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ABSTRACT

The most important skill teachers can communicate through reading experiences is the awareness of what kinds of questions to ask with different kinds of texts. These questions are not the factual questions that drift in and out of short term memory but the implicit questions, the thought-provoking "big questions." Some teachers concentrate on teaching only reading skills while others teach reading with literature or with content areas such as social studies. Two little "experiments" (reading lines of random symbols, nonsense words, pseudo-words and legitimate words, and "The Three Little Pigs" translated into another symbol system) demonstrate that reading is only incidentally visual. With the "Three Little Pigs," readers use sound-letter correspondences, syntax, semantics, and their own ability to predict what will happen to decode the print. Language is not only predictable, it is generative. From just 26 letters of the alphabet come not only all the words in an unabridged dictionary, but new words are also created constantly. Comprehension and learning cannot be separated. Social studies adds the power of finding relevant answers to the "big questions" to the content that is already inherent in language itself. (Contains four illustrations of the "Three Little Pigs" story with accompanying captions written in an alternative symbol system.) (RS)

CONTENT READING: Is There Any Other Kind?

Paper presented in the session, "The Power of the Reading-Social Studies Partnership", at the National Council of Teachers of English International Conference, "Reconstructing Language and Learning for the 21st Century", New York, New York, July 7-9, 1995

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Content Reading: Is There Any Other Kind?

In order to study any language, at the end of the nineteenth century and early in this century, linguists removed the language from its broad cultural context. The effect of their research on educational practitioners was profound. For the remainder of this century, teachers have debated how to teach language in the classroom, and the most hotly debated area of language education has become the teaching of reading.

Some teachers concentrate on teaching only reading skills while some others teach reading with literature or with content areas such as social studies. The teachers who give reading the content of literature or social studies declare that "All teachers are teachers of reading and writing", and distance themselves from the teachers who focus only on reading skills. Professionals thus divide into two camps determined by their vision of how we learn to read. One camp believes we master skills first in order to get to read, while the other camp believes that we read whatever we can in order to get the skills.

But let us return to my opening statement about the linguists who tried to isolate language as much as possible in order to study it. Could such an undertaking be successful? In English, for instance, if I make a simple isolated statement such as, "Give me my blue mug," you know: (1) that I have to be from a society that uses "mugs", even if you don't know what "mugs" are; (2) that these mugs may be blue, but may not always be blue since I am using a color word in my statement; (3) that mugs are owned by individuals and my society permits individual possessiveness; (4) that someone besides myself is either close to my mug or knows where it is and is able to

hand it over; and (5) that this someone is not too far from where I am because I am able to get the mug. All this information is content which you as either a listener or a reader bring to your understanding of my simple statement.

But what if I look at you and simply say the word, "mug"? Without some body language, such as pointing to the mug to support my utterance, you would probably not know what "mug" means. In this case, we realize that the philosopher Wittgenstein was correct years ago when he declared that words do not have meanings, people have meanings for words (1969, p. 2). In fact, if we wanted to call the "ceiling" the "floor" and call the "floor" the "ceiling", we could do it. All we would have to do is to leave this room and recruit more English speakers to agree to change their usage. As the new usages spread throughout our language group, the symbols would come to represent the reversed connotations. Once again, "people have meanings for words". We must remember that words serve us, and it is we who give them their power.

So how much meaning do we actually bring to words anyway? I would like to try a few experiments to make us think about what it is that we do to understand print.

OVERHEAD

(An overhead briefly demonstrates eight lines of print one line at a time. The audience must take out a piece of paper and write what they see as quickly as possible. The lines are: P△ □; 6749 2; azqr d m n; 75BS m; TRANSLATION; ALABATER; PRAFANZINGLY; Can you read this?

The audience consensus is that the first line of random symbols is the most difficult to read. Next, the random letters are more difficult to read than both the numbers and letters combined and the random numbers alone. Most of the audience agree that the numbers and letters combined are more difficult to read than the random numbers alone. The reasons for their decisions depend on how much day-to-day experience they have encountering each example. For instance, the only example they can produce for random numbers and letters combined is license plates, while they note that random numbers alone appear in phone numbers, social security numbers, zip codes, easier mathematics, charge cards, etc. The group therefore concludes that random numbers are easier to perceive.

The "words" bring forth other observations. The audience comments on the ease of reading, "TRANSLATION", and then adds how difficult the reading would be read if the reader did not already know the word. They then give pronunciations, syllables, prefixes, and suffixes for "ALABATER" and "PRAFANZINGLY". However, they concur that this knowledge does not help them understand what ALABATER and PRAFANZINGLY mean. Nor does length help their encounter. They all agree that, "Can you read this?", the longest line, was the fastest and easiest to handle.

