Instructional Strategies for Implementing a Reading for Meaning Approach

Elaine G. Wangberg
University of New Orleans

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic

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In recent years reading educators have increasingly recognized that the reading process involves the reader's active construction of meaning from printed text. As such, reading is viewed as a complex cognitive and linguistic process. The reader's knowledge of the world and the reader's knowledge of language (including the graphophonemic, semantic, and syntactic systems) interact and provide cues to meaning as the reader deals with the printed page (Goodman 1969; Rumelhart & Ortony 1977; Smith 1979 & 1982).

Smith (1975) states that the child applies the same basic skills in learning to read as have been applied before coming to school in learning to master language and to make sense of the world. Goodman (1970) has referred to reading as a psycholinguistic guessing game; "one that requires strategies of sampling, predicting, confirming or rejecting, and integrating in order to gain meaning from the printed page." Such strategies are cognitive functions being applied by the reader to a language situation. Blachowicz (1978) writes that current studies suggest a constructive view of the reading process, one which "stresses the reader's contribution to the text..." The reader does not simply interpret the text but brings his or her meaning to it.

These sources suggest that, from the beginning of reading instruction, the gaining of meaning and the use of context that is meaningful to the student should be emphasized. Many instructional practices, however, are inconsistent with such a psycholinguistic view of the reading process. The beginning reader is often regarded as a blank slate, without language competency, and is exposed to a reading program, and to consequent evaluation procedures, based on the abstract, isolated parts of language (e.g., letters, consonant sounds, vowel sounds, isolated words). This "taking apart" makes reading more difficult, as it requires the student to focus on parts of language not isolated in natural speech and then integrate these parts into meaningful wholes— a complex cognitive process. To compound matters, such an approach often makes it impossible for the student to use cognitive cues (his or her knowledge of the world) when "reading" as there is little or no meaning involved in the instructional activities or, perhaps, no meaning the student can attach to his or her own world experience.

If our goal as reading educators is to develop in students the ability to gain meaning from written language, our instruction and programs should present and emphasize experiences which promote this ability. The following is a listing of practical suggestions for implementing a reading for meaning approach:

Provide real reading experiences

> Stock classrooms with a wealth of meaningful and interesting books, magazines, newspapers.
> Include time each day for "real" reading activities— students learn to read by reading.
> Read aloud to students each day.
> Use read-a-long activities.
> Use assisted reading activities (Reader reads a sentence, then student reads it. Reader reads, pausing to leave out highly meaningful words. Student provides these words. Reader and student read together, in unison.)

Use the language experience approach

> Integrate the language arts by combining reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities.
> Remember that listening and speaking are primary to the development of reading and writing.
> Don't separate reading and writing instruction— use each to reinforce the other.
> See Van Allen 1972, and Moffett & Wagner 1976, for description of the language experience approach.
> Use the LEIR (Language Experiences in Reading, Encyclopedia Britannica 1974) and Interaction (Houghton Mifflin 1973) programs for language experience activities, materials.
> Place student-made books in the classroom library or reading center. Make multiple copies of these books for students to share and read together.
> Weave skill instruction into students' language experience activities.

Base Instruction on meaning

> Use context (not isolated sounds or words) in practice exercises, games, workbook pages, etc.
> Encourage "risk-taking" when students read. Provide support for the making of predictions, or educated guesses, as to what would "come next" or "make sense" in the sentence, paragraph, or story.
> Emphasize use of the beginning sound of a word plus context as a basic strategy to predict what would "come next" or "make sense."
> Use cloze exercises to develop the use of context cues. Variations of cloze activities include: "free" cloze (no cues other than context are given), cloze with word banks, and use of beginning word clues in cloze blanks.
> Develop sight vocabulary through activities using context. Do not use isolated words on word cards or lists for instruction.

Tape students reading aloud. Have them listen to the tape, finding the words and phrases they read without meaning. Have students supply words that would make sense.

Use evaluation techniques which stress reading as a meaning-getting process

Listen to students read.

Take time to ask questions about what students read, and discuss these answers.

Use silent and oral reading inventories and/or miscue analysis.

Use students' writing as diagnostic information about students' language growth.

Don't over-rely on basic skills tests.

Look for strengths as well as weaknesses. Build on these strengths.

Use reading for meaning strategies for reading "problems"

Remember the student having difficulties needs the most meaningful activities and materials.

When a reader makes reversals, stress that reading must make sense. "Was" is not as likely to be read as "saw" if materials have meaning for the student, and if reading for meaning is being emphasized. Ask students if given responses "make sense." The language experience approach will help here.

When a reader meets an unknown word, do not have the reader "sound it out" as a first technique. Have the reader predict what word or words might come next and then check this prediction by asking "Does this make sense?" and/or looking closely at the word. Encourage parents to use this same approach with students during at-home reading.

When a reader "miscues," do not stop and correct the reader —allow the reader to complete the sentence or phrase and see if s/he self-corrects. If meaning is not lost, ignore the miscue. If meaning is lost and there is no self-correction, ask the reader if what was read made sense. Guide the reader in strategies to gain meaning. Encourage parents to use this same approach when reading with students at home.

If a reader is hesitant to try to read unknown words, provide an accepting environment and use games or other activities that require "guessing" in non-reading situations. Then, discuss making "educated guesses" with students and transfer to activities requiring "guessing" in reading situations.

Recognize that reading will be easier if the reader has had direct experience with the content of the material to be read. Make the classroom a "real" place for learning where students are actively involved with language and the world through activities that go beyond textbooks or basal readers.

The above suggestions are offered as practical ways in which our instructional programs can focus on developing the ability

to gain meaning from written language. We cannot expect students to develop this ability without presenting and emphasizing experiences that allow and encourage students to use their knowledge of the world and of language as they encounter written text.

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