Improving the Reading Comprehension Skills of Poor Readers

J. Lloyd Eldredge
Brigham Young University

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J. LLOYD ELDREDGE

Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah

Introduction

Although much has been written about reading comprehension in the last twenty years, theories defining the comprehension process, and strategies on how to teach it still pique the interest of educators. This article addresses the negative effects of poor decoding on reading comprehension, and reviews various strategies that have been used with poor readers to successfully compensate for the problem. It is proposed that the extensive exposure to printed discourse, and the phrase and sentence reading provided students in these successful remediation strategies are keys to improving the comprehension of poor readers.

Reading comprehension is making sense out of what one reads. The term decoding refers to the recognition or identification of words in print. Word recognition refers to the instantaneous recognition of words, while word identification refers to the use of (a)context clues, (b)phonics, (c)morphemic analysis, or (d)syllabic analysis combined with phonics to identify previously unrecognizable words. Word recognition is a fast, almost semi-conscious decoding process while word identification is a slower, conscious process.

Although the ability to decode words in print will not assure good reading comprehension, good reading comprehension will not occur without that ability. Certainly one cannot create meaning from printed text without a knowledge of the words used by the author of the text. A

common characteristic of poor readers is that they tend to be word-by-word readers; i.e., they are more involved in word identification than word recognition. This is a serious problem since the readers' decoding abilities determine the amount of printed discourse on which they can focus within relevant time periods, which, in turn, affects the meaning they construct. If readers take too much time to identify the author's words they forget many of the words identified at the beginning of a sentence by the time they get to the end. The theory of automatic information processing proposed by LaBerge and Samuels (1974) supports this line of thinking. According to the theory of automaticity, good readers decode text automatically, so they are able to give more attention to text comprehension. Beginning and word-by-word readers are nonautomatic in their decoding, and because most of their attention is on decoding, comprehension suffers.

Resolving the Decoding Problem of Poor Readers

How can teachers help students with poor decoding skills better comprehend written text? A review of the literature related to this question has identified some interesting success stories. Students with decoding problems have been helped to decode and comprehend better: (1) by using Rod Heckelman's Neurological Impress Method; (2) by reading text material along with taped audio support; (3) by using Kenneth Hoskisson's Assisted Reading Strategy; (4) by using the Method of Repeated Readings; and, (5) by using Dyad Reading.

The Neurological Impress Method. Heckelman seems to be the first to remediate reading handicaps by helping poor readers get involved with reading natural text. Heckelman (1969) developed an assisted reading strategy to be used with handicapped readers in the early 50s that he called the Neurological Impress Method. It was a technique of impressing mature reading behaviors upon students with severe reading disabilities.

He described the method as a system of unison reading whereby the student and the teacher read aloud, simultaneously, at a rapid rate. The disabled reader was placed slightly to the front of the teacher with the student and the teacher holding the book jointly. As the student and teacher read the material in unison, the voice of the

teacher was directed into the ear of the student at close range. The teacher moved her finger along the line following the words that were being spoken. At times the instructor read louder and faster than the student and at other times she read softer than the reading voice of the student and lagged slightly behind. The goal was to cover as many pages of reading material as possible within the time available.

Gardner (1965) found that the Neurological Impress Method (NIM) lowered student anxiety as they read because they were freed from failure experiences they encountered using traditional methods of reading instruction. Heckelman used the technique in 1952 with an adolescent girl in a clinical situation. He reported that she received 12 hours of instruction which resulted in 3 grade level jumps (1969, p. 277). Neurological Impress studies conducted by Heckelman and others over the years have produced positive achievement results (Meyer, 1982).

Audio Tapes. It was probably William Jordan who popularized the combined use of radio tapes and written text to help poor readers get more meaningfully involved in reading. Prime-O-Tec, an adaptation of Rod Heckelman's Neurological Impress Method, was developed by William C. Jordan (1965) in the mid-sixties. Prime-O-Tec was a combination visual-audio-tactile-kinesthetic-motor input to reading instruction. Learners used teacher-made prerecorded tapes and headphones. They were instructed to listen to a tape, follow the print with a finger, and finally to read along with the tape. The listening, seeing, saying, and touching was all done in unison.

Schneeberg & Mattleman (1973) initiated a Listen-Read (L-R) Program at an inner city school in Philadelphia in the Fall of 1971. Teachers read stories or played tapes of stories and students would follow the words in their own books. To insure the matching of print and speech, children would follow the words with their fingers or a ruler. Echo reading, another variation of unison reading, was also used. The teacher would read a phrase or sentence and the children would repeat it in unison, imitating inflections and phrasing. Although the study had obvious design weaknesses, the data showed that the Listen-Read had a positive effect on reading scores of the subjects (Schneeberg,

1977).

Chomsky (1976) reported a successful experiment using tapes with five slow readers in the third grade. Chomsky used five tape recorders and two duzen story books recorded on tapes. The books ranged from about second to fifth grade reading level. Most of the books were 20 to 30 pages long. The students selected the books they wanted to read. Once the selections were made they listened to the tapes, read along with the tapes, and tried to memorize each book before moving on to another. This gave the students practice in reading connected discourse, and put them in touch with a variety of books. Pretest and posttest scores on several reading tests at week one and week fifteen showed encouraging gains.

