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BILLY AND THE THREE BILLY-GOATS GRUFF OR, HOW BILLY LEARNED TO READ NATURALLY

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Growing up in a family with a school-aged brother and sister and with parents who are teachers usually means that a younger child will be exposed to a wide variety of books and various reading materials. This was true for our five-year-old son, Billy.

From the time he was about nine months old, family members read aloud to Billy, looked at and talked about books with him. He owned numerous books and frequently visited libraries and bookstores to choose those which interested him. When he was two, he had a warm, grandmotherly babysitter who not only read and talked about books, but also taught him the names of the letters. Later, he attended nursery school where he learned "sounds", and he came home "ffffing" and "ssssing." For some time, he had been reading familiar words and phrases in his environment such as food labels, street signs, store names and family names. He showed interest in writing by labeling pictures he drew and by carefully writing notes to his grandma. Having heard books read aloud, Billy was encouraged to "read" books by telling the story as he looked at and turned pages. He particularly enjoyed "reading" riddle books, anxiously hoping that the listener would not know the answer, so that he could tell it.

Billy talked about other children in his kindergarten class who were reading, but he claimed he did not know how to read. Despite knowing the letter names and a few sounds, and despite the "reading" Billy was doing, he did not think of himself as a reader.

Three Billy-goats Gruff - Version One

One day I brought home a copy of the Three Billy-

goats Gruff (1968) from the library. The little book, printed in England, was exquisitely illustrated. The artist had captured the curiosity and determination of the goats and the ugly, mean characteristics of the troll from an unusual variety of vantage points.

The language used by the author was as rich and colorful as the illustrations:

There was a wooden bridge over the river. Under the bridge there lived an ugly troll. People were afraid to cross the bridge because of the troll. Everytime he heard footsteps on the bridge, he popped out and gobbled up the person who was trying to cross. (page 10)

The book contained many repetitive sections:

Out popped the troll's ugly head. He was so ugly that the eldest Billy-goat Gruff nearly fell down with fright. (page 38)

The dialogue between each goat and the troll followed the same pattern. "Who's that trip-trapping over my bridge? roared the troll." Each goat, in turn, would identify himself and explain that he was going to the meadow to make himself fat. "Then I'm coming to gobble you up! roared the troll."

Even the size of the print contributed to the increasing drama of the story:

"It's me, the biggest Billy-goat Gruff," he bellowed...
And he stamped his feet even louder; TRIP TRAP, TRIP TRAP
BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! (p.40 & 42)

Strategies Billy Used in Learning to Read

From the first time this story was read aloud, Billy begged us to read it again and again. Soon, he took the parts of the various characters by reading the dialogue of the goats or the troll when we came to that section. The sections grew longer and longer. Then he took the book and began to read to himself.

Billy translated various words and phrases into his own language. For example, the text said, "I'm coming to gobble you up!" Billy read "I'm coming to eat you up!" He was not "corrected". It seemed obvious that he approached reading from the standpoint of meaning and his understanding preceded his reading ability. And we noted that as he became more proficient (i.e., becoming more aware of the significant features of the print while continuing to read for meaning), he read, "I'm coming to gobble you up!"

He sometimes asked us to tell him a word or phrase he didn't know. We suggested he skip that part, read to the end of the sentence or section. He was to think of a word or phrase that would "make sense" or "sound right" in the part he had omitted. He also inserted words or misread words which resulted in the meaning being lost or distorted. We waited, saying nothing. He would soon say "Hey, that doesn't make sense," and reread to find where he got off the track.

Excited and fascinated by this story, Billy worked diligently at learning to read the book. He worked under his own direction, receiving assistance only when he requested it.

After several days his attitude about himself as a reader had changed considerably. He told his kindergarten teacher that he oud read! He also told her that he was ready to begin the books the other kindergarteners had been reading. His teacher shared his excitement and she began to send home pre-primers for him to read to us.

A week or so later a graduate student at the university where I teach, herself a kindergarten teacher brought to class a variety of puppets and masks she had made for her students. Among them were the three billy goats and the troll, fashioned with cardboard horns and yarn beards of grocery bags which slip over one's head. I immediately borrowed the set and could hardly wait to show the characters to Billy. Excitedly, he placed the biggest billy goat's mask over his head, and cast me as the troll. "Who's that trip trapping over my bridge?" I asked. "I'm coming to gobble you up!" Billy, in character, "Oh no, you're not! It's me, the eldest Billy-goat Gruff!" and on we went.

