DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 025 744 AL 001 587

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Pub Date Sep 68

Note-6p.; Paper presented at the TESOL Convention, San Antonio, Texas, March 1968.

Available from-TESOL, School of Languages and Linguistics, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. 20007(Single copy $1.50).

Journal Cit-TESOL Quarterly; v2 n3 Sep 1968

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.40

Descriptors-American Indians, Bilingual Education, *Bilingual Students, Cultural Differences, *English (Second Language), *Reading Instruction, Reading Skills, *Reading Tests, Secondary School Students, *Second Language Learning, Spanish Speaking

The author examines some statistics which indicate entire classrooms of Indian students at the junior high school level are reading at the second or third grade level, and are graduated from high school with perhaps intermediate grade reading ability. Various surveys seem to have established that children are able to achieve at grade level through the primary grades but their level of achievement from that point on is an endless downward spiral. In the intermediate grades, the carefully controlled content and vocabulary breaks down; the children are expected to learn, at a faster rate, more complex materials in various content areas. At this point also, instruction in reading usually stops. That the principles of teaching English as a second language should be observed is obvious, and lack of facility with English handicaps the child in learning to read English. However, it cannot be said that the ability to speak English will insure ability to read English. Teaching oral English and teaching reading are not identical processes and do not have the same purposes. Further, the processes and aims of initial reading instruction and advanced reading instruction are not the same. At higher levels, the students should equate words not with sounds but with meanings. They should explore, interpret, and extend the concepts represented in writing in order to develop the conceptual basis for abstraction in English. (AMM)

*Barriers to Successful Reading for Second-Language Students at the Secondary Level**

Joyce Morris

In several years of visiting reading classes in New Mexico, I have had the opportunity to observe the reading of Indian and Spanish-American children who were non-English speakers. Two examples may serve to illustrate the nature of some of their reading difficulties: 1) An eighth grade Navajo girl read a poem containing the line "He married his girl with a golden band. . ." The girl read the line perfectly in that she pronounced all the words correctly. However, when asked what was meant by this line, she was unable to explain it. 2) A Spanish-speaking boy was asked the meaning of the word *brave*. He replied that when something was put over your face, you couldn't "brave" (breathe). Aside from specific examples of reading-language confusion, I have been struck by the fact that we accept, as perfectly normal, the fact that we have entire classrooms of Indian students at the junior high school level who are reading at the second or third grade level. These children are graduated from high school with, perhaps, intermediate grade level reading ability. Several years ago I tutored Indian students at the University of New Mexico. The majority of these students were performing at approximately a fourth or fifth grade reading level as measured by a standardized test.[1] When we consider the fact that standardized tests generally overestimate true reading ability, the degree of reading retardation becomes even greater.

This situation is not new, nor is the fact that these problems become even more pronounced the longer the child stays in school. Let's take a brief look at what we know of the achievement of the non-English-speaking children in our schools.

1. In 1936, Loyd Tireman found that Spanish-speaking children in Albuquerque became more academically retarded the higher they advanced through the grades: [2]

Fourth Grade	7 months retardation
Fifth Grade	1.1 years retardation
Sixth Grade	1.8 years retardation
Seventh Grade	2.3 years retardation

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* This paper was presented at the TESOL Convention, March 1968.

Miss Morris, Indian Education Specialist at the Educational Service Center, Albuquerque, New Mexico, has taught remedial reading and bilingual education courses at the University of New Mexico.

[1] Miles V. Zintz and Joyce Morris, *Tutoring-Counseling Program for Indian Students, 1960–62* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, College of Education, 1962).

[2] Loyd S. Tireman, *Teaching Spanish-Speaking Children* (Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press, 1948), p. 68.

