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RESTRUCTURING TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR UNSTRUCTURED BASAL STORIES

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The basal reader is the most powerful tool and pervasive force affecting reading instruction in the elementary schools throughout the nation. For 95 percent of the schools in the United States, the basal reader is the major component of the reading program (Yarrington, 1978). So widely used and so heavily relied upon, it has been utilized by many elementary classroom teachers as the total reading program (Shannon, 1983); or at the very least, it has been considered a vehicle for standardizing reading instruction by establishing objectives and instructional strategies as well as methods to test mastery in reading skills (Auckerman, 1981).

The historical dominance of the basal reader in elementary classrooms has kept it under scrutiny, leading researchers to findings that have practical applications for effective reading instruction. One such finding has described teachers' over-reliance on these texts (Durkin, 1984; Rosecky, 1978) a type of reading instruction that employs a "strict application of commercial materials," where there is little maintenance of control, content, method, and pace by teachers (Shannon, 1983). Other researchers have focused on the content and language of stories in basals (Beck, 1984; Bettelheim & Zelan, 1982; Bruce, 1985; Green, 1984) charging that these texts, so thoughtfully written for the reading program, may indeed be counterproductive in developing students' comprehension for stories.

This article, therefore, proposes to identify some of the trouble spots in basal stories caused by the uses of vocabulary control and readability formula, the inherent features of commercial texts. Additionally, for a more ef-

fective employment of the basal reader, specific suggestions will be made that will enable teachers to help their young readers to construct meaning from stories that are less than perfect.

Effects of Vocabulary Control and Readability Formulas

Vocabulary Control

One distinctive characteristic of the basal reader is vocabulary control which publishers have traditionally used as their major sales pitch to prospective buyers. Vocabulary control is achieved through (1) the regulation of the number of new words in a story and (2) the limitation of words to a "high-frequency" list of words. The obvious advantage is that students' over-exposure to the same words should result in automaticity for word recognition.

However, the disadvantages that vocabulary control presents are numerous. Since ideas are represented by words, such a restriction on words within a story would obviously result in similar restrictions on ideas. To explain further, diluted ideas appear in simplified text, because all too often, difficult lexical items do not always have precise synonyms on the "high frequency" list (Davison & Kantor, 1982). So meaning is adjusted. When the altered concepts are central to the story, text is particularly troublesome for the young students. This "roundabout language" may result in blocking the readers' comprehension of the story (Beck, McKeown, McCaslin, 1981).

Another concern is the need for the students to expand their knowledge base through literature. Simplified texts do not challenge their readers with the heavy conceptual load which demands greater text processing, needed to foster reading fluency in students (Beck, 1984). A steady diet of stories constructed on a small body of word concepts would hamper development and growth of students' knowledge structure.

The late E. B. White, author of Charlotte's Web and master of prose has left a legacy to authors of children's literature that needs to be followed:

In Charlotte's Web I gave them a
literate spider, and they took
that. Some writers for children
deliberately avoid using words

they think a child doesn't know.
This emasculates the prose, and
I suspect bores the reader (White, 1969).

Readability formula

In addition to vocabulary control, another major feature of basal readers is graded text whereby text difficulty is measured by a readability formula. One assumption of such formulas is that word difficulty and sentence length determine text comprehensibility. Essentially, there are three ways readability formulas are used: first, grade-level scores are derived through the application of a formula to written text; second, children's literature may be modified or adapted for a grade level through the use of a formula; and third, stories are written using a readability formula. All of these uses of readability formulas with basal texts have generated much criticism.

One major problem in describing text with a grade-level score is that it tends to oversimplify the nature of the reading process (MacGinitie, 1984). While readability formulas account for some factors of text difficulty, they overlook more powerful text features that affect comprehension--number of different word concepts (Antonacci, 1982), the number of idea units within sentences (Kintsch & Keenan, 1973), the syntactic complexity of sentences (Botel, Dawkins, & Granowsky, 1973), story structure (Stein & Glenn, 1979), to name only a few. How could language, so complex, variant, and qualitative in nature be reduced to a single quantitative symbol to describe its comprehensibility?

More problems are created when authors are directed to modify children's literature for a particular grade level. The adapted version may become the more difficult text as syntactic changes result from the shortening of sentences (Davison & Kantor, 1982; Rubin, 1985). For example, a compound sentence containing a connective, may be rewritten as two shorter sentences with the connective deleted. Explicit links are needed to form a tight network among sentences, producing more readable text (Moe & Irwin, 1986). To illustrate, in the following compound sentence, (a) may be rewritten as two simple sentences (b) in order to simplify text suggested by the

rewrite rules of a readability formula.

- (a) The boy ran fast, because he was chased by a pack of wolves.
- (b) The boy ran fast. He was chased by a pack of wolves.

The connective "because" in sentence (a) signals the reader to comprehend the cause-effect relationship between the two ideas within the sentence. Without the explicit link "because," as in the rewrite (b), the reader must infer the cause-effect relationship. Therefore, shortening sentences may interfere with the reader's understanding of critical relationships within text.

