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MONITORING PROGRESS TOWARD INDEPENDENT SILENT READING

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If fluent silent reading for meaning is the overall goal of learning to read, what are the major indicators of progress toward that goal for beginning readers? What further understanding of the process of moving from non-reading to independent silent reading is to be gained through naturalistic research of beginning readers? In considering questions such as these this study of beginning readers was conceived. Particular attention centered on (1) the reader's attainment of oral fluency, (2) the reader's ability to achieve meaning using a modified cloze procedure, and (3) the reader's ability to write a sentence independently. Each skill was viewed as a preliminary step toward becoming an independent silent reader.

There is considerable empirical evidence that oral fluency training improves overall reading ability. Chomsky (1978) for example, in a study of third grade nonreaders combined simultaneous reading while listening to taped selections and repeated reading of a familiar text either orally or silently as steps toward fluent silent reading. Martin and Meltzer (1976) reported similar findings in their study of visual rhythms as a method to facilitate the teaching of reading. Further support is evidenced in the research of Morgan and Lyon (1979) and Neville (1968).

Thus research suggests the need for providing training to develop oral fluency at least during the reading acquisition stage. However, Allington (1983) points out that in practice lack of oral fluency is frequently mistakenly viewed by teachers as simply symptomatic of poor reading, suggesting that the poor reader is inefficient in word recognition or word analysis skills. Such interpretations often lead to further instruction in letters, sounds, or words in isolation, in the mistaken belief that more attention in this area will result in improved reading. While limited instruction in word recognition skills through the use of sound symbol relationships and structural analysis was provided in this classroom setting, all teaching-learning procedures were carried out with a reading for meaning orientation. This included the procedures used in the study as well as all classroom reading support activities.

Thus, in an effort to gain a greater understanding of how children make the transition from reading word for word orally to becoming independent silent readers this study monitored the development of fluent oral reading of beginning readers, recorded progress related to the children's ability to use a modified cloze procedure as an indication of their perception of reading as a meaning gathering process, charted children's ability to write a complete sentence independently, and observed children as they made voluntary decisions to read a trade book silently.

Major questions considered were:

1. How many weeks of classroom instruction in reading are needed by first grade children placed in one of four reading groups before they can read orally with good phrasing a selection previously practiced through over-reading, giving evidence of comprehension by retelling the story in their own words?
2. How many weeks of classroom instruction in reading are needed by first grade children placed into one of four reading groups before they can recognize that a sentence can be changed in meaning by adding or deleting one or more words using a modified cloze procedure?
3. How many weeks after responding correctly to the modified cloze procedure are children from each of the four groups able to read a book independently?
4. How many weeks after showing evidence of good phrasing in oral reading of a selection previously practiced through over-reading with ability to retell the story in their own words are children from each of four groups able to read a book independently?

Method

Subjects

The eleven subjects of this study were randomly selected from an alphabetized class list of 22 children, members of a first grade class of beginning readers in a Northern New England industrial town. Upon entering first grade all the children involved in the study were non-readers, although one child repeating first grade could decode consonant, vowel, consonant words. Seven of the eleven children qualified for the free lunch program. Responding to an informal interview by the teacher, three indicated that an adult frequently read to them at home, four were read to occasionally, and four were never read to at home. Only three of the eleven ever visited the City library.

Definitions

- (1) For the purposes of this study beginning oral fluency refers to reading which replaced word-by-word reading with some 2 and 3 word phrasing and at times included adequate stress in relation to syntax.
- (2) Fluent oral reading refers to reading in phrases using terminal punctuation and intonation reflecting normal speech patterns.

- (3) An independent silent reader is defined as a child who voluntarily chose a book from the classroom or school library, and was then able to read 90% of the words without assistance and who after reading the text silently was able to retell the story in his own words.

Design

The 11 children in this twenty-six week study were placed in one of four reading groups based on the teacher's judgment of readiness to read. (Top Group-I; Upper, Middle Group-II; Lower Middle Group-III; Bottom Group-IV.) Reading Instruction was given to each group on a daily basis using the Holt Basic Reading Series (1982). As children showed ability to read in the first preprimer over-reading was introduced and biweekly audiotaping sessions of oral reading were begun.

In the biweekly sessions samples of the oral reading of the 11 children in this study were taped and then analyzed for beginning fluency and later for fluent oral reading. Passages averaged 55 words and were selected from the Holt Basic Reading Series levels 3-6. Each passage was originally presented as part of a small group directed reading lesson.

While being taped for fluency in oral reading the children were asked to individually read the passage and retell the story orally. Approximately one to two instructional weeks passed between the initial directed reading lesson and the later taped rereading. During this interim the children were given several opportunities to over-read with an adult. They were also encouraged to reread the story silently independently. Taped passages were analyzed by three independent raters. Passages were recorded as indicating either beginning fluency or fluent silent reading only when at least two of the independent listeners were in agreement.

Weekly directed writing sessions were started during the third week of reading instruction. Children were asked to supply a word or words using a modified cloze procedure. At the beginning of the instructional period the incomplete sentence required the addition of a simple noun, verb, or adjective. Ten weeks into the instructional year the sentences were composed in a manner to suggest the addition of phrases, and the children were encouraged to add more than one word.

To gain further insight into the learner's ability to write, three times a week the children were asked to independently write a sentence using a teacher selected word. In all writing situations whenever a child asked for the spelling of a word it was written on a card for him. Weekly anecdotal records were kept for each child. A folder of each child's written work provided additional evidence of each one's progress.

Support Activities

Supportive classroom teaching-learning activities treated reading as part of the total instructional process. Activities were structured to provide for integration of speaking, listening, reading, and writing. During the first three weeks of instruction

Language Experience activities were used to introduce children to reading. Children kept word banks and were encouraged to write and draw about their thoughts. Word charts were displayed in the classroom to facilitate the writing process.

