

---

12-1-1996

## Case Study Analysis in Reding/Language Arts: Getting to the "Nitty-Gritty"

Janet H. Towell  
*California State University, Stanislaus*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)



Part of the Education Commons

---

### Recommended Citation

Towell, J. H. (1996). Case Study Analysis in Reding/Language Arts: Getting to the "Nitty-Gritty". *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 37 (2). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol37/iss2/2](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol37/iss2/2)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



final, they were given the following scenario as their assignment:

*You are a bright-eyed bushy-tailed newly credentialed elementary teacher, ready to teach the world. You are equipped with an adequate knowledge of reading theory and methodology including whole language, basals, language experience and phonics. You can teach lesson plans such as the KWL, DLTA and LEA; you are aware of the best in children's literature, and are ready to teach your first thematic unit. It is the second week of school; you have created a beautiful print-rich environment and have been given a class of 28 linguistically and culturally diverse second-graders.*

*This particular morning your students are having free reading time and you notice Maria, an olive skinned dark-haired child who has recently moved to California from Mexico. She is looking at the pictures in the Little Red Riding Hood book but does not seem to be comprehending any of the words on the page. You ask her to read a sentence to you and red-faced, she stumbles over the words, struggling with most of the sounds. Somewhat familiar with the inquiry method of teaching (Short and Burke, 1991), you start to ask yourself questions about Maria's possible reading problems. How can I help Maria become a better reader? How can I help her want to join the "literacy club" (Smith, 1984)? You decide to call your friend Susan, a bilingual reading specialist, for help. What do you need to know before you can help Maria? What are the five most important questions to ask and why?*

The resulting questions that students included in their final papers were listed in order of frequency. The top seven were selected to be used in this article. Why each question is

important will be explained in sequence. They are not listed in order of priority.

### TABLE

1. Why does this student go up and down in her academic performance?
2. What are the child's strengths?
3. What can I do that is different for a student who has been in resource for several years and has shown no improvement?
4. How can I help a student who has been identified as having an excessive processing deficiency?
5. How do I know what a child is capable of doing?
6. Is the child making reversals when reading and/or writing? What does this mean?
7. What skills does the child possess in the following areas: phonemic awareness, word recognition and word meaning, comprehension?
8. What is the parental attitude toward reading (e.g., reading to the child or listening to the child read at home, encouragement, access to books, trips to the library)?
9. At what age did the child start school?
10. How many times has the child moved during his academic career?
11. How many times has the child been absent during the past academic year?
12. Has the child had the opportunity to read in his or her primary language?
13. What are the child's interests and attitude toward reading?
14. Is there a reading program and learning style mismatch?
15. Does the child have a concept of print?
16. Are there any environmental stimuli that may be distracting the student?
17. Is there a physical impairment that is affecting the student's reading?
18. Are there any factors outside of school that are affecting the student's progress?
19. Are they receiving instruction in their primary language?
20. What is the child's perception of his reading problem? The parent's perception? The teacher's?

## 1. What are the student's strengths?

*Whole language teachers reject the clinical, medical model of educational assessment. In this model, one looks for what is wrong with the child, and then writes a prescription to fix it. The child-centered nature of whole language instruction demands that we look first at the strengths of children — what they know, how they can use what they know to learn, and what they can teach us. Assessment and evaluation in whole language will move us away from test- and text-driven measures to student-centered observation. We will accept only assessment and evaluation measures that keep language whole and fulfill children's expectations for how language works (Harp, 1992).*

Before starting any research it is important to define who your subject is. Questioning what the student knows, thinks, and likes is essential to forming a foundation of the student's strengths. These strengths should be the premise of where you will begin. A child's strengths should be used to build success while learning how to strengthen a "weakness." Identifying a child's strengths when you begin reading diagnosis is important to a child's self-esteem, knowing that there are some things she does well or that in some areas she is just like everyone else. For example, if Maria liked books, enjoyed being read to, and wanted to learn to read, you could use her determination to learn to read to get her to focus on the skills she needed to develop. Positive self-esteem is vital to a child's ability and willingness to learn, to her socialization into the community of her peers, and how the child sees herself as a worthwhile person.

