

1-1-1984

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Recommended Citation

Swanson, B. B. (1984). Readiness for Reading Readiness. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 24 (2). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol24/iss2/5

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READINESS FOR READING READINESS

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A child entering school is confronted with the truly immense task of learning how to read. Though more research has been done in this area of education than most others, how a child goes about acquiring the skill of reading is still basically unknown.

In an attempt to uncover the mystery, educational researchers have sought through the decades to specify prerequisite and requisite skills for learning to read. Readiness programs have followed to develop these postulated needed skills.

Readiness Prerequisite Skills

A new focus on readiness is at the forefront in reading education. Cognitive reasoning and problem solving abilities are being examined as necessary prerequisite skills to reading.

Fitts and Posner (1967) view the child's confusion about beginning reading as one caused by instruction geared one level above that necessary for children to become aware of the skills. Bruner (1971) provides a vivid account of what a beginning skill-learner must deal with:

a skilled action requires recognizing the features of a task, its goals, and means appropriate to its attainment; a means of converting this information into appropriate action, and a means of getting feedback that compares the objective sought with the state attained
(p. 112)

In other words, before children can deal with the linkage of instructional terms such as "first sound," "letter," or "word" used so frequently in readiness activities, they must have a firm understanding of these terms and the relationship between them. The beginner must discover what the skill is used for, its function, the salient aspects of the task to attend to, the technical concepts, and the jargon for talking and thinking about the skill. In an unfamiliar situation, the person must find out what to do.

Research Theories and Studies

Two theories concerned with the beginner's ability to reason about the reading process have recently been developed and reported in various research writings. The first theory, developed by psycholinguistics Kenneth Goodman (1967) and Frank Smith (1978), views meaning as a communicative function of language and a primary concern from the very beginning of reading instruction. The other

recent theory developed by John Downing (1979), the Cognitive Clarity Theory, emphasizes the chief aim of reading instruction should be a clear understanding of why people read and write (functional concepts) and how they code language in writing (featural concepts).

Research based on these two theories have discovered there may be no more important question to ask in exploring the child's concept of reading readiness than "What is reading?" (Clymer, 1968). Via interviews with young children, we see their doubts concerning the purpose and process of learning to read. Collective responses to questions defining reading as a process of deriving meaning from print are comparatively few to the many that may be categorized as a "word recognition equal reading mode" (Tovey, 1975; Johns & Ellis, 1976; Ngandu, 1977).

Investigations have also explored the child's understanding of the technical vocabulary used by the teachers during beginning reading instruction. Confusion among the terms letter, word, sentence, first word, sound, first letter, etc. and conventions of print, such as reading begins at the top of the page and is read from left to right, periods signal stop have been observed frequently in young children during reading instruction (Fox & Routh, 1975; Francis, 1973; Johns, 1977).

Related research has emphasized the beginner's lack of awareness of interword space as a cueing convention for the written word. Since beginners tend to combine letters from two adjoining words while reading (Meltzer & Herst, 1969; Weber, 1970), it appears children utilize numbers of letters to identify "words" rather than white spaces between the words (Clay, 1968), and this may be due to the lack of understanding words as printed units.

The extent to which young children are aware of how lexical units of speech are mapped onto the written word has also been a recent concern of researchers. Downing and Oliver (1974) found younger students in their study to associate spoken phrases and sentences to individual written words and to frequently consider long words to be two short printed words. Few children, even older ones, are able to recognize that isolated phonemes and syllables are not words. Children, it appears then, have even less understanding of the spoken "word" than the written "word". Perhaps, states Ehri (1976) this is because speech uses phrases and sentences rather than isolated sounds to communicate ideas.

Implications of Research Findings

Perhaps Pitts and Posner's view could be a viable one in that typically reading instruction is geared above that necessary for beginners to profit from. Prerequisite readiness training should first be an assessment of the child's ability to reason about reading tasks. The second step should be the involvement of the child in activities to foster the development of concepts about the purpose for reading, the salient aspects of the printed word, and the technical language of instruction. The third step is currently where most readiness programs begin, that is requiring children to link various readiness concepts to complete a task.

For instance, when we ask a beginning reader "What is the letter that stands for the first sound in this word, 'bed'?" What concepts must the child know to complete this task? --letter versus number, word, and sentence; first versus last, second, etc.; sound versus letter, word; word versus letter, sentence, etc. But we're asking more than an understanding of individual concepts. We are requiring the child to link all these concepts to give a correct response, i.e., boy or ball.

If misconceptions are not clarified early in the reading program discouraged beginners may develop negative attitudes and avoid future reading and writing activities.

Types of Assessments

To date several devices to measure the child's understanding of the reading purpose and process are either commercially available or have been developed experimentally in research endeavors.

Reading Purpose Measures

The Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness Test (Ayers, Downing, & Schaefer, 1977) is a three subtest group-administered test. The first two subtests "Recognizing Literacy Behavior" and "Understanding Literacy Behavior" measure beginning reading readiness and concepts of literacy by directing children to circle pictures (depicting reading/writing activities) in response to oral directions.

