

*A Critical Review of Stevens' Paper: Possibilities
For Creative Approach to Key Stage 3 Literacy Teaching*

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at critically discussing Stevens's argument about the model of literacy underpinning the National framework for teaching and his suggested model for effective teaching of literacy in his work *Showing the Strategy Where to Go : Possibilities for Creative Approach to Key Stage 3 Literacy in Initial Teacher Education*. Descriptive critical analysis technique is used to investigate the topic in question. A review of Literature is conducted to collect the data required. Main Conclusion came to is that effective teaching of literacy is more likely to come to fruition providing that:

- (1) more emphasis is placed on elements of meaningful and critical literacy ;
- (2) the objectives in the strategy framework pay more attention to the pupils' needs and abilities and works in favor of imaginative teaching;
- (3) teachers are trained and encouraged to be inventive and resourceful;
- (4) teachers work collaboratively and flexibly to adapt structural patterns inspired by the strategy in their particular context. Recommendations are made to adopt meaningful and critical literacy in learning and teaching and further studies be conducted in this area.

Keywords: Literacy, creative approach.

ملخص

**نموذج د. ستيفنز الابتكاري لكيفية إكساب مهارات القراءة، والكتابة
بمرحلة التعليم الأساسي بالمدارس البريطانية، [دراسة نقدية]**

تستهدف الدراسة الحالية تقييم نموذج د. ستيفنز الابتكاري لكيفية إكساب مهارات القراءة، والكتابة بمرحلة التعليم الأساسي بالمدارس البريطانية. كما تستهدف إلقاء الضوء على

المعالجة النقدية التي قام بها د. ستيفنز للبرنامج الحكومي الذي تطرحه وزارة التربية، والتعليم البريطانية لإكساب التلاميذ المهارات الأساسية اللازمة للقراءة، والكتابة للمرحلتين الابتدائية، والإعدادية. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج التحليلي النقدي لإبراز معالم هذا الطرح، وبيان محامده، وماأخذه. وتلخصت إجراءات هذه الدراسة في جمع البيانات المتعلقة بالمشكلة موضوع البحث من مظانها، وتحليلها في ضوء الأدبيات التي تناولتها بالعرض، والمناقشة. وقد أسفرت الدراسة عن العديد من النتائج أبرزها ما يلي: أن التدريس الفعال لإكساب التلاميذ مهارات القراءة، والكتابة إنما يؤتي ثماره شريطة أن يتوافر الآتي:

(1) إلقاء مزيد من الاهتمام لإبراز الغاية من التعليم بحيث تصبح العملية التعليمية ذات معني، وجدوي بالنسبة للمتعلم، والعمل على إكساب المتعلم مهارات التفكير النقدي من خلال التناول النقدي للمحتوى التعليمي؛

(2) إيلاء المزيد من الأعتناء نحو مراعاة الأهداف التعليمية لحاجات التلاميذ، وقدراتهم، وميولهم الابتكارية؛

(3) تدريب المعلم على مهارات التدريس الفعال؛

(4) تدريب المعلمين على العمل الجماعي، وكيفية التعامل البناء مع ما تطرحه وزارة التربية، والتعليم من برامج تتعلق بإكساب التلاميذ مهارات القراءة، والكتابة. وأوصت الدراسة بضرورة إيلاء البرامج المعنية بتعليم مهارات القراءة، والكتابة في المراحل الأولى من التعليم المزيد من الاهتمام نحو حاجات المتعلمين، وأن تتم العملية التعليمية في إطار من النشاط، والنقد الهادف. كما أوصت الدراسة بإجراء مزيد من البحوث حول هذا الموضوع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مهارات القراءة، والكتابة، النموذج الأبتكاري.

The National literacy strategy has become central to debates on policy and practice in education in the UK. Stevens, in his paper Showing the Strategy Where to Go: Possibilities for Creative Approach to Key Stage 3 Literacy Teaching in Initial Teacher Education argues that the theoretical base of the National strategy s framework for teaching English at key stage 3 leans towards a narrow conception of literacy based on textual analysis approach as the key to understanding any given genre, rather than emphasising more subtle senses of meaning and value. He points out that elements of subjectivity and critical literacy are not given the prominence they deserve in this model of literacy the strategy s framework is based on. He also contends that the emphasis on control through stages and timed delivery in the strategy framework may be at the cost of meaningful teaching and learning. And although signs

of innovative planning and imaginative, meaning-orientated form of English teaching can exist within the strategy framework, this is possible only if it is critically read and flexibly, and inventively used by teachers of English in their classroom practice.

