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ABSTRACT

Ways that the teacher can make communication skills instruction relevant to the learner are emphasized. It is suggested that teachers (1) learn more about our language structure, (2) study the particular environment and language of students, (3) emphasize strategies of word attack in context rather than teach lists of individual sight words, (4) distinguish between oral and silent reading demands for meaning, and (5) concentrate on the child's language development prior to reading. The language-experience approach and provisions for individualized instruction are claimed to be the most effective in reaching the interests and experiences of the learner. The needs for developing and implementing provisions for transfer of learning, instruction in reading expository materials, multimedia instructional facilities, effective evaluation devices, differentiated instructional personnel teams, inservice programs, and research activities are also outlined. It is concluded that reading instruction, and, in fact, all communication skills instruction, must be subsumed by ideas. Communication skills are means to ends, not ends in themselves. References are included. (CM)

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Communications and Curriculum Change*

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Instruction in reading and all of the other communication skills is of little value if it is not perceived as relevant by the learner.

The term 'relevance' in education implies that what is to be learned is perceived by the learner as having meaning in his present life and the expectation that it will have utility in future learning or coping situations. It also implies a dissolution of the dichotomy between cognitive and affective factors, between content and feeling. There is no set ratio

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between these factors since a dynamic interaction is required in order to accommodate the vacillation in needs for each individual. . . .(4)

Assuredly competence is still ". . . a relevant educational concern. Information mastery, communicative competence, problem solving, and personal-social self-mastery are not irrelevant as educational goals. It is the manner in which these are represented in the curriculum and the purposes which formal education is perceived to serve that are irrelevant to our students' concerns."(3)

In the 60's emphasis was placed on the culturally deprived or disadvantaged. Such labels suggested that ". . . something was wrong with the learner, not with the school and its educational process."(2) In the 70's we must proceed from the realization that the school is disadvantaged. School has lost or is losing its meaning for a very large number of students. "Perhaps this is true because the school has faltered in acknowledging the need for personal interaction of both learners and teachers with ideas in the pursuit of ways to exercise intelligent action. School experience, at least as students see it, is failing to provide what they need most-- meaningful human encounter. When they speak of participation, they are not referring to superficial, mickey mouse activity; they ask for continuing involvement in the decisions which

affect not only the kind of learning they need, but also the kind of person they aspire to become."(1)

From the viewpoint of the educator principally concerned with reading or the total communication process, relevance and meaningfulness are vital considerations. Excellence in the teaching or learning of communication skills has ineffective results when applied to the content of a curriculum alien to the student.

Curriculum change must be a concern of the reading or communications specialist. The suggestions which follow are based on such a premise.

A Broader Base

We have much more information about language today than in the past; it is time to stop using materials and techniques based on fallacious reasoning or extremely limited knowledge. Granted, it is only within the last thirty years that we have been able to describe language in organized fashion. But we now need to capitalize on knowledge about language.

We must study our language before we generate approaches to reading instruction. Too many teachers have been trained to use prescriptions and know little about their own language. Such generalizations as "when two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking" are limited in nature and unreliable as word attack strategies. We need to learn more

about the patterns of specific letters in words, sentence patterns, and the overall organizational patterns of our language. Eventually we may have enough information about language and the learners of language to formulate sets of generalizations of utility to different types of learners.

In all probability we will help many learners, particularly the so-called disadvantaged, by de-emphasizing individual sight words and emphasizing strategies of tackling new words in contextual situations. The learner already knows much about language whatever his background. He brings this background to a reading program. When we rely on word lists in reading and spelling and do not carefully consider the whole contextual environment, we act as if we felt the learner knew nothing about his language. We need to re-analyze our dedication to word lists. Probably, teaching reading and spelling through word lists contributes little to the ^{language} success of the student, and particularly the student who is having trouble.

We must also study the environment of the learner. There is no such thing as one way of speaking English. There are probably more learners who have been defeated by having teachers say to them, "This is not right; you've got to say it correctly!" Some educators confuse oral language and written language. "You've got to speak correctly in

order to read properly" is not necessarily valid.

