DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 064 685 CS 000 060

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TITLE	Variables in Beginning Reading Instruction.
PUB DATE	71
NOTE	20p.; Paper presented at 3rd World Congress, Sydney, Australia, August, 1970; and also presented at the Annual Convention of the International Reading Assn., Anaheim, Calif., May 1970
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Beginning Reading; Language Enrichment; Linguistics; *Physical Environment; *Reading; *Reading Instruction; *Social Environment

ABSTRACT

This paper describes various approaches to beginning reading instruction and discusses the major factors which determine success or failure in beginning reading regardless of the approach used. The teacher, the child, and the social and physical environment while being infinitely variable can be controlled to great extent by the teacher of beginning reading. The paper shows the beginning reading teacher how to control her own behavior, the child's behavior, social and physical environment so that optimum learning can be provided. Included are descriptions of the synthetic and analytic phonics approach, the linguistic approach, the visual-auditory-kinesthetic tactile (VAKT) approach, the whole word approach, and language experience approach. A brief note concerning research in beginning reading and a challenge to administrators and teachers of beginning reading conclude the article. (Author)

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Abstract

VARIABLES IN BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION

Describes various approaches to beginning reading instruction and discusses the major factors which determine success or failure in beginning reading regardless of the approach used. The teacher, the child, and the social and physical environment while being infinitely variable can be controlled to a great extent by the teacher of beginning reading. The paper shows the beginning reading teacher how to control her own behavior, the child's behavior, and the social and physical environment so that optimum learning can be provided. Included are descriptions of the synthetic and analytic phonics approach, the linguistic approach, the VAKT (visual-auditory-kinesthetic-tactile) approach, the whole word approach, and the language experience approach. A brief note concerning research in beginning reading and a challenge to administrators and teachers of beginning reading conclude the article.

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VARIABLES IN BEGINNING READING INSTRUCTION

Proponents of beginning reading instruction approaches often fail to point out important variables, other than the mechanics of the approach, which contribute to success or failure in beginning reading. Three other major factors, the teacher, the child, and the environment are infinitely variable and must be given due consideration. Rather than spending energy arguing about the merits one approach has over another for all children in the world, reading specialists might better spend their valuable energy determing how to show beginning reading teachers how to improve their skills in the diagnostic teaching of reading so that the right beginning reading approach or combination of approaches is used at the right time in the right way with individual children within the classroom.

The Teacher

Each teacher of reading looks at reading from his own bias, point of view, or pair of glasses, so to speak. Each reader of this article brings to this printed page his own point of view concerning beginning reading and weighs his own vicarious and practical experience, his own conceptualization

of reading and reading instruction, against that which he reads. That which is not in keeping with the reader's experience or conceptualization and makes no immediate appeal to his cognitive or affective sensibilities is stored with other information on reading instruction or, perhaps, is rejected outright.

Likewise the reading teacher, who is told that a particular emphasis in beginning reading instruction is best, may respond passively, critically, or even negatively when he has found other approaches to beginning reading instruction highly successful. Trevor, reporting from New Zealand, for example, has found the language-experience approach to beginning reading instruction more effective than approaches emphasizing mastery of the sound/symbol code and flatly disagrees with Chall's conclusions and recommendations in Learning to Read: The Great Debate which, says Trevor, support "... code-based emphasis in beginning reading instruction."[1] On the other hand, Levin reporting a study he conducted at Cornell University documents the inadequacies of the linguistic, or word family approach, espoused by Fries, Bloomfield and certain other linguists and favors an approach to beginning reading instruction which initially illustrates to the learner graphemic/phonemic inconsistencies.

Which approach to beginning reading instruction, then, might we say is best for Trevor, for Chall, for Levin, for Fries and Bloomfield, and for the many disciples of the approaches which each of these writers advocate? The approach which the individual believes will be most successful in teaching the child beginning reading probably will be the approach relied upon most frequently and in most, but not all, cases will be the best approach for the individual to use.