This paper will critically discuss Stevens's argument about the model of literacy underpinning the National Framework for teaching and his suggested model for effective teaching of literacy. It will also explore the positive strengths and limitation of the strategy framework and how to make the best of it for creative teaching of literacy.

Before going any further, it is important to define the boundaries of what is meant by literacy in the context of literacy across the curriculum. It is also essential to shed light on the elements of the Key Stage 3 National Literacy Strategy.

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, literacy was defined as simply reading and writing using the conventional system of written signs of a particular language. But since the late 1980s, the meaning of literacy has been widened to include listening and speaking. Moreover, since 2000, literacy meaning has had new dimension. It is no longer being considered as a mere set of basic skills to meet the demands of the society but it is rather seen as «a means to enable individual to apply their literacy skills, knowledge and strategies to a range of texts and situations (Batho, 2007, p.89).Hannon (2000,p. 44), for example, defines literacy as: «the process in which children (or, in some circumstances, adults) change from being totally unable to use written language to being able to use it in one or more context. Hannon (Ibid.,p.9) explains that literacy is a means that enables the individual to communicate with others meaningfully in different context . David Wray (2001) defines literacy as :

The ability to read and use written information and to write appropriately for a range of purpose. It also involves the integration of speaking , listening and critical thinking with reading and writing and includes the knowledge which enables a speaker, writer or reader to recognize

and use language appropriately to different social situations. (Wray, 2001, p. 12)

Wray (2001) adds that literacy is not just a mere application of a set of skills for particular purposes, but rather , it involves knowledge and understanding about how literacy works in society and ability to distance oneself from this use in order to reflect upon and criticize (Wray, 2001, A Dialogue in literacy,p. 16).

These definitions of literacy tend to extend the basic notion of literacy, from simply an ability to read and write , to indicate a level of competence which enables the pupil to function independently, flexibly and critically in a subtly meaningful way in different contexts. And this agrees to a great extent ,, with my opinion ,and as will be discussed later , with the broader conception of literacy Stevens recommends to be given more emphasis in the strategy s theoretical and practical bases .

The National literacy strategy, introduced in 1998, was a part of the government 's commitment to raise standards of literacy in primary schools. This Government-funded initiative was based on and developed into the key stage 3 National strategy with the introduction of English strand in 2001. «key stage 3' is the term used by the UK government to refer to the first three years -7, 8 and 9- of the secondary schooling in England and Wales. Literacy is stated to be one of the cross-curricular elements of the secondary National strategy (Batho 2007 , p.88).

The key stage 3 National literacy strategy is designed to support schools to meet the learning needs of 11-14 year old pupils. It supports personalized learning by promoting an approach in which careful attention is paid to pupils' learning styles, motivation, needs and enjoyment (Darwin, 2008, p. 16).

The two most important means identified in the strategy are the introduction of The 'literacy Hour' into all schools in England and the 'framework for teaching.' The literacy Hour' is a daily lesson consists of four parts (10-15 minutes whole class work with shared text; 10-15 minutes of whole class word or sentence work; 25-30 minutes of group activities ; 5-10 minutes of

whole class work-plenary; reflecting, consolidating teaching points and work covered in the session (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2005, pp. 38-39).

The framework for teaching English at key stage 3 sets out teaching objectives for pupils in years 7,8, and 9 and provides guidance on how English teachers can use these objectives to plan appropriately challenging work for their 11-14 year old pupils.

The notion of literacy embedded in the objectives is much more than simply the acquisition of ‘basic skills’ which is sometimes implied by the word :it ‘encompasses the ability to recognize , understand and manipulate the conventions of language, and develop pupils’ ability to use language imaginatively and flexibly’ (Darwin, 2008,p.9).

However, Stevens proposes that this notion of literacy implies more emphasis on the genre-based model of literacy rather than the critical literacy approach. Wray (Loc.cit.) also states that the National strategy framework is based on the skill-based approach and this is clearly shown in its emphasis on whole texts as a basis for the teaching of skills . And this due to , as Hannon (2000,p.38) ascertains, to the strategy’s view of literacy , as a neutral skill, separated from its socio-cultural context. This led, in his opinion, to a greater focus, in the strategy framework, on the acquisition of skills than on the engagement in social practices (ibid., p.39).

