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AUTHOR Melnik, Amelia; Larson, Martha L.
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ABSTRACT

Unfortunately, the current popularity of questioning strategies has led to their widespread excessive and/or exclusive employment in evaluating reading comprehension. An approach in reading instruction which utilizes both verbal and nonverbal communication for assessing comprehension contains several unique features that provide for the integration of all levels and skills of comprehension, the fusion of affect and cognition, the appeal to shy or language deficient children, and the active participation of students rather than passive acceptance. A number of activities which use two types of nonverbal assessment--pictures and pantomime--demonstrate the efficacy of a nonverbal approach to assessing reading comprehension. (JM)

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Amelia Melnik
College of Education
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona 85721

Amelia Melnik
Martha L. Larson

Martha L. Larson
College of Education
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona 85721

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VERBAL AND NONVERBAL ASSESSMENT OF COMPREHENSION

Amelia Melnik and Martha Larson
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona

"Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! (1)" With these words Liza Doolittle expresses an overwhelming exasperation bordering on contempt for Henry Higgins' exclusive preoccupation with verbal communication. Her words provide a prelude to her pent-up frustrations as they erupt into song and she pleads "...Show me! Show me! Show me now!" More than a song of love, her spirited declaration is also an eloquent affirmation that communication, like love, is fully realized only in a partnership in which both verbal and nonverbal communication systems participate. (2)

Placed in the context of reading, "Words! Words! Words! I'm sick of words!" might also symbolize the desperation felt by countless pupils who day after day, year in and year out, are confronted with reading lessons in which teaching and evaluation are confined primarily to verbal modalities. Pupils are deluged with tasks and assignments in which "Words! Words! Words!" are the primary, if not exclusive, mode of instruction.

Words of Caution

The current popularity of questioning strategies has led to their widespread excessive and/or exclusive employment in evaluating reading comprehension. In allowing questions to monopolize our quest for comprehension, we have also encouraged verbalism to dominate our mode

of instruction, in fact to the exclusion of any other mode of instruction. A re-examination of the course of our efforts is urgently needed before we, too, like Henry Higgins, fall prey to a one-sided die-hard approach that is exclusively preoccupied with verbal communication.

Posing well-stated questions and evaluating resulting responses has always been an essential and appropriate skill for each teacher ever since the origin of the Socratic method of instruction. Yet, as recently as 1964, in examining current major textbooks on the teaching of reading in elementary school, it was hardly possible to find the topic of questions in the index or table of contents of these leading professional texts. (9) Since that time, however, we have become alerted to the basic inadequacies of teachers' questions as a result of research findings on classroom interaction and insights gained through teacher-made informal reading inventories, usually required in diagnostic reading courses in teacher education institutions. From these sources spawned a multiplicity of publications, in-service education programs, workshops, conferences, courses, speeches, et al., designed to develop competence in questioning techniques commonly patterned on the model provided in Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Cognitive Domain. (2)

Such a concentrated focus on questions compels us to be cautious that questioning does not become the only way of examining comprehension, nor that we confine ourselves to procedures that rely completely on verbal modes of instruction.

Words of Wisdom and Direction

The need for nonverbal forms of assessment has been suggested by Vygotsky and the Study Group on Linguistic Communication sponsored by the National Institute of Education (NIE). Vygotsky's investigations into the nature of language and thought more than thirty years ago led to a fundamental conclusion:

Our studies show that it is the abstract quality of written language that is the main stumbling block, not the underdevelopment of small muscles or any other mechanical obstacles. (12, p.99)

Today Soviet educational research and program development are being expanded in the direction of implementing the ideas of Vygotsky. Their educators and psychologists are concentrating on the development of instruments and procedures which are nonverbal in nature, (although instructions for their use may be given verbally):

The reason for using a nonverbal approach is that any true measure of mental actions (comprehension) must separate out speech (in oral or printed form), as speech in young children is not fully developed and, therefore, it is not characteristic of the underlying psychological content of the child. (4, p. 34)

Instead of developing instructional techniques designed to assess large populations of children and to accumulate massive evidence of performance, Soviet educators are concentrating on procedures that elicit the maximum information about an individual in a given task situation. Such a goal can be achieved only through employing both verbal and nonverbal modes of communication which together present the most revealing portrait of the nature of comprehension.

Currently here in the United States the NIE initiated an intensive study to guide the future direction of educational efforts along similar lines of inquiry. In 1978 the Institute identified the Essential Skills Program as a priority area and established a Study Group on Linguistic Communication. According to Marshall S. Smith, Acting Director of NIE, the Study Group addressed the problem of raising language comprehension in the entire population, considered one of the most pressing problems of literacy. (10, p. vii) In their attempt to create a balanced program in language comprehension, the Study Group formulated a series of recommendations. Included in this report is a highly significant statement concerning the measurement of comprehension:

Various comprehension tests are in use, but they are all heavily dependent on verbal abilities in their execution. These may be serious limitations. A recurring theme in many of the presentations that were heard by this Committee was that our verbal measures of how well a reader comprehends a written message are inadequate indices of what was grasped. (10, p. 42)

In direct straight-to-the-point language the Study Group declares,

"We need nonverbal measures of comprehension (10, p. 42)."