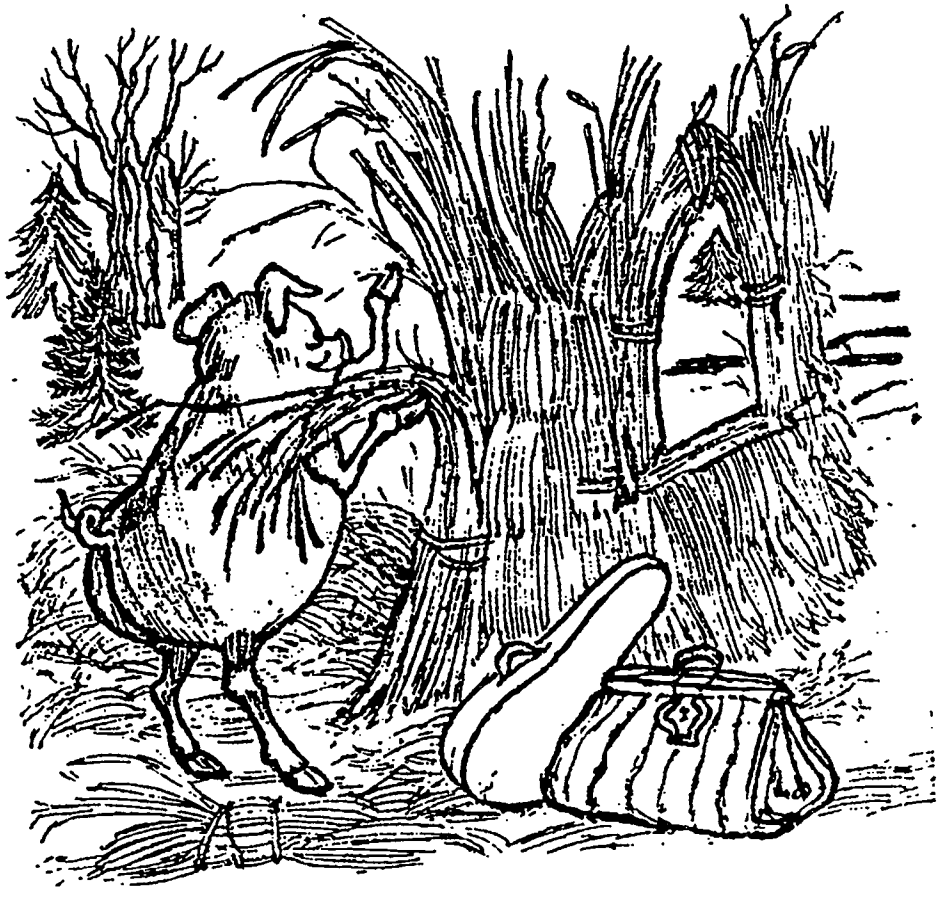
THE THREE PIGS

The audience then receives the following four pages, a translation of a folk tale that is familiar to them.

ᐃᑉᓕᕐᓂᖅ ᓄᓇᕗᑦ ᐊᑐᕐᕕᒃ ᐊᑐᖅᑕᐅᓂᖅ.

