjoyment so that they will continue to engage as readers, gradually developing greater independence and competence. Au (1991), Dugan (1997), and others argue that supportive patterns of interaction are particularly beneficial to literacy learning.

### ***5. Students learn successful reading strategies in the context of real reading***

In order to construct meaning effectively, students need to learn appropriate strategies for “orchestrating the information provided at all levels of the four cueing systems” (Braunger and Lewis, 1998, p. 44), as outlined in section 6 below. Pressley (1998, p. 220) argues that there is “substantial evidence that elementary students can learn to comprehend actively – they can learn to predict, question, make mental images, seek to clarify confusions, and summarize as they read,” and he emphasizes the importance of teachers modeling this learning.

Central to guided reading is the understanding that comprehension strategies will be modeled by teachers and that students will be encouraged to use them before, during, and after they read a text. When they are engaged in guided reading, they are solving problems as they read for meaning and, over time, they will learn to use various strategies across a range of texts. As they do so, they are supported by the guidance, demonstrations, and explanations of their teacher (Button, Johnson, and Furterson, 1996). The aim, though, is to encourage students to use these strategies independently to facilitate their development as readers (Dowhower, 1999).

In Au’s (1997) view, “authentic” literacy activities (that is, ones that are real and meaningful for the students involved) are central to a successful classroom literacy program, especially for students of diverse backgrounds. The emphasis in guided reading is on “real” reading of “real” texts (of whatever variety) because teachers seek material that is relevant and meaningful to the students with whom they are working.

### ***6. Reading involves complex thinking***

Reading involves using a range of thinking skills in order to make sense of texts. Although there are many theories about the workings of written language, Braunger and Lewis (1998, p. 30) confirm that “most are in agreement that written language relies on four cueing systems, representing types of knowledge the reader uses as he interacts with text:

- (a) pragmatic (social context)
- (b) semantic (meaning)
- (c) syntactic (structural)

(d) grapho-phonetic (the alphabetic, orthographic, sound symbol aspects).

All of these must be operating in tandem for optimal meaning.”

Smith and Elley (1997, p. 78) also emphasize the way in which various cues should “interact to help the student achieve a successful understanding of the author’s message, and by mutual interaction help him/her build up a repertoire of strategies for doing so efficiently and independently in future.”

**18. Guided reading encourages students to use all four cueing systems and to cross-check one source with others.**

Guided reading provides an ideal setting for teachers to encourage students to use all four sources of information (cueing systems) as they read and to cross-check one source with others. In the course of regular guided reading sessions, classroom teachers are able both to develop and monitor these cross-checking behaviors across a range of increasingly complex texts. Au (1997) argues that such “skill instruction” can and should take place within the context of students’ engagement in meaningful activities, emphasizing that this is particularly important for struggling readers and writers because they are the ones who “most need to experience ownership of literacy” (p. 187).

**19. Skill instruction should take place within the context of students’ engagement in meaningful activities.**

Making sense of texts is crucial to reading and is an essential session towards addressing the need for critical thinking and problem solving, a need that, as Braunger and Lewis (1998) note, is highlighted by current educational reform. They consider it a daunting challenge to bring all students, whatever their varying needs, to “high” levels of literacy (p. 63) and suggest that this challenge involves helping every student to develop:

- (a) a firm command of basic skills and strategies,
- (b) the ability to construct and negotiate meanings with text,
- (c) the knowledge and the disposition to be critical, lifelong readers.

This perspective on literacy is supported, in Braunger and Lewis’s (1998) view, by models of the reading process that portray reading as thinking.

**20. Guided reading is integrative.**

One such reading as thinking model is that developed by Freebody and Luke (Luke, 1992; Simpson, 1996). Guided reading fits well into this model. Freebody and Luke’s perspective could be described as “integrative” because it combines components of reading that have often been perceived as separate and mutually exclusive. These components, which are described as four “key elements of proficient, critical reading as social practice” (Luke, 1992, p. 8), are:

- (i) Coding competence: learning your role as a code breaker.  
How do I crack this?
- (ii) Semantic competence: learning your role as text participant.  
What does this mean?
- (iii) Pragmatic competence: learning your role as text user.  
What do I do with this, here and now?
- (iv) Critical competence: learning your role as text analyst.  
What is this text trying to do to me?

Luke points out that the model is not constructed as a hierarchy in which the “pragmatic” and “critical” components of reading are seen as “add-ons” to emerge at upper school levels, if at all. He argues that what he calls a “socially-critical” literacy program would “systematically introduce students

**21. Exploring and developing critical analysis of texts is vital in literacy development.**

**22. Regular guided reading enables critical text analysis to occur.**

**23. Teachers seeking to incorporate cultural and critical dimensions as well as the more traditional components of literacy can do so with guided reading.**

**24. Guided reading is much more than a set of activities to work through. An understanding of the theoretical underpinnings is essential.**

to the four elements of reading practice, not hierarchically, not developmentally, but at all stages of literacy development” (p.11). In fact, Freebody and Luke believe that it is possible to read in these four roles simultaneously and that to be a text analyst “does not always imply that students first have to be skilled readers of complex or sophisticated texts” (Simpson, 1996, p. 121).

Exploring and developing critical analysis of texts is vital in literacy education, according to Simpson (1996) and many others (for example, Dowhower, 1999; Learning Media, 1997). Regular guided reading sessions provide a structure within which this can occur – a structure within which students can present and discuss their questions about the text. The approach enables teachers to establish meaningful contexts within which students can be helped to develop the competencies identified by Freebody and Luke. Given this kind of systematic support, students can gradually employ these competencies at increasingly sophisticated levels across a range of texts. As their competencies grow, so does the likelihood that the students will become proficient, critical readers.

To appreciate the depth and significance of this perspective on literacy education, it is necessary to understand that Luke (1992, 1998) emphasizes both the changing nature of literacy in contemporary societies and the fact that those who are most literate are those who have the most knowledge and power in societies. He points out that not all students get equal access to cultural knowledge and social power via literacy and that in Western countries, this distribution has continued to fall along the lines of class, color, and gender. Luke’s view of literacy and its significance in contemporary society is shared by a number of literacy educators, for example, Christie (1990), Knobel and Healy (1998), and Tierney (1998). Tierney notes that “literacy contributes to social transformation as we connect with what we read and write, not in acquiescence, but in reaction, reflection, and response” (p. 375).

Teachers seeking to incorporate cultural and critical dimensions as well as the more “traditional” components of literacy into their work with students can do so with guided reading. As an approach to literacy education, it has the capacity to be both consistent with the values of a democratic society and a means of enhancing those values.

### ***Conclusion***

Guided reading is, potentially, a very powerful approach that teachers can use to develop students’ literacy. The extent to which that potential is reached is determined by a range of factors (some of which may be beyond an individual teacher’s control, for example, the range of texts available for use with students). Whatever the constraints, a teacher who understands the basic theoretical perspectives that underpin the guided reading approach is in a better position to use it effectively with students than a teacher who views the approach only as a set of activities to work through.

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