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BASIC READING SKILLS

Gwen Horsman

Deriving meaning from the printed page in a high school situation requires the ability to use a great variety of reading skills. Some of these skills are developed in the first grade. During each school year they are extended and refined and new skills are acquired. By the time a student enters high school he should have at his command the knowledge of and the ability to apply a vast variety of reading skills when attacking the printed page. Only then can he understand, use and enjoy ideas presented in written form.

Because materials on this level of learning present new difficulties there is a need for the development of additional reading abilities if the student is to experience successful reading activities. The act of reading has now become a highly technical process and continues so throughout a lifetime. It is obvious, then, that continued guidance in the expansion of reading skills must be provided. The regular classroom teacher in any area is the one best prepared to give this instruction since it so closely parallels instruction in the subject matter under consideration.

However, the teaching of reading skills on a high school level presents several major problems. In the first place, many high school teachers have not been trained in the teaching of reading. They have acquired a rich background in their respective content fields with little or no training in the methods of presenting it. Secondly, they are faced with the problem of teaching students where there is a wide discrepancy in the reading abilities found in a single classroom—anywhere from fourth grade reading levels through university levels. A third difficulty is that of obtaining enough mature reading materials on simplified reading levels to accommodate the slower learners, since advancement in reading ability must start at the level where the student left off in reading fluency.

Still another problem is that of *teaching* these several levels of learning during the same classroom hour. Challenging the accelerated learners, guiding the average learners, and helping the retarded group all at the same time place severe demands on the teacher. However, if a teacher accepts the challenge and faces the responsibility, the teaching of reading can be a satisfying and enjoyable part of the classroom procedure as the teacher observes individual student growth.

Because the so-called mechanical reading skills are more or less

familiar to teachers, this paper will deal with the teaching of the interpretive reading skills. Teaching or applying these skills during the study of a literary masterpiece in a literature class will not harm the development of an appreciation for the selection; it will, rather, *enhance* the literature while advancing a deep and lasting appreciation of an author's work. For instance, in Pearl S. Buck's story, *The Frill*, there are numerous opportunities for the teaching and application of basic reading skills which will enlarge a student's vision, deepen his sympathetic understanding, and generate an enduring appreciation of this kind of literature. A brief review of the story will help in identifying some of the areas for skill development.

Mrs. Lowe, the postmaster's wife, settled herself with some difficulty into the wicker rocking chair upon the wide veranda of her house, saying, "My dear, the only way to manage these native tailors is to be firm." She was a large woman who had had little exercise over the ten-odd years she had spent in a port town on the China coast. She spoke to her American friend, Mrs. Newman, who looked at her hostess with admiration.

The Chinese manservant announced the arrival of the tailor. The tailor, a middle-aged man, clothed in a long clean robe of blue, patched neatly at the elbows, entered and bowed. From under his arm he took a bundle wrapped in white cloth, untied it, and carefully shook out a half-finished dress. Mrs. Lowe surveyed it coldly, then announced in a loud voice that she had asked for a frilled collar, not a flat collar. The tailor reminded her that she had first mentioned a frilled collar but had changed her mind in favor of a flat collar. Mrs. Lowe denied this, accused him of lying, and waved him away.

The tailor suggested, certainly, that since he had more cloth he would make a frilled collar. He was ignored, then rudely reprimanded, and finally told to make the frilled collar and return with the finished dress the next day if he wished to receive pay for his work. The tailor, upon leaving, asked in an agony of supplication if Mrs. Lowe would advance him two dollars to help purchase a coffin for his dying nephew. Because it was the third time he had made such a request, Mrs. Lowe, genuinely aghast, refused the loan. The nervous tailor wiped his lips furtively and turned in cold despair to leave. She called to her manservant to watch the tailor as he left the house to see that he did not take anything. Then she turned to Mrs. Newman and said, ". . . I don't believe a word of it. Probably wants the money for opium or to gamble. They all gamble . . ."

The scene changes, showing the tailor walking silently and swiftly

to his own section of town. Mrs. Buck describes vividly and in detail the Chinese quarters.

