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TEACHING READING IN BUSINESS SUBJECTS

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All that mankind has done, thought, gained, or been;
it is lying as in magic preservation in the pages of books.
They are the chosen possession of men.—Carlyle

“Anyone can read” is the attitude of some people, even people who should know better. The fallacy of such an attitude is realized with the following analogy. Aristotle is known to have said, “One learns to be a good flute player by playing the flute. One also learns to be a poor flute player by playing the flute.” In the same way, one learns to be a good or poor reader by reading.

Some teachers complain that the curriculum is already overpacked and they do not have time to crowd another teaching unit into their busy classes. Others “. . . have been brainwashed into feeling that they must have the latest gadgets, programs, and publications or they cannot teach reading” (6). This may be true for special cases, in which the students should go to a reading specialist for clinical diagnosis and treatment; but some students just lack understanding of certain reading skills. Since a student spends most of the school day in the classroom and because subject matter teachers read their material better than anyone else, reading authorities believe the subject matter teachers should teach their students how to read the materials in their discipline.

Teaching future business leaders to be effective readers is of particular importance because written documents continue to be the most efficient means for business men and women to read and learn the vast amounts of needed information. Business students preparing for initial employment need special learning experiences in reading, collecting, processing, storing, retrieving, and distributing information.

In addition to the vocational business subjects, the business program in the secondary schools consists of basic business subjects which contribute to general education needed by all persons. Because teachers of these subjects welcome all students into their classes, there is apt to be a wide variance in reading levels represented. For this reason, it is important to remember that reading is much more than pronouncing letters and words. “Reading is bringing meaning *to* and taking meaning *from* the printed page” (11). Reading is a *process* rather than

a single fact. It is bringing the reader's experience and knowledge to bear on the meanings the writer has put in print.

Business teachers, therefore, will appreciate in greater depth the reading problems of some students if they are aware of the meanings that different students are likely to bring to bear on business information. For example, students from minority backgrounds who have been exposed to very limited business experiences certainly will have different feelings about business information than students who have had many business experiences. For many words, students of minority groups will have no personal meaning at all. In either event, special instruction in reading is necessary.

Reading need not be a separate course added to the curriculum, but rather an integral part of every course. This article will suggest strategies that the busy business teacher can use to help improve the reading skills of students in both vocational and basic business courses.

READING LEVELS

At the beginning of each class, business teachers can determine the reading levels of students. Instead of using individual tests such as reading specialists use, Hasselriis (8) suggests that classroom teachers use a Cloze test, a group test, to determine if their students can read their textbooks and other materials at an instructional level.

Here is how it works. A passage is selected from any written material and the first sentence is typed in its entirety. Beginning with the second sentence any word is deleted and replaced with a numbered blank. From then on every fifth word is deleted and replaced with a number until fifty such deletions are made. All blank spaces are of equal length so that the length of the word that has been deleted is not revealed. The sentence in which the fiftieth deleted word occurs should be completed and the following sentence should be typed in its entirety.

Students are asked to read through the entire selection to get a general idea of the content and then insert the words in the blanks that they think were deleted. In scoring the tests, only exact replacements are correct although minor misspellings are accepted. A student must score between 19 and 22 correct answers in order for the material to be considered at his instructional reading level.

READING RATES

Although most classroom teachers are not successful in significantly increasing the reading rates of learners, teachers should consider the

amount of time it takes students to read the assignments given them. Teachers may obtain rough reading rates very easily by having students read a portion of the textbook while being timed for five minutes (8). Students can then calculate a "words per minute" reading rate by counting the approximate number of words they read and dividing by five. A short comprehension test may be given on the material to make sure the students understood the information rather than just skimmed the surface to see how far they could get. This would admittedly give only a crude approximation of reading rates, but at least a teacher would become aware of the wide range of abilities in his class and also realize why some students never seem to finish a reading assignment.

READING DIFFICULTY

A major reason for lack of comprehension in business subjects is that the textbooks and related materials are difficult to read. House (10) found that business students need a reading comprehension level of at least the tenth grade, but a large majority of business students rank below this level.

The nature of business information helps make it difficult to read. For example, the way one reads and interprets a financial report is considerably different than the way one reads a short story or novel. Another cause for the difficulty level is the technical vocabulary. Business vocabulary is difficult because such words as "liquid," "credit," "cycle," "depreciate," "account," "rescind," and "expense" along with hundreds of others have exact and special meanings to business people.

SUCCESSFUL ACTIVITIES

Recognizing the technical vocabulary and the difficult reading level of business information, successful business teachers have a planned program of activities for teaching students to read and comprehend business information.

Reinforcing Vocabulary

Many students have been forced to learn vocabulary in the form of once-a-week-on-Friday lists of words with no contexts. What percentage of these meanings do learners retain? Words should be chosen by the teacher and presented to the students prior to a reading assignment in which the words were taken. Words should always be presented in context, for words do not have meanings when they are iso-

lated from the environment of the real world. Vocabulary study guides in which sentences with the selected vocabulary words are left out are useful. With the words listed in the margin, students choose the appropriate word for each blank after reading an assignment. Interesting crossword puzzles can also be developed.

