

7-1-1980

Suggestions for Improving the Language Development of Disabled Secondary Readers

Nancy A. Mavrogenes
Aurora, Illinois

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Mavrogenes, N. A. (1980). Suggestions for Improving the Language Development of Disabled Secondary Readers. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 20 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol20/iss4/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING THE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF DISABLED SECONDARY READERS

Nancy A. Mavrogenes

READING AND ENGLISH TEACHER, AURORA, ILLINOIS

As high school teachers of reading and English know, some students in their classrooms are poor in all areas of language. They read on a fourth-grade level; they write and spell so as to obscure most communication; they speak in simple sentences; their listening ability is so low that they can't seem to follow most directions. What can we do to fill in the innumerable gaps in all these areas? It is the purpose of this article to present two ways to improve a student's level of language development: 1) daily exposure to good literature *in the original* (not adapted to a fourth grade level) and 2) daily lessons in syntactical manipulation and sentence combining, including the use of language games.

Reading the Originals (Listening while Reading)

Probably students like those described above with low levels of language development need to be exposed to the richest variety of language possible, an exposure which may very well have been denied them in a way affecting their language development. Carol Chomsky (1972) made this suggestion in her study correlating reading backgrounds and linguistic stages. Such exposure to rich language is based on the nature of language acquisition, which occurs naturally as people mature and develop in an environment where they are adequately exposed to language and where they can use such inputs in their own ways. Hoskisson and Krohm (1974) recommend "assisted reading" in a classroom, using a tape recorder, a listening post, and reading couples. This kind of reading gives children the full context of written language while they learn to read, just as their environment should have provided them with the full context of spoken language while they learned to speak.

Listening while reading has its roots in the basic assumption of the psycholinguistics-information processing theory of reading: "Reading programs must enhance the strategies natural to the reading process. Readers . . . need practice at the strategies natural to the skill of reading" (Cooper and Petrosky, 1976, p. 200). Such exposure would provide an antidote to "controlled" reading and reading "made easy" as students' "structural understanding of their reading material could be enhanced by greater exposure to the more complex syntax of informed

adult speech” (Stotsky, 1975, p. 43). It also is the way reading— and language— were taught in the “good old days” when “the basics” were the only things around. Here is a description of “English” at the turn of the century in a Kansas country school:

Readers were fairly solid affairs, designed to do more than develop skills. They included chapters from novels by Dickens, selections from *Walden* and *Gulliver's Travels*, and poems by various English and American poets. . . . *The Psalm of Life*, *Barefoot Boy*, parts of *Thanatopsis*, and Lowell's stanza on June were usually memorized. I recall that at about the sixth grade our teacher read *Oliver Twist* aloud as part of the morning exercises, younger pupils being expected to appear attentive (as they did). We also did choral reading. On one occasion the four upper groups memorized Byron's *Battle of Waterloo* and recited the whole as a single voice. (LaBrant, 1977, p. 6)

In addition, theory is backed up by research. Cohen (1968) reported on 580 second graders from seven New York City schools with high minority populations. The experimental group read an interesting story each day of the school year and participated in many kinds of follow-up activities; the goal was to strengthen the vocabulary of socially disadvantaged children, to stimulate their desire to read, and to increase their actual reading achievement. The experimental group made significantly higher gains than the control group in vocabulary, word knowledge, and reading comprehension. Schneeberg (1977) described a similar situation at the fourth grade level in an inner-city Philadelphia school. In this case the experimental group, which read and listened to 70-80 books during two school years, for two to four hours a week, and then participated in follow-up activities, gained 2.5 years on the total reading test of the California Achievement Test. Normally, educationally disadvantaged students progress .65-.75 grade equivalent units per year (Tempo Center for Advanced Studies, 1971).

