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INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO SIGHT VOCABULARY DEFICITS

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Introduction

In examining clinical reading records, one is struck with a number of learners whose problems relate in some way to a sight vocabulary deficit. The gravity of this can only be fully apprehended when one recognizes that a child with a sight vocabulary problem is not "just another reading problem." His is a *limiting* problem—a problem, which if uncorrected, stands the strong risk not only of crippling his total reading growth but, indeed, crippling his self-concept as a learner.

To neglect providing a child with a functional sight vocabulary deprives him of his prime resource for further work identification skill development. The child is limited not only in his ability to group words into thought units so necessary for fluency and comprehension, but he is also seriously handicapped in identifying new words. For example, if the child already recognizes "circus" as a sight word, he has a basis for a later intelligent examination of the word in terms of specific phonetic elements like the variant sounds of "c." Further, the learner is hampered in his ability to use structure clues, e.g., affixed words will be difficult to identify because the reader lacks the ability to identify root words. Perhaps the greatest restriction placed on the reader is the fact that without a basic sight vocabulary, it is inefficient, if not impossible, to develop strategies to employ context—a skill not only requisite to word identification but to comprehension generally.

Arguments about the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement bear predictable overtones of the "chicken" and "egg" arguments. There is, however, more than reasonable evidence that the relationship does exist.² It is reasonable to advance arguments for taking every precaution to provide the beginning reader with as much input to enhance his image of himself as a learner as possible. The most potent input source is undoubtedly initial success as a reader. The most convincing rationale for teaching a basic sight vocabulary, then, is efficiency and quick success and confidence. This initial reading vocabulary provides the young learner with a quick ticket to the world of independent reading.

There is no dearth of literature explicating and indeed, lamenting the gamut of physiological and psychological correlates of reading difficulties. The most crucial source of causation, however, is that of instructional

practices that tend to produce or aggravate sight vocabulary problems. It is, in a discussion of the nature of these practices, that we meet the challenge not only of correction of existing problems but more importantly, the prevention of future problems.

This paper discusses in some detail certain practices that contribute to sight vocabulary deficits—practices concerned with word selection and materials, teaching-learning strategies and motivational considerations.

Word Selection and Materials

Failure to recognize the purposes of sight vocabularies. It appears that, in large measure, the problem in teaching sight vocabulary results from the confusion over the purposes of sight vocabularies. Petty⁹ points clearly to a distinction between:

a sight vocabulary that is needed by the child in his first experience in reading to provide success to him, to keep him motivated, and to satisfy his needs. . . . It is an individual one which need not be limited as to size . . . and the sight vocabulary of words which do not fit into sound and symbol correspondence patterns. This is the vocabulary made up of the words referred to in the teachers' manuals as "needing teaching to recognize by sight." (pp. 24-25)

Expecting the child to learn words of low utility and low meaningfulness. If early success in reading is one of the key concerns, judicious selection of words becomes a critical issue. The need to employ words from real life experiences as grist for the sight vocabulary mill is hardly new. As early as 1908, Huey⁶ stated:

The best way to get a reading vocabulary is just the way that child gets his spoken vocabulary, by having the need words keep coming in a context environment that is familiar and interesting, and by trying to use them as they will serve his purposes (p. 4).

We are talking here about the first class of sight words referred to by Petty. These are the words that are grounded in meaningful experiences—words that are high in visual imagery as a result of the background of experience, real or vicarious. These are the words with concrete referents—words about things the child has laughed about, talked about, touched, kicked, smelled, savored, loved, and longed for. To reiterate, the most logical basis for concentration on this initial high meaningful sight vocabulary is to ensure quick success and to foster confidence.

Failure to select judiciously words for the slow learner or beginning reader which are readily discriminable. The reference here is more to Petty's class of words that need "teaching to recognize by sight" than to the very earliest high meaningful selection of words. Included in this class are many of the highly abstract structure and function words for which there are no concrete referents to evoke any degree of imagery. Recognizing this

limitation, then, places tremendous importance on cues within and between words for identification. Certainly, in the beginning stages, it is crucial that varying lengths and configurations are taught together to aid ease of discrimination. Singer¹³ concurs that teaching strategies that require children in the early stages of reading to struggle with too many high-frequency (and highly similar) words, invite inevitable frustration and early failure. Similar words, according to him, should be added gradually to focus attention on post-initial letters rather than initial letters only.

