Understanding the Hypothesis, It's the Teacher that Makes the Difference: Part II

Jerome Harste
University of Indiana, Bloomington

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
**Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic**

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Jerome Harste
UNIVERSITY OF INDIANA, BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

EDITOR'S NOTE: ". . . research findings suggest pupil success or failure is most directly related to the 'teacher variable' in the teaching of reading." In Part II of "Understanding the Hypothesis, It's the Teacher that Makes the Difference," Jerome C. Harste explores the impact of the teacher's own theoretical orientation toward teaching reading, whether the teacher consciously or not admits to such an orientation. "While other researchers have not directly studied the notion that how a teacher cognitively processes available information may be key to understanding the elusive teacher variable in reading, much of their work lends credibility to such a study."

Our readers will find the conclusions of this outstanding article especially thought provoking when applied to their own effect on those they teach.

Examples of Theoretical Learning

We began our explorations of pupil orientations to reading assuming that if we explored pupil perceptions of the reading process we would, in fact, have an unobtrusive measure of reading teacher effectiveness. What we discovered during these interviews, however, is that some pupils in every classroom hold theoretical orientations toward reading which differ from their teacher's. We have therefore had to tentatively question the notion that the theoretical orientation held by a given pupil is passively dependent upon the teacher's theoretical orientation. Because we have found incongruencies between teacher and pupil theoretical orientations even among very young readers, we now believe that readers hold a theoretical orientation to reading regardless of whether or not they have been exposed to instruction. Apparently in their interaction with the process of reading a theoretical orientation develops. Stated differently, we now believe that to be a user of the reading process is to view that process theoretically.

At first blush this statement appears dramatically opposed to our earlier statement that student performance, at least in part, mirrors instruction. We make both statements, however. As subsequent data will show, an analysis of student reading performance clearly shows the utilization of those reading strategies taught. If anyone ever questions the effectiveness of reading instruction, we strongly recommend that some time be taken to study in-process reading behavior. This activity should certainly set your mind at ease about the utility of instruction. It will, however, raise the

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[1]"The Cliver Turtle," Level 6, Book B, *Scott Foresman Reading Systems*, 1971.

question of whether or not those strategies taught should be taught as exclusively as they are under certain models of reading. Studying in-process behaviors of readers will also demonstrate the fact that all readers use strategies which have not been formally taught. It is because of this phenomenon that we make the statement, "to be a user of the reading process is to view that process theoretically." Our experience suggests that the reading behavior of proficient readers often far extends the theoretical model which is being presented in the classroom. The reading behavior of less proficient readers seems more dependent upon the instructional model being presented for the development of their reading strategies. A good test of the adequacy of the various models of reading is to observe the reading performance of those students whose reading behavior documents that they are applying that model consistently when reading.

To illustrate this point, we will offer an extended example of one student's responses to a series of questions about his reading:

Q: I want to ask you some questions now just about your reading. When you come to something you don't know in reading, what do you do to figure it out?

A: First I try to sound the word out. Then, if I don't know it, I ask my teacher.

Q: Is there any other way you can figure out words other than by sounding them out?

A: By putting the letters together first. If it's a compound word, just put one word together and add the other one to it.

Q: Are there any other ways?

A: Putting the letters together and sounding out their sound and putting them together.

Q: Do you know anybody who is a good reader?

A: Yeah.

Q: What makes them a good reader?

A: They pay attention and then try to sound out the words and just try a lot and they do it.

Q: Do you know what your teacher thinks a good reader does?

A: No.

Q: What would you guess. If she walked up to you and patted you on the head and said, "You are really a good reader," what do you think she'd mean?

A: Well, I tried and I got all the words right and I just read the story good and I really tried and got all the words.

Q: If you wanted to get better in your reading, you know, become a better reader, how would you go about it?

A: I'd just get more books and try more harder and things and then get more easier words and work my way up.

Q: Who is the best reader you know?

A: A girl who is in my class named Lisa.

  Q: Why do you think Lisa is such a good reader?

A: I don't know. She just reads real good.

Q: What do you mean when you say, "She reads real good?"

A: I don't know. Well, she tries and she gets her stories right and she gets all her words right and everything.

Q: How do you think writing is like reading?

A: I don't think it's alike.

Q: How do you think talking is like reading?

A: . . . I don't know.

    This pupil's name was Toni. He was just beginning the second grade. From his interview it is easily seen that he has some definite ideas about what reading is all about. These ideas, it should be noted, are consistent and hold up over repeated probings.

