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Professional Concerns

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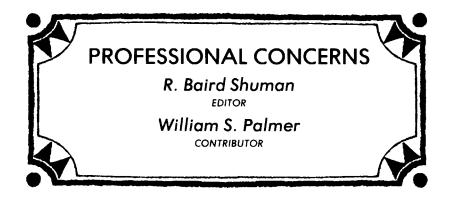
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Professional Concerns is a regular column devoted to the interchange of ideas among those interested in reading instruction. Send your comments and contributions to the editor. If you have questions about reading that you wish to have answered, the editor will find respondents to answer them. Address correspondence to R. Baird Shuman, Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, Illinois, 61801.

William S. Palmer is Professor of Reading and Language Arts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is well known for his contributions to professional journals in the field of reading and English education. He is author of *Teaching Reading to High School Students.*

In his contribution to this column, Professor Palmer points out some of the oversimplication which results from basing reading programs upon the taxonomic model. He carefully explores the stages of beginning reading, and he sets these in a useful historical perspective. In doing so, he avoids the Aristotelian either/or dichotomy in his reasoning and presents suggestions which involve a both/and type of reasoning.

Beginning Reading: A Continuing Debate

In the teaching of reading today, we continue to use one of the earliest models as a basis for our classroom methods—the taxonomic model. In most taxonomic models, reading skills are divided into similar categories, such as word perception, comprehension, reaction, and integration. A taxonomic model, therefore, is purely descriptive, an attempt to tell what happens when one reads. The orderly presentation of these four categories in reading, however, may suggest a greater precision than the classification system possesses.[1] Today, some research in beginning reading has progressed beyond just naming and leveling, suggesting many new implications for use in the classroom. Gibson, for example, delineates the following stages in beginning reading: (1) learning to use spoken language, (2) learning to discriminate between graphic symbols, (3) learning spelling-sound correspondences, and (4) learning to handle larger units of structure.[2]

1. *Learning to use spoken language*

Children, we know, differ in language control and effectiveness. By the time many young children enter school they can already understand and use a wide range of grammatical structures and vocabulary. Value stems from consistent social reinforcement and sentence expansion opportunities in development, refining, and extending the child's language. Reading difficulties occur when young children do not have a good grasp of the printed language to be read — when there is a mismatch between the way they speak and what is written for them to read. Developing oral language, then, is an important prerequisite to beginning reading.

2-3. *Learning to discriminate between graphic symbols and learning spelling-sound correspondences*

The history of reading instruction in American schools has been characterized by a movement from one extreme to another in regard to phonics. In 1967, Jeanne Chall wrote a rather controversial book: *Learning To Read: The Great Debate.*[3] Few books on reading methodology have aroused more comment and discussion. Here are some of her major contentions.

(a) Basically, approaches to reading have either emphasized a *code* emphasis or a *meaning* emphasis.
(b) The code emphasis is preferred over the meaning emphasis, for the first step in learning to read in one's native speech is essentially learning a printed code for the speech we possess.
(c) Early code learning produces better word recognition and spelling.
(d) Early code learning makes it easier for the child to read with understanding at least up to the 4th grade.
(e) Children from lower social economic status do better with an early code emphasis.
(f) There is more than one way to facilitate learning the code such as a systematic phonics program, modified alphabet sequence and the linguistic approach.
(g) A child's ability to identify letters by name in kindergarten or the beginning of grade one is an important predictor of his reading achievement at various points in the first and second grades.
(h) The criticism that systematic phonics leads to dull drill is not completely founded.

Here are some of Chall's recommendations to teachers of reading and researchers in reading:

(1) Research supports the need for a change in methods from the meaning emphasis to code-emphasis. The code-emphasis method she proposes is one that combines control of words on spelling regularity; some direct teaching of letter-sound correspondence, and the use of writing and tracing.
(2) There is no evidence that certain content in beginning reading programs influence reading achievement favorably or unfavorably. She

challenges the assertion that content of stories stimulate interest in and motivation for reading, in turn, promises the acquisition of reading skills.

(3) There needs to be a single component list which provides measures of the various subskills of reading mastery.

(4) Research results need to be put into a form that can be used by school people.

Chall, then, accepts the premise that beginning reading instruction fits comfortably into two categories — one is "meaning emphasis," the other is "code emphasis." According to Heilman,[4] these terms are different names for the older sight-word method vs. phonics method. Current practice and the reading establishment advocate the beginning reading instruction should consist of meaning emphasis. Chall, however, unequivocally recommends code emphasis as a beginning reading method. Beginning readers, of course, should be receiving instruction which helps them crack the code. *However, they become handicapped if they rely too heavily on phonic analysis.* A child who can and does sound every word in a story is not becoming an effective reader.

It is doubtful whether reading instruction can ever become so effective as it might be as long as either code cracking or reading for meaning are presented as alternative rather than as concomitant learning strategies. Beginning reading instruction must produce measurable growth on three very closely related facts. Beginning readers must constantly be (a) mastering and applying letter-sound relationship, (b) enlarging their sight vocabulary, and (c) profiting from context clues while reading. If any one of these skills is overemphasized in beginning reading, students are likely to *overlearn* and overrely on this skill. This mitigates against their maintaining a proper balance between these three essential elements for growth in reading.

4. *Learning to use larger units of structure*

Language development is important to reading specialists because numerous theorists maintain that competence in the spoken word is an essential first step in learning to read. Findings in research show that students differ in language facility. Studies by Loban[5] and Strickland[6] indicate that students rated high in language ability tend to draw upon the rich resources of language, extending meaning through the use of complex forms, and by using a variety of words, patterns, and syntactic elements. In contrast, students rated low in language ability tend to use fewer words and fewer complex forms. Their sentences are typically short and simple, instead of extended, embedded, and combined. These studies likewise show a high correlation between students' oral and written language facility and their ability to read. As students with limited language facility interact with print, they are likely to experience difficulty in understanding concepts when they are expressed in unfamiliar and complex grammatical forms.

What, then, are some conclusions we must make based on a comparision of Gibson's and Chall's theories as to how young children learn to

read? First, teacher must remember what Gates told us about reading years ago:

> Reading is not a simple mechanical skill; nor is it a narrow scholastic tool. Properly cultivated, it is essentially a thought process. However, to say that reading is a "thought-getting" process is to give it too restricted a description. It should be developed as a complex organization of patterns of higher mental processes. It can and should embrace all types of thinking, evaluating, judging, imagining, reasoning, and problem-solving. Indeed, it is believed that reading is one of the best media for cultivating many techniques of thinking and imagining.[7]

Secondly, teachers of beginning readers, like teachers of reading at all levels of learning or of any subject for that matter, must become language teachers as well, because learning how to learn means learning how to use verbal symbols. Children particularly need to do certain things with language in the defining process, in the generalizing process. Not only is the inquiry process largely a language operation, but all subjects in the school curriculum are language. Reading activities provoked by language and thought-centered situations, then, provide children with practice in communication, thinking, working with others, and creating. Thus, the perceiving of the reading process in these terms makes this activity right from the beginning of instruction an integral part of all learning.

Summary

Beginning reading instruction must not be perceived as an either/or phenomenon — as either strong adherence to the code devoid of meaning — or the reverse. Rather, teachers, who understand that reading is in large part a language process extending thought will teach the code and meaning concomitantly. Such teachers do more than help children master and apply letter-sound relationships. In addition, they help youngsters to extend their sight vocabulary and facilitate their use of context clues. Thus, beginning reading instruction, rather than being viewed as a mere "mechanical skill," becomes capable of encompassing many facets of both language and thought — and right from the earliest of interactions with print.

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