Some teachers of reading who have learned the mechanics of a single approach will use that approach exclusively, often failing to determine which approach or combination of approaches is most suitable for a particular child. Teachers bound to a single set of narrowly conceived instructional materials fail to produce optimum results in their beginning reading instruction because the material is unsuitable for meeting the reading needs of all children. The ability of the teacher to choose the best approach or combination of approaches and to utilize the mechanics of the approach as well as to control other aspects of the learning situation will determine the difference between success and failure in beginning reading instruction. Ideally, the approach or combination of approaches used should be one which the teacher can use well, feels comfortable in using, believes will be successful, and which best suits the individual child beginning to learn to read.

The Approach Itself

Even when the teacher knows which approach or combination of approaches to beginning reading instruction is best, she may find it difficult to provide the kind of instruction she would like to provide for the child. Often the teacher is required to provide instruction from one basal reader series and as a result may neglect to provide the right type of instruction at the right time for a number of children in the classroom. Many teachers of beginning reading have become so dependent upon the guidebook to the basal reader that they would find it difficult to teach reading without it. In other words, the beginning reading approach is purchased in the form of a basal reader series and is presumed to suit the teaching style of the teacher as well as the reading needs of the child. This approach to beginning reading instruction is roughly analogous to a government health department demanding that all patients visiting their family doctor receive a shot of penicillin and some sulfa tablets regardless of their illness and regardless of the physician's recommendation and familiarity with the treatment.

The teacher of beginning reading should, of course, be able to provide the type of beginning reading instruction which she feels is best suited to each child in her classroom. The decision as to what approach or combination of approaches to use with a child may be determined after administration of formal and informal reading and reading

readiness tests, discussionswith the child, and even a trial and error procedure which would eliminate those beginning reading approaches which prove to be ill-suited for the child. While the teacher may decide to use only one approach, she will probably determine that some combination of approaches initially emphasizing both discrimination and meaning is best. In the discrimination approaches, associations between the symbols of the alphabet and the sounds in speech which the symbols represent are emphasized. In the meaning approaches the emphasis in teaching is upon associations between the sight of written whole words, the sound of the words, and the experience of the child relevent to the words.

The basic approaches from which the teacher of beginning reading may choose can be described as (1) the synthetic phonics approach, (2) the analytic phonics approach, (3) the linguistic approach, (4) the VAKT (visual-auditory-kinesthetic-tacile) approach, (5) the whole word approach, and (6) the language experience approach. While discrimination and meaning are emphasized in each of these approaches, the first four approaches place greater emphasis initially on discrimination, whereas the latter two approaches emphasize meaning to a somewhat greater degree.

1. The synthetic phonics approach - In this approach the teacher ascribes to various letters and letter combinations the sound which she believes the letters will represent

when found in words the child later will be asked to decode. She may, for example, show the child the letters p, t, s, and a and ascribe to each letter the sound which she feels the letter usually "will say" when found in whole words. After this instruction, the child would be expected to read words like sat, tap, at, past, sap, taps, etc. and sentences such as Pat sat at last. The child customarily would be guided away from words such as pa and as which do not follow the sound/symbol generalizations taught. Seldom, however, do the sounds which are ascribed to isolated individual letters appear as such is spoken words. There is not tuh sound when any of the above words are pronounced, for example. This fact can be further illustrated by pronouncing aloud the words tap and pat and noticing in the two words first the difference in the p sound and then the difference in the t sound. Four distinct sounds are represented by the t and p none of which is a tuh or a puh sound. Even when a rule is proposed ascribing one sound to a letter or combination of letters, the number of words which illustrate exceptions to the rule often outnumber the words which follow the rule. Some children who have had only intensive synthetic phonics instruction have difficulty synthesizing the various phonemes in a word and laboriously sound out each word they read in separate phonemes.