Closely related to this problem is that of providing practice materials with type sets that squeeze words too close together. Ample spaces between words to aid clear definition of words boundaries is of prime importance in beginning reading materials.

To illustrate some of the problems associated with word selection and materials, examine the following passage typical of many of the “phonico-linguistic” materials on the market:

N E D C A N N O T G E T U P T I L L H E I S F E D.
N E D C A N N O T G E T T H E N U T T O T H E H U T.

The passage illustrates dramatically the problem of similarity of word length and configuration. Equally salient is the problem of relative spacing of letters within words and spacing of word boundaries.

Continuing to submerge the child in materials at increasing levels of difficulty when sight vocabulary has not been fully mastered at earlier levels. It is difficult for adults to imagine the frustration resulting from building one unsuccessful experience upon another. The child who is finally able to stumble through “today’s words” without ample opportunity to apply them in a variety of situations is hardly prepared for another “batch” tomorrow. Not only will he likely experience extreme difficulty with the new task, but the new words will also act as interfering agents on the words barely retrieved from the preceding day’s lesson. This cumulative deficit tends to progress geometrically and would appear to account for many of the children who after two and three years of school can still be considered non-readers.

Teaching-Learning Strategies Technique

Failure to develop prerequisite skills for effective sight vocabulary learning. Efficiency in sight vocabulary development assumes proficiency in some very basic prerequisite competencies, which, if not mastered, lay waste even the “best laid” efforts. Perhaps the most basic of these is a general disposition to “attend” to a task and then, more specifically, knowing where to focus special attention to achieve sight vocabulary acquisition. Vernon¹⁶ believed one of the foremost causes of reading disability to result from the child’s introduction to reading while in a state of cognitive confusion. Subsequent research has produced evidence not only

to support her hypothesis but to define this state of cognitive confusion. Downing³ describes this as the child's confusion over what the purposes of reading are, what are words, what letters are in relation to words, etc.

It seems that inability to focus attention and cognitive confusion may be mutually inhibitive factors in early sight vocabulary acquisition. Knowing where to look and what to look for means "that the child can formulate some internal goal and method for checking to see when the goal has been reached" (15, p. 62). This, then, implies that attentive processes have progressed from the early exploratory, generalized alertness stage to selective attending where the learner knows what he is looking for (as in a typical problem solving task). The teacher directs the child to look at the word "happy." The child's task is to aud the message, comprehend what a word is, realize the word "happy" represents a feeling in the spoken language (knowledge that cannot be assumed of the young child), focus visual attention on the graphic display and recognize that the five letters (in particular order only) graphically represent the spoken word "happy." The abstractness of the whole task, of course, is confounded by the fact that an association has to be made between the *temporal* sequence of the phonemic display in the spoken language and *spatial* sequence of the graphic display in the written counterpart, "happy."⁴ Sticht¹⁵ summarizes aptly the resultant confusion:

The teacher-imposed task may completely bewilder the child, making looking an almost pointless activity. This may be especially important if the teacher at one time expects the child to focus on whole words and at other times on elements of words such as letters, digraphs, inflectional morphemes, and other word segments. A type of looking "confusion" could result in that the child would not precisely know where to direct his focal attention (p. 62).

To add to an already grim picture one need only imagine the child's encounter with the word "happy" in a new context when he, in fact, doesn't perceive the notion of word boundaries.⁵

Another basic readiness concern has to do with the young learner's visual discrimination ability. The child who is thrown into a formal reading task before he has had considerable informal (and perhaps formal) experiences attending to likenesses and differences in concrete situations, pictorial tasks, geometric shapes, highly dissimilar and highly similar words, is likely not ready to "attend to" the fine discriminations requisite for efficient sight vocabulary acquisition.

Further, added to this basic competency in visual discrimination the child needs to acquire skills to hold in memory storage visual components of both gross and finer discriminations. It is essential to underline the fact that the same basic focal attention skills referred to earlier must be brought to the application level at the visual discrimination-visual memory readiness level.

