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STRATEGIES FOR INDEPENDENTLY ATTACKING UNRECOGNIZED WORDS

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"What's this word, Mrs. Kalb?" asked Matt.

"Mrs. Kalb sighed. "You should be able to sound it out, Matt. It follows the short vowel rule we learned just yesterday."

Sound familiar? Many remedial readers--in skill lessons--seem to have satisfactory command of the phonic or structural analysis subskill on which they are working. They can satisfactorily complete a worksheet, play a game, or engage in an activity requiring the use of the subskill. But, like Matt, they often cannot reliably apply these same skills in functional reading situations when they meet an unrecognized word. They are able to handle individual subskills in isolation but when faced with a situation in which they must respond to and manipulate several of these skills in a non-mechanical manner, that is, where they must make decisions, they seem unable to perform equally well.

Guthrie (1973), in an impressive study comparing normal and disabled readers, concluded that "a lack of interfacilitation among skills is debilitating for the disabled children" (p. 17). He believes that interfacilitation among subskills is necessary for normal reading and that one source of disability for poor readers is their lack of integration of decoding subskills.

Jenkins, et al (1980) asked 17 good and 17 poor third grade readers to pronounce nonsense words such as clide, sarwinky, and weapadoot in isolation. They found that the good readers were significantly more flexible in their attempts than were the poor readers, many of whom either continuously repeated a pronunciation or gave one that was entirely unrelated to the key word. Even though given repeated opportunities to correctly pronounce these words, poor readers as a group didn't change each pronunciation or think of reasonable alternatives.

Possible Explanations

There are several plausible explanations for this depressing phenomenon. One is that these students have not mastered the subskill to a level where its use is automatic (Samuels, 1976). This explanation would require that these

children receive additional practice in the subskills until automaticity is reached.

Another possible explanation is that of Piaget (1958) who holds that at the concrete operations stage of mental development, ages 7-11, children can't simultaneously manipulate two or more variables but can only focus on one of them at a time. This explanation provides some insight into why some five to eight-year-olds behave as they do when faced with an unrecognized word. But it doesn't specify what we can do instructionally to help these children other than to wait for them to reach a subsequent stage of mental development. Neither does it explain why older remedial readers who have attained stages of mental development beyond that of concrete operations still are also unable to apply learned subskills in functional reading situations to sound out unrecognized words.

A third possibility is that these readers lack a systematic strategy for independently attacking an unrecognized word, i.e., they have not been taught nor have they practiced what to do in such situations.

Suggested Strategies

Several reading authorities have outlined strategies they believe will help remedy this deficiency. Evelyn Spache (1982) suggests a complicated procedure for attacking monosyllabic words.

1. What is the sound of the first letter or blend? Finish reading the sentence. What makes sense here with this beginning sound or blend? Now do you know the word? If not, go on to step 2.
2. If there is one vowel at the beginning or middle, try the short sound of the vowel.
3. If there is one vowel in the middle and an e or a at the end, try the long vowel.
4. If there are two vowels together, try the long sound for the first vowel, except for oi, oy, ou, ew, or ui.
5. Say the whole word. If that does not make sense, try the other vowel sound.
6. Now do you know the word? If not, write it down. Go on with your reading and get help later.(p.63)

It must be noted that, before this procedure can be

used effectively, the child must know the short and long sounds of the vowels. Also, it applies only to monosyllabic words and young children may have difficulty recognizing whether a word is monosyllabic, e.g., thought vs. even. Last, it is too complicated for young children to learn and use as it is given.

However, each step--plus step 6--could be taught individually to children after they had learned the requisite phonic principle. A chart could be made showing steps 1 and 6 and the procedure explained and modeled by the teacher. Ideally the teacher would then present a sentence containing a word the children couldn't identify, e.g., He had strong arms, and have them model the steps. The chart might be displayed and referred to whenever an unrecognized word needed decoding. As each step was taught, the chart could be expanded, allowing the children to practice using several steps to arrive at the word's pronunciation.

If a child meets an unrecognized word while reading orally, however, it's probably best to tell the child the word, particularly if the children are in groups. Later, the teacher can refer to the chart and discuss with the child or the whole group what might be done to decode the word successfully.

