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# TEACHING READING FLEXIBILITY IN THE CONTENT AREAS

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Two problems existing in secondary classrooms warrant the teaching of reading flexibility. The first is the problem of students being required to read extensively in many of their classes. In order to meet this requirement, they must accomplish their reading assignments efficiently in these subject areas. This, in turn, demands that they be flexible readers who can read rapidly when such speed is appropriate and slowly and carefully when a slow and careful rate is demanded.

In addition to the great amount of reading students have to do in many of their classes, there is also the problem of continually being forced to play the game of finding the proverbial "needle". Students are given reading assignments in various subject areas with no specific purpose in mind. Not knowing what to expect, they read all materials at the same rate, always looking for the information the teacher expects them to find. If teachers would give students purposes for reading, or help them set their own purposes, and teach them how to vary their rate accordingly, the needle in the haystack game would be discontinued.

Research findings indicate that most readers are rigid rather than flexible in their rate of reading, and this lack of flexibility in rate may simply be the result of inappropriate training (Harris, 1970). For, while the importance of reading flexibility is frequently emphasized in preservice and inservice classes for teachers, specific strategies for assessing and teaching the skill are generally not presented. This lack of training on the part of teachers is unfortunate, given the conclusion of many reading authorities that flexibility in rate can be substantially improved

with appropriate instruction (Dechant 1973, Weintraub 1967, Witty 1969). This article will define the flexible reader, suggest methods of assessing reading flexibility and present a strategy for teaching reading flexibility in content area classrooms.

#### Definitions of a flexible reader

There is general agreement among authorities that reading speed is relative to what one is reading and what one expects to derive from the reading. Specifically, a flexible reader is one who has the ability to successfully set his speed by integrating two important variables in the reading act: 1) the nature and difficulty of the material being read, and 2) the purpose for reading (Harris 1970, Otto and Smith 1970, Stauffer 1975).

No material is difficult in and of itself. While factors such as difficult technical vocabulary, abstract ideas, and esoteric problems affect readability, a reader with certain prior knowledge would not necessarily find material containing those factors difficult to read. The more familiarity readers have with a topic, the less they have to rely on the visual inputs from the text to gain information, thereby allowing them to skim. Their own background of information substitutes for those portions of the material they have skipped. Flexible readers survey the material for a particular assignment to obtain an idea of the difficulty of the reading task based upon material characteristics and the amount of familiarity with the topic they have, and decide on an appropriate reading rate and strategy.

Reader purpose can be determined either by the student or by the teacher, and can refer to either intellectual processes or to the type of information sought in a passage. Flexible readers determine their rate of reading on the basis of the kind of process and information demanded by the material and/or the teacher. For example, if a reader's purpose is to get an idea of the author's point of view regarding a certain topic, a skimming rate is appropriate. If, however, the reader is to read a step-by-step description of a scientific experiment in order to learn the details of setting up the experiment, a careful, slow rate is called for. This kind of accountability demanded by a teacher regarding a particular assignment will also have some bearing on the purpose setting and the reading rate. Students' reading rates, for example, should differ depending upon the kind of test they are preparing for, one that requires only literal recall or one that demands much higher level thinking.



- 1) a slow and thorough reading rate for study materials and difficult reading with unfamiliar abstract concepts and technical vocabulary;
2. an average reading rate for some magazine articles, textbook chapters, and easy fiction;
3. a rapid reading rate for entertainment reading;
4. a skimming rate for getting a general overview of material and obtaining key ideas; and
5. a scanning rate for finding specific facts and locating particular information quickly.

When preparing this exercise, it is important that the teacher provide a purpose for reading the material as well as suggest the appropriate rate and strategy in order for the test to be a teaching tool. For example, the teacher would say, "Read this passage on the life of Dwight D. Eisenhower in order to learn what college President Eisenhower attended. Use a scanning strategy." A graph comparing all five rates could be used to provide immediate diagnostic feedback. Student who performed all five reading tasks at much the same rate can clearly see that they are in need of rate adjustment.

Another type of teacher-made test is an exercise to determine if students can adjust their reading rate according to the purpose for which they read. A simple device may be used. The teacher selects for the students two passages from a unit in a text, and establishes different purposes for reading them. One purpose might be to find a specific piece of factual or statistical information contained within a passage. Another purpose might be to classify certain information within the other passage and to relate it to the broader topic of the passage.