2. The analytic phonics approach - An improvement upon the synthetic phonics approach is the analytic phonics approach.

In this approach the teacher begins the instruction by presenting a written word whose sound is familiar to the child. The word is pronounced aloud by the teacher and perhaps by the child. The child then may be asked What is the first sound?, The last sound?, The sound which follows the first sound?, etc. The letter combinations which represent each phoneme are identified by the teacher, the child pronounces these letter combinations as they are identified and later may be asked to pronounce them isolated from the word in which they originated. The analytic phonics approach emphasizes meaning as well as discrimination. When analytic phonics is taught as described above, whole word instruction and language experience instruction precede instruction in grapheme/phoneme correspondence. Therefore the value of the analytic phonics approach could be due to the fact that the learning of reading is initially associated with words which relate meaningfully to the child's language and experience. Also certain children may find it easier to relate the learning of grapheme/phoneme correspondences to reading by applying analytical thought processes rather than by applying thought processes which require synthesizing parts into a whole.

3. The linguistic approach - The linguistic approach or word family approach requires the child to make discriminations between initial, terminal, and other phonemes within words which rhyme or words which compose a word family. The teacher might

begin with a family such as the et family (et, bet, get, jet, etc.) and graduate to families such as the etch family (etch, fetch, ketch, retch, stretch, etc.). Later the child would be given sentences and stories containing words learned in word families. The teacher may find that the child does not rhyme bet and get but pronounces the latter word "git." If so, the word get is not part of the child's et family and should not be taught as if it is. Similarly, a child may wish to add words like debt to the et family and words like catch and such to the etch family. These words may be phonemically part of the family but graphemically they are distant cousins. The study by Levin alluded to above indicates that the child will have more success in beginning reading if graphemic/phonemic inconsistencies are taught initially rather than introduced at a later time.

4. The VAKT (visual-auditory-kinesthetic-tacile) approach - The VAKT approach has been described by some writers as an eclectic approach to beginning reading because the child utilizes most of his sensory modalities when learning to read new words. The child looks at the printed words, hears the word, and then touches and traces over the word with his finger while saying the word aloud. Both manuscript and curvise writing have been advocated for use in this approach and the surface of the letters may be smooth, stencil cut, or of sandpaper. The VAKT approach is extremely time consuming and may be discouraging to most children for this

reason alone. The approach is not eclectic in the sense that synthetic phonics, linguistic, and language experience instruction are generally not considered part of the approach. The main emphasis is placed upon the discrimination of whole words. Research has not proven the VAKT approach to be more effective than other approaches when used with either normal or abnormal children, as will be explained below.

5. The whole word approach - The whole word approach or the look-say approach has received its share of criticism even though most words which individuals learn to read initially are learned as wholes rather than sounded out phoneme by phoneme. In this approach, the child is shown a word either in isolation or in context, the sound of the word is presented with the word, and the child learns to associate the printed word and the sound. After the first few words are learned in this manner, it is difficult to say whether or not the child attacks new words as wholes or analyzes the graphemic/phonemic units within words by using inductively learned graphemic/phonemic generalizations. In a whole word approach the child learns grapheme/phoneme correspondences which are more authentic than those taught in either a synthetic or an analytic phonics approach.

6. The language experience approach - The language experience approach enables the child to read whole words in a context which relates meaningfully to both his language and experience. The procedure will vary depending upon the

sophistication of the learner and his knowledge of reading, but the approach can be used successfully with any beginning reader who can discriminate between the various upper and lower case letters and who also knows that a word is a word. One way of proceeding would be as follows.

First the teacher encourages the child to discuss an actual past experience or to describe something that is taking place at the moment. Each important sentence from the discussion is repeated over and over again by the child so that the teacher can transcribe the sentence in manuscript form on a piece of paper in front of the child. After the sentence is finally transcribed, the child is asked to read the sentence aloud, is then asked to read random words from the sentence, and finally is asked to read the entire sentence again, and after the first sentence is recorded, any preceding sentences. The child is reminded always to <u>read the way he talks</u>. After a sufficient number of sentences are recorded in this manner, the child is asked to give his story a title. The same procedure is followed in recording the title of the story as is followed in recording sentences in the story. The child then reads the title and the entire story. He makes his own copy of the story in manuscript form, reads his own story aloud again, and finally illustrates his story with a sketch or perhaps with an illustration from a newspaper or magazine. The story is reviewed at subsequent class sessions and further language experience stories are added to the child's collection.

