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ENRICHING THE BEGINNING READING PROGRAM: THE NATURAL LANGUAGE TECHNIQUE

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A friend's first-grade son came running home the other day to show his mother the story he'd "written" and could "read." The story was one he had told the teacher's aide in his classroom; the aide had written it down for him and had read it with him several times until the child knew it by heart. This technique, termed "language experience" or "chart stories," is an extremely good one for promoting positive attitudes toward reading in children and for providing useful experiences with reading.

There is another technique that is equally motivating and useful. This is the technique suggested by Bill Martin in his *Sounds of Language* readers, but it can also be used with many other books. The technique involves finding a book that has predictable language patterns; those with words that are repeated or that rhyme are especially useful. (A list of suggested books is provided at the end of this article.) The book should also have pictures that illustrate the story line and should be reasonably short (10 to 20 pages). If a longer book is used, such as *Go Dog Go*, sections of it can be used at a time.

I have called this technique the "natural language" technique. The way I remember which label goes with which technique is to consider that "language experience" stories are about a child's own experience, and are written in his own language, whereas "natural language" stories contain language children can learn easily and "naturally." (Of course the labels aren't really important; the experiences provided by both techniques are what count.)

Just as language experience stories can be composed by one child or by a group of children, so the natural language technique can be used with either an individual or a group. The following explanation of the natural language procedure is for an individual, but it can be readily adapted to a group situation.

The Procedure

The teacher reads the title to the child and they look at the cover and title page together; they can look at the pictures in the book, too, if the child is interested. The teacher then reads each page to the child, running her finger under the line of print as she reads. (The reading should be done in a natural way, *not* word by word.) When she reaches the end of the story, they can discuss it: did you like it, what did you like best, would you like to

do something like that, etc. Then she suggests to the child that they read the story again and that this time the child read along—“Let’s read it together.” The teacher again runs her finger under each line; every so often she can encourage the child by telling him how well he’s doing. This rereading can be repeated several times. Each time the teacher should try to read less and less—she can start a line with the child, but she should fade out toward the end of it and let the child finish it himself. Finally the child should be encouraged to try and read it himself with any prompting necessary provided by the teacher.

This procedure—the teacher reads, the teacher and child read together, the child “reads” by himself with necessary prompting—may be repeated on consecutive days. After several trials the child will get to the point where he can “read” the book by himself.

Theoretical Implications

In *Sounds of Home*, Bill Martin provides a convincing description of the natural language technique at work. He describes a child who has heard his teacher read the poem “Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been.” He states:

Once a child has these sounds clearly in the ear, he will have little difficulty reading this old rhyme in its printed form. Once his ears begin telling him what his eyes are seeing, he approaches the reading with confidence and expectation. At first it may seem that he is merely repeating what he has memorized, but when he comes to you and exultingly declares, ‘I know that word, Miss Corbett, that word is Pussy,’ you will have evidence that he is relating sight and sound in reading. Nor will this be your only evidence. Notice how he ponders the printed page, studying the words and, thus, taking in visually the patterns of language that already are ringing in his ear. (Martin, 1966, pp. TE5-6)

Through such experiences the child is becoming aware of the relationships between spoken and printed words, an understanding that young children appear not to have (Holden & MacGinitie, 1972), and thus he is learning to discriminate the distinctive features of printed words and letters (Gibson, 1965). He is also learning to integrate the printed information in letters and words with the contextual information available from his knowledge of how the language works and his knowledge of the subject matter of the story.

The ability to combine the printed and contextual information is critical. Biemiller (1970) followed the progress of children learning to read and found that those children who were able to integrate these pieces of information were the best readers at the end of the first grade. In contrast, those children who were unable to relate the printed and contextual information were the poorest.

Instructional Implications

There are many activities that can be planned to extend the usefulness

of the natural language technique. These activities can easily be applied to the language experience technique as well. In using these activities the teacher should constantly keep in mind that the ultimate goal is twofold: first, to help the child learn to read, and second, to ensure that reading is pleasurable. Listed below are several suggested activities.

1. The story can be duplicated, following the format of the book, and the child can illustrate it.
2. He can take home the duplicated story and read it to his family (and neighbors, perhaps). The teacher might want to send home a note telling the parents that “books” and stories will be coming home and asking that they read them with their child.
3. If he’s able, the child can copy the story from the book. Dolores Durkin’s (1966) early readers were incessant “scribblers” and loved to copy words and sentences. This, of course, helps the child focus on the letters and words themselves.
4. The child may want to write his own story by substituting words he already knows for those that are in the story. For example, he may want to write, “Tommy, Tommy, where have you been. I’ve been to school to visit my teacher.”
5. The child can find similar words: “Find all the ‘I’s’.” First he should be encouraged to find them within a single story; perhaps he could circle all of one word with green crayon, all of another with red crayon, and so on. Then he can find similar words in two stories, then three stories, and so forth. He may wish to make lists of words that appear often, or he may want to learn “special” words. (This, of course, is reminiscent of Sylvia Ashton Warner’s, 1963, organic vocabulary approach.)
6. The child can be encouraged to read his book to other children, gaining experience reading a book fluently and with expression to an audience.

It’s important to mention that the success of each technique depends on the child involved. Some children are fascinated with seeing their own experiences go down in print; for them, the language experience technique is more effective. Other children can’t wait to learn to read a “real” book; for them, the natural language technique is more effective. Both techniques, however, provide children with important experiences with reading and should be included as part of any program designed for beginning readers.

Suggested Books

The books listed below are only a sampling of those available. Teachers may want to select certain poems or pages from some books (i.e., *Best Mother Goose*). Other books contain a few unfamiliar words (i.e., *Ape in a Cape*); however, this can provide excellent opportunities for expanding children’s concepts and meaning vocabularies.

Baum, Arline and Joseph. *One Bright Monday Morning*. Random House, 1962.

Bemelmans, Ludwig. *Madeline*. Viking Press, 1939.

Berenstein, Stan and Jan. *Bears in the Night*. Random House, 1971.

- Carle, Eric. *Have You Seen My Cat?* Franklin Watts, 1976.
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- Emberley, Barbara (adapted). *One Wide River to Cross*. Prentiss-Hall, 1967.
- Graham, John. *A Crowd of Cows*. Scholastic Book Services, 1968.
- Hutchins, Pat. *Rosie's Walk*. Collier Books, 1968.
- Keats, Ezra Jack (illus.). *Over in the Meadow*. Four Winds Press, 1971.
- Krauss, Ruth. *The Happy Day*. Harper and Row, 1949.
- Langstaff, John. *Frog Went A-Courtin'*. Scholastic Book Services, 1955.
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- Lionni, Leo. *Inch by Inch*. Astor-Honor, 1960.
- Lobel, Arnold (illus.). *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog*. Bradbury Press, 1968.
- Lund, Doris H. *Did You Ever Dream?* Parents' Magazine Press, 1969.
- Maestro, Betsy and Giulio. *Harriet Goes to the Circus*. Crown Publishers, 1977.
- Martin, Bill. *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1970. (This is just one title in Bill Martin's "Instant Reader" series. There are many other excellent books in this series.)
- Scarry, Richard. *Best Mother Goose Ever*. Golden Press, 1974.
- Seuss, Dr. *Hop on Pop*. Random House, 1963.
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