A word of extreme caution is in order here. Efficient reading involves a balance of skills. It is possible, in fact, for a child to focus so much attention on visual aspects of words that this may impede reading progress. Serafica and Sigel,¹² in fact, found male reading disability cases to be superior to normal males in visual discrimination. Downing³ attributes this seeming paradox to the fact that the normal reader needs not only to see that printed letters are different but also to know when to ignore differences. This knowledge is developed only through the process of categorization.

If one subscribes to need for high visual imagery of a word as a basis for sight vocabulary acquisition, then the need to develop meaning is crucial. Mickelson⁸ found a high positive correlation between the number of associations children had for words and their reading achievement. It is highly unlikely that the word "pollution" will be high in associative value for Eskimo children when the word is unrelated to their first-hand experience and, at best, have been given a dictionary definition of the word. The combination of high meaningfulness of a word plus ready access to the child's listening-speaking vocabulary is not only desirable, but absolutely crucial, for efficient sight vocabulary development.

The discussion here has centered on only some of the readiness components. Further, the implicit focus has been on readiness at the pre-reading level. The important point to be stressed is that the child who is experiencing sight vocabulary problems at any level may well have a deficit in one of the readiness components. The skills and competencies outlined, then, suggest bases for diagnostic assessment and correction.

Failure to provide sufficient opportunities for practice and application of words in varying contexts to develop fluency and confidence. The practice of requiring children to read the same selection five or six times does little to promote efficient application of acquired sight vocabulary. The child knows where to expect particular words as a result of having encountered the word in his first reading so the focus of attention may be more on spatial dimensions than on featural aspects of words. The practice of providing limited practice situations can be criticized on another count—the purpose of developing a reading vocabulary is to gain information. By reading and re-reading the information dimension is played down, when by applying the new words in a new context the child can discover that the same words that provided information of its own kind before, in a new context, provide entirely new information.

Failure to employ a variety of practice techniques and strategies to develop a level of automaticity of response before the young reader becomes "bogged down" with a large repertoire of reading vocabulary that is accessible to him only with difficulty. While this problem is inextricably intertwined with the one discussed above, it involves specific emphasis from another standpoint—that of overlearning. It is commonly recognized that skill development typically involves three states, a) the initial development of the skill, b) application of the skill in new situations, and c) developing ease and automaticity in using the skill. It is this automaticity level of functioning which makes it possible for the reader to use the visual display

to get at implied meanings, read critically and, generally, interact with the material intelligently. Blumenthal¹ has made the distinction between “focus of attention” and “margin of attention.” Sticht *et al* have drawn an appropriate analogy between these two attentional stages and the act of searching a display with a spotlight:

The point of focus of the spotlight is bright and clear, while the area surrounding the spot of light fades from brightness to dimness to darkness. The bright spot represents the focus of attention, while the dim area represents the margin of attention. In attending to one aspect of an internal display, we are also vaguely aware of non-attended information in the margin of consciousness or awareness (p. 53).

Applying this analogy to the sight vocabulary acquisition-achievement of automaticity problem, the focal attention (spotlight) is necessary at the acquisition level. After extended practice, the “focus of attention” is freed for the performance of other higher level reading activities. The performance of the former activity has achieved “automaticity”⁷ and can be performed while focal attention is elsewhere.

This raises a crucial pedagogical question with respect to whether or not sequential strategies should go from presenting words in context and then in isolation shifting the emphasis from initially employing linguistic constraints and then shifting to intensive practice strategies. It is clear that giving attention to words in isolation to achieve automaticity is more efficient than practice in context.¹⁴ Perhaps, awaiting further research, the most logical approach would be to present words in highly meaningful contexts (giving the reader maximum benefit from semantic and syntactic constraints) extract some of the more troublesome words to be practiced in isolation and then to “re-cycle” these troublesome words in a novel contextual situation.

