This review paper synthesized results from the literature on context effects in reading into a model of individual differences that explained the previously paradoxical finding that context effects by reviewer were more salient in better readers, but that it was the poor reader who relied more on context to facilitate word recognition.

To explain the interaction of contextual information and reading skill at the word recognition level I made use of the idea of interactive processing that had already been imported into the psychology of reading by others and married it to the idea of compensatory processing: that deficiencies at any level in the hierarchy of reading-related cognitive processes could be compensated for by a greater reliance on other knowledge sources. The idea of interactive-compensatory processing, and an emphasis on the demarcation of levels of processing when surveying the literature, resolved most of the paradoxes in reading theory that our own early results had helped to create.

Six years later, I again surveyed the literature on context as part of a larger theoretical review paper for the same journal. The conclusions in my earlier 1980 paper, with minor modifications, were found to have stood the test of time. This second review paper—which in part evolved from the earlier work—won the 1988 Albert J. Harris Award of the International Reading Association.

I think there are two reasons the 1980 interactive-compensatory paper is frequently cited. One is that the issue of context effects had loomed large in reading theory for quite some time but by the late 1970s had entered a stage of utter confusion. Teachers were bombarded by seemingly contradictory studies and theories at every turn. By arguing that the contradictions in the literature were more apparent than real and by claiming that there was actual convergence among the empirical studies, my review became a lightning rod for all those who disagreed with my conclusions were forced to deal with them.

The second reason that this paper has received so many citations is that there is something in it for many different basic and applied science communities. There were instructional implications for reading educators, but there was also a mindshift of the interactions among contextual and stimulus information sources that was of interest to cognitive scientists. Thus, it is the only paper I have ever written that has been cited in both the Reading Teacher and in Behavior and Brain Sciences.

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