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Evelyn B. Thornton
Texas Southern University at Houston

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READING: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

Evelyn B. Thornton

Among college students from culturally deprived backgrounds the problem of communicating ideas in writing is indeed a real one. It hampers their progress in most of their academic courses and, in numerous cases, forces them to give up their goal of becoming college graduates—a decision which jeopardizes their chances of achieving their maximum potential.

Among other factors, their inability to write clearly and effectively stems largely from (1) inadequate vocabularies, (2) a dearth of knowledge from which to draw ideas about which to write, and (3) inadequate command of accepted usage patterns and mechanics of the language. To the college reading teacher it is immediately obvious that each of these problems may be overcome through diligent contact with the printed page.

Unquestionably, reading extends the student's fund of words, the basic tools of communication. Through his reading he comes in contact with new words in a meaningful relation with other words, thereby developing an awareness of their connotative as well as their denotative meanings. He is less likely, therefore, to think the fireman pregnant because he leaves a burning house "carrying a baby," as the well-known first grader assumed.

A second deterrent to writing effectively, a paucity of knowledge from which to draw ideas, too, may be overcome by reading widely. One discusses with greater ease those topics on which he is well versed. Books, then, by broadening one's acquaintance with facts, may become an important ally in his struggle to communicate in writing.

The value of reading widely as an aid to vocabulary building and to broadening one's fund of knowledge is a widely recognized concept of long standing. A somewhat newer concept is the fact that careful reading can help one to eliminate sub-standard usage patterns. This by-product of reading is perhaps more important than the aforementioned attributes, for such media as television and radio make significant contributions in these areas. One may exhibit a remarkable degree of sophistication in discussing an idea he has heard on the radio or television, but only the printed page presents to him a model by which he may learn to join words in meaningful discourse.

Beginning with the rudimentary problems of subject-verb agree-

ment, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling, through the more complex techniques of organization in composition, the careful reader may observe the points at which his practices differ from those of established writers. He may find on the printed page a solution to most of the problems in writing which confront him by imitating the manner in which expert writers treat them.

Recognizing the fact that reading is the key factor in helping students to improve their writing skills, the reading teacher is also cognizant of the fact that many of the factors which concern teachers of composition may also shed light on the reading process. She is further aware of the fact that students from deprived backgrounds generally do not read widely because they do not read well. Here, then, is a revolving problem, whose solution might hinge upon a revolving approach.

After the student becomes aware of the crucial nature of his problem, he looks for the quickest way to overcome his deficiencies in communication skills, for time is quite a factor with him at this point. The technique of relating the teaching of reading directly to the teaching of writing—the other side of the coin approach—immediately appeals to him. Analyzing the structure of sentences takes on new significance to him, for now he is no longer concerned with identifying subjects, verbs, and other sentence elements simply for the sake of recognizing them; he is now primarily concerned with interpreting meaning through his knowledge of the function of the sentence parts. This procedure provides a tangible approach for the student who has difficulty in reasoning abstractly. He can see readily that the arrangement of the words in the sentence, “The car struck the tree,” suggests a mental image that is altogether different from that suggested by the sentence, “The tree struck the car,” simply because two words changed places in these sentences.

Proceeding linguistically from the sentence, to the paragraph, to the whole essay, the student is taught to write in standard form his interpretation of what an author has said. When he is interpreting sentences, he is encouraged to vary the patterns by which he communicates one idea. If, for example, the sentence with which he is concerned is written in the subject-verb-object pattern, active voice, he learns to convert it to the passive voice, where the object becomes the subject of his new sentence. In addition to the obvious practice in writing this procedure affords, varying his method of expression also helps the student to clarify or to sharpen his impression of what the author has said.

When analyzing the paragraph, the student writes an interpretation of the topic sentence when one is given, and he formulates one when it is implied. In addition to developing a thesis statement of an essay which he has read, the student may also learn to develop a sentence outline by which this essay could have been written. In other words, he unravels the author's work in order that he may learn to put together ideas of his own.

Essays covering a wide range of subjects and presenting a liberal sprinkling of new words are chosen for this project. An evaluation of the ideas expounded as well as of the structure of the work is a basic facet of this approach. In fact, such discussions usually provide topics from which the student may develop themes.

When the usual precautions of selecting materials according to the interests and ability levels of the students are taken, the teaching of reading and writing can be coordinated, effecting mutual benefits to instruction in both areas.

Evelyn B. Thornton is a member of the faculty of Texas Southern University at Houston. She has assisted in the work of the Psycho-Educational Clinic at Western Michigan University.