

10-1-1985

## Observations of a Reading Specialist

Gary Kay  
*Plantation Public Schools, Florida*

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

Kay, G. (1985). Observations of a Reading Specialist. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 26 (1). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol26/iss1/10](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol26/iss1/10)

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).

# OBSERVATIONS OF A READING RESOURCE SPECIALIST

Gary Kay  
Reading Specialist  
Plantation, Florida

In 1983 the Florida legislature made a critical decision concerning the improvement of reading in the secondary schools. It provided funds for the creation of a new position, the reading resource specialist. Each high school was allowed one, whose specific areas of responsibility included the following: a) contributing the expertise needed to prepare the school's total reading program, b) working with the school's curriculum person in planning and implementing the basic skills remediation program as determined by the Florida State Assessment Accountability Act of 1976, c) providing individual diagnostic testing to enable better prescriptive approaches for classroom instruction, d) assisting the school staff in organizing and managing reading skills as an integral part of all subject areas, e) providing inservice training for school staff in the area of reading, f) participating in a team teaching effort with classroom teachers, and g) interpreting the reading program for both parents and the community. In August 1983 I was hired as a reading resource specialist at Coral Spring's High School. With the generous help of the administration and teaching staff I attempted to fulfill these ambitious objectives. I set out to prove that the legislature had indeed made a wise decision and that the services of a resource specialist were essential to a well coordinated school program. I intended to make the Coral Spring's program a model that other schools could follow.

## I. Getting out the Word

My immediate task was to make as many teachers as possible aware of my presence. I introduced myself to department heads, explained my role as a resource specialist, and gave each a list of general areas of assistance I could offer--reading a text, skimming, vocabulary study, test-taking strategies, reference skills, and so on. The department heads then circulated it and told those teachers who were interested to see me. Before I knew it I had a full calendar.

## II. The SQ3R Method of Reading a Text

My first goal was to teach students how to read their textbooks effectively (with the greatest degree of understanding) and efficiently (in the least amount of time required to achieve that understanding). From the many study formulas devised to fulfill this purpose I chose the original, Robinson's SQ3R (1961), because I felt it embodied sound learning principles and was simple for students to apply.

For several classes I gave a one period lecture-discussion on "How to Read a Text." I began each session with the question, "How many textbooks do you think you will be required to read during the course of your lives?" Answers ranged from twenty-five to one hundred. I observed that students would probably be required to read their texts at least twice, and that if they were shown how to read effectively they would probably do better on tests, find their courses more enjoyable, and earn extra time for leisure and recreation.

While teaching the SQ3R I also introduced learning concepts and study skill strategies. For example, I recommended that after they surveyed a chapter, students should then decide on the number of pages they would study before they take a break. This procedure motivates them to read specific content with a clearly defined goal, a much better strategy than deciding merely to "study" for forty-five minutes. I further indicated that key terms that appear in italics and at the end of a chapter are often present in a section usually entitled, "Identify the following," or, "Define these terms." Students could list these words and their definitions on separate sheets and review each carefully before the exam.

The "recite" step, I noted, could be performed by silent or oral repetition, notetaking, or underlining. (A follow-up lecture is probably required to teach students the important skills of notetaking and underlining.) This critical step, properly performed, helps students retain more information because they are reinforcing their understanding of ideas they have just encountered. As Pauk observes: "Recitation strengthens the original memory trace, because your mind must actively think about the new material" (p. 95). I told students that if they were fortunate enough to have a few free minutes before the end of a class, they should spend

this valuable time reciting the major concepts they had just been taught. If this time were unavailable, they could silently repeat the main ideas as they walked to their next class. However, they should watch their step or they might bump into other similarly motivated students.

When teaching SQ3R to students, I selected two passages from the textbook they were using. They read the first with no assistance and the other with prequestions based on the heading that they and I suggested. Often the difference in performance on the two passages was quite impressive; thus students discovered for themselves the potential benefits they could derive by actively applying this method.

## II. Vocabulary Study

Since vocabulary study forms an integral part of all content area courses, I gave as many classes as possible an introductory lecture on the role of vocabulary in reading and learning. I began by describing the two kinds of vocabularies we all possess: receptive and expressive (Burmeister, 1978). Our receptive vocabulary includes those words whose meanings we learn through listening and reading. Our expressive involves those words we use in our speech and writing. Generally, a word must become part of our receptive vocabulary before we can use it with confidence and accuracy. And the only means of enlarging our receptive vocabulary is by hearing new words spoken by others or by seeing them in print. Therefore, I warned that students who refuse to read, or who read infrequently, are severely restricting their vocabulary development process. Moreover, acquiring new words by reading is superior to listening because one can see how the word is spelled, can examine it in context, and has the time to study the sentence in which it appears.

I also cautioned students to avoid the insidious process of memorizing a list of words for a test and inevitably forgetting most of them too soon afterwards. Better strategies that require a careful examination of words and thereby engender a greater depth of information processing include looking for familiar roots and affixes, examining the content in which the target word appears, and creating a sentence that clarifies the meaning of the target word. An additional strategy involves "visual-

izing" a person, event or situation that students could relate to the word under study. Thus, to remember the word "loquacious" students could visualize a talkative person with his/her mouth wide open. For further reinforcement, they could draw a picture. Finally, when studying long lists of words they could group many under categories, such as aspects of communication, personality traits, emotions, physical characteristics, geographical features, and so on.

