



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 29
Issue 1 *October 1988*

Article 3

10-1-1988

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Recommended Citation

Gray, M. J. (1988). The Reading Process for the Beginning Reader. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 29 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol29/iss1/3

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THE READING PROCESS FOR THE BEGINNING READER

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In spite of the fact that most of us learn to read to some degree or another in our lifetimes, no one has yet provided for us an answer to the question "What is reading?" Unfortunately, there is no single, simple answer to this question now, nor will there be such an answer in the future. Southgate, Arnold, and Johnson (1981) indicated, "One great problem about understanding the nature of reading is that being a mental process it is generally a silent one, which makes it even more difficult to investigate."¹)

Further, learning to read is a process which is unique for each individual. The reading task for a beginning reader is quite different from the task for a reader who has attained some proficiency. There is a common thread, however, in the reading process that is essential for success at any level. That thread is two-ply; one strand is interest on the part of the reader; the other is meaningful material.

Harris and Hodges (1981) provide a framework for us by defining three theoretical views of the reading process. These are as follows:

Top-down processing--a theoretical view of reading as a process of using one's experiences and expectations in order to react to text and to build comprehension. In top-down processing, comprehension is seen as reader-driven rather than text-driven.

Bottom-up processing--a theoretical view that comprehension in reading consists of the accurate, sequential processing of text. In bottom-up processing, comprehension is seen as text-driven; it is built up and governed by the text

only, and does not involve the reader's inner experience and expectations.

Interactive processing--a theoretical position that reading involves both the processing of text and the use of experiences and expectancies that the reader brings to the text, both sources of information interacting and modifying each other in reading comprehension. In interactive processing, comprehension is generated by the reader under the stimulus control of the print.(2)

A number of children appear to have learned to read prior to school entrance. Anyone who has observed a pre-school child going through a storybook s/he has heard several times and repeating the story as s/he turns the pages at the right time appears to have learned something about reading. To begin with, s/he is moving from left to right and secondly, is pronouncing words correctly. Is this indeed reading?

Let's look at two examples of children who seemed to have learned to read before enrolling in school. Their experiences will help to demonstrate how children become aware of print and learn to recognize print as meaningful. After looking at their progress, an examination of the similarities in their experiences will be undertaken. A review of recent research in the area of preschool reading and its relationship to the procedures followed by these children will be presented. Then, we will make a closer analysis of whether or not they have really learned to read without benefit of formal instruction. Finally, the implications for classroom instruction will be considered.

Tom

Tom, an only child and only grandchild for both sets of grandparents, came from a home which provided him with a good background for learning to read, a feat which he seemed to have accomplished by the age of three. Both parents had a college education, his father, both a B. A. and and M. A.; and his mother, a B. A. and advanced work beyond this level. Both parents were educators, but his mother did not go back to teaching until Tom entered first grade. His father had taught at junior high and high school levels before Tom was born, but was a school administrator for the major portion of his career.

Tom demonstrated his first interest in reading by listening to nursery rhymes which he learned and to stories which his parents or other adults read to him.

He was very observant, so he noted with interest the various daily activities his mother performed. In the morning he watched as she picked up the newspaper from the front porch. Right after this, she sat down for five or ten minutes to quickly skim the news of the day. It was not long before Tom went to perform this task for his mother. Then he would sit down in his small rocking chair and look over the news as his mother had done. He would frequently ask questions such as, "What is this?" while pointing to a letter. When he came across the letter again in another setting, he would point to it and say its name. He knew all the letters of the alphabet when he was three.

When anyone read to Tom, he followed along intently and became so competent that it was not unusual for him to pick up a book, and while looking at each page, repeat exactly what was written on that page. Since his parents were educators, he had access to many sample textbooks. One of his favorites was a science book in which he pointed to various pictured animals, insects, and birds. After having his parents repeat the names for him several times, he was able to identify each picture in the book correctly. His final activity following the reading of a book was to draw very small, stick-like illustrations to accompany the text. He was always ready and eager to explain his illustrations to anyone who could be persuaded to listen.

Another activity of his which he observed his mother doing was writing a list of items needed from the store on a memo board beside the telephone in the kitchen. Tom made his own list of items on a small chalkboard in his room.

His powers of observation continued when he was riding in the car. A comment such as, "King on a bun," would advise the occupants of the car that they were passing a Burger King Restaurant. He also came to recognize the frequent symbols and jingles used to advertise products on television. Mr. Clean became one of his favorite TV people, and he would stop whatever he was doing to watch and to listen when he heard the musical jingle

which introduced the appearance of Mr. Clean.