The skill-based model specifies learning literacy in terms of skills and sub-skills which produce effective reading and writing (Wray, 2001, p.13). Literacy, according to this model, is considered as a generic skill. That is, it can be applied to any situation and in any context (Street, 2005,p.417)

In comparison with the genre-based approach, the critical literacy model emphasizes the ability to select and being actively able to make meaning and Judgments about texts. It provides students with opportunities to be creative and recognize alternative possibilities when working with the texts (Wary, 2001,p.13). Literacy is viewed, here, as a context-related skill. It is always used within a context. Its operation varies according the situation in which it is used (Wary, 2006,p.10).

In spite of the importance of generic model of literacy, it is less powerful a determinant of pupils' literacy development than the critical literacy approach. 'Genre theory runs the risk of overemphasizing the linguistic evidence of different text types at the expense of social context factors, which written genre may reflect, but rarely construct; (Webster, Beveridge and Reed, 1996,p.24). literacy develop in a learning environment where pupils interact in social and meaningful contexts and use texts actively and critically to realize definite purposes (Cox, 1991, p.24;Hannon, 2000,p.31, Netten, et.al., 2016, p.206).

The National curriculum, in my view, does not give these elements of critical literacy the importance it deserves. This can be implied from the first aim it sets for the education system. It states that the curriculum should enable all young people to become 'successful learner who enjoy learning, make progress and achieve (National curriculum , 2008). And to realize this aim, the curriculum should enable students to (the National Curriculum, 2008, quoted in Darwin, 2008,p.1):

- have the essential learning skills of literacy, numeracy and information and communication technology;
- be creative, resourceful and able to identify and solve problems;
- have enquiring mind and think for themselves to process information, reason, question and evaluate.

Though the second and third aims asserts some characteristics of the broader meaning of literacy-being creative as well as being able to question and evaluate, more emphasis is placed on the narrow meaning of literacy as it is shown in the first aim.

Although these elements of critical literacy are not directly emphasized in the framework's notion of literacy, as Stevens advocates, they are given, in my view, prominence, in the framework's aims. 'the overall aim of the framework is to enable all pupils to develop sophisticated literacy skills. Each pupil is expected to be ' a shrewd and fluent reader, orchestrating a range of strategies to get at meaning in text, including inferential and evaluative skills' as well as being ' reflective, critical and discriminating in response to a wide

range of printed and visual text's(idem).

Pupils, here, are expected to use the language appropriately meaningfully and imaginatively for different purposes in different contexts. This reflects, in my view, the main elements of meaningful and critical literacy Stevens calls for. However, I agree with him that greater focus ought to be thrown, in the theoretical framework of the Strategy, on these elements to draw the teacher's attention to their importance in creating effective classroom practice.

Despite the negative impact of the framework conception of literacy on English teaching practice, it can be used, as suggested in the research project's evidence, to encourage that subtle meaning in text that all imaginative English teaching seeks to elicit from students. This means that creative teaching and learning possibilities can exist within the ks3 strategy for English, providing teachers are placed to do so. These creative possibilities are clearly demonstrated, as Stevens himself refer, in the participant student teachers practice as follow;

- Integrating meaning with form in language analysis and ensuring the priority of creative meaning over form, as it is in the case of student teacher C.
- Running the starter activity for the bulk of the lesson, as pupils' needs necessitate, and meaningful linguistic debates, as it is in the case of student teacher D.
- Successful use of an adaptation to the framework four-part lesson, as it is in the case of student teacher F

In these examples, the student teachers illustrate Stevens' idea of what he considers as good English teaching – that starts from what is desirable and possible in the reality of the classroom engagement, with 'a best possible fit' into the detail of the National curriculum through an organic way rather than mechanistic approach' (Stevens, 2004) the English teacher and the National curriculum, in Fleming and Stevens ,(2004, p.11). Grainger , Barnes and Scoff ham (2004,p.253) makes the point that good teachers are those who bring into equilibrium ' the incessant drive for measurable standards on the one hand and the development of creative teaching on the other hand; that is,

they could achieve a good balance, in their planning and teaching, between the pupils' needs and the teaching objectives, as set in the strategy framework in a meaning-orientated context.

