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The Causes and Correction of Verbalism in Reading.

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Experience background deficiencies and a combination of several factors contributing to inattention in reading can cause children to be verbalizers. The causes of and some corrections for these two problems are discussed. Since reading is essentially a process of reconstructing one's experiences back to the printed symbols, background deficiencies seriously hamper the reading of middle- and upper-grade students whose reading material has not been purposely selected to represent a familiar environment. As a corrective approach, teachers should identify and clarify unfamiliar concepts. Secondly, a major inattention factor is prolonged exposure to material that is too difficult. This problem can be corrected by providing appropriate reading matter. Another inattention factor is lack of reading purpose. This can be remedied by keeping motive questions before the child and by teaching him to set his own purposes. Poor listening skills also hamper reading, but practice in listening will improve the student's reading ability. Finally, lack of interest is a serious inattention factor. The teacher must be careful to teach reading interest as well as reading skill. References are listed. (BS)

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THE CAUSES AND CORRECTION OF VERBALISM IN READING

The verbalizer in reading is one who is characterized by ability to pronounce words rhythmically and with unusual facility, but with little or no comprehension of what has been read. He seems to have difficulty keeping his mind focused on the task at hand; his attention tends to wander even though he may think he is making a serious attempt to concentrate.

In order to deal effectively with the prevention and correction of verbalism in reading, let us consider some of the major causes and what can be done about them. Although there are several factors which contribute to the creation of verbalizers, most of them can be placed in two major categories: (1) experience background deficiencies, and (2) a combination of several factors which contribute to the reader's inability to keep his mind focused on the reading matter.

Experience Background Deficiencies

Reading is essentially a process of reconstructing one's own experiences back of the printed symbols. If a child has not had meaningful experiences that are related to the content he is expected to read, the reading will be empty of meaning even though the words may be pronounced correctly. It is indeed impossible to think at all beyond the most everyday concepts without the instruments with which to formulate thought. Meaningful vocabulary built from a rich experience background is not the least of these.

Experience background deficiency is a much more crucial problem in the middle and upper grades than it is in the primary grades. Stories and selections included in primary reading are purposely chosen to represent things with which the child is familiar in his immediate environment. From the fourth grade on, however, the child must increasingly read at a creative level because then the things, the people, and the scenes he meets in print are often outside the realm of his immediate experience, and in reading about them he has to "make up" a response. That is to say, he must draw upon his background and his imagination. Despite this need, I'm afraid that the amount of classroom time devoted to enriching experience background is inversely related to the increase in grade level. The higher the grade level, the less that is done to prepare the child for his reading. The opposite, of course, should prevail.

If children are to read intelligently materials that are saturated with strange concepts, some provision must be made for

clarifying these concepts before the reading is undertaken. Therefore all teachers, and especially intermediate grade teachers, should survey their textbook materials to identify strange concepts and vocabulary, and then take whatever steps are necessary to clarify these before the reading is done.

To accomplish this purpose, a wide variety of learning aids should be employed, giving special emphasis whenever possible to first-hand experiences in which the child engages in or observes the actual activities themselves. Typical of such activities are churning butter, making fire with a drill, or observing cloth being woven. In this connection, however, it is doubtful that there is much of a place for such artificial and misleading activities as making a papier mache' model of a volcano or constructing a dairy farm on a sand table, particularly if a real dairy farm is nearby.

Since it is not always possible to have children participate in or observe first-hand the actual activities themselves, various representations of reality such as scale models, motion pictures, television, flat pictures, maps, and other audio-visual aids must be used. These, of course, should be as realistic and truthful as possible.

What I'm really saying is that in so far as possible, activities for enriching background of experience should be as close to actual doing as possible in order to insure accuracy of facts, and that the use of language in any form (i.e., reading or discussion) is, at best, a hazardous means of overcoming experience deficiencies.

Factors Which Contribute to Inattention in Reading

Bear in mind that all of us are verbalizers when we read materials for which we do not have adequate experience background. Conversely, attention should also be called to the fact that a person may have adequate background of experience for the material he is reading and still be a verbalizer if he can't keep his mind focused on the material. Any individual may on occasion take mental excursions while reading. On the other hand, with some individuals these mental wanderings become habitual. Since a substantial percentage of children do suffer from habitual inattention when reading, let us consider some of the factors which contribute to it.

Prolonged exposure to too difficult material.--Pupils whose immaturity and lack of reading skills make them unable to read intelligently a single page of simple narrative material often are asked to study and recite literature that challenges cultured adults. When a child is exposed to materials at his frustration level he tends to focus his attention on the identification of the strange and difficult words, with little or no attention to meaning. Prolonged exposure to materials at the frustration level will cause this inattention to meaning to become habitual, and it will persist even when the difficulty of the material is reduced to an appropriate level.

