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PERSONALIZING THE DEVELOPMENT OF INITIAL READING VOCABULARY AT THE CAMPUS SCHOOL WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

David W. Fraser and Ruth Bosma

The Campus School at Western Michigan University recently has been experimenting with the Language-Master Machine as a means of developing initial reading vocabularies with children in the first grade. Realizing that the act of learning to read is unnecessarily complicated when the pupil is asked to deal with printed word symbols whose meaning and sound are foreign or uninteresting to him, the objective here is to identify a personalized *reading* vocabulary from the actual *speaking* vocabulary of each individual child. It is hypo-thesized that such a personalized vocabulary should be an even more effectual device for beginning reading instruction than the basal text which usually offers a controlled vocabulary designed for a specific cultural or socio-economic group.

Generally, instruction has proceeded in the following fashion. The teacher leads a "sharing time" kind of discussion with the children each day. As a pupil finishes sharing, the teacher asks him to sum-marize and to record his summary sentence on the strip of magnetic tape affixed to the bottom of a Language-Master card. At her earliest convenience the teacher writes the recorded words in the blank space at the top of the card and returns it to the child for his personal use. Now as he plays back the tape, he not only hears, but sees the exact words he has spoken. Children may make several such "audio-visual" cards each day.

After a number of cards has accumulated, a typed personalized word list is prepared for every child containing key words from his recorded summary sentences.

During the day, time to review the cards and work with his list independently is provided. When necessary he may replay a tape to check a word he is unsure of. However, a youngster soon learns to identify the visual symbols without referring to the sound track. When work with a card has been sufficient to insure permanent learning of its content, both writing and sound are erased and the card is reused.

Sometimes a youngster will exchange cards with a classmate, thus providing additional words for his list.

In one sense such personalization of basic vocabulary development is analogous to the experience chart method. Essentially both approaches capitalize on the same child-expressed interest and vocabulary ingredients with the personalized approach actually resulting in the daily derivation of one or more components of an individualized experience story. After mastering writing skill, the pupil is encouraged to take a further step; with his personalized vocabulary to work from, he can write stories related to the original experience, thus providing kinesthetic re-enforcement of the visual patterns of his own words.

Experiences with and analysis of the Language-Master Machine have revealed its functional versatility. Primarily, the auditory material recorded on the tape may be related to visual stimuli other than words. For instance, recognition of beginning and ending sounds may be developed by attaching appropriate pictures to the card; pictures may also be used as an added recall cue in establishing a basic sight vocabulary or for an audio-visual presentation of the rhyming concept; a child-drawn picture might result as a response to the instructor's taped directive.

Another feature of the Language Master card is that its dual track tape permits communication between the teacher and student without the actual presence of both. As the teacher makes preparation for a lesson, she asks a question on one track and the child listens and responds on the other during an independent work period. Following through, the teacher can listen to a response and make a return comment without the child's being there. Developmental skill experiences may easily be presented profitably to individuals, small groups, or the whole class.

Constant exposure to taped reproduction of his own voice tends to develop a substantial sensitivity on the part of the child to the quality of his vocal communication. Any speech defect becomes readily apparent to him and he is provided with a convenient means for comparing his speech with an acceptable model.

The simplicity of its operation makes the Language-Master Machine a very practical tool for the classroom. First grade children at the Campus School all work it with ease and confidence.

The overall experiment thus far leads to speculation that the machine is a source of unlimited opportunities for the creative teacher in planning individual and independent enrichment activities.

A personalized basic reading vocabulary, built from his own experience and speech patterns utilizes the child's natural interests and motivations. Its most obvious consequence would seem to be a flexible self-selection reading program throughout the elementary school that would keep abreast with the changing interests and needs of the maturing individual.

These and many other conjectures stimulate interest in this approach to beginning reading, and doubtless will serve to encourage further exploration in personalizing acquisition of the initial reading vocabulary.