Wilson (1972) suggests a seven-step procedure for use with multisyllabic words.

1. Look carefully at the word from left to right. (Although this step may appear to be elementary, it is often all that is necessary.)
2. Examine the context for contextual clues. (Read the whole sentence.)
3. Examine the word for structural characteristics: prefixes, suffixes, and compound words.
4. Divide the word into syllables and try to pronounce it. As stated earlier, this technique is often sufficient for older readers.
5. Establish the vowel sounds and attempt to pronounce them.
6. Sound out all the letters and attempt to pronounce them.
7. If at this point the student still is unable to derive the word's pronunciation or meaning, he/she

should: first, be referred to the dictionary; second, be directed to use word attack skills which will unlock the word; or third, be told the word.

He suggests putting these steps on a chart in a readily available place so it can be easily referred to.

It would be possible to incorporate Spache's suggestions on sounding out vowel letters with Wilson's step 5 where he merely admonishes the reader to "attempt to pronounce them" but gives no specific suggestions as to how to do this. This specificity is a strength in Spache's steps.

The remedial readers with whom I'm acquainted are nearly always unable to use such a procedure if all the steps are presented at once; they require smaller "chunks" taught over a period of time and each one integrated with the ones previously learned. As with Spache's steps, explicit instruction, teacher modeling, practice by the children, and repeated application are necessary if this procedure is to become more automatically and habitually used by children.

Readers need to understand that these procedures offer no guarantees that they'll produce a recognizable pronunciation. Many monosyllabic words are spelled irregularly, occasionally multisyllabic words don't follow common syllabication generalizations (e.g., u'ni/form, dec'o/rate), and sometimes context is inadequate to cue pronunciation of the word. And sometimes two of these situations may be combined as in "They wanted to fete the new king." In these instances, independence may be beyond the grasp of the reader.

Reader Application and Flexibility

Durkin (1983) lucidly illustrates how readers should flexibly apply procedures such as those outlined above. This is how she believes a reader should think while trying to determine the pronunciation of prove in "That doesn't prove a thing."

The last e probably means one syllable. Two vowels. The o has the long sound so that's \bar{o} ---pr \bar{o} v \emptyset . Pr \bar{o} ve? I never heard that word before. I'll try the short sound: \check{o} ---pr \check{o} v \emptyset . Gee, that's not a word either.

Let's see. I'll try some other words: prāv, prēv, prīv, pr--I can't even say it with a long u sound. I better keep going; proov--Oh, proov. Sure. That doesn't prove a thing. (p. 194)

Or, similarly with the multisyllabic word giddy in the sentence, "The children were too giddy to hear what the man said."

I'll divide it between the d's. The first syllable probably sounds like kid so that would be jid. The y has the long e sound so the last syllable is de. Jiddy. Jiddy? I never heard of a word like that. Maybe g doesn't have the soft sound. I'll try the hard one. That would be giddy. That's okay. The children weretoo giddy to hear what the man said.(194)

To help children be flexible and to vary possible sounds and syllabication (as well as putting the pronounced word into context to see whether it makes sense) as Durkin suggests, teachers will have to "walk children through the process," step by step, with words they don't recognize. Then the children must imitate the teacher, verbalizing the process (to the degree possible with their limited ability to express themselves).

Conclusion

Learning this skill, just like learning the short sound of e or how to divide between medial consonants, must be systematically and regularly taught to children and used by them. A casual explanation now and then won't suffice anymore than it would for learning decoding skills.

Even though we must provide children with the competence to use these skills in a functional reading situation so that they can successfully attack unrecognized words, there are some problems. One is that this technique isn't described in any basal reader teacher's manual, there are no worksheets to teach it, I have never seen it in any scope and sequence chart, and few methods textbooks include it.

Second, a teacher is needed. This process requires

interaction between a child and a human being who can explain this process at the child's level of understanding; a human being who can demonstrate to children what to do and how to do it and help the child know when and how to do it; a human being who can incorporate the process into functional situations when it is appropriate.

Maybe we can help the Mats of this world.

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