Audio-Visual Stories: Pre-Reading Activities for Bilingual Children

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The children arrive at the reading lab, exclaiming in a mixture of Navajo and English, expressing their enthusiasm, when they see the filmstrip projector and the tape-player ready for use. Some of them rush to the tape-player to read the title of the story from the cassette. Others try to obtain a copy of the text for the story. Once the lights are turned off and the viewing screen pulled down, the presentation will be interrupted only by the flipping of pages as the students watch, and read along.

Bilingual children, like all children, enjoy and benefit from learning activities which provide the promise of success and achievement. When children begin to understand more fully what they read, an impetus can begin for them to learn to enjoy what stories and books contain. This paper will present learning needs that are specific to bilingual children which may interfere with their understanding of what they read, and then describe a few instructional activities in which audio-visual stories were used as pre-reading activities to increase student understanding of English text.

Teachers of bilingual children are aware of the learning needs of these children when teaching them to read English text. In many cases, they fail to profit from the readily-available published materials and activities that work so well for English speaking children (Saville-Troike, 1978). The linguistic and cultural communities in which bilingual children have developed are the two basic factors responsible for their learning differences. In the classroom, they are taught with reading materials that contain many concepts and experiences which are unfamiliar to them and are coded in a language different from their first language. Ching (1976) points out that differences in the syntax, phonology, and meaning vocabulary of bilingual children's first language can interfere with their understanding of English text.

Once they have gained some fluency in English, however, these children still may fail to grasp securely the meanings that exist beyond the written English code. The experiences bilingual children have had in their native, social community may contrast with the experiences being portrayed in text. Simply translating the code into a recently attained language such as English may not be sufficient for them to understand and appreciate an author's intended meaning.

The cultural values depicted in published reading materials,
intended for children in America's mainstream, are often foreign to, and may conflict with, traditional values of bilingual children. For example, a story that depicts the competitive personality and great achievements of a sports hero may convey only a portion of the intended meaning to Native American children. This could be especially true for those children who possess the traditional values of a cooperative, non-competitive life-style that guided their survival under extremely harsh conditions for hundreds of years (Burgess 1978).

John (1972) reports that the learning and response styles of bilingual children can conflict with teachers and their methods. Expected student behaviors, basic to American schooling, can contribute to confusion, dismay, and failure in school for many bilingual children. Classroom practices of oral recitation, competition for good grades, and the push for individual achievement are distant from and alien to the ways in which some bilingual children learn to perform duties at home. Phillips (1970) provides an example of how some Native American children learn from older relatives. When learning to do household tasks, Warm Springs Indian children are expected to observe adults perform the task by patiently and silently watching the elders. At a later time, an older relative will work with and gently supervise a child as he/she attempts to do a portion of the task. Next, the child tries to complete the chore on his/her own, away from adult supervision so that this period of learning is one of self-assessment and away from the anxiety of possible failure. In contrast, many American children learn at home with the omnipresent assistance of verbal direction from their elders and step-by-step supervision. Similarly, the classroom demands continual assessment and supervision of these children. They are asked to demonstrate individual competence each day under the observation of teachers and peers.

Bilingual children may fail to respond adequately to regular reading instruction and materials for a variety of reasons. Their understanding of the English in these materials can be limited, due to their limited experience with English, and their variant cultural values, experiences, and learning styles. Normally available reading materials, by themselves, are not enough.

As a teacher of reading to bilingual Navajo children, I found these characteristics to be valid for many of the upper-elementary students in my classes. With the help of intensive reading instruction, my students mastered the skill assignments of word recognition, word identification, and comprehension. However, they had great difficulty, in large part, applying comprehension skills to text of any substantial length. For them, the reality of reading books and stories was limited to pronouncing the written words but understanding little of the meaning therein. In an attempt to rectify this situation, the author developed activities which he found to be appropriate to their cultural needs and interests, and their less than fluent English skills.

The activities contained two common steps. First, students would observe and listen to an audio-visual presentation of a story for children. The media forms of filmstrips, slides, photographs, and posters were used, in variations of the activity, to illustrate
the story. Commercially available or teacher-produced cassette tapes were used to present the narration of each story. The verbatim text of each story was also made available for the children to follow during the audio-visual presentation. Once the "show" was completed, students were directed to read the written text of that same presentation, the second and final step of the activity. Stories and text were selected according to the reading ability and interests of the children.

In one example of this activity, children were directed to watch and listen to a filmstrip/cassette story that presented an Apache Indian myth. Since no text came with the audio-visual components, a classroom aid transcribed a text from the cassette tape. As the story was shown to them, the children followed along in the text. The presentation completed, the children re-read the story on their own.