The learner comes to the classroom from his own environment. If the teacher says to this learner, "You are wrong-- you are speaking incorrectly," the teacher is in reality saying, "I don't like you; I don't like your parents; I don't like the environment from which you come,"

And, then sometimes, injury is added to insult, by the introduction of sight words meaningless to the child or by the introduction of a basal reader with carefully controlled language artificial to the beholder. Such basals may be traditional basals or those basals called linguistic readers which, in the main, present carefully controlled graphemes and the same nonsensical discourse to the unprepared learner. If reading instruction is to be considered on a broader base, the language-experience approach for beginning readers, of five or fifty, seems desirable; it makes sense to start with the language and the experiences of the learner, and build the reading program out of this until learners are capable, psychologically and linguistically, of coping with the different types of language usage they meet in some of our books.

Written language is not always oral language written down. There is a tremendous difference between what students meet on the printed page in most of the materials confronting them, and what they are saying within their own peer and family environments. We must concentrate on language

development first. We must, perhaps, for some youngsters coming into nursery schools and kindergartens, dispense with reading materials. Perhaps they are threatened by books being pushed at them. Perhaps books should not be brought into the classroom (other than the single book the teacher is reading to the group at the time), until the children are able to cope with different kinds of English language which may be spoken under different sets of circumstances. Then, perhaps, they will approach reading as a new and useful experience.

We must distinguish between oral and silent reading. When a student reads orally, unless in a testing situation, he is normally reinterpreting what has been read silently. He does need to pronounce each word, but not necessarily exactly as the teacher does. He needs to pronounce in a manner similar enough to those listening so the message is understood. In silent reading a student is carrying on a dialogue with the author; there is no need to pronounce each word "correctly" or even (perhaps) to pronounce at all.

Individual Needs

We are beginning to move away from the three-group approach as the method of teaching reading. Certainly there are many problems inherent in the teacher attempting to cope with thirty, thirty-five, forty individuals in one classroom, and granted there are compromises the teacher must make as he

strives to meet individual needs. But, the teacher still has the obligation of meeting those individual needs to the best of his ability. It can't be done with just a stereotyped three-group approach. It can't be done, certainly, at the high-school level with a single-group approach without any differentiation of assignments and using materials wholly inadequate for the students. It's about time (and things are stirring) that high schools wake up to their responsibilities and adjust methodology and materials to the varied needs of the learners--ego-wise, work-wise, society-wise, and interest-wise.

We have gone on the assumption, too long, that transfer of learning takes place automatically. And yet there exists a host of psychological studies which tell us that transfer of learning does not take place automatically, that one must teach very carefully to get transfer of learning, that one must make the follow-up situation as parallel to the initial teaching situation as possible for the average student to transfer, and that one must direct this transfer. Still we continue with separate reading teachers and reading clinics, dichotomous from the rest of the program in the school.

We have not been making enough contact with the types of materials and experiences the student faces in his environment in the classroom or outside of it. Our reading programs

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have concentrated largely on literature and narrative-type reading tasks. The program needs to expand to direct concern with the reading tasks demanded of expository materials. Patterns of writing and indeed reading tasks differ within a discipline and from discipline to discipline, and students need direct help in making the transfer.

Communication Services

Total communication services dealing with all media are beginning to be developed throughout schools and school systems. These multi-media networks will provide every possible type of communication device that can be used, sometimes replacing, and often augmenting print materials. The school or school system needs a vital instructional communications center handled by a capable team of workers experienced in library science, audio-visual materials, and communications.

There also ought to be, in the school or school system, a center for the preparation of materials, staffed by personnel trained to prepare materials suited to individual needs as requested by teachers. It will never be possible for any commercial enterprise to provide every type of material that is needed in the classroom, although some school systems might cooperate with commercial enterprises in such ventures.

Community members, staffs of educational organizations, and members of business enterprises should combine in an effort to construct effective evaluation devices. Our standardized tests do not measure adequate samples of realistic reading behavior. Our informal devices suffer from low reliability. We need master thinkers--teachers, writers, technicians--to develop computer programs and to provide the brains and know-how for the host of equipment available for the development of evaluation programs.

