10-1-1976

R> S1 + S2 + S3 +…Sn

Richard T. Vacca
The University of Connecticut

Jerry L. Johns
Northern Illinois University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

Part of the Education Commons

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
**Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic**

$R > S_1 + S_2 + S_3 + \ldots S_n$

Richard T. Vacca
THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

Jerry L. Johns
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

Consider two ways of looking at reading which can influence the manner in which we plan and implement instruction. Expressed as a symbolic representation, the first view can be stated as:

$$R = S_1 + S_2 + S_3 + \ldots S$$

In this equation, R (reading) is equal to $S_1 + S_2 + S_3 + \ldots S$ (the sum of "teachable" skills generally believed to be operating while reading). A second representation, however, suggests:

$$R > S_1 + S_2 + S_3 + \ldots S$$

In this formula, R (reading) is greater than $S_1 + S_2 + S_3 + \ldots S$ (the sum of "teachable" skills generally believed to be operating while reading).

Teaching children to discover meaning has often been translated into scores of ditto-produced skill materials designed to build comprehension skills whose labels have been a source of mystery to teachers and students alike. Haven't we all wondered at one time or another what would happen if the ditto machine broke down? As reading teachers we should create a context in which children will develop a concept that $R > S_1 + S_2 + S_3 + \ldots S$. This view is not a denunciation of skills instruction. Rather, it embodies an attitude that places instructional emphasis on the development of reading as an active, meaning-getting process and places skills development within that context.

The first representation reflects one facet of a *psychometric* view of reading—that reading is a mental activity composed of discrete, but interrelated, skills and processes. By reducing reading to its skill components, we have typically sought to intensify learning through emphatic teaching and practice. The second symbolic representation, that reading is greater than the sum of its skills, subtly arises out of a psycholinguistic view (Goodman, 1970; Smith, 1972) of the reading process—one that combines an understanding of how language works with how individuals learn. In short, the emphasis is on how learners process various kinds of information in an effort to make sense out of written language.

Proponents of a psychometric view of reading support the notion that there are identifiable "skills." These skills portray a compact picture of reading that underlies both its *measurement* and its *teaching*. The rock upon which most of reading instruction is built is a psychometric one! Tests,

materials, taxonomies, etc. — most all are ensconced in the belief that reading is measurable. By identifying the skills involved in reading and studying the relationships among them, appropriate instruction can be planned and executed.

The field of reading is replete with its own special terminology, especially its clusters of skills in each of the broad areas of instruction: word identification, comprehension, and study skills. In many instances, authorities have found it difficult to reach consensus on what the labels should be or what they even mean. Kerfoot (1965) has indicated that many problems in reading result from a confusion in terminology. In the instructional area of comprehension, he claims that reading experts have confused teachers by personalizing terms with their unique labels. Kerfoot recommends that we dispense with confusing, generalized labels and, instead, identify the specific tasks of reading.

Where attempts have been made to operationalize these specific tasks into instructional materials and strategies, they have tended to reinforce the questionable notion that reading equals the sum of the separate skills. As a result, reading instruction runs the risk of becoming quantified: teaching, practice, and reinforcement in X number of skills lead to more effective and efficient reading. Frequently, false dichotomies are established. Martin (1969), for example, points out the dilemma established by "code-breakers" vs. "meaning-pursuers":

> Discussions of reading sometimes assume a contradiction between decoding a passage and discovering its meaning. If decoding is interpreted as converting graphemes into phonemes, then there is indeed a fence on whose two sides partisans of two opposed points of view can range themselves: code-breakers vs. meaning-pursuers. The decoding advocate can argue that speech is common property, even among non-readers, and that writing is a set of clues designed to elicit in the reader's mind the spoken language; since native speakers already know the greater part of the spoken language before they come to school, the teaching of reading is simply a matter of clueing the student into the system for turning printed hieroglyphics into the already-familiar language of speech. The pursuer of meaning, on the other hand, can argue that the capacity to pronounce haltingly a page of prose is a far cry from understanding what one is pronouncing — that the principal problem in promoting literacy is not to teach the empty mouthing of sounds but to foster an intelligent approach to the significance of the passage, including a capacity for judgment, appreciation, and lively animated response. (p. 22)

The "code-breakers" and "meaning-pursuers" represent extremes on a continuum. Genuine readers, however, pursue meaning and use the

alphabetic code to help them process print. There should not be an un-
necessary dichotomy among these readers — they realize that both code and
meaning are necessary for comprehension to occur.