After some weeks of participating in activities of this type, the children began to read other stories, not connected with the presentations, on their own. Their increased enthusiasm and interest in books attested to the motivational influence of the pre-reading activities, their comprehension also developing as evidenced by their independent completion of the stories they were reading. This dramatic change in their reading behavior leads us to the following reasons why audio-visual media may be an effective tool for increasing comprehension.

First, it is suggested that the visual presentation of the story gave these Navajo children a clear representation of characters as well as actions and ideas that were in the text. For example, in the story Danny and the Dinosaur by Syd Hoff (1958), children were shown in the kind of urban surroundings in which the story took place. For them, the visual form was of enormous value in understanding the story. Their comprehension of such stories, then, was not completely dependent upon their recently-attained knowledge of English. Levin and Pressley (1981) state that illustrations can provide the reader with a "very simple, concrete framework for organizing the incoming passage content (p. 53)." The visual media used in these activities helped the children impose structure upon the verbal message of the stories. Petty et al (1976) and Sinatra (1981) note also that children who are learning English as a second language need this extra dimension to aid their comprehension of spoken and written English.

Second, it is suggested that hearing and seeing a story prior to reading enabled the students to read the same story later with a greater feel for the language of a particular story. They may have experienced greater understanding of a story because the presentation, with the text, developed much redundancy in pronunciation, word meaning, and story plot. Goodman (1972) likewise proposes that reading and understanding text is making successful predictions of the text's graphic, syntactic, and semantic information. These children had improved understanding because they 1) knew what would happen in the story, 2) heard the English sounds for the printed words, and 3) were exposed to the meaning that was conveyed by these words. In addition, they heard English in running sentences, spoken in a highly energetic manner by the story-teller and the characters.
A third helpful function of the presentation was that children saw and heard stories, their plots and characters, in one sitting. As low achieving readers, they previously had little opportunity to complete a story or a book, perhaps only reading the first few pages before returning it to the shelf. Here, they must have gained much satisfaction in the completion of stories, the resolution of their plots.

A fourth factor which may have contributed to the positive impact of this kind of activity could be the rather benign nature of the way the activity was conducted by the teacher and aids. Children were not required to perform their unpolished reading skills before others in the classroom. Also, it was not necessary for the teacher or the aids to constantly supervise each facet of the activity. Once the students could operate the equipment and complete the other tasks assigned to them, they were capable of working on their own.

The combination of the afore-mentioned factors, it is suggested, enabled the Navajo children to read the books after the audio-visual presentation and complete other books, later, on their own time and of their own volition: 1) observing illustrated portions of the story; 2) being exposed to the language and content of the story prior to reading; 3) experiencing the story in its entirety; and, 4) completing the assigned work in a low key atmosphere. Although numerical data was not gathered on students' performance as a result of the pre-reading presentations, it is postulated here that their increased reading of books, and their completing more books after participating in the activities, is some evidence on the impact of the activities.

A variety of audio-visual media forms can be used to show and tell a story. There are many commercially available filmstrips, movies, posters and pictures that can be used to illustrate a story. Narration or written text can be created by the teacher for those materials which do not contain accompanying narration. In addition, teachers can construct both visual and audio components of stories if relevant material is not available.

Photographs, posters, slides, and transparencies can be created to illustrate the people, objects, and activities of the children's community. Whatever the visual media, exciting narration for it can be put onto cassette tapes, used and stored, and a text can be written and duplicated to accompany the narration and the visuals. Certainly, children can be enlisted to help the teacher to design and create audio-visual pre-reading activities about topics of their interest. Each form can be viewed, listened to, and later read by the students. The following activity is an example of the use of photographs:

1. Decide with the children what neighborhood activity you all would like to watch, listen to, and read about, e.g. "How To Round Up Horses."

2. Outline a sequence of steps which illustrates the process or actions of the story. For example, 1) Boys are
getting on their horses, 2) They ride out into the prairie, 3) They surround the horses, 4) The boys shout and wave at the horses, and so on.

3. Take pictures of each of the steps and have them developed.

4. Create a narrative or story that describes what the pictures are showing. Once the story is written, it can be recorded onto audio-tape and written for duplication.

5. The audio-visual pre-reading activity can begin and be used with all children for whom it would be of interest.

Using audio-visual media in this way is by no means a substitute for the instruction of reading skills. Watching a filmstrip and listening to the contents of a cassette-tape can not replace the serious interaction that needs to occur between a reader and what is written. A pre-reading activity as has been outlined can inform students about the contents of stories with the hope that the energy and excitement communicated through the audio-visual media will act as a stimulant to their reading more books at a later time. For those children who have received little reward for reading an unfamiliar language, such an activity literally opens up the world of books and stories for them to see, hear, and understand.

REFERENCES


