

Reading Horizons

Volume 19, Issue 1

1978

Article 12

OCTOBER 1978

Content Reading: Past. Present! Future?

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Abstract

With the impetus gathered by such ideas as presented by Flesch (1955) in "Why Johnny Can't Read" and, certainly, by Allen's (1969) proclamation that every child should have the "right to read," a large portion of current educational writing has concerned the area of reading and reading education. Within reading education one particular facet of instruction, content area reading, has blossomed within the last few years. Articles, books, and conference sessions have been devoted to this very specific area of reading education (Herber, 1970; Laffey, 1972; Robinson, 1975).

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With the impetus gathered by such ideas as presented by Flesch (1955) in "*Why Johnny Can't Read*" and, certainly, by Allen's (1969) proclamation that every child should have the "right to read," a large portion of current educational writing has concerned the area of reading and reading education. Within reading education one particular facet of instruction, content area reading, has blossomed within the last few years. Articles, books, and conference sessions have been devoted to this very specific area of reading education (Herber, 1970; Laffey, 1972; Robinson, 1975).

What is the reason for this growing emphasis from reading educators? Previously, reading instruction was conceived from a basic skills approach which took place in the reading class—and only the reading class. If children had difficulty reading their textbooks, the approach was to reinforce those important skills considered necessary for successful reading. Many times the skills taught were isolated from the actual act of reading, and no differentiation was made in teaching reading to children using a basal reader or a content text.

The realization that "reading instruction in reading class only" was inadequate has finally surfaced. While the "closet clinician" has been busy remediating reading deficiencies, the remedial readers have been struggling with printed materials in their science, social studies, math, and English classes. That situation alone has caused reading educators to examine more closely the important area of content reading.

However, another stimulus, perhaps a more effective one, has been presented to reading educators from outside their profession. The emphasis on accountability in their instruction has prompted state departments of education and/or state school boards to become concerned over the reading achievement levels of their students graduating from their high schools. A dramatic trend had arisen over the past few years in the certification requirements for secondary education majors. In effect, states are beginning to mandate competence in reading.

Studies conducted by Estes and Piercey (1973) and Bader (1975) have pointed out this phenomena. In summary, they indicated that there was a 100% increase in the number of states requiring secondary reading preparation for certification in the two years between the studies. Furthermore, Bader pointed out that 55% of the states either had, or were considering, a reading requirement for secondary teachers.

Together, the internal realization of the needs of content area reading and the trend toward reading requirements for secondary majors have brought content area reading to the forefront. However, with it have come a number of concerns. First of all, it is hoped that those individuals responsible for designing and implementing new preservice courses as a result of this impetus are emphasizing the important aspects of content area reading, rather than approaching the subject from the traditional basic skills point of view.

Second, there does appear to be a lack of understanding by many inservice reading specialists of the exact nature of content area reading. It is truly a sad situation when a reading specialist is approached by a content teacher with concerns about the reading difficulties of students in that particular content area, and can offer little or no specific assistance other than from a basic reading skills orientation. In many cases the misunderstanding by reading specialists concerning content area reading is due to the fact that they received little or no instruction in content reading themselves in their graduate reading preparation. As such, there is a general need to provide inservice for these individuals.

Third, complicating this growing awareness of content area reading are the objections raised by content specialists themselves. When presented with the need for such training, a typical response is—

“But I was hired to teach history, not reading. I like history! I have an undergraduate degree in history because that is what I want to teach. If I wanted to teach reading, I would get a degree in reading!”

Such a response may indicate the possibility that the term “content reading” is too restrictive. Is it any wonder that the physical education, music, and art teachers are turned off by reading people? They are instructors of activity-oriented courses. Reading, they say, has little or nothing to do with their students’ success in their activity-oriented courses! Yet, it can be argued that the technical vocabulary and concept load of music, art, and physical education is as extensive as that of English, social studies, or a host of other “core” subject areas.

Instead of pushing a philosophy which some content specialists find objectionable, perhaps a broader perspective of secondary reading is in order. This broader perspective not only can be a present aid in dealing with such objections by subject-matter teachers, but also has implications for future trends in content area reading. At the elementary level a growing emphasis in reading instruction is that of a total language arts approach (Moffett, 1973; Ruddell, 1974; Wilson and Hall, 1972). In such an approach reading is viewed as one of four communication processes, the others being listening, speaking, and writing. Since all four processes are interrelated and dependent in both process and function (Goodman, 1970), it can be argued that instruction in one communication process is reinforcing for another; i.e., instruction in listening, speaking, or writing is helpful for success in reading.

Can we, at the secondary level, separate these elements of language? Should we not take such a broader view at the secondary level? Since language is the mediational process for thinking (Ruddell, 1974), and since all content area courses require thinking skills, should we not provide students with experiences in all language or communication processes? If we conceive of the job of secondary education as the creation of a functioning member of society who is able to think and make rational decisions, then we should acquaint students in all subject areas with the power of language as a means to aid one in dealing effectively with the environment!

The need to furnish experiences in all language processes has been pointed out by Peck and Brinkley (1970) and Moore (1970). They indicated that students leaving the public schools and entering the junior college lack the language skills necessary to insure their probability of success in college level work.

Additionally, it can be legitimately argued that in all content courses, including those activity-oriented courses previously mentioned, students are required to use one, if not all, of the language processes in trying to deal with the content of the course. Listening, speaking, and writing, as well as reading, are required in all courses to deal with the language of that course!

Thus, the adoption of this broader perspective of content area reading deals with the current objections of content specialists and puts reading into its proper perspective — as one tool available for students to use in thinking, making better decisions, and dealing with their environment.

The intent of this article has been to assess the “state of the art” of content reading. Significant strides have been made in dealing with the needs of content area reading, yet significant advances still need to be made. It is hoped that content area reading can be examined from a broader perspective, i.e., perhaps educators should emphasize “content communication” in lieu of the narrower focus of content reading.

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