Finally, he saw his parents reading themselves. Newspapers, books, and magazines were all found in his home, and each evening some time was spent by his parents in reading. He shared a story with his parents at bedtime.

Margery

Margery was a second child who showed an early interest in reading. She was the only child in her family and the only granddaughter for both sets of parents. Both her parents had college degrees. Her father was a commercial artist. Her mother did not work outside the home while Margery was young. Many reading materials were available in the home, and Margery observed her parents reading each day.

By the time she was two years old, she was able to repeat from memory many of the Mother Goose nursery rhymes. She had several alphabet books and knew the names of each of the letters at this age.

Margery enjoyed listening to stories which her parents or grandparents read to her. After hearing a story a number of times, she would then take the book and give a perfect rendition.

When she went along with her mother to do errands, she was very observant. Each week she noted her mother writing a shopping list for groceries and using it when she went to the supermarket. Margery soon began to make her own shopping list. She took a small piece of paper, and although she was unable to write, she made some marks which apparently were meaningful to her. When they arrived at the store, she looked at her list, and then, as she moved between the aisles, she would pick out the items she had designated on her list. Frequently these items included apples, cookies, cereals, etc.

Her mother often took her to the park where she was once again very observant. She noted the different kinds of flowers and asked their names. Margery noted various signs about which she inquired. These included, "Keep off the grass!" and "No trespassing!" She recognized that certain people came to the park on a regular basis and sat in particular locations. She made friends with some of them and would stop to talk each time she came.

She had an extremely large vocabulary for a young child. Perhaps this was due to the fact that many of her preschool years were spent in large measure with adults. By the time she arrived at school, she had a very sound foundation for learning.

Similarities Between the Two Children

A review of the two cases makes evident that there were many similarities between the two children. To summarize, there seem to be five major areas of similarity. They are as follows:

1. Good home environment
2. Learning about alphabet letters
3. Learning to become aware of print in environment
4. Becoming aware of print in books, magazines, newspapers, etc.
5. Learning to write

Let us take a closer look at how these children advanced in each of the areas and what research has to say about the importance of these areas in learning to read. Finally, a summary statement as to what the essentials are for learning to read will be made, along with a comment as to whether the formal school program can continue to build on this base. This is a crucial point; in order to build the best foundation for readers in our formal education system, we must recognize the stage each child has reached and how s/he got there. Only then can we be prepared to help her/him advance in the development of literacy.

Good Home Environment

Both of these children were from middle class families, and the parents all had college degrees. They were only children. Additionally, Tom was the only grandchild, and Margery was the only granddaughter. Since they had association with many adults, they were exposed to the vocabularies used by these adults, and this helped them to expand their own vocabularies.

Over seventy-five years ago, Huey (1908) told us: "The home is the natural place for learning to read, in connection with the child's introduction to literature through storytelling, picture reading, etc. The child will make

much use of reading and writing in his plays, using both pictures and words"(3).

We have at least one example of each of the areas listed in Huey's statements. Both children shared literature with their parents. They also did some of their own writing of grocery lists modeled after their mother's lists. The illustrations made by Tom provide another form of representing descriptions graphically.

Teale (1978) much more recently lent support to Huey's statements when he stated, "Reading to children acquaints them with the function of print, also sensitizes them to the structure and nature of written language"(4).

McCormick (1983) agreed as evidenced by her statement "Reading books to children can positively affect their language development, interest in books, academic readiness, success in learning to read, specific reading interests, and social attitudes and values"(5).

One more benefit of listening to stories read by parents is that children have the opportunity to observe the left-to-right movement in reading. When repeating stories they have heard, they can move in the proper direction, from line to line, and from page to page. While they may not actually be reading, this experience is good readiness for the task itself.

Besides having many books provided for them, they were able to observe their parents reading. Parents read to them as well as listened to them when they rendered an account of a story after having heard it several times. They thus found reading both meaningful and interesting. The illustrating of stories and the writing of the lists for supermarket shopping were two other bits of evidence demonstrating that these children were aware of the usefulness of print and that print carried meaning.

One of the most important similarities between the two children was the fact that they both came from home environments that encouraged reading, yet did not apply pressure to learn to read. Perhaps this is too broad a generalization, but it seems that the person most often credited with the child's success or failure in learning to read is the teacher. In reality, the major key to a child's

success in reading is found in the home, as a great deal of the prerequisite of learning, including mastery of oral language, is acquired before the child reaches school age.

