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Giovanna James

Silver Valley Special Services Cooperative, Pinehurst, Idaho

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Thinking About Making Reading Easy

Giovanna James

Why not use "Hooked on Phonics" with remedial readers? Recently a colleague asked this rhetorical question as we sat waiting for a meeting to begin. She claimed to be "eclectic" in teaching high school reading classes and she was pleased to report on the reading improvement of several students.

During the last school year I had contributed negative input into the decision on whether or not to purchase a "Hooked on Phonics" kit for the high school Special Education Resource Room. Her comment made me realize that I had not clearly explained my reasons. In the end the kit had been borrowed from the parent of one of the Resource Room students and was apparently being used with several students by both the Special Education teacher and this reading teacher.

Her question led me to examine my beliefs about reading, and in particular it brought to mind a question I had been asked to answer on written comps in graduate school: What are the issues regarding making reading easy? As I recall, this was one of those questions that I had chosen to answer in my own way. In other words I had come to the test situation with so much information crammed into my head that I had to spit it out just as I had programmed it in. Nothing else would work. Two years later and safely past the written and oral

exams, I felt like I could explore this question in a thoughtful and meaningful way, with no pressure to satisfy anyone but myself in formulating the answer.

Reading is a meaning-making activity

Dorothy Strickland (1994) recently stated that basic skills are not precursors to actual reading. In fact using skills out of context makes reading harder. So if we are to facilitate students' learning to read it seems important to examine just how we can make that process easier.

Discussions of reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978; Squire, 1990) and reading as a meaning-making activity (Goodman, 1992; Tierney and Pearson, 1983; Wells, 1986) stress the fact that the reader's focus must remain on constructing meaning through interaction with print. The brain can only engage in one process at a time — either attending to letters or attending to meaning (Smith, 1988). Therefore asking children to sound out individual words only slows the reader and prevents reading for meaning.

A program like "Hooked on Phonics" puts the cart before the horse. It assumes that learning phonics will result in good reading. In fact the opposite is true. Phonics is a result, a consequence of good reading rather than a cause. Good readers understand phonics rules because they can read; they do not read because they understand phonics rules (Smith, 1978). So spending class time on phonics may teach phonics, one small part of the reading process, but does not teach reading. Actual reading is the only way to become a fluent and proficient reader.

Much of phonics instruction emphasizes the various vowel sounds and stresses the importance of recognizing these sounds for accurate reading. In reality vowels provide

very little information to the reader. Consonants are much more regular and much more helpful to the reader's meaning-making efforts. Try reading these two sentences and see for yourself:

_ _ _ee _i_ _ _ a_ _ _ _o _o_ _ _e_e _ _o_e _ _o
 e _e_e_ _ _ _e _ _ _oo_ a_ _ _e _eo_ _a_ _ _ _o_
 _e_i_io_.

Thr_ _ g_rls _nd tw_ b_ys w_r_ ch_s_n t_
 r_pr_s_nt th_ sch_l _t th_ g_ _gr_phy c_mp_t_t_n.

(Three girls and two boys were chosen to represent the school at the geography competition.)

Five ways to make reading easy

Here are three suggestions for guiding actual classroom practice and two suggestions for changing attitudes. All will positively affect student performance.

Develop and maximize prior knowledge. Read aloud to students of all ages. This provides knowledge of story schema or structure (Tancock, 1994) as well as "book language", which in turn enables predictions about print. Children need exposure to a variety of genres. In addition, repeated readings of texts result in semi-memorization and allow more accurate guesses and predictions about print (Blum and Koskinen, 1991). Listening to texts on tape is another way to provide repeated readings of favorite texts. Students should follow along with the print as they listen. Use activities which teach children how to think about what they already know and what they expect to learn from a next text. Pre-reading discussion and brainstorming generate many ideas to bring to the text while communicating an appreciation of each child's thoughts and experiences.

Use familiar materials that are fun, interesting, and meaningful. The use of familiar rhymes, songs, and chants is especially effective in facilitating reading for meaning. The rhythm and flow of the language along with prior knowledge of the text allows the student to read without having to examine letters and words to insure accurate decoding of the print.

Allow children to choose their own reading materials (Spaulding, 1992). According to Henk, Stahl and Melnick (1993), a reader's interest and level of involvement in a topic has an important bearing on comprehension. Controlled vocabulary materials are less interesting than literature selections. The reduced number of words makes it more difficult to make meaningful predictions while reading.

Model fast, fluent reading. Demonstrations of what real readers do are instrumental in developing reading behavior in children (Cambourne, 1988). Teachers can model effective strategies like skipping difficult words and focusing on the meaning, reading ahead for clues to the meaning, guessing and asking if the word makes sense in context, and rereading sections which are difficult to understand. Explain what you do and why as you read aloud to students. By reading content area materials to older students the teacher is able to familiarize them with the materials, reveal the schema of the text, activate prior knowledge, and encourage guessing and predicting when reading.

Reading for students provides the support or scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978) necessary to assist students as they gradually become more independent in their reading. "When adults help children to accomplish things that they are unable to achieve alone, they are fostering the development of knowledge and ability ... From this perspective, which places instruction at the heart of development, a child's potential for

learning is revealed and indeed is often realized in interactions with more knowledgeable others." (Wood, 1988, p. 24)

Accept all efforts. Students must learn to be risk-takers if they are to learn something new (Cambourne, 1988). School must be a safe place to learn. Errors must be welcomed as signs of growth rather than interpreted as signs of failure. Teachers can learn to use reading miscues to gain insight into the reading process for individual students (Goodman, Watson, and Burke, 1987).

Expect success of all students. This reduces anxiety in the learning process. A relaxed child can activate prior knowledge and make guesses about print without fear of correction. Constant interruptions and corrections emphasize word accuracy rather than the importance of meaning in print. Requiring close examinations of print for accurate decoding teaches word calling and prevents fast, fluent reading for meaning (Hiebert, 1983).

Older students can participate in content area reading using the jigsaw model (Larrivee, 1989). This method facilitates participation in assignments by reducing the amount of actual reading required — an amount which can seem overwhelming and cause anxiety and avoidance behaviors. When using the jigsaw model, students are placed in small groups or teams. Content area material is broken into sections and each section is assigned to an individual student. Students read and then study their section with members from other groups assigned to the same section. They then return to their own group and teach their section to their group members.

Conclusion

Reading is a meaning-making activity, a construction of meaning by the reader as he/she interacts with the text. Teachers can facilitate this process or make it more difficult for students. Materials which focus attention on letter sounds and individual words slow the student's efforts and interfere with fast, fluent reading for meaning. They result in high school graduates who can complete skills worksheets but who do not read for enjoyment and who cannot read with understanding.

Teachers of reading are responsible for making reading an easy task for students. We can do this in several ways: 1) by showing children how to use their prior knowledge of text as well as topics; 2) by providing access to a variety of motivating reading materials; 3) by modeling real reading behavior; 4) by supporting all attempts and efforts that students make; and 5) by expecting that all students will learn to read.

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Giovanna James is a school psychologist at Silver Valley Special Services Cooperative in Pinehurst, Idaho.