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ABSTRACT

Visual and verbal literacy skills are crucial to children because of their relationship to reading, and to adults because of their social utility. Such skills are, paradoxically, among those least often developed in a systematic fashion in elementary schools. One reason for this is that component subskills of visual and verbal literacy are infrequently identified. The three subskills identified in this paper are describing, comparing, and oral valuing. An effective way of encouraging children to learn these skills is to use illustrations from children's literature. The approach offers many advantages because illustrations are easy to locate, plentiful, and of much interest to children. The teacher attempting to use this approach will find that children respond eagerly and in the process develop valuable visual and verbal literacy skills. (TS)

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BOOK ILLUSTRATION: KEY TO VISUAL AND VERBAL LITERACY

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Those of us who teach children to read are only too aware of the word liter-
acy: it is a seemingly elusive goal toward which we work. Much effort has been ex-
pended, and many words written about achieving reading literacy--the ability to
decode and utilize what is decoded. Most definitions of literacy include reading
and writing. Our colleagues in language arts have expended similar lavish amounts
of time helping children achieve written literacy.

Yet some efforts are incomplete, since they do not include an important com-
ponent: visual and verbal literacy. To be truly literate, especially today, we
must be able to decode messages in pictures, and to encode our findings in verbal
language. How can such an assertion be justified?

About 80% of our information comes to us visually. (Debes, 1974) This bombard-
ment by visual stimuli is so universal it hardly evokes comment. Yet where in the
curriculum do we teach children to "read" such visual input--to examine it carefully
part by part, extracting meaning and interacting with what is extracted? Such pro-
cesses are central to the reading program, but few children learn to read pictures
effectively.

A related factor is developing verbal literacy: the ability to put coherent
thought into words, words into sentences, and sentences into larger units. Most of us
spend more time communicating orally than in either reading or writing. Yet where
in elementary schools do we help children learn to express in words what they have
taken in through their senses? Specifically, where do children learn to talk lit-
erately about what they see in pictures, and other visual stimuli they view?

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Such verbal literacy is important for two reasons. First, for its intrinsic value--to be verbally literate is crucial for adults. Such literacy is also important for children, for the base it provides for reading instruction. We know that success in reading is closely-linked to oral fluency, yet too frequently oral language skills receive limited attention.

Because conscious instruction in visual and verbal literacy seems minimal, I would like to describe some approaches to developing these skills. Such approaches are as yet a mosaic of interesting ideas, rather than a coherent philosophy or a unified approach to educating young children. One pair of authors has commented: "...after the early grades, there is a tendency to minimize the visual aspects of communication as children are...weaned away from pictures and illustrations..." (Fransecky, 1972)

If children are seldom encouraged to study illustrations, they are even less often asked to translate what they have learned in this visual mode into the verbal mode. Putting thoughts about what was learned visually into spoken words is an important challenge all children should experience.

Visual-Verbal Skills

In developing visual-verbal literacy, there are three sub-skills to be considered. These are sequential, from simple to more complex, and children should have opportunities to develop one skill before moving to the next one.

The first skill is to describe objectively--clearly, concisely, concretely, what the child sees. We are asking children to study an object providing visual input, and then translate this input into words.

The second skill is an extension of the first--to compare two different objects, using common descriptors. Given two objects, can the child accurately describe them, including differences which exist? In looking at two pictures, can the child see what is similar about them, and what sets them apart? If we have two versions of

Little Red Riding Hood, can children describe how Little Red is the same or different in the pictures?

The third, more sophisticated, and most important skill is the ability to value one of the objects. Children can develop the ability to say which of the pictures they prefer, and why. This verbal ability is important: few adults are capable of an effective description of their evaluations. Listen to adults tell you what they like. Inchoate thoughts too often come out as insistent reiterations of what a person "likes." It is a rare individual who can give a convincing reason for a visual preference. The adult who insists, "I don't really know anything about art, but I know what I like," not only tells the listener about an impoverished background, but also about muddled thought processes and a paucity of verbal expression. Believing then, that this three-part ability is crucial for adults, and possible for children, what kinds of experiences develop children's visual-verbal literacy?

