DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 073 414 CS 000 331

AUTHOR Gage, Thomas
TITLE The Reader As Performer.
PUB DATE 71
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English (61st, Las Vegas, November 1971)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Affective Objectives; Creative Teaching; Elementary Education; *English; Literature; Literature Appreciation; *Reading; Reading Instruction; Recreational Reading; Secondary Education; *Student Centered Curriculum; Student Interests; *Student Motivation

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that there has been an overemphasis among reading and English teachers on the role of diagnosis, prescription, and testing for mastery of isolated skills. The result has been a short-term profit of increased scores on posttests, but a long-term sacrifice of students who are eager to read. The author suggests that the best method of teaching reading is to encourage children to trust their own responses to what they read. Rather than a managerial technique of reading instruction, an affective approach, stressing the importance of student reading motivation, is proposed. Reading should be taught as a kinetic experience--the teacher should not ask what a word or sentence means, but what it does. Reading, then, is a language sensitizing experience. Literature teaching should emphasize the interrelations between life and literature; it should not regard a literary work as an object to be studied, but rather as a process to be experienced. The author concludes that in order to excite a student to perform more actively in his reading, teachers must encourage curiosity in the student, rather than overstressing his ability to make sophisticated judgments. (Author/DI)

THE READER AS PERFORMER

by Thomas Gage

Delivered at the National Convention
of NCTE in Las Vegas, 1971

Heading south to Monterey on Highway 17 from the Bay Area this fall, I arrived at San Jose where there is a junction one has to take in order not to spend an extra twenty minutes jokeying with stop lights in San Jose. The highway sign merely alerts the driver that Los Angeles is the destination if he turns right. Being a Northern Californian, I brought into that reading experience not only a mission that did not include Los Angeles, but, also, a subconscious displeasure at the thought of going to Los Angeles.

Consequently, I misread the author's message and spent twenty minutes in San Jose.

This reading episode reminds me of another personal experience I had when I was - I-don't-know-how-young. I was being driven through San Francisco, and I was amazed by the frequency of references to an apparently unknown relative, M-O-R-T-G-A-G-E. I asked my brother if he had ever met the famous Mort, and I discovered that the word I had heard often, though not frequently, was spelled in the way that it was.

Two lessons might be inferred from the experiences: first, in order to read you gotta know the territory, and second, your territory often affects the way you read the written word.

I am going to discuss certain aspects of these lessons and other issues in order to present what I mean by the reader as a performer.

Since I began with the subject of driving, I might extend the analogy in a different way. To drive a car, the learner doesn't practice the single skill of turning on the ignition and flooring the accelerator repeatedly until he attains 85% mastery; nor does he simulate the synchronization of clutch and gas repeatedly, nor left turns, sweeping around various angles from 15^{o} to 350^{o} nor practice rearview mirror judgments. Moreover the neophyte driver certainly doesn't need to study the anatomy of the combustion engine, the relationship of the differential to the axle, nor the flywheel to the transmission, to learn how to drive; though it is wise for his teacher to know some of these deep structural relationships.

Being able to drive one type of car doesn't mean that one is able to drive any other kind with equal proficiency. I find Jaguar steering wheels fight back, my mother-in-law's Buick's brakes project me through the windshield, and a forklift requires the kind of body orchestration necessary to perform a one-man band act.

My point is that driving is experiential and so is reading. Reading content in one area doesn't guarantee reading as proficiently in another area. Hints, tips, and strategies to facilitate both processes are helpful to the neophyte when presented at the right time. These skills, though, may not be presented nor sequenced in the right fashion for every initiate.

I am convinced that we have for the last twenty years overemphasized the role of diagnosis, prescription, and testing for mastering of isolated skills; so emphasized these admittedly important aspects of a reading program that we have turned off students, sacrificing our long-range goal of having students find reading satisfying, for a short-term profit of increased scores on post tests.

I too seldom hear the crucial question, what do I do now that I have identified a student's reading deficiency? What I most frequently hear is, what is a good diagnostic test, or why does a student's score on the STEP reading test differ so radically from his score on the Gates? We have so overemphasized testing that I would bet that we are reaching the point when there isn't time to teach them the content or the skill for which they are being tested.