As Chomsky's (1972) research indicated, young children who have been exposed to a variety of language through books of all kinds being read aloud and later read personally, are more able to comprehend and use language at higher linguistic levels than children who have not had these experiences. Billy, at five years, had acquired the ability to appropriately use "eldest" in context. This is a word rarely used orally today and a word he probably would not hear in conversation. He experienced this word through hearing it in the story, later reading it for himself. When he encounters the word in the future, it will present no difficulty.

Three Billy-goats Gruff - Version Two

Several weeks later one of the books brought

home from school for nightly reading was The Three Goats, a "getting ready to read" book, according to the publisher (Pollett, 1963). The following is an excerpt:

See the goats.

One, two, three goats.

Goats can run and jump.

The little goat said, "I want something.

I want to find something.

Away I go."

See the goat go.

The little goat can go up.

Up. Up. Up. (page 3)

The book continues in this manner and only with the aid of illustrations can one determine it is a version of The Billy-goats Gruff, perhaps written with the intention of providing an "easy" book for beginners.

Billy, understandably, did not recognize the story as being similar to the one he knew so well. And he could not easily predict the sequence of words and sentences because the language patterns were not those he had heard or used before. The story didn't excite or capture Billy's interest enough to make it worth his effort to learn what it was about or how it ended.

Qualities of Good Books for Beginning Readers

Why did the former version of the Three Billy-Goats Gruff become Billy's "bridge to literacy" (Kohl, 1973) the book through which Billy became a reader in his own eyes? What qualities did it have that so interested him that he became determined to learn to read it for himself?

The book had a strong sense of story, a plot which captured interest while building action and suspense. (Billy had asked if he could have more books with "brave parts.") The plot was meaningful, logical and sequential, with a definite beginning, a climax and a conclusion. Current investigations on the relationship between story plots and children's comprehension indicate the importance of story logic and order for beginners (Stein, 1979).

The author's language was forceful and stimulating, evoking images in the minds of readers and listeners. The words, phrases and sentences were usually similar

to those most children have heard or used before. They were not "watered-down" words--an adult's idea of something made easy for children to read. Familiar language patterns are easy for children to read because they can better predict the sequence and the meaning.

Use of meaningful, repetitive sections of text was another element employed to aid beginning readers in predicting the next part of the story. After hearing the story read aloud, children can anticipate the repetitive sections and "read" those parts the next time the story is read. The Three Pigs, The Little Engine That Could, The Gingerbread Boy, and Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day are other examples of stories with highly predictable and repetitive sections.

Additionally, illustrations, delightfully integrated with the story, contributed toward capturing the interest of the reader. Unfortunately, too many books on the market have superb illustrations that accompany stories with little content.

One is tempted to assume that choice of print and graphic appearance were an important element in encouraging the beginner. Fairly large print was used, with wide spaces between lines and never more than eight lines per page. The amount to be read never seemed overwhelming. Importantly, the change in the print size and the use of capital letters enhanced the drama and the meaning of the story.

Each of the qualities of books mentioned above also contributes to another important step for children learning to read naturally. Most natural readers go through a phase of memorizing books which appeal to them. Hoskisson (1979), pp. 492-3) states, "This memorization aspect of children's knowledge of the written language appears to be a very important component...all children seem to go through this phase of constructing their knowledge of written language when learning to read naturally...Memorization, storing the meaning of the story, appears to be a very important phase in learning to read by reading." This phase may be a necessary step in the natural learning process of becoming an independent reader.

Conclusion

Smith (1973, p. 195) advocated, "The only way to make learning to read easy is to make reading easy." It is hoped that the example of Billy's learning to read will provide an illustration for teachers of how to make reading easy. Billy learned to read with

a book that was so interesting that he could hardly put it down. Similarly, teachers can make learning to read easier by knowing the interests of the children in their classrooms, and providing books and other meaningful materials which stimulate those interests. Smith admonished us to "Respond to what the child is trying to do." Billy learned to read because, in addition to having an interesting book, he had people around him who reacted to his efforts by providing information when he requested it. Teachers can likewise respond to children's efforts through observation, interaction, feedback and encouragement. With books which are full of meaning, stimulating, well-written, and with a sensitive response from teachers, children can learn to read naturally.

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