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reau of Indian Affairs, Madison Coombs documented the same trend toward progressive retardation.[3]

3. In 1960, Boyce found that Indian children were achieving at grade level at the end of the second grade, but that by the end of the sixth grade they were two or more years retarded.[4]

4. In 1961, Townsend tested 558 eleventh and twelfth grade Indian students in selected high schools in Albuquerque. He found that 73% of the eleventh graders, and 65% of the twelfth graders were achieving at a level below the 20th percentile rank. Further analysis showed that 54% of the eleventh graders and 51% of the twelfth graders fell below the 10th percentile rank in reading achievement.[5]

5. In 1964, Smith surveyed the achievement of Indian children in New Mexico schools, and found the following to be characteristic in terms of age in grade: [6]

Grade	*Of Age In Grade*	*1 Year Retarded In Grade*	*2 Years Retarded In Grade*	*3 or More Years Retarded In Grade*
1	40%	43%	12%	5%
6	28%	38%	22%	14%
9	28%	46%	21%	7%
12	25%	42%	23%	11%

6. In 1966, The Coleman Report found that all minority groups (excluding Orientals) score distinctly lower than the children of the dominant group, and the degree of the discrepancy in achievement is greatest in the twelfth grade, a finding that led Bruce Gaarder of the U. S. Office of Education to remark that ". . . Indian children lose ground the longer they stay in school." [7]

Now that we have established the fact that these children are able to achieve at grade level through the primary grades but that their level of achievement from that point on is an endless downward spiral, let's look at some of the possible reasons for this.

In the primary grades there is high interest in the initial decoding pro-

[3] L. Madison Coombs, *et al.*, "The Indian Child Goes to School" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1958), p. 3.

[4] George Boyce, "Why Do Indians Quit School?" *Indian Education*, No. 344 (Lawrence, Kansas: Haskell Institute, May, 1960), p. 5.

[5] Irving D. Townsend, "The Reading Achievement of Eleventh and Twelfth Grade Indian Students and a Survey of Curricular Changes Indicated for the Improved Teaching of Reading in the Public High Schools of New Mexico," Diss., The University of New Mexico (1961), p. 118.

[6] Anne M. Smith, *New Mexico Indians Today: A Report Prepared as Part of the New Mexico State Resources Development Plan* (Santa Fe, 1965), p. 47.

[7] Bruce Gaarder, "Education of American Indian Children," in *Reports of the Annual Conference of the Southwest Council of Foreign Language Teachers at El Paso, Texas* (November, 1967), p. 33.

cess. Children have a real sense of accomplishment in learning to say what is written on the page. This is the acquisition of a new and highly valued skill, and motivation is not the problem it becomes at higher grade levels. In addition, the vocabularly and the concepts the small child is asked to master are both rigidly controlled and are within the grasp of the learner. The primary school teacher is with the child all day, all year, and becomes intimately acquainted with him and with his specific needs and weaknesses. She can make time throughout the day to provide special help. Perhaps most important, in these years school is important to the child. He has fewer outside interests, and his teacher and his school work loom large in his life.

In the intermediate grades, there is a sudden and tremendous increase in the difficulty of vocabularly, content, and concepts that the child is expected to cope with. There is more pressure for academic achievement, and more emphasis on speed. The carefully controlled content and vocabulary of earlier grades breaks down here, and children are expected to learn, at a faster rate, more complex material in various content areas.

This same trend continues into the junior high years, and it is in these years that many teachers feel that now the children have learned to read and that from here on they simply read to learn. Just at the point where materials become more complex, as the quantity of reading increases, and as more refined reading skills are demanded—only too often—instruction in reading stops.

At the high school level there is even more content to master in less time; the teacher's time with each child is far less; and if the child has been having trouble with reading, the years of frustration and failure have killed his interest in learning to read *or* in reading to learn.

It may fairly be said that the above description fits many children and is not true only of the English-as-a-second-language learner. When speaking of this child, we realize that there are additional barriers to reading success. Obviously, the major problem of these children is the fact that they have little or no facility with the English language. This is so obvious that it has often been said that teaching reading to these children is, in reality, teaching English as a second language. It certainly can't be denied that in initial reading instruction command of the oral language must precede reading, and that in teaching reading we must observe the principles of TESOL: hearing, speaking, reading, writing. A few remarks of adult Indians illustrate their recognition of the importance of learning English:

> If you could learn English, the other things related, it would come and open your mind, because you could begin to read, and pick up a book and read and understand—Here's a good occupation I could be training for. But with a minimum of English and no true challenge, well, the Indian is bound to take the lazy way out.
>
> I think if they want us to speak English, if they want us to have a really good command of English and thereby as a result get along in the world of the white man, I think English should be emphasized at the beginning stages. . . We don't have good enough command of English to communicate effectively.