My thesis is that having children read, leading them to stories and books, and encouraging them to trust their own responses to what they read, is the best method for teaching children to read and to make reading a life long behavior. This method is more difficult to practice today than ever before because of forces outside and inside education, impinging upon the classroom teacher.

After discussing some of these forces, I want to question some basic assumptions which have caused much anxiety and to share some ideas of literary criticism that suggest viable alternatives to the teaching of reading.

Conflicts Affecting Teachers

One of the main forces affecting the teacher might be thought of as originating from within teachers. From 1967 to the present, teachers of English and teachers of reading have, to a great extent, been involved in a process of soul searching, a kind of inquiry into one's professional raison d'etre. Much like other professions, such as medicine and law, nearly every fundamental assumption is being questioned. The doctor whose primary goal is to perpetuate life is now told that the greatest problem facing man is the population explosion, or to put it pessimistically, there is a need to manipulate death control. The lawyer whose primary goal is to perpetuate law and justice discovers that epistemologically the superstructure of society is apparently racist and unjust for all but those in the middle class. The teacher whose goal is to provide options for his students is informed that recent developments in media, such as television and motion pictures, have made him not only innocuous but a perpetuator of print bound provincialism. Unlike the lawyer and the doctor, the teacher is also caught in a crossfire between those critics who attack education for its want of humanism, suggesting such alternatives as voucher systems or even the possibility of deschooling society; and, on the other hand, those critics who criticize education for its want of efficiency, suggesting such alternatives as PPBS, solutions that in the words of James Moffett, would "bring to perfection the error of our present ways," that is, further institutionalization and bureaucratization.

The English teacher, deeply introspective by nature, numbed by conflicting ideas, pressured by academic and political camps, and by institutional intimidation, experiencing a kind of professional future shock.

Another force impinging upon the English teacher is the division within his professional community. According to Kent Gill,[1] in the May, 1971, issue of the English Journal, the teacher of English is further torn among several trends in English curriculum: (1) Academic English, the knowledge-centered curriculum influenced by the National Defense Education Act Institutes in English, (2) Behavioral English, the skill-centered curriculum advocated by the educational engineers, and (3) Affective English, the student-centered curriculum influenced by the Dartmouth Conference, the British open classroom experiment, and the Moffett K-13 curriculum.[2]

Questionable Assumptions

With regard to Behavioral English, I would like to challenge one current notion that I believe is at the center of much confusion: that the role of the teacher is to modify or to change behavior. This concept is derived from the operant behaviorists' definition of learning as "a change or modification of behavior."[3] However, I recommend rather the definition that Ralph Tyler suggested at the conference on English Education in Portland in March, 1971, that learning is what occurs in an individual as the result of experiencing something. Related to this notion is what R. Buckminister Fuller, at the National Convention in Milwaukee, described as the role of the English teacher as one that strives "to increase the student's inventory of experiences." Therefore, the teacher provides options just as the school provides alternatives to the life-style of the home from which the student comes: the student essentially is being asked to make choices. Edgar Dale suggests:

---

1. Barth, John. The Sot Weed Factor, New York: Bantam Books, 1960.
2. Brower, Reuben A., "Book Reading and the Reading of Books," Daedalus, Winter, 1963.
3. Chomsky, Noam, "Review of Verbal Behavior by B. F. Skinner," Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1962.

> "I see the word 'choice' as central to the educative process. All education, it seems to me, is the development and refinement of choice--the development of an awareness of alternatives and the need for studying and mentally rehearsing the consequences of these alternatives before choosing them. To choose wisely is to live well, and the story of every man's life lies in the big and little choices that he has made."[4]

Because of the academic curriculum and the behavioral curriculum, too many teachers have not been approaching the teaching of reading or the teaching of English in the light of this notion of providing choices, but, rather like those following the behavioral curriculum, they have sought to manipulate the classroom environment so that students are diagnosed, then trained, then measured with the hope that the student performances provide some indication of the teacher's success or failure. Or, like those following the academic curriculum, they decide upon those concepts the class as a whole must know. Teachers would be better off following the Affective Curriculum, which begins the student's language so that these options provided will be appropriate for every pupil. As Allen Purvis points out, "English is people using language to shape their experiences and people using a variety of languages to articulate their response to the varieties of esthetic expression.[5]