Rather than reinforce a restricted concept of reading as a collection of
skills frequently taught in isolation from one another, we suggest that reading
be viewed as a language-based process that is greater than the sum of its
so-called "skills." Goodman and Burke (1972) have recognized that all the
skills of reading, no matter how they are identified, do not necessarily
combine to produce effective reading performance. As they explain:

> You cannot know a process by listing its ingredients or
> labeling its parts; you must observe the effect of the parts as
> they interact with each other. Acting together, the parts
> compose an entity which is uniquely different from the
> identity of any of the separate parts. Flour, sugar, baking
> soda, salt, eggs and water can all be listed as ingredients of a
> cake. Yet the texture, weight, flavor and moistness of a cake
> cannot be related directly to any one of the ingredients, but
> only to the quality and result of their interaction. (p. 95)

In recent years a number of teachers have been giving their students an
opportunity to approach reading as a process that is greater than the sum of
its individual skills. Their instruction has emphasized the "product" of each
student's reading as much, if not more, than the skills by which a student
reads. Children are encouraged to engage in reading as a search for
meaning without having to worry about whether X, Y, and/or Z skill has
been mastered. Moffett (1973) has suggested that teachers create a
framework in which a student must do something with what he has read.
Thus, a teacher's ability to deal with the resulty of a child's search for
meaning in written language will lead to productive reading in the long
run. Moffett prescribes strategies for dealing with the results of reading
through writing, discussion, and dramatic work.

Hunt (1970) has contended that "by emphasizing silent reading . . .
ultimately better readers can be developed" (p. 150). He suggests a strategy
that has become popularly known as USSR or SSR —(Uninterrupted)
Sustained Silent Reading. This strategy permits the student to focus on the
task of generating meaning from print. The teacher's role is to develop the
understanding in the reader's mind that reading means getting as many
important ideas out of print as he possibly can. Again, instructional em-
phasis is on the results of productive reading. According to Hunt (1970), the
teacher helps students to sense reading as an entity in itself by asking
questions such as:

1. How did you read today? Did you get a lot done?
2. Did you read better today than yesterday?
3. Were you able to concentrate today on your silent reading?
4. Did the ideas in the book hold your attention? Did you have the
    feeling of moving right along with them?

5. Did you have the feeling of wanting to go ahead faster to find out what happened? Were you constantly moving ahead to get to the next good part?
6. Was it hard for you to keep your mind on what you were reading?
7. Could you keep the ideas in your book straight in your mind?
8. Did you get mixed up in any place? Did you have to go back and straighten yourself out?

Recently, Evans and Towner (1975) have acknowledged the increasing numbers of teachers at all educational levels who have implemented SSR. They also have questioned the influence of SSR on skills achievement and, therefore, designed a preliminary study involving forty-eight students in fourth grade. Over a period of ten weeks, half of the students were involved in SSR, while the other half used selected commercial practice materials that commonly supplement basal reading programs. All students also were given daily reading instruction in a popular basal reading series. Pretest-posttest data using the Metropolitan Achievement Test revealed no significant treatment, classroom, or interaction effects between the SSR group and the supplemental skills practice group. Within the limitations of the study, the researchers have concluded that SSR is "neither more nor less effective than a multi-material form of practice" (p. 156) in which skills instruction is emphasized.

We interpret the finding of no significant differences in the Evans and Towner study to support an instructional environment beyond the basic program where the focus is directed toward reading as an entity in itself. Obviously, the added instructional time spent in supplemental skills practice did not have the potency on skills performance we might have assumed. Why, then, not have children practice reading by reading!

REFERENCES

Evans, Howard M., and Towner, John C. "Sustained Silent Reading: Does It Increase Skills?" *The Reading Teacher,* 29 (November, 1975), 155-156.

Goodman, Kenneth S. "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game," *Journal of Reading Specialist,* 6 (May, 1967), 126-135.

Goodman, Yetta M., and Burke, Carolyn L. *Reading Miscue Inventory Manual: Procedure for Diagnosis and Evaluation.* New York: The Macmillan Company, 1972.

Hunt, Lyman C., Jr. "The Effect of Self-Selection, Interest, and Motivation Upon Independent, Instructional, and Frustrational Levels," *The Reading Teacher,* 24 (November, 1970), 146-151, 158.

Kerfoot, James F. "Problems and Research Considerations in Reading Comprehension," *The Reading Teacher,* 18 (January, 1965), 250-256.

Martin, R. G. "Decoding and the Quest for Meaning," *Journal of Reading Behavior,* 1 (Fall, 1969), 22-30.

Moffett, James. *A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13.* Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1973.

Smith, Frank. *Understanding Reading: A Psycholinguistic Analysis of Reading and Learning to Read.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971.