    Toni's beliefs about reading show up clearly when one examines his oral reading in process behaviors.


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key -- omissions - circled
        substitutions - written above word
        ⌀ - sounds like
        + - evidence of clear syllable unification
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    We interviewed Linda, a fifth grade student, and asked her, "When you are reading and you come to something you don't know, what do you do? She answered, "I skip it." We probed, "How does that help you?" She responded, "It helps me keep to the story, and besides you really don't need to know all the words to understand." Her view of reading as an empirical process showed itself clearly when she was reading:

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[2] "Turtle Rescue." Level 6, Book B. *Scott Foresman Reading Systems*, 1971.

In summer the living *is* has been easy for the world's

largest (carnivorous) land mammals, *animals* the big brown bears

of Kodiak islands. [3]

We asked Linda, "If a student were having difficulty reading, how would your teacher help him?" She replied, "She'd probably have him sound the word out." We asked Linda, "Do you ever sound words out when you are reading?" Her reply, "Yes, but not much. I don't find it works so good for me."

Building from the work of previous researchers (Weintraub and Denny, 1963; Johns, 1970), one of our growing favorite questions to ask children in an effort to explore their theoretical orientation to reading is, "What is Reading?" Their responses, while showing theoretical orientation, often also reflect their instructional history:

"It's filling out workbooks."
"Pronouncing the letters."
"It's when you put sounds together."
"Reading is words put together."
"Reading is learning hard words."
"Reading is like think . . . you know, it's understanding the story."
"It's when you find out things."
"It's like talking, only it's reading."

Other Research Suggesting Teacher Cognitive Processing Behaviors as a Key Dimension of the Teacher Variable

While other researchers have not directly studied the notion that how a teacher cognitively processes available information may be key to understanding the elusive teacher variable in reading, much of their work lends credibility to such a study.

Shavelson (1973), for example, concluded from his research on teacher behavior that any teaching act is the result of a decision, either conscious or unconscious. He argues that *the* basic teaching skill is decision making, and criticizes previous research on basic teaching skills because it has examined alternative teaching acts (e.g., explaining, questioning, reinforcing) without examining *how teachers choose* between one or another act at a given point in time. He goes on to say:

What distinguishes the exceptional teacher from his or her colleague

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[3] Text and Story Authorship Unknown.

is not the ability to ask, say, a higher-order question, but the ability to decide when to ask such a question. This decision-making process is examined using decision theory. Viewed from the decision theory perspective, a teacher has a number of alternative acts from which to choose. The choice may depend, for example, upon the teacher's subjective estimation of a student's understanding of some material and the usefulness of various alternatives in increasing that understanding. (p. 14)

Shavelson suggests that understanding how teachers arrive at instructional decisions is key to growth in the field of teacher education research. Our field observations not only also suggest this, but further suggest that looking for patterns across teacher decisions is a necessary component of such research.

Similarly, Morine (1973) urges educators to focus their attention to teacher planning skills. Morine's argument is logical, namely, that the diagnostic-prescriptive teaching of reading presupposes teacher planning for instruction prior to and during instruction with students. While Morine focuses her attention on developing alternative behavioral repertoires in teachers, it is interesting to note that the focus of her work, like Shavelson's, is upon teacher cognitive processing behaviors. This is interesting because cognitive processing, which characterizes both the preinstructional and instructional phases of teaching, has not been the focus of much teacher education research conducted during the 60's and 70's. Most research during this period focuses upon the behavioral dimensions of teaching (Flanders, 1960; Rosenshine, 1971, 1974; Brophy and Good, 1969; Brady and Lynch, 1975). While cognition can be inferred from behavior, such a direction has not been the thrust of most past research in this area, even though such explorations seem warranted given the results of past research.

Veldman and Brophy (1974), for example, investigated teacher stability in producing student learning gains. Using residual gains on standardized achievement tests administered in four successive years, a series of regression models were compared, using pretest, squared pretest, pupil sex, years of testing, and teacher as predictors of post-test performance. Inclusion of the teacher variable usually yielded a substantial and significant increase in predictive efficiency.

Samph (1974) identified a sample of 155 sixth graders who scored two or more grades below their normal level on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT). The subjects were grouped according to teacher verbal patterns measured by Flander's System of Interaction. Student performances were compared on pretest and post-test results on the Language Section of MAT and on the Pupil Attitude Inventory. Seven months elapsed between the administration of pre- and post-measures. Analysis of covariance was used, co-varying on pre-achievement, with the outcome favoring the group taught by teachers who showed more frequent behaviors allowing for student freedom of expression, such as praise and use of student ideas.