The way disabled secondary readers could read the originals would be to provide them with both tapes and printed copies. If ears and also eyes are put to work on interesting material, the problem of comprehension should be solved. Some work with three-level study guides (Herber, 1970), reinforcement activities, and reactions to the books read (Mavrogenes, 1977) would be a regular part of the program. Here are some suggestions for solidly written original reading material appealing to secondary students: Edgar Allan Poe (“The Pit and the Pendulum,” “The Tell-tale Heart,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Oblong Box,” “The Black Cat”); Robert Louis Stevenson (“The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”); Mark Twain (“The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” *Huckleberry Finn*); Jack London (“To Build a Fire,” *The Call of the Wild*); Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories; J. D. Salinger (“For Esme— With Love and Squalor,” *The Cat-*

cher in the Rye); Ernest Hemingway ("My Old Man," "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," *A Farewell to Arms*); John Steinbeck ("Flight," *Of Mice and Men*); O. Henry ("The Cop and the Anthem," "The Gift of the Magi," "The Ransom of Red Chief"); W. W. Jacobs ("The Monkey's Paw"); F. Scott Fitzgerald ("Babylon Revisited," *The Great Gatsby*); Kurt Vonnegut (*Welcome to the Monkeyhouse*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*); Shirley Jackson ("The Lottery," "Charles"); Dorothy Parker ("The Waltz"); *The Diary of Anne Frank*; Dick Gregory (*Autobiography*); Gordon Parks (*Autobiography*); William H. Armstrong (*Sounder*); Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein*); Bram Stoker (*Dracula*); perhaps such current popular novels as *Carrie*, *The Omen*, *Sybil*, or *Jaws*. Adolescent novels could also be used provided they are written at a minimum readability level of seventh grade. At this level the language in the books should be complex enough to stimulate language development but not above the students' listening levels.

Syntactical Manipulation

There is evidence from research that work on the development of syntactic understanding improves language skills. In the case of writing the evidence is clear. O'Hare (1973) studied the impact of sentence-combining on seventh graders' writing. He demonstrated that such practice in combining groups of kernel statements into sentences more structurally complex than those students would normally be expected to write resulted in twenty times normal growth in words per T-unit, "the most reliable measure of syntactic maturity. . . . The experimental group's compositions showed evidence of a level of syntactic maturity well beyond that typical of eighth graders and in many respects quite similar to that of twelfth graders" (p. 67). Even experimental students with low IQ's made significant gains in syntactic maturity.

Stotsky (1975) suggests that sentence-combining exercises may have opened the door to "an uncharted and unexplored area—the concept of writing as a profound mental activity" (pp. 66-67), which may facilitate cognitive growth as well as reading ability. She cites the "meager evidence" available on whether a writing approach can improve reading comprehension: in one tenth-grade experimental writing program reading comprehension gains were noted at the .06 level for four out of seven experimental classes, and in another study, work on syntax and paragraph structure in the seventh grade improved reading comprehension at the .01 level.

Another report (Hughes, 1975) of twenty-four seventh graders compared an experimental group which had ten to thirteen weeks of sentence-combining exercises. On a standardized test of reading speed and accuracy there was no difference in gains of the two groups, but miscue analysis showed that the experimental group's reading improved significantly in the use of grammatical relations and in the integration of syntactic and semantic cues. Combs (1977) reported on two groups of seventh graders, one of which received sentence-combining instruction.

Although the two groups were similar on a pretest in reading rate and comprehension, the experimental group, after sentence-combining practice, experienced significant gains in reading comprehension but not rate.

