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## The element of predictability in whole language instruction

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## The element of predictability in whole language instruction

### Abstract

FUN WITH DICK AND JANE conjures up memories in the minds of many adults in this country. Most will agree that the name was really a misnomer. Their first book was actually pretty dull, and, for many, the whole process of learning to read was fraught with anxiety. Beginning reading instruction in the United States has traditionally involved heavy dependence on basal readers which use a controlled vocabulary and a detailed hierarchy of skills. A current trend in early reading instruction emphasizes a whole language approach rather than a skills emphasis approach often associated with basal readers. Studies show that children learn to read by using whole units of quality literature instead of the stilted basal stories and accompanying reinforcement and skill activities that frequently center on language fragments.

The Element of Predictability in Whole Language Instruction

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FUN WITH DICK AND JANE conjures up memories in the minds of many adults in this country. Most will agree that the name was really a misnomer. Their first book was actually pretty dull, and, for many, the whole process of learning to read was fraught with anxiety.

Beginning reading instruction in the United States has traditionally involved heavy dependence on basal readers which use a controlled vocabulary and a detailed hierarchy of skills. A current trend in early reading instruction emphasizes a whole language approach rather than a skills emphasis approach often associated with basal readers. Studies show that children learn to read by using whole units of quality literature instead of the stilted basal stories and accompanying reinforcement and skill activities that frequently center on language fragments.

In response to the trend to offer reading instruction in the primary grades through experiences with whole language, the writer will review the professional literature on the subject and will offer suggestions for extending the basal reader program in grade one through the use of predictable texts as one strategy derived from a whole language view.

#### WHOLE LANGUAGE VERSUS BASAL READER SERIES:

##### THE CASE FOR WHOLE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

School programs developed around basal reading series have been in place in this country for years. Administrators who are

interested in accountability generally favor basal readers because they yield test scores that can be translated in more concrete terms to the public. Administrators and the public often equate test scores with reading ability (Huck, 1982).

An adeptness at taking skills tests cannot be equated with an ability to read. Responding to the fragments of language usually presented in a skills test does not necessarily mean that children comprehend or enjoy what they read, the ultimate goals of reading instruction (Goodman, 1986). Basal readers do not insure the development of children's thinking--language abilities that will allow them to gain enjoyment and information from the reading process.

Reading instruction based on basal readers has several drawbacks. First, the hierarchy of skills presented in fragments makes learning to read difficult for children even though it seems logical to adults (Goodman, 1987). Commenting on the ease and difficulty of language learning, Goodman (1986) says that "learning language sometimes seems ridiculously easy and sometimes impossibly hard. And the easy times are outside school, the hard times in school" (p. 7). Children, unless they are handicapped, learn to speak their language at home and are fluent users of oral language by the time they reach school, yet no one gave them formal instruction. Children are active learners, modeling the language they hear around them (Bromley, 1988).

When children reach school, they frequently experience an entirely different learning situation. Instead of continuing whole-to-part learning in which they have played an active role, they are suddenly thrust into a situation in which learning is part-to-whole and requires passive participants (Goodman, 1986). Children are presented skill learning, a part-to-whole experience, through instruction in a basal reader series. This instruction presents an unnatural learning situation and is not an efficient or effective way to teach language, for learning language is an active process of pattern-detecting that goes on in the human mind as part of the learning process (Hart, 1983).

Teaching word concepts and letters in isolation cannot be justified because that is not the way language is learned.

[Children] look for, but do not ask to be told, some rules that will specify the defining characteristics of the category. They construct "hypotheses" about what the concept is . . . . Children can generate hypotheses only by comparing examples of the category being named with nonexamples of the same category (Smith, 1983, p. 14).

A second drawback of basal readers is that the stories are often written with a controlled vocabulary. The language is not similar to children's language or to any language they have previously heard in stories; therefore, these language units are

less predictable for the students. Goodman (1986) says that basals "often create artificial language passages or text fragments by controlling vocabulary or by building around specific phonic relationships or word-attack skills. They also often create artificial texts by applying readability formulas to real texts" (p. 362).

Bridge (1979) relates that stories in basal pre-primers and primers are written in a short, stilted style in an effort to control vocabulary. Since the style of language does not match the child's language, predictability is decreased. Children cannot rely on their well developed syntactic and semantic systems, but must look at visual features of the words, thereby relying on graphophonics, which are the most difficult for them to use.

A third drawback is that basals place unnecessary demands on children because implicit in the system is the demand for mastery of language fragments--isolated vocabulary and word skills. Such mastery is part of the testing program. Unsuccessful learning is subject to the pressure of reteaching. If the children do not respond well to this system of learning reading, they can quickly be labeled as learning problems (Smith, 1983).