You are familiar with Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1993). If the student's best learning modality is

verbal, but logical-mathematical or kinesthetic, it may be that poor reading skills are only a problem in certain classes, such as language arts or social studies. There are many ways to approach the basic material presented in those subject areas that incorporate intelligences beyond the verbal. With that in mind, the student could make use of one or more of those alternative approaches to augment required reading or in lieu of some of it, especially at the upper grade levels. Teaching a student using her best learning modality is critical to her success in school. The seven styles of learning include: linguistic, logical/mathematical, spacial, musical, bodily/kinesthetic, and interpersonal or intrapersonal.

2. Is there a physical impairment that is affecting the student's reading? This is an important question to ask because often a child may have a vision or hearing problem that has gone undetected and is responsible for inhibiting the child's reading development. If a child is far-sighted, for example, it will be difficult for her to see things up-close like the words on the page of a book, and this will seriously inhibit her ability to learn to read. A hearing problem can prevent a child from developing skills in letter/sound recognition and this will have an influence on the other skill areas as well. Sometimes a child may have an undetected illness that will inhibit her reading development. When a child is not well, she may not have the energy or the will to concentrate on learning to read.

In summary, the obvious areas that should be addressed before learning can take place consist of vision impairment, hearing difficulties, nutrition, processing deficiency and overall health problems. Items as routine as thorough vision screening, hearing tests, and intervention regarding hunger can be enough to turn around a child's learning potential. If one or more of these physical impairments proves to be a

factor negatively affecting a child's reading success, even the best teacher and materials, and the most appropriate strategies for remediation may not be able to impact the child favorably until these impairments are removed or alleviated. Begin by asking the school nurse.

3. What are the student's interests and attitudes toward reading? What does Maria like to do in her free time? What are her interests and hobbies? How Maria feels about other things in her life may reflect upon her motivation — or lack of — in her reading. Does she like to read or be read to? What kinds of books does she like? What are some of her favorite book titles? Does someone read to her at home and how often? If you know what a child's interests are, you can incorporate some of them into your remediation program. It will motivate a child to learn to read much quicker if she will be reading about things that interest her. It may even be possible to change a child's attitude toward reading if she is really interested in a subject and wants to find out more about it, especially if she has to read to do it. Having a variety of genres available on varying levels of difficulty to motivate the child to read such as newspapers, magazines, comic books, trade books (e.g., poetry, realistic fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, nonfiction) and reference books is essential. Multicultural selections are always recommended.

Interest inventories and attitude surveys can assess this information quickly and effectively. One of my favorite attitude surveys for elementary students is the *Garfield Elementary Reading Attitude Survey* (McKenna and Kear, 1990). Interest inventories generally include questions about hobbies, school, family, favorite things, and possibly plans for the future (career, dreams, etc.).

4. What skills does the student possess in the following areas: comprehension, phonemic awareness, word recognition and word meaning? Before this question can be answered, you must determine the strategies Maria uses when she reads. For example, does she use picture clues when she comes to a word she does not know? Which language cueing systems does she use — graphophonic (how a word looks and sounds), syntax (word order), semantic (meaning, use of context clues), or schematic (background knowledge)? Does she look for meaning first and then use the rest of the language cueing systems automatically as good readers do? If not, this is a good place to start her on the road to becoming a better reader. (A child needs to understand that reading is a meaning-making process; it is not just a matter of decoding or pronouncing words.)

If Maria has been read to consistently, phonemic awareness (an awareness of sounds in spoken words) develops naturally. Songs, poetry, and reading rhyming books with word play such as Dr. Seuss are an effective way to practice phonemic awareness. This skill is necessary before teaching phonics makes sense (an awareness of sounds in written words). Teaching initial consonants in a meaningful context is recommended as a good starting point since consonant sounds are the most consistent.

If Maria is reading on at least the first grade level, an IRI (Informal Reading Inventory) is one example of a well-established heuristic to assess her sight/meaning vocabulary and comprehension. It typically consists of graded passages, questions on the literal, inferential and critical levels, and word lists in narrative and/or expository text on the first through eighth grade levels. Retellings are also recommended for checking comprehension. A miscue analysis on the oral reading provides valuable information on the child's use of the

four language cueing systems. This IRI assessment should relate test patterns to observations derived from Maria's classroom behavior, in peer settings and at home. One of my favorite informal reading inventories is the Steiglitz (1992). It also includes an assessment for emergent readers using interesting pictures. If one can identify the knowledge a child has in the areas of comprehension, vocabulary and phonics, a teacher can build on it and provide instruction toward "filling in the gaps" needed to allow for success in reading.