The student teacher were also mindful of the learners' need of enjoyment, fun as well as motivation. Learning is more likely to take place when teachers tap into pupils' motivation through an interesting and enjoyable classroom environment. Stevens assures that teachers ought to make full use of the strategy to fulfill the meaningful literacy in an interesting and enjoyable classroom atmosphere (Stevens, D. (2004) key stage 3 and the strategy, in Fleming and Stevens, 2004, p.18). Wyse and Jones (2008) ensure that :

A good teaching practice should make adaptation in the teaching Strategies, activities, resources, materials in the process of planning in a way That realizes the teaching objectives and the needs of the class and the enjoyable atmosphere. (Wyse and Jones, 2008, p.224)

Effective teachers strike a balance between the imposed National format for teaching and their intrinsic drive for creative classroom practice. Hyatt (2005) intensifies that critical literacy is difficult to achieve if teachers totally bind themselves by curricular imperatives. They need to read them flexibly and seek opportunities to change and develop the National framework (Hyatt, 2005, pp.55-56; Protherough, R. and King, p., 1995, p.15) Hodges (2005, p. 58) maintains that it is necessary for teachers to be offered opportunities to participate in creative approaches during their pre-service and in-service training in order to engender creativity in the classroom.

This model of learning is based on the theories put forward by the Russian Psychologist Vygotsky whereby pupils learn the language through social interaction in which the teacher (or adult) models and scaffolds the learning (Davison and Dowson, 2007, p.67). For Vygotsky, knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction and language use. In particular, interaction with parents and other important adults lead to the creation of knowledge, which is internalized by the children. He, therefore, affirms of the role of teachers in supporting learners in the learning process (Jordan, Carlile

and Stack, 2008, p. 18). The focus, here, is on ‘a kind of collaborative, or shared meaning that is built socially by a group of members who interact with other’ (Spivey, 1997,p.24).

The concept for which Vygotsky is best known is the zone of proximal Development (ZPD). This an intellectual space where learner and teacher interact. Vygotsky (1986) states that : what the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore, the only good kind of construction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it’ (Vygotsky, 1986,p.188,in Hannon, 2000,p.46). According to this view, the teacher measures the learner’s intellectual development

and provides the appropriate support to help the learner to advance to what is targeted in the task. The learners first watch and observe, before gradually, under the guidance of the teacher, they take some parts of the work, and as confidence and competence grow, they take over more and more until they finally take over the task unaided (Adams, 2006,pp. 256-257).

The student teachers’ practice gives a good example, that can be learned, of a social constructivist lesson. They drew upon the pupils past experience, scaffolding and sharing meaning through group-working. The student teachers interact with their pupils in ways which balance the need to challenge them with the need to support them so that they remain engaged in meaningful activities. Pupils develop literacy by joining in small groups-micro-social units- in which they interact and use literacy purposefully.

The strategy’ framework may also be helpful, as the research project demonstrates, in that (1) it gives English teachers the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice to make sure whether it is systematically, sufficiently and progressively covered, and whether they pay due attention to explicit teaching of the literacy skills in the classroom; (2) it also introduces some useful pedagogic ideas that can help develop English teaching practice and provide guidance for teachers (Fleming, M. and Stevens, D., *ibid*,p.xv) . Stevens assures that the framework is ‘a helpful, enabling structural device’ in the writing of lesson plans. It proves to be helpful in ‘ integrating language with more traditionally literature-based approaches’. This is clearly shown, as the

research demonstrates, as follow;

-Making and inference of meaning through textual analysis, in a way that is sensitive both to the text and the needs of the pupils as it is in the case of student teacher A.

-Successful use of eliciting, as it is in the case of student teacher B.

The framework is viewed, here, as a useful toolkit for serving classroom skills. It is a source of pedagogic ideas that is more likely to construct a basis of creative planning and teaching. Dramatic enactment, for instance, was successfully used in the teaching process. It helps pupils 'develop active, interactive and reflective relationship with the text whilst giving teachers the freedom to facilitate depth of learning in a diverse and exciting way (Baldwin and Fleming, 2003,p.5). in my experience, as a practising teacher, dramatic enactment has proved to be a good technique in teaching novels and short stories. Sharing in the role-play activity, students get enjoyment, motivation and hold, in consequence, a good grasp of what is taught.

Wilson (2002,p.14) holds that the National strategy gives an opportunity for the Teacher to work with a prescribed framework in a structured way. It also gives him freedom to concentrate on creative teaching possibilities and to monitor, at the same time , pupils' development against nationally targeted aims.

