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THE WHY AND A LITTLE HOW— TEACHING READING IN THE CONTENT AREAS

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Any classroom teacher who is employed to teach students from approximately the third grade through graduate school faces a common problem—those students who cannot read their textbooks or have difficulty doing so. Many of them share another common dilemma—what to do about their students' reading problems. Perhaps two factors, to be discussed here, can help these teachers. One factor is understanding the reasons why the students have reading difficulties, while the other is finding some way to teach the subject content and reading at the same time.

The Why

There are many complex and diverse reasons why students have difficulty reading content area materials. Many upper level teachers like to blame the primary teachers (who say it was the parents!), but most of the time the reasons are much more complicated. Harold L. Herber (2) has summarized the numerous causes in four concise categories. He states that the problem can usually be traced to (1) student competence; (2) content materials; (3) curriculum pressures and/or (4) teacher education.

Often, student competence is *not* simply an inability to read and can be coupled with the second category, characteristics of content materials. Sometimes, as Herber (2) notes, reading has never been practiced in content area materials, and therefore, the reader cannot apply what he knows. At other times, the student is simply not skilled enough to read the content area materials—which tend to run one to two years higher in readability than the grade level in which they are used. Gail B. West (3) suggests that text difficulty can be traced to several culprits. The authors of content texts are often scholars in their fields, and, as such, in their writing they make no effort to control vocabulary, sentence complexity or even concept load. The first two factors are those most often measured by readability formulae, and, therefore, cause the readability levels of the books to rise.

A third source of problems for content area reading is curriculum pressures. Many administrators and subject-area teachers feel that they must teach their discipline *or* reading; they cannot do both. As Austin and Morrison (p. 50) have concluded, teachers "reportedly do not have sufficient time to 'teach everything' and unaware that a dichotomy need not exist, feel it more important to cover the content than to teach reading skills

in content areas.” Practices in many school districts often enhance the feeling among teachers that pages must be covered and books finished, whether or not the students are successfully learning. This writer once taught in a district where “progress in pages covered” was measured at the end of each six weeks! The principal actually asked teachers to fill out such a form.

The final category of causes for difficulties in content area reading is teacher education. Unfortunately, most content area teachers, particularly at the secondary level, have never had any training in teaching reading. Their study has been devoted to their specialty. Therefore, even if they are willing to try to help students who have reading problems, they do not know what to do—and many times have no one available to help them. Thus, the lack of training in teaching reading may complement the student’s in-competencies.

Enough discussion of the why’s. Teachers know that students have difficulty reading content area materials, and perhaps understanding some of the reasons makes the problem easier to handle. However, the handling part is what is most important.

A Little How

It is impossible for every teacher—even for those who want to—become a teacher of reading. Furthermore, it is beyond the scope of this article to cover all the possible methods and adjustments for teaching content area reading. However, two approaches to the teaching of reading—the language experience approach and the individualized reading approach—can be easily modified for teaching reading in the content areas. A description of such modification follows.

The language experience approach might be used in this way. After a class discussion, film, lecture or similar “stimulant,” the class might be divided into about three groups. The teacher acts as supervisor for the whole class and a capable student as recorder for each group. If no capable student is available, the teacher will have to alternate recording for each group. The students dictate a passage on a topic that the teacher has assigned (“How to Find Square Roots,” “Causes of the Civil War,” “How to Parallel Park”) based on the “stimulant.” Ground rules appropriate for the group are established, such as, “one sentence per student can be contributed,” “the first sentence must tell the main idea,” etc. The recorder writes the passage on the board, an overhead projector or chart tablet so that the entire group can see it. The recorder should repeat each sentence as she/he writes it down. When the passage is completed, at least one student reads it over. The next day a duplicated copy is given to each student. Specific vocabulary words and comprehension questions from the passage should be studied—perhaps by making word cards, doing a handout, or writing a summary. In most cases, the students can read the passages and they generally learn the same material covered in the text— with much less frustration for students and teacher.

Individualized reading can be another useful alternative. The individualized approach to teaching reading in the content areas involves the use of a large number and variety of books, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets and anything else “readable” on the topic under study. These materials should cover many reading levels, ranging from those needed by the poorest reader in the class (which might be just pictures) to something to challenge the best reader. Librarians can be a tremendous help in collecting these materials.

In this approach, each student reads something of his own choice at his own rate, but all the materials deal with the topic being studied. The teacher can circulate around the room and help with difficult vocabulary, ask questions to make sure the student is understanding what he reads, explain difficult ideas or conduct small group discussions. After a few days of classroom reading, and as students finish at different times, assignment sheets can be ready for them to work on. Later, discussions can be held, and/or group projects carried out. Finally, some sort of evaluation would be done; usually, this would be a test. Whatever reteaching that is necessary should be carried out, and then the group progresses to the next topic.

Such is the individualized approach. Throughout this procedure, each student is successful at reading something on the topic being studied. They all learn at least some of the concepts, and an unlimited range of abilities can be handled within one classroom. If it is too much work for consistent use, it can be employed two or three times a year.

Either of these approaches can be readily used in the content classroom. Moreover, both have the advantage that the content teaching goes on at the same time as reading instruction. They are not “either-or” methods. The teacher who uses both also demonstrates an insight into why students have difficulty reading in the content areas, as well as a willingness to employ some strategies that will help solve the problems.

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