Such diverse purposes for reading, then, call for different rates of reading. In the first instance, a scanning strategy should be used, and, as a result, the students' flexibility is easily measured in terms of the speed with which they find the information. The second purpose requires a slow and thorough rate of reading. After the students have completed both assignments, a comparison of the time taken on each should be made. If, in the first instance, they have plodded through the material until they happened upon the answer, the students are not flexible readers. If, in the second case, they have sped through the material, they have not adjusted their rate to meet their purpose. Another measure of the inflexible reader is, if the students take as much time to find the isolated fact in a passage as they do to analyze or

classify important information within the passage.

The following example shows how students' abilities to adjust reading rate according to purpose can be measured:

Purpose 1: Scan the following passage to determine the two bases mentioned for classifying heart diseases.

Purpose 2: Read the following passage to identify the more common kinds of heart diseases. Be sure to understand the varying pathological conditions within each of the categories and their causes.

The last type of informal, teacher-made test is to determine if students can adjust their reading rate according to the relative difficulty of the material being read. One way teachers may assess students' ability to perform this task is to compare their reading rates for material containing familiar concepts and vocabulary with material containing unfamiliar concepts and vocabulary. Students would be encouraged to draw upon their prior knowledge with the familiar selection, and should be able to read it more quickly than the unfamiliar selection. If there is no difference in performance between the two tasks, students know that they are unable to adjust their reading rate according to the relative difficulty of the material. An example of this type of reading flexibility assessment follows:

Purpose: Using your knowledge of the family structure obtained through our reading and class discussions during the last few days, read the following selection on divorce in order to determine its effects upon the family structure.

Teacher observation checklist. Here is another method of assessing reading flexibility. Classroom observations often help identify students who need to become more flexible readers. Questions such as these may be kept in mind as the teacher observes one individual or a small group:

- 1) Does the student consistently take longer to finish reading assignments in class than other students?
- 2) When the purpose for reading is to find a single piece of information, does the student start at the beginning and read every paragraph?
- 3) When the purpose for reading is to get an idea of what the author is saying, does the student appear to be reading all the words?
- 4) Does the student fail to adjust rate in situations where the material is familiar and unfamil-

iar to him?

5) Is the student reluctant to do recreational reading because books take too long to finish?

6) Does the student read assignments which require in-depth study with little or no comprehension?

7) Given your responses to the above questions, would you say that this student is able to read at different rates for different materials and purposes?

Student self-assessment inventory. With the use of this inventory, students, as well as the teacher, can obtain immediate feedback regarding their competencies in this area. Some teachers are reluctant to use student self-assessment inventories because a number of students cannot or will not evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. Robinson (1978), however, says that even these students will do so if 1) they know that their teacher is using the results to help them; 2) there is no competition in the evaluation process; 3) the self-assessment is individual and private; 4) the self-assessment emphasizes a small and visible part of the curriculum; and, 5) the self-assessment is significant to the students and leads to a better understanding of themselves. A flexibility inventory can include questions such as the following:

1. When you begin to read an assignment, do you go over your purpose for reading it?

\_\_\_\_\_ often \_\_\_\_\_ sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ rarely

2. Do you read most of your assignments at the same rate?

3. Do you know how to skim?

4. Do you know how to scan?

5. In which of the following instances would you use a skimming technique (mark those with + )?

\_\_\_\_\_ reading a word problem in your math textbook

\_\_\_\_\_ reading to find out how fish digest their food

\_\_\_\_\_ reading an article to get the main idea

\_\_\_\_\_ looking up a word in the dictionary

\_\_\_\_\_ studying for a test on the details of reconstruction after the Civil War

\_\_\_\_\_ reading an editorial to learn the writer's opinion

\_\_\_\_\_ reading a science experiment

6. In which of the above instances would you use a scanning technique (mark those with a -)?

7. Are you flexible in your reading rate?

### A strategy for teaching reading flexibility

There are two contexts or settings in which flexibility in reading rate can be taught to secondary students. One setting is that of a reading and study skills class which is part of the school developmental reading program. In this context, materials designed specifically for rate improvement are used to develop reading efficiency. These materials do not generally approximate materials students actually confront in their academic reading, nor is a purpose for reading often established for the flexibility exercises.