> I didn't really learn English though a graduate of a BIA boarding school, until I went to Bacone and I began to feel that I could understand the newspaper, and really pick up a book and read it for pleasure or understanding, and I was no longer *simulating* understanding. Before Bacone I did recognize a few words and this and that but my vocabularly was very poor.[8]

Contributions from linguists have impressed on us that learning a language is not just learning words, but that pitch, structure, intonation, and the cultural setting are all a part of language learning. Further, the recognition of the importance of first teaching regular pronunciation and spelling patterns in beginning reading has influenced classroom practices. The value for the children in paying careful attention to phoneme-grapheme correspondence in beginning reading instruction has led to the development of improved beginning reading programs.

However, there are a few points that disturb me when we talk of applying TESOL approaches to secondary reading instruction. First of all, we know that lack of facility with English handicaps the child in learning to read English, *but*, conversely, we cannot say that the ability to speak English will insure ability to read English. If this were true, we would not have estimates from 10% to 15% of the general school population struggling with reading retardation. We know that it is possible for the upper-class Anglo child who has an above average command of the oral language to have serious reading problems at the high school and college levels.

My second point is that teaching oral English and teaching reading are not identical processes and do not have the same purposes. In the first we are concerned with oral production, and here the aural-oral techniques are effective. In teaching reading, we do not want the student to pronounce each word. A truly efficient reader uses a minimum of oral production, or even "mental pronunciation," as he reads.

The third point is that the processes and aims of initial reading instruction and advanced reading instruction are by no means the same. In initial reading instruction, the learner is learning how to break the code. He is learning that the symbols (graphemes) represent sounds—that writing is indeed "talk written down." In the first grade, perceptual skills and visual and auditory discrimination are necessary for success. However, at higher levels the ability to form and use concepts increases in importance. One study shows that by the fifth grade concept formation is more closely related to reading achievement than is I.Q.[9]

Studies of concept formation and learning have shown us that concept development is facilitated when: (1) the child (or adult) has had concrete experiences on which to base his concepts; (2) that the wider variety of associations the child can make with the concept, the easier it is to learn and to retain; (3) that the more *meaningful* the ideas to be assimilated, the

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[8] Smith, p. 54.

[9] Jean Braun, "Relationship Between Concept Formation and Reading Achievement," *Child Development,* XXXIV (September, 1963), 675–82.

easier the learning and retention; and (4) that a concept, once formed, is represented by a symbol, and that the symbol is usually a word. The word then becomes sufficient in itself to trigger the release of the meanings of the concepts it represents.

Think of frequently used words, such as *democracy*, *hatred*, *patriotism*, or *prejudice*, and I think we will all realize that what comes to mind is not a dictionary definition, but a flood of feelings, emotions, and opinions that have been formed by innumerable past experiences, both real and vicarious.

In short, at higher levels we do not want children to equate words with sounds but with *meanings*. We do not want them to translate from graphemes to phonemes—we want them to be unaware of graphemes, as most of us are, and to grasp from the printed page the concepts, feelings, and opinions put there by the writer. The purpose of reading at the secondary level is usually not to teach the students to decode the written symbols—that is, to produce the corresponding speech forms—but to explore, interpret, and extend the concepts represented by the written symbols. The major weakness in the reading of ESL students at the secondary level is the fact that, in all too many instances, the initial reading step is performed: the child decodes the symbols and produces the word—and stops. The word fails to trigger *anything* because the concepts it represents to us and to the author simply do not exist for the child, or they exist in a limited, vague form.

This is the point where, in my opinion, our teaching of English and reading breaks down. We must realize that reading is a skill and a tool, and as such is meant to be used to extend knowledge. Teaching children to pronounce words, and *assuming* that they have meaning for the child is not teaching reading. Too many of us are guilty of limiting the children's ideas of what reading is by our acceptance of word calling without real understanding. We spend a great deal of time on workbook exercises calling for filling in blanks with words that can be found by a process of elimination. Questions teachers ask are usually concerned with simple repetition of fact and do not lead the children to develop or extend reading. Guzsak found that over 70% of teacher questions at the elementary level asked for simple recall.[10]

In addition to teaching children to pronounce words, we must also provide experiences—whether these experiences be real or vicarious—that will make the words mean something once they have been decoded. Certainly we cannot bring war, germs, or the Detroit riots into the classroom so that concepts may be formed through concrete experiences, but we can use audio-visual aids, field trips, or conversations with those who have had real experience with such things.

