

10-1-1976

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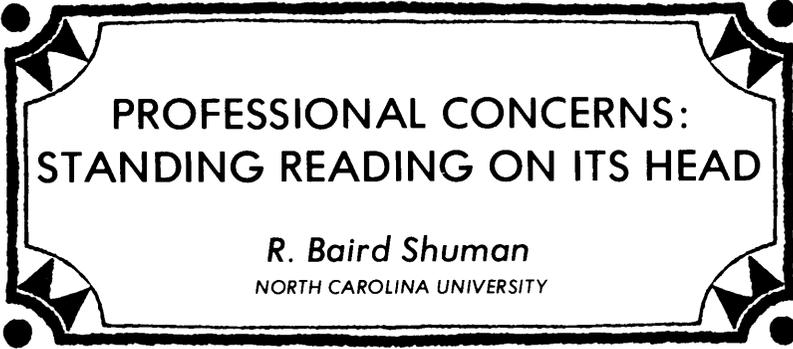
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Recommended Citation

Shuman, R. B. (1976). Professional Concerns: Standing Reading on its Head. *Reading Horizons*, 17 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol17/iss1/10

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PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS: STANDING READING ON ITS HEAD

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Professional Concerns is a regular column devoted to the interchange of ideas among those interested in reading instruction. Send your comments and contributions to the editor. If you have questions about reading that you wish to have answered, the editor will find respondents to answer them. Address correspondence to R. Baird Shuman, Department of Education, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina 27708.

In his contribution to this column, Denny T. Wolfe, Jr., Director of the Division of Languages of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, calls for a more organic approach to the teaching of reading and suggests specific means of proceeding in this direction. What Dr. Wolfe writes is much in accord with the sentiments of James Moffett, who was quoted in the first appearance of this column (Spring, 1976).

Dr. Wolfe reminds his readers that they must take into account the significant differences between mechanical skills and thinking skills if they are to teach youngsters effectively. He also suggests that, while it might be easier to teach reading skills in isolation, this is not the way that human beings learn. He therefore calls for a holistic approach to the teaching of reading.

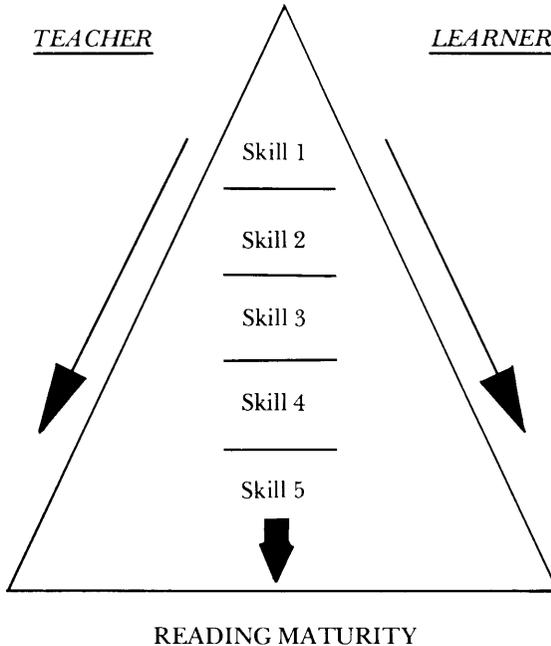
STANDING READING ON ITS HEAD

Learning how to read involves much more than developing isolated skills. To some, that is hardly a profound observation; to others, it is almost heretical. It is, however, an observation which is relevant to anyone who has faced, is facing, or may be about to face the task of developing a *skills continuum*, or an *objectives-based reading program*, or another similarly cold and high-sounding document that defines a sequential plan for teaching kids how to read.

A typical skills-centered reading program, sequentially developed, will include an arrangement of items such as word recognition, word meanings, phonics, context clues, study skills, flexibility, appreciation—the list can go on interminably. No one seriously questions the desirability of identifying the skills which students must master in order to read; therefore, a *continuum* which names the reading skills is in itself a harmless thing. Many

teachers even find it quite helpful and instructive. Certainly, supervisors and administrators revel in seeing a planned program written down in a linear fashion.