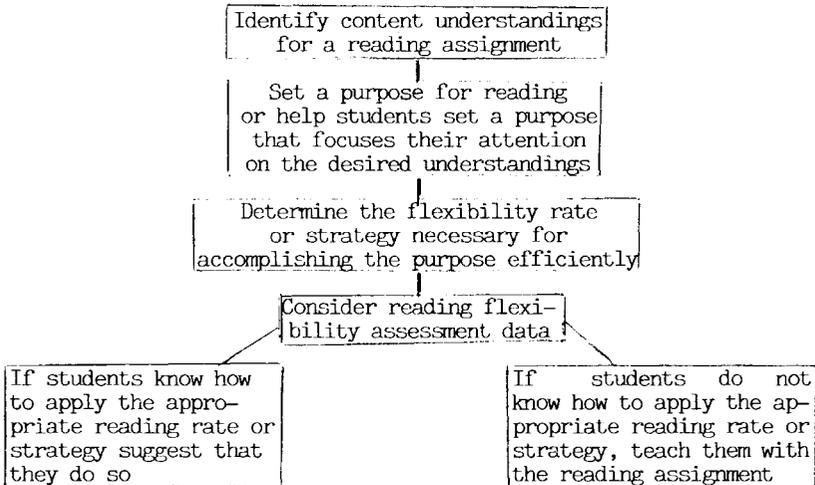
The other context in which flexibility in reading rate can be taught is that of a content area classroom. In this context, teachers are asked to integrate the teaching of reading flexibility with the teaching of content. There are several advantages to this approach. Instead of being taught in a vacuum, the skill of reading flexibility is taught for functional purposes by content teachers who see the need for their students to be flexible readers, in order to do the extensive and intensive reading required in their subject areas. Materials used in this approach are the reading assignments themselves.

The strategy presented here follows the theory of content area reading which means that the content determines the process. That is, the subject matter teacher first identifies the content understandings to be gained by the students, and then determines the skills necessary to achieve those understandings. If students are found to be lacking in the skills, the teacher integrates the teaching of the skills with the teaching of subject matter. This content centered approach is contrasted with the process centered approach used by reading teachers where the process determines the content.

Since flexibility of reading rate is a skill that is necessary for efficient reading in all content areas, informal assessment should be done at the beginning of the year or semester, using one or more of the assessment strategies suggested in this paper. If students are found to be flexible readers, then all that needs to be done by the teacher is to suggest an appropriate reading rate and strategy for the efficient achievement of the content understandings. If students are found to be inflexible readers, then the teacher needs to integrate the teaching of reading flexibility with the teaching of content, so that the desired content understandings will determine both the sequence and depth of purpose questions as well as the probable speed of search behavior. Presented in this way, the reason for reading in any content

area class is to arrive at content understandings, and an appropriate reading rate and strategy can help students gain those understandings efficiently and effectively. The following graphic display illustrates the teaching of reading flexibility in the content classroom:

## TEACHING READING FLEXIBILITY IN THE CONTENT CLASSROOM



By way of example, let us consider the application of this strategy in a social studies classroom where the students are studying the Civil War. The teacher wants her class to understand the biggest advantage the North had over the South during the War. Purpose for reading the chapter is to be able to explain why this advantage was so important in terms of the final outcome. The flexibility strategy important for accomplishing this purpose efficiently is skimming. Assessment data indicate that students do not know how to skim, and the teacher shows them a technique for skimming. Since class members are already familiar with the advantages each side had over the other, they should be told to let their eyes move quickly over the pages to mentally note/list the advantages the North had over the South. They should pay attention to headings, note the ideas in the introduction and conclusion, and check topic sentences in each paragraph discussing an advantage. Then the teacher encourages students to think about what they have already learned concerning favorable conditions for winning any war, and see if they can answer the purpose setting question. If they cannot, they should be encouraged to return to the selection, find the headings that explain the

advantages the North had over the South, and read those paragraphs carefully.

Because of the extensive reading that needs to be done, and the need to have students read with a purpose in mind, secondary teachers should diagnose students' flexibility needs. Integrating the teaching of flexibility with the teaching of content can be accomplished. Flexible readers can select appropriate rates and strategies. Those who are inflexible can be taught to apply particular rates and strategies.

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