In addition we must enlist—or demand—the help of all teachers in developing meaning. Those in other content areas are best equipped to teach

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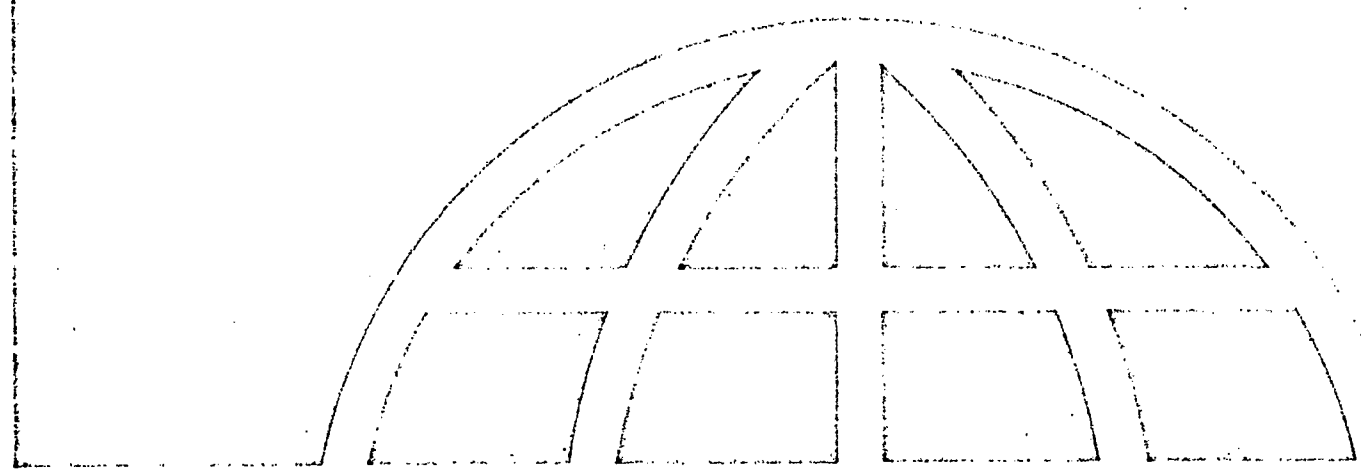
[10] Frank Guzsak, "Teacher Questioning and Reading," *The Reading Teacher*, XXI, 3 (December, 1967), 227–234.

the concepts and the vocabulary of their particular field, and they must do this. The English and reading teacher cannot bear the entire burden.

Test results, teacher comments, and personal experience and observation support the major assumption I have made here: that *meaning*, and not oral production, is the greatest problem encountered in the teaching of both English and reading to the secondary school student of ESL. Reading test scores of Indian students reveal that they consistently score lower in comprehension than in the mechanics of reading. Comments of teachers of Indian children are equally consistent: "They're word callers, but they don't have any idea what the words mean." Those dealing with Navajo children have one universal remark to make: "They just can't deal with abstractions. Everything must be concrete; and even then, only the literal interpretation is made." Perhaps this is interference of the native language and thought patterns, but we must also consider that maybe they have never had the opportunity to develop the conceptual basis for abstraction in English.

Most of our knowledge is gained through reading. Without reading skill the best and most profitable path to knowledge is blocked, as is the path to what we call "the mainstream of American life." By accepting a limited version of reading we are limiting the child's educational career and his later life. We are actually advocating a different kind of reading for the non-English speaker than that we consider suitable for the Anglo child. We have had a great deal of help from linguists in terms of increasing our knowledge of what our language is really like, and we have had help from the foreign-language teachers regarding methods and techniques of second-language teaching. But now we need to move on and ask how—once the children have mastered the initial oral language and reading skills—we can proceed to the development of real thinking and concpet formation ability in the new language. We cannot be satisfied with less.



TESOL

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

QUARTERLY

Volume 2 September, 1968 Number 3

TESOL QUARTERLY

A Journal for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

Membership in TESOL ($6.00) includes a subscription to the journal.
TESOL QUARTERLY is published in March, June, September, and December.
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