Patterns for Change

Differentiated instructional personnel. Teams of differentiated instructional personnel planning and working together appear to offer the best chances of success for constructing a meaningful and relevant curriculum suited to the individual and group needs of our students. Such teams should be composed of fully trained teachers, adolescents and adults with varying abilities and levels of educational achievement, as well as representation from the student group itself. Many part-time helpers with a diversity of backgrounds may also be members of a team. Opportunities need to be developed so that all members of the team may have the opportunity to upgrade themselves educationally. Such upgrading programs need to be joint endeavors with colleges and universities who are willing to cooperate in providing learning situations at a variety of educational levels. It may be that team membership

will provide the best training ground for the development of master teachers.

Team planning followed by cooperative implementation makes it very difficult to fragment instruction in reading, listening, or spelling. Communications become visible as the tools of learning and teaching, no matter what the content may be.

Teacher education. In helping ourselves contend with the complex needs of our society, we must also provide other patterns of training for educational personnel. We need a training continuum from preservice education through inservice education. The university professor needs help from the school practitioner. The professor may (we hope) visit classrooms but, even so, such experiences are very different from being in a classroom day after day. Public and private school staff members must provide consultant help to the college program so the professor may revise his reading methods course in line with the needs of today's society. But also within the school setting, inservice courses must change from lectures on reading instruction to the reality of contending with the reading and other communication needs of the students. Inservice programs should focus on specific problems such as: "How can you help a student learn to draw conclusions from what he reads in his difficult social studies textbook?" "Can the language-experience approach be used in

a continuing class discussion of the Vietnam war? How do you evaluate the reading skills needed in coping with science materials?"

Courses, programs, sessions or whatever might be considered teacher education activities need to operate from developed or developing conceptual frameworks, but the activities must be pragmatic. Behaviors are rarely changed by talking about something. Leaders or coordinators of training programs should make every effort to tailor such programs to the individual needs of prospective teachers or teachers in service. Instruction should be organized for small groups or individuals whenever feasible so actual involvement may take place. It is, in reality, more economical for the instructor to repeat procedures with a number of individuals or small groups at the involvement level than to "expose" a large group to concepts at a "talking" level.

Research activities. Although there will always be a need for individual, creative investigations, most research effort should converge on significant problems which must be solved. Young researchers must be effectively trained, but such training should not keep them in limbo as perennial students. Research training should start early enough in the career of the graduate student to make him comfortable and competent in reading research reports and in handling parts

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of research designs, long before he begins his own dissertation. Perhaps if we can turn out young researchers rapidly enough who enjoy engaging in research they will continue to serve the educational community as investigators.

The new breed of researchers should be trained to work cooperatively on large, significant problems and should be at home in both the university and in the school. Cooperative effort, sometimes including industry, may help us close the gap between research findings and practice. Although we need to collaborate on large, important problems, we must not just concentrate on medians and products, but look carefully at individuals within the treatment and non-treatment groups to gain insights about individual modes of learning and about the process of reading.

Research should also be specifically focused on the interrelationships among communication skills, as well as the functioning of these interrelationships throughout the disciplines represented in a curriculum. Too much of what we now accept about such interrelationships as fact is hardly based on well-designed study.

Certainly we must also aid and abet investigations concerned with teacher effectiveness since the teacher appears to emerge as a significant factor in most research reports. Teacher effectiveness studies may well be the types of investigations which lend themselves to cooperative research involving university and school personnel.

Concluding Remarks

Within the next decade the institution we now call "school" may change radically; it may even find its role in this complex society. Little question that reading will not be the dominant learning mode for many, and that it will have relative degrees of significance for others. We must keep marching with the changing needs of society. We need to learn how to help students learn to skillfully use all aspects of the communication processes, with emphasis on individual and specific group needs. But we must learn also how to help students perceive such activity as meaningful and relevant.

Most students are not interested and can see little value in learning outcomes such as how to find a main idea, or how to pronounce a digraph, or to read in sequence, or to make an inference. There are two large curriculum areas of concern to learners: first and foremost, probing into and evaluating problems, interests, and needs of concern to them in this present society; second, investigating ideas and information about events, phenomena, and living organisms which relate to the world around them.

Hence, reading instruction, in fact all communication skills instruction, has to be subsumed by ideas. Communication skills are means to ends not ends in themselves.

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