The child as a passive learner is contrary to the way children learn language. Rather than acting as little sponges, taking in knowledge as the teacher pours it into the instructional



situation, children need to be active learners. Reading, for everyone, is a "predict-verify" process (Gillet & Temple, 1986). Any predicting means taking a chance. There is always a chance that a prediction will be wrong and will need to be revised and rethought. "Learning cannot take place without error" (Smith, 1983, p. 17). Smith further explains that children learn by forming hypotheses and testing them. If the answer was correct, the hypothesis is confirmed; if the answer was wrong, the hypothesis needs to be reworked or adjusted. The child takes the initiative for learning to read, and the adult acts as support person in this learning process.

The role of adult as a support person instead of the adult as a direct teacher was recognized by Dolores Durkin (1966) in her study of children who read early. One characteristic of these young children who were self-taught was that all had parents who gave them help in response to the children's questions about reading. On the other hand, parents of non-readers stated that they had withheld help when the children asked because they feared negative consequences when the children reached school. Other parents of non-readers mentioned attempts to teach children to read for reasons other than the interest of the child. Attempts to impose reading on the children were unsuccessful. Even young children understand the necessity of owning the reading experience.

A fourth drawback of basal readers is that so much time allotted to reading instruction is spent in skill instruction and workbook use that little time is actually left for reading. Frank Smith says "children learn to read by reading" (Smith, 1983, p. 35).

Too much emphasis on skills, too little opportunity for risk-taking, too little time for reading, too much teacher control of reading, too little quality reading material, all of these are drawbacks to using a basal reader: It is time for a change. A whole-language approach offers whole units of language that are predictable: The focus is on meaning. Children are encouraged to take risks, and the teacher assists children with their learning. A whole language approach to learning to read is child-oriented, not text-oriented (Goodman, 1986).

Comparative studies of children's reading growth in basal readers and the whole language approach reflect favorably upon the latter. Shapiro's study (1986) explored the issue of whether whole language instruction limited the children's exposure to repetition of important basic vocabulary. The conclusions were that children learning to read in an instructional program emphasizing whole language units at first were slower in developing reading and writing vocabularies, but eventually matched and often surpassed those in a basal reader series.

Eldredge (1986) conducted a study to examine the following elements related to whole language instruction: 1) Does ability grouping increase achievement or would heterogenous grouping be as effective? 2) Are tradebooks as effective for reading instruction as basal readers? 3) Is an alternative and abbreviated decoding method as effective as basal skill instruction? The subjects in the study were in grade two. Eldredge found that children who used tradebooks with the decoding program made the greatest gains. Greater gains were made by children using tradebooks than those using basals and by children using the shortened decoding procedure instead of the basal skills sequence. Heterogenous grouping with cooperative learning techniques was more effective than homogeneous grouping.

Bridge (1983) explored the effectiveness of teaching sight words to low achieving first graders using preprimers and predictable materials. The children who had experiences with predictable materials learned significantly more of the targeted words than the children using the preprimer. In addition, the children involved with predictable materials learned other vocabulary incidental to learning the target words. Before the treatment, children in both groups said they would ask for help or sound it out when confronted with an unknown vocabulary word. After treatment, the response of the children who had been in

the basal reader program remained the same; the children who were presented predictable materials indicated that they would use the context to decode a new word. Attitudes also differed: When asked how they felt about reading aloud, the children reading the preprimer responded negatively; the children reading predictable books had a more confident, positive attitude. It was concluded that a whole language approach shows some advantages over a basal approach--greater vocabulary growth, a more positive attitude toward reading, and more efficient decoding techniques using context instead of graphophonic cues.

#### IMPLEMENTING A WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH WITH PREDICTABLE MATERIALS

After reading the professional literature on the value of the whole language approach in reading programs, the writer was strongly encouraged to modify her instructional program in grade one. In initiating this approach, she had to consider that the school reading program was based on a basal reader series. These elements were considered in incorporating whole language principles into the first grade program.

1. Predictable materials instead of basal materials were presented during the first half of the year with heterogenous grouping of the children.
2. Work on letter sound relationships was developed in the context of children's reading and writing instead of basal skill work in a large group.

3. Each day the children wrote stories, leading to publication.
4. Children had opportunities to listen/read daily.
5. Modified instruction in the basal reader was initiated in mid-year.

#### Predictable Patterned Books

The statement that "children learn to read by reading" (Smith, 1983) needs translation into practical terms for teachers of beginning readers (p. 35). Goodman (1986) recommends reading materials with predictable texts:

The best books at this stage are predictable books. Their familiar content and structure, and the often repetitious, cyclical sequencing make them predictable. This is the House That Jack Built or I Know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly are good examples. It's easy for kids to get a sense of where the book is going and to predict what is coming next. (p. 47)

Several characteristics make books predictable. Much rhyme, rhythm, and repetitions in stories assist in predictability. For example, Brown Bear, Brown Bear, by Bill Martin, has these elements.

