DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 047 918 RE 003 428

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TITLE Reading for the 70's: The Challenge in Australia.
PUB DATE Aug 70
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the International Reading Association World Congress on Reading, Sydney, Australia, Aug. 7-9, 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Reading, *Child Language, Elementary School Students, *Foreign Countries, Grade 1, *Language Development, Language Research, Linguistic Performance, Psycholinguistics, Reading Achievement, *Reading Difficulty, Reading Instruction, Reading Materials, Reading Research

ABSTRACT

Educational research in Australia is minimal, according to the author. And yet the need for improved instruction to reach poor and reluctant readers compares in seriousness with the needs in the United States and Great Britain. It is recommended that research should place less emphasis on comparative evaluation of teaching methods and an increased emphasis on understanding learning processes and language development. A series of studies done in Canberra, Australia, is described. Language samples from over 100 primary-grade children were analyzed, and these samples were compared with language patterns in reading materials. It was concluded that children of fairly high language development, who have mastered grammatical constructions and vocabulary and whose family backgrounds are rich in language, have little trouble learning to read, regardless of the system used. It was postulated that these children had less trouble with the artificial language of a primer than did children who had not yet mastered oral language. It was further postulated that instruction aimed at increasing the language development of children who experienced early difficulty in reading would help them become more efficient readers. (MS)

T. J. O'Connell

READING FOR THE 70'S: THE CHALLENGE IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, as in many other countries, a continuing challenge to the schools of this decade comes from those children who, despite several years of the most intensive teaching, read badly, unwillingly or not at all.

Depending on the criteria of competence used the size of this group ranges from 5-15% of any age level in a school population; and it is not surprising that teachers continue to be deeply concerned about a problem of such magnitude, especially since those children who remain deficient in reading skills suffer enormous disadvantage in most other aspects of their education as well.

The Local Situation

1. Teacher attitudes

A wide sampling of teacher attitudes to the problem will show that many approach it with decreasing faith in the possibility of any real solution.

In part this is due to the fact that special educational provision for the poor reader is as rare as that for many other types of handicapping. The disadvantaged ones are seldom able to be placed in groups small enough for effective individual teaching, and there is a notable shortage of the sort of teaching materials likely to assist them.

More important, however, there is fundamental lack of ideas on which more effective teaching practice might be based. Perhaps this could be said to apply to many areas of education and to be true of education systems outside Australia also. But there seem to be special reasons why the handicapped reader is further handicapped by the lack of well founded teaching ideas.

2. Sources of teaching ideas

An objective assessment of our present resources for

improving teaching practice suggests it would be very over-optimistic to depend on them for the information and the stimulus necessary to generate new and more effective teaching procedures.

Our educational research is minimal. As well, those institutions which could be expected to undertake essential research remain generally aloof from the schools in which their research tasks might originate and to which their findings might be expected to return.

In the absence of outside support the classroom teacher continues to depend on conventional methods drawn from experience returning almost inevitably to the old recipe, a combination of "remedial" reading books and regular intensive drill in phonics or other word attack skills.

And the proportion of poor or reluctant readers remains generally unchanged.

Some Comparisons

1. Available literature and report

Strangely enough there are many signs that the overall proportion of inefficient readers in the education systems of the United Kingdom and the United States is much the same as in Australia, and in certain areas very much higher.

David Holbrook's "English for the Rejected" (U.K.), and Daniel Fader's "Hooked on Books" (U.S.A.), for example, suggest a persisting problem similar to Australia's, and probably more extensive (and understandable) in a number of very large cities with special areas of cultural and economic deprivation.

Discussions with visiting educators confirm what the literature indicates and underline the possibility that this is a wide-spread and intractable problem in even the most advanced education systems.

2. Reading and research

In this age many types of human enterprise are rising to quite astonishing levels of efficiency mainly because they are backed by a steadily increasing body of exact research. The effectiveness of research in developing more efficient education, however, is as open to question as it has always been.

As a pertinent example - the field of the teaching of reading would be the most extensively researched of any in education. Jeanne Chall's very enlightening book, "Learning to Read: The Great Debate", gives some idea not just of the sheer bulk of studies carried out in the United States, but, more significantly, of what seem to be the chief pre-occupations of researchers; and here could be the explanation of why reading research remains relatively ineffective in changing teaching practice.

Very much of the research seems to be at fault because it is still largely concerned with comparative evaluation of teaching methods, despite the many reservations about the validity of such an undertaking that serious researchers have always maintained.