I believe that if the schools have failed to teach reading, and I am not altogether sure that the failure is as ubiquitous as is often claimed, it is greatly a result of the managerial technique of reading instruction that has been the practice in elementary and secondary schools in the last 25 years. James Squire, in his essay, "What Does Research in Reading Reveal About Attitudes Toward Reading?"[6] focuses on the essential issue of student-motivation which is altogether overlooked by the "skills first school." He says that "methods of teaching can affect the individual's attitudes toward reading. They affect

---

4. Dale, Edgar, "Stop and Think," The Newsletter, January, 1971, Vol. No. 4.

5. De Cecco, John P., The Psychology of Learning and Instruction, Prentice Hall, 1968

6. Fader, Daniel, Hooked on Books, New York: Putnam & Sons, 1966; The Naked Children, New York: Macmillan, 1971.

preferences for reading as much as they color individual response to any selection, and they must be considered carefully by any teacher planning a literary education for students in secondary schools today."

We can only consider alternative approaches to the teaching of reading by first tackling the problem of the metaphor of "student as product." We can make no progress until we purge from the institution generally, and the English reading class specifically, the damaging analogy that schools receive input (students with low scores) and produce output (students with higher scores).

Appearing in his critique of B.F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior,[7] Chomsky refutes the S-R Model that so conveniently fits in with the industrial output analogy. Chomsky uses Skinner's argument and frame of reference to demonstrate that the S-R model is descriptively inadequate.

During his schooling, a graduating senior has been in a process of reorganizing himself, a procedure to which the educational institution has contributed significantly. Sole knowledge of external stimuli, whether it be a lesson in English or 8 classes of English, is only a part of the so-called "input." What we have not yet been able to measure and what we must measure before the analogy of input/output is valid, are three very important components: (1) the manner in which the child's neurological processes integrates the child's perception of the stimuli; (2) the genetic rules that determine at what time in a child's maturation he is available to experience stimuli; and (3) the past experiences of each child which bear on and are interrelated with the digestion and the integration of that stimuli. Chomsky argues that until we devise a means of measuring these three components, no measure of the student's performance at grade 12 will be a valid measure

