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A READING SPECIALIST REACTS TO CHALL'S READING STUDY

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Research into beginning reading instruction has been published recently in the form of a book entitled *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (2). Its author is Jeanne Chall, professor of education at Harvard University, who was commissioned by the Carnegie Foundation to analyze critically the findings of over fifty years of research studies in beginning reading. As part of this project, Dr. Chall also interviewed teachers and administrators and visited some 300 classrooms in the United States, England and Scotland.

This book is generating as much interest in the teaching of reading as Flesch's book *Why Johnny Can't Read* (5). The difference between the two authors, however, is that Mr. Flesch based much of his writing on subjective judgment while Dr. Chall analyzed the data for her book in a critical, yet objective, manner.

Discussion of the Book

During her investigation for this book, Dr. Chall was appalled at the poor quality of educational research. She underscores the lack of sophistication on the part of many "researchers" in the application of research techniques and the unwarranted generalizations made on the basis of some of these studies. She indicates that manipulation of data sometimes occurs to prove a researcher's opinion and that the results of many studies have no appreciable effect on classroom instruction.

Despite the poor quality of educational studies, she divided the many beginning reading methods studied into two groups: the "code-emphasis" group and the "meaning-emphasis" group. Code-emphasis involves teaching children to master the alphabetic code by teaching the recognition and sound of the letters of the alphabet. Meaning-emphasis involves stressing the meaning of what children read rather than sound-blending techniques in the initial stages of learning to read. This method is known as "look-say" and is the predominant approach currently being used in most basal reading programs.

Analysis of the data led Chall to conclude that a code-emphasis approach in beginning reading instruction produces better results than a meaning-emphasis approach. According to Chall, children at

all levels of the socio-economic and intellectual spectrum, who learn to break the code learn to read and to spell more efficiently than children who learned by means of the sight method.

Some common code-emphasis methods are the modified alphabet, linguistics, or phonic methods. In the book, no particular method is singled out as being superior and the admonition is made that code-emphasis should be used only as a *beginning* method—to be discarded once the child has learned how to break the code.

Since the less effective method (meaning-emphasis) is so closely associated with the basal reader approach, the author comments on these readers. Although she states that these readers “are not as hopeless as critics would have us believe,” Dr. Chall does indicate that vocabulary control tends to be a hindrance rather than a boon and that the phonics portion of the program often takes a second place to story content. She also suggests, as did Austin (1) before her, that teachers should use the manuals accompanying basal texts on a suggestive rather than prescriptive basis.

Recommendations

In *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* the author makes the following five recommendations for the improvement of beginning reading instruction:

1. Beginning reading instruction should shift from a meaning-emphasis to a code-emphasis approach.
2. There should be an examination of what kind of content to include in beginning readers and programs.
3. Grade levels of basal readers should be re-evaluated so as to produce less rigidity of vocabulary control and to permit advanced readers to read materials which are now prescribed for work at higher grade levels.
4. Better diagnostic and achievement tests should be developed.
5. There should be greatly improved research into reading practices and methodology.

Reactions

In recommending that beginning reading instruction shift from a meaning-emphasis to a code-emphasis method, it is wisely cautioned by the author that not *all* children will benefit from such a shift. Obviously, there is no single method suitable for every child. Different modalities of learning exist for different children and it is conceivable that some children do learn better by means of the look-say approach.

If school systems are already getting good results from this method, the need for a shift in emphasis seems lessened.

Since 1962, many changes in content have been made in basal readers. The locale of many stories in basal texts has shifted from suburbia to the city. Characters are now at least biracial and, in some cases, multiracial. Language structure has been used which more nearly typifies the language patterns of children, particularly those classified as disadvantaged (4).

Unfortunately, critics of basal readers have only looked at the story content of these books. Rarely have they examined the heart of any basal program—the skills development lessons outlined in the manuals. Some basal systems, regardless of whether their approach is code-emphasis or meaning-emphasis, have changed content but have neglected to assess the needed changes in that aspect which develops crucial reading skills. These self-pronounced critics have done children a disservice because all they've done is look at pictures to determine the ethnic composition of story characters instead of also looking at the skills development sections of these "new" texts to determine their effectiveness. Dr. Chall sums it up in precise terms when she states in her book: "The children's attitudes may be improved. But a reading program that improves attitudes and does not succeed in teaching reading is no program at all."