However good the ideas of the strategy recommended pedagogy are, the danger is in too narrow or restrictive an interpretation of them. Identification of prior knowledge; for example, may be interpreted to mean simply 'ascertaining what 's been previously taught' rather than drawing on the pupils' relevant experience in and out of schools. Similarly, teacher demonstration of process' may be understood as the teacher showing just one way of conducting an activity according to the conventions of particular genre rather than variegating approach so as to meet pupils different needs and abilities (Stevens, 2004,key stage 3 and the strategy, in Fleming and Steven, 2004,p.21).

Therefore, the most important lesson to be learned, in my opinion, and as Topping and Ferguson (2005,p.141) recommend, that the teacher needs to

interpret the aims and the suggested pedagogy of the strategy framework in a broader way that helps for an imaginative method of teaching enabling pupils to learn for meaning and critical literacy. Frater (2000, p. 111-112) holds that the slavish emulation to the letter of the National strategy framework for English will be at the expense of the development of English and effective delivery of the teaching practice. Hence, he recommends that teachers should deal flexibly with the framework in order to be able to develop the language in purposeful and meaningful contexts.

Stevens points out that the strategy has limitation in that it has a stultifying impact on the language due to the narrow conception of literacy embedded in the strategy. This narrow conception, as he maintains,, reflects the traditional approach in teaching English. This approach tends to reduce English to linguistics. That is, it concentrates on the language itself without taking opportunities to focus adequately on the use of the language. Stevens advocates that English ought to be acquired and developed through its active use in meaningful contexts. Although he does not exclude completely the explicit instruction of the language grammar and skills, he affirms that it should not be at the expense of the meaningful and creative use of the language (Fleming and Steven, 2004,pp.x-xii).

The other limitation in the National strategy framework Stevens refers to in the paper is that ‘the emphasis is all on control through stages and targets and timed delivery of key skills’. Wyse and Jones (2008,p.17) confirms that framework is too prescriptive and demonstrates a lack of choice for pupils and teacher Anderson, Digings and Urquhart (2000,p.117) assert that although creative teaching practice is

still possible within the National framework, the imposed format of the framework may engender the feeling of disempowerment that may limit teachers’ ability to be adaptive and innovative in planning and teaching. Timed delivery, for example, probably make teachers anxious about all children having to keep up with learning objectives, regardless of their needs, abilities as well as their enjoyment. This, in turn,negatively affects the learners’ development. It may cause them less confident, less

independent and less creative.

Dean (2004,p.18) stresses that the National framework concentrates on giving instructions to teachers on what and how to teach literacy skills while paying little attention to how pupils can use skills to re-interpret and control their perceptions of the world. A recent research assures that the National Strategy framework for timed delivery and the literacy Hour are to inflexible and demanding. They are not suited to classes with children with a wide range of abilities (Smith and Harris,2000, pp.37-38). Hall and Thomson (2005,p.15) hold that ‘standardized outcome measures and timed delivery unlikely to be the optimal conditions for promoting creativity in schools’. To engender creativity in pupils needs creative approaches in planning and teaching and, at the same time, securing opportunities for pupils to enjoy their subjects and to be motivated to learn in a meaningful context. This, in turn, requires some reductions of current constraints on the exercise of teachers’ professional practice. (Osborn and McNess, 2002,pp.83-84). Therefore, Protherough and King, in their book *the challenge of English in the National Curriculum*, make the demand for ‘a framework for the curriculum that is flexible enough not to rule out any sensible interpretation of English’ (Protherough and King, 1995,p.14).

In spite of these limitations, Stevens affirms that the National Strategy model of literacy more emphasis is put into subtle senses of meaning and value and elements of subjectivity and critical literacy to be given the prominence.

In conclusion, in agreement with Stevens, effective teaching of literacy is more likely to come to fruition providing that :

- (1) More emphasis is placed on elements of meaningful and critical literacy in the theoretical framework of the strategy.
- (2) Teachers are trained and encouraged to be inventive and resourceful in their planning and teaching.
- (3) Teachers are encouraged to read the strategy framework inventively and critically and use it, in their planning and teaching practice, creatively and flexibly in a way that is linked to the objectives in the strategy framework, meets the pupils’ needs and abilities and works in favor of imaginative teaching.

(4) Teachers work collaboratively and flexibly to adapt structural patterns inspired by the strategy in their particular context.

The paper suggests that local educational systems adopt, in theory and put into practice, the philosophy that tend to extend the basic notion of literacy, from simply an ability to read and write , to indicate a level of competence which enables the pupil to function independently, flexibly and critically in a subtly meaningful way in different contexts. In addition, further researches are to be done to assess how this creative view of literacy assist meet the national objectives and pupils' needs.

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