To encourage the enjoyment of books a daily 20 minute period was set aside by the teacher for reading to the children. A "look at books" time was also part of the children's daily routine.

New vocabulary from the basal series was introduced in context. At the same time children were encouraged to use their knowledge of letter/sound relationships to decode words whenever appropriate. Silent reading was encouraged both in directed reading sessions and in the independent rereading of basal stories. To aid fluency in oral reading children were given frequent opportunities to over-read with an adult reader.

Results

As noted earlier, weekly anecdotal records were kept for each child. As this naturalistic study evolved interrelationships between learning to read and the ability to write connected discourse became evident. Ten of the eleven children in the study demonstrated the following progression of skill development:

- 1st The ability to complete a sentence using a modified cloze procedure by providing a meaningful noun, verb, adjective, or phrase.
- 2nd The ability to compose a sentence using a given noun.
- 3rd The ability to read preread passages orally with beginning fluency.
- 4th The ability to read preread passages orally with fluency.
- 5th The ability to read silently and independently self selected trade books.

Six of the seven children who began to read independently during the twenty-six weeks of this study needed four to nine weeks of additional instruction between the time they began to show fluency in their oral reading and their ability to read silently independently. The ability to read orally with fluency and the ability to read independently appeared to develop almost simultaneously, usually within one or two weeks of each other. The one child who chose a book to read independently before reading fluently, read Bill Martin's Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See?, a very repetitive book not requiring the same skills as evidenced in book choices of the other six children.

It is of interest that the first four fluent oral readers all had one year more educational experience than the others. (One was a repeater, three had attended a prefirst class.) While all directed reading was done in the basal series at the Pre-Primer level, the material that the children were asked to read progressively increased in difficulty. Fluency began to develop in the second PP (Level 4) and improved markedly in Level 5 leading to fluency in Level 5 or Level 6.

Seven of the eleven children became independent silent readers during the twenty-six weeks of this study. Of the four remaining,

two attained fluent oral reading, one reached beginning fluency, one continued oral reading at the word-by-word level.

In response to the four major questions of this study, the following findings were evidenced:

1. How many weeks of instruction in reading are needed by first grade children placed into one of four reading groups before they can read orally with good phrasing?
 - A. Group I needed 19 to 22 weeks.
 - B. Group II needed 22 to 25 weeks.
 - C. Group III needed 23 to 24 weeks.
 - D. Group IV needed 26+ weeks.
2. How many weeks of classroom instruction in reading are needed by first grade children placed into one of four reading groups before they can recognize that a sentence can be changed in meaning by adding or deleting one or more words using a modified cloze procedure?
 - A. Groups I and II needed 5 weeks.
 - B. Group III needed 7 weeks.
 - C. Group IV needed 14 to 16 weeks.
3. How many weeks after responding correctly to a modified cloze procedure are children from each group able to read a book independently?
 - A. Group I needed 16 to 18 weeks.
 - B. Group II needed 12 to 21+ weeks.
 - C. Group III needed 17 to 21+ weeks.
 - D. Group IV needed 21+ weeks.
4. How many weeks after showing evidence of good phrasing in oral reading are children able to read a book independently?
 - A. Group I needed 1 to 2 weeks.
 - B. Group II needed 0 to 2+ weeks.
 - C. Group III needed 1 to 2+ weeks.
 - D. Group IV NA.

As noted earlier, one of the support learning activities included the writing of sentences independently using a given word correctly in context. An additional question related to this activity emerged as significant in the monitoring of progress toward independent reading, namely: "How many weeks of classroom instruction in reading are needed by first grade children placed into one of four reading groups before they are able to write a complete sentence using a given word correctly in context in each of three consecutive trials, using a different word for each trial?"

Findings in this area are as follows:

- A. Group I needed 5 to 6 weeks.
- B. Group II needed 6 to 11 weeks.
- C. Group III needed 7 to 14 weeks.
- D. Group IV needed 15 to 16 weeks.

A summary of the findings is presented in the table found at the end of this article.

Discussion

Several implications for the teaching of reading are to be found in the results of this study.

1. Children who use the modified cloze procedure after only five weeks of classroom instruction in reading were also very successful in their first reading experiences using the preprimer in the basal series. As pointed out by Starr and Bruce (1983), researchers believe that comprehension techniques can be incorporated from the very beginning of a child's learning to read. Emphasis on meaning in reading appeared to help these children.
2. Children who were given an opportunity to express thoughts in writing were also given additional understanding of the purpose and process of reading. While similar procedures are often an integral part of the early Language Experience approach continued development of the writing strand appears to be a fruitful and necessary strategy in the early years.
3. It is essential to consider beginning reading instruction as a strand in the development of total communication skills presenting together reading, writing, speaking and listening skills with continued emphasis on the function and meaning of language.
4. Fluent oral reading is an important step toward reading for meaning and independent silent reading.
5. Silent reading should be encouraged from the very beginning of reading instruction starting with short periods set aside as a "look at books" time.

Number of Weeks of Instruction Related to Specific Skills					
Name	Modified Cloze	Sentences	Begin. Fluency	Fluent Oral Reading	Independent Silent Read'g
I					
Vicki	5	5	17	19	21
Jared	5	5	14	22	23
John	5	6	14	21	22
II					
Stacy	5	11	17	23	25
Amy	5	8	19	25	Not Yet
Veronica	5	11	19	22	23
Susan	5	6	19	23	17
III					
Melissa	7	7	20	24	Not Yet
Scott	7	14	20	23	24
IV					
Angie	16	15	26	Not Yet	
George	14	16	Not Yet		

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