5. What is the parental attitude toward reading? As in any case, teachers are simply not "miracle workers." Educators agree that the first and most important teacher is the parent. Learning to read, write, and speak need to be fostered outside the classroom as well. This is especially true for a child who is experiencing difficulties in these areas. Parents can do much for their children by supporting outside activities and experiences aimed at reinforcing strategies which can help their child read (e.g., library trips, access to books, encouragement, designated reading time). Having books available in the home is crucial. Jim Trelease (1994) emphasizes the "three B's" consisting of books, a bookrack (in the bathroom), and a bed lamp as necessary for creating a reader.

Different cultures have different attitudes toward literacy. Some literacy events occur as music, storytelling, letter writing, daily visits to church, and so on. Reading may or may not be an important part of the family's culture. If it is not, it is important to look to the type of literacy in which the family is involved to tie in to that view appropriately in the classroom.

For example, you discover that Maria's family has very few books, most of them owned by the children. It appears that her parents do understand the importance of the children

having books of their own to read, even though they do not participate in this type of literacy. In addition, Maria does attend mass daily where literature and music are an important part of the service. You can share pictures of Maria's first communion and little missals that she brings to school with her classmates. They are representations of literacy events to be celebrated.

Literacy values start in the home. If Maria has not and does not have exposure to quality literature outside of the school environment, her literacy knowledge will be limited. If the parents/family do not support literacy/academics, the child will miss the quality, one-on-one learning support of accomplishing homework. Because a teacher cannot spend this individualized time with each student each day, the parent's support is needed.

Vygotsky's research promotes the value of socially-mediated dialogue to construct meaning. His theory of "The Zone of Proximal Development" develops the importance of an adult's help (or more capable peer) in learning. What a child can accomplish with the adult "today" they will be able to accomplish alone "tomorrow." The parent's commitment, support and attitude toward learning may well be the most important factor influencing a child's school success (Vygotsky, 1978).

6. What is the student's perception of her reading problem? The parent's perception? The teacher's perception?

The student: The entire diagnostic process should "involve" Maria through interactive conversations and dialogue. Time for reflection and time for Maria to participate and share her feelings on the selection and development of appropriate strategies is very important! Initially you should

be very careful about establishing a relationship with Maria in order to maintain a strong and trusting work environment as a base for teaching.

The parent: Any home circumstances that affect the child's social, emotional or psychological well-being, and hinder the child's ability to perform her school functions because of anger, fear, or discouragement should be carefully considered. Using a sentence-completion screening can help to reveal social and emotional adjustment. Parent interviews may also be beneficial. Other factors to be aware of that could affect the student's progress are:

- sibling attitudes toward reading/school
- parent's perception of child's ability
- absences in past school year and academic past
- number of moves during academic past

The teacher: Additional factors to consider include the match between your philosophical approach towards teaching, the reading program used, and the learning style of the child. An auditory learner may succeed with a phonics program, whereas a visual or kinesthetic learner may not. The classroom environmental set-up may also have an impact on the child's success and/or motivation to learn. For instance, a child suffering from A.D.D. (attention deficit disorder) may not do well in a whole language classroom because of the possible distractions and noise level.

7. Is the student reading and receiving instruction in her primary language? Last, but not least, this is the most important question for second language learners. Not considering a child's cultural and linguistic background (when they are learning a different culture and language) would be detrimental to the child's ability to learn. Cultural differences affect how children will learn, interact and communicate

because each culture gives different values and status to being able to read and write. This fact greatly influences how literacy manifests itself within a culture. You as the teacher must be aware of these differences since the child's ability and receptivity to learning could be affected if they are not supported. Research has shown that the methods used to help the second language learner function in their new surroundings are also beneficial to the target language learners. All students will benefit in an atmosphere where community, value and equality are promoted.

It is important to consider the following factors:

- Is a bilingual, sheltered instruction or pull-out ESL program available?
- Is primary language reading material available?
- What is the student's level of English acquisition?
- Are social-cultural interaction differences accounted for?

