



**Jane Spiro and Amos Paran**

***Becoming a Reading Teacher: Connecting Research and Practice***

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**Reviewer: Alison Hasegawa**

### Overview of the Book

Tomie dePaola, creator of over 260 children's books famously said, 'Reading is important because if you can read, you can learn anything about everything and everything about anything' (cited in Burns, 2012). In the blurb for *Becoming a Reading Teacher*, Jane Spiro and Amos Paran agree with dePaola and consider reading 'not only as an encounter with written language but as a lifelong habit of engagement with ideas'. To teach reading effectively, teachers of English need awareness of the principles behind this complex process and the skills involved, from decoding words and comprehending simple sentences to efficiently searching for specific information in a text and understanding distinct styles of different genres. As the subtitle 'Connecting Research and Practice' indicates, the authors introduce key research findings on how to teach reading effectively throughout the book. Organised as four sections and with reading systematically analysed in each, the authors consider reading as a linguistic process, a personal experience, a collective experience, and importantly, as a classroom practice. In the final section, Spiro and Paran recommend that teachers undertake research into their own teaching of reading in their classrooms. And thus, we experience full circle handover from research-on-practice to research-in-practice.

### Part-by-Part Walkthrough

In Part 1, *From Research to Implications*, Spiro and Paran pose ten fundamental questions regarding the kinds of skills required when teaching reading. These range from 'What are we doing

as we read?’ to considering the cognitive and emotional effects of reading, ‘Can reading change the way we think and feel?’ Practical concerns for teachers such as ‘What pedagogies are used in the teaching of reading?’ are also systematically introduced. The authors address these questions with observations from their professional experience and evidence from recent research, and gradually, a set of implications or *guiding principles* to effectively teach reading emerge. In Part 2, *From Implications to Application*, the same ten questions from Part 1 form a framework with 44 practical activities to apply the guiding principles and develop core skills. These activities are organized from simple to more challenging and could easily supplement a coursebook or an integrated course on developing reading skills for primary or secondary level learners of English.

For learners who experience bottom-up processing challenges, such as with decoding or word-level reading skills, solutions are provided to increase learners’ reading speed and assist them when making text-related predictions. There are several activities to help learners to develop reading subskills such as skimming, scanning and differentiating facts from opinions. Reflective activities are also included, for example keeping a reading journal to assist learners to embark on the vital process of self-reflection as readers. Next, the authors focus on top-down processing, in particular the schematic knowledge readers bring to reading, and they introduce activities that challenge learners to use critical skills when identifying opinions and bias. Later activities include learners comparing factual articles in L1 and L2, introducing reading for pleasure, and reading fiction as a collective experience. The final section enables teachers and student teachers to consider best practices, experience the guiding principles first-hand, and engage in collaborative explorations of different pedagogical approaches.

In Part 3, *From Application to Implementation: Teaching Reading in Time and Place*, the authors recognize the multiple variables that differentiate one teacher’s context from another. They offer advice on common issues, such as how to make a wide range of reading resources available to learners; they also introduce principles for assessment, suggest how to cater for different reader ages, and offer practical tips for facilitating reading with large or small classes. In addition, they advise how to promote reading outside of the classroom and how to create a positive culture of reading in school environments. This section emphasizes the importance of connecting with other reading teachers to share the joy of reading, and ultimately acting as a model reader of fiction and

non-fiction to learners in the classroom, as the title of the book *Becoming a Reading Teacher* implies.

In Part 4, *From Implementation to Research*, the four standpoints utilized in the previous sections help teachers with the selection of a topic to initiate some small-scale classroom research. These include researching reading as a linguistic process, a personal experience, a collective experience or researching reading pedagogy. Spiro and Paran present ten suggestions for potential research projects and each template indicates possible data collection methods and the types of analyses which could be conducted. Then, the authors recommend that teachers act on their findings by modifying their classroom practice. This achieves one of the book's stated aims to provide some 'stepping stones' for any teacher to become a researcher. Questions to inspire classroom research include 'What makes readers choose books?' and 'What are the qualities of successful reading lessons?' which are likely to support teachers as they start to conduct empirical classroom inquiries.

### Final Thoughts

*Becoming a Reading Teacher* is an informative and thought-provoking companion for any teacher at any stage of their pedagogical journey, and it supports the teaching of reading to learners of any age. As the authors state in the blurb, the book is 'useful for any teacher or reader who wishes to refresh their view of how reading fits into the development of languages and the development of a reading life'. If there are any shortcomings, the very wide scope, from early years to upper secondary and beyond, rather than focusing on one age range, is the only criticism I could mention. However, in all classrooms the practical reality is that teachers meet students with diverse needs and a range of abilities that require a rich pedagogical repertoire of effective approaches for teaching reading. The book not only introduces the attractive concept of a 'reading culture' it additionally offers concrete steps to creating one. This laudable aim is supported by relevant research findings with over 100 pages of practical suggestions and concrete ideas for small-scale classroom research. While the publication does not claim to be a step-by-step reading syllabus; it offers substantial scaffolding for educators to develop important micro- and macro-skills for learners of English to read more confidently, competently, fluently and joyfully.

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### Reference

Burns, T. (2012, April 26). *Tomie dePaola on why reading is important*. Building a Library: Finding the Right Books for Your Kid (Through Trial and Error).  
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