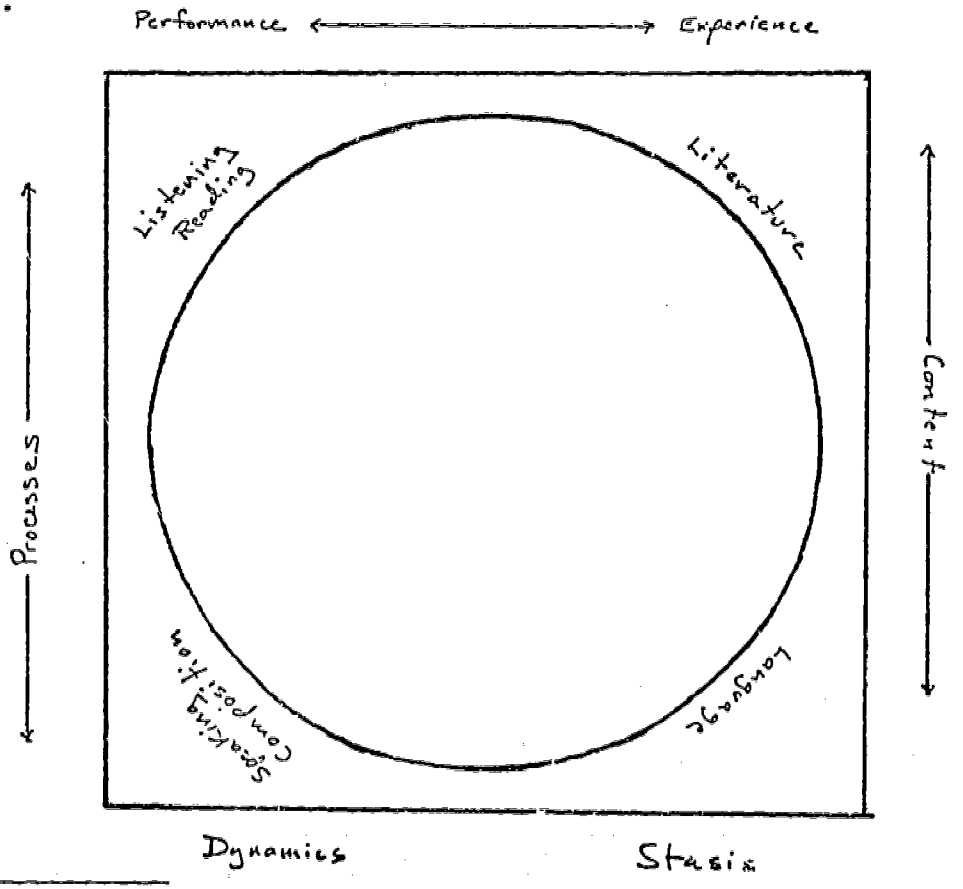
---

7. Fish, Stanley, "Literature in the Reader," Affective Stylistics: New Literary History, Vol. II, Autumn, 1970.

of the so-called product or output. This challenge has never been answered by Skinner.

Let me restate that learning is a result of experience, that the role of the teacher is to structure experiences in light of what students bring to class so that a maximum number of options are available, that the learner reorganizes himself uniquely, and that a school is not a factory. As John Barth aptly states: "The sport of teaching and learning should never become associated with certain hours or particular places, lest student and teacher alike fall into the vulgar habit of turning off their alertness, except at those times and those places, and thus make by implication a pernicious distinction between learning and other sources of natural behavior."[8]

At this point, I would like to propose a model of English that has bearing on the title of this speech. The stuff of English is represented holistically by the circle.



8. Gill, Kent, "Whither an English Curriculum for the Seventies?" English Journal, April, 1971, Vol. 60, No. 4.

The four points on the circle, moving clockwise, are literature, language, composition, and reading. The right hemisphere represents content, (literature or the texts on the shelf) and language (the symbolic system we deal with when we communicate). These should not necessarily be thought of as the objects of study in an English class nor the instructional materials, but rather as a stasis in this holistic model. One might think of the left hemisphere as being the dynamics of the model, representing the psychoneurological processes of reading, listening, composing, and speaking. Each process involves the individual as he participates in a dance of words and syntax as these linguistic components succeed one another in time. The north hemisphere represents those processes in which the individual is a recipient of some kind of content; the south hemisphere represents those processes in which the individual is yielding the language to some audience.

If this paradigm roughly depicts the stuff of English, what occurs when a reader engages with a text? He actively experiences or performs. This performance could be either what Goodman refers to as recoding or decoding. We have all seen youngsters who could read orally or silently with apparent pleasure and yet who are not able to tell you what they read. I think they experience something but they must lack retention or the ability to integrate the experience, or both. The important thing is that they experience, through time, printed language. I must stress that active engagement does not necessarily denote overt behavior. A student on an LSD trip can be very actively engaged in an experience but reveal a placid, apparently inattentive mask.

I want to distinguish among three important terms: experience, performance, and competence.

Teachers uneasy with a child quietly reading, choose tests that purport to measure something which is supposed to be a result of this quiet performance.

What they measure is only a facet of performance, not the experience in a black box, nor the student's competence. What does a student's score of 147 on the COOP Reading Test tell us? It merely indicates that at a moment in time, he registered that abstract number of 147. His performance is inferred from the single test or it can be mechanistically charted with several tests given over a period of time. His competence, on the other hand, is that elusive, shadowy capability that we think we detect behind performance.

