
10-1-1986

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Recommended Citation

Gray, M. J., & Henneberry, M. (1986). Good Readers and Their Reading Strategies. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 27(1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol27/iss1/6

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GOOD READERS AND THEIR READING STRATEGIES

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Those who are responsible for elementary reading programs should have as a major concern recognizing what children do as they engage in the act of reading. F. Smith (1973) makes this clear in his statement, "Find out what a child is trying to do and then help him do it." (p. 195)

In order to take a first step in gaining this information we need to have children provide answers to some pertinent questions. One of these would be what children consider as the criteria for good reading. A particularly relevant question, especially at the beginning stages, would be related to the word attack strategies employed when meeting an unknown word. Will those

who share the same criteria for good reading use similar word attack strategies when meeting an unknown word?

To secure this information, responses to the following questions (adapted from Southgate, Arnold, and Johnson, 1981) were obtained.

-
1. Do you think you are a good reader?
 2. Why do you think so?
 3. If you come to a word you don't know when you are reading alone, what do you do about it?

A group of students who were just completing their third grade year in a suburban parochial school supplied the responses. Third grade was selected since at this stage most children have sufficient experience in reading so that they have begun to experience success in independent reading efforts.

Twenty-four children, 15 girls and 9 boys from the same classroom, were questioned. The school was located in a suburban community outside a large Midwestern city. Most of the parents in the community were professional people, with a large number of the fathers being either doctors or lawyers. Many of the children had broad experiential backgrounds which would contribute to their success in reading. Eighteen of the 24 children considered themselves good readers. Two were not sure, three thought they were average, and one thought he was not a good reader.

It would seem likely that children who indicated the same criteria for good reading would have the same view of the reading process. It would also seem that they would use the same word attack strategies when attacking unknown words. This, then, was the hypothesis to be tested.

Children indicating the same criteria for good reading use the same word attack strategies when attacking unknown words.

Criteria for good readers fell into 7 categories which were subsumed by the authors into three major areas.

1. Enjoying reading and/or understanding what is read.
2. Accuracy in reading performance, or
3. Opinion of adult regarding reading performance.

Four word attack strategies were named by these students.

1. context clues,
2. phonics,
3. asking parents or teachers, or
4. using the dictionary.

Results

Eight children's responses fell into the category of enjoying reading and/or understanding what was read. On examining their word attack strategies as illustrated in Table 1, it can be noted that four of them made use of context clues, one of these in combination with the use of the dictionary; two made use of phonics; one asked an adult for assistance, and one did not specify his method.

If one considers reading a meaningful process, it might be expected that s/he would make use of context as a major word attack strategy. Of the four children recommending the use of context, three emphasized the meaningful aspect of what was read.

Five children's responses were related to accuracy in reading. An examination of their responses as shown in Table 2 makes apparent that most relied on phonics. This, too, would not be unexpected as their emphasis is on accuracy in word recognition. Four of the children recommended phonics; one of these would also consult his mother. A fifth child would consult his mother.

Five of the children relied on the opinion of parents or teachers or on report cards as the criterion for their success in reading. Only one of these children recommended the use of context as a word attack strategy and that in combination with asking an adult. Three others would also consult an adult for aid. This is not too surprising since these children rely on the opinions of others regarding their capacity in reading. The other student would look it up in the dictionary.

Table 1

Criteria for Good Readers - - - - - Word Attack Strategies
 Enjoyment and Understanding

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Because each time I finish a book, I read another one | I ask my parents or teacher. |
| 2. I read all the time. | Try and learn it by spelling it out. |
| 3. It's not that I can read good; it's because I enjoy books. | I look at the sentence again and try to figure out what it means. |
| 4. I like to read. | Sound it out. |
| 5. I can read hard books. | Keep on reading and it gives me clues. |
| 6. I can read fast and still know what I am reading. | Go and finish the sentence.. see if it has any clues.
Get the dictionary. |
| 7. I can read and understand what I am reading. | Read the rest of the sentence and see if it has clue |
| 8. I read 2 chapters out of a book every night | Strategies not specified |

 Accuracy in Reading Performance

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. I can read fast | Try to pronounce it. |
| 2. I understand big words and it's easy for me to read. | I sound it out.
I ask my mom. |
| 3. I think I know a lot of vocabulary. | Ask my mom. |
| 4. I have practiced enough. | I sound it into syllables. |
| 5. I don't make lots of mistakes. | Sound it out. |

 Opinion of Adult

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. My teacher said so. | Look it up in a dictionary. |
| 2. The teacher says, "Very good." | Ask my mom or dad. |

3. People have told me and
on my report card.

I would read the rest
of the sentence and try to
figure it out.

I would ask someone
what the word is.

4. I get good grades.

Ask my mom , or
sister.

5. My mother said I am.

I would ask my mom
what the word is.

Two children were not sure if they were good readers, three considered themselves only average, and one felt she was not a good reader. Table 4 gives a more complete picture of their responses. Three of these children would consult the dictionary, two would ask others for assistance, and one did not specify the method of word attack. For these children who did not have such a positive view of their ability, reliance was heavy on someone else, or on the dictionary.

The hypothesis would have to be rejected as students with the same criteria for good reading did not always use the same word attack strategies.

Discussion

It is interesting to note, however, that the children in Categories 1 and 2 relied heavily on themselves for determining unknown words. Their views of successful readers did seem to have an influence on the word attack strategies they employed. Reliance on context was made by four of the eight students who viewed reading as a meaningful and/or enjoyable process. For those who viewed accuracy in reading as a major criterion of successful reading, phonics was the recommended method of word attack. Four of the five students in the category did mention phonics as their preference.

Those children in Category 3 relied on an outside adult to indicate whether or not they were good readers. In a similar vein their methods of word attack also centered on outside assistance. Four of the five children mentioned asking an adult for assistance.

Table 4

Criteria for Good Readers - - - - - Word Attack Strategies

Not Sure

- | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Yes, I guess so. | I ask my mom. |
| 2. I'm not sure. | I look it up in the dictionary. |

Average Readers

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. I am an okay reader, nor fast, nor slow. | Strategies unspecified |
| 2. Sometimes I stutter. | I look it up in the dictionary. |
| 3. So-so, I don't know. | I look it up in the dictionary. |

Not a Good Reader.

- | | |
|-------|----------------------|
| 1. No | I go and ask my mom. |
|-------|----------------------|

For the final group of children who were not sure whether they were good readers, who felt that they were average readers, or who felt that they were poor readers, the reliance on the dictionary was predominant. This seems to be an unusual response, since less capable readers would likely be less competent than would good readers in selecting appropriate meanings for the particular context in which the word was found. It would also seem reasonable to assume that they would not be as competent in locating words in the dictionary as would more skilled readers. Surely for most children, as well as for adults, the use of the dictionary does not seem to be the preferred source for word attack.

Recommendations for Further Research

The sample of students in this study was very small in number, limited to one grade level, and to one school. It would be of value to obtain the same information from a greater number of students at various grade levels and in different settings to determine whether views of criteria for good reading vary, and along with those views a variation

in preferred word attack strategies.

If this is shown to be true on a broader scale than that demonstrated in this study, teachers would be well advised to examine children's criteria for good reading and preferred methods of word attack. This would give them some insight into what children are trying to do as they read. What they learn should serve as a firm base from which to launch effective reading programs leading to both success in word attack and reading for enjoyment and understanding.

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