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SOME THOUGHTS ON SYSTEMATIC READING READINESS INSTRUCTION

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Of the many reading readiness factors, some are known to be immune to, or at least not easily impacted by, the effects of schooling. These include students' socioeconomic and backgrounds of experience, their mental age and IQ, and their basic motivation and achievement orientations. Other readiness factors are recognized as being amenable to training—in other words, as being teachable and learnable. Happily, these include four of the most significant ones; auditory discrimination, auditory comprehension, visual discrimination, and visual memory. In the remarks that follow, an attempt is made to review selected instructional procedures in each of these areas.

First, though, a few preliminary remarks should be made to provide context. Today's mounting pressure on teachers to insure that students perform well on minimum competency and standardized achievement tests has resulted in two fundamental errors related to reading instruction. One is that many teachers are focusing too heavily on teaching skills, particularly phonics and structural analysis, and too little on teaching comprehension and appreciation. The other is that increasing numbers of teachers, in their haste to get students reading, are bypassing or shortchanging readiness, opting instead for earlier (and premature) "formal reading." Nothing, of course, could be costlier.

The fact is that time "saved" by hurrying through readiness is nearly always short-lived and counterproductive. Most teachers have recognized this for years. But, again, because of accountability pressures or whatever, alarming numbers of them seem amnesic. They forget that students' difficulties with specific aspects of reading can be traced frequently to their deficiencies in related readiness skills—phonics to auditory discrimination, comprehension to auditory memory, and sight vocabulary to visual discrimination and memory. That teachers need reminding of these and other relationships is distressing; that they need occasional reminders of pertinent instructional procedures is understandable.

Auditory Discrimination

Auditory discrimination can be defined as the ability to hear likenesses and differences in sounds. As indicated above, it is prerequisite to phonics since relating specific sounds to specific letters or letter combinations is dependent on identifying

likenesses and differences in the sounds themselves.

As with any skill, in teaching auditory discrimination it is essential to progress from easy to difficult in accordance with students' abilities. In other words, teachers first should determine what students can and cannot do; then, perhaps, review briefly certain items in their areas of proficiency; and, finally, begin systematic instruction with the easiest tasks in their areas of inability. To illustrate this progression, ten sets of words are given below. Students would be asked to listen carefully to each set of three words and to identify which two have a like sound and/or which one does not.

- | | | |
|----------|-------|-------|
| 1. born | hope | roast |
| 2. pat | hit | mop |
| 3. Sue | Mark | Sam |
| 4. sink | think | bank |
| 5. hear | bird | her |
| 6. flip | slice | flag |
| 7. sand | fan | band |
| 8. Sam | hip | tack |
| 9. stir | beer | Hank |
| 10. Dick | Don | Mike |

Item 3, focusing on an initial consonant sound, is believed to be the easiest. The next easiest item is either 6, an initial consonant blend, or 2, a final consonant phoneme. Since 9 deals with /r/, it is judged to be more difficult than 2. The most difficult items are the two focusing on medial vowel sounds, with 1 considered more troublesome than 8 because of the influence of /r/. Although the specific steps in the progression are less than exact, the general direction is clear. Instruction should begin with initial consonant sounds, gradually should progress to ending sounds, and finally to medial sounds.

Experience suggests two other guidelines for instruction. First, contrary to the recommendations of some published material, auditory discrimination training should not begin with rhyming words. Items 4 and 7 are obvious examples of difficult discrimination tasks, but even easier rhyming items tend to be troublesome. Second, care should be exercised initially not to confuse students with mixed items. In 5, for example, students could attend to like initial phonemes (hear - her), like final phonemes (hear - her) or like medial phonemes (bird - her); and in 10, to like initial phonemes (Dick - Donald) or like final phonemes (Dick - Mike).

Auditory Comprehension

Auditory comprehension can be defined as the ability to understand spoken material. Instruction should be provided through the same procedure as in reading, namely, by asking students three types of questions - literal, inferential, and judgmental. These types can be handled concurrently. There is no need, in other words, to progress from literal to inferential and, finally, to judgmental.