Another characteristic of predictable books is picture cues that are closely related to the text. In The Very Busy Spider (Carle, 1984), the illustrations and story closely collaborate

meaning: As the animals approach the spider to invite her to join in an activity, each is illustrated in a fullspread. A familiar story line can also make a book predictable, for example, the familiar folk tales, such as The Three Little Pigs and Three Billy Goats Gruff.

Familiar cultural sequences often add to the predictability of stories. In The Very Hungry Caterpillar (Carle, 1969), the plot structure is organized by counting, with the illustrations closely related to the text. Another plot organization--cumulative plot--contributes to predictability. In The Great Big Enormous Turnip (Tolstoy, 1968), new people and animals are added one by one to the scene and all assist in harvesting the large turnip, until a mouse finally adds the final bit of strength needed.

#### Experiences with Predictable Text

The experiences with predictable text were presented to small heterogeneous groups during the first semester of grade one. Several related activities were associated with a predictable text so children were involved with each for several days. First, the book was read to the children and then discussed and reread, allowing the children opportunities to recite parts that they remembered. Then the children were given copies to read aloud as a group. If the text lent itself to variation, children served as soloists and chorus members. After the children became familiar with the text, it was read from a chart with no picture

cues. Then the children read the sentences of this text from sentence strips and matched them to the lines on the chart, reading aloud during the process.

The children then made word cards for vocabulary words that they remembered from the story. If they recalled the words one day later, the words were added to a word bank that each kept. When the children had collected a few words that they could recall, work began on letter-sound associations, rhyming, and classifying words. One activity was word sorting--finding words that began or ended like a given word and represented different colors and animals. This practice also strengthened sight vocabulary. Another activity used was rhyming the words of the text with other known vocabulary. Children also enjoyed working in dyads, composing lists of words that started with various single letters, blends, and digraphs based on the words in the story.

Another aspect of the whole language program was story writing. The children wrote stories, each on topics of their own choosing. Rehearsal, or choosing the topic of the story, was supported by the children drawing a picture before writing. After the story was written, the children read their stories aloud to the group to receive comments of appreciation and questions for clarification. These young children were not concerned about revision. They chose their favorite stories for publication into a book.

An opportunity for independent reading was a daily part of the program. A comfortable library corner provided in the room complete with well-stocked bookshelves supported sustained silent reading.

### Evaluation

Evaluation of individual children's growth in reading after experiencing a whole language approach through predictable materials required different methods of assessment from those offered in the basal reader series. This teacher used four methods of evaluation: (a) observation, (b) word bank count, (c) examination of writing and (d) attitude assessment.

#### Observation

Observation of children during small group instruction was carried on in an informal, daily basis. Children's finger-pointing to words was observed to determine development of such concepts as directionality and understanding of the concept of a word. Oral reading was observed to determine development of vocabulary.

#### Word Bank Count

A periodic count was made of the number of words in each child's word bank to determine progress in reading. This count was found to correlate with the results of the Gates-McGinitie Reading Test given in January of this school year. Children who had 175 words or more in their word banks were the same children



who scored at a grade level of 2.0 or more on the test; likewise, the children who had 40 or less words in their word banks were the children who scored at the 1.2 level of the Gates test.

### Examination of Writing

The children's writing was also evaluated to determine developmental levels of invented spelling. Four accepted levels were used to identify stages of development: (a) pre-phonemic, (b) early phonemic, (c) letter-name and (d) transitional (Gillet & Temple, 1968).

Pre-phonemic. Children functioning on the pre-phonemic level have no understanding of letter-sound associations and may write HM for NEAR. These children are not yet ready to read and need an adult to read to them pointing to the print in order to develop an association between the spoken and written word.

Early phonemic. Children in the early phonemic stage use one or two letters to represent a word, for example N for NEAR. These students are almost ready to read, but need to learn to segment phonemes. They need to be encouraged to write as many sounds as they can hear in a word.

Letter-name. At the letter-name stage, children write NIR for NEAR, and are beginning readers. They need to do much functional writing and to read predictable materials. Charts, labels, word banks, and picture dictionaries are helpful resources for these children when they read and write.

Transitional. Children at the transitional stage have had more experience with print and are changing from invented to standard spelling. This group includes the most advanced readers in the class.

#### Attitude Assessment

Attitude toward reading was also observed. Children who used whole language methods were more confident and excited about reading than children who had used the basal program. They viewed themselves as readers from the start. Parents stated that their children were very enthusiastic about reading to them.

#### CONCLUSION

Recent research suggests that a whole language approach to reading instruction is superior to a basal reader approach. Administrators have been reluctant to accept whole language because they are interested in accountability, and the skills testing system built into the basal series provides a tangible means of reporting reading progress to the public. Administrators and the public have mistakenly equated skill gains with reading progress.

Teachers need to take the initiative to implement whole language practices in the classroom. They are supported by research and by the improved attitudes of the children toward reading. Parents are impressed by their children's reading

progress and enthusiasm. Eventually, administrators may be influenced by improved scores on standardized reading tests.

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## Appendix A

## Predictable Books for Early Readers

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