Many studies show that children who speak English as a second language should be encouraged to learn basic communication skills in English while building a cognitive base in their primary language (Spanish in the case of Maria). Then children do not fall behind in academic studies while gaining a second language. If the child is not receiving instruction or reading in her primary language, then that is what the child needs, not remediation. If it is not possible to provide the child with instruction in her primary language, then sheltered instruction techniques (e.g., visuals, repetition, manipulatives, realia, simple speech, gestures) need to be used in the classroom or an aide provided to help the child with her work in the primary language. It will not help a child to give her reading remediation in English when she needs to develop a base of strong skills in her primary language first before she

can begin to transfer those skills to learning in the English language.

Since time is of the essence for elementary teachers, narrowing down the initial list of 20 questions was essential to get to the "nitty-gritty" of what is really important when doing a case study on a child in reading/language arts. These questions begin the process for doing the case study (see Appendix B for the complete case study outline used in this course). The primary goal should be to get students interested in joining the "literacy club" (Smith, 1984), to turn them on to reading. Students learn to read by reading. Giving students opportunities daily for free voluntary reading (FVR) according to Stephen Krashen in *The Power of Reading* makes the difference between a reader and a nonreader. These seven questions (see Appendix A) get down to the basic facts, elements and issues of what really matters. However, it is important to realize that the teacher makes the real difference. This quote was submitted by one of my graduate students as part of her final paper:

"The difference between good readers and struggling readers is often the ability to apply reading strategies at the right time. Learning to read is not difficult. But having the opportunity to read with an understanding teacher, guiding in the right direction, can be the difference between the literate life and the illiterate one" (Donna Gordon, Reading Specialist).

#### References

- Gardner, H. (1993). *Frames of mind: Theory of multiple intelligences*. NY: Basic Books, Inc.
- Harp, B. (1992). Principles of assessment and evaluation in whole language classrooms. In K. Goodman, L. Bird, & Y. Goodman (Eds.), *The whole language catalog: Supplement on authentic assessment*. Santa Rosa CA: American School.

- Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading*. Englewood CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- McKenna, M., & Kear, D. (1990). Measuring attitude toward reading: A new tool for teachers. *The Reading Teacher*, 43, 626-639.
- Smith, F. (1988). *Joining the literacy club*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Stieglitz, E. (1992). *The Stieglitz informal reading inventory*. Boston MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Trelease, J. (1994). *The read-aloud handbook*. NY: Penguin Books.
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University.

*Janet Towell is Coordinator of the Reading Specialist Credential Program at California State University, Stanislaus in Turlock California.*

## Appendix A

### *Case Study Analysis in Reading/Language Arts: Getting to the "Nitty-Gritty"*

1. What are the student's strengths?
2. Is there a physical impairment that is affecting the student's reading?
3. What are the student's interests and attitude toward reading?
4. What skills does the student possess in the following areas: comprehension, phonemic awareness, word recognition and word meaning?
5. What is the parental attitude toward reading?
6. What is the student's perception of her reading problem? The parent's perception? The teacher's perception?
7. Is the student reading and receiving instruction in her primary language?

## Appendix B

Case Study Outline: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Background Information? Based Upon
  - A. Interests?
  - B. Attitude?
  - C. Ability in reading? (Test scores ...)
  - D. Description of current reading program?
  - E. Problem?
2. Strategies?
  - A. Cueing systems? (Semantic? Syntactic? Graphophonic?)
  - B. Predicting? Confirming? Integrating?
3. Level of reading?
  - A. Instructional reading level (oral and silent reading)?
  - B. Capacity level (listening)?
4. Student's concept of reading?
  - A. Bottom-up?
  - B. Top-down?
  - C. Interactive?
5. Reading Strengths? Writing strengths?
  - A.
  - B.
  - C.
6. Reading needs? Writing needs?
  - A.
  - B.
  - C.
7. Recommendations for remediation?
  - A. Parents (list of suggested books for reading aloud and list of books the child can read based on interests and readability).
  - B. School (a minimum of three strategies/activities and examples).
8. Summary of experience
  - A. Conclusions and reflections
  - B. Gaps? (Further questions to be explored).