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FOUR STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING READING IN CONTENT AREAS

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Despite all that has been written about the teaching of reading in the content areas, and despite the existence of books such as Herber's *Teaching Reading in Content Areas* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1970), Laffey's *Reading in the Content Areas* (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1972), and Robinson and Thomas' *Fusing Reading Skills and Content* (Newark, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1969), most secondary school teachers in the content areas still feel inadequate to teach reading and, even though they acknowledge the existence of a substantial reading program among their students, they do not know how to go about dealing with the problem.

As more and more states enact legislation requiring that all public school teachers, regardless of subject or teaching level, have formal training in reading, the problem is being more adequately dealt with. However, the fact remains that many of today's high school teachers know little or nothing about reading instruction and go on, year in and year out, teaching subject matter which their students cannot handle from textbooks that their youngsters cannot read efficiently. The results are often quite devastating, the loss in time and effort monumental.

Paul Rosewell claims that "the foci of the instructional reading study . . . appear to be *evaluating reading competency, diagnosing reading difficulties, prescribing study techniques to alleviate problems and ineffective procedures, and promoting enriched reading opportunities.*"¹ Rosewell continues, "The major concern of the classroom teacher becomes one of identifying reading skills needed or appropriate to the subject-matter field as well as techniques of motivating and providing purpose to reading."

Before the teacher can begin to teach his subject matter effectively, he must be sure that the reading materials he is using are not beyond the ability of his students to handle them. Two basic techniques, the quick assessment and the cloze procedure, can be employed in making this determination.

Quick Assessment Tests

Quick assessment tests such as the San Diego Quick Assessment are not difficult to construct and can be used to provide the teacher with a rough idea of a student's reading level within the subject area. The San Diego Quick Assessment Test² consists of eleven ten-word lists, one for each grade from one through eleven. The student is given each list in sequence and asked to read it. If he misses no more than one word, he is deemed capable

of reading independently at that level. If he misses two words, this is probably his instruction level. If he misses three or more words, the material at this level and beyond is probably beyond his reading ability.

It must be cautioned that quick assessment tests are only meant to give general indications of the level at which a student might be reading. They are neither precise nor 100% accurate. But they can be helpful early in a school year for the teacher who wants a general indication of students' reading abilities. Where accurate IQ scores are also available, the teacher can use the following equation³ to give a further insight into where a student might be expected to be reading:

$$\text{Number of years in school} \times \frac{\text{IQ}}{100} + .1$$

Using this equation, a student entering tenth grade and having an IQ of 120 should be reading at the 11.8 level and a similar student with an IQ of 90 should be reading around the 9.1 level. It must be remembered, however, that not all students will be reading at or even close to the *anticipated* level. This formula, used in conjunction with a quick assessment test, can provide the teacher with a basis for helping the student by finding reading materials which he would be likely to handle adequately.

In making up a quick assessment test within a content area, the teacher need not start at grade one and go through grade eleven. Probably four or five lists of words common to the subject and compiled in an ascending order of difficulty would be adequate for most situations. The words should be drawn from typical reading materials in the specified content area, but the materials should cover a broad range of ability levels.

The Cloze Procedure

If students are not performing at the anticipated level in any of the content areas, the teacher should immediately suspect that the difficulty lies within the reading materials being used. The *cloze procedure* enables the teacher to test with relative accuracy the appropriateness of the reading material for any student who is experiencing difficulty.

All the teacher has to do is select three or four passages of about 300 words each from the texts being used. Each passage should contain related ideas and should be somewhat independent of what has gone before it. The teacher reproduces the passage, replacing every tenth word with a ten space blank. The student is then asked to fill in the blanks. his answers *must be exact*. Synonyms, different tenses of verbs, etc. are counted as incorrect. If he scores at 50%, the material is considered appropriate for him; that is, it is neither so difficult as to frustrate him nor so easy as to bore him. Students scoring above 70% could be handling more difficult material and the teacher might consider giving them more advanced texts.

Jones and Pilulski⁴ suggest that "to provide an orientation to the context of the passage, the first sentence and the last [be] left intact." The teacher should not try to reach any conclusions from *individual* scores on cloze tests; it is the average of three or four scores that is significant. Cloze tests probably should be administered to whole classes early in every term. It is

probably best to give no more than one cloze test on a given day and to allow 10-12 minutes for each one.⁵

Teaching Connectives

Writers in various content areas employ styles of writing appropriate to their areas. The mathematician does not use the style and vocabulary of, let us say, the historian or the zoologist. For this reason, it is difficult for anyone outside a given area to teach reading based on materials from that content area.

Of late, considerable attention has been paid to the correlation between a student's understanding of connectives and his ability to read effectively within a specified subject area.⁶ It has been pointed out by Rodgers particularly that each subject area has its own frequency list of connectives, biology, and physics. Following his lead, teachers in other content areas can make up frequency lists of connectives used in their disciplines and they can then make sure that their students are instructed in the meanings of these connectives.

Impedilexae

Farther ranging than Rodgers' frequency list of connectives are Robert C. Aukerman's excellent lists of words in various content areas which are likely to cause difficulty for students.⁷ Aukerman provides lists for social studies, English, science, mathematics, business, industrial arts, vocational education and home economics. It would be nice to think that every teacher in today's secondary schools might have access to a copy of Aukerman's book because his practical approach to teaching reading would be of substantial benefit to almost any teacher.

Teachers in subject areas not dealt with among Aukerman's lists of *impedilexae* can construct their own lists based upon what Aukerman has done. Teachers can also add to Aukerman's lists, basing their additions on the texts which they are actually using.

Afterword

Probably the single factor which most determines a student's success or failure in secondary school is his ability to read. Because reading is such a complex area of instruction and because so much about the dynamics of learning to read still remains so misunderstood, the challenge is a school-wide one. Only by enlisting the aid of every teacher in the school, can one hope to meet the problem. And the first step toward meeting the problem comes from making sure that every teacher in every subject area has some basic means of providing positive instruction in reading within his subject area.

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7. *Reading in the Secondary Classroom*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1972. See especially pp. 31-41.