Children use as their models those people with whom they are most closely associated. For preschool children these tend to be parents and brothers or sisters. If children see these individuals reading various types of material on a regular basis, talking about these materials and sharing them with one another, reading is likely to be of value to them. If there were only slight interest in reading in the home, they are likely to show little or no interest in reading. Further, if parents read to children, they are providing opportunities for deriving enjoyment from books. This also gives them exposure to the language of literature.

Learning About Alphabet Letters

One activity which was very beneficial in helping Tom and Margery learn the letters of the alphabet was the reading of the newspaper by their parents and the modeling of this behavior by the children. Both asked what particular letters were and by repeating them and using them frequently made them an integral part of their knowledge about letters.

A second activity which helped them to learn the letters of the alphabet was the reading of alphabet books with parents or other adults. These books also introduced them to words and the initiation of the development of a sight vocabulary.

Mason (1980) tells us, "It is evident from testing and interviewing kindergarten or entering first grade children that they know a great deal about reading. Many can recite the alphabet, name and print letters, call off words from billboards, road signs, and package labels"(6).

Letter naming does seem to be a good predictor of success in learning to read. Teaching letters, however, doesn't necessarily ensure a child's success in reading. The key may lie with the child in that s/he must be the one to show interest. It cannot be forced.

In 1980, Mason studied the development of four year olds' knowledge of letters and printed words to learn if preschool children begin reading, and if so, how. She con-

firmed the natural ordering of letter and word knowledge. She found that most children can recite the alphabet. Next, they began printing and recognizing their own name. The third step was one in which signs and labels were read.(7)

Another study, conducted by Hiebert (1981), had as one of its aims establishment of developmental patterns of a number of print-related concepts and skills over the preschool years. She tested preschool children (3, 4, and 5 year olds) on three conventional reading readiness measures. These were letter naming, visual discrimination, and auditory discrimination. The three year olds demonstrated some proficiency on all measures. Data made clear that knowledge of all concepts and skills increased significantly over the preschool period. The greatest growth occurred between the ages of three and four. Thus, it becomes evident that the greatest growth occurred during the initial rather than the final half of the preschool period. The data also demonstrated that letter naming is only one of a number of kinds of concepts and skills about reading which young people acquire.

Learning to Become Aware of Print in Environment

Recognition of print in the environment on an independent basis gives testimony to the importance of print to a child. King-on-a-bun, derived from the sign on Burger King Restaurants, undoubtedly brings to mind the delights to be enjoyed at these restaurants. Mason makes clear that being able to read words on signs is not generally recognized as "reading," yet she also states that her study demonstrates how letter knowledge, printing, and sign reading serve as forerunners to more skilled reading.(8)

Reading signs and labels has some similarity to learning sight words. They are recognized as wholes and in meaningful context. Thus, children who are able to read words from traffic signs, package labels, business signs, and television advertisements may have an advantage over other children in learning to recognize words and to read stories.

Teale (1980) shows us through his investigation of early readers and his examination of the background of those readers that four environmental factors are associated with early reading. The first two of these have relation to

recognition of print in the environment.

He stressed the importance of the availability and scope of printed materials in the environment encompassing everything from books to labeled products in stores and beyond.

Secondly, he states, "Reading is 'done' in the environment. The child must initially learn that print is meaningful"(9). Recognition of signs can reinforce this concept.

What Teale really tells us encompasses both the good home background and recognition of print in the environment. It is largely through the influence of the home background that children learn to be observant in all settings, and to have access to printed material.

Goodman's research (1980) indicated that children develop the ability to read print embedded in the environment in different ways. One of these occurs when a child sees printed symbols embedded in a situational context which assists her/him in decoding these symbols to meaning. Even two year old children may request certain products on a shopping trip. These children may be able to select the appropriate package by its label and point out its name. Goodman says that this type of behavior tends to develop between the ages of two and four in literate societies.

Baghban (1984) who studied the reading and writing development of her daughter from birth through age 3 supports Goodman's statement. She noted that her daughter could recognize 22 signs by the age of 26 months. She could also follow such directions as, "Go and get a Bounty paper towel," or "Find a big box of Cheerios."(10)

Becoming Aware of Print in Books, Magazines, Newspapers, etc.

The recognition of letters from the newspapers, hearing of nursery rhymes read by parents, hearing of stories read by parents, reading notes written by parents, and recognition of various illustrations in science books all involved print awareness.

Listening to stories read by parents introduced the children to the language of literature, provided enjoyment, and further strengthened the building of sight vocabulary.