The recommendation that grade levels of readers should be re-evaluated bears attention. Who is to say that a 31 book is most appealing to third-grade children? As we evaluate this recommendation, however, we must not overlook the fact that much research into the area of child development has preceded the establishment of the reading levels of these materials.

Indeed, the vocabulary used in many of the modern basals does not parallel the vocabulary of all children. The problem is particularly acute in terms of the ghetto child. It does not seem so crucial that schools "lift the ceiling" to permit top pupils to use the more advanced readers they would ordinarily read at higher grade levels. Too many teachers race through these readers as it is—reading a story a day without enough attention to the skills development aspect of the program. The stories in basal readers are vehicles for developing needed skills. It is very likely that a good reader may read well at a particular level, but has not mastered the skills necessary for efficient use of these skills.

A recent study (3) compared two approaches—enrichment and acceleration—used in the context of a basal reading program. Each

reading group in the enrichment program spent the entire six months of the study on one basal text doing the skills development exercises and also the enrichment program as suggested in the teacher's manual. The other group did not do the enrichment portion and finished the basal reader after three months and then was accelerated into the next higher text—thus covering two basals for each group. Statistical analyses of the data showed a significant difference in mastery of reading skills in favor of the enrichment group which had covered the text so intensively.

The development of better diagnostic and achievement tests is a definite need in the area of reading. For the most part, diagnostic tests yield more practical data to the teacher in her everyday work than achievement tests. Many basal series publish their own diagnostic tests to assess pupil mastery of the skills developed in their program. Pupil performance on these tests provide an objective analysis of which skills have not been mastered. Unfortunately, many teachers do not use these tests. One teacher of the writer's acquaintance does use them and quite effectively. She administers the unit test accompanying a reader of the series she is using, corrects it and then discusses items missed with the children in the reading group. No score from these tests is obtained, i.e., 3.2 or 2.1 which is nebulous anyway. Rather, the important thing here is to discover which skills need to be reinforced or re-taught.

Scores achieved on standardized reading tests are practically revered by some teachers. They record them here and post them there. Untenable comparisons are then made among teachers and classrooms. Little or no effort is made to interpret the results so as to effect needed changes in instruction. Some reading achievement tests are more popular than others. These tests should be chosen carefully. One popular test was standardized on a population so far removed from those who reside in cities that the disadvantaged testee is at a disadvantage even before he takes the test. The ability to listen and to follow directions affect results. Disadvantaged children, because of a crowded home environment, often "tune out" the tester. The result may be low achievement scores in reading even though the opposite may be true.

Many teachers use standardized test scores to group children for reading instruction. They do not realize that such scores place children at their *frustrational* reading level and are not appropriate for grouping purposes. It is much more fruitful to administer an Informal Reading Inventory using established criteria to determine

the child's *instructional* reading level. Yet many teachers do not know how to administer such an instrument. Much in-service work needs to be done in this area.

The research skills of the average graduate student undertaking an educational study lack the degree of sophistication necessary to arrive at tenable conclusions. Fortunately, more and more colleges and universities are requiring their graduate students to understand and to apply sound research techniques.

Even when research studies are conducted competently, their findings rarely affect changes in instruction where it counts—in the classroom. Organizations such as Phi Delta Kappa and the International Reading Association are doing much to disseminate the results of the latest research studies, but more still needs to be done. So many teachers and administrators lack the knowledge and security not only to launch a good research project but also to use this knowledge to improve reading instruction at all levels.

In-service work in research techniques and the application of research findings needs to be done at the grass-roots level if children are to benefit from the latest research findings.

Concluding Remarks

Anyone who reads *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* can have confidence in the findings and recommendations made by the author. Dr. Chall possesses unimpeachable credentials and the interest this book has created concerning teaching beginning reading hopefully will result in improved classroom instruction.

The Great Debate will continue, of course. Chall's research, however, has provided us with some of the answers. We can use these answers to continue the Great Debate in a more informative manner and to attack related problems with a greater degree of confidence and skill.

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