All too often, and especially for primers, readability formulas guide the authors in writing text; for example, through the manipulation and the counting of words a story becomes a "good fit" for the primer level. These stories have received the loudest criticism of all--What has been created is empty text, stories with no meaning (Bettelheim & Zelan, 1982); Stories written for primers contain prose that is colorless and artificial (Green, 1985); Basal stories often lack structure and are incomplete (Bruce, 1984).

It is the **story**, however, that is at the heart of every reading program and appropriately so. Children hear stories long before they come to school, stories are a very natural form of entertainment, good stories motivate children to learn to read and to continue reading, and, stories are central to our conceptions on how one learns to read. Therefore, a student's first experiences with a story in print must allow for the construction of meaning. However, because of the problematic aspects of basal stories--whose authors are guided in their writings by readability formulas--the task of constructing meaning from primer stories becomes all too difficult for our novice readers.

A look at how stories are structured is critical in identifying those trouble spots in primers that may disable children's comprehension. Considerable research over the past decade has generated a definition of a story as "an idealized internal representation of parts of a typical story and the relationship among those parts" (Mandler &

Johnson, 1977, p. 111). According to Stein and Glenn (1979), the elements or parts of the story that depict the episodic story structure are the setting and the episode. The setting includes the main character(s), time, and place, that is, the protagonist and the context in which the story takes place. The episode includes all the events that lead the protagonist toward goal attainment or nonattainment as well as his responses to the outcome of the action. A story that is complete and well-structured includes all of these elements in a predictable sequence.

Children develop their own grammar or schema for story only after hearing well-structured stories over and over. They use their story schema to facilitate their understanding for story. The reader's story grammar provides them with a framework to anticipate the protagonist's actions, to organize story information, and to recall story events (Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Stein & Glenn, 1979). However, comprehension for story occurs only when there is a match between both story grammars, that of the reader and the text. Thus, children have a better remembrance for stories whose elements are intact, that is, for stories that conform to the "prototype" story structure (Stein & Glenn, 1979).

Stories in basal readers have been criticized as being incomplete messages. In their investigation, Beck, McKeown and McCaslin (1981) found examples of stories in primers where important story elements were missing. In one story, the researchers cite an action, serving as the initiating event or the first event within the story episode, deleted from the story. To construct meaning around this incomplete story, the reader must infer the missing story part. However, these inferencing demands go beyond the cognitive capabilities of young novice readers (Paris & Lindauer, 1976) who find filling in missing story parts far more difficult than intermediate students (Stein & Glenn, 1979).

Comparing primer stories, where text is written by authors guided by readability formulas, with intermediate basal stories, where the grade level of the text is described through the application of a readability formula; reveals that higher restrictions of text controls on primers cause these stories to violate story structure more fre-

quently than intermediate basal stories. Then it is more likely that the text processing demands for younger readers will be greater than for older readers--a greater number of stories with deleted story elements requires readers to make more inferences. When teachers are aware of the omitted story elements, they will be able to help students to construct meaning from these stories.

If we want our instructional practices to work with our reading materials effectively to develop fluent readers, what is needed is a thorough knowledge of the materials we employ. Sensitivity to the strengths and weaknesses of the basal texts will enable classroom teachers to modify their teaching strategies, to select appropriate supplementary literature, and to adjust curriculum objectives, thereby making the goals of the reading program attainable. Following are specific suggestions for classroom teachers who employ basal readers in their delivery of reading instruction.

Strategies for Developing Children's Understanding of Stories

Provide students with the missing signal words to help them make the necessary connections between ideas.

When sentences are shortened and explicit connectives, such as, because, when, if, or but, are deleted, critical relationships between two or more sentences must be inferred. Facilitate the children's understanding for the related ideas through a discussion of the target concepts, supplying the deleted explicit connective.

Supply correct word concepts to elucidate ambiguous meanings within the story.

When meaning is diluted through vocabulary control, the teacher can make a deliberate effort to suggest the intended meaning by using the correct synonyms. For example, if a story is about a race, appropriately called a "marathon," but this word was not on the high-frequency list, the substitute phrase "long race" might be used in print for the word "marathon." In the pre- and post-story discussions, use "marathon" synonymously with the phrase "long race;" extend the discussion to develop precise concepts about a marathon, and relate this knowledge to children's background experiences as well as to the events

within the story.

Help children get a sense of meaning for the story by supplying any missing story element.

Do not trust that a beginner reader will be able to infer a story element that is implicit and that is needed to construct meaning around the story. For example, if the setting is not explicitly described, yet it is critical to comprehending the story, tell the children where the story takes place, discussing it in detail, before they read the story. Beck, McKeown, and McCaslin (1981) suggest an alternate view of primer stories; the reading lesson might incorporate the basal story as part told through print, the rest supplied through teacher discussion and questioning.

Create a literary environment in the classroom.

To do this, become acquainted with the best works of children's literature and make them available within the classroom. Set a time aside daily when children and teacher luxuriate in free reading.

Rather than basal stories, make daily storyreading a central part of reading program.

Since it is a priority, do not place this literary event at the end of the day when everyone is tired and anxious to go home. Make storyreading the main attraction! Provide thoughtful literature selections with your best story delivery. Remember, this is one of your most important teaching strategies. When children read and hear complete and structured stories, their story schemas are further developed, a facilitator in story comprehension.

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