ᐃᑉᓕᕐᓂᖅ ᓄᓇᕗᑦ ᐊᑐᖅᑕᐅᓂᖅ

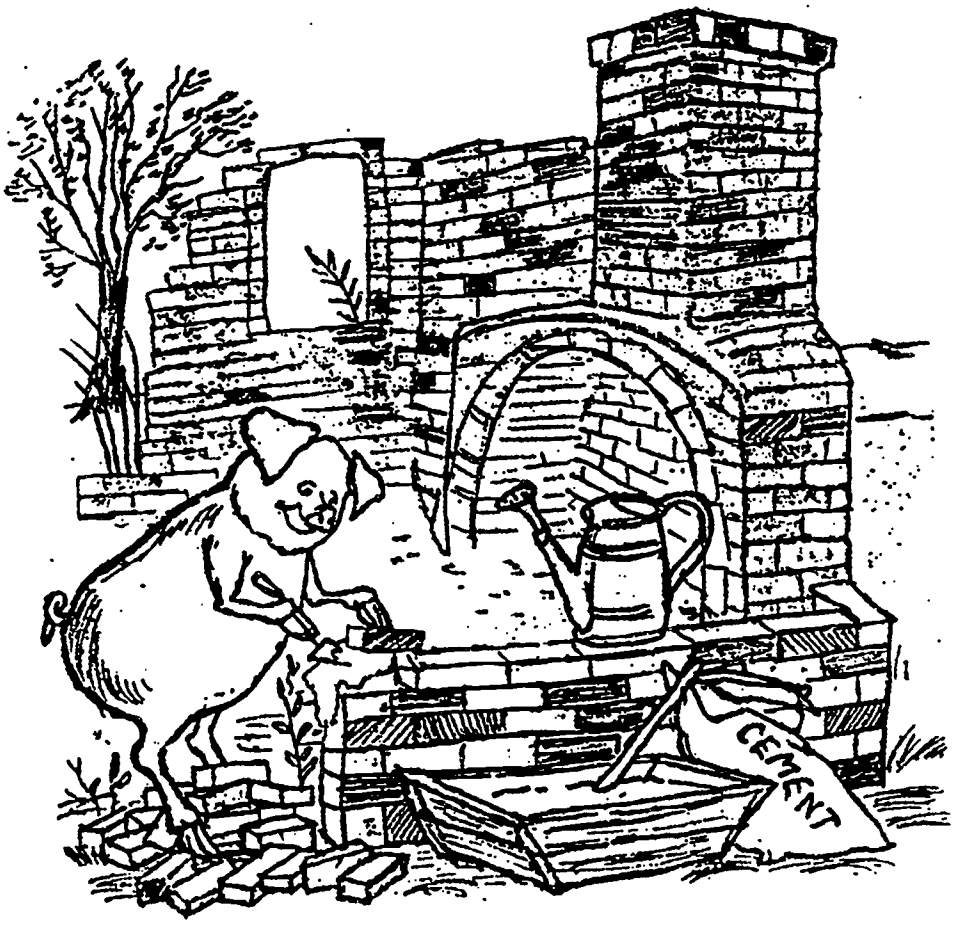
ᐊᑐᕐᕕᒃ ᓄᓇᕗᑦ ᐊᑐᖅᑕᐅᓂᖅ ᐊᑐᕐᕕᒃ ᓄᓇᕗᑦ ᐊᑐᖅᑕᐅᓂᖅ.



ᐱᒪᐅ ᓇᐅᒣᒪᐱ ᐯᐅᐱᐱᐯᐅ ᐧᐅᘐ
ᖷᐧᒪᐅ + ᑕᐦᓂᑐᐅ ᐦᓇ ᒪᐱᒣᐦᓂᓂ.

ᐱᒋᐧ ᒪᐧᐦᓴᐤᒪᐧ ᐯᑌᐱᐯᐧ ᐠᑌᑎ

ᑫᐢᑕᐧ + ᒥᓴ-ᐅᒪᐧ ᓴᐤ ᒪᐢᑌᐦᒥᒪ.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They decide that indeed illustrations help support understandings of print for without the illustrations here, they would have no idea that these pages are a story. Moreover, their knowledge of story conventions helps them decode the first line of this folk tale as, "Once upon a time." They then work in pairs or small groups to translate "The Three Pigs" into easily readable English, and we share the translation page by page.)

In summary, what you tell me from these experiments is that reading as Paul Kolers and Frank Smith say is only incidentally visual. From the overhead with the symbols, you decided that the more knowledge you bring to the arrangement of symbols, the easier the symbols are for you to understand. With "The Three Pigs", you used sound-letter correspondences, syntax, and semantics, and your ability to predict the meaning of the story to decode the print. What you know from life and from language has served you well to help you handle the print you encounter.

In fact, the ability to predict is one of our strongest learning strategies, not only in literacy experiences but in all life experiences. Without our cognitive strength to predict, we would have to handle every experience as if the experience were brand new. Our ability to adapt and survive as a species depends on our making sense of our world and responding as quickly and as smoothly as possible.

However, language is not only predictable, it is also generative. It is mind-boggling to realize that from just 26 letters of the alphabet, we get all the words in an unabridged dictionary, and we humans are constantly creating new words and adopting words across languages and dialects. We learn new words by speaking and

by reading. Moreover, we also learn new information from speaking and reading. As we control language, we also use language to learn about the world. We create as Frank Smith says, "a theory of the world". This theory of the world relies heavily on the organization of long term memory. Long term memory is a network, a coherent structure of everything we know about the world and everything we know about how the world is organized (Smith, 1985, p. 42). If we learn at all, it is by modifying and elaborating our theory. Therefore, anything we learn must be related to the structure of knowledge that we already have.

Comprehension and learning cannot be separated. To comprehend, one must predict. To learn, one must hypothesize. As teachers then the most important skill we can communicate through reading experiences is the awareness of what kinds of questions to ask with different kinds of texts. These questions are not the factual questions that drift in and out of short term memory but the implicit questions, the thought-provoking "big questions", that help us find relevant answers to understand our history, our humanity, and life itself. It is the premise of this session that THE SOCIAL STUDIES add this power to the power of the content that is already inherent in language itself.

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