The Child

Some obvious decisions concerning the choice of one or more of the above beginning reading instruction approaches for an individual child can be made. A phonics approach should not be used with a child who is unable to hear well enough to distinguish clearly between basic sound units within the language. Even though the teaching of grapheme/phoneme relationships as an initial step in beginning reading is valued highly, little purpose would be found in teaching the sounds of s, t, sh, ch, etc., if the child is unable to distinguish one sound from another.

Similarly, a synthetic phonics approach should not be used if the phonic generalizations generalize poorly to the child's spoken language. While the synthetic phonics approach may seem to some teachers a most logical approach to use in beginning reading instruction, the value of the approach diminishes approximately in proportion to the number of exceptions to the generalizations found in the child's language. Many writers, including Clymer and Wardhaugh in the United States, have illustrated the futility of teaching phonic generalizations such as "when two vowels go walking, the first does the talking as in read and teach." The word learn, for example, and many other words do not follow this particular phonics rule.

Does the child find the approach to beginning reading instruction enjoyable or positively reinforcing? is another important consideration to be made. If the child finds that each attempt to learn reading is an intolerably monotonous chore, he is learning something about reading. Reading, he learns, is not for him. If, on the other hand, the child finds that each step to learning reading is enjoyable and has meaning to him personally, he will want to continue to learn to read.

Abraham Maslow of Harvard has demonstrated the importance of meeting certain basic needs before much learning of any type can occur. Therefore, requisite to the child's optimum learning of reading is the satisfaction of certain basic physiological and psychological needs. Before the first step in beginning reading instruction is taken, the child should be physiologically fit, neither ill, tired, thirsty, nor hungry, and should have other bodily needs satisfied. Furthermore, the child should feel secure and unthreatened in the teaching-learning situation and should realize a sense of belonging both within and outside his instructional group. The child should also be made to feel that he is a worthwhile member of the group in which he finds himself and his esteem as a group member should be constantly heightened. In addition, he should receive continual encouragement while learning reading and while developing his capabilities in other areas as well. Unless these needs are met before reading

instruction proceeds, however, the results of beginning reading instruction will not be what they should.

The importance of having a child complete certain reading readiness activities before beginning instruction is initiated has been discussed by many writers. Generally, if the child desires to learn to read, if he can discriminate between various upper and lower case letters and knows that a word is a word, and if basic physiological and psychological needs and prerequisites have been met, the competent teacher using a viable approach in a suitable teaching-learning situation will teach the child how to read.

Only after the reading teacher becomes aware of the different variables which affect successful beginning reading will she be able to control the variables so that each child in the classroom will experience successful beginning reading. Not the least important factor in beginning reading instruction is the control of the environment in which the beginning reading instruction takes place.

The Learning Environment

Many factors within the social and physical environment can be controlled so that beginning reading is enhanced. Many studies of the approaches to beginning reading instruction have given too little consideration to the effects of important variables within the learning environment. Both sociological and physical aspects of the learning environment must be

observed and controlled by the reading teacher to promote successful learning of beginning reading.

Social Environment

In controlling the social environment the teacher of beginning reading must consider such factors as class size, grouping, teacher-pupil relationship, peer relationships, and the effects of reinforcement on both the pupils receiving and the pupils observing the reinforcement. Ideally, class size in beginning reading instruction should be small enough so that the teacher can easily give one-to-one instruction. Almost invariably the child who receives one-to-one reading instruction learns to read and makes significant gains in reading ability. Today most children receive beginning reading instruction in classes of twenty or thirty children or in sub-groups of five or six and thus do not receive sufficient attention to their individual learning needs. Grouping provides the means by which the teacher can provide more individual attention to children but still the larger the number of groups the teacher must teach and the larger the size of the groups the less effective the the instruction in beginning reading will be. In many areas of the United States housewives, parent groups, and other individuals have volunteered to work in the schools to help children learn reading. Most of these volunteer programs have been highly successful because one-to-one instruction was provided.