Alternative Approaches

The idea of the reader as performer was inspired by Louise Rosenblatt's seminal work, Literature as Exploration[9] and, more recently, by the insights of Stanley Fish,[10] Associate Professor of English at the University of California. Fish's thesis is that a work is not a spatial phenomenon other than the fact that it exists in space (it is found on library shelves, in students' pockets, or that its pages lie one on top of another, etc.). That a book has a beginning, a middle, and an end, as Aristotle claims, Fish entirely rejects. Instead, Professor Fish likens the activity of reading to kinetic art, a temporal phenomena in which the reader responds to a text, actively engaging with language. Lines pass by the student's eyes, eventually pages turn, eventually the book is closed. Like kinetic art, the observer viewing the work of art is an event, the act of viewing gives the work existence. Meaning, in other words, is an event, "something that happens to and with the participation of the reader." Reading, whether one is responding to a work like Camus' The Stranger, or to such prose as "How to Assemble a Styrofoam Tyrannosaurus on Christmas Eve After Nine Tom and Jerrys," is an activity that brings to mind the question posed at the end of W. B. Yeats' poem, "Among School Children."

---

9. Moffett, James, A Student Centered Language Arts Curriculum K-13: A Handbook for Teachers, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968.

10. Purves, Allan, An unpublished papter delivered at the Central California Council of Teachers of English, Spring Conference, "Accountability English Style."

Labor is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Not beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Fish argues that by changing the notion that a book is an object in space to the notion that reading is an activity that involves the reader and the text in time, generates concomitantly a pedagogical change. The teacher no longer asks the student, "What does this word, sentence, or chapter, mean?" but rather "What does this word or sentence do?" Another way of saying this is that we should not ask what does the text say, but how do you respond to the language experience. The result of the teacher's change of emphasis makes reading a language sensitizing experience. In a Buberian fashion, the relationship between the reader and the book is no longer one of I, the observer, and IT, the object; but rather I, the reader responding to the language of the work, and THOU, the language in the work being given existence through my participation with it. The book is no longer a thing in itself to be observed and studied scientifically, but rather an event, something which the student experiences as he performs the act of reading. Thus, reading becomes a personal experience and each student may legitimately have a different experience, unlike the old Lit-Crit approach.

Professor Fish's thesis that the reader should be put back into the text is another statement in a growing number of objections to the philosophy of the New Critics. One can trace this trend back to Loban, Squire, Purves, eventually to Louise Rosenblatt. The one difference between these earlier advocates of the importance of reader response and Professor Fish's is that he does not make a distinction between literature and nonliterature, but borrowing from the insights of Chomsky and Wardhaugh, he is concerned with the reader's existential response to the lexical and syntactic experience of the written word.

Another critic, Walter Slatoff, in With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response, reenforces the concern of these critics of the New Criticism.

> "Insofar as we divorce the study of literature from the experience of reading and view literary works as objects to be analyzed rather than the human expressions to be reacted to; insofar as we view them as providing order, pattern, and beauty as opposed to challenge and disturbance; insofar as we favor form over content, objectivity over subjectivity, detachment over involvement, theoretical over real readers; insofar as we worry more about incorrect responses than insufficient ones; insofar as we emphasize the distinctions between literature and life rather than their interpenetrations, we reduce the power of literature and protect ourselves from it."[11]

Slatoff also identifies an interesting paradox that makes our charge as teachers of reading a difficult one. He suggests that responding to a literary work is essentially a private act, yet our classroom literary study is a very public act.

> "(The teacher) has no way of acknowledging or evaluating a pregnant silence or gleam of understanding, to say nothing of 'thoughts that lie too deep for tears' or of 'internal difference/where the meanings are.' In short, literature in the curriculum and classroom becomes essentially subject matter to be studied and talked about like other subjects and other matter."[12]

In science, social studies, math, and most other subject areas, the teacher and textbook writers try to follow an empirical formula, presenting a series of particular incidents unique to the field, with the purpose of having students inductively discover a generalization. If a teacher drops a pencil, then a book, a pen, a chalk, and a ruler, the students after describing each occurrence,

---

11. Rosenblatt, Louise, Literature as Exploration, New York: Appleton Century Company, 1937.

12. Slatoff, Walter, With Respect to Readers: Dimensions of Literary Response, Cornell University Press, 1970.

attempt to explain the principle operating behind all of the particulars, a principle on which prediction of future behavior is possible. On the other hand, a teacher of English wants students to approach a particular work of fiction, a poem, a short story, or a novel, so that he will respond to that work. His response is the result, not only of the external stimuli, the work of art, but more important, Chomsky's three components mentioned above; the neurological process in which an individual integrates what he perceives, the influence of maturation that affects this integration, and the individual's multitudinous past experiences that shape and color and intensify or diminish each of the preceding components. The young reader responds, evoking generalizations about his experience. He may evoke several utterances as a result of that experience and his classmates will probably evoke as many generalizations derived from the experience as there are individuals in the class.

