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CAN WE UPDATE EXPERIENCED TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN READING?

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A recent review charting the impact of educational research on classroom teaching found that teaching practices, particularly in reading, were rarely modified to reflect current research findings (Clifford, 1973). Clifford chronicled the fragmentary, "one short" nature of much of the educational research produced and reported over the last fifty years. He suggested that a more unified body of cumulative research findings in a cohesive area of investigation might stand a better chance of influencing change in the classroom.

Psycholinguistics, spanning the last 15 years of reading research represents such a cumulative, unified research enterprise that should be a pivotal force in updating and modifying our past beliefs and practices in the teaching of reading. Indeed, persuasive data banks exist in miscue analysis that directly challenge our prior beliefs and practices on a number of fronts (Allen and Watson, 1976). For example, miscue research has cogently demonstrated the reconstructive, top-down nature of the reading process. Synonym substitutions are valued since they rarely disrupt meaning, phonic skills are downplayed as an aid to fluent reading, and "armchair" hierarchies of reading rules and sub-skills are viewed with suspicion by most psycholinguists. Given that we have such a persuasive body of empirical data to challenge our past practices in the teaching of reading, to what degree do experienced teachers subscribe to a psycholinguistic view of the reading process?

A recent cross-cultural survey explored the degree to which experienced and preservice teachers in America and England reported agreement with some of the tenets of psycholinguistics (Robinson, Goodacre, and McKenna, 1978). The researchers constructed a self-rating scale based on a verbatim list of statements introduced by Smith (1973) in an article entitled "Twelve Easy Ways to Make Learning to Read Difficult." Table 1 presents the self-rating scale.

A teacher who subscribes to a psycholinguistic view of the reading process would be expected to respond negatively (i.e., select "No" or "Slight Emphasis") to the 12 items on this scale. Robinson et al. (1978) predicted that experienced teachers, steeped in traditional reading dogma would tend to concur with Smith's 12 statements. Thirty-seven experienced teachers in America completed the rating scale. Indeed, the researchers' expectations were confirmed. Experienced American teachers exhibited little agreement

TABLE 1

Robinson et al. (1978) Rating Scale

Directions: Place a check mark () under the statement that best represents your teaching emphasis for each of the 12 items.

	No Emphasis	Slight Emphasis	Uncertain	Moderate Emphasis	Heavy Emphasis
1. Aim for early mastery of the rules of reading.					
2. Ensure that phonic skills are learned and used.					
3. Teach letters or words one at a time, making sure each new letter or word is learned before moving on.					
4. Make word-perfect reading the prime objective.					
5. Discourage guessing; be sure children read carefully.					
6. Encourage the avoidance of errors.					
7. Provide immediate feedback.					
8. Detect and correct inappropriate eye movements.					
9. Identify and give special attention to problem readers as soon as possible.					
10. Make sure children understand the importance of reading and the seriousness of falling behind.					
11. Take the opportunity during reading instruction to improve spelling and written expression and also insist on the best possible spoken English.					
12. If the method you are using is unsatisfactory, try another. Always be alert for new materials and techniques.					

with the 12 statements. Similar response patterns were noted for experienced English teachers and preservice teachers in both countries. The researchers concluded that the basic principles of psycholinguistics were either unknown to this sample of teachers or in marked contrast to their deep-rooted beliefs about reading instruction.

The present study was designed to explore the degree to which a one semester graduate level course in Psychology of Reading might update experienced teachers' beliefs and practices in reading. The self-rating scale reported by Robinson et al. (1978) was used as the criterion measure. The 11 students enrolled in the course were elementary and secondary teachers of reading pursuing either a California reading specialist credential or a master's degree. The core text for the course was Frank Smith's *Understanding Reading* (1978) with supplementary readings in cognitive psychology but Smith's (1973) article was not read by these students. The course involved a blend of psycholinguistic theory and practical teaching strategies that would be supported by a psycholinguistic view of the reading process. For example, the "ReQuest" procedure (Manzo, 1969), emphasizing prediction and applied level thinking was introduced and implemented by members of the class. It was reasoned that a combination of intensive exposure to psycholinguistic theory and its practical application would yield statistically different results from the Robinson et al. (1978) sample.