The Sand Test (Clay, 1972) is an individually administered measure determining the child's knowledge of page turning, book handling, word and picture arrangement on the page, and word and letter sequencing.

Technical Terms of Instruction

The Units of Print Test (Watson, 1979) is a test requiring children to circle upper and lower case letters, words, and sentences (which end either at the end of a line of print, before the end of a line of print, or in the middle of a second line of print) to show their knowledge of the orally-presented terms "letter", "word", and "sentence".

The Linguistic Awareness in Reading Readiness Test, Subtest C (Ayers, Downing, & Schaefer, 1977) "Technical Language of Literacy" measures the child's ability to differentiate "numbers", "letters", "words", and "sentences" by circling those terms directed by the test administrator.

Written Word Boundary Tests

The Mickish Word Boundary Task (Mickish, 1974) is a three item test; practice items, one which the teacher instructs students to draw a vertical line beside another vertical line, and one which the students are instructed to draw a similar vertical line between four circles. The test item, itself, requires the students to mark between six words printed with no spaces between them (thecatandthedogplayball) as the teacher reads the sentence several times.

Meltzer and Herse's (1969) Written Word Boundary Task is

a test to determine the extent to which students use space to define word boundaries. A written sentence "Seven cowboys in a wagon saw numerous birds downtown" is presented to students who are asked to circle every word.

Oral Word Boundaries Tests

The Mow-Motorcycle Task (Rozin, Bressman, & Taft, 1974) tests the student's awareness of the relationship between oral and printed symbols, i.e., the length of the printed word. Eight cards containing pairs of printed words beginning with the same letter are presented to students. The student is told, "One of these words is mow and the other is motorcycle. Which one is mow?" The child responds by pointing to his/her choice.

The Aural Word Boundary Task (Evans, 1975) involves four sentences read orally and students are asked to repeat each one. After each repetition the student says the sentence again and designates each word by either moving a small wooden block or tapping a series of colored circles. The task assesses the student's ability to segment oral sentences into their component words.

Instructional Strategies

Purpose for Written Language

The conceptual development of the purpose of written language as a communication process is an essential readiness factor. It cannot be assumed, as research has shown, that those children knowing letter names also know what those letters are used for. The following strategies focus on deriving meaning from the printed word:

1. Use children's own language for reading and writing instruction, stressing the relationship between oral and written language. Also daily handwriting lessons can be developed from children's own experiences rather than a teacher's guide.
2. Use a variety of reading materials in the classroom. Trade books, magazines, cereal boxes, comics, newspapers, travel brochures are materials that communicate as well as motivate. Use these materials to teach both beginning reading skills and enjoyment of reading. For instance, children working in pairs can look for words that start like "bed" from a cereal box instead of a mimeographed worksheet.
3. The saying "Nothing teaches reading better than reading itself" is never truer than when it applies to the purpose for reading. Reading to children daily and having children read to each other establishes the understanding of the true purpose for reading—communication of the written word.
4. Writing activities can also reveal the importance of deriving meaning from print. Children may select pen pals from their own classrooms or others. Throughout the school year writing is encouraged through activities related to personal interest, class announcements, etc. Writing periodically to parents is another motivational and purposeful method to foster writing and reading skills.

Salient Aspects of the Printed Word

Activities which make it necessary for children to look at, point to, and write will foster further understanding of written and oral word boundaries. Suggested activities include:

1. From time to time request children to count number of words or sentences on a worksheet or language experience chart story.
2. Teach directionality concepts within the context of reading materials. For instance, ask children to circle the first word in a sentence, the last letter in a word, or the second letter on a page.
3. Have children cut words from a sentence strip noting whether or not space cues are being used to identify words.
4. Ask children to clap or tap out words in a spoken sentence. Do this also with syllables and phonemes. Children can also mark each word, syllable, or phoneme by placing a poker chip or button on the table.

Language of Instruction

It is assumed children come to school equipped with the language for reading instruction. Many do not. The following helpful activities are for teaching the terms necessary to complete beginning reading tasks:

1. At the beginning of the school year stress terms such as word, letter, and sentence in all related activities. Say the terms clearly and be redundant. Ask for some feedback from children.
2. Play games to assess children's understanding of reading terminology. "I'm thinking of a number—" or letter— or word— may be played in the format of the guessing game "Twenty Questions".
3. Have children from time to time write their five favorite letters or words or numbers, etc.
4. Dictation during a language experience activity offers many opportunities to discuss words, letters, and sentences. Special care should also be taken to discuss conventions of print, i.e., spaces between words, words are composed of letters, use of punctuation, and the left to right progression.

Summary

Research supports the notion children are confused about concepts related to beginning reading instruction. Assessments are becoming commercially available or can easily be devised by classroom teachers adapting the formats suggested in the foregoing assessment section.

Children lacking awareness about print need to have either direct or informal instruction to clarify those beginning concepts necessary to profit from further reading instruction.

Parent education programs are another vehicle by which parents can acquire methods to develop language concepts early on in their children so that success in beginning reading instruction is more likely.

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