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By-Potter, Thomas C.

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The hypothesis of this study was that stories created by a dialectical subgroup of third grade Negro children might be more comprehensible to other members of that group than the usual instructional materials. A random sample of third graders was asked to tell stories in response to four pictures. The stories were tape recorded and then transcribed. Cloze exercises were made from passages in the child-developed stories and the textbook, and then given to all 79 third grade students in the school. When scores on the two cloze tests were compared, it was found that 70 subjects scored higher on the child generated passages, thus supporting the hypothesis. This language experience approach to reading comprehension may be more effective for minority group youngsters than materials based on standard English. (NH)

READING COMPREHENSION AMONG MINORITY GROUPS: CHILD-GENERATED INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

by

Thomas C. Potter
School of Education
San Fernando Valley State College
Northridge, California

Introduction

In non-integrated schools across the country reading scores are found to be significantly lower among Black children than in more racially balanced schools (Ecroyd, 1968). There is little disagreement among researchers that Black children that attend predominantly Black schools in a neighborhood of low-middle to low socio-economic level are not able to read as well as children of similar ability in other learning environments.

While this problem exists among Mexican and Indian children in the American southwest in the rural white child of Appalachia, the problem is most readily identifiable, and probably most serious, with Negro children if for no other reason except they form such a large group within the minority community. Large numbers of black children lag far behind the national norms in reading skills regardless of whether or not their classroom is integrated. Apparently there is some powerful factor of difference which holds many of them back and does not, in the same proportion, hold back the middle-class Caucasian youngster (Ecroyd, 1968).

According to recent studies (Loban 1966, Stewart 1964, Labov 1967), the problem is at least partly related to the oral language the black child brings with him to school. Linguists suggest that this language has it's own structure and is regularly and defineably different from standard English. Most teachers, however, may not be aware that their pupil's dialect represents a virtual language, with its own phonology, morphology, and syntax. It has been suggested that some teachers are under the misapprehension that there is only one language in their classroom (theirs!), and that the child who does not speak their language, simply speaks incorrectly.

The questions raised by these linguistic studies have profound implications for reading research. Is the spoken language of the black child more comprehensible to him in written form than that material written by adults for instructional purposes? Are stories, told by children from a socio-economic sub-culture, more comprehensible to other children who are members of that same sub-culture than materials of equivalent readability that appear in basal reading texts?

Recent Research

Labov (1967) suggests that it is natural to look at any educational

problem in terms of the peculiar type of ignorance which is to be overcome. For example, (1) ignorance of standard English rules on the part of the speaker of non-standard English may contribute to ineffective instruction by a speaker of standard English. (2) Ignorance or non-standard English rules by teachers and text writers may interfere with the comprehension of those materials by speakers of non-standard English. It is suggested that the educator faces a case of reciprocal ignorance, where teacher and student are ignorant of each other's language systems as well as the implication of the differences between these systems in the design of instructional material and the implementation of instructional programs.

Ecroyd (1968) cites the following example: One paragraph to be read includes the sentence, "George Washington lived at Mount Vernon." The black child may read this sentence orally, "George Washington he live at Mount Vernon." In other words, it is suggested that speakers of non-standard English have learned to translate standard English into their own dialect. The written, standard English might be understood and rephrased.

If we consider reading instruction in the initial stages to include decoding and literal comprehension skills as in the Walcutt (1964) model, then writing as a representational symbol system is functioning to call up the sounds and literal meanings from the primary symbol system: spoken language. Thus, in the example cited, the word "lived" and the oral symbol /liv/ are functional homonyms for the child in question.

Background of Present Investigation

One assumption underlying the language-experience approach to reading instruction (Van Allyn, 1967) is that the child comprehends best that idiom which most closely approximates the verbal milieu in which he has learned to speak. It is hypothesized in the current investigation that stories generated by members of an identifiable dialectical sub-group among elementary school children may be more comprehensible to other members of that group than materials written by adults for instructional use with the particular sub-group in question.

Procedure

Randomly selected third grade children (S^1) from a black community in the greater Los Angeles area were asked to tell a story about a cat and a mouse. A series of four pictures were presented simultaneously to S^1 at the beginning of the session. S^1's were told, "Tell a story about these pictures. Tell about what you see and what is happening." The stories were tape recorded and transcribed. These stories were then matched by the Spache (1953) Readability Formula with passages from state adopted text books to be used in reading instruction for the same group of children (Harper & Row, 1968).

Both textbook and the equivalent child generated passages were made into cloze exercises (Taylor, 1953). That is, one word in five was removed from the text and replaced by a blank of standard length. Randomly

selected pairs of matched passages in cloze test form were then given to all third grade children (S^2) attending the same school attended by S^1. Completion of the cloze exercises over these passages represented the final phase of a single one hour session conducted by E for all subjects ($S^1 + S^2$). The first part of the session included an instructional period in which children were given directions and practice in the procedure for completing cloze tests (Potter, 1968).