Method

Eleven students completed the 12 item rating scale on the last evening of class. The accumulated data for experienced American teachers in the Robinson et al. (1978) study and the present study were compared statistically in an analysis of variance. Table 2 presents the raw percentage data for the two samples on each item of the rating scale.

In order to statistically compare the data from the two studies, two main categories were formed reflecting agreement or disagreement with Smith's (1973) psycholinguistic principles. That is, "no emphasis" and "slight emphasis" responses were combined to form a "no/slight" category. And, "moderate emphasis" and "heavy emphasis" responses were collapsed to form a "moderate/heavy" category. Uncertain responses were not included in the analysis of the data. Percentage scores reflecting agreement or disagreement with Smith's 12 psycholinguistic principles were computed for the two samples (Table 2).

Results

Two separate analyses of variance were conducted. The first F-test contrasted the Robinson et al. (1978) sample with the Psychology of Reading group in terms of agreement with psycholinguistic tenets as portrayed in Smith's (1973) statements. The mean agreement score for the Robinson et al. sample was 25 percent and the Psychology of Reading group evidence 54 percent agreement ($F [1,23] = 5.80, p .05$). This statistically significant difference suggests that the Psychology of Reading

TABLE 2
 Percentage of Teachers Agreeing or Disagreeing
 With Traditional Reading Beliefs

	EMPHASIS			
	No/Slight *I	*II	Moderate/ Heavy I	II
1. Aim for early mastery of the rules of reading.	22	54	68	9
2. Ensure that phonic skills are learned and used.	18	62	78	27
3. Teach letters or words one at a time, making sure each new letter or word is learned before moving on.	48	100	38	0
4. Make word-perfect reading the prime objective.	72	100	18	0
5. Discourage guessing; be sure children read carefully.	43	82	45	0
6. Encourage the avoidance of errors.	24	90	72	1
7. Provide immediate feedback.	5	1	89	82
8. Detect and correct inappropriate eye movements.	18	54	72	18
9. Identify and give special attention to problem readers as soon as possible.	5	18	94	82
10. Make sure children understand the importance of reading and the seriousness of falling behind.	32	54	62	36
11. Take the opportunity during reading instruction to improve spelling and written expression and also insist on the best possible spoken English.	22	36	70	54
12. If the method you are using is unsatisfactory, try another. Always be alert for new materials and techniques.	2	0	92	100

* I. Robinson et al. sample (n = 37).

** II. Psychology of Reading sample (n = 11).

course did have an influence on the degree to which experienced teachers reported agreement with psycholinguistic principles. The results of the second *F*-test lend further support to this finding. The mean score for the Robinson et al. (1978) sample was 66 percent, reflecting an emphasis on these traditional beliefs and practices. In contrast, the Psychology of Reading group evidenced a mean score of only 34 percent "moderate/heavy" emphasis on traditional beliefs and practices in reading instruction ($F(1,23) = 6.72, p < .05$).

Discussion

The findings of the present study strongly suggest that graduate course work in the Psychology of Reading can be instrumental in helping experienced teachers update their beliefs and practices in the teaching of reading. Furthermore, this study points to the need for curriculum at the master's level that goes beyond a "grab bag of tricks" approach to the reading process. Substantive, challenging experiences with recent linguistic and psychological research findings must be an integral part of our graduate curriculum. Only in this way can we begin to counter Clifford's (1973) contention that classroom teachers are historically victims of inertia, operating in a kind of vacuum that ignores the findings of educational research. The cumulative body of information from psycholinguistics holds much promise for improving the teaching of reading. Let's not play "I've got a secret" with this wealth of knowledge for too long.

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