If a teacher decides to incorporate sentence-combining into his/her instructional program, there are several ways to go about it. Some commercial programs exist utilizing sentence-combining activities. Frank O'Hare (1975) has a complete workbook called *Sentencecraft*. If a less extensive or easier program is desired, Cahill and Hrebic's two workbooks, *Cut the Deck* and *Stack the Deck* (1977), might be appropriate. In addition, a teacher could make up his/her own exercises, based perhaps on a book the class is currently reading. Here are some examples taken from Frank Bonham's *The Nitty Gritty* (1968). Complex sentences can be broken into kernels or, vice-versa, kernels can be combined into complex sentences:

1. Complex sentence: *Since Charlie was not especially interested in the conversation, he let his mind slip out of gear like a car.* Kernels: 1) *Charlie was not especially interested in the conversation;* 2) *Charlie let his mind slip out of gear;* 3) *Charlie's mind was slipping out of gear like a car.*
2. Complex sentence: *Charlie had talked to some old winos around the bars on Ajax Street, the main stem of Dogtown, a rundown section of the big city where he lived.* Kernels: 1) *Charlie had talked to some old winos;* 2) *The winos were around the bars;* 3) *The bars were on Ajax Street;* 4) *Ajax Street was the main stem of Dogtown;* 5) *Dogtown was a rundown section of the big city;* 6) *Charlie lived in Dogtown.*

Besides sentence-combining, there are other ways of providing practice for the development of syntactic understanding. Sentences can be lengthened in the manner suggested by Francis Christensen (1967). The basic sentences in the following examples are again taken from *The Nitty Gritty*.

1. Begin with a main clause, then qualify it, or compare it, or detail it, as follows:
 Basic sentence: *Charlie kept forking in the food,*
 Qualifying: *smearing red sauce from the ribs over his mouth,*
 Comparing: *like a mechanical arm in the Schlitz beer factory,*
 Detailing: *bread mixed with collards, butter mixed with the ribs.*
2. Examples of two-level and multi-level sentences:
¹*Charlie's father muttered,*
²*stripping the meat from a sparerib with his teeth.*
¹*Charlie's father drank deeply from the can of beer by his plate,*
²*slurping some beer over his cheeks,*
³*licking it all off to get the last drop.*
¹*Charlie would come out of a dream*
²*like a person walking from a theater on a summer afternoon,*
³*blinking in the cruel sunlight.*

3. Examples of basic sentences to add to:
 - a. The old building sounded fascinating, especially the basement, .
 - b. Some of those old winos were interesting. _____
 - c. Outside, Charlie heard a motorcycle popping along like _____.
 - d. Charlie was seventeen, short for his age but _____.

Another possibility would be to use exercises which give practice in structures such as expanded verb forms, relative clauses, participle phrases, causal clauses, question forms, negative sentences, passives, connectives, and indirect discourse. The following examples are taken from McCarr (1973).

1. Give the sentence a "helping word."
The boys ran in the hall. The _____ in the hall.
2. This question is wrong. Make *one* change, and write it correctly.
Wrong: Did Tom lost his cap? Correct: _____?
3. Change to a question.
They play baseball sometimes. _____?
4. Write the answer. Where did the boys walk? The boys _____.
a) in the morning; b) fast; c) to the park.
5. Read the sentence. Write in "so" or "because."
The house was locked _____ Ann couldn't get in.
6. Change to indirect discourse.
Tom said, "The game is starting." _____.
7. Write in the correct answers.
Bob's bike was bought by Mike. _____ bought the bike. He paid _____ \$10.

A final way to provide practice for the development of syntactic understanding would be exercises based on Fillmore's case grammar. Such exercises might direct the students to an understanding of the semantic relationships between parts of sentences. For a discussion of this approach to grammar, see Brown (1975, pp. 132-147).

1. Start with a verb, such as *gave* or *hit*.
2. Add the agent, in two ways (the animate instigator of action):
Mike gave a party. The party was given by Mike. Mike hit Ed. Ed was hit by Mike.
3. What was the instrument? (The inanimate object causing the action)
The wind gave me a cold. The car hit Ed. Mike hit Ed with a rock.
4. Who was affected by the action? *Me* and *Ed* in the above sentences.
5. Where was the action taking place? *Mike gave the party in his basement. With a rock, Mike hit Ed on his head.*
6. When did the action take place? *Mike gave the party in his basement two weeks ago. Last Saturday Mike hit Ed with a rock on his head.*
7. Who benefitted from the action? *Mike gave the party for Jenny in his basement two weeks ago.*

8. Who else was along? *With Sue and Jane making to dozen pizzas, Mike gave the party for Jenny in his basement two weeks ago. Mike, with the help of Bob, hit Ed on his head last Saturday.*

Language Games

The following suggestions are representative only, examples of activities which can serve as pace-changers or fillers on days before vacation. They are taken from Bailey (1975), Hurwitz and Goddard (1969) and Shipley (1972), which are all rich sources for further ideas.