Materials Used

All of the passages that were made into a cloze test were approximately 100 words in length with the number of sentences varying from six to seven. (Insert Table 1.)

The Spache (1953) readability data on each of the passages used is reflected in Table 2. The readability data on each of the passages used is reflected in Table 2. The readability ratings of the textbook passages varied from grade level 2.8 to 4.2 while the child generated passages ranged from 2.9 to 4.5 in difficulty. Only the "correct word" scoring criterion was used to obtain cloze data on the passages. (Insert Table 2.)

Summary Findings

Table 3 and 4 summarize the findings of the cloze tests. The total number of subjects (N = 79) and the number of instances in which the cloze scores were lower on the textbook passages than on the child generated passages is shown in Table 3. Significance is shown for all paired passages. Seventy subjects obtained higher cloze scores on the child generated passages than on the equivalent textbook passages ($< .01$). The hypothesis of this investigation was supported.

It may be noted in passing that Bormuth (1967) suggests that a cloze test score of 35-45% is equivalent to a multiple choice test of comprehension of 75%. Mean comprehension scores for the child generated passages in the present study ranged from 19% to 48% while the mean comprehension scores for the textbook passages ranged from 8% to 15%. (Insert Table 3 and 4.)

Conclusions

This study suggests that the sample population comprehended materials generated from their own language better than equivalent materials that appear in state adopted textbooks designed for reading instruction. There is an implication that for reading instruction purposes, carefully selected passages from child generated stories may be more suitable for some reading instruction purposes when reading comprehension is a required or desireable outcome of the reading instruction sequence. One implication for classroom practice derived from the current investigation is that an emphasis on the "language-experience approach" to reading comprehension instruction with minority group pupils at the third grade level may be effective. It must also be noted that the frequency of the use of such techniques may decrease gradually if children adapt or modify their language expression patterns to more closely resemble those used in traditional text materials.

Implications for Further Study

A second investigation comparing the readability of stories generated by minority group children and stories generated by white middle-class children may provide data on the relative merit of using "dialectically oriented" materials. These materials may originate in the minority community for use in the same community while standard English stories would be used for instruction in those communities speaking standard English.

Summary

Disadvantaged children's pronunciation and articulation, vocabulary, sentence length, and use of grammatical and syntactic structures resembles in some way the privileged children of a younger age (Ecroyd, 1968). Such children lack the language facility required in doing independent thinking and problem solving. This delay or deficit may only increase negative affective reactions to programs of intervention unless novel means are introduced in the reading instruction received by younger children. Thus the gap in reading ability, and the ability to manipulate the symbols of language, may not be narrowed sufficiently for many minority group children to succeed in school.

Because his oral dialect is so often different from the written dialect he reads in his school books the relationship of the two symbol systems is especially obscure for the black child. It is possible that the widespread use of locally generated reading materials will assist the child in developing comprehension skills. It will be difficult to break the circular pattern of inability to read and the resultant lack of information needed to cope with expected school tasks unless a frontal attack on classroom procedures in the instruction of reading is recognized and developed.

TP/pm

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TABLE 1

Spache* Readability Measures

Five Child Generated and Five Textbook Passages

	Child Generated Passages	Textbook Passages
Mean Passage length (words)	85	99
Mean number of sentences	6	7
Mean number of words not on Short Dale list	8	9

*Spache (1953)

TABLE 2

Spache* Readability Scores on Matched Passages

Child-Generated Passage			Textbook Passage	
Passage Identification	Spache Readability		Passage Identification	Spache Readability
A	4.519	matched with	2	4.258
B	3.305	" "	4	3.109
C	2.961	" "	3	2.853
D	3.219	" "	5	3.050
E	4.337	" "	1	4.089

*Spache (1953)

TABLE 3

Summary of Findings

Passages (Pairing Designations)	Subjects (Number of subjects tested on passage pairing)		Positive Instances (Number of high cloze scores on child generated passages)	Significance (Sign test significance*)
A - 2	18		17	<.01
B - 4	14		13	<.01
C - 3	16		14	<.01
D - 5	16		14	<.01
E - 1	15		12	<.05
Total N =	79	Total Positive Instances	70	<.01

*Tate and Clelland, 1959

TABLE 4

Comprehension (Cloze) Scores Over Child-Generated and Textbook Passages

Child-Generated		Textbook	
Passage Identification	Comprehension Score	Passage Identification	Mean Comprehension Score
A	19.10%	2	13.12%
B	38.50%	4	15.00%
C	25.50%	3	7.50%
D	48.75%	5	11.05%
E	24.37%	1	8.18%

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