The solution to this problem is obvious: Simply avoid having children work in materials that are unsuitable from the standpoint of difficulty. Although space limitations will not permit a dis-

cussion of criteria for judging the suitability of reading material, a rough rule of thumb is that primary grade children should not encounter more than four unknown words in 100 running words and intermediate grade children not more than six.[1]

Reading without a purpose.--Another factor which contributes to habitual inattention when reading is reading without a purpose or motive. Yet elementary and secondary school pupils frequently are required to read orally for no reason other than to demonstrate to the teacher that they can pronounce the words.

An excellent example of absence of pupil purpose is the old type of "around-the-room" or "start-stop" reading lesson, still found in some school situations, where a child is called upon to read orally a few lines while the other members of the class are compelled to follow along in their books. After one child has rattled off a few lines, the teacher stops him, rouses the next child, and starts him on his turn.

Since such reading lessons are entirely without purpose, when one pupil reads orally the others often find it convenient to "tune out" in order that they may think of more interesting things as they appear to scan the printed symbols. There is neither a real audience situation nor personal motive for the reading. Consequently, both the reader and the listeners fall into the habit of letting their thoughts wander. This inattention can become habitual and subsequently will carry over to all reading situations.

How can children be helped to develop purposes for reading? One

thing is to keep before them one or more motive questions. It has been known for many years that superior results are obtained, both on immediate and delayed recall, through reading guided by questions as compared with careful reading and rereading without guiding questions.[2] In this connection, it has been said that "if you are looking for nothing in particular in reading you will be likely to find just that!"[3]

In making a reading assignment, the teacher will sometimes help to set the purpose for reading by a preliminary discussion with the class in which an overview is provided and attention called to major questions to be answered as the selection is read.

Although teachers can help establish pruposes for some of the reading the child must do, the reader must also learn to set his own purposes, or discover for himself what it is he is looking for when he reads an assignment. One of the best ways of doing this is to teach the reader how to make a preliminary survey of the material in an effort to anticipate as much meaning as possible before the actual reading is undertaken.

In teaching pupils to do this survey, we must help them develop skill in discovering the author's outline. In any well organized textbook the outline by which the author wrote the book or chapter usually is indicated by a systematic series of headings. The sole purpose of these headings is to make it easier for the reader by serving as visual clues or prompters, much the same as signs along the road aid the motorist. The reader must learn that headings have values, that center headings usually represent major divisions of a chapter or selection and that side heads represent subdivisions of these various center heads. By surveying these headings the reader

not only discovers the author's outline but also receives an overview of what the selection is about, thus getting clues as to what to expect when the reading is done.

Once the reader has developed the habit of surveying a selection before he reads, he will save himself a good deal of time because the actual reading will consist of filling in details of an organization with which he is already familiar. Moreover, this preliminary insight will help to keep the mind focused on the material, thus preventing the lapses of attention that otherwise might occur. It soon will become evident to the reader that it is much easier to find something if he knows what it is he is looking for.

Poor listening skills.--Still another factor which contributes to chronic inattention when reading is inattention when listening to someone talk. In this connection, two findings supported by research seem important: (1) the school activity engaged in most frequently by children is listening,[4,5,6] and (2) children, on the average, are actually poor listeners.[7,8]

What does all this have to do with the verbalizer in reading? It has been clearly established that reading and listening are somewhat analogous processes in that each involves the act of perception and that these two receptive skills are closely related.[9,10,11,12]

Since reading and listening do appear to involve the same mental processes, it has often been hypothesized that programs designed to improve listening ability will result in a concomitant improvement in reading achievement. This hypothesis has been confirmed.[13] It is not surprising, therefore, to find that programs for the improvement

of listening skills involve the same types of materials and the same sub-skills that are used in the correction of the verbalizer in reading. The major difference in the two programs is that the materials are presented orally on the one hand, requiring the pupil to listen, while on the other hand the same types of materials are presented in written form, requiring the pupil to read them himself.

Some of the types of reading exercises that can be adapted and used for listening purposes are: listening to and carrying out directions, listening for main ideas, recognizing sequence of events, using the context to get the meaning of a word, interpreting figures of speech, recognizing cause and effect, predicting outcomes, distinguishing between fact and opinion, drawing conclusions, recognizing propaganda devices, and the like. There is now little doubt that practice in listening for these purposes improves pupils' ability to read for the same purposes.

Lack of interest.--Finally, let me direct your attention to one other factor which contributes to chronic inattention in reading: lack of genuine interest in and a love for reading.

All too often we have been disposed to consider the task of teaching children how to read as the sole function of the reading program. No one, of course, can deny that before a person can develop reading interests, attitudes, and tastes he must master the basic mechanics of the process. However, many children have been subjected to reading programs which undoubtedly have taught them how to read with some degree of skill, but which have left them with the attitude of the earnest young pupil who remarked, "Now that I've learned to read,

do I have to?" If the majority of a child's reading tasks are of little interest to him, it is only natural that he develop habits of inattention when reading.

The acid test of any reading or literature program is whether or not the children in it or graduated from it read for themselves. Among our major tasks as teachers of reading and literature are the development of a genuine love for reading and lifetime reading habits. If these things are done, inattention during the act of reading will cease to be a problem.

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