The empiricist examines a series of particulars and arrives at a universal; whereas the reader of a poem studies one particular and can generate an infinite number of universals. What every child evokes must be listened to and weighed as to its appropriateness or sufficiency of response, not as to its correctness. It is not a declaration of meaning about the work, but a generalization resulting from the student's experience, a happening that is compounded by his own psychological make-up, and dreams, his past experiences. The form of evocation may be rough and may be regarded as immature from our stance as adults who are used to the prose of a Muggeridge or Kazin. There are literally an infinite number of reader responses and subsequently of verbal generalizations about that experience of which a single reader is capable.

Let me digress by referring to a principle of mathematics. An infinite number of numbers does not mean <u>all</u> numbers. Working with the integers 1 2 3 4, we can generate an infinite number of numbers, but we cannot generate

a number 27. An infinite number of generalizations about Frost's "Stopping by Woods" could include a young reader's commiserating with Santa Claus because he has "miles to go before he sleeps" on this "the darkest night of the year" but it would not include a reader stating that the poem is about John Brodie of the San Francisco 49ers in the Super Bowl playoffs. As Slatoff remarks, "The responses of all but the insane readers are to some degree guided and limited by the literary work they are reading."[13] Within those limits, responses are infinite.

Conclusion

There are alternative approaches to excite the reader to perform more actively. First, as teachers of reading, we have to do a lot more listening to what students say to encourage them to speak about their reading experiences and not to be so impatient to provide the right interpretations. We must help them develop self-confidence when they evoke their responses to reading. Second, we have to avoid the pathological approach to reading with its emphasis on diagnostic testing, remedying weakness through concentrated exercise and post testing.

Third, we need to help students understand that the written word represents the spoken word. We need to help them listen to the voice behind the print. As Rueben A. Brower states, "What we miss is a positive recognition of the part that is heard, aural experience that plays in our response to language and to literature even in silent reading. To catch the implication of a single word in a newspaper editorial or novel often depends on our hearing 'that kind' of person talking in 'that kind' of voice."[14]

Fourth, we need to widen students' reading experience by having them read more and criticize less, by encouraging curiosity rather than fostering

---

13. Squire, James, "What Does Research in Reading Reveal About Attitudes Toward Reading?" English Journal, April, 1969, Page 530.
14. Brower, Reuben A., "Book Reading and the Reading of Books," Daedalus, Winter, 1963.

opinions, by broadening interest instead of narrowing their focus to sophisticated judgments.

Fifth, teachers can begin by doing away with the one title for 33 students formula, by having clusters of kids read 5 or 6 titles or by having each one read a different title. Sixth, we can break out of the literary straitjacket and introduce nonfiction, ranging from selections from the Science Digest to Honda advertisements. Seventh, we can reread Hooked on Books[15] or Fader's more recent book, The Naked Children.[16] Eigth, we can read aloud much more than we do and encourage our colleagues in Social Studies and Science to do the same.

What is necessary, is to foster the motive of curiosity, as opposed to necessity or ambition, because, as John Barth suggests in The Sot-Weed Factor, "simple curiosity is the worthiest of development, it being the 'purest' (in that the value of what it drives us to learn is terminal rather than instrumental), the most conclusive to exhaustive and continuing rather than cursory or limited study, and likeliest to render pleasant the labor of learning."[17]

---

15. Fader, Daniel, Hooked on Books, New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1966.

16. Fader, Daniel, The Naked Children, New York: Macmillan, 1971.

17. Barth, John, The Sot-Weed Factor, New York: Bantam Books, 1960.

K/4