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READING: WHAT IS IT? WHAT'S REQUIRED?

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What is the task of the reader who is immersed in the act of reading? The importance of understanding this task has been recognized and given increased emphasis in recent years. For those engaged in the preparation of reading teachers, it has become apparent that they must help these future teachers to see that their choice of materials and teaching procedures should stem from an understanding of the task faced by the reader. To obtain an indication of whether or not future teachers did recognize the importance of basing their choice of procedures and materials on their view of the reading task, a study was conducted with a group of preservice elementary education majors.

Subjects and Procedures

The eleven subjects in this study were enrolled in a second preservice reading course which was conducted both on campus and in a field based setting. The first eight weeks of the semester were spent on campus. During these first sessions on campus students were asked to begin thinking about the task faced by a reader and to be able to provide an explanation of this task by the end of the semester. Recognizing that the task varies depending upon the particular level of the reader, the students were to consider a specific level of reader rather than readers in general. One chapter in the text dealt with this subject, and a number of class sessions were devoted to a discussion of the topic. Also available to the students, housed in the Media Center, was a series of slide tape presentations on the various theories and models of reading. These tapes included behavioral, cognitive, information processing, and psycholinguistic models. Although not required to do so, students were encouraged to view some of these slide tape presentations to become familiar with the various theories and models represented by them.

During the last six weeks of the semester, the students conducted tutoring sessions in an elementary school setting. Each student worked with an elementary child who was experiencing difficulty in reading. The tutoring sessions were very structured. Students were asked to use no textbooks or workbooks during these sessions. Their major emphasis was to be placed on helping each child develop an interest in reading and a desire to read. Trade books were to be used and tutors were to spend a portion of each

tutoring session reading aloud to the child. Language experience techniques were also to be a part of each session. The child was to read from trade books in areas of interest for a third portion of the period. The instructor of the college class was present each day during the tutoring sessions and thus kept in close contact with the students. All lessons were conducted in the lunchroom of an elementary school. There was sufficient room to enable each child to work with his tutor at a separate table located far enough from the other children so that the working situation was a quiet one.

At the end of the semester the students were asked to respond to two questions:

1. What do you see as the task required of a reader? (Specify the grade level for the reader you will be discussing.)
2. If you could choose any materials you wished for teaching reading, what would those materials be?

Findings

First View of the Reading Task

Three of the students, all of whom were describing the reading task for a child in second or third grade, saw the task as being one of mastering individual letters and their sounds. The sounds were then to be combined into words, words into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs. The overall goal was to give meaning to the words.

Materials Recommended by First Group

As might be expected, one of their first recommendations for materials was phonic books (to help decode words), phonic games and cards.

All three would also recommend basal readers because the accompanying manuals provide for sequential presentation of skills. Workbooks were requested along with the basal readers.

The rest of the recommendations made by these students included trade books for independent reading and for supplementing content area books. One student thought games should be incorporated into the program so that children would get the idea that learning can be fun.

A final suggestion was for tape recorders, movie projectors, and film strips. In all instances these were to be used for listening to and for viewing stories.

Second View of the Reading Task

The second view of the task of the reader was held by the other eight students in the class. All but one of these students was discussing the reading task in the middle grades.

The viewed the task of the reader as being comprised of four activities: seeing, thinking, imagining, and assimilating. They went on to state that as a child reads, s/he ideally should be seeing reading as a whole instead of bits and pieces without

significant meaning. The reading process varies from child to child, but each brings with her/him certain basics such as background experiences and her/his own attitude toward what s/he is doing.

Materials Recommended by Second Group

All once again recommended basal readers on a wide variety of difficulty levels for each grade and with a wide variety of content. Trade books to be read for pleasure and to supplement content area texts should be included. All recommended that teachers read to children both in material above pupils' reading levels and those at their reading levels.

Language experience creations should be written and tape recorders be made available for dictation of these creations.

Tapes and earphones should be available for listening to stories while following along in a printed text. Finally, riddles and puzzles were to be included to add meaning to the reading program.

Discussion

While it is reasonable to assume that the students describing the task of the primary reader would see this task in a different light from those students describing the task of readers at higher levels, such a sharp difference seems unusual.

The first description of the reading task was one which had as its base a foundation in phonics—synthetic phonics. Students who expressed this view saw reading as an adding up of letters into sounds, sounds into words, words into sentences, and sentences into paragraphs. The total outcome was to assign meanings to words. This seems to be an extremely fragmented process which would not easily lead to the obtaining of the total meaning expressed in the author's message. It also is quite far removed from the students' experiences in the on-campus class meetings and in the tutoring sessions. If students viewed any of the slide tape presentations, the result of that viewing was not apparent. There was no indication that the students had based their definition of the reading task on any of the models presented in the slide tapes.

It is not difficult to understand why in their choice of materials they selected phonics materials to help decode words. Certainly this selection of materials follows from their view of the reading task. The recommendation of basal readers with accompanying workbooks because of the sequential presentation of skills also seems to follow from their definition.

Beyond those, however, the other recommended materials are centered on the meaningful aspects of reading. One of the best means of making reading meaningful and interesting is to use trade books for pleasure reading, both by students themselves and by teachers to students. Trade books in the content areas can make those areas meaningful or at least comprehensible, while in some instances the text does not do this, and for a number of reasons. One of the most obvious of these reasons is that

the text is too difficult for many of the pupils to read.

The use of tape recorded stories accompanied by printed texts or stories presented on film strips would be another means of developing interest in and enthusiasm for reading.

In no way would the description of the reading task expressed by these students lead to the choice of meaningful and interesting materials for reading instruction. The fact that they would incorporate games into their instructional materials so that children would find pleasure in learning seems to be an indication that children could not receive pleasure from the reading task itself. This is definitely a feeling teachers should not be conveying to children.

The use of trade books for pleasure and for supplementing content areas was perhaps included because of the emphasis placed on these areas in the tutoring sessions and in other written assignments which were required of the students in the on-campus sessions.

The choice of materials of instruction in the case of the second group is more closely related to the view of the reading task held. It should be noted, once again, however, that their use of trade books and the language experience approach, could be as a result of the requirements of the tutoring sessions.

While basal readers were recommended, it was pointed out that these should be on a wide variety of levels and should include a wide variety of content. Supplementing the basal readers would be trade books to stress the importance of making reading a pleasurable activity. The trade books were to be read by the children and by teachers to the children. Finally, the trade books should supplement content area instruction.

Another suggestion for the use of language experience creations and tape recorders for recording these is geared to making reading meaningful. Trade books, including those made of riddles and puzzles, would serve to further increase children's interest in reading.

Listening to stories and following along in a printed text is a final activity designed to increase children's skill in reading while providing them with a pleasurable reading activity.

Summary

It appears that both groups were guided, at least in part, in their selection of reading materials by the view of the reading task held. The second group of students gave more emphasis to providing materials which took into consideration the readers' experiential backgrounds and the cognitive, affective, and linguistic components of the reading task. How much of this was due to the influence of the requirements of the tutoring sessions and how much was due to the definition of the reading task cannot be clearly determined.

Suggestion for Future Research

Answers to the two questions should be obtained from students

enrolled in this class in future semesters. In these instances students should not be given strict guidelines as to the make-up of the tutoring sessions. Thus, there would be greater likelihood that their choice of materials would be more firmly based on the views they have of the reading task.