Because enthusiasm and strong bias are generally complementary qualities in the most earnest teachers we have come to accept them as constitutionally, in the Gilbert and Sullivan mode, either wholly radical or wholly conservative; either permissive or authoritarian in approach; and in the field of reading either enthusiastically "meaning-centred" or doggedly "code-centred".

But it is disturbing to find the assumedly objective researcher quite plainly entangled in this "either-or" impasse and spending valuable time and resources on projects of very doubtful value.

For the classroom teacher the situation is complicated by

the intrusion of another factor - the persuasive publicity of those who jump on the reading band-wagon and produce easily followed systems or laboratories for teaching reading. These are the patent medicine hawkers of the education world and one would expect that the research field would operate to protect the teacher from them, in the same way as authentic medical research moderates the influence of the commercial pill and potion vendors.

Eventually, since Australian teachers, lacking their own sources of investigation and stimulation, turn to America and England and find no substantial help there, it may be said that the basic dearth of teaching ideas is fairly general.

This paper offers no firm solutions. The best that it can do is suggest some matters, now relatively neglected, that might repay precise examination.

Potential Research and Study Areas

1. Learning and teaching

The present attitude of many now conducting investigations into some aspects of education is strangely reminiscent of the man who lost his stud under the bed but searched out on the mat because the light was better.

What needs to be found is a good deal of exact information on how children learn to read. What is most commonly sought for, apparently, is a decision on which of two general extremes of teaching method is more effective.

It may seem unreasonable to suggest that reading method is frequently little more than an accompaniment to the development of reading skills; that, for all the specific evidence available, it would often be as justifiable to attribute the development of reading competence to diet as to teaching method.

The facts are that many children learn to read without any

organized teaching procedures; and many do not learn to read no matter what teaching method is used or how skilfully it is applied.

It does appear however that for many children, perhaps the largest group at any age level, organized teaching is at least a major influence on the development of reading skill.

Further there are good grounds for saying that no one teaching method would be suitable for all children, and that a composite of the chief elements of both "meaning-centred" and "code-centred" methods has, logically, greater claims than the pure forms of either extreme.

2. Learning processes

Since many children learn to read without any but the most occasional and informal tuition, and since this is consistent with the fact that children, before ever coming to school, acquire many other difficult learnings in the same way, it would seem that learning processes rather than teaching methods would best repay close research.

Linguists and psycho-linguists working on the field of early spoken language acquisition have thrown much light on human learning processes generally and an extension of their studies to those children who readily acquire abilities with written language (as in reading) without formal tuition could be most rewarding.

Given the possibility that relevant factors could be identified in the successful pre-school readers, their presence or absence in unsuccessful readers would allow very much firmer conclusions about teaching method than are able to be made at present.

Some of this work has already been done in the field of the culturally disadvantaged (e.g. by Irwin, Jensen, Hess and Shipman) but there is little indication that it has been influential in shaping new programmes for handicapped readers.

3. The role of the school

Chall has pointed out the dangers of teachers and school principals carrying out "research" in reading. In such cases emotional involvement is more common than detached objectivity, and many of their findings must remain suspect.

There is, however, a very clear role for those working in the school, apart from the immediate demands of their teaching tasks.

Assuming what is not now generally true, that teachers keep some contact with research, theory, and learned investigation in the fields relevant to their work, they are in an ideal position to make and record observations which (a) support or cast doubt on controlled research studies, (b) provide information suggesting further research, (c) suggest the possibility of modifying current teaching methods, or developing new ones.

In this regard some studies and method trials carried out over a period of three years at North Ainslie School, Canberra, may be of interest.

North Ainslie Studies

1. The language of children

The studies had a dual basis. First there was the concern of the teachers for the handicapped readers in the school. Next there was a high degree of interest, among some of the teachers at least, in the role of language as a possible fundamental determinant of intellectual and conceptual skills.

Generally it was accepted as a supportable assumption (following much evidence in the field of psycho-linguistics) that normally, by the age of about four years the child will have mastered the language constructions and vocabulary of his particular language community.

If he comes from a family with a rich language environment, he will have considerable competence both in using and understanding

speech.

In addition, he will probably have some acquaintance with the patterns of written language from having been read to from an early age.

A child from such a background may be expected to respond readily to early reading tuition, and it does not seem to matter greatly what teaching method or reading system is followed; indeed many such children appear to learn to read with only occasional and informal assistance.

A surprising number of children, however, will be found to suffer from some form of language deprivation.

This may occur because the home environment is low in language skills, there is little regular exchange of ideas in words, the parents do not frequently talk <u>with</u> the child, or, on the other hand, so frequently talk <u>at</u> him that he withdraws from regular verbal communication; or because of an early hearing defect.