Words of Reason

What do good teachers of reading do? Sterl Artley posed a similar question to one hundred education majors, asking them to recall what their teachers had done to promote competence and interest in reading (1). In their responses, students frequently referred to a number of activities used by their teachers. Artley's students listed

dramatizations, puppetry, games, puzzles, audio visual aids, art and music as some of the activities that made reading exciting and fun and added variety to the day. The activities recalled by Artley's students are predominantly nonverbal in nature, suggesting that the nonverbal approach had lasting impact.

The Final Word: Why?

What are the unique features of an approach that utilizes both verbal and nonverbal avenues of communication to assess comprehension?

1. It integrates all levels and skills of comprehension into a single unifying ongoing process.
2. It fuses rather than separates affect from cognition.
3. It creates an environment for diagnostic teaching, with teaching and assessing becoming interrelated activities.
4. It allows opportunity for participation by all pupils regardless of age, ability and competence.
5. It is an approach that is frequently more comfortable for shy children and those whose development is impeded because of language deficiencies.
6. It invites involved participation. That which is comprehended is internalized rather than passively accepted.
7. It invariably results in product development and qualitative task analysis of performance and response.

Activities using two types of nonverbal assessment, pictures and pantomime, are described to demonstrate the efficacy of a nonverbal approach to assessing comprehension.

ACTIVITIES USING NONVERBAL ASSESSMENT OF COMPREHENSION

Nonverbal forms of communication, like pictures and gestures, complement or augment the more traditional verbal forms of comprehension assessment. In using this approach the reader is asked to select or make a response that is not verbal--neither spoken nor written language. Then assessment of comprehension is accomplished through observations of the reader's ability to correctly select a picture, or to reproduce an idea in a drawing, or to combine a series of gestures into pantomime in order to dramatize some story element. Several activities will be offered to illustrate these nonverbal modes of assessment.

Assessment Through Pictures

In planning for pictorial assessment, the selection of reading material as well as the activity should be considered. Choose stories or articles that possess characters or people with distinctive qualities who are involved in exciting, dramatic or action-centered plots. Generally, look for narratives about people or "things" that can project an image in a child's mind. Along with verbal assessment, try one of the following ideas:

1. FROM A GROUP OF PICTURES, ASK READERS TO SELECT THE MAIN CHARACTERS FOR THEIR STORY.
2. ASK READERS TO CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE SETTING FOR A STORY OR ARTICLE, FROM THREE PICTURED SETTINGS.

3. FROM A STORY OR ARTICLE, ASK READERS TO MAKE A SIXTY SECOND SPEED SKETCH OF ONE STORY ELEMENT, DEPENDING ON WHICH STORY ELEMENT PROVIDES THE BEST SUBJECT MATTER. (e.g., the best liked or most disliked character, the most exciting moment, an important event)
4. ASK READERS TO DRAW A PICTURE WHICH ILLUSTRATES THEIR PERSONAL SOLUTION TO A SOCIAL PROBLEM. (e.g., a description of a school situation—a dope peddler on campus, a news article telling of an impending strike by city employees)
5. AFTER READING A SET OF DIRECTIONS WHICH CONTAIN NO PICTURES, ASK READERS TO DRAW A PICTURE OF THE POSSIBLE OUTCOME OR RESULT IF THE DIRECTIONS WERE FOLLOWED. (e.g., directions for building a canoe, baking a cake, changing a tire, mixing cement, cutting hair)

Assessment Through Pantomime

Another type of nonverbal assessment technique is pantomime: the expression of meaning by gestures and actions, without words. Through pantomime readers can demonstrate their comprehension of a given story by showing they have:

1. grasped a literal description,
2. interpreted a character's response to a situation—either physical or emotional,
3. synthesized the whole into his dramatization.

Also, in improvising a different turn-of-events or story ending, pupils find opportunities to use both critical and creative thinking skills.

After selecting a story or article possessing characters with unique physical or personality factors and a plot that has dynamic qualities for dramatization, invite a dramatic response from readers as follows:

1. SHOW US HOW THE STORY STARTED. (or ended)
2. SHOW US THE MOST EXCITING MOMENT. (or the saddest, or the happiest, or the funniest, or most frightening)
3. WHICH WAS YOUR FAVORITE CHARACTER OR PERSON?
SHOW US THEIR MOST IMPORTANT SCENE.
4. IF YOU COULD REWRITE THIS STORY OR ARTICLE, SHOW US A DIFFERENT ENDING.
5. (of a particularly significant scene) SHOW US IN SLOW MOTION WHAT HAPPENED. SHOW US HOW X REACTED IN THIS PARTICULAR SITUATION.

These suggestions are particularly for nonfiction:

1. WHICH PERSON DID YOU ADMIRE THE MOST? SHOW US HOW THEY REACTED UNDER CERTAIN CONDITIONS.
2. SHOW US THE EVENTS IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER.
3. IF THERE IS SOME ASPECT THAT IS OR WILL BE REMEMBERED IN HISTORY, SHOW US THE MEMORABLE MOMENTS.

As the foregoing activities suggest, nonverbal assessment procedures allow learning and the evaluation of learning to occur simultaneously. Finally, among its motivational properties, it appears likely that a nonverbal approach to comprehension can only enhance both teachers' and pupils' conscious awareness of the meaning, use, and purpose of verbal communication.

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