In some classes I had time to discuss the concept of connotation and to encourage students to be sensitive to the subtle shades of meaning of different words. Follow-up exercises could involve an examination of the connotations of various names for products--for example, Brute connotes savage masculinity; LeBaron suggests elegance and sophistication; and Joy signifies exhilaration. Students could be given a list of products and asked to create names for each that would have rich, positive connotations, thereby making the product more appealing to potential consumers.

### III. The Language-Experience Approach

The language-experience approach (see Dechant, pp. 231-232, and Harris and Sipay, p. 67) proved very successful with students whose reading skills were well below average, students who had been forced throughout their school years to read materials that they usually found to be difficult, uninteresting and remote from their experiences. I met with two English teachers whose students had reading levels that were approximately five to two years below grade level. Together we devised the following strategy.

1. We divided each class of 14-16 students into two groups of seven. I directed one group and the classroom teacher directed the other.
2. We provided six or seven topics for each group, and students brainstormed additional ones. Members of the group voted on each topic and the one that received the most votes was selected. My groups chose "A Trip to New York," and "How I Plan to Spend My Christmas Vacation." If a teacher wishes, s/he might offer pictures of interesting scenes and situations, and students could suggest topics that relate to each picture.
3. Each group formed a close circle. One student volunteered the first sentence and moving clockwise and in

turn each student added another to the developing story. Students were allowed to pass their turn; however, as often as possible we encouraged reticent students to contribute. When necessary, we prompted.

4. Students wrote down each sentence as it was given so that they could have a personal copy after the story was finished.

5. Since the experience was designed to be positive and non-threatening, we made no corrections in grammar or style. If students asked how a particular word was spelled, we did give them the correct spelling.

6. Since some time remained before the end of the period, students also created questions based on their story. I recommended that questions concern its main idea, supporting details, sequence of events and key words.

7. The teacher collected the stories and typed them with the names of all students involved appearing at the top.

Next class, students of both groups exchanged stories and discussed their contents. Teachers may want to structure the discussion by having each group answer questions that the other created.

This activity could be scheduled regularly, once a month, or every two weeks. Near the end of the year, the teacher could compile a booklet of all the stories written. Art and journalism departments could contribute an attractive cover page and lively illustrations. The authors, students who daily experience frustration and failure, would derive a sense of recognition and self-esteem when they see their names in print.

#### IV. Television Programs

For another activity I showed students an episode of the sitcom "Happy Days" and required them to analyze it as a short story. I began with a brief review of the major elements of a short story, emphasizing conflict, since it was an essential component of the taped show. My prequestion for each class was to identify the internal and external conflicts and to examine reasons for their occurrence. Discussion of the program began with a close examination of the previous question. Students then worked on a study guide which contained questions concerning characterization and theme. After they shared their answers, we began to compare different aspects of

the show with other stories they had read.

The use of television in schools is not restricted to the showing of sitcoms, movies, and plays. Teachers of history, geography, psychology, science and other disciplines are making frequent yet judicious use of this potentially powerful teaching aid. The resource specialist can offer considerable assistance to these teachers. Working together, both educators could create a series of questions: prequestions to stimulate student interest and guide their viewing, adjunct questions to help them follow the logical development of concepts and further direct their subsequent viewing, and postquestions to enable them to synthesize the information presented. Advance organizers (see Ausubel, 1960, 1963) and structured overviews (see Estes, Mills & Barron, 1969) might also be used.

#### V. The School Newspaper

The school newspaper is a natural source for reading skill development. Since this paper deals with many aspects of student involvement, students are likely to be interested in its content. Additionally, the paper is written by peers in familiar and comprehensible language.

I suggested to the newspaper advisor the creation of a column called "Dear Teach." Students could write letters describing school related problems and a selected panel of teachers could offer solutions.

The reading resource specialist might also write a column containing important hints regarding reading and study skills. This column need not be written for each publication, perhaps only when the content is relevant or timely. For example, an article about test-taking skills could precede mid-term exams. When several classes have research papers assigned, a column could describe how to extract salient information from reading materials.

The resource specialist can also help classroom teachers use the newspaper as a means of improving reading skills. Using selected articles, teachers could pose questions on main ideas, supporting details and organizational patterns. Further analysis might focus on author's tone, intent, unstated assumptions and use of language.

## Concluding Remarks

This list of suggested activities for the reading resource specialist could be expanded endlessly. In fact, with the myriad services that specialists can provide, it is not naive to expect that after a single year of their presence in the schools, administrators, staff, and students will ask the question, already articulated by Becky Williams, reading coordinator of Broward County: "How did we ever get along without them?"

## REFERENCES

(Author's note--For a more comprehensive description of the duties and responsibilities of the reading resource specialist, see Florida Statute 233 057.)

Ausubel, D. P. The use of advance organizers in the learning and retention of meaningful verbal material. Journal of Educational Psychology, 1960, 51, 267-272.

----- The psychology of meaningful verbal learning. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1963.

Burmeister, L.E. Reading strategies for middle and secondary school teachers. (2nd ed.). Reading, MA: Addison Welsley, 1978.

Dechant, E. V. Improving the teaching of reading. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975.

Estes, T.H., D.C.Mills & F. Barron. Three methods of introducing subjects to a reading-learning task in content subjects. In Herber & Sanders (Eds.), Research in the content areas. First Year Report. Syracuse: Reading and Language Arts Center, 1969.

Harris, A.J. & E.R.Sipay. How to increase reading ability. (6th ed.). New York: Longman, Inc., 1975.

Pauk, Walter. How to study in college. (3rd ed.). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984.

Robinson, F. Effective Study. (Rev. Ed.). New York: Harper & Row, 1961.