The attitude the teacher takes toward her pupils and the attitude the pupils take toward one another and toward the teacher will affect the results of beginning reading instruction. The teacher can establish harmonious social relationships within the classroom by assuming a positive reinforcing attitude, by encouraging the children to work together in groups, by letting the children help one another with learning, by being the child's friend and teacher rather than simply the child's teacher, and by rewarding socially acceptable behavior and refusing to react to most socially unacceptable behavior.

Whenever the teacher provides extrinsic rewards in the form of praise, smiles, nods, grades, stars, stickers, and other rewards, she must be certain that the efforts of the children are being rewarded on an equitable basis. Studies indicate that when reading performance is reinforced so that some children receive more rewards than other children, the children aware of receiving fewer rewards than others do not perform in reading as well as they could. Rewards should be provided on the basis of effort regardless of ability and should be distributed equiponderately to the children in the group. For most children "losing the reading learning game" discourages them from wanting to continue. Initial success in beginning reading is an excellent predictor of later success in reading and the beginning reader should be given every indication possible that he is succeeding to learn to read.

Physical Environment

The importance of the physical environment in beginning reading instruction must also be considered. If the child associates an attractive physical environment with beginning reading instruction, the learning of reading will be enhanced. The room itself, the books and other instructional media, the desks, the bulletin boards, the windows, the lighting, the attire of the children and teacher, the room temperature, the sounds and sound level, and whatever physical rewards the teacher introduces into the teaching-learning situation all will affect to some degree the learning of beginning reading. An attractive, comfortable, well-illuminated room with colorful bulletin boards and an attractively dressed teacher will be positively reinforcing to the beginning reader. Furthermore, an abundance of attractive books and other media relevant to the child's interest and experience will reinforce reading performance more than will the use of one book or the use of books and other media with which the child has difficulty relating.

If teachers in the classroom do use tangible rewards to reinforce the learning of beginning reading, care should be taken to reward all students in the classroom equitably so that "losing the reading learning game" does not inhibit the performance of students who receive fewer rewards than others.

The Research

Each of the approaches to beginning reading instruction outlined above have been described by various writers and researchers as the best approach to use to teach beginning reading. Even well-designed research studies have shown that some of these approaches are better than others. What one must realize, however, is that the results of studies on beginning reading almost always produce actuarial results not results which indicate what approach would be best for all individual children within the experimental group. When a study shows that an approach is significantly better than another at the .05 level of significance, can we say that we have found a good approach to teach beginning reading? Not at all. Questions which may legitimately be asked are Might there be better approaches with which to compare the approach which appears significantly better?, To what degree is the approach what it is described to be?, What effects did teacher, child, and environmental variables have on the results of study?, Are the results of the study generalizable to different teachers, children, and environmental conditions?, Could certain children in the group studied have learned more reading by using another approach or combination of approaches?, Were other contaminating effects such as history, testing, regression, etc. controlled?, Was the statistical treatment of the data appropriate?, etc.

Too often reading specialists and writers in the field of reading support their arguments for or against various approaches to beginning reading instruction with studies which are, in effect, no support at all because of inferior design, inappropriate statistical analysis, or other contaminating factors in the studies cited.

In a reply to an article on research findings concerning phonics in beginning reading instruction, LeFevre writes:

> It must be chastening to all of us to realize that there has never been a method of teaching beginning reading that has been a total failure, nor has there ever been one that was a total success. Some children have learned to read by all known beginning reading programs; but some children have also learned to read almost entirely by themselves using no known methods, and possibly in spite of methods and material. Anyone who is interested in reading improvement must be concerned with the children who do not learn to read by any known method so far devised. Here is the challenge.[2]

The method to teach non-reading children how to read does exist at this moment in many classrooms throughout the world. What is needed, however, are additional teachers and administrators sensitive to the learning needs of individual children so that in each situation there will be proper and sufficient focus on and attention to more of the variables which contribute to successful beginning reading. The above challenge of LeFevre is being met by some administrators and teachers of beginning reading and certainly can be met by many more.

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