The tailor entered the home of his nephew who was lying on a bed, with a gangrenous leg swollen to the size of his body. A young, grief-stricken wife was seated on the ground beside the bed, her baby and two older children close beside her. After promising his nephew that he would take care of his wife and children, the tailor remained by the bedside until the nephew died. At twilight he went to his own home where he spent most of the night working on the dress and making the finely pleated frilled collar. At dawn he rose, completed the dress, and returned through the hot streets to the home of the American. After a grumbled acceptance of the dress Mrs. Lowe grudgingly paid the tailor five dollars for his work. Later, when Mrs. Newman admired the dress with its frilled collar, Mrs. Lowe said with satisfaction, "Yes, it is nice, isn't it? I am glad I decided to have the frill, after all. And so cheap! . . . It's as I said—you simply have to be firm with these native tailors."

After reading Mrs. Buck's story the students of a particular class agree, unhesitatingly, that it was interesting but the majority felt that it needed an ending! When asked what purpose they felt Mrs. Buck had in writing the story, one student paralleled Mrs. Lowe's treatment of the tailor with the treatment of China by the other world powers.

Another student carried the skill a step further when he stated that aggressive nations have either ignored, misunderstood, overpowered or dominated lesser nations and that understanding is essential to world peace.

The students were asked to characterize Mrs. Lowe in order to pin-point the observations made by these two students. Some of the character traits suggested were: selfish, domineering, stupid, abominable, cruel, ruthless, untruthful, and stout.

Each student who contributed the name of a character trait was asked to

Ability to grasp the general meaning or significance of a passage.

Ability to find the underlying meaning.

Ability to characterize from direct description, action, or conversation.

Ability to locate information; ability to jus-

read the sentence orally which justified his opinion.

When no member of the class could recall where the text said that Mrs. Lowe was untruthful, they were asked to reread until they found conclusive evidence that she had lied. One of the slower readers located and read orally, "I am glad I decided to have a frill, after all." Asked to give only the two words which proved the point, he immediately responded, "after all."

When the class challenged the student who placed "stout" on the list of character traits, his confident response was, "It is there because stout people dominate. Mrs. Buck was wise to choose a stout person to represent the domineering nations." A girl immediately accused him of making an unfair generalization and of asserting that Mrs. Buck made such an implication. She informed him that her mother was a very stout person and the most gentle, non-aggressive and unassuming woman she had ever known. Another girl took exception to Mrs. Lowe's statement, "They all gamble." She said it was an unfair generalization made of a nation.

After the one student was convinced that the word "stout" belonged under a different classification, the characterizations fell under two headings: character traits and physical traits. Under physical traits were placed the terms stout; large, red-faced; square, hard-fleshed face; round, hard, gray eyes; dead-brown hair; loud voice; buxom.

The slower readers did an excellent piece of work when asked to describe the Chinese town.

The students in the average ability

tify statements; ability to read orally.

Ability to draw an inference from an implication.

Ability to recognize a generalization.

Ability to classify.

Ability to note detail.

group made a list of facts true of China, being careful not to state facts true of the Chinese people in this story alone.

The accelerated students were asked to write a few sentences explaining the ironic significance of the title, "The Frill." Several students dramatized the new vocabulary by pantomiming, "he wiped his lips furtively" and "asked in an agony of supplication." One student repeated the words in the introduction to the story by stating that he felt, indeed, that it was the epitome of the world's injustice.

When asked why Mrs. Lowe doubted the excuses offered by the tailor for requesting an advance of money, several of the students came quickly to her defense by stating reasons why she was justified in her attitude. In their judgment any person would have a right to doubt one who offered the same excuse three different times.

Because the students expressed their opinions on the "poor" ending of the story, they were asked to write an ending which pleased them. Without exception each student created a situation in which the American woman learned of the tailor's pathetic plight and of the fact that he had spoken the truth. Justice reigned in each conclusion as the Chinese tailor and the American woman became fast and loyal friends.

The final remark by one student, after hearing a few of these endings read orally, was, "Our story endings are happy ones, but they do not carry out the author's purpose. They give us no reason for thought. Mrs. Buck wanted us to consider the dangers of the situation she depicted."

And so through a careful and consistent attack on the teaching

Ability to discriminate.

Ability to extend and enrich vocabulary.

Ability to appraise critically and fairly.

Ability to predict, or create, an outcome.

Ability to identify the author's purpose or viewpoint.

of basic reading skills to students in the senior high school, they grow and mature as they are guided in the interpretation of what is read. The act of reading extends their visions and deepens their understandings.

Gwen Horsman is Supervisor of Reading for the Detroit Public Schools. Her article, "Fundamental Principles Underlying Good Teaching of Reading," was published in the Winter, 1965, issue of *Reading Horizons*.