1. Write a telegram of one sentence in which the words begin with letters of the alphabet in order. Or choose one word and write a sentence with words beginning with those letters—e.g., *procrastinate*.
2. Hold a contest involving two teams which write as many sentences as possible using ambiguous words with their different meanings—words like *drum, fair, back, saw, fire, hole*, etc.
3. Hand out dittos with words on them like the following. The students are to begin at the bottom and go up, finding as many sentences as possible. Words can be used more than once, and the students write the sentences on their papers.

up	ideas	looks	once	late
shut	the	her	always	for
please	understand	like	you	me
you	don't	to	and	are
I	will	listen	try	why

4. Adjective brainstorming: given a limited time, and a noun, the student is to write as many applicable adjectives or descriptive words as possible. Adverb brainstorming: given a limited time, and a verb, the student is to write as many adverbs or adverb-phrases as possible that are applicable to the verb.
5. The group writes a story: The first person writes one line, folds the paper over so that no one can see it, passes it on. When everyone has written a line, the paper is unfolded and read aloud. Several stories may be written simultaneously, with two or three papers passed in different directions at once. For extended practice, these stories or poems may be edited and rewritten and the best ones saved.
6. Card game—antonyms or synonyms: Make a set of cards with as many pairs of words as desired. Deal three cards to each player. The rest of the deck is placed face down in the middle of the table, and play proceeds as in the card game “Fish.”
7. Compound word spin: Make a wheel, with a spinner in the middle, with words on it such as *car, light, room, day, where, side, thing, to*, etc. Also make a deck of cards with words such as *air, grand, head, up, down, base, hick, snow, every*, etc. Fan the deck of cards out on the table, face down. Player one draws a card and then spins the word wheel. If the word in his hand and the word he dialed

make a compound word, he scores one point. If not, he keeps the card. At his next turn he may choose to draw another card, or spin to match the one he already has. When all the cards in the deck are used, the game is over.

8. **Big Deal** (prefixes, suffixes, roots): Make a deck of 68 cards—16 prefixes (7 with *re*, 3 with *pre*, 2 with *mis*, 4 with *un*), 42 roots (3 each of *view*, *heat*, *tell*, *call*, *cover*, *spell*, *even*, *understand*, *pair*, *coil*, *form*, *claim*, *taken*, *written*), and 10 suffixes (5 each of *ed* and *ing*). After the cards are shuffled, seven cards are dealt to each player, and the rest of the pack is laid face down. The object of the game is to build as many words as possible by putting together prefixes, roots, and suffixes. Play proceeds as in the card game “Rummy.”
9. **Sentence-forming**: From a dictionary select at random 10-12 words, preferably as unrelated as possible. The players write these words in a vertical list. Then each player tries, within a given time, to compose a sentence using all the words in the order in which they are listed, using a few words either before or after each word so as to connect it to the rest of the words in the sentence. When time is up, the sentences are read aloud and compared.
10. **Word trading**: Make up a deck of cards consisting of the words of several related sentences of equal length, each word on a separate card. If three play, there should be three sentences of not more than twelve words each and each player should receive a third of the cards. With his cards, each player tries to construct a sentence, without showing them to the other players. Players can trade cards, each laying down a word that does not fit his sentence. As a player picks up a word, he has to discard another one. Players keep trading words, one at a time, trying various rearrangements of their cards until one sees exactly what he needs to win. The first player to put down a complete sentence wins.