The repetition of stories on a word-for-word basis by these children is an activity that is frequently observed in preschool children who are exposed to stories and poetry at an early age. Their listening to the same stories over and over again indicates that there is something in these stories which is very appealing and which is enjoyed each time it is heard.

Recognizing printed words in a story; recognizing signs and labels; and recognizing, naming and printing letters are not sufficient for reading, however. Goodman tells us there is no automatic or simple relationship between being print aware in terms of print embedded in environmental context and being aware of function of print in books and magazines (11).

The more experience a child has in hearing stories read to her/him the more likely s/he is to begin to develop the understanding that the print in the book tells the story.

Learning to Write

Durkin (1966) stated, "The starting point of curiosity about written language was interest in scribbling and drawing"(12).

One of the behaviors Lass (1982) noted in studying her young son from birth to age two was interest in writing. Once again awareness of writing was first observed in the home. The amount of writing children may see in their homes varies greatly. Taking telephone messages, writing grocery lists, writing letters, or filling out various types of forms are some of the most common types of writing children may see done in the home environment.

Baghban (1984) observed that her daughter Giti began to write at the age of 17 months after having many opportunities to see her parents engage in many of the above listed writing activities in their home.

The noting of her mother writing a grocery list led Margery to her own writing of a personal list. Tom's list was written on his chalkboard. In addition to his writing his list, he recorded written impressions through illustrations.

Writing provides another situation in which a child is moving from left to right as in reading. Additionally, writing

forces the child to attend carefully to letters and spelling, and to learn that meaningful messages may be recorded in print as well as transmitted through speech.

It is interesting to note Goodman's (1980) contention that children's early scribbling looks like cursive writing. She goes on to explain that this may be because they are using their parents as models and that it is the type of writing they have observed. While youngsters begin this cursive type of writing at age 3, by ages 4 or 5, their writing is more likely to be in print form.

Summary - Did Tom and Margery Learn to Read Before Entering School?

There still may not be unanimity on the answer to this question. Certainly, as has been demonstrated, they shared experiences in the five areas listed and discussed so far. Are these five areas the crucial areas for success in beginning reading instruction? This, too, is a difficult question to answer and there is little research available.

Two studies are of note. The first was conducted by Lass as she observed her son from birth to age 2. The second was conducted by Baghban as she observed her daughter from birth to age 3.

Lass listed six categories of behaviors that she observed (1982). These are as follows:

1. interest in and skill with print
2. interest in and ability with written words
3. interest in books as playthings
4. enjoyment of content of books
5. oral language play, and
6. interest in writing (13)

The only area she does not mention in her listing of six categories which was on the list derived from study of Tom and Margery was the influence of a good home background. While she did not list it by name, she included it indirectly when she listed certain reading behaviors that seem to be acquired without teaching. She also explained that these may appear quite early in life, given facilitative conditions. The four behaviors are acquisition of letter and number names, a beginning sight vocabulary, an interest in the messages of print, and delighting in the pleasures of literature.

Her continued observation of her son through age three led her to list the following as distinguishing features between prereading and reading.

1. The reader perceived himself or herself as such.
2. S/he has developed reading tastes.
3. S/h gets meaning from printed sources.
4. S/he decodes some words independently, using phonic or structural cues, perhaps in conjunction with context to identify unknown words.
5. S/he is able to read a book independently, without memorization which often accompanies repeated readings by adults. (14)

Certainly Tom and Margery perceived themselves as readers. Their involvement with print in the newspapers, in books, and in the environment gives testimony to this.

The development of tastes can likewise be attested to as these children showed strong preferences for stories read to them. These were the stories which they were able to repeat on a word-for-word basis.

They did get meaning from printed sources as illustrated by their recognition of signs on business establishments, signs on highways or in parks, signs on products in stores, and enjoyment of stories.

We cannot be certain whether or not they were decoding some words independently using phonic, structural, and/or context clues. Nor can we be certain they were able to read a book independently. The fact that they could sit quietly for extended periods of time interacting with a book independently would lead one to believe that the experience was meaningful and interesting to them.

Baghban (1984) would not distinguish between prereading and reading. Thus, she would consider both Margery and Tom as readers. In discussing the views of parents of natural readers, she stated, ". . . the most commonly shared expression of the parents is that their children just 'took off' reading" (15). That characterization seems to fit both Tom and Margery.

Both Lass and Baghban have demonstrated for us the importance of taking into account what each child already knows. We must stop preparing children to read and expand

on their immersion in all kinds of reading and writing activities.

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