But trouble begins when the program “goes into action,” i.e. when the skills are isolated and taught as separate and distinct entities, with the assumption being that all the parts eventually will add up to a whole. Such an approach might be represented as a pyramid, with the teacher and the learner theoretically starting at the same point:



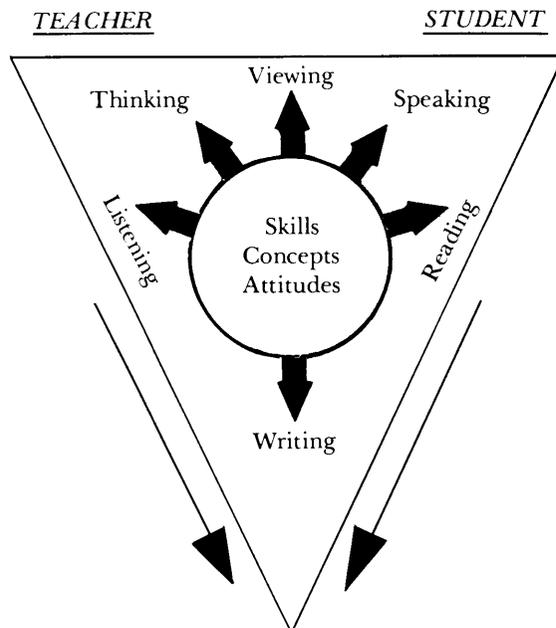
It is easy to see from the diagram, even assuming a common starting point, that the teacher moves in one direction and the students move in another. Realistically, the teacher and the students (or the students themselves, for that matter) are not only moving in different directions, but they are also moving at different rates according to varying degrees of concentration. Even though the skills are *listed* sequentially, they may not be *learned* in the same sequence. Supposedly, following the sequence will enable teachers to cause students to reach higher and higher levels of reading maturity, assuming that the parts add up to a whole. But such an assumption, in fact, does not completely hold.

Just as some teachers of writing feel that their first task is to teach vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, some reading teachers feel that their first task is to teach equally visible, concrete, and measurable skills. Such a conception of the teaching task is derived from the spurious notion that skills can be taught better apart than together. After

all, the argument goes, mechanical skills can be specifically identified and placed in a linear order to be learned; on the other hand, *thinking* skills are abstract and nebulous, and it is next to impossible to pin down the thinking processes that a given learner passes through. Therefore, many teachers settle for following concrete and comfortable lists of linear mechanical skills, presuming that *thinking* and overall language development will take care of themselves.

Neither the reading teacher nor the writing teacher can be successful by ignoring the holistic quality of total language development in their students. In fact, stimulating students to think, to speak, to view, to listen, and to *read* and *write* must occur simultaneously. Full language maturity can be achieved in no other way. It is not a matter of achieving one skill before, after, or without another. The teacher must attend to total language development as a whole.

Through inquiry and warm interaction with students, the teacher can provide learning experiences which make possible the development of thinking, speaking, listening, viewing, reading, and writing skills at once. These skills, indeed, are elements of language development, but they are not mutually exclusive and they cannot be isolated, taught, and learned separately. The development of any one of them depends upon the development of all the others. The following illustration more accurately reflects the actual process of language learning than does the pyramid we saw before:



LANGUAGE MATURITY

At the base of this inverted pyramid are teachers and students with widely different starting points. Obviously, each must proceed toward language maturity according to his/her own interests, rates, abilities, and aspirations. It is naive to think that one can directly and matter-of-factly teach *skills* as if students were not real people. Equally important are the *concepts* associated with the skills to be taught (thinking *about what?* viewing *what?* speaking to *whom?* listening *how?* reading *what?* and writing *what?*) and *attitudes* toward the various contexts (subject matter, time, space, learning atmosphere) within which the skills are to be learned.

The teacher can and must create an open and vital environment which promotes honest and frequent interaction among students. Through cooperative and stimulating learning experiences in *total* language development, students can acquire the thinking, listening, viewing, speaking, reading, and writing skills that produce full language maturity.

Teaching language must be done personally, eyeball to eyeball. As useful as the *skills continuum* is for defining a program, it must not be taught according to the linear structure which appears on paper. Language learning cannot be reduced to a series of sequential steps; too much of the *person* is involved, too much of the teacher and too much of the learner.