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LEARNING MODALITY: ANOTHER PEBBLE IN THE POND

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Introduction

Approaches for teaching reading, as found in the plethora of reading materials now available, have become increasingly diversified. Audio materials have been added to several major reading programs. Kinesthetic materials are now provided for some programs. Many authors of reading programs are now reluctant to rely on "visual only" cues for teaching the numerous reading skills.

The movement toward diversified reading approaches and materials has, in part, been precipitated by the clearly visible need to reduce the large number of reading casualties in the schools. In part, it has been brought about by the findings concerning the way children best learn. If diversified reading approaches and materials are to be maximally effective, it is paramount that research and implications for this research be thoroughly understood.

The purpose of this article is to examine some of the significant research in the area of learning modalities, analyze the findings of this research, and discuss the implications of reading research as it relates to reading instruction.

Review of Research

Research concerned with modality preference has been in existence since the latter part of the nineteenth century. Several summary reviews have been written on this topic. In a serial review summarizing most of the known research comparing oral and visual presentations, Witty and Sizemore (1958, 1959) reached the following conclusions, "learning was not always accelerated or reinforced by simultaneous presentation involving a combination of avenues such as seeing and hearing. Sometimes a particular approach rather than a combination proved more effective."

de Hirsch also reported results that strongly supported the need to identify modality preferences in young children. de Hirsch conducted a study in which a predictive index was developed that would identify first grade children who might encounter reading difficulties early in their school career. Based on the results of this study, de Hirsch strongly recommended that modality strengths and weaknesses in children be considered in determining teaching methods. She went on to say that children who do well in both auditory and visual modalities tend to do well with either a sight or phonic method while those who perform poorly in both modalities will need a multiple approach in order to activate as many learning pathways as possible.

Bateman (1968) conducted a study that attempted to determine the

effectiveness of reading instruction when first grade children were grouped and taught according to their preferred learning modality. The major conclusion reached by Bateman was that children with auditory preferences appear to be superior in both reading and spelling achievement when compared with the visual modality preference children. It was also noted by this researcher that children who prefer the visual modality may be handicapped relative to those who prefer the auditory modality during the initial stages of learning to read, and the auditory method of instruction may be superior regardless of the child's own pattern of learning.

Ringler designed a study to investigate the feasibility of identifying modality preferences of first-grade children. She also sought to determine the relationship between preferred learning modalities, differentiated presentation of reading tasks, and work recognition. The results of this study indicated that modality preferences can be identified in young children but in this particular case, no significant achievement differences appeared among the children studied when they were categorized by modality preference.

Robinson conducted an investigation in order to determine the progress in reading of children with differing visual and auditory abilities when taught by two approaches to beginning reading. Two conclusions reached by Robinson were that children who scored high in both modalities consistently achieved higher reading scores, and that the ability in the area of auditory discrimination appeared to make a significant contribution to reading achievement.

Conclusions

The research cited is typical of the studies and results reported in the area of learning modalities. Although these and other studies tend to strongly support the early identification of modality preferences in young children the research tends to produce somewhat conflicting results and the evidence continues to remain inconclusive. The general conclusions that can be drawn from the vast amount of research on learning modalities are as follows:

1. Modality strengths and weaknesses are discernible in young children.
2. Children identified as auditory learners appear to be higher achievers in reading than children identified as visual learners.
3. Children identified as high visual and high auditory learners achieve better than children identified as high in one modality and low in another or low in both visual and auditory modalities.
4. Utilization of a predictive index holds promise in the early identification of "high risk" children as a means of preventing reading casualties.
5. No one teaching method appears to be best for all children.
6. The kinesthetic approach appears to be a viable teaching method and seems to facilitate learning.

Implications

Learning modality must be considered a significant "pebble in the

pond” when we, as educators, examine the numerous factors that affect a child’s ability to learn. Just how significant learning modality may be still remains unknown. Some implications based on past research deserve serious consideration.

1. Development of additional instruments to identify modality preferences in young children is needed. Instruments currently available tend to identify children who manifest either multiple modality strengths or multiple weaknesses. A test that could successfully identify a child’s modal preference as well as modal deficit (if a deficit exists) is greatly needed.
2. Continued validation of instruments currently available to assess modality preferences is needed.
3. Longitudinal studies utilizing specific populations (e.g., ethnic groups, urban groups, disadvantaged groups, and others) is greatly needed. This could provide significant information about populations where minimal success with traditional methods has been found.
4. Continued development and usage of multi-modal instructional material is recommended. Research in this area supports the idea that children vary in their style of learning and that a flexible as well as a multi-modal instructional program should be offered in order to reach all children.

In summary, learning modality appears to be a significant factor that should be considered when developing beginning approaches to reading. The research strongly suggests that modality preferences can be identified in young children and that it might be wise for educators to capitalize on model preferences. Much more research is needed in this area, but as an educator, I am convinced that the area of learning modalities holds great promise for reducing the number of reading casualties in our schools.

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