A child with such a background will enter school and begin to be introduced to written language under the great handicap that he lacks both competence and confidence in spoken language.

What is more he has already, by this time, passed through the maturational stage in which the most fruitful acquisition of language could be expected to occur, so that attempts by the school thereafter to remedy his language defects are unlikely to meet with great success.

In attempting to devise ways of overcoming reading difficulties of these children a number of studies were carried out.

A large range of language samples was taken in the age groups 5-9 years throughout the school. Some 50,000 words from over 100 children were recorded under the following conditions; (a) in informal interview; (b) in structured interview; (c) in a small group under self-chosen activity conditions; (d) individually

under self-chosen activity conditions.

Without going into detail of the analysis carried out on this material by expert linguists as well as teachers, it can be said that there were substantial and significant differences between the language of those children who read well or moderately well and of a majority of those who read badly or not at all.

With a brevity regrettable but essential under the conditions of this paper it can be said that the great majority of those who failed to read well were found to be deficient in language skills.

2. The language of provided reading material

It was a logical step from the above comparison to a comparison between the language of handicapped groups and that of the material they were expected to read.

The strong possibility that emerged was that the simple language commonly used in the most popular reading primers or systems for teaching reading, was in itself a major source of difficulty for the children with a poor language background.

The language of the early reading primer is unique.

It is notably different from the spoken language with which the young child may be expected to be familiar; its staccato repetition of mainly one-syllable words lacks the flow and rhythm of spoken language; it features short and jerky sentences, and artificial-conventional situations and vocabulary.

The child who, at age five, is thoroughly master of a wide range of language patterns and vocabulary is able to generalise the apparent rules of an artificial language, and so finds it no barrier to learning to read.

But the child with a poor language background, lacking confidence and competence in any form of language, is likely to find that the introduction of a new language form as well as the skills necessary for reading sets too heavy a task altogether.

3. Method trials

A group of children who had failed to read common early reading material and using standard methods were selected and set to work on a different type of reading material.

The idea was to use the child's known stock of language as the material for learning to read.

This was managed on a real situation basis by providing classroom activities likely to persuade the child into comment and discussion.

His conversation was first tape-recorded and played back to him as a stimulus to further interest in his own words, and as a means of allowing him to become aware of the words at one step removed from his original purposeful act of communication.

Next, he was shown how his words could be represented in printed form by transferring them to an overhead projector sheet and projecting them on a screen.

After reading his own words back to him and having him repeat them several times they were then printed on a slip of paper and pasted in his book.

By this means he built up a cumulative record of what he, other group members, and the teachers had said about a number of meaningful situations and incidents in which they played a part, and this became the material on which he learned the skills of reading.

The procedure had the following very clear advantages: (a) it dealt with situations in which the child was personally involved and interested; (b) it made use of the well known tendency of the child to be interested in and want to recall his own past actions and words; (c) it ensured that he used as reading material the terms and constructions with which he was familiar, thus disposing some of the unknowns that were likely to trouble him in his new enterprise.

At first reading was purely by sight identification of whole words, phrases and sentences, and it was not till the child was thoroughly committed to reading by this method that he was introduced to phonics, generally first by analysis of simple words already known to him by sight.

It was found that by using this method poor readers or non-readers made rapid progress to the stage where they could read freely material dealing with known situations; work from written comments, requests, or instructions made by the teacher provided they were based on an immediate situation in which the children were involved; and given some latitude in spelling correctness, communicate their thoughts in writing to the teacher or other members of the group, about an immediate activity.

It was interesting that when this stage had been reached and children were freely reading material containing many quite difficult words they failed again with the prim language of standard reading systems which seldom extended beyond one syllable phonetic words.

Indeed, after several months when some of the children in the group were quite accomplished readers with a good competence in phonic and sight recognition skills, they continued to stumble and

be ill at ease with the unique type of prose that has always been considered the proper material for learning to read.

4. Some possible conclusions

The following conclusions seem justifiable at this stage of the North Ainslie studies: (a) that at the stage of beginning reading only a small highly intelligent minority of children have acquaintance with any except spoken language forms; (b) that spoken language varies significantly from written language; (c) that provided reading material in general is widely different from any form of spoken language and only slightly less different from other forms of written language; (d) that because of its unique form, provided reading material constitutes an actual barrier to learning to read; (e) that the barrier is greater for those children who for various reasons have only limited competence even in spoken language; (f) that for those children whose disability seems to be connected with limited language competence the situational approach, both using and attempting to extend the child's present language stock, seems to provide a reasonable solution.

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