Materials to Use

Some writers describing visual literacy programs recommend film study. This is an exciting possibility after preparatory experiences. For young children, such film images move too quickly, and are not conducive to the study and reflection I am recommending. Additional drawbacks are the cost, and relative inconvenience of film.

Rather, a plentiful, convenient, and relatively inexpensive source of material exists: the illustrations in children's books. Picture and illustrated books proliferate rapidly. The teacher is at no loss, therefore, to find materials children may use in developing these skills.

It is simple to locate several artists' illustrations of the same story of poem as a basis for practicing each of these skills. Cinderella, Rumplestiltskin, Chanticleer and the Fox, and other stories have inspired artists to create their visual impressions. Poetry has also received such attention from artists. Well-known poems like Lear's "The Owl and the Pussy Cat" have been illustrated by several artists, and can be used as the basis for describing, comparing, and valuing experiences.

Variety in Style

In using book illustrations as stimulus material, the teacher is helping children study the pictures for their own sake--not merely for the extension or augmentation they provide the text. We are examining illustration as an independent visual artifact which has meaning of its own. With young children, we begin very simply, using one illustration and asking children to tell what they see.

The Three Billy Goats Gruff is a logical beginning with kindergarten or first grade children. We may focus attention of the visual treatment of the goats. The bold rendering in casein by Stobbs (1967) is quite unlike the dainty hoofed goat by Lenski (in Hutchinson, 1925). The rakish mien of the goat sketched casually by Marcia Brown in fluid ink line (in Asbjornsen, 1957) is different than the precise black designs by Vroman (in Asbjornsen, 1963). A bold woodcut design (Blair, 1963) contrasts with other illustrations.

Another favorite of young children is Little Red Riding Hood. The visual treatment of Little Red varies from the stolid interpretation by Bruna (1966) through the pixy created in lithography by Jean Merrill (1968) to the apprehensive little girl overwhelmed by the encompassing forest drawn by Aloise (in Gant, 1969). The scene at the bedchamber with the wolf and Little Red elicits many responses. One child commented that she liked the illustration by Bernadette (in Grimm, 1968) because, "It looks like it happened long ago." In looking at the illustration by Hogrogian (1967), one child commented, "Little Red Riding Hood should have the glasses on. Then she could see by the big nose that it's a wolf and not grandma."

After children have several experiences describing what they see in pictures, we move to the next skill, comparing two pictures for the same story or poem. In all these experiences, we are helping children take in through their sense of sight, and give out their observations and comparisons through words.

A favorite of older children, Cinderella, works well for comparison purposes. A

French version of the tale has Cinderella posed beside the clock which bids her leave. (Contes de Perrault, 1965) Lenski's highly stylized version shows the affluence of the home from which Cinderella is liberated (in Hutchinson, 1925). Brown (1954) uses watercolor wash treatment to show the consideration of the prince and the dismay of the sisters. Encourage children to compare the treatment of the prince: the one by Ness (in Haviland, 1965) in bold modern robes but unfortunately large feet is very different than the one by Brown. The luxuriant patterning evident in Ness's woodcuts capture and hold children's attention as they explore the wealth of visual detail. One child said of the romantic, yet gothic illustration by Arthur Rackham (1950), "Her dress is so fluffy it looks like it could float to the ball by itself." When studying an illustration in the Lang book (1948), another child wondered how Cinderella could run fast in such a full skirt.

Puss in Boots is an old tale which never fails to amuse children, who delight in the sly cat's efforts to trick a wide variety of people. Some versions are in simple black and white (as in Huber, 1965), yet even when the color is limited and the technique is similar, there are discernible differences in interpretation (see Johnson, 1961). The lithographs of Brown's debonaire cat (1952) and Fischer's striped one (1959), both limited in color, are nevertheless favorites of children, and stimulate oral description. More complex treatments good for comparison purposes also show variety of style. (Haviland, 1959) One child remarked of this version, "I like this one because it looks like it happened in a foreign country." (Kastner, 1957)

Goldilocks and the Three Bears has challenged the talents of many artists. These range from favorite old illustrations by Arthur Rackham to a version by Paul Galdone (1972). Sometimes the bears remain very much animals, as in the illustrations by Rackham (1950). At other times they are very human; Lenski (in Hutchinson, 1925) clothes her family, as does Stobbs (1965).