Progress from easy to difficult tasks should be made by increasing the amount of spoken material. Students first should demonstrate skill in listening to one sentence and responding appropriately to various questions. Example:

John has a brown and white pet named Mutt.

What color is the pet? (literal)

What kind of pet is it? (inferential)

Is Mutt a good name for a pet? (judgmental)

Subsequently, they should become proficient in dealing with two sentences, then three, then a short paragraph, and so on. The exceptional value of such an activity for present and future listening and reading purposes should be obvious.

Visual Discrimination

Visual discrimination can be defined as the ability to see likenesses and differences in shapes, letters, and words. Typical sets of visual discrimination activities - where students would be asked to match one of the three objects on the right with its like object on the left—are presented below.

- | | | | |
|----------|------|------|------|
| 1. # | * | + | # |
| 2. #+ | #+ | +# | #* |
| 3. ++ | ##* | +++ | ### |
| 4. m | m | n | r |
| 5. o | m | t | o |
| 6. ob | bo | od | ob |
| 7. E | e | a | o |
| 8. to | do | to | so |
| 9. so | tape | look | so |
| 10. lamp | limp | lamp | lump |

Three errors are often committed in training students in visual discrimination. First, the usual sequence of initially working on shapes, followed by letters, and then by words violates the instructional principle of progressing from easy to difficult. As can be seen above, the easiest discrimination item among the shapes is 1, among the letters 5, and among the words 9. But both 5 and 9 are probably easier than 1 and certainly are less difficult than the other two shape items, 2 and 3. Additionally, 9 is easier than the two remaining letter items 4 and 6.

A second error in visual discrimination training is that students sometimes are given inappropriate assignments. For example, item 7 requires their matching an upper- and lower-case e. Although this item deals with an important readiness skill, namely, knowing the alphabet, it is simply not a visual discrimination task.

A third error is that too much instructional time is devoted to shapes and too little to words. Items 8, 9, and 10 are obviously far more related to reading than items 1, 2, and 3. Yet, with

the objective of getting students "ready for reading," sometimes teachers seem inclined to spend more time on the latter. In the same context, some of the better known readiness tests have several items on shaped discrimination but none at all on word discrimination.

Visual Memory

Visual memory can be defined as the ability to remember items that have been seen. Visual memory training usually involves showing students an object (shapes, letters, or words) on a flashcard or overhead projector. Subsequently, the item would be removed or covered and the students instructed to identify a like object from two or more distractors. For example, after being shown + on a flashcard, students would be instructed to circle on their paper the matching object in item 1 (below):

1. #	*	+
2. #*	+#	+*
3. ##*	**#	##+
4. a	c	d
5. po	ph	pd
6. tdt	tbt	ttd
7. am	to	is
8. cat	hip	fun
9. hatch	hitch	hutch

Two errors common to visual discrimination training are found also in visual memory. First, even though letters and words are obviously more integral to reading than shapes, some teachers and instructional material seem to place more emphasis on the letter. And second, the usual sequence of beginning instruction with shapes and proceeding to letters and then to words runs counter to the principle of progressing from easy to difficult. As can be seen in items 1 to 9, one example is that some shape items (2 and 3) are more difficult than some letter and word items (4 and 7).

In addition to graduating the complexity of the items themselves, other means of increasing the difficulty level of visual memory activities include: shortening the time an item is displayed, lengthening the interval between the times an item is displayed and the students are directed to respond, and providing interference — through extraneous conversation or commentary — between the display and the response times.

A Final Thought

In the preceding paragraphs, attention was given to certain errors made by teachers in reading readiness instruction. The most serious of these warrants repeating. It is the tendency of some teachers to neglect readiness instruction entirely, particularly for older non-reading students. Whether this neglect is

the result of outside pressures or teachers' own insensitivity is basically irrelevant. What is relevant is the fact that readiness skills are prerequisite to reading skills - regardless of age or grade considerations. Attempts to alter or invalidate this fact will continue to prove futile.