Failure to focus on reading for ideas so that the accent on analysis is reduced in the early reading stages. This statement implies somehow dovetailing the processes involved in focal and marginal attending. The crucial point to be made is that heavy emphasis on analytical techniques – drilling on isolated word parts becomes a conditioning process that tends to result in words falling to pieces before the young reader’s eyes. In fact, the child may experience so much success and satisfaction from the novelty of working out words that he fails to feel a need to build a sight vocabulary. The greatest hazard is, of course, that the focus is on saying words rather than on finding ideas.

Failure to encourage and stimulate fairly rapid reading for specific purposes. To achieve the complementary focal and marginal attention required for fluent reading, it would appear that fairly early emphasis should be given to rapid reading and reading for purposes other than finding out “what is on the page.” Setting purposes, thus inducing a “mental set” on the part of the reader would appear to be one of the efficient means of achieving the automaticity level discussed earlier.

Failure to ensure that children focus on no more than the initial consonant fooling themselves and the teacher into believing that they have acquired a functional sight vocabulary. Children frequently appear to have developed a quick repertoire of sight words. However, after what appears like a spurt of success, they reach a plateau which is characterized by confusion in word identification.¹¹ Research by Samuels and Jeffrey¹⁰ has demonstrated that serious confusion arises from the child's focus on a single cue such as the beginning consonant to identify a word. When he encounters new words including some with the same initial consonant, he is confused because the initial consonant is not a sufficient basis for correct word identification. Clearly, programs must be designed to ensure that children discriminate on more than initial word features.¹³ This has some strong implications for the early visual discrimination-visual memory training tasks.

Teaching sight words without recognition of the fact that in order to make fine visual discriminations "non-exemplars" may be as important as the particular word to be learned at the moment. Learning theorists have long recognized the importance of presenting both exemplars and non-exemplars in a concept learning task to aid the learner in focussing on the necessary attributes to learn the concept. While learning a particular sight word is no way analogous to the acquisition of a concept, it seems desirable to have the young reader abstract certain properties of a word in terms of similarities and differences with other words. For example, if he already has mastered the word "black," and he now approaches the task of learning "back," it would seem practical to refer to the word black as a basis for focussing careful attention on the new word. On the one hand, "back" becomes a new element in the expanding set of words beginning with "b"; on the other hand, "back" forms part of a new sub-set that does not begin with "bl." In this sense, "black" is a non-exemplar of the new sub-set (or "concept") to be learned.

Motivation

Failure to condition the child early to develop a "set" or expectation that he recognize known words immediately rather than study each word encountered as though it had never been seen before. Many children, particularly those exposed to heavy phonic-oriented programs, develop the notion that reading is a ponderous code-breaking process and tend to break up words (or sound out) without even considering that the need is no longer there for many words. This has serious motivational implications. The novelty of being able to "crack the code" as a mature type of pastime will certainly sustain the child's motivation for a while. But with the heavy emphasis on the code, meaning is pushed to a secondary position and, before long, motivation begins to lag. When the child wishes to "read to learn" (either new facts or to experience new feelings), he is still so preoccupied with basic laborious "learning to read" processes that it is almost impossible to "focus attention" on the "reading to learn" task.

Part of the motivational problem harks back to the point made earlier about "goal directedness." Specific goals or objectives, to be met effectively, require "focus of attention" rather than "margin of attention." Two points must be made. First, if the goal is no more than "decoding," this goal will occupy the "focus of attention." Further, even if the teacher attempts to direct the learner toward goals of interpretation or inference, the "focus of attention" will not be available to achieve these goals because the "spotlight" has only one point of focus.

Failure to develop within the child a need early in his reading experience to establish a sight vocabulary by over-emphasizing analytical, rule-bound approaches to reading. The problem here is closely associated with the one just discussed. The distinction to be made, however, is that a child (as in the discussion preceding) may develop a highly analytical approach, and hence, a "set" to persist in analyzing, almost by accident. Here the problem is that of a deliberate programming to analyze and occupy the learner's "focus of attention" with rules and more rules. This results from approaches anchored in the very narrowest definitions of reading (if one can call them definitions).

Apart from the grave problem of attention ineffectively deployed, the motivational side-effects are further evidenced by the fact that, analyzing everything in sight, the child becomes a laborious reader, reads less and less, and eventually finds his place with the teacher "at the end of the hall."

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