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TEACH THEM READING WHILE YOU TEACH THEM SPANISH . . . OR FRENCH . . . OR ANY OTHER SUBJECT

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Teachers in general are well aware of the appalling reading deficiencies that many students bring to the classroom. This is true at the elementary, the secondary, and the college level.(1) In many cases, however, teachers of subject matter tend to refuse to accept responsibility for helping students to overcome their reading problems.(3) Such an attitude is, of course, understandable, as the limited time that students spend in any particular class is barely sufficient to “teach” them the subject itself. The additional responsibility of teaching reading may seem to many educators not only an unfair imposition, but an impossible task to handle.

There is some justification for the unspoken fear of not knowing just how to cope with the problems of reading retardation. Some teachers are, unfortunately, deficient in the necessary skills of reading, and therefore find it impossible to help their students acquire those skills themselves.(4) Other teachers simply feel inadequately prepared to do the job, although they themselves are skillful readers.(5) Reading skills, often accidentally acquired, may be taken for granted, and the teachers, not being fully certain of the process by which their knowledge was acquired, feel unable to transmit it.

While it is true that serious cases of reading retardation need the corrective guidance of a specially trained reading specialist, it is also true that the regular classroom teacher, at every educational level, has much to offer his or her students in helping them to become better readers. In a sense, then, every teacher—regardless of the content area in which he or she operates—should be a teacher of reading. Should the subject taught be social studies, mathematics, natural sciences, or a foreign language, who knows better than the teacher in charge of the class what the students should look for in the textbook assigned, in the reference materials to be used, in the examinations given? And who should be better prepared to guide the students in the search?

The near impossibility of teaching the many facets of the reading process along with the subject matter can and does discourage the best-intentioned teacher, however. And the suggestion presented here is not meant to imply that every classroom teacher must become a reading specialist overnight. The suggestion is meant as a strong recommendation for teachers to make a *conscious effort* to improve their students' reading skills as they teach them specific subjects that on the surface might appear to be unrelated to the one of reading. Reading and practically every discipline are not only related, but are interdependent as well. Moreover, success in the latter is often based on proficiency in the former. And as a final consideration for the argument, there is the fact that the skill acquired in the reading process will, in all probability, be retained longer than any other subject learned. This being, perhaps, partially due to the fact that the opportunities to put reading to use will be many and continuous—at least for as long as the individual attends school.

Another vital reason why reading skills are retained when properly acquired is rooted in the very nature of the reading process: *reading is thinking*. In educating our young people we often lose sight of what should be the ideal in education: to teach individuals to think. Only too often do we emphasize memorization and assimilation of facts and dates that the students are required to give back at exam time. Yet, it is the ability to think, to organize and categorize ideas, to generalize and conceptualize that constitute the very core of human intelligence.

Teachers, instructors, professors, every individual involved in the business of education, therefore, has the sacred obligation to promote the process of learning to think. And insofar as reading is an integral part of that process, a part of the classroom curriculum should be instruction in reading, if not in general terms, definitely as it applies to the subject being taught.

It is not within the scope of this article to itemize and delineate a subject by subject, step by step procedure for all teachers to follow while teaching the materials for which they are officially responsible. The aim of this author is to encourage and also to share with the readers some of her experiences with simultaneous dual teaching of her two fields of interest: Spanish and reading.

The teaching of a foreign language offers special challenges in our one-language (English)-oriented culture, and new methods and techniques of teaching foreign languages spring up with the same frequency and offering the same magic results as do the many approaches to the teaching of reading. In the final analysis, though,

just as it is in reading, it is the eclectic approach that produces the best results. And it is the instructor who combines the best features of every approach, method and technique, who is the most successful.

Among other things, the students are taught quite early the sounds of the Spanish letters alone and in combinations. Syllabication is explained, and so is sentence structure. The alert instructor, the one who wishes to stress reading along with the foreign language, will take advantage of every opportunity to establish comparison between the foreign language and the mother tongue. Making students aware of the differences between Spanish and English serves to reinforce or review rules learned long ago on English syllabication and sounds of diphthongs and consonant clusters. Exercises in Spanish sentence structure can be used to reinforce the basic idea of the required subject and verb agreement that exists in both languages. And as students progress from simple to complex sentences guidance on how to rely on context clues to make sense of specific sentences can prove invaluable to the students, especially when they are reminded that this is a helpful tool to use on their own native English.

Helping students establish associations between sentences and between paragraphs, helping them find subjects or implied subjects in sentences, or topic sentences in paragraphs can also be used as ways to teach reading along with the subject of Spanish. The old traditional method of emphasizing translation and grammar in the teaching of a foreign language has given way, in many instances, to more realistic and palatable techniques such as stressing that the students make every effort to think in the foreign language. Grammatical points are more effectively explained *in context* rather than in isolation, and mainly as it becomes necessary in their relevance to the written or spoken lesson.

Although some institutions subscribe to the practice of "immersion" in the foreign language, with all English left out, in the majority of the institutions of higher learning and in the high schools also much of the first year as well as some of the second year of a foreign language instruction is conducted in a bilingual fashion, which gives the teacher the opportunity to explain fully, and to everyone's understanding, important points in the language. This custom also proves advantageous to those who strongly believe in the importance and the value of possessing reading skills and who strive to teach them along with the foreign language.

Combining the teaching of these two subjects obviously demands suitable techniques. Combining the teaching of reading with other

subjects will require other approaches tailored to each particular case.(2) Needless to say, this type of dual teaching will demand additional preparation, effort, and dedication from the teacher. In turn, his or her rewards will come mainly from the satisfaction of having helped students acquire or improve the valuable tools of reading skills. Such tools they will continue to need and use long after the cobwebs of time have covered much of whatever else they learned along with the magic process of reading well.

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