

SILENT READING

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Increasing the pupils' ability to comprehend what is read is one of the various phases of teaching reading in the elementary grades. We have emphasized silent reading for some time, and have recently made tests to ascertain the effect of this emphasis.

We gave the Starch reading tests twice during the year 1915-16 to measure the progress of the year's work. The first test was given in the latter part of November, early enough in the year to show fairly well the ability of the pupils at the beginning of the year, yet late enough to allow the pupils to get into the habit of study after the summer vacation. The second test was given in May when the year's progress could well be measured.

The same material was used in both tests. Six months intervened between the tests, and the teachers during this time omitted any reading lessons which contained the same material. Dr. Starch asserts that the same material may be used in subsequent tests if sufficient time intervenes between the tests.

While these tests are quite familiar to the majority of teachers a brief explanation here may be in order. The tests are carefully graded for use in Grades II to VIII inclusive. Each pupil is given a printed sheet which contains a part of some narrative or descriptive material well within the comprehension of the pupils of each grade. The pupils are given thirty seconds to read silently, and then, after marking the amount read, they write what they can on the reverse side of the sheet. To compare the results with the Starch standards, the number of words read per second and the number of words written without any time limit are counted. One possible weakness of the test in comprehension is the fact that the number of words used by the pupils in their reproduction is taken as their ability to retain. The number of words used by the pupils in expressing themselves varies as it does with adults. In these tests, however, this variation has been found to be slight.

During the six months which intervened, these two phases of reading were emphasized by the teachers in devoting about four periods per week to this work. Some of the work was done with the geography, history, hygiene, literature, and civics material, and often in other periods than the reading period. Carpenter's *Geographical Readers* were frequently used, as the paragraphs contain many facts, and the material correlates well with the geography.

Different devices were used in these drill periods to increase the pupils' ability to read silently. The pupils were given material, principally narrative and descriptive, to read silently, a paragraph at a time, in many cases with a time limit placed upon the reading. Placing time limits upon the reading often speeds up the work and produces greater concentration and clearer thinking. After the reading of each paragraph the pupils were asked questions upon the thought of the passage read. Questions directed so as to bring out the thought seem to secure better results than asking the pupils to "tell what they have read." Many pupils can give from memory what they have read without being able to answer questions upon the thought. The plan often reveals the pupils' ability to think logically in response to the questions. We often find it necessary to remind the pupils that while they have given much of the substance of the paragraph, they have not answered the questions.

An illustration may be taken from a lesson given with a VB class using Carpenter's *Geographical Reader of North America*. The class was given sixty seconds to read the paragraph on p. 50:

A car ride of less than three hours brings us from Baltimore to Philadelphia. We pass the manufacturing city of Wilmington, Delaware; and long before we reach Philadelphia itself we see factories, and learn that we are in one of our chief manufacturing centers. There is only one city in the country which has more manufacturing establishments than Philadelphia, and that is New York. There are more than two hundred thousand men and women in Philadelphia who make things to sell. Thousands are busy weaving woolen cloths and making clothing. There are thousands of men building ships, and our greatest naval vessels are made here. Other thousands are making goods of iron and steel; and we learn that the United States has become the greatest manufacturing country in the world.

After the reading of this paragraph some of the following questions were asked: "How long a car ride is it from Baltimore to

Philadelphia?" "What is Philadelphia's greatest industry?" "How many people are engaged in this industry?" "What are the principal things made?"

This was followed by another period of sixty seconds occupied in reading the next paragraph:

After our country was first settled the most of the people were farmers. They raised things from the soil. As more people came, some of them began to make things to sell. This has gone on until now one man out of every five in the United States is engaged in manufacturing. We have now twelve times as many factories as we had forty years ago, and a vast amount of money is spent every year paying wages of the men who work in them. If we could see all the workmen of the world, we should learn that our people are better fed, and better clothed, and have better houses than those of any other nation. We find this especially so in Philadelphia. We walk for miles through long streets of small but neat houses made of bricks with steps of white marble. There are thousands of such houses here belonging to the working people, and it is said that more people own their own homes in Philadelphia than in any other large city of the world.

This reading is followed by another series of questions: "Why is the occupation of the people of the United States different from the occupation of those who first came?" "How do the conditions of our workmen compare with the conditions of the workmen of other countries?" "Give five facts concerning the homes of the workmen."

The pupils were then asked to find three facts in the next paragraph which show why Philadelphia has become a great manufacturing city:

But why has Philadelphia become a great manufacturing city? One reason is because it is so situated that materials can be cheaply brought to it, and the manufactured goods shipped from it to other parts of the United States. The slopes of the Appalachian Range are such that railroads have been built from Philadelphia through the passes of the Alleghany Mountains, thus giving it an easy road to the lands farther west. It is also a seaport, although it is one hundred miles from the Atlantic Ocean. Large steamships can sail up the Delaware Bay to Philadelphia, bringing materials people want to use in their shops, and carrying their manufactured goods to all parts of the world. The Schuylkill River furnishes Philadelphia with water-power for manufacturing purposes, and the city lies so near the coal lands of Pennsylvania that the fuel for steam-power costs very little. Not far from it are the largest beds of anthracite coal to be found anywhere. This coal makes a great heat and is very valuable for manufacturing. It is so hard that people for a long time did not think it would burn, one noted man saying that if the world were burned up this would be the very last thing that would catch fire.

Telling the pupils what to look for in a paragraph is often necessary with pupils who are deficient in silent reading, as well as

with fifth-grade pupils in general, who are being held responsible more than ever for their textbook material.

Tom Sawyer's experience in whitewashing the fence was read to the pupils of the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. In the paragraph telling of the articles received by Tom in exchange for the privilege of whitewashing, the names of four articles at a time were read to the pupils and they were asked to name them. After the list was read to the pupils in this way by fours the entire list was re-read to them, and they were asked to name as many as they could remember. One fifth-grade pupil was able to remember thirteen of the sixteen articles and a sixth-grade pupil was able to name fourteen. This, of course, was a test of concentration and memory, and not of silent reading, yet it is interesting and helpful in assisting the teacher to become familiar with the pupils' mental faculties.

In the seventh grade, as a further illustration, the pupils read silently *Rip Van Winkle*. In the paragraph describing Rip, the pupils were asked to give Rip's characteristics. Some of the pupils had considerable difficulty in doing this, and frequently began to relate amusing incidents of the narrative. Being held down to definite information is excellent drill for the pupils.

Some teachers not only require a time limit, but require only one reading of the material. It is thought that this will increase the pupils' accuracy.

The charts show that considerable progress was made during the year. I am unable to account for the loss in speed in the seventh and eighth grades during the year unless the pupils in these grades had acquired poor habits of comprehension, the correction of which entailed a decrease in speed. The decided drop in the score of the seventh grade as compared with the sixth is due to the fact that there were a large number of weak pupils in this grade. It is interesting to note, however, that the ability of these pupils increased nearly as much during the year as it did with the pupils of the other grades.

While drill work of this kind is upon only one phase of the reading, it may tend to make better students, as they will be better able to look for the essential in their texts, and be better able to comprehend it.