Reading authorities agree that visual imagery is crucial to success in reading and spelling; therefore, such activities must be part of classroom instruction. One such activity that can be used in all business classes is controlled reader exercises. Vigorous controlled reader drills of about ten minutes in length repeated three or four times a week over a period of time tends to foster significantly improved reading skills.

Students must ultimately develop skills with which they can learn meanings of unfamiliar words independently. Students can learn to place unfamiliar words on the front side of index cards. On the top of the reverse side of the cards, they are taught to write the sentence in which the word was used and on the bottom of the reverse side to state the dictionary definition.

Study Skills

Some teachers assume students know how to read the textbook properly. As a result, many youngsters learn how to study, or how not to study, by trial and error. Teachers should, first of all, guide learners through the whole book drawing particular attention to the title, contents page, preface, index, glossary, appendix, bibliography, section headings, questions at end of chapters, student activities, footnotes, pictures, graphs, and tables. Students will benefit from a discussion of the value and/or purpose of each of these.

When giving a specific reading assignment, good teachers help their students set a purpose for reading. They never say, "Read pages 6 through 10 for tomorrow." Good teaching suggests requiring each reader to:

1. Read and write name of chapter.
2. Identify study helps: headings, introduction, graphs, pictures, summary, questions.
3. Read introduction and/or summary carefully.
4. Read main headings.
5. Write on a card: name of chapter on front; summary on the back.
6. Change first main heading into a question or do No. 7 first if there is no main heading.

7. Read first section: write on the back of a card what the section contains and on the front make up a question that would lead to that answer or statement on the reverse side.
8. Repeat 6 and 7 for the whole chapter (always number the cards).
9. Study for test by making two piles of cards.
10. Prepare a diagram from what has been read (4).

Each student may ask himself, "If I were preparing a test on the chapter, what would I ask?" Business students need to be involved with such study methods through which they can become independent learners.

Library Research

Since many students learn significantly more by doing research than by studying textbooks, business teachers are getting away from the "textbook-workbook" syndrome. Students are being taught how to gather pertinent business information and to choose information selectively by:

1. Taking a library trip and viewing all the reference material appropriate for business students.
2. Illustrating how to use indexes and card catalogs.
3. Conducting "treasure hunts" for information requiring use of various resources.
4. Inviting the librarian to explain library services.

Business students are then asked to read widely and in depth on certain topics and report in writing or orally to the class. Utilization of such individual and group research projects will help students perceive, understand, and remember.

Reading and Following Directions

A common complaint of many teachers is that students cannot follow directions. When asked if the students have been taught how to follow directions, a blank look usually appears on the face of the teacher.

Business teachers can help students learn to follow directions by:

1. Requiring pupils to number the consecutive steps when reading directions.
2. Discussing the reasons for the particular sequence.
3. Pointing out to pupils the value of reading the entire set of directions first to obtain a general understanding of purpose.
4. Requiring the pupils in the second, more deliberate reading of the directions to determine how the steps in sequence, if followed, will achieve the purpose.

5. Showing, by demonstration, the value of rereading directions during the process of completing a long series of directions to be sure that they are followed exactly and in sequence.
6. Restudying directions to see where the error has occurred after the completion of a project when the purpose has not been achieved (7).

Reading Graphs

Business information is filled with graphs, figures, and tables. Without the ability to understand information in graphs, figures, and tables business students would miss much basic information. Business teachers need to illustrate how to read and interpret graphs, figures, and tables.

Problem Solving

One of the chief aims of business teachers is to educate students to make objective, rational decisions for the problems with which they are confronted. With the use of case problems and role playing, a teacher can lead students in defining problems, identifying goals, determining all possible solutions, analyzing the consequences of choosing each alternative, and then selecting the best solution (the one which contributes most to the ultimate goal).

Skimming and Scanning

Because of the voluminous amounts of information business students need to read, skimming and scanning is an important technique to acquire. Students should skim and scan references very quickly, list the important ones, and go back at a later time to read in detail. Students should also be taught to read at different speeds depending on the nature and difficulty of the material.

SUMMARY

Vocational business students need special reading experiences that will help them become future business leaders, and basic business students need special reading experiences to help them function as an economically literate adult. Every business teacher has an obligation to provide these experiences for each student enrolled in business courses.

Business teachers can begin by determining students' reading level and reading rate as well as the level of difficulty of the information their students are required to read. Built into every course must be the teaching of special business vocabulary, including extensive reading of

a variety of business publications. Business teachers should specifically teach learners how to study, how to do library research, how to read and follow directions, how to read graphs, how to solve problems, and how to skim and scan.

Although business teachers will find the strategies discussed just a place to start, an improvement in their students' reading ability and knowledge of course content will take place if the techniques are implemented. The whole idea is to help learners before they encounter reading problems rather than afterwards.

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