Comparing the treatment of the central character is facilitative of verbal language fluency. Three artists show her sampling the porridge, yet in each case the

illustration is very unlike the others. (See The Three Bears, 1955, Rojankovsky, 1948, My Book of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, 1962.)

This old tale is useful in working on the idea of story variation with children. Unlike other old tales, this one can be traced to a specific author, Eleanor Mure (1967). In her original version the intruder was not a sweet child, but rather a greedy old woman. The incensed bears, not content with chasing her from the house, tried to do away with her in the fireplace. To their dismay, they discovered she was noncombustible. The Andrew Lang (1949) version also depicts an irascible old lady, not dismayed, but in fact rather annoyed at having her sleep interrupted. Still another mutation of the story which captivates children but arouses the wrath of some of their teachers is one by Palazzo (1959). He depicts a conventional enough trio of bears, but a highly unconventional Goldilocks: an appealing, blond and shaggy dog!

Using Poetry Illustrations

Illustrations for poetry also help motivate children in the process of describing, comparing and valuing. For example, several illustrations are available for two poems, "The Owl and the Pussycat," and "Old Mother Hubbard."

The nonsense of Lear's poem (1961) has intrigued artists, including the poet himself. These illustrations are of historic interest, but do not capture children's attention and motivate verbal language as easily as do other versions. Contrast them with the contemporary open color illustrations of Cooney (1961) which evoke a lush forest repast. The color boundaries are more controlled and more details are provided by du Bois (1961). Tinkelman (1964) gives us energetic black line to detail his green and white illustrations, while Palazzo (1956) provides a realistically colored owl and cat.

Mother Goose rhymes offer rich possibilities for developing verbal facility. "Old Mother Hubbard" has elicited illustrations from many artists, with wide differences in interpretation. Some are in black and white (Rackham, 1969), while some

are in full color (Tenggren, 1940). Some feature an old woman of ample proportions, while Tudor (1944) chose to show her as wispy in nature. Ward's illustration (in Huber, 1965) depicts her as tall, while Lobel's version (1968) shows a compact dumpling of a woman. Even the evocation of time is different. In comparing two illustrations, one child felt that deAngeli's (1954), "Looks like it happened longer ago," than did the one by Rojankovsky (1942).

Children's Response to the Materials

Once a variety of illustrations for a story or poem is selected, the teacher is ready to begin. How should the materials be used? How can we expect children might respond? Specific methods of presentation, types of questions to stimulate observation and discussion, number of illustrations used, and length of the sessions must depend upon the group.

While using the illustrations for "The Owl and the Pussycat," I discovered that kindergarten children without previous experience in structured oral discussion delighted in telling me what they saw in illustrations for the verse. They were developing the first skill--describing. Since it was an initial experience, we began simply with one illustration and a few questions:

1. What do you see in the picture?
2. What colors has the artist used?
3. Where is this happening? How can you tell?
4. What things did they take along with them?
5. Is the boat like any you have seen? How is it different?

Sixth graders, with a variety of previous oral language experiences, did well in evaluating as a result of close observation and practice in describing. A classroom teacher used three illustrations for The Hare and The Tortoise in doing a unit on describing skills. Illustrations for the story were put up in the room for a few days. Children responded well to the challenge of seeing how closely they could observe what was in the pictures. One discussion session involved describing,

separately, each illustration. A second session centered on comparing two of the illustrations. During the third session children explained to their peers their reason for preferring, or valuing, one of the three illustrations. There was little verbal impoverishment apparent as these sixth graders discussed articulately the reasons for their choices.

Summary

Visual and verbal literacy skills are crucial to children, because of their relationship to reading, and to adults because of their social utility. Such skills are paradoxically among those least often developed in systematic fashion in elementary schools. One reason for this is that component subskills of visual and verbal literacy are infrequently identified. Because the three subskills identified here are crucial, children must be provided opportunities to describe, compare, and value orally. An effective way of encouraging children to do this is to use illustrations from children's literature. The approach offers many advantages: illustrations are easy to locate, plentiful, and of much interest to children. The teacher attempting to use this approach will find children respond eagerly and in the process develop valuable visual and verbal literacy skills.

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