Carbo (1978) taped stories with correct phrasing for eight average intelligent learning-disabled students in grades 2 and 6 to listen to and mimic. She recorded entire books and parts of books, varying the reading rate and phrase length depending on the reading ability of each student. The students listened to their individual tapes three or four times and then read the text aloud. The students were able to read the stories with fluency and expression. In her uncontrolled study she reported impressive gains for all eight students in word recognition, comprehension, and attitudes toward reading.

Carbo believed that the method worked because: (1) it was multisensory and helped compensate for the perception deficits of the students; (2) it was interesting and held the students' attention; (3) it removed the decoding burden so students were able to attend to comprehension; (4) it was highly structured so steady growth and feelings of security were obtained; (5) it was fail-safe, so self-concept was not weakened; and (6) it provided the repetition the students needed to overcome their deficiencies in memory.

Assisted Reading

Frank Smith (1976) argued that children learn to read by reading, and a teacher's prime task is to do as much reading as was necessary for children until they could go on their own. Influenced by Smith, Kenneth Hoskisson (1974) proposed a technique for parents to use to help their children learn to read. He called this technique

"assisted reading". Assisted reading was based on the premise that if children saw the graphic shapes of words, heard them pronounced, and followed their patterning in sentences they would learn to read. In short, he claimed that children could learn to read by reading, much as they learned to talk by talking. Using Hoskisson's method, a parent moved her finger slowly under the line of print being read to get the child to begin to focus on the words. After repeated visual exposures to words as they were pronounced by the parent, the child was eventually able to read the book.

Repeated Readings

Dahl and Samuels (1974) developed the method of repeated readings to increase the automaticity of poor readers' word recognition skills. Unskilled readers, they claimed, could access meaning by rereading a passage several times. They believed the first few readings would bring the printed material to the phonological level as if the students were "listening" to it rather than reading it.

The method involved the use of short selections (50-200 words), taken from interesting stories selected by students, which were marked off for reading practice. Students read a selection to an assistant, or into a tape, and immediately afterward their reading speed and number of recognition errors were calculated and recorded on a graph. The students then practiced reading the selection in preparation for another reading, timing, and word error count. The procedure was repeated until an 85 wpm criterion rate was reached. Then the student went on to the next selection.

Samuels found that as a student's reading rate increased, word recognition errors decreased, and reading comprehension improved (Samuels, 1979). He observed that a student's reading comprehension improved with each additional rereading. He reasoned that improvement resulted because the decoding barrier to comprehension was gradually overcome. Recent research has fairly well substantiated the positive benefits of repeated readings on both decoding and reading comprehension (Amlund et al., 1986).

Dyad Reading

Eldredge (Eldredge & Butterfield, 1986) modified

Heckelman's Neurological Impress Method so it could be used in the regular classroom setting rather than the clinical one used by Heckelman. He called the strategy he developed "dyad reading." Among the modifications made to the original technique, a "lead reader", a student in the classroom, replaced the teacher. The "assisted reader", the student who did not decode well, worked with a differ- ent "lead reader" each week. Eldredge ignored the diffi- culty level of the reading material used by the student teams, whereas Heckelman controlled it. If the material could be read by the lead reader and if it was of interest to both students, it was appropriate for use.

Dyad reading was originally researched in classrooms during the 1983-84 school year. Poor readers in the experi- mental classrooms were paired with students capable of reading the school material. The students paired together sat side-by-side, reading aloud from the same book. The lead reader touched each word as it was read, while the assisted reader read along with the lead reader. The lead reader read the book at a normal speed, avoiding word-by- word reading. The assisted reader looked at the words as they were read by the lead reader and read as many of the words that he could repeat during the process. Over a period of time the assisted readers were able to read the regular school material without any assistance.

During the 1985-86 school year dyad reading was researched extensively. It was used with 61 poor readers in second grade classrooms in various schools located in Utah County. These students' reading achievement scores were compared with 61 poor readers who were not involved in "dyad reading." The assisted readers achieved nearly a year's growth more than the poor readers who were not involved in dyad reading.

DISCUSSION

It is possible that poor readers cannot direct enough of their attention on the message of the text because they have to concentrate so heavily on the decoding task. The Neurological Impress Method, taped supported reading, assisted reading, and dyad reading probably frees readers from the decoding burden so that they can give the needed attention to the text message. The Method of Repeated Readings eventually brings the printed material to the

phonological level as if the students were "listening" to it rather than reading it.

It is also possible that these strategies help poor readers decode better since they are provided with repeated visual exposures to "frequently used words" in print. One of the common characteristics of all the approaches discussed is the repeated exposures to the printed representations of words provided for students. This repeated exposure to words frequently used in print probably improves the students' sight recognition of such words which, in turn, probably improves reading comprehension.

Another characteristic common to all of these techniques is that poor readers are involved in the reading of natural text--they read phrases and sentences of print rather than just individual words. This experience probably helps the word-by-word readers discover that reading is a meaningful process. One of the signs of poor readers is that they perceive reading as a word-by-word decoding process rather than a meaningful communication process.

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