Organizing Reading Material into Thought Units to Enhance Comprehension

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Many teachers recognize that type of poor reader who "knows the words but just can't comprehend what he or she is reading." Reading programs have been relatively successful in dealing with tasks at the word level, yet we recognize that comprehension is truly the goal of reading. Teachers have been clamoring for ideas to enhance the comprehension abilities of their students. This article offers one suggestion for the improvement of comprehension.

An inherent problem with understanding the written word is that phrasing the disparate words into thought units is an additional task of the reader, beyond merely figuring out the words. There are a few punctuation clues in print, but this mechanism is a poor substitute for the phrasing provided in speech by the human voice (Kleiman and Schallert, 1978). When we speak, the pauses between sets of words provide much meaning for the listener; indeed, these pauses "chunk" the individual words into units of thought. By listening to any radio newscast carefully, one can appreciate the information given by the broadcaster's voice as she or he pauses between meaningful chunks of language. Consider this sentence heard on a news broadcast:

Sheik Yamani / has issued / what might be

considered / a stern warning / after OPEC's

failure / to reach price agreement./

The lines represent the pauses heard in the broadcaster's voice as he stated this news item. These pauses serve to place the individual words into phrases, and it is only in phrases that words have meaning.

Unfortunately, oral phrasing, that powerful clue to the meaning of a message, is not available to readers. Instead, a reader of the message is presented with the eighteen words in the above sentence with no clue as to which words go with which. Imagine a reader who does not group words together mentally, but reads every word as if it were separate — no message is possible. Or, imagine a reader who reconstructs the message thus: Sheik Yamani has / issued what might / be considered a stern / warning after OPEC's failure / to reach price / agreement./ Surely this reader's comprehension of that message will be distorted at best. Phrasing is the clue to meaning that listeners have and readers do not

have, therefore we must help readers develop a mechanism for reconstructing thought units as they read. For even if readers can identify every word in a sentence, they will not understand unless they can organize the verbal input in a sensible manner.

Research Evidence

There is a body of research suggesting that organizing the verbal input for readers aids the comprehension of these readers. Cromer (1970) found significant gains in comprehension for junior college students when reading material was pre-phrased; indeed, when material was so organized, some poor readers with adequate vocabulary skills read as well as matched good readers. Stevens (1981) found that chunking words into thought units (by using slash lines) resulted in significantly greater comprehension scores on the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test among high school sophomores. This mode of presentation aided low, middle, and high ability readers equally. Oakan, Wiener, and Cromer (1971) found that poor fifth grade readers' comprehension was facilitated by organizing material into meaningful units. It thus seems that attention to the chunking of words into thought units can be profitable in increasing students' comprehension. Thus, teachers must be aware of opportunities to develop these chunking abilities in readers.

Developing Thought Units: Primary Grades

Teachers of reading at all levels must become aware of the necessity of organizing words into thought units. Difficulties with chunking become more apparent as written material becomes more complex, yet the habit of organizing printed input must be established early in the primary years. Unless children learn to read by phrasing into thought units with easier material, they will be unable to organize more complex material.

Early on, teachers should point out to their students the difference in phrasing between oral and written language. Students should be aware that providing phrase units is the task of the readers. Starting with the simplest sentences, such as:

<p align="center">You can play with me.</p>

indicate to students that "You can play" and "with me" go together as idea units. Have the children listen to the way they would say this sentence. Point out that when they read the sentence, they must provide the pauses for themselves, for no speaker can do it for them.

Adapting a language experience story for this purpose may help children see the necessity for providing phrasing, since there is a direct connection between spoken and written language in this medium. For example, imagine that the following story has been elicited from the class:

> The name of our school is Bryant School.
> The name of our teacher is Ms. Greco.
> We will have lunch at noon.
> We will learn to read.

Using this material, show children which words go with which in thought units. Try reading the story with erroneous pauses

(e.g., The name of / our / school / is Bryant / School./), and ask the children if this makes as much sense as reading the story with words chunked properly. Discuss the necessity of "making words make sense" while reading.