The advantages of such a program for strengthening the language development of disabled readers go beyond “merely” language. Since language is the basis of all cognitive development, including reading, it can be hypothesized that strengthening the level of language development will also strengthen reading ability. Basic mental skills will be developed: concentration, accuracy, seeing relationships and analogies, forming hypotheses, following directions, comparing and categorizing (Hurwitz and Goddard, 1969). It can further be hypothesized, based on psycholinguistic theory interrelating all parts of the language process, that such a program might also involve gains in students’ writing ability, oral reading, listening ability, and oral language ability. In fact, if all these areas are improved, gains should also be noted in self-confidence, the very basis of all adolescent and, indeed, all human achievement.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bailey, Evalyn James. *Academic Activities for Adolescents with Learning Disabilities*. Evergreen, Colorado: Learning Pathways, 1975.
- Bonham, Frank. *The Nitty Gritty*. New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1968.
- Brown, Roger. *A First Language: The Early Stages*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1973.
- Cahill, Robert B. and Herbert J. Hrebic. *Cut the Deck and Stack the Deck*. Chicago: Cahill and Hrebic, 1977.
- Chomsky, Carol. "Stages in Language Development and Reading Exposure." *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 42 (February 1972), pp. 1-33.
- Christensen, Francis. *Notes Toward a New Rhetoric*. New York: Harper and Row, 1967.
- Cohen, Dorothy H. "The Effect of Literature on Vocabulary and Reading Achievement." *Elementary English*, vol. 45 (February 1968), pp. 209-213, 217.
- Combs, Warren E. "Sentence-Combining Practice Aids Reading Comprehension." *Journal of Reading*, vol. 21 (October 1977), pp. 18-24.
- Cooper, Charles R. and Anthony R. Petrosky. "A Psycholinguistic View of the Fluent Reading Process." *Journal of Reading*, vol. 20 (December 1976), pp. 184-207.
- Herber, Harold. *Teaching Reading in Content Areas*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970.
- Hoskisson, Kenneth and Bernadette Krohm. "Reading by Immersion: Assisted Reading." *Elementary English*, vol. 51 (September 1974), pp. 832-836.
- Hughes, Theone O. *Sentence Combining: A Means of Increasing Reading Comprehension*, 1975 (ED 112 421).
- Hurwitz, Abraham V. and Arthur Goddard. *Games to Improve Your Child's English*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969.
- LaBrant, Lou. "The Profession in Perspective." *English Journal*, vol. 66 (March 1977), pp. 6-9.
- Mavrogenes, Nancy A. "101 Ways to React to Books." *English Journal*, vol. 66 (May 1977), pp. 64-66.
- McCarr, James E. *Lessons in Syntax*. Lake Oswego, Oregon: Dormac Publishing Co., 1973.
- O'Hare, Frank. *Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing without Formal Grammar Instruction*. NCTE Research Report No. 15. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1973.
- O'Hare, Frank. *Sentencecraft*. Lexington, Mass.: Ginn and Company, 1975.
- Perron, J. D. "An Exploratory Approach to Extending the Syntactic Development of Fourth Grade Students through the Use of Sentence-Combining Methods." *Dissertation Abstracts International*, vol. 35 (1975), p. 4316A.
- Perron, J. D. "Beginning Writing: It's All in the Mind." *Language Arts*, vol. 53 (September 1976), pp. 652-657.
- Schneeberg, Helen. "Listening While Reading: A Four Year Study," *The Reading Teacher*, vol. 30 (March 1977), pp. 629-635.
- Shipley, Joseph. *Word Play*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1972.
- Stotsky, Sandra L. "Sentence-Combining as a Curricular Activity: Its Effort on Written Language Development and Reading Comprehension." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 9 (Spring 1975), pp. 30-71.
- Temps Center for Advanced Studies. *Evaluation of Title I ESEA-Compensatory Education*. GE 71 TMP-23. Santa Barbara, California: General Electric Co., 1971.