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Using Newspapers With Remedial Secondary Students to Improve Reading and Writing Literacy

**Deborah G. Phelps
Donald D. Pottorff**

Literacy has gained national attention and continues to concern educators, parents, and a business community that relies on a literate work force. The use of newspapers in the classroom with secondary remedial reading students is a supplementary strategy that is worthy of attention. Newspapers provide special elements that have been well received by secondary students with reading problems.

Secondary students with reading difficulties typically have many problems. Repeated failures have embittered many, and are often the basis of negative attitudes, inappropriate behavioral responses and broken spirits unwilling to take risks which may lead to additional failures. Many prefer to assume roles of clowns or tough guys over being seen as students with reading problems. Changing this pattern can be a major task for even a seasoned teacher.

Discrepancy between theory and practice

Adding to the problem is the fact that few secondary schools have a systematic, consistent reading program. Current research suggests that secondary reading

programs should include reading instruction in content classrooms bolstered by integrated developmental and remedial programs that focus on content support (Roe, Stoodt and Burns, 1990). The authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* concluded that the most logical place for instruction of reading and thinking strategies is in social studies and science rather than in separated lessons about reading (Anderson, Herbert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1985).

However, current research and theory on reading is often not reflected in the educational practices in our schools. A study by Gee and Forester (1988) suggests that the majority of secondary schools either have no organized reading or offer reading instruction in a single class with a reading label.

A factor contributing to the problem appears to be some resistance by veteran content area faculty members to including reading strategies in their lessons. The focus predominantly continues to be on content mastery. Reading instruction is often viewed as a separate content area, or as being the responsibility of the elementary teacher who has had the training needed to give reading instruction.

Using the newspaper with disabled readers

The newspaper, which has proved to be an excellent source of instructional material for secondary remedial readers, is adaptable to a variety of teaching strategies (Lehr and Harris, 1989). Newspapers provide variety and fresh material with which few book publishers can compete. Even a discouraged reader may find an item of interest which may be in the form of a classified advertisement, advice column, sports event, weather report, horoscope, movie review, fashion/beauty announcement, sensational

occurrence, article involving teens, or news of local celebrities. Generally, at least one of the topics will interest most students.

Commercial reading materials tend to be a reminder of past failures and are often resented or branded as babyish. Many become dated quickly since teenage fads and interests change so frequently. These materials are often a source of embarrassment for the remedial reader because they are different from the typical high school textbooks. Criscuolo and Gallagher (1989) point out that for the hard to reach or troubled teenager, newspapers do not look like books, and have none of the negative associations that many students feel toward textbooks. In addition, they are not leveled. The remedial reader uses the same newspaper as the honor student.

Initially, students need to have the newspaper format needs clearly explained so that they can use it more efficiently. Once this is accomplished and students have been given adequate time to explore a few of their own interests, instructional strategies can be employed. Since poor readers are generally passive readers (Bristow, 1985) many self-monitoring strategies need to be taught, practiced and reinforced until students can experience their benefits.

Enhancement of comprehension. Comprehension can be fostered by introducing the journalistic approach to story copy. Students are taught to search for the answers to who, what, where, when, why and how as they read, helping them to categorize information mentally (Ammann and Mittlesteadt, 1989). The inference questions – how and why – may require more practice before mastery is achieved. Semantics can also be taught by helping students discover the meaning of new words through context.

Individual conferences are beneficial for monitoring student comprehension and fostering the development of personal rapport with students who may feel threatened by teachers. In addition, conferences can provide a forum for discovering particular student interests which can be accommodated with alternative materials (Brozo, 1990).

Critical thinking skills. The editorial page is excellent for encouraging development of critical thinking skills. Students may react either verbally or in writing to an editorial with agreement or disagreement, while supporting their individual viewpoints. Letters written to the editor are beneficial responses which allow students to express themselves in writing.

Vocabulary increased. Word knowledge can be improved through article context. Unfamiliar vocabulary can be put into word banks and used with special activities to sustain understanding. Students can then listen to television and radio broadcasts for additional reinforcement for the words they have learned. Often follow-up newspaper articles will appear helping vocabulary words to become an active part of their vocabulary.

Creative writing opportunities. Research offers strong support for the reading-writing connection (e.g., May, 1990) and many opportunities for creative and varied writing activities are present in every new edition of the newspaper. The advice column can be used by having students respond to write-in questions, or they can write their own questions. Responses to questions can then be shared with the rest of the class, or compared and contrasted with the advice columnist's counsel. Students may enjoy writing a review for a movie that they have recently seen and giving it

a rating. The class can then enjoy comparing student reviews with those found in the paper.

Graphophonic skills. Graphophonic skills can be improved by using vocabulary from the paper to structure a lesson around a subskill. Words can be cut out and placed in categories and spelling patterns compared. Structural analysis within context can also be taught based on examples that appear in the paper.

Increased general knowledge. Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of using the newspaper is the wealth of background information that students gain. Schemata are enhanced as students gain valuable insights into world events as well as their own lives, and develop a foundation for further learning. Many students are surprised and encouraged when they find that they are able to understand issues that previously seemed beyond their own understanding. Familiarity with the paper also provides the reader with a lifelong learning tool. Extension activities are numerous and special projects can be done in any area. Criscuolo and Gallagher (1989) report that students in one particular school made scrapbooks on topics of special interest and maintained them throughout the year. Conferences were scheduled with the teacher to share the information along the way.

Extension activities. Other extension activities include chart-making using weather forecasts to record the percentage of accurate predictions for a designated period of time. Research projects can be done when students desire more information on their subject; classes can publish their own paper; advertisements can be scrutinized for misleading statements; classified ads written; and employment possibilities examined.

Conclusion

The need for secondary programs that emphasize reading strategies is obvious. Those students hindered by inadequate reading skills are disadvantaged in nearly all of their subject areas because reading is an integral component of content literacy. The greatest differences in reading levels appear in the secondary school where it is not unusual for students reading at the elementary level to sit in the same classroom with students reading and comprehending at a college level. One technique that has proven successful in motivating and working with this population of students is that of using the newspaper in the classroom to improve reading and writing skills.

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