Brady and Lynch (1976) argue that more continuity between the two fields of reading and teacher behavior is a must if we are to improve reading instruction. Few studies have attempted to identify teacher skills in reading from theoretical perspectives of the reading process. We know that some teachers spend by far the majority of their reading instructional time on word recognition skills (Quirk, *et al.,* 1974) and that such behaviors affect pupil reading strategies and achievement. Clark (1974), for example, when using a modification of Quirk's system (1974), found that more oral reading occurred in low than in the high achieving schools. Piestrup (1973), in an investigation of teacher styles of responding to dialect-speaking first graders, found that teacher responses to such errors affect reading achievement. In this study, pupils in classrooms where teachers demanded Standard English pronunciations had significantly lower reading achievement than those who accepted the child's speech. However, a more detailed understanding of the cognitive processing underlying teacher behaviors during reading instruction is needed if we are to relate teaching strategies to pupil reading strategies.

How a pupil approaches reading and the stages of reading he/she goes through have been shown to be influenced both by developmental and instructional factors (Barr, 1975; Biemiller, 1970; Cohen, 1975; Weber, 1970). However, none of these studies actually observed teacher responses to miscues. Better readers, regardless of instructional method, progress to a stage of contextually and graphically constrained miscues, though the stages differed, depending on method (Biemiller, 1970; Cohen, 1975). Poorer readers, however, tend not to progress to the stage of contextually and graphically constrained miscues. They fail to self-correct when context is distorted (Levitt, 1972; Weber, 1970), have difficulty utilizing graphic cues (Barr, 1975), and, once graphic cues are learned, tend to misuse graphic information (Weber, 1968). Goodman (1965) concluded that interruptions during oral reading were detrimental and argued that the focus during reading must be placed on meaning.

The results of the above misue studies and other research in reading suggest relationships between teacher behaviors and pupil reading strategies. If a teacher demands exact word-for-word reading, as most do (Brady, 1976), the pupil will be using only one source of information-letters to identify words. When the focus is only on isolated words, pupils tend to make more errors and are less likely to self-correct because the grammar and meaning of the sentence or story are not being attended to (Goodman, 1965; Piestrup, 1974). If the teacher always tells the pupil to sound out unknown words, as in synthetic phonics approaches, nonsense word production and sounding out may be frequent error types, as Cohen's results (1975) suggest. Spelling as a teacher approach to word recognition can cause pupils to spell unknown words but may have no relationship, or a negative one, to achievement in word recognition. Teaching the name of letters making up a list of words to be learned does not shorten the time needed to learn the list of words (Samuels, 1970).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to capture some of the field data and thinking which led Dr. Burke and me to the formulation of the hypothesis that both the teaching and learning of reading is theoretically based and to relate this work to past and present efforts at understanding the teacher variable in reading. Readers interested in pursuing this hypothesis should contact the author as new research instruments and procedures for studying this hypothesis are currently being developed and field tested.

It is our belief that the findings reported in this paper merit widespread exploration and have much utility for the profession. An experience we had while involved in teacher preparation follows and makes this point most vividly.

We called one teacher, whom we had observed conducting a directed teaching lesson, in which children were presented vocabulary, set a purpose of reading, read the selection, and did follow-up skill work, to check out a date when our classes might observe her teach. To our surprise she announced that we could bring our students on the date we wished, but that she would be doing a "language experience" lesson. We agreed to come with the understanding that she would talk about how she normally conducted reading with our students at the end of the hour. When we arrived she did teach a language experience lesson to the children. Together with the class they composed a story covering a class trip to the zoo. The story read:

> We went to the zoo.
> We saw lots of animals.
> We saw a monkey.
> We saw a tiger.
> We saw a duck.
> We had lots of fun.

It was fascinating watching her use this approach. No matter what the children actually said she transformed it into the type of sentence shown in the story. When the class finished the story the teacher framed the letters "We" and asked the children to identify the word and find the same word someplace else in the story. She followed the same procedure with the word "saw." With the word "A" she said, "This is a sight word. Who can find this same word someplace else in the story?" While this teacher might have "changed reading approaches," because she had not changed theoretical orientations, what she was doing in the classroom remained, in effect, unaltered.

From this experience and others like it, we have come to believe that looking at reading instruction in terms of theoretical orientation is a more cogent, insightful, and accurate one than looking at reading instruction in terms of reading approaches. In short, the variable we have identified looks hopeful. We would encourage you to explore it with us.

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