Teachers should take every opportunity to stress this idea, especially since it is so widely ignored in published reading materials. While reading to children, the teacher can point out how phrasing aids understanding. When teaching punctuation, the teacher can indicate how punctuation tells us where to separate ideas sometimes, but does not give us sufficient clues to this; we must still be constantly aware of which words go together. One might ask children to use slash lines in order to see if they understand which words belong in a single thought unit.

Since thought units or phrases are so important to comprehension, one must question an <u>over</u> reliance on working with words in isolation. While it may occasionally be necessary to isolate single words, this should not occur too often, because it is in phrasal units that words carry meaning. Thus, rather than practice isolated words, children should have more exposure to phrases. Whenever possible, have children practice on phrase units. They will, hopefully, become familiar with phrases, and will have less trouble chunking words into phrases as they read complete sentences. The habit of practicing with phrases seems especially vital for the slower learner, since that learner needs explicit help in making the connections between words.

Thus, if the target words are "store", "play", "see", and "what", have children practice them in such phrases as:

    to the store   play ball

    see the turtle   what is it?

This will enhance the ability of readers to see words as parts of phrasal units. Readers then are more likely to look for such units on their own. It is incumbent upon primary teachers to seek every opportunity to develop the abilities of their students in this regard.

Developing Thought Units: Upper Grades

As children progress to more difficult reading material, the necessity of chunking words into thought units becomes even more important. Sentences are more complex, with more embedded ideas. It is necessary for the reader tao impose "order" on the sentence by seeing the relationship among phrases. A reader who has had some success with simpler primary materials without chunking will find that s/he is overwhelmed by the more difficult intermediate materials. Indeed, the intermediate grades present problems to the up-to-then successful readers. It is possible that the failure to organize words into phrases may be at the root of a fraction of those problems. Teachers need to develop the abilities of their charges to organize verbal input, especially if no prior work with this concept has been done. Only by organizing the written input into phrases can students hope to cope with a sentence like this:

Interest in acid rain finally came in 1967

when a Swedish scientist named Svante Oden

reported a pattern of increasingly acid

precipitation.

Without phrasing, this mass of words means nothing. Perhaps because many upper grade students are not providing phrasing for themselves, they are failing to comprehend, even though they are successful at the word level.

One way to emphasize the importance of chunking ideas is to present sentences such as the above with phrase units marked (perhaps by using slash lines). Have students read each phrase, and discuss why these groups of words go together:

Interest in acid rain / finally came / in 1967 /
when a Swedish scientist / named Svante Oden /
reported a pattern / of increasingly acid precipitation.

A next step is to present somewhat complex sentences, asking students to mark their own phrase units. Discuss how understanding is impossible unless the words are grouped properly. For those students having difficulty, start with some of the ideas mentioned earlier (such as the use of language experience or oral reading). If necessary, start with easier material that children can chunk into thought units; if children cannot chunk material, they cannot understand it in any meaningful fashion. Gradually increase the difficulty of the material, emphasizing phrasal units. Instruct students to look for the "words that make a thought" when they are confronted with material that is difficult. In this way, they can recover the author's meaning by reconstructing the thought units of the author.

Again, overreliance on words in isolation (especially for poorer readers) must be questioned in the intermediate and upper grades. If we ask readers to look for thought units, practice in reading must take the form of phrases. By becoming adept at identifying the message carried by a phrase, a reader becomes a comprehender.

Concluding Remarks

This article has attempted to emphasize an important but often overlooked component of comprehension: the reader must chunk the many words of a sentence into meaningful groups of words in order for comprehension to result. While this problem becomes more apparent in the later grades due to the complexity of the reading material, it should be the concern of reading teachers from the very beginning. If children become expert at chunking words into thoughts (and not being content until they have derived a thought from each unit) at an early age, reading and chunking complex material will merely be an extension of this skill. Comprehension of more complex material is an impossibility without attending to thought units, a term which should be emphasized throughout the reading instruction periods. Recall that the addition of a very small artificial chunking device (slash lines) resulted in superior comprehension in the three studies cited

earlier (Cromer, 1970; Oakan, Wiener & Cromer, 1971; Stevens, 1981). If such minor attention to thought units produces significant changes in comprehension, what results could we expect from prolonged and systematic attention to this requisite comprehension task?

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